Immigrant Attitudes Toward Immigration in Friendly and Hostile Political Climates: Evidence from Central Europe and Sweden

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Chance Carothers is a Political Science major in the Class of 2025. His interest in immigrant attitudes began with a curiosity about how they often diverge from what traditional immigration theories predict—an area that is rarely studied. Through his research, Chance has gained a behind-the-scenes perspective on academic work, which he describes as one of the most fulfilling aspects of his undergraduate experience. With plans to pursue a Master's in Legislative Affairs at George Washington University after graduation, Chance credits Professor Setzler for being instrumental in guiding him through both the writing and research process.

Abstract

This study explores how political attitudes toward immigration among immigrants are shaped by the political climate of their host country. Using data from the 2014 European Social Survey, the research mainly focuses on immigrants in Sweden, which has more positive views on immigration compared to Central European countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Hungary, known for their anti-immigration policies. My results show that immigrants generally have more favorable attitudes toward immigration than non-immigrants, regardless of the country they move to. However, immigrants in countries with hostile immigration policies tend to support immigration slightly more than those in Sweden. Another important finding is the similarity in attitudes toward immigration between anti-immigration countries and countries that are more welcoming, suggesting that anti-immigration policies are driven more by concerns over cultural identity than outright xenophobia. These findings emphasize the crucial influence of government decisions and the broader political context on individual beliefs. This research enhances our understanding of immigration, the motivations behind nativist policies, the connection between anti-immigration policies and xenophobia, and immigrant attitudes toward immigration.

Immigration to Europe has increased quite dramatically, with many European countries relying on immigration in an attempt to counterbalance the shrinking native European population (Deimantas et al., 2024). Many individuals with nativist and anti-immigration attitudes have argued against continued immigration for a variety of reasons, ranging from concerns about the practical capacity of their nation to absorb high numbers of immigrants, beliefs that immigrants may be a source of crime, concerns that immigrants may be draining the ability of social programs to cover natives' needs, fears of losing cultural

identity, and xenophobia (Guia, 2016). There has been considerable research into attitudes toward immigration among native populations; however, much less is known about the sources of immigrants' attitudes toward immigration, which is the knowledge gap my research aims to address.

Specifically, this paper examines the extent to which political attitudes toward immigration among immigrants differ depending on the kind of nation to which they have immigrated. For instance, do immigrants living in countries widely regarded as being hostile to immigrants, such as the Czech Republic or Hungary, adopt their host country's negative views about the effects of immigration when compared to newcomers' beliefs in immigrant-friendly Sweden? Alternatively, do immigrants who settle in hostile environments feel more attached to their fellow immigrants' plight and the contributions that immigrants make to their host countries?

My research focus will provide information about how changes in the European political landscape may be shaping how immigrants feel about their in-group and a policy area that has become highly salient in many nations. Across Europe, we are witnessing the emergence of strong political parties centered on nativist policies. Many of these parties are rising in popularity, including the Danish People's Party, the French and Walloon National Fronts, the German Republicans, the Italian Social Movement, and the Freedom Party of Austria (Czaika, 2018). These parties represent a growing block of anti-immigration attitudes within European politics (Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007). While in most European democracies these growing parties do not represent the majority, in countries like Poland, Hungary, and several others, anti-immigration parties now hold power with the backing of a populace that shares their hostility toward immigration.

The data that will be examined in the empirical sections of my study were collected in 2014, a period in which a continent-wide refugee crisis was beginning to escalate, with a surge of refugees and migrants seeking asylum in Europe. Central Europe, while not necessarily being the intended final destination of these refugees, became a critical transit region for migrants moving up from the Middle East and Africa. Hungary, in particular, became a focal point of the crisis due to its geographic position along one of the most common migration routes. Hungary's government responded to the refugee wave by constructing a fence along its southern border and enacting strict anti-immigration policies. Hungarian political leaders attempted to frame the migration crisis as a matter of national security and a threat to cultural identity, efforts that garnered support domestically and from sympathetic nations in Central Europe that were dealing with a similar migration crisis. Poland, for example, cited similar concerts and refused to accept significant numbers of refugees. Slovenia, geographically situated on the Balkan route that many refugees take into Europe, faced significant logistical challenges during the crisis, eventually choosing to tighten border control as well. And the Czech Republic rejected the EU's refugee relocation quotas, citing concerns over security, cultural integration, and logistical strain. In short, the data for this study were collected during a period in which the need for immigration to protect fleeing civilians from other countries was broadly understood by European leaders, but also a period in which countries varied considerably in their willingness to accommodate newcomers.

