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Understanding Public Ambivalence about Immigration:

The Role of Legal Heuristics

Anne-Marie Jeannet & Marcela Rubio

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Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations



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Abstract

Abstract: Many Europeans are ambivalent about migration, simultaneously recognizing both its benefits and its challenges as a social phenomenon. This study investigates public support for migration policies and how the preferences of ambivalent individuals respond to legal heuristics. To answer these research questions, we conducted an original online conjoint experiment on migration policy preferences fielded as part of a survey to a representative sample of six European countries: Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden. We consider a range of preferences of 9,000 respondents that evaluate 90,000 policies that randomly differ across migration policy areas including asylum, refugee resettlement, labor migration, and border control. We find that moderate and ambivalent participants systematically privilege legality-based distinctions when supporting multidimensional migration policies. These patterns are consistent with our argument that legality-based heuristics predict migration policy support among the ambivalent majority. Our results imply that migration policies that provide legal bases for admission, establish conditional pathways to regularization, and condition rights on recognized status are more likely to obtain majority support.

Keywords: migration policy, legal heuristics, public opinion, Europe,

Author: Anne-Marie Jeannet (University of Milan) & Marcela Rubio (University of Milan)

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1 Introduction

It is often said that the public is increasingly concerned about immigration yet empirical evidence tells a different story. As a stylized fact, when Europeans are asked whether or not their country's culture is undermined or enriched by immigration, the most frequent response is the middle answer: a 5 out of 10. (Kwon et al 2024). Rather than growing more concerned, individual opinions about immigration are remarkably stable over time, as demonstrated by the analysis of panel data in nine countries (Kustov et al. 2021). In the long run, as countries develop a longer experience of sustained international immigration, there is a habituation effect whereby the public becomes acclimated to the phenomenon (Claassen and McLauren 2021).

Yet most scholarly interest has been dedicated explaining anti-immigrant sentiment (see Ceobaneu and Escandell 2010, Fussell et al. 2014, Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). While we acknowledge the existence of anti-immigrant opinion and the importance of studying the phenomenon, as a group they still constitute a minority. Their disproportionate impact on public discourse about immigration is derived from the salience and intensity of their negative views (Nasuto and Rowe, 2024). These loud and often extreme voices tend to drown out the typical citizen: the indifferent, unbothered, or morally ambivalent majority, often referred to as the "movable middle" (Butcher et al. 2021). This ambivalent middle is numerically large and socially consequential, yet often overshadowed by the smaller but more vocal anti-immigrant minority.

In this study, we consider the migration preferences of the latter group: the ambivalent middle, where greater social complexity lies. This study investigates public support for migration policies and tests whether, when exposed to legal heuristics, the 'moveable middle' is more supportive of liberal migration policies. Heuristics are commonly understood as mental shortcuts that reduce a person's cognitive load when making a decision. We use the term legal heuristic to refer to a decision-making rule that individuals can apply that favors policy attributes signaling legality. This could apply to different aspects of migration policy such as permission to stay, border crossings, social assistance, and repatriation.

To answer these research questions, we conducted an original online conjoint experiment on migration policy preferences fielded as part of a survey to a representative sample of six European countries: Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden. We consider a range of preferences across a broad range of migration policy areas, including asylum, refugee resettlement, labor migration, and border control. We consider a range of preferences of 9,000 respondents that evaluate 90,000 policies that randomly differ across migration policy areas including asylum, refugee resettlement, labor migration, and border control. We find that moderate and ambivalent participants systematically privilege legality-based distinctions when supporting multidimensional migration policies. These patterns are consistent with our argument that legality-based heuristics predict migration policy support among the ambivalent majority.

The study offers new empirical insights by using experimental methods to understand the use of heuristics in policy preference formation. Another important contribution is our focus on ambivalent citizens, that have been largely overlooked by the immigration attitude literature. Ambivalence is difficult to capture with traditional survey instruments; experimental designs allow us to elicit responses that provide less bias. In doing so we respond to recent calls for a more nuanced understanding of immigration preferences (Helbling 2024). A simple dichotomy of pro vs. con of immigration is highly

reductionist yet much research still centers on whether natives perceive (im)migrants or immigration as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. We move beyond this framing by focusing on moderate opinions.

2 Existing Empirical Evidence

A substantial body of scholarship has examined public attitudes toward migrants, immigrants, and refugees using conjoint experiments and related experimental designs. Given that this is a vast literature, we have summarized this in Appendix 1. These studies, spanning countries such as the United States (e.g., Hainmueller & Hopkins 2015; Adida et al. 2019), Germany (e.g., Czymara & Schmidt-Catran 2017), France (Clayton et al. 2021), and more recently countries in Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East (e.g., Argote & Daly 2024; Kage et al. 2022; Getmansky et al. 2024), have demonstrated that host populations evaluate migrants not as a homogeneous group, but based on individual attributes such as gender, language proficiency, educational background, religion, and reason for migration. Across contexts, there is robust evidence that migrants perceived as skilled, culturally proximate, and vulnerable (e.g., women and those fleeing persecution) tend to receive greater support, while Muslim migrants and those seen as culturally distant or economically burdensome face more skepticism.

Despite their breadth, most of these studies focus on general attitudinal preferences rather than preferences over specific migration policy instruments. While such work is invaluable for understanding social desirability and bias, it offers limited insight into how citizens evaluate real-world policy trade-offs or the institutional design of migration regimes. Moreover, most studies examine attitudes within a single country and focus on narrow migrant categories, such as asylum-seekers or labor migrants rather than encompassing the full range of policy-relevant migrant types.

