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DATA & TRENDS

Attitudes towards immigrants in European contexts. Social origins or generational influence?

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ABSTRACT How do inter- and intra-generational perspectives influence attitudes towards immigrants? Demographic studies have uncovered the roles played by parental (inter) socio-economic background and by birth cohort (intra) in shaping prejudicial or tolerant attitudes towards immigrants, but these roles have not been examined together. In this study, we do so using data from the European Social Survey, rounds 1–10 (2002–2020). In particular, we rely on the question "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?" to examine the influence of parental socio-economic background (class and education) on respondents' attitudes towards migrants. Moreover, we study whether this influence varies by birth cohort. Results of linear regression models including country-year fixed effects indicate that while individuals born in recent cohorts are more pro-immigrant, the influence of parental socio-economic background has amplified in these same birth cohorts.

KEYWORDS Social stratification • Birth cohorts • Attitudes toward immigrants • Political demography • Europe

Introduction

Migration, together with fertility and mortality, are the three central dynamics investigated in population studies. Despite the ample empirical evidence of the positive effects of international mobility on the demographic and social wellbeing of the country of destination, foreign immigration is predominantly perceived as a threat and not as a strength (Dustmann et al., 2019; AISP, 2021; Favell, 2022), especially across advanced economies (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010). This is also the case in countries where immigrant populations are relatively small (Czymara, 2021). The integration of migrants remains a salient issue that has been difficult to resolve across countries, and anti-immigrant attitudes are at the core of the rising forces of the radical right in Europe and beyond (Rydgren, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Therefore, understanding how attitudes towards immigrants are formed is a central aim in contemporary socio-demographic research (Grigorieff et al., 2020; Gereke, et al., 2022; Huang, 2023; Šedovič, 2023; Igarashi and Creighton, 2025), especially if negative or positive attitudes towards immigrants are intertwined with socio-economic inequalities in the population.

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In this study, our goal is to address this issue by examining the roles played by parental socio-economic background and birth cohort in shaping prejudicial or tolerant attitudes towards immigrants. A large body of research has focused separately on the role played by parents in shaping the attitudes of their offspring on the one hand (Paskov et al., 2021), and on the role played by birth cohort on the other (Munck et al., 2018; Jeannet and Dražanová, 2023), without examining them together. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to disentangle and then combine the roles of inter- (parental socio-economic background) and intra-generational (birth cohort) socialisation in shaping attitudes towards migrants in a comparative setting. Furthermore, we examine the roles played by different aspects of parental social origins, while simultaneously testing the roles of parental social class and level of parental education, with the aim of gauging the influence of economic (Billiet et al., 2014; Bolet, 2020) and non-economic (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Lancee and Sarrasin, 2015; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Davidov et al., 2020) factors.

We rely on the interdisciplinary theoretical lens of political demography (Braungart and Braungart, 1986; Goerres and Vanhuysse, 2021; Favell, 2022), integrated with theoretical perspectives from research on cohorts (Mannheim, 1952; Ryder, 1965), to propose an empirical analysis of attitudes towards a phenomenon of crucial relevance for both the population and the politics of European countries.

Theoretical framework and literature review

The contribution by Braungart and Braungart (1986) on "*Life Course and Generational Politics*" identified two main ways in which generational factors may affect political attitudes: generational descent and cohort socialisation.

The inter-generational perspective highlights parental socio-economic background as the primary driver of their offspring's attitudes (Braungart and Braungart, 1986). This pattern has also been documented for attitudes towards migrants: a lower socio-economic background is typically associated with negative attitudes towards immigrants, who may be seen as direct competitors for jobs (Paskov et al., 2021) – a mechanism that also drives a strong association between attitudes towards immigrants and the actual occupational position of respondents (Pardos-Prado and Xena, 2019; Bolet, 2020). However, parental occupation is not the only socio-economic factor that may shape the attitudes of their offspring: education, in particular, is seen as a central factor in predicting attitudes towards immigration, with more educated individuals tending to have more favourable attitudes towards immigrants due to their higher likelihood of embracing egalitarian values (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Davidov et al., 2020). However, longitudinal evidence shows that fixed characteristics play a stronger role than an individual's own educational attainment (Lancee and Sarrasin, 2015), potentially indicating an important role for social origins. To test comprehensively the influence of both aspects, we posit the following:

Hypothesis 1. Respondents whose parents belong to a lower social class are less pro-immigrant than their peers whose parents belong to a higher social class.

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Hypothesis 2. Respondents whose parents have a lower level of education are less pro-immigrant than their peers whose parents have a higher level of education.

By contrast, the *birth cohort politics/political generations* perspective sees intra-generational peers as the leading agent of attitude formation (Braungart and Braungart, 1986). Individuals sharing the same birth years tend to develop similar socio-political attitudes (Giddings et al., 2014; Elder and George, 2016). This is because they face the same socio-historical developments during their impressionable years (Elder Jr and George, 2016). Applying the classic concept of cohorts as "engines of social change" (Ryder, 1965) to attitudes towards migration, research has shown that recent cohorts tend to be more pro-immigrant (McLaren and Paterson, 2020), especially in the context of European integration after the opening of borders within the European Union (Schmidt, 2021). Drawing on this perspective, we further posit the following:

Hypothesis 3. Respondents from more recent birth cohorts are more pro-immigrant than respondents from older birth cohorts.

