EXPLORING PUBLIC PREFERENCES FOR RETURN AND NON RETURN

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Authors	Francesco Renzini, University of Milan (UNIMI) Arjen Leerkes, Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) Flaminio Squazzoni, University of Milan (UNIMI)
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EXPLORING PUBLIC PREFERENCES FOR RETURN AND NON RETURN

[30/10/2026]

Francesco Renzini, Arjen Leerkes & Flaminio Squazzoni

FAiR Finding Agreement in Return



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on a survey experiment involving 16,301 respondents from 13 EU+ countries. It includes two studies: The first study examines public preferences regarding different return and non-return policies for irregular migrants, while the second study explores the socio-demographic and attitudinal profiles associated with these preferences. Study 1 reveals that respondents generally favour forced return over assisted voluntary return. They also favour restrictive, short-term permits funded by migrants or European institutions over more stable pathways to regularisation. Access to regularisation is viewed as being more dependent on cultural integration than employment. Preferences generally follow a sharp left–right divide, but moderates, including the highly educated, tend to align more closely with the right, where even detention and abandonment are favoured. Basic humanitarian shelter is a limited point of convergence across ideological groups. Study 2 shows that support for forced return spans at least two distinct demographic groups: predominantly male, lower-educated, economically active respondents of working age and an older, predominantly retired population with similar gender and educational characteristics. However, supporting forced return does not necessarily extend to detention. For example, highly educated, employed respondents who strongly favour forced over assisted voluntary return are divided on the issue of detention. These findings reveal an impasse: public preferences favour restrictive and coercive responses, while institutional evidence indicates that large-scale return is limited by structural constraints and competing policy objectives.

ABOUT THE FAIR PROJECT

The Finding Agreement in Return (FAiR) project aims to strengthen the governance of return migration in the EU, addressing legitimacy issues around return migration policies and alternatives. The project contributes to generating new insights into the factors and processes that either foster or impede the legitimacy and effectiveness of related policies. The initiative places the perspectives of non-EU realities centre stage and brings together multidisciplinary expertise from academic, policy research, governmental, and migrant advocacy organisations across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. This policy brief is based on a representative survey of 16,301 respondents conducted by the research team of the University of Milan in 13 EU+ countries (Austria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) in spring 2025. The survey examined public preferences regarding forced or assisted return policies.

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Introduction

This report includes two independent papers (Study 1 and Study 2) based on a survey of 16,301 respondents from 13 EU+ countries (Austria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) conducted in spring 2025. Both papers are original and have been co-authored by the three authors of this report.

Study 1 reveals that respondents generally favour forced return over assisted voluntary return. They also favour restrictive, short-term permits funded by migrants or European institutions over more stable pathways to regularisation. Access to regularisation is viewed as being more dependent on cultural integration than employment. Preferences generally follow a sharp left–right divide, but moderates, including the highly educated, tend to align more closely with the right, where even detention and abandonment are favoured. Basic humanitarian shelter is a limited point of convergence across ideological groups.

Study 2 shows that support for forced return spans at least two distinct demographic groups: predominantly male, lower-educated, economically active respondents of working age and an older, predominantly retired population with similar gender and educational characteristics. However, supporting forced return does not necessarily extend to detention. For example, highly educated, employed respondents who strongly favour forced over assisted voluntary return are divided on the issue of detention. These findings reveal an impasse: public preferences favour restrictive and coercive responses, while institutional evidence indicates that large-scale return is limited by structural constraints and competing policy objectives.

These findings contribute to the objective of the FAiR project's objective of understanding the legitimacy and effectiveness of return migration governance. They inform European and national policy discussions about the enforcement of returns, administrative detention, regularisation, and alternatives for individuals for whom return is not possible. While they do not establish the effectiveness of the policies examined, they suggest measures to address the 'non-return problem' by minimising public expectation traps that erode institutional trust.

Study 1

Europe's impasse on irregular migration: Public preferences favour restrictive responses despite structural limits to return

Abstract. Irregular migration poses a persistent challenge to European societies. While governments increasingly seek to repatriate irregular migrants, data suggest that a majority remain due to limited cooperation from countries of origin, humanitarian and implementation constraints, and trade-offs with other public policy objectives. This "non-return problem" is a source of political controversy, yet little is known about public opinion on the various possible policy responses. Drawing on a large-scale survey of 16,301 respondents from 13 European countries conducted between March and April 2025, we examine public preferences regarding return enforcement and policies for addressing non-returnable migrants. The results show that Europeans favour deportation over assisted voluntary return, and restrictive, short-term permits, funded by migrants or European institutions, over more secure pathways to regularisation. Access to regularisation is viewed as conditional on perceived cultural integration rather than employment. Preferences generally follow a sharp left-right divide, but moderates, including the highly educated, align more closely with the right, where even detention and abandonment are favoured. These findings reveal an impasse: public preferences favour restrictive and coercive responses, while available empirical evidence indicates that large-scale return is limited by structural constraints and competing policy objectives. Symbolic action by governments in response to public demand cannot resolve the underlying problem of non-return.

Keywords: Irregular migrants; European public opinion; regularisation policies; non-return; migration policies

Background

The issue of irregular migration starkly exposes the limits of state control, constraining the capacity of governments to regulate borders and residency thereby challenging the foundations of sovereignty (Geddes, 2005; Bonjour, 2011; Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023). Despite efforts to reassert control through restrictive visa and passport regimes, as well as strengthened border controls (Torpey, 1999; Adamson, 2006; Feigenberg, 2020; Kalkman, 2021), irregular migrants continue to circumvent these barriers. Between 2017 and 2023, between 2.6 and 3.2 million people were identified as being in an irregular situation in the European Union plus the United Kingdom (Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024). Their presence fuels security concerns, including exaggerated fears of terrorism, and can contribute to support for populist movements (Adamson, 2006; Böhmelt et al., 2020; Noury & Roland, 2020; Berman, 2021).

Over the last two decades, the EU and the UK have invested heavily in post-arrival enforcement infrastructure (Gibney, 2008; Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020). Central to these efforts are return policies, which aim to repatriate irregular migrants to their countries of origin or third countries willing to accept them. States may implement return decisions through deportation or assisted voluntary return programmes, which offer financial or logistical assistance, with forced return remaining an option if voluntary departure does not occur (Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020; Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023; European Commission, 2025).

In 2022 and 2023, approximately 460,000 and 480,000 irregular migrants were ordered to leave EU countries, respectively. However, only 16% (74,000) and 18% (91,000), respectively, returned through registered voluntary return or deportation (Eurostat, 2024). Consequently, most migrants ordered to leave remain in the country illegally for months or years, sometimes

permanently (Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020; European Migration Network, 2021; Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023, Peitz, 2026).

Limited return should not necessarily be understood as straightforward policy failure, but as the outcome of constrained implementation and competing policy objectives. Practical constraints include high costs, bureaucratic hurdles, difficulties in establishing identity, and limited cooperation from countries of origin (Noll, 1999; European Commission, 2017a, 2017b; Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020; Song, 2019; Schmid, 2022; Pahladsingh, 2025). Return objectives may also conflict with fundamental rights, diplomatic and economic interests, international security cooperation, and domestic political considerations. Yet this persistent divergence between return decisions and actual departures creates a distinct governance dilemma—the "non-return problem": how should governments govern the continued presence of irregular migrants who remain despite being ordered to leave? Governments pursue different responses amid political debate (European Migration Network, 2021; Hollifield & Foley, 2022). Inclusive responses range from regularisation, whereby residence or work permits are granted according to specified criteria, to measures that stop short of legal status, such as providing shelter and other basic rights (Baldwin-Edwards & Kraler, 2009; Hendow & Qaisrani, 2024; Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020). Governments may instead adopt restrictive measures, such as repeated administrative detention or mandatory reporting (Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020). These choices are becoming increasingly important as governments are intensifying their efforts to enforce migration control and are placing greater emphasis on coercive measures (European Commission, 2026), while a range of constraints and trade-offs continue to limit returns. However, relatively little is known about whether this stronger emphasis on enforcement and coercive measures aligns with public opinion, or how citizens evaluate the policy options that arise when return decisions are difficult or impossible to implement. While public preferences do not directly determine migration policy, they can influence it, especially when migration is a key political issue (Stimson et al., 1995; Lahav, 2004; Basile & Olmastroni, 2020; Böhmelt, 2021; Van Hauwaert, 2023; Bansak et al. 2023). Understanding these preferences is especially important in contemporary, enforcement-oriented contexts where governments are placing an increasing emphasis on returns, while large-scale regularisations have become less frequent since their peak in the 1990s and 2000s (Elguezabal & Martínez-Zarzoso, 2026; Baldwin-Edwards & Kraler, 2009; Hendow & Qaisrani, 2024; European Commission, 2026).

Existing research offers limited insight into how citizens weigh alternative policy responses to persistent non-return. Previous studies have predominantly examined desired immigration levels and the characteristics of migrants and asylum seekers whom citizens would admit (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015; Bansak et al., 2016, 2023), differences in attitudes towards immigration stocks and flows (Margalit & Solodoch, 2022), and public preferences regarding deportation and immigration enforcement, including how these vary with migrant characteristics and the harms associated with enforcement (Whitaker & Doces, 2023; Gerver et al., 2023). Other studies have examined specific components of migration governance, such as regularisation (Lafleur & Marfouk, 2026) and international cooperation over return and readmission (Detlefsen & Ruhs, 2025). Yet we know much less about how citizens weigh the range of policy responses that arise specifically when return decisions are not implemented. We therefore ask: *how should governments pursue return and govern the continued presence of irregular migrants when return decisions are not implemented*? Three perspectives suggest why these preferences may vary. Firstly, political ideology strongly influences migration attitudes (Peresman et al., 2023). Right-leaning citizens tend to perceive a greater cultural

threat from immigration and may also value social order, compliance with the law, and stringent law enforcement more highly, making coercive responses more attractive (Gerber & Jackson, 2016). Secondly, citizens differentiate between migrants based on socially constructed judgements of deservingness, taking into account migrants' perceived control over their situation, their attitude, identity and need, and ability to reciprocate economically (De Coninck & Matthijs, 2020; Heuer & Zimmermann, 2020; De Coninck et al., 2024). Several attributes in our analysis correspond to these considerations, enabling us to examine whether inclusive policies are more widely accepted among migrants who are employed, socio-culturally integrated, vulnerable, or have lived in the host country for an extended period. Finally, framing of policy outcomes may influence citizens' evaluations (Druckman, 2001; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Avdagic & Savage, 2021). This could be particularly true when outcomes are presented as a policy success (e.g. when attention is directed towards the rate of "successfully" implemented returns) rather than a failure.

The analysis is based on a survey that included 16,301 respondents from 13 European countries (including EU Member States, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland) between March and April 2025. We proceed in three steps. Firstly, we examine whether citizens want their country to prioritise forced or assisted voluntary return as the primary means of enforcing return decisions. Secondly, we analyse which features make regularisation policies relatively more attractive for unreturned migrants, and which alternative responses to regularisation citizens prioritise when return remains possible or has effectively become unfeasible. Thirdly, we test whether citizen's policy preferences change when equivalent information about limited return implementation emphasises either those whom governments can return or those who remain. We primarily examined variation by political ideology, and secondarily by socio-demographic characteristics and country Finally, we compare the effects of two equivalent but differently valenced frames regarding governments' capacity to return irregular migrants: a more positive frame stating that EU Member States are "able to repatriate 20%" and a more negative frame stating that they are "unable to repatriate 80%". The former emphasises successful implementation, whereas the latter emphasises implementation failure.

Results

How to Repatriate Irregular Migrants

Respondents were informed that governments may implement return decisions through either assisted voluntary return, with financial or logistical assistance provided to returnees in exchange for their cooperation in leaving the country, or forced return (deportation), whereby irregular migrants who do not leave voluntarily are escorted out of the country by the authorities, with physical force used if necessary. They were then asked which approach their country should prioritise. 56.48% of respondents (95% CI: [55.59, 57.36]) selected forced return over assisted voluntary return (Figure 1, Panel C). This proportion is significantly higher than the 50% threshold representing an even split between the two options ($z = 14.26$, $P < 0.00001$, $N = 16,301$, two-sided test). While preferences are divided, there is an overall lean toward the more coercive of the two implementation mechanisms presented.

Figure 1A shows the probability of preferring forced to assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by respondents' political ideology (see Methods), alongside the marginal distribution of ideology scores in the sample. The data reveal a clear polarisation: only 26% of respondents on the far left favour forced over assisted voluntary return (95% CI: [21.40,

30.65]), compared to 78.20% among those on the far right (95% CI: [75.02, 81.39]). Support for forced return changes swiftly across the ideological spectrum. Even among the modal group of politically moderate respondents, who comprise 26% of the sample, 59.73% favour forced over assisted return (95% CI: [57.97, 61.48]). Moderates' preferences are substantially closer to those on the far right (absolute difference: 18.47%; 95% CI: [14.84, 22.10]) than to those on the far left (33.73%; 95% CI: [28.80, 38.65]).

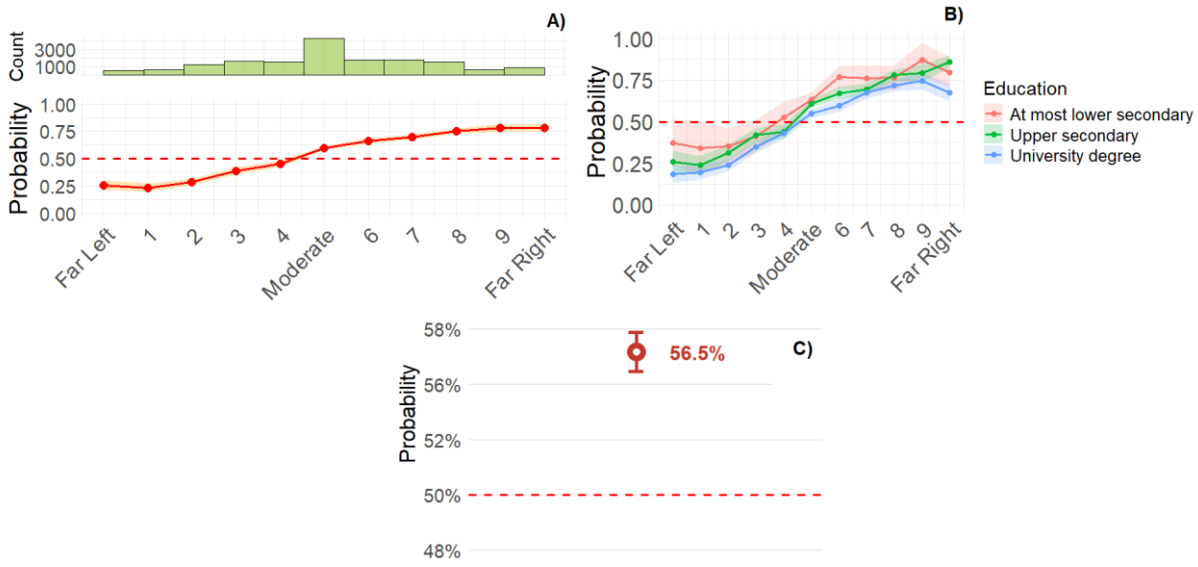


Figure 1. Public preferences on return policy by ideological and educational groups. A) Bottom panel: probability that respondents prefer forced to assisted voluntary return, stratified by political ideology (0 = far left, 5 = moderate, 10 = far right). Top panel: marginal distribution of political ideology in the pooled sample (N = 16,301) across 13 EU+ countries. B) Same as in A, but additionally stratified by respondents' educational attainment. C) Overall probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary result in the pooled sample (N = 16,301). In all panels, the red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options. In Panels A) and B), shaded ribbons indicate 95% confidence intervals.

This pattern also applies to highly educated respondents (Figure 1B). Although university graduates generally express less support for forced return than other groups, with an overall probability of favouring it of 51.24% (95% CI: [50.05, 52.44]; see Extended Data Figure 1), this probability is 54.92% among those who are politically moderate (95% CI: [52.37, 57.47]). This figure rises to 59.77% (95% CI: [56.15, 63.40]) among those who are just one point further to the right on the ideological scale (score = 6). This closely mirrors the rate observed among moderates with at most an upper secondary diploma (60.93%). Even among university-educated moderates, preferences align more closely with those of the far right (absolute difference: 12.57%; 95% CI: [6.89, 18.25]) than with those of the far left (36.68%; 95% CI: [31.01, 42.35]). A preference for forced return indeed increases with right wing political orientation, regardless of education level. In a linear probability model, the differential impact of each one-point shift to the right between respondents with at most a lower secondary qualification and university graduates amounts to only 0.007 probability points (HC1 robust t = 1.18; p = 0.2377; N = 16,301, two-sided test; see Table S2 of the Supplementary Information for the detailed estimates and Table S3 for robustness checks yielding the same results on an

odds-ratio scale using a logistic regression approach with the same specification). This suggests that higher education does not attenuate the ideological gradient in support for forced return.

Similar patterns emerge across age cohorts, gender, and occupation, with the notable exception of right-wing Gen Z respondents (aged 18-24), whose views resemble those of their moderate peers, showing only around 50% support for forced return (see Extended Data Figure 2 and Figures S37-S38 in the Supplementary Information). To more systematically test whether ideology is indeed a key determinant of return policy preferences, we fitted a structural equation model in which socio-demographic factors could shape return policy preferences both directly and indirectly through ideology, while ideology itself exerted only a direct effect (Section C of the Supplementary Information). The results confirm that political ideology is the strongest predictor of support for forced return, shifting preferences for forced return by 0.384 standard deviations ($z = 39.96$, $p < 0.0001$, $N = 16{,}301$, two-sided test), which is more than twice the effect of the next most influential socio-demographic factor. In contrast, indirect pathways from socio-demographics via ideology are weak, shifting return preferences by an average of only 0.05 standard deviations.

Addressing Non-Return: Regularisation Policies

To assess what types of regularisation policy proposals citizens consider attractive, we conducted a conjoint experiment in which participants were asked, in each task, to select the policy they favoured from a pair of empirically plausible, randomly generated options (Baldwin-Edwards & Kraler, 2009; Hendow & Qaisrani, 2024). Figure 2 shows the marginal means for each policy characteristic, i.e., the probability of selecting a policy that incorporates a specific feature, averaged across all other features (Leeper et al., 2020). The experiment followed a forced-choice design, with each participant completing eight choice tasks, resulting in a total of 260,816 observations.

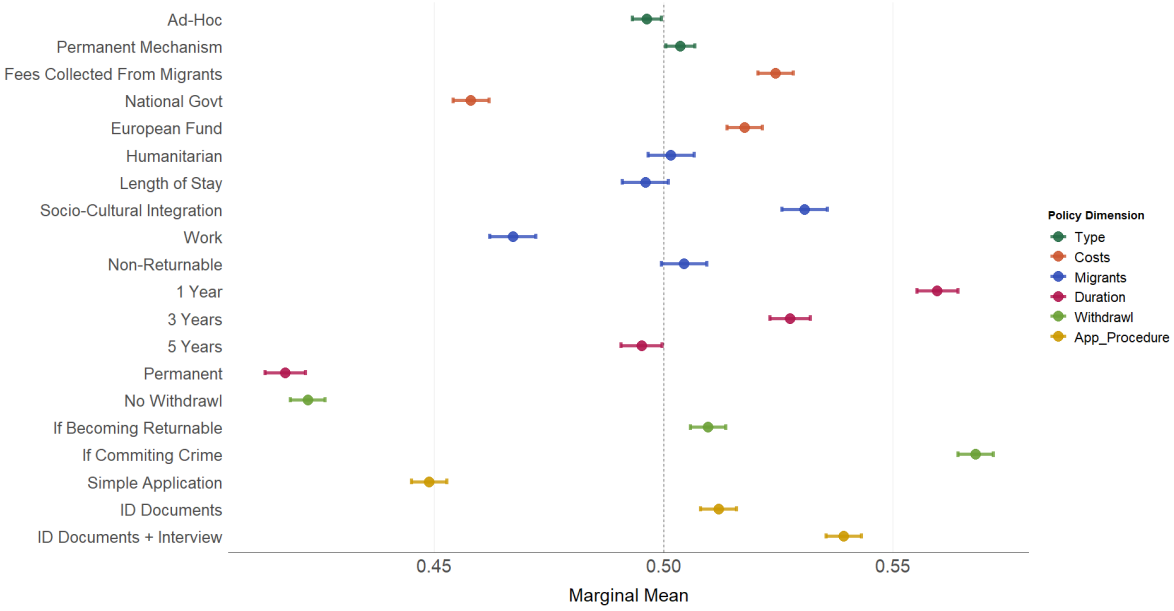


Figure 2. Public preferences over regularisation policy characteristics (N = 260,816). Dots represent marginal mean point estimates with 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the

respondent level. Colours differentiate policy dimensions drawn from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical black dashed line marks the point at which the marginal mean is 0.50. In forced-choice conjoint experiments with two profiles per task, a respondent who answers randomly would generate a marginal mean of 0.50 for each attribute. Values above 0.5 indicate features that increase the probability of a policy being chosen, while values below 0.5 indicate the opposite (Leeper et al., 2020).

Results reveal a clear ordering of preferences regarding which categories of irregular migrants should be prioritised for regularisation. Among the alternatives presented, proposals granting permits to migrants who are socio-culturally integrated (e.g. speak the language and are culturally assimilated) into the host society receive the most support, followed by those granting permits to migrants with specific vulnerabilities, such as individuals who cannot be repatriated due to conditions in their home countries, those in need of medical treatment, and victims of exploitation. Migrants with a long-term irregular stay (e.g., over ten years) come next in the preference ranking. Despite the frequent use of employment as a criterion in regularisation programmes (Baldwin-Edwards & Kraler, 2009; Hendow & Qaisrani, 2024), respondents were least likely to select proposals granting permits to migrants working in the informal economy, without additional integration expectations being met.

Specifically, the marginal mean for work-based regularisation policies is 46.71% (95% CI: [46.21, 47.21]), which is the lowest among all options. By contrast, policies prioritising socio-cultural integration yield a substantially higher marginal mean of 53.08% (95% CI: [52.58, 53.58]). This difference reflects the causal effect of shifting from a work-based to an integration-based regularisation scheme (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Leeper et al., 2020): on average, this switch increases the probability that a policy proposal is selected by 6.37% (95% CI: [5.63, 7.10]). This is the largest effect across the five categories of migrants to be regularised, as the marginal means for the remaining three categories are all close to 50%. This indicates that the work-to-integration shift represents a comparatively large change in support within this policy dimension. Respondents clearly reject the idea that national governments should cover the costs of regularisation programmes, including administrative, staffing and bureaucratic expenses. Proposals specifying that national governments should cover these costs receive the least support (marginal mean: 45.80%; 95% CI: [45.41, 46.19]). By contrast, proposals funded through a European scheme are 5.97% more likely to be supported than those relying on national funds (95% CI: [5.39, 6.55]), and those financed by collecting fees from migrants are 6.64% more likely to be chosen (95% CI: [6.02, 7.26]).

On average, respondents express a clear preference for regularisation policies that grant short-term, revocable residence or work permits, which can be withdrawn if migrants commit a crime or when their return can be implemented. Support for permanent permits is particularly low (marginal mean: 41.75%; 95% CI: [41.31, 42.19]), increasing progressively as the duration shortens and peaking for one-year permits (marginal mean: 55.97%; 95% CI: [55.52, 56.42]). Similarly, proposals granting non-revocable permits are unpopular (marginal mean: 42.24%; 95% CI: [41.86, 42.62]). In contrast, the ability to revoke permits in the event of criminal offences receives stronger support (marginal mean: 56.80%; 95% CI: [56.42, 57.18]), followed by the ability to revoke permits when migrants become returnable (marginal mean: 50.97%; 95% CI: [50.58, 51.36]). Respondents also favour application procedures involving a high degree of state oversight. Policies that require irregular migrants to provide verified identification documents or attend an interview with immigration authorities, receive greater support than policies without such requirements (marginal mean: 44.89%; 95% CI: [44.50, 45.27]). Finally, essentially no difference was observed in the level of support between

regularisation schemes that are ad-hoc or extraordinary (marginal mean: 49.63%; 95% CI: [49.31, 49.95]) and permanent schemes that are clearly codified by law (marginal mean: 50.37%; 95% CI: [50.06, 50.67]). Figure 3 shows how these preferences vary according to respondents' political ideology (Casiraghi et al., 2024), focusing specifically on the differences in marginal means between far-right and far-left individuals (based on 21,888 observations), between far right and moderate individuals (81,216 observations), and between moderate and far left individuals (76,256 observations). Figures S14 and S20 in the Supplementary Information report the marginal means estimated separately for each of the three ideological groups.

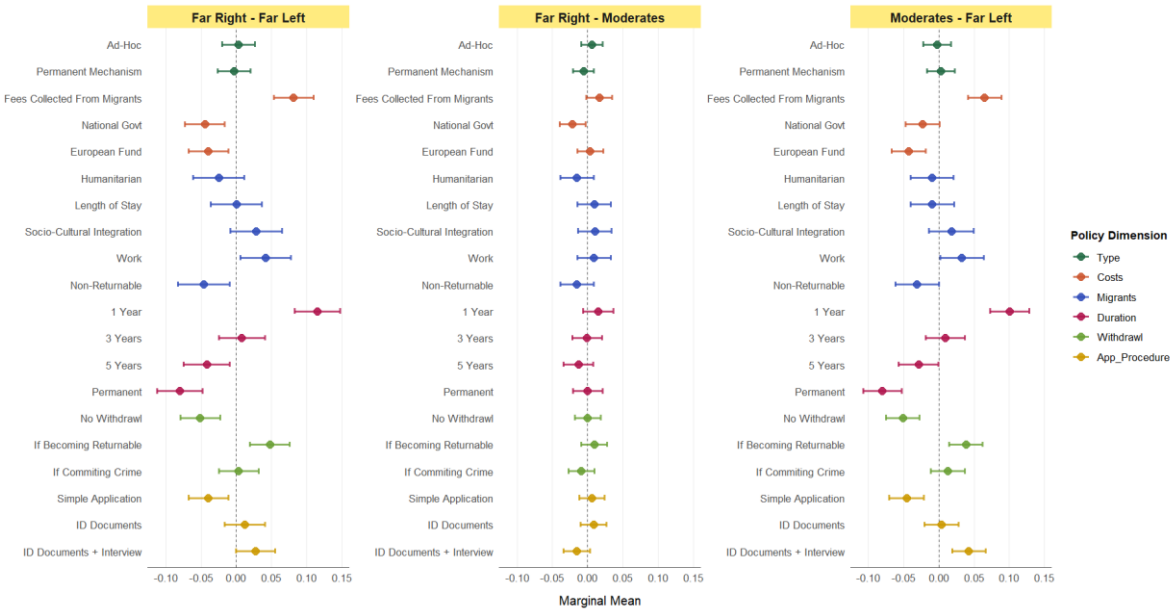


Figure 3. Regularisation policy preferences, by political ideology. Panels A-C show differences in marginal mean estimates for each policy characteristic between the following ideological groups: far right vs. far left (panel A; N = 21,888), far right vs. moderates (panel B; N = 81,216), and moderates vs. far left (panel C; N = 76,256). The second ideological group in each panel title is the comparison group. Thus, "Far Right - Far Left" shows the difference in marginal means between far-right and far-left respondents for each policy characteristic. Positive values indicate greater support among far-right respondents, while negative values indicate greater support among far-left respondents. Each dot represents the difference in marginal means for a given policy characteristic, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours differentiate policy dimensions drawn from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line at zero denotes no difference between groups.

Panel B shows that moderates and far-right respondents have similar regularisation policy preferences. The only statistically significant difference emerges in preferences for using national funds to cover costs, with far-right respondents showing slightly more negative attitudes than moderates (-2.14%; 95%CI: [-3.97, -0.32]). However, this difference is not substantively meaningful.

Panel A compares far-right and far-left respondents, while Panel C compares moderates and far left respondents. We observe that both far-right respondents and moderates favour restrictive regularisation policies. Specifically, they are more supportive of conditional, short-term, and precarious permits. For instance, both groups show substantially greater support

for permits lasting only one year (difference in marginal means relative to far left respondents: +11.51%, 95% CI: [8.25, 14.78] for far right; +10.01%, 95% CI: [7.24, 12.78] for moderates). Conversely, both groups show lower support for permanent permits (difference in marginal means relative to far left respondents: −8.03%, 95% CI: [−11.26, −4.80] for far right; −8.03%, 95% CI: [−10.78, −5.28] for moderates), and longer fixed-term permits (5 years). In terms of financing, both groups are more supportive of policies requiring migrants to pay fees than those on the far left (+8.16%, 95% CI: [5.35, 10.96] for far right; +6.49%, 95% CI: [4.11, 8.87] for moderates) and are less supportive of policies using public resources, such as national or European funds. They are also more likely to favour the withdrawal of permits when migrants can still be returned to their country of origin and are less supportive of policies lacking withdrawal mechanisms. Regarding application procedures, both far-right and moderate respondents express less support for simple application regularisation processes (difference in marginal means relative to far left respondents: -3.96%, 95% CI: [-6.80, -1.11] for far-right; -4.59%, 95% CI: [-7.03, -2.15] for moderates), and greater support for stricter procedural controls, such as the requirement of identification documents and formal interviews.

Interestingly, ideological divisions hardly determine preferences regarding the institutionalisation of regularisation policies, i.e., whether they should take the form of ad hoc measures or be embedded in permanent legislation. Finally, both far-right and moderate respondents show greater support for work-based regularisations than those on the far left (4.16%, 95% CI: [0.6, 7.76] for far-right respondents; 3.26%, 95% CI: [0.2, 6.33] for moderates), although this remains the least preferred criterion for regularisation across all ideological groups (see Figure S14 in the SI file).

Similar ideological patterns are observed among university graduates (see Extended Data Figure 3). Differences in preferences between moderates and far-right graduates are generally small and cluster around zero. By contrast, both moderates and far-right graduates express markedly more restrictive preferences than far-left graduates. They favour shorter-term and more limited access to regularisation, and prefer to allocate permits to the socio-culturally integrated.

By bootstrapping the distribution of pairwise marginal mean differences across levels of respondent characteristics (see Section C and Figures S5-S6 of the Supplementary Information), we again find that political ideology drives the greatest variation: the standard deviation of differences across ideological groups (SD = 0.033, 95% CI [0.031, 0.035]) is approximately 50% greater than that associated with the next most influential characteristic, occupation (SD = 0.022, 95% CI [0.020, 0.024]).

Addressing Non-Return: Policy Options Beyond Regularisation

We used two ranking tasks to evaluate the level of support among respondents for various policies aimed at managing non-return when regularisation does not occur. A distinction was made between cases where return could still be possible and cases where irregular stay has effectively become permanent (see Section F of the Supplementary Information). We analysed the resulting rankings using a Plackett-Luce model (Thurner et al., 2020) to estimate the relative popularity of each policy, disaggregated by political ideology. These estimates can be interpreted as the probability that a given policy is prioritized compared with all other policies (see Section C of the Supplementary Information). Had respondents within a given ideology group ranked the policies randomly, we would expect the relative popularity estimates to be uniformly distributed across the policies.

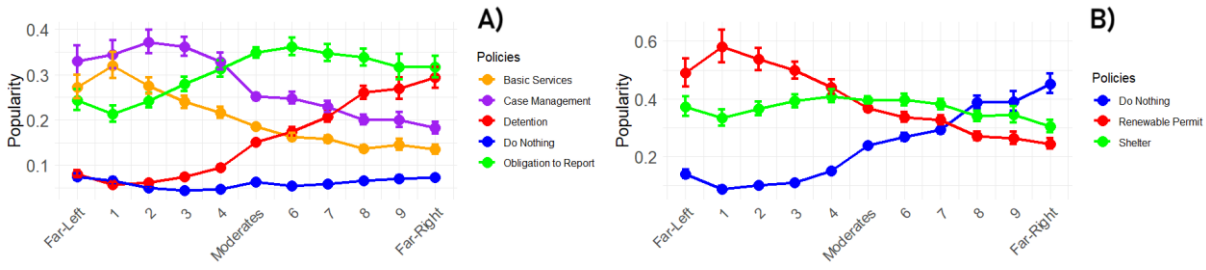


Figure 4. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, by political ideology (N = 16,301). Panel A shows preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of being returned. Panel B shows preferences for those in *de facto* permanent irregular stay. Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data.

Panel A in Figure 4 shows preferences for policies targeting irregular migrants who still have a realistic prospect of repatriation. Almost all respondents consistently reject inaction. However, those on the left of the political spectrum tend to favour supportive and non-coercive approaches, such as case management, which involves providing information sessions to help migrants explore assisted return or identify potential legal pathways to remain in the country, or the provision of basic socio-economic services, including access to employment, education, healthcare, and housing. Among left-wing respondents these options had estimated relative popularities of 33.00% (95% CI: [29.97, 36.41]) and 27.21% (95% CI: [24.70, 29.97]), respectively. Left wing respondents strongly oppose the continued use of detention centres, which migrants often experience as prison-like environments involving prolonged stays (Leerkes and Kox, 2017).

By contrast, right-wing respondents express a clear preference for more punitive and restrictive measures. Detention ranks highly among this group, with a relative popularity of 29.34% (95% CI: [27.15, 31.71]) among far-right respondents. Conversely, far-right individuals show limited support for basic services (13.48%, 95% CI: [12.51, 14.52]) and case management (18.25%, 95% CI: [16.97, 19.63]). Here, the obligation to report, a non-custodial measure requiring migrants to check in regularly with immigration authorities (e.g., weekly), receives the greatest backing at 31.70% (95% CI: [29.39, 34.18]). In the pooled sample, it is also the most popular option overall (32.79%, 95% CI: [32.26, 33.36]).

Support for several policy options varies systematically with political ideology: moving from left to right, support for mandatory reporting and detention increases, while support for case management and basic services declines. Notably, moderates again tend to align more closely with right-leaning respondents in favouring greater state control and restrictive measures. For instance, moderates favour the obligation to report, which is relatively popular at 34.85% (95% CI: [33.70, 36.05]), and express only marginally greater support for basic services than for detention. Among respondents just to the right of moderates (e.g., an ideology score of 6), detention is more popular than basic services.

Figure 4 (panel B) presents the same analysis, now focusing on policies targeting migrants in *de facto* irregular permanent stay, with no prospect of being returned to their countries of origin. Generally, left-wing respondents favour granting such migrants renewable permits that allow them to work and access basic services (relative popularity: 48.89%, 95% CI: [44.28, 53.98]). Right leaning respondents favour this option the least (relative popularity: 24.37%, 95% CI: [22.62, 26.24]).

In the ranking task, the inaction option was explicitly framed as a form of institutional abandonment, reflecting the expectation that withdrawing support may eventually induce migrants to leave the country. Institutional abandonment receives strong support from right-wing respondents, for whom it is the most popular option for non-deportable migrants, achieving a relative popularity of 45.17% (95% CI: [41.90, 48.70]). Thus, passive management strategies with deterrent value resonate strongly with right-leaning individuals when return is not feasible. Basic shelter, a minimal form of humanitarian assistance, receives around 40% support across the ideological spectrum, making it the only policy with relatively broad cross-ideological support.

Moderate respondents occupy an intermediate position, showing a preference for providing shelter to those migrants. Their relative support for renewable permits (36.69%) places them somewhat in between the ideological extremes. At the same time, however, moderates exhibit a marked increase in support for inaction as a deterrent strategy, rising to 23.78% (95% CI: [23.00, 24.59]), compared to those on the far left.

Similar patterns are observed among university graduates (see Extended Data Figure 4). Using the same procedure developed for regularisation policies, we find that variation in preferences is driven primarily by political ideology rather than socio-demographic characteristics (Figures S7-S10 of the Supplementary Information). In the first ranking task, the average standard deviation of pairwise differences between popularity estimates is 0.090 (95% CI: [0.086, 0.095]), more than twice that of the next factor, occupation. A similar pattern emerges in the second ranking task (average for ideology = 0.1476, 95% CI: [0.1403, 0.1591]).

The Effect of Political Communication

Early in the survey, respondents were randomly presented with one of two mathematically equivalent statements regarding the capacity of European countries to repatriate irregular migrants subject to return orders: “Able to repatriate 20%” (a more positive frame emphasising successful implementation) or “Unable to repatriate 80%” (a more negative frame emphasising non-implementation or failure). Figure 5 (panel A) shows that compared with the more positive frame, the more negative frame increased the perceived severity of irregular migration as a problem by approximately 0.186 points on a 0–10 scale (95% CI: [0.098, 0.261]). On this scale, 0 indicates that respondents consider irregular migration “no problem at all”, whereas 10 indicates that they consider it “a very big problem”. While the effect is statistically significant, it is substantively small. Notably, overall attitudes remain strongly negative, with mean scores above 7 in both conditions. The difference also does not translate into meaningful differences in policy preferences in subsequent tasks. Panels B, C, and D of Figure 5 show that the marginal means for different features of regularisation policies, as well as the relative popularity of policies in the ranking tasks, do not significantly or substantively vary based on the framing to which respondents were exposed.

