

Effects of Information Provision on Undocumented Migration to Europe

Evidence from a Survey Experiment

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Context of the research

“I'm simply implementing the policy that people are calling for.

I'm convinced that the majority of Belgians do not want our country to take these people in.”

Anneleen Van Bossuyt, Belgian Minister for Asylum and Migration

Theoretical framework

- Articulation between
 - public opinion & migration
 - Framing effects
- Methodological and empirical gaps

RQ: Do Information Frames Matter for Public Support for regularization of undocumented immigrants?

Methods

- Online survey experiment
- Representative sample of adult Belgian population
- N = 2,121 stratified by age, gender, education and region of residence
- Administered in March 2025 in Dutch and French (Bpact)
- 5 different vignettes tested

Vignettes

- Based on arguments/approaches used to justify regularisation campaigns
 1. Non-fiction narrative (no magnet effect)
 2. Economic and Social considerations (tax inflow)
 3. Policy double standard (tax evasion)
 4. Stratified mobility (golden visa)
 5. Emotion and empathy (personal story)

Example of a vignette (emotion)

Gloria Ilunga works as a receptionist at a nursery school in Brabant. She arrived in Belgium from Kinshasa in 2012 and was ordered to leave the country in 2023 after her application for regularisation was refused.

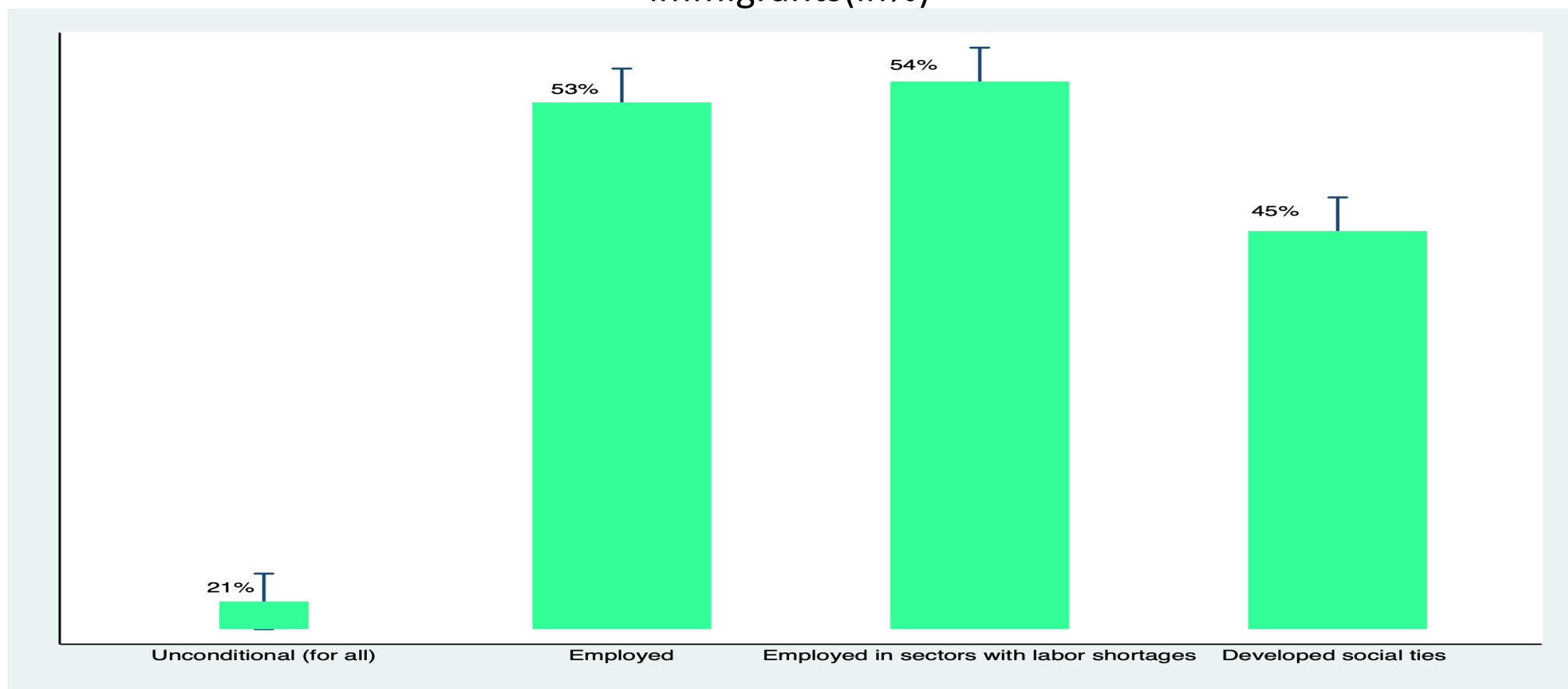
According to the school principal, "What Gloria does at the school, no one else does. Starting at 7:30 a.m., she serves lunch and provides after-school care." Two demonstrations brought together several hundred people in the village to show their support for Gloria and opposition to her deportation. The municipal council and Gloria's colleagues also joined the protests.

