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Unemployment and attitudes to immigrants in Europe: A comparison of early and late countries of immigration¹

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Abstract

Rational economic self-interest predicts that a period of unemployment is likely to increase negative attitudes towards immigrants. Our findings indicate that, in the five countries examined, a period of unemployment does not necessarily lead to more negative attitudes to immigrants. Crucially, the statistical differences in the mean attitudinal scores of the unemployed and those continuously employed disappears when political values are considered. Trust in politicians, political parties and national parliament is a stronger predictor of attitudes to immigrants than a period of unemployment. Additionally, there was no evidence that attitudes among the unemployed towards immigrants differed between countries with a long tradition of immigration and those experiencing immigration more recently such as Ireland and Spain.

Keywords: attitudes to immigrants, political institutions, unemployment

¹ The data used in this paper is available from the European Social Survey website (www.europeansocialsurvey.org/). The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

Introduction

A substantial literature has documented the extent to which job loss is a disruptive life event with far-reaching effects on the trajectories of workers' lives (Brand, 2015). A period of unemployment can have adverse health and mental effects (Gallo et al., 2000; Stolove et al., 2017; Myles et al., 2017). Unemployment is associated with severe material, psychological and social impacts for individuals and their dependents. Previous certainties about work, social relations and political values are likely to come under stress and possibly re-evaluation. If severe, the shock of unemployment may act to undermine existing social attitudes and shift an individual's perception of immigrants in a more negative trajectory. People who are unemployed or who have experienced unemployment may be particularly susceptible to negative feelings about immigrants. Negative attitudes to immigrants are often based on fears that significant inflows of foreign workers will increase unemployment, depress wages and lead to a decline in the employment of national workers; and qualms that new immigrants contaminate the values and traditions that comprise their country's national identity (Borjas, 1999; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2001; Zick et al., 2011; Sassen, 1999). Most European Union (EU) countries experienced a significant increase in migration in the latter part of the twentieth century, including countries previously characterised as emigrant countries such as Ireland, Italy and Spain (Van Mol & de Valk, 2016). In the majority of EU countries, immigrants account for an average of just over 10 per cent of the population (Fargues et al., 2011). A combination of demographic changes, highly segmented labour markets and differentiated economies means European countries will increasingly depend on immigrant workers in the twenty-first century (OECD, 2003; Hix & Noury, 2007). Yet various Eurobarometer surveys indicate that attitudes towards immigrants is far from positive, particularly in regard to those from outside Europe and non-Western countries (Yilmaz, 2012, p. 371; Murray, 2017). Anti-immigrant sentiment has taken the form of violent protests and riots in countries such as France and there has been a notable rise in support for far-right political parties in Europe (Rustenbach, 2010; Rooduijn, 2015).

Here we focus on the relationship between an individual's experiences of long-term unemployment over their working life and attitudes towards immigrants in five countries: France, Germany,

Ireland, Spain and Sweden. France, Germany and Sweden represent countries that experienced substantial immigration after the Second World War in the mid-twentieth century (Panayi, 2014; Skodo, 2018). Significant levels of immigration to Ireland and Spain only commenced towards the end of the twentieth century. Yet, these latter countries now have sizeable immigrant populations and by 2019 had a greater number of immigrants per 1,000 inhabitants than Germany, France and Sweden (Eurostat, 2021a). Economic recession and recovery has characterised countries of the European Union in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008 (Szczepanski, 2019). Nevertheless, the unemployment rate in the EU has remained relatively high over recent years. It stood at 9.9 per cent in 2010, peaking at 11.4 per cent in 2013 (Statista, 2025) and was 7.5 per cent in 2021 (Eurostat, 2021b). In this context, this paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of the impact of unemployment on attitudes to immigrants (see, for example, Keita & Valette, 2019). Our analysis is based on a combined database of nine rounds of the European Social Survey from 2002 to 2018. A large sample such as this allows a robust test of whether a period of unemployment lasting more than twelve months impacts on an individual's attitudes towards immigrants. Specifically, we examine whether the experience of long-term unemployment has a direct negative effect on attitudes to immigrants and the extent to which this relationship is mediated by an individual's political ideology and trust in political institutions. In addition, we test whether the effect of unemployment on attitudes to immigrants differs in countries with a long history of immigration compared to newer countries of immigration.

