

## Public Attitudes to Immigration in the Aftermath of COVID-19

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### Abstract

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected public opinion towards immigration? Long-term evidence in Europe and the United States suggests attitudes to immigration are relatively stable and, in some cases, becoming more favorable with high volatility instead in the perceived importance of the issue. However, theoretically a global pandemic could exacerbate people's fears of outsiders or that migration may contribute to the disease. By contrast, attitudes could remain stable if their distal drivers prove to be robust enough to withstand the shock of COVID-19, which may instead highlight the disproportional importance of migrant workers. We draw from Eurobarometer data from 2014 to 2020 across 28 European countries, weekly national survey data during the outbreak from the US and individual panel data from the UK and Germany to find little *systematic* change in immigration preferences and no country-level correlation between the observed changes and the severity of the outbreak. Instead, the perceived importance of immigration has consistently and significantly decreased. These findings suggest that, if COVID-19 is to have an impact on attitudes to migration, it is likely to emerge via longer-term means, such as early-life socialization and value change, rather than reactions to the immediate shock of the pandemic.

Keywords: Immigration Attitudes, COVID-19, Europe, United States, Longitudinal Data

Word count: 2831

## Introduction

Whereas evidence in Europe and the United States of long-term attitudinal trends regarding immigration suggests relative stability and, in some countries, greater favorability, we consider whether these long-term trends have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a 2020 report surveying the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on migration and mobility, the International Organization for Migration identified the potential for the pandemic to be ‘weaponized’ against migrants, leading to scapegoating, discrimination, xenophobia, and violence (Guadagno 2020). Similarly, academic research has predicted that the pandemic will lead to more negative attitudes to immigration, reinforcing existing trends to border controls and security while fueling expression of hostility, discrimination, xenophobia, and racism (O’Brien and Eger, 2020; Esses and Hamilton, 2021). While the immediate, strict travel restrictions had been at least partially rolled back in Europe and North America by 2021 due to rising vaccination rates, some argue that this crisis will deal a permanent blow to international human mobility via a significant worsening of public attitudes (Yayboke, 2020). Commentators and politicians have made similar predictions with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, for instance, claiming in May 2020 that the pandemic had ‘unleash[ed] a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering’.<sup>1</sup> These responses highlight two key issues that the following analysis explores: (i) how the pandemic has affected various types of attitudes to immigration; (ii) how the pandemic has affected the perceived importance of immigration relative to other political issues.<sup>2</sup>

We draw from Eurobarometer data from 2014 to July 2020 across 28 European countries and the weekly national survey during the outbreak from the US (VGS), complemented with the individual

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<sup>1</sup> [www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20076.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20076.doc.htm)

<sup>2</sup> To be clear, there can simultaneously be high(er) levels of expressions of hostility, xenophobia and, racism because of the pandemic, regardless of the overall national-level trends in attitudes, which we consider.

panel data from the UK (BES) and Germany (GLES). Overall, we find little *systematic* change in immigration preferences during the outbreak. We do find, however, that the perceived importance of immigration as an issue has significantly decreased across most national contexts. Taken together, these early findings suggest that, if COVID-19 has a lasting impact on attitudes to migration, it is likely to emerge via longer-term means such as early-life socialization and value change, rather than an immediate emotional reach to such an exogenous shock as the pandemic.

### **Theoretical Expectations: Immigration Attitudes under a Pandemic**

Theoretically, significant natural and economic shocks such as a global pandemic—and the widespread social restrictions in response—can have important and lasting consequences for a variety of political institutions and attitudes. Centuries later, the effect of the Black Death on political institutions is still visible today (Gingerich & Vogler, 2021). Furthermore, there is some evidence from the recent Ebola epidemic that widespread contagious diseases can shape immigration attitudes under certain politicized conditions (Adida et al., 2020).

How should we expect immigration attitudes to change in the aftermath of COVID-19? It has been argued that exposure to a global pandemic can make people more anti-immigration, at least in the short term. Esses and Hamilton's (2021) review of the literature mentions the 'increased feelings of threat and competition, heightened uncertainty, lack of control, and a rise in authoritarianism' among other possible psychological effects of COVID-19. Related to that, Rosenfeld and Tomiyama (2021) find that '[b]y promoting epistemic and existential motivational processes and activating people's behavioral immune systems', this pandemic may have made people more socially conservative. Moreover, social psychological theories of Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation suggest that, amongst those with certain psychological orientations, the COVID-19 pandemic may trigger perceptions of a threat to 'in-groups' and thus

greater and/or more vociferous opposition to immigration (Craig and Richeson 2014; Whitley 1999; Hartman et al. 2021; Pratto et al. 1994). Given this reasoning, we formulate the following baseline expectation:

*H1: Immigration attitudes have become more negative during the COVID-19 outbreak.*

