

Immigration and the welfare state

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Abstract

As immigration continues to be politically salient in North America and Europe, questions about the compatibility of modern welfare states with immigration inflows remain central to public and policy debates. This article examines the empirical evidence surrounding three key questions: first, whether generous welfare systems attract immigrants disproportionately (the ‘welfare magnet hypothesis’); second, the extent to which immigrants’ net fiscal contributions are positive, negative, or neutral; and third, how public attitudes toward immigration intersect with concerns about the welfare state. Our analysis indicates that while evidence supporting the welfare magnet hypothesis exists in some contexts, its applicability depends on factors such as migrant characteristics and policy environments. Similarly, fiscal contributions vary: high-skilled immigrants generally contribute positively, while low-skilled migrants and those entering on humanitarian grounds can present short-term fiscal challenges, though these are usually mitigated by integration policies over time. However, while public attitudes and perceptions often diverge from these nuanced realities, they do not entirely correspond with perceptions of existing welfare systems as magnets for migrants or of migrants’ fiscal impacts as being overwhelmingly negative. Instead, public concerns about immigration and welfare often reflect broader socio-economic and cultural anxieties that can shape politics and policy-making despite not aligning with best-available evidence. Therefore, researchers should prioritize finding ways of bridging gaps between empirical findings and public perceptions to inform effective and balanced policies. This could be achieved, in part, by fostering more informed public discussion that acknowledges underlying anxieties, as well as implementing policies that reconcile economic sustainability with social cohesion.

Keywords: immigration, immigration policy, fiscal impacts, welfare state, redistribution, public opinion.

JEL codes: J61, H53, F22, Z13, I38

I. Introduction

Immigration continues to be politically salient across Europe and North America. The electoral rise of populist and radical right parties, the move towards more restrictive immigration policy regimes, and public discontent linked to perceived government failures in managing immigration and asylum inflows all highlight the centrality of immigration for politics (McLaren, 2012, 2013, 2015; Freeman, 2013; Freeman *et al.*, 2015; Alesina and Tabellini, 2024). Perhaps chief among these debates are two key questions: first, how and to what extent do modern welfare states depend on immigration to sustain them in the face of ageing populations, declining fertility rates, and strained public finances; and second, how do different public views on the extent to which social and economic rights should be restricted to the non-migrant population matter for the long-term viability of existing welfare systems?

The relationship between immigration levels and the functioning of welfare states has been a significant political and policy issue across most OECD countries. Yet how best to characterize this relationship is not settled. While earlier received wisdom assumed that higher immigration would lead to decreases in aggregate social spending (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004), more recent comparative research suggests European welfare systems actually expanded between 1990 and 2010 to address perceived risks from increased immigration (Fenwick, 2019). Answers to this question clearly matter politically: for example, in the UK, the link between immigration and public services

was central to the political debate leading up to the 2016 EU Referendum (Donoghue and Kuisma, 2022; D'Angelo, 2023) raising the question of whether the British welfare system will either change to look more like the American one or retain features of European examples (Gingrich and King, 2019).

Increasing immigration levels, along with the political salience of immigration-related issues, creates new political and economic dynamics while amplifying existing ones. On the one hand, migrants can contribute to economic activity and expand the tax base, thereby improving the financial sustainability of welfare systems. This is particularly crucial for states with populations who are living longer, ageing rapidly, and have declining fertility rates.¹ On the other hand, immigrants' presence raises concerns among some politicians and citizens in receiving countries about potential strains on social and public services as well as broader public support for redistribution. These concerns partly relate to considerations of who deserves access to those services and under what conditions, how limited state resources should be distributed among the resident population, and whether increased ethnic diversity driven by migration weakens solidarity and cohesion. This tension has motivated and sustained extensive discussions among academics and policy-makers for at least three decades, with significant implications for immigration policy (Freeman, 1986; Borjas, 1999; Jakubiak, 2017, 2019; Gingrich and King, 2019; Ferwerda *et al.*, 2024). As such, this is an opportune moment to take stock of recent scholarly developments by assessing the empirical evidence regarding the relationship between immigration and welfare states, with a focus on the UK and other high-income countries.

Specifically, we address three questions. First, does welfare state generosity act as a pull factor for immigrants (the 'welfare magnet hypothesis') over and above other factors? This concern has driven recent policy developments towards more restrictive welfare regimes. Second, are immigrants' fiscal contributions to the welfare state generally positive, negative, or neutral? This question has underpinned political discussions that portray immigrants as either a 'burden' or a 'support' to public finances in order to justify their access to—or exclusion from—a range of benefits and protections provided by welfare states. Third, what are the perceptions of citizens and electorates in high-income receiving countries about the economic and fiscal contributions of immigrants, and to what extent do those perceptions condition views towards redistribution? As is the case in other issue domains, public perceptions of immigrants' economic contributions can play an important role in shaping immigration and welfare policies while also being shaped by them. This raises important questions about the direction between policy and public attitudes. We conclude by drawing together key insights from the literature, highlighting areas of consensus as well as ongoing debates regarding the relationship between immigration and welfare states. We also discuss the implications of these findings for contemporary policy challenges, including the critical question of whether the welfare state can remain viable in increasingly diverse societies.

II. The 'welfare magnet hypothesis': taking stock of the evidence

(i) The state of social expenditure, migration stocks, and welfare policy developments

Expenditures on social programmes in OECD countries represent a significant share of GDP, averaging around 18 per cent (Damas de Matos, 2021). While this share remained stable in the early 2000s, it increased substantially in 2008 following the financial crisis and then levelled off until the onset of the Covid pandemic. Immigration, however, increased from 2000 to 2021, but remained a small fraction of the overall population in the OECD (4–5 per cent in 2021). Meanwhile, asylum and migration inflows increased sharply during the 2015 refugee crisis but declined again after 2016 (Figure A2).

In the case of the UK, the share of social spending has accounted for approximately 20 per cent of GDP in the past decade which roughly tracks the OECD-wide average (Figure 1). By contrast, countries like France, Belgium, and Denmark spend between a quarter and a third of their GDPs on social programmes (Figure 2 and Figure A3). While there is clear variation in levels across countries, notable increases in social spending have coincided with the financial crisis in 2008 and the onset of the Covid pandemic in 2020 (Figure 2).

Similarly, the proportion of immigrants in UK (17 per cent as of 2024) has generally tracked the upward dynamic seen in other European countries while remaining below the levels in Sweden, Germany, and Belgium (Figure 3). In one of the main comparative studies on the relationship between immigration levels and welfare state spending, Fenwick (2019) found that, in European OECD countries, greater levels of immigration led to greater

¹ While fertility rates are projected to continue decreasing across most regions of the world, this trend is particularly concerning for Europe, where the number of children per woman has been—and is likely to remain—well below the replacement rate for several years and is expected to keep declining (see Figure A1 in the Appendix).

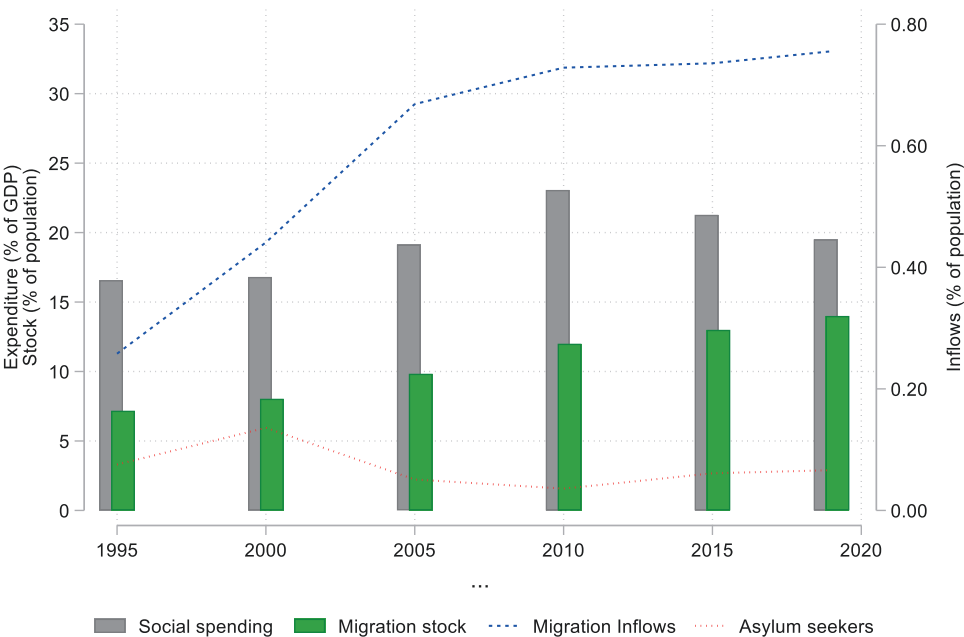


Figure 1: Social expenditure and immigration (flows and stock) in the UK (1995–2020)
Source: OECD International Migration Database and OECD SOCX database (1995–2019).