Unemployment and the formation of attitudes towards immigrants

Studies on the formation of attitudes towards immigration rely either on rational-type explanations based on self-interest calculations about the perceived effect of immigration on the labour market and welfare system, or psychological and culturally based explanations such as social identity, intergroup conflict and personality type (Markaki & Longhi, 2013; Dustmann & Preston, 2007). Self-interest denotes actions that elicit personal benefit and in standard economic theory, it refers to the notion that individuals act rationally in their own best material or economic interests (Nohara, 2021). These interests include a share of the scarce goods in society, particularly tangible assets such

as income and physical assets. A substantial body of literature indicates that attitudes to immigration are driven by changing levels of perceived individual and group conflict over the competition for scarce material resources such as jobs, housing and welfare (Burns & Gimpel, 2000; Coenders & Scheepers, 2008; Lancee & Pardos-Prado, 2013). This is likely to be particularly acute for those in a lower socio-economic group in less favourable economic conditions when the availability of goods that are the objective of competition between immigrant groups and natives become scarcer, leading to increased negative attitudes towards immigration (Scheve & Slaughter, 2001; McLaren & Johnson, 2007). Increases in numbers of immigrants into a country are often opposed on the basis of fears that significant inflows of foreign workers will increase unemployment, depress wages and lead to a decline in the employment of national workers who are available for low-skilled work (OECD, 2001; Friedberg, 2000). These workers fear that employers are likely to substitute immigrant labour for native workers since the former are cheaper (Roy, 1997; Borjas, 1999). Native workers whose labour is substitutable with immigrants may find themselves in competition for the same jobs, meaning that one or other of the groups may become unemployed, creating tensions between native and immigrant workers. Economic self-interest thus predicts that being disproportionately harmed by immigration or the perception that this is the case will increase opposition to immigration (Fetzer, 2000, p 3). Negative sentiment regarding immigration is thus a defensive reaction to perceived competition for scarce goods. In a static or shrinking economy where immigrants are substitutes for native workers, attitudes are more likely to be negative. Alternatively, in an expanding economy, immigrant labour can complement rather than substitute native labour relieving bottlenecks in the labour market facilitating economic expansion, increasing available jobs and hence better opportunities for native workers (Roy, 1997). In this scenario, a period of unemployment may be less likely to give rise to anti-immigrant sentiment.

Generally, the empirical evidence of the relationship between the experience of unemployment and attitudes towards immigrants is relatively inconclusive. According to Hainmueller & Hopkins (2014), a substantial body of research shows little evidence that immigration attitudes are related to personal economic circumstances. Research in Ireland indicated that unemployment either has no discernible impact on attitudes towards immigrants (Laurence et al., 2024; McGinnity et al., 2018) or only a modest negative effect (McGinnity et al., 2023).

In contrast, based on a meta-analysis of several social science disciplines in the years 2009–19, Drazanova et al. (2023) found that unemployment was on average associated with more anti-immigrant attitudes. In Germany, using longitudinal household panel data from 1999 to 2016, Kayran (2025) found that being in a worse off position with a higher likelihood of unemployment compared to other native workers raises adversity levels toward immigrants, while evidence from the United Kingdom indicates that those of lower status measured by education, skill level and income are more likely to fear competition for jobs, housing and social services (Igarashi & Laurence, 2021; Sagar, 2003, p. 185). Fluctuations in economic condition such as the rise in unemployment have been found to affect attitudes towards immigrants negatively in a number of comparative studies in the European Union (Turner & Cross, 2015; Isaksen, 2019). Moreover, it appears that a high unemployment rate predisposes citizens to accept the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the far-right in Europe (Cochrane & Nevitte, 2014) and that anti-immigrant sentiments increased in countries where perceptions of insecurity also increased (Kuntz et al., 2017). More specifically, labour market vulnerability (as measured by temporary contracts, involuntary part-time status and unemployment) is significantly correlated with more negative beliefs about the economic contribution of immigrants (Kevins & Lightman, 2020). Hypotheses 1 and 2 test whether native workers who experience a relatively prolonged period of unemployment have less favourable attitudes towards immigrants compared to those in continuous employment.

Hypothesis 1: workers who are unemployed or who have experienced unemployment are more likely to have negative attitudes towards allowing immigrants into their country.