Methods

- The Belgian government should regularize the residence status of undocumented people present in the country (Q1)
- The Belgian government should regularize the residence status of undocumented immigrants who are employed (Q2)
- The Belgian government should regularize the residence status of undocumented people working in sectors experiencing labor shortages (Q3)
- The Belgian government should regularize the residence status of undocumented people who have developed social ties in the country (Q4)

Results

Proportion of respondents in favor of regularization of undocumented immigrants(in%)

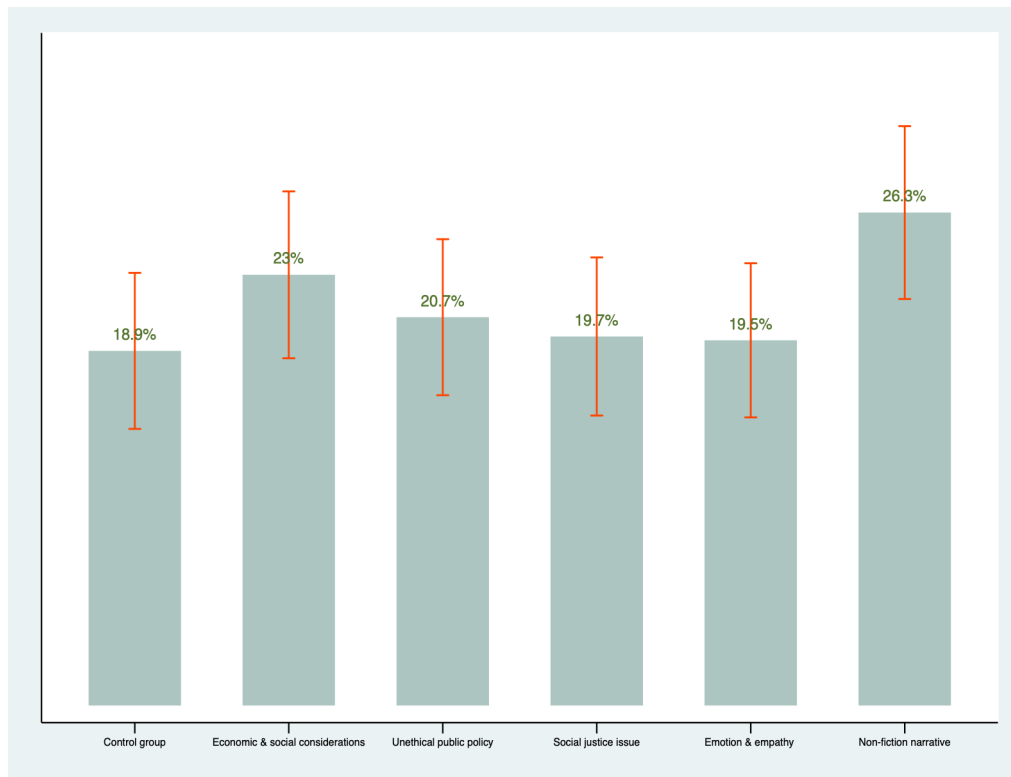


Proportions are survey-weighted (post-stratified). The bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

