

Attitudes towards immigration explain beliefs about asylum authorities and their decisions

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Abstract

Whereas previous research has examined how national identity, social welfare, and security concerns shape public attitudes toward the asylum system and asylum applicants, less is known about the role of individual factors. Drawing on the theory of motivated cognition, we investigated how personal immigration attitudes, gender, and age shape beliefs about asylum authorities and their decisions. Using data from 255 respondents, we found that individuals with more lenient immigration attitudes view the asylum system as overly restrictive, believe that rejected claims are often incorrect, and tend to see asylum applicants as truthful. Conversely, those with more restrictive immigration attitudes perceive the system as too lenient, question the accuracy of accepted claims, and are more skeptical of asylum applicants. Gender and age were also associated with these views, with men and older individuals typically being more restrictive. These findings highlight how ideology shapes public beliefs about asylum processes.

Keywords: Asylum beliefs, immigration attitudes, motivated cognition, refugees, migration

Research on public attitudes toward asylum applicants and the asylum system shows a complex and shifting pattern across nations, time, and individual characteristics, and these shifting attitudes also reflect broader societal discussions about national identity, social welfare, and security (e.g. Czymara, 2020; De Coninck et al., 2021; Jeannet et al., 2021; Verkuyten, 2021). For example, the way asylum applicants are framed in the media can have a profound impact on how the public perceives them (Bohman & Hjerm, 2016): In some contexts, asylum applicants are portrayed as vulnerable individuals seeking refuge from persecution, while in others, they may be described as a threat to national security or social resources. Such variations shape how individuals view asylum systems and the decisions made by authorities. Whereas previous studies have documented some of these variations, less attention has been given to how individual factors, such as personal immigration attitudes, gender, and age, shape beliefs about asylum authorities and their decisions. Here, we report a study designed to examine the influence of these individual factors on both knowledge and beliefs in the context of asylum decision-making.

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Immigration and asylum

Although public discourse often conflates immigration with asylum seeking, it is essential to distinguish between these two categories. Not all immigrants are asylum applicants; in fact, asylum applicants represent only a minority of the immigrant population in Europe. For example, data from recent years show that asylum applications constitute less than 10% of the total number of immigrants entering the European Union (Eurostat, 2023). Immigrants may arrive for diverse reasons such as employment, education, or family reunification, and are subject to different legal frameworks than those seeking international protection (Eurostat, 2023). Under international and European law—including the 1951 Refugee Convention (United Nations, 1951)—individuals have the right to seek asylum if they face a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. This legal right does not extend to migrants whose primary motivation is economic or otherwise unrelated to persecution.

Asylum determinations in Europe are governed by both international and EU legal frameworks, particularly the 1951 Refugee Convention (United Nations, 1951), the EU Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU), and the Common European Asylum System (European Union, 2011). Under these frameworks, each EU Member State is responsible for assessing individual asylum claims to determine whether an applicant qualifies for refugee status. The process typically involves an individual interview, assessment of evidence and credibility, and a legal determination made by a national asylum authority. In Finland, the Finnish Immigration Service is the competent authority responsible for processing asylum applications. The methods used in these complicated decisions have been subject to criticism, as they do not always correspond to best-practice guidelines and leave room for error (e.g. Selim et al., 2023a; Selim et al., 2023b; Skrifvars et al., 2024; van Veldhuizen et al., 2018). Despite a general agreement that asylum determinations are not perfect, there are no reliable estimates on the proportion of wrongful decisions or the relative proportions of incorrectly accepted claims and incorrectly rejected claims (European Council on Refugees & Exiles, 2022).

Motivated cognition and asylum beliefs

The theory of motivated cognition (Kunda, 1990) offers a useful framework for understanding how personal beliefs and motivations shape individuals' processing of information related to asylum decisions. According to this theory, individuals do not process information purely objectively but are instead motivated to interpret it in a way that supports their pre-existing beliefs and values, including political views (e.g. Jost et al., 2014; Taber & Lodge, 2006). For example, a recent study showed that individuals with conservative political positions were more likely to reject scientific evidence on climate change, while individuals with liberal positions were more likely to accept the same evidence (Caddick & Feist, 2022). Drawing on the theory of motivated cognition, people are likely to process information about asylum applicants and the decisions made by asylum authorities through the lens of their values. More specifically, individuals who hold more restrictive views on immigration may be more likely to perceive the asylum system as too accepting and believe that asylum applicants tend to misrepresent their reasons for seeking asylum, thus reinforcing their

negative immigration attitudes. On the other hand, those who have more lenient attitudes towards immigration may be more inclined to trust asylum applicants and view the asylum system as too restrictive and not doing enough to protect vulnerable individuals.

