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# Political interest, political ideology, and attitudes toward immigration

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Although much research has been devoted to how political interest is related to different political outcomes, little is known about its influence on attitudes toward immigration. In line with deliberative theory, political interest should facilitate greater exposure to various perspectives via political discussions and other forms of political engagement that, in turn, should contribute to more positive attitude toward those with differing views or backgrounds. Using data from the European Social Survey, including 39 countries across 10 survey rounds 2002–2021, this study shows that political interest is positively related to immigrant acceptance. However, there is moderation effect of conservative values. Being politically interested is associated with a higher probability of holding pro-immigrant attitudes among weak conservatives, while there is no significant association among strong conservatives. This finding can be explained by the motivated cognition theory, which states that individuals tend to seek out and pay more attention to information that supports their strong pre-existing ideologies. For individuals with ideologies that predispose them to adopt very negative attitudes toward immigration (strong conservatives), being politically interested might entail a greater exposure and attention to ideology-congruent perspectives and, as a result, confirmation of initial predispositions.

## KEYWORDS

attitudes to immigration, political interest, perspective taking, conservatism, political ideology

## Introduction

In the past few decades, many European societies have faced a rapid increase in immigration and concomitant changes in their ethnic mix. Countries such as Sweden, France, and Germany now have an immigrant population of 12–20 percent (OECD, 2019). At the same time, segregation is evident across Europe (Andersson et al., 2018) and immigrants are often perceived as a cultural and economic threat (Quillian, 1995; Semyonov et al., 2006). Anti-immigrant attitudes are one of the major risk factors for the social cohesion of multicultural societies because they are associated with discrimination, hostility and exclusion (Bunar, 2010). It is therefore no surprise that attitudes toward immigration have become central for politics in modern multicultural societies.

There are many viable theories or explanations for attitudes toward immigrants (Rustenbach, 2010). In this study, we extend knowledge on the role of political interest and a set of conservative values (i.e., security, conformity, and tradition) (Schwartz, 1992). First, we examine the general association between political interest and immigration attitudes. Deliberative theory (Fearon, 1998; Habermas, 1996) and political sophistication perspective (Aboud, 1988; Carpinì et al., 1996; Putnam, 2000) suggest that political interest might stimulate more openness toward diversity due to a greater exposure to different perspectives during

political discussions and other forms of political engagement (participation in civic organizations). Interest-stimulated political engagement is assumed to facilitate perspective-taking and democratic commitments, which should increase tolerance of those with different worldviews and backgrounds. In line with this, research shows political interest to be positively related to political engagement (Hooghe and Dejaeghere, 2007; Van Ingen, 2015; Quintelier and Van Deth, 2014) and political engagement to be linked to higher levels of perspective-taking and tolerance (Gillespie and Richardson, 2011; Grönlund et al., 2017; Mutz, 2002; Wise and Driskell, 2017). However, there is still little research on the relation between political interest and attitudes toward immigration.

Second, we examine how political interest interact with conservative values to predict attitudes toward immigrants. Motivated cognition theory suggests that individuals tend to seek information that supports their pre-existing ideologies (Kunda, 1990). For individuals with ideologies that predispose them to adopting very negative toward immigration, that is strong conservatives with needs for security, conformity, and tradition, being politically interested might entail being exposed to mainly ideology-congruent perspectives. This selective exposure to congenial information rather than attitude-inconsistent information is likely to lead to a deeper entrenchment of strong conservatives' initial anti-immigrant predispositions (Berggren et al., 2019). In contrast, moderate to weak conservatives who are politically interested might be less prone to seeking out ideology-congruent information and more likely to be exposed to different perspectives in various forms of political engagement, leading to higher tolerance of those with different worldviews and backgrounds.

We test our hypotheses regarding the direct association between political interest on attitudes toward immigration and the moderating role of conservatism using data from the European Social Survey (ESS). Rather than generalising based on a study of a single country at a single point of time, we maximize the number of countries of different size, culture, and affluence (39 countries) analyzed over a longer period of time (ten survey rounds between 2002 and 2021).

## Political interest and attitudes toward immigration

Political interest, defined as a general curiosity toward politics, is one of the most important norms in democratic societies—citizens are expected to be interested in their political reality. In addition to its intrinsic value, political interest has been linked to a great number of other characteristics of good citizens, such as political discussions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016; Lu and Lee, 2021), civic and political participation (Hooghe and Dejaeghere, 2007; Maurissen, 2020; Quintelier, 2013), political knowledge (Eveland and Thomson, 2006; Golebiowska, 2020) and news consumption (Strömbäck and Shehata, 2019). Some studies have shown that the relationship between political interest and political outcomes, such as political news consumption (Strömbäck and Shehata, 2019) and civic and political participation (Quintelier and Van Deth, 2014), is reciprocal. Thus, political interest may lead to positive, reinforcing cycles, which further emphasizes its importance.

