

Does Immigrant Integration Foster Positive Attitudes towards Immigration? Evidence from England

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When immigrants are more integrated, do local populations have more positive attitudes towards immigration, or are immigrants more easily able to integrate when local populations have more inclusive attitudes? Many critics of immigration cite the inability, or unwillingness, of immigrants to integrate into the destination country as the reason for wanting to decrease or halt immigration. The idea of integration having “failed” remains a popular idea among publics and leaders across the European continent with Angela Merkel famously stating that multiculturalism had “failed” in Germany and that immigrants must do more to become part of society (Weaver, 2010). Today, integration policies are often guided by the idea that integration will lead to more positive attitudes and acceptability of immigrants in the local population.

However, cross-sectional evidence also shows that negative attitudes are themselves a barrier for immigrants in becoming part of the destination society. In areas with more negative attitudes towards immigrants, immigrants face greater labor market discrimination (Waisman & Larsen, 2007), housing discrimination (Carlsson & Eriksson, 2015), and have a more difficult time making social connections (Schilling & Stillman, 2022). Moreover, immigrants experience lower mental health outcomes (Pinillos-Franco & Kawachi, 2022; Vargas et al., 2017)

Despite several decades of research on attitudes towards immigrants and on the integration process, little work has investigated the dynamics of this complex relationship between attitudes and integration. This paper aims to fill this gap by empirically investigating one possible relationship between attitudes and integration: namely whether residents in areas where immigrants have better integration outcomes show more positive attitudes towards immigration over time. Using data on attitudes from the British Election Study’s online panel survey, I model the relationship between attitudes and integration outcomes in England from 2014 to 2020 using a multi-level model with three levels: the individual level, a time level, and local characteristics, including integration outcomes for immigrants in the respondents’ local area. Through this method the research questions will be answered: 1) Do better integration outcomes at the local level lead to more positive attitudes towards immigration over time? 2) Do individual attitudes towards immigration change in response to shifts in local integration outcomes? 3) Which integration outcomes—economic, social, political, or cultural—have the strongest relationship with attitudes towards immigration?

Data

Data for attitudes towards immigration come from the British Election Study Internet Panel, a longitudinal, representative survey of public opinion and political behavior conducted by

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YouGov across Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland). The survey interviews approximately 30,000 people per wave.

The **dependent variable** is a binary variable indicating whether or not the respondent stated that immigration was the most important issue facing the country. Additional analyses on whether respondents feel that immigration has a positive or negative effect on the culture and economy of the country may also be included. **Individual-level** controls include age group, gender, education level, immigrant background, and political orientation.

As mentioned above, integration outcomes are difficult to operationalize and should be used with caution. As this paper aims to investigate the relationship between attitudes and integration outcomes, the selection of integration outcomes was based on the findings of (Sobolewska et al., 2017), which investigates how publics, rather than national or regional governments, understand the term integration. For this reason, the following **integration indicators** for foreign-born residents in each local authority district are used: percent of foreign-born residents who are citizens (political integration); percent of intermarriage with UK-born residents (social integration); employment rate and percentage of high-skilled workers (economic integration); and the use of English as the main language at home (cultural integration). **Local authority level controls** include foreign-born residents as a percentage of the population, level of deprivation, and population density.

Data for integration outcomes, with the exception of cultural integration, are taken from the UK longitudinal household survey, Understanding Society, a nationally representative survey of approximately 40,000 UK residents per year. Understanding Society includes an ethnic minority booster, and integration indicators – again, excluding cultural integration – are modeled as time-variant, independent variables. Data for cultural integration, here measured as English as the main language used at home, comes from the 2011 UK census. While a time-variant measure is more ideal, the high quality of the census data overcomes some of the data limitations in the Understanding Society data.

Methodology

Multi-level models are a common technique for understanding nested data, or data in which the outcomes for individuals violate the assumption of independence (Peugh, 2010). Attitudes inherently violate this assumption as people's attitudes are strongly correlated with their previous attitudes. Moreover, the literature on political sorting and "geographies of discontent" suggests that a range of political issues, such as Brexit voting and Euroscepticism, are determined in part by geographic inequalities and cluster in smaller, regional areas (Boateng et al., 2021; Goodwin & Heath, 2016; McCann, 2020). As this study aims to understand how individual attitudes change over time based on local level characteristics, a three-level hybrid model of attitudes is employed.

Expected results and contribution

The expected results of the study are the following:

- 1) The degree to which attitudes towards immigration change over time on the individual level
- 2) The degree to which attitudes towards immigration differ amongst local authority regions,
- 3) The strength and significance of the relationship between integration outcomes

As a result, the study will answer the following questions: do social, political, cultural, and economic measures of the local immigrants' population have a significant effect on attitudes towards immigrants, after controlling for both individual and local characteristics? By answering this question, this study aims to contribute an empirical verification of the proposed relationship between attitudes towards immigration and integration. In other words, are those who see immigration as a highly important issue reacting to real inequalities and differences between groups? Moreover, this finding would have implications for both integration policy, which often states that better integration leads to greater social cohesion and improved relationships between groups. If integration outcomes are not related to more positive attitudes, policymakers may have to rethink the degree to which they implement integration policies and communicate their effectiveness to publics. Finally, the strength of these relationships will conclude whether certain integration outcomes – for example, social and cultural integration outcomes – have a stronger relationship with more positive attitudes than others. This finding would have implications for integration policy, as it will suggest whether certain factors, such as language acquisition or economic stability, should be a greater priority.

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