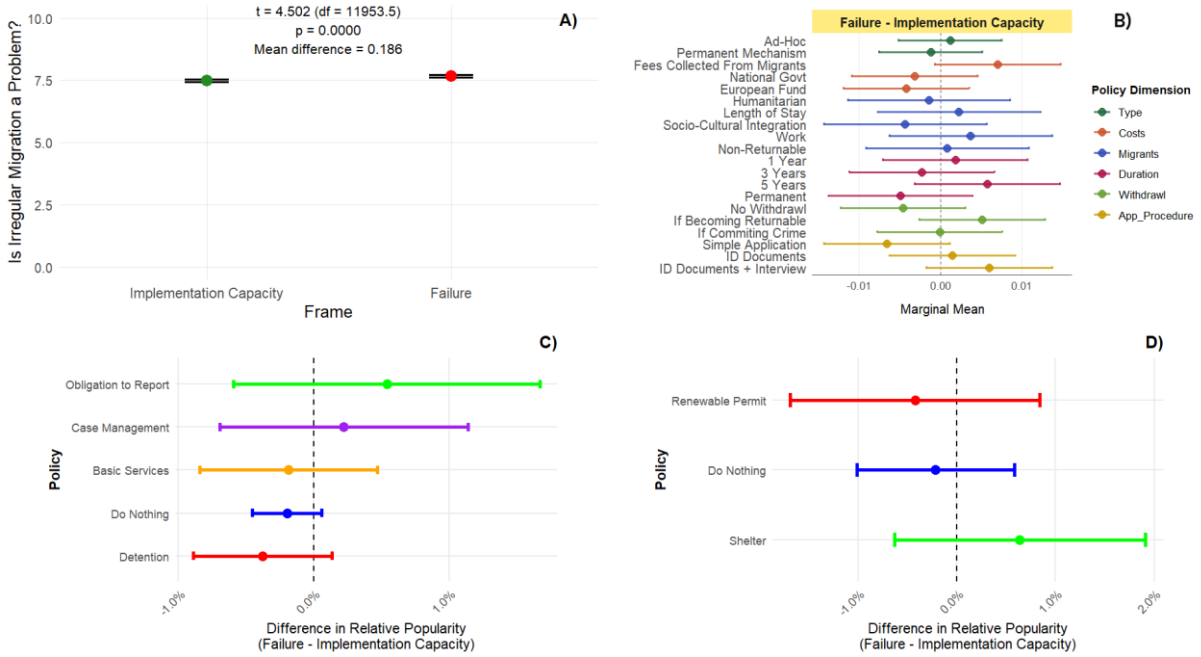


Figure 5. Effects of positive versus negative framing of return outcomes on attitudes and policy preferences.. Panel A shows differences in mean attitudes towards irregular migrants in response to the question "Is irregular migration a problem?" ('0': not a problem at all, '10': a very big problem; N = 16,301). Panel B shows differences in marginal means across framing conditions for a given policy feature, with standard errors clustered at the respondent level (N = 260,816). Panels C and D (N = 16,301) present the differences in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across the framing conditions, with the 95% confidence intervals being estimated using a Plackett-Luce model.

Variation Across Countries and Attitudinal Groups

While our primary focus here was on disaggregating preferences by political ideology and socio-demographic characteristics, the Extended Data section reports selected analyses by country. Specifically, Extended Data Figure 5 shows the geographical distribution of the probability of preferring forced to assisted voluntary return across the countries included in the study. Extended Data Figure 6 reports the average marginal component effect (AMCE; Hainmueller et al., 2014) for two key regularisation policy dimensions. Panel A shows the effect on the probability of a regularisation policy being chosen when the financing scheme shifts from national to European funds. Panel B shows the effect when the eligibility criterion changes from work-based regularisation to granting permits to socio-culturally integrated migrants. Extended Data Figure 7 shows the relative popularity of detention (panel A) and basic services (panel B) in the first ranking task. Extended Data Figure 8 presents relative support for the three policy responses to non-returnable migrants in a *de facto* permanent state of irregular residence (Figure 4, panel B).

Overall, two consistent regional patterns emerge. Respondents from Central European countries, such as France, Germany, and Austria, tend to display more restrictive policy preferences across the range of policies examined. By contrast, respondents from Mediterranean countries—particularly Spain and Greece—tend to express more inclusive

attitudes and stronger relative support for regularisation policies financed through European rather than national funds.

Finally, we examined whether policy preferences vary with respondents' general attitudes towards migrants, measured prior to the choice tasks. Reanalyses of Figures 1–4 (Figures S44–S47) reveal a consistent pattern. Respondents with more negative attitudes towards migrants are more likely to prefer forced over assisted voluntary return and to favour more restrictive attributes in regularisation policies. They also show greater relative support for restrictive responses to non-return, including detention, reporting obligations and, for migrants with no prospect of return, institutional abandonment. Conversely, respondents with more positive attitudes are more likely to favour assisted voluntary return, less restrictive regularisation policies, and supportive responses such as basic services and case management. Overall, policy preferences are systematically associated with respondents' pre-existing attitudes towards migrants.

Discussion

European governments issue a considerable number of return orders, but a minority is implemented, due to various constrains and trade-offs with other European public policy objectives, especially on the terrain of human rights, labour market needs, and international relations (Gibney, 2008; Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023; Torres Chedraui et al., 2025). Consequently, governments must also address the issue of how to manage the ongoing presence of individuals who remain despite being ordered to leave. We define this broader issue as the 'non-return problem'. Our survey of 16,301 respondents in 13 European countries examines public preferences regarding possible responses to this problem, as well as which approach to return enforcement should be prioritised.

The findings reveal a clear overall preference for coercive, restrictive, and tightly controlled approaches. On average, respondents favour forced return over assisted voluntary return as the main means of enforcing return orders, and they prefer highly selective regularisation schemes offering short-term, conditional permits over schemes providing more secure pathways to legal status. Eligibility for regularisation is more strongly associated with perceived socio-cultural integration than with employment or humanitarian considerations. Respondents also prefer regularisation policies that are funded by migrants or European institutions, rather than by their own national governments. Support for restrictive responses extends to the governance of continued irregular presence in cases of non-return and non-regularisation, including detention, mandatory reporting to authorities and, among some groups, withdrawal of institutional assistance. These results do not establish whether respondents consider these policies to be feasible or effective. Existing research points to substantial structural constraints on large-scale return (Noll, 1999; Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020; Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023; Torres Chedraui et al., 2025), but the survey did not ask respondents whether they were aware of the practical constraints on forced return or the underlying policy trade-offs. We therefore do not know whether such knowledge would have influenced their choices. Consequently, the central finding is not that citizens knowingly support infeasible measures. Rather, public preferences favour coercive responses, while governments face persistent constraints and competing objectives that limit their ability to implement such policies on a large scale.

Fundamental rights constitute one important constraint. European return law has traditionally prioritised voluntary departure over coercive removal, while forced return remains subject to fundamental-rights protections (Schmid, 2022; Pahladsingh, 2025; European Commission, 2026). These include the principle of non-refoulement and rights to effective judicial review, while coercive measures must be proportionate and used only as a last resort. Practical obstacles include difficulties in establishing identity and obtaining travel documents, resistance by migrants, and limited detention capacity (Noll, 1999; European Commission, 2017a, 2017b; Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020). Finally, return objectives may conflict with other policy objectives, including trade interests, security partnerships, labour-market needs, and diplomatic relations (Gibney, 2008; Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023; Torres Chedraui et al., 2025).

Consistent with previous research on migration attitudes (Berman, 2021; Vranceanu et al., 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024, return governance preferences vary sharply according to ideology). Respondents on the left are more supportive of assisted voluntary return, more accessible and stable legal status, and basic rights, information, and shelter for migrants who cannot be returned. In contrast, those on the right favour deportation, short-term permits, detention, reporting requirements and withdrawal of institutional support. Moderate respondents are particularly important: across many outcomes, they align more closely with far-right respondents, resulting in an overall distribution that favours restrictive responses. Similar patterns among university graduates and across different sociodemographic groups suggest that support for restrictive responses is not confined to lower-educated or socioeconomically disadvantaged groups**.** Examining moderates more closely, Figures S2 and S3 of the SI reveal that they tend to occupy an ideological position between the two extremes represented by far-left and far-right respondents on several issues. These include the extent to which they self-identify as progressive or conservative, their level of nationalism, and their general attitude towards migrants. This pattern suggests that the moderate category occupies a meaningful position within the ideological space rather than representing an absence of coherent or systematic political attitudes (Fowler et al., 2023). The political consequences of this asymmetry may extend beyond numerical distributions. While right-leaning respondents and moderates together constitute a majority, restrictive preferences are more likely to be politically salient among the former than inclusive preferences are among the latter (Kustov, 2023). Consequently, governments may respond disproportionately to the preferences of constituencies that are more likely to reward visible restrictive action and punish perceived inaction.

Sustained political rhetoric about border control, sovereignty and institutional failure may have broadened support for coercive migration policies beyond the radical right, in an 'oil-spill' fashion (Schain, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; DellaPosta, 2020). Populist and radical right-wing actors often depict irregular migration as evidence of government incompetence or unwillingness to control borders. The sustained circulation of such narratives may have amplified concerns about irregular migration among adjacent segments of the population. Consistent with this possibility, politically moderate respondents report substantial concern about irregular migration (7.61 as average score on the 'Is irregular migration a problem?" scale; 95% CI: [7.55, 7.68]). However, this interpretation remains tentative as a cross-sectional survey cannot determine whether political rhetoric caused these preferences, whether politicians responded to pre-existing concerns, or whether both processes reinforce one another. Future studies should be specifically designed to assess the mechanisms underlying widespread support for such restrictive policies. .

The combination of the distribution and salience of public preferences and the dominant political framing of irregular migration may create an *expectation trap*.. Governments that repeatedly define irregular migration primarily as an enforcement issue may reinforce the expectation that return is the default, fully implementable response. The incentive to do so may be particularly strong when restrictive preferences are held by a large and politically engaged group of people. However, when structural constraints prevent governments from delivering returns on the promised scale, the resulting gap may generate demands for stronger enforcement rather than greater acceptance of alternative responses. Political responsiveness may therefore become self-perpetuating: enforcement-oriented policies and communication both respond to and perpetuate expectations that governments cannot fully fulfil.

Our findings differ in important respects from those of a recent Belgian survey experiment on public support for regularisation (Lafleur & Marfouk, 2026). The Belgian study found majority support for regularising undocumented migrants who were employed, particularly those working in sectors facing labour shortages, whereas regularization of migrants "who developed social ties" in Belgium and unconditional regularisation attracted substantially less support. In our experiment, by contrast, employment in the informal economy was the least preferred basis for regularisation, while socio-cultural integration received the strongest support. These differences should be interpreted cautiously because the studies examine different populations and operationalise eligibility criteria differently. Whereas Lafleur and Marfouk asked about the regularisation of undocumented migrants generally, our experiment concerned migrants who had already received a return order and whose return had not been implemented. Moreover, their measure of "social ties" is conceptually distinct from our explicit measure of socio-cultural integration. The comparison therefore suggests that public support for regularisation may depend not only on migrants' characteristics, but also on whether regularisation is presented as a response to irregular residence generally or to non-return following an unsuccessful return process. .The comparison therefore raises the possibility that public support for regularisation depends not only on migrants' characteristics, but also on how the underlying policy problem is defined. Our framing experiment tests a relatively subtle contrast between two mathematically equivalent presentations of the same return outcome and therefore does not capture the potentially stronger effects of substantively different elite frames. Future comparative experiments could examine whether framing irregular residence as an enforcement problem, a labour-market issue, a humanitarian concern, or a broader governance challenge systematically affects policy preferences. Future research could also examine more directly the mechanisms underlying return governance preferences, including perceptions of policy effectiveness and costs, fairness considerations, and the harms associated with enforcement (Gerver et al., 2023), as well as how preferences for regularisation and other responses to persistent non-return vary with the number of migrants affected, thereby distinguishing preferences for particular policy instruments from preferences concerning their scale.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. First, the survey provides a cross-sectional snapshot and measures stated preferences rather than their salience or the trade-offs that respondents would accept when policies explicitly incur fiscal, diplomatic, legal or humanitarian costs. Preferences may also depend on migrants' origin, religion, family circumstances, length of residence, employment, or route into irregularity (Bansak et al., 2016, 2023). For instance, respondents who perceived irregular migrants as primarily

originating from the Middle East or North Africa expressed stronger support for restrictive policies (see Figures S39-S42 of the Supplementary Information), but the underlying mechanisms require direct testing.

Moreover, some design choices could be reassessed in future iterations of the study. For instance, the current design does not measure whether respondents prefer regularisation over return enforcement, or directly compare regularisation *tout court* with alternative approaches to implementing return decisions. This design reflects the EU legislative framework, under which irregularly staying third-country nationals who become visible to the immigration authorities are generally subject to a return decision. We could, for example, have added a question after the regularisation conjoint task asking respondents to rate their overall support for regularisation on a scale from 0 to 10. Although this judgement would have depended on the 16 policy proposals that each respondent encountered, randomising these proposals would have allowed us to obtain an informative measure of overall support across the sample. Furthermore, while we aimed to measure whether respondents would prefer their country to prioritise forced or assisted voluntary return in enforcing return decisions, these options are not necessarily mutually exclusive; a country may invest in assisted voluntary return but still resort to deportation once initial attempts have failed.

Finally, the study cannot determine how public preferences interact with policy. Instead, its contribution is more specific: restrictive preferences are widespread and coexist with institutional conditions that limit large-scale return. Together, these conditions constitute Europe's impasse on irregular migration: governments face — and may themselves reinforce — pressure to intensify enforcement, even though structural constraints and competing objectives limit what return policies can achieve.

Methods

Our survey was administered by Bilendi in the following 13 EU+ countries: Austria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (see Section A of the SI). The countries were selected based on the size of their irregular migrant populations (Eurostat, 2024), the historical significance of the phenomenon, variation in enforcement approaches (Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020), and their proximity to major migration corridors or routes (e.g., Croatia along the Balkan route). Each national sample comprised around 1,250 respondents, for a total sample size of N = 16,301 (see Table S1 in the Supplementary Information for country-specific breakdowns). The sample is representative of national populations with respect to gender, age, and region of residence. To further improve external validity, we applied entropy balancing (Hainmueller, 2012) to generate weights that refine the marginal distributions of gender and age and adjust for educational attainment, using official national benchmarks (Bansak et al., 2016, 2023). All analyses reported in the main manuscript are based on these weighted data. For robustness, comparisons with unweighted results are reported in Section D of the Supplementary Information (Figures S11-S16) and yield substantively similar findings.

Respondents were given the option to "prefer not to answer" when asked to self-report their political ideology on a scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right). A total of 947 respondents (5.8% of the sample) selected this option. To retain information from these observations, we employed a machine learning-based imputation approach (Jerez et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2023). Specifically, we divided the dataset into an "observed" subset (with ideology responses) and a "missing"

subset (those who selected “Prefer not to answer”). We trained an XGBoost model on the observed subset, using a wide range of attitudinal and socio-demographic predictors, to capture non-linear relationships with political ideology (Section A of the Supplementary Information). The trained model was then used to predict the political ideology of respondents in the missing subset. As a robustness check, we conducted additional analyses (Figures S17-S36 of the Supplementary Information) that (a) excluded cases with missing responses, (b) used an alternative measure of ideology i.e., a composite index combining self-reported nationalism and progressive-conservative orientations, (c) used multivariate imputation by chained equations (MICE), with either predictive mean matching or ordinal logistic regression as alternative imputation methods. The results were consistent across all specifications.

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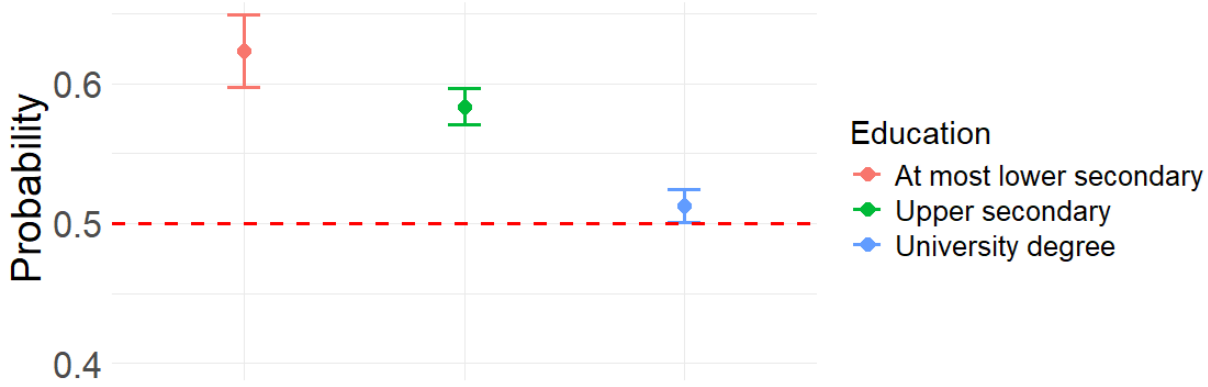
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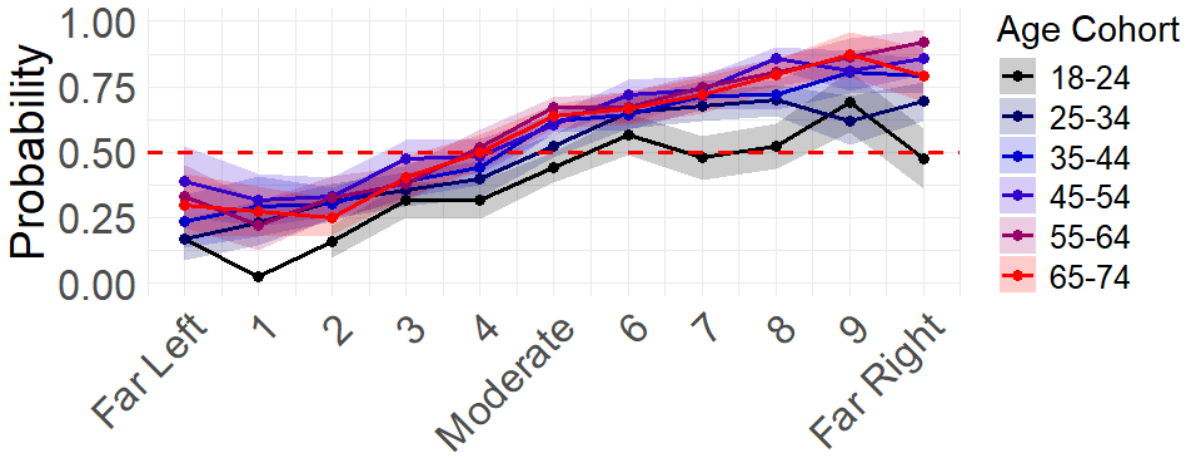
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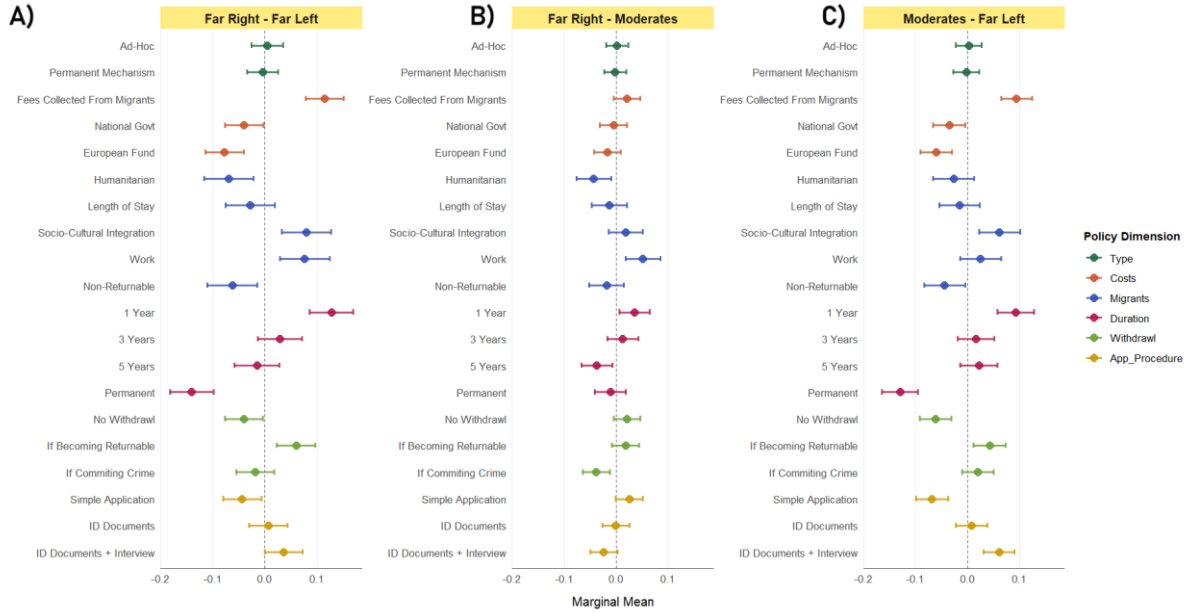
Extended Data Figures



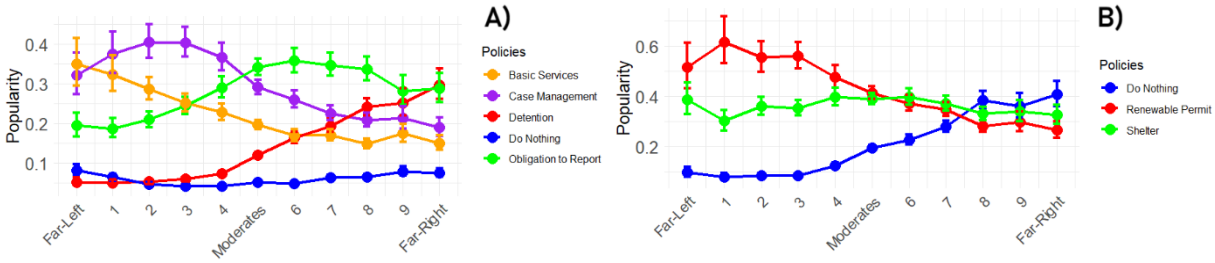
Extended Data Figure 1. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return across educational attainment groups (N = 16,301). The red dashed line at 50% indicates indifference between the two return policy options. Error bars denote 95% confidence intervals.



Extended Data Figure 2. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return by political ideology and age cohort (N = 16,301). The red dashed line at 50% marks the point of indifference between the two return policy options. Shaded ribbons indicate 95% confidence intervals.



Extended Data Figure 3. Preferences for regularisation policy characteristics among university graduates, by political ideology. Panels A-C show the differences in marginal mean estimates for each policy feature between the following ideological groups: far right vs. far left (panel A; N = 10,064 conjoint observations), far right vs. moderates (panel B; N = 32,768 conjoint observations), and moderates vs. far left (panel C; N = 31,088 conjoint observations). Each dot represents the difference in marginal means for a given policy feature, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours differentiate policy dimensions drawn from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line at zero denotes no difference between groups.

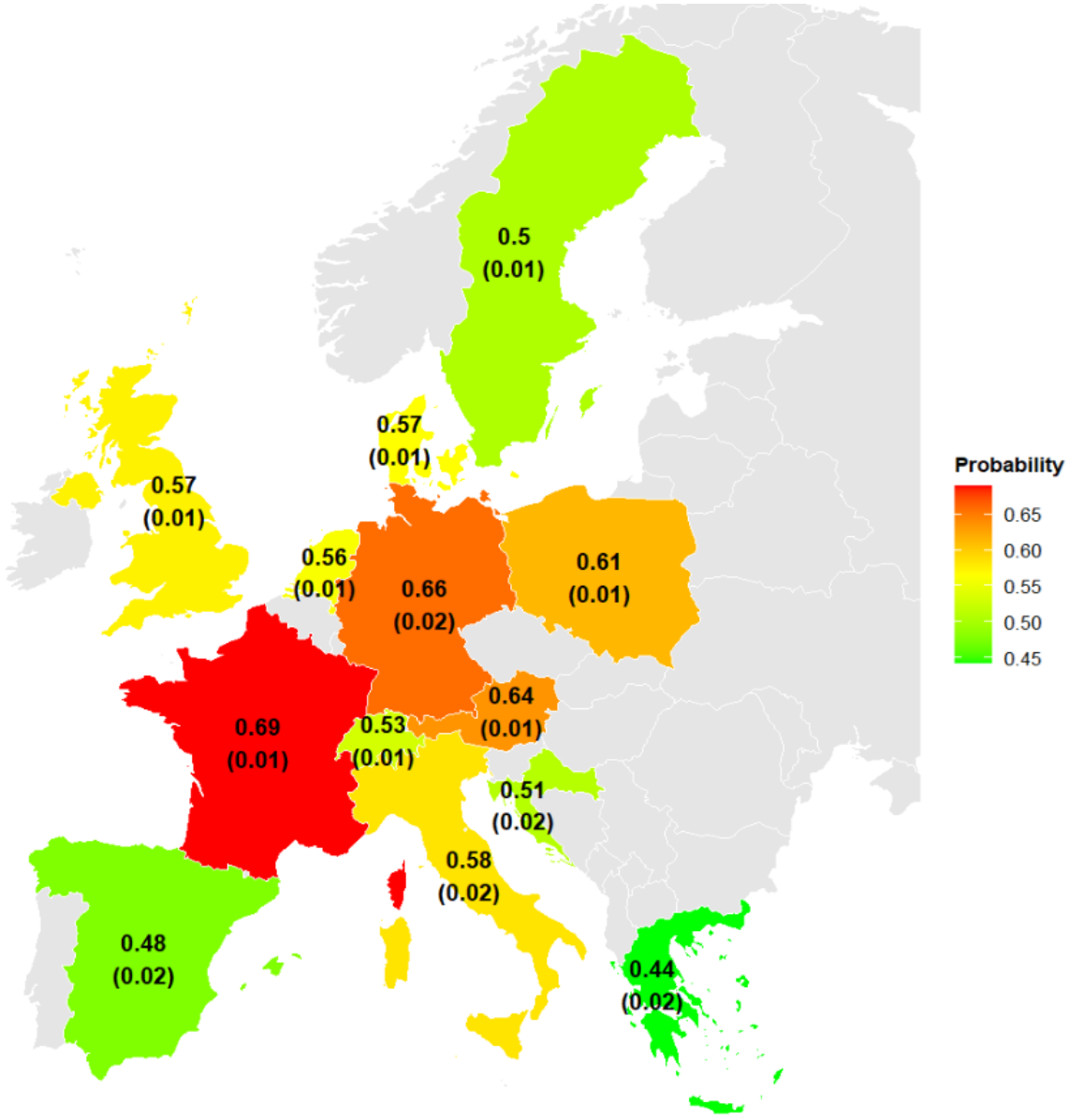


Extended Data Figure 4. Preferences for policies to manage non-return among university graduates, by political ideology (N = 7,630). Panel A shows preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of being returned, and Panel B shows preferences for those in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay. Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data.

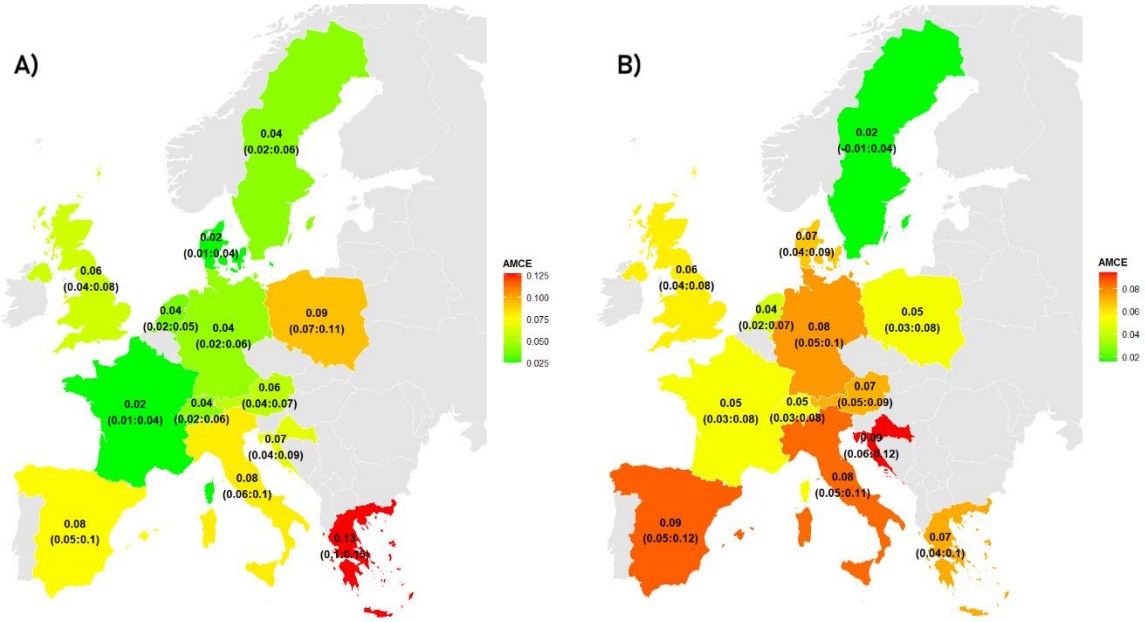
Extended Data Figures 5-8 present selected country-specific results. Extended Data Figure 5 reports the probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return by country. Extended Data Figure 6 shows the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE; Hainmueller et al., 2014) for two key policy dimensions. Panel A shows the effect on the

probability of a regularisation policy being chosen when the financing scheme shifts from national to European funds. Panel B shows the effect when the eligibility criterion changes from work-based regularisation to granting permits to the socio-culturally integrated. Extended Data Figure 7 shows the relative popularity of detention (Panel A) and basic services (Panel B) for non-returning migrants who still have a reasonable prospect of return, while Extended Data Figure 8 presents relative support for the three policy responses to non-returnable migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay (Figure 4, Panel B).

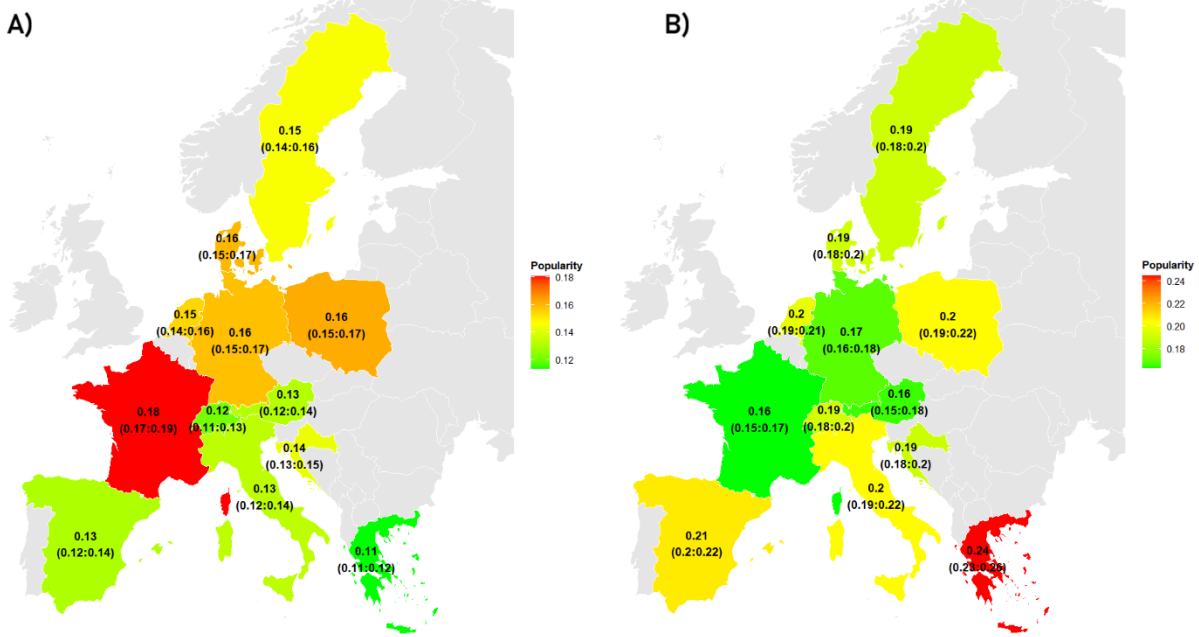
Overall, two consistent regional patterns emerge. Respondents from Central European countries such as France, Germany, and Austria tend to display, on average, more restrictive policy preferences across the full range of policies examined. By contrast, respondents from Mediterranean countries — particularly Spain and Greece — consistently display more inclusive attitudes and express stronger relative support for regularisation policies financed through European rather than national funds.



Extended Data Figure 5. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return, by country (N = 16,301). Standard errors are reported in parentheses. The colour scale ranges from green to red, with lower probabilities shown in green and higher probabilities in red.

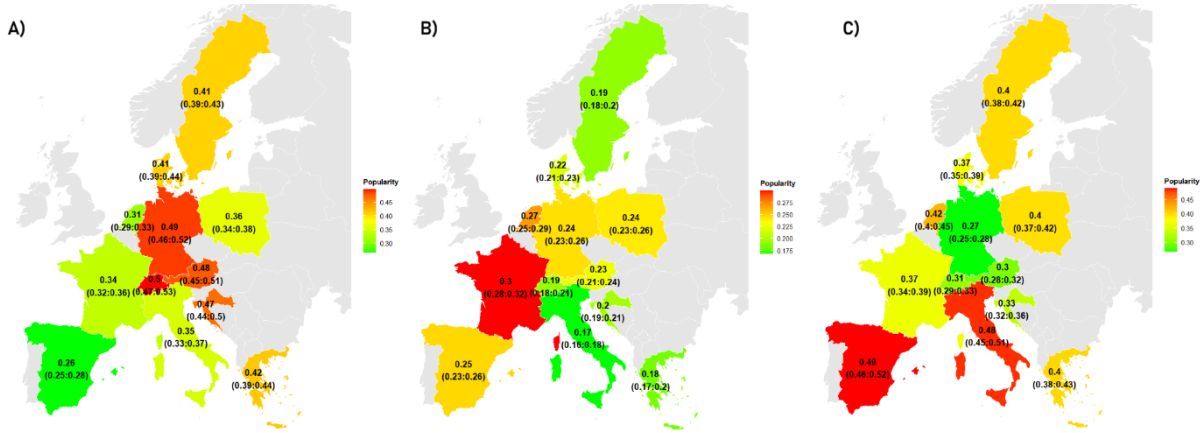


Extended Data Figure 6. Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) by country for two regularisation policy dimensions: shifting from a scheme financed by national governments to one financed through a European mechanism (Panel A), and shifting from a work-based regularisation policy to one granting permits on socio-cultural grounds (Panel B). 95% confidence intervals, based on standard errors clustered at the individual level, are reported in parentheses. The colour scale ranges from green to red, with lower AMCEs shown in green and higher AMCEs in red. In Panel A, the marginal effect of moving from national to European financing is stronger for respondents in Mediterranean countries, whereas in Panel B, with the exception of Sweden, all countries display a greater preference for socio-cultural integration over work-based regularisation. N = 260,816.



Extended Data Figure 7. Relative popularity of two policy options for non-returning irregular migrants who still have a reasonable prospect of return, by country. Panel A shows the relative popularity

of placing such migrants in detention centres, while Panel B shows the relative popularity of granting them access to basic socio-economic rights and services. 95% confidence intervals (in parentheses) are derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranking data. The colour scale ranges from green to red, with lower relative popularity shown in green and higher relative popularity in red. N = 16,301.



Extended Data Figure 8. Relative popularity of three policy options for non-returning irregular migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay, by country. Panel A shows the relative popularity of granting access to dedicated shelters; Panel B shows the relative popularity of taking no action, hoping that migrants would eventually leave the country; and Panel C shows the relative popularity of providing a renewable permit granting access to work and social services. 95% confidence intervals (in parentheses) are derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranking data. Because all three options of the second ranking task are shown (see also Figure 4, Panel B), the relative popularities for each country sum to 1. The colour scale ranges from green to red, with lower relative popularity shown in green and higher relative popularity in red. N = 16,301.

Appendix

This document is structured as follows. Section A provides details on the sample, the weighting scheme and the data preprocessing steps. Section B presents an overview of the survey design. Section C provides further details on the statistical models used to analyse the data presented in the main manuscript, the Extended Data section, and this Supplementary Information. Section D reports the results of the robustness checks and sensitivity analyses referenced in the main text. Section E presents additional analyses, including (i) the construction of an index of general attitudes towards migrants and the disaggregation of the main manuscript's analyses by this index, (ii) analyses disaggregated by issue importance, as measured by responses to Q11 ('Is irregular migration a problem?'), and (iii) an analysis of choices in the conjoint and ranking tasks disaggregated by respondents' choices between forced and assisted voluntary return in the first choice task. Finally, Section F includes the full questionnaire and the coding of all survey items.

The questionnaire was translated and back-translated into all languages spoken in each country. For Switzerland, versions were prepared in French, Italian, and German. When a language was shared across countries (e.g., German), translations were adapted to reflect country-specific linguistic nuances.