Hypothesis 2: workers who are unemployed or who have experienced unemployment are more likely to have negative attitudes towards the economic and cultural impact of immigrants compared to the continuously employed.

Ideological orientation and political trust

The relationship between unemployment and attitudes to immigrants is likely to be mediated by an individual's political ideology, trust in politicians, political parties and state institutions. A consistent finding

in the literature shows that people on the left of the political spectrum have reported more liberal attitudes to immigrants. Those on the left are significantly more positive than the groups on the right about the economic and cultural impact of immigrants and are more open to allowing more immigrants into their country (Simmons et al., 2018; Pardos-Prado, 2011). Previous studies show a significant relationship between unemployment and a shift leftward. Evidence from Swedish and Dutch studies indicated that left-wing parties gain an electoral advantage when the local unemployment rate rises in less well-off areas (Brännlund, 2021; Emmenegger et al., 2015). A large-scale study of Western European nations and county-level data from the United States of America indicated that voters who favour lower unemployment tend to vote for parties on the left (Dassonneville & Lewis-Beck, 2013; Wright, 2012). Using Dutch panel data from 2007 to 2016, Wiertz and Rodon (2021, p. 309) found a systematic if modest tendency of people to revise their ideology towards the left after job loss, particularly when attended by a major fall in household income. Where unemployment shifts an individual's political ideology leftwards, it may counter negative tendencies and shift attitudes towards immigrants in a more liberal direction.

Hypothesis 3: Unemployment shifts an individual's political ideology towards the left of the political spectrum.

Unemployment is also likely to exert a strong influence on political values, attitudes and beliefs. It rests on the premise that political values are not stable internal predispositions but are the result of social influence and are reflections of an individual's social context (Connors, 2020). We treat attitudes to politics and state institutions as potentially mediating the relationship between unemployment and attitudes to immigrants. Studies in the United Kingdom (McLaren, 2012), United States (MacDonald, 2021) and Europe (Jeannet, 2020) found that low trust in politics and institutions are associated with anti-immigration attitudes and that concerns about the impact of immigration significantly affect trust in institutions. An increase in unemployment rates in a number of EU countries has also been found to be associated with a pronounced fall in trust in politicians and national institutions (Roth et al., 2013; Muro & Vidal, 2017). Since the unemployed are more likely than workers in continuous employment to experience declining disposable income, lower social mobility and poverty, they are less likely to believe that politicians and

political parties represent their interests and are more likely to be sceptical of the political system and the credibility of state institutions (Muro & Vidal, 2017).

Hypothesis 4: Unemployed workers are more likely to have lower trust in politics and state institutions than the general population.

Early and late countries of immigration

According to Freeman (1995), migration is a phenomenon that takes time to develop, beginning with an initial influx, followed by settlement and secondary immigration through family reunion and chain migration processes. In this cycle, immigration tends initially to produce concentrated benefits, particularly to employers and businesses that benefit from expansions in the population and diffuse costs that fall initially and disproportionately on the minority of the population competing with immigrants for scarce jobs and other goods such as housing, and only belatedly on the population as a whole. Based on this logic, Freeman (1995, p 885) argues that rather than the host society becoming more comfortable with immigrants over time, the opposite occurs, with opposition to immigration likely to grow over the lifetime of the natural immigration cycle. Alternatively, a basic contention of contact theory is that intergroup contact typically diminishes intergroup prejudice and a larger outgroup size provides opportunities for positive intergroup contact, which in turn ameliorates anti-outgroup attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010). Thus, over time, greater contact between natives and immigrants should increase positive attitudes towards immigrants (Laurence et al., 2024). Yet based on a study of fourteen countries, Gorodzeisky & Semyonov (2018) found that anti-immigrant sentiment was more pronounced in the old immigration countries like France and Germany compared to new immigration countries like Ireland and Spain (see also Heath & Richards, 2019). Consequently, it is difficult to specify *a priori* the expected nature of the association between unemployment and attitudes towards immigrants in old and new immigration countries. Thus, we rely on the empirical data to ascertain whether unemployed workers in countries with a longer history of immigration are more likely to have more negative attitudes towards immigrants compared to unemployed workers in countries with more recent immigration flows.