By contrast, the literature on migration policy preferences is more limited, but growing. Recent studies have begun to examine how the public evaluates concrete policy choices, such as access to labor markets, eligibility for asylum or deportation, naturalization criteria, or resettlement mechanisms. For example, Jeannet et al. (2021) explore preferences for asylum and refugee policies across Europe, Helbling et al. (2023) examine support for different immigration rules in Germany, and Corre & Tilley (2024) assess public preferences for asylum-related measures in the UK. These studies provide important insights into public trade-offs and support for different policy dimensions, but they are typically limited to one policy domain or national context, and often focus on a single type of migrant.

2.1 Public Ambivalence about Immigration Policy

Ambivalence is best described as having ‘mixed feelings’ or an internal conflict. Public ambivalence about public policy occurs due to value conflict (Craig and Martinez, 2005). Values are ‘stable motivational constructs or beliefs about desirable end states that transcend specific situations’ and guide selection or evaluation (Brosch and Sander, 2013 p. 3; Rohan 2000). Yet, internal value conflict is inherent to the human experience. It occurs when two opposing values push the individual’s preferences into different directions with one another (see Schwartz 1992). When internal values conflict, this generates ambivalence (Alvarez and Brehm 1995, Katz and Hass 1988, Zaller 1992).

Many individuals do not have insight into their own ambivalent preferences. This makes it difficult for researchers to use observational survey techniques to inquire about ambivalence. Instead, their ambivalence is captured through middle responses (e.g. responding 5 on a scale of 0 to 10), inconsistent,

or non-responses. This is because preference ambivalence tends to manifest itself as experiencing hesitancy, uncertainty or indecision (Moore et al. 2021).

Immigration raises value conflicts among citizens in receiving societies (Jeannet et al. 2021). Decisions about how to regulate entry and how people who enter should be treated brings into conflict principles of sovereignty with the ethics of human rights (Carens, 2013). Attitudes towards immigration bring to the surface internal value conflict between openness and conservation, as well as between self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence (Davidov 2008).

2.2 Considering the Role of Legal Heuristics

When feeling ambivalent, individuals tend to rely on heuristics to resolve their inner conflict when making a decision. Put simply, heuristics are mental shortcuts. Heuristic processing is a way of reducing the cognitive effort that would be required when making a judgement (Chaiken 1989). One might expect that morally complex issues would require long deliberation. Instead, behavioral scientists have found that, contrary to popular expectation, these are often subject to 'fast and frugal' cognitive processes (Gigerenzer, et al. 2001). Heuristics have been shown to be especially important when individuals are reasoning under circumstances of complexity, uncertainty, or ambivalence (See Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 2011).

Heuristics are particularly relevant for moral issues or socially sensitive issues according to leading behavioral scientists (Sunstein 2005). Legal heuristics provide one such shortcut. Rather than evaluating immigration in abstract moral or economic terms, individuals often anchor their judgments in whether migrants are perceived as "legal" or "illegal" (Blinder and Jeannet 2018, Kerwin, 2013). This distinction offers a cognitively accessible and normatively resonant cue, allowing citizens to reconcile inner value conflicts between sovereignty and human rights. By invoking legality, individuals can express support for control and rule enforcement while maintaining a self-conception consistent with fairness and equal treatment (Drazanova and Ruhs 2024). In this way, legal status functions not merely as information, but as a simplifying device that provides justification for their policy preferences.

We reason that legal heuristics are particularly important for individuals who are ambivalent about immigration. Because ambivalent individuals experience greater uncertainty, decision-making entails higher cognitive costs. Resolving the underlying inner conflict requires sustaining attention and reconciling competing values. In many cases, this would involve prioritizing one core value over another. Legal heuristics provide a way to escape this inner tension. By deferring to existing legal categories and rule-based distinctions, ambivalent respondents can rely on the legal framework of the state to structure their judgment, avoiding the need to personally decide whether or not to values one in favor of another.

Based on these expectations, we formulate the following testable hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who are ambivalent about immigration are more supportive of immigration policies that use legal conditionality for admission, repatriation, protection, and assistance when compared to individuals who hold stronger opinions.

3 Data and Empirical Approach

3.1 Data and Sample

We conducted a fully randomized conjoint survey experiment following Hainmueller et al. (2014). The online survey was conducted in 2025 across six European countries in multiple languages: Austria (German), Italy (Italian), the Netherlands (Dutch), Slovakia (Slovak), Spain (Spanish), and Sweden (Swedish). We selected countries to represent various geographic locations within Europe (Nordic, Southern, Continental, and Central), country sizes, and historical experience with migration. We acknowledge that this sample of countries is not representative of Europe as a whole and therefore we refrain from making inferences at the European level.

It targeted 1,500 participants aged 18 and older in each country, totaling 9,000 respondents. Quota sampling ensured a balanced distribution of gender, age, and geographic region comparable to the national population. For conjoint experiments, a sample size of at least 300 respondents is recommended, with typical ranges from 150 to 1,200 respondents (Orme, 2019). In a conjoint experiment, the unit of analysis is the evaluated policy profile. In this case, the total number of observations is calculated by multiplying the number of respondents (9,000) by the number of choices each respondent makes (5) and the number of policy profiles included per choice (2), resulting in 90,000 observations. A sample size of 1,500 participants per country is therefore sufficient and enables subgroup analyses with adequate statistical power. This approach aligns with similar studies, such as those conducted by Jeannet et al. (2023, 2021). Sampling was

In addition to the conjoint task, the survey contains information about the participants' sociodemographic information, personal migration history, attitudes toward immigration, and beliefs about migration decision-making.

3.2 Empirical Approach

Each respondent completed five conjoint tasks, selecting between two randomly generated policy profiles in each task. The policy dimensions and attributes were randomized across respondents while the order of policy dimensions was consistent across all five comparisons for each individual respondent.

