

Toward Identifying Political Compromise: Rethinking Public Support of Immigration as a Conditional Preference*

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Abstract

Public opinion on immigration appears deeply polarised, but this picture may reflect how attitudes are measured rather than their true structure. The dominant unidimensional framework, which locates citizens on a single pro-versus-anti continuum, has driven a persuasion paradigm in which researchers and advocates seek to shift restrictive attitudes in a more permissive direction. This approach has yielded limited and inconsistent results. In this conceptual review article, we argue that immigration attitudes are better understood as conditional preferences: multidimensional and non-separable evaluations of specific policy bundles. The same voter who opposes immigration in the abstract may support it when it is, for example, economically beneficial or paired with credible integration provisions. This reframing shifts the practical goal from persuasion to compromise identification. We first present a survey experiment with parallel question-wording variants and visual priming treatments, whose results suggest that more specific items reveal pre-existing differentiated preferences rather than prime new ones. We then go on and make a conceptual contribution by providing a unified account of conditional preferences and distinguishing it from the absolute preference framework based on recent research. We outline survey-based tools for mapping voters' conditional preferences, point out possible limitations of this approach and discuss further research steps.

Keywords: Immigration Policy, Public Opinion, Conditional Preferences, Survey Experiment

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Introduction

There is a voluminous literature on immigration policy preferences—how citizens evaluate and rank different approaches to managing immigration. In this literature, it is common to assume that most people can be consistently classified as pro-immigration, anti-immigration, or somewhere in between on a single continuum (Ruedin 2020). Under this framework of unidimensional “absolute preferences,” when voters report a pro-immigration view on one issue (e.g., freer legal admissions) but an anti-immigration view on another (e.g., stricter border control), which they often do, scholars interpret this as indicative of ambivalence, misunderstanding, or measurement error (e.g., Kustov et al. 2021; for an alternative account, see Levy & Wright 2020).

There is substantial evidence of widespread public opposition and negativity toward immigration, often interpreted as placement on the anti-immigration side of this assumed continuum. Most advocacy efforts and academic research on persuasion operate in the same paradigm, where the goal is to change people’s preferences, alongside their core beliefs and identities in a more pro-immigration direction on this single continuum. Sometimes these efforts are framed in terms of correcting common misperceptions, reducing prejudice, or “myth-busting,” and sometimes they explicitly seek to “convert” people to like immigration (Lutz & Bitschnau 2023; Schmid et al. 2025). Either way, these efforts have had limited and inconsistent success, particularly for voters who consider immigration an important issue (Kustov 2025b).

We argue that this standard view of clear pro- or anti-immigration mindsets, while not without merit for capturing broad orientations, is incomplete and obscures how citizens actually evaluate specific immigration policies and trade-offs. Drawing on recent studies and public opinion data across several rich democracies we develop a “conditional preference” framework that treats immigration attitudes as multidimensional and non-separable. Existing research shows that policy bundles offering credible assurances of legality, tangible economic contribution, and meaningful cultural integration can command majority support, even amid racial bias and general scepticism (Levy & Wright 2020; Kustov 2025b). This perspective also clarifies what progress on immigration might look like in diverse democracies where people genuinely disagree about the issue. Rather than seeking primarily to reshape core attitudes and identities, we argue that researchers and

policymakers should focus on identifying, and rigorously measuring, the specific trade-offs citizens are prepared to accept across different issues.

This reframing has both conceptual and practical implications. Conceptually, it shifts attention from the level of immigration support to its structure—from asking how permissive or restrictive citizens are to asking under what conditions they are prepared to accept specific policy arrangements. Practically, it shifts the goal of public debate from persuasion to compromise identification: rather than trying to convert opponents into supporters, the task becomes designing policy packages that majorities across the political spectrum can collectively recognise as improvements.

While several recent empirical studies have moved in this direction—demonstrating that citizens distinguish between immigration and integration policies and that support for specific policy dimensions varies independently across individuals (e.g., Jeannet et al. 2021; Helbling, Maxwell & Traunmüller 2024; Briggs & Solodoch 2024; Ivarsflaten & Sniderman 2022; Levy & Wright 2020)—this literature lacks a unifying conceptual account of what conditional preferences are, how they differ from absolute preferences, and what their implications are for measurement, persuasion, and democratic compromise. The present paper provides that account: we give precise theoretical content to the notion of conditional preferences, distinguish it rigorously from the standard absolute preference framework, and show what a research programme oriented around conditional preferences requires in terms of survey design, experimental strategy, and outcome measurement.

According to this new framework, most voters do not inherently support or oppose “immigration” in general, but rather pick specific policies or policy combinations that better advance or reflect their more basic preferences and values. For example, if many people value control and use sociotropic considerations to assess policies, they may prefer stricter border security and asylum policy while also preferring freer skilled immigration and immigrant rights, especially when these two parameters go together (Kustov 2021; Briggs & Solodoch 2024; Helbling, Maxwell, & Traunmüller 2024; Kustov 2025b).