While the preponderance of theoretical expectations points to the likely negative impact of COVID-19 on immigration attitudes, there may also be reasons to expect more *positive* attitudes in the aftermath of the pandemic (Dennison & Geddes, 2020). Adam-Troian and Bagic (2021) theorize a ‘pathogen paradox’ whereby a ‘panic narrative’, as theorized above, can be contested by a countervailing narrative of ‘unity, compassion and solidarity’ that enlarges in-group boundaries in the face of an existential threat. Such an effect could be strengthened by the role of migrants in sectors that have been labelled as essential work and highlighted during the pandemic, such as food production and health care, in which migrants are typically overrepresented.<sup>3</sup> We thus also specify the following alternative expectation:

*H2: Immigration attitudes have become more positive during the COVID-19 outbreak.*

It is also possible that immigration attitudes are stable and robust enough to withstand even the shock of a global pandemic. According to a recent comprehensive review of the literature and the longitudinal cross-national evidence, for instance, neither the 2008 economic recession nor the post-2015 refugee crisis were able to significantly shift public preferences regarding immigration (Kustov et al., 2021). In line with this, a recent study based on a two-wave survey in Germany was unable to detect any changes in xenophobic attitudes during COVID-19 in particular (Drouhot et al., 2020). Should attitudes to immigration continue to remain stable or even become more positive

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/what-will-be-impact-covid-19-public-attitudes-immigration>.

despite a third ‘crisis’ that, like the previous two, had been widely predicted to increase animosity to immigration, it would support theories that see attitudes to immigration as deeply rooted, a result of early life socialization and primarily changed at the aggregate level via generational replacement. Consequently, another plausible expectation is null *systematic* effects—that is, although immigration attitudes could go up or down in the aftermath of COVID-19 in different contexts, there is no systematic change in pre-COVID trends.

*H0: Immigration attitudes have not systematically changed during the COVID-19 outbreak.*

Overall, whereas there have been predictions that the pandemic would increase negativity to migrants and immigration because of the pandemic—with some socio-psychological theoretical grounding—there are also good empirical and theoretical reasons to expect that any effect of short-term contextual changes—even as grave as a global pandemic—may be muted compared to longer term and deeper socialization effects.

However, we should differentiate between two distinct forms of immigration public opinion that the pandemic could affect: on the one hand, attitudes, perceptions and preferences to immigration and immigrants and, on the other, the importance or salience that the public believes the issue of immigration to have (Dennison, 2019). Whereas attitudes have hitherto been found to be relatively slow-moving and resulting from deep-seated early-life sociological and psychological formative forces, public issue salience—being typically measured in relative terms of perceived importance compared to other political issues—is volatile and results from agenda-setting and “real-world” external developments (Singer, 2011; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016), with the pandemic being an obvious example of the latter. Indeed, whereas attitudes to immigration and immigrants remained generally stable or even became more positive during the ‘migration crisis’ in Europe after 2015, the salience of immigration soared, particularly in Western and Northern Europe, which has been

identified as a cause of the rise—and, later, partial decline—of anti-immigration populist radical right parties (Dennison and Geddes, 2019; Dennison, 2020, Mendes and Dennison, 2021). Just as the salience of immigration typically *fell* during the 2008 financial crisis and, where applicable, the following Eurozone sovereign debt crises, the salience *rose* during the “migration crisis”. We expect that perceived importance of immigration is likely to decrease with the rise of the health and various economic concerns due to the outbreak. Consequently, we also expect that, if COVID-19 had any significant impact on immigration attitudes, it would mostly be apparent in terms of the decreasing salience of the issue to many people across the world.

*H4: Immigration issue salience has significantly declined during the COVID-19 outbreak.*

### **Cases, Data and Methods**

To test the above hypotheses, we choose the US and across Europe as our cases: both are major immigration destination countries and regions. We use additional data from Germany and the UK, which allows us to verify our findings according to alternative data sources and other types of attitudes to immigration: specifically perceived effects of immigration on culture and the economy and immigration policy preferences. In both Europe and the US, there has been a tendency towards border restrictions and controls that predates the pandemic, as well as growth in support for populist, right-wing anti-immigration political parties and movements. However, we also see divergent responses to the pandemic with variation in, for example, political leadership and imposition of restrictions between Europe and the USA. For example, in the US we saw an overt tendency from the former President and other political leaders to associate migrants and foreigners with the virus.

As the main source for our analysis, we rely on the Eurobarometer data from November 2014 to July 2020 across 27 European countries for the items on immigration *policy preferences* and the Eurobarometer data across 28 European countries from May 2005 to February 2021 for *issue salience*.<sup>4</sup> For policy preferences, we use responses to two questions: “Does immigration of people from other EU member states give you a positive or negative feeling?” and “Does immigration of people from outside the EU give you a positive or negative feeling?”. Possible responses to both questions are on a five-point Likert scale from very positive to very negative, which we collapse into a net positivity measure at the country level. For issue salience, we use responses to “what do you think are the two most important issues affecting your country?” Respondents are offered around 14 responses, including immigration, which have changed occasionally over time. We also provide some preliminary exploration of the pandemic’s possible heterogeneous impact by comparing the net change in attitudes across countries by the outbreak severity.<sup>5</sup>

We then look at the unusually frequent nationally representative survey conducted as a part of the Voter Study Group in the United States from January 2 to June 19 of 2020.<sup>6</sup> Finally, we complement our repeated cross-sectional analyses with two individual *panel* datasets (surveying the same individuals over time): the British (BES) and German (GLES) election studies. This selection of data sources both allows us to verify the identified trends and make use of their most robust panel character.

