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MORE EDUCATED, MORE PRO-IMMIGRATION?

UNDERSTANDING THE CONDITIONAL EFFECT OF EDUCATION ON SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRATION IN EUROPE

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SUMMARY

Education is often seen as a key to fostering more inclusive attitudes toward immigration and building social cohesion in diverse societies. This Policy Paper challenges the idea that education alone can deliver these outcomes. Using data from 20 years of the European Social Survey (2002–2022) across 27 countries and applying multilevel modelling, it shows that the effect of education on immigration attitudes is conditional – shaped by psychological predispositions, economic insecurity, and the broader social context.

Overall, higher levels of education are linked to more favourable views of immigration. However, individuals with self-transcendent values or high social trust benefit more from education's liberalizing effect. Conversely, economic hardship tends to reduce the positive impact of education, especially among those with lower educational attainment. Even among university graduates, financial insecurity correlates with more exclusionary views – though less so than among the less educated.

The findings suggest that education is a vital, but not self-sufficient, driver of democratic resilience. Policy efforts to counter polarization and strengthen civic openness should, therefore, not rely on education alone. They must also address the economic and psychological conditions that allow its full potential to take root.

1. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

Public attitudes toward immigration and refugees are central to the political climate of contemporary Europe (Kriesi et al. 2024). They shape voting behaviour, influence integration policy, and can drive both civic solidarity and societal division. Education is widely regarded as one of the most effective tools for promoting more inclusive attitudes. Higher levels of education are often associated with greater tolerance (Dražanová 2017) and more supportive attitudes toward immigration (Cavaille/Marshall 2019; Dražanová et al. 2024). Based on this strong correlation, some scholars and policymakers have recommended expanding access to education as a means to strengthen social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies, reduce anti-immigrant sentiment, and foster democratic values (European Education and Culture Executive Agency: Eurydice 2016; Inglehart 1977). Yet this approach assumes a direct and universal effect of education, meaning that simply increasing the quantity of higher educated individuals and possibly the quality of the educational systems ought to lead to a spread of liberal attitudes among the general public – an assumption that recent research increasingly challenges. Determining whether education directly causes more positive attitudes remains complex, as findings are mixed. Some studies find no clear causal link (Finseraas et al. 2018; Weber 2022), while others suggest that education has only a modest impact on individual attitudes, which does not always lead to greater openness toward immigration (Simon 2022). In some cases, research indicates a small but positive effect (Velásquez/Eger 2022).

Even when a positive relationship between education and attitudes to immigration is identified, there is little agreement on why it exists or under what conditions it applies. Additionally, much of the existing evidence originates from Western European countries. The assumption that education functions the same way everywhere is increasingly questioned. Cross-national studies indicate that in many countries, education is only a moderate – or even weak – predictor of more tolerant (Dražanová 2017) or pro-immigration attitudes (Borgonovi/Pokropek 2019; Umansky et al. 2025). However, these studies often fail to explain why the impact of education at the individual level varies from one context to another, or they do not systematically investigate the mechanisms behind these differences.

This study seeks to identify the key individual-level factors that shape how education influences public attitudes toward immigration across European societies. Rather than assuming education always fosters more positive views, the analysis explores how its impact depends on broader individual psychological and economic conditions. Specifically, it examines how psychological characteristics and socio-economic status can either strengthen or weaken the link between education and support for immigration. Understanding these complexities is crucial for policymakers considering education-based strategies to foster more inclusive societies and address concerns about immigration in different contexts. Empirical research on political socialization indicates that individuals tend to form their immigration attitudes early in life, though these can be influenced by experiences during early adulthood and the maturation process, after which they generally become more stable (Jeannet/Dražanová 2024). Understanding the conditions under which education shapes immigration attitudes is therefore essential - not only for theory but also for effective policy design.

The Policy Paper is organised as follows. Firstly, it provides a theoretical overview of how and why education should lead to more positive attitudes toward immigration. Secondly, using data from multiple rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS), covering the 2002–2022 timeframe and 27 countries, the study applies advanced statistical multilevel modelling to capture both individual and, to a certain extent, country-level dynamics in the relationship between education and attitudes toward immigration. Instead of assuming a uniform relationship, the study focuses on the conditions that moderate this

link at the individual level. It explores how psychological characteristics (such as human values) and socio-economic status (such as income difficulties) influence whether education fosters support for immigration. Finally, it discusses policy implications based on the results and provides policy recommendations. The aim is to move beyond simple correlations and offer a more realistic understanding of when and for whom education works as a force for positive attitudes to immigration.

2. HOW EDUCATION SHAPES ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION

Education is often viewed as a key driver for fostering more inclusive attitudes toward immigrants in diverse democratic societies. Higher levels of education are associated with increased civic engagement, support for democratic norms, and more open attitudes toward ethnic, racial, and religious minorities (Lijphart 1997; Hillygus 2005; Bobo/Licari 1989; Vogt 1997). This relationship has led many policymakers and scholars to advocate for the expansion of education as a strategy to reduce anti-immigration attitudes and strengthen social cohesion. However, recent evidence suggests that the impact of education on immigration attitudes is not always straightforward or universal.