What is often overlooked is that the conditional preference framework has profound implications for our understanding of “persuasion” and for making progress on immigration in contemporary societies where many people evidently disagree on the issue. While informing voters about facts

may be good in and of itself, in large democracies persuasion should not be only about changing preferences but also about identifying compromise policy solutions with trade-offs people are willing to accept. For example, those who currently report they want to decrease immigration may support more immigration if it is more selective or more secure. At the same time, those who currently report they want to increase immigration may support less immigration if the rights of existing immigrants become more generous (Helbling, Maxwell, & Traunmüller 2024).

Some of these conditional preferences may operate due to misinformation, but much of it arguably reflects genuine differences in views about equality, citizenship, and social cohesion in democracy (for example, Schmid et al. 2025). Instead of trying to convert all those who currently dislike immigration, governments and advocates who seek progress on the issue may benefit from identifying what their diverse constituencies actually want from immigration and from compromise.

We start off with illustrative evidence from a U.S. survey experiment to motivate the conditional preference framework and its implications for measurement, persuasion, and compromise. Our findings indicate that varied responses to specific immigration questions capture genuine differences in underlying preferences rather than framing effects. These differences do not reflect actual shifts in opinions. Instead, they suggest that public attitudes toward immigration are more nuanced than commonly assumed, leaving greater scope for political compromise than is often acknowledged. This allows us to develop the conceptual distinction between absolute and conditional preference frameworks and their divergent implications for how scholars think about persuasion and progress on immigration. The presentation of the theoretical framework on conditional immigration preferences is followed by a broader review of recent cross-national studies that have begun to operationalize such preferences across different policy dimensions. We then discuss the implications of such an approach for the study of immigration preferences and close by discussing possible limitations and outlining directions for future research on mapping the specific trade-offs citizens are prepared to accept.

Priming vs. revealing preferences

It is important to clarify what scholars are usually trying to achieve by asking different questions about immigration in surveys or including various experimental stimuli. For the sake of the argument, let's first focus on the issue of immigration admission numbers. For years, Gallup and many other pollsters have been asking the following question: "In your view, should immigration be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?" A version of this long-standing question has been asked in a variety of contexts across time and space, arguably tapping into people's views on immigration admissions in their country alongside their more general views on the issue. As a result, many persuasion scholars have similarly used it as their outcome of interest when trying to change people's minds on the issue.

Why do people disagree, and then potentially change their minds, about this question? Equally important, why do people tend to give different answers to different versions of this question or in response to various stimuli before answering the question? According to the absolute preference perspective, most people have some kind of underlying attitude toward immigration rooted in their predispositions which can be revealed by a set of questions with some measurement error (Kustov et al. 2021).

One particularly common worry is that different people may answer differently because, depending on their background or context, they may imagine different types of immigrants while answering the policy questions (e.g., Blinder 2015). For example, those in the US who identify as Republicans who are more likely to be exposed to stories about illegal immigration will likely think of the illegality aspect while those who identify as Democrats will likely think of asylum and humanitarian obligations. Including some kind of messaging treatment or asking the question in a slightly different way can shift which migrants respondents imagine in their heads.

An alternative (though not fully mutually exclusive) conditional perspective we put forward here stipulates that people may have different preferences regarding different immigration issues in line with their other preferences and values. As a result, information treatments and asking different questions rather tap into their distinct preferences. To the extent people may imagine different migrants due to contextual characteristics, it appears that asking more specific questions can resolve this issue. So, what happens when we ask the question in a more or less particular

way, specifying whether it is about legal immigration or the skill levels, alongside other details, to make sure all respondents are on the same page?

To illustrate the conditional preference framework with new evidence, we conducted a large-scale US survey experiment on the Prolific survey platform in October 2025, approximating national demographics ($N = 3,504$).¹ The control group was exposed to the standard, most general Gallup item with more room for interpretation, while various treatment groups were exposed to a variety of more or less specific items with less room for interpretation (*italic is only used for emphasis here*):

- Control/Default: “Do you think the number of immigrants in the United States should be increased, decreased, or kept the same as it is now?”²
- Illegal immigration: “Do you think the number of *immigrants without authorization* in the United States should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?”
- Illegal, low-skilled immigration: “Do you think the number of *low-skilled immigrants without authorization* in the United States should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?”
- Legal immigration: “Do you think the number of *legal immigrants* in the United States should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?”
- Legal, high-skilled immigration: “Do you think the number of high-skilled legal immigrants in the United States should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?”³

¹ To be clear about what this experiment is and is not designed to show: that Americans are more opposed to unauthorized than legal immigration, and more favorable toward high-skilled migrants, is well established and is not our contribution. Our interest is in two less obvious quantities: whether the partisan gap narrows as questions become more specific, and whether such shifts reflect priming of different considerations or the revelation of distinct, pre-existing preferences. Our design builds on earlier question-wording experiments by Levy, Wright and Citrin (2016; see also Levy & Wright 2020), which show that an abstract preference for less immigration coexists with majority support for keeping or expanding admissions through family reunification, skills-based visas, and refugee provisions.

