Discussion

Interpretation of average results in Europe

Political elite discourses, especially exclusionary rhetoric from right-leaning parties, have contributed to growing polarization of attitudes toward immigration along ideological lines. Right-wing voters are particularly responsive to exclusionary messages, while inclusionary discourses do not show the same polarizing effect. However, there is little evidence of polarization between different education levels (Schmidt-Catran & Czymara, 2022)

Van der Brug & Hartefeld (2021) report that the refugee crisis (2014–2016) intensified opinion polarization regarding immigration between left- and right-leaning citizens. Hutter & Kriesi (2021) report the same, but note that this is driven in particular by radical right parties in Northwestern and Central Europe ()

Such as Hungary

Under Viktor Orbán, Hungary is being governed by such an aforementioned radical right party (Bösckei & Molnár, 2019; Vadhanavisala 2020)

The party’s governance is marked by populist, nativist, and authoritarian tendencies, with a strong emphasis on nationalism and welfare chauvinism, and a dismissive stance toward the European Union and liberal democratic values (Lugosi, 2018; Hegedüs, 2018)

Germany

As of 2015, Germany became a primary destination for refugees. Initially, there was a significant wave of sympathy and support for the arriving refugees. This was evident in the warm welcomes at train stations, with many Germans offering food, water, clothing, and shelter. Chancellor Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das" ("We can manage this") became a widely cited expression of confidence and a symbol of this welcoming culture. his period was characterized by widespread volunteer efforts, public displays of support, and a strong humanitarian response, especially in major cities and at train stations where refugees were greeted by cheering crowds (e.g., Funk, 2016; Neis, Meier & Furukawazono, 2018; Zimmerer, 2016). However, with time, concerns among the German citizens and political parties started to rise. These concerns often revolved around the capacity of the country to integrate so many people, potential impacts on social cohesion, and security issues. Previous research suggests that there seems to no overall trend in anti-immigration sentiment overall, but instead only in specific subgroups. Longitudinal analyses show that, despite increased public debate and the heightened salience of immigration since 2015, there is no consistent evidence of a significant rise in overall or between-group polarization on immigration issues in Germany. Attitudes toward immigration have remained relatively stable over time, even as the topic became more prominent in public discourse (Teney & Rupieper; Dochow-Sonderhaus & Teney, 2024). According to Helbling et al (2023), both generally pro- and anti-immigration groups share similar preferences on specific policy details, suggesting less polarization than often assumed. There is some divergence in attitudes between occupational classes, with working-class respondents generally expressing more unfavorable views toward immigration. However, significant heterogeneity within these groups limits the extent of structural polarization. Regional differences also exist, with certain areas showing higher support for anti-immigrant parties, but these do not amount to a nationwide increase in polarization (Dochow-Sondershaus & Teney, 2024).

Our results, however, do suggest an increase in several aspects of polarization

**Interpretation of Differences Hungary vs. Germany:**

These differences likely reflect the distinct political and social contexts of Germany and Hungary in relation to immigration.

* **Government Response:** Germany, particularly in the initial phase of the 2015 crisis, adopted a more welcoming stance ("Wir schaffen das!"). In contrast, Hungary's government, led by Viktor Orbán, took a strong anti-immigration stance, framing immigrants as threats and erecting border fences. This stark difference in official responses likely shaped public opinion and the dynamics of polarization in each country.
* **Public Discourse:** The public discourse surrounding immigration in the two countries also varied significantly. In Hungary, the government's strong anti-immigration rhetoric likely contributed to a more negative framing of the issue. While Germany initially showed more support for refugees, negative sentiments and concerns about integration also grew, particularly after events like the 2015/16 New Year's Eve incidents in Cologne.
* **Transit vs. Destination Country:** Germany was a primary destination for many refugees during the 2015 crisis, while Hungary largely served as a transit country. This difference in experience with the direct impact of refugee flows could have influenced public perceptions and the resulting polarization.
* **Pre-existing Attitudes:** Pre-existing attitudes towards immigration and the level of societal homogeneity also differed between the two countries, which could have influenced how the refugee crisis impacted public opinion.

**Conclusion:**

While the 2015 refugee crisis acted as a significant polarizing event in both Germany and Hungary, the specific patterns and magnitudes of change in opinion polarization differed. Germany generally experienced a clearer shift towards negative sentiment and increased polarization across various dimensions after the crisis. Hungary's response was characterized by a strong government-led anti-immigration stance, which likely contributed to a distinct pattern of opinion polarization compared to Germany. The comparison highlights how a major European event can interact with different national contexts to produce varying effects on public opinion and its polarization.