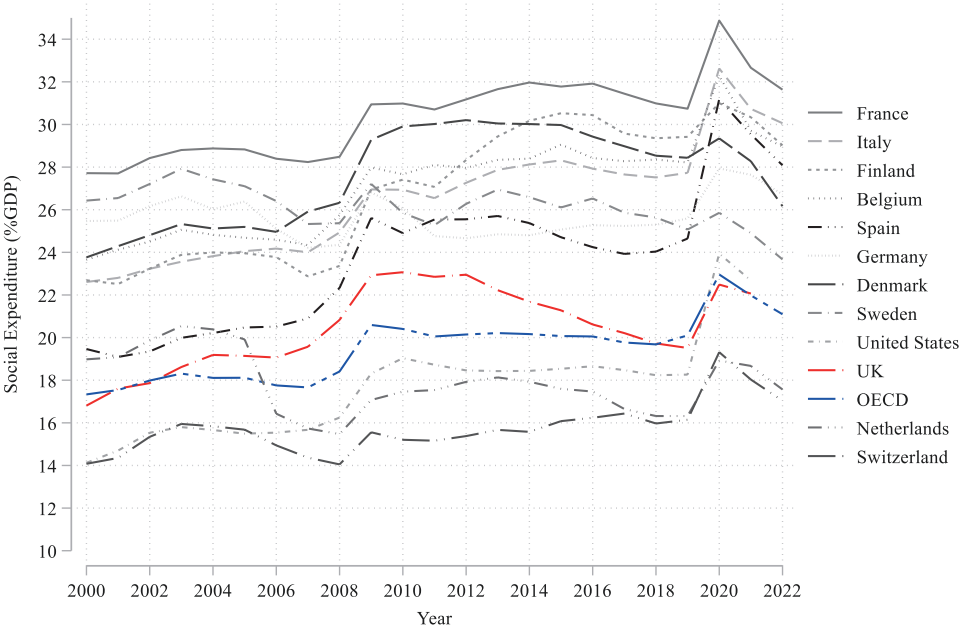


Figure 2: Social expenditure (% GDP) in selected OECD countries, 2000–22
Source: OECD SOCX database (2000–2022). Countries in order of magnitude in 2022.

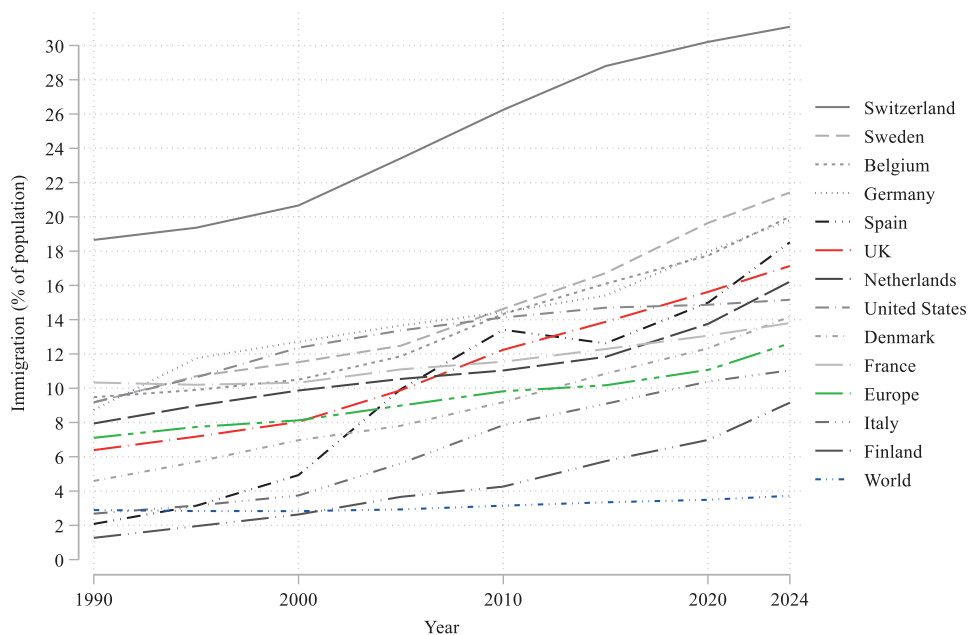


Figure 3: Migrant stock (% of total population) in selected OECD countries, 1990–2024

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024). International Migrant Stock 1990–2024. Countries in order of magnitude in 2024.

welfare expenditure² as governments expanded protections to mitigate economic insecurity presented by immigration and globalization.

An important question in immigration policy design has been whether countries' welfare entitlements act as a pull factor, influencing both the decision to migrate and the choice of destination. This idea, known as the 'welfare magnet hypothesis', was first popularized by George Borjas in his 1999 study on the location choices of immigrants in the United States.³ Previously, he had documented how immigrants' dependence on means-tested programmes (i.e. cash assistance) had grown disproportionately over the years (1984 to 1991) compared to non-migrant workers, suggesting that migrants' decisions about where to relocate could be sensitive to the presence of certain welfare programmes (Borjas and Hilton 1996).

A central question in Borjas's (1999) study was whether welfare benefits act as a pull factor (a 'welfare magnet') that shapes the size, skill composition, and geographic distribution of immigrant flows *within* the United States. He theorized that low-skilled immigrants would be more attracted to regions that offered more generous welfare programmes. This, in turn, could result in a higher concentration of low-skilled immigrants in areas with more developed welfare systems, potentially increasing the dependence on public assistance in those regions.⁴ Borjas's model predicted that immigrants' sensitivity to differences in available welfare (their 'benefit elasticity') would be greater than non-immigrants' sensitivity, which would result in different settlement patterns of the former relative to both non-immigrants and non-welfare dependent immigrants.

Subsequent studies have suggested that the welfare magnet hypothesis could lead to competition among governments, particularly at subnational levels, to strategically reduce welfare benefits to avoid attracting 'undesirable' immigrants, i.e. those more likely to rely on welfare support. Over time, this 'race to the bottom' could result in lower welfare standards across the board, producing lower than socially optimal levels of welfare benefits (Brueckner, 2000; Dahlberg and Edmark, 2008) as well as greater centralization of welfare systems (Freeman, 1986; Kvist, 2004). For instance, Brueckner (2000) finds evidence that benefit levels in nearby states affect a given state's welfare policies, demonstrating strategic interactions among states motivated by concerns over welfare migration.

² The article looks at what the author calls 'welfare state effort', which includes social welfare spending as percentage of GDP and a welfare generosity index (Fenwick, 2019).

³ Borjas looks at the decision-making of immigrants who had already arrived in the United States as compared to natives (Borjas, 1999).

⁴ He argued that compared to natives, newly arrived immigrants had a lower cost of moving to other states, in particular to those that would maximize their welfare benefits.

Dahlberg and Edmark (2008) also found evidence of strategic interactions in Swedish municipalities, showing that local governments adjust their welfare benefit levels in response to those set by neighbouring municipalities.

Concerns about welfare-driven immigration may have also contributed to growing negative attitudes towards unconditional access to welfare systems, which has likely informed changes to welfare eligibility policies in many high-income countries (Keskinen *et al.* 2016; Avdagic and Savage, 2021; Chemin, 2024; Fairless and Laurence, 2024). For example, the United States imposed restrictions on immigrants' eligibility for welfare benefits via the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, which denied non-US citizens with legal residence access to means-tested federal benefits for their first 5 years in the country (Zavodny, 1997; Kaushal, 2005; Broder *et al.*, 2024). These restrictions were controversial: several states used their discretionary funds to restore many of these benefits. To date, restrictions on access to federal public benefit programmes⁵ are still in place for most immigrants, with only certain categories (e.g. refugees, green-card holders) being eligible (Broder *et al.*, 2024).

