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Framing Effects on Public Support for Undocumented Immigrant Regularization

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Abstract

Migration has become a highly contentious issue across many European countries, where initiatives to regularize the status of undocumented migrants face substantial political opposition. While public attitudes toward immigration have been extensively studied, comparatively little attention has been paid to public opinion on large-scale regularization programs (i.e., the granting of legal status) and the role of framing in shaping support for such policies. To address this gap, we conducted an experimental study to examine how different framing strategies influence public support for regularization policies in Belgium. Our results show that emotionally engaging messages and narrative presentations of factual information increase support for the regularization of undocumented migrants, especially those who are employed. From a public policy perspective, these findings suggest that framing can help policymakers build public support for regularization programs.

Keywords: International Migration; Regularization of Undocumented Immigrants; Public Opinion; Public Policy; Survey Experiment

JEL Codes: F22, J61, J68

1. Introduction

Regularization is a tool within migration policies by which States can respond to long term situations of irregularity (Ahrens et al, 2025). While it is often presented as an exceptional measure designed to remedy a situation that should not have happened in the first place, it is actually a response used frequently by States to address pragmatically a recurrent social issue. In a context where deterrence and deportation measures fail to reduce the numbers of undocumented migrants, many States have therefore included regularization mechanisms and programs as an integral part of the “administrative toolbox of migration governance” (Kraler 2019; Yanaşmayan and Palop-García, 2026). Looking only at the past two years, two of the European Union’s (EU) largest Member States — Germany and Spain— have been implementing programs that provide a pathway to obtain permanent residence to selected undocumented migrants who meet clearly defined criteria. Others, such as Italy and Portugal, have implemented temporary regularisation mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemics. In France and Belgium, on the other hand, authorities have been reluctant to follow to a similar path in recent years and rely on “heavily discretionary systems, where humanitarian need, integration indicators, or medical conditions may justify residence status being granted” (Cacciapagli, 2025).

Five arguments are generally put forward to justify the strong political opposition to implementing regularisation programs on the basis that they would: encourage more people to enter the country irregularly or overstay their visas ; undermine the rule of law by “rewarding lawbreakers”; weaken the country's immigration policy by discouraging others from following the rules; signal the failure of both internal and external migration controls; and —mostly importantly— they would not be supported by the public opinion.

In this article, we focus particularly on this issue of public support for regularization programs and mechanisms which —the supposed absence thereof— is used as a central argument by policy-makers opposing such programs. As we show in the next section, most empirical studies have focused primarily on general attitudes towards undocumented immigrants defined as a homogeneous group. One consequence is that existing research therefore overlooks potential differences in public opinion support for the regularization of specific subcategories of undocumented immigrants such as those who work or those who have developed strong social ties in their country of residence. Because regularization programs and mechanisms are rarely unconditional, our study considers it critical to disentangle the determinants of public support both for the unconditional (open to all) and conditional (based on specific criteria) regularization of undocumented immigrants. In this study, we also investigate which specific types of message (i.e. frame), if any, is effective in shaping public support for regularization.

Overall, our goal is therefore to address the following two research questions: 1) Which factors influence public support for the unconditional and conditional regularization of undocumented immigrants? and, 2) To what extent do frames affect public support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants? In the next section, we review existing evidence on public attitudes towards undocumented immigrants and public support for regularization programs and position our study within the existing literature. Section three presents our methods and a brief contextualization of the Belgian case study. In particular, we present our pre-registered framing experiment embedded in a nationally representative survey of Belgian adult population ($N = 2,121$) which enabled us to test five different vignette messages that could influence public attitudes toward the regularization of undocumented immigrants. Section four presents and discusses our results. It shows most importantly that the framing of the issue of irregular immigration influences public support for their regularization. The article concludes with a discussion on the policy implications of our findings.

2. Theoretical framework

To understand the current state of the scientific literature on public attitudes towards undocumented immigrants and regularization programs, it is necessary to place it in the broader empirical literature on public attitudes toward immigrants and immigration in general. Over the years, this very rich scholarship has identified numerous characteristics that shape individual attitudes such as age, gender, education, and labor market status (Dražanov et al., 2023), contact opportunities (Jolly & DiGiusto, 2014), racism and xenophobia (Hjerm, 2007; Ayers et al., 2009), perception of threats (Quillian, 1995), misperception of the size of the immigrant population (Citrin & Side, 2008) or feelings of relative deprivation (Aleksynska, 2011). Other studies have also underlined the role of Media effects (Eberl et al., 2018), of national and regional contexts (Semyonov et al., 2008; Markaki & Longhi, 2013), and of immigrant attributes that include country of origin, education level, language skills, profession and job experience (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015).

Although this impressive literature has contributed significantly to our understanding of several facets of anti-immigrant sentiment, most of these studies have rarely distinguished individuals' attitudes towards different immigrant groups, due largely to the limited availability of individual-level survey data that distinguish for example different origin, racial, religious or ethnic groups are limited¹. Instead, immigrants are often treated as a broad, homogeneous category (e.g. Blinder, 2013; Murray & Marx 2013), thereby implicitly assuming uniformity of

¹ Only a handful of publicly available surveys allow researchers to assess attitudes toward specific categories. For example, the immigration module of the cross-national European Social Survey (ESS) Round 7 that allow analyze of respondents' preferences on how many immigrants of different types should be admitted to their country: https://stessrelpubprodwe.blob.core.windows.net/data/round7/fieldwork/source/ESS7_source_main_questionnaire.pdf

opinion. This assumption, however, has been challenged by studies showing that attitudes toward immigrants vary considerably depending on the specific group under consideration (see for instance Hellwig & Sinno 2017; Steele et al. 2023; Qi & Garand 2024).

Following the broader literature on attitudes towards immigrants, a large scholarship relying on small samples of US college students has delved into public attitudes on undocumented immigration. It shows most notably that it is strongly associated with stereotyping of this group (Cowan et al., 1997), that negative attitudes towards undocumented immigration increase as local unemployment rises and GDP growth decline (Diaz et al., 2011) and that greater prejudice, perceived threats, and intergroup anxiety is shown toward unauthorized compared to authorized immigrants (Murray & Marx, 2013). This literature also focused on individual characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, education and political orientation. It showed among other things that older individuals and women were more likely to hold negative attitudes toward undocumented migrants, whereas respondents with higher levels of education and those identifying as Hispanic expressed more favorable views (Espenshade et al., 1993). Similarly students who belong to an ethnic minority tend to hold more favourable views of undocumented immigrants than their White counterparts (see Frasure-Yokley & Wilcox-Archuleta; 2019 and Peña et al., 2021). With regard to political orientation, other studies reported that students identifying with parties other than the Democratic Party (Bishop & Bowman 2020) and those who believed in the superiority of one's own group were more likely to hold negative views (Lyons et al., 2013).