We can reconcile these perspectives using the approach by Mannheim (1952), who argued that birth cohort intersects with other individual social characteristics, such as parental socio-economic background, in shaping attitudes and behaviour. Mannheim (1952) argued that while the socio-historical process poses the same problems to an entire generation, different units (groups within the same cohort, but differentiated by, for instance, socio-economic background) arise within the same birth cohorts due to their different approaches to dealing with these problems. By applying this concept to attitudes towards immigrants, we can expect that while more recent birth cohorts might still be more pro-immigrant on average, parental characteristics may play an important role in shaping the within-cohort variance. McLaren and Paterson (2020) found that younger cohorts' pro-immigrant tendencies weaken in contexts with strong radical right parties, corroborating the observation that different agents of socialisation are operating at the same time; see also Bursztyn et al. (2024). Therefore, our last two research hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 4. While the influence of parental social class on attitudes towards migrants persists across older and more recent cohorts, it generates heterogeneous effects.

Hypothesis 5. While the influence of level of parental education on attitudes towards migrants persists across older and more recent cohorts, it generates heterogeneous effects.

Data and analytical strategy

To test our hypotheses, we rely on the entire set of available European Social Survey data, rounds 1–10 (2002–2020). The ESS is a repeated cross-sectional survey that is fielded biannually in several countries in Europe and in its geographical neighbourhood (e.g., Turkey), which crucially allows us to control for the role of the national context (Paskov et al., 2021)

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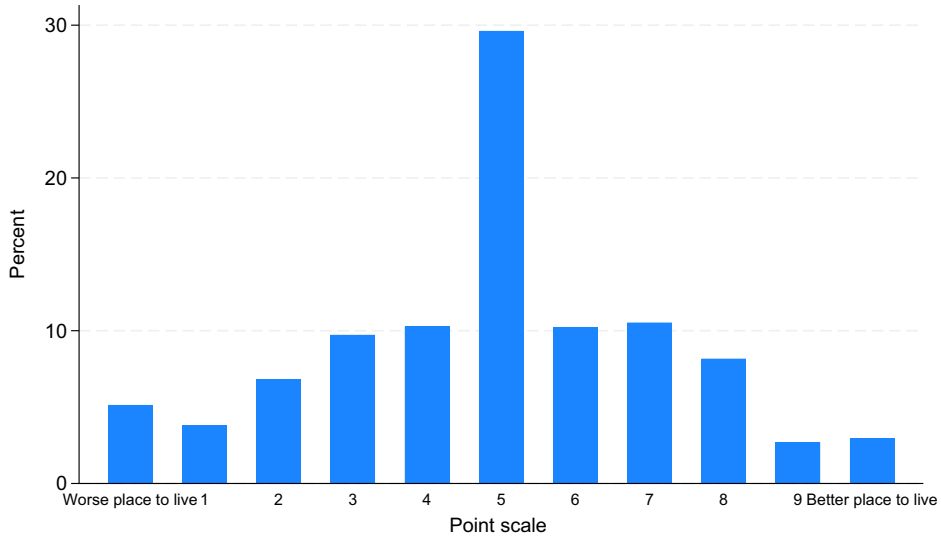
Figure 1 Percentage distribution of attitudes towards immigrants (point scale)



Note: Design weights included.
Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

when examining individual characteristics, behaviours and attitudes. Thus, the ESS follows countries longitudinally, drawing different population-representative samples across waves. After the inclusion of all key covariates, we rely on a sample size of 350,718 individuals. The respondents are drawn from 38 countries.[1] To operationalise attitudes towards immigrants, we rely on the following survey question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?" (ESS Questionnaire). Respondents are asked to answer this question on an 11-point scale from zero (worst) to 10 (best). This question is well-established in the literature as a measure of attitudes towards immigrants (see the review by Davidov et al., 2020). We depict the distribution of our dependent variable in Figure 1, which shows that most respondents' answers tend towards the central value.

Our first key covariate is *decade of birth*, which represents the aggregation of 10 yearly birth cohorts: e.g., 1950 for a respondent born between 1950 and 1959; see Table 1. We rely on decade of birth to avoid sample numerosity problems in country-years, and to ensure that no cells are empty in the moderation analysis, in which we focus on the interaction with parental social class and education. In Figure 2, we show the distributions of attitudes towards immigrants by decade of birth, with the rectangles with a dashed outline indicating attitudes towards immigrants that may be classified as "good" (six and upwards).

1 Full list available here: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/about/participating-countries

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Table 1 Descriptive statistics for socio-demographic controls

Variable	Percent (%)
Decade of birth	
1910	0.29
1920	2.68
1930	7.69
1940	13.28
1950	17.43
1960	18.57
1970	16.37
1980	14.98
1990	7.90
2000	0.80
Parental social class	
Salariat	13.71
Intermediate occupations	32.37
Working class	25.44
Missing	28.47
Highest level of parental education	
Tertiary education	23.16
Upper or post-secondary	30.44
Lower secondary and below	46.40
Parental migration background	
Both parents born in country	84.25
Only one parent born in country	5.58
Second-generation immigrant	9.99
Information on both parents missing	0.19
Social class of respondent	
Salariat	28.67
Intermediate	20.45
Working class	50.88
Missing	
Household income decile	
Decile missing	43.84
First decile	5.22
Second decile	6.07
Third decile	6.21
Fourth decile	6.21

(table continues)

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Table 1 (*continued*)

