



## Policies & Governance in Europe

Course of Data Analysis for Social Sciences

# Government Trust and Migration Attitudes: A Comparative Study of Northern and Southern Europe

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## **Abstract**

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This thesis examines the relationship between institutional trust and public attitudes toward migrants in three European Union Member States: Germany, Spain, and Italy. Given the rise in polarization and growing aversion toward migrants in Europe, this link is significant. Therefore, this study explores whether institutional trust, which is defined as the confidence in the competence, fairness and transparency of political and legal institutions, can stabilize migration attitudes and foster social cohesion. Moreover, this research is grounded in theories of Social Identity, the minimal group paradigm, threat perception, and intergroup contact (Jost and Sidanius, 2004; Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Turner, Brown and Tajfel, 1979).

These different psychological theories provide a framework for analyzing how individuals perceive migrants and how these perceptions are affected by institutional legitimacy. This study focuses on three research questions: To what extent is higher institutional trust associated with favourable attitudes towards migrants? How does the regional migrant presence (contact theory) affect immigration attitudes? And lastly, how does institutional trust moderate the relationship between migrants' presence and attitudes towards them? These research questions are investigated using the European Social Survey (ESS, Round 10) and regional migration statistics from national sources (ISTAT, INE, Destatis). To grasp this relationship further, the analysis uses a multilevel mixed-effects regression model on a sample of over 18,000 individuals nested within 38 NUTS-2 regions. The results from this study show that institutional trust emerges as a robust and statistically significant predictor of favourable migration attitudes. This effect was consistent even after controlling for age, education, gender, ideology and country characteristics. Conversely, the presence of migrants does not affect attitudes towards immigrants and institutional trust does not moderate the effect of migrant presence, which challenges the assumptions drawn from the psychological frameworks used in this study. This highlights the limited influence of regional exposure to migration flows in shaping public sentiment. However, some exploratory models reveal that institutional trust significantly moderates the effect of political ideology, suggesting that institutional trust may serve as a buffer against ideological polarization. In particular, this research piece finds that, though unable to erase ideological divides, institutional trust reduces their influence on migration perceptions. The results here position institutional trust as a direct predictor of inclusive migration attitudes and a moderating factor that can dampen ideological

extremes. It concludes that rebuilding institutional trust is essential for reducing migrant aversion, promoting cohesion, and ensuring effective and sustainable migration governance.

## **Introduction**

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In a time where mass polarization, distrust, and aversion towards migrants are prevailing across Europe and the world, the management of migration integration as a policy problem is central to this thesis. This crisis began with the Arab Spring in 2011, a series of anti-government protests across the Arab World. Thereafter, migration flow intensified with the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, leading to the mass arrival of refugees and migrants in Europe in 2015 (Caponio and Ponzo, 2022a, p. 12). This historical event starkly changed the European migration narrative. The reasons for migrants arriving thereafter were conflict, economic instability, or persecution. Initially, Italy and Greece were the largest recipients; however, over time, Spain also became a major destination as burden-sharing mechanisms expanded. By contrast, Germany acted as the largest recipient of asylum requests and offered the most aid among Northern European countries (Caponio and Ponzo, 2022a).

Moreover, this crisis, which began in 2015, persists today, as illustrated in a report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In 2024, Germany ranked first, with 229,695 migrants, followed by Spain, which ranked second with 164,000 migrants, and France, which ranked third with 132,825 migrants (IOM, 2025, p. 5). This report also mentions the highly contested European Union (EU) asylum claims and return legislative framework for 2025, drafted by the EU Commission. Additionally, the continuous flow of migrants and shifting legal framework, from the initial Amsterdam Treaty through the latest EU migration pact, underscore that this crisis remains a policy problem (Ambrosini and Petrovic, 2023; Karageorgiou and Noll, 2022). At the same time, institutional distrust is also rising in Europe, with 74.5% of citizens lacking trust in their institutions and 64% in international ones (Mingo and Faggiano, 2020, p. 825). This fact is crucial because institutional distrust is linked to increased polarization, which hinges on securitization narratives that influence migration (Mingo and Faggiano, 2020, p. 816).

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of considering culture, economic instability, and class when studying factors influencing migration (Bonjour and Chauvin, 2018).

Considering Europe's economic instability in the past decade and the impact of COVID-19, better cohesion policies are necessary. Additionally, the very fabric of European unity is being tested by the rise of anti-migrant groups and polarization. However, migration is neither new nor unnatural for humans. In fact, it is a fundamental element of human history, dating back to prehistoric times. This paper examines the mechanism of institutional trust to determine whether it can serve as a buffer against aversion towards migrants. In this thesis, institutional trust refers to citizens' faith in the integrity, efficiency, and competency of their governments (Kaasa and Andriani, 2022, p.46).

The EU has a vital role in this matter, as this issue raises questions about its democratic governance and human rights. Additionally, the lack of compliance with Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), regarding the concept of solidarity, has intensified the relations among EU Member States (MS) (Karageorgiou and Noll, 2022). The numerous re-drafts and current issues presented by the new "legal framework" for processing migrants, linked to violations of international human rights (De Leo, 2025, p. 107), demonstrate the urgency for alternative policy solutions. Additionally, to foster greater stability and cohesion within the EU, it is essential to address polarization as it drives these sentiments. This thesis posits that addressing this political phenomenon could be central to future migration frameworks by exploring institutional trust's impact. The EU plays a significant role in the global landscape, as its policies and laws establish standards and regulations that extend beyond its borders, a phenomenon known as the "Brussels Effect" (Bradford, 2020). Therefore, if they conceive a new policy framework, the impact would not be limited to Europe; it would extend worldwide.

According to scholars such as Mungiu-Pippidi (2020a), institutional trust is a pillar for good governance and fosters greater social cohesion. Although they highlight that achieving this form of trust in practice is difficult, particularly in international contexts, it requires greater transparency and integrity. Additionally, the World Bank (2020) argues that before achieving institutional trust, "social trust," meaning social cohesion, is a cornerstone to its success. Thus, it is of interest to analyze the relationship between migration, which is a challenge to social cohesion, and institutional trust during periods of mass polarization. However, as this crisis continues to be a policy problem, this study suggests a deeper examination of trust to understand the factors that

could foster a more successful framework. The paper will include psychological, political science, and sociological frames to analyze this policy problem. Through quantitative methods, this analysis aims to support the benefits of institutional trust and its influence on shaping perceptions of migrants, incentivizing greater and more sustainable social cohesion.

Multiple research studies have examined the influence of political parties, institutions, and governments (Bonjour and Chauvin, 2018; Macdonald and Cornacchione, 2023). However, the literature lacks studies that unite the analysis of institutional trust, how they shape perceptions of migrants and how their presence is part of the dialogue. This paper argues that this combination of elements could be crucial to improve the chances of policy success when it comes to integration policies. Additionally, the current upheaval of democratic backsliding, institutional delegitimization, and widespread political erosion highlights the importance of studying this topic. The research question addressed in this study is to what extent institutional trust correlates with attitudes towards migrants in Italy, Spain, and Germany. It will also examine whether the presence of migrants in “hotspots” influences migration attitudes. In here, hotspots refer to geographical areas that hold the highest number of migrants within a nation-state. Lastly, this study will also explore whether institutional trust can moderate the relationship between migrant presence and migration attitudes.

Therefore, this analysis will use individual-level data from these three countries. It will also analyze the influence on perceptions depending on hotspots, political ideation, and trust. The legal status of migrants will not be studied in this paper since the focus is on perceptions of migrants recorded by citizens of MS. Furthermore, this analysis focuses on citizens' institutional trust and its effect on migration perceptions. While wars occur worldwide and near Europe, which can generate new migration waves, it is crucial to consider factors promoting cohesion. A comprehensive migration framework may support stronger market integration, less political fragmentation, and uphold European values. Therefore, if trust is a significant factor, rebuilding it should be a central focus for future European policies in this domain.

In summary, this paper is important for social cohesion and sustainable governance to mitigate the migratory crisis in Europe and Worldwide. This research will expand into the literature

review to analyze how policies and institutions shape perceptions of migrants. This review will then examine how institutional trust is essential for sustainable migration governance. It will then delve into the methodology and data analysis sections. Lastly, it will address these findings and suggest policy solutions to foster sustainable governance in Europe in this regard.

## **Chapter 1 – Theoretical Framework**

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### **1.1 How Policies and Perceptions Shape Migrant Aversion and Hinder Integration**

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Migration has emerged as one of the most pressing and politically sensitive issues European governments have faced recently. It has mobilized intense public and political debates across the continent, often dividing nations and influencing electoral outcomes (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo, 2021; Macdonald and Cornacchione, 2023; Oso, López-Sala and Muñoz-Comet, 2021). The EU and its MS have implemented a range of management strategies attempting to mitigate these flows (Larin, 2020). These measures include tighter border controls, stricter asylum procedures, and agreements with third countries. Despite the numerous approaches, the management of borders whilst upholding human rights has been challenging (De Leo, 2025). This visible struggle reflects the pressure on policymakers to address citizens' growing demands for control over this matter.

#### **1.1.1 Policy Design as a Driver of Social Division**

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Amid this crisis, numerous MS have attempted different management strategies. Kalogeraki's (2012) study focused on the impact these integration policies had on perceptions of migrants and their potential to divide society. It shows how exclusive integration policies fostered threat perception bias, whereas inclusive ones diminished the ethnic threat. Threat perception refers to citizens' fear that migrants may negatively impact the social, political, economic, and national identity of their country. They found that countries like Greece, which practiced exclusionist integration policies, fostered greater threat perception and intense inter-group relations. Conversely, Sweden's implementation of inclusive integration policies was associated with more moderate relations and greater integration. According to Kalogeraki, this divide in perception stems from the policies themselves. They further argue that research in this field mainly observes citizens' perceptions without considering those of migrants. Their study goes beyond prior research and integrates migrants' perceptions. This difference allowed for a more

comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of these frameworks, as it enabled a thorough assessment of inter-group dynamics. Lastly, these findings illustrate how migration policies can institutionalize societal biases, urging a reflection on what incentivizes integration. This highlights the relevance of examining perceptions of citizens in these legislations.