Alongside this research on attitudes' towards undocumented migration, another strand of the scientific literature has looked into the public's policy preferences toward undocumented immigration. In line with findings discussed above, it shows that individuals characteristics such as age, gender, education, ethnicity, religiosity, political orientation have an impact on policy preferences. Indeed, these variables have been found to affect individual support for policy measures against undocumented immigrants (Berg, 2009), policy measures that provide a pathway for undocumented immigrants to remain permanently in the country (Knoll, 2009, Nteta, 2014), health policies for undocumented immigrants (Sanchez et al., 2011), border control policies (Chiricos et al., 2014), as well as affecting overall immigration policy preferences (Macdonald 2025). Lastly, scholarship has also emphasized the role of media exposure (Facchini et al., 2017) and personal contacts in shaping individuals' attitudes. In the latter case, evidence is mixed as some studies suggest that contact with ethnic minorities leads to more positive attitudes (Peña et al., 2021) and lower levels of support for government action against undocumented immigrants (Berg, 2009) while others found that such contact can sometimes intensify negative sentiments toward undocumented immigrants (Espenshade and Calhoun, 1993) or have no significant effect (Gravelle, 2016).

Overall, our articulation of selected studies in the field of public attitudes towards migration in general and undocumented migration in particular provides a strong foundation to study more in depth public attitudes towards regularization programs. Indeed, they highlight the role of individual characteristics in shaping those attitudes. Most importantly, they stress the need to measure support for clearly defined policies and distinguish between different types of migrants who may benefit from regularization programs based on clear qualification criteria. This literature review also shows the prevalence of a North American focus and the reliance on samples of convenience with students. This is a noticeable limitation of the existing literature as it affects the generalizations of these findings and does not take into account the specificity of European migration debates and its politicization at Member States level. In the next section, we describe how an experimental approach to the study of public support for regularization programs can help us address these shortcomings.

The experimental approach has been used in prior studies that concern more or less broadly the issue of undocumented migration. Ommundsen et al. (2014), for instance, have studied the importance of linguistic choices and showed how respondents exposed to the label “illegal immigrants” expressed significantly less positive attitudes than those exposed to the label “undocumented immigrants”. Another experimental study by España-Nájera & Vera (2020), on the contrary, has also shown that attitudes remained largely unfavorable even when undocumented immigrants were framed as either Hispanic or European. This suggests that public opinion is more influenced by moral concerns about legality than by immigrants’ personal characteristics. Similarly, Cadenas et al. (2018) demonstrated that participation in viewing documentary films about the experiences of undocumented students leads to more positive attitudes toward undocumented immigrants and Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro (2019) — in a study in which participants were expected to estimate prison sentences to different profiles of criminal— identified a bias against Mexican suspects among White participants. Lastly, Blackburn and Haeder (2024) used an experimental approach to find out that there exist public support for expanding existing medical policies to undocumented individuals. Given the existence of a strong body of literature that has enabled the field of study on public attitudes towards undocumented migration to move forward, this study proposes to apply to the specific topic of public support for regularization programs. Our study therefore aims to make two contributions to this literature. First, we aim to examine the determinants of public support for regularization of undocumented immigrant, whether unconditional (open to all) and conditional (based on specific criteria). Second, our goal is to determine which types of frame, if any, is effective in shaping public support for regularization.

3. Methodology

To reach these two stated goals of our study we have decided to focus on the Belgian case study. The choice of Belgium is justified by the perceived current impossibility to put the issue of regularization on the political agenda in spite of the presence of an estimated undocumented population of 112.000 people (Bircan et al, 2023). Indeed, even though Belgium has organized three large regularization campaigns in 1974, 1999 and 2009, the persistent demand of a well-organized civil society for a new regularization program has remained unheard (see Vertongen 2023, 2024 and Swerts, 2026 on mobilizations around the issue). The context of increased polarization and securitization of migration debates —observed also in other EU Member States— is of course an important element to understand the low salience of the issue of regularization. On the contrary, the current Federal Government’s stated ambition to “implement the strictest asylum and migration policy ever” (European Migration Network Belgium 2025) has materialized in the further closing of avenues for migrants’ access and residence in Belgium. In recent years, this contentious approach has materialized most notoriously in the Government’s explicit refusal to respect judicial decisions who found public authorities guilty of not implementing adequate reception policies for asylum seekers (Lafleur et. al forthcoming). In this particularly unfavorable context to the adoption of a new regularization program for undocumented migrants, we have —as mentioned earlier— decided to focus on two critical research questions whose responses could contribute to revive debates on this important societal issue: 1) “Which factors influence public support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants, whether unconditional (for all) or conditional (depending on certain criteria)?”, and 2) “To what extent do frames affect public support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants?”.

To answer the research questions, we designed a pre-registered survey experiment conducted among a representative sample of the Belgian adult population. The sample (N = 2,121) was stratified by age, gender, education achievement and region of residence to reflect the adult

Belgian population aged 18 and over. Data collection took place in March 2025. The survey was administered in both Dutch and French by the Belgian company Bpact, specialized in conducting surveys and has a panel for collecting data on attitudes regarding various topics. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Social Sciences Ethics Committee of the authors' university. The sample closely matched the population in terms of age, gender, and education level. 50.1% were female, average age was 48 years, and 38% of the respondents held a tertiary education degree. The respondents were distributed across the three Belgian regions of residence - Brussels (10.6%), Flanders (57.9%) and Wallonia (31.5%).

3.1 Experimental vignette design

Conducting a survey experiment allow us to test whether different types of messages could influence public attitudes towards the regularization of undocumented immigrants. In our study, participants in the five experimental groups were randomly assigned to one of the five vignettes and participants in the control group did not receive any treatment.

Our first vignette is guided by the fact that Belgians like other Europeans overestimate the size of the undocumented population (European Commission, 2022), revealing a misperception of the phenomenon. Beyond Belgium, a strong body of scientific evidence has indeed shown that the flawed perception of the demographic size of the immigrant population is associated with preferences for immigration policies, xenophobia, subjective perception of immigrants as a threat, and opinions on whether they should be granted equal rights and (see Sigelman & Niemi, 2001; Citrin & Sides, 2008; Blinder & Schaffner, 2020). Existing research has also tried to determine whether providing accurate information affect public attitudes on migration. At this stage it offers mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of such approach since it shows that different types of information have different effects². Other scholars such as Dahlstrom (2021) have also looked at the format of the message and argued that narratives can help to counter misinformation. In line with this approach, Graeber and colleagues (2024) suggest that presenting factual information in narrative form, through personal stories or anecdotes, can be more persuasive than presenting “dry statistics” alone. This approach, often referred to as “non-fiction narrative”, is widely used in journalism but also by policy-makers to improve message retention. In line with these findings, our first vignette therefore includes both narrative and statistical information on the demographic size of the undocumented immigrant population and reports research findings on the non-existence of a 'pull effect' resulting from the regularization of undocumented immigrants.