Despite the rich research on political consequences of political interest, still little is known about the relationship between political

interest and views on immigration. Yet, there are theoretical perspectives suggesting that political interest might stimulate more positive attitudes toward immigration.

First, according to deliberative theory (Dewey, 1927/1984; Fearon, 1998; Habermas, 1996), political interest should lead to a greater exposure to perspectives different than one's own, because more politically attentive citizens are more likely to be politically engaged (Putnam, 2000; Tzankova et al., 2019; Wise and Driskell, 2017). Individuals who participate in political discussions and civic organizations need to consider issues from various points of view to understand others' opinions, which stimulates perspective-taking. Perspective-taking, in turn, should be positively related to immigrant acceptance because it enables recognition of other ways of thinking and being, sympathizing with outgroup members (Bigler and Liben, 2007; Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997) and perceptions of similarity between self and outgroups (Aboud, 1988; Aboud and Amato, 2003; Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000). Thus, by an increased exposure to various perspectives via societal participation, political interest can be expected to stimulate more positive attitudes toward groups with values and ideas different than one's own.

Second, political interest is a facet of political sophistication, which is positively related to immigrant acceptance (Carpini et al., 1996; Putnam, 2000) and commitment to democratic principles (Chong et al., 1983) that should imply more positive attitudes toward those with different worldviews or values. Political sophistication refers to a combination of political knowledge, cognitive complexity, and ideological development (Trüding, 2006). It facilitates understanding and acknowledging the values of others, a recognition that there are other ways of thinking and being. Consequently, it may encourage the notion that the political system benefits from heterogeneity and diversity, thereby facilitating openness toward others in one's country.

In line with these perspectives, studies show the positive role of political interest for political engagement. Specifically, political interest has been shown to predict a greater involvement in political discussions, including cross-cutting discussions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016; Lu and Lee, 2021) and in civic and political organizations (Hooghe and Dejaeghere, 2007; Van Ingen, 2015; Quintelier, 2013), which, in turn, have been linked to higher perspective taking and more openness to diversity. For example, participation in cross-cutting or deliberative political discussions has been shown to facilitate understanding of rationales for others' people opinions (Mutz, 2002, 2006), perspective-taking (Gillespie and Richardson, 2011), sympathy toward immigrants (Grönlund et al., 2017) and more positive attitudes toward immigrants (Miklikowska et al., 2022; Quintelier, 2013). Increases in perspective-taking have also been linked to the development of more positive attitudes toward immigrants (Miklikowska, 2018). Civic participation has been linked to more tolerance (Putnam, 2000; Wise and Driskell, 2017) and immigrant acceptance (Quintelier, 2013; Tzankova et al., 2019). Moreover, political interest has been shown to facilitate political knowledge and sophistication (Eveland and Thomson, 2006; Golebiowska, 2020), which have been linked to greater tolerance and more positive attitudes toward outgroups (Hall, 2018; Trüding, 2006). By using an experimental design, Hall (2018) showed that this effect is not coincidental or influenced by uncontrolled variables.

Based on this, we hypothesize that political interest is linked to more positive attitudes toward immigration.

*H1: The greater political interest the more positive the attitudes toward immigration.*

## Conservative values as a moderator of the relation between political interest and attitudes toward immigration

Political interest is unlikely to have a universal effect on immigration attitudes across the political spectrum. While the politically interested individuals participate in political discussions and organizations more than less politically interested, they not only expose themselves to various perspectives but also come across opinions that they already strongly agree with (Garrett and Stroud, 2014). According to motivated cognition theory, individuals have a tendency to seek out information that supports their strong, pre-existing ideologies and concentrate on arguments that are ideology-consistent (Berggren et al., 2019; Kunda, 1990). Thus, for individuals with ideologies that predispose them to adopting very negative attitudes toward immigration (strong conservatives), being politically interested might entail a selective exposure and attention to mainly ideology-congruent perspectives. For these individuals, political interest might not milder their initial predispositions but confirm and entrench them.

As a political ideology, conservatism builds typically on such doctrines as authority, tradition and complying with the established system (Duverger, 1951/1964). Although there are various dimensions to conservatism, we focus on cultural conservatism as it has been most relevant for the issues of immigration (Perlmutter, 1996). Rich theoretical tradition links culturally conservative ideology and a psychological pattern involving aversion to novelty, complexity and stimulation, valuing of social conformity and order and a concern with threat to national values and culture (Jost et al., 2003; Rokeach, 1960). Conservative policies typically uphold traditional societal arrangements and resource allocations as well as offer continuity and sense of protection, appealing to individuals with strong needs for security and certainty (Jost et al., 2008). Because immigration and diversity imply pluralism of values and customs, they can be perceived as a cultural threat to the national culture, tradition and order by conservatives. In line with this, previous research from both Europe and North America has shown that conservatives are more opposed to immigration and more likely to feel that there are already too many immigrants in their country (Beaton et al., 2003; Burns and Gimpel, 2000; Kessler and Freeman, 2005; Malka et al., 2014). Previous research has also shown that conservative parties tend to have restrictive policies concerning issues like immigration or the rights of homosexuals (Ennser, 2012). Party ideologies particularly strongly affect certain immigration policy areas such as integration policies (Natter et al., 2020).

