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Marching Together? Military Conscription and Immigration Attitudes in Europe

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Abstract

Amid renewed debates about national service in Europe, military conscription is increasingly seen not just as a tool for defense, but as a way to foster social cohesion and national identity. This paper asks whether exposure to conscription shapes how people think about immigration. Using data from the European Social Survey and a regression discontinuity design, I examine the long-term effects of conscription on attitudes toward immigration in eleven European countries that abolished mandatory conscription between 1961 and 2006. Individuals who narrowly missed conscription due to abolition express less negative views about immigration's impact on the economy, culture, and quality of life, consistent with conscription reinforcing exclusionary perceptions. However, these changes in perception do not consistently lead to lower support for far-right political parties or to more liberal policy preferences, suggesting a gap between personal beliefs and political behavior. These findings contribute to debates on nationalism, civic institutions, and the political consequences of military service, and carry implications for countries currently reconsidering conscription.

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1. Introduction

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several European countries have reinstated or reconsidered conscription. The war exposed weaknesses in military preparedness[1], prompting larger defense budgets and concerns over soldier shortages (Cienski and Barigazzi 2024; Angelos 2023). Lithuania, Sweden, Latvia, and Croatia have reinstated conscription, and countries like Germany[2] are discussing it. Yet this return to conscription is framed not only in military terms: it is also seen as a civic tool (Besch and Westgaard 2024; Samar 2024) to address democratic fatigue and social fragmentation.

This symbolic weight is particularly salient in a context of rising anti-immigration sentiment and populist nationalism. Parties such as France's Rassemblement National and Germany's AfD are reshaping electoral landscapes by invoking threats to cultural integrity and social order (Jones 2024; Ipsos 2024). In the 2024 European elections, the Rassemblement National campaigned on "double borders"[3] and systematic pushbacks of migrant boats, securing a record 31.4% of the vote (Pascual 2024). Such rhetoric appeals not only to economic grievances but to a broader identity politics in which national belonging is cast in opposition to immigration.

In this climate, conscription is often positioned as both a bulwark against external threats and a means of restoring internal solidarity (Niinistö 2024; Panagiotis Politis Lamprou 2025). Its reinstatement thus becomes a powerful signal: of unity, duty, and belonging. What remains

[1] Ukraine has struggled to recruit; European forces have long missed recruitment and retention targets (Kayali 2024).

[2] In June 2024, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius proposed a new voluntary service, stating "[Germany] must be ready for war by 2029" (Ngendakumana 2024). Drafted over the summer 2025, the new military service scheme for Germany is yet to be discussed in the Bundestag lower house of parliament.

[3] "Establish a double border, French and European: control national borders and set up a border at the gates of Europe, allowing Frontex to send back illegal migrants. It's a question of double security," explains the far-right party's booklet.

unclear, however, is how conscription affects the very attitudes it is meant to shape. Does conscription foster inclusion and reduce prejudice, or does it reinforce exclusionary forms of nationalism? While recent studies suggest that military draft can reduce intergroup prejudice when it involves meaningful contact with diverse peers (Green and Hyman-Metzger 2024; Zhang and Lee 2025), this mechanism may not operate where immigrants are absent from military ranks. Indeed, this new literature largely examines outcomes like racial tolerance or civic identity–not attitudes toward immigrants per se. This paper addresses that gap, showing that conscription's legacy is so far not one of inclusion, but of exclusion.

This paper investigates the long-term effects of exposure to military conscription on attitudes toward immigration in Europe. Specifically, it asks: How does exposure to military conscription affect attitudes towards immigration? To answer this, the paper draws on theories of political socialization and intergroup contact. Military institutions have long been viewed as powerful socializing agents, instilling values of loyalty, discipline, and national duty (Weber 1976). The military has often been described as a "school of the nation" (Krebs 2004), capable of molding political attitudes and reinforcing state narratives. Yet its expected effects are mixed. Shared service may reduce prejudice through intergroup contact (Allport 1954; Pettigrew et al. 2011), but it may also deepen in-group identification (Tajfel 1974) and exclusion, especially when framed around cultural conformity.

This paper contributes to these debates by providing causal evidence on the attitudinal effects of exposure to conscription. It exploits the staggered abolition of conscription across eleven European countries between 1961 and 2006 and uses a regression discontinuity design applied to European Social Survey data. By comparing individuals born just before and just after reform thresholds, it isolates the effect of conscription exemption on immigration attitudes. The

findings show that abolishing conscription softens anti-immigration attitudes, particularly regarding immigration's impact on culture, the economy, and the quality of life. However, these shifts do not consistently lead to reduced far-right support or less restrictive policy preferences– highlighting a gap between personal beliefs and political behavior.