In summary, we test firstly whether a period of unemployment of twelve months or more will have a direct negative effect on attitudes to immigrants. Secondly, the extent to which this relationship is mediated by an individual's political ideology and trust in politics and state institutions is examined. Finally, we assess whether unemployment differs in its impact on attitudes to immigrants in traditional countries with a long history of immigration compared to newer countries of immigration.

Data and measures

The data used here comes from nine rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is a biennial multi-country survey covering over twenty nations. The first round was fielded in 2002 and the ninth round in 2018. Data collection is by means of face-to-face interviews of approximately an hour in duration. The requirement is for random (probability) samples with comparable estimates based on full coverage of the eligible residential populations aged fifteen and over. A target response rate of 70 per cent is set for each country. In the following analysis, respondents born outside the country are excluded so that the results almost wholly reflect national citizens attitudes to immigrants. The number of sampled respondents born in each country for the nine rounds combined is: Germany (N = 23,290), France (N = 15,377), Sweden (N = 14,043), Spain (N = 15,591) and Ireland (N = 17,682). These five countries are chosen on the basis that Germany, France and Sweden are countries with a long tradition of inward migration since the 1960s, while significant immigration to Ireland and Spain only commenced in the twenty-first century (Muñoz de Bustillo & Antón, 2010). Yet, by 2019, the non-national percentage of the population in Ireland and Spain had reached or exceeded these traditional immigration countries, with a substantial proportion of immigrants arriving from non-EU countries (Table 1).

The national unemployment rate increased after the financial crisis in 2008 in all countries except Germany but was especially high in the new immigration countries of Spain and Ireland. In the data analysis, the ESS rounds are divided into two groups from 2002 to 2008 and post the financial crisis from 2010 to 2018. In all countries except Germany, there was a substantial rise in the national unemployment rate, particularly in Spain and Ireland and to a lesser extent in France and Sweden. In this regard, it might be expected that the responses in the survey rounds after 2008 will exert a negative effect on attitudes

Table 1: Number and source of immigrants in 2019^a

	<i>Non-national % of the population^a</i>		<i>Citizens of another EU state as a % of the non- national population</i>		<i>Citizens of a non-EU state as a % of the non- national population^b</i>		<i>Average unemploy- ment 2002–2008</i>	<i>Average unemploy- ment 2010–2018</i>
Germany	12.5	(2)	42.1		57.8	(4)	9.25	4.98
France	7.6	(5)	28.3		71.7	(1)	8.45	9.7
Sweden	9.0	(4)	33		65.1	(3)	6.3	7.6
Spain	11	(3)	32.9		67.1	(2)	10.5	20.8
Ireland	13	(1)	53.7		46.2	(5)	4.98	11.2

Abbreviation: EU = European Union.

^a Countries are ranked (in parentheses) from highest to lowest proportion of non-EU proportion of immigrants.

^b Source of this data: Eurostat (2019).

compared to the pre-crisis survey rounds. In the ESS, the definition of an unemployed person is based on the guidelines of the International Labour Organization as someone aged fifteen to seventy-four years without work, who is available to start work and who is actively seeking employment. Two measures of unemployment are used: whether respondents experienced unemployment for three and twelve month periods, respectively. Specifically, respondents experiencing unemployment for twelve months or more is the main independent measure here based on the following question: have you ever been unemployed and seeking work for any period that lasted for twelve months or more?

Essentially people who have been unemployed for twelve months or more fall into the category of long-term unemployment as defined by the International Labour Organization and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Altogether, 15 per cent of the sample in the five countries reported being unemployed for twelve months or more, composed of 56 per cent of women and 46 per cent of men. Such a lengthy period of unemployment is more likely to have been an involuntary event rather than a voluntary choice. Research shows that the negative effect of the unemployment experience, particularly when it is long-term, may last for a very long time with a significant wage penalty and a negative impact on health (Richter et al., 2020; Frech et al., 2022).

While the analysis here is based on pooled cross-sectional surveys, we argue that this is not a grievous issue. Undoubtedly by applying longitudinal analyses and controlling for all between-person differences it is possible to isolate the effect of changing economic conditions on an individual over time from competing explanations in a way that cross-sectional research cannot and thus to test whether worsening economic conditions are a catalyst of growing anti-immigrant concerns (Lancee & Pardos-Prado, 2013). However, given the often immediate dynamic effect on an individual's material and social position, and potential life-scarring effects of long-term unemployment, it can be argued that tracking unemployed respondents over time would be useful but not essential. A comparison of long-term unemployed respondents with those continuously employed controlling for factors such as age and education provides, we believe, a substantial basis to assess attitudes to immigrants.