In each conjoint task (see sample task in Appendix Table 2), respondents were asked to make their policy choice in two ways. First, respondents had to make a binary choice about which policy they preferred. In our analysis, a policy takes on the value of 1 if the person chose the policy in a conjoint task or 0 if the person did not choose the policy. The binary choice constrained respondents to make trade-offs and decide between the two policies they faced. Second, respondents were asked to rank their support for each policy on a scale from 1 (highly unsupportive) to 7 (highly supportive).

Policy profiles include the following six dimensions of migration policy, each with 3-4 levels. We operationalize legal heuristics by embedding explicit legality cues across several attributes of the conjoint design as shown in Table 2. In the social welfare dimension, eligibility varies between provision regardless of legal status, conditional on legal authorization, and conditional on employment and tax contributions. The regularization attribute distinguishes between unauthorized migrants who meet specified legal criteria (e.g., no criminal record or entry as minors) and those categorically excluded from regularization. The return dimension varies whether migrants without authorization are not returned, returned voluntarily, forcibly returned if convicted of a crime, or forcibly returned solely

on the basis of unauthorized status. Border enforcement attribute levels also range from minimal monitoring to intensive prevention of illegal crossings.

With six policy dimensions and 3–4 attributes per dimension for a single policy profile, there are up to 972 ($3 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3 \times 4 = 972$) possible combinations. Policy A and Policy B must always differ by at least one attribute, but the same policy may appear in subsequent rounds. Considering the comparison of two policy profiles across five conjoint tasks, the total number of combinations for all 5 rounds would be given by: $(972 \times 971) + (972 \times 971) + (972 \times 971) + (972 \times 971) + (972 \times 971) = 4,719,060$

Table 1. Attribute Descriptions and Levels Used in the Conjoint Experiment

Attribute	Levels
Asylum seekers and refugees	1. People from other countries can arrive in [country] and claim asylum with minimal restrictions
	2. UN-recognized refugees are resettled in [country] through structured programs
	3. Asylum seekers are contained in camps outside [country] in third party nations
Skills/labour shortages	1. [country] allows employers to recruit non-EU workers freely, depending on the needs of the economy
	2. Non-EU workers from sectors experiencing shortages receive incentives like reduced taxes and a quick residency path to living in [country]
	3. Upskilling people already living in [country] in critical sectors occurs before admitting new non-EU workers
Social welfare access	1. [country] will provide welfare benefits to all foreigners regardless of foreigners' legal status
	2. [country] will provide welfare benefits to foreigners conditional on being legally authorized to reside in [country]
	3. [country] will provide welfare benefits to foreigners conditional on employment and tax contributions
Regularization	1. [country] will create opportunities to regularization for all unauthorized foreigners with no criminal record
	2. [country] will create opportunities to regularization for unauthorized foreigners who entered the country as minors
	3. [country] will NOT offer opportunities to regularization for foreigners who entered the country through irregular channels
Borders	1. Border patrols conduct routine monitoring with minimal enforcement along [country's] borders
	2. Border patrols conduct strong enforcement along [country's] borders while ensuring migrants' rights are not violated
	3. Intensive surveillance technologies and intelligence operations prevent illegal crossings into [country] at all costs
Returns	1. [country] will NOT return irregular migrants to their country of origin because it is costly or ineffective
	2. [country] will return irregular migrants who are voluntarily willing to return to their countries of origin
	3. [country] will forcibly return all migrants who are convicted of a crime
	4. [country] will forcibly return all migrants who are in the country without authorization

To assess support for or opposition to migration policies both at the European level, pooling data across six countries, and at the individual country level, experiment results have been analyzed by estimating the average marginal component effects (AMCEs). The AMCE represents the average difference in the probability of a policy being supported when comparing two features within the same policy dimension (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto, 2014). Because each level was randomly assigned, it is possible to estimate the AMCEs using a simple linear regression by regressing an indicator for whether the respondent chooses a given policy on the various policy dimensions. Our dependent (outcome) variable is a dichotomous variable that takes the value of 1 if a policy profile is chosen, and 0 if the respondent does not select the policy.

Following Häusermann et al. (2018), we estimate the following equation, where every respondent (indexed as i) is presented with K conjoint comparisons (k) and in each comparison chooses one of J alternatives (j):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{chosen}_{ijk} = & \theta_0 + \theta_1[\text{attribute1}]_{ijk = \text{level2}} + \theta_2[\text{attribute1}]_{ijk = \text{level3}} \\ & + \theta_3[\text{attribute2}]_{ijk = \text{level2}} + \theta_4[\text{attribute2}]_{ijk = \text{level3}} \\ & + \theta_5[\text{attribute3}]_{ijk = \text{level2}} + \theta_6[\text{attribute3}]_{ijk = \text{level3}} \\ & + \theta_7[\text{attribute4}]_{ijk = \text{level2}} + \theta_8[\text{attribute4}]_{ijk = \text{level3}} \\ & + \theta_9[\text{attribute5}]_{ijk = \text{level2}} + \theta_{10}[\text{attribute5}]_{ijk = \text{level3}} \\ & + \theta_{11}[\text{attribute6}]_{ijk = \text{level2}} + \theta_{12}[\text{attribute6}]_{ijk = \text{level3}} \\ & + \theta_{13}[\text{attribute6}]_{ijk = \text{level4}} + \varepsilon_{ijk}, \end{aligned}$$

where chosen_{ijk} is coded as 1 if the profile is chosen and 0 otherwise. $[\text{attribute3}]_{ijk = \text{level2}}$ and $[\text{attribute3}]_{ijk = \text{level3}}$, for example, are dummy variables coded 1 if the attribute level takes the respective level in the shown policy and 0 otherwise. We determine the reference category to be the level 1 across all policy dimensions. For instance, for the asylum seekers and refugees' policy dimension, our reference category is 'People from other countries can arrive in [country] and claim asylum with minimal restrictions'. Consequently, θ_5 estimates the average difference in the probability of a profile being chosen if it changes to a different category compared to the reference category, with the average calculated over all possible combinations of levels of the other attribute levels. We apply cluster-robust standard errors at the respondent level to correct for possible within-respondent clustering.

