



How Origin Country Corruption Shapes Immigrants' Political Trust

Trust in political institutions is a cornerstone of democratic governance, influencing everything from policy compliance to civic participation. In host countries, the integration of immigrants into the political and social fabric hinges on this trust. Yet, concerns abound that immigrants from countries with high levels of corruption might transfer their skepticism regarding institutions to their new environments, potentially eroding trust in host-country governance. This narrative has gained traction in both academic and policy circles (Borjas, 2014; Clemens & Pritchett, 2019) and has been

echoed by political figures such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, who has warned against the societal risks of immigration, and Matteo Salvini in Italy, who has argued that immigration could destabilise social order and undermine trust in governance. These discussions raise pressing questions regarding the implications of immigration for democratic stability. Understanding the mechanisms shaping immigrants' political trust is therefore crucial for designing effective integration policies and fostering cohesive societies.

In a recent study (Aksoy et

al. 2024), we address these concerns by investigating how immigrants' exposure to corruption in their home countries affects their trust in host-country institutions. Using data from 38 European countries, we uncover a novel dynamic: immigrants exposed to higher levels of corruption during their formative years exhibit greater trust in host-country political institutions. These findings challenge prevailing assumptions and opens new avenues for understanding the relationship between migration, corruption, and institutional trust.

Empirical strategy and data

We utilise data from eight waves of the European Social Survey (ESS), conducted between 2004 and 2018, which provides rich individual-level information across 38 European countries. The ESS includes detailed questions on immigrants' trust in political institutions, such as parliaments, political parties, and politicians, as well as demographic and socio-economic characteristics. To measure corruption in immigrants' countries of origin, we rely on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, which offers comprehensive corruption indices capturing executive, judicial, legislative, and public-sector corruption over time. By linking

individuals' survey responses to these external measures of corruption, we construct a framework to analyse how exposure to corruption during the critical 'impressionable years'—ages 18 to 25—affects immigrants' trust in the political institutions in their host countries. This approach enables us to examine the interplay between early-life experiences with governance and subsequent political attitudes in a new institutional environment.

Our empirical strategy leverages variation within origin countries, within host countries, and across age cohorts. Simply put, we compare immigrants

with similar observable characteristics, originating from the same country, living in the same host country, but exposed to differing levels of corruption in their home countries prior to migration. This is achieved by incorporating fixed effects for origin–host country pairs, origin country by year, host country by year, and age cohorts. This approach, in its broad structure, aligns with strategies employed in Giuliano and Tabellini (2022), which examines how historical European immigration influenced modern political ideologies and preferences for redistribution in the United States.

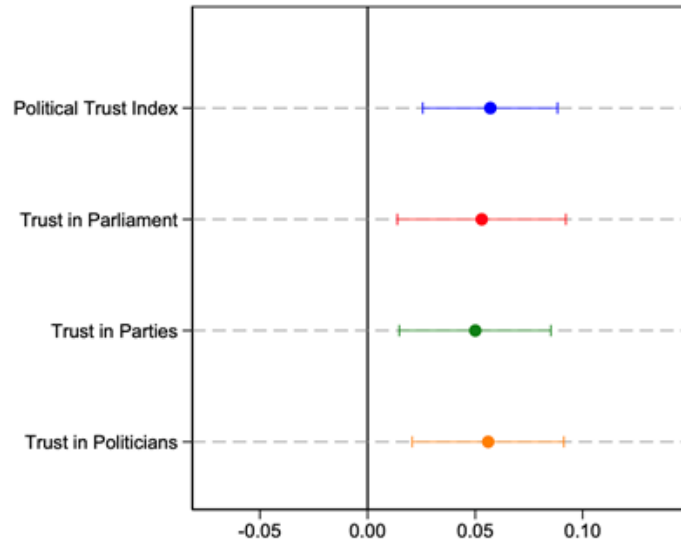
Main results

We find that immigrants' exposure to corruption in early adulthood (i.e., at ages 18–25) in their native country is an important determinant of the trust they place in parliaments, political parties and politicians of their country of immigration. Strikingly, exposure to more corruption in the native country affects trust in the political institutions