Understanding this dynamic is crucial. As European states reconsider conscription, their decisions are not only about military capacity. They also signal visions of national identity, civic duty, and inclusion. By analyzing the attitudinal legacy of conscription, this study contributes to contemporary debates about nationalism, integration, and the political psychology of state institutions.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework. Section 3 outlines the empirical strategy. Section 4 reports the main results, and Section 5 discusses and concludes.

2. Military Conscription and Immigration Attitudes

Military conscription has long been understood as more than just a tool for national defense (Huntington 1957; Moskos 1988). Beyond preparing individuals for potential conflict, conscription serves as a powerful state institution for shaping political beliefs, civic identity, and social attitudes (Ostwald 2019; Ronconi and Ramos-Toro 2025; Zhang and Lee 2025). This paper explores how compulsory conscription affects attitudes toward immigration. Given the renewed interest in conscription across Europe in response to growing geopolitical threats and societal divisions, this question is especially timely. Building on prior research highlighting the profound influence of military experiences on individuals' values, beliefs, and political behavior and affiliations (Bove, Di Leo, and Giani 2022; Weiss 2022; Jackson et al. 2012; Fize and Louis-

Sidois 2020), this study reinforces the view that the close-knit environment of conscription can shape perspectives that persist in civilian life.

This study examines the transformative nature of conscription and its enduring influence on civic and political attitudes beyond the confines of military service. As individuals reintegrate into civilian life, their perspectives on societal issues, particularly immigration, may be shaped by experiences acquired during service. Within the military's hierarchical and conservative environment, socialization into discipline, conformity, and nationalist narratives may promote ideological alignment and reinforce in-group loyalty, fostering exclusionary conceptions of national belonging. At the same time, conscription can create the very conditions emphasized by intergroup contact theory–conditions of equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support–that enable interaction across ethnic, regional, and socio-economic boundaries to reduce prejudice and strengthen civic solidarity. Building on these contrasting mechanisms, the paper distinguishes between exclusionary and inclusionary forms of nationalism and empirically tests which of these dynamics prevails in shaping attitudes toward immigration.

2.1 Exclusionary Nationalism

Military conscription has historically been envisioned as a "school for the nation," a civic institution tasked with instilling loyalty, discipline, and national cohesion (Krebs 2004). As Posen (1993) argues, modern states deliberately used mass armies to spread a standardized national culture and mobilize citizens in defense of the state. Yet this civic mission has always been double-edged. By defining the obligations of citizenship, conscription also implicitly delineates who belongs to the national community, and on what terms. Military socialization

frequently blurs into ideological inculcation (Krebs 2004), reinforcing norms of conformity and political loyalty that privilege dominant conceptions of nationhood.

Empirical research underlines that such environments tend to reinforce the characteristics and worldviews of dominant social groups, reproducing hierarchies that privilege conformity and loyalty to the national in-group. Guimond (2000) finds that officer candidates became increasingly prejudiced toward out-groups and more accepting of inequality over time, illustrating how military socialization internalizes and legitimizes dominant-group beliefs about status and order. Extending this logic, Villamil, Turnbull-Dugarte, and Rama (2024) document that military personnel in Spain are more than twice as likely as civilians to vote for the far-right party VOX, and that areas surrounding military facilities exhibit higher far-right vote shares. Similarly, Rouban (2013) documents a descriptive pattern of growing far-right support among French public servants, particularly within the police and armed forces. Together, these findings suggest that political socialization within military settings may function as transmission belts for conservative and exclusionary political norms, beyond institutional boundaries.

Social identity theory helps explain these dynamics (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 2004). Conscription constructs a salient in-group–the nation's defenders–and, by contrast, out-groups who do not serve. Identification with this in-group fosters cohesion and moral superiority, but also sharpens symbolic boundaries of belonging. When national identity is framed in defensive or securitized terms, these boundaries become exclusionary. Immigrants, who are often absent from conscript cohorts and portrayed as culturally or politically misaligned, are especially likely to be positioned as out-groups. This boundary-drawing function is particularly salient in contemporary Europe, where nationalist and far-right actors increasingly frame political conflict around questions of belonging, cultural integrity, and internal security (Jones 2024). In this

context, conscription does not merely socialize individuals into abstract civic values; it embeds them within a hierarchical institution that emphasizes order, obedience, and collective defense against perceived threats.

This normative content of military socialization resonates strongly with conservative and authoritarian worldviews that also often underpin far-right ideology (Villamil, Turnbull-Dugarte, and Rama 2024). A large literature documents that such orientations are strongly associated with anti-immigration attitudes. Davidov and Meuleman (2012) find that individuals with conservative political ideologies are more likely to view immigration as a threat, whether the perceived danger is economic, cultural, or security-related. Political ideology also plays a critical role in shaping these attitudes. Pardos-Prado (2011) argue that stable ideological placements, such as left–right alignments, serve as organizing frameworks for individuals' beliefs about immigration. In contexts where socio-economic vulnerability is low and competition between natives and immigrants for resources is limited, ideology can plausibly become a dominant determinant and moderator of immigration attitudes (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). Under these conditions, military socialization may operate less through economic channels and more through symbolic and identity-based ones, reinforcing narratives of national homogeneity and sovereignty that are central to far-right mobilization.