Meanwhile, among Nordic countries, which feature some of the most generous welfare systems among developed nations, Denmark stands out as a key example in Europe of so-called 'welfare chauvinism' or the belief that welfare services should be restricted to a country's own citizens. This is reflected in increasingly restrictive policies limiting immigrants' and refugees' access to welfare benefits (Andersen and Bjørklund, 1990; Careja and Harris, 2022). In 2002, the Start Aid reform—aimed at reducing welfare dependence and promoting labour market participation—reduced welfare benefits for people with legal refugee status by approximately 40 per cent. In 2015, another reform was introduced where welfare benefits for unemployed immigrants, including those with refugee status, were set 10–40 per cent lower than previous levels. (Andersen *et al.*, 2019; Arendt *et al.*, 2022; Dustmann *et al.*, 2024).⁶

The UK has also restricted immigrants' access to welfare through its 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) policy.⁷ This policy limits access to public welfare benefits (universal credit, income support, child benefits, housing benefits, and disability allowances) and social housing. The policy mainly applies to individuals who do not have permanent residence, either in the form of Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) or settled status, and thus need permission to enter or remain in the UK, e.g. those on work, study, or family visas. The policy aims to limit access to individuals who have contributed to the system through taxes and other contributions over an extended period, or who are otherwise considered highly vulnerable.⁸

(ii) Empirical evidence on the welfare magnet hypothesis

Do immigrants factor in welfare considerations when choosing their destination? A broad body of research has tested the welfare magnet hypothesis across different time frames and contexts, examining the extent to which it is sensitive to considerations beyond country-specific features while also accounting for immigrants' intra-country mobility. Although we focus on high-level patterns in this subsection, Table A1 provides a non-exhaustive summary of key studies and their main features which have informed this review.

Most of the early empirical evidence focused on immigrants within the US, specifically looking at whether differences in welfare programmes and benefit levels across states—driven by state-level discretionary policies—affected new immigrants' destination choices, particularly following the introduction of federal restrictions on immigrants in the 1990s. Research published prior to 2010 was largely based on observational analysis, with much of the evidence showing heterogeneous results depending on immigrants' skill levels and origin countries.

Early work in this area includes Zavodny (1997) who examined immigrants from 18 countries arriving in the US between 1982 and 1992. Her study found little evidence that variations in welfare benefits across states influenced immigrants' location choices. Instead, her findings highlighted the importance of social networks: immigrants tended to settle in areas where they have social contacts or where large populations of co-nationals and long-established co-ethnic communities existed (Massey, 1986; Massey and España, 1987; Munshi, 2020; Palloni *et al.*, 2001). Meanwhile, Borjas (1999) compared the location decisions of welfare-receiving immigrants, non-welfare-receiving immigrants, and US-born welfare recipients.⁹ Using data from 1980 and 1990 US Census

⁵ Examples are the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), non-emergency Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

⁶ Germany is another example of a country introducing welfare reforms in response to the 2015 'migration crisis'. These reforms included reductions in welfare benefits and housing restrictions for asylum seekers with protected status in other EU states. Moreover, in 2019 an additional reform was introduced to restrict access to social welfare benefits for EU migrants without an established long-term connection to the labour market.

⁷ NRPF has its roots in The Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 (and 1968, 1971 amendments), the Immigration Act of 1971 (which formally introduces the concept), and subsequent expansions from the 1980s onwards as part of the UK's evolving immigration policy regime.

⁸ Relatedly, examples of policies in the UK that limit access to welfare or public services include the minimum income required for migrants on a work visa or the immigration health surcharge (IHS) (Broadhead and Ruiz, 2021; Vargas-Silva *et al.*, 2024).

⁹ Borjas's empirical approach primarily revolves around the hypothesis that immigrants, due to their greater mobility and lower relocation costs, are more responsive to state-level welfare benefits than the native-born population.

microdata samples, he examined state-level welfare benefits—including differences in cash assistance across states¹⁰—alongside immigrant status and welfare participation. His results, in contrast to those of Zavodny, seemed to support the welfare magnet hypothesis by showing that immigrants' welfare participation rates were more sensitive to changes in benefit levels across states than those of natives.

Building on these findings, [Dodson \(2001\)](#) incorporated additional factors such as country of birth, co-ethnic networks (stocks and flows), gender, and labour market conditions while examining different immigrant categories (i.e. family, employment, study, and refugee visas). While co-ethnic networks play an important role, his results further supported the welfare magnet hypothesis across all migrant categories, with the effect being strongest among refugees and family-sponsored immigrants. Finally, [Kaushal \(2005\)](#) leveraged variation in state policies following the implementation of PRWORA in 1996. Focusing on legal immigrants who obtained permanent residency upon arrival and using data from 1995–6 and 1998–9, the study found no evidence for the welfare magnet hypothesis. Instead, family ties and pre-existing immigrant communities appeared to play a more critical role in shaping new immigrants' settlement patterns, which aligned with [Zavodny's \(1997\)](#) conclusions.

Beyond the US, evidence on the welfare magnet hypothesis is mixed and context dependent. For instance, [Ponce \(2019\)](#) examined Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), while [De Giorgi and Pellizzari \(2009\)](#) analysed a selection of OECD countries.¹¹ Both studies found that welfare benefits were not the primary drivers of immigration, but rather labour market conditions and wages. In the Nordic context, lower migration flows—particularly from the Global South—were likely explained by the high cost of living in these destinations, which offset the attractiveness of generous welfare benefits. Similarly, [Jakubiak \(2019\)](#) uses original European survey data rather than aggregate level data to measure immigrants' stated preferences for location choices. Although welfare benefits appear to play a role in migration decisions, particularly among those with fewer labour market opportunities, employment prospects, language barriers, and family reunification policies often outweigh welfare considerations.

Recent growth in the availability of administrative data have refocused attention on the welfare magnet hypothesis, particularly in European countries with comprehensive population-wide records. Unlike earlier research that relied on aggregate migration flows or survey-based evidence, administrative data enable researchers to track individual-level welfare participation and migration decisions with greater precision. For instance, [Ferwerda *et al.* \(2024\)](#) analysed detailed administrative records of social assistance recipients across Swiss cantons from 2005 to 2015, comparing these data against both local variations in welfare benefit levels and exogenous shocks caused by policy changes. Their findings suggest that factors such as housing costs, population size, and migrant networks matter more for determining immigrants' location choices than welfare generosity alone. Similarly, [Dellinger and Huber \(2021\)](#) exploited a natural experiment in Austria where variation in welfare entitlements for refugees across states between 2012 and 2017 allowed them to assess the impact of benefit levels on migration. While their aggregate findings support the welfare magnet hypothesis, their results reveal heterogeneity, notably with different types of reforms affecting different groups of refugees in distinct ways. In Denmark, [Agersnap *et al.* \(2020\)](#) used population-wide administrative data from 1980 to 2017 to examine the effect of three major welfare reforms on migration flows. Their analysis focused on non-EU immigrants and compared migration patterns before and after these policy changes. While their findings provide evidence in favour of the welfare magnet hypothesis, the effect was primarily concentrated among migrants most likely to rely on welfare support, such as those arriving under asylum or family reunification permits. Additionally, they demonstrated that reductions in welfare benefits can act as a deterrent to migration.

(iii) Taking stock of the evidence

A key challenge in this literature lies in the difficulty of identifying the causal impact of welfare generosity on migrants' location decisions: changes in welfare policy may be responses to, rather than causes of immigration inflows. Immigrants may also systematically differ from non-migrants, which threatens causal claims if some immigrant characteristics (e.g. risk aversion, preferences) determine both the decision to migrate *and* the likelihood of seeking welfare benefits, independent of the generosity of welfare programmes.

Despite these limitations, the most robust studies using high-quality administrative data, natural experiments, or quasi-experimental designs generally support the idea that welfare generosity can influence migration decisions, particularly for those most likely to rely on such support, such as non-labour migrants. However, the magnitude and extent of this influence is usually contingent on a range of factors including the broader economic context,

¹⁰ Aid Family with Dependent Children (AFDC), a major welfare programme at the time.

¹¹ Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK.

labour market conditions (e.g. unemployment and wages), the demographic composition of migrants, and the specific design of welfare policies. Moreover, factors such as social and family networks likely play a more significant role in migrants' overall location decisions. As a result, efforts to assess the impact of welfare benefits on migration to inform policy formulation should attend to sociodemographic features of likely migrant groups as well as the policy and labour economic context.

III. Fiscal take-up and fiscal impacts of immigration: what do we know?

The fiscal impacts of immigration have been a key area of interest for academics and policy-makers for over 30 years (Nannestad, 2007; Jakubiak, 2017), even warranting a review paper on the topic in this journal in 2008. In that review, Rowthorn (2008) examined the fiscal effects of immigration in Europe and the US. He concluded that immigration can play a positive role in the public finances of advanced economies by offsetting demographic challenges such as declining birth rates and ageing populations. Specifically, in the short term, immigrants expand the share of population that is of working age as they are generally younger and many also have high fertility rates (Bagavos, 2019; Harrison *et al.*, 2023). Yet despite the potential short-term benefits for the financing of pensions and welfare services, this strategy requires a continuous supply of young immigrant workers, as earlier immigrant cohorts will require support from the welfare system as they age.

