

Belonging over generations: Exploring the historical contexts of the cultural integration of migrants and their descendants

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Introduction

Migrants' integration into host societies is a dynamic and multidimensional process encompassing socioeconomic, social-relational, political, civic, and cultural dimensions. Crucially, integration is a two-way process: it involves not only the adaptation of migrants and their descendants, but also their acceptance by the host society—the subjective feeling of belonging, of being recognized as “one of us” without having to forgo their identities. Yet this cultural dimension of integration has received comparatively little attention in quantitative cross-national research.

Existing studies have largely emphasized objective or externally observable dimensions of integration, such as socioeconomic outcomes (e.g., labor market participation and occupational status) (Drouhot & Nee 2019; Kim et al. 2022; Sirbu et al. 2021), social indicators (intermarriage, friendship, and social networks), political and civic engagement, and cultural markers such as religion and language. Far fewer have examined belonging as a reciprocal outcome that captures whether migrants and their descendants feel accepted by and/or identify with membership in the host society. Understanding this dimension is crucial because subjective belonging reflects both individual experiences and the institutional contexts that define who is considered part of a political community.

As discussed by Favell (2022), classical scholarship on migration conceived integration within the triad of immigration → integration → citizenship, describing the process through which migrants become members of a political community within the institutional frameworks of the nation-state. Citizenship policy thus constitutes a central mechanism linking individuals' opportunities for belonging with state definitions of membership. Comparative research on naturalization demonstrates how such frameworks shape intergenerational trajectories of legal and social inclusion (Gathmann & Garbers 2023; Labussière & Vink 2020; Mazzolari 2009; Soehl et al. 2020; Stadlmair 2017; Vink et al. 2013).

Beyond this institutional perspective, Mamdani (2020) highlights a deeper structural dimension: the modern nation-state organizes political belonging through categories of inclusion and exclusion—distinguishing citizens from non-citizens and, historically, settlers from natives. These legacies continue to shape how states define membership and how individuals experience belonging. The continuum between *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* traditions captures part of this variation, but longer-term processes of state and nation formation—colonial expansion, democratization, and linguistic or religious consolidation—have produced durable regimes of belonging and exclusion that persist into the present.

This project situates cultural integration within that long historical arc. It asks how historical and institutional legacies shape the subjective sense of belonging among migrants and their descendants today, and whether certain characteristics are associated with stronger belonging. By doing so, it aims to identify both the enduring barriers and the institutional contexts that foster inclusive membership across societies.

Building on Mamdani (2020)'s critical analysis of the nation-state, this study treats belonging not as a universal endpoint of integration but as an outcome contingent on historically specific regimes of inclusion

and exclusion. The formation of nation-states—through processes of colonization, ethnic consolidation, and institutional boundary-making—has produced enduring differences in how states define membership and in how migrants and their descendants can imagine their place within it. By situating quantitative analysis within this theoretical framework, we examine how such legacies continue to shape the linguistic, ethnic, and civic boundaries of belonging today. Our approach links this structural critique to empirical evaluation, using systematic, cross-national data and regularized modeling to identify which historical features of nation-state formation are most strongly associated with inclusive versus exclusionary patterns of cultural integration.

To capture this underexplored subjective dimension of cultural integration, we focus on territorial identification with the country as a measurable expression of belonging (Haerpfer et al. 2024). This indicator reflects both individual self-placement within the host society and the perceived legitimacy of their membership in the national political community. Its cross-national availability allows a consistent comparison of belonging among first- and second-generation migrants across diverse institutional contexts.

Data

This study draws on data from the Integrated Values Surveys (IVS 1981–2022; (Haerpfer et al. 2024)), which harmonize all available waves of the World Values Survey (WVS) and European Values Study (EVS) into a single, cross-national dataset. The IVS provide nationally representative samples with standardized measures of identity, values, and attitudes across multiple survey waves. We restrict our analytic sample to OECD member states to ensure broadly comparable institutional and data environments. The number of available waves per country ranges from one (Israel) to ten (Spain), covering the period from 1981 to 2022 (see Figure 1).