While education correlates with more pro-immigration attitudes in many Western contexts, cross-national research shows that its effect varies significantly between countries and groups (Umansky et al. 2025; Borgonovi/Pokropek 2019). In some contexts, education is only weakly related to openness toward immigrants, and in others, it may have no discernible effect at all (Frølund Thomsen/Olsen 2017). This variation raises critical questions: What mechanisms drive the link between education and attitudes toward immigration? Why does the effect appear stronger in some societies than others? And what are the conditions under which education is most effective in promoting inclusive views of immigration?

Past studies have rarely explicitly shown at exactly what level education should begin to have its positive impact (Cavaille/Marshall 2019, but see for example Umansky et al. 2025). This approach considers each additional year of schooling to have the same consequence as any other year and therefore expects each higher category of education to lead to more pro-immigration attitudes compared to lower educational categories. For example, Cavaille and Marshall (2019) argue that an additional year of secondary schooling substantially reduces the probability of opposing immigration. However, would an additional year of university have the same effect or stronger? There is no general consensus on whether the effect of education is linear. While most researchers simply include “years of education” to test the effect of education, others point out that it might be only higher education (university) that is of major importance (Scott 2022).

Another complication lies in distinguishing between abstract support and willingness to extend tolerance to specific groups such as immigrants, refugees, or ethnic minorities. Studies have shown that people may endorse general democratic principles but resist extending rights to marginalized or disliked groups (Sullivan et al. 1982; Duch/Gibson 1992). Highly educated individuals may be more likely to express support for immigration in surveys, while in some cases what appears as tolerance may reflect social desirability or awareness of normative expectations, rather than deeply held beliefs (Jackman 1978). On the other hand, one may argue that even if such responses are strategic or superficial, they still contribute to the public legitimacy of liberal norms. Moreover, if highly educated individuals are seen as standard-bearers of societal values, their visible endorsement of pro-immigration attitudes (even when not fully internalized) may influence others and strengthen the cultural salience of inclusivity.

Different theories have been proposed to explain how education influences immigration attitudes. Some emphasize the role of schools as spaces for socialization. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Jacobsen (2001), interactions with peers and teachers can transmit liberal values to students. Through informal socialization, new students are exposed to and often adopt the democratic and tolerant values held by those around them. Others highlight the content of education. Hillygus (2005) finds that curricula that foster language and civic skills promote greater democratic participation. Similarly, Werfhorst and Graaf (2004) and Carnevale et al. (2020) suggest that education emphasizing communication and social skills may be more effective at fostering openness than more technical or task-oriented forms of learning. These findings indicate that education alone does not guarantee the development of tolerant immigration attitudes; the quality, content, and context of education matter greatly.

The role of socio-economic conditions

Public attitudes toward immigration are often shaped by how people perceive its impact on the economy - both personally and more broadly. One influential explanation is the labour market competition hypothesis, which argues that immigration has unequal effects across society. Individuals who are more likely to compete with immigrants for jobs – such as those with lower levels of education – may view immigration more negatively. This perceived threat fosters less favourable immigration attitudes (Svallfors 2006; Persell et al. 2001). In contrast, higher-educated individuals, who tend to occupy more secure social positions, are less likely to view immigrants as threats (Gerber et al. 2017; Margalit 2019). In addition to concerns about jobs, economic opposition to immigration can also stem from sociotropic considerations, that is, worries about how immigration affects public finances and the welfare state. For example, lower-income individuals who rely on

the welfare system may be concerned about having to share limited resources (Gerber et al. 2017).

Economic conditions can therefore moderate the effect of education – under economic strain, even higher-educated individuals may express more restrictive attitudes. Conversely, in times of economic stability, the gap in immigration attitudes between education groups may widen. This highlights the importance of considering both structural conditions and individual characteristics when explaining public opinion on immigration. However, research shows that education and socio-economic status often have independent effects (Stubager 2008). While economic conditions matter, they do not fully explain away the role of education in shaping immigration attitudes.

The role of psychological predispositions

Social-psychological theories offer further insights into why education may affect immigration attitudes differently across individuals. Education may also shape immigration attitudes through traits like personal security and perceived control over one's life. Educated individuals often feel more capable of navigating complex social environments, which reduces fear of difference and promotes psychological stability (Jenssen/Engesbak 1994). They are also more likely to exhibit interpersonal and social trust, which has been linked to lower perceptions of threat from immigrants and outgroups. Importantly, these traits can moderate the impact of education on immigration attitudes. In short, education may make individuals feel secure, in control, and open to difference and this, in turn, may impact their attitudes to immigration.