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<sup>4</sup> The United Kingdom was not surveyed about immigration policy preferences. At the time of writing only issue salience data was available for the February 2021 round of the Eurobarometer.

<sup>5</sup> To that end, we use the officially confirmed cumulative COVID-19 deaths per one million people (logged) by the survey date for each country. The use of non-log measure does not affect our results.

<sup>6</sup> One limitation of this survey is its focus on *irregular* immigration. However, we have no theoretical reason to believe that the results in terms of the attitudinal *change* would have been different for the items focusing on *regular* migration.

To summarize our results, we use simple graphic evidence indicating average public attitudes across survey waves by country.<sup>7</sup>

## **Analysis and Results**

### *Repeated Cross-national Evidence from Eurobarometer*

First, we rely on the Eurobarometer data to examine the change of public positivity toward EU and non-EU immigration across 27 European countries in the last seven years with a focus on the last two (pre- and post-outbreak) waves from November 2019 to July 2020 (see Figure 1). As can be seen, there is much diversity in terms of the attitudinal changes during 2020—while some countries have experienced a worsening of public immigration preferences (including the EU average)—other countries have seen an improvement in those preferences.

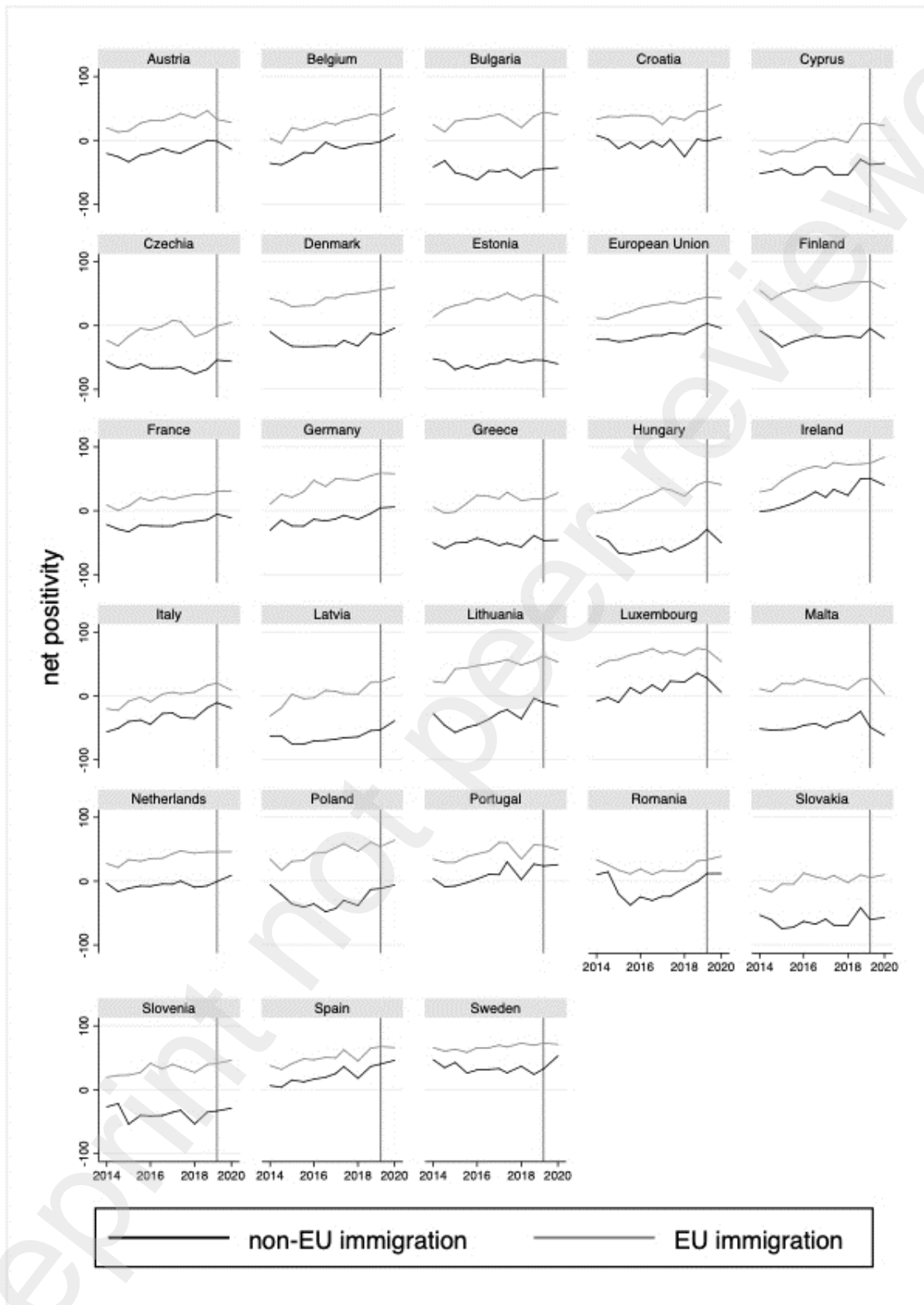
Clearly, public response to the pandemic across countries can vary. In line with the theoretical reasoning behind H1, countries that have been particularly hit by the outbreak may display the biggest negative change in attitudes. Figure A1, however, for the EU shows that this is not the case—the average attitudinal changes toward either migrants from within the EU or non-EU immigration are unrelated to the outbreak's severity across countries. More significantly, none of the observed changes in net attitudes appear to be systematic after accounting for countries' pre-trends in attitudes (see Table A1).