The choice of the second vignette is guided by the scholarship on the role of appeal to emotions in shaping attitudes and policy preferences suggesting it is an effective communication strategy in the field of migration (Lecheler et al., 2015) and a better way to make complex information easier to understand for individuals than factual information (Ecker et al. 2020). The second vignette labeled ‘emotion and empathy’ therefore presents the story of a hardworking female undocumented immigrant and the local community’s mobilization to prevent her deportation. This personal story—which very much resembles personal stories frequently featured in the Press—can engender empathy and a positive reaction due to its emotional resonance. The fact that the message frame relies on a concrete example can resonate not only with respondents who already favor regularization but also shift the opinion of others

² See for instance studies on providing accurate information about the size of the immigrant population (Citrin & Sides, 2008; Hopkins et al., 2019) and on the economic impact of migrants and their characteristics (Allen et al., 2024; Grigorieff et al., 2020).

The selection of the last three vignettes is based on the “emphasis framing effect” or “issue framing” literature. It emphasizes how the way information is presented and which aspects of the content are highlighted over others can draw attention to different considerations of an issue (see Druckman, 2001, Bullock & Vedlitz, 2017, Amsalem & Zoizner 2022). The large and impactful scholarship has shown also how different actors frame issues in the media by emphasizing certain aspects over others (Chong & Druckman, 2007) and, in particular, the way how governments and policymakers present proposals can substantially shape public evaluations of those policies (Connolly & Touchton, 2020). Based on this approach, the selection of the last three vignettes focused on frames frequently used in public and policy debates by policy-makers, civil society representatives and academics in support of implementing a new regularization program in Belgium. The third vignette labeled ‘economic and social considerations’ conveys the idea that restrictive immigration policies engender unauthorized migration. It also highlights the economic and social benefits of regularizing the status of undocumented immigrants for both undocumented migrants and society as a whole. The fourth vignette named ‘policy double standard’ emphasizes that Belgian authorities have opposed large-scale regularization for undocumented immigrants for many years but have, in the meantime, implemented tax regularization programs to the benefit of those who commit tax fraud. This vignette underlines the double standard of some policy-makers who oppose regularisation of undocumented migrants on the grounds that it “rewards” law-breaking individuals but do not apply the same logic to those who commit tax fraud. The fifth vignette is called ‘stratified mobility’ and highlights the existence of programs offering wealthy non-EU citizens residence and citizenship. It offers a contrast with the limited avenues offered to socio-economically disadvantaged ‘would-be migrants’ for whom unauthorized migration is one of the few available options to meet their aspirations to migrate.

Box 1. Vignettes presented to respondents (English translation)

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 and 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.

Policy double standard (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.

Stratified mobility (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.

Comment: The control group (N = 344) did not receive any treatment.

3.2 Expectations

Our experimental design enables us to test six hypothesis. Our first hypothesis is based on the idea that there exist more support for the regularization of undocumented migrants who meet criteria previously used in Belgium and other European regularization campaigns (i.e. employment and social ties) than for the regularization of the undocumented population as a whole. In addition, this hypothesis also expects a similar effect with undocumented migrants who work most specifically in economic sectors that have been repeatedly presented in the

Press as experiencing labor shortages (and where perception of competition with natives is therefore likely to be weaker). The hypothesis is coined as follows:

- H1: Support of individuals for the regularization of employed migrants, of migrants employed in sectors experiencing labor shortages or of migrants who have established strong social ties in the country, is significantly higher than the support for the regularization of all undocumented immigrants.

The next five hypotheses indicate that exposure to any of the five vignettes presented above increases support for the regularization of undocumented migrants compared to respondents of the control group. We have labelled them as follows:

- H2: Respondents who are exposed to the non-fiction narrative treatment will express significantly stronger support for regularization than those in the control group.
- H3: Respondents who are exposed to an emotionally engaging treatment featuring a personal story will express significantly stronger support for regularization than those in the control group.
- H4: Respondents who are exposed to a treatment emphasizing the economic and social benefits of regularizing undocumented immigrants will express significantly stronger support for regularization than those in the control group.
- H5: Respondents who are exposed to a treatment showing double standards on the part of public authorities in their response to law-infringement will express significantly stronger support for regularization than those in the control group.
- H6: Respondents who are exposed to a treatment showing inequalities in mobility rights between socio-economically privileged and unprivileged individuals will express significantly stronger support for regularization than those in the control group.

3.3 Dependent variables

Before responding to a set of questions, participants in our survey were initially invited to read the following short explanatory text: “We would like to know your opinion on undocumented immigrants living in Belgium, who are often referred to as ‘illegal’ or ‘irregular’ immigrants. In other words, these are foreigners residing in Belgium without a residence permit.” This particular phrasing was chosen as, in the media, political discourse, and public debate, the terms ‘undocumented immigrants’, ‘illegal immigrants’ and ‘irregular immigrants’ are often used interchangeably. Despite their apparent equivalence, the choice of terminology is not neutral, and can influence individuals’ attitudes towards immigration (see Ommundsen *et al.* 2014) but only if the considerations this terminology emphasizes is already available in that citizen’s mind (Amsalem & Zoizner 2022: 4).

After reading the explanatory text presented above, respondents were randomly assigned to one of six groups: a control group and five treatment groups, each exposed to a different informational vignette (see above). Participants in the control group were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements presented in random order to prevent the possibility of order effects, in which responses to the preceding statement may affect the responses to subsequent ones. The statements read as follows:

- 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).

In all cases responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (“Strongly disagree”, “Somewhat disagree”, “Neither agree nor disagree”, “Somewhat agree”, “Strongly agree”). Participants in the treatment groups were asked the same set of questions, but only after reading one of five vignettes designed to influence perceptions of the regularization of undocumented immigrants. From the responses to these statements, we constructed our four dependent variables, which were used in our regression analyses. Each variable was coded as 1 if the respondent selected the options “Strongly disagree” or “Somewhat disagree”, and as 0 otherwise.

3.4. Independent variables

Our regression models included a set of control variables capturing respondents’ demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including age, gender, and educational attainment represented by a dummy variable. Employment status was controlled for using dummy variables for unemployed and ideological orientation was measured in terms of respondents’ self-reported proximity to national political parties. Personal contact with different ethnic groups was measured using a dichotomous variable combining the frequency and quality of intergroup contact. Frequency captures how often respondents encounter individuals from ethnic groups different from most Belgians in everyday settings (e.g., public transport, streets, shops, or neighborhoods), while quality reflects whether these interactions are perceived as positive, neutral, or negative. The variable was coded 1 for positive contact and 0 otherwise (i.e., no, neutral, or negative contact).