> ***Hypothesis 1:*** *Exposure to compulsory conscription fosters exclusionary nationalism by reinforcing conservative values and in-group identification, leading to more negative attitudes toward immigrants.*

2.2 Inclusionary Nationalism

While conscription can reinforce exclusionary nationalism, it potentially also provides a powerful environment for intergroup contact and social exposure. By bringing together individuals from diverse ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds, shared service creates opportunities for sustained interaction that can challenge stereotypes and foster a more inclusive understanding of national belonging. According to Allport (1954)'s intergroup contact theory, prejudice is reduced when contact occurs under conditions of equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support. The military is precisely and uniquely positioned to provide these conditions. Within units, conscripts collaborate on shared tasks, live in close proximity, and depend on one another regardless of background, creating what Lowe (2024) describes as an "Allport-optimized" environment.

A growing body of empirical work documents this inclusive potential. Evidence from Spain indicates that cross-regional contact during service fosters more integrative national identification: Cáceres-Delpiano et al. (2021) and Bagues and Roth (2020) show that conscripts from regions with weak Spanish identity who served elsewhere were more likely to identify as Spanish and less likely to support regionalist parties years later. Finseraas and Kotsadam (2017) provide experimental evidence from Norway showing that conscription-induced exposure to diversity improves majority soldiers' perceptions of immigrants' work ethic, offering strong support for the idea that cooperative, equal-status contact reduces prejudice. In Argentina, Ronconi and Ramos-Toro (2025) find that conscription strengthened civic identity and reduced social distance toward marginalized domestic groups, though it produced no significant change in attitudes toward foreigners. Similarly, Green and Hyman-Metzger (2024) show that white American men drafted during the Vietnam War developed more tolerant racial attitudes, with

interpersonal contact emerging as the key mechanism, although these effects diminished over time.

Collectively, these findings suggest that conscription can promote inclusionary nationalism by redefining belonging around shared civic contribution rather than ethnic or cultural origin. By uniting individuals around a common mission (the defense and service of the nation) conscription may weaken ascriptive boundaries and foster generalized empathy across social divides. Crucially, this mechanism does not rely on immigrants themselves being directly embedded in military cohorts. Instead, exposure to a broad set of fellow citizens from diverse social, regional, and cultural backgrounds may be sufficient to induce generalized belief updating. As the evidence on intergroup contact shows, repeated interaction with multiple, heterogeneous individuals, or what Chakraborty et al. (2025) calls "broad contact" facilitates learning about the outgroup as a category rather than treating encountered individuals as exceptional cases. In this sense, conscription operates as a large-scale sampling device: individuals extrapolate from everyday cooperation with diverse co-nationals to broader judgments about who belongs to the national community. The resulting inclusionary nationalism is thus grounded in generalized civic experience, where immigrants and minorities, whether or not they directly serve, are more perceived as legitimate and equal members of the polity, countering exclusionary narratives that frame national identity as fixed, homogeneous, and incompatible with immigration.

> ***Hypothesis 2:*** *Exposure to compulsory conscription fosters inclusionary nationalism by facilitating broad intergroup contact in pursuit of a common civic duty, leading to more positive attitudes toward immigrants.*

3. Empirical Analysis

3.1 Data

This study draws on individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS), covering eleven waves from 2002 to 2023, to evaluate the long-term societal consequences of military conscription. These data are merged with information on eleven[4] conscription reforms that occurred in Europe between 1961 and 2006[5], as compiled in the Military Recruitment Dataset and described in Bove, Di Leo, and Giani (2022). The ESS offers nationally representative samples collected using rigorous probability sampling methods and post-stratification weights. The analysis focuses on male respondents aged 30 and older, born in countries that abolished conscription during the relevant time window. This restriction ensures that outcomes reflect long-term attitudinal formation, as opposed to short-term or still-developing beliefs.

To ensure internal validity and comparability across countries, several exclusion criteria were applied. Professional military personnel are excluded, given the risk of systematically different attitudes due to selection bias and prolonged service or institutional loyalty. Individuals under age 30[6] are removed to avoid including respondents whose attitudes may not yet have stabilized. Non-citizens are excluded to restrict the sample to those legally eligible for

[4] The enacted reforms included in this study and listed in Table 2 cover the following countries: the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and the Slovak Republic.

[5] During this half-century, the length of service in countries with a conscription system varied from 4 months to 36 months, with an average of 17 months. The minimum age for enlistment ranged from 16 to 21, with an average of 18 (Toronto 2007; Central Intelligence Agency 2025).