Variable	Percent (%)
Fifth decile	6.10
Sixth decile	5.78
Seventh decile	5.80
Eighth decile	5.48
Ninth decile	4.64
Tenth decile	4.67
Highest level of education of respondent	
0 not possible to harmonise into ES-ISCED	16.57
1 ES-ISCED I, less than lower secondary	7.58
2 ES-ISCED II, lower secondary	14.22
3 ES-ISCED IIIb, lower tier upper secondary	15.15
4 ES-ISCED IIIa, upper tier upper secondary	17.52
5 ES-ISCED IV, advanced vocational, sub-degree	9.87
6 ES-ISCED V1, lower tertiary education, BA level	8.85
7 ES-ISCED V2, higher tertiary education, >= MA level	10.24
Current labour market activity	
Paid work	50.84
In education	8.40
Unemployed and looking for work	4.75
Inactive	4.76
Retired	22.11
Sick/disabled	1.98
Outside workforce	7.16
Religious	
Yes	62.12
Gender	
Man	47.01
Native	
Yes	91.21
Ethnic minority status	
Yes	5.66

Notes: Sample size: 350,718. Design weights included.
Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020).

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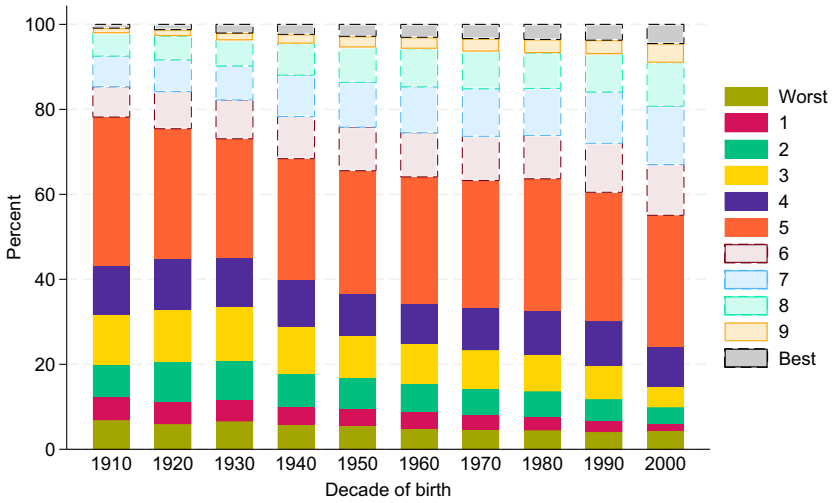
Figure 2 Percentage distribution of attitudes towards immigrants (point scale) by decade of birth



Note: Design weights included.
Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

The second key covariate is *parental social class*, with which we operationalise parental socio-economic background according to the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero class schema,[2] recoded into three large classes, plus a category for those respondents who do not report information on their parental social class (around 28% of the sample). We rely on the highest class of the parents of the respondent; see Table 1. The third key covariate is the *highest level of parental education*, recoded into three levels: lower secondary and below (including missing and not harmonisable up to ES-ISCED I), upper or post-secondary (including ES-ISCED III and IV) and tertiary education (including ES-ISCED V and upwards, from bachelor's degree to PhD). Again, we rely here on the highest level of education of the parents of the respondent. The highest level of parental education is low for about 46%, middle for about 30% and higher for about 24% of the respondents.

We include other individual socio-demographic controls (the respondent's social class, level of education, household income decile, religiosity (binary), gender and parental migration background; and whether the respondent has ethnic minority status and was born in the country of residence (native)). In particular, we add the "destination" social class and the level of education of the respondent. This allows us to better gauge the impact of the parental socio-economic characteristics, while controlling for the influence of the

2 Based on ISCO occupational codes, provided in the *iscoco* and *isco08* variables, and recoded using the *iscogen* STATA package.

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respondents' own socio-economic characteristics, which may have large direct effects on their attitudes towards immigrants (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Bolet, 2020; Paskov et al., 2021). Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for these controls as well.

In terms of analytical strategy, we linearly regress attitudes towards immigrants (0–10, from most negative to most positive) on the selected covariates and controls and include fixed effects for country-years (with clustered standard errors) and design weights. The use of linear regressions to study attitudes towards immigrants is again well-established in the literature (e.g., Billiet et al., 2014; Jeannet and Dražanová, 2023). Formally:

$$Y_{ict} = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\gamma_i X_{ict}} + \lambda_{ct} + \epsilon_{ict} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ict} is the dependent variable, β_0 is the intercept, γ is the vector of coefficients for the vector of $\boldsymbol{X ict}$ socio-demographic controls (which include β_1 $ParentalSocialClass_{\boldsymbol{ict}}$ and β_2 $DecadeOf Birth_{\boldsymbol{ict}}$, our key covariates) and λ_{ct} captures the fixed effects for country c in year t. In a second step (2), we add an *interaction term* between β_1 $ParentalSocialClass_{\boldsymbol{ict}}$ and β_2 $DecadeOf Birth_{\boldsymbol{ict}}$, β_3 $(ParentalSocialClass\, x\, DecadeOf Birth)_{ict}$. The purpose of the country-year fixed effects is to control for the entire (time-invariant and time-variant) unobserved heterogeneity at the country level, which is a powerful confounder of attitudes towards migrants (Paskov et al., 2021; Jeannet and Dražanová, 2023), allowing us to model the effect of the individual predictors. We note that our research question faces the classic age-period-cohort problem in demography (Glenn, 2003). In our setting, we cannot fully disentangle the impact of age and cohort, which is problematic especially for the oldest and youngest decades of birth. Therefore, our analyses should be seen as examining differences between groups of individuals according to "decade of birth", without formally considering them as cohorts. We will infer theoretically the role of age by exploiting the differential exposure to ageing of different decades in the study period (2002–2020).