² We also included an alternative, slightly longer control more similar to the original Gallup item with no change in the underlying results. Similarly, we also had items specifying the examples of high-skilled and low-skilled immigrants with no change in the results. Therefore, we decided to merge similar items with each other to improve statistical power. All items were recoded as 0-1 quasi-continuous variables with 1 being anti-immigration and 0 pro-immigration.

³ The design varies skill within each legality condition (legal vs. high-skilled legal; unauthorized vs. low-skilled unauthorized), permitting within-legality comparisons of the skill dimension. We did not field a fully crossed design because some cells (e.g., high-skilled unauthorized immigration) lack realistic referents.

As expected, Figure 1 shows that the standard control item has the biggest difference in views between much more anti-immigration Republicans and much more pro-immigration Democrats (as well as the largest variation between responses). However, these differences shrink when we ask people more specific questions. While it is true that Republican attitudes toward illegal immigration, and Democratic views on legal immigration, are respectively more similar to their general views, it is also the case that their opinions converge when we talk about more specific immigration types. We see the same dynamic if we divide the sample into those who reported pro-immigration and anti-immigration attitudes on a separate set of attitudinal questions in the survey.

As a parallel experiment to question wording, to get at the role of priming, we also randomly exposed our respondents to visual stimuli illustrating a chaotic image of migrants at the border, an orderly image of seemingly well-off migrants at a naturalization ceremony, a placebo image, or no image (see Appendix). Across all four conditions, mean responses hover between 0.55 and 0.58—a range roughly nine times smaller than the shift produced by question wording alone (Figure A1). Omnibus tests detect no statistically significant differences across priming conditions, whether in the full sample or within specific question-wording arms. In other words, being primed with more or less sympathetic images of migrants does not meaningfully alter people's responses, whereas specifying the content of immigration policy does—consistent with the interpretation that policy specificity reveals pre-existing differentiated preferences rather than creating them through affective priming.⁴

Building on earlier specification experiments (Levy, Wright & Citrin 2016), our design adds a parallel priming arm that allows us to compare two approaches directly: the traditional view, which seeks to demonstrate that individuals can be persuaded to change their opinions, and a newer approach that reveals the nuanced nature of public attitudes toward migration. Our findings show that differentiated responses to specific immigration questions reflect genuine variation in underlying preferences rather than mere artefacts of framing. Importantly, the observed differences do not indicate actual changes in individuals' preferences. These results suggest that

⁴ We note that immigration attitudes in the United States are intertwined with racial perceptions, and that visual or verbal cues about immigrant categories may activate racialized associations (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2014). Disentangling these mechanisms from the conditional preference structure documented here is an important task for future research.

public attitudes toward immigration may be more flexible than previously assumed, with greater potential for political compromise than is often recognised by researchers and policymakers. As we discuss in the next section, it is therefore more useful to conceptualise public opinion not as fixed or absolute, but as conditional.