[6] While the estimates weaken slightly when lowering the age threshold, this is expected given the small number of respondents in their twenties (age percentiles: 1% = 25.17; 5% = 28.08; 10% = 31.58) and the greater attitudinal volatility at younger ages. Individuals in their early twenties are also closer to the end of service and still undergoing key life transitions, which adds noise and dilutes the long-run effect. Despite this, the results remain consistent when using age 25 or even 21, in line with comparable cohort-based RDD studies (see Cavaille and Marshall (2019)).

conscription. Countries with limited data, such as Albania, Bulgaria, and Croatia[7], where data on conscription policies or immigration attitudes were insufficient, were excluded. Late reforms, such as Germany's in 2011, were omitted due to small affected cohorts. University-educated respondents are excluded, as higher education often conferred conscription exemptions[8]; this avoids conflating treatment assignment with educational sorting and related progressive attitudes toward immigration[9].

After applying these filters, the final sample includes 120,624 respondents across eleven European countries. Table 2 provides a detailed list of reforms, their implementation dates, and cohort eligibility criteria. These reforms, which targeted young male cohorts traditionally subject to compulsory conscription, generate quasi-experimental variation that facilitates comparison between individuals narrowly exposed to conscription and those who were exempt due to policy changes.

3.2 Identification Strategy

This study identifies the causal effect of exposure to compulsory conscription on immigration attitudes by exploiting quasi-experimental variation generated by conscription reforms across eleven European countries. Each reform abolished mandatory conscription for individuals born on or after a legislated cutoff date, creating a sharp discontinuity in legal eligibility for compulsory service that can be leveraged using a regression discontinuity design (RDD). Individuals born just before and just after the cutoff are assumed to be comparable in all predetermined characteristics, such that eligibility for conscription changes discontinuously while potential outcomes vary smoothly at the threshold. Developed first by Bove, Di Leo, and

[7] But also, Macedonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland, and Romania.
[8] See Bauer et al. (2014), Card and Lemieux (2001), and Di Pietro (2013) for more information.
[9] Higher education is associated with a variety of social and political attitudes, including more progressive views on immigration (Cavaille and Marschall 2019).

Giani (2022), this design allows identification of the effect of conscription exemption under the assumption that no other policy or societal changes coincided precisely with the reform thresholds. The analysis focuses on the average intention-to-treat (ITT) effect, defined as the causal effect of being rendered ineligible for compulsory service, regardless of whether conscription would have been enforced or completed.

Focusing on the ITT estimand is especially appropriate in this context because the reforms induce a discontinuity in legal eligibility for conscription rather than in realized service, which is subject to exemptions and heterogeneous enforcement. The ITT effect is therefore cleanly identified by the RDD and captures the policy-relevant impact of abolishing compulsory conscription as an institutional change, while remaining comparable across countries. Formally, the estimation is based on the following model:

$$y_{i,x,c,w} = \alpha + \beta T_{x,c} + f(r_{x,c}) + \theta_c + \mu_w + \varepsilon_{i,x,c,w} \qquad (1)$$

where y denotes the immigration attitude of individual i, born in year x, in country c, interviewed during wave w; T is the treatment indicator, equal to 1 if i is exempt from conscription due to a reform in c, 0 otherwise; r is the running variable capturing the distance in birth years from the reform cutoff; f(r) is a flexible function of the running variable (a polynomial); θ and μ are country and wave fixed effects; and ε captures the error term.

The coefficient of interest, β, identifies the local average intention-to-treat (ITT) effect of exemption from compulsory conscription on immigration attitudes, under standard RDD assumptions, meaning no other discontinuous changes occur at the cohort cutoff. The design also mitigates typical endogeneity concerns: reverse causality is ruled out, as individuals cannot influence their birth year or the timing of reforms; and unobserved heterogeneity is minimized by comparing adjacent cohorts. Density tests show as expected no evidence of manipulation in the

running variable (Cattaneo, Jansson, and Ma 2018), consistent with the impossibility of strategic sorting by birth year. Balance tests further confirm the absence of discontinuities in observable characteristics around the cutoff (Online Appendix A2). Finally, because eligibility rules are strictly defined by birth cohort, misclassification is minimal. Any residual inconsistency in enforcement would likely attenuate the estimated effects, rendering the results conservative.

3.3 Dependent Variable: Immigration Attitudes

Immigration attitudes are measured using six harmonized items from the European Social Survey (ESS), selected for their consistency across survey waves and their coverage of both policy preferences and evaluative beliefs about immigration[10]. These items are presented in Table 1 and fall into two conceptual domains, as established in prior research (Cavaille and Marshall 2019; Karapınar Kocağ and Longhi 2022): (1) Admission Preferences: Whether immigration should be allowed from people of the same race/ethnic group, a different race/ethnic group, or poorer non-European countries; and (2) Perceived Consequences: Attitudes or beliefs about immigration's impact on the economy, culture, and quality of life.