Attitudes to outsiders is measured in two ways; firstly, by attitudes to allowing immigrants into the country, composed of three items gauging the extent to which respondents would allow immigrants: (a) of the same race/ethnic group as the majority, (b) from a different race/ethnic group from the majority, (c) from poorer countries outside Europe (all scored 1 = allow none to 4 = allow many). Secondly, the impact of immigrants on economy and culture is composed of three items to assess whether respondents believed that people coming from other countries: (a) was generally bad or good for [country]'s economy, (b) meant that cultural life is generally undermined or enriched, (c) made the country a worse or a better place to live (all scored 0 = bad to 10 = good). Cronbach alphas for both measures are above 0.7 indicating that these individual items are measuring the same construct.

Trust in politics is measured by two items: how much do you personally trust each of the following: (a) politicians, and (b) political parties (scored 0 = no trust at all to 10 = complete trust). In Table 2, the Spearman–Brown coefficient (scored 0.92) is provided as it is the most appropriate reliability statistic for a two-item scale (Eisinga et al., 2013). Trust in institutions is measured by three items (Cronbach alpha = 0.75): how much do you personally trust each of the following: (a) country's parliament, (b) the legal system, and (c) the police (scored 0 = no trust at all to 10 = complete trust). Political ideological orientation measured by a single item: 'in politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right" – where would you place yourself on this scale where 0 means the Right and 10 means the Left?'

Table 2: Measures of attitudes to immigrants and political values

	<i>Openness to outsiders</i>	<i>Alpha score</i>
Allowing immigrants into the country	Measured with three items: 1. Would you allow many/few immigrants of same race/ethnic group as majority. 2. Allow many/few immigrants of different race/ethnic group from majority. 3. Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe. Scored 1 = allow many to come and live here; 2 = allow some; 3 = allow a few; 4 = allow none. Items are reverse coded to 1 = allow none to 4 = allow many.	0.9
Immigrants good or bad for economy and culture	Measured with three items: 1. Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries? 2. Would you say that cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries? 3. Is your country made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? Scored 0 = good to 10 = bad. Items are reverse scored from 0 = bad to 10 = good.	0.9
Trust in politics	Trust in politics measured by two items: How much do you personally trust each of the following: 1. Politicians 2. Political parties Scored 0 = no trust at all to 10 = complete trust.	0.92^a
Trust in state institutions	Trust in institutions measured by three items: How much do you personally trust each of the following: 1. Country's parliament 2. The legal system 3. The police. Scored 0 = no trust at all to 10 = complete trust.	0.75

Table 2: Measures of attitudes to immigrants and political values (Contd.)

	<i>Openness to outsiders</i>	<i>Alpha score</i>
Political ideology	Political ideological orientation measured by one item: ‘In politics people sometimes talk of “left” and “right” – where would you place yourself on this scale where 0 means the Right and 10 means the Left ?’	

^a Spearman–Brown coefficient

In addition, a number of controls are used in the multivariate analysis that include gender, age, years in education, and whether respondents are able to cope on their income. A substantial body of literature indicates that age is a significant predictor of variation in anti-immigration sentiment with younger people appearing to be more positive about immigration (Mayda, 2006; McLaren & Paterson, 2020; Schotte & Winkler, 2018). Higher levels of education tend to be associated with liberal pro-immigration attitudes, while lower levels of education are linked with anti-immigrant attitudes (Cavaille & Marshall, 2019; Laurence et al., 2024). Studies are mixed regarding the effects of gender with men more likely to hold anti-immigrant views than women in some though not all cases (Ponce, 2017). Experiencing financial strain appears be consistently linked with more negative views of immigrants McGinnity et al., 2018; Gang et al., 2013; Lee, 2023).