### 1.1.2 The Mutual Reinforcement of Social Perception and Institutional Structures

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Moreover, discrimination manifests itself in multiple ways within migration policies. An excellent example is Bonjour & Chauvin's (2018) research, which investigated how social perceptions of class, financial status, ethnicity, and gender are embedded in our institutions. They wanted to grasp the interplay between social biases and migration policies to determine whether one reinforces the other. One of the key findings was the divisive language practices transmitted by society, in which they highlight the situational usage of terms such as "ex-pats" instead of "migrants." Those who were considered "ex-pats" were akin to the middle-class concept of European identity. This was determined by education, ethnic background and language. By contrast, those who were not perceived as socially or economically aligned with the host country were labelled as "migrants." This linguistic division illustrates how these social biases create in-groups and out-groups, in turn hindering the integration process. These divisive practices were reinforced by MS through the concept of meritocracy. Citizens who shared the practices and values of the host were exempt, for instance, from integration courses and programs. This also limits the success and opportunities migrants have when integrating into host societies. In summary, Bonjour and Chauvin (2018) demonstrate that migration policies reflect societal connotations and are reinforced by institutions. This means that nation-states using the concept of meritocracy unintentionally create differences in the integration process. This study's findings are key to understanding societies and institutions' involvement in shaping these frameworks.

In addition, research conducted by Suerbaum and Richter-Devroe (2022) recognizes how equally important it is to examine the influence of legal institutional structures on this procedure. The findings demonstrate traces of aversion in the legal and bureaucratic sphere. This form of discrimination hinders their integration with the host country. Therefore, integration is not merely a social process; instead, it is also shaped by legal and institutional mechanisms. These studies show how perceptions of migrants are both shaped and embedded within social and institutional structures. They also preface the need to observe its impact given their influence on integration.



Lastly, these insights reinforce the relevance of studying the first hypothesis, which attempts to understand if higher institutional trust reflects more positive migration attitudes.

### 1.1.3 Social Identity Theory and the Foundations of Migrant Perception

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The phenomenon we observed, where society separates in-group “ex-pats” and out-group “migrants,” stems from psychology. This divisive practice can be explained through Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Minimal Group Paradigm theory. Tajfel and Turner conceived these frameworks between the late 1960s and early 1970s (Jost and Sidanius, 2004; Turner, Brown and Tajfel, 1979). To comprehend group formation, they examined how social categorization shapes individuals and their group behaviours. Moreover, they intended to comprehend the unique factors which drive group behaviours and distinguish them from others. According to their theory of SIT, individuals derive their identity from multiple social categories that aid their self-categorization. They determined the key identity traits contributing to this classification are ethnicity, social class, sex, and religion (Jost and Sidanius, 2004; Turner, Brown and Tajfel, 1979). Succinctly, they observed how these characteristics influenced implicit group behaviours, aiding the categorization process. Therefore, they determined that socially relevant values are important for group formation and aversion dynamics.

After establishing the importance of SIT and its socially significant categories, Tajfel aimed to study whether this effect was replicable in the Minimal Group Paradigm theory (Jost and Sidanius, 2004; Billig and Tajfel, 1973). The theory posits that group formation can stem from a trivial characteristic that is not socially relevant. The research explored two groups, based on preferences for the paintings by Paul Klee and the other by Wassily Kandinsky (Jost and Sidanius, 2004; Billig and Tajfel, 1973). This resulted in the formation of in-groups and out-group aversion towards each other. This result is significant since it indicates that arbitrary distinctions can form groups and trigger bias and hostility. It also highlighted the facility of group formation and exclusionary attitudes, which are relevant to this study. This research also reinforces Bonjour & Chauvin’s (2018) and Kalogeraki’s (2012) findings and highlights the importance of individual-level biases as potential considerations in policy design. These psychological processes permit us to grasp the individual factors influencing perceptions of migrants. They also help us understand the social aspects impacting migration policies. Specifically, the formation of groups (in-groups) and rejection from these (out-groups) through SIT and the minimal group paradigm theory.

In summary, these theoretical lenses allow us to comprehend the mechanisms through which policies translate into everyday discrimination. These results underscore how perceptions of migrants are often rooted in psychological grouping. It underscores the importance of studying the perception of migrants as posited in the first hypothesis of this study, since their opinions will inherently impact the migrant's integration process. They also suggest considering exposure as conceived in the second hypothesis, which explores how migrant presence (e.g., in hotspots) influences the trust attributed to states. Given that states frame these contexts and psychological effects reinforce them, it is important to consider these elements in our analysis.

#### 1.1.4 From Theory to Practice: Case Studies in Migrant Categorization

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In this paragraph, these theoretical psychological frameworks will be observed in real-world contexts. For instance, Ekerim-Akbulut et al. (2020) tried to examine the formation of in-group versus out-group in Turkey's migration field. This research study comprised Turkish nationals as the reference group, Syrian immigrants and Norwegians. It analyzed their capacity for mind-reading, which is the ability to infer the mental states of out-group members. They used this variable to examine whether it was feasible to understand another individual from an out-group. To finally assess whether the proximity or distance formed among these groups was due to sociological factors. This research supported the findings of Tajfel and Turner, since they observed clear in-group bias and out-group aversion. Turks were found to have a higher ability to mind-read with each other due to their shared cultural proximity. However, Syrians who originally share culturally similar aspects to Turks incited threat perception in them. Conversely, Turks exhibited higher mind-reading capacities with Norwegians due to low threat perception. The research concluded that this difference between these two groups is associated with perceived threat.

An interesting finding in this research regarding the lowest mind-reading ability was its association with perceptions of low education, less similarity, and high prejudice. This result revealed the importance of individual factors such as education and internal dialogues in society, suggesting to policymakers that these factors are also key to decreasing discrimination and fostering cohesion. Lastly, this research highlights the importance of perceived threat in migration narratives and the role of individual factors (Ekerim-Akbulut et al., 2020). Therefore, this kind of policy could address the psychological roots of threat perception to reduce the formation of in-

groups and out-groups. Even though this study focused on the cognitive mechanisms behind discrimination, it is crucial to understand these trends in our policies and society.

Another key aspect of our study is the impact of self-categorization on migrants before and after their arrival in the host country. A fitting example of this phenomenon is the longitudinal study conducted by Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. (2012). They examined these effects on Ingrian-Finnish and how they shape the integration process and perceptions migrants and nationals hold of each other. This paper underlined how many migrants hold positive attitudes towards the host country upon arrival. However, once nationals have shown their threat perception, migrants' attitudes become negative towards the hosts and themselves. This implicit discrimination, shaped by perceptions of migrants, demonstrates its importance in group formation and influencing integration. It must be acknowledged that this study is hard to generalize given its specific identity.

However, the influence of society on their insertion is relevant and supports prior findings, such as Bonjour & Chauvin's (2018). This study found that class, gendered identities, and the expectations of host societies shaped and limited job-seeking strategies. Another research conducted by Lee and Fiske (2006) supports this claim, demonstrating that social categorization is based on perceptions of warmth and competence. It was a psychological analysis reviewing the perceived threat from Americans towards multiple nationalities. Their study supports the aforementioned findings on perception of class, education and relevancy of individual factors influencing the perceived threat of in-groups. Most participants fell within the mixed category, given the complexity of the individual factors. Although patterns related to labour position and historical past were significant in terms of the level of warmth felt by citizens. These results reinforce the need to examine perceptions of the host country of migrants and consider historical pasts to foster sustainable policies.

In summary, these findings support the direction of this thesis, which is to analyze perceptions of migrants as a dependent variable. It also highlights the importance of examining and integrating individual factors into policies to promote cohesion. Lastly, this literature emphasizes the significance of considering education, citizens, institutions, and geography within these policy frames, as well as in this study. They also affirm the analysis of the first hypothesis,

which focuses on the role of institutional trust in shaping perceptions of migrants. It also reinforces the examination of the second hypothesis, which posits that the effect of migrant presence (e.g. hotspots) is a relevant factor to be considered.

## 1.2 Institutional Trust and Sustainable Migration Governance

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In summary, while aiming to promote inclusion, current integration policies often inadvertently reproduce prevailing social paradigms and stereotypes about migrants, as seen in the prior literature. These policies can reinforce the clear divide between the “in-group” and the “out-group,” framing migrants as fundamentally different and needing assimilation to the host country (Bonjour and Chauvin, 2018). As a result, rather than bridging divides, such approaches may amplify perceptions of otherness, hindering inclusion. In fact, despite these policy efforts, levels of hostility towards migrants remain high across many parts of Europe. As reflected in the existing literature, this persistent tension warrants a more in-depth examination of the preconditions for achieving successful policy outcomes. Therefore, trust in institutions seems to be a reasonable factor to consider, since it fosters inclusionary attitudes across political affiliations in the host country, as seen in the study by Macdonald and Cornacchione (2023, p. 503). This section will explore its potential to assist integration, generate sustainable policies and mitigate polarization.

### 1.2.1 Trust as a Moderator of Attitudes Toward Migration

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Macdonald and Cornacchione (2023) examined how political trust influences opinions on immigration in Europe. This form of trust is defined as an individual’s positive or negative attitudes attributed to the broader political system. To measure this, they considered political parties, the domestic parliament, and politicians in general. They used the ESS data set, focusing on 21 European countries, including those with high and low intake of migration. They found that political trust was predictive of an increase in support for allowing different groups to immigrate to their country. It also translated into greater public support for generous and accommodating refugee policies. They attributed this finding to the fact that high institutional trust was correlated to individuals perceiving migration as not posing a threat culturally, economically, or to their safety and identity. This study highlighted the importance of studying institutional trust, since they believed it would allow countries to show greater flexibility in this policy field. Meaning, if countries leverage this form of trust, they will be able to manage greater amounts of migration flows without receiving the levels of popular scrutiny exhibited currently.

These findings align with our first hypothesis, which posits that institutional trust shapes perceptions of migration. They recommend further research to compare countries with high asylum processing against those with high asylum reception. They explicitly state that Germany is a high asylum processing country and should be compared to countries such as Italy, Spain or Greece, given their high asylum receptions. Thus, supporting the rationale for the comparative framework in this thesis.