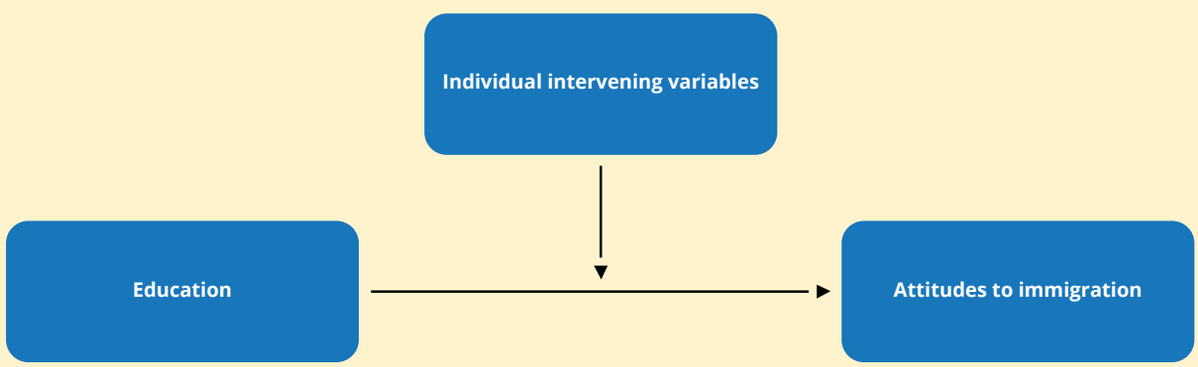
The influence of education on immigration attitudes is shaped not only by knowledge acquisition or exposure to diversity but also by individuals' underlying value orientations. Two particularly relevant value dimensions are conservation (emphasizing tradition, security, and social conformity) and self-transcendence (emphasizing universalism, empathy, and concern for the welfare of others) (Lechner et al. 2024). According to Schwartz's theory of basic human values, individuals high in conservation values may be more resistant to change, while those high in self-transcendence are more likely to support inclusive and humanitarian policies (Schwartz/Cieciuch 2022). These value predispositions can moderate how people internalize and act on the information and norms they encounter through education. In other words, even with similar educational backgrounds, individuals who strongly prioritize conformity and tradition may be less likely to translate their education into pro-immigration attitudes. Conversely, individuals who value empathy and openness to others may be more receptive to education's liberalizing influence. Understanding these interactions is crucial for designing educational and communication strategies that resonate across diverse value systems.

Figure 1 presents the theoretical model guiding the analysis presented here. It illustrates how education influences attitudes toward immigration, both directly and indirectly through individual-level intervening variables. These intervening factors, such as economic insecurity, social trust, or personal values, can moderate the relationship between education and immigration attitudes, helping to explain why the effect of education varies across individuals.

3. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The following analysis relies on biannual data from the European Social Survey (ESS) for the period 2002–2022 in 27 European countries and a sample of 363,672 respondents. The ESS survey instrument has been widely used by scholars to measure attitudes towards immigration. Multilevel models are used to assess how personal factors interact with education to produce either positive or negative attitudes toward immigration while controlling for cross-country differences in this relationship. Nevertheless, the main emphasis is not on cross-country differences, but on how individual-level moderators shape the education–immigration attitudes relationship in different societal contexts.

Figure 1: The theoretical model of the effect of education on attitudes to immigration and moderating variables



Source: Own Elaboration

Attitudes to immigration

The measure of attitudes to immigration is a composite index that measures a person's overall assessment of the impact of immigration on their society. Respondents were asked three questions: (1) Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries? (2) Would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries? and (3) Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? Answers are coded on an eleven-point scale where 0 is the most negative and 10 is the most positive reply. I created an additive index ranging from 0 to 30. The index has been widely used by other scholars studying attitudes to immigration (see for example Gorodzeisky/Semyonov 2018; McLaren/Paterson 2019; Jeannet/Dražanová 2024). Those respondents with missing values on all three items were excluded from the analysis, while those answering at least 2 out of the three questions have been retained.

Measuring education across countries

To understand how education shapes immigration attitudes, it's essential to measure educational attainment in a way that makes sense across countries with very different school systems. In the European Social Survey, education is captured in two ways: the age someone left school, and the highest level of education completed. For the purposes of cross-country comparison, the second measure – the highest level attained – is the most meaningful. This is because the age at which people leave school varies greatly by country (each European country has different years of obligatory schooling and a different age at which obligatory schooling starts) and may not reflect the actual level of education.

Based on the original European Social Survey classification, I divided education into five detailed categories, ranging from (0) less than lower secondary, (1) lower secondary education, (2) upper secondary education, (3) sub-degree and (4) university-level education. Instead of treating education as a continuous scale assuming that each step in schooling has the same effect, I treat it as a set of categories. This is because it's unrealistic to assume that every year of education contributes equally to shaping attitudes. For example, two consecutive years in secondary school may not have the same impact as the transition from secondary school to university. Treating education as categorical allows us to better capture meaningful shifts in educational experience and their impact on immigration attitudes. This also allows me to ask more practical questions, such as: At what point does education start influencing immigration attitudes? Does completing secondary education make a difference, or is the impact seen only at the university level? This approach also helps to identify whether the effect of education is consistent or varies by level.