*Figure 1: Immigration positivity pre- and post- the outbreak of COVID-19*

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<sup>7</sup> As a more formal test, we also compute (1) the difference in average public attitudes between the latest pre- and the earliest post-pandemic wave and (2) the same difference after accounting for pre-pandemic trends in the earlier waves. For more details and variable descriptions, see Appendix.





Notes: Net positivity measured as total positive responses minus total negative responses to the questions: “Does immigration of people from other EU member states / outside the EU give you a positive or negative feeling?”  
 Source: Eurobarometer, vertical line represents emergence of COVID-19

Second, we repeat our analysis in the EU for immigration *salience* or whether people consider immigration one of the most important issues facing their country at the moment (see Figure 2). Unlike the case of policy preferences, most European countries have experienced an unambiguous decline in the issue salience of immigration in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, while it is also true that immigration issue salience has been in decline for a few years prior to the outbreak across many countries, a ‘COVID-19 effect’ holds even after accounting for these pre-trends.

#### *Fine-grained Repeated Cross-national Evidence from the United States (VSG)*

We can also take advantage of the unusually frequent representative US survey (VSG) and look at how the US public reacted to the outbreak and the progression of the pandemic (see Figure 3). As can be clearly seen, none of the available immigration preference items have moved much throughout the first half of 2020. US attitudes slightly worsened at the time of the declaration of a national emergency on March 13, but these changes quickly dissipated just a week after. In the end, despite the significant pandemic toll and the numerous (even if temporary) restrictive changes to the actual immigration policy<sup>8</sup>, US immigration attitudes were remarkably stable from the beginning (in January) to the end (in June) of the survey panel.

#### *Longitudinal evidence from the United Kingdom and Germany (BES and GLES)*

We can also consider the individual panel data from the UK and Germany where it is possible to see whether the same individuals changed their mind on immigration throughout the outbreak (see Figures A2 and A3). As before, there is no evidence that immigration preferences have worsened

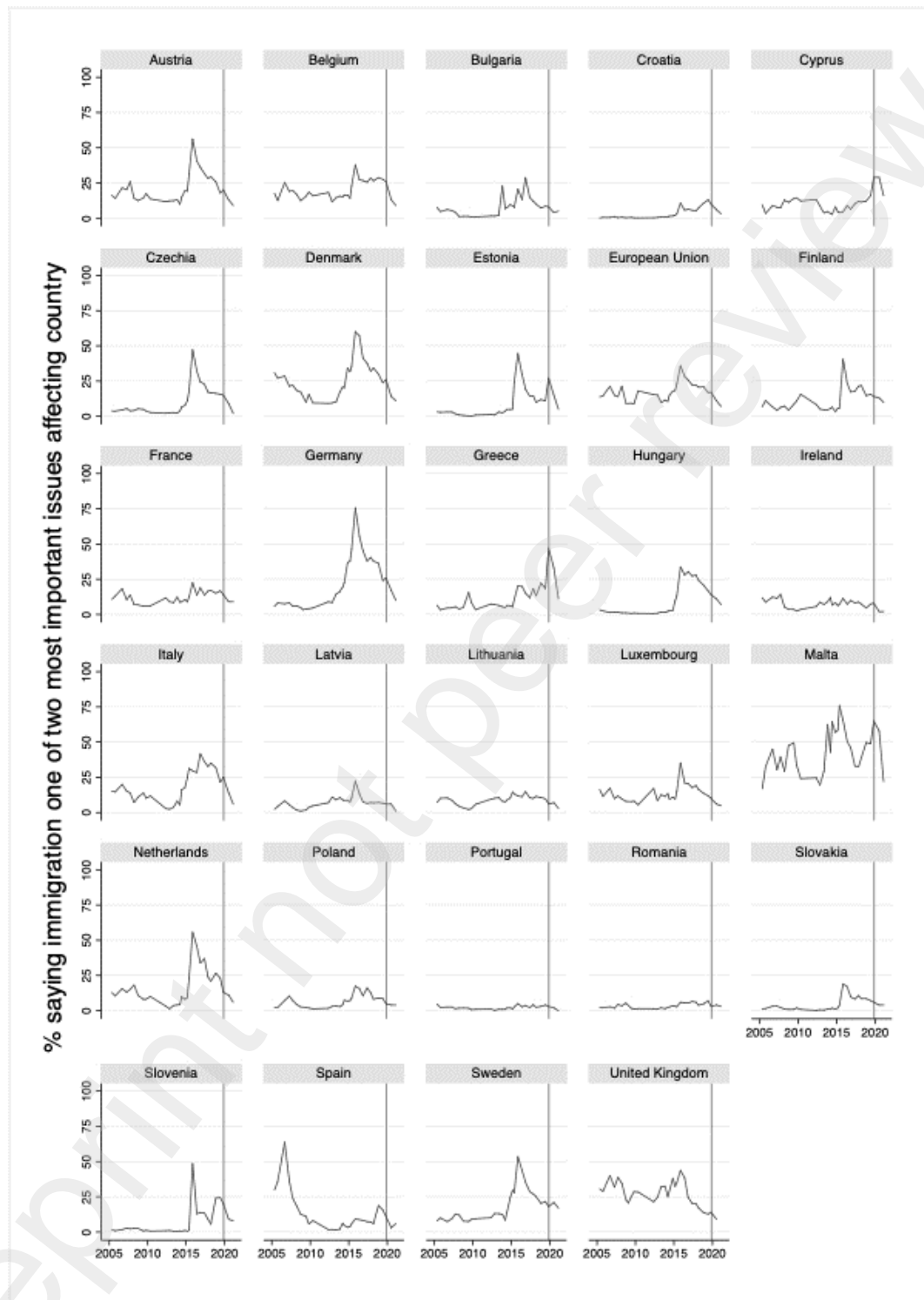
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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/impact-covid-19-us-immigration-system>.