### 1.2.2 The divide in Institutional Trust and Mass Polarization

As previously discussed, Europe faces mass polarization, which significantly erodes institutional trust (Mingo and Faggiano, 2020, p. 816). The study by Mingo and Faggiano (2020) assessed this form of trust across countries of the EU, observing political sophistication, social trust, economic conditions, and perceived corruption and its impact on confidence in national and international political institutions. This analysis found lower trust and satisfaction in Southern and Eastern countries; among these, Italy and Spain recorded the lowest trust in national political institutions. These findings align with prior research, demonstrating high levels of polarization in Italy and Spain promoted by populist narratives (Oso, López-Sala and Muñoz-Comet, 2021, p.17). This political rhetoric was used to frame migrants through “threat perception”, which is a securitization strategy (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo, 2021, p.387; Mingo and Faggiano, 2020). The rise of these parties was also associated with the erosion of political trust and institutional trust, as seen in Mingo and Faggiano (2020). Scholars such as Buzan et al. (1998) emphasize concern over these narratives, since they exploit threat perception for domestic purposes, often violating democratic values (Buzan, Waever and Wilde, 1998, p. 20). Conversely, in the analysis conducted by Mingo and Faggiano (2020), Northern and Western countries recorded more trust than distrust. Germany, one of the countries studied in this paper's analysis, appears to have a more neutral rate. The difference among these countries could be related to how long these values have permeated national narratives (Oso, López-Sala and Muñoz-Comet, 2021). Lastly, this neutral level of trust could be explained by the recent rise of polarization in Germany (Macdonald and Cornacchione, 2023, p.507).

In summary, this research demonstrated how distrust in political institutions prevails among EU citizens, although it varies across countries. It also considered how institutional trust

impacts migrant perceptions. This research found that higher immigration rates per 1,000 inhabitants are significantly associated with lower levels of trust in international political institutions. However, these findings were not seen for individual national institutions. This study used country-level aggregated analysis, which did not permit the evaluation of trust and immigration at a nation-state level. These prior research findings reinforce the need for Individual-level data nested within regions to evaluate variations. This approach could yield a greater understanding of institutional trust's effects on immigration. Thus, this argues for the statistical approach this thesis takes. In addition, the rise in polarization and its usage of securitist narrative framing migration as a threat, consequently impacting institutional trust, renders the analysis of the first hypothesis relevant.

### 1.2.3 Contact Theory, Exposure, and the Role of Trust

The reason for our focus on hotspots lies in the intersection between contact theory and threat perception. Inter-group contact theory posits that direct exposure to migrants can reduce prejudice by promoting familiarity and empathy, according to Pettigrew (1998). However, this effect may not hold consistently across cultural contexts and regions within a nation-state.

Hence, research studies such as Indelicato, Martín and Scuderi (2022) support a regional analysis of migration perspectives. This paper examines whether attitudes towards migrants vary for countries close to humanitarian crises. They found areas such as the Balearics, having a 20% immigrant population, to be more open to immigrants. Conversely, those in Corsica, not exceeding 10%, were more averse to these populations (Indelicato, Martín and Scuderi, 2022, p. 13). These findings support Pettigrew's (1998) Intergroup Contact Theory. However, these results have not been consistent across studies evaluating contact theory, thus making it relevant to observe. For instance, Angelucci et al. (2021) demonstrated how framing migration as an economic or cultural threat, combined with politicization and sudden demographic shifts, increases threat perception and institutional distrust. In this sense, contact-driven exposure does not inherently reduce hostility. By contrast, they highlighted that its effect depends on the historical, social and political context that frames migrant presence.

Therefore, we aim to research two angles, the first of which considers migration hotspots as influencing the attitudes towards migrants. The second aspect that will be investigated is

whether institutional trust moderates the relationship between migrant presence and attitudes towards them. These two research angles aim to discern across Europe whether contact theory impacts institutional trust and consequently shapes migration perceptions.

## **Chapter 2 – Methodology**

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### **2.1 Country and Data Selection**

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This study investigates to what extent institutional trust shapes attitudes towards immigration across three European MS, namely Spain, Italy and Germany. These three selected countries have increased data tracking systems and are among the MS most affected in the Union, rendering them relevant for this study. I want to examine whether low trust in institutions is associated with more negative views of migrants (H1), if negative immigration attitudes are more common in areas with high migrant presence (H2), and whether high institutional trust can reduce or buffer those sentiments (H3). To test these hypotheses, I will use mixed-effects regression models. This analysis will also account for both individual-level and regional-level variation by nesting individuals within NUTS-2 regions.

The European Social Survey (ESS) round 10 (2020–2021) served as the primary source for citizen attitudes towards migration and institutional trust. In addition, the regional migration data were obtained through the national data portals of each country. The individual state data for Germany were retrieved from the German Federal Statistical Office (Destatis), via their published table on foreign residents by the federal state. Spain’s regional migration data were collected from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), and the data were retrieved through their interactive immigration portal under “Inmigración desde el exterior.” The Italian data set for hotspots was retrieved from ISTAT’s database through the variable “Saldo migratorio anagrafico estero – Totale”. Lastly, the variable hotspots was constructed as a binary one, which meant all regions or states comprising more than 10% of the national migrant population qualified as a “hotspot.” This approach ensured consistency in hotspot identification across countries, maintaining comparability in the dummy variable construction. In summary, these sources form an analytical dataset of approximately 18,000 respondents, integrating both raw survey responses and constructed indices.

## 2.2 Variables and Measures

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The variables used in the analysis include demographic characteristics (age, gender, education), political ideology, institutional trust, and immigration attitudes. The main dependent variable, attitudes towards migrants, is constructed as a composite index based on three items from the ESS survey. These variables encompass the perceived impact of immigration on the economy, culture, and the country as a whole. Specifically, these are derived from the ESS variables immigration and the economy (imbgeco), immigration and cultural life (imueclt), and immigration and the country as a whole (imwbcnt). The resulting index demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ), indicating strong reliability across the items. This finding supports the construction of a unified index representing generalized attitudes toward migration.

Our key independent variables include institutional trust at the individual level and the presence of migrants at the regional level. Institutional trust used five measures from the ESS indicators, which were trust in the national parliament (trstprt), political parties (trstprl), legal system (trstlgl), politicians (trstplt), and the European Parliament (trstep). These variables were combined into a single index capturing general trust in political and legal institutions. This trust index also showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ ). This finding supports the construction of a unified index representing individuals' institutional trust. The second key independent variable for the study is the identification of "hotspots," aiming to operationalize exposure or contact with migrants. These were measured at the regional level using official administrative data from each region or state. Specifically, we included a binary variable indicating whether a region met the hotspot threshold (0 = No hotspot; 1 = Hotspot), and a cardinal variable capturing the total number of migrants in each NUTS-2 region. The data we have obtained is multilevel, containing individual-level responses nested within regional contexts. To facilitate the analysis for this study and account for both individual and regional variation, it will be examined through mixed methods modelling.

The variables for control included in the model are the following: education (edu), age (agea), gender (gndr), country (cntry), and political ideology (lrscale). Education is a continuous variable and tends to predict more positive attitudes toward immigration and institutional trust as it increases (Mingo and Faggiano, 2020; Schotte and Winkler, 2018; Umansky, 2025). Moreover,



it was recoded to a maximum of 29 years to reflect the upper bound of plausible formal education duration across contexts. This cap accounts for primary and secondary schooling (approximately 12 years), undergraduate degrees (around 3–5 years), and postgraduate or doctoral studies (up to 8 years). After recoding, the distribution of education was approximately normal (Skewness = 0.05, Kurtosis = 3.54), with a mean of 13.52 years (SD = 4.52). These characteristics indicate sufficient variation and mitigate the influence of extreme outliers. The age variable is also continuous and is often associated with more negative immigration attitudes among older individuals (Schotte & Winkler, 2018). Moreover, gender is a binary variable (0 = male, 1 = female). It is relevant to consider in the analysis, as prior research has observed gender-based variation in immigration threat perceptions, with women in some contexts exhibiting heightened sensitivity (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo, 2021). Country (cntry) is a dummy-coded categorical control variable, accounting for national-level fixed effects across Germany, Spain, and Italy. This variable itself captures national-level fixed effects, such as immigration policy, political context, and cultural climate, although it does not capture regional exposure to migrants. It serves as a control for broader national differences such as immigration policies, political context or cultural climate. Lastly, political ideology is measured as a categorical ordinal variable on a scale from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right). This variable is relevant to our study, as prior research shows that right-wing individuals tend to hold more negative attitudes toward migrants and lack institutional trust (Indelicato, Martín and Scuderi, 2022; Mingo and Faggiano, 2020). Moreover, in our first interaction model, political ideology is used in its original continuous form to preserve variation across the full spectrum. In a second model, however, it will be recoded into four categories to examine potential non-linear ideological effects. These four categories will be Strong Left (0-3), Moderate Left (4/5), Moderate Right (6–7), and Strong Right (8–10). This categorical approach facilitates the analysis of potential differences in migration attitudes across distinct ideological segments.

### 2.3 Statistical Models

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The study employs a mixed-effects (multilevel) regression model using `xtmixed` in Stata. Random intercepts by region (NUTS level 2) were included to account for unobserved contextual differences across regions. To test the hypothesized buffering effect of institutional trust, an interaction model was created between migrant presence and trust. A second interaction model was conducted to explore how the relationship between institutional trust and immigration

attitudes varies across levels of political ideology. Finally, this design reduces the risk of Type I error and improves the generalizability of the findings across the European setting.

## **Chapter 3 – Data Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

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### **3.1 Descriptive Statistics**

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The dependent variable, attitudes towards migrants, was formed as a composite index of three ESS items measuring general sentiment towards immigration. Specifically, these items perceived the impact of immigration on the economy (imbgeco), cultural life (imueclt), and the country overall (imwbcnt). The new variable created was standardized to a 0-10 scale, with lower values indicating negative attitudes and higher positive ones towards immigration. The internal consistency of this index indicates a high level of reliability, which supports the internal coherence of the index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). In this study, Germany represented the most positive attitudes, with a mean of 6.47 (SD=2.13), indicating generally favourable views toward migrants. Spain followed with a mean of 6.18 (SD = 2.20), which positioned the country as the second most positive in this context. Lastly, Italy recorded the most negative attitudes, with a mean of 5.03 (SD = 2.37). For each model, we observed in the statistical tests a significant cross-national variation in migration attitudes in the statistical tests ( $p < .001$ ). These results highlight notable differences even between Northern and Southern European MS. This fact justifies including "country" as a control to isolate within-country regional variation. In summary, these findings highlight the value of a multilevel modelling approach capable of disentangling individual, regional, and national-level effects.