Given that conservative ideology predisposes individuals to more negative views on immigration, their political interest might reinforce their pre-existing sentiments, rather than facilitate perspective-taking and immigrant acceptance. When engaged, politically interested conservatives might have a greater likelihood of selecting information or media that is consistent with their pre-existing predispositions (Gvirsman, 2014; Price and Kaufhold, 2019) or avoiding media that offers ideology-inconsistent contents (Garrett and Stroud, 2014). They

might also evaluate ideology-congruent information as being of high quality (Fischer et al., 2008).

In line with this, research has shown selective exposure to media based on political ideology. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) showed that high conservatives had a strong tendency to prefer conservative outlets (Fox News) for politicized and non-politicized matters, while liberals avoided Fox News but treated other news sources relatively similarly, and that these tendencies were stronger among more politically engaged individuals. Garrett and Stroud (2014) showed that Republican Party voters were more likely than others to avoid counter-attitudinal contents. Democratic voters, in contrast, selected contents even if it also included counter-attitudinal information, thus consciously exposing themselves to a wider variety of attitudes (Garrett and Stroud, 2014). Schulze (2020) showed that for audiences with critical attitudes toward immigration, political interest is a significant predictor of consuming right-wing alternative online media.

Moreover, research has shown the moderating role of political ideology for the relationships between factors facilitating tolerance or perspective-taking and individuals' openness to diversity. For example, Glaser et al. (2021) and Oskoi et al. (2018) showed that education had positive effects on support for immigration and political compromise for liberals and moderates but not for conservatives. Similarly, Eriksson et al. (2022) showed that having more frequent political discussions was associated with a higher probability of holding more liberal opinions among liberals while there was little association between discussion frequency and opinions among conservatives. Dunn (2014) showed that the difference between individuals with authoritarian or liberal values was significantly larger in democracies than non-democracies, suggesting that authoritarians react less positively to the political environment promoting diversity and tolerance. Similarly, Avery et al. (1992) showed that a tolerance-promoting curriculum improved attitudes on the aggregate level but has the reverse effect on authoritarian students who become less tolerant because of the curriculum.

Given this, we expect that political ideology moderates the effects of political interest on attitudes toward immigration.

*H2: Conservative values weaken the relationship between political interest and attitudes toward immigration.*

## Materials and methods

### Data

We tested our hypotheses using data from 10 rounds of the biennial European Social Survey (ESS). Round 1 was fielded in 2002–2003 and Round 10 in 2020–2021. They were nationally representative samples for all individuals of at least 15 years through face-to-face interviews. The pan-European survey measures social attitudes and behavior and offers a host of reliable indicators. For our purposes, the ESS was ideal because the survey has in every round included questions measuring attitudes toward immigration, human values and political interest. 39 countries were available in the integrated data file, although the survey has not been implemented in every country every second year. The countries are listed in Table 1. Over 490,000 respondents were in

TABLE 1 Spearman's rank-order correlations.