All survey items are recoded into binary indicators to address the limitations of ordinal scales[11]. Given the possibility of social desirability bias (Krumpal 2013), two binary indicators are created for immigration admission preferences (items 1–3): (1) "None" coded as 1 (strongly restrictive); (2) "None" or "a few" coded as 1 (restrictive). To capture broader opposition, composite indicators are constructed to flag respondents expressing restrictions toward at least one immigrant group, allowing us to distinguish consistent openness from selective or

[10] The ESS survey contains specific, more detailed modules dedicated to immigration, notably in waves 1 and 7. However, this study focuses on the six immigration-related questions consistently repeated in each wave.

[11] Ordinal response scales may imply an artificial linearity that does not reflect how individuals cognitively perceive or evaluate attitudinal intensities. By dichotomizing responses around conceptually clear thresholds, this approach reduces such distortion and enhances cross-context comparability.

generalized opposition[12]. For beliefs about immigration's consequences (items 4–6), which are rated on an 11-point scale, responses from 0 to 4 are recoded as 1 and all others as 0. This isolates clearly negative responses, addressing the tendency for respondents to cluster at midpoints.

In addition, a variable measuring proximity to far-right parties is manually coded using respondents' self-reported political affiliations. Individuals expressing closeness to far-right parties are identified as having stronger anti-immigration sentiments, providing a behavioral correlate of anti-immigration sentiment. Details of this classification process are elaborated in the Online Appendix A1.1.

The six binary items are aggregated into a composite anti-immigration sentiment scale by averaging across items and standardizing within and across countries[13]. Following Cavaille and Marshall (2019), this approach captures latent dispositions toward immigration while reducing the biases inherent in individual survey items.

Table 1. Immigration Attitudes Evaluation in the ESS.

[12] Respondents may oppose immigration for different reasons depending on the type of immigrant, such as economic concerns for low-skilled workers or cultural concerns for those of different religious or ethnic backgrounds. This heterogeneity complicates the analysis of individual items. By creating composite indicators that capture restrictive preferences across any immigrant type, I can better identify both general opposition to immigration and selective opposition based on specific criteria. This approach helps to assess both the breadth and intensity of anti-immigration attitudes within the population.

[13] These additive scales are created by combining six individual binary variables, each representing a distinct dimension of anti-immigration sentiment. Using Cronbach's alpha, the internal consistency of these variables is assessed, ensuring that they reliably measure the same underlying construct. Regarding the scale standardizing the outcomes across countries, the average interitem correlation of 0.3323 indicates moderate positive associations between the items, reflecting their relatedness without redundancy. The resulting reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.7491$) suggests that the scale is sufficiently reliable ("high") for capturing anti-immigration attitudes (Taber 2018). As for the scale standardizing within countries, the details of the internal consistency per country is provided in the Online Appendix A1.2.

Question	Wording	Response scale
1	To what extent do you think [country] should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as most [country] people to come and live here?	Allow: many, some, few, or none.
2	How about people of a different race or ethnic group from most [country] people?	Allow: many, some, few, or none.
3	How about people from the poorer countries outside Europe?	Allow: many, some, few, or none.
4	Is it generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries?	A 0 to 10 scale, with 0 representing "bad" and 10 representing "good."
5	Is [country]'s cultural life generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?	A 0 to 10 scale, with 0 representing "bad" and 10 representing "good."
6	Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?	A 0 to 10 scale, with 0 representing "bad" and 10 representing "good."

3.4 Independent Variable: Country-Level Conscription Reforms

The key independent variable in this study captures variation in exposure to compulsory conscription, based on the timing of conscription reforms across European countries. During the second half of the twentieth century, many European states transitioned from mass conscription to all-volunteer forces in response to shifting strategic, political, and societal demands. Conscription has however deep historical roots, formalized through modern mass mobilization with France's levée en masse (Lucassen and Zürcher 1998), and became central to European military policy through the 19th and 20th centuries (Forrest 1989). By the late 20th century, technological change and evolving security priorities made large conscript armies less relevant (Haltiner 1998). The Cold War's end further accelerated reform, with NATO-led cooperation emphasizing smaller, professional forces for peacekeeping and crisis response (Besch and Westgaard 2024). Between 1990 and 2013, 24 European countries abolished conscription, with early precedents set by the United Kingdom in 1961[14] (Bieri 2015). Western European nations

[14] Some countries have since then reinstated conscription. Notably, Lithuania reintroduced it in 2015, Sweden followed suit in 2017, more recently Latvia and Croatia reinstated conscription in 2024 and 2025 respectively. These

like Belgium (1995) and the Netherlands (1997) followed, while post-communist countries adopted reforms to align with NATO standards (George and Teigen 2008). These reforms varied in structure but uniformly exempted younger cohorts from mandatory conscription. Table 2 lists below the eleven reforms included for the purpose of this study.