The key explanatory factor, which is our independent variable for this study, is trust in institutions. This was created through an index based on five ESS items, which observed trust in the national parliament (trstprt), political parties (trstprl), the legal system (trstlgl), politicians (trstplt), and the European Parliament (trstep). The resulting index was standardized to a 0–10 scale, where lower values indicated less trust and higher values more trust in institutions. Additionally, the internal consistency of this index indicates strong reliability, which supports the internal coherence of the index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Germany represented the highest trust, with a mean of 5.94 (SD = 2.13). Spain was classified as moderate trust, having a mean value of 5.01 (SD = 2.03). Italy had the lowest level of institutional trust, with a mean of 4.25 (SD = 2.12). In

addition, in each statistical model, we observed a cross-national difference in trust, which was also statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). This supports the inclusion of the variable country within the models to isolate within-country regional variation. These findings underscore the significance of considering national political contexts in shaping institutional confidence.

In summary, the variance may reflect legacies of institutional performance, civic engagement, or governance stability. The difference observed in trust in the North could be associated with stronger institutional performance or civic culture. The Southern difference could be the contrast with the latter, where government instability and corruption had an important part in their recent history.

### 3.2 Multilevel Regression Results

*Hypothesis 1 – Higher institutional trust correlates with more positive attitudes toward migrants*

**Table 1. Baseline Mixed-Effects Model Testing the Impact of Institutional Trust on Immigration Attitudes**

| Variable                          | Coefficient (SE)    |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Institutional trust (index_trust) | 0.4013*** (0.0078)  |
| Age (agea)                        | -0.0096*** (0.0009) |
| Education (edu)                   | 0.0639*** (0.0037)  |
| Female (vs. male) (gndr)          | 0.0790* (0.0316)    |
| Spain (vs. Germany) (country)     | 1.1133*** (0.0414)  |
| Italy (vs. Germany) (country)     | -0.4938*** (0.0373) |
| Constant ( _cons)                 | 3.3961*** (0.0866)  |

**Note:** Robust Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

**Model Fit:** Observations: 16,594; Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 6): 4729.92; Residual (SD): 2.0303

Log likelihood: -35297.086

This model (Table 1) examines the relationship between trust in institutions and attitudes towards immigrants. It employs country-level controls operationalized through a series of dummy variables but does not account for regional variation or contextual factors, such as hotspot status or migrant presence. These results directly assess the core hypothesis (H1) in a pooled linear regression framework. The key predictor is institutional trust (index\_trust), which shows a strong positive and highly significant effect (Coefficient = 0.4013,  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, each one-point

increase in institutional trust on a (0-10 scale) is associated with a 0.40-point increase in pro-immigration attitudes. The magnitude and significance of this coefficient affirm trust as the central factor in shaping immigration perceptions.

Age remains a significant negative predictor (Coefficient =  $-0.0096$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), implying that older individuals tend to express more negative views. The model in this table showed this effect over 10 years, translating to an approximate 0.096-point decrease in the immigration attitude index. This finding ratifies prior literature by Schotte and Winkler (2018), who warn other researchers that such cross-sectional results often conflate age and cohort effects in immigration attitudes. Their findings demonstrate that once a cohort is considered, the age effect diminishes or reverses in most countries. Therefore, observing education is crucial to consider the impacts on perceptions of migrants. Additionally, in this model, education has a positive and significant effect (Coefficient =  $0.0639$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), which suggests that more educated individuals are generally more favourable toward migrants. This model also considers the role of gender; the effect of this variable is significant, with women showing a 0.0790-point increase in pro-immigration attitudes as compared to men ( $p = 0.012$ ). This finding reflects a slight yet meaningful difference in perceptions by gender. Regarding country effects, Spain has significantly more favourable attitudes towards immigration than Germany, the reference group, with a coefficient of  $1.1133$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, Italy's coefficient is  $-0.4938$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), which showcases significantly negative attitudes.

This model does not include regional random effects or variables such as migrant presence or hotspots, focusing solely on national and individual variation. The residual standard deviation (SD =  $2.0303$ ) confirms that most variation remains at the individual level. Therefore, this model provides an initial direct confirmation that higher trust in institutions is associated with reduced aversion to migrants, even when it does not account for regional and contextual controls. In summary, the strength and consistency of the variable trust support the first hypothesis (H1) and highlight that institutional trust is a key factor in shaping immigration attitudes across countries.

Therefore, this table accepts the first hypothesis that trust in institutions is associated with more favourable attitudes towards immigrants. However, it must account for country-level

variation to observe whether trust remains a strong and statistically significant predictor. According to this model, individuals who perceive their institutions as competent, fair, and responsive express lower aversion toward migrants. These results support Macdonald and Cornacchione (2023) and the report by the World Bank (2020), since citizens' trust in their governments increases when these are seen as capable of managing this issue, which decreases aversion towards migrants. These findings also reinforce Bonjour and Chauvin's (2018) argument that public opinion on migration is formed by society and institutions. Meaning public perceptions shift in response to the portrayal of their government. Therefore, this form of trust derives from the institutional frameworks and the legitimacy that citizens ascribe to these.

In addition, these results present an intriguing narrative when considering mass polarization in Europe. For instance, the confirmed effect of institutional trust on immigration attitudes is particularly relevant in countries such as Italy and Germany, which are facing considerable democratic backsliding and a rise in populism. Interestingly, Spanish respondents view migrants more favourably than Germans, ratifying Pettigrew's contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998). This result makes sense, given the historical legacy of Spain's reception of migrants. However, since this model does not consider the regional presence, we will assess this third hypothesis (H2) later. By contrast, Italians who carry a long historical legacy of being a receiving country display themselves as the country holding the most significant negative attitudes, even when accounting for institutional trust in this model. This dichotomy is consistent with prior literature (Mingo & Faggiano, 2020; Angelucci et al., 2021), which presents Italy's political discourse through a securitization strategy bolstering pre-existing threat perception. Conversely, Spain also carries these historical securitized narratives, and they have increased in the past 10 years, as proven by Oso, López-Sala and Muñoz-Comet (2021). However, their attitudes towards migration are starkly different. Therefore, excluding regional contextual factors in this model demonstrates that national political discourse may be relevant depending on the political and cultural context that shapes institutional legitimacy.

This model also supports observing individual-level characteristics in this field. For instance, age demonstrates the importance of considering cohorts and the change in perceptions regarding migration. Negative perceptions are associated with older generations. However, this

could reflect the change in mentality, as stated and found by Schotte & Winkler (2018). Conversely, education remains a strong positive predictor, reflecting the increased impact of knowledge. It also aligns with the findings by Mingo and Faggiano (2020), where higher levels of education were positively associated with increased institutional trust (Mingo and Faggiano, 2020, p.827). However, even though the gender effect is negligible, it showcases how women tend to show slightly more positive attitudes toward migrants, which is also statistically significant. This finding is important, as researchers such as Angelucci, De Sio, and Paparo (2021) state in their studies that prior research has ratified women's greater propensity to perceive migrants as a threat. Although, as they point out, recent literature is shifting the narrative significantly, demonstrating the opposite or neutral perceptions (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo, 2021, p.377). These demographic outcomes preface the importance of considering cultural context, age, education and gender when tailoring these policies to reach a greater impact, fostering cohesion. They also support the narrative that other research in this field considers that individuals and history matter (Oso, López-Sala and Muñoz-Comet, 2021; Petrovic, 2021).

Finally, these results in this first model (Table 1) have clear implications for policymakers. The strong predictive power presented by institutional trust suggests that strengthening institutional legitimacy is essential for effective strategies in reducing hostility towards migrants. Therefore, to yield greater confidence, it is crucial to follow the advice stated by the World Bank and its report, which states that countries must focus on the societal conditions necessary to foster social cohesion and institutional trust (Kumagai and Iorio, 2020). Given the historical legacies of corruption in countries such as Spain and Italy, transparency is crucial to increase trust in MS, as stated by Mungiu-Pippidi (2020a). This may also serve Germany by increasing institutional trust and can also assist their current political erosion and migrant crisis.

**Table 2. Multilevel Mixed-Effects Model Estimating the Association Between Institutional Trust and Immigration Attitudes Across NUTS-2 Regions**

| Variable                          | Coefficient (SE)    |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Institutional trust (index_trust) | 0.397*** (0.0079)   |
| Age (agea)                        | -0.0095*** (0.0009) |
| Education (edu)                   | 0.063*** (0.0037)   |
| Female (vs. Male) (gndr)          | 0.075* (0.031)      |
| Spain (vs. Germany) (country)     | 1.109*** (0.108)    |
| Italy (vs. Germany) (country)     | -0.459*** (0.144)   |
| Constant (_cons)                  | 3.398*** (0.112)    |

**Note:** Robust Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

**Model Fit:** Observations: 16,594; Groups: 38 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 6): 3458.61;

Log likelihood: -35,256.27; Residual (SD): 2.021(0.0111); Region-level intercept (SD): 0.268(0.0432);

**LR Test vs. Linear Model:**  $\chi^2$  (1) = 81.63, \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (random effects significantly improve model fit)

The results presented in Table 2 confirm the initial hypothesis (H1). They demonstrate that institutional trust remains a statistically significant and substantively meaningful predictor of immigration attitudes, even after the inclusion of individual-level controls, country fixed-effects, and a cluster variable at the regional level. Moreover, the coefficient for institutional trust (Coefficient = 0.397,  $p < .001$ ) remains almost unchanged from the prior model 1 (baseline model), which indicates that the inclusion of covariates (age, education, gender, and country) did not diminish the effect. It also suggests the effect is robust and not confounded by demographic or country-level variation. Consequently, it reinforces the strength of the association between higher institutional trust and more favourable views toward migrants.