Section A: Sample, Weighting Scheme and Data Pre-Processing

The survey was administered by Bilendi between March and April 2025 across 13 European countries, 11 of which are members of the European Union (EU). The countries included Austria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Country selection was guided by the following criteria: (i) the size of both the stocks and flows of irregular migrants (Eurostat, 2024; Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024); (ii) historical relevance and the long-standing policy responses to irregular migration (Baldwin-Edwards & Kraler, 2009); (iii) location along key migration routes, such as the Mediterranean and Balkan corridors; and (iv) various post-arrival enforcement regimes (Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020). The selected countries also vary in terms of their geographical and demographic characteristics, encompassing both larger and smaller states, as well as border, coastal and inland countries (Bansak et al., 2023).

The 11 EU countries and Switzerland share a common legislative framework, the *EU Return Directive*[1], which regulates how states organise the return of irregular migrants and establishes the legal foundations for related measures, such as regularisation and detention, along with the associated safeguards. The United Kingdom operates under its own legal framework on irregular migration, the '*Illegal Migration Act 2023*'[2]. The questionnaire wording and related materials were adapted accordingly (see Section E).

The survey included approximately 1,250 respondents per country (see Table S1), yielding a total sample of 16,301 individuals. The sampling scheme was designed to be representative of each country's population in terms of age, gender and region of residence. The median interview duration was 11 minutes (first quartile: 8 minutes; third quartile: 16 minutes; IQR =

[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2008/115/oj/eng
[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/illegal-migration-bill

8 minutes). The survey design and questionnaire were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan (protocol no. 107/24, 14 October 2024). A pre-analysis plan, including details on the survey design, questionnaire, power analysis, and planned statistical models, was preregistered and is publicly available at: https://osf.io/mpujg/overview?view_only=3ffbf9771da2489d97458365238b29ba

COUNTRY	N. RESPONDENTS	MEDIAN AGE	% OF MALES
AUSTRIA	1,251	46	49.40
CROATIA	1,254	48	49.28
DENMARK	1,251	46	50.76
FRANCE	1,252	46	48.72
GERMANY	1,249	47	50.44
GREECE	1,255	48	50.36
ITALY	1,252	48	49.68
NETHERLANDS	1,247	46	50.28
POLAND	1,252	45	49.28
SPAIN	1,274	47.5	48.98
SWEDEN	1,252	46	51.11
SWITZERLAND	1,249	46	50.84
UNITED KINGDOM	1,263	45	50.12

Table S1: Number of respondents, median age, and percentage of males, by country.

To improve the study's external validity, we used entropy balancing techniques (Hainmueller, 2012) to generate weights that refine the marginal distributions of gender and age and adjust for educational attainment, using official country-level statistics (Bansak et al., 2016, 2023). As is common in surveys and online panels, the unweighted sample was somewhat skewed toward younger and, particularly, more highly educated respondents (Tourangeau et al., 2013). The *Replication Notebook* reports the target marginal distributions for age, gender, and education used in the entropy balancing optimisation routine. We used the most recent data sources available, including national statistical offices for age and gender, and the *OECD – Education at a Glance* for educational attainment.

Age was recoded into six cohorts (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65-74 years) to enable balancing by cohort. Educational attainment was standardised across countries by mapping national degree titles to five categories (see Section E), and subsequently collapsed into three categories: (i) *At most lower secondary education* (no formal education, elementary school, or lower secondary degree), (ii) *Upper secondary education*, and (iii) *University degree* (at least a bachelor's degree). Figure S1 shows the distribution of the normalised weights obtained from the entropy balancing procedure (raw weights divided by their mean). The median weight was 0.93, with a 95% range from 0.18 to 2.4. All analyses reported in the main manuscript are based on these weights. For robustness, comparisons with unweighted results are reported in

Section D. The *Replication Notebook* also reports diagnostic checks, as well as the country-specific weights and effective sample sizes (ESS) generated by the entropy balancing routine.

Political ideology was measured using the standard left-right self-placement question adopted in major surveys such as the *European Social Survey* and the *European Values Survey* (see also Casiraghi et al., 2024): *"In politics we often talk about 'left' and 'right'. On a scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right), where would you place your own political views?"* (see Section E). Respondents could also select '99', corresponding to *"I prefer not to specify".* Among the 16,301 respondents, 947 (5.8%) selected this option.

To address item nonresponse, we used a machine-learning-based imputation approach (Jerez et al., 2010; Ramosaj et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023) to predict missing political ideology values based on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and their answers to other questions about political attitudes and views towards migrants. For robustness, Section D reports all main weighted analyses repeated after excluding respondents who opted not to disclose their political ideology ("filtered" analyses), as well as performed using multivariate imputation by chained equations (MICE) as a conventional alternative imputation framework (van Buuren and Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). We also implemented an alternative, non-imputed index of ideology, computed as the mean of items Q2 and Q3 (see Section E), which capture respondents' positions on a progressive-conservative scale (0 = strongly progressive; 10 = strongly conservative) and a nationalism proxy, respectively. Respondents were required to provide an answer for these items, as no "*I prefer not to specify*" option was available (see Section E).

Regarding the machine-learning-based imputation procedure, we first split the dataset into two subsets: a training set containing respondents with observed left-right political ideology, and a target set with missing responses on this question. We trained an XGBoost model to learn the relationships between socio-demographic variables, such as age (continuous), gender (binary), educational attainment and occupation (categorical), a set of survey items capturing political ideology and attitudes towards migrants in general and irregular migrants in particular (Q3-Q9, Q11, and Q12; see Section E and the *Replication Notebook*), all treated as continuous variables on a 0-10 scale, with political ideology, our outcome variable (0 = left, 10 = right), which was also treated as continuous. The model was trained to minimise the root mean squared error (RMSE). The maximum depth of each decision tree was set to 5, the learning rate to 0.1, and the number of sequential trees fitted to 150.

Next, we applied the trained XGBoost model to the subset of respondents with missing left-right ideology, using the same socio-demographic and attitudinal variables as input. The model produced a predicted continuous political placement for each respondent, which was subsequently rounded to the nearest integer. Figure S2 shows the distribution of the predicted continuous values obtained from this machine-learning imputation procedure. The median predicted score was 5.040 (95% interval: [2.98; 7.78]).

As a robustness check, we also performed MICE using two alternative imputation methods: Predictive Mean Matching (PMM) and Ordinal Logistic Regression (OLogit). We used the same set of predictors as in the XGBoost imputation procedure. This allowed us to assess the robustness of our results under two alternative treatments of the 0-10 political ideology scale:

as a continuous variable using PMM and as an ordinal categorical variable with 11 categories using OLogit. For each alternative imputation method, we generated 30 imputed datasets, each containing the full sample of 16,301 respondents. As a final step in the pre-processing phase, we verified that respondents who either reported or were predicted to report '5' on the political ideology scale were genuine moderates with broadly centrist positions across issues and attitudinal domains, rather than extremists in disguise or respondents answering at random (Fowler et al., 2023). To this end, we compared the distributions of these respondents with those who self-identified as being on the far left or far right, as well as with those who were classified as *left or right moderates* (i.e., respondents who reported or were predicted to report either '4' or '6'), across several attitudinal and socio-demographic variables. Specifically, we examined boxplots for the progressive-conservative scale (Q2; Figures S3 and S4, Panel A), a proxy for nationalism (Q3; Figures S3 and S4, Panel B; higher values indicate more nationalistic attitudes), an index of general attitudes towards migrants (sum of Q6-Q9; Section E; Figures S3 and S4, Panel C; higher values indicate more positive attitudes) and age (Figures S3 and S4, Panel D).

These comparisons were performed for both the filtered sample (excluding respondents who answered "*I prefer not to specify*" to the political ideology question, see Figure S3) and the full sample (including the rounded imputed values from Figure S2; see Figure S4). Overall, moderates closely resembled those reporting '4' or '6' and differed markedly from extremists. On average, moderates fell squarely between far-left and far-right respondents on the progressive conservative scale: they were more conservative than far left respondents, but less conservative than far right respondents. They were also more nationalistic than far left respondents, but less than far right respondents, and they held more negative attitudes towards migrants than far left respondents, but had more positive attitudes than far right respondents. No significant differences in age were observed.

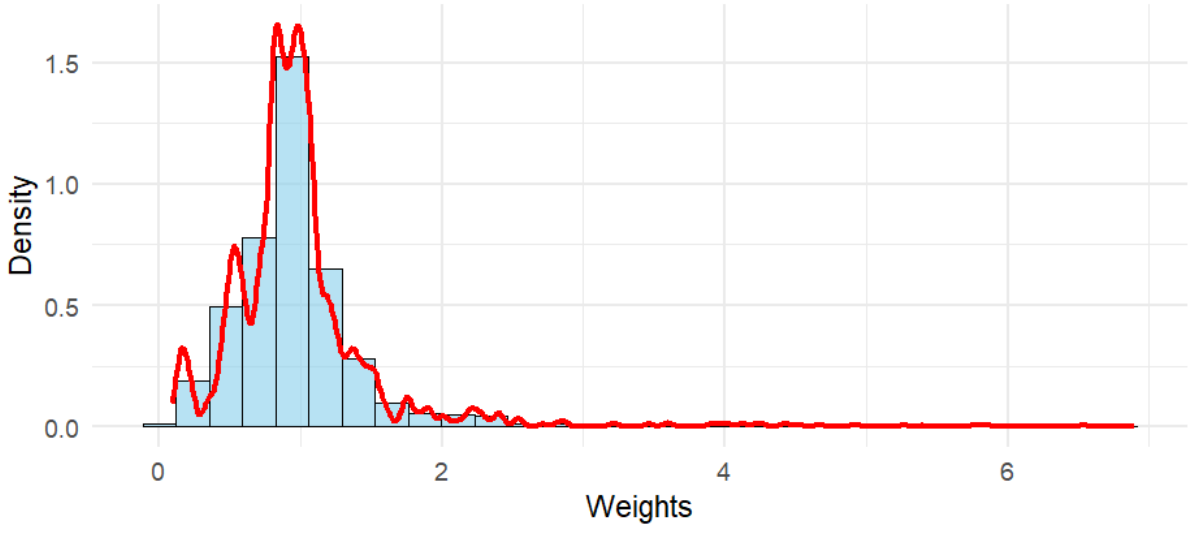


Figure S1. Histogram (light blue) with overlaid kernel density estimate (KDE, red) of the normalised weights obtained from entropy balancing. These weights aligned the sample marginal distributions of

respondents by gender, age cohort and educational attainment with the corresponding country-level distributions from official statistics. For details, please refer to the *Replication Notebook*.

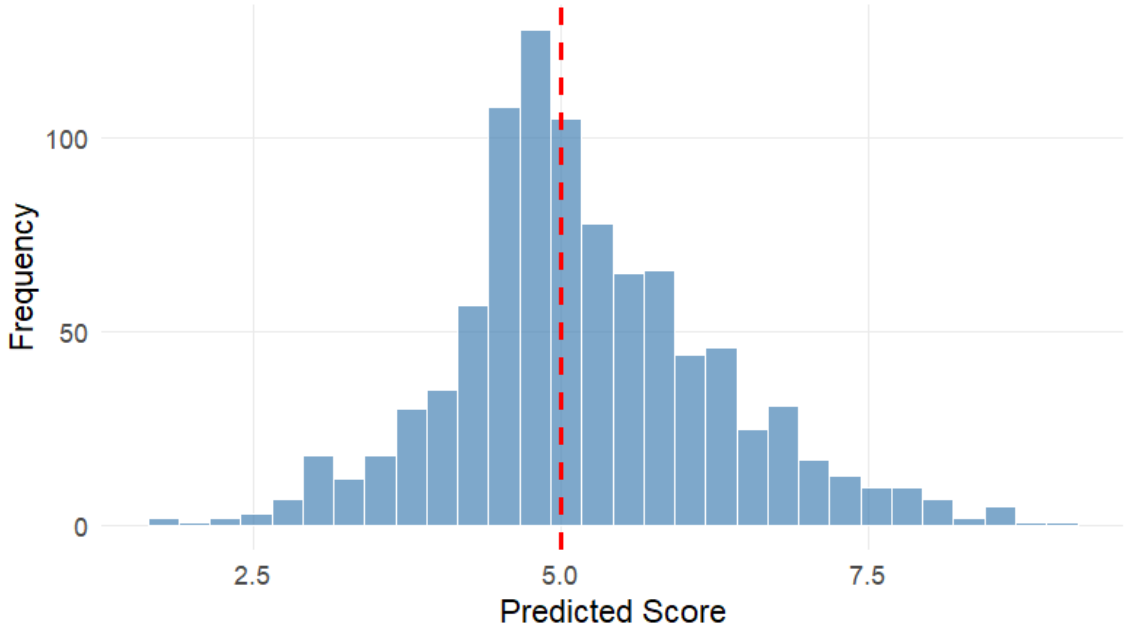


Figure S2. Histogram of predicted left-right political ideology scores from the trained XGBoost model for respondents who opted not to specify their position in the original survey. Predictions were conditional on socio-demographic and attitudinal variables (see the *Replication Notebook* for details). The vertical red dashed line indicates a score of 5, representing "moderates", the modal category in the sample (Figure 1A, top panel in the main manuscript). Predicted scores were subsequently rounded to the nearest integer.

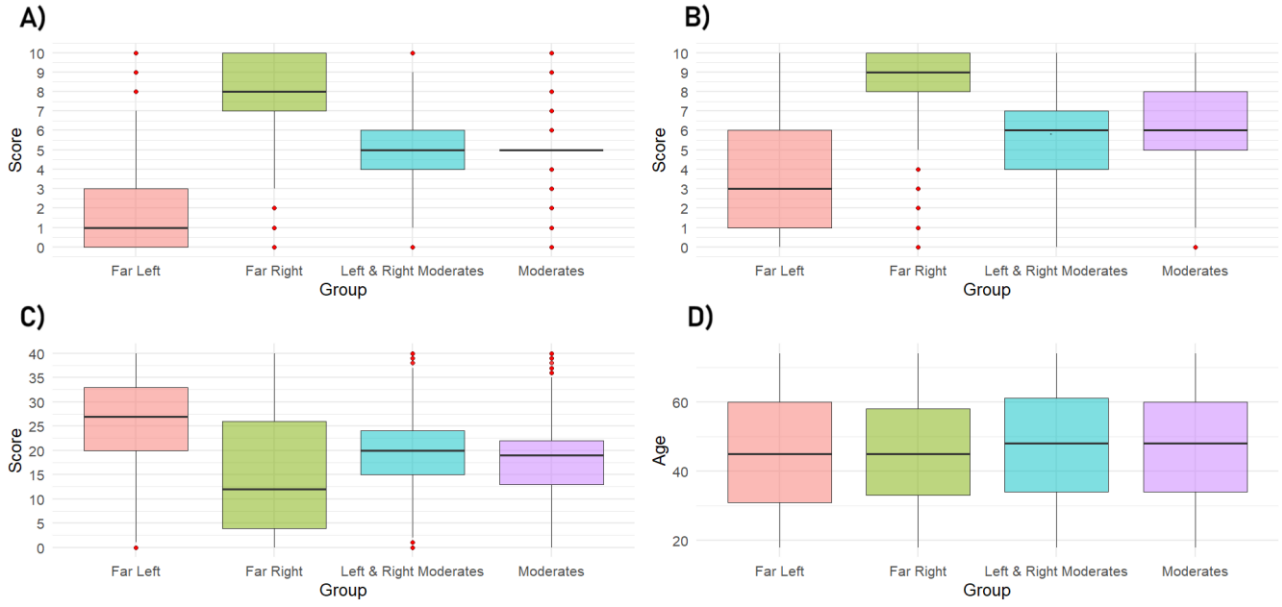


Figure S3. Boxplots of various measures by political ideology. Groups include far-left (coral; responses '0' or '1'), far-right (green; responses '9' or '10'), left & right moderates (responses '4' or '6'; light blue), and moderates (response '5'; violet). Panel A shows the progressive-conservative scale (0 = strongly progressive, 10 = strongly conservative); Panel B shows the nationalism proxy (Q3; higher values indicate stronger nationalistic tendencies); Panel C shows general attitudes toward migrants (sum of Q6-Q9; higher values indicate more positive attitudes); and Panel D shows age. These distributions excluded respondents who preferred not to disclose their left-right ideology (5.8% of the sample).

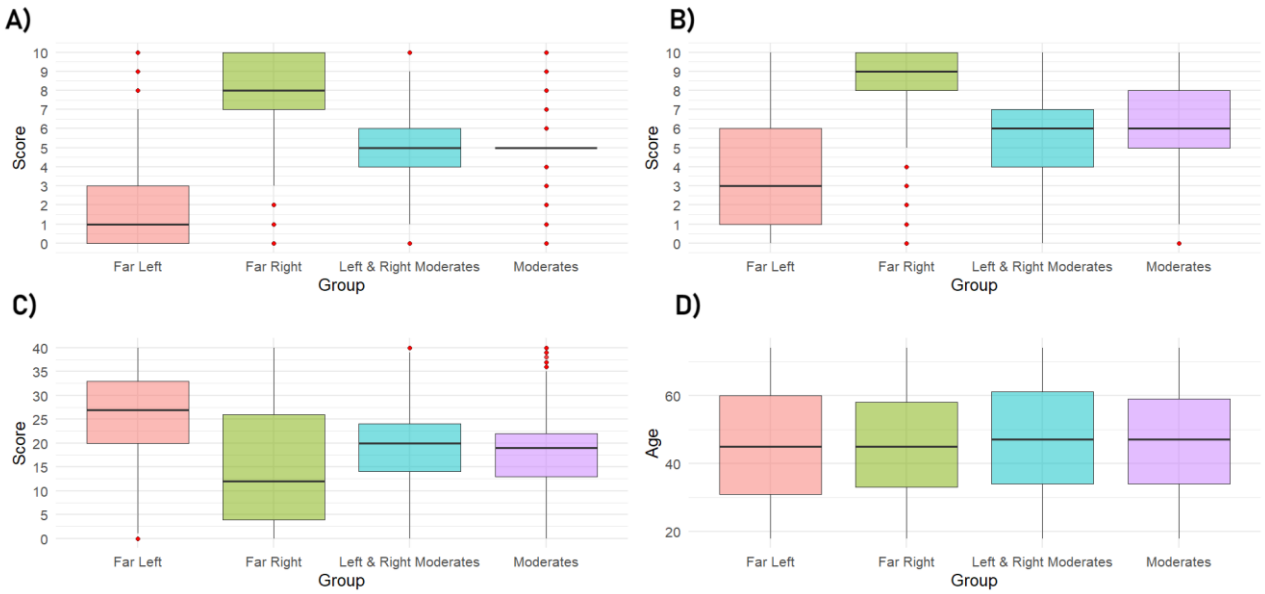


Figure S4. Boxplots of various measures by political ideology. Groups include far-left (coral; responses '0' or '1'), far-right (green; responses '9' or '10'), left & right moderates (responses '4' or '6'; light blue), and moderates (response '5'; violet). Panel A shows the progressive-conservative scale (0 = strongly progressive, 10 = strongly conservative); Panel B shows the nationalism proxy (Q3; higher values indicate stronger nationalistic tendencies); Panel C shows general attitudes toward migrants (sum of Q6-Q9; higher values indicate more positive attitudes); and Panel D shows age. These distributions included also the rounded imputed values (Figure S2) for respondents who preferred not to disclose their left-right ideology.

Section B: Survey Design

The survey began with the collection of socio-demographic information, including gender, age, educational attainment, occupation, region of residence and migratory background, as well as the migratory background of the respondents' parents. Specifically, we recorded whether respondents were born in their current country of residence. For those born elsewhere, we further distinguished between those born in a non-European country (i.e., outside the EU, Switzerland, Norway, the United Kingdom, Iceland or Liechtenstein). Equivalent information was collected for respondents' parents.

Next, respondents provided information on their political attitudes and general attitudes towards migrants. This began with political ideology (left-right self-placement; Q1),

progressive-conservative orientation (Q2), a proxy for nationalism (Q3), preferences for state intervention to reduce inequality (Q4), and cosmopolitanism (Q5). Questions Q6-Q9 assessed general attitudes towards migrants. The wording of all these items was based on established surveys, including the *European Social Survey*, *European Values Survey*, and *Eurobarometer*.

After the profiling phase, respondents were introduced to the topic of irregular migration. They were given clear definitions of irregular migrants and informed about the scale of the phenomenon based on the most recent Eurostat estimates (Eurostat, 2023; 2024). They were then briefed on the legal framework, which states that under EU and UK law, irregular migrants must receive an order to leave the country, either returning to their country of origin or to a third country willing to accept them, provided these destinations are safe. They were subsequently asked how their own country should enforce such orders, choosing between *forced return*, where governments can use force to escort migrants if necessary, and *assisted voluntary return*, where migrants receive financial or logistical assistance in exchange for their cooperation in leaving the country.

After providing their views on how countries should enforce return orders, respondents were randomly presented with an informational vignette about the overall effectiveness of return enforcement — covering both forced and assisted voluntary return — based on the most recent official estimates (Eurostat, 2024). Specifically, half of the respondents were informed that states were *able to return approximately 20%* of migrants who receive a return order, while the other half were told that states were *unable to return 80%* of such migrants. Immediately after the exposure to this information, on the same web page, respondents were asked Q11 and Q12 in random order. These questions measured their attitudes towards irregular migrants (Q11: *"Is irregular migration a problem?"*) and whether they thought that fewer people from non-European countries should be allowed to stay in their country, even if they entered and resided legally (Q12).

The survey then informed respondents that irregular migrants might still be granted extraordinary residence or work permits through regularisation policies even after receiving a return order. They were then presented with eight pairs of hypothetical regularisation policies and were asked to indicate their preferences for each pair. These policies varied randomly across six dimensions — Type, Fees, Candidates for Regularisation, Length of Permit, Withdrawal of the Permit, and Application Procedure — each with a different number of levels. In short, respondents completed a forced-choice conjoint experiment, contributing 16 observations each (indicating whether a given policy, defined by its randomly assigned attributes, was chosen or not across eight consecutive pairs). This yielded a total of 260,816 observations (16 observations per 16,301 respondents). The order of the policy dimensions was fixed for each respondent but randomised across respondents. The dimensions and their respective levels were informed by previous regularisation programmes implemented across Europe (Baldwin-Edwards & Kraler, 2009; Hendow & Qaisrani, 2024). A detailed overview of the conjoint design, including all policy dimensions and levels, is provided in Section E.

After completing the regularisation conjoint task, respondents were informed that not all irregular migrants are granted the opportunity to stay through extraordinary permits, and were subsequently introduced to the issue of non-return. We explained that, following a return decision, some irregular migrants may remain in the host country for extended periods

(even years), and that in certain cases it may become entirely unfeasible to return them. Respondents were then presented with two ranking tasks, each corresponding to a distinct non-return scenario. For each scenario, they were shown a set of policies in random order (five in the first scenario and three in the second), each accompanied by an intuitive and concise description of possible strategies to address non-return (Leerkes & Van Houte, 2020; Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023). Respondents were asked to rank these policies from the most to the least preferred.

Finally, respondents were asked to select two out of 10 groups of countries of origin that they most commonly associate with the term *"irregular migrant",* thereby concluding the survey.

Section C: Statistical Models

We analysed the distinct data structures generated by the survey (e.g., conjoint choices and ranking tasks) using different statistical models. Please refer to the *Replication Notebook* for details of their actual implementation in R.

Starting from the estimated probability of preferring forced to assisted voluntary return, we assessed the differences in probabilities between far right and moderate respondents, as well as between moderates and far left respondents, in the main manuscript. This comparison aimed to show that moderates' preferences regarding return enforcement were significantly closer to those of far right individuals than to those of far left individuals.

These differences were obtained by subtracting the respective conditional probabilities of preferring forced return across ideological groups. The standard error for these differences, which was used to construct the 95% confidence intervals, was computed as follows (Bansak et al., 2023). Let SE_1 denote the standard error for one group of respondents (e.g., moderates) and SE_2 the standard error for another group (e.g., far-right respondents). Assuming independence between groups, the standard error of the difference, $SE_{difference}$, is given by: $SE_{difference} = \sqrt{SE_1^2 + SE_2^2}$.

Table S2 presents the full estimation results of the weighted linear probability model used to assess whether the likelihood of preferring forced to assisted voluntary return varied by ideological group across different levels of education. The intercept represents the predicted probability for a far-left individual with at most a lower secondary education. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors (HC1) are reported.

Further accounting for the clustering of HC1-robust standard errors by respondents' country of residence does not alter the substantive inferences (see the *Replication Notebook*). Specifically, the coefficient capturing the differential effect of a rightward shift in ideology on the probability of preferring forced over assisted return among individuals with at most a lower secondary education and those with a university degree ($Ideology \times University\ Edu.$) has a clustered standard error of 0.00555. This yields a t-value of 1.27 and a two-sided p-value of 0.206, which is consistent with the simpler HC1-robust version.

These results were also corroborated by a weighted logistic regression using the same specification as the linear probability model, with HC1 robust standard errors for consistency

(Table S3). On the odds-ratio scale, the interaction term between political ideology and holding a university degree was 1.016 (95% CI: [0.954, 1.083]).

Coefficient	Estimate	Std. Error (HC1)	t value	Pr(>|t|)	Signif.
(Intercept)	0.3140966	0.0327430	9.5928	< 2.2e-16	***
Ideology	0.0596062	0.0055396	10.7600	< 2.2e-16	***
Upper Secondary Edu.	-0.0935273	0.0358628	-2.6079	0.009118	**
University Edu.	-0.1439873	0.0349713	-4.1173	3.852e-05	***
Ideology x Upper Secondary Edu.	0.0095853	0.0060320	1.5891	0.112066	
Ideology x University Edu.	0.0070291	0.0059538	1.1806	0.237773	

*Signif. codes: *** 0.001, ** 0.01, * 0.05, . 0.1*

Table S2. Estimates from a weighted linear probability model (LPM) including interactions between political ideology and three education levels, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors (HC-1). The dependent variable indicates whether respondents selected forced return (1) or assisted voluntary return (0). N = 16,301.

Coefficient	Odds Ratio	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Higher)
(Intercept)	0.4119102	0.3019070	0.5619944
Ideology	1.3191844	1.2430811	1.3999469
Upper Secondary Edu.	0.6695992	0.4752774	0.9433713
University Edu.	0.5688137	0.4072667	0.7944400
Ideology×Upper Secondary Edu.	1.0419629	0.9762793	1.1120656
Ideology×University Edu.	1.0164298	0.9537957	1.0831769

Table S3. Estimates from a weighted logistic regression model including interactions between political ideology and three education levels, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors (HC-1). The dependent variable indicates whether respondents selected forced return (1) or assisted voluntary return (0). N = 16,301.

To more systematically assess whether ideology is the main factor shaping preferences over return policies, we fitted a structural equation model (SEM) in which socio-demographic characteristics could influence return preferences directly or indirectly via ideology. In this model, ideology itself was modelled as having only a direct effect. The socio-demographic factors included were gender (binary), education (three categories), age cohort (six categories) and occupation (eight categories; a recoded version is used in Figure S28, as detailed in the *Replication Notebook*). The model was estimated using Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) and incorporated entropy weights. The *Replication Notebook* reports the standardised path coefficients.

To analyse the conjoint data, we used the R package 'cregg' (Leeper et al., 2020) to estimate marginal means in the pooled sample and conditional marginal means by selected respondent attributes (e.g., political ideology). Standard errors were clustered at the respondent level to

account for multiple consecutive choice tasks per individual. We also estimated the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) (Hainmueller et al., 2013), which capture the causal impact on the probability of a policy being selected when shifting from one value of a given policy dimension to another. These were computed as the difference in marginal means relative to a designated reference level within that dimension. For example, within the *Costs* dimension, setting "National Government" as the reference allowed us to estimate the causal effect of shifting to "European Funds" or "Fees Collected from Migrants". These estimates were primarily used to generate the maps reported in Extended Data Figure 6.

To assess which respondent characteristics accounted for greater variability in preferences for regularisation policies, as captured by marginal means across policy features, we first computed all pairwise differences between levels of each respondent characteristic within a policy feature. We then calculated the standard deviation of these pairwise differences.

Specifically, for each respondent characteristic, we computed all pairwise differences between marginal means across its M levels, yielding $\frac{M(M-1)}{2}$ unique differences per policy feature. For instance, political ideology comprises $M = 11$ levels, ranging from far left to far right, resulting in $\frac{11\times(10)}{2} = 55$ unique pairwise differences for each policy feature (e.g., "National Government", "3 years", "Work", *etc.*). Given that the conjoint experiment included 20 policy features, ideology produced $55 \times 20 = 1{,}100$ differences in total. These differences centred around zero (Figure S5). We then calculated the standard deviation of this distribution of marginal-mean differences, which we interpret as a concise measure of variability in preferences across the levels of the respondent characteristic. Although higher values of M naturally produce more pairwise comparisons and thus greater potential for larger random fluctuations, the standard deviation adjusts for this intrinsically, effectively penalising larger M.

This procedure was repeated $B = 100$ times. At each iteration, the respondents were resampled with replacement based on their anonymous IDs, and the marginal means and corresponding pairwise differences were recomputed. This generated a bootstrapped distribution of standard deviations for each respondent characteristic. A higher standard deviation indicates greater heterogeneity in preferences across the levels of that characteristic. Figure S6 shows the resulting bootstrapped distributions for five characteristics of the respondents: age cohort, education, gender, occupation, and political ideology. Overall, political ideology exhibits by far the greatest variation in preferences for features of regularisation policies of all the considered variables.

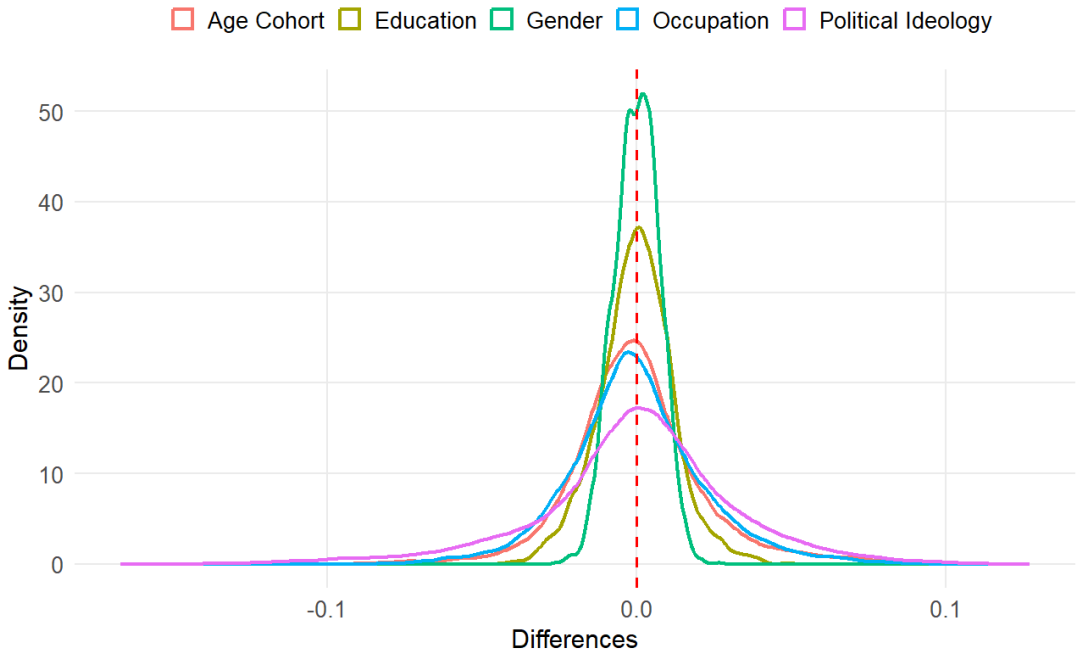


Figure S5. Kernel density estimates (KDEs) of the bootstrapped distributions of pairwise marginal-mean differences within policy features in the regularisation task, across the levels of five respondent characteristics: age cohort (coral), education (yellow), gender (green), occupation (light blue), and political ideology (violet). The vertical dashed line indicates zero difference. The distribution by political ideology shows notably longer and fatter tails, reflecting greater variability in preferences across ideological groups.

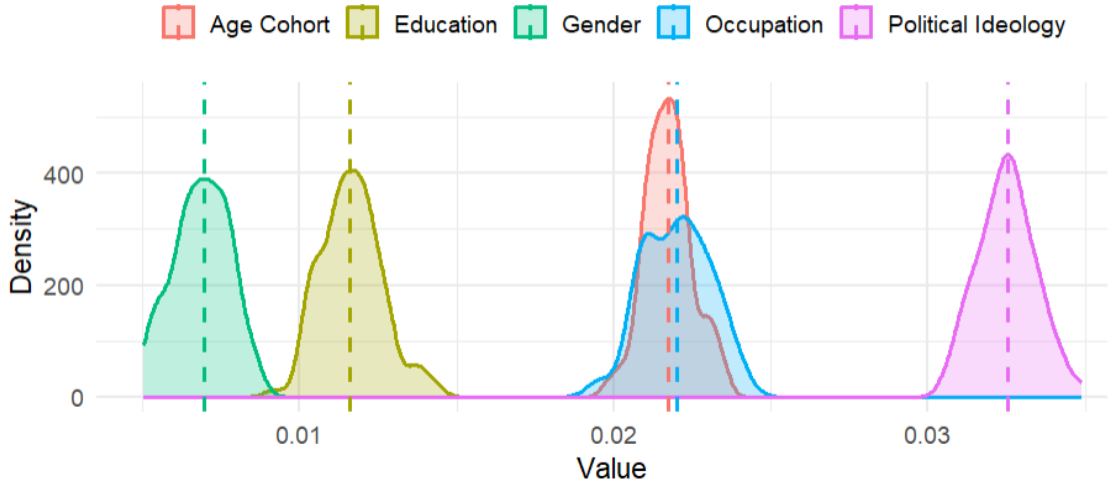


Figure S6. Kernel density estimates (KDEs) of the bootstrapped distributions of standard deviations of marginal-mean differences of policy features in the regularisation task, across the levels of five respondent characteristics: age cohort (coral), education (yellow), gender (green), occupation (light blue), and political ideology (violet). The vertical dashed line indicates the median of each bootstrapped distribution.

For the analysis of the two ranking tasks — designed to assess preferences for policies addressing the non-return of irregular migrants when regularisation is not implemented — we estimated separate Plackett-Luce models (Thurner et al., 2020). In each task, respondents ranked an initially randomised set of K policy options, $P = \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_K\}$, with $K = 5$ in the first task and $K = 3$ in the second. Following Luce's axiom of choice (1959, 1977), we assumed that the odds of ranking policy p_i higher than policy p_j were independent of the set of available alternatives. In other words, if a respondent prefers "providing basic services to non-returnable migrants" to "placing them in detention centres", this preference remains the same whether "obligation to report" is included among the ranking options or not.

Under Luce's axiom, the probability of selecting policy p_k out of P is:

$$\pi(p_k|P) = \frac{\alpha_k}{\sum_{i \in P} \alpha_i} \quad (1)$$

where α_k was the worth, attractiveness or popularity of policy k.

A ranking of K policies can be interpreted as a sequence of independent choices. When the available set of policies is P, the first policy selected — the highest ranked — is considered the most attractive or preferred option for a given respondent. Once this policy is selected, the remaining alternatives form a reduced choice set $P' = P \setminus \{\text{most preferred}\}$. The next choice identifies the second most attractive policy, leaving a further reduced set $P'' = P \setminus \{\text{most preferred, second most preferred}\}$, and so on, until all policies are ranked and the least preferred option remains. Following this logic, the probability of observing the ranking $p_1 \succ p_2 \succ \cdots \succ p_K$, where $p_i \succ p_j$ means that that policy p_i is ranked higher than policy p_j, is:

$$\prod_{k=1}^{K} \frac{\alpha_k}{\sum_{i \in A_k} \alpha_i} \quad (2)$$

where $A_k = \{p_k, p_{k+1}, \dots, p_K\}$ is the updating set of available alternatives.

The estimands are the popularity parameters α_k. In both the main text and Section D, we calculated these parameters relative to the popularity of the *average item* (Thurner et al., 2020). We then rescaled the estimated parameters so that they summed to one and rescaled the confidence intervals accordingly.

To assess which respondent characteristics generated the greatest variability in policy preferences for the two ranking tasks, we applied the same bootstrapping procedure as for the regularisation conjoint task. Specifically, for each policy, we computed $\frac{M(M-1)}{2}$ unique pairwise differences in relative popularity across the levels of the respondent characteristic and then calculated the standard deviation across all policies. This process was repeated for $B = 100$ bootstrapped samples. For example, in the first ranking task, political ideology ($M = 11$) produced $55 \times 5 = 275$ pairwise comparisons across policies. The resulting differences were centred around zero (Figure S7), and Figure S8 shows that political ideology generates substantially greater variation in preferences than age cohort, education, gender, or occupation. The same is true for the second ranking task (Figures S9 and S10).