To test for heterogeneous effects in a conjoint experiment, it is not sufficient to simply add control variables to the model. In this case, we estimate marginal means which "describe the level of favorability toward profiles that have a particular feature, ignoring all other features" (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2020, pp. 2010). The results of the exploratory analysis of heterogeneous effects are included in the appendix section.

We have also conduct a series of robustness and diagnostic tests to minimize the risk of type I errors. We will begin by testing a series of alternate specifications. First, we replicated the analysis without the weights and employing as the outcome a categorical variable that captures the respondent's rating of the chosen policy, ranging from 1 (highly unsupportive) to 7 (highly supportive) as the outcome. We

have also performed attention checks. This has been done using the timestamps of the respondents for each of the treatments to remove outliers (respondents who spent too little time and respondents who spent too much time) and indicators that measure the level of congruence between the policy choice and policy rating. All attention checks are shown in the Appendix section.

To identify individuals in the ambivalent middle, we use their attitudes toward immigration which we collect in the survey. Questions regarding attitudes to immigration are randomly asked before and after the conjoint experiment to avoid, as much as possible, priming effects on the experimental results. The respondent's attitudes towards immigration are computed as composite additive ordinal index ranging from 1 to 3, derived from five survey items assessing respondents' perceptions of the impact of immigrants on different aspects of society: the economy, culture, social welfare, crime, and overall national wellbeing.

The five items are: 1) "Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?" 2) "Is [country]'s cultural life generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?" 3) "Most people who come to live here work and pay taxes. They also use health and welfare services. On balance, do you think people who come here take out more than they put in or put in more than they take out?" 4) "Are [country]'s crime problems made worse or better by people coming to live here from other countries?" and 5) "Would you say that people who come to live here generally take jobs away from workers in [country], or generally help to create new jobs?"

Each item is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (most negative attitude) to 10 (most positive attitude). The index is constructed in two steps: The resulting composite additive index is a three-point ordinal variable coded as 1 (conservative), 2 (moderate), and 3 (progressive). The five scores are summed, producing a total score ranging from 0 to 50. Respondents are then categorized into three groups: 1= conservative (total score less than or equal to 16.67), 2 = moderate (16.68–33.33) and 3 = progressive (33.34–50). The resulting measure is a composite additive ordinal index coded as 1 (conservative), 2 (moderate), and 3 (progressive).

4 Results

4.1 Describing the 'Ambivalent Middle'

The distribution of attitudes toward immigration across countries shows that individuals with moderate or neutral views constitute the majority in all six surveyed countries. In Table 2, we observe that at the pooled level, 60.3% of respondents expressed moderate or indifferent attitudes toward immigration, compared to 25.45% with negative views and only 14.29% with positive ones. This middle category is particularly pronounced in Italy (64.97%), the Netherlands (63.65%), and Slovakia (63.13%), where nearly two-thirds of respondents fall into the neutral range. In Austria and Sweden, however, there is a relatively higher share of respondents holding negative attitudes (36.03% and 27.89%, respectively), with Austria also reporting the lowest share of positive attitudes (8.52%). Spain stands out as the country with the highest proportion of positive views (19.4%), followed by Sweden (18.03%). Overall, these figures highlight the centrality of the moderate/neutral group, which consistently outnumbers both negative and positive orientations toward immigration in the countries we surveyed.

Table 2. Public Attitudes Toward Immigration by Country (%)

Country	Negative	Moderate/Neutral	Positive
Austria	36.03	55.45	8.52
Italy	19.14	64.97	15.89
Netherlands	23.68	63.65	12.67
Slovakia	25.68	63.13	11.18
Spain	20.34	60.27	19.40
Sweden	27.89	54.08	18.03
Pooled	25.45	60.26	14.29

Individuals with moderate or neutral views toward immigration are relatively balanced across men and women, with women slightly outnumbering men in most countries. Table 3 shows that, at the pooled level, 52.04% of individuals in this group are female and 47.96% are male. Age distribution within this group is broad, with the largest share falling in the 30–44 age range (30.95%), followed by those aged 45–59 (27.32%), and the 60–86 group (23.41%). The youngest cohort, aged 15–29, comprises 18.32% of the moderate/neutral group. These figures suggest that neutral or indifferent attitudes toward immigration are common across age groups but are especially prevalent among those in early and middle adulthood.

Some might find surprising that individuals with moderate or neutral views toward immigration are politically diverse. While over half of this group identify as progressive (51.03%), a substantial share are moderate or centrist (26.19%), and nearly a quarter (22.78%) identify as conservative. Notably, Slovakia stands out with the highest share of conservatives (38.64%) among the neutral group, while Italy and Austria have the largest proportions of progressives (60.3% and 59.53%, respectively). These distributions indicate that the “moderate/neutral” category on immigration attitudes does not necessarily map onto the political center, but rather encompasses individuals across the ideological spectrum.