during the pandemic. In fact, in both Germany and the UK there seems to be a slight positive change, albeit insignificant after accounting for the pre-trends in those countries.

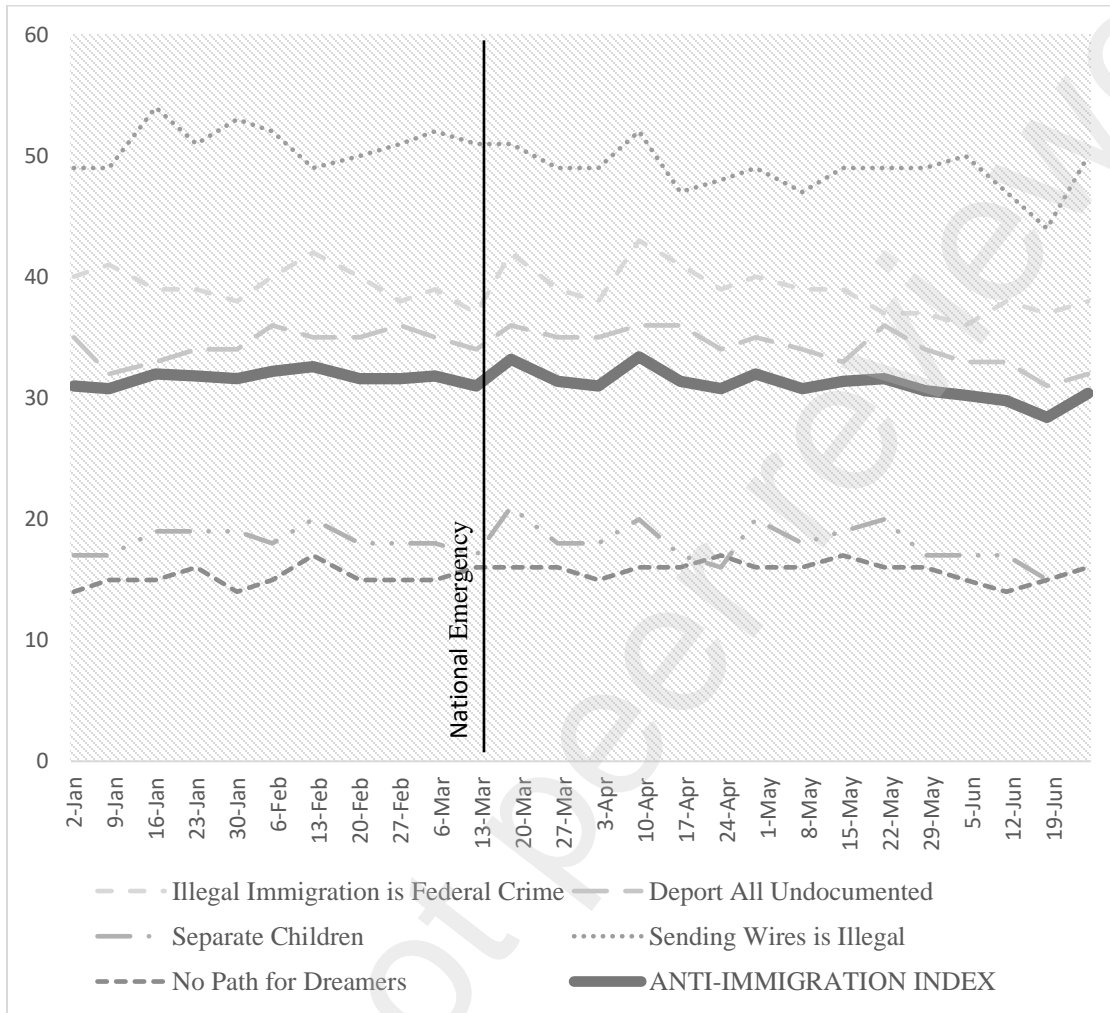
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Figure 1: Immigration Salience Pre- and Post the Outbreak of COVID-19