Despite the vast literature on immigration attitudes, there is an apparent lack of research designed to investigate how immigration attitudes shape beliefs about asylum applicants and the asylum system. However, there are some studies that provide some limited support for the notion that attitudes toward immigration can influence perceptions of fairness and trust in asylum decision-making processes. For example, Pedersen and Hartley (2017) found that individuals with right-wing political beliefs were relatively likely to hold false beliefs about individuals seeking asylum in Australia, highlighting the role that pre-existing values might play in shaping attitudes toward asylum applicants. Similarly, Mancini et al. (2020) found that individuals higher in right-wing authoritarianism also held more prejudice against asylum applicants. Finally, a study by Canetti et al. (2016) demonstrated that people with conservative views tend to see the asylum system as too accepting, and that this association could partly be explained through increased threat perceptions. These perceptions are not necessarily the result of a lack of knowledge; rather they are shaped by broader ideological and affective orientations. As a result, beliefs about the asylum system might not be grounded in objective knowledge but influenced by cognitive biases and motivated reasoning, potentially stemming from more fundamental attitudes towards immigration.

Gender differences in immigration attitudes

Immigration attitudes are not randomly distributed in the population. Gender influences attitudes toward immigration, with notable differences in how men and women perceive immigration-related issues. Research indicates that men often exhibit more negative attitudes toward immigrants compared to women (Polacko et al., 2024). For instance, a study analyzing European Social Survey data found that men are generally more opposed to immigration (Ponce, 2017). This trend aligns with the male warrior hypothesis (Vugt et al., 2007) and theories of male intra-sexual competition (Antfolk et al., 2018), which both suggest that men are evolutionarily predisposed to be more protective against out-group members. In line with these theories, men may perceive immigrants, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds—which is often the case with asylum applicants—as potential threats, prompting a defensive and exclusionary stance toward immigration (Antfolk et al., 2018; Vugt et al., 2007). Conversely, women tend to express more favorable attitudes toward immigrants, often driven by empathetic and humanitarian concerns (Kobayashi & Tanaka, 2025; Shrestha et al., 2025). Taken together, research indicates women might generally be more likely to emphasize the moral obligation to support vulnerable groups, including refugees and asylum applicants, and may perceive immigration through a human rights lens rather than as a threat. In sum, gender might moderate immigration attitudes through complex mechanisms involving evolutionary predispositions, perceived threats, and social ideologies.

Age-related differences in immigration attitudes

Age is another critical factor influencing attitudes toward immigration. Research consistently shows that older cohorts generally tend to have more negative immigration attitudes

compared to younger cohorts. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Dražanová and colleagues (Dražanová et al., 2024) synthesized findings from studies conducted between 2009 and 2019, revealing that age is negatively associated with favorable immigration attitudes: As age increases, positive perceptions of immigration tend to decrease, suggesting that older individuals may be more likely to hold restrictive views on immigration and asylum policies. This relationship between age and immigration attitudes is, however, somewhat more complex and is influenced by a variety of factors, including socialization experiences, educational background, and exposure to changing political climates (Jeannet & Dražanová, 2024; Miklikowska, 2017). For example, McLaren and Paterson (2020) found that younger individuals, particularly those with higher education levels, tend to hold more positive attitudes toward immigration. Furthermore, Jeannet and Dražanová (2019) demonstrated that exposure to egalitarian political climates during one's formative years plays a crucial role in shaping immigration attitudes in later life: Young people who grow up in politically progressive environments are more likely to adopt inclusive attitudes toward immigrants and asylum applicants, while those exposed to more conservative or traditional values may be more likely to hold restrictive views. This finding underscores the importance of considering the political context in which individuals form their attitudes toward immigration.

Taken together, prior research suggests that whereas older individuals may be more prone to restrictive views, younger people with higher levels of education are more likely to adopt progressive views on immigration. In addition to generational differences, shifts in political ideology also contribute to age-related variations in immigration attitudes. Furthermore, gender and age also interact in shaping immigration attitudes. Research has found that the ideological divide between young men and women regarding immigration is widening globally. In countries like the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom, young women are increasingly adopting progressive stances on immigration, while their male counterparts are trending toward more conservative views (Bohman & Hjerm, 2016). This divergence reflects broader societal trends where younger generations, particularly women, are more likely to hold lenient, positive immigration attitudes. In contrast, older generations, especially men, might be influenced by traditional values and hold more restrictive, negative immigration attitudes.

