



Policy Brief

BUILDING ROBUST DEMOCRACIES THROUGH IMMIGRANT INCLUSION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Right wing populist parties (RWPP) are driving democratic backsliding across wealthy democracies by exploiting anti immigrant sentiment, yet evidence shows that copying their exclusionary rhetoric fails electorally and further erodes liberal norms. This brief argues that the true antidote lies in robust immigrant inclusion. Countries with comprehensive, coherent integration policies—measured by indices like MIPEX—consistently report lower xenophobia and weaker far right votes. On balance, studies find that inclusion fosters everyday contact, shrinks perceived threat, and sets off a virtuous cycle in which tolerant attitudes reinforce pro democratic governance. Mainstream parties should therefore pair humane border management with a suite of integration policies that expand the parameters of belonging and address broader quality of life concerns, thereby undercutting RWPP mobilization and fortifying democracy for all.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Freedom House, global freedom declined for the 19th consecutive year in 2024 (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe 2025). While most advanced industrialized democracies are still free, more than half have experienced a drop in their Freedom House scores since 2013. This backsliding is closely associated with the rise of right-wing populist parties (RWPP) that demonize and scapegoat immigrants to win votes (see Table 1).

Country	2013 Score	2024 Score	Change	RWPP Presence	RWPP Highest Vote Share
Hungary	88	65	-23	Yes	1st
Poland	93	80	-13	Yes	1st
United States	93	83	-10	Yes	1st
Israel	81	74	-7	Yes	1st
France	95	89	-6	Yes	2nd
Spain	96	90	-6	Yes	3rd
UK	97	91	-6	Yes	3rd
Austria	96	93	-3	Yes	1st
Bulgaria	81	78	-3	Yes	1st
Germany	96	93	-3	Yes	2nd

Note: Ranking is limited to high-income countries with >5 million inhabitants scored as FREE in 2013 (Freedom in the World 2025). Of the nine countries that experienced no democratic backsliding, only Italy and Switzerland have dominant RWPP.

RWPP pose a serious threat to democracy for two reasons. First, they are willing to violate and/or change the rules of the democratic game to achieve their objectives. Second, their exclusionary nativism is incompatible with the basic tenets of liberal democracy. At the heart of any democracy is the equality of all citizens regardless of their birthplace or identity. A liberal democracy goes a step further to guarantee that everyone, regardless of their citizenship, enjoys basic human rights. Discrimination, xenophobia, and denial of due process are attacks on democracy even when directed against non-citizens.

Preserving democracy is therefore integrally linked to how pro-democracy parties respond to immigration, especially in Europe and the United States. Kapeiner (2024) suggests that the rise of RWPP may put these parties in a “democratic dilemma” that requires them to choose between two incommensurate outcomes:

1.
Safeguard democracy
by adopting anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy and thereby “crowding out” RWPP; or

2.
Uphold immigrant justice at the risk of losing power to RWPP and thereby enabling democratic backsliding.

Drawing on empirical research, we reject the democratic dilemma on two fronts. First, we find that the first approach often fails and, worse, can weaken democracy even further. Second, we find that **inclusive immigrant integration** offers a way out of the democratic dilemma by mitigating anti-immigrant attitudes and support for RWPP. Rather than trying to outbid RWPP with anti-immigrant appeals, the best way to safeguard democracy may be to render these appeals less relevant by reshaping what it means to belong.

IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON SUPPORT FOR RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES

Before turning to integration, it is worth examining whether immigration itself is driving anti-immigrant attitudes and, by extension, support for RWPP. Scholars have posited two conflicting theories about how native-born residents are likely to respond to immigrants (Callens 2015). **Ethnic competition theory** holds that the in-group (the native-born majority) will feel threatened by outgroups (immigrant minorities) when they experience real or perceived competition with the outgroups for material resources, status, and/or cultural dominance. This theory predicts that increased immigration will fuel anti-immigrant attitudes, especially among more vulnerable groups in the native population. **Contact theory** makes the opposite claim. Rather than creating competition, “large groups of immigrants raise opportunities for inter-group contact and, consequently, lead to decreased perceived threat and prejudice” (Callens 2015, 4). This theory predicts that increased immigration will be associated with more pro-immigrant attitudes and, in turn, less support for RWPP.