Calculating the net contributions that migrants make to public finances requires assessing their direct contributions (e.g. through income tax, value-added tax, national insurance) and indirect contributions (share of taxes paid by business) to public finances, as well as their direct costs (such as health, education, cash benefits) and indirect costs (e.g. transport, police, other public services). Rowthorn's review, along with later studies, highlight the complexity involved in even making these calculations. Moreover, their outcomes vary depending on assumptions made, and on a wide range of factors including migrants' sociodemographic characteristics, skill levels, cohort of arrival, length of stay in the destination country, reason for migration, and employment rate. This is even before considering wider contextual features of welfare systems and policy regimes (Damas de Matos, 2021), or fundamental questions about how to define who 'counts' as an immigrant for the purposes of these calculations in the first place (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Anderson and Blinder, 2024).

As a result, and perhaps not surprisingly, studies have produced highly variable findings regarding the fiscal impact of immigration (see Table A2), ranging from a net contribution to a net burden depending on how these factors are handled (Rowthorn, 2008; Pekkala Kerr and Kerr, 2011; OECD, 2013; Jakubiak, 2017; Hennessey and Hagen-Zanker, 2020; Damas de Matos, 2021; Vargas-Silva *et al.*, 2024). However, there is broad consensus that the *overall* fiscal impact of immigration is relatively small. Early cross-country estimates for OECD countries suggested that the net fiscal effect of immigration between 2007 and 2009 was typically less than 0.5 per cent of annual GDP, with the exception of Luxembourg where the estimate was around 2 per cent due to its higher proportion of immigrants (OECD, 2013). More recent estimates covering the 2006–18 period place the fiscal impact of immigration between –1 and 1 per cent of GDP. This reinforces the view that, while immigration matters for public finances, its effect remains modest in scale (Damas de Matos, 2021). In this regard, the UK is not an outlier: the fiscal impact of immigration has remained reasonably small and in line with these overall figures, ranging from 0.5 per cent of GDP during 2007–9 (OECD, 2013) to 2 per cent of GDP during 2006–18 (Damas de Matos, 2021). Indeed, the majority of studies have produced estimates for the UK within a range of ± 1 per cent of GDP (Vargas-Silva *et al.*, 2024).

However, disaggregating these figures by migrants' origins and skill levels reveals important differences. Studies consistently show that European Union (EU) immigrants, particularly those from Western Europe, have tended to make a more positive net fiscal contribution compared to non-EU immigrants. This is likely due to EU migrants being younger and more likely to be employed, which reduces their reliance on public benefits. Meanwhile, higher-skilled migrants tend to earn higher salaries, contributing more in taxes while placing fewer demands on public services compared to low-skilled migrants. Finally, compared to non-EEA countries, immigrants from EEA countries tend to make a net positive fiscal contribution to the UK, even during periods of budget deficits (Dustmann and Frattini, 2014). This contribution was particularly strong for immigrants from countries that joined the EU in 2004.¹² On this point, it is important to remember that migrants in the UK are subject to salary thresholds (work

¹² However, further distinctions arise when examining non-EEA migrants. A study commissioned by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) estimated that non-EEA migrants had a negative net fiscal contribution, primarily due to higher spending on children's education, as they are more likely than UK-born individuals to have dependent children (Oxford Economics, 2018). They were also found to receive more in family benefits and tax credits. Nevertheless, the same study produced separate calculations that accounted for the entire life-cycle of non-EEA migrants while excluding the cost of children. Under this approach, the fiscal impact of non-EEA migrants was no longer negative (Oxford Economics, 2018; Vargas-Silva *et al.*, 2024). This only underscores the importance of transparently reporting accounting and analytical procedures.

visas) and the ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) condition described earlier. Therefore, they can access benefits only after they are granted indefinite leave to remain (ILR) which can typically take 5 years or more after their arrival. Meanwhile, eligibility to receive a state pension in the UK can require 10 or more years’ worth of national insurance contributions (NIC).¹³ For example, this means that a migrant arriving in the UK with a work visa in 2018 would only be eligible to settle in 2023¹⁴ and could start claiming benefits if they applied for indefinite leave to remain (ILR) (MAC, 2024).

Considering the changes in the composition of immigrants after the UK’s 2016 EU referendum result took effect, recent analysis from the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) estimated that skilled visa workers contributed more through tax receipts in fiscal year 2022–23 compared to the UK average, once government expenditures were taken into account. Overall, the MAC estimated that the average immigrant (and average immigrant household) on the skilled visa scheme had a higher positive net fiscal impact compared to the average UK-born adult and household (MAC, 2024).

In general, three factors appear to be particularly important for explaining differences in migrants’ fiscal impacts across countries and over time: first, the age distribution of the migrant population, as older age groups tend to have a lower net contribution compared to working-age cohorts; second, the skill composition of immigrants, with higher-skilled migrants making larger net contributions than lower-skilled migrants due to having higher wages and paying more taxes; and finally, the reason for migration, with those moving due to humanitarian reasons, seeking asylum, or family reunification being more likely to impose a net fiscal cost compared to those migrating for work or study, at least in the short term.

Yet recent research has cast some doubt on the extent to which people who move specifically for humanitarian reasons impose a net fiscal cost on receiving countries. Focusing on the US, Clemens (2022) explores the economic and fiscal effects of the reduction in refugee and asylum-seeker arrivals from 2016 to 2020, which fell by 86 per cent. He estimates that this reduction in admissions cost the US over \$2 billion annually, net of public expenses. This is because, he argues, refugees often settle permanently and tend to integrate into the labour market more successfully than many other immigrant groups. As they acquire skills and education that increase their productivity and earnings over time, they make greater tax contributions and have a more positive long-term fiscal impact. These conclusions are consistent with another study by Ghertner *et al.* (2024) which finds that refugees with more than 10 years of US residency had income levels and employment rates similar to the general US population, producing a positive net fiscal impact between the years 2005 and 2019.¹⁵

(i) Different approaches, different results

Besides arising from actual differences among migrant groups, variation in these fiscal outcomes also emerge from researchers’ choices and approaches, which generally rely on either *static* or *dynamic* views (Preston, 2014). Static analyses are ‘snapshots’ that account for the taxes immigrants pay and the government expenditures they absorb within a specific period (e.g. a year). By contrast, dynamic analyses calculate the *entire* stream of future taxes and expenditures associated with immigrants and their descendants, typically discounted to the present value. These approaches comprise cost–benefit analysis (Clemens, 2022), survey data analysis (Borjas and Hilton, 1996), national accounts and welfare state analysis (Boeri, 2010), generational accounting (Auerbach and Oreopoulos, 2000; Chojnicki, 2013; Chojnicki *et al.*, 2018; Collado *et al.*, 2004; Mayr, 2005),¹⁶ dynamic models (Hansen *et al.*, 2017),¹⁷ and microsimulation models (Christl *et al.*, 2022).¹⁸ Whichever method is used, the results likely depend on the assumptions made, and the timeframes selected by researchers or imposed by data availability. Consequently, it is difficult to assume that published conclusions have long ‘shelf lives’ for

¹³ This applies to most migrants except for those on humanitarian visas or those who are returning UK or Irish citizens.

¹⁴ The Home Office estimates that only around half of the total would have done that (MAC, 2024).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that the authors also find that state and local governments experienced higher costs due to education expenditures for children. Additionally, refugees were more likely than the general population to receive benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Supplemental Security Income (SSI), but less likely to use Social Security and Medicare due to lower workforce participation before retirement.

¹⁶ This approach consists of projecting the lifetime contributions and benefits of different cohorts (natives and immigrants) by examining taxes paid and benefits received over the life cycle. It therefore requires making assumptions about future immigration levels, labour market integration, and fertility rates.

¹⁷ Known as dynamic computable general equilibrium (CGE) models, which are programmed to account for how immigrants affect both the demand and supply sides of the economy, including wages, employment, and public finances. Again, assumptions about the economy in question are needed, including behavioural responses.

¹⁸ Microsimulation model simulates the tax and benefit systems across EU countries. It estimates the net fiscal contributions of immigrants by comparing their tax payments and receipt of welfare benefits to those of natives.

policy-making and advising purposes. For instance, shifts in immigration policy or changes in the composition of inflows and outflows will inevitably impact fiscal projections. More constructively, this reality suggests that analyses of these types should at a minimum transparently engage in sensitivity checks—either through formal statistical methods or by reporting multiple scenarios—to signal the levels of confidence that decision-makers should place in any given estimate.

(ii) Limitations of policies aimed at reducing the fiscal costs of immigration

Policies that prioritize high-skilled over low-skilled immigrants or restrict immigrants' access to the welfare state have been justified as interventions to reduce the influence of welfare provisions on migrants' location choices (as discussed in the previous section) and to limit immigrants' fiscal costs to the state. These policies, however, have received criticism. While high-skilled migrants contribute more in terms of taxes and economic innovation, many migrant workers in low-skilled occupations also contribute to the functioning of the economy doing jobs that locals avoid due to the unattractive working conditions. For example, this is the case of care workers in Western societies where immigrants, who are overrepresented in the sector (OECD, 2020), provide essential support to increasingly ageing populations. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it became apparent that large shares of frontline essential workers, including those in healthcare, sanitation, delivery and warehouse, or agriculture, were foreign born (Anderson *et al.*, 2021; Broberg *et al.*, 2024).