The independent variable is constructed as a binary treatment indicator, equal to 1 if an individual was born in a cohort that became exempt from conscription due to a national reform, and 0 otherwise. Eligibility is based on official reform enactment dates and conscription age requirements, as documented respectively in the Military Recruitment Dataset (Toronto 2007) and the CIA World Factbook[15] (Central Intelligence Agency 2025). This cross-national, inter-cohort variation provides the basis for the regression discontinuity design by identifying discontinuous changes in conscription eligibility. The variable isolates the institutional change most plausibly linked to long-term shifts in immigration attitudes. Previous studies (Bauer et al. 2014; Bove, Di Leo, and Giani 2022) document related effects on education and institutional trust. This study extends their approach to examine how conscription reform shapes immigration attitudes.

Table 2. Considered Compulsory Conscription Reforms in Europe.

decisions were largely influenced by growing regional security threats, particularly from tensions with Russia in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region (Samar 2024).

[15] Both datasets available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WI7WN0.

Country	Year of parliamentary approval of reform	Year of reform enactment	Minimum age of first affected cohort
United Kingdom	1957	1961	18
Belgium	1992	1995	18
Netherlands	1992	1997	17
France	1997	2002	18
Portugal	1999	2005	18
Italy	2000	2005	18
Spain	2001	2002	18
Slovenia	2002	2004	18
Hungary	2004	2005	18
Czech Republic	2005	2005	18
Slovak Republic	2005	2006	18

4. Results

The analysis compares male cohorts just eligible for conscription before each reform with those just exempted afterward, exploiting within-country variation in reform timing. Table 3 and Figure 1 summarize the central findings. The results show that abolishing conscription generally reduces anti-immigration sentiment, particularly negative beliefs about immigration's impact on culture, the economy, and the quality of life. The dependent variables span three dimensions: (1) immigration restrictions, (2) perceived societal consequences, and (3) support for far-right parties. While each item is analyzed individually, two standardized indices (across and within countries) are also constructed for aggregation. Columns (7) and (8) in Table 3 present the aggregated results. Both show a statistically significant decline of approximately 0.06 standard deviations in anti-immigration sentiment among cohorts exempted from conscription. These effects are primarily driven by changes in perceived consequences, not policy preferences or far-right affiliation.

Table 3. The Effect of Ending Compulsory Conscription on Anti-immigration Attitudes. All specifications are estimated using local linear regression using the Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014) optimal bandwidth and a triangular kernel. The reported optimal bandwidth is

rounded down to the nearest integer. Standard errors are in parentheses. + denotes $p < 0.1$, * denotes $p < 0.05$, ** denotes $p < 0.01$, and *** denotes $p < 0.001$.

	Outcome variables							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Anti-immigration ("none" only)	Anti-immigration ("none" or "few")	Immigration is bad for the economy	Immigration undermines local culture	Immigration reduces local livability	Feel close to far-right	Anti-immigration scale (across)	Anti-immigration scale (within)
Reform	-0.012	-0.010	-0.042*	-0.056**	-0.061**	-0.008	-0.060*	-0.061*
	(0.017)	(0.015)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.022)	(0.013)	(0.028)	(0.029)
Bandwidth	13	19	13	13	10	16	12	11
Observations	53572	53572	53572	53572	53572	38888	53572	53572
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
ESS wave FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Columns (3)–(5) of Table 3 isolate the effects on perceived impacts of immigration and show a consistent pattern of significant improvements in beliefs. Negative assessments decline by 4.2 percentage points regarding the economy (driven by Belgium and Hungary, see Online Appendix A11), a 5.6 percentage point decline for cultural impacts (driven by Belgium, Spain, Hungary, and Slovakia, see Online Appendix A11), and a 6.1 percentage point decrease in perceived effects on quality of life (driven by Hungary and Italy, see Online Appendix A11). These shifts are modest in magnitude but substantively consistent, and they are visually corroborated in Figure 1, which shows small but clearly visible breaks at the reform threshold.

By contrast, Columns (1) and (2) examine preferences for immigration restrictions and reveal no consistent effect. While country-level estimates vary in sign and magnitude (see Online Appendix Table A11), the pooled effect is close to zero and statistically insignificant, and the corresponding graphical evidence reveals no discontinuity at the cutoff. Finally, Column (6) investigates political behavior, focusing on support for far-right anti-immigration parties. Although all estimated coefficients are negative, none reach statistical significance.

These findings may however reflect opposing mechanisms at play and should not be interpreted as evidence strictly against an inclusionary mechanism. Rather, it suggests that any

inclusionary shift in underlying preferences or beliefs may be counterbalanced (or dominated, as we see here in the case of beliefs) by more entrenched exclusionary considerations. This pattern reinforces the interpretation that improved beliefs or attitudes alone are insufficient to shift preferences or weaken far-right support, which may be anchored in identity-based or ideological commitments that are more resistant to rather marginal belief updating.