Results

Tables 2–4 report the results of linear regressions of the dependent variable (immigrants make the country a worse or a better place to live from most negative (zero) to most positive (10)) on the key covariates as well as on the socio-demographic controls, including country-year fixed effects, country-year cluster-robust standard errors and design weights. The three specifications report the results of the main effects regression without any interactions (M1 – baseline). Then, the other two specifications report otherwise identical regressions, respectively interacting decade of birth with parental social class (M2 – int. class) and with highest level of parental education (M3 – int. educ.). The tables are split for graphical purposes, but refer to the same three specifications: Table 2 reports the key covariates; Table 3 reports the socio-demographic controls; and Table 4 reports the interaction terms.

The key results of the first specification are reported in Figures 4 and 5, which we present below for purposes of clarity. The key results of the second and third specifications are reported in Figure 6.

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Table 2 Attitudes towards immigrants by focal covariates and socio-demographic controls (Part A)

Dependent variable	**Point scale (0–10)**		
Model n. **Specification**	**(M1)** **Baseline**	**(M2)** **Int. class**	**(M3)** **Int. educ.**
Parental social class (baseline: salariat)			
Intermediate occupations	−0.083***	0.021	−0.081***
	(0.020)	(0.037)	(0.020)
Working class	−0.137***	−0.074	−0.134***
	(0.025)	(0.041)	(0.025)
Missing social class	−0.097***	−0.014	−0.095***
	(0.027)	(0.045)	(0.028)
Highest level of parental education (baseline: tertiary education)			
Lower secondary and below	−0.277***	−0.276***	−0.253***
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.037)
Upper or post-secondary	−0.179***	−0.175***	−0.098**
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.035)
Decade of birth (baseline: 1950)			
1910	−0.344***	0.277	0.042
	(0.072)	(0.240)	(0.253)
1920	−0.226***	−0.114	−0.199*
	(0.038)	(0.103)	(0.092)
1930	−0.191***	−0.156*	−0.149*
	−0.344***	0.277	0.042
1940	−0.080***	−0.084	−0.126**
	(0.018)	(0.051)	(0.039)
1960	0.017	0.077*	0.052
	(0.016)	(0.039)	(0.032)
1970	0.008	0.104*	0.037
	(0.021)	(0.041)	(0.035)
1980	−0.014	0.082	0.031
	(0.025)	(0.043)	(0.040)
1990	0.104**	0.243***	0.194***
	(0.037)	(0.054)	(0.052)
2000	0.424***	0.592***	0.530***
	(0.067)	(0.095)	(0.088)

(table continues)

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Table 2 (*continued*)

Dependent variable	**Point scale (0–10)**		
Model n. **Specification**	**(M1)** **Baseline**	**(M2)** **Int. class**	**(M3)** **Int. educ.**
Social class of respondent (baseline: salariat)			
Intermediate occupations	−0.223***	−0.222***	−0.224***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Working class	−0.312***	−0.309***	−0.313***
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.021)
Missing social class	−0.175***	−0.173***	−0.174***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Highest level of education of respondent (baseline: MSc/MA)	–	–	–
	−0.808***	−0.827***	−0.818***
Not harmonisable into ES-ISCED	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.046)
	−0.671***	−0.675***	−0.676***
Less than lower secondary (ES-ISCED I)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)
	−0.667***	−0.670***	−0.673***
Lower secondary (ES-ISCED II)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.040)
	−0.410***	−0.412***	−0.415***
Upper secondary (ES-ISCED III)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)
	−0.351***	−0.352***	−0.355***
Post-secondary education (ES-ISCED IV)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
	−0.061*	−0.061*	−0.065*
Bachelor's degree (ES-ISCED Va)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.027)
	−0.808***	−0.827***	−0.818***
Constant	6.222***	6.153***	6.187***
	(0.058)	(0.065)	(0.063)
Continues on next table			
Country-year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	350,718	350,718	350,718
R-squared	0.163	0.163	0.163

Notes: Linear regression models with socio-demographic controls. Specifications: M1 (baseline), M2 (interaction between decade and parental social class), M3 (interaction between decade and highest level of parental education). Country-year fixed effects, country-year cluster-robust standard errors (in parentheses) and design weights included.

Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

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Table 3 Attitudes towards immigrants by focal covariates and socio-demographic controls (Part B)

Dependent variable	**Point scale (0–10)**		
Model n. **Specification**	**(1)** **Baseline**	**(2)** **Int. class**	**(3)** **Int. educ.**
Continues from previous table			
Household income decile (baseline: 10th decile (top))			
Missing household income decile	−0.283***	−0.287***	−0.281***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)
First decile (bottom)	−0.328***	−0.341***	−0.327***
	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.046)
Second decile	−0.221***	−0.233***	−0.218***
	(0.038)	(0.037)	(0.038)
Third decile	−0.237***	−0.245***	−0.234***
	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.040)
Fourth decile	−0.184***	−0.191***	−0.182***
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Fifth decile	−0.166***	−0.170***	−0.163***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)
Sixth decile	−0.114***	−0.116***	−0.112***
	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.033)
Seventh decile	−0.082**	−0.083**	−0.081**
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.028)
Eighth decile	−0.085**	−0.085**	−0.084**
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Ninth decile	−0.021	−0.021	−0.020
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Current labour market activity (baseline: paid work)			
In education	0.374***	0.355***	0.371***
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Unemployed (looking for job)	−0.145***	−0.142***	−0.145***
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Inactive	−0.148***	−0.151***	−0.148***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)
Retired	−0.067***	−0.077***	−0.067***
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Sick/disabled	−0.308***	−0.303***	−0.307***
	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.035)
Outside workforce	−0.050*	−0.050*	−0.049*
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)