Results

Taking the respondents from the five countries as a whole, there is a significant difference between those who experienced a period of unemployment of twelve months or longer over their working life compared to the continuously employed (mean scores and T-tests reported in Table 3). Respondents who experienced long-term unemployment are significantly less likely to favour allowing immigrants into to their country and to view their economic and cultural impact more negatively confirming both hypotheses 1 and 2 that people who experience a period of unemployment are likely to have more negative attitudes towards immigrants. This significant difference between the unemployed and others is not consistent across all countries. In Sweden and Spain there is no statistical difference,

Table 3: Attitudes to immigrants by employment status

	<i>Allow immigrants into the country</i> (scored 1 = allow none to 4 = allow many) ^a		<i>Economic and cultural impact of immigrants</i> (scored from 0 = bad to 10 = good) ^a	
	<i>Unemploy.</i> <i>12 months +</i>	<i>No unemploy.</i> <i>12 months +</i>	<i>Unemploy.</i> <i>12 months +</i>	<i>No unemploy.</i> <i>12 months +</i>
Germany	2.63	2.84	4.84	5.46
France	2.55	2.6	4.64	4.81
Sweden	3.14	3.23	5.93	6.32
Spain	2.65	2.63	5.3	5.44
Ireland	2.58	2.69	5.03	5.47
All countries	2.62	2.74	4.92	5.3

Source: European Social Survey 2002 to 2018 (appropriate weights applied).

Abbreviations: ns = not significant, $P < 0.05^*$, $P < 0.01^{**}$, $P < 0.001^{***}$.

^a The sum of the computed measures of 'Allow immigrants into the country' and 'Economic and cultural impact of immigrants' are divided by three to give a mean ranging from 1 to 4 and from 0 to 10, respectively.

^b T-tests are used to compare the means of respondents who have experienced unemployment and those continuously employed to determine if the difference between them is statistically significant.

and only a weak relationship in Ireland towards allowing in immigrants. Alternatively, the attitude of unemployed respondents towards the economic and cultural impact of immigrants is consistently and significantly more negative across the five countries.

There appears to be no significant relationship between unemployment and a country's location in the immigration cycle. Unemployed workers in countries with a longer history of immigration do not display more negative attitudes towards allowing immigrants in and to the economic and cultural impact of immigrants compared to unemployed workers in more recent countries of immigration (Table 3). Among the unemployed, attitudes to allowing immigrants in are more negative in France, but most positive in Sweden, both with a long history of immigration. Ireland, a recent country of immigration is less positive than Germany. Positive attitudes towards the economic and cultural impact of immigrants among the unemployed are greater in Spain and Ireland than in France and Germany, but again are highest in Sweden.

Finally, the descriptive evidence in Table 4 supports hypotheses 3 and 4 that unemployment shifts people's political ideology towards the left of the political spectrum, and unemployed workers are more likely to have lower trust in politics and state institutions than the general population. Unemployed respondents are significantly more likely to be on the left of the political spectrum and have lower trust in politicians, political parties and state institutions. A longer period of unemployment has no impact on political ideology but appears to significantly decrease trust levels in politics and state institutions when

Table 4: Ideology, trust in politics and unemployment (mean scores reported)

	<i>Unemployed 12M+</i>	<i>Continuous employment</i>	<i>T-test Sig. for 12M+</i>
Political ideology (0 = Right to 10 = Left)	5.57	5.25	***
Trust in politics (0 = low trust to 10 = high trust)	2.68	3.38	***
Trust state institutions (0 = no trust to 10 = high trust)	4.74	5.42	***

Source: European Social Survey 2002 to 2018 (appropriate weights applied).
Abbreviations: M = months, ns = not significant; P<0.05*, P<0.01**, P<0.001***.

respondents experiencing unemployment lasting three months or more are compared to those with twelve months or more.

As the regression analysis in Table 5 indicates, these political measures have a more significant effect on attitudes towards allowing immigrants into the country than being unemployed. Indeed, a period of unemployment of twelve months or more has only a minor impact on the dependent variable. Unemployment has a negative impact in Germany and Sweden, a positive effect in Ireland and France, and no relationship in Sweden or Spain. In all of the equations, unemployment explains almost none of the variance in the dependent measure and hence there is no support for hypothesis 1 that people who experience a period of unemployment are likely to have more negative attitudes towards allowing immigrants into their country when we control for the political measures. With the exception of Ireland, the two measures – political ideology and educational level – explain most of the variance in the dependent variable. Trust in politics and state institutions are also consistently associated with positive attitudes to allowing immigrants into a country. National rates of unemployment were substantially higher in the period after the financial crisis in 2008 in all countries except Germany. Yet attitudes to allowing immigrants into the country were more positive after the financial crisis in all countries except Ireland compared to attitudes prior to the crisis. Thus, a climate of relatively high years of unemployment did not appear to negatively affect attitudes towards immigrants.