In addition, we included responses to several other survey questions as explanatory variables in order to control for respondents’ perceptions of their current financial situation, their views on the impact of immigration. We also controlled for respondents’ views on whether immigrants should be discriminated against in terms of access to employment. Finally, we accounted for participants’ region of residence to control for unobserved local characteristics that might influence individuals’ support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants.

4. Results and discussion

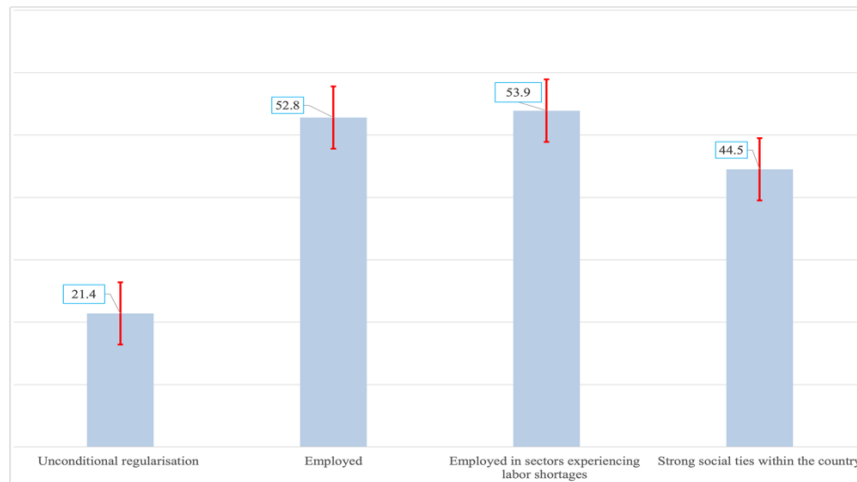
The findings of our study are examined from four perspectives. First, we provide descriptive statistics on the public support for regularization of undocumented immigrants. Second, we compare differences between the control and treatment groups in the proportion of participants supporting unconditional (open to all) and conditional (based on immigrant characteristics) regularization. Third, we estimate a series of regression models to determine whether the observed differences in proportion persist after controlling for relevant covariates. Fourth, to further ensure robustness of our results, we conduct sensitivity analyses excluding participants who failed attention-control questions and those who completed the survey unusually quickly.

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, we find that support for unconditional regularization is limited: only 21.4% of respondents believe the government should regularize all undocumented immigrants. As was expected, Figure 1 shows that support increases significantly when specific migrant attributes are considered. A majority of respondents favor regularization for undocumented immigrants who are employed (52.8%) or who work in sectors facing labor shortages (53.9%), while 44.5% support regularization for those who have developed strong social ties within the country.

It is also important to note that among those who did not express support for regularization, a substantial proportion expressed a “neutral position” declaring that they neither agreed nor disagreed with granting a legal status to undocumented immigrants. More precisely, 25% of respondents are neutral regarding both unconditional regularization and regularization for those who have developed strong social ties within the country, 20% are neutral regarding regularization of those who are employed, and 19% are neutral regarding regularization of those employed in sectors facing labor shortages (not shown in Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Survey-weighted support for the regularisation of undocumented immigrants (in %)

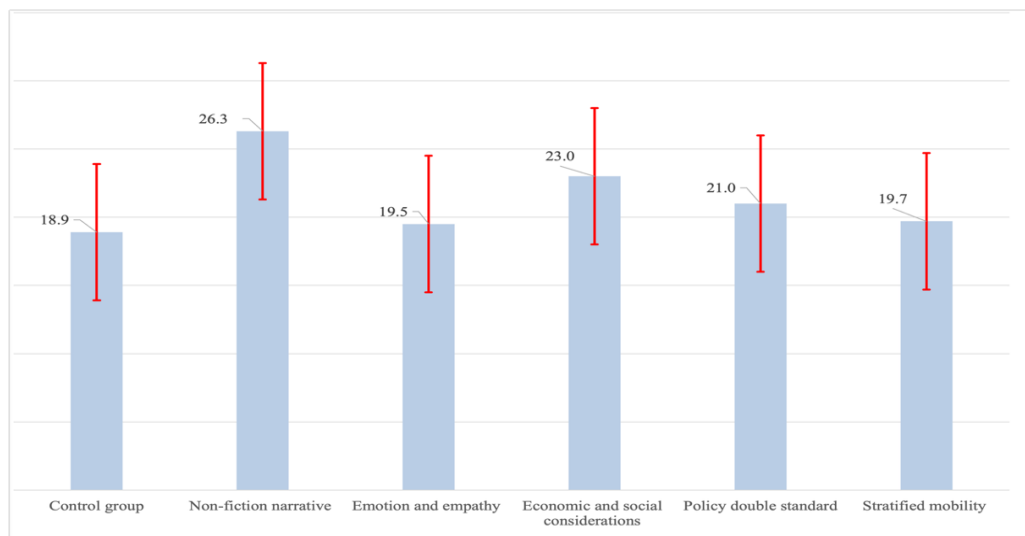


Note: All proportions are survey-weighted (post-stratified). The bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

4.2 Effect of frames on support for regularization

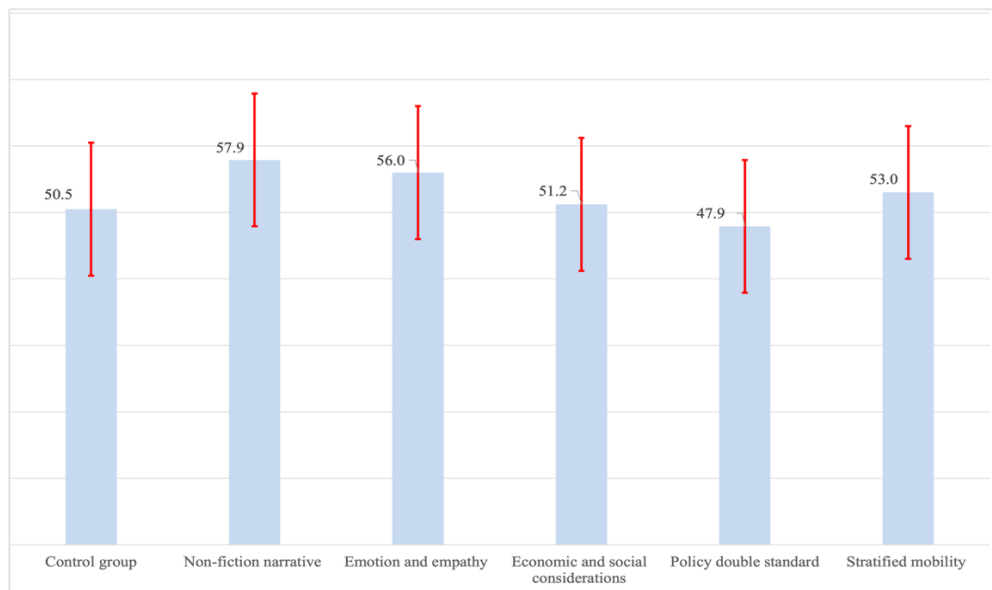
Figure 2 shows that 26.3% of participants exposed to the “Non-fiction narrative” intervention expressed support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants, compared to only 18.9% in the control group. Figure 3 indicates that narrowing down only to employed undocumented immigrants leads to a substantial increase in support for regularization. In the control group, 50.5% of participants favored regularizing employed undocumented immigrants. The corresponding proportion in the treatment group exposed to the “Non-fiction narrative” intervention was 7.4 percentage points higher, reaching 57.9%.