(table continues)

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Table 3 (*continued*)

Dependent variable	**Point scale (0–10)**		
Model n. **Specification**	**(1)** **Baseline**	**(2)** **Int. class**	**(3)** **Int. educ.**
Religious	−0.072***	−0.072***	−0.072***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Gender – women	0.008	0.008	0.008
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Native	−0.358***	−0.358***	−0.359***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)
Minority	0.167*	0.169*	0.168*
	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.069)
Parental migration background (baseline: both parents born in country)			
Only one parent born in country	0.213***	0.213***	0.213***
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Second-generation immigrant (both parents born outside country)	0.668***	0.670***	0.668***
	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.051)
Missing parental migration background	0.008	0.010	0.011
	(0.091)	(0.091)	(0.091)
Continues on next table			
Country-year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	350,718	350,718	350,718
R-squared	0.163	0.163	0.163

Notes: Linear regression models with socio-demographic controls. Specifications: M1 (baseline), M2 (interaction between decade and parental social class), M3 (interaction between decade and highest level of parental education). Country-year fixed effects, country-year cluster-robust standard errors (in parentheses) and design weights included.
Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

First, let us consider the association between attitudes towards immigrants and decade of birth, which is reported in Tables 2–4 specification 1 and is visualised in Figure 3.

There is significant variation across cohorts born in different decades relative to the cohort born in the 1950s (the baseline), supporting Hypothesis 3. However, this variation is driven by the cohorts who were over age 60 (1910–1930) or under age 30 (1990–2000) during the study period (2002–2020). In contrast, we see coefficients with almost zero magnitude for the three cohorts born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, which are, respectively, 0.017 (SE 0.016), 0.008 (SE 0.021) and −0.014 (SE 0.025). Thus, these cohorts are not statistically different from the cohort born in the 1950s; see Figure 3. This underscores that individuals born between the 1950s and the 1980s have substantially similar attitudes towards immigrants.

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Table 4 Attitudes towards immigrants by focal covariates and socio-demographic controls (Part C)

Dependent variable	**Point scale (0–10)**		
Model n.	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**
Specification	**Baseline**	**Int. class**	**Int. educ.**
Continues from previous table			
Interaction: Parental social class and decade of birth (baseline: salariat x 1950)			
Intermediate x 1910		−0.321	
		(0.318)	
Intermediate x 1920		−0.055	
		(0.115)	
Intermediate x 1930		0.008	
		(0.077)	
Intermediate x 1940		0.026	
		(0.055)	
Intermediate x 1960		0.000	
		(0.000)	
Intermediate x 1970		−0.106*	
		(0.045)	
Intermediate x 1980		−0.134**	
		(0.043)	
Intermediate x 1990		−0.154***	
		(0.042)	
Intermediate x 2000		−0.201***	
		(0.045)	
Working class x 1910		−0.145	
		(0.114)	
Working class x 1920		−0.382	
		(0.286)	
Working class x 1930		0.050	
		(0.114)	
Working class x 1940		0.069	
		(0.075)	
Working class x 1960		0.047	
		(0.056)	
Working class x 1970		0.000	
		(0.000)	
Working class x 1980		−0.066	
		(0.048)	

(table continues)

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Table 4 (*continued*)

Dependent variable	**Point scale (0–10)**		
Model n. **Specification**	**(1)** **Baseline**	**(2)** **Int. class**	**(3)** **Int. educ.**
Working class x 1990		−0.110*	
		(0.047)	
Working class x 2000		−0.130*	
		(0.053)	
Missing social class x 1910		−0.704**	
		(0.253)	
Missing social class x 1920		−0.198	
		(0.111)	
Missing social class x 1930		−0.123	
		(0.081)	
Missing social class x 1940		−0.039	
		(0.057)	
Missing social class x 1960		0.000	
		(0.000)	
Missing social class x 1970		−0.036	
		(0.044)	
Missing social class x 1980		−0.101*	
		(0.046)	
Missing social class x 1990		−0.038	
		(0.055)	
Missing social class x 2000		−0.026	
		(0.081)	
Interaction: highest parental education level and decade of birth (baseline: tertiary x 1950)			
Lower secondary and below x 1910			−0.410
			(0.270)
Lower secondary and below x 1920			−0.002
			(0.093)
Lower secondary and below x 1930			−0.009
			(0.061)
Lower secondary and below x 1940			0.064
			(0.043)
Lower secondary and below x 1960			0.000
			(0.000)

(table continues)

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Table 4 (*continued*)

Dependent variable	**Point scale (0–10)**		
Model n. **Specification**	**(1)** **Baseline**	**(2)** **Int. class**	**(3)** **Int. educ.**
Lower secondary and below x 1970			−0.039
			(0.036)
Lower secondary and below x 1980			−0.018
			(0.040)
Lower secondary and below x 1990			−0.005
			(0.050)
Lower secondary and below x 2000			−0.107
			(0.061)
Upper or post-secondary x 1910			−0.173
			(0.175)
Upper or post-secondary x 1920			−0.387
			(0.278)
Upper or post-secondary x 1930			−0.128
			(0.095)
Upper or post-secondary x 1940			−0.166*
			(0.067)
Upper or post-secondary x 1960			0.023
			(0.045)
Upper or post-secondary x 1970			0.000
			(0.000)
Upper or post-secondary x 1980			−0.056
			(0.038)
Upper or post-secondary x 1990			−0.067
			(0.040)
Upper or post-secondary x 2000			−0.114**
			(0.042)
Country-year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	350,718	350,718	350,718
R-squared	0.163	0.163	0.163