Neither theory is consistently supported by the evidence. Cross-national studies find little to no effect of the size of the immigrant population on anti-immigrant attitudes or far-right voting (Careja and Andreß 2013; Cools, Finseraas, and Rogeberg 2021; Isac, Maslowski, and Werf 2012). Moreover, Dancygier et al. (2025) find intriguing evidence that the main driver of support for RWPP in Europe is not the arrival of immigrants but the **departure of citizens**, which has negative consequences for the quality of life.

There is a bit more support for **ethnic competition theory** at the country level. Studies of Japan, the UK, Sweden, Italy, France, Austria, and the Netherlands find a positive association between increased immigration (including by refugees) and either anti-immigrant sentiment or support for RWPP (Abbondanza and Bailo 2018; Edo et al. 2019; Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017; Igarashi and Laurence 2021; Rydgren and Ruth 2011). Consistent with ethnic competition theory, this effect is largely driven by lower-educated or lower-skilled individuals rather than the entire native population. It also tends to be fueled by a rapid influx of non-Western or low-skilled immigration.

The results are more mixed at the neighborhood level. Some studies find that competition for local resources correlates with higher far-right voting (Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017; Otto and Steinhardt 2014), but others find that sustained contact with refugees at the neighborhood level lowers far-right voting by decreasing prejudice through close interpersonal experiences

(Hennig 2021). Anecdotal evidence from the United States lends further support to **contact theory**. For example, the residents of two small towns in New York (Rodriguez 2025; Wilkinson 2025) and Missouri (Healy and Davis 2025) voted overwhelmingly for Trump yet protested vigorously against his administration's efforts to deport valued members of their community (see Box 1).

BOX 1: Sackets Harbor, New York is a Trump stronghold and the hometown of Trump's so-called border car, Tom Homan. In March 2025, agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) apprehended three grade-school students during a raid of a local dairy farm, sent them to a detention center in Texas, and placed them on a fast track to deportation. The school's principal immediately took action and organized hundreds of phone calls to local and state officials with the help of other teachers in the town. Their efforts caught steam, and in a matter of days, a massive rally took place demanding the release of the children with numerous members of the media present. Ultimately, these efforts proved to be successful as ICE quickly announced that they would be releasing the children. **Kennett, Missouri** is also a staunchly pro-Trump town. In May 2025, ICE agents arrested and detained Carol Hui, a Chinese immigrant who had spent 20 years in the United States building a life and family. The majority of the town voted for strong immigration policies - but not like this, not mothers. The community came to her defense with Church vigils, fundraisers, and petitions to bring her home.

The main takeaway of all these studies is that "immigration has **heterogeneous effects** on political outcomes" (Hennig 2021, 2) depending on the context and composition of the electorate. Green et al. (2016) and Vasilopoulos (2022) show this heterogeneity across jurisdictional levels within the same polity. At the district or departmental level, their results are consistent with ethnic competition theory. Green et al. (2016) find that higher shares of low-income immigrants in Swiss districts heightened threat perceptions and, in turn, increased support for the Swiss People's Party. Similarly, Vasilopoulos (2022) finds that higher levels of immigration correlated with higher far-right vote shares in the 2017 elections in France.

The results are different, however, at the community level. In the Swiss case, positive everyday contact with similar immigrants reduced far-right voting propensity through reduced threat (Green et al. 2016). Likewise, in the French case, high-immigrant neighborhoods had lower far-right vote shares (Vasilopoulos, McAvay, and Brouard 2022). These results lend support to contact theory. They also suggest a **disconnect** between what citizens experience in their everyday lives and what they perceive to be happening to others, raising questions about whether ethnic competition is, in fact, driving the macro-level effects.