Figure 2- Survey-weighted proportions of respondents in the control and experimental groups who favor unconditional regularization of undocumented immigrants (in %)



Note: All proportions are survey-weighted (post-stratified). The bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

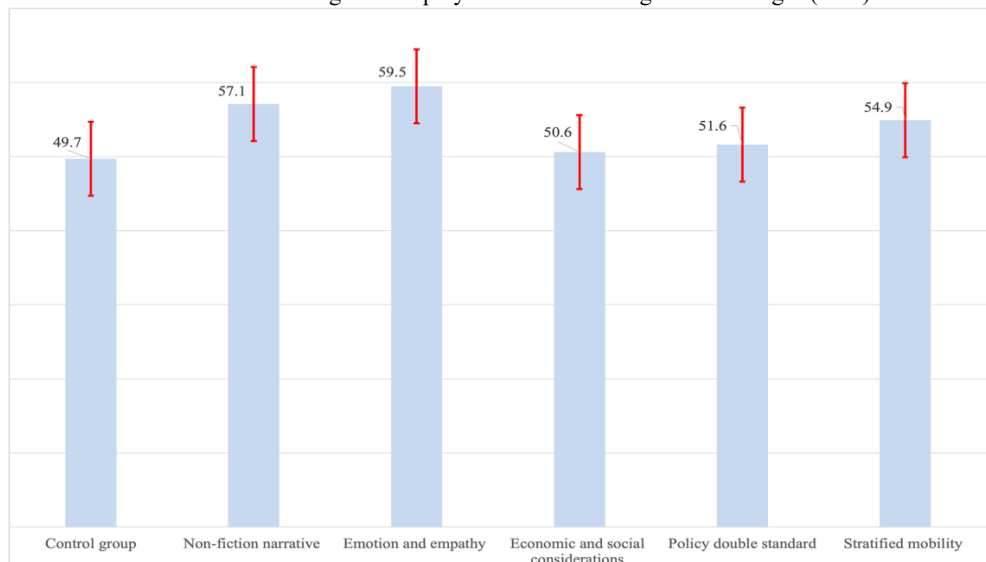
Figure 3- Survey-weighted proportions of respondents in the control and experimental groups who favor regularization of employed undocumented immigrants (in %)



Note: All proportions are survey-weighted (post-stratified). The bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

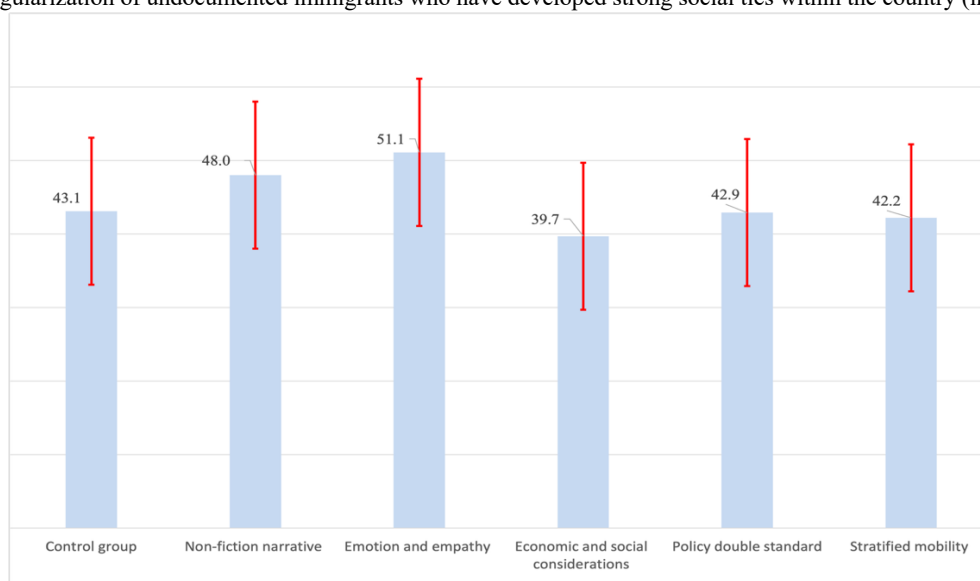
With regard to undocumented immigrants employed in sectors experiencing labor shortages, Figure 4 shows that 49.7% of participants in the control group supported regularization for this category. In comparison, exposure to the “Emotion and empathy” and “Non-fiction narrative” messages increased support by 9.8 and 7.4 percentage points, to 59.5% and 57.1%, respectively. Finally, Figure 5 shows that 43.1% of respondents in the control group supported regularization for undocumented immigrants who have developed strong social ties within the country. Exposure to the “Emotion and empathy” vignette increased support to 51.1%.

Figure 4- Survey-weighted proportion of respondents in the control and experimental groups who favor regularization of undocumented immigrants employed in sectors facing labor shortages (in %)



Note: All proportions are survey-weighted (post-stratified). The bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 5- Survey-weighted proportion of respondents in the control and experimental groups who favor unconditional regularization of undocumented immigrants who have developed strong social ties within the country (in %)



Note: All proportions are survey-weighted (post-stratified). The bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

4.3 Regression analysis

Although the control and experimental groups display numerical differences in proportions, the overlapping confidence intervals suggest that these differences are not necessarily statistically significant. Regression analyses were performed to determine whether these observed patterns are robust when accounting for factors that might explain individuals' support for regularization.

Given the nature of the dependent variables, we performed a multivariate analysis using a probit estimator to examine the impact of the vignettes and control variables on individuals' support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants. The analysis was weighted (post-stratified) to match the general population in terms of age, gender, education and region of residence. Equation 1 shows the coefficients relating to the impact of the vignettes and control variables on the probability of supporting the unconditional regularization of undocumented immigrants. While equations 1 to 4 show the likelihood of supporting regularization based on three criteria: employment; employment in sector experiencing labor shortages and having developed strong social ties within the country (Table 1).