Countries	ESS rounds	Corr (pol.int., imm.acc.)		Corr (cons.val., imm.acc.)		Corr (pol.int., cons.val.)	
All	1–10	0.21	**	–0.17	**	–0.06	**
United Kingdom	1–10	0.27	**	–0.16	**	–0.04	**
Spain	1–9	0.26	**	–0.13	**	–0.10	**
Sweden	1–9	0.25	**	–0.17	**	–0.09	**
Belgium	1–10	0.24	**	–0.13	**	–0.05	**
Denmark	1–7, 9	0.24	**	–0.19	**	–0.08	**
France	3–10	0.24	**	–0.23	**	–0.07	**
Portugal	1–10	0.24	**	–0.09	**	–0.05	**
Germany	1–9	0.23	**	–0.20	**	0.00	
Austria	1–3, 7–9	0.22	**	–0.22	**	–0.03	**
Finland	1–10	0.22	**	–0.15	**	–0.05	**
Iceland	2, 6, 8–10	0.22	**	–0.14	**	–0.03	
Italy	6, 8–10	0.22	**	–0.10	**	–0.01	
Netherlands	1–10	0.22	**	–0.16	**	–0.06	**
Norway	1–10	0.22	**	–0.15	**	–0.08	**
Switzerland	1–10	0.20	**	–0.20	**	–0.07	**
Ireland	1–10	0.20	**	–0.09	**	–0.03	**
Israel	1, 4–8	0.18	**	–0.18	**	–0.06	**
Luxembourg	2	0.15	**	–0.05		–0.02	
Slovenia	1–10	0.14	**	–0.14	**	0.03	**
Poland	1–9	0.13	**	–0.06	**	0.05	**
Hungary	1–10	0.12	**	–0.09	**	0.08	**
Albania	6	0.11	**	–0.04		0.02	
Cyprus	3–6, 9	0.11	**	–0.05	**	0.00	
North Macedonia	10	0.11	**	0.03		–0.05	
Romania	4	0.11	**	–0.05		0.00	
Turkey	2, 4	0.11	**	–0.13	**	–0.04	*
Czech Republic	1–2, 4–10	0.10	**	–0.09	**	0.08	**
Estonia	2–10	0.09	**	–0.11	**	0.06	**
Greece	1–2, 4–5, 10	0.09	**	–0.10	**	0.03	**
Croatia	4–5, 9–10	0.09	**	–0.05	**	0.00	
Slovakia	2–6, 9–10	0.08	**	–0.03	**	0.06	**
Serbia	9	0.07	**	–0.03		0.03	
Lithuania	5–10	0.04	**	–0.05	**	0.12	**
Ukraine	2–6	0.04	**	–0.01		0.10	**
Latvia	4, 9	0.03		–0.05	*	0.07	**
Bulgaria	3–6, 9	0.02	*	–0.01		0.12	**
Russia	3–6, 8	0.02		–0.08	**	0.10	**
Montenegro	9–10	–0.01		0.03		0.04	
Kosovo	6	–0.04		–0.01		–0.01	

The second column reports the ESS rounds for each country. Abbreviations: pol.int., political interest; imm.acc., immigrant acceptance; cons.val., conservation values. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

the original pooled survey data set, but this number was reduced to about 413,000 respondents due to missing values. We used the ESS post-stratification weight that corrects for sampling and non-response error.

## Measures

The dependent variable, *attitudes toward immigration*, was constructed as an index based on three survey items which measure

perceived threat on the national economy, cultural life and living conditions due to the influx of immigrants. The exact wordings of the items and the response alternatives are presented in the [Supplementary Appendix Table A1](#). Respondents answered the questions on an eleven-point scale with values ranging from 0 (bad for the economy/cultural life undermined/worse place to live) to 10 (good for the economy/cultural life is enriched/better place to live). The composite index was computed as a geometric mean. Higher scores on the index reflect more positive views of immigration. The measure has been demonstrated to be reliable and comparable across countries (Kuntz et al., 2017, 398). Internal consistency was high as the pooled Cronbach's alpha was 0.86 (and varying between 0.82 and 0.88 when calculated for each survey round). The large majority (91 percent) had valid values for all three measures. Respondents with one missing value (5 percent) were also included (using person mean substitution to replace missing values), while those with two or three missing values were excluded.

*Political interest* was the first independent variable. In the surveys, the respondents were asked to report their level of political interest: not at all interested; hardly interested; quite interested; and very interested. For parsimony, we treated political interest as a continuous variable measured on a four-point scale for ease of interpretation.<sup>1</sup> We decomposed political interest into three levels: country, survey round, and individual. This was achieved by using group means and group-mean centred variables. First, *country mean political interest* was simply calculated as the grand mean for each country and its coefficient tells us how well country-level political interest explains cross-national differences in attitudes toward immigrants. Second, means were calculated for each survey round within each country and then the national mean was subtracted from the country-survey round mean. *Round mean political interest* thus reveals whether variation in political interest over time within countries is linked to attitudes toward immigration. Third, *individual political interest* was group-mean centred on the country-survey round mean. The variable represents the pure individual-level relationship between political interest and immigration attitudes. Because group-mean centring eliminates contextual influences, it also mitigates possible concerns about cultural differences in means responses regarding political interest.

*Conservative values* was the second main independent variable. ESS included a battery of items on conservation values (i.e., *security*, *conformity* and *tradition*) which emanate from a set of basic personal values (Schwartz, 1992). Hence, conservation is a core value for conservatives. First, security values include “safety, harmony and stability of society, of relationships and of self.” Second, conformity values are understood as “restraint of actions, inclinations and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms.” Third, tradition values are described as “respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide” (Schwartz et al., 2014, 903–904). The

European Social Survey included 21 short verbal portraits of different people to capture four higher-order values in Schwartz's value theory. For each portrait, respondents indicated much alike they think they are on a six-point scale ranging from “very much like me” to “not like me at all.” The six items that measure conservation values are presented in the [Supplementary Appendix A](#). The score of conservative values was obtained by taking the geometric mean (recoded on a scale from 0 to 5) of the six items. The internal consistency of the items was satisfactory as Cronbach's alpha was 0.73. We imputed missing values by the person mean, or average of the available items, but only if respondents had no more than two missing values (2 % of those in the analyzed sample had one or two missing values).