Another criticism points to the short-term and limited nature of the fiscal cost calculations and projections. As noted by Jakubiak (2017), many studies on fiscal impacts fail to capture the full range of welfare benefits and services because they focus primarily on cash transfers such as unemployment benefits. They also tend to overlook the long-term integration potential of immigrants and how welfare state programmes can have a positive impact on migrants' labour market outcomes.¹⁹ Some authors highlight the importance of active integration policies and access to social benefits: if well-designed, these kinds of policies can smoothe migrants' transition into employment while reducing their need for welfare assistance, thus enhancing the likelihood of them positively contributing to the public finances over the long term (Giulietti, 2014; Christl *et al.*, 2022; Clemens, 2022).

By contrast, policies that restrict immigrants' access to social assistance or reduce its level can have negative consequences extending beyond fiscal concerns, though these effects may be difficult to predict in advance by policy-makers. An example of these unintended consequences is discussed by Arendt *et al.* (2022). Focusing on welfare benefit reforms in Denmark, they look at the impact on restrictions on refugee employment and welfare dependency. As mentioned earlier, Denmark's welfare reforms in 2002 and 2015 significantly reduced welfare benefits by about 40 per cent in 2002 and a further 10–40 per cent in 2015 to incentivize labour market participation among refugees. While the authors find a positive effect of this reform on employment in the short term, they note that the success of the reform was mainly driven by local labour market conditions. This suggests that supply-side incentives alone might not suffice to increase employment participation if the labour market conditions are weak. Indeed, when looking at the long-term consequences of the reform, Arendt *et al.* (2022) found that the reduction in household income resulted in a significant number of refugee households falling below the poverty line. This reduction in disposable income was associated with an increase in criminal activity among both adults and teenagers²⁰ in refugee households, and the withdrawal of women from the labour force.

IV. Public attitudes towards immigration and the welfare state

Ethnic and linguistic fractionalization in societies is often cited as a factor which undermines social solidarity and support for welfare systems (Hechter, 2004; Kymlicka and Banting, 2006). In this vein, Alesina and Glaeser (2004) argued that ethno-racial diversity and fragmentation are significant factors explaining the relatively weaker welfare state in the US compared to Western Europe. In the US, redistributive policies are less popular because racial animosity makes voters less willing to support welfare programmes that are perceived to disproportionately benefit minority groups. By contrast, they argue Europe's historically greater ethnic homogeneity contributed to stronger public support for redistribution. However, among other factors, the increasing political salience of immigration—particularly following the 2015 'migration crisis'—has reignited debates about whether growing diversity might

¹⁹ Jakubiak (2017) highlights that immigrants are often perceived as a strain on welfare systems due to their visible presence in certain welfare programmes, such as unemployment benefits or child allowances. However, this perception is not always grounded in reality: much of the perceived fiscal burden stems from lower contributions to welfare systems, rather than from disproportionately higher benefit usage.

²⁰ Particularly small-scale property crimes, such as shoplifting.

be eroding public backing for the welfare state in Europe as well (Dennison and Geddes, 2019; Eger *et al.*, 2020; Hutter and Kriesi, 2022).

The political saliency of immigration in Europe has favoured the growing electoral support for populist radical right parties (Dennison and Geddes, 2019) which tend to advocate for stricter restrictions on migrant access to the welfare state (Eger *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, the emergence of the populist radical right has impacted the policy positions of mainstream parties, which have increasingly endorsed anti-immigrant and culturally protectionist positions (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). Against this backdrop, and linking with the empirical evidence covered in the previous sections, we examine how public attitudes toward immigration and the saliency of immigration in political debates relate to perceptions of immigrants' overuse of welfare systems (the 'fiscal burden hypothesis') and broader public support for economic redistribution and social policies.

(i) The fiscal burden hypothesis

A substantial body of literature in economics, political science, and sociology explores the patterns and determinants of attitudes towards different types of immigrants (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Dennison and Dražanová, 2018; Dinesen and Hjorth, 2020; Dražanová, 2022) and individual preferences for immigration levels (Citrin *et al.*, 1997; Facchini and Mayda, 2008; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001). These studies aim to identify the drivers of immigration attitudes and how these translate into voting behaviour and policy preferences, including redistributive and welfare support policies.

Two main groups of theories have emerged to explain attitudes toward immigration: cultural and economic explanations. On the one hand, cultural and identity-based explanations suggest that opposition to immigrants varies depending on their country of origin, independent of their skill levels. These perspectives emphasize the role of historical determinants in shaping attitudes and preferences, including a society's historical background, perceptions of cultural distance, and stereotypes associated with different religions or ethnicities. Such factors influence how host populations perceive and react to different immigrant groups (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010; Ford, 2011; Creighton and Jamal, 2015; Bansak *et al.*, 2016; Newman and Malhotra, 2019).

On the other hand, economic explanations focus on the perceptions of immigrants as potential threats to the economic well-being of natives. One such explanation, the fiscal burden theory, argues individual attitudes toward immigration depend on the perceptions of immigrants' net fiscal impact (tax contributions and use of welfare services) and individuals' positions within the income distribution. Low-skilled immigration is assumed to impose a financial strain on public resources, prompting governments to either raise taxes or reduce welfare and public services to ease budgetary pressures (Facchini and Mayda, 2009; Naumann *et al.*, 2018; Alesina and Tabellini, 2024). As a result, low-income natives are expected to oppose low-skilled immigration due to concerns about welfare cuts and overcrowded public services, while high-income natives are likely to oppose it out of fear of increased taxes stemming from higher public spending. Naumann *et al.* (2018) found evidence that concerns about potential tax increases are the main driver of the income gradient in attitudes towards immigrants: preferences for high-skilled immigration are stronger among high-income individuals compared to low-income individuals. By contrast, in the US, Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010) found that both high- and low-income individuals are equally opposed to low-skilled immigration. Although they find that opposition to low-skilled immigration increases among low-income natives in states with high fiscal exposure, they argue that non-economic factors such as ethnocentrism—where an emphasis on cultural differences fuels fears of cultural erosion and social tension—often outweigh economic considerations in shaping attitudes and public opinion on immigration.

(ii) Immigration and preferences for redistribution

Beyond explaining general immigration attitudes, there is a large body of literature investigating what drives individual preferences for redistribution and cross-country differences in redistributive policies. As mentioned earlier, key contextual factors include a country's institutional history, past policies, and broader structural developments (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Cusack *et al.*, 2006), as well as levels of inequality (Bénabou, 2000; Bénabou and Tirole, 2006), the structure of that inequality (Lupu and Pontusson, 2011), and levels of ethnic diversity. At the individual level, preferences for redistribution are shaped by several factors. Religiosity has been found to influence attitudes, with more religious individuals often being less supportive of redistribution (Scheve and Stasavage, 2016). Income and expectations of social mobility also play a role, with wealthier individuals and those anticipating upward mobility tending to be less supportive of redistributive policies (Alesina *et al.*, 2018b). Additionally, beliefs in meritocracy strongly shape attitudes: those who attribute inequality to individual effort are more likely

to oppose redistribution, whereas those who see it as a result of luck or structural factors, such as institutional discrimination, tend to be more supportive (Mijs, 2021).

Crucially, a substantial body of work investigates the role of individual immigration attitudes and immigration-driven increases in ethnic diversity on preferences for redistribution (Alesina *et al.*, 2001; Luttmer, 2001; Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Alesina *et al.*, 2018a; Naumann and Stoetzer, 2018; Alesina *et al.*, 2023; Eick and Busemeyer, 2024). This literature connects with and extends the work of Alesina and Glaeser (2004), which viewed ethnic diversity as an obstacle to redistributive policies—particularly if minorities are perceived to be overrepresented among potential welfare recipients. Studies into the relationships among immigration levels, immigration attitudes, and preferences for redistribution have even attracted their own term of welfare ‘immigrationisation’ (Garand *et al.*, 2017; Burgoon and Rooduijn, 2021) to describe how political debates about redistribution and the welfare state have become increasingly intertwined with immigration issues.

On this front, most empirical studies show that higher immigration levels tend to reduce support for the welfare state. Similarly, negative attitudes toward immigration are strongly associated with lower support for redistribution. These associations are largely driven by the perception that immigrants—usually negatively stereotyped and viewed as less deserving than native-born citizens—place a disproportionate burden on welfare systems.