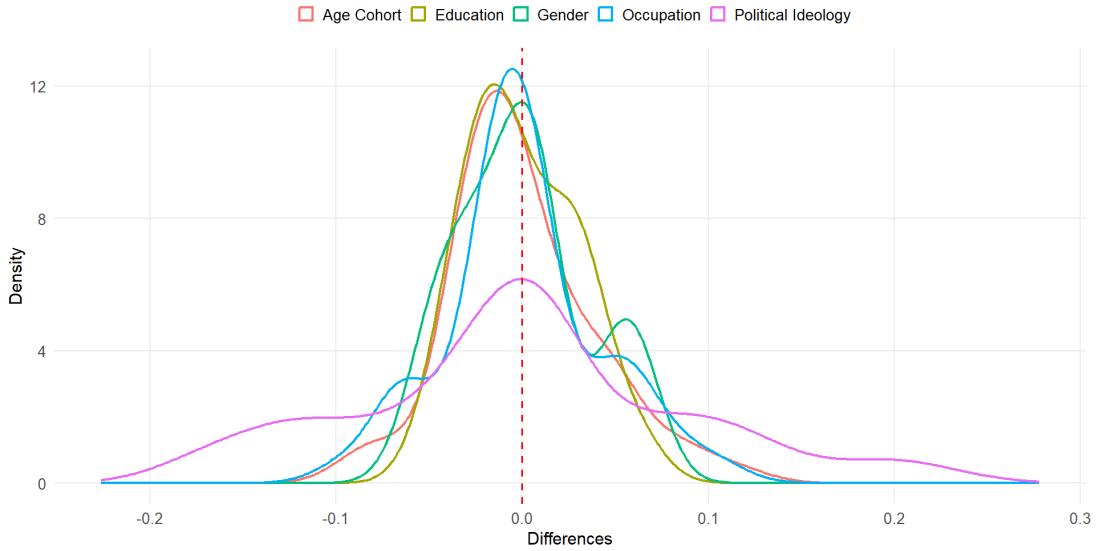


Figure S7. Kernel density estimates (KDEs) of the bootstrapped distributions of pairwise differences in relative popularity for policies in the first ranking task, across the levels of five respondent characteristics: age cohort (coral), education (yellow), gender (green), occupation (light blue), and political ideology (violet). The vertical dashed line indicates zero difference. The distribution by political ideology shows notably longer and fatter tails, reflecting greater variability in preferences across ideological groups.

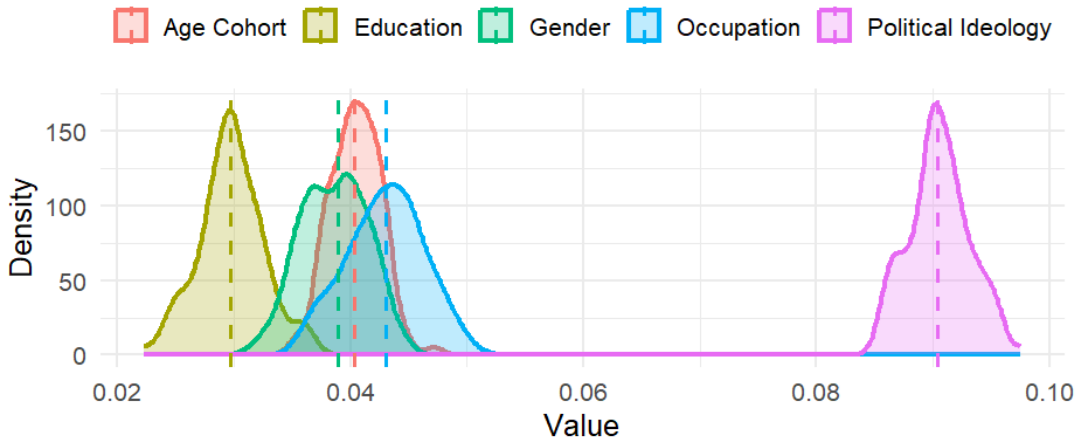


Figure S8. Kernel density estimates (KDEs) of the bootstrapped distributions of standard deviations of pairwise differences in relative policy popularity for the first ranking task, across the levels of five respondent characteristics: age cohort (coral), education (yellow), gender (green), occupation (light blue), and political ideology (violet). The vertical dashed line indicates the median of each bootstrapped distribution.

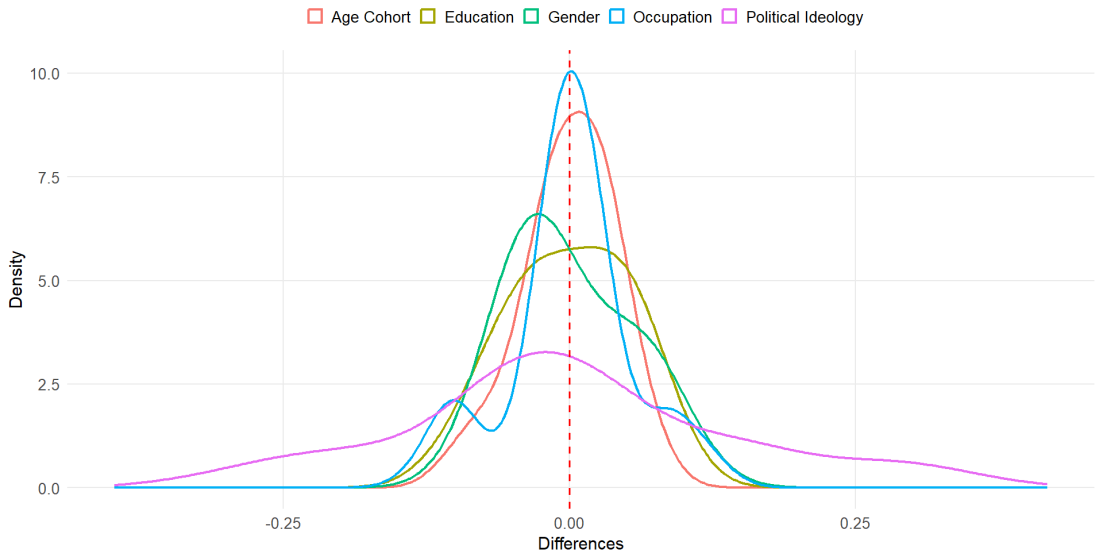


Figure S9. Kernel density estimates (KDEs) of the bootstrapped distributions of pairwise differences in relative popularity for policies in the second ranking task, across the levels of five respondent characteristics: age cohort (coral), education (yellow), gender (green), occupation (light blue), and political ideology (violet). The vertical dashed line indicates zero difference. The distribution by political ideology shows notably longer and fatter tails, reflecting greater variability in preferences across ideological groups.

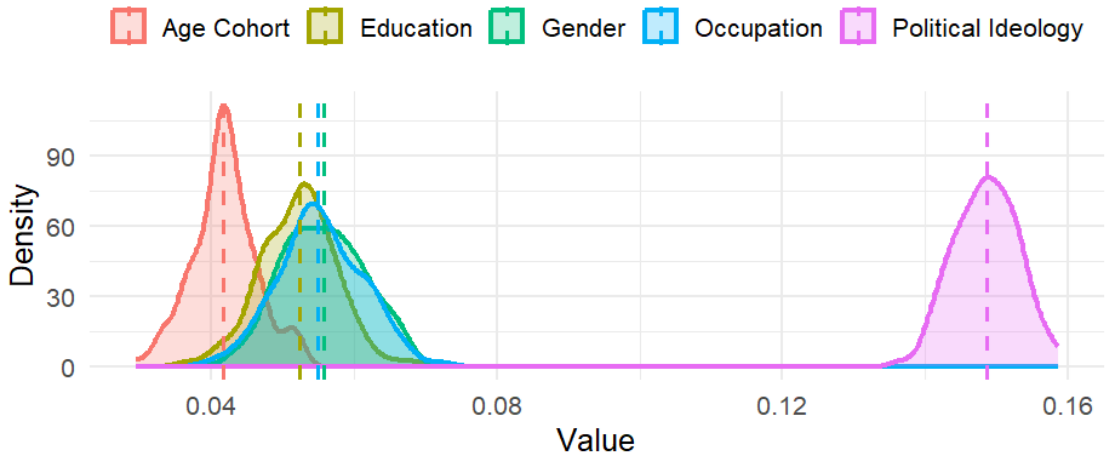


Figure S10. Kernel density estimates (KDEs) of the bootstrapped distributions of standard deviations of pairwise differences in relative policy popularity for the second ranking task, across the levels of five respondent characteristics: age cohort (coral), education (yellow), gender (green), occupation (light blue), and political ideology (violet). The vertical dashed line indicates the median of each bootstrapped distribution.

Section D: Robustness Checks

Unweighted Analyses

Figures S11-S16 replicate the main results by comparing the estimates obtained using entropy-balanced weights (as described in Section A) with the estimates derived from unweighted data. Rather than displaying differences in marginal means in the regularisation task across moderates and respondents at the far left and right, Figure S14 presents the marginal means themselves, from which such differences can be computed. As no noticeable discrepancy emerges between the weighted and unweighted estimates of the marginal means, the corresponding differences are also indistinguishable. Figures S15 and S16 directly present the estimated differences (weighted minus unweighted) in the relative popularity (ranging from 0 to 1) of each policy according to the political ideology of the respondents in the two ranking tasks. Overall, we found no substantive quantitative or qualitative differences between the inferences drawn from weighted and unweighted data.

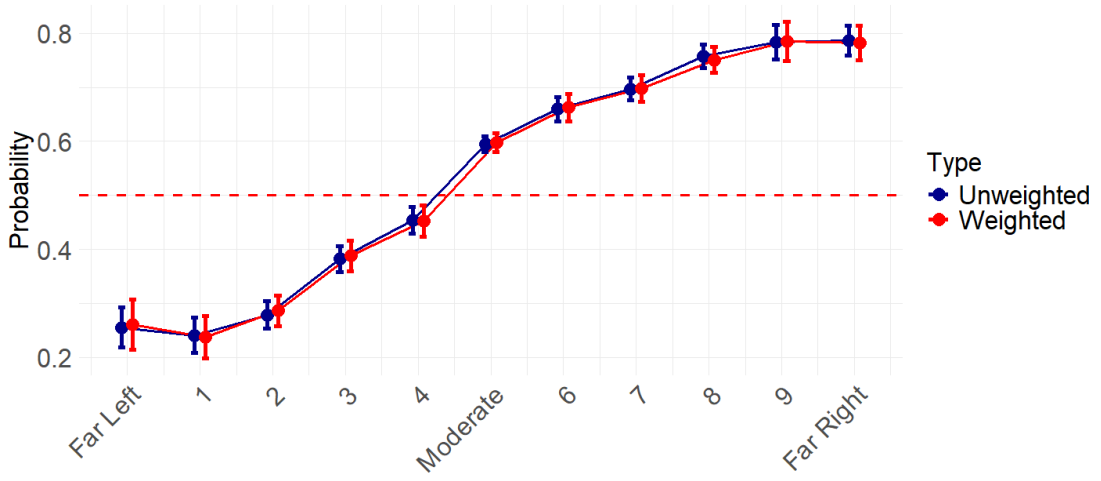


Figure S11. Comparison of weighted (red; corresponding to Figure 1A in the main manuscript) and unweighted (dark blue) estimates of the probability of preferring forced to assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by the political ideology of the respondents (N = 16,301). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

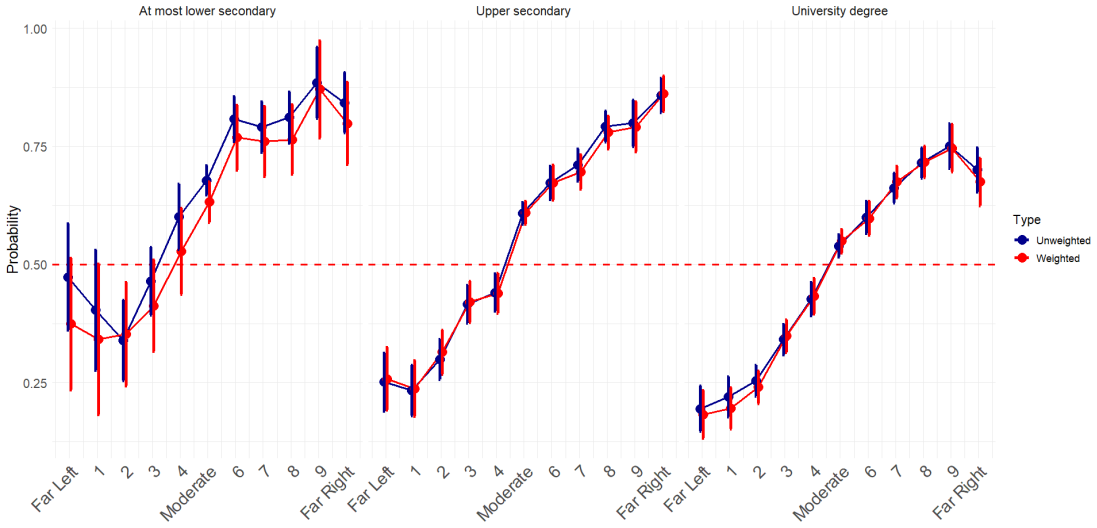


Figure S12. Comparison of weighted (red; corresponding to Figure 1B in the main manuscript) and unweighted (dark blue) estimates of the probability of preferring forced to assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by the political ideology and educational attainment of the respondents (N = 16,301). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

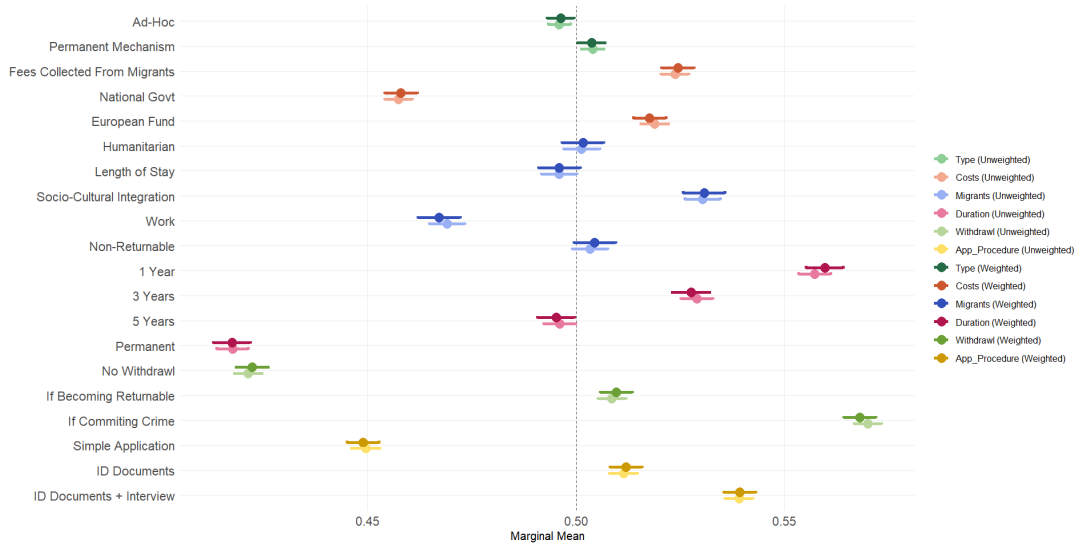


Figure S13. Comparison of weighted (darker shades; corresponding to Figure 2 in the main manuscript) and unweighted (lighter shades) estimates of preferences over regularisation policy characteristics (N = 260,816 conjoint observations). Dots indicate marginal mean point estimates, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line marks the point at which the marginal mean equals 0.50. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

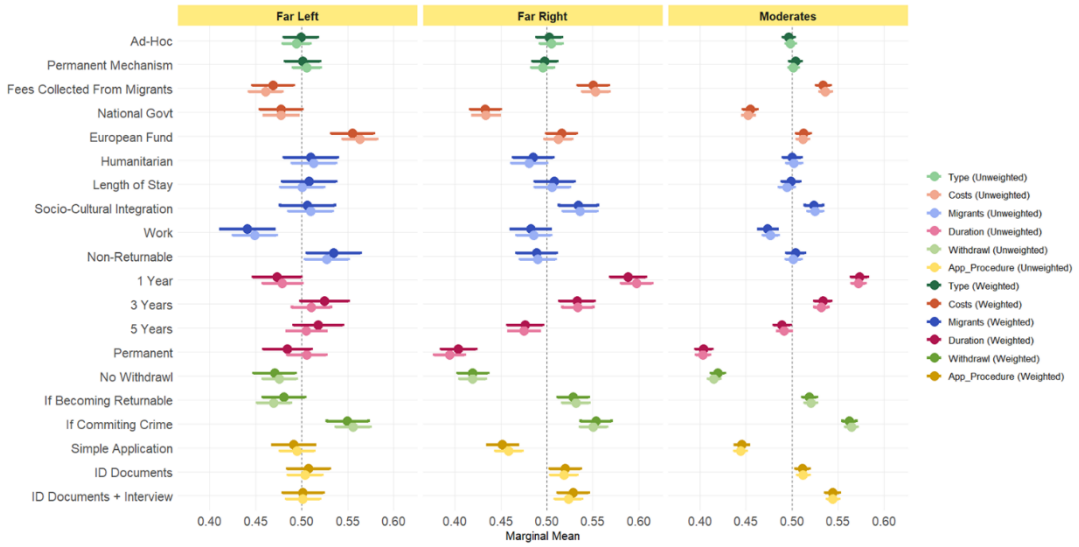


Figure S14. Comparison of weighted (darker shades) and unweighted (lighter shades) estimates of preferences over regularisation policy characteristics, by political ideology. The leftmost panel includes 8,464 conjoint observations from far left respondents, the middle panel 13,424 observations from far right respondents, and the rightmost panel 67,792 observations from moderates. Each dot represents the point estimate of the marginal mean for a given attribute, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line marks the point at which the marginal mean equals 0.50. From these estimates, it is evident that pairwise differences in marginal means for each policy feature are equivalent across the two specifications.

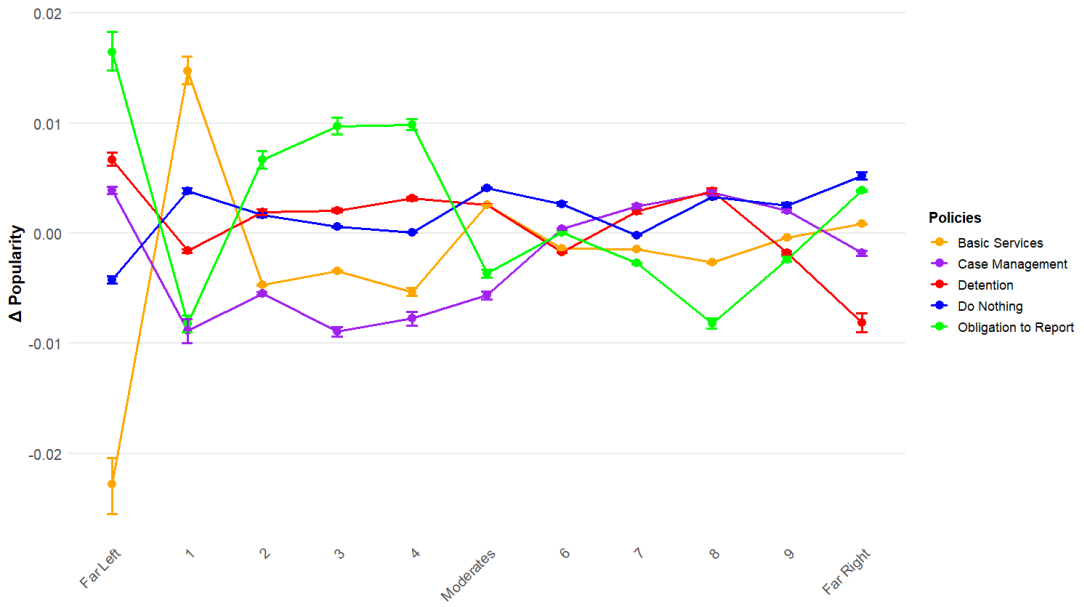


Figure S15. Differences between weighted and unweighted estimates of the relative popularity of policies to manage non-return, by political ideology (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants who still have a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point estimates represent the difference (weighted minus unweighted) in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

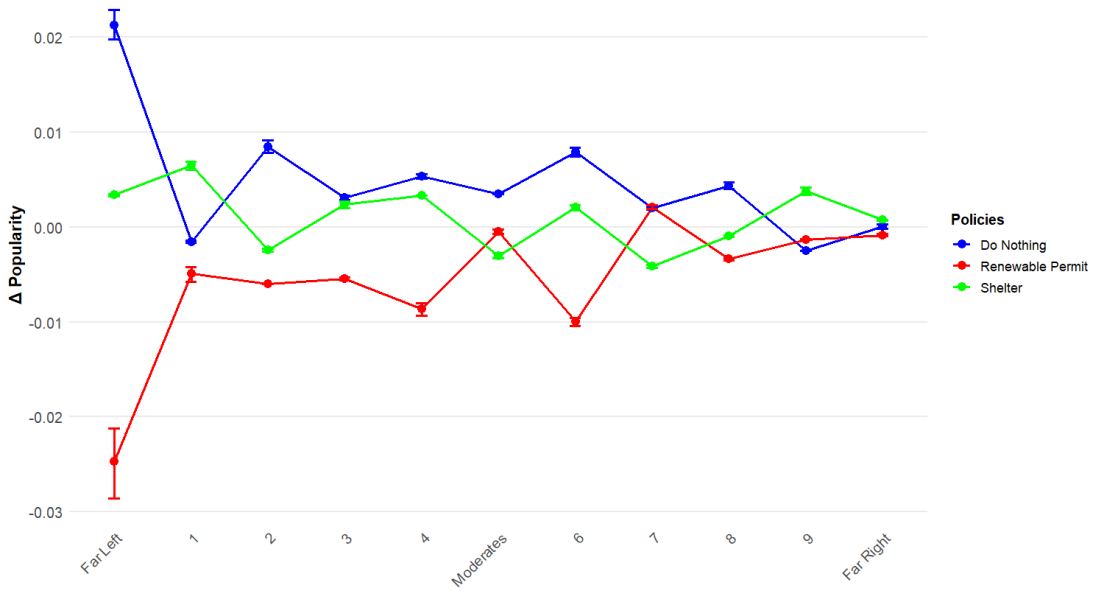


Figure S16. Differences between weighted and unweighted estimates of the relative popularity of policies to manage non-return, by political ideology (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the difference (weighted minus unweighted) in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

Filtered Analyses

Figures S17-S22 replicate the main results, comparing the weighted estimates obtained using the imputed data from the XGBoost algorithm (as described in Section A) with the estimates derived after excluding the 947 respondents (5.8% of the sample) who declined to report their political ideology on the 0-10 scale (Sections B and E). Overall, we found no substantive quantitative or qualitative differences between the inferences drawn from the filtered and imputed data. Rounding the imputed values shown in Figure S2 yields a minimum ideology score of 2 and a maximum of 9, with a median of 5, a first quartile of 5, and a third quartile of 6. Consequently, no differences between specifications can be observed among respondents at the far left and far right of the ideological spectrum.

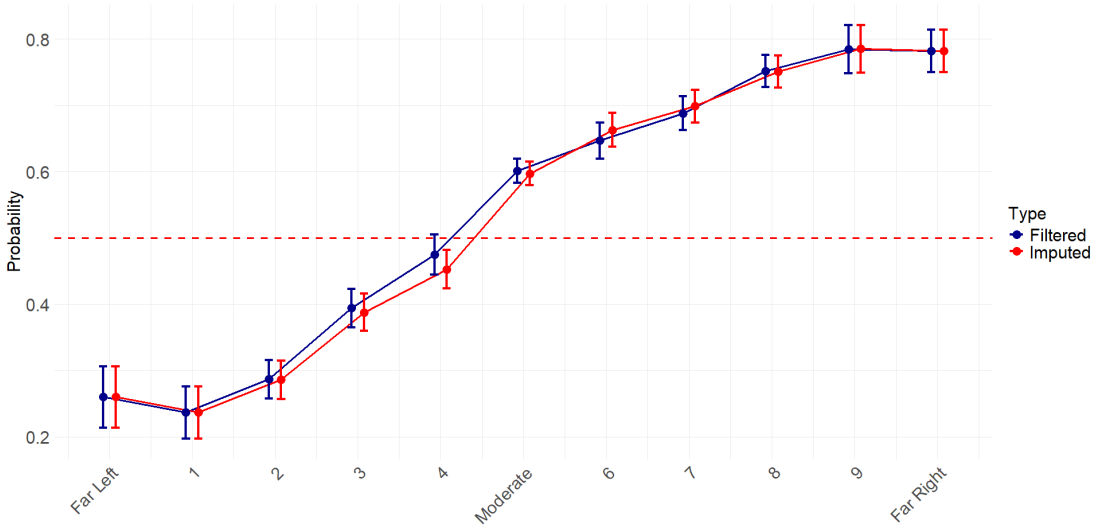


Figure S17. Comparison of imputed (red; corresponding to Figure 1A in the main manuscript; N = 16,301) and filtered (dark blue; N = 15,354) estimates of the probability of preferring forced to assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by the political ideology of the respondents. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

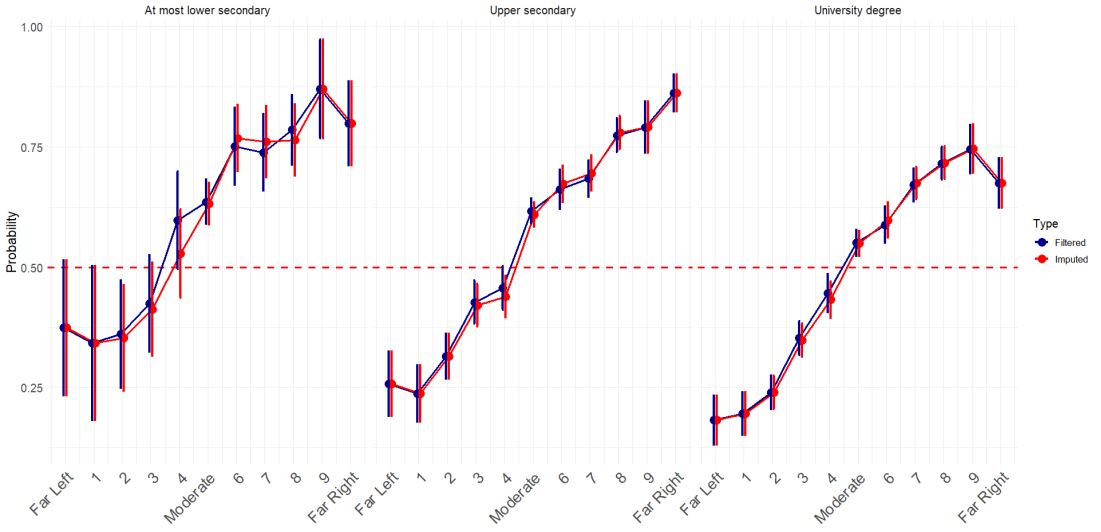


Figure S18. Comparison of imputed (red; corresponding to Figure 1B in the main manuscript; N = 16,301) and filtered (dark blue; N = 15,354) estimates of the probability of preferring forced to assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by the political ideology and educational attainment of the respondents. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

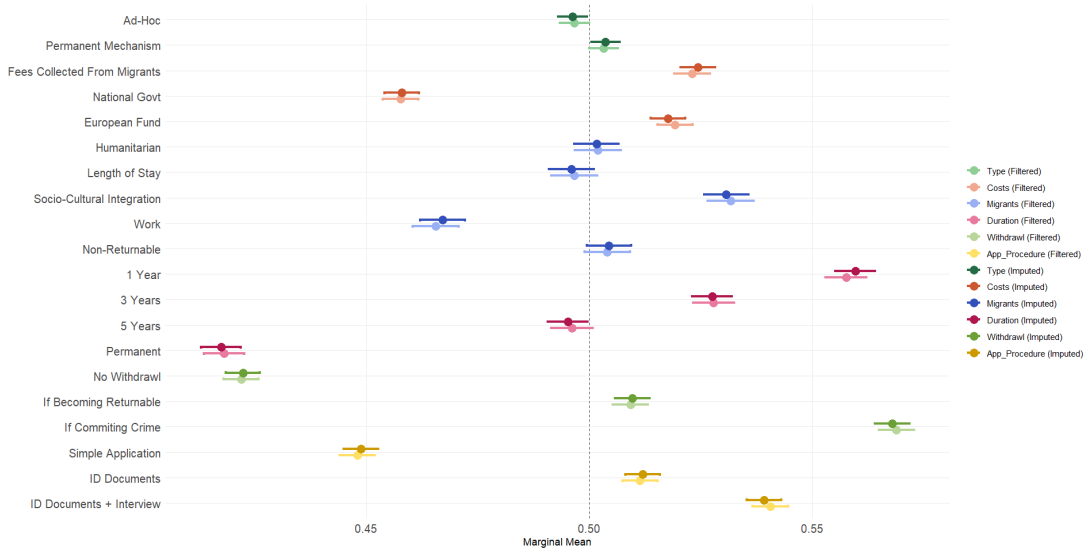


Figure S19. Comparison of imputed (darker shades; corresponding to Figure 2 in the main manuscript; N = 260,816 conjoint observations) and filtered (lighter shades; N = 245,664 conjoint observations) estimates of preferences over regularisation policy characteristics. Dots indicate marginal mean point estimates, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line marks the point at which the marginal mean equals 0.50. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

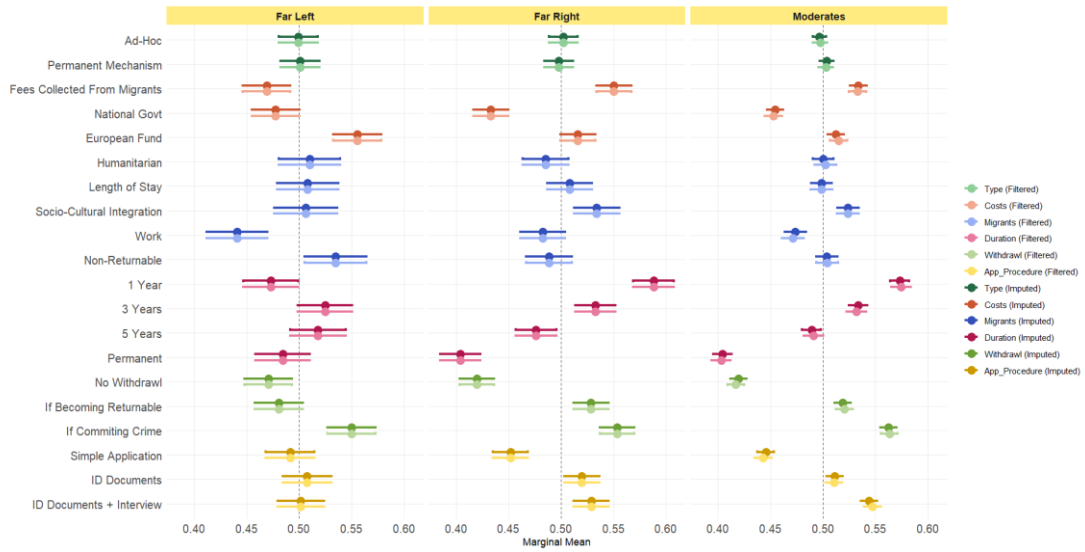


Figure S20. Comparison of imputed (darker shades) and filtered (lighter shades) estimates of preferences over regularisation policy characteristics, by political ideology. The leftmost and middle panels display identical estimates, as the number of conjoint observations from far left and far right respondents is the same across specifications. The rightmost panel compares estimates based on 67,792 conjoint observations from moderates in the imputed case and 61,232 in the filtered case. Each dot represents the point estimate of the marginal mean for a given attribute, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line marks the point at which the marginal mean equals 0.50. These estimates indicate that pairwise differences in marginal means of policy features are equivalent across the two specifications.

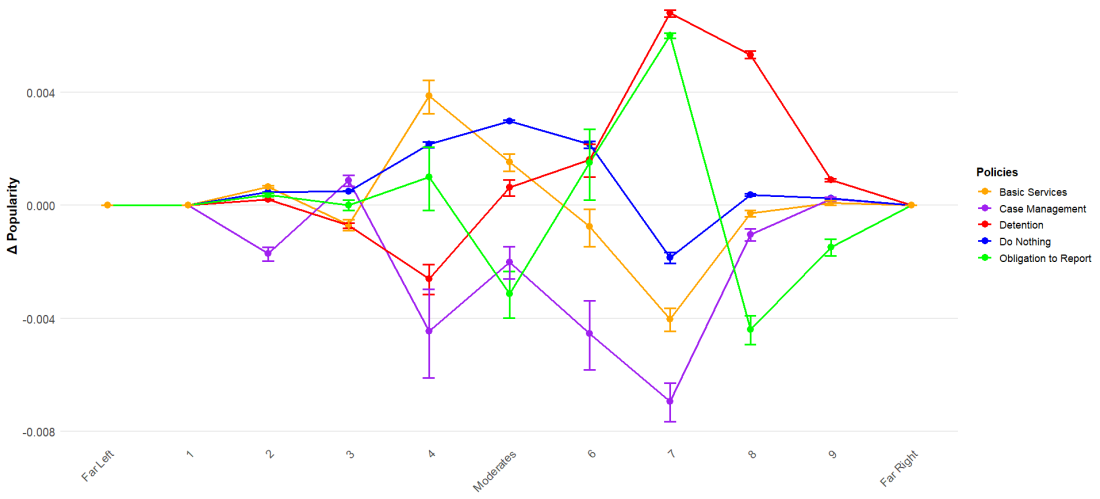


Figure S21. Differences between imputed (N = 16,301) and filtered (N = 15,354) estimates of the relative popularity of policies to manage non-return, by political ideology. The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point estimates represent the difference (filtered minus imputed) in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

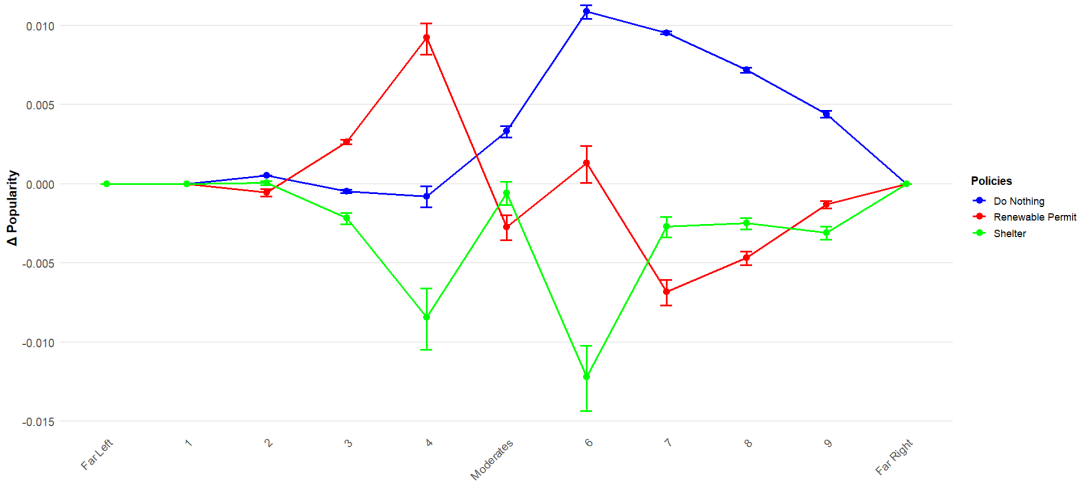


Figure S22. Differences between imputed (N = 16,301) and filtered (N = 15,354) estimates of the relative popularity of policies to manage non-return, by political ideology. The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the difference (filtered minus imputed) in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

Using An Alternative Measure of Political Ideology

Figures S23-S26 present the results obtained by using the political ideology index described in Section A, instead of imputing the missing values on the left-right scale via the XGBoost algorithm. Briefly, the index was computed as the simple average of two components: a progressive-conservative scale (0 = strongly progressive; 10 = strongly conservative) and a nationalism proxy (0 = lowest nationalistic tendencies; 10 = highest nationalistic tendencies). The exact formulation is reported in Section E. Individuals scoring 0 on the index are labelled as *progressive, non-nationalistic*; those scoring 10 as *conservative, nationalistic*; and those scoring 5 as *moderates*. The Spearman correlations between the imputed left-right scale and the progressive-conservative and nationalism measures are 0.65 and 0.47, respectively, while the correlation between the two index components is 0.44. Overall, no qualitative differences were found between the inferences drawn using the imputed left-right scale, the filtered left-right scale, or the alternative ideology index. All the analyses reported here are weighted.