We also included a set of control variables to account for possible confounding effects. *Gender* was coded 1 for women and 0 for men. *Age* in years is a continuous variable (divided by 10 for simplicity of interpretation of the coefficient). It is top-coded to 85 years of age to reduce the impact of outliers that might occur due to reporting errors. *Age squared* was included to account for a possible nonlinear age effect on attitudes toward immigration. *Years of education* (divided by 10) is based on responses to the question of how many years of full-time education the respondent has completed. The variable was top-coded at 30 years to limit the effect of outliers. *Place of domicile* is a categorical variable that informs about the place where the respondent lives (such as a country village a town or small city and a big city).

In times of economic decline, hostility toward immigrants may increase because competition over social and economic resources will increase (Kuntz et al., 2017). Three subjective measures of the economic situation at the individual level were therefore included. *Employment status* was a trichotomous variable measuring whether the respondent is currently unemployed and has actively been looking for a job in the past 7 days. *Household income* was measured by asking the respondents to assess how they cope with their household's present income on a 4-point scale from very difficult to living comfortably. *Satisfaction with the national economy* was recorded on an eleven-point scale from extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied.

*Migration background* was controlled for because foreign-born respondents (Just and Anderson, 2015) and those with foreign-born parents (Buckler et al., 2009) are more likely to show more positive attitudes toward immigration than native-born respondents or people with only native-born parents. Three separate dummy variables indicated if respondents themselves or their parents were born in another country (0 = no, 1 = yes).

*Social trust* has been associated with positive attitudes toward immigration. High-trusting individuals have been suggested to have developed a social intelligence which is a bridging social capital, extended to a generalized other that is not personally known (e.g., immigrants) (Miklikowska et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2021). Social trust was an index (0–10) of individual responses to three attitudinal questions (ranging from 0 to 10) about people in general being trustworthy, fair and helpful.

## Results

Bivariate correlations were first estimated to examine the relations between the key variables, that is immigration attitudes, political

<sup>1</sup> An often-expressed concern is whether the ordinal categories are equally spaced. However, an alternative model, where the ordinal variable was treated as categorical with multiple dummy variables, confirmed that the effect of political interest is remarkably linear.

interest and conservative values. Political interest was here treated as an ordinal variable with four values. Table 1 presents Spearman's rank correlation coefficients to quantify the strength of correlations, both for the pooled sample and separately for the 39 countries. First, political interest was positively correlated with pro-immigration attitudes ( $\rho=0.21$ ) for the pooled sample. In two thirds of the countries, the correlation between political interest and pro-immigration attitudes was weak (between 0.10 and 0.26) and in one third the correlation was negligible (below 0.10). Second, conservative values were negatively correlated with pro-immigration attitudes. The correlation coefficients varied between  $-0.10$  and  $-0.23$  in about half of the countries, while they were closer to zero in the other half. Third, the correlation between political interest and conservative values was negligible in the whole sample. The country-wise correlations between political interest and conservative values were low to non-existent and differ in terms of direction (between  $-0.10$  and  $0.12$ ).

To test our hypotheses, we estimated multilevel regression models to minimize the risk of underestimating the standard errors of regression coefficients. Our data had a hierarchical structure with individuals (level 1) nested within survey-years (level 2) nested within countries (level 3). Multilevel regression models incorporate random effects to account for the fact that respondents in the same country tend to be more alike in their characteristics or outcomes than respondents from different countries. It is also possible that individual responses are correlated with each other in the same time period or survey round. We first fit a three-level multilevel model where intercepts varied by country and year.<sup>2</sup> Table 2 presents the estimates. We started with an empty model (Model 0) without any predictors to monitor the reductions in the estimated variance components and intraclass coefficients in subsequent models. Based on the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC), 10.9 percent of the total variation in the dependent variable was due to differences between countries and an additional 2.7 percent due to differences between survey-years within the same country. Thus, the remaining 86 percent of the variation was due to within-country differences and, consequently, with factors at the individual level.

Model 1 is the full model that included the independent and control variables. Individual political interest (entered as a group-mean centred variable) had a large positive effect on pro-immigration attitudes, even when controlling for a variety of individual-level factors. For every one-point increase in individual political interest (group-mean centred on a scale from about  $-2$  to  $2$ ), the

TABLE 2 Multi-level regression estimates predicting pro-immigration attitudes.