This disconnect may be explained by another strand of research showing that it is the **salience** of immigration, not its levels or even composition, that matters most for triggering far-right voting (Dehdari 2025; Goodwin, Eric, and Larsen 2022; Schneider-Strawczynski and Valette 2025). Support for RWPP has vastly outpaced the growth of anti-immigrant attitudes, which have remained relatively stable over time. What has changed is the amount of attention being paid to immigration by politicians, parties, and the media. RWPP have benefited disproportionately from this change due to “an asymmetric realignment around immigration” (Goodwin, Eric, and Larsen 2022, 1–2). Because anti-immigrant voters care more about immigration than pro-immigrant voters (Kustov 2023), they are easier to mobilize when the salience of immigration increases.

This brings us back to the democratic dilemma. If the salience of immigration is what drives support for RWPP, then trying to beat these parties at their own game is unlikely to work. In fact, it is likely to backfire. Rather than capturing votes that would otherwise go to RWPP, anti-immigrant accommodation by mainstream parties legitimizes the far right while reaffirming the notion that immigration is a threat (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; May and Czymara 2024). The result is less democracy, not more.

Fortunately, there is an alternative strategy that, while difficult to implement, has the potential to weaken RWPP while upholding democratic norms and institutions. As hinted by the community-level results supporting contact theory, better integration of immigrants into the host society may help bridge the gap between immigrants and native-born citizens and thereby reduce the perceptions of threat that drive support for RWPP.

IMPACT OF INTEGRATION ON SUPPORT FOR RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES

Integration is difficult to measure, which complicates an analysis of its impact on anti-immigrant attitudes and/or support for RWPP. We identify four types of indicators:

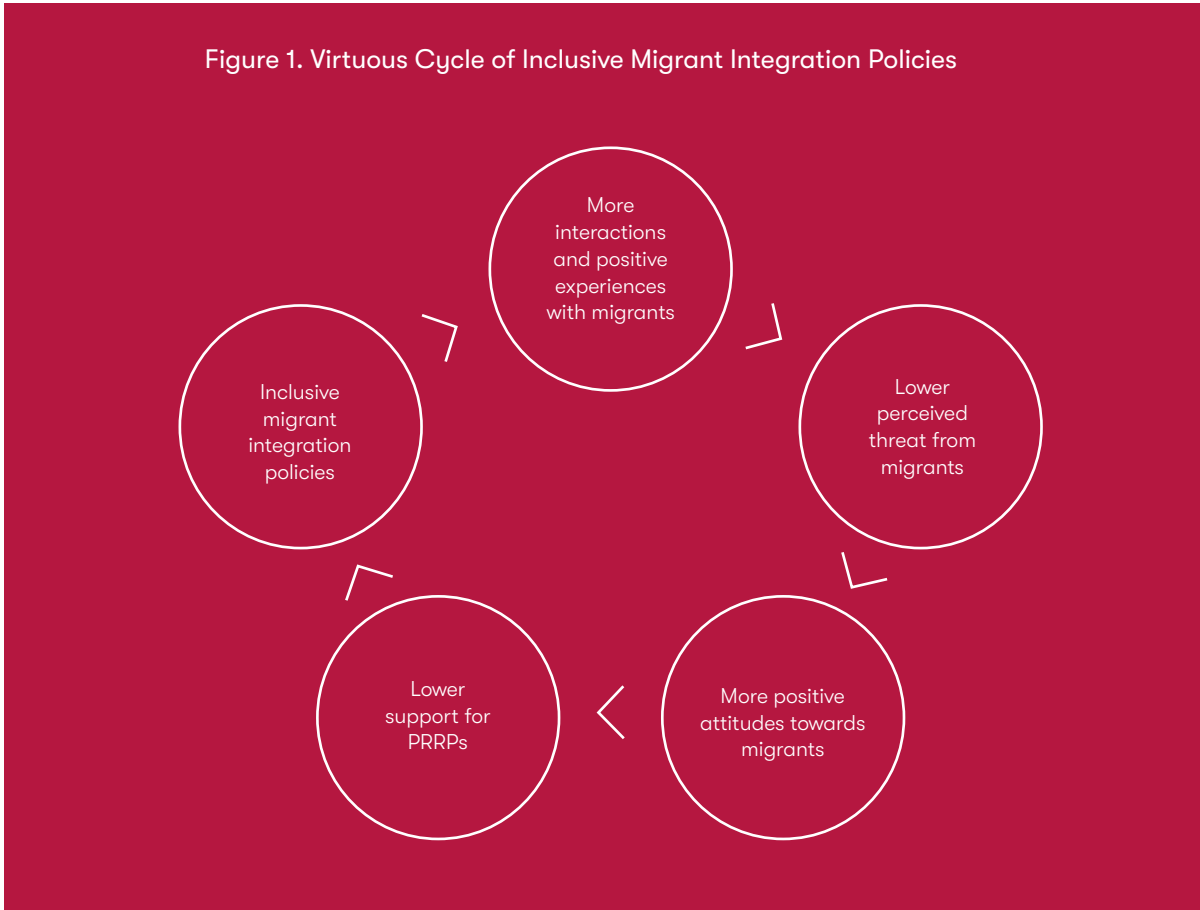


De **jure integration policies** are relatively easy to define and quantify because they are based on formal rules, regulations, and programs. Not surprisingly, this indicator is the most widely used in cross-national research on the relationship between immigrant integration and political outcomes. Most of these studies draw on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) to measure integration policies (MIPEX 2020).

This literature documents a **strong, inverse relationship between inclusive integration policies and anti-immigrant attitudes and/or support for RWPP**. In a meta-analysis of 18 studies using MIPEX, Callens finds consistent evidence that “more inclusive policies tend to improve attitudes towards immigrants among the general public across European countries, while exclusionary policies tend to harden anti-immigrant sentiments in the population” (2015, 11). Studies published since Callen’s review reinforce the conclusion that inclusive migrant integration policies dampen anti-immigrant attitudes by creating more interactions and positive experiences with migrants and thereby decreasing the perceived threat they pose (Callens and Meuleman 2017; De Coninck et al. 2021; Green et al. 2020; Kende et al. 2022; Neureiter 2022; de la Sablonnière et al. 2020). In an interesting twist, De la Sablonnière et al. (2020) find that it is not just the inclusivity of integration policies that matters for how the native-born perceive immigrants but also the **coherence and consistency** of these policies.

Zagórski et al. (2025) reach a similar conclusion regarding the relationship between integration policies and far-right voting. In a study of 15 EU member

states, they find a positive association between more inclusive integration policies and a lower likelihood of support for RWPP. Following MIPEX (2020), they point to a **virtuous cycle** between inclusive integration and immigrant-friendly politics (see Figure 1). The flipside, as documented by Gruber and Roseberg (2023) in the case of Austria, is a **vicious cycle** between the success of RWPP and constraints on integration policies.



Source: (Zagórski, Díaz Chorne, and Lorenzo Rodríguez 2025, 52).
 PRRPs = populist right radical parties

The disadvantage of using de jure integration policies is that they not necessarily map onto **de facto to integration outcomes**, which are presumably what increase intergroup contact and reduce the perceived threat of immigrants. Unfortunately, we did not find any studies using data on integration outcomes from datasets such as the OECD’s Indicators of Immigration Integration (OECD and European Commission 2023). An alternative is to use measures of **economic or social distance** as a proxy for integration outcomes. In effect, this is what many of the studies reviewed in this brief do. By including immigrant skill-levels and/or religious or cultural differences in their models, they implicitly test for levels of integration.