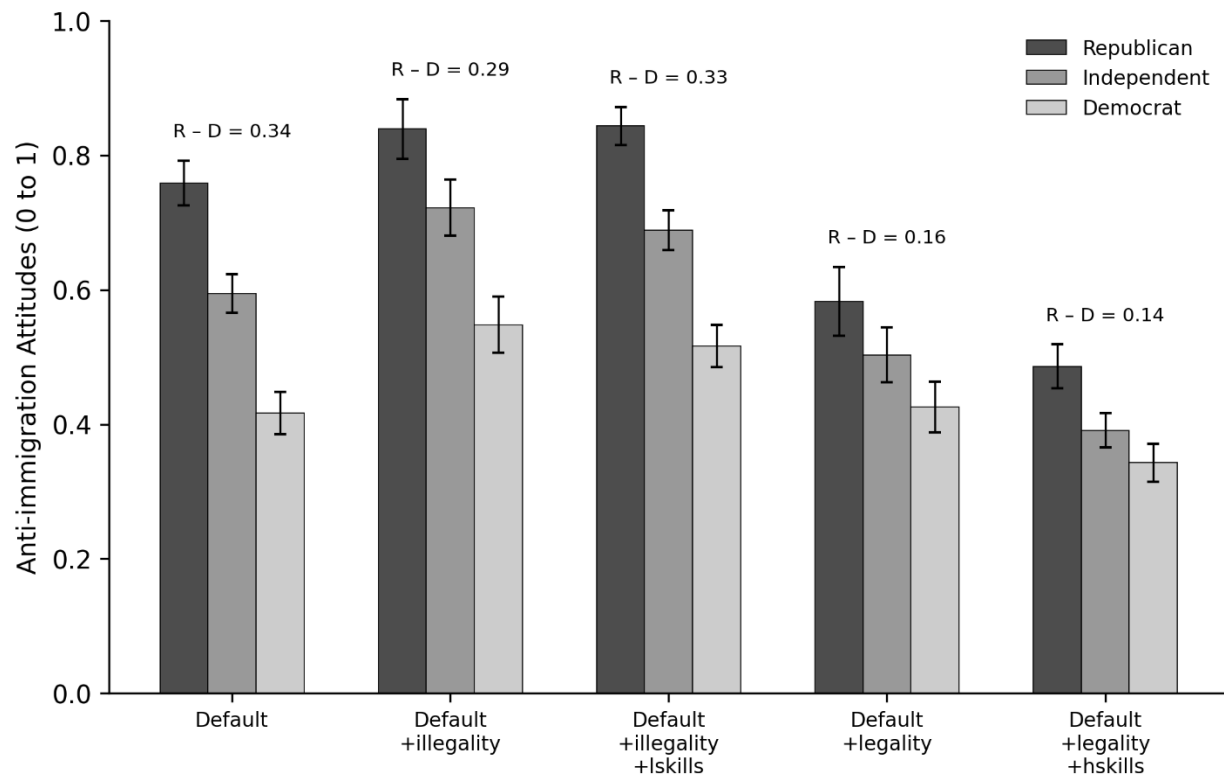


Figure 1: Self-reported anti-immigration preferences based on policy specificity. “Default” indicates the standard survey wording that is also used as the “control” condition.

Absolute vs. conditional preferences

Many people do change their minds, not just about empirical facts but also about what they intrinsically want. Still, despite occasional thermostatic changes in aggregate positivity toward immigration, there is growing evidence that immigration preferences are generally stable at the individual level (Hopkins et al. 2019; Maxwell 2019; Kustov et al. 2021; Lancaster 2022). This aligns with psychological research showing that these preferences form early in life and reflect

deep-seated predispositions such as openness to experience and ethnocentrism (Jeannet and Dražanová 2024; Kinder & Kam 2009). To the extent that durable attitudinal changes exist, they happen gradually and mostly due to generational replacement, not persuasion (Dennison & Geddes 2026).⁵ Given this stability, the question becomes not how to change minds but how to identify policy designs that diverse citizens can recognise as improvements.

As we have seen in the previous section, a central limitation of the existing research on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration policy is its reliance on a unidimensional perspective that treats these preferences as simply more or less permissive, or in some interpretation as more or less “prejudiced” (see Heath et al. 2020). Such an approach ignores the inherently multidimensional character of migration processes and their regulation. Immigration policy encompasses a wide array of distinct rules—different categories of migrants, admission criteria, conditions attached to entry and residence, the rights afforded to migrants, and adjacent citizenship rules governing naturalisation. Neglecting this complexity and underlying objective trade-offs risks misrepresenting people’s preferences.

Relatedly, most empirical studies have paid little attention to the possibility that citizens hold non-separable policy preferences: attitudes toward one policy element may depend on how other elements are configured (Lacy 2001). Horiuchi et al. (2018) recognised this problem in the electoral context, showing that voters’ choices over parties and candidates—which aggregate multiple policy dimensions—obscure the underlying multidimensional preferences. Standard approaches therefore struggle to reveal how citizens evaluate policy bundles when component positions vary.

All policy preferences are conditional on empirical beliefs about policy effects (e.g., preferring tax policy X over Y depends on which one is believed to be better for one’s finances). This pattern is well documented in research on fiscal policy preferences, where citizens often express simultaneous support for lower taxes and for higher spending, revealing a desire for “something for nothing” unless trade-offs are made explicit (e.g., Citrin 1979). Yet immigration research has

⁵ Although persuasion or preference change brought about by shifting narratives or providing information is possible even for racialized issues (Kustov & Landgrave 2026; Santiago, Kustov, & Valenzuela 2023), it appears to be much harder for issues that voters perceive as important (Howe & Krosnick 2017; Vidigal & Jerit 2022), such as immigration in many countries today. Immigration is also an issue on which most voters across OECD countries distrust their governments, even more than they distrust government in general, and better information campaigns alone are unlikely to change this (Kustov 2025b).

rarely integrated this insight (but see Levy, Wright & Citrin 2016), even though many proposed expansions of immigrant rights and services also require someone to bear the associated fiscal costs. The conditional preference perspective we propose here adds that preferences are also conditional on other preferences people hold regarding adjacent issues and more basic values. In the immigration domain, this may operate at several levels.

First, immigration views are often constrained by non-immigration issues such as related to welfare or the economy. Citizens may, for instance, favour higher admissions only if they believe migration alleviates labour shortages or public debt rather than exacerbating them. Second, people differentiate across distinct immigration subissues. The same individual can support stricter border enforcement, more generous asylum protection, expanded skilled labour migration, and broad access to integration and citizenship rights, depending on how these elements cohere with their other preferences. Third, even within a given subissue, preferences depend on concrete design choices: support for higher numbers may hinge on selectivity criteria, for instance, or on the presence of credible enforcement and integration requirements. Across all these levels, empirical beliefs about economic, cultural, and institutional consequences shape how citizens evaluate specific combinations of policies, rather than a single underlying attitude toward “immigration” in the abstract.

While both absolute and conditional preference frameworks are positive, descriptive perspectives on how to conceptualise what people want, they differ in their normative foundations and implications for persuasion. The “absolute preference” framework and the related “myth-busting” persuasion paradigm often imply that people who oppose immigration are mostly mistaken or morally wrong (Kustov 2026). The conditional preference framework acknowledges that immigration involves hard problems and moral dilemmas on which fully informed people may disagree (e.g., Schmid et al. 2025).