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Individual level</i>			
Political interest	–	0.27**	0.27**
		(0.02)	(0.02)
Conservative values	–	–0.21**	–0.21**
		(0.02)	(0.02)
Political interest × Conservative values	–	–	–0.13**
			(0.01)
<i>Country level</i>			
Political interest	–	0.41	0.40
		(0.45)	(0.45)
Conservative values	–	–0.15	–0.16
		(0.48)	(0.48)
<i>ESS round level</i>			
Political interest	–	1.57**	1.56**
		(0.28)	(0.28)
Conservative values	–	0.06	0.06
		(0.28)	(0.28)
<i>Control variables</i>			
Gender: woman	–	0.06*	0.06*
		(0.02)	(0.02)
Age/10	–	–0.08**	–0.08**
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Years of education/10	–	0.52**	0.52**
		(0.05)	(0.05)
Domicile: country village	–	0.35**	0.35**
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Domicile: town or small city	–	0.31**	0.31**
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Domicile: suburbs or outskirts	–	0.24**	0.24**
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Domicile: big city	–	0.14**	0.14**
		(0.02)	(0.02)
Employment: unemployed	–	0.01	0.01
		(0.04)	(0.04)
Employment: yes	–	–0.01	–0.01
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Household income: difficult	–	0.09**	0.09**
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Household income: coping	–	0.21**	0.21**
		(0.03)	(0.03)

(Continued)

<sup>2</sup> A valid concern is whether our multilevel models might suffer from omitted variable bias in terms of country-level and temporal predictors. To check for robustness, and dismiss the plausibility of confounding higher-level factors, we added fixed effects for countries and survey-years to remove all variation between the higher-level units. In other words, we included dummy variables for all countries and survey-years, except for two reference groups. This procedure holds constant all unobserved characteristics at these higher levels of analysis. The results did not substantially change. Another concern might be that the coefficients for the political interest dummies and authoritarian values were not allowed to vary randomly across countries and survey years. However, to fit such a model is computationally intensive and results in an unreasonable computation time.

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2
Household income: living comfortably	–	0.36**	0.37**
		(0.04)	(0.04)
Satisfaction with the economy	–	0.14**	0.14**
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Social trust	–	0.21**	0.21**
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Born outside country	–	0.36**	0.36**
		(0.05)	(0.05)
Father born outside country	–	0.35**	0.34**
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Mother born outside country	–	0.32**	0.32**
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	5.02**	2.52**	2.55**
	(0.12)	(0.16)	(0.16)
<i>Random effects</i>			
Country-level random intercept variance	0.53	0.28	0.28
	(0.12)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Survey round random intercept variance	0.13	0.08	0.08
	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Individual-level residual variance	4.17	3.48	3.48
	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.13)
<i>Intraclass correlations</i>			
Country	0.109	0.074	0.074
Round-within-country	0.136	0.094	0.094
<i>Observations</i>			
Countries	39	39	39
Rounds	246	246	246
Respondents	413,311	413,311	413,311

Unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors are in parentheses are reported. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

pro-immigrant index score increased by 0.27 points. Thus, the first hypothesis (H1), which predicted that the greater political interest the more positive the attitudes toward immigration, was supported. Round mean political interest was also positively related to pro-immigration attitudes, but in practice the effect was limited because the within-country variation over time was small, on average a 0.25 points difference between the minimum and maximum values of the variable within a country, and at most a 0.62 points difference. Furthermore, the coefficient the country mean of political interest was insignificant, meaning that cross-national differences in political interest did not predict immigration attitudes. It thus appears that

individual-level political interest is associated with pro-immigration attitudes, while national-level political interest is irrelevant.

As expected, conservative values at the individual level were negatively related to pro-immigration attitudes. According to Model 1, a one-point increase in individual-level conservative values (group-mean centred on a scale from about  $-4$  to  $6$ ) corresponded to a 0.21 points decrease in the dependent variable. Gender, age, place of domicile, employment status, household income and foreign birthplace (of the respondents themselves, their father and mother) have modest effects. Education, social trust, satisfaction with the national economy and conservative values had relatively large effects. For each additional 10 years of education, positivity toward immigration increased by 0.52 points. A one-point increase on the social trust scale, corresponded to an increase of 0.21 points on the immigration attitude scale. Each incremental step on the satisfaction from the state of national economy scale, increased pro-immigration attitudes with 0.14 points.

We ran a random intercepts model to assess whether the positive effect of political interest on immigration attitudes is moderated by conservative values (H2). This model included an interaction between *individual political interest* and *conservative values*. The results showed that the marginal effect of political interest was conditional on conservatism (see Model 2 in Table 2). The coefficient of the interaction terms was negative and achieved statistical significance. Thus, the positive effect of political interest on immigration attitudes weakened as the support for conservative values increased.