Moderating variables

Economic hardship is measured by personal income difficulties. Unfortunately, the variable measuring unemployment had too many missing values to be used in the analysis. Income difficulties are measured as a binary variable that captures whether individuals report experiencing economic hardship. It is derived from the original ESS subjective household income variable. Respondents who say it is "difficult" or "very difficult" to live on their income are coded as 1 (indicating hardship), while those reporting they are "coping" or "living comfortably" are coded as 0. Measuring subjective income can often provide a more accurate reflection of how individuals perceive their own economic situation, which is especially important when studying attitudes and preferences. Unlike objective income, which captures actual earnings, subjective income accounts for feelings of financial security, relative deprivation, and economic anxiety, i.e. factors that are closely linked to attitudes to immigration. People with the same objective income may experience very different levels of economic stress depending on their expectations, debt, or comparison with others, making subjective income a more meaningful predictor in many attitudinal analyses. Moreover, the variable measuring real income in the European Social Survey includes many missing values and would lead to a significant drop in the overall sample.

Psychological moderators are measured by social trust, overall life happiness, and the values of conservation and self-transcendence. Social trust is an index of generalized social trust, created by averaging responses to three standard ESS items: (1) whether most people can be trusted, (2) whether people are fair, and (3) whether people are helpful. The index is calculated for each respondent when at least two items are non-missing and ranges from 0 to 30, with higher values indicating more social trust. Overall happiness is measured by directly asking the respondent how happy they are in their life and the variable ranges from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 10 (extremely happy).

Conservation captures preferences for tradition, conformity, and security. It is based on six value items (e.g., the importance of behaving properly, being safe, and respecting tradition), using the best available version (male or female) when applicable. All items are reverse-coded so that higher scores reflect stronger conservation values and then averaged to create a raw index. Self-transcendence reflects concern for others and universal values such as tolerance, equality, and protecting the environment. It is created by combining five reverse-coded items that measure empathy, helpfulness, environmental protection, loyalty, and understanding. The items are averaged to create the overall self-transcendence score. Both measures range from 1 to 6.

Other variables in the model

Other statistical controls that might influence attitudes to immigration included in the analysis are age, gender, living in an urban setting, left-right political self-placement, political interest, religiosity, overall life satisfaction and being a citizen of the country where the respondent has been surveyed.

4. KEY FINDINGS

Regression results confirm that education has a statistically significant effect on attitudes toward immigration at all levels of attainment, compared to those respondents with only basic (less than lower secondary) education. However, the strength of this effect varies considerably across education groups, indicating a clear non-linear pattern. These findings show that the impact of education is not uniform across the board – transitions between levels, particularly from secondary to university education, are associated with disproportionately larger shifts in attitudes. This supports the decision to model education categorically and highlights the importance of targeting interventions not just by years of schooling, but by key educational milestones.

To better understand how the effect of education on immigration attitudes varies across countries, a more flexible model was estimated allowing the effect of education to differ by country. This so-called random slope model shows that not only do average education levels matter, but the strength of the relationship between education and immigration attitudes is not the same everywhere. In some countries, education has a stronger positive effect, while in others the effect is more modest.[1]

To look more specifically at the national context, a regression with interactions for education and countries was performed. While higher education is often associated with more positive views, this relationship is not uniform. In the base country (Austria), the coefficients for education levels increase progressively, suggesting a positive but non-linear effect - each level of education adds more to support for immigration than the previous one. However, once we consider the interaction terms with country, it becomes evident that these effects differ substantially depending on national context. For instance, the positive effect of university education is particularly pronounced in countries like France, Great Britain, Ireland, and Sweden, where the interaction terms are large and significant. By contrast, in countries like Bulgaria and Slovakia, the interaction effects are negative or not significant, indicating that university education has a much weaker or even negative association with pro-immigration attitudes.

A similar pattern emerges for secondary education. In some countries, such as Denmark, Spain, and the Netherlands, even lower levels of completed secondary education significantly boost support for immigration. In others, like Hungary or Croatia, the effect is more modest or inconsistent. These findings highlight that education does not have a uniform, direct effect across contexts. Instead, its impact is shaped by country-specific factors, likely including how immigration is framed in the media, the curriculum content, or prevailing political narratives.

Crucially, these results challenge the idea that the relationship between education and immigration attitudes is linear or automatic. Rather, the data suggests that what education means in terms of shaping values depends heavily on where it's received and at what level. This has important implications for policymakers: expanding access to education alone may not be enough to foster inclusive attitudes - the quality, content, and context of education matter just as much. These results highlight the importance of considering the national context when designing education-based strategies to promote more inclusive attitudes. What works in one country may not have the same effect in another.