Among Western European countries, Alesina *et al.* (2021a) and Alesina *et al.* (2021b) find that native support for redistribution decreases as the share of immigrants in a region increases. This effect is particularly pronounced in countries with larger welfare states, such as France and the Nordic countries, and is primarily driven by individuals on the centre-right of the political spectrum.²¹ Meanwhile, in the US, Hero and Preuhs (2007) show that states with larger immigrant populations tend to adopt less generous welfare policies. In Germany, Schmidt-Catran and Spies (2016) find that native support for welfare spending declines as the proportion of immigrant residents rises, particularly in areas with high unemployment. This finding is reinforced by more recent work by Eick and Busemeyer (2024), also using German data, who show local labour market conditions moderate the relationship between immigration levels and welfare attitudes. Even in Sweden, a country with a strong redistributive tradition, increasing ethnic diversity appears to erode public support for welfare spending (Eger, 2010).

Meanwhile, attitudes toward immigration also play a crucial role in shaping preferences for redistribution. Garand *et al.* (2017) find that individuals who hold negative views of immigrants also tend to express unfavourable opinions about welfare recipients and government spending on social policies. In line with previous research on misperceptions about immigration, respondents frequently overestimate the number of immigrants in their country and misperceive their cultural and economic characteristics (Daniel, 2010; Blinder, 2015; Huang, 2023). This tendency to overestimate immigrant numbers, as demonstrated by Alesina *et al.* (2001), leads to an inflated perception of their economic dependence and, in turn, lower support for redistribution.

Beyond perceptions of immigration levels, the salience of immigration in public discourse also influences attitudes toward welfare policies. Alesina *et al.* (2023) show that priming respondents to think about immigration before answering questions on redistribution leads to lower support for social spending. Using a survey experiment conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, they tested different narratives about immigrants, such as emphasizing their work ethic versus their reliance on welfare. The findings suggest that deep-seated stereotypes about immigrants as welfare-dependent significantly drive opposition to redistribution. This echoes work by Kustov (2023) who underscores the importance of issue salience in arguing that both individual- and country-level exposure to immigration-related discourse shape attitudes toward redistribution.

While much of the literature highlights a negative association between immigration and support for redistribution, some studies do provide evidence suggesting immigration can increase demand for social policies by heightening perceptions of economic insecurity (the ‘compensation hypothesis’). Brady and Finnigan (2014), use data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) across 17 countries in 1996 and 2006 to show that immigration inflows are positively associated with greater support for welfare policies, particularly those addressing retirement and housing. Similarly, Finseraas (2008) analyses cross-national European data to show that respondents who believe immigration lowers wages or displaces jobs are more likely to support redistributive policies.

²¹ The effect is also stronger when immigrants come from culturally distant regions (e.g. Middle East and North Africa) or are less skilled.

This divergence may be explained by contextual factors which moderate the relationship between immigration and attitudes toward redistribution. [Burgoon and Rooduijn \(2021\)](#) find that negative attitudes towards immigration tend to be linked to less support for redistribution in countries where the proportion of immigrants is high, welfare spending is substantial, and immigrants rely more heavily on social benefits than natives. By contrast, in contexts where the proportion of immigrants is lower, welfare spending is more modest, and immigrants are less reliant on social benefits, the presence of negative immigration attitudes may have the opposite effect. In these cases, concerns about labour market competition appear to drive greater demand for redistribution rather than opposition to it.

Overall, while most research supports the view that immigration reduces support for redistribution, this relationship is shaped by several factors including the perceived economic and cultural characteristics of immigrants, the political salience of, and the economic anxieties linked to, immigration, and broader economic conditions.

(iii) Welfare chauvinism

Perhaps not surprisingly given economic conditions and political agendas, the empirical literature on welfare chauvinism—or the belief that access to the welfare state should be restricted to in-group members usually defined along lines of nationality or ethnicity—has dramatically grown in recent years ([Careja and Harris, 2022](#); [Eick, 2024a](#); [Eick and Busemeyer, 2024](#)). It shows that restrictionist attitudes towards access to welfare depend on the national origins, ethnicity, and perceived contribution of potential beneficiaries.

Using survey experiments in Italy, France, the UK, and the US, [Magni \(2024\)](#) finds evidence of welfare chauvinism towards immigrants, with those with no history of employment facing the largest penalties. For the UK, this discrimination applies to both Western and non-Western European migrants: recent survey experimental evidence found that migrants' occupational profiles, length of residence, and country of origin influenced perceptions of their entitlement to welfare benefits, including access to the NHS ([Broadhead and Ruiz, 2021](#)). Moreover, as is the case with other European countries, immigrants' country of origin and ethnicity are also relevant, with non-EU migrants from Africa and predominantly Muslim countries being perceived as less deserving. However, in that same study, immigrants' occupational profile seems to play a larger role in shaping attitudes towards access to public services and welfare entitlements than country of origin. These findings align with earlier research by [Ford and Mellon \(2020\)](#), which showed that the UK public gives more weight to migrants' skills than their country of origin when expressing immigration admission preferences. That said, welfare chauvinism against European 'labour migration' likely influenced voting behaviours in the 2016 EU Referendum, even though European migrants have not typically been the primary target of anti-immigrant discourse ([D'Angelo, 2023](#)).

Meanwhile, the presence and strength of welfare chauvinist attitudes shows sensitivity towards a range of individual- and macro-level features as well as the type of welfare in question. For example, raising levels of education is often cited as a potential channel for reducing these restrictionist attitudes towards extending welfare to immigrants, although more recent work using European survey data suggests this possibility is overstated and needs to be placed in the context of broader social policy changes ([Eick, 2024a,b](#); [Eick and Busemeyer, 2024](#)). Yet extending *in-kind* benefits to immigrants which provide them with services, as opposed to *cash* benefits, appears to attract greater public support across the political spectrum in Denmark, Germany, and the UK—with only modest differences among groups varying in education, income, or perceptions of immigrants' cultural threat ([Eick and Larsen, 2022](#)).

Yet experimental evidence from the UK suggests that means-tested welfare programmes which explicitly target specific populations rather than distributing benefits universally may still exacerbate welfare chauvinism. [Pardos-Prado and Xena \(2019\)](#) found that public support for redistribution declined more sharply when immigrants were perceived as primary welfare recipients in *means-tested* programmes compared to *universal* ones. Their findings suggest that in universal programmes all social groups benefit equally from transfers, which mitigates identity-based concerns. By contrast, in means-tested programmes, the identity of beneficiaries becomes more salient, intensifying opposition to redistribution among native populations. This suggests that shifting welfare systems toward means-testing in an effort to reduce overall spending may, paradoxically, reinforce divisions and weaken broader support for social policy in ethnically diverse societies. More generally, these results highlight that, despite possibly confronting public scepticism—if not outright opposition—towards expanding migrants' access to welfare, policy-makers may have greater scope for change depending on the *type* of welfare programme under consideration.

V. Discussion: The future of the welfare state in the 'age of migration'

Societies and economies have arguably always been marked by human mobility, even if the consequences and drivers of these movements have taken on contemporary urgency in what some have characterized an 'age of migration' (de Haas *et al.*, 2019). As such, it is obvious that immigration and responses to it present both challenges and opportunities for welfare states in high-income countries. Our review of the best-available evidence to date regarding the relationship between immigration and welfare provision, as well as public perceptions of this relationship, is motivated by a recognition that the future of welfare states—both those of UK and others—is not yet settled: choices to reshape welfare in a more conditional, universal, or some kind of middle-way direction remain high on policy and political agendas (Gingrich and King, 2019). As such, by taking stock of what we know, we aim to inform those ongoing discussions.

Notwithstanding differences in methods and approaches, the literature generally shows that immigrants' fiscal impacts in the UK and other Western countries tend to be small. That said, high levels of migration can significantly alleviate some of the immediate fiscal challenges faced by welfare states in ageing societies with low fertility rates, at least in the short term. However, this does not imply that societies necessarily require high levels of immigration to sustain their finances: fiscal sustainability also depends on other factors, such as tax policies. Moreover, in many countries—including the UK—immigration policies restrict many migrants from accessing welfare benefits for a few years after arrival. This means that new migrants often contribute through taxation without immediately drawing on public resources, reinforcing their short-term positive fiscal impact. Additionally, the reliance on migrants in certain sectors, such as agriculture and social care, provides a cost-effective solution for employers and the state, as it ensures access to a reasonably steady supply of low-cost labour.