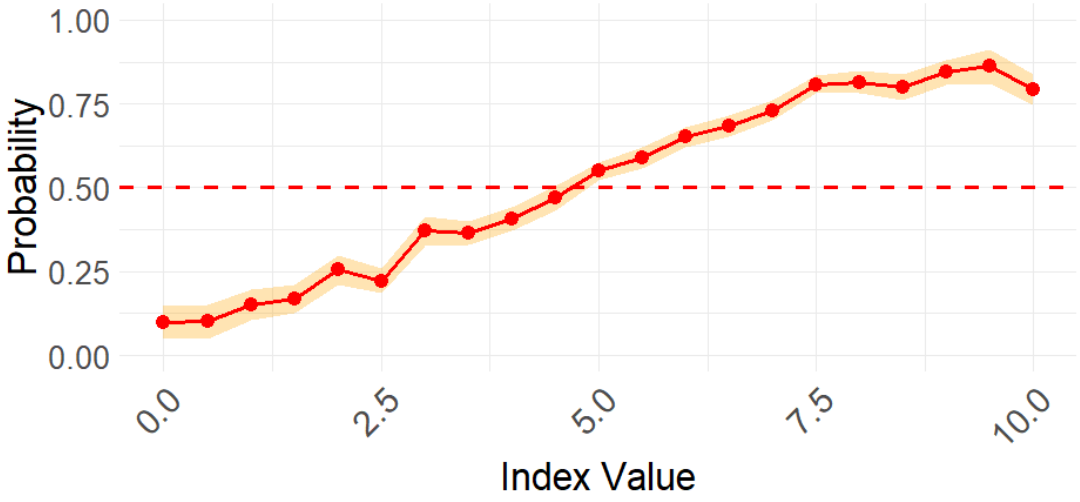


Figure S23. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by values of the alternative index measuring respondents' political ideology (N = 16,301). The shaded ribbon represents 95% confidence intervals. In general, respondents who are progressive and non-nationalistic (scoring low on the index) are not at all in favour of forced return, whereas the opposite holds for conservatives with nationalistic tendencies (scoring high on the index). Moderates align more closely with conservatives holding nationalistic views than with progressives holding non-nationalistic views. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options.

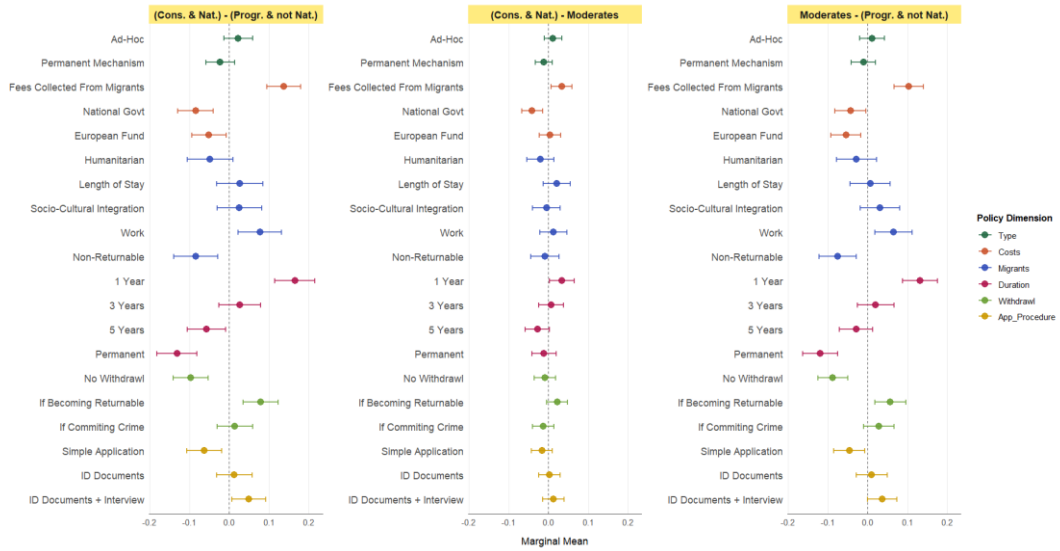


Figure S24. Preferences for regularisation policy characteristics, by the alternative political ideology index. The leftmost panel shows differences in marginal mean estimates for each policy feature between conservatives with nationalistic tendencies and progressives with non-nationalistic tendencies (N = 9,776 conjoint observations); the middle panel shows the same differences between conservatives with nationalistic tendencies and moderates (N = 39,280 conjoint observations); and the rightmost panel compares moderates with progressives holding non-nationalistic tendencies (N = 36,128 conjoint

observations). Each dot represents the difference in marginal means for a given attribute, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line at zero denotes no difference between groups. The inferences are consistent with those reported in Figure 3 of the main manuscript.

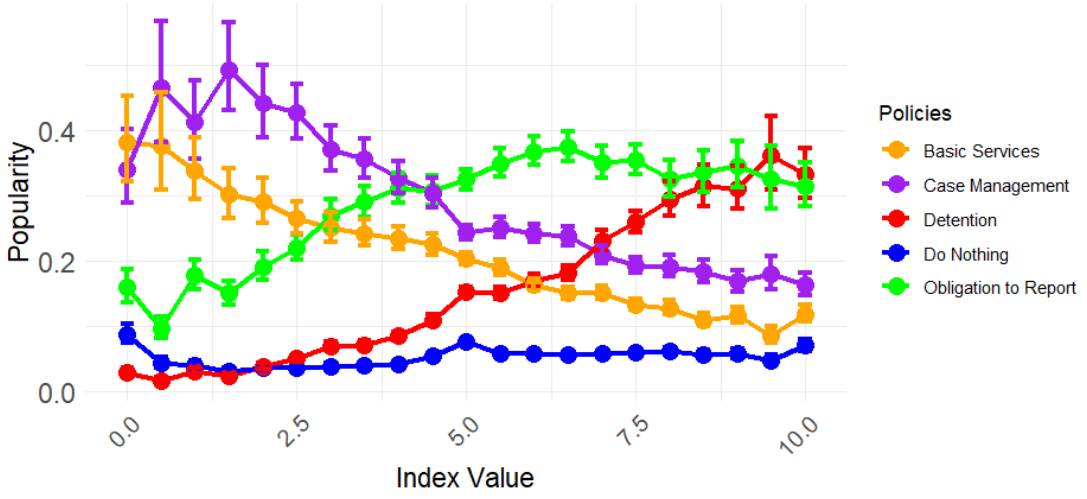


Figure S25. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, by the alternative political ideology index (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data. The inferences are consistent with those reported in Figure 4A of the main manuscript.

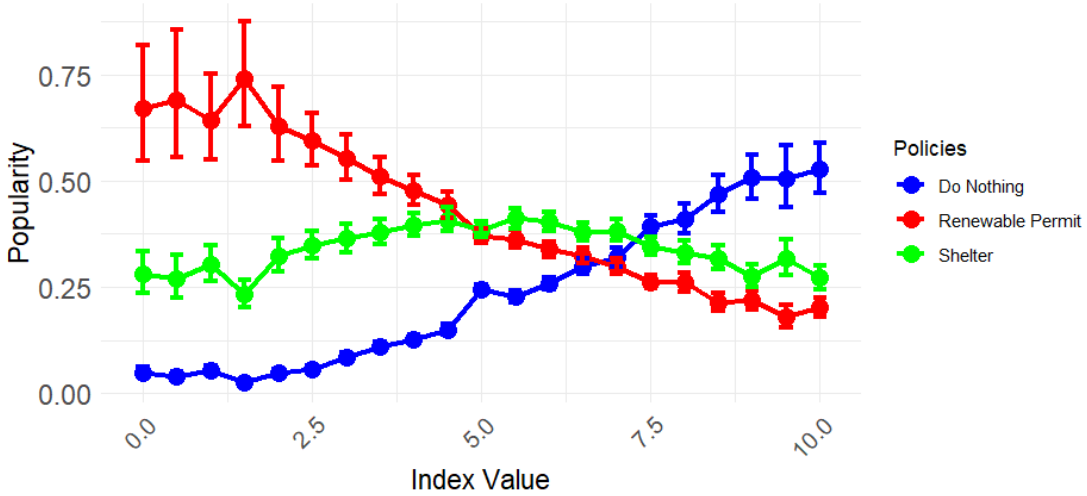


Figure S26. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, by the alternative political ideology index (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative

popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data. The inferences are consistent with those reported in Figure 4B of the main manuscript.

Comparison with MICE Imputation Techniques

As a first check, for each of the two multivariate-imputation approaches — PMM and OLogit — we compared the distribution of imputed political ideology values in each of the 30 imputed datasets with the corresponding distribution obtained using XGBoost. We conducted a two-sided Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) test for each comparison, yielding 30 p-values per imputation method. These p-values are reported as separate histograms in Figures S27 and S28, respectively, with the conventional 0.05 significance threshold marked by a red dashed vertical line. In both cases, the null hypothesis was never rejected, indicating no statistically significant difference between the distributions of imputed political ideology values generated using MICE with PMM or OLogit and the distribution generated using XGBoost. These results provide additional reassurance that the distribution of the imputed ideology measure is not sensitive to the choice of imputation procedure.

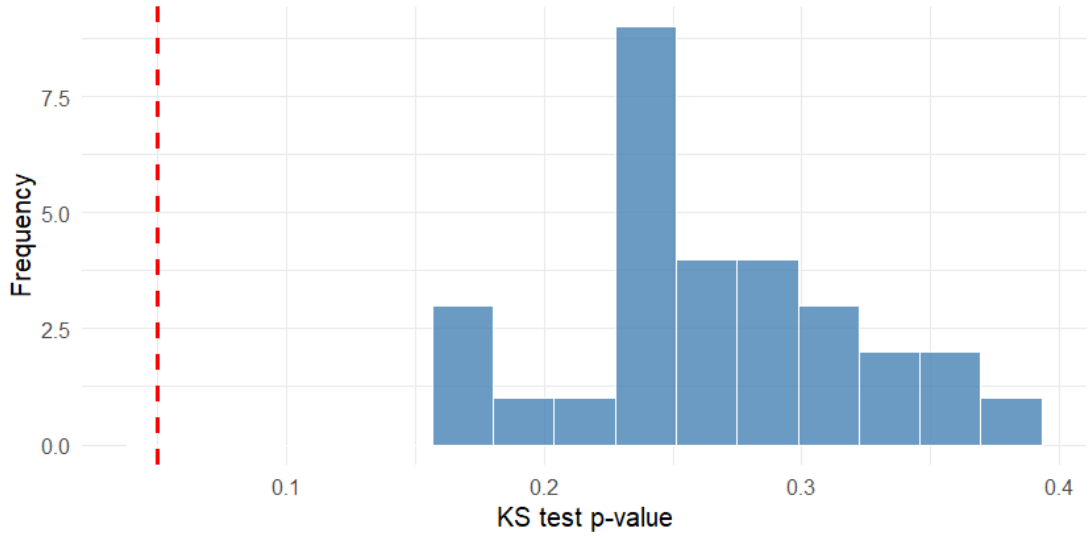


Figure S27. Distribution of p-values from 30 two-sided Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) tests, each comparing one of the 30 imputed distributions of political ideology generated using Multivariate Imputation via Chained Equations (MICE) with Predictive Mean Matching (PMM) against the imputed distribution obtained using XGBoost. Each distribution has N = 16,301 values. The vertical red dashed line marks the conventional p-value threshold (0.05) for assessing statistical significance; p-values falling to the left of this line would indicate rejection of the null hypothesis that the two distributions are equal.

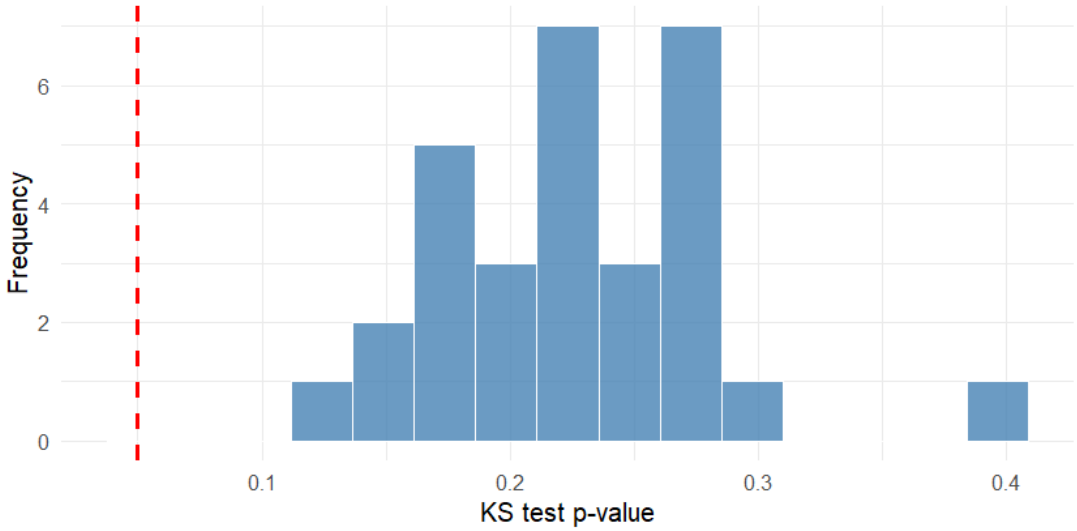


Figure S28. Distribution of p-values from 30 two-sided Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) tests, each comparing one of the 30 imputed distributions of political ideology generated using Multivariate Imputation via Chained Equations (MICE) with Ordinal Logistic Regression (OLogit) against the imputed distribution obtained using XGBoost. Each distribution has N = 16,301 values. The vertical red dashed line marks the conventional p-value threshold (0.05) for assessing statistical significance; p-values falling to the left of this line would indicate rejection of the null hypothesis that the two distributions are equal.

We further assessed the robustness of our substantive findings by conducting a set of analyses analogous to those reported in Figures S17-S22, under both MICE imputation approaches. Specifically, we compared key substantive results obtained using the two MICE approaches with the corresponding estimates reported in the main manuscript and obtained using XGBoost. These included: (i) estimates of the probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return by political ideology (Figures S29 and S30); (ii) differences in marginal means from the conjoint experiment between far right and moderate respondents, and between moderate and far left respondents (Figures S31 and S32); and (iii) differences in relative popularity across the five policies in the first ranking task and across the three policies in the second ranking task, compared with the corresponding estimates obtained using XGBoost (Figures S33-S36). Across all of these analyses, we found no substantive and statistically significant differences between the results obtained using either MICE approach and those obtained using XGBoost.

For each comparison, we pooled the estimates across the 30 imputed datasets generated under each MICE approach. The pooled point estimates are the arithmetic means of the corresponding estimates across the 30 imputed datasets. Confidence intervals were calculated using Rubin's rules, which account for both within-imputation uncertainty and between-imputation variation, thereby incorporating the additional uncertainty arising from the imputation of missing values.

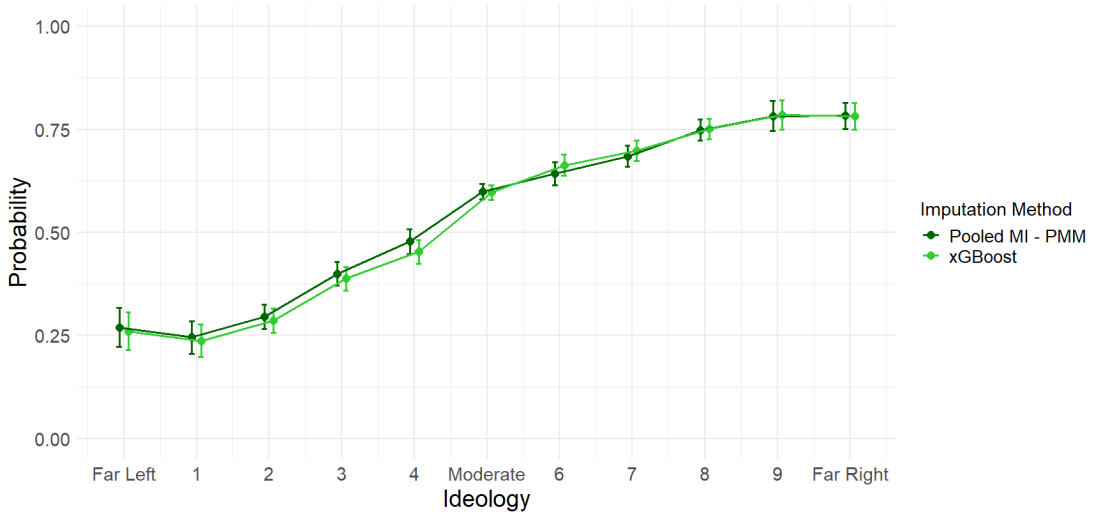


Figure S29. Comparison of estimated probabilities of preferring forced return over assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by respondents' political ideology, using XGBoost-imputed (light green; N = 16,301) versus pooled MICE-PMM-imputed (dark green; N = 16,301) political ideology values. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

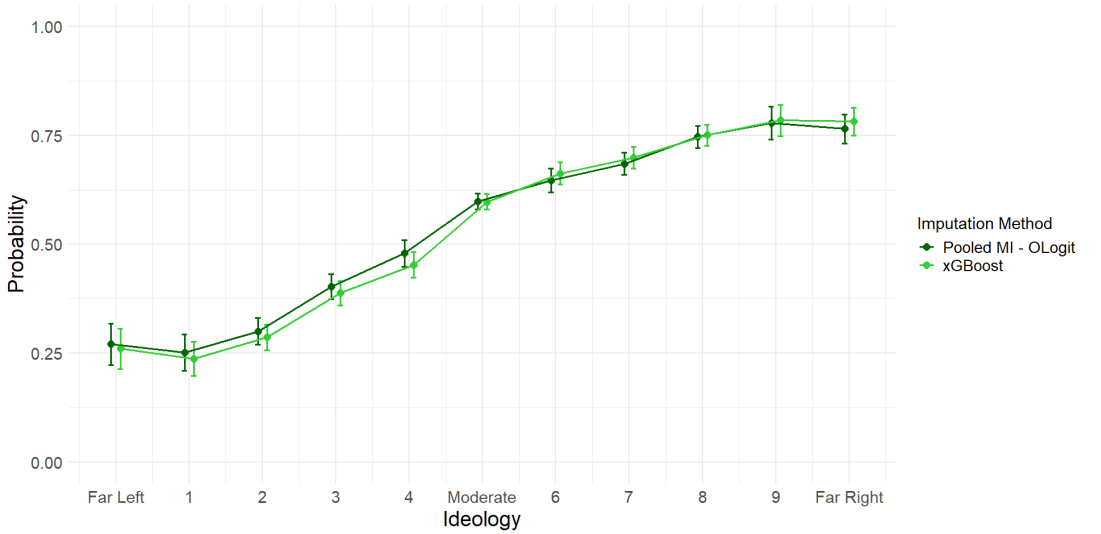


Figure S30. Comparison of estimated probabilities of preferring forced return over assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by respondents' political ideology, using XGBoost-imputed (light green; N = 16,301) versus pooled MICE-OLogit-imputed (dark green; N = 16,301) political ideology values. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

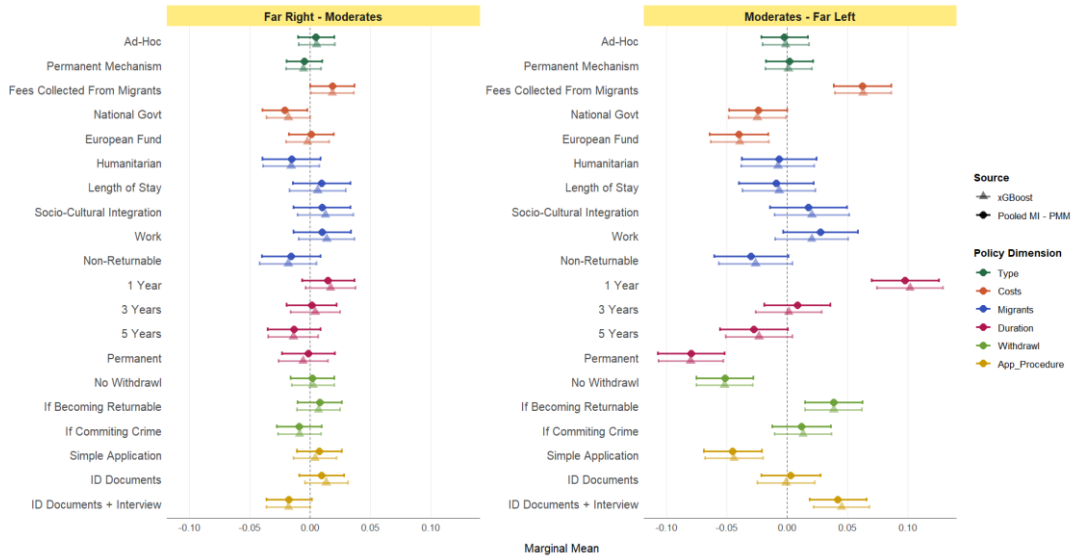


Figure S31. Comparison of XGBoost-imputed (triangles, lighter shades) and pooled MICE-PMM-imputed (circles, darker shades) estimates of the difference in marginal means over regularization-policy characteristics, by political ideology. The left panel shows the difference in marginal means between far-right and moderate respondents; the right panel shows the difference between moderate and far-left respondents. Horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions (Type, Costs, Migrants, Duration, Withdrawal, Application Procedure) derived from existing laws and previous regularization programs. The vertical dashed line marks the point at which the difference in marginal means is zero.

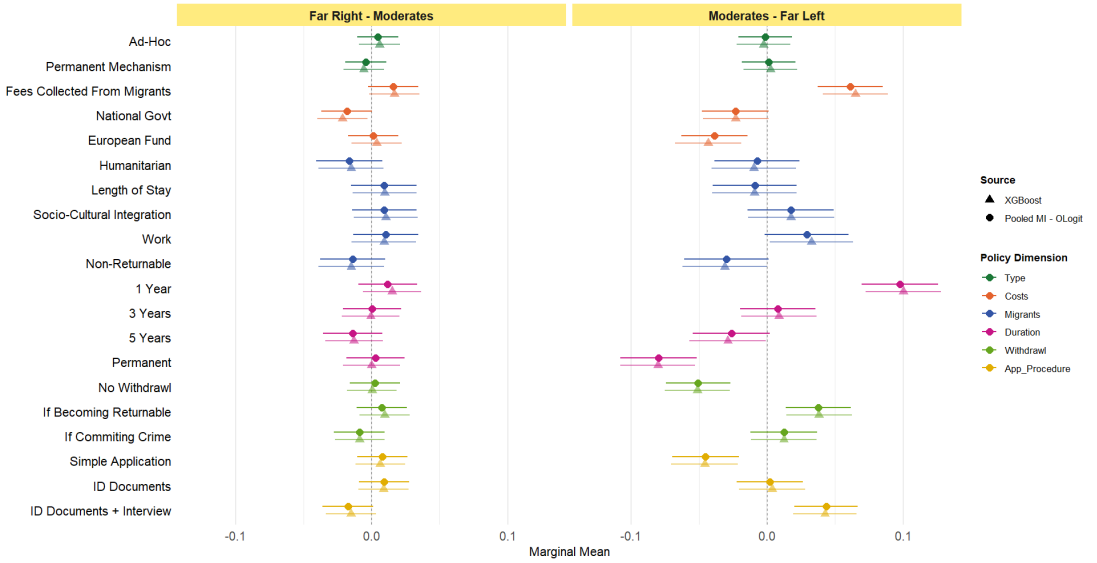


Figure S32. Comparison of XGBoost-imputed (triangles, lighter shades) and pooled MICE-OLogit-imputed (circles, darker shades) estimates of the difference in marginal means over regularization-policy characteristics, by political ideology. The left panel shows the difference in marginal means between far-right and moderate respondents; the right panel shows the difference between moderate and far-left respondents. Horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions (Type, Costs, Migrants, Duration, Withdrawal, Application Procedure) derived from existing laws and previous regularization programs. The vertical dashed line marks the point at which the difference in marginal means is zero.

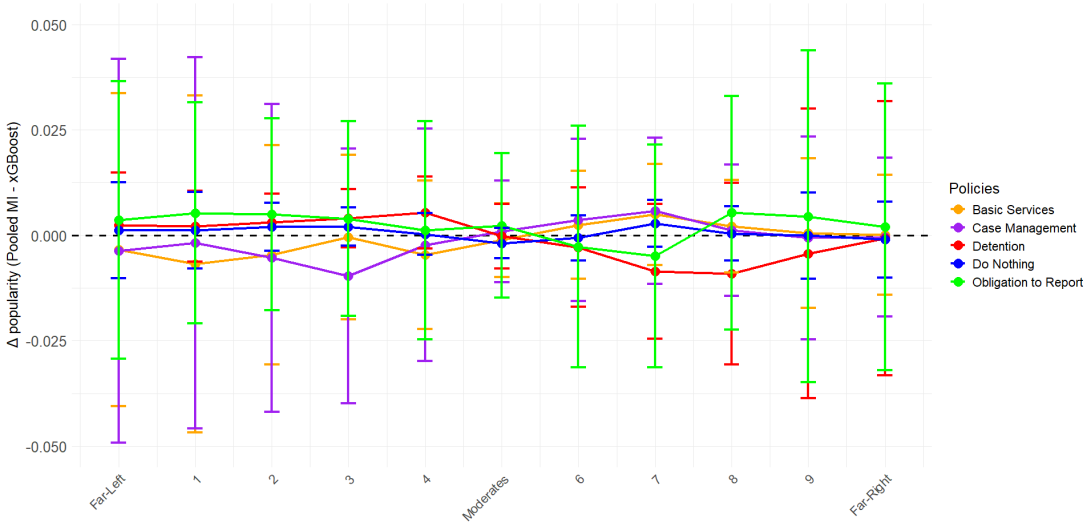


Figure S33. Differences between pooled MICE-PMM-imputed and XGBoost-imputed estimates of the relative popularity of policies to manage non-return, by political ideology. The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point estimates represent the difference (MICE-PMM minus XGBoost) in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by color) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data. No substantial differences were observed between the two specifications.

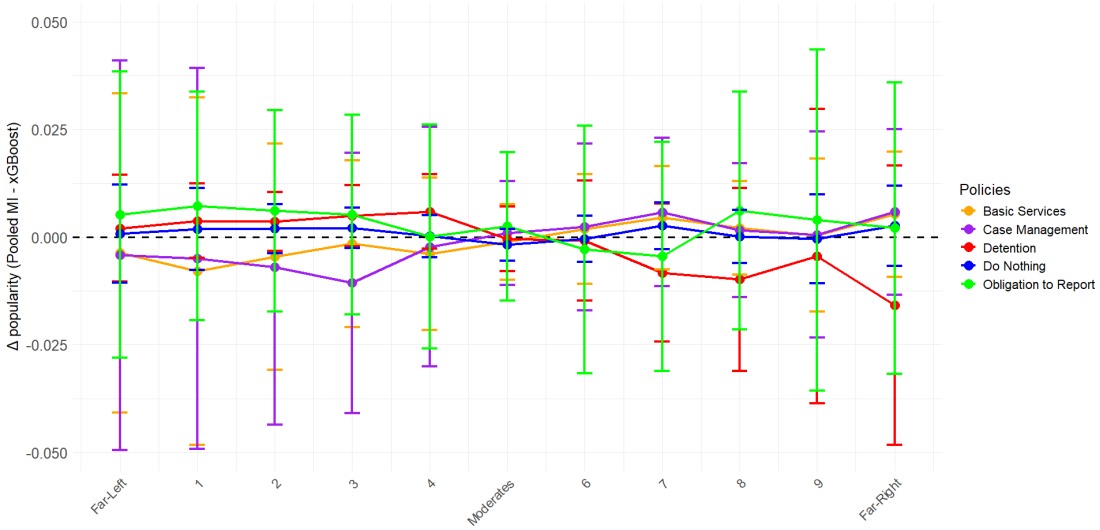


Figure S34. Differences between pooled MICE-OLogit-imputed and XGBoost-imputed estimates of the relative popularity of policies to manage non-return, by political ideology. The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point estimates represent the difference (MICE-OLogit minus XGBoost) in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by color) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data. No substantial differences were observed between the two specifications.

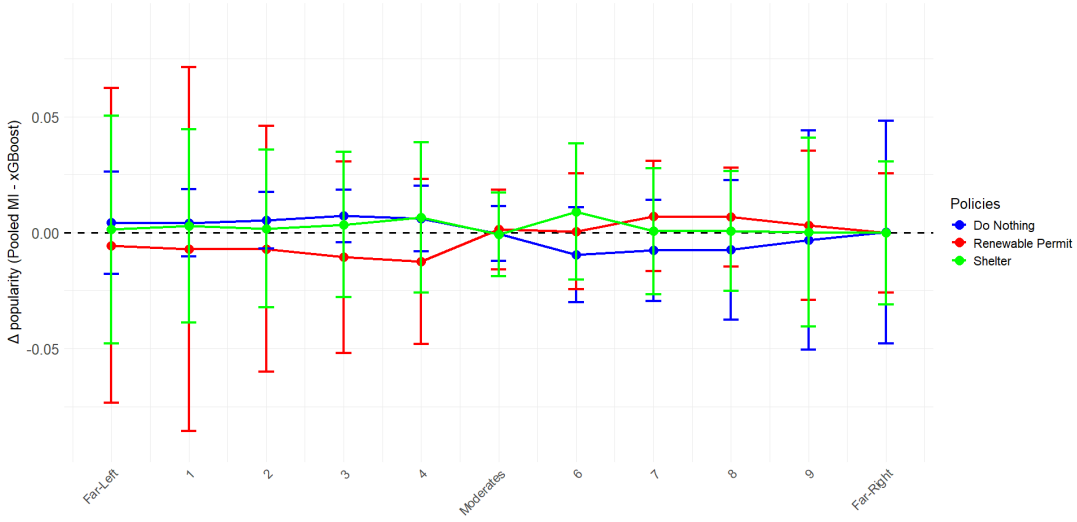


Figure S35. Differences between pooled MICE-PMM-imputed and XGBoost-imputed estimates of the relative popularity of policies to manage non-return, by political ideology. The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a de facto permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the difference (MICE-PMM minus XGBoost) in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

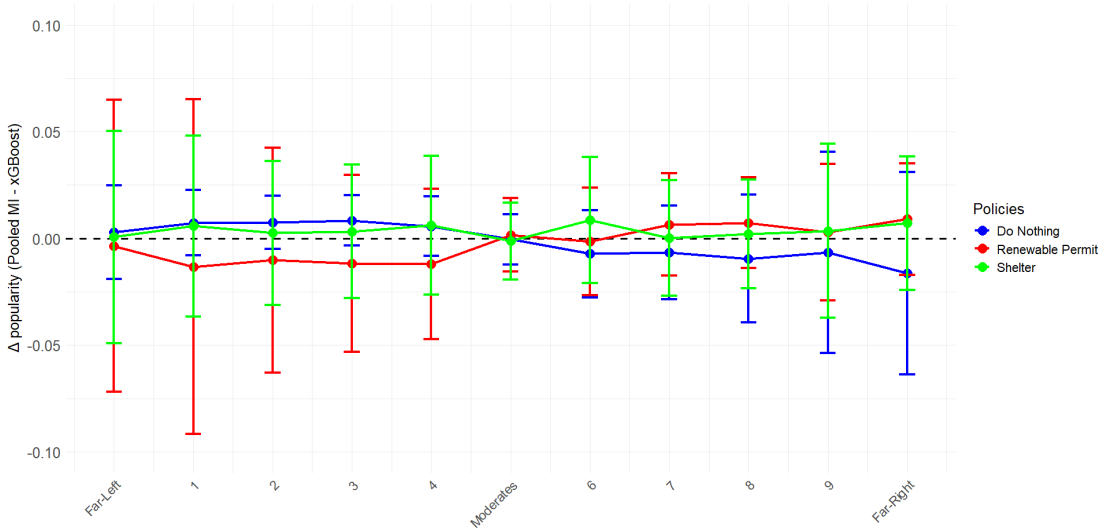


Figure S36. Differences between pooled MICE-OLogit-imputed and XGBoost-imputed estimates of the relative popularity of policies to manage non-return, by political ideology. The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a de facto permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the difference (MICE- OLogit minus XGBoost) in the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett-Luce model for ranked data. No noticeable differences were observed between the two specifications.

Preferences for Forced Return by Gender and Occupation

Figure S37 shows the probability of favouring forced over assisted voluntary return, by respondents' gender and political ideology. On average, men exhibit more restrictive return-enforcement preferences than women. Nevertheless, even politically moderate women are more likely to favour forced over assisted voluntary return, with 56.10% (95% CI: [53.71, 58.49]) supporting it. Their preferences are closer to those of far-right women (absolute difference: 18.40%; 95% CI: [12.47, 24.33]) than to those of far-left women (32.20%; 95% CI: [25.58, 38.82]). The rate at which support for forced return increases with right-wing ideology does not differ significantly by gender. A weighted linear probability model estimates the interaction effect at -0.003 probability points per unit increase in ideology (HC1-robust t = -0.87, p = 0.38; N = 16,301; two-sided test).

Figure S38 shows the probability of favouring forced over assisted voluntary return, by respondents' occupation and political ideology. No substantial interaction effects are observed between occupational categories and political ideology, except among right-wing students. This pattern is consistent with the Gen-Z effect identified in the main manuscript.

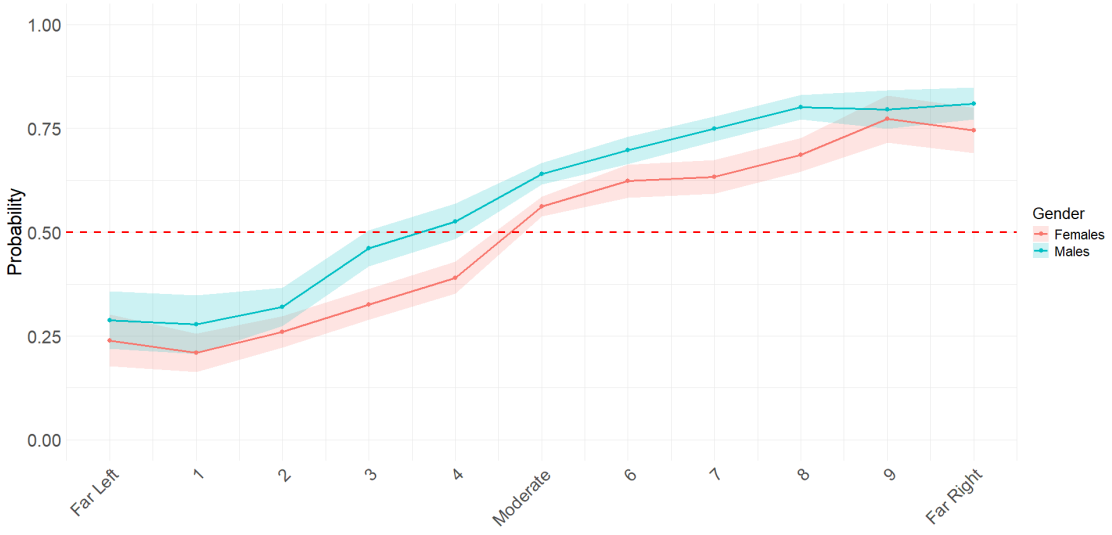


Figure S37. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by political ideology (left-right scale) and gender of respondents (N = 16,301). The shaded ribbon represents 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options.

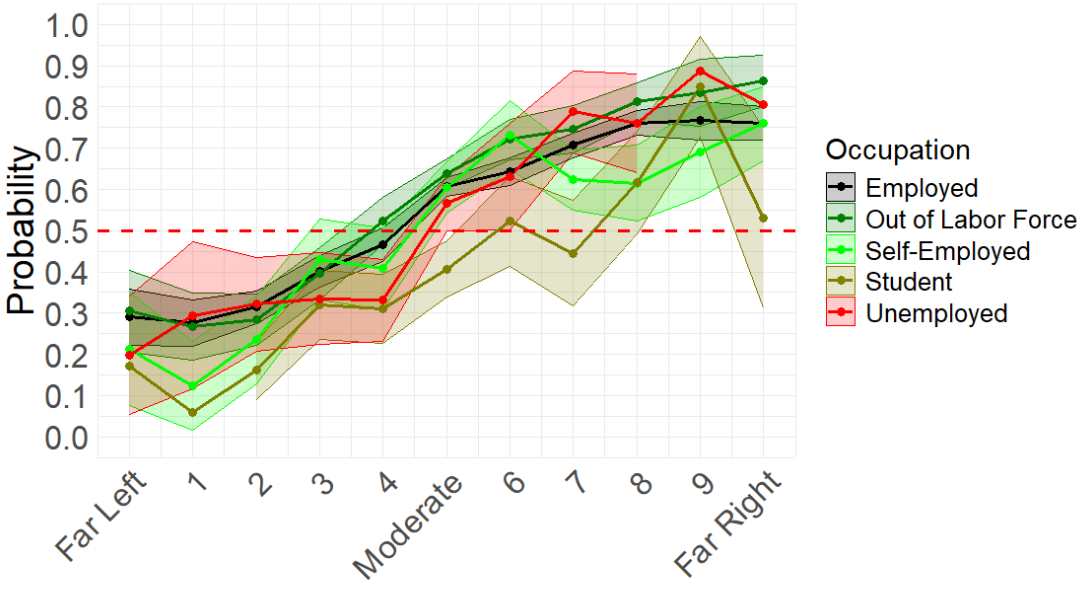


Figure S38. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by political ideology (left-right scale) and occupation of respondents (N = 16,301). The shaded ribbon represents 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options.