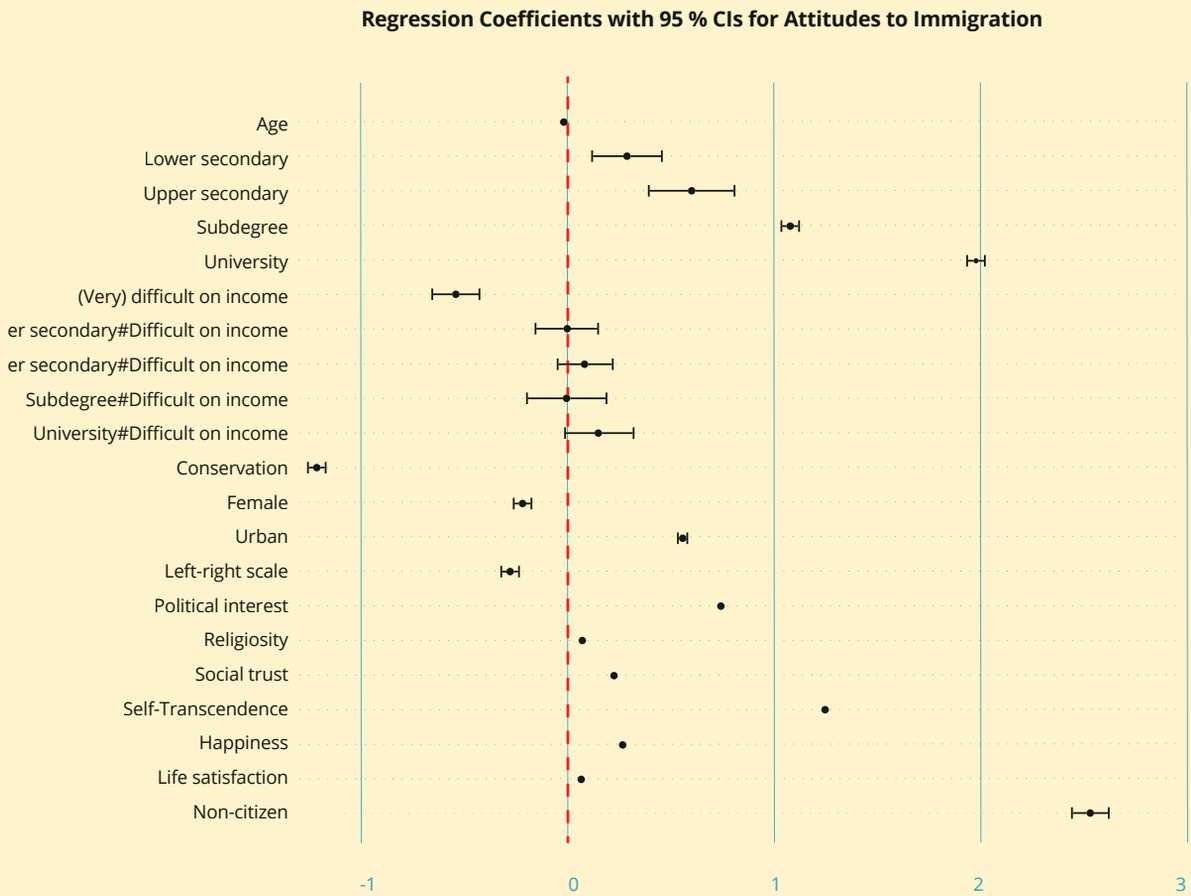
In addition to education, several other factors significantly influence public attitudes toward immigration. Age is negatively associated with support for immigration, meaning that younger individuals tend to hold more inclusive views. Women are also slightly less supportive than men, while residents in urban areas consistently express more positive attitudes compared to those in rural areas. Non-citizens are significantly more likely to hold pro-immigration attitudes. Economic insecurity plays a notable role - people who report difficulties making ends meet are significantly less likely to express pro-immigration views. Political orientation and interest matter as well - individuals who place themselves further to the right on the ideological scale, or who report low political interest, tend to be more sceptical of immigration. In contrast, higher levels of interpersonal trust, happiness and life satisfaction are all associated with more favourable immigration attitudes. Notably, both conservation and self-transcendence values have strong effects: those who prioritize tradition and conformity tend to oppose immigration, while those who emphasize understanding, tolerance, and concern for others are more supportive.

The moderating role of income difficulties

The results from the interaction model between education and income difficulties reinforce a strong and consistent relationship between higher education and support for immigration. Support increases significantly at each step of the educational ladder, with the most substantial gains seen among those with university education. Importantly,

1 A likelihood-ratio (LR) test comparing the random slope model to a simpler model with only random intercepts confirms that allowing the slope of education to vary significantly improves model fit (LR $\chi^2 = 1669.94$, $p < 0.001$). This means that cross-country variation in how education influences immigration attitudes is statistically significant and cannot be ignored.

Figure 2: Effect of education and income difficulties and their interaction on attitudes to immigration



Values to the right of 0 indicate more pro-immigration attitudes; values to the left indicate more restrictive ones. Dots show estimated effects, lines represent 95% confidence intervals. If a line touches 0, the result is not statistically significant. Interaction terms show how education effects differ depending on income difficulties.