Country	Gender		Age Group				Political Views		
	Male	Female	15–29	30–44	45–59	60–86	Conservative	Moderate	Progressive
Austria	46.57	53.43	22.14	33.43	23.01	21.42	18.17	22.30	59.53
Italy	49.00	51.00	17.59	34.44	26.18	21.79	14.85	24.85	60.30
Netherlands	46.71	53.29	17.05	28.41	26.71	27.83	17.70	26.42	55.88
Slovakia	50.89	49.11	21.60	25.36	28.07	24.97	38.64	24.52	36.84
Spain	47.95	52.05	15.75	27.79	36.93	19.53	20.38	28.56	51.06
Sweden	46.14	53.86	15.81	37.28	22.16	24.75	27.86	31.92	40.21
Pooled	47.96	52.04	18.32	30.95	27.32	23.41	22.78	26.19	51.03

In the next step we consider if individuals who express moderate views about immigration are ambivalent or rather just expressing a neutral attitude. To assess the validity of our measure of ambivalence, we examine intra-respondent variability across survey items capturing immigration attitudes.

Table 4 presents the distribution of respondents based on the variability of their immigration attitudes across six European countries. Respondents were classified into two groups: those who consistently selected the midpoint (value 5) on the attitude scale across all items, referred to here as the neutral group, and those who expressed more variation in their responses, referred to as the ambivalent group. The ambivalent group constitutes most moderate responses across all countries, ranging from 90.11% in Italy to 95.26% in the Netherlands. In contrast, only a small minority of respondents (between 4.74% and 9.89%) consistently selected the neutral option. This distribution indicates two important features. First, it demonstrates respondent attentiveness and engagement with survey items rather than clicking through choosing the same response for each item. Second, moderate responses appear to reflect substantive ambivalence across immigration dimensions.

Country	Diverse choice of attitudes (%)	Always chose 5 (neutral) (%)
Austria	95.09	4.91
Italy	90.11	9.89
Netherlands	95.26	4.74
Slovakia	90.60	9.40
Spain	92.09	7.91
Sweden	93.23	6.77
Total	92.66	7.34

4.2 Experimental Results

Figure 1 presents the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) estimated from a conjoint experiment examining public preferences across six key migration policy dimensions: asylum-seekers and refugees, skills and labor, social welfare, regularization, border control, and returns. In this first step of the analysis, we examine the structure of public preferences with the six pooled samples without distinguishing their immigration attitudes. The analysis has also been conducted for each country sample separately (see Supplementary Information). Each dot represents the marginal effect of a policy attribute relative to a reference category within its dimension, with horizontal lines denoting 95% confidence intervals.

As shown in Figure 1, respondents exhibit statistically significantly lower support for policies that involve containing asylum seekers in third-party countries. In contrast, there is greater propensity to support policies that allow asylum claims with minimal restrictions and for resettlement through UN-recognized structured programs. Policies that grant welfare access regardless of legal status are viewed less favorably, as shown by negative and statistically significant AMCE. In contrast, there is strong support for conditioning access to social welfare on legal residence or on employment and tax contributions, indicating that respondents privilege authorization and rule compliance in welfare inclusion. A similar pattern emerges when the effect of attribute levels on labor market policy is examined. Public preferences favor up-skilling individuals already residing in the country. Policies that make migration contingent solely on the needs of the labour market are not statistically more likely to be supported or rejected.

Turning now to the dimension of admission control, the public, on average, strongly supports policies emphasizing strict border enforcement, particularly those aimed at preventing illegal crossings at all costs. Policies that include minimal enforcement measures receive significantly less support. Policies offering regularization to migrants with no criminal record or those who entered the country as minors are more likely to be supported. In contrast, policies that fail to provide any form of regularization are significantly more likely to be rejected. This indicates public openness to conditional regularization pathways based on individual characteristics or vulnerability.

When looking at the full pooled sample, the highest probabilities of support are found when policies provide the possibility of forcible return without authorization or based on criminal convictions. Voluntary return of irregular migrants is also positive and significant, while policies that rule out the return of any irregular migrant are statistically less likely to be supported. These findings indicate that public preferences in the sample favor, on average, assertive return mechanisms in which criminality or lack of legal status is involved.