The upper left panel in Figure 1 displays graphically how the effect of political interest on attitudes toward immigration varied with conservative values in the pooled data. Individual political interest was fixed at values ranging from about  $-2$  to  $+2$  points (deviation of the respondent's score from the within-country survey round mean) and individual conservative values at its mean (solid line) and two standard deviations below the mean (short dashed line) and above the mean (long dashed line). The least interested respondents scored close to 4.6 points on the pro-immigration scale irrespective of level of conservative values. Those who were very interested and held non-conservative values were predicted to have a score of about 6.5 points on the dependent variable and about 5.0 points when the index measuring conservative values was set to two standard deviations above the mean. The remaining panels show the slopes separately for each survey round (estimates reported in the Supplementary Appendix Table A2). They indicate that the interaction effect was similar across years.

## Discussion

Political interest is among the most important democratic norms and has positive effects on a variety of key political outcomes such as political discussions, civic and political participation, political knowledge, news consumption, and democratic values. Yet, little research has been conducted to find out about the relationship between political interest and attitudes toward immigration, which are central for politics in modern multicultural societies. The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of political interest for attitudes toward immigration using a large data of 372,000 individuals from 33 countries. The current results revealed several important insights concerning the magnitude of the direct effect of political interest as well as the moderating factor that shapes the relationship between political interest and attitudes toward immigration.

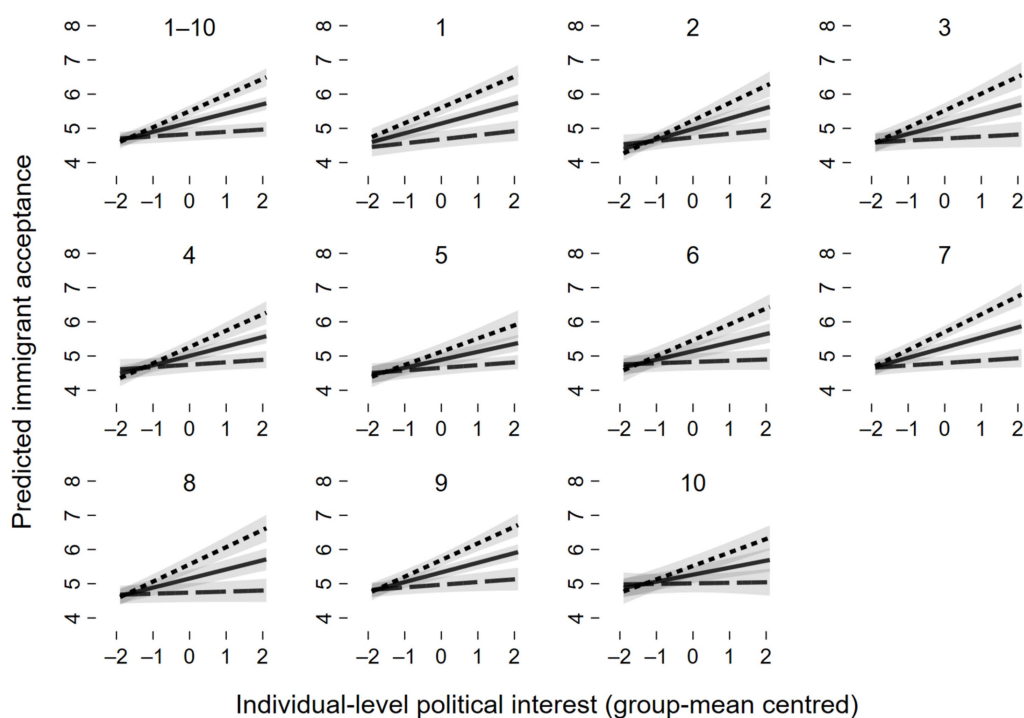


FIGURE 1

Predictive margins for pro-immigration attitudes by individual-level political interest and conservative values: all rounds and by survey round. Solid line = conservative values at its mean; short dashed line = conservative values two standard deviations below the mean; long dashed line = conservative values two standard deviations above the mean. The shaded areas represent the 95% confidence intervals.

First, the results clearly show that the relationship between political interest and more permissive immigration attitudes is positive, and that political interest is the strongest predictor of immigrant acceptance among other known predictors. This finding is in line with deliberative (Dewey, 1927/1984; Fearon, 1998; Habermas, 1996) and political sophistication perspectives (Carpini et al., 1996; Putnam, 2000), suggesting that political interest should lead to a greater exposure to different perspectives via political engagement (Putnam, 2000; Tzankova et al., 2019; Wise and Driskell, 2017) and to a greater commitment to democratic principles (Chong et al., 1983). Increases in perspective-taking and democratic commitments should, in turn, facilitate a recognition that there are other ways of thinking and being, greater openness to individuals and groups with values and ideas different than one's own, and perceptions of similarity between self and outgroups (Aboud, 1988; Aboud and Amato, 2003; Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000; Miklikowska, 2018).