Robustness checks confirm the identification strategy. There is no sorting around the cutoff and pre-treatment covariates are balanced (see Online Appendix A2). Results are stable across bandwidths, polynomial orders, and kernel choices although rectangular kernels slightly attenuate effects (see Online Appendix A3). A leave-one-country-out analysis further shows no single case drives the results (see Online Appendix A4.2). The results are also re-estimated excluding treated individuals with less than six months of conscription; the findings remain substantively unchanged[16] (see Online Appendix A4.1). Lastly, no effects are observed for female cohorts, supporting a conscription-specific mechanism (see Online Appendix A4.4). Examining the underlying outcome components also confirms that improvements in immigration attitudes are primarily driven by reduced negative perceptions (see Online Appendix A4.3), with no consistent changes in restrictive preferences or far-right support.

Heterogeneity analysis (see Online Appendix A5) shows stronger effects in countries with abrupt or recent reforms, and among individuals with higher socioeconomic status, where reductions in anti-immigration sentiment are up to three times the average. The effects also seem to vary with the political context in which conscription reforms were adopted. When reforms were enacted under left-wing governments, the reduction in anti-immigration sentiment is

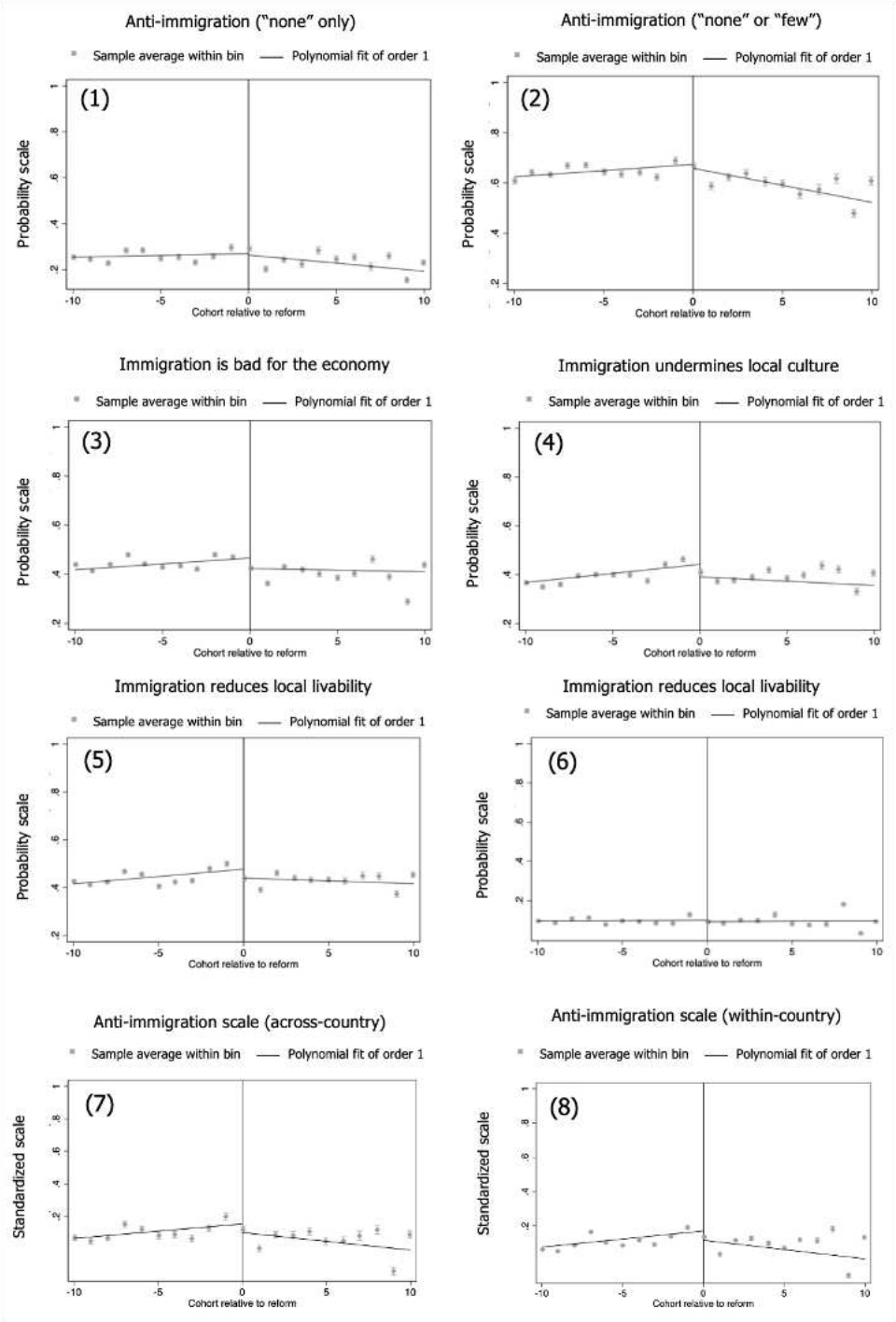
[16] This addresses concerns that very short conscription spells may be insufficient for socialization.

substantially larger[17]. This pattern suggests that the attitudinal consequences of conscription abolition depend not only on the institutional change itself, but also on the political framing and symbolic meaning attached to the reform, which can be captured within the intention-to-treat framework. Detailed estimates are reported in Online Appendix A5.3.