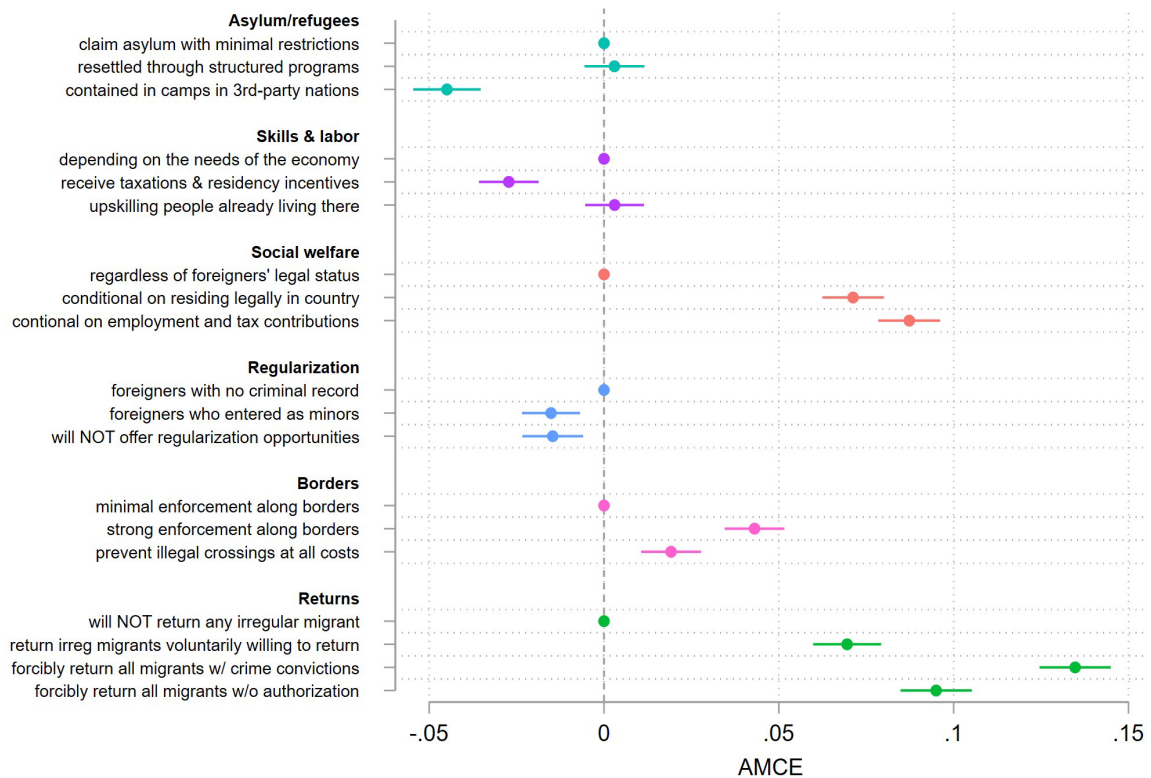


Figure 1. Aggregate effects of policy features on the probability of choosing an immigration policy

In the next part of the analysis, we focus on the respondents with moderate views, as they represent a large segment of public opinion. We do this by conducting a sub-group analysis of the experimental results to examine how the experimentally manipulated policy attributes are evaluated by the ambivalent group compared to the positive and negative groups. We provide additional results of other sub-groups in the analysis in the Online Appendix.

The findings regarding the moderate group can be understood through our theoretical argument regarding the use of legal heuristics to resolve ambivalence regarding immigration preferences. The patterns observed among respondents with moderate attitudes towards immigration are consistent with our expectation that they resolve their issue ambivalence by applying legal heuristics to form policy preferences.

Figure 2 presents the marginal means along with 95 percent confidence intervals whereby statistically meaningful differences are indicated by non-overlapping intervals distinguishing between respondents with negative, moderate, and positive attitudes toward migration.

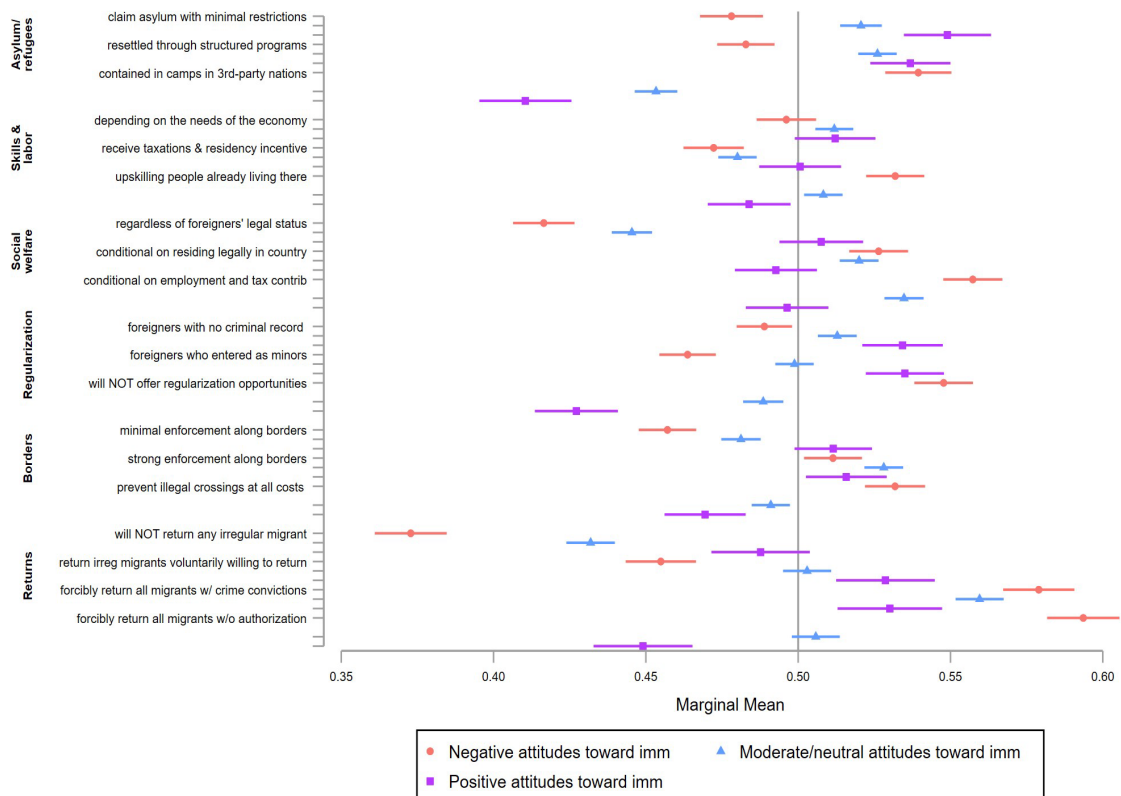


Figure 2. Subgroup analysis: Margin mean by attitudes toward immigration

Looking at the regularization dimension in Figure 2, moderates show significantly higher support for offering regularization to unauthorized migrants (as long as they do not have a criminal record) and significantly lower support for policies that do not provide any opportunity for regularization. Regarding regularization, the marginal means for the moderate group are closer to the pro-immigration group and statistically distinguishable from the anti-immigration as shown by the confidence intervals that do not overlap.

Moderates are less likely to support to policies that do not return irregular migrants. At the same time, they express greater support for forced returns when migrants are convicted of a crime than for forced returns based solely on unauthorized status. Where confidence intervals do not overlap, their evaluations differ from both positive and negative groups.