Despite the potential overall positive impact immigration can have on welfare states, particularly in the short term, segments of the public may react negatively to rapid increases in ethnic and cultural diversity. These reactions are often driven by concerns over perceived threats to social cohesion and fears that migrants may decrease their economic well-being. Such concerns are especially pronounced regarding refugees, low-skilled migrants, and those from different ethnicities. Public perceptions, whether accurate or not, may complicate effective policy-making. In the UK, immigration has been a highly relevant issue for voters with anti-immigrant attitudes, who are more likely to support the Conservative Party (Richards *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, during periods when immigration has been highly salient, the Conservative Party—holding office from 2010 until 2024—had clear political incentives to implement restrictive immigration policies including the Asylum and Immigration Act 2024 (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021).

What might change these attitudes? On the one hand, in circumstances where attitudes are based on misperceptions or a lack of knowledge about the scale and impacts of immigration, providing correct information represents one popular strategy supported by experimental research (Grigorieff *et al.*, 2020; Blinder and Schaffner, 2021; Allen, 2024). On the other hand, there are good reasons to be sceptical about the efficacy of this approach, especially on matters involving immigration which displays strong partisan divides. Prior beliefs, as well as messengers' own political identities, likely matter for these kinds of information-based interventions. Consequently, Hopkins *et al.* (2019) argue that commonly held misperceptions about immigration are consequences, not causes, of negative attitudes towards immigrants. As a result, efforts to correct these misperceptions with the aim of changing policy preferences might have 'muted' effects (Sides and Citrin 2007; Jorgensen and Osmundsen, 2022). More broadly, the efficacy of communications-based interventions likely depends on the nature of immigration concerns being addressed as well as the rhetorical targets of messages' appeals—not all of which need to rely on or even make reference to factual claims or evidence to establish their authority (Dennison, 2022; Kustov, 2025).

Although fully aligning public perceptions with nuanced realities may be an ambitious or even unattainable goal (see Lupia, 2006), scholars and policy-makers should nevertheless focus on mitigating the consequences of these gaps (Ruhs *et al.*, 2019), especially when they likely contribute to avoidable social, political, or economic problems such as discrimination. This could involve fostering informed public discussions (Schudson, 2010) and leveraging richer understandings of how communications choices can change attitudes and preferences (Allen, 2023). While these approaches have clear limitations when viewed in isolation, they nevertheless start to open avenues for creating public environments in which evidence-based policies that balance economic concerns with goals of social integration may be more likely to emerge and gain public support. Ultimately, the future of the welfare state in increasingly diverse societies will depend in large part on policies that foster inclusion, ensure fiscal sustainability, and address the needs of both native and immigrant populations.

Table A1: Summary of the empirical literature on the welfare magnet hypothesis

Citation	Countries	Population	Type of welfare	Period/Policy	Evidence
<i>A. International mobility</i>					
De Giorgi and Pellizzari (2009)	15 countries of the pre-enlargement EU.	Migration within the EU-15 countries	Unemployment-related benefits	1974–94	Weak—small compared to labour market conditions
Razin and Wahba (2015)	European Union	Bilateral migration flows between 14 EU countries + Norway and Switzerland and others.	Social expenditure	1990–2000	Strong evidence for unskilled migrants but depends on the migration policy environment.
Jakubiak (2019)	France, Germany, Italy, and Spain.	Non-EU migrants	Social expenditure and various welfare generosity indices	2011–12	Strong with heterogeneities across migrant groups: lower-educated migrants and larger households
Ponce (2019)	Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland	Bilateral migration panel dataset	Total social support as a percentage of GDP	1995–2010	Weak evidence with other factors such as co-ethnic naturalization and commitment to humanitarianism being stronger.
Agersnap <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Denmark	Non-EU immigration into Denmark against other Nordic countries	General cash assistance	1991–2017	Strong—conditional on moving, the generosity of the welfare system matters for choice of destination country.
<i>B. Within-country mobility</i>					
Zavodny (1997)	United States	New immigrants from 18 countries	AFDC, food stamps, SSI, and Medicaid	1982, 1992	Weak—co-national networks are better predictors.
Borjas (1999)	United States	Welfare and non-welfare receiving immigrants and welfare receiving immigrants	AFDC, SSI, and general assistance	1980, 1990–1	Strong for low-skilled welfare recipient immigrants. Higher sensitivity to changes.
Dodson (2001)	United States	New immigrants: family-sponsored, employment, relatives, refugees, and asylees	Cash assistance: AFDC and food stamp programme	1991–2	Strong across all migrants. Also, strong effect of networks
Kaushal (2005)	United States	New low skilled unmarried immigrant women	Means tested welfare programmes, i.e. TANF, Medicaid, and food stamps	1995–6, 1998–9	Weak effect on location choice of newly arrived low-skilled unmarried immigrant women
Dellinger and Huber (2021)	Austria	Refugees and asylum seekers	Income support levels	2012–17	Strong. Heterogeneous effects: asylees versus subsidiary protected and across different states.
Agersnap <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Denmark	Non-EU migrants	General cash assistance	1980–2017	Positive. Elasticity of 1.3 (5,000 per year) but driven by (asylum or family)
Ferwerda <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Switzerland	Refugees and asylum seekers	Social assistance	2005–15	Weak evidence. Instead factors such as lower housing costs, larger population sizes, and the presence of conational networks

Notes: * Cash assistance: Aid to Family with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Table A2: Summary of the empirical literature on the fiscal impacts of immigration

Year	Citation	Countries	Period of study	Evidence
1999	Auerbach and Oreopoulos (1999)	United States	1995 and projection to 2070	Unclear—Dependent on the degree that the government's intertemporal fiscal imbalance falls on future generations. Larger degrees yield more positive impacts of immigration
2000	Auerbach and Oreopoulos (2000)	United States	1991 and projection to 2100	Unclear—Dependent on the skill composition of the immigrant population due to changes in immigration policy.
2000	Miller and Lee (2000)	United States	1994-96/ projection to 2098	Positive—minimal positive impact over long time horizon.
2004	Collado <i>et al.</i> (2004)	Spain	2000 base year /100 year projection	Positive—due to the decrease in fertility rates and ageing population.
2005	Mayr (2005)	Austria	1998 base year	Positive—contingent on whether the age and fiscal characteristics of future immigrants resemble those of the current immigrant population.
2005	Sriskandarajah <i>et al.</i> (2005)	UK	1999–2004	Positive—contributions differing by type of migrant.
2010	Dustmann <i>et al.</i> (2010)	UK	2005–9	Positive—for A8 immigrants compared to the UK born, as immigrants have a higher labour force participation, pay more in taxes, and use less benefits.
2010	Shimasawa and Oguro (2010)	Japan	UN 2007 data, and projection to 2100	Positive (annual immigration flows of 150,000 dramatically increase the welfare of current and future generations)
2013	Chojnicki (2013)	France	2005/projection to 2050	Positive—small and contingent on the skill composition of immigrants.
2014	Dustmann and Frattini (2014)	UK	1995–2011	Positive (EEA immigrants) Negative (Non-EEA) Results driven by lower-income migrants. Arrivals after 2000, regardless of origin, made positive fiscal contributions.
2016	Chojnicki and Ragot (2016)	France	1900/projections to 2100	Positive—contingent on age and skill composition
2017	Blau and Mackie (2017)	United States	1994–2013	Positive—Future fiscal impacts of immigrants are generally positive at the federal level and negative at state and local levels
2017	Hansen <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Denmark	2013 and projection to 2050.	Positive (Western) Negative (Non-Western) amounting to a deficit of 1 per cent of GDP (mostly driven by refugees)
2017	Martinsen and Pons Rotger (2017)	Denmark	2012–13	Positive (EU migrants) Immigrants from old EU member states contributed more than those from new EU member states.
2018	Kancs and Lecca (2018)	27 EU states and the UK	2016 and projection to 2060	Positive—Contingent on effective and sustainable integration policy
2018	Oxford Economics (2018)	United Kingdom	2016–17	Positive—Overall Positive (EEA: £2,300 more than average UK adult; older member states: £3,700 more; £78,000 discounted lifetime contribution) Negative (non-EEA) (£800 less than average adult;—also noted that non-EEA migrant arriving in 2016 would make a lifetime fiscal contribution of £28,000
2022	Mesa and Castaño (2022)	Colombia	2013–18	Positive (small)