Moreover, this second model evaluates whether trust in institutions affects immigration attitudes while controlling for key demographic and contextual characteristics. It builds on the baseline model 1 by including these control variables of age (agea), years of education (edu), gender (gndr), and country (cntry). This statistical analysis uses a multilevel mixed-effects regression framework, nesting individuals within 38 NUTS-2 regions and including random intercepts to account for the unobserved heterogeneity across space. The direction and strength of

the relationship remain positive and highly consistent; a one-unit increase in institutional trust on the 0–10 scale is associated with an approximate 0.40 scale increase in pro-immigration attitudes.

The national level and country-level controls indicate significant differences. For example, Spain continues to exhibit more positive views than the German reference group (Coefficient = 1.109,  $p < .001$ ). By contrast, Italy continues to show more negative views (Coefficient =  $-0.459$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) than the other countries in the study. These results align with the previous descriptive statistics and emphasize the importance of national political and cultural factors. It must be prefaced that the inclusion of random intercepts at the regional level has improved the model significantly (LR test:  $\chi^2(1) = 81.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Even though the variance attributed to regions was modest ( $SD = 0.268$ ), this suggests that most of the variation remains at the individual level. The standard deviation of the residuals ( $SD = 2.021$ ) confirmed that the unexplained individual-level variance dominated contextual factors.

Therefore, this second model (Table 2) confirms the first hypothesis (H1) that trust in institutions is associated with more favourable attitudes toward immigrants. Additionally, given the robustness and significance of the results, we can confidently reject the null hypothesis. This second model (Table 2) includes regional-level variation (NUTS-2), and the effect remains the same, presenting the significant role trust in institutions plays in shaping perspectives on migrants. Therefore, individuals who assess their institutions as fair, competent, and transparent express lower levels of migrant aversion, even when regional variations in countries are accounted for. This model confirms the robustness of institutional trust as a key factor and aligns with prior research (Macdonald and Cornacchione, 2023). These results prove that trust in political institutions is a reliable predictor of public support for inclusive migration policies. It also supports Bonjour and Chauvin's (2018) argument that societal narratives and institutions are significant for social cohesion policies.

In addition, this second model reinforces that institutional trust remains significant across varying contexts. The results found are nearly identical to those in Table 1, even after including 38 NUTS-2 regions with random intercepts to account for unobserved heterogeneity. The trust coefficient found in this second model is almost identical to the baseline model's (Table 1),



excluding regions. This consistency further validates the stability of this relationship and suggests that institutional trust operates independently of regional variations. It also supports the narrative for inclusive migration policies by Kalogeraki's (2012). Meaning, if a state is perceived as transparent and capable, it is given a greater extent of trust by citizens. Therefore, the continued significance of this effect, even in the regional model, presents it as a strong contender for limiting group-based divisions and migration aversion.

Including random intercepts at the regional level significantly improved model performance, as seen in the LR test ( $\chi^2(1) = 81.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Although the regional variance remains modest ( $SD = 0.268$ ), this indicates that most variation is still related to the individual level. This is confirmed by the residual standard deviation ( $SD = 2.021$ ), which further proves that contextual factors, though relevant, do not prevail over the individual-level drivers of migration attitudes. This model illustrates how national and regional differences exist, despite the strength of the explanatory variable of institutional trust remaining consistent and dominant.

Finally, institutional trust is relevant and in peril, as seen through the increase in polarization documented here and by Mingo and Faggiano (2020). Given its central role in migration policies and the way transparency fosters further trust in institutions, policymakers in both migration and transparency should collaborate to develop effective transparency strategies that enhance institutional trust.

*Hypothesis 2 – Migrant presence affects immigration attitudes (Contact Theory)*

**Table 3. Multilevel Model Isolating the Effect of Migrant Presence on Immigration Attitudes**

| Variable                                 | Coefficient (SE)    |
|--|---------------------|
| Migrant Presence ( <i>perc_migr</i> )    | 0.0073 (0.0087)     |
| Age ( <i>agea</i> )                      | -0.0092*** (0.0009) |
| Education ( <i>edu</i> )                 | 0.0821*** (0.0039)  |
| Female (vs. Male) ( <i>i.gndr</i> )      | 0.0743* (0.0337)    |
| Spain (vs. Germany) ( <i>i.country</i> ) | 0.7315*** (0.1292)  |
| Italy (vs. Germany) ( <i>i.country</i> ) | -0.6021** (0.1766)  |
| Constant ( <i>_cons</i> )                | 4.8838*** (0.1369)  |

**Note:** Robust Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

**Model Fit:** Observations: 16,669; Groups: 38 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 6): 762.28;

Log likelihood: -36633.82; Residual (SD): 2.1738 (0.0119); Region-level intercept (SD): 0.3301 (0.0491)

**LR test vs. linear model:**  $\chi^2$  (1) = 135.31, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (random effects significantly improve model fit)

The third model (Table 3) studies the second hypothesis (H2), which intends to explore if local migrant presence shapes attitudes toward immigration. This model examines whether higher concentrations of migrants in a region are linked to more negative attitudes toward immigration. It was tested through a multilevel mixed-effects regression, which was estimated using the immigration attitudes index (0-10 scale) as a dependent variable. The key independent variable in this study was introduced here as migrant presence (*perc\_migr*), treated as a continuous variable capturing the share of migrants within each region across the different countries.

This model omits institutional trust since it intends to isolate the examination of migrant exposure effects. It follows specifications, where individual respondents are nested within 38 NUTS-2 regions, and random intercepts are included at the regional level to account for unobserved heterogeneity in subnational contexts. This statistical inference demonstrates that migrant presence is not a statistically significant predictor of immigration attitudes. The coefficient for *perc\_migr* is positive but extremely small (Coefficient = 0.0073,  $p = 0.403$ ), and the 95% confidence interval crosses zero. This means that individuals living in areas with greater migrant concentrations do not, on average, report significantly more negative or positive attitudes toward

immigration. The result persists in marginal effects estimations, where it reiterates the lack of substantive association between local exposure and immigration sentiment.

By contrast, the control variables continue to exhibit the same tendencies as seen in the prior models and corroborate with the literature. Age is negatively associated with pro-immigrant attitudes (Coefficient =  $-0.0092$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating a tendency among older individuals towards aversion. Additionally, for every 10-year increase in age, the immigration attitude index declines by approximately 0.092 points. Education is again positively associated with pro-immigrant sentiment (Coefficient =  $0.0821$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which suggests that each additional year of education corresponds to more favourable views. Lastly, gender remains a modest but significant factor, where women show slightly more positive immigration attitudes than men (Coefficient =  $0.0743$ ,  $p = 0.028$ ).

When observing country effects, Spain is associated with significantly more positive views toward migrants compared to the German reference category (Coefficient =  $0.7315$ ,  $p < .001$ ). At the same time, Italy remains negatively associated (Coefficient =  $-0.6021$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ); these findings echo earlier descriptive results. The model fit statistics suggest a significant improvement over a standard linear model ( $\chi^2(1) = 135.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC =  $0.0225$ ), unveils that only 2.25% of the total variation in immigration attitudes is attributable to between-region differences. This meant that 97.75% of attitudes towards migrants are associated with the individual level. The standard deviation of the regional-level intercept (SD =  $0.33$ ) further confirms that contextual factors at the regional level exert only limited influence in explaining attitudes.

As previously seen in the literature, the study by Indelicato, Martín and Scuderi (2022) successfully observed these regional differences. Conversely, the methods they used, such as the fuzzy-hybrid TOPSIS, are quite innovative in the social sciences field and have their caveats. These divergent findings suggest further research is needed to identify consistent patterns across contexts. This approach will assist policymakers and researchers alike in discerning the best practice for matters that intersect country-level differences. Currently, the findings of this paper challenge the interpretation of these psychological theories in migration. By contrast, whilst these

outputs fail to reject the null hypothesis, they reinforce the first hypothesis (H1) and individual-level factors. Therefore, this model prefaces the importance of not treating migrant presence as a uniform predictor; it must be seen through the lens of governance management and institutional credibility. The result also questions the psychological and policy assumption that exposure is enough to foster integration or social cohesion, meaning Pettigrew's theory (1998).

In summary, the results of this model suggest that policies focusing solely on regional exposure may overestimate the impact since local migrant presence does not significantly predict attitudes. Policymakers and researchers should investigate more avenues to foster institutional trust. In addition, further longitudinal research should be conducted to understand if the views held by the young are related to their cohort or education programs. Ultimately, the study underlines that perceptions of good governance play a critical role in shaping public sentiment toward migration.

**Table 4. Multilevel Model Testing the Effect of Migrant Hotspot Residence and Migrant Presence on Immigration Attitudes (with Controls)**

| Variable  | Coefficient (SE)    |
|---|---------------------|
| Migrant Presence ( <i>perc_migr</i> )             | 0.0101 (0.0109)     |
| Institutional Trust ( <i>index_trust</i> )        | 0.3944*** (0.0089)  |
| Interaction: <i>hs_dummy</i> × <i>index_trust</i> | 0.0101 (0.0184)     |
| Hotspot Region ( <i>hs_dummy</i> )                | -0.1246 (0.2380)    |
| Age ( <i>agea</i> )                               | -0.0095*** (0.0009) |
| Education ( <i>edu</i> )                          | 0.0627*** (0.0037)  |
| Female (vs. Male) ( <i>i.gndr</i> )               | 0.0751* (0.0314)    |
| Spain (vs. Germany) ( <i>i.country</i> )          | 1.1088*** (0.1061)  |
| Italy (vs. Germany) ( <i>i.country</i> )          | -0.4509*** (0.1428) |
| Constant ( <i>_cons</i> )                         | 3.3485*** (0.1261)  |

**Note:** Robust Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

**Model Fit:** Observations: 16,594; Groups: 38 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 9): 3465.97

Log likelihood: - 35255.565; Residual (SD): 2.0211 (0.0111);

Region-level intercept (SD): 0.2614 (0.0431)

**LR test vs. linear model:**  $\chi^2$  (1) = 72.64, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (random effects significantly improve model fit)

The fourth model (Table 4) evaluates the relationship between migrant exposure and immigration attitudes while accounting for institutional trust and individual-level controls. In this section, migrant exposure is operationalized both through a continuous measure of the percentage of migrants in a region and a binary "hotspot" variable indicating whether the region falls in the top quartile of migrant presence. The results indicated that neither form of migrant exposure significantly predicts immigration attitudes once controls are included.