The nations of Central Europe that I am studying share a similar history and generally hold similar values and attitudes toward immigration, making these nations useful cases to study. Central Europe has had a tumultuous history due to its geographic location between

major empires of history and being a transit between regions of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Western Europe. The central European countries I examine often constituted parts of other major powers' territories in their past and were subjected to the influence of these major powers. Poland, for instance, has been partitioned between major empires and European powers for centuries, and this is true of the other Central European nations as well. Wars between major powers oftentimes made these central European countries battlegrounds that were eventually partitioned up in treaties, and these nations only gained true independence in the 1990s following the fall of the Soviet Union (Wandycz, 2017).

It is this shared geographic region and history that make these nations so similar and explain why they had such similar negative responses to the refugee crisis. It also accounts for why these nations have commonly experienced a rise in far-right parties, often centered around nativist policies. Each of these central European countries expressly rejects taking in refugees and immigrants, citing them as a threat to cultural identity and cultural cohesion. For these countries, the latest refugee crisis has not represented a humanitarian challenge as much as it has an opportunity to assert their independent, cultural identity. Having emerged from a history of occupation, partition, and cultural suppression, these nations have viewed immigration waves and refugee crises as a threat to a cultural identity that has always been under attack from outsiders.

It is important to note that it is not just these Eastern European countries' leaders who express hostility toward immigrants, but rather these societies are anti-immigrant as a whole. In Hungary, for instance, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has made the issue of immigration a priority, with the wholesale rejection of immigration central to his party. In this way, he has increased anti-immigration attitudes and capitalized on preexisting negative attitudes toward immigration. Fear of migration has been substantial among all socio-demographic groups and among supporters of all parties in Hungary (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). In Poland, anti-immigration attitudes have been fostered similarly by politicians, leading to rising xenophobic sentiment among the population. Other nations in the Visegrad Four of central Europe show similar trends, with Slovakia having seen a parallel rise in right-wing anti-immigration parties (Kazharski, 2018). In a 2016 survey of the Czech Republic, under 20% of people in a survey were "strongly or rather in favor of permanent settlement," whereas over 80% were not in favor of permanent settlement, including 61% of respondents who said they were against the country accepting any refugees at all (Čadová 2016, 2).

My primary expectation in the empirical analyses that follow is that both immigrants and non-immigrants residing in countries like those in Central Europe will hold views about immigration that differ considerably from those of immigrant and non-immigrant persons living in less nativist, more immigrant-friendly settings found elsewhere in Europe. My analyses use Sweden as a case study for an immigrant-friendly setting because the country has traditionally been one of the most immigrant-friendly countries in Europe, known for its generous asylum policies and strong social welfare programs. As of 2017, more than one out of every five individuals living in Sweden had either been born abroad or was the offspring of two non-native parents (Skodo, 2019).

Why should the extent of anti-immigrant sentiment and policies in a given host country shape how immigrants in that country feel about whether immigration is having a positive or negative influence on their host country? Three theories that offer insights to help answer this question are group conflict theory, threat theory, and what I will refer to as solidarity theory.

The first of these, conflict theory, suggests that immigration drives up competition over resources between groups, thus motivating both native and already established immigrant socioeconomic minorities to perceive new migrants as direct, zero-sum competitors for jobs, social programs, and other economic goods (Coser, 1956). Current quantitative cross-national survey data like the one in this study provide strong support for this theory. Individuals who are considered socioeconomically vulnerable, such as those with limited education or low skills, are more likely than others to express negative attitudes toward immigration (Mayda, 2006).

Hostility to immigration is strongly associated with the size of a country's foreign population and weaker economic conditions (Semyonov & Rajiman, 2006). Thus, it might be the case that immigrants living in hostile countries are adopting the prevailing views of their non-immigrant peers, seeing immigration as a source of economic competition and thus a threat to their livelihood.