Men are slightly more positive towards immigrants than women overall, while women are more positive in Sweden and men more positive in Spain and Ireland though the relationships are relatively weak. Being older and income adequacy are consistently associated with more negative attitudes to immigrants across all countries.

A similar pattern prevails regarding the economic and cultural impact of immigrants. A period of unemployment has little effect on attitudes when controlling for the political measures and educational level (Table 6). These results provide no support for hypothesis 2 that unemployment will be associated with more negative attitudes towards the economic and cultural impact of immigrants compared to the continuously employed. Again, political ideology and educational level are central to explaining the variance in attitudes towards the economic and cultural impact of immigrants. However, trust in politics and in state institutions are, in some countries, equally as significant. Again, attitudes were generally more positive in all countries except

Table 5: Attitudes to allowing immigrants into the country^a
(Method linear regression – Standardised Beta coefficients and significance reported)

	<i>All countries</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Ireland</i>
Unemployed 12M +^b	-0.01***	-0.04***	ns	-0.03**	ns	+0.03***
Political ideology	0.22***	0.18***	0.28***	0.18***	0.21***	0.09***
Trust in politics	0.11***	0.11***	0.07***	0.12***	0.07***	0.06***
Trust in institutions	0.12***	0.14***	0.14***	0.1***	0.04***	0.08***
National unemployment rate ^c	0.09***	0.15***	0.09***	0.02*	0.13***	-0.08***
Controls						
Gender	0.006*	ns	ns	-0.06***	0.03***	0.02*
Raw age	-0.08***	-0.06***	-0.12***	-0.1***	-0.07***	-0.08***
Years of education	0.21***	0.22***	0.21***	0.18***	0.22***	0.2***
Income adequacy	0.1***	0.09***	0.1***	0.07***	0.03**	0.13***
F score	3,231***	645***	420***	242***	224***	205***
R2	0.2	0.22	0.24	0.15	0.15	0.11
N	114,161	20,137	12,199	12,435	11,669	14,281

Source: European Social Survey 2002 to 2018 (appropriate weights applied).

Abbreviations: M = months, ns = not significant; P<0.05*, P<0.01**, P<0.001***.

^a Dependent variable: allow immigrants into the country – measured by three items.

^b Scored 1 = yes; 0 = no.

^c The national unemployment context is scored 1 = 2010 to 2018; 0 = 2002 to 2008.

Controls: gender: 1 = male; 0 = female. Raw age: education: number of years; income adequacy: 1 = not adequate; 2 = barely adequate; 3 = adequate; 4 = comfortable.

Table 6: Attitudes towards the economic and cultural impact of immigrants ^a
(Method linear regression – Standardised Beta coefficients and significance reported)

	<i>All countries</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Ireland</i>
Unemployed 12M +	-0.007**	-0.03***	0.02*	-0.02*	ns	0.03***
Political ideology	0.24***	0.19***	0.29***	0.17***	0.21***	0.05***
Trust in politics	0.13***	0.16***	0.12***	0.21***	0.1***	0.1***
Trust in institutions	0.12***	0.22***	0.21***	0.16***	0.14***	0.17***
National unemployment rate	0.05***	0.06***	0.03***	ns	0.06***	-0.07***
Controls						
Gender	0.03***	ns	0.03***	-0.06***	0.08***	0.06***
Raw age	-0.05***	-0.02**	-0.08***	0.02*	-0.03***	ns
Years of education	0.21***	0.2***	0.23***	0.26***	0.22***	0.25***
Income adequacy	0.1***	0.08***	0.08***	0.07***	0.05***	0.11***
F score	3,922***	776***	539***	452***	238***	300***
R ²	0.24	0.26	0.28	0.25	0.16	0.16
N	113,729	19,882	12,310	12,232	11,654	14,181

Source: European Social Survey 2002 to 2018 (appropriate weights applied).

Abbreviations: M = months, ns = not significant; P<0.05*, P<0.01**, P<0.001***.

^a Dependent variable: immigrants good/bad for economy and culture – measured by three items.