Broader evidence on conditional immigration preferences

More broadly, research within migration studies has begun to address the shortcomings of a traditional unidimensional absolute preference approach going beyond focusing on just one particular (immigration) issue like admission or selectivity. Jeannet et al. (2021), for instance, were among the first to disaggregate asylum policy into multiple dimensions and demonstrate that public preferences are not well captured by a single “restrictive versus permissive” axis. Across Europe, the public broadly supports protection in principle, while simultaneously favouring policy designs that provide governments with tools for control. This nuanced perspective reveals that across European countries, there is considerable common ground: most citizens support refugee protection in principle, provided governments retain meaningful tools for managing and controlling the process.⁶

Helbling et al. (2025) adopt a similar strategy in the German context for a broader set of immigration issues. Drawing on detailed policy indicators (e.g. MIPEx, Solano and Huddleston 2020, IMPIC, Helbling et al. 2017), they differentiate immigration, integration and citizenship regulations and show that public attitudes are not uniformly open or closed across these domains. Instead, citizens express a mixture of permissive, restrictive and indifferent preferences depending on the issue: for example, respondents endorse stricter language requirements and integration tests while favouring more permissive labour-market access and welfare entitlements. It also appears that distinctions between those generally favourable and generally unfavourable to migration are matters of degree rather than direction: both groups reveal comparable mixes of support and opposition to particular policy measures. This evidence suggests that public preferences are subtler and less polarised than is often assumed.

A multidimensional approach also permits a reassessment of causal mechanisms emphasised in earlier cross-national work. For instance, several studies have linked immigration and citizenship regimes to public attitudes (Weldon 2006; Ariely 2012; Schlueter et al. 2013; Wright 2011), examining whether more liberal institutional frameworks produce more liberal public attitudes via

⁶ Similarly, the European Social Survey has long included items that capture differentiated attitudes toward various immigrant characteristics, and the special issue edited by Heath et al. (2020) demonstrates how these multidimensional measures reveal conditional patterns across European countries—findings broadly consistent with the framework developed here.

socialisation. While long-term institutional socialisation may indeed matter, it is likewise plausible that citizens behave as strategic, self-interested actors who form preferences in response to the anticipated consequences of concrete, short-term policy choices. Abstract regime typologies (for example, “multiculturalist” versus “assimilationist”) as used in these earlier studies are useful heuristics but mask important variations across specific regulatory instruments; they also risk treating citizens as passive recipients of institutional norms rather than as evaluative agents.

To address these issues, Helbling et al. (2024) also disaggregate policy regimes and experimentally investigate how combinations of three policy dimensions—numbers admitted, selectivity, and migrants’ rights—influence public support for immigration. Their findings illustrate that many citizens are willing to make trade-offs: individuals who generally oppose immigration support higher numbers if entrance criteria become more selective, whereas those generally supportive of migration accept fewer immigrants if they receive more rights. These patterns imply that compromise packages balancing numbers, selectivity and rights can reduce polarisation and create possibilities for broader political consensus. This is possible, among others, because pro- and anti-immigration constituencies prioritise different policy dimensions: As Helbling et al. (2024) and Kustov (2025a) show, the former primarily value migrants’ rights, while the latter privilege restrictive admission criteria.⁷

Briggs and Solodoch (2024) contribute to this literature by showing that perceived border security affects the willingness of Americans to accept higher immigration, principally by enhancing feelings of control. Their work highlights the important psychological functions of border policies: visible measures of control can attenuate public backlash by signalling order and manageability. This result is not self-evident as one might alternatively suppose that stricter borders would reinforce in-group boundaries and intensify hostility as the literature on policy regimes has shown. Their experiments indicate that perceived effectiveness and control can moderate opposition.

Levy and Wright (2025) pursue a related line of inquiry by asking whether concrete, policy-specific integration requirements (for example, employment, basic host-language proficiency, and

⁷ A similar multidimensional approach has been applied to attitudes toward diversity more broadly. Harris et al. (2024) conceptualise ‘diversity assent’ as encompassing distinct dimensions and show, using survey data from German cities, that aggregate pro- or anti-diversity labels obscure meaningful variation in how citizens evaluate specific aspects of living in diverse societies.

background checks) can increase public support for greater legal admissions. Their experiments show that specifying attainable integration benchmarks substantially raises support for expansionary admission proposals and outperforms generic positive information about immigrants. Crucially, clarifying such requirements can generate broad acceptance for higher admissions without relying on high-skill selection or introducing further restrictive trade-offs.

In addition to studies that emphasise the impact of migration regulation on attitudes towards migrants, another group of research focuses more specifically on how people's policy preferences depend on the material benefits of various migration pathways. Kustov (2021) shows that anti-immigration sentiments are not set in stone but significantly depend on perceived sociotropic costs and benefits. The same exact people who are currently sceptical of immigration in general may be willing to support select policies and pathways that they view as economically beneficial to their nation. In such a context, immigration could be expanded if policies were not just simply presented as beneficial but designed to intuitively demonstrate national benefits to a broad segment of the electorate (Kustov, 2025b; also see Mason-Sucher 2025). The same principle likely applies to sociotropic costs and benefits beyond the economy.