Source: European Social Survey 2002-2022

this relationship is non-linear – each additional level of education is associated with a greater boost in support, and this boost becomes particularly pronounced for university graduates, suggesting that the impact of education intensifies at the upper end of the attainment scale.

Economic hardship, however, remains a key factor in shaping attitudes. As shown in Figure 2, across all educational groups, individuals experiencing financial difficulties are less supportive of immigration. Yet university education seems to buffer this effect more than other education levels. While most interaction terms between education and income difficulty were not statistically significant, the interaction for university education approached significance (b = 0.15, p = 0.088), pointing to a meaningful, if modest, moderation effect.

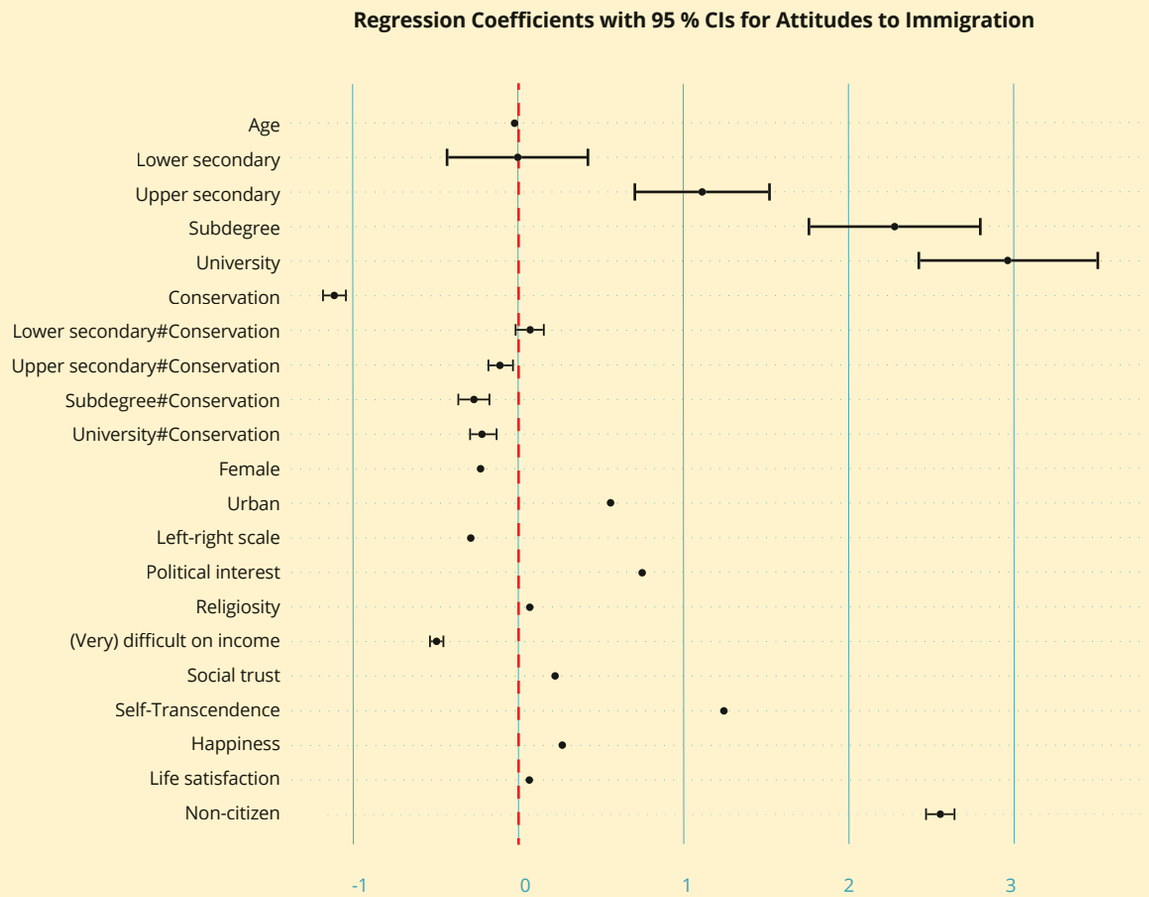
This is further supported by the marginal effects analysis. Among university-educated respondents, those who are financially comfortable show a substantial boost in support for immigration (AME = 1.99, $p < 0.001$). Crucially, this support remains high even among university graduates facing income difficulties (AME = 2.14, $p < 0.001$). In other words, economic hardship does not erode pro-immigration attitudes among university-educated individuals to the same extent as it does for less-educated groups. This pattern suggests that the cognitive or value-based resources associated with higher education may offer some resilience against the pressures of economic insecurity.

Together, these findings highlight the importance of both education and material wellbeing in shaping immigration attitudes. While higher education, especially at the university level, can foster inclusive views and mitigate some of the effects of economic stress, it does not completely neutralize them.