Notes: Responses to the question “what do you think are the two most important issues affecting your country?”, source: Eurobarometer vertical line represents emergence of COVID-19

Figure 2: Immigration Preferences Pre- and Post the Outbreak of COVID-19 (United States)



## Discussion

Public support for international mobility is often cited as being among the possible long-term costs of the global COVID-19 pandemic. With the increased economic uncertainty due to a deadly pathogen, many have understandably expected a resurgence of ethnocentrism and anti-immigration sentiments around the world. Nonetheless, as we show in our research based on the best available cross-national and longitudinal public opinion data, immigration attitudes have not systematically become more negative in the aftermath of COVID-19. What did change is that many

people have become less concerned about immigration as a political issue due to the increasing importance of other economic and public health problems. Nonetheless, it is entirely plausible that immigration return to the forefront of the public agenda as and when the pandemic declines, as has already been evident in the US.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, it may also be possible that the effects of the pandemic on immigration preferences will only become apparent in the long-term if decreases mobility leads to changes in generational socialization or relevant changes in societal norms that result from the pandemic. Overall, these results are in line with the growing research demonstrating the remarkable stability of immigration preferences, as well as the volatility and the corresponding political importance of immigration salience (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Kustov et al., 2021).

This research note is not without limitations. As of July 2021, COVID-19 is still ravaging in many parts of the world, which means that it is possible that our conclusions could require updating as more evidence becomes available, especially if the pandemic lasts significantly longer than expected. Evidence of the effects of previous pandemics highlight the potential for differential effects depending on how hard hit specific places or countries have been by the disease (Gingerich and Vogler 2021). To that end, future research can expand on our analysis by including more extensive data from our case countries and regions as well as other countries, as well as comparing with other periods or crisis events, as well as exploring potential heterogeneous impacts in more detail (including the consideration of policy responses across different countries).

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<sup>9</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/349205/fewer-cite-coronavirus-important-problem.aspx>.

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## Appendix

Figure A1: Change in Immigration Preferences Pre- and Post by the Outbreak Severity

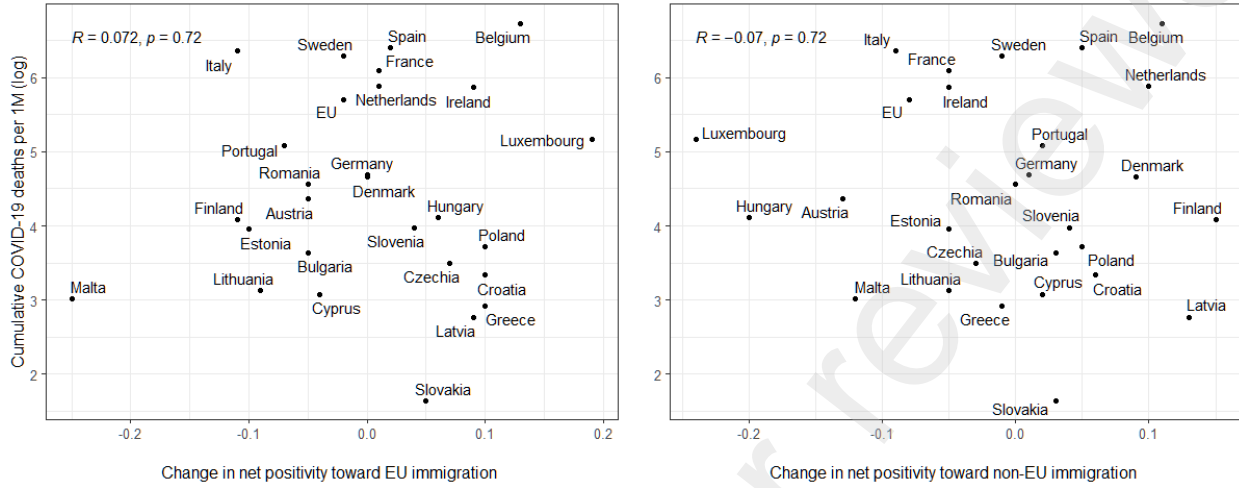


Figure A2: Immigration Preferences Pre- and Post the Outbreak of COVID-19 (Germany)