While conflict theory focuses on resource competition among immigrants and other groups, threat theory emphasizes the crucial role that elites, institutions, and influencers play in portraying immigrants as a threat to the host country's culture, security, or political stability. In the European countries I will be examining, political parties and their leaders are likely to have played a central role in driving the upswing in anti-immigration sentiment. Critically, nativist political parties do not simply ride passively on a wave of public opinion but actively mold the public narrative around immigration so that it is driven by fear and anger. Anti-immigration parties systematically link immigrants to all kinds of domestic social problems, security threats, and cultural decline to increase their political support. Researcher Christopher Cochrane suggests that far-right anti-immigration parties invariably prime citizens to blame immigrants for a wide range of economic and social issues (Cochrane, 2014). If this is the case, we might anticipate that immigrants living in countries with leaders and parties that are aggressively and loudly hostile to immigrants might be more likely than their peers in other countries to hear and absorb such hostile views toward immigration as their own. Conversely, as immigrants themselves, these individuals may well feel more threatened than they would in other settings, causing them to identify more with the cause of their fellow immigrants and the positive contributions they see immigration as bringing to societies that openly reject them.

Finally, some scholarship on immigrant behaviors and attitudes in the United States suggests that European immigrants may primarily view other immigrant groups through a pan-ethnic lens, identifying with co-immigrants regardless of their origin and valuing immigration in general due to shared experiences—particularly the challenges of assimilation, even in societies that are not overtly hostile to immigrants (Jang et al., 2021). Across Europe, "foreigners" come from diverse backgrounds and do not share a common ethnic origin or a single country of origin. However, they are still perceived as outsiders in both pro- and anti-immigration countries. During the migration crisis, the foreign population in all the countries examined in this study was substantial, making it reasonable to expect an increase in anti-foreigner sentiment among native populations. At the same time, the circumstances of this immigration—primarily composed of refugees—and its sheer volume may have fostered a stronger sense of solidarity among immigrants as a whole.

Hypotheses, Data, and Operationalization:

The theories above provide the basis for four competing hypotheses:

H1: Based on conflict theory, we would expect immigrant residents of the Visegrad Four (Eastern European countries) and Sweden to be at least as hostile toward immigration as are native residents.

H2: Per threat theory, native residents of the Visegrad Four should be more hostile toward immigration than either their immigrant peers or residents of Sweden.

H3: Alternatively, if both native and immigrant residents of the Visegrad Four are being influenced by their leaders' anti-immigrant messages, both groups should be more hostile toward immigration than natives and immigrants in Sweden.

H4: Based on solidarity theory, we would expect immigrant residents of Sweden, especially those from the Visegrad 4, to be less hostile toward immigration than natives.

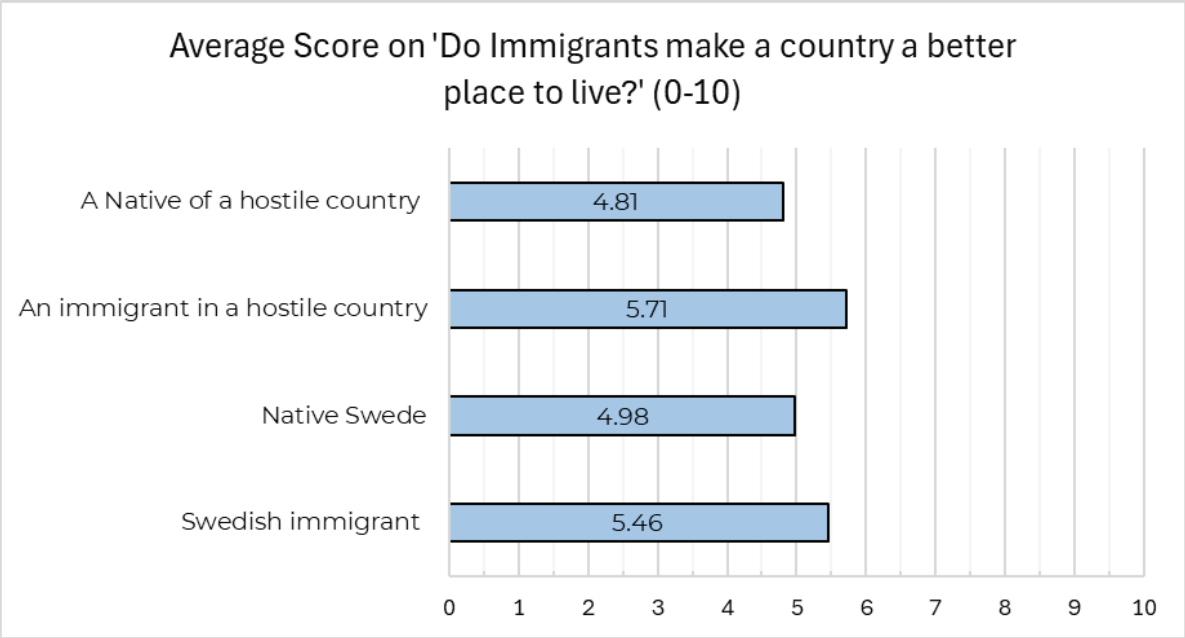
For this research, I will be using the 2014 European Social Survey. The survey involves strict random probability sampling and rigorous translation protocols. The survey was conducted face-to-face. The survey has tens of thousands of respondents, but the subsample I will use will focus on the 8,476 respondents from Sweden, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. This provides a sufficiently large sample size to reliably draw statistical inferences and conclusions regarding my hypotheses. In the empirical analyses that follow, both first- and second-generation immigrants are considered immigrants. First-generation immigrants are individuals born abroad, while second-generation immigrants are individuals with at least one parent born abroad. This definition is consistently used in other literature on immigration.