This finding reinforces research on youth showing significant positive effects of political interest on attitudes toward immigrants (Miklikowska et al., 2022) and positive effects of political sophistication on openness toward outgroups (Hall, 2018; Trüding, 2006). Together with these studies, our research suggests that higher political interest facilitates the notion that the political system benefits from diversity and being more open toward acceptance of others in one's country. Our research extends previous studies by showing that the effects of political interest are also present in adults, are strong and generalizable across EU populations.

Second, the results show that the effects of political interest are strongly dependent on political ideology. As hypothesized, holding strong conservative values decreases the impact of political interest

on immigrant acceptance. In fact, for the most conservative people, political interest does not predict attitudes toward immigration at all, while the relationship is strong for the weakest conservatives. This finding is in line with the notions that culturally conservative ideology satisfies individuals' needs for security (Jost et al., 2003, 2008; Rokeach, 1960), predisposes individuals to embracing views that uphold traditional societal arrangements such as anti-immigrant views (Beaton et al., 2003; Burns and Gimpel, 2000; Enns, 2012; Kessler and Freeman, 2005), as well as offers a sense of protection from threat to culture, tradition, and order (Malka et al., 2014). This finding is also in line with motivated cognition theory suggesting that individuals tend to seek out information that supports their strong, pre-existing ideologies and concentrate on arguments that are ideology-consistent (Berggren et al., 2019; Kunda, 1990). Our finding suggests that for individuals with strong conservative ideology that predisposes them to very negative attitudes toward immigration, being politically interested might entail a greater exposure and attention to ideology-congruent perspectives and, as a result, confirmation of initial, anti-immigrant predispositions. In contrast, for moderate-to-weak conservatives, being politically interested might lead to a greater exposure and attention to a range of different perspectives, moving this groups toward higher immigrant acceptance.

This finding reinforces research showing conservatives to consume more partisan, ideology-congruent media (Garrett and Stroud, 2014; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Schulze, 2020) and having more attitude-reinforcing discussions with like-minded (Gvirsman, 2014; Price and Kaufhold, 2019). This finding also echo research showing moderating role



of political ideology for the relationship between factors facilitating tolerance or perspective-taking (such as education, tolerance promoting curriculum or political discussions) and individuals' openness to diversity or political compromise (Avery et al., 1992; Eriksson et al., 2022; Dunn, 2014; Glaser et al., 2021; Oskoi et al., 2018). Together with these studies, our research suggests that the effects of political interest are not universal across the political spectrum. For strong conservatives, their political interest might increase coherence of their conservative ideology (Keating and Bergan, 2017) and lead to exposure and attention to ideology-congruent information, thereby shielding conservatives from the acceptance-increasing effects of political interest. This finding suggests that, while increasing immigrant acceptance in general, political interest also increases polarization in attitudes toward immigration (Abramowitz, 2010).

Taken together, our results show that political interest is a strong predictor of greater openness toward diversity, albeit only for individuals with moderate and weak conservative values. These findings imply that one way to facilitate social cohesion in ethnically diverse societies is to stimulate political interest, particularly among individuals with moderate and low conservatism. They also imply that other measures are needed to facilitate immigrant acceptance among individuals with strong conservative values and to avoid attitudinal polarization.

## Strengths and limitations

This study has various strengths, such as drawing attention to the role of an understudied individual factor (political interest) for attitudes toward immigration, using an extensive database covering 33 countries and 17 years and the attention to the factor moderating the relationship between political interest and immigrant acceptance (conservative values).

Although the data were large, we cannot make causal inferences or make firm statements concerning the direction of effects. However, panel studies support our results by showing positive effects of political interests on attitudes toward immigrants over several years (Miklikowska et al., 2022). Studies have also shown that the relationship between political interest and political outcomes is often reciprocal (Quintelier and Van Deth, 2014; Quintelier, 2013; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2019). Thus, it is quite likely that political interest leads to positive, reinforcing cycles where it facilitates political engagement which, in turn, increases interest. Future studies could complement our results by examining the relationship between political interest and immigrant attitudes using experimental methods (e.g., workshops that stimulate political interest) and by investigating the direction of effects. Data were self-reported and, although we controlled for known predictors of attitudes toward immigrants, third variables could still potentially explain the relationships at the between-person level. In addition, only European countries are included. Therefore, we cannot be sure that the results hold in American, African, or Asian countries because of the differences in political and immigration systems and the salience of the immigration issue.

## Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data-portal>.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the ESS ERIC Research Ethics Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements.

## Author contributions

VH: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PS: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MM: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1422364/full#supplementary-material>

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