Notes: Linear regression models with socio-demographic controls. Specifications: M1 (baseline), M2 (interaction between decade of birth and parental social class), M3 (interaction between decade of birth and highest level of parental education). Country-year fixed effects, country-year cluster-robust standard errors (in parentheses) and design weights included.
Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

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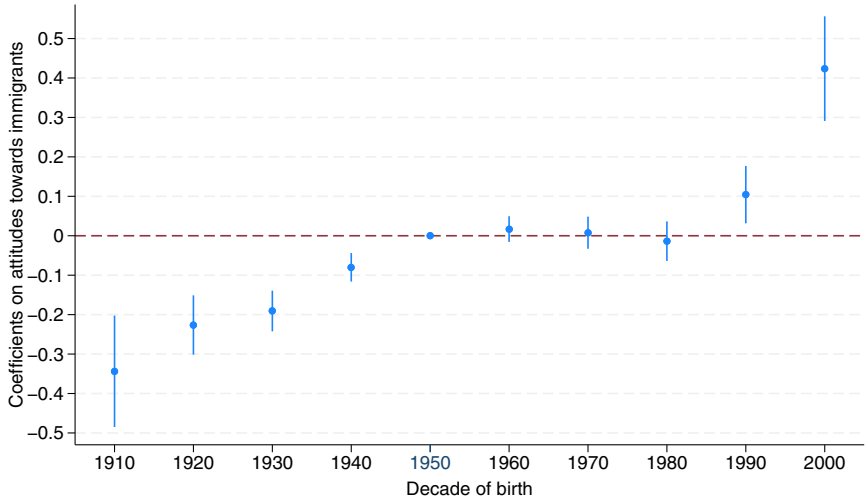
Figure 3 Estimated coefficients for decade of birth on attitudes towards immigrants (point scale)



Notes: Coefficients with 95% confidence intervals, from the M1 linear regression model, with socio-demographic controls. Country-year fixed effects, country-year cluster-robust standard errors and design weights included. Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

Figure 4 presents the differences in attitudes towards immigrants in terms of coefficients for the social origins variables (parental social class and highest level of parental education), drawn again from specification 1 of Tables 2–4. There are clear social origin gradients in attitudes towards migrants, supporting both Hypotheses 1 and 2. In terms of social class origin, children of parents in the intermediate and working classes are less favourable to immigrants than the baseline (salariat): the coefficients are, respectively, 0.083 (SE 0.020) and −0.137 (SE 0.025); these coefficients correspond, respectively, by −3% and −5% of a standard deviation in the dependent variable (which is 2.34). The impact is similar for respondents with a missing social class origin: the coefficient is −0.097, SE 0.027. The magnitudes are larger for educational origin: children of parents with upper or post-secondary education and children of parents with lower secondary education and below are, respectively, less favourable to migrants by −8% and −12% of a standard deviation, relative to the baseline of tertiary educated parents, with the coefficients being −0.277 (SE 0.022) and −0.179 (SE 0.016), respectively.

When we compare the coefficients for decade of birth and social origins, we can observe two main patterns. At first glance, the generational (parental) descent perspective appears to matter more than the cohort perspective, with parents' positions in the social stratification shaping their children's attitudes towards migrants in Europe. Second, while both parental social class and parental education are relevant for attitudes towards migrants, parental education plays a larger role than parental social class. This highlights the primacy

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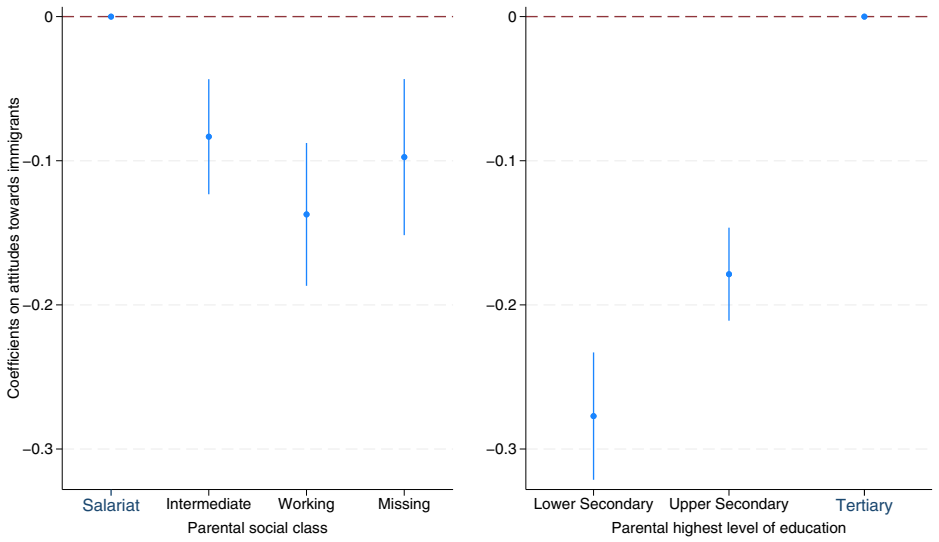
Figure 4 Estimated coefficients for parental social class (left panel) and highest level of parental education (right panel) on attitudes towards immigrants (point scale)



Notes: Coefficients with 95% confidence intervals, from the M1 linear regression model, with socio-demographic controls. Country-year fixed effects, country-year cluster-robust standard errors and design weights included.
Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

of parents' non-economic characteristics over their economic characteristics in influencing their children's attitudes towards migrants.