The dependent variable was created from the question, "Is [country] made a worse or better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?" This question is coded on a 0 to 10 point scale, with 0 indicating a "Worse" place to live and 10 indicating a "Better" place.

My independent variable is whether a person is an immigrant, and there are control variables for gender and age, as well as country-specific controls, such as whether the person is from Sweden, Slovenia, Hungary, Poland, or the Czech Republic. The fixed-effect controls (i.e., a control for the respondent's location) are necessary to account for the various characteristics that distinguish these countries from each other beyond the fact that they are either friendly or hostile to immigrants. The table below provides summary information for each of the study's variables.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Immigrants make country worse or better place to live	7978	0	10	4.92	2.353
Immigrant to Anti-Immigration Country	8476	0.00	1.00	0.0700	0.25510
Native Person from Anti Immigration Country	8476	0.00	1.00	0.7637	0.42484
Native Person from Sweden	8476	0.00	1.00	0.1675	0.37347
Swedish Immigrant	8476	0.00	1.00	0.0438	0.20460
Age	8465	15	114	48.53	18.551
Gender	8476	0.00	1.00	0.5354	0.49878
Swedes	8476	0.00	1.00	0.2113	0.40826
Czechs	8476	0.00	1.00	0.2534	0.43500
Hungarians	8476	0.00	1.00	0.2003	0.40027
Slovenians	8476	0.00	1.00	0.1444	0.35152
Poles	8476	0.00	1.00	0.1905	0.39275

My analysis is built to isolate the effects of being an immigrant or a native person living in "friendly" political climates characterized by the pro-immigrant policies and inclusive rhetoric of Sweden versus the "hostile" political climates distinct for their restrictive immigration policies, nativist sentiments, and xenophobia in the central European countries of Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic. By juxtaposing these contexts and taking the average responses to the question, "Do immigrants make a country a better or worse place to live?" we can examine the aggregate trends in attitudes across the two contexts in both immigrant and non-immigrant groups.



The plotted variables in the bar chart are the independent variables for status as an immigrant to an immigration-hostile country, a non-immigrant in an immigration-hostile country, an immigrant to Sweden, and a non-immigrant in Sweden. Non-immigrants in immigration-hostile countries, on average, had a score of 4.81 on the 0 to 10 measure of attitude toward immigration. Immigrants in hostile countries scored 5.71, non-immigrants in Sweden scored 4.98, and immigrants in Sweden scored 5.46. The most surprising finding in the tables is that, at the time of this survey, the typical European in the five study countries was essentially neutral on the question of whether immigration was making the country a better or worse place to live. The results provide no support for most of my hypotheses. Contrary to conflict theory, immigrants are not more hostile than natives in either setting, suggesting that they generally do not view immigration as a source of competition harming their host country. Nor is the data consistent with threat theory. Neither native-born individuals nor immigrants in the Visegrad 4 are notably more hostile to immigration than their Swedish peers. Surprisingly, Swedish immigrants had lower levels of support for immigration than immigrants in hostile central European countries, but the difference is minimal. There is some support for the solidarity theory hypothesis that immigrants will have more positive attitudes toward immigration than natives; however, the effect is quite moderate, amounting to less than a single point on the 11-point measure of support for immigration. Put another way, just like their native-born peers, the typical immigrant in Sweden and other hostile environments is in the middle of the scale on whether immigration harms or helps their host country.