Ivarsflaten and Sniderman (2022) provide perhaps the most systematic demonstration of conditional acceptance in the integration domain. Drawing on a series of iterative survey experiments fielded through the Norwegian Citizen Panel, they probe, step by step, how far non-Muslim majorities in Western democracies are willing to include Muslim minorities—and where they draw the line. Their key finding is that substantial majorities who express general unease about Muslim immigration nonetheless support specific inclusion measures—such as the right to build mosques or wear headscarves in public institutions—when these are framed in terms of established liberal democratic principles like religious freedom and equal treatment. Crucially, this conditional acceptance is not uniform: support drops when accommodation is perceived as requiring special exemptions from generally applicable rules rather than extending existing rights. The structure they document closely parallels the conditional preference logic we develop here: citizens do not simply oppose or support inclusion in the abstract but evaluate specific measures against their broader normative commitments. Their work also underscores a point central to our framework—that probing beyond general attitudes to specific policy designs reveals far more room for acceptance than aggregate measures suggest.

Helbling, Ivarsflaten and Traunmüller (2026) explore the role of perceived cultural threat using an experimental manipulation that distinguishes between zero-sum and non-zero-sum regulations of cultural accommodation. They vary both the intrusiveness of accommodation (from unobtrusive measures such as offering halal meals in canteens to more salient measures such as recognising a public Muslim holiday) and whether or not minority cultural rights replace existing majority practices (zero-sum) or coexist with them (non-zero-sum). Their results indicate that willingness to accommodate Muslim cultural practices depends strongly on how rights are regulated, and not just how they are presented.⁸ Thus, for some citizens, support for migrants' cultural rights is conditional on the design of those rights.

Aspide and DiGiuseppe (2026) demonstrate that conditional preferences can also be observed across different policy areas. Their study reveals that, when informed that increased immigration reduces public debt, Italian respondents substantially increase their support for pro-immigration policies. Furthermore, when forced to choose between parties advocating debt reduction through austerity or immigration, respondents prefer fiscal consolidation via immigration. In turn this indicates that the general opposition to immigration among many citizens is not absolute.

Taken together, these studies imply that opposition to greater migration can be reduced by addressing the specific aspects of policy that concern sceptical citizens. Economic and cultural threats—such as worries about job competition or cultural change—are central drivers of resistance; attenuating those threats through not just particular messaging but also carefully designed policy elements can diminish opposition not only with respect to admission numbers but also regarding the scope of migrants' rights. In practice, these findings suggest that packages combining, for instance, enhanced labour-market screening with expanded legal pathways and post-arrival integration support could command broader public support than either open admissions or blanket restriction alone.

⁸These effects also differ based on respondents' predispositions: those with an inclusionary mindset respond positively to non-zero-sum regulations, whereas respondents with an exclusionary mindset remain relatively resistant across framings, albeit to varying degrees.

How to study conditional preferences

What are the implications of a conditional preferences approach for the study of immigration attitudes? A first implication concerns how researchers interpret disagreement and opposition. An influential strand of the literature has focused on polarisation, extremism, and xenophobia, treating restrictive views as products of misinformation or ignorance that can be corrected. Our evidence, along with related work, suggests that this stance is too one-sided. Citizens with pro-immigration predispositions are not systematically better informed about policy details (Kustov & Landgrave 2026), and those who favour more restrictive policies often hold internally coherent, if differently prioritised, views on control, fairness, and social cohesion. Treating one side's concerns as mere error—as much of the “myth-busting” literature implicitly does (see Schmid et al. 2025 for a critique)—while taking the other side's preferences at face value risks mischaracterising the structure of mass attitudes and overlooking opportunities for compromise.

Another implication is methodological. If preferences are conditional, multidimensional, and non-separable, then standard survey items that ask whether respondents support or oppose immigration in general are too blunt to capture the underlying structure of opinion. We recommend that studies of immigration attitudes specify policy details and trade-offs whenever possible, including the type of migration pathway, admission criteria, enforcement instruments, and associated rights. Rather than relying on a single outcome measure such as a generic admissions question, researchers should employ batteries that cover distinct subissues and examine how support for each element varies across respondents and policy bundles.

This is particularly important for persuasion research. If our framework is correct, most treatments are unlikely to move respondents along a single pro- versus anti-immigration continuum. Instead, they are more plausibly shifting support for specific combinations of numbers, selectivity, and rights, or for particular migrant categories. Outcome measures should be designed to detect these shifts.

Relatedly, researchers should be cautious in treating specific behavioural indicators as straightforward proxies for general immigration attitudes. For example, the increasingly popular outcome of donations to specific pro-immigration or refugee charities (e.g., Grigorieff et al. 2020; Choi et al. 2023) captures a meaningful but narrow behavioural choice. It conflates support for humanitarian organisations or support for particular migrant groups with underlying preferences

about immigration policy in general. While we do not argue that such measures are uninformative, the challenge lies in developing and implementing a broader measurement strategy that captures the conditional and multidimensional nature of preferences—and in using such measures to identify where genuine disagreement ends and feasible compromise begins.