The moderating role of psychological variables

The results from the interaction models with psychological moderators offer strong evidence that psychological orientations significantly shape the relationship

Figure 3: Effect of education and conservation and their interaction on attitudes to immigration



Values to the right of 0 mean the variable is linked to more pro-immigration attitudes; values to the left mean more restrictive views. Dots show estimated effects, lines represent 95% confidence intervals. If a line crosses 0, the effect is not statistically significant. Interaction terms indicate how education effects change depending on a person's conservative values.

Source: European Social Survey 2002-2022

between education and support for immigration. These findings help us understand not only *whether* education matters for inclusive attitudes, but *for whom* and *under what conditions* it matters most.

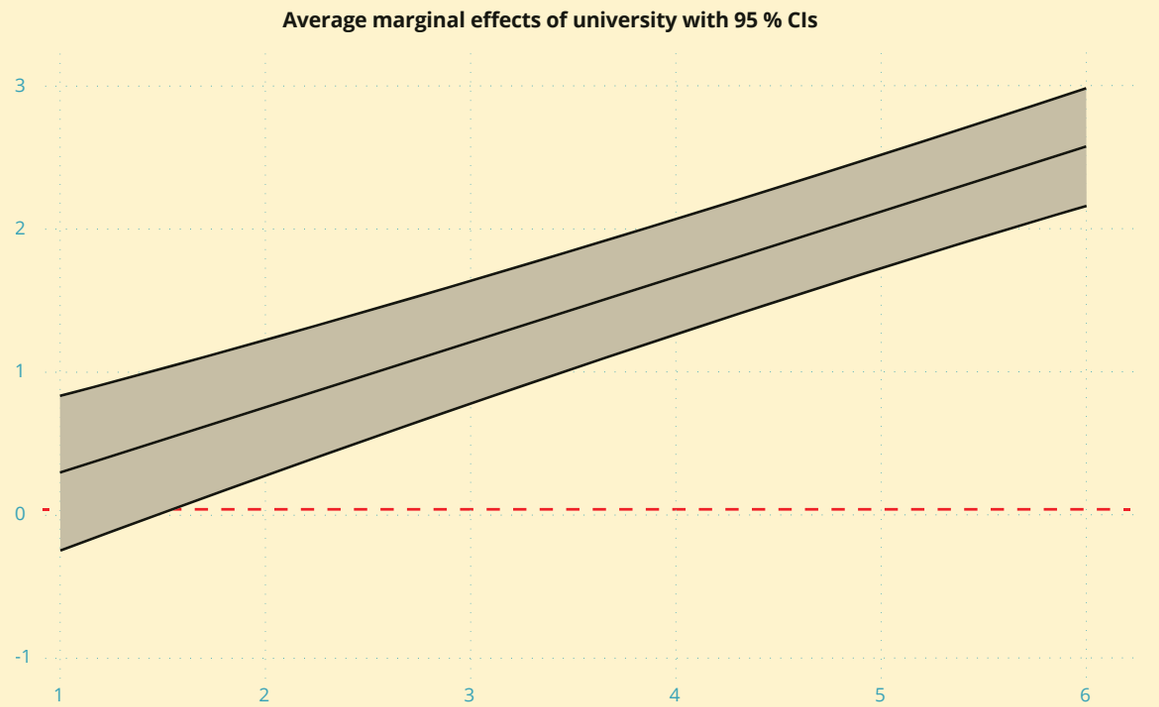
Social trust

The interaction between education and social trust suggests that trust in others amplifies the positive association between education and support for immigration. While higher education already predicts more favourable attitudes, this effect grows stronger as trust increases. Among those with a sub-degree or university-level education, social trust significantly boosts support for immigration (b = 0.05 and 0.012, respectively). The marginal effects plot shows a clear trend: the positive impact of university education becomes more pronounced with increasing levels of social trust, growing from 1.86 among those with no trust to over 2.21 among those with very high social trust. This indicates that education and social trust work synergistically - trust provides the social outlook necessary for inclusive attitudes.

Conservation values

The interaction of education with conservation values (which reflect the preference for tradition, conformity, and security) shown in Figure 3 reveals a buffering effect. As the preference for conservation values increases, the positive effect of education on immigration support declines, especially for those with sub-degree or university education. For example, the interaction term for university-educated respondents is negative and significant (b = -0.21, $p < 0.001$), indicating that among those with strong conservative value orientations, the impact of higher education is substantially dampened. The marginal effects curve clearly illustrates this: the benefit of a university education declines steadily as conservation values rise, from 2.74 among low-conservation individuals to just 1.68 among those with high conservation. This highlights a value-based ceiling on education's liberalizing potential.

Figure 4: Average marginal effects of university and self-transcendence on attitudes to immigration



This figure shows how university education affects immigration attitudes depending on levels of self-transcendence (e.g. empathy, concern for others). Values above 0 mean education leads to more pro-immigration views at that level of self-transcendence. The shaded area represents the 95% confidence interval; if it includes 0, the effect is not statistically significant at that level.