Preferences by Country of Origin of Migrants

In the final section of the survey (see Section E), respondents were asked to select two groups out of ten of possible countries of origin that they typically associate with the term *irregular migrant*. This question was used as a proxy to assess whether preferences for migration policies vary depending on the perceived countries of origin of irregular migrants (Bansak et al., 2016; 2023). To examine this, we constructed a simple binary indicator, set to one for respondents who exclusively associated irregular migration with individuals from North Africa (NA) or the Middle East (ME) and set to zero for those who did not, selecting instead any combination of the remaining eight regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa (Section E). NA and ME are of particular interest as these regions are predominantly Muslim, poorer than European countries, and represent key irregular migration corridors to Europe.

Overall, respondents who exclusively associate the term *irregular migrant* with individuals from NA and ME exhibit significantly more restrictive policy preferences than those who never report these two regions as typical origins of irregular migrants. As shown in Figure S39, their probability of preferring forced return is 67% (95% CI: [65.02, 68.98]), compared to 51.10% (95% CI: [49.02, 53.18]) among respondents who do not associate irregular migration with these two regions.

Figure S40 shows the differences in the marginal means of regularisation policy features between the two respondent groups. Respondents who exclusively associate irregular migration with individuals from NA and ME tend to prefer shorter and conditional permits,

greater administrative oversight of the application process, and broader conditions under which permits can be withdrawn, compared with those who do not associate irregular migration with these regions. They are also less likely to support policies that never revoke permits. Furthermore, they show stronger support for policies financed through migrant fees rather than national funds, as well as for regularisation schemes that require an "integration premium", favouring individuals who are socio-culturally integrated.

Regarding policies that address non-return, Figures S41 and S42 reveal that respondents who exclusively associate irregular migrants with individuals from NA and ME tend to favour more restrictive measures, such as detention and obligation to report, while they show less support for more inclusive policies, such as providing basic services or renewable work permits to those in *de facto* permanent irregular stay.

Taken together, these results suggest the possible presence of an anti-Muslim bias (Bansak et al., 2016; 2023): individuals appear more inclined to endorse restrictive policies and less willing to support inclusive ones when they associate irregular migrants with these two regions, which are geographically close to Europe, almost entirely Muslim and commonly perceived as such within the European imaginary.

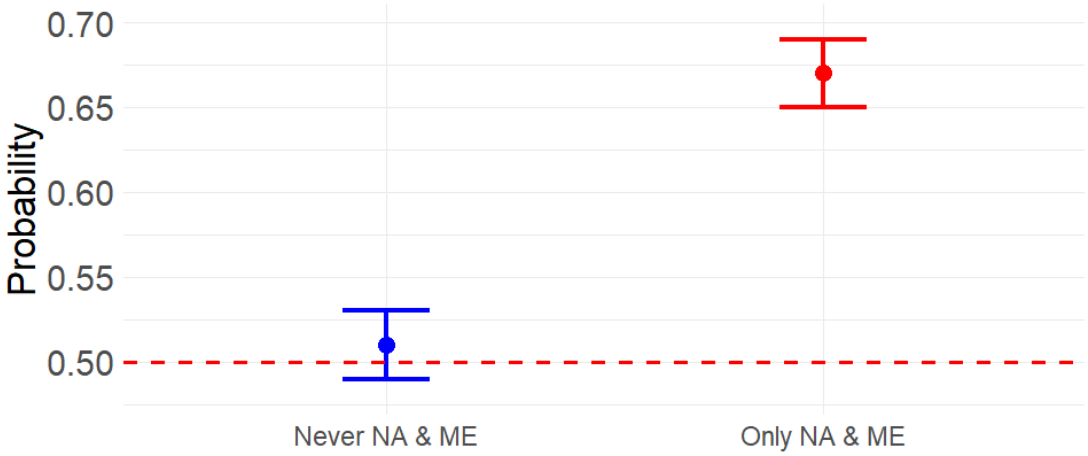


Figure S39. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return, by respondent group (N = 5,681). One group includes respondents who exclusively associate the term *irregular migrant* with people from North Africa and the Middle East ("Only NA & ME"), while the other includes those who never identify these two regions as typical origins ("Never NA & ME"). The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

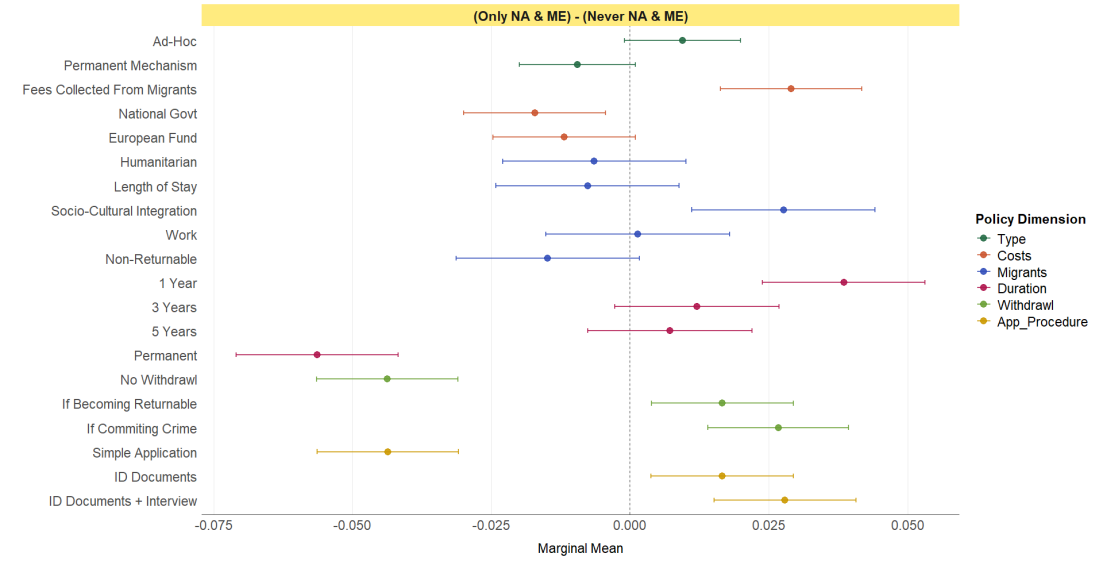


Figure S40. Preferences for regularisation policy characteristics, by respondent group (N = 90,896 conjoint observations). One group includes respondents who exclusively associate the term *irregular migrant* with people from North Africa and the Middle East ("Only NA & ME"), while the other includes those who never identify these two regions as typical origins ("Never NA & ME"). Each dot represents the difference in marginal means for a given policy feature, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line at zero denotes no difference between groups.

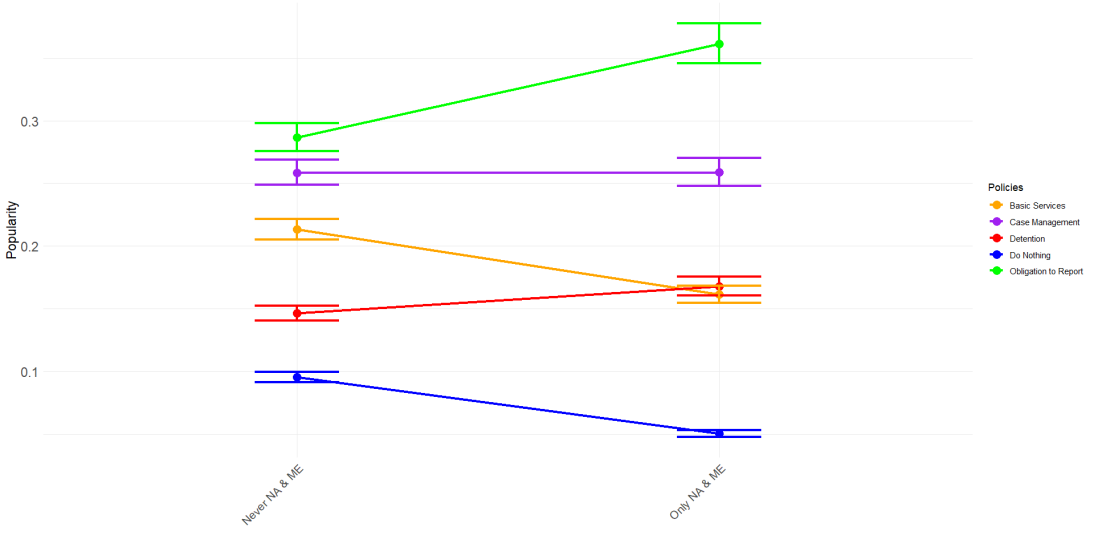


Figure S41. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, by respondent group (N = 5,681). One group includes respondents who exclusively associate the term *irregular migrant* with people from North Africa and the Middle East ("Only NA & ME"), while the other includes those who never identify these two regions as typical origins ("Never NA & ME"). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point

estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data.

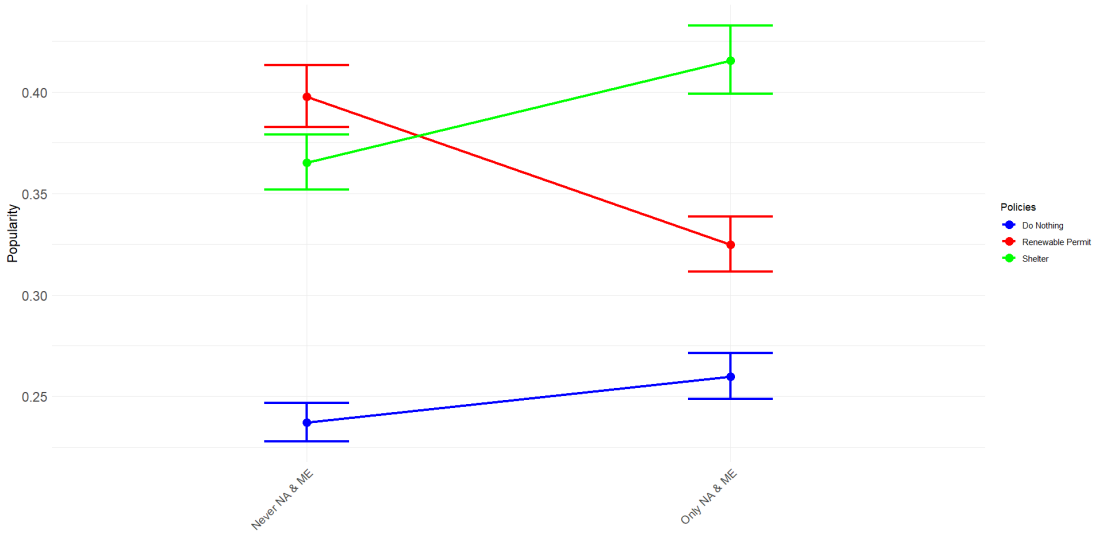


Figure S42. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, by respondent group (N = 5,681). One group includes respondents who exclusively associate the term *irregular migrant* with people from North Africa and the Middle East ("Only NA & ME"), while the other includes those who never identify these two regions as typical origins ("Never NA & ME"). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data.

Section E: Additional Analyses

Preferences by General Attitudes Towards Migrants

In the pre-treatment profiling phase of our survey (see Sections B and F), we measured general attitudes towards migrants using a battery of questions, each of which was either taken directly from or substantially inspired by established survey items used in major ongoing European-wide surveys, such as the European Social Survey (ESS), the European Values Study (EVS), and the Eurobarometer.

We first examined the associations among Q6-Q9 (see Section F for the exact wording). Figure S43 reports two heatmaps showing the Pearson and Spearman correlation matrices for these four variables, each measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 denotes the most negative attitude towards migrants and 10 the most positive. For example, Q6 asks: "*On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'No, not at all', 10 means 'Yes, totally', and 5 represents a position in between, do you think that migrants currently living in [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY] make a positive contribution to its society?*" Overall, responses to these questions are highly correlated.

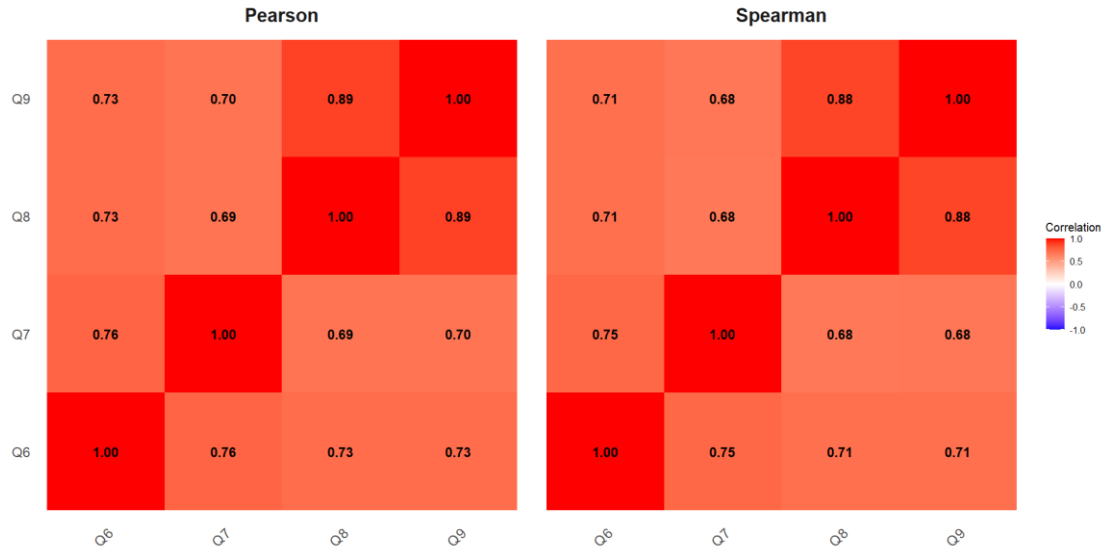


Figure S43. Pearson (left) and Spearman (right) correlation matrices for questions Q6-Q9 (see Section F for the exact wording), measuring general attitudes towards migrants. Each question is measured on a 0–10 scale, with 0 corresponding to the most negative attitude and 10 to the most positive attitude towards migrants, as captured by each question.

Both raw and standardized Cronbach's alpha were 0.92 across these variables, with an average inter-item Pearson correlation of 0.75 (Figure S43). When each item was removed in turn, both raw and standardized Cronbach's alpha were 0.90 when Q6 was excluded, 0.91 when Q7 was excluded, and 0.89 when either Q8 or Q9 was excluded. Factor analysis further indicated that the four items loaded strongly on a single latent dimension. Taken together, these metrics supported the construction of a composite index of general attitudes towards migrants, calculated as the mean of each respondent's responses to the four Q6-Q9 items.

Figures S44-S47 replicate the analyses presented in the main manuscript but disaggregate preferences according to respondents' scores on the index of general attitudes towards migrants rather than political ideology. As described above, higher values on this index indicate more positive attitudes towards migrants, whereas lower values indicate more negative attitudes.

We found that respondents expressing more negative attitudes towards migrants were more likely to prefer forced over assisted voluntary return, whereas respondents expressing more positive attitudes showed the opposite pattern (Figure S44). Importantly, the probability of choosing forced rather than assisted voluntary return increased progressively as attitudes became more negative. A similar gradient emerged across the other policy choices. In the conjoint regularisation task, respondents with more negative attitudes tended to select policy profiles with more restrictive attributes than respondents with moderate attitudes, who in turn tended to select more restrictive profiles than respondents with more positive attitudes (Figure S45). Likewise, in the first ranking task, more restrictive policy options, including detention and obligations to report to the authorities, were relatively more popular among respondents with more negative attitudes (Figure S46). In the second ranking task, concerning migrants in "limbo" who had neither been regularised nor had a reasonable prospect of

return, institutional abandonment was also relatively more popular among respondents with more negative attitudes. By contrast, respondents with more positive attitudes were relatively more likely to favour the provision of services, case management, and information sessions to migrants in "limbo" (Figures S46 and S47). Overall, the relative popularity of these policy alternatives followed a systematic gradient according to respondents' pre-treatment general attitudes towards migrants (Figures S46 and S47).

The measures of political ideology and general attitudes towards migrants are also informative beyond one another. Figure S48 illustrates this point. Among respondents expressing very positive pre-treatment attitudes towards migrants, those at the rightmost end of the ideology scale nevertheless have a substantially higher predicted probability of selecting forced rather than assisted voluntary return than those at the leftmost end, with the difference reaching approximately 25 percentage points. Thus, even among respondents who otherwise express highly positive general attitudes towards migrants, political ideology continues to systematically differentiate responses to the subsequent policy choice. The estimates reported in Figure S48 are predicted probabilities from an underlying weighted logistic regression model that also controls for socio-demographic characteristics, including age group, gender, educational attainment, and occupation.

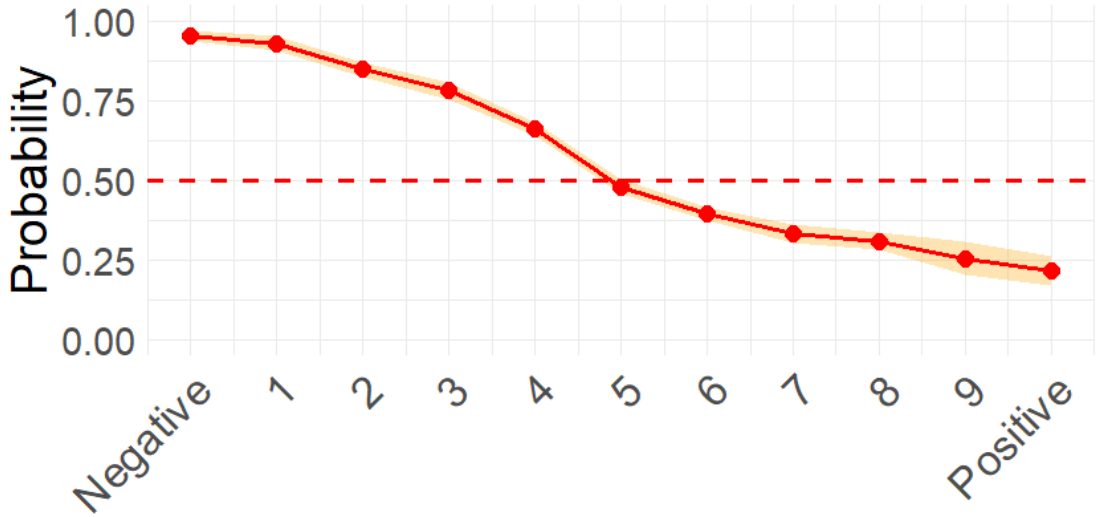


Figure S44. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by values of the index measuring respondents' general attitudes towards migrants (N = 16,301). Scores range from 0, indicating very negative attitudes, to 10, indicating very positive attitudes towards migrants. The shaded ribbon represents 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options.

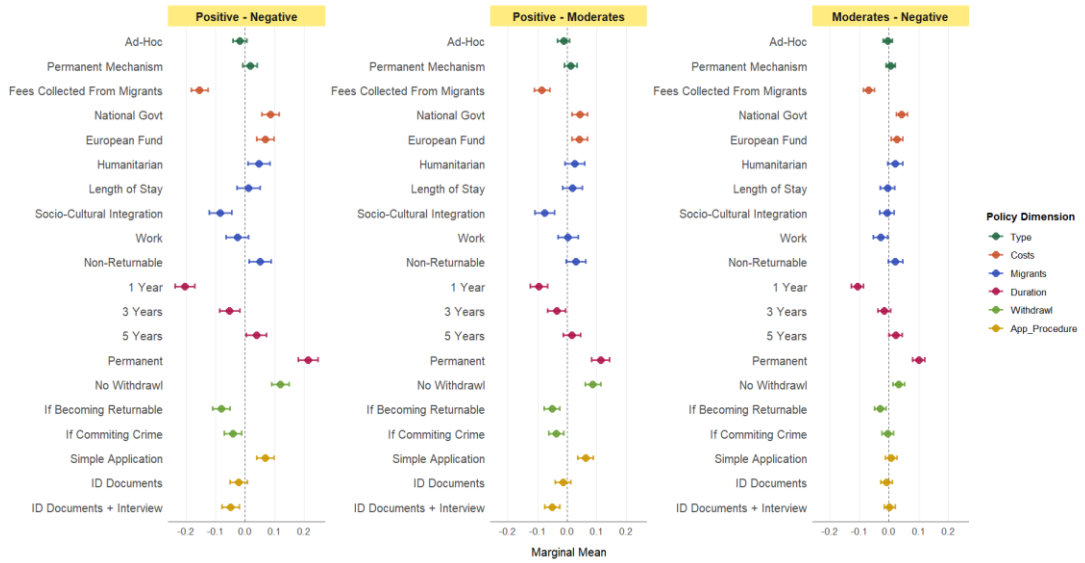


Figure S45. Preferences for regularisation policy characteristics, by the index measuring general attitudes towards migrants. The leftmost panel shows differences in marginal mean estimates for each policy feature between respondents with positive attitudes towards migrants, with index score = 10, and those with negative attitudes, with index score = 0 (N = 20,704 conjoint observations); the middle panel shows the same differences between respondents with positive attitudes and those with moderate attitudes, with index score = 5 (N = 51,584 conjoint observations); and the rightmost panel compares respondents with moderate attitudes and those with negative attitudes (N = 59,040 conjoint observations). Each dot represents the difference in marginal means for a given attribute, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line at zero denotes no difference between groups.

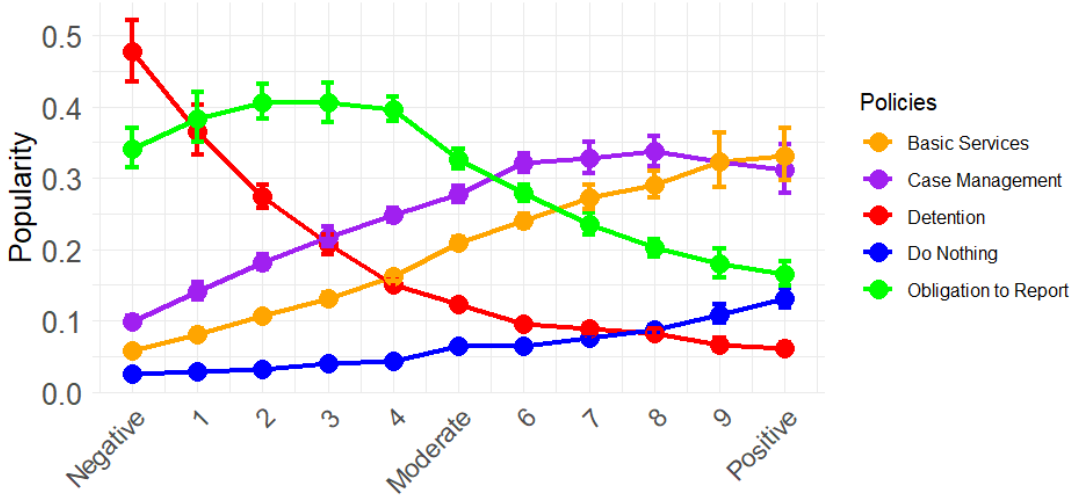


Figure S46. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, by the index measuring general attitudes towards migrants (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95%

confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data. Scores range from 0, indicating very negative attitudes, to 10, indicating very positive attitudes towards migrants.

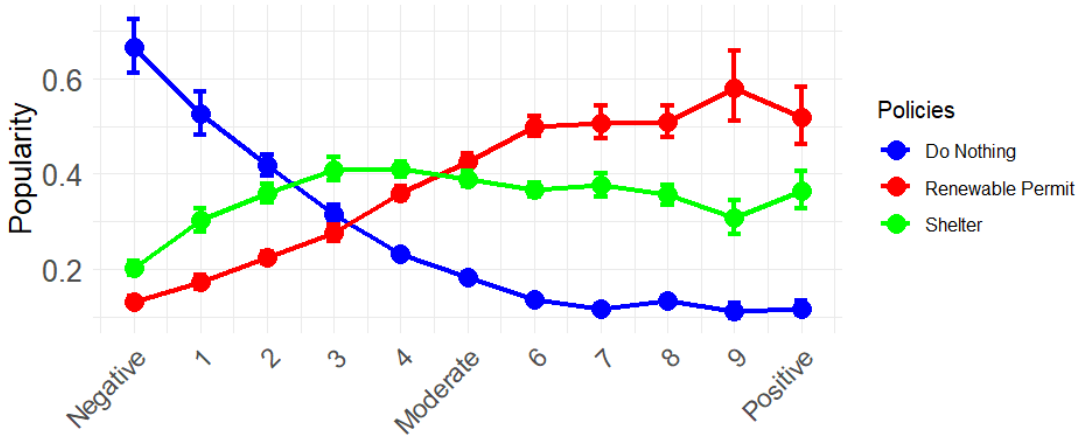


Figure S47. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, by the index measuring general attitudes towards migrants (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data. Scores range from 0, indicating very negative attitudes, to 10, indicating very positive attitudes towards migrants.

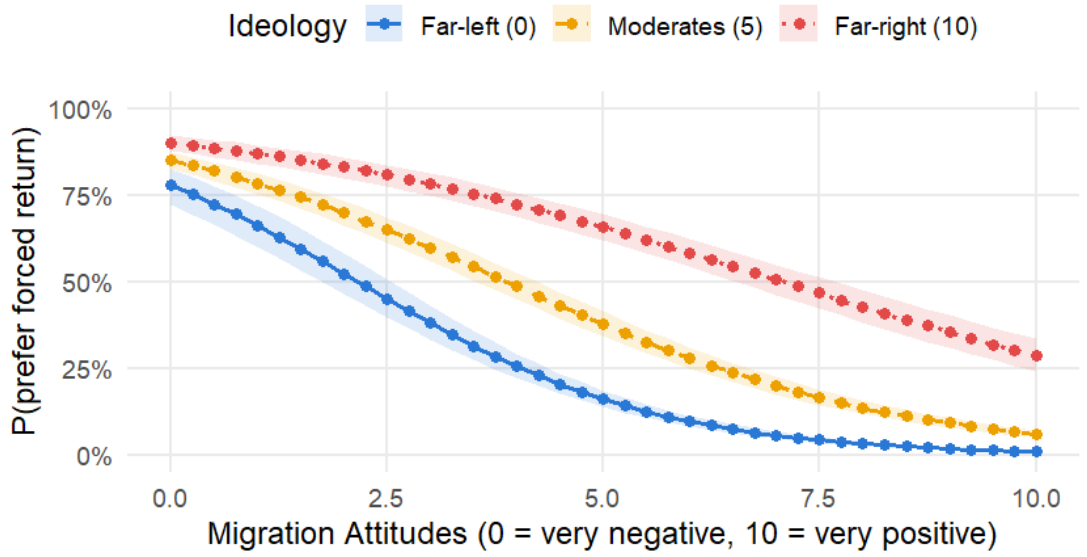


Figure S48. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by respondents' scores on the index measuring general attitudes towards migrants and selected ideological groups (far-left, moderate, and far-right respondents). The shaded ribbon represents 95% confidence intervals. Probabilities are derived from a weighted logistic regression model including an

interaction between the two measures and controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, including age group, gender, educational attainment, and occupation.

Preferences by Issue Importance Q11 asks respondents, after being informed about who qualifies as an irregular migrant and about the scale of irregular migration in Europe using the most recent available estimates (see Sections B and F), to what extent they consider irregular migration to be a problem, on a scale from 0 ('no problem at all') to 10 ('a very big problem'). Figures S49-S52 show that respondents who perceive irregular migration as a more serious problem tend to favour more restrictive policy responses, whereas those who perceive it as less serious tend to favour less restrictive responses. Overall, there is a clear gradient in policy preferences, with support for more restrictive approaches increasing as the perceived severity of irregular migration as a problem increases. In general, estimates for respondents who consider irregular migration less serious are more uncertain, reflecting the highly skewed distribution of responses towards higher levels of perceived problem severity (Figure 5a of the main manuscript). Indeed, the IQR extends from 6 at the 25th percentile to 10 at the 75th percentile, the maximum value of the scale.

We further examined which respondents perceived irregular migration as a more serious problem. We treated the outcome as an ordinal variable and used a weighted ordered logistic regression model to examine its association with political ideology, while controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, including age group, gender, educational attainment, and occupation. The ordered logistic regression estimates reported in Table S4 were obtained under the proportional-odds assumption. As a robustness check, we also estimated a partial proportional-odds model, allowing the association between political ideology and each cutpoint of the dependent variable to vary while keeping the socio-demographic controls constrained to satisfy the proportional-odds assumption. Although this more flexible specification allowed for greater heterogeneity in the relationship between ideology and the outcome across cutpoints, it did not substantively alter the results or their interpretation. We therefore report the proportional-odds specification, which provides a more parsimonious and straightforward interpretation. In other words, allowing for a more flexible relationship between ideology and the different thresholds of the outcome did not lead to substantively different conclusions.

We found that, holding age group, gender, educational attainment, and occupation constant, a one-unit increase on the ideology scale (that is, a one-unit shift towards the right of the political spectrum) was associated with approximately 32% higher odds of being in a higher category of Q11, corresponding to perceiving irregular migration as a more serious problem. A 10-unit increase on the ideology scale, corresponding to a shift from the far left to the far right of the ideological spectrum, was associated with approximately 16.1 times higher cumulative odds of being in a higher category of Q11. Thus, right-leaning respondents were more likely than left-leaning respondents to report higher values on the scale measuring the extent to which they perceived irregular migration as a problem.

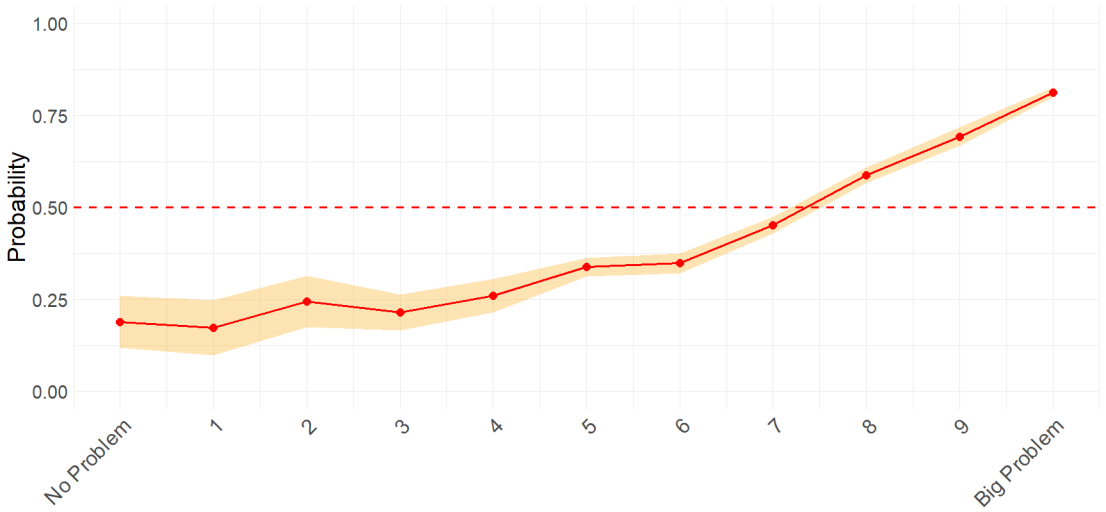


Figure S49. Probability of preferring forced over assisted voluntary return, disaggregated by respondents' assessment of the seriousness of irregular migration as a problem (N = 16,301). Scores range from 0, indicating that respondents consider irregular migration to be 'no problem at all', to 10, indicating that they consider it 'a very big problem'. The shaded ribbon represents 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at 50% marks an even split between the two return policy options.

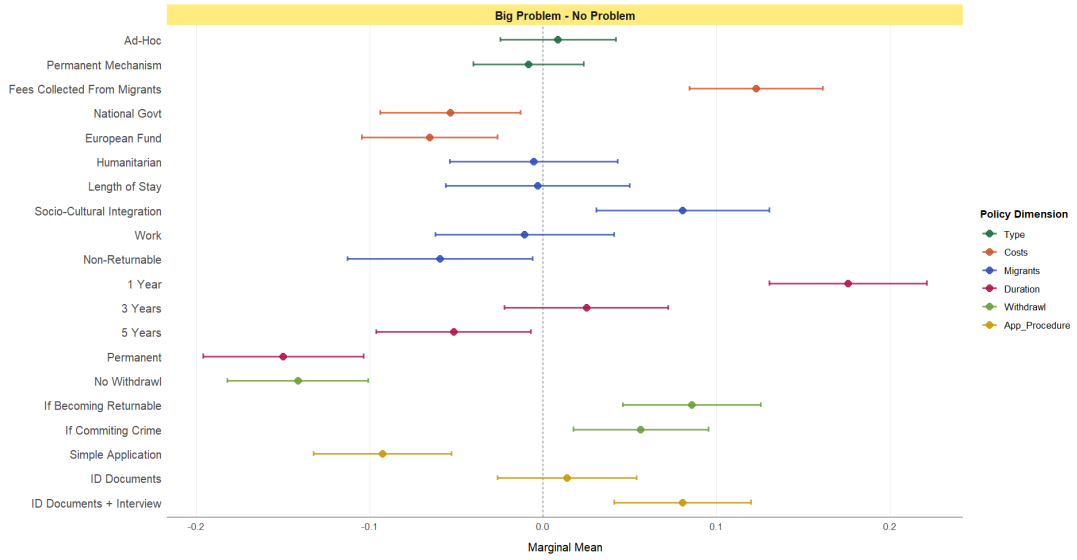


Figure S50. Preferences for regularisation policy characteristics, disaggregated by respondents' assessment of the seriousness of irregular migration as a problem**.** The figure shows differences in marginal mean estimates for each policy attribute between respondents who consider irregular migration 'a very big problem' (score of 10 on Q11) and those who consider it 'no problem at all' (score of 0 on Q11). The plot is based on a total of N = 76,880 conjoint observations. Each dot represents the difference in marginal means for a given attribute, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line at zero denotes no difference between groups.

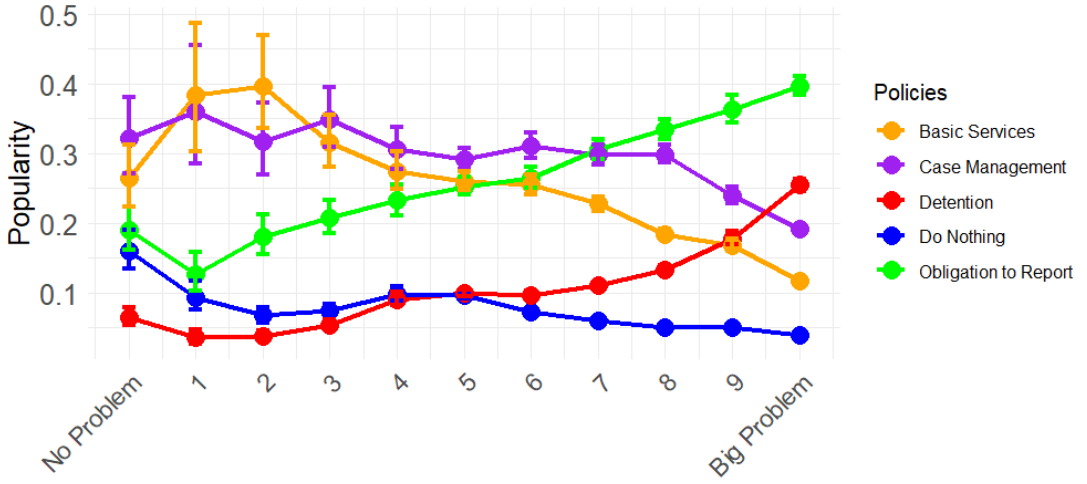


Figure S51. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, disaggregated by respondents' assessment of the seriousness of irregular migration as a problem (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data. Scores range from 0, indicating that respondents consider irregular migration to be 'no problem at all', to 10, indicating that they consider it to be 'a very big problem'.

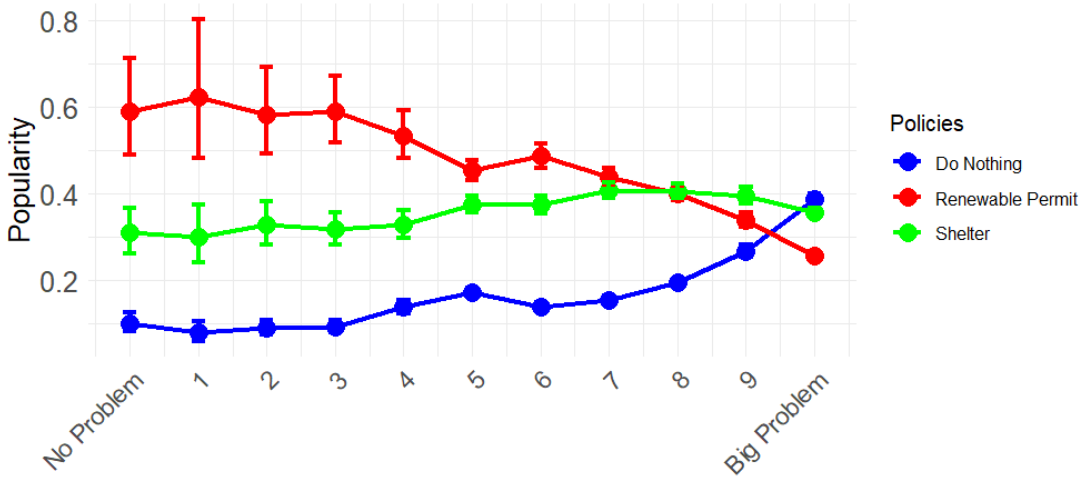


Figure S52. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, disaggregated by respondents' assessment of the seriousness of irregular migration as a problem (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for

ranked data. Scores range from 0, indicating that respondents consider irregular migration to be 'no problem at all', to 10, indicating that they consider it to be 'a very big problem'.