Moreover, the interaction term between institutional trust and hotspot residence (*hs\_dummy* × *index\_trust*) is positive but statistically insignificant (Coefficient = 0.0101,  $p = 0.584$ ), which indicates that the effect of institutional trust on immigration attitudes does not differ meaningfully between hotspot and non-hotspot regions. This means that institutional trust operates consistently across different regional exposure levels. This result is crucial for

policymakers to apply legislation targeting this matter. Thus, this model does not support the hypothesized buffering effect of trust regarding regional exposure.

Additionally, the variable considering hotspots has a statistically insignificant effect (Coefficient =  $-0.1246$ ,  $p = 0.601$ ), and migrant share similarly lacks significance (Coefficient =  $0.0101$ ,  $p = 0.355$ ). Conversely, institutional trust remains a highly significant and substantively strong predictor (Coefficient =  $0.3944$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), even when controlling for migrant exposure. These results suggest that trust in institutions is essential, which provides support for the initial hypothesis (H1). These findings suggest that belief in institutional efficacy, rather than direct exposure to migrants, drives more favourable attitudes. When observing the control variables operationalized in this statistical model, age is negatively associated with support (Coefficient =  $-0.0095$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while education (Coefficient =  $0.0627$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and being female (Coefficient =  $0.0751$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ) predict more favourable views. In addition, country effects remain strong, and we can observe respondents in Spain reporting more positive attitudes (Coefficient =  $1.1088$ ) and those in Italy more negative (Coefficient =  $-0.4509$ ).

Lastly, the model fit significantly improved by accounting for region-level random effects ( $\chi^2(1) = 72.64$ ,  $p < 0.0000$ ), the small variance component at the regional level (SD =  $0.2614$ ) indicates that individual characteristics are significantly relevant in explaining the majority of variation. In summary, these findings imply that migrant quantities in the populations alone do not substantially shape immigration views. Instead, these are created by institutional trust, which plays the most decisive role in forming individuals' attitudes.

Our findings thus reinforce all prior models and the first hypothesis (H1), undermining the second hypothesis (H2). Lastly, these results put forth the primacy of institutional trust as a driver of immigration attitudes even in regions characterized by high migrant presence. Therefore, belief in institutional competence overrides demographic concerns.

This model reflects challenges in applying contact theory and threat perception. We cannot assume that proximity to migrants increases anti-immigration sentiment. Our data indicate that the amount or geographic concentration pales in comparison to the strength of institutional trust. This model reinforces the narrative posited by other scholars, where the state mediates the salience of

perceived social threats (Macdonald and Cornacchione, 2023). This result underscores the importance of institutional trust in shaping perception. This finding substantiates prior literature by Bonjour and Chauvin (2018) and Kalogeraki (2012), setting institutions as the implicit drivers of these narratives. Although this fourth model fails to reject the null hypothesis (H2), it is of utmost importance to conduct further research in this area, given the findings by Indelicato, Martín and Scuderi (2022) as stated previously. These results also underscore the need for further research in state-driven initiatives to grasp the elements fostering social trust and mitigate aversive attitudes.

Finally, this model ratifies the importance of demographic trends in immigration. Age (Coefficient =  $-0.0095$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), education (Coefficient =  $0.0627$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and gender are the pillars of individual characteristics, which significantly impact perceptions on migrants and are confirmed again in this model. This implies further studies need to be conducted to assess if these differences are associated with the manner of thought of the time or related to initiatives that resonate with the public. Country-level fixed effects reveal a stark difference between Spaniards holding more positive perspectives (Coefficient =  $1.1088$ ), while Italians are more skeptical (Coefficient =  $-0.4509$ ). Therefore, these results highlight the need for further research to grasp the division in attitudes. Finally, the sum of these results prefaces the importance of considering institutional trust and focusing on individual characteristics to develop effective and enduring migration policy initiatives.

*Hypothesis 3 – The effect of migrant presence on immigration attitudes is moderated by institutional trust*

**Table 5. Multilevel Mixed-Effects Model with Interaction Between Migrant Hotspot Status and Institutional Trust (Testing H3)**

| Variable   | Coefficient (SE)    |
|--|---------------------|
| Migrant Presence ( <i>perc_migr</i> )              | 0.0010 (0.0084)     |
| Institutional Trust ( <i>index_trust</i> )         | 0.3823*** (0.0130)  |
| Interaction: <i>perc_migr</i> × <i>index_trust</i> | 0.0015 (0.0011)     |
| Age ( <i>agea</i> )                                | -0.0095*** (0.0009) |
| Education ( <i>edu</i> )                           | 0.0627*** (0.0037)  |
| Female (vs. Male) ( <i>i.gndr</i> )                | 0.0750* (0.0314)    |
| Spain (vs. Germany) ( <i>i.country</i> )           | 1.1064*** (0.1064)  |
| Italy (vs. Germany) ( <i>i.country</i> )           | -0.4464** (0.1425)  |
| Constant ( <i>_cons</i> )                          | 3.4090*** (0.1300)  |

**Note:** Robust Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

**Model Fit:** Observations: 16,594; Groups: 38 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 8): 3466.74

Log likelihood: – 35254.808; Residual (SD): 2.0210 (0.0111);

Region-level intercept (SD): 0.2626 (0.0431)

**LR test vs. linear model:**  $\chi^2$  (1) = 75.29, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (random effects significantly improve model fit)

The fifth model (Table 5) examines the hypothesized (H3) buffering effect of trust on the perceived migrant threat by testing whether the relationship between hotspot regions and immigration attitudes is moderated by trust in institutions. The dependent variable here remains attitudes toward migrants.

The interaction term included in this model to test the third hypothesis (H3) between institutional trust and regional migrant presence (*perc\_migr* × *index\_trust*) permits the assessment of trust as a moderator for migrant exposure on immigration attitudes. Again, this model confirms the findings in model 4, demonstrating that the result is not statistically significant (Coefficient = 0.0015, SE = 0.0011). Therefore, it does not act as a buffer in places with a high presence of migrants. However, institutional trust consistently predicts favourable views toward migrants



regardless of their presence. Moreover, these results do not support (H3); instead, they ratify the findings in prior models.

The main effect for institutional trust is again significant and strong (Coefficient = 0.3823,  $p < 0.0001$ ), which indicates that in non-hotspot regions ( $hs\_dummy = 0$ ), greater trust in institutions is established robustly with favourable views toward immigrants. However, the interaction between institutional trust and hotspot status is small (Coefficient = 0.0015) and not statistically significant ( $p = 0.162$ ). This offers no evidence that trust effects differ depending on where an individual is positioned geographically. In short, trust acts the same across regions despite the context, and there is no indication that it is a buffer for high migrant presence. Therefore, the continuous measure of migrant presence ( $perc\_migr$ ) continues to show no effect on immigration attitudes (Coefficient = 0.0010,  $p = 0.903$ ). These findings further support the conclusion that neither objective exposure to migrants nor regional concentration meaningfully shifts views on immigration once other factors are accounted for.

In addition, the control variables are consistent with all prior models in this study. Age is negatively associated with immigration support (Coefficient =  $-0.0095$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and education shows a strong positive effect (Coefficient = 0.0627,  $p < 0.001$ ). Although women report slightly more positive attitudes toward immigration (Coefficient = 0.0750,  $p = 0.017$ ). When observing the country-level effects, it remains strong with respondents in Spain expressing significantly more favourable views (Coefficient = 1.1064). In contrast, those in Italy remain more negative (Coefficient =  $-0.4464$ ), and both of these effects are highly significant.

Lastly, the model fit is correct; the likelihood ratio test against a linear model is again significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 75.29$ ,  $p < 0.0000$ ). This justifies the inclusion of regional-level random intercepts. However, the standard deviation of the regional intercept is modest ( $SD = 0.2626$ ), and the predictive strength of individual-level variables continues to dominate. This reinforces the concept that individual-level categories must be taken into consideration in migration policy.

Overall, the model provided a full test of the third hypothesis (H3) and found no results supporting that institutional trust differentially moderates attitudes in migrant-dense versus less exposed regions. Instead, trust appears to function as a stable, cross-contextual predictor of

immigration favourability. In other words, the key takeaway here is that trust in institutions confers a general resilience in immigration attitudes, regardless of the surroundings.

These results challenge the prior social psychology literature on SIT and the minimal group paradigm, reinforcing the need to consider other technical methods to evaluate this outcome. It is important to note that the presence of migrants in hotspots is an output extracted from the national dataset of MS. Therefore, the ESS dataset and the variables extracted have been treated differently. Another study, having all variables treated the same, would allow us to discern what element creates this difference in results. After said findings, if they align with those of Indelicato, Martín and Scuderi (2022), the flaw in this model was the variables collected. However, if they cannot reproduce the same results, the differing methodologies create this dichotomy. This research would allow us to grasp whether the methods used by Indelicato, Martín and Scuderi (2022) are best practice for regional-level attitude surveys or if other techniques are valid. This is important, given that the methodology employed yielded significant results. Contrasting these would allow us to reinforce or refute the psychological theories in this field.

The differing results from prior literature also suggest that securitization narratives in Spain and Italy must be re-evaluated to determine the key variables of threat perception (Indelicato, Martín, and Scuderi, 2022). This model ratifies the strength of good governance through trust, and the lack of moderating effects suggests that it is a universal driver for public attitudes. Therefore, this reinforces the need to consider good governance as a mechanism to dampen polarization and aversive migration attitudes.

Finally, the demographic effects in this model mirror the trends observed in the previous tables. These individual patterns underscore the importance of their inclusion in policy initiatives. To target the elements that foster institutional trust while deterring aversion towards migrants. Given the findings by Schotte and Winkler (2018), these should be policies in education. Since they found that shifts in attitudes in generations are not a reflection of generational change, but are related to educational programs. In summary, the findings confirm prior models; thus, the policy stance that should be taken is to promote mechanisms that increase institutional trust.