The first point to note is that the estimated probit results are consistent with our expectations: exposure to both emotionally engaging messages and non-fiction narrative messages increases public support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants (Hypothesis 2 and 3). These effects appear to operate by fostering empathy and by providing fact-based information embedded in a narrative format about the size of the undocumented immigrant population. Exposure to the emotional message significantly affects attitudes towards undocumented immigrants employed in sectors facing labor shortages, as well as those who have developed strong social ties within the country. As shown in Table 2, which reports predicted probabilities, the message increases the likelihood of supporting regularization for these two groups by 9.2 and 7.7 percentage points, respectively. This differential effect may reflect the fact that the notion of “social ties”—even though it was a criteria used in the 2009 regularization campaign in Belgium—is more abstract and potentially considered less important concept than employment-based criteria. Social integration constitutes a more subjective dimension, which may not resonate equally across respondents. In addition, public debates and media narratives

tend to emphasize migrants' economic utility rather than their relational or community ties, potentially attenuating the impact of a message centered on social connections.

Similarly, exposure to the non-fiction narrative message has a positive effect on support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants across policy framings. More precisely, it increases the probability of supporting unconditional regularization (i.e., open to all undocumented immigrants) by 7.4 percentage points (significant at the 1% level) and increases support for the regularization of employed undocumented immigrants and those employed in sectors experiencing labor shortages by 6.6 and 6.5 percentage points, respectively (significant at the 10% level). The small differences in the magnitude of the estimated marginal effects suggest that the treatment broadly increases support for undocumented immigrants rather than generating a significant differentiated effect across these immigrants' groups.

Contrary to our expectations, messages emphasizing economic and social considerations (H4), double standards in the treatment of law-infringement (H5), and inequality in mobility risks (H6) had no significant effect on support for regularization. One explanation is that these frames generated divergent interpretations among respondents that offset each other at the aggregate level, explaining the absence of a significant impact on support for regularization. The message highlighting economic and social considerations may have produced a neutral effect because it can be interpreted in opposing ways. Some respondents may view regularization as economically rational and socially beneficial. Others, however, may perceive it negatively, particularly in terms of increased competition for jobs, leading to reduced support. These opposite perceptions may cancel each other out, resulting in no overall effect.

A similar rationale may apply for the exposure to the message emphasizing the government's opposition to the regularization of undocumented immigrants while granting preferential treatment to taxpayers in form of tax amnesties that allow them to regularize their status without prosecution. One possible explanation is that respondents interpret this "double standard" differently. For some, it may appear unfair, thereby increasing support for regularization. For others, however, the comparison may reinforce the perception that both taxpayers benefiting from amnesties and undocumented immigrants are lawbreakers, thereby reducing willingness to support regularization. These divergent interpretations may again produce a null average effect.

Finally, exposure to the vignette contrasting the situation of wealthy individuals who can "purchase" residency or citizenship with less privileged individuals who cannot afford also had no significant impact. Such messages may primarily reinforce the views of those already supportive of regularization, effectively "preaching to the converted," while failing to persuade those who are opposed or ambivalent. Moreover, the framing may appear ideological or overly activist to some respondents, potentially undermining the message's credibility and limiting its persuasive power.

Another possible explanation for the absence of a significant impact of messages emphasizing economic and social considerations, policy double standard, or stratified mobility is that this does not necessarily imply that these frames are ineffective; rather, it may reflect the need for repeated exposure. In the context of immigration, public attitudes are often shaped through repeated exposure to similar messages over time. In particular, political discourse and media coverage of undocumented immigrants tend to be highly repetitive. Research shows that exposure to repetitive news framing produces both stronger and more persistent effects on opinions than single exposure (Lecheler et al. 2015b). Based on these findings, we can reasonably expect that even a vignette with no immediate observable effect may exert an influence on attitudes towards the regularization of undocumented immigrants when exposure is repeated over time.

In addition to the effects of the vignettes, several control variables significantly influence support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants. Political proximity is one of the most influential factors, with clear polarization: respondents who identify with left-leaning parties Workers' Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA) and the green political parties (Green–Ecolo) are substantially more likely to support regularization, especially if they have developed solid social ties within the country. Support for regularization of this category increases by 22.9 and 22.4 percentage points respectively among these respondents. By contrast, support for regularization of the same group drops by 12 and 22.5 percentage points respectively among those who identify with the Flemish nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) and the nationalist far-right party Vlaams Belang (VB).

The results also show that people with higher levels of education and good contacts with minority groups were more likely to support the regularization of undocumented immigrants. By contrast, being in favor of discrimination against immigrants in terms of access to employment, dissatisfied with one's financial situation and believing that immigrants take jobs from native workers decreases the probability of supporting regularization. The effect of the variable 'age' is unclear. While older individuals are less likely to support the regularization of all undocumented immigrants, they are more in favor of the regularization of those employed, those employed in sectors facing labor shortages, and of those who have developed solid social ties within the country. The same is true of the variable gender. Women are neither more nor less likely than men to support the regularization of all undocumented immigrants or of those who have developed solid social ties within the country. However, they are 8 and 6 percentage points more likely than men to support the regularization of employed undocumented immigrants and those working in sectors facing labor shortages, respectively.

Moreover, the findings highlight that context matters. Compared to Brussels residents (the reference group), Flemish residents show a decrease in the probability of supporting any kind of regularization by around 14 percentage points. Consistent with this, Walloon residents are less likely to be in favor of regularization for all undocumented immigrants (-5.3 percentage points), and even more so for those who have developed strong social ties within the country (-7.2 percentage points).