The aforementioned finding that economic and social distance heightens anti-immigrant attitudes and far-right voting reinforces the argument that integration matters. In a slightly different version of the **vicious cycle** argument, Docquier and Rapoport (2025) find a “vicious circle of xenophobia” between negative skill-selection of immigrants and support for right-wing populism. Since wealthy, aging societies need low-skilled immigrant labor (see Policy Briefs #1 and #2), inclusive integration rather than exclusion may be the best way to disrupt this negative feedback loop.

The challenge, of course, is to reduce the perceived threat posed by immigrants while recognizing the heterogeneous composition of immigrant communities. This brings us to our fourth indicator: the **parameters of belonging**. Inclusive integration is not achieved through unidirectional assimilation into the dominant society. To the contrary, it occurs through a mixing and melding of native and immigrant norms, institutions, and practices. By expanding native-born citizens' beliefs about **who belongs**, inclusive integration can potentially reduce the perceptions of threat that drive support for RWPP.

In her study of the Turkish community in Berlin, Annika Hinze (2013) introduces the concept of a **"third-space"** where immigrants and their children form hybrid identities, combining elements of their Turkish origin with elements of the German society of which they have become a part. This space is shaped by daily social interactions within a neighborhood – the foods people eat, the activities they enjoy, the neighbors they meet on the street. The neighborhood becomes a site of peaceful cultural coexistence, producing new conceptions of what it means to belong.

Third-spaces are likely to emerge wherever immigrants are spatially concentrated within an urban environment. For example, immigrant-owned corner stores in U.S. cities like New York City and Philadelphia have spawned a bodega culture (Kaufman and Hernandez 1994; Pine 2007) that bridges socio-economic and ethnic divides (see Box 2). Cuisine can also be an important third-space. In Berlin, the Turkish Döner Kebab (Annika Marlen Hinze 2013) has become one of the city's most popular street foods (see Box 3). Other examples include Tex-Mex in the United States and Chicken Tikka Masala in the UK. While these hybrid cuisines do not immediately change the political preferences of the native-born, they expand the parameters of belonging through their indirect impact on the dominant culture.

While we lack direct evidence that exposure to third-spaces reduces the propensity to support RWPP, the indirect evidence is compelling. First, these parties tend to do poorly in more diverse, urban districts. Second, studies show that positive everyday contact with immigrants can reduce perceptions of threat. If the parameters of belonging can be broadened in other contexts through explicit programming, RWPP may find less fertile ground for mobilizing voters.

BOX 2: Bodega culture has blossomed in major U.S. cities such as New York City and Philadelphia. Bodegas are family-owned corner stores that sell a variety of food, groceries, snacks, drinks, and supplies. They have become immensely popular, and the immigrants who often own, run, and/or work at them have cemented their role as pillars in their respective communities. Besides providing an essential service, generating tax revenue, and creating jobs, the bodegas are an important site of cultural exchange. Whether a banker buying groceries after a long day at the office or a construction worker grabbing a bagel in the morning, the bodega's customers are exposed on a daily basis to the products, language, and music of the immigrants who often run them. These interactions foster mutual understandings between native- and foreign-born populations. Even the popularization "bodega" of the word "bodega" as a substitute for "corner store" or "convenience store" amongst native populations shows how deeply these shops have permeated U.S. culture.

BOX 3: The Turkish Döner Kebab is a dish featuring shaved meat from a rotating rotisserie (usually beef, lamb, or chicken) served on pita bread or on a platter with an assortment of sides and condiments. By 2012, there were more Döner Kebab shops in Berlin than in Istanbul, the biggest city in Turkey and one of the biggest cities in the world. The non-Turkish population consuming Döner Kebab as part of their daily routine is exposed to the culture of the Turkish community through the food, exposure to the native languages of shop owners, and even the presence of music/media inside these shops.