**Table 6. Country-Level Multilevel Model: Germany, Spain & Italy**

| Variables                                  | Germany<br>Coefficient (SE) | Spain<br>Coefficient (SE) | Italy<br>Coefficient (SE) |
|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Migrant Presence ( <i>perc_migr</i> )      | 0.0112 (0.0090)             | 0.0003 (0.0116)           | 0.0252 (0.0229)           |
| Age ( <i>agea</i> )                        | -0.0081*** (0.0012)         | 0.0009 (0.0019)           | -0.0197*** (0.0016)       |
| Education ( <i>edu</i> )                   | 0.0756*** (0.0063)          | 0.0498*** (0.0060)        | 0.0581*** (0.0072)        |
| Female (vs. Male) ( <i>i.gndr</i> )        | 0.0956* (0.0449)            | 0.0776 (0.0687)           | 0.0706 (0.0560)           |
| Institutional Trust ( <i>index_trust</i> ) | 0.4949*** (0.0111)          | 0.2856*** (0.0170)        | 0.3162*** (0.0143)        |
| Constant ( <i>cons</i> )                   | 2.5992*** (0.1540)          | 4.5740*** (0.1949)        | 3.7306*** (0.1990)        |

**Note:** Robust Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.1$

**Model Fit for Germany:** Observations: 7,652; Groups: 16 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 5): 2421.26; Log likelihood: – 16010.601; Residual (SD): 1.957 (0.0158); Region-level intercept (SD): 0.228 (0.0564)

**Model Fit for Spain:** Observations: 3,717; Groups: 17 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 5): 374.25; Log likelihood: – 8022.0273; Residual (SD): 2.0874 (0.0243); Region-level intercept (SD): 0.2966 (0.0734)

**Model Fit for Italy:** Observations: 5,225; Groups: 5 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 5): 934.96; Log likelihood: – 11084.382; Residual (SD): 2.0175 (0.0197); Region-level intercept (SD): 0.1059 (0.0458)

To further validate and contextualize the broader findings, this module examines country-specific models for Germany, Spain, and Italy. These models isolate each country in their national context to evaluate whether institutional trust and other individual and region-level factors operate similarly across the three countries. It found consistent patterns with prior models; however, each country exhibits its nuance in the relationship between trust, demographic characteristics, and immigration attitudes.

For instance, in Germany, institutional trust presents itself as the most significant predictor of immigration attitudes. For every one-point increase in trust, attitudes improve by nearly half a point (Coefficient = 0.4949,  $p < 0.001$ ), making this the strongest trust effect observed across the three nations. Education also has a robust positive impact, while older individuals are significantly more likely to hold negative views. Conversely, gender is statistically significant in Germany, with women expressing slightly more favourable views than men. Instead, migrant presence in the region (*perc\_migr*) shows no significant effect, which reinforces the prior statement that objective exposure to migration does not predict individual attitudes.

In Spain, institutional trust remains a key predictor (Coefficient = 0.2856,  $p < 0.001$ ), though the effect is somewhat weaker than in Germany. Education also plays a significant and

positive role, while age and gender do not exert a relevant influence. However, regional variation explains slightly more of the attitudinal variance in Spain than in Germany or Italy, but the majority remains at the individual level. Migrant presence remains irrelevant (Coefficient = 0.0003,  $p = 0.977$ ), once again challenging contact-based hypotheses.

In Italy, the role of institutional trust is significant (Coefficient = 0.3162,  $p < 0.001$ ), affirming its cross-national importance. In addition, education is a consistent predictor. By contrast, age is a significant negative factor (Coefficient =  $-0.0197$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), as older Italians demonstrate notably more negative attitudes toward immigration. Again, gender fails to reach significance in this model. Notably, regional variation is lowest in Italy, suggesting an even more individualized attitudinal structure. As with the other countries, migrant presence remains statistically insignificant.

In conclusion, these country-level models reinforce the centrality of institutional trust as a driver of immigration attitudes across diverse national contexts. Despite differences in political systems, migration histories, and regional cultures, trust consistently predicts more positive views toward immigration. This finding underscores its potential as a unifying mechanism in shaping public sentiment. Whilst education does play a significant role, the effects of age and gender vary more by country. However, the negligible impact of migrant presence casts doubts on proximity-based theories of immigration perception.

*Exploratory Model – Interaction Between Institutional Trust and Political Ideology*

**Table 7. Interaction Model: Trust and Political Ideology as Continuous Predictors of Immigration Attitudes**

| <b>Variables</b>                                 | <b>Coefficient (SE)<br/>(not recoded model)</b> | <b>Coefficient (SE)<br/>(recoded model)</b> |
|--|---|---|
| Institutional Trust ( <i>index_trust</i> )       | 0.3298*** (0.0166)                              | –   |
| Political Ideology ( <i>lrscale</i> )            | –0.3435*** (0.0148)                             | –   |
| Interaction: <i>index_trust</i> × <i>lrscale</i> | 0.0102*** (0.0032)                              | –   |
| Moderate Left/Centre ( <i>pol_affil4</i> = 2)    | –   | –1.1102*** (0.0402)                         |
| Moderate Right ( <i>pol_affil4</i> = 3)          | –   | –1.6317*** (0.0519)                         |
| Strong Right ( <i>pol_affil4</i> = 4)            | –   | –2.2132*** (0.0620)                         |
| Age ( <i>agea</i> )                              | –0.0064*** (0.0009)                             | –0.0053*** (0.0009)                         |
| Education ( <i>edu</i> )                         | 0.0563*** (0.0036)                              | 0.0725*** (0.0039)                          |
| Female (vs. Male) ( <i>i.gndr</i> )              | –0.0172 (0.0315)                                | –0.0086 (0.0339)                            |
| Spain (vs. Germany) ( <i>i.country</i> )         | 1.1023*** (0.1001)                              | 0.7805*** (0.1273)                          |
| Italy (vs. Germany) ( <i>i.country</i> )         | –0.2370* (0.1334)                               | –0.3177* (0.1744)                           |
| Constant (_cons)                                 | 4.9601*** (0.1284)                              | 5.7932*** (0.1247)                          |

**Note:** Robust Standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

**Model Fit for not recoded model:** Observations: 14,790; Groups: 38 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 8): 5265.14; Log likelihood: – 30546.124; Residual (SD): 1.9045 (0.0111); Region-level intercept (SD): 0.2448 (0.0392)

**LR test vs. linear model for the not recoded one:**  $\chi^2$  (1) = 80.39, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ (random effects significantly improve model fit)

**Model Fit for recoded model:** Observations: 14,813; Groups: 38 (NUTS-2 regions); Wald  $\chi^2$  (df = 8): 2515.72; Log likelihood: – 31677.169; Residual (SD): 2.0481(0.0119); Region-level intercept (SD): 0.3264 (0.0471)

**LR test vs. linear model for the recoded one:**  $\chi^2$  (1) = 156.88, \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ (random effects significantly improve model fit)

This seventh model (Table 7) extends the analysis by examining the relationship between political identity, institutional trust, and immigration attitudes. This model investigates how trust levels differ across political affiliations and political identity to comprehend their influence on migrant perceptions. Additionally, it explores how political ideology, both as a categorical identity and a continuous spectrum, influences immigration attitudes and how institutional trust interacts with this effect. These analyses will allow us to discern whether trust in governance buffers political polarization.

Firstly, there is a continuous measure of self-placement on the left-right political spectrum (ranging from 0 to 10), which was used to explore nuanced ideological gradients. This model's mixed-effects regression results demonstrate that right-leaning individuals express more negative attitudes toward immigration. Second, to complementing this prior analysis, the ideology variable was recoded into four strong categories second model in Table 7: Strong Left (0–3), Moderate Left/Center (4–5), Moderate Right (6–7), and Strong Right (8–10). This categorical model confirmed the ideological gradient observed in the continuous approach. In comparison to individuals in the Strong Left, those considered moderate Left/Center showed a 1.11-point decline in pro-immigration attitudes ( $p < 0.001$ ). However, the Moderate Right declined by 1.63 points ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the Strong Right showed the steepest drop at 2.21 points ( $p < 0.001$ ). The sum of these findings illustrates a linear, ideology-driven erosion of support for immigration. Lastly, these categorical distinctions permit a more interpretable framing of the data.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the interaction between trust and ideology is statistically significant and positive (Coefficient = 0.0102,  $p = 0.001$ ). This interaction highlights the significant role trust plays for right-wing individuals and its relevance in mitigating anti-immigration sentiment among this group of voters. While trust does not reverse ideological tendencies, it subsides the effects. Therefore, trust serves as a partial buffer in reducing the effect of ideological polarization on attitudes towards migrants, although it does not eliminate it.

In both models, age continues to show a negative effect on immigration attitudes, while education remains a consistent positive predictor. The variable gender effects are non-significant across the board. Lastly, country effects suggest Spain is significantly more positive than Germany (reference), while Italy is marginally more negative. These models confirm that political ideology is one of the most relevant predictors of immigration attitudes. It also notes that institutional trust consistently tempers the effect of ideology, particularly among right-leaning individuals. Lastly, these findings reinforce the importance of rebuilding trust in institutions not just as a civic virtue, but also as a mechanism for mitigating political polarization. Ultimately, fostering more cohesive immigration discourse

These findings are an interesting contribution to the theoretical narrative in migration studies and governance. These models take a step further by prefacing the importance of institutional trust and how it interacts with parties promoting securitization narratives. Even though right-wing individuals are more likely to oppose immigration, the increase in trust significantly moderates the effect of ideological polarization. Although it cannot override ideological divides, the ability to mitigate one of the harshest outcomes is crucial nowadays. This frames trust as a stabilizing mechanism for politically fragmented societies, which currently affect Europe and the world. These findings are important in countries experiencing democratic backsliding or institutional delegitimization.

Moreover, this study suggests that the lack of trust in institutions leaves room for fear-based identity narratives. The observable linear gradient in the model, where the variable is recoded, highlights the erosion of immigration support across the spectrum. The gap between the strong left and right groups showcases how securitist narratives target political identity. It also demonstrates the potential for institutional trust to change this trend and serve as a lever to de-escalate polarization. These findings consider a different perception of political stances, perceiving them as not fixed, with a potential for leniency on subjects such as migration. However, institutional trust is crucial to reach this political attenuation.

This study reiterates the same policy advice stated in all prior models, which is that trust in institutions is crucial to controlling aversion towards migrants. It also demonstrates how the inclusion of this variable would address polarization in these different contexts.