Table 1- Survey-weighted probit regression predicting support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants: Effects of interventions and control variables

	Unconditional regularization	Conditional regularization based on specific criteria		
	For all	Employed	Employed in sector facing labor shortages	Have developed strong social ties within the country
Experimental groups (control group as reference)				
Economic and social considerations	0.186 (0.118)	0.035 (0.102)	0.019 (0.103)	-0.099 (0.105)
Non-fiction narrative	0.295*** (0.114)	0.197* (0.102)	0.198* (0.103)	0.139 (0.103)
Emotion and empathy	0.010 (0.118)	0.143 (0.102)	0.277*** (0.103)	0.233** (0.104)
Stratified mobility	-0.003 (0.118)	0.056 (0.103)	0.132 (0.104)	-0.040 (0.104)
Policy double standard	0.120 (0.116)	-0.057 (0.100)	0.075 (0.102)	0.016 (0.103)
Control variables				
Age	-0.006*** (0.002)	0.003* (0.0018)	0.004** (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)
Female	0.087 (0.066)	0.239*** (0.059)	0.182*** (0.059)	0.058 (0.060)
Tertiary educated	0.234*** (0.069)	0.166*** (0.064)	0.234*** (0.064)	0.282*** (0.064)
Dissatisfied with one's financial situation	-0.171* (0.096)	-0.282*** (0.080)	-0.298*** (0.081)	-0.156* (0.083)
Belief that immigrants take job from natives workers	-0.316*** (0.105)	-0.535*** (0.087)	-0.589*** (0.087)	-0.397*** (0.090)
Have positive contact with different ethnic groups	0.328*** (0.074)	0.440*** (0.063)	0.461*** (0.063)	0.402*** (0.064)
In favor of discrimination against immigrants in employment	-0.287*** (0.085)	-0.215*** (0.074)	-0.280*** (0.074)	-0.300*** (0.075)
Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V)	0.012 (0.171)	-0.095 (0.140)	-0.122 (0.139)	0.065 (0.140)
Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)	-0.364** (0.151)	-0.327*** (0.116)	-0.338*** (0.116)	-0.366*** (0.119)
Vlaams Belang	-0.077 (0.200)	-0.650*** (0.160)	-0.576*** (0.158)	-0.685*** (0.173)
Parti socialiste & Vooruit (PS & Vooruit)	0.251** (0.113)	0.119 (0.099)	0.021 (0.100)	0.235** (0.099)
Parti du Travail de Belgique & Partij van de Arbeid van België (PTB & PVDA)	0.709*** (0.120)	0.503*** (0.115)	0.491*** (0.115)	0.697*** (0.111)
Ecolo & Groen	0.657*** (0.117)	0.446*** (0.114)	0.395*** (0.116)	0.681*** (0.113)
Mouvement réformateur & Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (MR & Open VLD)	-0.008 (0.130)	0.087 (0.110)	-0.095 (0.110)	-0.103 (0.113)
Flanders	-0.557*** (0.110)	-0.431*** (0.105)	-0.445*** (0.107)	-0.430*** (0.108)
Wallonia	-0.212** (0.107)	0.007 (0.103)	-0.105 (0.104)	-0.220** (0.104)
Constant	-0.658*** (0.183)	-0.170 (0.164)	-0.126 (0.166)	-0.382** (0.166)
	F(21, 2100) = 11.80***	F(21, 2100) = 18.44***	F(21, 2100) = 18.05***	F(21, 2100) = 17.98***
Observations	2,121	2,121	2,121	2,121

Note: In Belgium, political parties are organized along linguistic lines. For analytical purposes, we group together French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parties that share broadly the same ideological positioning; entries are coefficients with standard error in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 2 – Marginal effects of significant experimental interventions and controls on support for regularization

	Unconditional regularization	Conditional regularization based on specific criteria		
	For all	Employed	Employed in sector facing labor shortages	Have developed strong social ties within the country
Experimental groups (control group as reference)				
Economic and social considerations	0.046 (0.029)	0.012 (0.034)	0.006 (0.034)	-0.032 (0.034)
Non-fiction narrative	0.074*** (0.028)	0.066* (0.034)	0.065* (0.034)	0.046 (0.034)
Emotion and empathy	0.003 (0.030)	0.048 (0.034)	0.092*** (0.034)	0.077** (0.034)
Social Stratified mobility	-0.001 (0.029)	0.019 (0.034)	0.044 (0.034)	-0.013 (0.034)
Policy double standard	0.030 (0.029)	-0.019 (0.033)	0.025 (0.034)	0.005 (0.034)
Control variables				
Age	-0.001*** (0.0006)	0.001* (0.0006)	0.001** (0.0006)	0.001** (0.0006)
Female	0.022 (0.017)	0.080*** (0.019)	0.060*** (0.019)	0.019 (0.020)
Tertiary educated	0.058*** (0.017)	0.055*** (0.021)	0.077*** (0.021)	0.093*** (0.021)
Dissatisfied with one's financial situation	-0.043* (0.024)	-0.094*** (0.026)	-0.098*** (0.027)	-0.051* (0.027)
Belief that immigrants take job from natives workers	-0.079*** (0.026)	-0.179*** (0.028)	-0.195*** (0.028)	-0.130*** (0.029)
Have positive contact with different ethnic groups	0.082*** (0.018)	0.147*** (0.020)	0.153*** (0.020)	0.132*** (0.021)
In favor of discrimination against immigrants in employment	-0.072*** (0.021)	-0.072*** (0.025)	-0.093*** (0.024)	-0.098*** (0.024)
Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V)	0.003 (0.043)	-0.032 (0.047)	-0.040 (0.046)	0.021 (0.046)
Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)	-0.091** (0.038)	-0.109*** (0.038)	-0.112*** (0.038)	-0.120*** (0.039)
Vlaams Belang	-0.019 (0.050)	-0.217*** (0.053)	-0.190*** (0.052)	-0.225*** (0.056)
Parti socialiste & Vooruit (PS & Vooruit)	0.063** (0.028)	0.040 (0.033)	0.007 (0.033)	0.077** (0.032)
Parti du Travail de Belgique & Partij van de Arbeid van België (PTB & PVDA)	0.177*** (0.029)	0.168*** (0.038)	0.162*** (0.038)	0.229*** (0.036)
Ecolo & Groen	0.164*** (0.028)	0.149*** (0.038)	0.131*** (0.038)	0.224*** (0.036)
Mouvement réformateur & Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (MR & Open VLD)	-0.002 (0.032)	0.029 (0.037)	-0.032 (0.036)	-0.038 (0.037)
Flanders	-0.139*** (0.027)	-0.144*** (0.035)	-0.147*** (0.035)	-0.141*** (0.034)
Wallonia	-0.053** (0.027)	0.002 (0.034)	-0.035 (0.034)	-0.072** (0.034)
Observations	2,121	2,121	2,121	2,121

Note: In Belgium, political parties are organized along linguistic lines. For analytical purposes, we group together French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parties that share broadly the same ideological positioning; entries are coefficients with standard error in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

4.4 Robustness check

Online surveys offer several advantages, including flexible administration across multiple formats, easy customization to target populations, low administrative costs, and access to diverse samples, making them an increasingly important method of data collection. However, prior research indicates that some respondents provide insufficient effort, threatening data quality and the validity of experimental results. Following established practices to minimize careless responding and improve data quality (see Arias et al., 2020; Arthur et al., 2021; Hibben et al., 2022; Muszyński, 2023; Meade & Craig, 2012; Ward & Meade, 2023), we asked participants to commit to providing accurate and honest answers and by including an attention-check question requiring identification of each vignette's topic from four options. A total of 133 participants (7.5% of the treatment groups) failed the attention check.