Regarding access to social welfare, Figure 2 shows that moderates align more closely with the negative group. They assign significantly lower support to welfare provision regardless of legal status and higher support to access conditional on legal authorization or employment and tax contributions. Finally, regarding the asylum and refugee dimension, moderates resemble pro-immigration respondents. Moderates assign higher support to structured resettlement and to asylum claims with recognized procedures, while they are substantially less likely to support policies which include containment in third countries. The negative effect associated with containment camps is large and statistically distinct.

We implemented several attention and response-consistency checks which can be found in the appendix. We examined completion times, the extent to which respondents repeatedly selected the same policy option across tasks, and overall response patterns. We excluded respondents whose completion times fell more than three standard deviations above or below the mean, thereby removing individuals who completed the survey implausibly quickly or unusually slowly. We also use the measures of policy ratings to validate the measures of the binary policy choices. Moreover, by comparing preferences according to both ratings and the binary conjoint choice, we can identify individuals who were inattentive (e.g. because they gave inconsistent answers) and whose choices may thus decrease data quality. We conducted robustness checks excluding those participants who gave inconsistent ratings in at least two of five tasks from the analysis. These procedures do not substantively alter the results, suggesting that inattention or satisficing does not drive our findings.

While our experimental results can be interpreted as internally valid, they should be interpreted as subject to our choice of applying equal weights for each country. This occurs due to the similar sample size in each of the countries included in our pooled analysis. The results of the separate analysis for each country in the sample is provided in the Online Appendix.

We are aware that the results of our sub-group analysis cannot be interpreted as causal (see Leeper 2020). Sub-groups are created based on observed characteristics, violating the principles of randomization embedded within an experimental framework. Aware of the pitfalls of interpreting the results for the sub-group analysis, we proceed cautiously with regard to inference. We report on the statistical associations of the moderate ambivalent group and their policy preferences without using causal language. Moreover, following best practice, we pre-register the sub-group covariates that we have targeted for inference before conducting the experiment and the analysis.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we report on the results of a conjoint experiment to examine public preferences for migration policy across six European countries: Austria, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Slovakia, and the Netherlands. Second, we assess preferences across six distinct policy dimensions that reflect the breadth of contemporary migration governance: (1) asylum and refugee protection, (2) labor and skills-based migration, (3) access to social welfare, (4) regularization of undocumented migrants, (5) border enforcement, and (6) return policies.

The study confirms that respondents with positive or negative attitudes toward migration have policy preferences for migration policy that are coherent and predictable: anti-immigration individuals favour restrictive policies which restrict entry, tighten border control, limit welfare state access, and return individuals to their home country whenever possible. Pro-immigrant respondents prefer progressive

policies which favour admission, assistance, and protection for those who decide to live in their country, regardless of legal status.

Our examination of respondents with moderate opinions about migration, which represent the majority in the six countries included in our study, have different and more complex preferences. This group is seemingly incoherent, sometimes closer to the pro-immigrant group and sometimes close to the anti-immigrant group.

By examining this group further in depth in our analysis, we find that policy support among moderates is systematically associated with legality cues embedded in policy attributes. Moderates express higher support for regularization when it is conditional on the absence of a criminal record and significantly lower support for policies that provide no path to legalization. They prefer welfare access conditional on migrants' legal authorization or employment and tax contributions, and assign lower support to policies that include unconditional provision regardless of status. Moderates are more likely to support policies with border enforcement and forced return when it depends on criminal conviction but tend to be less supportive of preventing crossings "at all costs" or to returns based solely on unauthorized status. Regarding issues of asylum and refugees, they prefer structured resettlement and recognized procedures and strongly penalize containment in third countries. These patterns are consistent with our argument that legality-based heuristics predict migration policy support among the ambivalent majority.

These findings have implications for understanding how majority support for migration policy is structured. Our study implies that if migration policies provide clear legal bases for admission, establish conditional pathways to regularization, and tie rights to recognized status are more likely to obtain majority support. Conversely, policies perceived as disproportionate or detached from formal legal criteria may reduce support within this group. According to our study, the ambivalent majority in these six European countries appears willing to endorse rule changes that incorporate unauthorized migrants, but primarily under conditions of compliance and non-criminality.

The results of our analysis also offer a cautionary tale regarding the interpretation of conjoint experiments to understand public preferences in social science. Conjoint experiments of public preferences reveal average preferences not majority preferences (see Ambramson et al 2022). Polarized social issues, such as immigration, are particularly susceptible to this problem. This occurs when minority groups with strong opinions and preferences that can skew estimates of average preferences. In the case of our study, we find that the preferences of an ambivalent majority are overpowered by intense preferences of anti-immigration sub-group when estimating average public preferences.

Future research could find opportunities to further the study of preference ambivalence. Ambivalence is decidedly a sociological construct (Baumaan 1991, Hillcoat and Nalletamby et al. 2011) yet one that continues to receive little attention. One fruitful avenue would be to investigate the causes for preference ambivalence, why it emerges in the first place. To this aim, qualitative methods would be particularly complementary to explore inner value conflicts and how individuals rationalize them to make decisions.

6 References

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7 Appendix

7.1 A.1 Additional Summary of the Literature

Table A1 summarizes key conjoint experiments that have explored public attitudes toward migration and migrant policy attributes across diverse national contexts. summarizes key conjoint experiments that have explored public attitudes toward migration and migrant policy attributes across diverse national contexts.