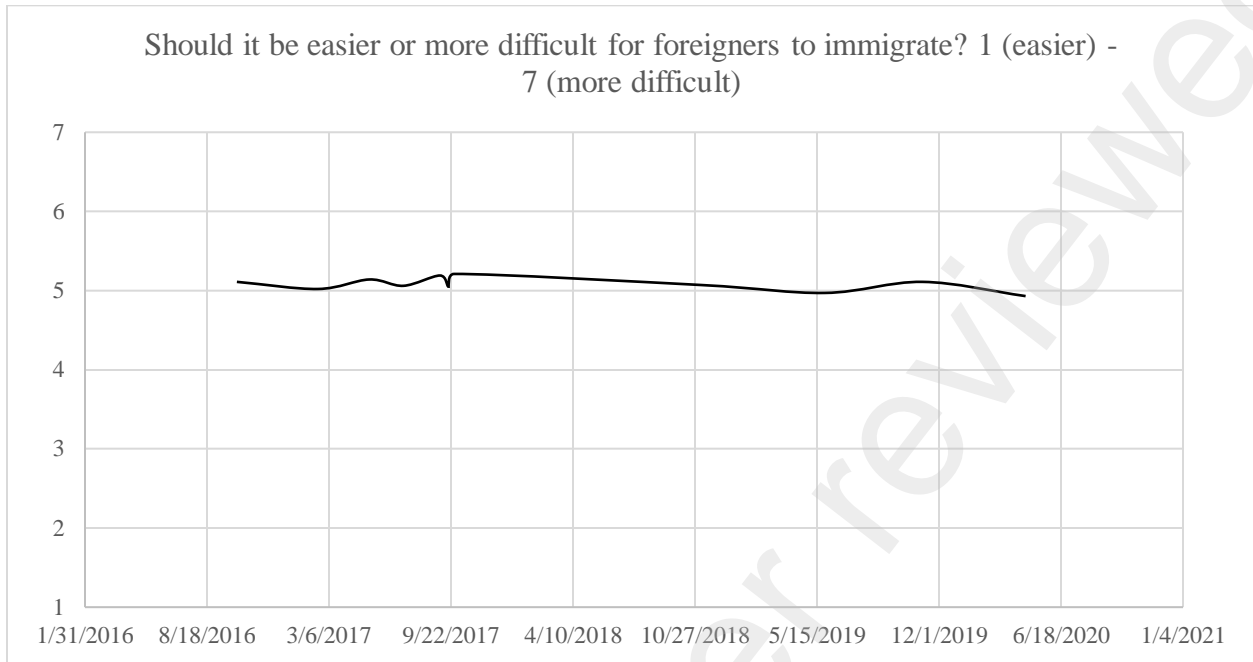
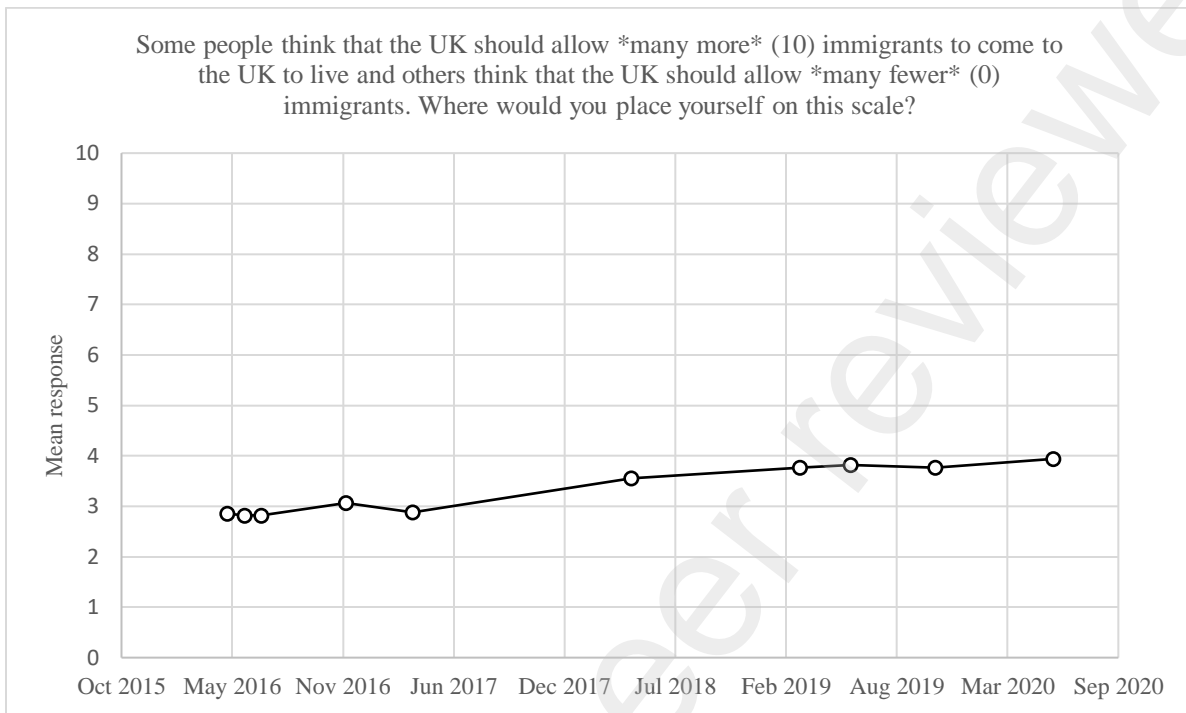
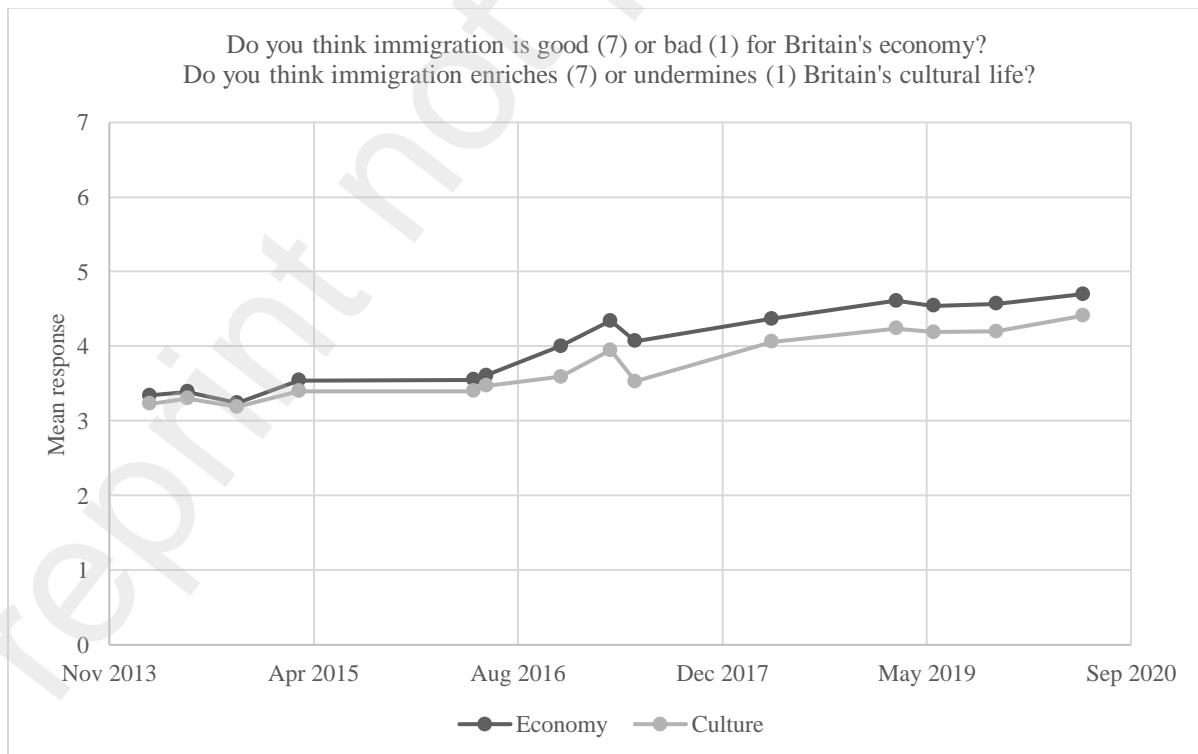