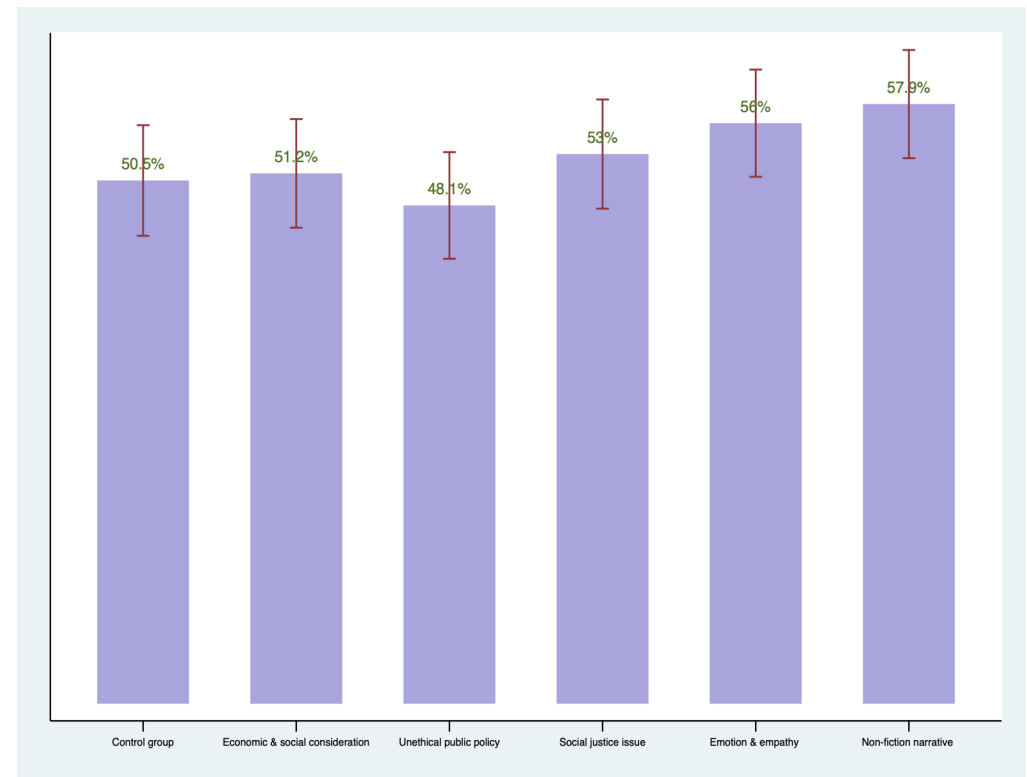
Results

Proportion of respondents in the control and experimental groups who are in favor of regularization of undocumented immigrants (in%)