The data in the bivariate bar chart do not take into account any effects of the demographic controls (i.e., gender and age) or, more critically perhaps, the fixed effect controls which consider what country a person lives in. To fully isolate the effect of being an immigrant or native in a country that is friendly or hostile to immigration, we will need to examine regression results with these controls. Thus, posted below are the linear regression results, where the dependent variable remains the 0-10 self-placement measure in response to the question: “Is [country] made a worse or better place to live by people coming to live here

from other countries?" In the table, the reference category is a Swedish immigrant, so the unstandardized coefficients report how much higher or lower the 11-point pro-immigration sentiment measure is for immigrants living in the Vise 4 countries, natives in these countries, and Swedish native-born individuals.

Coefficients[a]		
	Unstandarized Coefficiants	Beta
Immigrant to Anti-Immigration	0.255*	0.028
Native from Anti Immigration Country	-0.652***	-0.119
Native Person from Sweden	-0.477***	-0.077
Gender	0.121**	0.026
Age	-0.011***	-0.089
Czechs	-2.570***	-0.477
Hungarians	-2.382***	-0.401
Slovenians	-2.021***	-0.303
Poles	-0.975***	-0.160
Adjusted R Square		
0.226		

p<.05=* p<.01=** p<.001***

The addition of the controls did not alter the results reported earlier in the bivariate bar chart in any meaningful way. The only hypothesis with any support—and it is quite weak support—still is the solidarity hypothesis, which posits that immigrants will be more supportive of immigration than natives. Compared to Swedish immigrants, being an immigrant in a Vise 4 county very modestly increased the typical respondent's agreement that immigrants make the country a better place to live (by about a quarter of a point on the 11-point measure). Conversely, being a native resident of a country that was either friendly or hostile to immigration had about the same, small effect; in both cases, natives' level of agreement was about half a point lower than it was for Swedish immigrants.

Conclusions:

This study compared attitudes of native and immigrant groups in different host nations' political climates by contrasting Sweden's supportive approach against the more restrictive policies of Central European countries. The main contribution of this study lies in its discovery that the typical European, regardless of whether their being a native-

born person or immigrant, was essentially neutral as to whether immigration was harming or helping their country in 2014, when a large wave of refugees was dramatically increasing immigration across Europe. My other key finding is the lack of any meaningful variation in hostility to immigration among Swedes, who live in one of the most immigrant-friendly countries in Europe, and the Central Europeans living in nations with starkly anti-immigration policies.

As a whole, my research suggests that several theoretical frameworks previously used to examine support for immigration cannot adequately explain what we observed among the native-born and immigrants in Europe after a conflict-driven surge in immigration. Solidarity theory, which suggests that immigrants should show greater levels of belief that immigrants are beneficial to a country, was only modestly supported by my findings, with immigrants being only slightly more likely to see immigration as benefiting their host countries than native-born residents. This ambivalence toward immigration fully contradicts conflict theory, as immigrant groups did not generally show hostility toward immigration, even though additional immigration would presumably entail more competition for scarce jobs and resources. And it is both noteworthy and contrary to threat theory that the Central European nations implementing harsh anti-immigration policies are doing so in ways that are out of line with the moderate views of these nations' native-born and immigrant residents.

It is beyond the scope of this project to explore whether my findings will apply outside of Europe or carry over to situations where immigration rates are lower or fueled by economic concerns rather than refugees fleeing conflict. Future inquiries should tackle these questions. Future research could also explore specific traits, such as duration of residence, country of origin, and degree of integration, and their influence on attitudes towards immigration. These investigations would further improve our understanding of immigrants' attitudes towards immigration and how these attitudes are affected by political context.

Appendix

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Immigrants make country worse or better place to live	7978	0	10	4.92	2.353
1st or 2nd Generation Immigrant to Anti-Immigration Country	8476	.00	1.00	.0700	.25510
Native Person from Anti Immigration Country	8476	.00	1.00	.7637	.42484
Swedish 1stOR2ndGenImmig	8476	.00	1.00	.0438	.20460
Native Person from Sweden	8476	.00	1.00	.1675	.37347
Gender	8454	1	2	1.54	.499
Age of respondent, calculated	8465	15	114	48.53	18.551
People Who Are Czech	8476	.00	1.00	.2534	.43500
People Who Are Hungarian	8476	.00	1.00	.2003	.40027
People Who Are Slovenian	8476	.00	1.00	.1444	.35152
People Who Are Polish	8476	.00	1.00	.1905	.39275
Valid N (listwise)	7951				

Descriptive statistics of variables

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