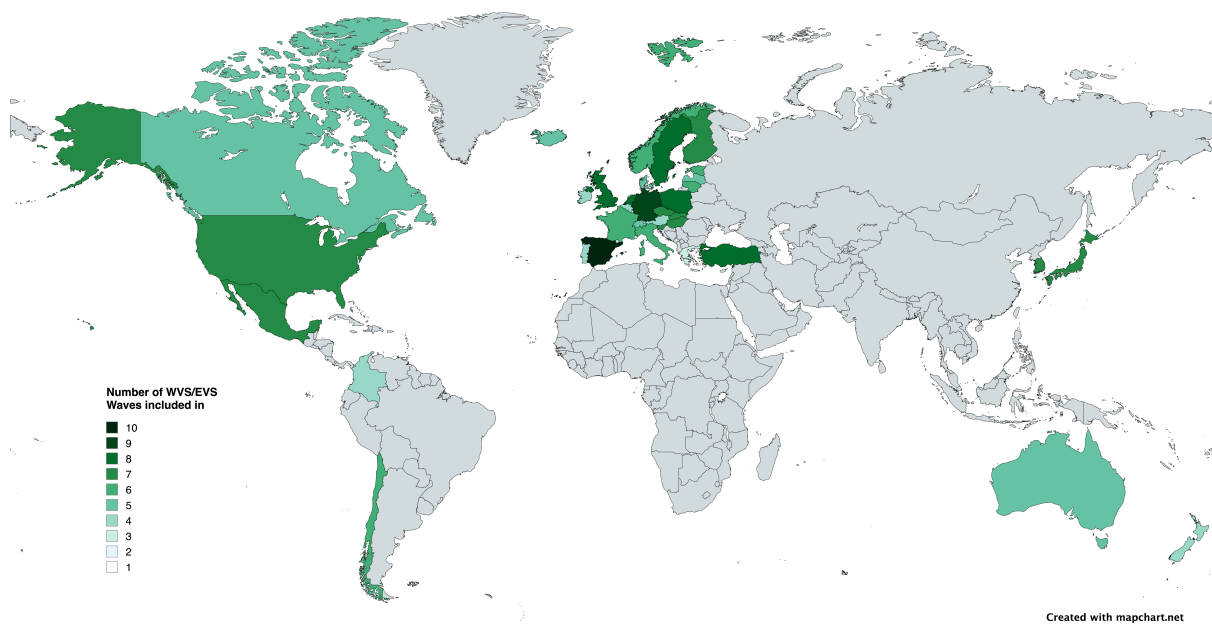


Figure 1: IVS data availability of countries included in the study.

Our main outcome variable is territorial identification with the country—a survey-based measure capturing respondents’ subjective sense of belonging and self-identification with their national community (IVS items G001–G002, G021, G257). This item series allows comparison across survey waves and countries. As a complementary indicator, we use national pride (G006) to examine the degree to which emotional attachment to the country correlates with territorial identification.

At the individual level, we include variables describing respondents’ migration background and legal status, such as citizenship, country of birth, and timing of immigration (G005, G017–G018, G027A–G027B), as well as parental migration status (G026–G027), allowing us to identify both first- and second-generation migrants. To capture variation in societal attitudes toward membership, we further incorporate items measuring population attitudes toward citizenship and belonging (G033–G036), which assess the perceived importance of birthplace, shared civic values, ancestry, or language for “being truly [nationality].”

These individual-level variables are complemented by a new cross-national historical dataset that pulls together historical-contextual indicators of citizenship and naturalization law regimes, political regimes, state typologies and structures, colonial and state formation legacies, conflict, displacement, and state-sanctioned discrimination, cultural, linguistic and religious contexts and diversity, gender and inclusion, socioeconomic development, and other international migration-pertinent variables (see Table 1).

Methods

The analysis proceeds in two stages to link individual experiences of belonging with historical and institutional characteristics of host societies while minimizing bias from compositional and multicollinearity effects.

We first estimate within-country-wave models of territorial identification to obtain adjusted measures of belonging among migrants and their descendants. These models include migration-related variables (generation, citizenship, duration of stay, parental migration status), standard demographic controls, and survey fixed effects. From these estimates, we derive country-wave-specific marginal means of belonging for first- and second-generation migrants and the corresponding “belonging gap” relative to the native-born population. This procedure isolates differences in subjective belonging that are not due to compositional variation in sample characteristics.

In the second stage, we regress the adjusted country-wave outcomes on the wide array of historical and institutional predictors displayed in Table 1. Because these macro-level variables are numerous and often highly correlated, we employ *elastic-net regularization* (Friedman et al. 2010; Zou & Hastie 2005). The elastic net combines the L1 (lasso) and L2 (ridge) penalties to perform simultaneous variable selection and coefficient shrinkage, identifying the most salient predictors while mitigating overfitting. Hyperparameters for the mixing and penalty terms are chosen via k -fold cross-validation clustered at the country level.