of the host country positively, not negatively (*Figure 1*). For instance, an immigrant from a highly corrupt environment is 6 percentage points more likely to trust these institutions compared to someone from a less corrupt country—a significant difference, given that average trust levels hover around 61%. This effect is robust to alternative specifications,

including different corruption measures and subsamples such as forced migrants, who had limited choice in their migration decisions. The persistence of this trust effect over time underscores the durability of formative experiences which aligns with findings from Eichengreen et al. (2021) and Eichengreen et al. (2024).

Figure 1.
Impact of Corruption Exposure on Political Trust



Note: This figure presents OLS estimates of the baseline model, where the independent variable is Corruption Exposure₁₈₋₂₅, corresponding to the cumulative V-DEM Corruption Index in the country of origin when individuals are between ages 18 and 25. Each line represents a separate regression with a different outcome variable. The Political Trust Index is defined as the average trust in parliament, political parties, and politicians. The regressions include a comprehensive set of fixed effect, control for demographic and labour market characteristics (see Table 1 in the paper for details). Whiskers corresponds to two-way clustered standard errors by host and origin country.

Data Sources: European Social Survey and V-DEM.

Interestingly, the impact is limited to national political institutions and does not influence trust in supra-national bodies, like the United Nations, or interpersonal trust. The effect is more pronounced when the institutional quality gap between home and host countries is wider, indicating that perceived governance improvements drive this trust. Additionally, our analysis highlights variations in the effect, with more educated immigrants showing stronger responses, likely due to their higher involvement with political systems.

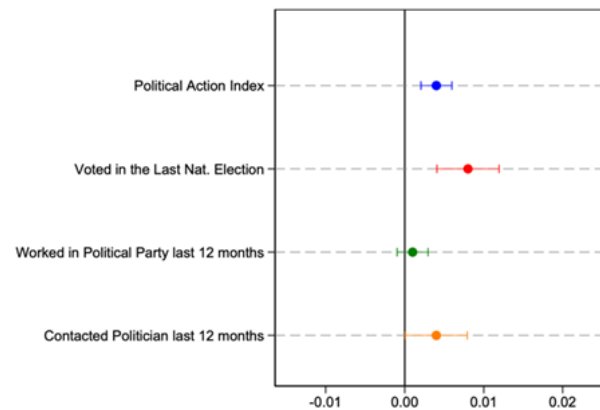
Trust among immigrants grows unevenly and is strongly

influenced by how much they engage with media in the host country. Immigrants who follow local news through newspapers, TV, or online platforms tend to gain a better understanding of how institutions work in their new home. This understanding helps them rely less on their experiences from their home country as a comparison, which gradually softens their trust levels. Those who engage more with local media are also more likely to notice flaws and issues in the host country's institutions, making the differences with their home country seem smaller. This connects to the findings in Yarkin (2024), which shows how staying connected to home-country networks

online can shape immigrants' attitudes and experiences.

Our results demonstrate a connection between enhanced political trust and increased political participation. Immigrants with prior exposure to corruption in their countries of origin show a higher likelihood of voting or engaging with political organizations in their host nations (Figure 2). This suggests that the heightened trust in institutions translates into tangible political involvement, further integrating these individuals into the democratic fabric of their new societies.

Figure 2.
Impact of Corruption Exposure on Political Behaviour



Note: This figure presents OLS estimates of the baseline model, where the independent variable is Corruption Exposure₁₈₋₂₅, corresponding to the cumulative V-DEM Corruption Index in the country of origin when individuals are between ages 18 and 25. Each line represents a separate regression with a different outcome variable. The Political Action Index refers to the average of the following outcomes: voting in the last national election (coded as "1" if individuals voted and "0" otherwise), working for a political party (coded as "1" if individuals worked for a political party and "0" otherwise), and contacting a politician or government official in the last 12 months (coded as "1" if individuals contacted and "0" otherwise). The regressions include a comprehensive set of fixed effects, control for demographic and labor market characteristics (see Table 4 in the paper for details). Whiskers corresponds to two-way clustered standard errors by host and origin country.