Unconditional regularization



Employed

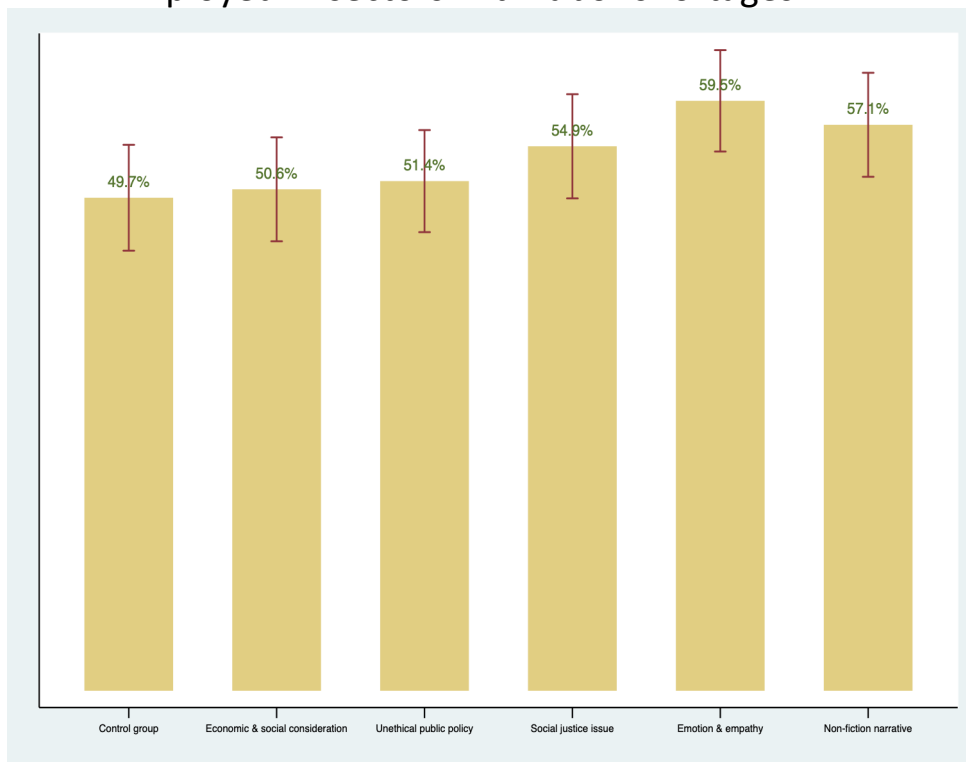


Proportions are survey-weighted (post-stratified). The bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

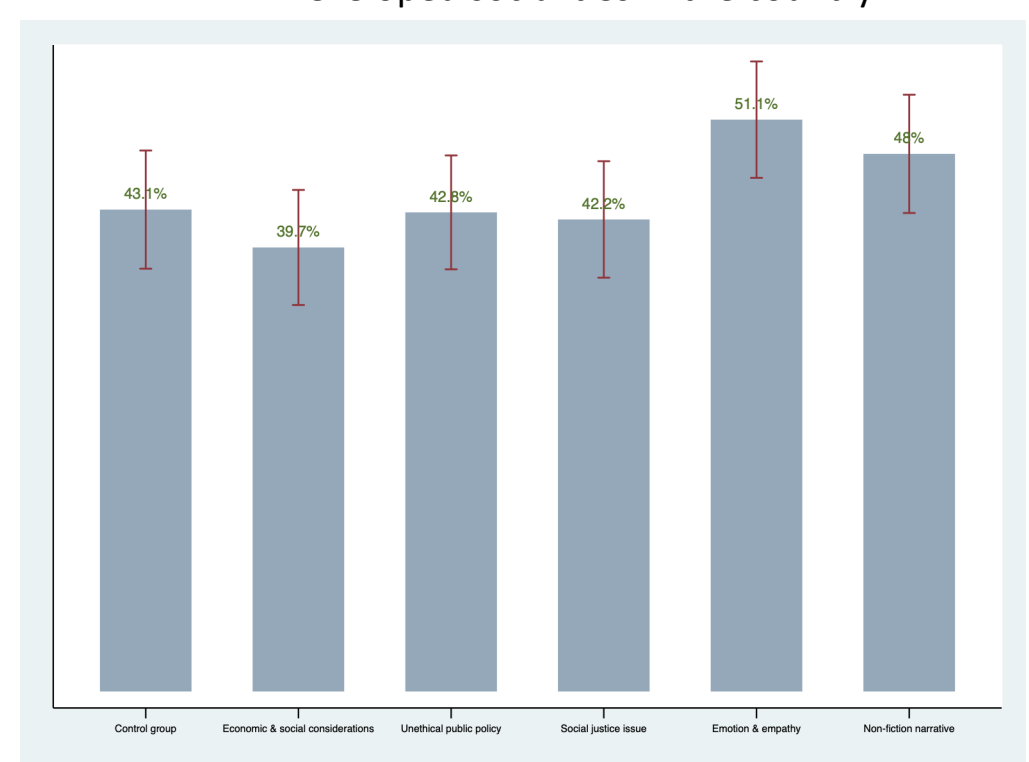
Results

Proportion of respondents in the control and experimental groups who are in favor of regularization of undocumented immigrants (in%)