CONCLUSION

The studies reviewed in this brief offer hope that pro-democracy parties can escape the democratic dilemma by adopting more inclusive immigration policies. Besides building more robust democracies, this outcome would greatly facilitate the kind of policymaking and coalition-building necessary to reap the potential gains – and ameliorate the potential losses – of migration for **all countries**, not just Europe and the United States. Only by lowering the political temperature and reframing migration as an economic opportunity rather than a security threat in the global North do we have any hope of implementing the recommendations in the other three policy briefs.

This is much easier said than done, however, especially in countries where RWPP have already made sizable gains. Resisting the temptation to outbid the far-right with stricter immigration policies requires political courage, and integration policies take time to work even if they get adopted. And once a vicious cycle has been set in motion, it is very difficult to shift the equilibrium to a virtuous one. It is not impossible, however, and may be critical to building more robust democracies.

Existing research suggests that no single policy can unlock the virtuous cycle of pro-democracy integration. In their study of 25 European countries, Careja and Andrej find that “natives are likely to agree that immigrants are needed for economic reasons in countries with a more generous opportunity structure for immigrants’ incorporation into the labor market” (2013, 402). This positive relationship does not extend, however, to perceptions of threat, which they suspect are more dependent on individual-level characteristics.

Bhatiya arrives at a similarly mixed result in his study of immigrant enfranchisement in the UK. On the one hand, he finds that “enfranchisement amplifies immigrants’ political engagement and prompts incumbents to address immigrant issues more frequently and positively” (2024, 25). On the other, native-born voters in these districts tend to gravitate toward rival parties, including RWPP, offsetting some of the gains. In addition, incumbents often complement their pro-immigrant policies with support for greater restrictions on new immigration, presumably in an appeal to native-born voters.

These studies suggest that reducing support for RWPP may require a suite of inclusive integration policies that mitigate anti-immigrant attitudes

along various dimensions. It may also require tackling broader anxieties fueling support for RWPP. While firmly opposing xenophobia or discrimination, pro-democracy parties could potentially benefit from addressing voter concerns about the quality of life and public order. Following de la Sablonnière et al. (2020), doing so coherently and consistently is likely to reap the greatest rewards. As Dancygier et al. (2025) and others show, voters tend to support RWPP when faced with high levels of inequality and poor service provision. Sometimes these anxieties lead to immigrant scapegoating. For example, if housing is scarce or costly, a sudden influx of immigrants is likely to elicit an anti-immigrant backlash – even if immigrants are not the ones to blame (Levitz 2024). But quality of life issues also generate support for RWPP by voters who hold more moderate views on immigration but are fed up with the status quo. The upsurge in far-right voting by naturalized immigrants in the United States and Germany (Jain and McCall 2025; Pham 2024) is a strong indicator that RWPP are tapping into cleavages that cut across ethnicity and immigration background.

Another source of anxiety is the perception that borders are out of control. This fear is often linked to concerns with rising crime. While the reality is more complicated, policymakers in Europe and the United States face pressure to demonstrate that they are in charge of who enters the country and on what terms. Their most common response, as noted by Bhatiya (2024), has been to fortify borders and recruit neighboring countries to do the same, often with dire consequences for human rights.

If this strategy actually deterred migration, it could potentially coexist with inclusive immigration policies for those who have already arrived. The problem is that it doesn’t work. As long as migrants believe they can find safety and prosperity in the destination countries, they will keep coming – and the criminals who benefit from irregular migration will keep getting rich (Burgess 2024). The option preferred by RWPP is to kill migrants’ dream altogether by criminalizing and deporting immigrants – which is the exact opposite of inclusive immigrant integration. It is therefore vital that pro-democracy parties come up with alternative ways to manage migration that are proactive, safe, and orderly (see Policy Brief #3). Only then are they likely to make room for inclusive immigrant integration as a way out of the democratic dilemma.

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