How do the other socio-demographic controls fare? As shown in Table 3, there is also a clear social stratification gradient in terms of the "destinations" of the respondents: both the social class of the respondents and their highest level of education are powerfully associated with their attitudes towards immigrants, with the respondents at the bottom of each of these categories being less welcoming towards immigrants. Similar patterns are found for household income decile and for current labour market activity, with the respondents who are poor or are unemployed/inactive being less in favour of immigrants than the respondents who are in the upper income deciles or engaged in paid work. Being religious is associated with less positive attitudes towards immigrants, as is being born in the country and belonging to the ethnic majority of the country. Parental migration background clearly plays a role: the respondents who are second-generation immigrants (both parents born outside the country of interview) and those who have only one parent born outside the country of interview are consistently more likely to welcome migrants than the respondents with both parents born in the country of interview.

But what happens if we combine both the generational descent and the cohort perspectives, following the last two hypotheses? Table 3 and Figures 5 and 6 present the predicted attitudes towards immigrants, obtained with marginal effects at the means after a regression

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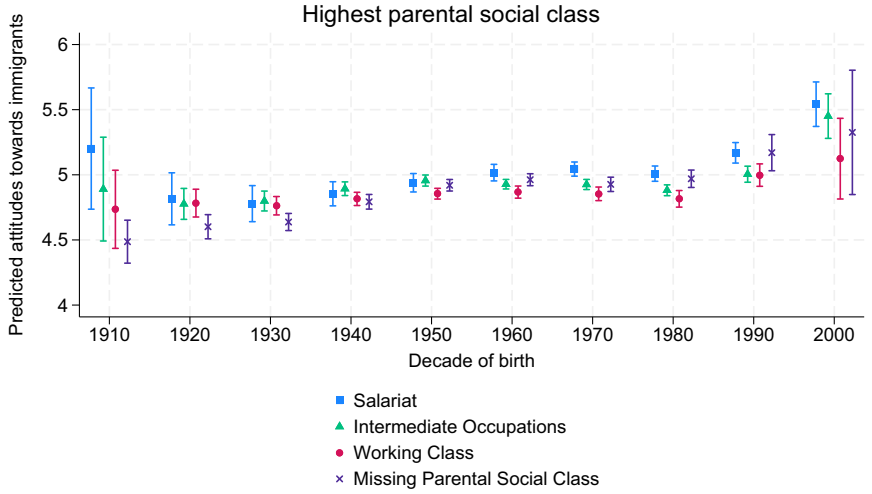
Figure 5 Marginal effects at the means on attitudes towards immigrants (point scale), by decade of birth and highest social origin (highest parental social class)



Notes: Marginal effects at the means with 95% confidence intervals, for interactions in M2 linear regression. Country-year fixed effects, country-year cluster-robust standard errors and design weights included.
Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

model similar to (1), but with the interactions between decade of birth and parental social class above, and the interactions between decade of birth and highest level of parental education below (specification 3). For social class, these results highlight how the role of social origins is consistently strong across different decades of birth. While individuals in more recent decades of birth are indeed more pro-immigrant, the role of origin class becomes stronger for those born in the 1960s and in the decades thereafter: except in the 2000s cohort, having a working-class parent is associated with a −0.10 to −0.15 worsening in attitudes towards migrants (between −4% and −7% of a standard deviation in the dependent variable) relative to the salariat within the decade of birth.

Notably, respondents with an intermediate class origin (32% of the sample) shift across the decades from being not statistically different from the salariat (1920–1960) to being not statistically different from the working class; thus, the class gradient in attitudes towards immigrants widens in more recent decades of birth. Those with a missing parental social class origin behave symmetrically to those with an intermediate class origin: i.e., they start at around the same level as that of the working class or lower, but progressively improve over time. Broadly, this pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 4.

For the highest level of parental education in Figure 6, the pattern is similar to that for social class, but is larger in magnitude: with the exception of those born in the 1910s and 2000s, members of cohorts born into families with at least one parent with tertiary education are systematically more in favour of immigrants than those born into families in

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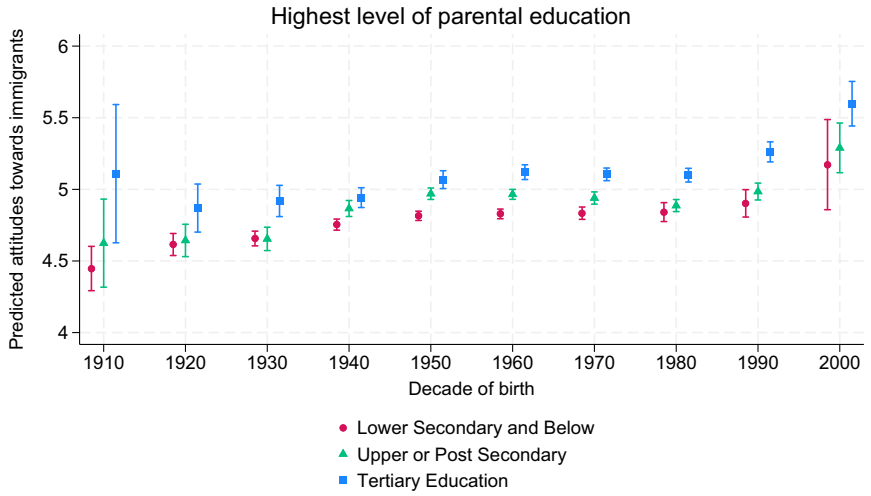
Figure 6 Marginal effects at the means on attitudes towards immigrants, by decade of birth and highest level of parental education