The conditional preference perspective also points toward fruitful extensions beyond the immigration domain. Many policy areas that are commonly debated in highly general terms—for instance, whether a country should “do more” on climate change or whether “the welfare state” should be expanded or retrenched—are in practice bundles of specific instruments that combine costs, benefits, and moral considerations. Yet citizens’ views may be far more differentiated when asked about concrete trade-offs: for example, whether they support higher carbon prices if revenues are rebated to households, or whether they favour expanding particular social programs if accompanied by specified tax increases. A conditional preference framework invites scholars of these issues to ask more targeted questions and to map the space of feasible compromise packages. While experienced politicians may intuitively grasp that voters respond to specifics, rigorous survey-based measurement can provide what intuition cannot: systematic evidence on which combinations of policy elements command majority support across different constituencies, and where the boundaries of compromise lie.

Finally, our analysis has implications for literatures on deliberative democracy and enlightened preferences. Much normative theory assumes that citizens, when provided with information and opportunities for reflection, will converge on more reasoned and perhaps more inclusive positions (Fishkin 2009). The evidence reviewed here suggests a more modest but still hopeful conclusion. Citizens may not change their core values or identities in response to new information, yet they are often willing to reconsider how those values should be realised in concrete policy arrangements. Deliberative processes that present respondents with realistic policy bundles, explicit trade-offs, and alternative criteria for success may therefore be better suited to revealing conditional preferences than stylised debates that reduce complex policy bundles to simple for-or-against positions. Mapping these conditional preferences can help identify compromise solutions that are both normatively defensible and politically sustainable, and can guide institutional reforms aimed at translating complex public judgments into policy.

Limitations and Future Directions

A multidimensional perspective on migration attitudes—one that disaggregates policy into its component regulations and examines combinations of measures—provides a richer and more accurate account of public preferences. It reveals latent possibilities for policy trade-offs and consensus building that are obscured by unidimensional or regime-level treatments. Future research should continue to map these conditional preferences across contexts, explore the durability of experimentally induced changes in opinion, and test the political viability of compromise packages in real-world policy debates.

However, such an approach may also have its limitations and be subject to criticism. For example, arguing that people change their opinion on immigration issues when they learn about the benefits of migration or how it is regulated might contradict research showing that such opinions remain relatively stable (Kustov et al., 2021). At the same time, the constant categorisation of people as either supporters or opponents of migration, even in the above studies that promote a more detailed approach, may appear to create a tension: how can we speak of stable “supporters” and “opponents” while simultaneously claiming that preferences are conditional and multidimensional?

However, these contradictions may simply be explained by different measurements. Unidimensional approaches, which have dominated the literature so far, only allow for broad categories of supporters and opponents. More detailed measurements reveal the heterogeneity of these groups. Support and opposition can mean different things, depending on what people have in mind when asked about migration. It seems that people think of different groups, regulations, and consequences. Therefore, their conditional preferences may also be rather stable.

An important question for future research is not only whether or not the levels of immigration attitudes are stable, but also their structure—that is, whether individuals maintain consistent priority orderings across dimensions over time. If someone prioritizes border control over admission numbers today, do they maintain this ordering as political context shifts? Establishing the temporal stability of conditional preference structures, not just overall positivity or negativity, would considerably strengthen the framework’s practical utility.

It could also be argued that, in the real world, people do not have the knowledge or capacity to form conditional preferences, when it comes to more detailed measurements. Public debates have become increasingly polarised in recent decades, focusing on broad questions such as whether migration is good or bad. However, research on conditional preferences could be seen as a positive sign that people are capable of differentiating between different regulations and are open to more nuanced debates. Rather than moving to the right in response to mobilisation from the far right, moderate right-wing and left-wing parties could choose to initiate a more nuanced debate on migration, explain the complexities of migration policies, and emphasise the benefits of migration.

It is also important for political actors to recognise that many people have nuanced preferences which cannot simply be categorised as either pro or anti. This may, of course, be easier said than done when many politicians are incentivized to present a black-and-white narrative and ignore trade-offs (Brzezinski & Garicano 2025). Still, political debates not only concern different ways to regulate migration, but also the efficiency of such regulations, and policy outcomes can be interpreted and framed very differently.

Nonetheless, the link between voter preferences and elite strategies is underdeveloped. Even if voters are open to compromise packages, political actors must identify, communicate, and credibly commit to them. Political compromises not only depend on policy designs but also on elite communication, incentives, and institutional context, and they can fail electorally if trade-offs are not clearly and convincingly conveyed. Thus, it is unclear when conditional preferences shape real political behaviour. Their impact depends on whether trade-offs are visible and understandable, whether elites converge on compromise positions, and whether messages are simple and credible. In practice, low information, polarisation, and distrust often prevent voters from acting on their nuanced preferences.