Table A2. Continued

Year	Citation	Countries	Period of study	Evidence
2022	Christl <i>et al.</i> (2022)	EU member states	2015 and projection to 2035	Positive (EU) —Intra-EU and extra-EU immigration across 27 EU member states Negative (non-EU) Discrepancy is exarcebated in generous welfare states such as France, Belgium, and the Nordic countries as opposed to the eastern and southern member states of the EU. Projections indicate that, by 2035, intra-EU migrants will maintain the highest fiscal contribution, while extra-EU migrants' contributions may surpass those of natives as population ageing accelerates
2022	Clemens (2022)	United States	2017–20	Positive (refugees) —The decline in refugee numbers is estimated to cost over \$2.0 billion per year (app. \$6,844 per missing refugee annually) across all levels of government, net of public expenses.
2024	Chassamboulli and Liu (2024)	United States	2000–10	Positive —Legal immigrants increase natives' welfare by having positive direct fiscal impact through tax contributions. Illegal immigrants increase natives' consumption through a positive impact on job creation and natives' income.
2024	Ghertner <i>et al.</i> (2024)	United States	2005–19	Positive (refugees) —Net fiscal impact of \$123.8 billion (including a net benefit of \$31.5 billion at the federal level and \$92.3 billion at the state and local levels). These effects persist even after accounting for immigrant consumption of government goods and services

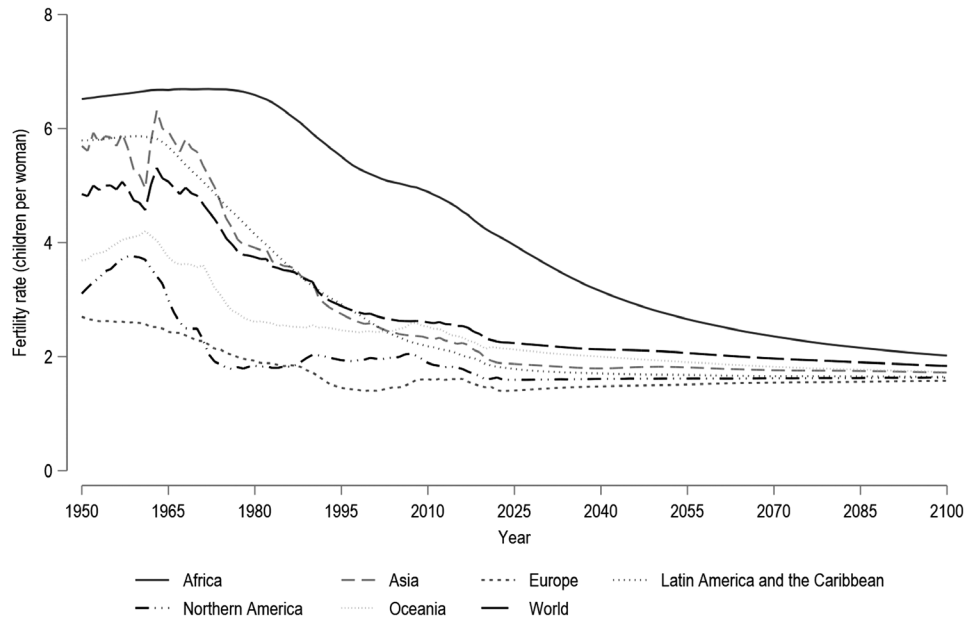


Figure A1: Fertility rate (children per woman) and projections
Source: Data from 'Our World in Data'.

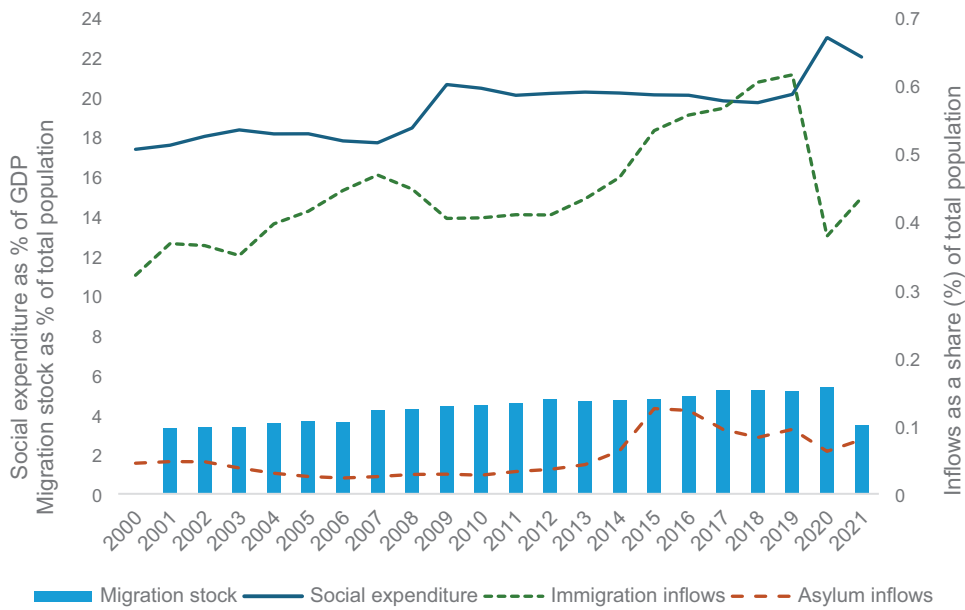


Figure A2: Social expenditure and immigration flows in OECD countries
Source: OECD International Migration Database and OECD SOCX database (2000–21).

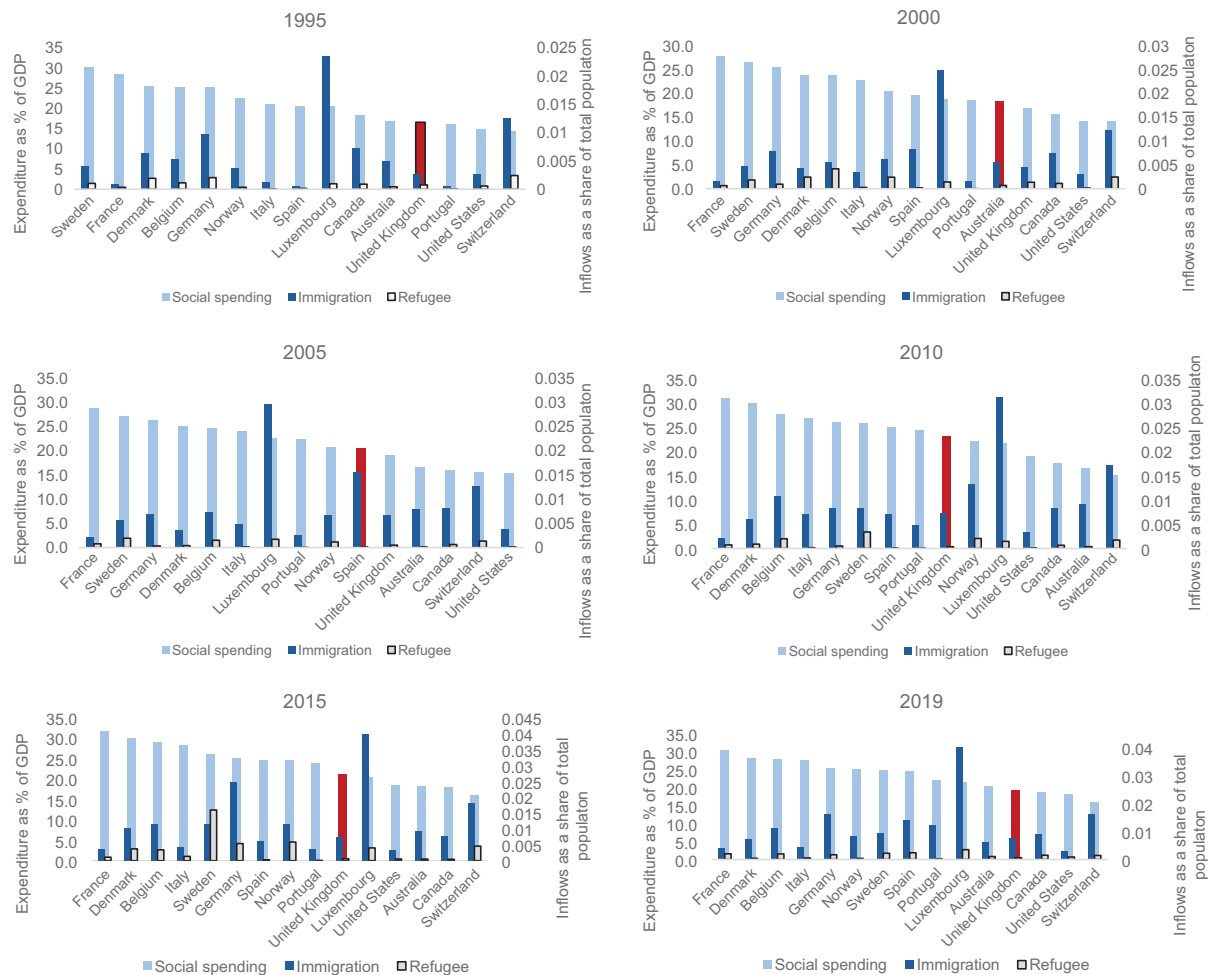


Figure A3: Social expenditures and migration flows among selected OECD countries

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