Notes: Marginal effects at the means with 95% confidence intervals, for interactions in M3 linear regression. Country-year fixed effects, country-year cluster-robust standard errors and design weights included.
Source: European Social Survey (2002–2020). Question: "Is [the country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"

which the highest educated parent has a lower secondary and below level of education. Effect sizes range from −0.08 to −0.27, respectively, around −4% to −12% of a SD in the dependent variable. Respondents born into families with an upper or post-secondary educational level shift over time, like those in the intermediate occupations: from the 1940 to the 1970 cohorts, these respondents are consistently more pro-immigrant than those with a lower tertiary and below educational background, and are not different statistically from those with a tertiary educational background in the 1940 and 1950 cohorts. However, in the 1980 and 1990 cohorts, there is no statistically significant difference between respondents with a middle level and those with a lower level of parental education, and the only difference is between those with a middle or lower level and those with a tertiary level of parental education. Broadly, this pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 5.

Discussion and conclusion

When it comes to attitudes towards immigrants, do parents or peers play the largest role? In this paper, we find that both are important, as both inter-generational and intra-generational dynamics shape attitudes towards immigrants. By focusing on the role of parental characteristics and generational descent, we find that both the social class (H1) and the

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educational levels (H2) of the parents shape their children's attitudes towards migrants, with education being relatively more important than class.

While economic and occupational aspects of parental background do play a role (Billiet et al., 2014; Pardos-Prado and Xena, 2019; Bolet, 2020; Paskov et al., 2021), it seems that factors related to parental education are more influential (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Lancee and Sarrasin, 2015; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Davidov et al., 2020).

At the same time, there is also variability driven by decade of birth (H3), with the differences from the 1950s baseline mostly being concentrated in respondents who were systematically over age 70 or under age 30 during the study period in the ESS, while no differences are observed for respondents born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

However, if we consider the inter- and intra-generational dynamics together, we see a broader picture: their interactions indicate that there are modest (parental class, H4) to strong (parental education, H5) gradients in attitudes towards immigrants driven by social origin, albeit with different magnitudes. Specifically, we find that the gaps driven by parental social class and parental education *widen* for respondents born in more recent decades, as those born into "middle" social class or educational backgrounds become more similar to those at the bottom than to those at the top. Nonetheless, the role of birth cohorts is still considerable, given that respondents with a working-class origin born in the 1990s have similar attitudes to those with a salariat origin born in the 1950s. Similarly, those born in the 1990s into a family with the lowest level of parental education have equivalent attitudes towards immigrants to those born in the 1940s into a family with at least one parent with tertiary education. Thus, two dynamics combine in an apparently counterintuitive way: more recent cohorts are indeed more pro-immigrant than older cohorts, but social origins play a larger role for the recent than for the older cohorts. We argue that the reasons for the diverging attitudes across cohorts between higher and lower social classes of origin are twofold. On the one hand, the perception of immigrants as direct competitors for individuals with more disadvantaged social backgrounds may have intensified due to several immigrant and refugee crises over the past decades (Schmidt, 2021), as well as rising levels of income inequality (McLaren et al., 2021). On the other hand, compared to older cohorts, younger cohorts with lower social backgrounds may be less socialised to embrace egalitarian values. Historically, the working class held more tolerant views towards foreigners and immigrant workers, as both natives and immigrants recognised their shared membership in the same (working) class (MacDermott et al., 2019). In more recent times, however, a form of working-class "chauvinism" has taken precedence (Afonso and Rennwald, 2018). With the racialisation of working-class identity, attitudes towards immigrants have grown increasingly negative.

This paper faces two main limitations. First, it relies on repeated cross-sectional data rather than on longitudinal data, which would allow us to capture how attitudes towards migrants are shaped over the life course while considering the social origins of individuals. However, this would come at the expense of large-scale cross-national comparability across 38 countries, many of which do not have panel datasets. Future research may address the focal research questions in specific countries with long-term panel data. The second limitation is connected to the first: as mentioned before, we could not fully disentangle the effects of age and cohort due to the age-period-cohort problem,

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especially with repeated cross-sectional data. Studies utilising longitudinal data may address this issue with approaches such as the age-period-cohort detrended model (see, for instance, Vera-Toscano and Meroni, 2021). A third limitation is associated with the impossibility of identifying specific mechanisms related to the role of non-economic parental characteristics in influencing their children's attitudes towards migrants. Scholars may overcome this limitation by focusing on data that are richer in information about non-economic types of parental capital, such as cultural capital, as well as on parenting styles.

In conclusion, combining the key generational perspectives of generational descent and birth cohort, represented by, respectively, the inter-generational and the intra-generational dimensions (Braungart and Braungart, 1986), can provide novel insights for the empirical analysis of attitudes towards migrants, a phenomenon that requires further exploration, considering its rising centrality for the demographic and political (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Dustmann et al., 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; AISP, 2021; Czymara, 2021; Favell, 2022) scenarios of European countries and beyond.

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