Data Sources: European Social Survey and V-DEM.

Corruption erodes trust in institutions for natives

Interestingly, the reaction of natives to corruption during their formative years is quite different. While immigrants tend to develop higher trust in better-functioning institutions abroad, natives exposed to

corruption often show reduced trust in their own institutions. This difference highlights the distinct way migration influences political trust by offering a basis for comparison. For second-generation

immigrants, however, trust patterns are more similar to those of natives, shaped primarily by the conditions in the host country rather than comparisons with their parents' home country.

What explains these effects?

We interpret this result through the "reference point hypothesis", which draws on insights from Kahneman and Tversky's prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Immigrants from corrupt countries develop low expectations of institutional quality based on their formative experiences. Upon encountering better-functioning institutions in their host countries, they perceive these as significantly more

trustworthy by comparison. This contrast effect is amplified for immigrants from countries with weak democratic practices or low-income levels, where institutional disparities are particularly pronounced.

Another mechanism involves host-country media consumption. Immigrants who engage with local media—such as newspapers, television, or online platforms—develop a

more nuanced understanding of institutional quality. This additional information tempers the contrast effect, reducing the elevated trust levels initially driven by favorable comparisons with home-country institutions. These results also show that trust is not static but evolves based on ongoing experiences in the host country.

Selection effects

A key concern in migration studies is the issue of self-selection: Do immigrants with a stronger aversion to corruption or a preference for democratic values systematically choose to migrate to countries with robust institutions? This «exit effect» could confound results if individuals predisposed to trust democratic institutions migrate not only out of aspiration but also as a form of strategic learning or as a no-regret strategy. Our analysis mitigates these concerns through several methods. First, we compare immigrants from the same

origin country migrating to the same host country, controlling for bilateral factors that could influence selection. Second, we examine forced migrants—individuals displaced due to conflict or persecution—who had limited agency in choosing their destination. Furthermore, robustness tests, such as Oster's δ , indicate that unobserved factors would need to exert implausibly strong effects to account for the results. These findings suggest that while some degree of selection may occur, it is unlikely to fully explain the

observed patterns of trust in host-country institutions.

Additionally, we examine whether immigrants with higher innate trust levels are more likely to migrate. If this were true, we would expect these individuals to exhibit higher trust across all institutional dimensions, including supra-national organizations and interpersonal trust. However, our results show that the effect is confined to trust in host-country political institutions, further supporting the causal interpretation of our findings.

Concluding remarks

Our findings challenge fears that immigrants from corrupt countries undermine trust in host societies. Instead, immigrants often exhibit heightened trust in host-country institutions, driven by favorable comparisons with their home countries. These dynamics underscore the importance of recognizing immigrants' adaptive capacity and leveraging their trust to enhance civic engagement and democratic participation.

Policymakers can harness this trust by promoting initiatives such as civic education and

media literacy programs, which encourage informed engagement. Facilitating inclusive participation through community projects and voter outreach can further integrate immigrants into the democratic fabric of host societies. Transparent communication about institutional strengths and weaknesses sustains trust, turning migration into an opportunity to reinforce democratic resilience. Furthermore, as immigrants build trust in host-country institutions, they may transfer these democratic values back to their home countries,

fostering institutional improvements through transnational connections.

This research not only adds to our understanding of the determinants of political trust but also offers a fresh perspective on the integration of immigrant populations. By recognizing the potential of migration to enhance democratic resilience, policymakers can turn immigration into an asset for building more inclusive and participatory democracies.

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