Finally, while immigration is generally beneficial, it is not costless. It entails distributive winners and losers, economic and cultural trade-offs, and a range of moral dilemmas. In democratic settings, what matters is not only what any individual observer regards as normatively desirable, but also what can command support among diverse citizens who disagree on first principles. Existing evidence suggests that moral condemnation of opponents and the provision of isolated factual corrections are unlikely to transform core attitudes, and that neither fully closed nor fully open

borders are politically attainable. Consequently, the politics of compromise, as we conceptualise it here, does not require abandoning one's normative commitments or deferring blindly to cost-benefit calculations. Rather, it involves designing and enacting policy packages that improve outcomes in ways that most citizens, across partisan and ideological divides, can recognise as collectively advantageous.

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Appendix: Priming images in the US experiment

Question-Wording Conditions

Each respondent answered one of the following items. The main text reports results for five simplified arms, pooling the base versions with their "+details" variants.

Control (Default–): "Do you think the number of immigrants in the United States should be increased, decreased, or kept the same as it is now?" (N = 434)

Default (Gallup): "Do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased, decreased, or kept the same as it is now?" (N = 435)

Default + legality: "Do you think the number of legal immigrants in United States should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?" (N = 436)

Default + legality + high skills: "Do you think the number of high-skilled legal immigrants in the United States should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?" (N = 435)

Default + legality + high skills + details: "Do you think the number of high-skilled legal immigrants in the United States, such as foreign doctors and engineers with professional degrees, should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?" (N = 435)

Default + illegality: "Do you think the number of immigrants without authorization in the United States should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?" (N = 449)

Default + illegality + low skills: "Do you think the number of low-skilled immigrants without authorization in the United States should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?" (N = 432)

Default + illegality + low skills + details: "Do you think the number of low-skilled immigrants without authorization in the United States, such as unemployed foreigners without a high school diploma, should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?" (N = 448)

Visual Priming Conditions

Independently of the question wording, each respondent was randomly assigned to see one of the following images immediately before the immigration question, or no image at all:

- **No image / pure control** (N = 876): No visual stimulus was shown.
- **Placebo image** (N = 872): A stock image of a U.S. passport on a world map (unrelated to immigration).
- **Positive image** (N = 876): An orderly image of a naturalization ceremony.
- **Negative image** (N = 880): A chaotic image of migrants at the border.

The priming images are reproduced below, followed by Figure A1 showing mean responses by priming condition.

[Placebo condition:]



[Negative valence:]



[Positive valence:]



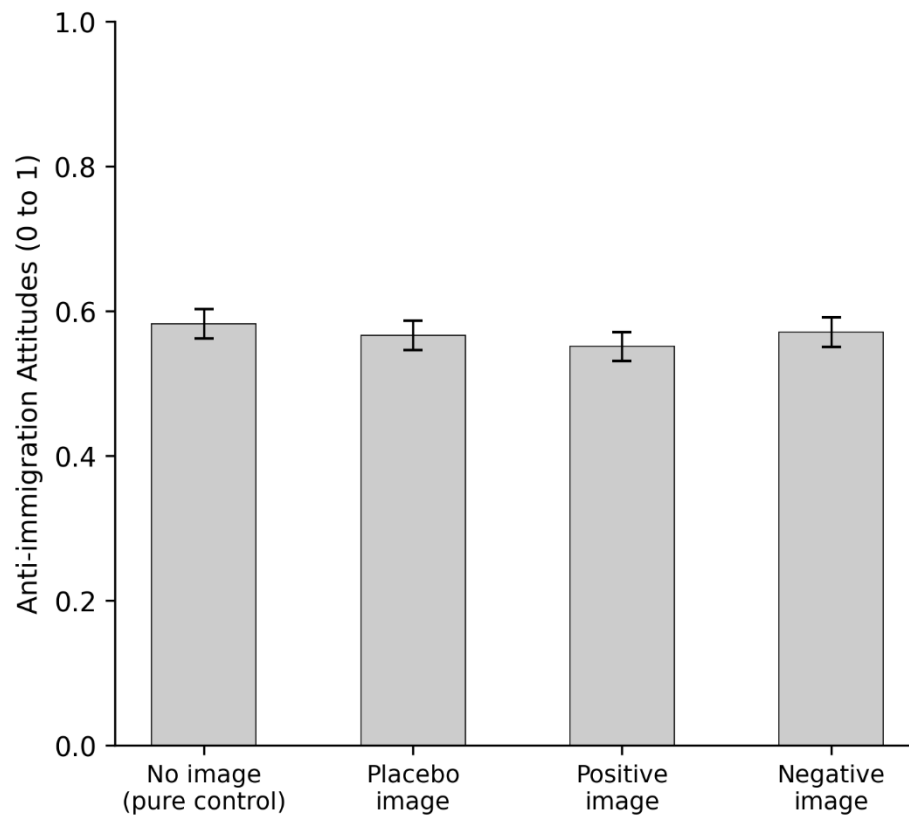


Figure A1. Mean immigration attitude score (0–1 scale; higher values indicate more restrictive preferences) by visual priming condition. The four priming conditions do not differ significantly from one another ($F = 1.63$, $p = 0.180$). $N = 3,504$.