Coefficient	Odds Ratio	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Higher)
Ideology	1.32050238	1.30423046	1.3369773
Upper Secondary Edu.	1.04789998	0.97099238	1.1308991
University Edu.	0.84051440	0.77678740	0.9094695
25-34 years	1.21588888	1.07865938	1.3705770
35-44 years	1.64097819	1.45042701	1.8565632
45-54 years	2.21891020	1.96070048	2.5111242
55-64 years	2.72510542	2.40202959	3.0916353
65-74 years	2.32207310	2.00431864	2.6902027
Male	0.98590638	0.93254470	1.0423215
Self-Employed	1.04812844	0.94944009	1.1570748
Student	0.86296259	0.75325057	0.9886543
Unemployed	0.98950092	0.88704050	1.1037964
Out of Labor Force	1.11859496	1.01860687	1.2283980

Table S4. Estimates from a weighted ordered logistic regression model under the proportional-odds assumption, including political ideology and socio-demographic controls. The dependent variable is Q11, an 11-level ordinal measure of whether respondents consider irregular migration to be a problem ('Is irregular migration a problem?'). The reference categories for the socio-demographic controls are: female for gender, 18-24 years old for age group, at most lower secondary education for educational attainment, and employed for occupation. N = 16,301.

Preferences by Choice in the Return Enforcement Task

Figures S53-S55 disaggregate preferences elicited in the conjoint and two ranking tasks according to whether respondents selected forced or assisted voluntary return as the approach they would want their country to prioritise when enforcing the return of irregular migrants who have been issued a return order. Respondents who selected forced return consistently and systematically selected more restrictive policy options in the subsequent choice tasks than respondents who selected assisted voluntary return.

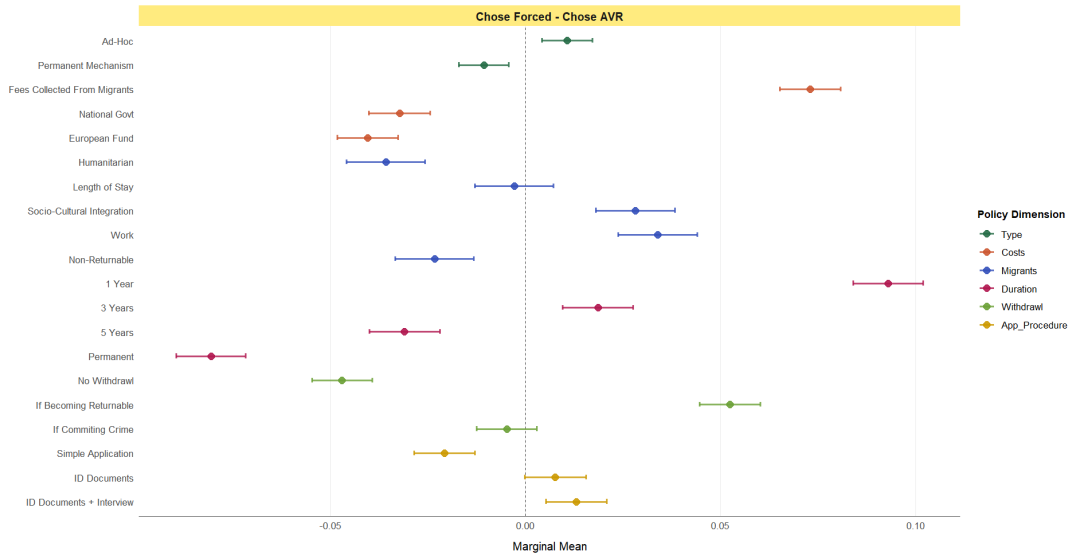


Figure S53. Preferences for regularisation policy characteristics, disaggregated by whether respondents chose forced or assisted voluntary return in the return-enforcement task. The figure shows differences in marginal mean estimates for each policy attribute between respondents who chose forced return and those who chose assisted voluntary return. The plot is based on a total of N = 260,816 conjoint observations. Each dot represents the difference in marginal means for a given attribute, with horizontal lines indicating 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Colours distinguish policy dimensions derived from existing laws and previous regularisation programmes. The vertical dashed line at zero denotes no difference between groups. ‘AVR’ stands for ‘assisted voluntary return’.

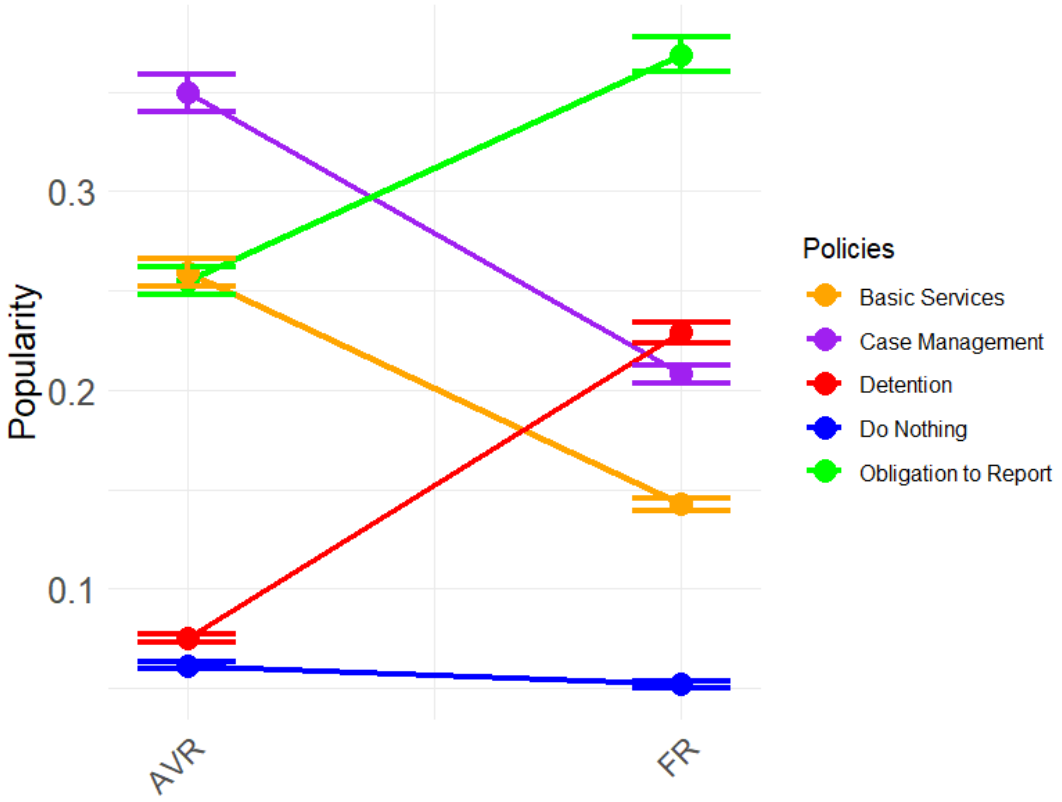


Figure S54. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, disaggregated by whether respondents chose forced or assisted voluntary return in the return-enforcement task. (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants with a reasonable prospect of return (first ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data. 'FR' stands for 'forced return' and 'AVR' stands for 'assisted voluntary return'.

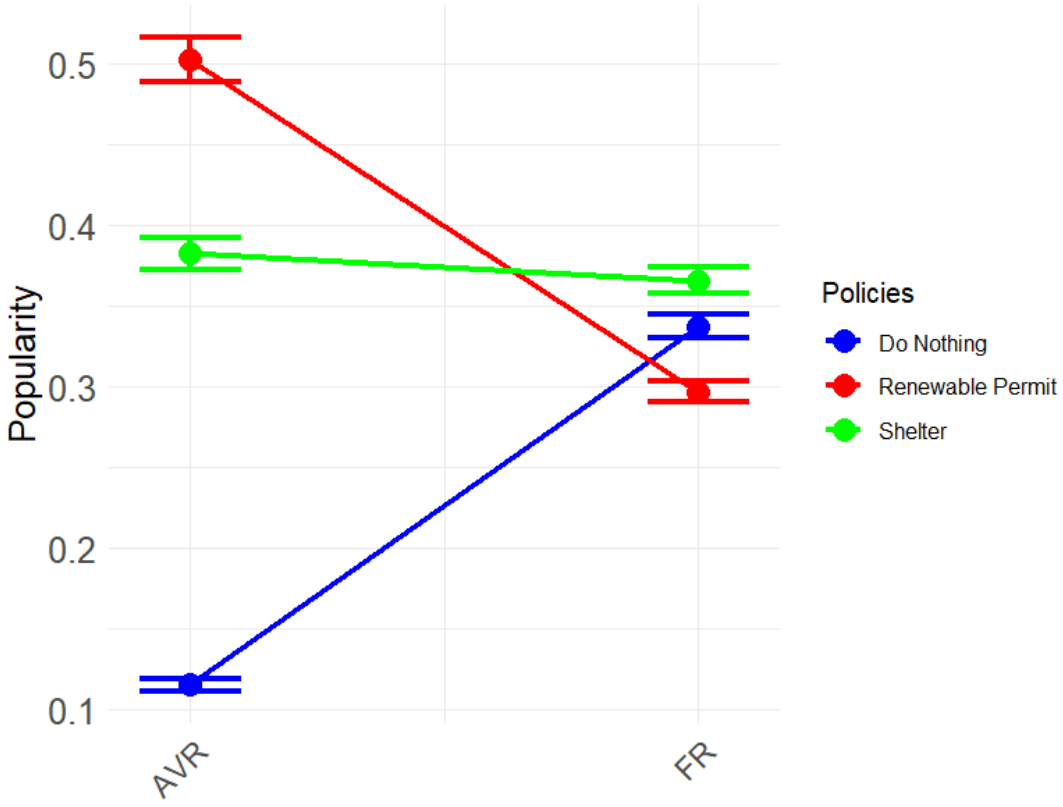


Figure S55. Preferences for policies to manage non-return, disaggregated by whether respondents chose forced or assisted voluntary return in the return-enforcement task. (N = 16,301). The figure presents preferences for policies governing the presence of irregular migrants in a *de facto* permanent irregular stay (second ranking task). Point estimates represent the relative popularity of each policy (indicated by colour) across political ideology groups, with 95% confidence intervals derived from a Plackett–Luce model for ranked data. 'FR' stands for 'forced return' and 'AVR' stands for 'assisted voluntary return'.

Section F: Questionnaire

We report the questionnaire in English here, noting that certain answer options were adapted specifically for the United Kingdom (e.g., educational qualifications). During translation, the wording of the questions and the framing of response options were carefully adjusted to reflect the linguistic and institutional context of each country.

Disclaimer

Thanks for clicking on this survey.

All the information you give us in this survey is treated in strict confidence in line with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct (MRS) and Data Protection legislation (GDPR).

The study you are about to participate in is for statistical purposes only. Nevertheless, for technical purposes, some of your personal data such as your project unique identifier may be registered. We may need to contact you again in connection to this survey only.

The survey should take up to 20 minutes.

This survey may include personal questions related to sensitive topics, such as your country of birth, political views, and opinion about migration. These questions are designed to help us better understand the diverse perspectives of our participants. Your responses to these questions are entirely voluntary, and you have the option to skip them by choosing the "Prefer not to say" option if you feel uncomfortable answering. You may also stop the survey at any time, there is no penalty for refusing to participate. We respect your privacy, and all responses will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Please click "**Continue**" if you agree to the above terms.

Sociodemographic Questions

HIDDEN DUMMY QUESTION
SC

D1. COUNTRY:	**LANGUAGE:**
1. Austria	German
2. Croatia	Croatian
3. Denmark	Danish
4. France	French
5. Germany	German
6. Greece	Greek
7. Italy	Italian
8. Netherlands	Dutch
9. Poland	Polish
10. Spain	Spanish

11. Sweden Swedish
12. Switzerland German, French, Italian
13. UK English

ASK ALL
OPEN-ENDED TEXT; NUMBERS ONLY; ALLOW FOR UP TO 2 DIGITS

S1. How old are you?

Please enter your age.

_____ years

TERMINATE IF <18 OR >74.

RECODE INTO DUMMY "**S1_AGE_GROUP**":

1. 18 - 24 years
2. 25 - 34 years
3. 35 - 44 years
4. 45 - 54 years
5. 55 - 64 years
6. 65 - 74 years

ASK ALL
SC

S2. What is your gender?

Please choose one of the following options:

1. Female
2. Male
3. Other / I prefer not to specify

ASK ALL
SC

S3. What is the highest level of formal education you have successfully completed?

Please choose one of the following options:

1. No formal education

2. Primary education (e.g., elementary school)
3. Lower secondary education (e.g., middle school or equivalent)
4. Upper secondary education (e.g., A-levels or equivalent)
5. University degree (e.g., bachelor, master) or higher (e.g., doctorate, medical specialization)

ASK SC ALL

S4. What best describes your work situation in the last week?

Please choose one of the following options:

1. Paid employee (including temporary leave of absence due to maternity/paternity, accident, illness or vacation)
2. Self-employed (e.g., freelancer, independent contractor, entrepreneur or family business)
3. Student (including PhD)
4. Unemployed, actively searching for a job
5. Unemployed, not actively searching
6. Chronically ill or permanently disable
7. Retired
8. Caring for children or others at home

ASK SC IF D1. = 1 (AUSTRIA)

S5. AT. Which region of Austria do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Burgenland
2. Kärnten
3. Niederösterreich
4. Oberösterreich
5. Salzburg
6. Steiermark

7. Tirol
8. Vorarlberg
9. Wien
99. I don't live in Austria ß **TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 2 (CROATIA) SC

S5. HR. Which region of Croatia do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Bjelovarsko-bilogorska županija
2. Virovitičko-podravska županija
3. Požeško-slavonska županija
4. Brodsko-posavska županija
5. Osječko-baranjska županija
6. Vukovarsko-srijemska županija
7. Karlovačka županija
8. Sisačko-moslavačka županija
9. Primorsko-goranska županija
10. Ličko-senjska županija
11. Zadarska županija
12. Šibensko-kninska županija
13. Splitsko-dalmatinska županija
14. Istarska županija
15. Dubrovačko-neretvanska županija
16. Grad Zagreb
17. Međimurska županija
18. Varaždinska županija
19. Koprivničko-križevačka županija
20. Krapinsko-zagorska županija
21. Zagrebačka županija

99. I don't live in Croatia ß **TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 3 (DENMARK) SC

S5. DK. Which region of Denmark do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Byen København
2. Københavns omegn
3. Nordsjælland
4. Bornholm
5. Østsjælland
6. Vest- og Sydsjælland
7. Fyn
8. Sydjylland
9. Vestjylland
10. Østjylland
11. Nordjylland

99. I don't live in Denmark ß **TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 4 (FRANCE) SC

S5. FR. Which region of France do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Île de France
2. Centre-Val de Loire
3. Bourgogne
4. Franche-Comté
5. Basse Normandie
6. Haute Normandie
7. Nord-Pas-de-Calais
8. Picardie
9. Alsace

10. Champagne-Ardenne
11. Lorraine
12. Pays de la Loire
13. Bretagne
14. Aquitaine
15. Limousin
16. Poitou-Charentes
17. Languedoc-Roussillon
18. Midi-Pyrénées
19. Auvergne
20. Rhône-Alpes
21. Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur
22. Corse
99. I don't live in France ß **TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 5 (GERMANY) SC

S5. DE. Which region of Germany do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Baden-Württemberg
2. Bayern
3. Berlin
4. Brandenburg
5. Bremen
6. Hamburg
7. Hessen
8. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern
9. Niedersachsen
10. Nordrhein-Westfalen
11. Rheinland-Pfalz
12. Saarland
13. Sachsen

14. Sachsen-Anhalt
15. Schleswig-Holstein
16. Thüringen
99. I don't live in Germany **ß TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 6 (GREECE) SC

S5. GR. Which region of Greece do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Attica
2. North Aegean
3. South Aegean
4. Crete
5. Eastern Macedonia and Thrace
6. Central Macedonia
7. Western Macedonia
8. Epirus
9. Thessaly
10. Ionian Islands
11. Western Greece
12. Central Greece
99. I don't live in Greece **ß TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 7 (ITALY) SC

S5. IT. Which region of Italy do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Piemonte
2. Valle d'Aosta
3. Liguria
4. Lombardia
5. Abruzzo

6. Molise
7. Campania
8. Puglia
9. Basilicata
10. Calabria
11. Sicilia
12. Sardegna
13. Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol
14. Veneto
15. Friuli-Venezia Giulia
16. Emilia-Romagna
17. Toscana
18. Umbria
19. Marche
20. Lazio
99. I don't live in Italy ß **TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 8 (NETHERLANDS) SC

S5. NL. Which region of the Netherlands do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Groningen
2. Friesland
3. Drenthe
4. Overijssel
5. Gelderland
6. Flevoland
7. Utrecht
8. North Holland
9. South Holland
10. Zeeland
11. North Brabant

12. Limburg
99. I don't live in the Netherlands **ß TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 9 (POLAND) SC

S5. PL. Which region of Poland do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Łódzkie
2. Świętokrzyskie
3. Małopolskie
4. Śląskie
5. Lubelskie
6. Podkarpackie
7. Podlaskie
8. Wielkopolskie
9. Zachodniopomorskie
10. Lubuskie
11. Dolnośląskie
12. Opolskie
13. Kujawsko-Pomorskie
14. Warmińsko-Mazurskie
15. Pomorskie
16. Warszawski stołeczny
17. Mazowiecki regionalny
99. I don't live in Poland **ß TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 10 (SPAIN) SC

S5. ES. Which region of Spain do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Galicia
2. Principado de Asturias

3. Cantabria
4. Pais Vasco
5. Navarra
6. La Rioja
7. Aragon
8. Comunidad de Madrid
9. Castilla y Leon
10. Castilla-La Mancha
11. Extremadura
12. Cataluña
13. Comunidad Valenciana
14. Islas Baleares
15. Andalucia
16. Region de Murcia
17. Ceuta
18. Melilla
19. Canarias
99. I don't live in Spain ß **TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 11 (SWEDEN) SC

S5. SE. Which region of Sweden do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Stockholm
2. East Middle Sweden
3. Småland and the islands
4. South Sweden
5. West Sweden
6. North Middle Sweden
7. Middle Norrland

8. Upper Norrland

99. I don't live in Sweden ß **TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 12 (SWITZERLAND) SC

S5. CH. Which region of Switzerland do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. Région lémanique/Genfersee
2. Espace Mittelland
3. Nordwestschweiz
4. Zürich
5. Ostschweiz
6. Zentralschweiz
7. Ticino

99. I don't live in Switzerland ß **TERMINATE**

ASK IF D1. = 13 (UK) SC

S5. UK. Which region of the UK do you live in?

Please select from the list.

1. East Midlands
2. East of England
3. London
4. North East
5. North West
6. Northern Ireland
7. Scotland
8. South East
9. South West
10. Wales
11. West Midlands
12. Yorkshire and The Humber

99. I don't live in the UK ß **TERMINATE**

ASK SC ALL

S6. Were you born in [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY]?

Please select either "Yes" or "No".

1. Yes
2. No
99. Prefer not to say

ASK SC IF S6 = 2 ("No")

S7. Were you born in a European country?

Note that "European country" means a country of the European Union, Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, or the United Kingdom. Please select either "Yes" or "No".

1. Yes
2. No
99. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL
SC

S8. Were your parents born in [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY]?

Please choose one of the following options:

1. Yes, both of them
2. Father only
3. Mother only
4. No, neither of them
99. Prefer not to say

ASK IF S8 = 2 ("Father only") OR 3 ("Mother only") OR 4 ("No, neither of them")
SC

S9. Were your parents born in a European country?

Note that "European country" means a country of the European Union, Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, or the United Kingdom.

Please choose one of the following options:

1. Yes, both of them
2. Father only
3. Mother only
4. No, neither of them
99. Prefer not to say

Attitudinal Questions

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10) WITH EXCLUSIVE RESIDUAL OPTION

Q1. In politics we often talk about "left" and "right". On a scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right), where would you place your own political views?

O Prefer not to say (EXCLUSIVE)

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q2. In politics, people often identify themselves as either 'progressive' or 'conservative' based on their views on social and economic issues. Progressives typically support social change and multiculturalism, while conservatives value more stability and tradition.

On a scale from 0 ('[IF D1. ≠ 13 THEN SHOW:] **very** [IF D1. = 13 THEN SHOW:] **strongly** [SHOW TO ALL:] **progressive') to 10 ('**[IF D1. ≠ 13 THEN SHOW:] **very strongly** [SHOW TO ALL:] **conservative'), how would you describe yourself?**

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q3. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is "strongly disagree," 10 means "strongly agree," and 5 is a moderate level of agreement, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"The government of [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY] should only care about the wellbeing of its own citizens, and not about people from other countries"

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q4. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is "strongly disagree," 10 means "strongly agree," and 5 is a moderate level of agreement, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"The government should intervene to reduce inequalities in society and the economy, even if this means increasing taxation".

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q5. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is "strongly disagree," 10 means "strongly agree," and 5 is a moderate level of agreement, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"*I feel more like a citizen of the world than of any specific country*"

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q6. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "No, not at all", 10 means "Yes, totally", and 5 represents a position in between, do you think that migrants currently living in [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY] make a positive contribution to its society?

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q7. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Worse place", 10 means "Better place", and 5 represents a position in between, do you think [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY] is a worse or a better place because of migrants?

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q8. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Allow none to come and live here", 10 means "Allow many to come and live here", and 5 represents a position in between, how many migrants from poorer countries outside Europe do you think

[RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY] should allow to come and live here?

ASK ALL

11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q9. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Allow none to come and live here", 10 means "Allow many to come and live here", and 5 represents a position in between, how many migrants of a different ethnicity from the majority in [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY] should be allowed to come and live in the country?

Forced Return vs. Assisted Voluntary Return

ASK ALL

NEW PAGE; DISPLAY TEXT; SUPPRESS CONTINUE BUTTON FOR 5 SECONDS

*Recent estimates indicate that in 2022 and 2023, about 3 million **irregular migrants** were present in Europe. 'Europe' here means the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. These irregular migrants come from outside Europe and have no official right to stay or work. Their status may result from unauthorized entry by air, sea or land, overstaying an expired visa, or the rejection of an asylum application.*

ASK ALL

NEW PAGE; DISPLAY TEXT; SUPPRESS CONTINUE BUTTON FOR 5 SECONDS

[IF D1. ≠ 13 THEN SHOW:] *According to the EU rules,* which also apply to [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY] [IF D1. = 13 THEN SHOW:] *According to the UK rules* [SHOW TO ALL:]*, every irregular migrant must receive a return order requiring them to leave the national territory for their country of origin or another country willing to accept them, provided these are considered safe.*

ASK ALL

NEW PAGE; DISPLAY TEXT; SUPPRESS CONTINUE BUTTON FOR 5 SECONDS

Once an irregular migrant receives a return order, the government has two options:

- *The first is **forced return**, where authorities escort irregular migrants for transfer by plane, boat or bus, using force if necessary, to their country of origin or another country willing to accept them.*
- *The second option is **assisted voluntary return**, whereby migrants are offered assistance, such as money or travel support, in exchange for their cooperation in leaving the country.*

ASK ALL
SC

Q10. Which option do you think [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY] should prioritize?

1. Forced return
2. Assisted voluntary return

Positive Frame vs. Negative Frame

HIDDEN DUMMY QUESTION
SC
RANDOMLY ALLOCATE RESPONDENTS (RESULTING IN CA. 50/50 SPLIT PER MARKET)

D2. FRAME – RANDOM ALLOCATION

1. Positive Frame
2. Negative Frame

ASK ALL
DISPLAY TEXT

[IF D2. = 1 THEN SHOW:]

*Data for 2022 and 2023 indicate that European countries **are able to return around 20%** of irregular migrants who have been issued a return order. This figure includes both forced and assisted voluntary returns.*

[IF D2. = 2 THEN SHOW:]

*Data for 2022 and 2023 indicate that European countries are **unable to return around***

80% *of irregular migrants who have been issued a return order. This figure includes both forced and assisted voluntary returns.*

SHOW Q11. AND Q12. ON THE SAME PAGE TOGETHER WITH THE TEXT ABOVE. (ONLY SHOW QUESTIONS AFTER 5 SECONDS)

HIDDEN DUMMY QUESTION
SC
RANDOMLY ALLOCATE RESPONDENTS (RESULTING IN CA. 50/50 SPLIT PER MARKET)

D3. Q11./Q12. - QUESTION ORDER

1. Q11. Then Q12.
2. Q12. Then Q11.

ASK ALL

11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q11. In your opinion, is irregular migration a problem?
Please provide an answer on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "No problem at all", 10 means "A very big problem", and 5 a position in between.

ASK ALL
11-POINT SLIDER SCALE (0 – 10)

Q12. Do you think that fewer people from non-European countries should be allowed to stay in [RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY], even if they enter and stay legally?
Please provide an answer on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "No, not at all", 10 means "Yes, absolutely", and 5 means a position in between.

Conjoint **Exercise**

ASK ALL
NEW PAGE; DISPLAY TEXT; SUPPRESS CONTINUE BUTTON FOR 10 SECONDS

Even after receiving a return order, irregular migrants may be given the opportunity to stay and obtain permission to reside and work legally. Some European countries offer this opportunity more often than others.

You will now see 8 pairs of regularization proposals to allow irregular migrants to stay in the country. For each pair, please indicate which proposal you would prefer for your country. Please take your time to read the descriptions of each proposal. People have different opinions on this issue and there are no right or wrong answers.

Conjoint Design

1. There are 6 dimensions with a total of $2 \times 3 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 3 = 1{,}080$ possible combinations. Each combination represents a ChoiceCard. Each ChoiceCard has a unique ID from 1 to 1,080.
2. For each respondent, 16 out of those 1,080 ChoiceCard configurations are randomly drawn. We use a monadic approach, so that each ChoiceCard ID has roughly the same chance to be drawn and will eventually be drawn roughly the same number of times across the total sample (per country separately).
3. For each Conjoint task (denoted as 'ChoiceSet'), 2 randomly chosen ChoiceCards are shown out of the individual pool of 16 ChoiceCards that were randomly drawn for that respondent in Step 2.
4. Please note that while the dimensions are always presented in a fixed order for the same respondent, the order of the dimensions is randomized across respondents to avoid unwanted bias in the data (i.e., order effects). The individual order in which the dimensions are shown should is stored in a dummy variable ("**D4. Dimension_Order**").

Overview of Dimensions for Conjoint

DIMENSION	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5

1) Type	Extraordinary, one-time provision	Permanent mechanism established by a law			
2) Fees	The costs of the proposal are covered by irregular migrants who have to pay a fee	The costs of the proposal are covered by the national government	The costs of the proposal are covered by a European fund		
3) Candidates for Regularization	Irregular migrants who are victims of exploitation or have serious health problems	Irregular migrants who have been in the country for a long time (more than 10 years)	Irregular migrants with a proven high level of socio-economic and cultural integration	Irregular migrants working in the informal economy	Irregular migrants who cannot currently be returned to their country due to circumstances beyond their control
4) Length of Permit	The permit is valid for 1-year	The permit is valid for 3 years	The permit is valid for 5 years	The permit is permanent	
5) Withdrawal of the Permit	Cannot be withdrawn before the expiry date	Can be withdrawn before the expiry date if there is a possibility to return the irregular migrant immediately to the country of origin	Can be withdrawn before the expiry date if the irregular migrant commits a criminal offence		
6) Application Procedure	Irregular migrants only have to submit an application to the immigration authorities	Irregular migrants have to submit identity documents to the immigration authorities, who will	Irregular migrants have to submit identity documents to immigration authorities, who will		

		check their validity	check their validity and may also conduct an interview before making a decision		

Example Mockup of a Choice Task:

CHOICE SET 1:

Suppose that only these two proposals are available, and you must choose one.

	PROPOSAL 1:	**PROPOSAL 2:**
TYPE	[Level 1 or 2]	[Level 1 or 2]
FEES	[Level 1 or 2 or 3]	[Level 1 or 2 or 3]
CANDIDATES FOR REGULARIZATION	[Level 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5]	[Level 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5]
LENGTH OF PERMIT	[Level 1 or 2 or 3 or 4]	[Level 1 or 2 or 3 or 4]
WITHDRAWAL OF THE PERMIT	[Level 1 or 2 or 3]	[Level 1 or 2 or 3]
APPLICATION PROCEDURE	[Level 1 or 2 or 3]	[Level 1 or 2 or 3]

C1. Which one would you choose?

I would personally choose… PROPOSAL 1 PROPOSAL 2

O **O**

REPEAT CONJOINT IDENTICALLY FOR TASKS C2. – C8.

Rankings

ASK ALL

NEW PAGE; DISPLAY TEXT; SUPPRESS CONTINUE BUTTON FOR 5 SECONDS

In reality, not all irregular migrants are given the chance to stay legally through these policies. When this does not occur, irregular migrants may remain in the country for a period of time after receiving a return order. This period can last for several months and in some cases even years due to various factors, such as personal circumstances, delays in obtaining necessary documents from countries of origin, or temporary humanitarian concerns, such as the need for medical treatment.

Governments have different strategies for managing the presence of these irregular migrants within their borders during this time. Below are several options, each with a brief description. Please rank these options from the most preferred to the least preferred.

ASK ALL

SHOW QUESTION ON THE SAME PAGE WITH THE TEXT ABOVE (ONLY SHOW AFTER 7 SECONDS)

RANKING QUESTION; MUST RANK ALL 5 ITEMS; SHOW ITEMS IN RANDOMIZED ORDER

Q13. Please rank the following options according to your preference from "Most preferred" (Rank 1) to "Least preferred" (Rank 5).

1. The authorities do not intervene or monitor the presence of irregular migrants in the country.
2. Irregular migrants may be held in detention centres, often in prison-like conditions. Individuals may be detained several times, even after failed return attempts, if the authorities believe that the return can still be arranged.
3. Irregular migrants are required to report to immigration authorities at specified intervals (e.g., weekly or monthly), to ensure that they remain in contact with them.
4. Irregular migrants are provided with individual support and information sessions to potentially find a solution to their case, either through voluntary return or by exploring other options to remain legally in the country.
5. Irregular migrants are given temporary access to basic socio-economic rights, including health care, social assistance, education, work and housing.

ASK ALL
NEW PAGE; DISPLAY TEXT; SUPPRESS CONTINUE BUTTON FOR 5 SECONDS

Finally, there may be situations where the above challenges are so significant that irregular migrants cannot reasonably be returned at all.

In these cases, there are no clear guidelines for governments to follow. Below are some options that they could apply. Please rank these options from the most preferred to the least preferred.

ASK ALL
SHOW QUESTION ON THE SAME PAGE WITH THE TEXT ABOVE (ONLY SHOW AFTER 5 SECONDS)
RANKING QUESTION; MUST RANK ALL 3 ITEMS; SHOW ITEMS IN RANDOMIZED ORDER

Q14. Please rank the following options according to your preference from "Most preferred" (Rank 1) to "Least preferred" (Rank 3).

1. These irregular migrants receive no special assistance, hoping that they will eventually leave the country.
2. Irregular migrants are given a renewable permit that gives them access to work and social services.
3. Irregular migrants are given access to basic housing, including shelter. This does not include a residence or work permit, and access to social services is limited.

ASK ALL
MC; MUST SELECT EXACTLY 2 ITEMS; SHOW ITEMS IN RANDOMIZED ORDER

Q15. As a final question, please choose <u>two</u> groups of countries of origin that you typically associate with the term 'irregular migrant'.

a. Europe / non-EU (e.g., Albania, Kosovo, Ukraine)
b. North America and Pacific (e.g., United States, Canada, Australia)
c. North Africa (e.g., Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria)

d. Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Senegal, Ghana, Congo, Nigeria)
e. Middle East (e.g., Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan)
f. Turkey
g. Caucasus (e.g., Armenia and Georgia)
h. East and South-East Asia (e.g., China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines)
i. South Asia (e.g., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh)
j. Latin America (e.g., Peru, Venezuela, Colombia)

END OF SURVEY

Replication Notebook & Data

The dataset, along with the questionnaire and coding of responses, is available at: https://gitfront.io/r/user-2172385/YkruNde3EPgP/Nature-Submission/tree/Data/. The Replication Notebook can be accessed at: https://gitfront.io/r/user-2172385/YkruNde3EPgP/Nature-Submission/tree/Replication-Notebook/.

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Study 2

Who prioritises coercive policies for irregular migrants? A person-centred analysis of European public opinion

Abstract

Public opinion in Europe varies significantly on how governments should respond to irregular migration, particularly with regard to the use of coercive measures such as deportation and detention. Although extensive research has examined general attitudes towards immigration, considerably less is known about how citizens evaluate the specific policies employed to manage the return and non-return of irregular migrants. Furthermore, preferences for coercive policies towards irregular migrants may resonate with different combinations of social characteristics of the respondent, meaning that groups that appear similar may hold markedly different policy views. Using survey data from 16,301 individuals across 13 EU+ countries (11 EU member states, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), we used latent class analysis to identify recurring patterns of socio-demographic characteristics and policy preferences. Our results show that support for coercive migration policies cannot be reduced to a single socio-demographic profile. Strong support for both forced return and detention emerges among two distinct groups: predominantly male, lower-educated, economically active respondents of working age, and an older, predominantly retired population with similar gender and educational characteristics. More moderate preferences are more prevalent among profiles containing larger proportions of women, highly educated individuals, younger people, and individuals with a migration background. Importantly, preferences for different coercive instruments do not necessarily coincide. For example, highly educated, employed respondents who strongly favour forced over assisted voluntary return are divided over detention. The identified profiles are systematically associated with political ideology, while revealing heterogeneity that a simple left–right distinction may obscure. These findings suggest moving beyond generic measures of support for or opposition to policies managing irregular migration, and instead examining the social legitimacy of the specific policy instruments through which irregular migration is governed.

Keywords: Irregular migration; Return policies; Detention; Public preferences; Policies.

Background

The return of irregular migrants who do not have the legal right to remain has become a central, yet persistently contested, component of European migration governance (European Commission, 2026). Under the EU Return Directive, Member States must issue a return decision to migrants identified by the relevant authorities as staying irregularly. Once this decision has been made, governments must determine how to implement it, either by encouraging voluntary departure through a negotiated approach involving informational and material assistance or by enforcing it through forced removal. Moreover, in cases in which a return order is not successfully fulfilled, Member States must make further decisions, including

whether individuals awaiting removal may be detained and, if so, under what conditions. These choices have significant political implications because they concern not only whether immigration rules should be enforced, but also the legitimacy of the coercive measures used to do so.

European return governance is marked by a persistent gap between formal policy objectives and actual implementation. A significant proportion of return decisions do not result in departure due to difficulties in identifying individuals, obtaining travel documents, securing cooperation from countries of origin, resolving legal claims and addressing humanitarian and non-refoulement constraints (Leerkes and Van Houte, 2020; Eurostat, 2024). Migrants may consequently remain in protracted conditions of irregularity or "non-deportability" even after receiving a return decision (Leerkes and Van Houte, 2020; Ambrosini and Hajer, 2023). This implementation gap creates pressure for governments to combine assisted voluntary return, forced removal, detention, tolerated stay and, in some cases, regularisation. Return policy is therefore better understood as a repertoire of instruments than as a single decision between enforcement and non-enforcement. The latter often generates tensions between migration control, individual rights and the practical limits of state power (Ellermann, 2015).

In this context, public attitudes matter because governments' ability to implement return policies depends, in part, on their perceived democratic legitimacy. Political actors often invoke public demand for immigration control when advocating stricter enforcement. However, public support for the general objective of immigration control does not necessarily translate into support for every means used to achieve it. For example, individuals may endorse the enforcement of return decisions through forced removal while opposing detention or prolonged confinement pending removal. Studying attitudes towards return policies therefore requires distinguishing between support for policy objectives and support for the means by which these objectives are pursued.