## Chapter 4 – Conclusion and Policy Pathways

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### 4.1 Key Findings and Theoretical Implications

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In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates the significance of institutional trust in shaping perceptions of migrants across different contexts. It also signalled the importance of considering individual factors that shape perceptions of migration. These findings are crucial to inform targeted policy initiatives and guide future research on effective migration policy design. Additionally, education is a key variable in shaping perceptions of migrants; the more education individuals have, the less aversion they exhibit towards migrants. Age was significantly and negatively correlated across all models, demonstrating that older generations hold more negative views than younger generations. Looking at country differences, Spain did not exhibit this trend; instead, it showed a positive result compared to Italy and Germany. This suggests that there is a weaker generational divide and that the majority holds positive views. Nevertheless, the literature by Schotte and Winkler (2018) found that aversion towards migrants was more closely related to education programs than to generational perceptions, which could be what is occurring in these models. Therefore, this factor should be considered in future research to discern its importance. Moreover, Spain could reflect the theory by Pettigrew (1998), where increased exposure to the out-group (migrants) decreases aversion with time. Across models, women demonstrated either neutral or slightly positive attitudes towards migrants, meaning they are more receptive to them than men. In summary, Spain held more positive views at the country level than Germany. Italy remained across models as the country holding the most negative views, which could be related to its historical narrative (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo, 2021).

This quantitative analysis confirms the rejection of the null hypothesis for the first one (H1). This means that higher institutional trust correlates with more favourable attitudes towards migrants. Moreover, the second hypothesis (H2), which tested whether migrant presence affected perceptions of them, failed to reject the null hypothesis. As did the third hypothesis (H3), which analyzed whether institutional trust moderated the perceptions of migrants in hotspots. The failure to reject the null hypothesis for the second (H2) and third (H3) hypotheses could be related to the treatment of the variables, thus signalling the need for future research treating them all in the same manner. Therefore, no significant effect was found for regional migration hotspots, and neither



SIT nor psychological threat perception frameworks substantially explained any of the variance in attitudes towards migrants.

Finally, these findings align with Bonjour and Chauvin's (2018), Kalogeraki's (2012) and Macdonald and Cornacchione's (2023) arguments that institutional trust, inclusive migration policies and citizens are essential to be considered in shaping these perceptions. Whilst Indelicato, Martín, and Scuderi's (2022) findings assert SIT and the psychological basis of threat perception, the present results from this analysis suggest further research is needed to compare with their findings. Finally, for future policy implementations to decrease aversion towards migrants, institutional trust should be a central variable to consider for increasing social cohesion and integration. Additionally, the capacity of institutional trust to reduce ideological divides stands out. The moderation effect in the political spectrum model demonstrated that higher trust significantly diminishes the negative association between right-leaning ideology and migration attitudes. These findings render institutional trust more than a direct predictor; it can be considered a stabilizing force against polarization in democratic societies.

## 4.2 Policy Recommendations: Designing Trust-Centric Governance

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### 4.2.1 Migration Governance (Germany, Spain and Italy)

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It is essential for policy design to understand the history of these countries, including the policies that existed prior to them and their shortcomings. Germany, Italy, and Spain transitioned from emigration to immigration states in the 20th century. This shift posed multiple difficulties due to the application of national state and EU regulations for managing migration. Among these three countries, Germany was among the first to adopt laws regarding migration management (Martin, P.L., 2002). Their first one was the *Ausländergesetz* (Aliens Act), regulating the entry of foreigners in 1965. Germany's biggest struggles across the years regarding migration are intake, integration, and outflow (Martin, P.L., 2002). The issue in managing this matter led to an increase in extreme far-right polarization and anti-migrant sentiment, as documented in Martin, P.L. (2002). Germany's regulatory system is federal; therefore, as demonstrated by Caponio and Ponzio (2022), it facilitated the implementation of EU directives concerning migration.

Italy, on the other hand, experienced a very similar trend in the later part of the century. The most significant difficulties in integration policies were visible in the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF), which is an EU project intended to improve migration management, enhance the integration of non-EU nationals, ensure fair integration, promote efficient asylum systems, and improve return strategies (Carteny and Petrovic, 2023). In the book "Per una governance territoriale dei flussi migratori," they underscore the difficulties in the Italian system. For instance, they found that the decentralized and fragmented governance meant that those on the front lines had less information on addressing irregular migration. This book also highlighted the concerns surrounding the lack of knowledge, which they found led to errors in distinctions between non-programmed migration, asylum, and regular pathways. The strength of EU-level action over local ones also created further issues in terms of internal coordination, as these directives functioned more effectively in a centralized state than in a regionalized unitary state, such as Italy (Caponio and Ponzo, 2022). Moreover, the lack of institutional coordination limits the capacity to integrate migrants into these communities and structures. Lastly, formal legal protection is left to be executed at the discretion of the region managing it. This decision harms institutional trust due to the lack of transparency and communication. Finally, local officials interviewed in the AMIF project expressed that public fear and misinformation about migrants is often shaped by local responses more than law or evidence.

In the book by Caponio and Ponzo (2022), they demonstrate how Spain took longer to apply migration regulations and only began after Franco's death. The majority of laws documented were often driven by EU initiatives. However, these directives were best suited for a federal state, not one that coordinates with its regions and autonomous ones like Italy. Due to the time they took to apply these legislations, the commission, as documented in Caponio and Ponzo (2022b), ignited an infringement procedure. At the same time, Catalonia brought Spain to the Supreme Court, arguing that the directives infringed on their rights as an autonomous region. They did so because the region noticed a lack of information, which made it difficult to support the migrant populations being attributed to them.

This demonstrates the need for the EU to simplify these directives, whilst integrating factors of institutional trust. To ensure all three countries can apply these regulations and achieve proper migration management whilst upholding migrants' rights. This would allow states such as Italy or Spain to adapt these regulations to their specific context, and enable Germany to manage its intake and outflow

#### 4.2.2 Policy Considerations for Strengthening Institutional Trust

To increase trust in institutions, we must focus on the mechanisms that increase good governance, as stated in the World Bank report (Kumagai and Iorio, 2020). This concept is based on ethical universalism, a foundational lens where trust in governments can be institutionalized. It is based on equity (providing equal outcomes to those who make equal contributions), reciprocity (demonstrating fairness) and impartiality (rule of law and rejection of favouritism) (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020b, p 91). This translates into states and institutions delivering public goods following these pillars. From 1996 to 2003, the World Bank, the OECD, and UNCAC used these pillars to attempt to dissolve and limit corruption worldwide.

However, it has been challenging to implement even in Western MS. Especially because applying these rules is not a one-size-fits-all solution, as Mungiu-Pippidi (2020b) states in her book. For instance, when she discusses the use of whistleblower laws, she points out that these often fail due to a lack of understanding at the ground level of how institutions operate and how citizens perceive them. This pushes for a more context-driven form of policy, to push transparency values forth and decrease polarization. Conversely, as Mungiu-Pippidi (2020b) stated, it has rarely been attainable across history without an autocratic figure or a revolution. Between both options, the advisable approach in this scenario is to involve the citizens and increase civic education. Thus, making individuals more aware of the different mechanisms states are working on and how to monitor them may generate further trust due to accountability. This idea is reinforced by Kumagai and Iorio (2020), who preface the World Bank report with the importance of citizen engagement in fostering a critical catalyst for restoring trust. This element increases with the responsiveness that governments demonstrate towards it. However, it requires a two-way form of legitimacy between the state and its citizens, and vice versa. To address institutional trust, this paper proposes using the existing transparency EU directives regarding migration and strengthening them. While simplifying the aspects that function best in centralized states compared to regionalized unitary

states. Additionally, they should establish public accountability systems that enable citizens to monitor the progress of these policies. It is also advisable for them to be published on social media, to facilitate the monitoring process by citizens. Lastly, keeping these directives is crucial since it allows discretionary space for states to apply them to their own countries. Whilst the EU can set goals for each of these. Therefore, having a revision of these existing systems, which are tangential to migration policies, and setting context-driven goals and timelines with public accountability can reinforce a positive outcome. This is reinforced by Bardach's (2005) paper, which advises "thinking politically, acting analytically," meaning that these trust-enhancing reforms must be integrated into existing institutional ecosystems, rather than imposed without a contextual framework.

In summary, this paper advises a directive rooted in ethical universalism to drive us closer towards institutional trust. This should be refined by context and designed to balance the existing institutional scope, providing strength. This approach will limit the pitfall of technocratic overreach and acknowledge the moral and civic dimension in governance. Finally, trust must be progressively earned; it is not a rapid process but a collective effort.

#### 4.3 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

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The methodological limitations present in this research are the cross-sectional data from the ESS round 10 (2020–2021), which limits the causal inference since it only captures a moment in time. Future research should adopt a longitudinal framework, giving us a greater perspective on whether and how the association between trust and attitudes towards migrants has evolved over time. Additionally, as stated previously, the data collected from hotspots came from national data sets; therefore, each data set respective to hotspots was collected differently. Future studies should harmonize this variable to compare it to Indelicato, Martín and Scuderi's (2022) findings. This would permit the evaluation of their new methodology and assess which one represents this effect best. Lastly, this study only considered host country citizens' perceptions as variables in the theories of Pettigrew (1998), Billig and Tajfel (1973), Tajfel and Turner (Jost and Sidanius, 2004). Future investigations on this matter should incorporate migrant perspectives and sentiments of integration to assess these theories further. Capturing the sentiment of those from the host country and those arriving is a more comprehensive framework for testing these theories (Kalogeraki, 2012). Given intra-regional differences, collecting presential data from cities would allow for

greater comparability and precision. It would support the regional findings and enable us to grasp which approaches work best for this policy field. Additionally, institutional trust should remain a core variable in future analyses, particularly in discerning its regulating effects in high-presence regions. Lastly, future studies should examine these three countries, as stated by Macdonald and Cornacchione (2023), to evaluate the differences between high asylum-receiving countries (Germany) and high reception countries (Spain & Italy). A final variable omitted from this study is the impact of the media; it could be interesting for future research to include this variable to grasp securitization narratives (Oso, López-Sala and Muñoz-Comet, 2021). Including this variable would provide further insights into its effects on aversion and perhaps capture polarization and its relation to institutional trust.

**Word Count:** 13.681

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