Overall, findings suggest that exposure to conscription can foster exclusionary views. Its abolition improves immigration perceptions but without necessarily shifting political behavior or restrictive preferences, highlighting the difficulty of shifting ideological commitments[18].

Figure 1. Anti-immigration Attitudes among Cohorts around Compulsory Conscription Ending Reforms Among Male Cohorts, Pooled across Reforms.

[17] The effects on the scales are nearly twice the magnitude of the average pooled effects (outcomes 7 and 8 in Table 3).
[18] Online Appendix A6 explores broader shifts in political alignment beyond far-right support.



Figures are obtained using the rdrobust package developed by Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014), based on IMSE-optimal binning and triangular dummy weights; 95% confidence interval. Please refer to the Table 3 above for estimates. Item numbering is equivalent.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the impact of eligibility for compulsory conscription on immigration attitudes by exploiting the staggered abolition of conscription across eleven European countries as a natural experiment. The findings show that exempted male cohorts express significantly more favorable views of immigration's cultural, economic, and societal effects. However, these attitudinal shifts do not consistently translate into reduced support for restrictive policies or far-right parties–suggesting that softened views may not lead to political realignment, which is plausibly more deeply rooted in ideology and institutional context.

The results offer partial support for the exclusionary nationalism hypothesis, which posits that conscription fosters in-group loyalty and out-group exclusion. The observed decline in negative immigration perceptions following abolition suggests that compulsory conscription may indeed reinforce exclusionary views. Yet the absence of consistent effects on restrictive policy preferences and far-right support indicates that these attitudes do not necessarily translate into political behavior. This pattern may reflect the presence of opposing mechanisms. On the one hand, conscription may foster exclusionary nationalism; on the other, the increased and broad intergroup contact associated with conscription may promote tolerance, with the former potentially dominating when it comes to shaping concrete political preferences. These mixed findings call for further investigation into how and when conscription shapes political attitudes and behaviors, and which mechanisms prevail under different contexts.

Effects are also not uniform across contexts or individuals. Stronger impacts are observed in countries with abrupt or recent reforms, enacted by left-wing governments and among individuals with higher socioeconomic status. As expected, the effects are confined to men; women, who are never subject to conscription, do not show comparable changes, which is also

reassuring. These patterns highlight the role of institutional design, reform timing, and individual characteristics in shaping how conscription influences social attitudes.

Despite the design's robustness, several limitations may however lead to conservative estimates. The study uses an intention-to-treat framework based on eligibility, not actual conscription, which likely attenuates treatment effects. In countries where reforms were gradual, treatment-control contrasts were blurred. Thus, the true impact of conscription may be larger. Additionally, reliance on self-reported outcomes limits the assessment of behavioral outcomes like voting or activism, which may evolve differently over time. Nevertheless, the consistent pattern that emerges across specifications is that exposure to compulsory conscription tends to reinforce exclusionary perceptions of immigration, while its abolition softens negative beliefs about immigrants' cultural, economic, and societal impact–without producing parallel shifts in restrictive policy preferences or far-right alignment.

These findings carry timely implications for current debates on the reintroduction of conscription in response to rising geopolitical tensions. While policymakers may focus on military readiness, this study cautions that conscription may carry social costs, particularly by entrenching exclusionary attitudes. If past conscription regimes contributed to social divisions, reinstating them without appropriate safeguards could risk reinforcing already rising nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments. The benefits of national conscription must therefore be carefully weighed against its potential to further polarize.

Future research should therefore examine and disentangle the opposing mechanisms driving these effects. Detailed data on military training–such as ideological content, exposure to diversity, and peer dynamics–could clarify how conscription shapes beliefs. Comparative work

across different military models would also help explain institutional variation in attitudinal outcomes.

In sum, the abolition of conscription appears to soften attitudes toward immigration, though its political consequences remain limited. This impact stands in stark contrast to the weight conscription now carries in public discourse, where it is increasingly promoted not only as a military necessity, but as a remedy for social fragmentation. As European leaders revisit national conscription in the name of unity and resilience, this study offers a timely reminder: the effects of military institutions on public attitudes are real, but not necessarily unifying.

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