Ireland in the survey rounds after the financial crisis. Overall, our results indicate the importance of political values in mediating the relationship between unemployment and attitudes to immigrants.

Discussion and conclusion

A key premise of group conflict theory is that attitudes to immigrants are due to changing levels of perceived conflict over scarce economic resources such as jobs. Negative sentiment regarding immigration is thus a defensive reaction to perceived intergroup competition for scarce goods. We proposed that a period of unemployment is likely to cause negative attitudes towards allowing immigrants into their country, and to negative attitudes towards the economic and cultural impact of immigrants. Our findings indicate, however, that in the five countries examined here, a period of long-term unemployment over a working life does not necessarily lead to more negative attitudes towards immigrants. The argument that unemployment may be perceived as resulting from job displacement by immigrants and, as a result, increases anti-immigrant sentiment is not supported by the data from eight rounds of the European Social Survey. Crucially, the statistical differences in the mean attitudinal scores of the unemployed and the continuously employed became insignificant or extremely weak when political values are considered. Previous studies have found that low levels of trust in politics and institutions are associated with anti-immigration attitudes. Here we found that trust in politicians, political parties, the police, legal system and national parliament are stronger predictors of attitudes to immigrants than a period of unemployment. Low scores in these measures (along with educational level) are associated with less positive attitudes to both allowing immigrants into the country and to their economic and cultural impact.

Our findings highlight that a period of unemployment significantly decreases trust in politics and state institutions and as such has an indirect effect on anti-immigrant sentiment. These results corroborate the findings of Macdonald & Cornacchione (2021) that higher levels of political trust are associated with increased public support for allowing a variety of different immigrant groups, including non-Europeans, and with support for a generous and accommodating refugee policy. In all five countries examined here, the experience of a period of unemployment of twelve months or longer is significantly associated with lower trust levels compared to those in continuous

employment. Labour market policies that ensure shorter periods of unemployment and lower financial penalties are thus likely to increase levels of political trust, enhance social solidarity and in turn more positive attitudes to immigrants. A positive feature of the recent coronavirus pandemic is that governments acted promptly to establish greater supports for those displaced from work and expanded job retention schemes of various kinds to counter the massive financial and labour market disruption from the lockdown of economies.

In general, the argument that negative sentiment towards immigration will tend to increase over the natural immigration cycle and hence new immigration countries will display more positive attitudes towards immigrants than early immigrant countries receives little support. Respondents in Sweden, for example, display more favourable attitudes to immigrants than any other country, including Spain and Ireland. This aligns with previous studies which found more positive attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in Sweden compared to most European countries (Genge & Bartolucci, 2022). Such comparatively positive attitudes may be related to higher trust levels in the political arena as Sweden scores higher mean levels of political trust across the nine survey rounds followed by Germany and Ireland (Table 7). These higher levels of trust in the political institutions are likely to spill over into more positive attitudes towards immigrants.

Table 7: Mean trust levels in politics and institutions

	<i>Political trust</i>	<i>Trust in institutions</i>
Sweden	4.77	6.30
Germany	3.58	5.69
Ireland	3.49	5.25
France	3.15	5.05
Spain	2.75	4.93

Source: European Social Survey 2002 to 2018 (appropriate weights applied).

It may also be the case that Sweden has traditionally ranked as one of the most equal countries in Europe² providing a universal range of basic public services in terms of housing, education, health and child support, and consequently experiences less conflict between interest

² Eurostat:

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_di12/default/table?lang=en

groups over actual and perceived access to valued resources compared to more unequal countries.³

A notable political development in European democracies is the rise of radical populist parties with an anti-immigrant agenda. These populist parties are increasingly electorally successful in mature liberal democracies such as Germany, Sweden, France and Spain (Rensmann et al., 2017; Rooduijn, 2015). In a world where immigration is likely to remain a contested and divisive political issue in European countries, the factors that determine peoples' attitudes towards immigrants are an important consideration for these societies. The results here indicate that trust in politicians, political parties and state institutions is more influential in the formation of these attitudes than labour market vulnerability as measured by a period of long-term unemployment.

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³ However, recent trends in Sweden tend to dent this model as levels of inequality are increasing sharply (Therborn, 2020; Gao & Chen, 2022; Walker et al., 2022) and this may well lead to greater friction over scarce resources and less tolerant attitudes towards immigrants.

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Forum articles

