When local policies matter: how perceptions of migrants change – evidence from Switzerland

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Fears towards migrants are often presented as spontaneous or inevitable reactions. But how much do they really depend on the presence of migrants themselves, and how much instead on the way integration is governed? A new study shows that these perceptions vary significantly depending on the political and institutional context.

Why talk about fear (and about policies)

In public debates on immigration, fear is often taken for granted. Migrants are frequently portrayed as a threat to security or as a risk to the cultural identity of the host society. These representations play a central role in political campaigns and media discourse, yet it is rarely asked to what extent they depend not only on migrants' characteristics, but also on the institutional context in which immigration is governed. In other words, can public policies influence the way citizens perceive migrants? A recent analysis of cantonal integration policies in Switzerland suggests that institutional differences are associated with different perceptions of migrants among the population, particularly with regard to cultural and security-related threat (El Khoury, 2025).

Switzerland as a case study

Switzerland represents a particularly suitable context for analysing the relationship between public policies and citizens' perceptions. While immigration legislation is defined at the federal level, cantons enjoy wide autonomy in designing and implementing integration policies. Depending on the canton in which one lives, access to citizenship, the presence of anti-discrimination measures, or opportunities for civic participation for foreign residents can be more or less inclusive. This institutional variation creates different reference contexts for the population, making it possible to observe how specific policy configurations are associated with different ways of perceiving migrants.

Beyond threat theory

When discussing negative perceptions of migrants, it is important to distinguish between different dimensions. On the one hand, there is symbolic threat, which refers to the fear that migrants may challenge values, traditions, and cultural identity. On the other hand, there is realistic threat, which is mainly linked to security and to the idea that immigration may increase crime or social disorder. These two forms of fear do not necessarily coincide and do not respond in the same way to public policies. Much of the literature interprets these perceptions through intergroup threat theory, according to which fear arises from competition over material resources or from cultural distance (Blumer, 1958; Stephan et al., 2008). While this perspective is useful for understanding why negative perceptions emerge, it is less well equipped to explain how such perceptions can be reduced or transformed. In other words, threat theory helps to clarify the origins of fear, but offers limited tools to understand the processes through which citizens and migrants may develop more inclusive relationships.

It is within this analytical gap that the concept of reflective solidarity, originally developed by Jodi Dean (1995) within feminist political theory, becomes relevant. Unlike forms of solidarity based on similarity or shared identity, reflective solidarity is grounded in mutual recognition in difference. It does not require assimilation or full consensus, but rather a willingness to consider the other as a legitimate member of the political community, even in the presence of disagreement. Applied to the migration context, this perspective shifts attention from managing fear to building the conditions that make coexistence possible. Integration policies can create institutional contexts that foster more horizontal relations between citizens and migrants. In this sense, measures that promote legal equality, protection against discrimination, and civic participation do not operate only at the level of rights, but also contribute to redefining the symbolic boundaries of "us".

What the results show

The empirical analysis combines a systematic examination of integration policies across Switzerland's 26 cantons with data from a national survey conducted in 2019. Cantonal policies were assessed according to their degree of inclusiveness in areas such as access to citizenship, anti-discrimination

measures, political rights, and labour market integration, and these dimensions were related to citizens' individual perceptions. The results reveal an interesting picture. In cantons with stronger anti-discrimination policies, citizens tend to perceive migrants as less threatening from a cultural perspective. This suggests that institutional recognition and public commitment against discrimination help reduce symbolic distance between "us" and "them". Access to citizenship, by contrast, does not significantly affect cultural threat, but is associated with a reduction in perceived insecurity. Where citizenship is more inclusive, migrants are less frequently linked to crime, likely because being a citizen signals stable belonging and shared responsibility within the community (Hainmueller et al., 2017). More counterintuitive is the role of labour market integration policies. These measures do not reduce perceptions of threat and, in some contexts, may even reinforce them. One possible explanation is that greater migrant visibility in public and work-related spaces makes differences more salient, particularly when political and media debates remain polarised. Overall, the analysis suggests that integration policies have a stronger impact on symbolic fears than on security-related ones.

When integration concerns everyone

In debates on immigration, integration is often treated as an issue that concerns migrants alone: what they should do, how they should adapt, and which requirements they must meet. The findings of this study suggest a different perspective. Integration policies do not only shape migrants' trajectories, but also influence how the host society perceives them. In this sense, integration is not a one-way process, but a dynamic that involves the entire community. More inclusive policies do not automatically eliminate fears or conflicts, but they can create institutional conditions that reduce symbolic distance between citizens and migrants and foster forms of mutual recognition. This is where reflective solidarity becomes relevant, not as forced consensus or assimilation, but as the capacity to live with difference within a shared framework of rights and responsibilities. Looking at integration from this perspective shifts attention away from the "migrant problem" towards the ways in which societies organise coexistence. Local policies, often seen as technical or marginal, emerge as a central arena in which the boundaries of the collective "we" are defined.

References

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