Source: Source: European Social Survey 2002-2022

Self-transcendence

In contrast, self-transcendence values (which reflect universalism and concern for others) reinforce the educational effect. The interaction terms are all positive and significant, particularly at higher levels of education. Marginal effects shown in Figure 4 reveal that university-educated individuals with high self-transcendence scores express substantially more positive attitudes, with predicted effects growing from 0.25 to over 2.55 as self-transcendence increases. This demonstrates that this type of value orientation can powerfully enhance the inclusive impact of higher education.

Happiness

Finally, happiness also moderates the education-attitudes link, albeit more modestly. The interaction term for university-educated individuals is positive and significant ($b = 0.043$, $p = 0.018$), suggesting that subjective well-being modestly boosts the positive impact of education. Marginal effects show that the university effect grows from 1.70 among the least happy to 2.13 among the happiest respondents. Though less dramatic than the effects of value orientations, this still suggests that psychological well-being may provide emotional resources that help translate education into more pro-immigration attitudes.

Together, these interaction models show that education is not a standalone shield against exclusionary attitudes – its effect depends on individuals' psychological predispositions. Social trust, self-transcendent values orientations, and emotional well-being reinforce the liberalizing effect of education, while conservation values can constrain it.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

This research shows that education plays an important, but not universal, role in shaping public attitudes toward immigration. Higher levels of education are generally associated with more positive perceptions of immigration's societal effects. However, this relationship is not automatic nor equally strong for all individuals or across all contexts. Its strength depends heavily on people's economic security and psychological dispositions. In particular, individuals with strong prosocial values (e.g., high self-transcendence or social trust) experience larger support for immigration as education increases. By contrast, those with more conservation-oriented values or economic insecurity show weaker responsiveness to educational attainment. This suggests that education is most effective in shaping attitudes when it aligns with underlying predispositions and is delivered in supportive social and economic conditions.

Moreover, the effect of education is context-dependent, shaping how education is received and how it translates into attitudes. In some settings, formal education may reinforce dominant values that are exclusionary, rather than inclusive.

Policy recommendations

Acknowledge the limits and variability of education's impact. Education can play a role in shaping more inclusive immigration attitudes, but its effects are neither automatic nor uniform. Education is not a silver bullet. Policymakers should be cautious not to overstate its influence or assume it leads to uniform outcomes. Studies show significant country and regional variation. For instance, the liberalizing effect of education on immigration attitudes is notably weaker in countries that have not been democratic for decades and even shows differences between East Germany compared to West Germany. Policymakers should avoid assuming that expanding educational attainment alone will lead to broader societal cohesion.

Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. Effective strategies must account for national, local, and cultural contexts. What works in one setting may not translate elsewhere. National-level education strategies should be complemented with regionally tailored approaches. In areas where education has had limited influence on openness to immigration, civic education programs should be adapted to reflect local histories and concerns, using trusted local actors to increase relevance and effectiveness. One-size-fits-all approaches risk reinforcing existing divides rather than bridging them.

Support economic stability alongside education. Economic insecurity can dampen the effects of education on immigration attitudes. When people feel economically vulnerable, they may be more susceptible to exclusionary or threat-based narratives, regardless of their educational background. Supporting economic stability through robust social safety nets, fair labor market policies, and access to public services is essential to unlock the civic potential of education.

Promote civic and value-aware curricula. Curricula should not just deliver knowledge but foster democratic values, pluralism, and critical thinking. Evidence suggests that formal education alone is insufficient unless paired with content that promotes civic engagement and equips individuals to understand and respect diversity. This is particularly relevant in polarized or post-authoritarian contexts, where formal education may not inherently support democratic socialization.

Tailor interventions to different audiences. People differ in how they interpret and respond to education based on psychological values like conservation and levels of interpersonal trust. Civic initiatives such as structured deliberative forums, community-based dialogues, or targeted outreach programs can help engage those who are less responsive to classroom-based learning alone. Education policy should consider not just content, but delivery and audience.

6. CONCLUSION

Education is often viewed as a foundation for tolerance and social cohesion. Expanding access to higher education can foster more reflective and open societies. However, education alone is not sufficient. This research shows that its influence on immigration attitudes is shaped by more than just access to schooling. Individuals do not absorb the effects of education in isolation – they interpret and respond to it through the lens of their personal values, experiences, and broader social environments. Education's impact is significantly conditioned by psychological predispositions such as basic human values, levels of social trust, and economic security. Even among the highly educated, financial hardship can temper support for immigration. Moreover, the moderating role of psychological traits may partly reflect self-selection, i.e. those predisposed to certain values may be both more likely to pursue higher education and to hold particular social attitudes.

For policymakers working to foster social cohesion, the key insight is that education matters but its effects are contingent. Rather than treating education as a universal remedy, effective strategies must address the full range of structural, psychological, and contextual factors that shape public attitudes. Only by integrating educational access with broader investments in social trust, civic resilience, and economic security can societies foster constructive public engagement with immigration in a diverse Europe.

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PROFILE

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