We include country and time (survey-wave) fixed effects to account for unobserved heterogeneity and common period shocks, treating them as unpenalized covariates. Robustness checks test alternative specifications of the dependent variable (using national pride instead of territorial identification) and the inclusion of random intercepts to capture hierarchical dependence. Analyses are conducted in R (v4.4) using the `glmnet` and `lfe` packages, and model stability is assessed through repeated resampling and stability-selection procedures.

This two-stage strategy allows us to isolate systematic cross-national and temporal variation in migrants’ and descendants’ subjective belonging and to identify which long-term institutional and historical features are most strongly associated with inclusive versus exclusionary belonging regimes.

Expected Contributions

This study makes both empirical and methodological contributions to the study of migration and integration. Empirically, it introduces a newly compiled historical-contextual dataset that integrates information from diverse sources on citizenship regimes, political systems, colonial and state-formation legacies, cultural and religious diversity, socioeconomic development, and more across OECD countries (see Table 1). This resource enables systematic linkage between long-term institutional histories and contemporary patterns of belonging. Methodologically, the analysis applies regularized machine-learning techniques—specifically elastic-net regression—to historical-demographic research, providing a transparent framework for identifying salient predictors among complex and correlated institutional variables. Substantively, the study contributes to understanding how enduring national legacies shape migrants’ and descendants’ sense of belonging, highlighting both persistent barriers and “bright spots” of inclusive membership. In doing so, it bridges micro-level measures of subjective belonging with macro-historical processes, offering a new way to conceptualize cultural integration as dynamic process contingent on evolving regimes of citizenship and nationhood.

Table 1: Overview of variables and data sources included in the analysis

Conceptual dimension	Variable / Indicator	Source
<i>Subjective belonging (dependent variable)</i>	Territorial identification (G001–G003CS, G019–G022N, G062–G257); National pride (G006)	Integrated Values Surveys (IVS, 1981–2022)
<i>Migration background and legal status</i>	Citizen of country (G005, G027B); Born in country (G017, G027A); Year of immigration (G018); Parents’ birthplace (G026–G027)	IVS
<i>Attitudes toward membership</i>	Importance of ancestry, civic values, language, and birth for “being truly [nationality]” (G033–G036)	IVS
<i>Citizenship regime and access</i>	Birthright citizenship (jus soli); Descent-based citizenship (jus sanguinis); Multiple citizenship acceptance; Naturalization requirements; Foreign-born naturalization rate (2011–2021)	ifo Institute Report; OECD Migration Statistics; GLOBALCIT; MIPEX
<i>State typology and structure</i>	Civic vs. ethnic regime type; Official multinational or multicultural state; Unitary/federal/confederal system; Recognized national minorities; Regime type (Republic, Monarchy, Fascist, Communist); Regime change	Comparative Constitutions Project (CCP); Classifying Political Regimes dataset (Anckar & Fredriksson, 2018)
<i>Colonial and state formation legacy</i>	Multinational empire; Colonial empire; Settler colony; Independence year; Post-colonial status	Colonial Dates Dataset (COLDAT); Gleditsch & Ward (2004)
<i>Legacies of conflict, displacement, and discrimination</i>	State-sanctioned discrimination; Border change; Internal/external ethnic cleansing; Ethnic population exchange; Internal conflict incidence	Ethnic Power Relations (EPR); UCDF/PRIO; Correlates of War (COW); EOSV (UCDF); Right-Peopling the State Dataset
<i>Political regime and democratization</i>	Democracy index; Regime stability; Timing of democratization	V-Dem; Polity V; CCP
<i>Cultural and linguistic context</i>	Official language(s); Majority language; Official multilinguality; Minority language recognition	Custom coding from official language lists; CCP (time-invariant)
<i>Religious context</i>	Official state religion; Majority religion	World Religion Project (WRP, 1945–2007)
<i>Ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity</i>	Ethnic, linguistic, and religious fractionalization indices	Fearon (2003); Alesina et al. (2003)
<i>Gender and inclusion</i>	Women’s property rights; Women’s suffrage; Immigration of women	V-Dem; OECD Migration Database
<i>Socioeconomic development controls</i>	GDP per capita; Urbanization rate; Education; Inequality indices	Maddison Project; Clio Infra; World Bank
<i>Migration context and spatial relationships</i>	Share of population foreign-born; Largest migrant groups; Distance, linguistic similarity, religious similarity, colonial ties	OECD Migration Database; CEPII Gravity Dataset; coordinate-Cleaner package
<i>Survey coverage</i>	Number of IVS/WVS/EVS waves per OECD country; Mean sample size per wave	IVS metadata (1981–2022)

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