Authors & Year	Country / Region	Attributes Tested	Type of Migrant	Key Findings
Adida, Lo, & Platas (2019)	USA	Country, gender, religion, job before leaving Syria, English fluency, age	Refugees	Preference for female, English-speaking, and Christian Syrian refugees
Alrababa'h et al. (2021)	Jordan	Gender, age, occupation in Syria, economic situation, place of residence, education, religion, reason for fleeing, family status	Refugees	Education and skills strongly shape acceptance
Argote & Daly (2024)	Colombia	Country of origin, type of worker, age, gender, number, ideology, relatives, reasons to immigrate	Migrants	Economic factors more important than ethnic identity
Arias & Blair (2022)	USA & Germany	Reason for migration, language fluency, gender, occupation, religion, origin, vulnerability	Climate migrants	Climate migrants seen as more deserving
Bansak, Hainmueller & Hangartner (2016)	Europe (15 countries)	Asylum testimony, gender, age, previous occupation, vulnerability, reason for migrating, religion, language skills	Asylum seekers	Preferences shaped by economic potential, humanitarian concerns, and anti-Muslim bias
Bansak, Hainmueller & Hangartner (2023)	Europe	Asylum testimony, gender, country of origin, age, previous occupation, vulnerability, reason for migrating, religion, language skills	Refugees	Support for refugees stable over time despite crises
Berinsky et al. (2020)	USA	Gender, country of origin, education level, language skills, religion, attends religious services	Immigrants	Strong "attribute affinity" effect
Clayton, Ferwerda & Horiuchi (2021)	France	Origin, application reason, prior trips to France, profession, job experience, job plans, gender, language, education	Migrants	Personal contact reduces restrictive preferences
Hainmueller & Hopkins (2015)	USA	Prior trips to US, reason for application, country of origin, language skills, professions, job experience, employment plans, education level, gender	Immigrants	Broad support for skilled, English-speaking immigrants
Hainmueller, Hangartner & Yamamoto (2015)	CH	Gender, origin, age, years since arrival, education, integration status, German proficiency	Immigrants	Conjoint validated with real-world outcomes
Hedegaard (2022)	Denmark	Reason to leave country of origin, connection to labour market, gender, age, education, English skills, religious background	Climate migrants	Climate reason boosts acceptance

Authors & Year	Country / Region	Attributes Tested	Type of Migrant	Key Findings
Hedegaard & Larsen (2023)	NL, DE, SE, DK	Gender, age, education, connection to labour market, English skills, religious background, reason to leave origin country	Immigrants	Consensus on economic gain, cultural proximity, and deserving reasons for migration
Hedegaard & Larsen (2022)	NL, DE, SE, DK	Labour market status, education, language skills, time lived in destination country, family relations, religious background, gender	Naturalization candidates	Emphasis on labour market status, education, language skills, family ties
Hellwig & Sinno (2017)	USA	Economic frames, culturebased frames, securitybased frames, crime frames	Immigrants	Different threats for different groups
Holland, Peters & Zhou (2024)	Colombia	Skill level, employment prospects, reason for leaving, race, gender	Migrants	Ideological divides affect preferences
Kage, Rosenbluth & Tanaka (2022)	Japan	Gender, age, education, income, unemployment, conservative party support, contact as friends, manager position, restaurant/hotel worker, right-wing authoritarianism	Migrants	Preference for work-oriented immigrants, skepticism on refugees
Krawczyk et al. (2024)	EU	Country of origin, displaced by, fraction of women, fraction of children, religion, yearly cost for you	Displaced persons	Support for groups with many children and women; role of region and religion
Lawrence (2015)	Chile	Ethnicity, country of origin, job type	Immigrants	Preference for skilled and legal immigrants from culturally proximate countries
Shockley & Gengler (2024)	Qatar	Children of Qatari mothers, those born in Qatar, non-native tribes, those with professional skills, those who give military service	Immigrants	Economic competition and cultural threat important
Sobolewska, Galandini & Lessard-Phillips (2017)	UK, Netherlands	Citizenship, voting habits, intermarriage, crossethnic friendship, high and low-skilled occupation, tax status, language at home, attitude towards women's employment, religiosity	Immigrants	Broad agreement on integration attributes
Steele & Gallagher (2025)	USA	Application type, reason for application, country of origin, occupation, religion, number of children, gender	Refugees, Immigrants	Strong preference for female immigrants and refugees; gendered biases exist
Steele, Abdelaaty & Than (2023)	USA	Application type, reason for application, country of origin, occupation, religion, number of children, gender	Refugees, Immigrants	Humanitarian reasons matter; mixed attitudes on religion
Ward (2019)	Germany	Origin countries, education levels, shares of young men	Immigrants	Threat perceptions matter
Weiss & Tulin (2021)	Germany	Country of origin, gender, employment, language capacity, education, reason for migrating, employment plans, job experience, religion, mentoring program participation	Immigrants	Preferences for traits conducive to employment, with ethnic identity and religion significant

Authors & Year	Country / Region	Attributes Tested	Type of Migrant	Key Findings
Wimmer et al. (2024)	22 Countries	Age, gender, language, occupation, country of origin race/culture, country of origin rivalry	Migrants	Geopolitical rivalry shapes sentiment
Wright, Levy & Citrin (2016)	USA	Level of formal education, family structure, employment history, English language ability, country of origin, work client base, religious background, years living in the U.S.	Immigrants	Legal status is a strong filter; some flexibility within categories
Zhirkov (2022)	USA	Age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, English proficiency, prior trips to US	N/A	New method for estimating marginal effects
Zhirkov & Smilan-Goldstein (2025)	Mexico	Sanctuary city status, job opportunities, Mexican community, crime rate, 2020 presidential election vote, region	Migrants choosing destinations	Sanctuary status increases the attractiveness of US destinations, overshadowed by preferences for localities with many jobs and low crime rates