Employed in sectors with labor shortages



Developed social ties in the country



Proportions are survey-weighted (post-stratified). The bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

Results

- Exposure to the “emotion and empathy” vignette increases
 - support for regularization of undocumented immigrants employed in sectors facing labor shortages by 9.2 percentage points
 - Support for regularization of undocumented immigrants who have developed strong social ties within the country by 7.7 percentage points

Results

- Exposure to the “non-fiction narrative” vignette increases
 - support to unconditional regularization by 7.4 percentage points
 - support for the regularization of employed undocumented immigrants by 6.6 percentage points
 - Support to those employed in sectors experiencing labor shortages by 6.5 percentage points

Results

- Contrary to our expectations, no significant effect of
 - messages emphasizing economic and social considerations
 - Messages on policy double standards (tax evasion)
 - Message stratified mobility (golden visa)

Conclusion

- Mismatch between public preferences and policy
- Emotionally engaging and non-fiction narrative treatments significantly increased support for regularization, particularly when migrants' economic contributions and labor market participation were emphasized
- To be explored: effect of repeated exposure to messages
- Ethical implications of the research

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Label	Treatment
Non-fiction narrative (N = 349)	According to a study published in 2023 by the Free University of Brussels, the number of undocumented foreigners living in Belgium represents approximately 1% of the entire Belgian population. One argument used by some politicians to oppose the regularization of undocumented immigrants is that such a policy would encourage other foreigners to enter Belgium illegally in the hope of subsequently benefiting from future regularization. Existing scientific studies on this subject demonstrate that such a pull factor does not exist.
Emotion and empathy (N = 358)	Gloria Ilunga works as a receptionist at a nursery school in Brabant. She arrived in Belgium from Kinshasa in 2012 and received an order to leave the country in 2023 after a request for regularization was refused. According to the school principal: "What the receptionist does at the school, no one else does. Present from 7:30 a.m., she also serves lunch and provides after-school care". Two demonstrations brought together several hundred people in the village to show their attachment to Gloria and their opposition to her expulsion. The municipal council and Gloria's colleagues joined this mobilization.
Economic & social considerations (N = 352)	Belgium's asylum and immigration policy makes it difficult for many foreigners to obtain the right to enter and reside in the country. As a result, non-European nationals decide to cross borders illegally to settle in Europe, including Belgium, where they find themselves in an irregular situation and live in precarious conditions. However, many undocumented migrants work in undeclared jobs, including in sectors experiencing shortages. Their regularization would increase tax revenues thanks to the taxes and contributions that regularized workers will now pay and would give them access to fundamental economic and social rights such as employment, social protection, and education.
Unethical public policy (N = 367)	To recover a portion of the estimated €30 billion in tax evasion per year, the Belgian government is launching a tax regularization operation. Starting July 1, 2025, taxpayers who have concealed income and capital will be able to regularize their tax status by paying a fine in addition to the standard tax rate, without the risk of legal reprisals. This will be the fifth such operation conducted by the Belgian government since 2004. However, regarding the situation of undocumented foreigners residing in Belgium, the government has not launched a major program to regularize their residence status since 2009.
Social justice issue (N = 351)	In recent years, various European states have implemented programs that allow wealthy non-Europeans to migrate to these countries or obtain citizenship in exchange for a financial contribution to state coffers or an investment in the economy. In this case, the applicant is not required to follow an integration process, have an interview with the authorities to explain their motivations for migrating, or provide proof of language skills. Non-wealthy foreigners, however, do not have access to these programs, which can lead them to cross a border irregularly and end up undocumented in Belgium or elsewhere in Europe.