Figure A3: Immigration Preferences Pre- and Post the Outbreak of COVID-19 (UK)

A.



B.



## *Eurobarometer*

- Immigration preferences:
  - “Does immigration of people from other member states evoke a positive or negative feeling for you?” (calculated as positive minus negative)
  - “Does immigration of people from outside the EU evoke a positive or negative feeling for you?” (calculated as positive minus negative)
- Immigration issue salience:
  - “What do you think are the [two] most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) in the moment?” (calculated as % saying immigration is one of the top two issues)

## *U.S. Voter Study Group (VSG)*

- Immigration Preferences (“Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements”):
  - “Charge immigrants who enter the U.S. illegally with a federal crime” (binary)
  - “Deport all undocumented immigrants” (binary)
  - “Separate children from their parents when parents can be prosecuted for illegal entry into the US” (binary)
  - “Require proof of citizenship or legal residence to wire money to another country from the USA” (binary)
  - “Create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants brought here as children” (binary, reverse coded for the index)
  - ANTI-IMMIGRATION INDEX (average of other items)

*BES (British Election Study)*

- Immigration Preferences:
  - “Some people think that the UK should allow *many more* (10) immigrants to come to the UK to live and others think that the UK should allow *many fewer* (0) immigrants. Where would you place yourself on this scale?”
  - “Do you think immigration is *good* (7) or *bad* (1) for Britain's economy?”
  - “Do you think immigration *enriches* (7) or *undermines* (1) Britain's cultural life?”

*GLS (German Election Study)*

- Immigration Preferences: “Let’s turn to the issue of immigration. Should it be easier or more difficult for foreigners to immigrate? What is your opinion on this issue?” (from 1—“facilitate” to 7—“restrict”)

*Outbreak Severity* is defined as the log cumulative (officially confirmed) COVID-19 deaths per one million people at the survey date of July 9, 2020 (Karlinsky and Kobak 2021).