Most public opinion research has focused on examining broad attitudes to-wards immigrants and the preferred levels of immigration, as well as the characteristics of migrants and asylum seekers who should be admitted. This literature has identified associations with education, age, gender, migration background, economic position, perceived cultural and economic threat, and political ideology (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Bansak et al., 2016). However, these findings cannot simply be extrapolated to attitudes towards coercive measures such as return and detention. First, when asked generic questions about 'immigration', respondents may have different migrant populations in mind. They may think primarily of asylum seekers, labour migrants, or permanent settlers, even when the survey question does not specify a particular group (Blinder, 2015). Second, attitudes are sensitive to the characteristics of migrants and the policy being evaluated. For instance, conjoint studies show that preferences regarding admission and asylum depend on applicants' economic prospects, vulnerability, reasons for migration, religion and other characteristics (Bansak et al., 2016; Jeannet et al., 2021; Bansak et al., 2023). Similarly, recent evidence on policies towards irregular migrants indicates that citizens differentiate between regularisation, social rights and control measures (Renzini et al., 2026), rather than adopting a uniform pro- or anti-immigration stance. In other words, both the policy objective and the instrument through which it is pursued matter (Carrasco Armijo and Vargas-Silva, 2026).

Our earlier analysis of the present survey showed that, although preferences varied considerably between instruments and scenarios, respondents across the countries studied generally preferred restrictive responses to irregular migration (Renzini et al., 2026). This study investigates the social configurations underlying this variation. Existing research typically estimates the average association between a socio-demographic characteristic and

an attitude, while holding all other characteristics constant. While such analyses are valuable for estimating independent associations, they do not directly describe how characteristics co-occur in population groups. Age, gender, education, employment status, and migration background are socially interdependent. For instance, young respondents are more likely to be students, whereas older respondents are more likely to be retired. Educational composition also differs across generations. Consequently, similar policy preferences may emerge within demographic groups whose social positions are otherwise quite different.

A person-centred approach complements a variable-centred analysis by identifying recurring configurations of characteristics, rather than estimating an average coefficient for each (Bergman and Magnusson, 1997; Woo et al., 2018). This is particularly useful when potentially 'moderate' sections of public opinion are heterogeneous. For example, a midpoint on a left–right scale does not necessarily identify a coherent political group. It may include centrist respondents, individuals with little interest in politics, people with left-wing economic views and conservative cultural views, and those reluctant to place themselves on an ideological scale. Furthermore, left–right identification has different substantive meanings in different national political contexts. Ideology remains important, but it may not be the only factor influencing support for particular forms of migration enforcement.

Using survey data from 16,301 respondents in 13 European countries, this study examines whether recurring socio-demographic configurations are associated with different preferences concerning two coercive instruments: forced return and administrative detention. Two questions were addressed. First, we identified recurring socio-demographic and attitudinal profiles based on the respondents' gender, age, education, employment status, migration background, and their preferences for forced over assisted voluntary return, as well as the relative ranking of administrative detention. Second, we examined how these profiles were distributed across respondents' self-placement on the left–right ideological spectrum.

By distinguishing between forced return and detention, we examine whether support for enforcing departure constitutes a single coercive orientation, or whether citizens delineate different boundaries around what constitutes accept-able state action. This distinction is important because forced removal and detention entail different forms of coercion and raise different questions about the appropriate scope of state authority. This analysis contributes to research on migration attitudes by shifting the focus from general approval or disapproval of immigration to the social legitimacy of specific governance instruments for irregular migration.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents our data and the latent class analysis method. Section 3 presents our results. Section 4 summarises our findings, elaborates on our conclusions and discusses the limitations of the study.

Data and Methods

Overview of the survey design and dependent variables of interest

We conducted a survey across 13 EU+ countries (Spain, France, Italy, Austria, Croatia, Greece, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) involving 16,301 respondents in total, with an average of 1,250 respondents per country. The sample was representative of each country in terms of gender, age composition and region of residence. The survey first measured the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, followed by a series of questions designed to assess their political orientation and their attitudes towards migrants in general and irregular migrants in particular. Respondents were then asked to decide which option they thought their country should prioritize for

returning irregular migrants: forced return (deportation) or assisted voluntary return. "Forced return" was described as a policy whereby "[...] *authorities escort irregular migrants for transfer by plane, boat, or bus, using force if necessary, to their country of origin or another country willing to accept them*", while "assisted voluntary return" was described as a policy whereby "[...] *migrants are offered assistance, such as money or travel support, in exchange for their cooperation in leaving the country*".

Participants then completed a conjoint experiment involving eight consecutive choice tasks between pairs of hypothetical regularisation policies. These policies varied along six key dimensions derived from historical typologies of regularisation proposals (Baldwin-Edwards and Kraler, 2009; Hendow and Qais-rani, 2024):

1. Legal framework of enactment
2. Financing mechanisms
3. Target beneficiary categories
4. Permit duration
5. Revocability
6. Assignment procedure.

At the end of the conjoint task, we further specified that not all migrants would be regularised. We therefore asked respondents what should be done in such cases, distinguishing between situations in which return is still theoretically feasible and situations where it is effectively impossible. We provided a set of five policies for the former and three for the latter, presented in an initial random order, and asked respondents to rank them from most to least favourite. Among the options in the first ranking task was administrative detention, which we described as follows: "*Irregular migrants may be held in detention centres, often in prison-like conditions. Individuals may be detained several times, even after failed return attempts, if the authorities believe that the return can still be arranged*".

Rather than examining the effects of individual socio-demographic variables separately, this study aims to identify latent demographic profiles, i.e., groups of respondents with similar socio-demographic characteristics, and to assess whether these profiles differ systematically in their support for coercive policies, namely forced return and detention. This person-centred approach allows us to identify population segments characterised by distinct combinations of a limited set of routinely collected socio-demographic characteristics and policy preferences.

These two policies were selected because, according to the survey descriptions provided to respondents, they represent the most coercive instruments within the migration governance cycle. They are officially classified as "last resort" measures under the EU Return Directive (Article 8(4) and Chapter IV), and are subject to strong safeguards against the risk of human rights violations (Ambrosini and Hajer, 2023; Leerkes and Van Houte, 2020). Indeed, the description of immigration detention explicitly states that individuals may be held in centres where living conditions are often "prison-like", while the description of forced return specifies that individuals are deported against their will and, where necessary, by the use of force.

The model

To identify recurring socio-demographic and attitudinal configurations within the European

population and estimate their prevalence, we implemented Latent Class Analysis (LCA; Lazarsfeld and Henry 1968; McCutcheon 1987; Collins and Lanza 2010; Sinha et al. 2021) using the StepMix Python package (Morin et al., 2025). Within the same latent-class framework, we simultaneously estimate latent profiles (or "classes") and the extent to which these profiles are systematically associated with different preferences regarding forced return and administrative detention (Lanza et al., 2013). The important implication is that the latent classes are not estimated independently of the policy outcomes. Rather, the socio-demographic indicators and policy preferences jointly contribute to the estimation of the latent-class model through a one-step maximum-likelihood procedure.

The central assumption of LCA is that the observed heterogeneity among individuals can be explained by a finite number of unobserved (latent) groups. Specifically, it is assumed that each respondent *i* belongs to one of *K* mutually exclusive latent classes C_i. These classes should not be conceptualised as directly observable social categories, but rather as synthetic profiles or 'personas' that summarise recurring combinations of socio-demographic and attitudinal characteristics in the population. In this study, the latent classes are characterised by distinct class-conditional distributions of educational attainment, occupation, gender, age group, and migration background. Within the same framework, the model also estimates the class-conditional distributions of preferences for forced rather than assisted voluntary return and for administrative detention.

Formally, the model assumes that the observed indicators are conditionally independent given latent class membership, such that the latent class captures the common dependence among the observed characteristics and policy preferences. The resulting classes therefore represent recurring socio-demographic configurations, while the policy variables are modelled as class-specific out-comes. This allows us to examine whether respondents sharing similar socio-demographic configurations systematically differ in their preferences concerning coercive instruments of migration governance.

The model therefore estimates both the prevalence of each latent class and the class-specific distributions of the observed socio-demographic indicators and policy preferences. By comparing these class-specific distributions, we can as-sess whether preferences for forced return and administrative detention are systematically patterned across different socio-demographic configurations, rather than treating support for coercive migration policies as a single, homogeneous orientation towards migration control.

This approach is analogous to biological taxonomy. Organisms are rarely categorised by a single defining feature; rather, species are identified through recurring combinations of traits, such as morphology, genetics, and behaviour. Similarly, LCA identifies personas or population "types" not from pre-existing labels, but from shared configurations of observable attributes. Just as taxonomy distils complex organisms into meaningful categories, LCA summarises multidimensional human variation into interpretable population profiles.

Mathematically, the observed characteristics of individual *i* are represented by the vector X_i. The vector Y_i contains individual *i*'s policy preferences: support for forced versus assisted voluntary return (a binary variable), and the ranking assigned to detention (a categorical variable ranging from 1, the most preferred option, to 5, the least preferred option).

The latent class model assumes that individuals belong to one of *K* unob-served and mutually exclusive classes, denoted $C_i \in \{1, \ldots, K\}$. Let $P(Y_{i1} \mid C_i = k)$ denote the conditional probability distribution governing respondent *i*'s choice regarding whether their home country should prioritise forced return (deportation) or assisted voluntary return, and let $P(Y_{i2} \mid C_i = k)$ denote the conditional probability distribution over the rank assigned to detention among the five candidate policy options. Both probabilities are conditional on belonging to latent class *k*. Meanwhile, $P(X_i \mid C_i = k)$ defines the class-conditional joint distribution of the

J observable socio-demographic characteristics for respondent *i*. We assume that, given *k*, the elements of X_i are conditionally independent of each other. This implies that once a respondent's latent class is known, knowing the value of one socio-demographic variable provides no additional information about any other socio-demographic variable.

By combining these conditional probability distributions (see the Appendix for the mathematical derivation), we obtain a likelihood function that, for a given number of latent classes *K*, estimates the composition and prevalence of the latent socio-demographic profiles and their associated patterns of preferences for coercive migration governance policies. Because the number of latent classes is unknown *a priori* and cannot be directly observed, *K* constitutes a key model-selection parameter. We therefore estimate the model separately for a range of candidate values of *K* and compare their fit to the observed data (Sinha et al., 2021).

For each value of *K*, the Expectation-Maximization (EM) algorithm is initialised multiple times from different random starting values of the parameters vector θ to reduce the risk of convergence to a local maximum, and the solution with the highest log-likelihood is retained. The optimal number of latent classes is then selected using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), which balances goodness-of-fit against model complexity by penalising models with more parameters (Sinha et al., 2021). BIC works particularly well when *N* is large, as in our case. As the number of latent classes increases, the likelihood generally improves; however, this improvement comes at the cost of estimating additional parameters (see Equation 3 in the appendix). Consequently, the preferred model is the one with the lowest BIC, representing the best compromise between goodness-of-fit and parsimony.

Initial conditions and model selection

In our application, the Latent Class Analysis (LCA) algorithm was estimated using a sample of *N* = 16301 respondents. The gender distribution is balanced, with 49.95% male and 50.05% female respondents. Educational attain-ment is categorised into three levels: "At most lower secondary" (14.42%), "Upper secondary" (38.77%), and "University degree" (46.81%). Employment status is divided into five categories: "Employed" (55.21%), "Self-employed" (9.28%), "Student" (6.63%), "Unemployed" (6.67%), and "Out of the labour force" (comprising retirees and housewives; 22.21%). The sample spans six age groups: 18–24 (10.47%), 25–34 (17.43%), 35–44 (18.46%), 45–54 (19.41%), 55–64 (19.02%), and 65–74 (15.21%). Finally, in terms of migration background, respondents fall into one of four groups: natives (individuals born in the country to native-born parents; 83.44%), natives with a mixed background (one parent born abroad; 6.04%), second-generation migrants (born in the country to two foreign-born parents; 3.12%), and first-generation migrants (foreign-born individuals; 7.40%).

In terms of policy preferences, 56.25% of respondents said that their home country should prioritise forced return over assisted voluntary return, while 43.75% favoured the reverse. When asked about policy options for non-returned irregular migrants who are not regularised, 22.15% of respondents selected ad-ministrative detention as the best option, 14.86% ranked it second, 14.16% third, 27.02% fourth, and 21.81% designated it as the least favourite option.

We ran the Expectation-Maximization (EM) algorithm across candidate model specifications for $K \in \{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8\}$ to determine the optimal number of latent classes based on the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). The EM algorithm was executed from 25 distinct random initialisations of ϑ in parallel for each candidate value of *K* (Sinha et al., 2021). For the BIC evaluation, we retained the specification corresponding to the highest log-likelihood value across these 25 runs.

Figure 1 shows the log-likelihood and BIC values across candidate specifications of *K*. While the log-likelihood consistently improves as *K* increases, the BIC accounts for model complexity and achieves its minimum at *K* = 6. Panel C shows a zoomed-in view that demonstrates that

for $K \geq 7$, the BIC begins to rise. This confirms that the additional parameters do not justify the marginal increase in log-likelihood.

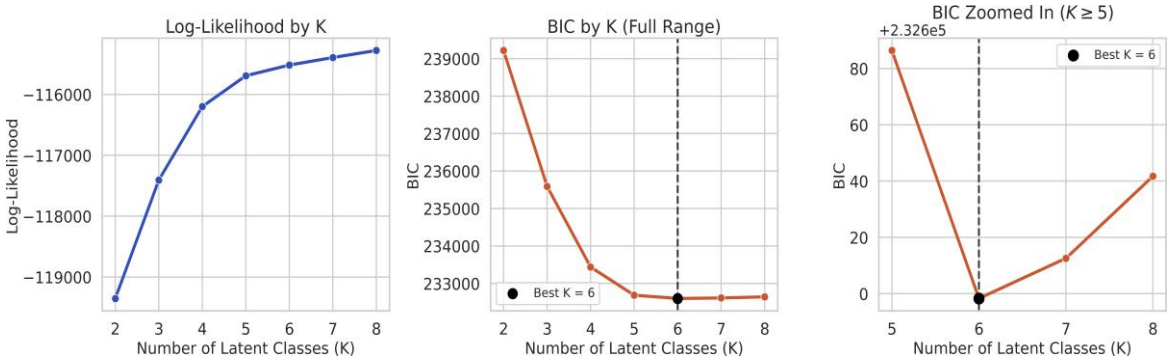


Figure 1: Log-likelihood and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) by number of latent classes (*K*). Panel C zooms in on the BIC values for $K \geq 5$. Values correspond to the maximum log-likelihood solution across 25 parallel runs of the Expectation-Maximization (EM) algorithm with random initialisations.

Results

Based on Figure 1, the six-class specification is selected as optimal. These six latent classes – or ideal-typical "personas" – combine distinct demographic profiles with unique and varying configurations of support for deportation and administrative detention.

Figure 2 shows significant differences in policy preferences between the six la-tent classes. Classes 1 and 5 are almost exclusively composed of individuals who favour deportation over assisted voluntary return. Specifically, 93% of respondents in class 1 and 97% of those in class 5 selected deportation when presented with this choice (see Figure 2, Panel A). Class 3 displays a less pronounced, yet still firm preference for deportation (69%). In contrast, the remaining classes express greater support for assisted voluntary return, ranging from complete opposition to deportation in class 2 (where no respondents preferred it over assisted voluntary return) to minor-to-moderate acceptance in classes 4 and 6 (17% and 31%, respectively).

Panel B of Figure 2 shows how preferences for deportation correlate heterogeneously with preferences for detention. Red highlights the probability of ranking detention as the most preferred option within each class, transitioning through a colour gradient to dark green, which indicates strong opposition (ranking detention fifth out of five candidate options). Classes 1 and 5 exhibit similar patterns in this regard: 63% and 66% of respondents in these classes rank detention as either their first or second preference. In contrast, Class 3 – where approximately 70% of respondents prefer deportation – shows an almost uniform distribution across detention ranks, suggesting that the supporters of deportation in this class are evenly split between favouring and opposing detention.

Among the classes that favour assisted voluntary return (classes 2, 4 and 6), detention is consistently ranked lower (4 and 5), with the degree of opposition correlating with support for deportation. Notably, virtually no respondents in class 2 rank detention as either their most or second most preferred policy option. Conversely, class 6 – which exhibits the highest residual support for deportation among these three classes (31%) – also shows the greatest acceptance of detention: on average, 22% of respondents rank it among their first or second preferred options, nearly twice the proportion observed in class 4.

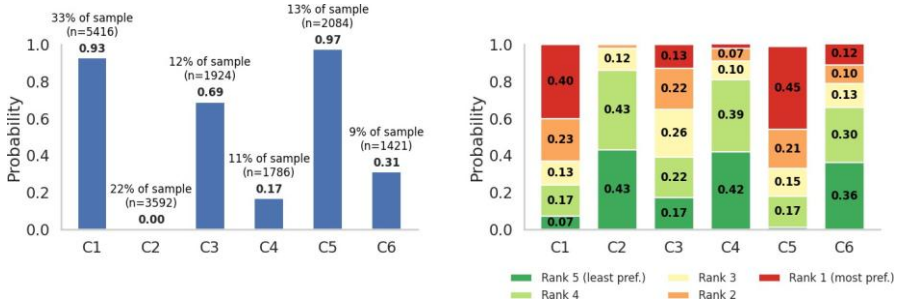


Figure 2: Panel A: Probability of preferring deportation over assisted voluntary return across the six latent classes. Annotations above each bar indicate class size, reporting both absolute respondent counts (*n*) and sample proportions (%). Panel B: Conditional rank distribution assigned to administrative detention by latent class. Colours denote preference ordering, ranging from red (detention ranked as the most preferred option, Rank 1) through orange (Rank 2), yellow (Rank 3), and light green (Rank 4), to dark green (detention ranked as the least preferred option, Rank 5). Segment labels report exact within-class probabilities; values below 5% are omitted for visual clarity.

Panel A of Figure 2 shows that the identified latent classes exhibit balanced sample proportions. The smallest group, class 6, comprises 1,421 respondents (9% of the sample), ensuring sufficient statistical power and subgroup representation. Meanwhile, the largest group, class 1, accounts for 5,416 respondents (33% of the sample), thus avoiding a distribution that is overly concentrated and dominated by a single majority class. Weighting the class-conditional prob-abilities of preferring deportation by their respective class membership proportions reconstructs the unconditional sample probability of favouring forced over assisted voluntary return (56.25%), confirming that the estimated mixture accurately reconstructs the observed aggregate distribution. The same is true for detention. Weighting the class-conditional probabilities of assigning a given rank to detention by their respective class membership proportions recovers the unconditional sample distribution.

Figure 3 shows the socio-demographic composition of each latent class, thereby identifying the demographic profiles associated with the distinct patterns of support for deportation and detention presented in Figure 2. Classes 1 and 5, which showcase the strongest support for coercive return policies, share several significant demographic similarities. Both are predominantly male (59.31% and 58.64%, respectively), have the highest proportions of respondents with at most lower-secondary education (17.74% and 29.94%, respectively) and are composed mainly of native-born individuals. However, they differ markedly in terms of labour-market status and age. Class 1 is primarily composed of employed respondents (76.86%), with an additional 12.1% being self-employed. This class is concentrated among individuals of working age (25-64 years). In contrast, class 5 is predominantly made up of respondents who are not in the labour force (93%), consistent with its substantially older age profile, with nearly 60% of its members aged between 65 and 74. These results suggest that strong support for both deportation and detention is associated with two distinct demographic profiles: one centred on economically active working-age individuals and the other on predominantly retired older respondents. Despite these differences, both groups are characterised by relatively low educational attainment, a pre-dominantly native background, and a male majority.

Class 3 generally reports high levels of support for deportation, with 70% of respondents choosing it over assisted voluntary return. However, there is no discernible pattern in their

preferences towards detention (see Figure 2, Panel B). This indicates that a preference for enforcing return can coexist with ambivalence about detention. In terms of demographics, the class is gender-balanced (51.92% female) and mostly composed of native individuals, displaying virtually identical composition patterns regarding migration background to classes 1 and 5. Like class 1, it consists primarily of employed working-age individuals. How-ever, all members of class 3 are university graduates. Thus, class 3 represents a segment of the employed, gender-balanced, graduate population that favours coercive measures for return enforcement, but is less definitive regarding the use of detention centres.

Class 4 is very similar to class 5 in terms of age structure and occupational status. It consists mostly of retired individuals who are no longer in the labour force, and it has a predominantly native background. However, class 4 is pre-dominantly female (60.36%) and has an overall higher level of education than class 5 (42.55% of class 4 are university graduates, compared to 22.60% in class 5; a similar proportion holds an upper secondary diploma, and only 14.89% have at most a lower secondary education). Therefore, despite belonging to the same generation and sharing a similar ethnic background, highly educated older women are more supportive of assisted voluntary return and substantially less supportive of detention than less educated men.

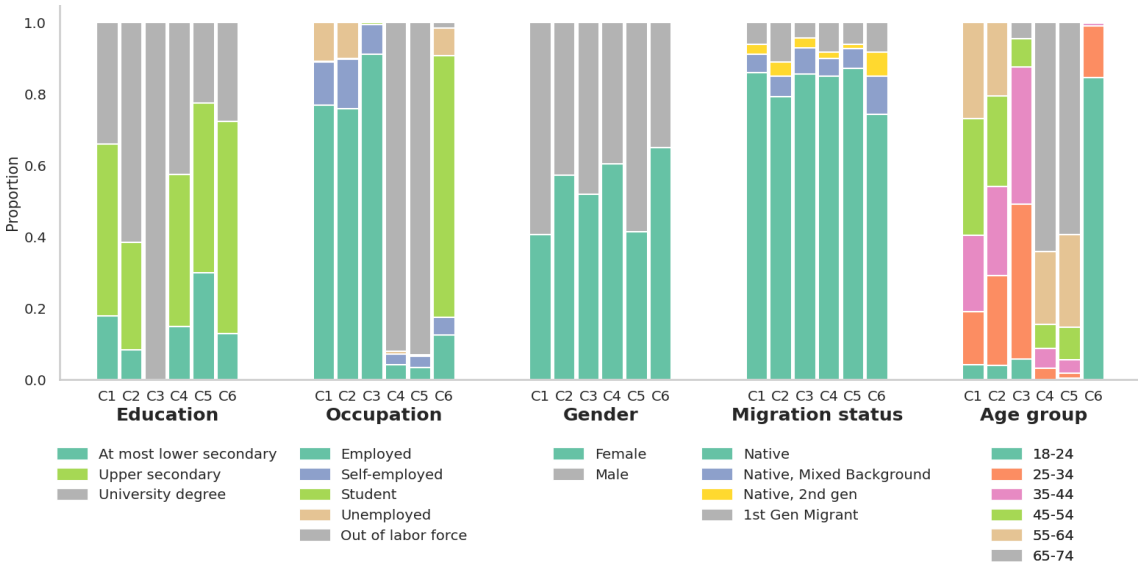


Figure 3: Socio-demographic composition of the *K* = 6 classes identified by the Latent Class Analysis (LCA) model.

Classes 2 and 6 are also predominantly female (57.35% and 64.89%, respectively) and have the highest proportions of individuals with a migration back-ground (i.e., first-generation migrants or second-generation individuals with one or both parents born abroad), at around 21% and 26%, respectively. By contrast, this proportion remains at around 15% across all other classes. Class 2 consists mostly of highly educated individuals (61.47% hold at least a bachelor's degree), who are evenly distributed across the working-age population (25-64). Class 6, on the other hand, is primarily composed of students, 84.59% of whom belong to Gen Z (aged 18-24).

In short, a latent class analysis reveals six distinct demographic profiles coexisting with public attitudes towards deportation and detention. Overall, several overarching

demographic patterns emerge across the classes. Women who are highly educated or currently enrolled in higher education, regardless of age group or employment status, tend to be substantially more supportive of assisted voluntary return and strongly reject detention. Conversely, men favour forced return enforcement (deportation), with high levels of support for detention concentrated among lower-educated men across both working-age and retired cohorts. Finally, having a migration background (i.e., being a first or second-generation migrant) is consistently associated with a preference for less coercive policies and a strong opposition to detention.

Correlation with political ideology

A key motivation for this study is the difficulty of profiling individuals outside the context of academic surveys based solely on political ideology, particularly when attempting to identify moderate segments of the population. To address this limitation, we segmented respondents using easily measurable socio-demographic characteristics that are systematically associated with support for coercive migration policies. However, since our data also include information on respondents' ideological self-placement, we also examined whether ideological orientations vary systematically across the identified latent classes. Specifically, we report the distribution of self-placement scores on a standard 0-10 left–right political spectrum scale, where 0 indicates the far left, 10 the far right, and 5 is moderate, across each latent class. The correspondence between socio-demographic and attitudinal segmentation and ideological positioning provides additional validation for our approach, suggesting that the differences in policy preferences captured by the latent classes are embedded in broader patterns of political orientation.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of political ideology scores across the latent classes using boxplots. Overall, classes 1, 3 and 5 show a substantial shift to-wards the right of the political spectrum, while classes 2, 4 and 6 lean towards the centre-left and left. The former group of latent classes generally exhibits strong support for coercive measures, while the latter group displays low sup-port.

Note that Figure 4 only reports a few examples of statistical significance for pairwise distribution differences (measured via Mann-Whitney U-tests) to avoid cluttering the plot with all fifteen possible unique comparisons. These selected annotations help the reader to identify statistically significant divergence. How-ever, it is important to note that, because the sample sizes within each class are relatively large, even minor differences are likely to be detected as statistically significant.

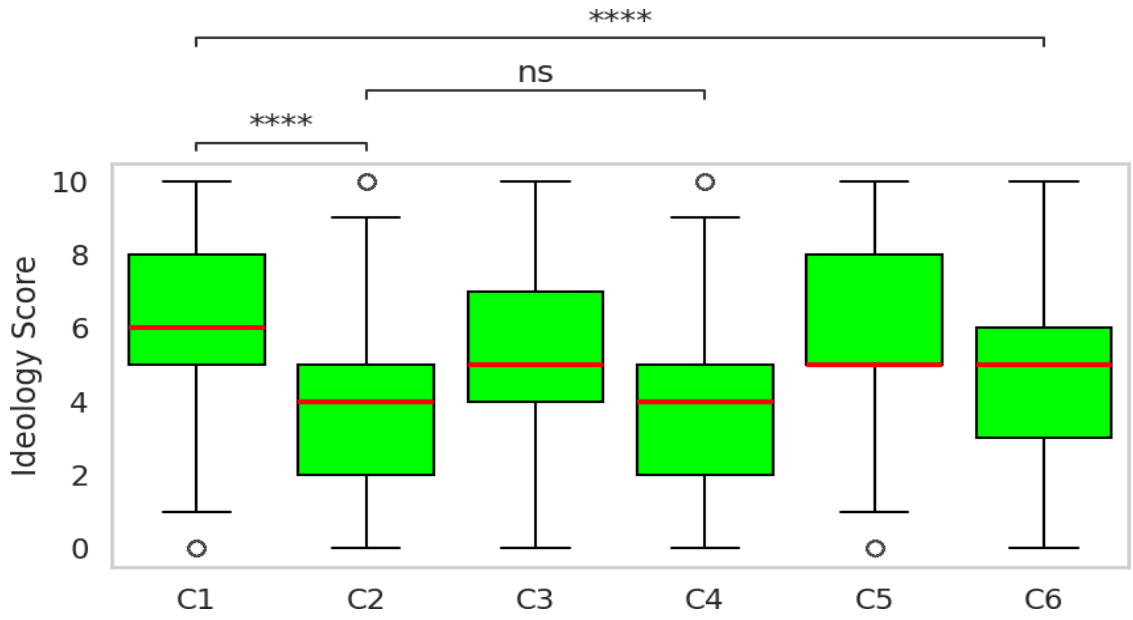


Figure 4: Boxplot of self-reported political ideology score distributions on a 0-10 political spectrum (0 = far left, 10 = far right, 5 = moderate) by latent class, with medians indicated in red. Significance levels: ns ($p > 0.05$), *$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$, ****$p \leq 0.0001$. Only selected pairwise differences evaluated via Mann-Whitney *U*-tests are reported to avoid cluttering.

Discussion and conclusions

This study examined how preferences regarding the use of coercive measures to govern irregular migration are distributed among the European population. Instead of considering socio-demographic characteristics as individual predictors of attitudes towards migration, we took a person-centred approach to identify latent patterns of social characteristics and policy preferences using multiple regression techniques. Three main findings emerged from the analysis.

First, support for coercive policies towards irregular migrants cannot be attributed to a single socio-demographic profile. Two of the identified groups display particularly strong support for both forced return and administrative detention, yet they represent substantially different segments of the population. One class consists predominantly of economically active working-age men, while the other consists largely of older respondents outside the labour force. These profiles have several things in common: a predominantly native background, a male majority and comparatively lower levels of education. Therefore, similar policy preferences can be associated with different social structural conditions. This is particularly evident among older respondents: the predominantly male, less educated class 5 strongly supports forced return and detention, whereas the similarly aged, more educated, predominantly female class 4 is substantially more supportive of assisted voluntary return and opposed to detention.

This finding challenges interpretations that associate restrictive immigration attitudes with specific socio-demographic characteristics. While education, age, gender, and labour-market position are well-established correlates of immigration attitudes, their associations are neither consistent nor independent of the social contexts in which they occur (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Markaki and Longhi, 2013; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). Our results

suggest that similar policy preferences are associated with different combinations of these characteristics.

Our findings illustrate the value of complementing conventional, variable-centred analyses of migration attitudes with a person-centred perspective. Characteristics such as gender, education, age, labour-market position, and migration background do not occur independently in actual populations, but rather form recurring configurations. Examining these configurations reveals heterogeneity that would be difficult to detect by considering the average association between each characteristic and policy preferences in isolation. This is consistent with the broader premise of person-centred research, which suggests that similar out-comes may be associated with different combinations of individual traits, and that the same trait may have different implications depending on its contexts (Bergman and Magnusson, 1997; Laursen and Hoff, 2006). In this sense, the pro-files complement, rather than replace, variable-centred estimates of the average associations between socio-demographic characteristics and migration attitudes. Second, our results call into question the assumption that support for re-strictive or coercive migration policies constitutes a single attitudinal dimension. Forced return and administrative detention are both coercive instruments, but support for them does not always coincide. The most revealing case is Class 3. Respondents in this group are predominantly employed, university-educated, and gender-balanced, yet approximately 70% favour forced over assisted voluntary return. However, they display no comparably clear preference for detention. Therefore, their support for enforcing return does not straightforwardly trans-late into support for confinement as a means of dealing with migrants who have not been returned.

This differentiation is consistent with research showing that public preferences regarding migration and asylum policies are multidimensional. Rather than applying a uniformly restrictive or permissive orientation to all policy components, citizens may combine demands for control with support for particular rights, safeguards, or humanitarian provisions (Jeannet et al., 2021; Detlef-sen and Ruhs, 2026). Our results extend this argument to return governance, demonstrating that preferences also vary across instruments within the coercive arm of the policy repertoire.

Furthermore, our results show that the latent profiles are systematically related to political ideology. Those exhibiting greater support for coercive instruments tend to be located further to the right of the ideological spectrum, while those favouring assisted voluntary return and opposing detention tend to be located towards the centre-left and left. This aligns with the substantial body of evidence linking right-wing ideology and support for radical-right parties with more restrictive attitudes towards immigration (Semyonov et al., 2006; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Jeannet et al., 2021; Renzini et al., 2026). This correspondence is important because political ideology was not one of the socio-demographic characteristics used to define the profiles. The resulting seg-mentation therefore captures social configurations that are embedded in broader patterns of political orientation.

At the same time, however, ideology does not render the socio-demographic profiles redundant. Respondents within each class are distributed across a relatively broad range of the left–right scale, and classes occupying similar ideological positions can differ in their socio-demographic composition and acceptance of coercive instruments. The person-centred approach consequently provides information that cannot be reduced to identifying a respondent as simply left-or right-wing. This is particularly relevant for understanding the views of those who are politically moderate, as ideological self-identification alone provides limited information about where they draw the line between legitimate enforcement and excessive coercion.

In conclusion, these findings have implications for how public opinion towards irregular

migration is conceptualised. Much research has understandably focused on whether citizens favour more or less immigration, and whether they hold more positive or negative attitudes towards migrants. However, governments do not govern irregular migration through a single policy choice. They employ a variety of measures — including assisted return, forced return, regularisation and detention — that differ in their objectives, costs and level of coercion. Public legitimacy may therefore attach differently to each instrument. This understanding of legitimacy specific to the instrument is consistent with emerging research showing that citizens distinguish between the various components of migration governance, such as admission, conditional protection, access to rights, regularisation, and enforcement (Detlefsen and Ruhs, 2026). Treating migration attitudes as a general pro- or anti-immigration disposition can obscure these distinctions.

Our results also have practical implications. Policy debates often portray European public opinion as divided between those demanding stricter enforcement and those supporting more humanitarian approaches. However, our results indicate a more differentiated landscape. Some population segments strongly support multiple coercive instruments, while others consistently favour less coercive alternatives. Still others combine support for return enforcement with reluctance to endorse detention. Therefore, public acceptance of migration enforcement should not be inferred from support for a single policy instrument. Governments may therefore enjoy substantial support for the goal of implementing return decisions, but face considerably less acceptance of the means used to achieve them. This distinction is important because the legitimacy of migration enforcement depends on both outcomes and perceived proportionality, procedural fairness, and respect for rights (Ryo, 2021).

This said, several limitations should be considered when interpreting our conclusions. First, the latent classes should be interpreted as synthetic, ideal-typical profiles rather than naturally occurring or immutable social groups. They provide a parsimonious representation of recurring configurations in the survey population, and individuals have probabilistic rather than essential membership of them. Second, the analysis is descriptive rather than causal. While particular demographic configurations are systematically associated with specific policy preferences, our findings do not demonstrate that gender, education, age, migration background, or labour-market status are the cause of these preferences. Nor can we establish why respondents distinguish between forced return and detention from the present analysis. To identify such mechanisms, experimental variation in the information provided about the consequences or coerciveness of particular instruments would be needed.

Third, although our analysis included data from a representative sample of respondents from 13 EU+ countries, the effect of national institutional and political contexts on respondents' perceptions was beyond its scope. Countries differ in their experience of irregular migration, their migration regimes, the salience and politicisation of immigration in national party systems, and the actual use of return and detention policies (Dennison and Geddes, 2019). Future research could therefore examine whether comparable latent profiles emerge within individual countries, and whether their prevalence or policy preferences vary systematically across national contexts. Finally, the present study focuses on forced versus assisted voluntary return and administrative detention. Extending the analysis to include preferences regarding regularisation and other instruments would enable a more comprehensive reconstruction of how citizens evaluate the full range of policies available for managing irregular migration.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates the usefulness of moving beyond isolated socio-demographic predictors and generic measures of being 'for' or 'against' immigration. European public opinion on irregular migration is not only structured by who supports enforcement, but also by which instruments different population segments regard

as legitimate. Similar preferences can emerge from different social profiles, and support for one coercive instrument does not necessarily imply support for another. Understanding these configurations and distinctions is important for explaining the social legitimacy of migration governance, as states must continuously negotiate the boundary between enforcement, assistance, and coercion in this policy domain.

Appendix

Since the choice between prioritising forced or assisted voluntary return can be represented as a binary indicator, $Y_{i1} \in \{0,1\}$, its conditional distribution $P(Y_{i1} \mid C_i = k)$ is modelled as a Bernoulli distribution:

$$P(Y_{i1} \mid C_i = k) = \rho_k^{Y_{i1}}(1-\rho_k)^{(1-Y_{i1})}$$

where $\rho_k = P(Y_{i1} = 1 \mid C_i = k)$ denotes the probability of choosing forced over assisted voluntary return ($Y_{i1} = 1$), conditional on membership of latent class k.

The detention ranking is modelled as a categorical random variable:

$$P(Y_{i2} = r \mid C_i = k) = \delta_{kr}, \qquad r = 1, \dots, 5$$

where δ_{kr} denotes the conditional probability that respondent i ranks detention in position r, given membership in latent class k, subject to the constraint $\sum_{r=1}^{5} \delta_{kr} = 1$ for all k.

Combining these components, the overall sample likelihood under the defined latent class model is given by:

$$L(\boldsymbol{\theta}) = \prod_{i=1}^{N} \sum_{k=1}^{K} P\,(C_i = k) \left(\prod_{j=1}^{J} P\left(X_{ij} \mid C_i = k\right) \right) \rho_k^{Y_{i1}}(1-\rho_k)^{(1-Y_{i1})} \delta_{k,Y_{i2}}$$

where $P(C_i = k)$ denotes the probability that respondent i belongs to latent class k; $X_{ij}, j = 1, \dots, J$, denote the J observed socio-demographic variables used to define the latent classes; and $\delta_{k,Y_{i2}} = P(Y_{i2} = r \mid C_i = k)|_{r=Y_{i2}}$ denotes the probability, under class k, of observing the respondent's actual ranking Y_{i2} assigned to detention. The vector $\boldsymbol{\theta}$ collects all model parameters to be estimated, namely $\{P(C_i = k)\}_{k=1}^{K}$, $\{\rho_k\}_{k=1}^{K}$, $\{\delta_{kr}\}_{k=1,r=1}^{K,5}$, and the parameters governing $P\left(X_{ij} \mid C_i = k\right)$. In practice, the log-likelihood $\ell(\boldsymbol{\theta})$ is optimised.

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