Survey completion time was also used to detect inattentiveness (see Schneider et al., 2018). Respondents who completed the survey in less than 60% of the median completion time (14.2 minutes) were classified as speeders; this applied to 202 respondents (10.2% of participants). As a robustness check, we re-estimated the final model excluding participants who failed the attention check and those identified as speeders. As shown in Table 3, the results confirm that the effects of exposure to the different messages on support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants remain consistent after excluding these participants.

Table 3- Survey-weighted probit regression predicting support for the regularization of undocumented immigrants: robustness check excluding participants who failed the attention control questions and completed the survey quickly

	Unconditional regularization	Conditional regularization based on specific criteria		
	For all	Employed	Employed in sector facing labor shortages	Have developed strong social ties within the country
Experimental groups (control group as reference)				
Economic and social considerations	0.128 (0.129)	-0.021 (0.112)	-0.009 (0.113)	-0.163 (0.114)
Non-fiction narrative	0.243** (0.123)	0.199* (0.110)	0.219** (0.111)	0.111 (0.110)
Emotion and empathy	0.009 (0.128)	0.167 (0.113)	0.322*** (0.113)	0.224** (0.113)
Stratified mobility	-0.060 (0.132)	0.023 (0.113)	0.141 (0.113)	-0.114 (0.114)
Policy double standard	0.135 (0.126)	-0.011 (0.108)	0.076 (0.110)	0.0270 (0.111)
Control variables				
Age	-0.006*** (0.002)	0.0004 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Female	0.053 (0.073)	0.196*** (0.065)	0.133** (0.065)	0.032 (0.066)
Tertiary educated	0.202*** (0.076)	0.087 (0.071)	0.178** (0.071)	0.232*** (0.070)
Dissatisfied with one's financial situation	-0.102 (0.105)	-0.318*** (0.088)	-0.273*** (0.089)	-0.100 (0.090)
Belief that immigrants take job from natives workers	-0.289** (0.127)	-0.529*** (0.100)	-0.631*** (0.101)	-0.394*** (0.104)
Have positive contact with different ethnic groups	0.249*** (0.081)	0.391*** (0.070)	0.396*** (0.069)	0.357*** (0.070)
In favor of discrimination against immigrants in employment	-0.437*** (0.096)	-0.301*** (0.082)	-0.382*** (0.082)	-0.390*** (0.082)
Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V)	0.014 (0.182)	-0.069 (0.151)	-0.121 (0.150)	0.131 (0.150)
Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)	-0.443*** (0.164)	-0.383*** (0.126)	-0.425*** (0.126)	-0.447*** (0.129)
Vlaams Belang	-0.174 (0.230)	-0.767*** (0.179)	-0.629*** (0.175)	-0.828*** (0.196)
Parti socialiste & Vooruit (PS & Vooruit)	0.183 (0.124)	0.069 (0.111)	-0.033 (0.112)	0.196* (0.109)
Parti du Travail de Belgique & Partij van de Arbeid van België (PTB & PVDA)	0.636*** (0.133)	0.505*** (0.133)	0.454*** (0.133)	0.642*** (0.124)
Ecolo & Groen	0.628*** (0.127)	0.431*** (0.128)	0.367*** (0.130)	0.714*** (0.126)
Mouvement réformateur & Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (MR & Open VLD)	-0.085 (0.146)	-0.003 (0.123)	-0.104 (0.123)	-0.146 (0.126)
Flanders	-0.615*** (0.124)	-0.517*** (0.122)	-0.569*** (0.126)	-0.456*** (0.124)
Wallonia	-0.233* (0.123)	0.0447 (0.122)	-0.130 (0.124)	-0.232* (0.122)
Constant	-0.438** (0.210)	0.200 (0.190)	0.287 (0.193)	-0.151 (0.190)
Observations	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787

Note: In Belgium, political parties are organized along linguistic lines. For analytical purposes, we group together French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parties that share broadly the same ideological positioning; entries are coefficients with standard error in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

5. Conclusion and policy implications

As mentioned at the outset of this article, the main goal of our study is to contribute to scientific debates on the regularization of undocumented immigrants by highlighting the role of frames on public support for regularization. In a context where migration —and unauthorized migration in particular— has become an extremely contentious topic across EU Member States, the policy and societal relevance of such study should also be stressed. While we do not claim that Belgium is representative of the entire EU, nor that our findings are directly generalizable to other contexts, Belgium nevertheless provides an excellent case for examining the role of the message framing on public support for regularization of undocumented immigrants.

First and foremost, a key finding of this study is that —in spite of the authorities' claim that they are implemented a strict approach on asylum and migration requested by the public opinion— there exist a majority in the Belgian public opinion that support a similar form of regularization campaign of undocumented immigrants as the one implemented in 2009. More precisely, our results highlight that there exist a broader support among the Belgian public for regularizing undocumented immigrants according to certain criteria compared to unconditional regularization. This finding indicates the existence of a potential moral dilemma for advocates of regularization torn between campaigning in favor of the least conditional form of regularization campaigns in line with their principles and the expectations of their base, or campaigning for regularization campaigns with more selective criteria that are more likely to be widely supported by the public opinion. Whereas many advocates of regularization may consider that unconditional regularization would be preferable, it should also be noted that it is generally not the case in practice. During Belgium's three regularization programs in 1974, 1999, and 2009, criteria related to length of residence, employment, the establishment of lasting ties to the country, or exceptional circumstances were used. In fact, even the most ambitious initiatives, such as the exceptional regularization announced by the Spanish government in early 2026, which is expected to enable an estimated 500,000 individuals to apply for residence and work permits, have made regularization conditional on specific criteria. Moreover, as pointed by Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas (2014), although immigrant movements often rhetorically divide between demands for universal legalization and case-by-case regularization, in practice these distinctions blur, as regularization applications are always examined individually by authorities and decisions are made individually.

Second, with regards to the messaging around regularization campaigns, our findings show that message effects dependent on how they are framed. Emotionally engaging and non-fiction narrative treatments significantly increased support for regularization, particularly when migrants' economic contributions and labor market participation were emphasized. In contrast, messages highlighting economic considerations, double standards of the authorities concerning law-infringement, and socio-economic inequalities in mobility rights did not produce significant changes in attitudes. The absence of effects for these treatments suggests that such frames generated heterogeneous interpretations that offset one another. Taken together, the results indicate that messages represent a powerful channel for advocating the regularization of undocumented immigrants in times of heightened contestation and disinformation. However, their effectiveness depends on their ability to resonate with the broader public and to avoid generating opposing interpretations among different segments of the population. Similarly, we cannot exclude that three types of messages that did not produce any effect would produce one if participants had been exposed to them several times over a period of time.

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