The current study

In the present study, we created a survey to test how personal immigration attitudes shape beliefs about asylum authorities and their decisions, and how these reflect well-established gender and age differences. Based on the theory of motivated cognition, it could be expected that individuals with more lenient immigration attitudes believe that a lower proportion of asylum applications are accepted; that fewer accepted applications and more rejected applications are incorrect; and that they are more likely to believe that asylum applicants are truthful when presenting their claims. Conversely, individuals with less lenient immigration attitudes would be expected to believe that a higher proportion of asylum applications are accepted; that more accepted applications and fewer rejected applications are incorrect; and that they are less likely to believe that asylum applicants are truthful when presenting their claims.

Moreover, based on previous literature, we expected gender and age—to the extent these reflect immigration attitudes—to also predict asylum beliefs. Given that men are more likely to hold restrictive immigration views, we hypothesized that male respondents would have more negative beliefs about asylum decisions and asylum applicants' truthfulness compared to female respondents. Similarly, given the generational differences in immigration attitudes, we expected younger respondents to report more favorable views on asylum and more trust in asylum applicants' claims compared to older respondents.

Method

Ethical permission

The study plan received ethical permission from the [name of IRB removed during peer-review] at [university name removed during peer-review] in February 2023. All respondents were asked to provide their informed consent before participation. Respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences and without providing a reason.

AI statement

ChatGPT (gpt-4-1106-preview or GPT-4.5) has been used to edit and shorten the text and to proof the language.

Supplementary materials

Data files, scripts for statistical analyses, and outputs of statistical analyses can be accessed on Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/jh5bq/>.

Participants

A total of 386 participants started the survey, all of whom were 18 years old or older and living in Finland. Out of these, 122 participants left one or more questions unanswered and were excluded, and nine participants did not report their gender as either male or female and had to be excluded as there were not enough respondents in this group for meaningful statistics. The final sample included 255 respondents and consisted of 128 women and 127 men.

Measures and procedure

We developed an online survey using QuestionPro. Before participation, respondents had to confirm that they were 18 years or older, had read and understood the informed consent form, and wished to take part in the current study. From February 27th to April 10th, 2024, a link to the survey was shared on social media, mailing lists at [university name removed during peer-review] with the goal to gather at least 200 completed responses from people living in Finland.

Background information

In this part of the survey, we gathered information about respondents' age, gender, nationality, education, income, frequency of contact with asylum applicants, and relationship

status. All questions were closed, meaning that the participants had to select their answer from a list of options.

Attitudes towards immigration

Next, we asked respondents to report whether they were strongly in favor of, in favor of, neutral, against, or strongly against immigration to Finland.

Knowledge about the asylum determination process

Respondents were then asked to answer three true-or-false knowledge questions about refugees and the asylum process (e.g. every person entering Finland from another country is a refugee). A knowledge score was computed as the sum of correct responses to the three items (range 0–3), with higher scores indicating greater knowledge about the asylum process.

Beliefs about the asylum determination process

The following part of the survey consisted of questions about beliefs towards the asylum determination process. We asked respondents to report the percentage of asylum applications they believe are accepted and the proportion of decisions (both accepted and rejected applications) they believe were incorrect. Next, we asked respondents to report how truthful they thought the asylum applicants were when describing the reason why they left their home country and their risk of harm if returned to their country of origin. In both cases, respondents reported the percentage of asylum applicants they believed were truthful.

Statistical analysis

To analyze data, we used the *R* platform (R Core Team, 2017). For data preparation and data cleaning, we used the packages *plyr* (Wickham, 2011), *dplyr* (Wickham et al., 2023a) and *tidyr* (Wickham et al., 2023b). For descriptive analyses, we used the packages *psych* (Revelle, 2016) and *Hmisc* (Harrell, 2021). For visualization, we used the packages *ggplot2* (Wickham, 2016), *gridExtra* (Auguie, 2017), and *corrplot* (Wei & Simko, 2021). To obtain effect sizes for Kruskal-Wallis tests, we used the package *rstatix* (Kassambara, 2023). Following Cohen (2013), these effect sizes were interpreted as $\eta^2 = 0.01$ indicating a small effect, $\eta^2 = 0.06$ a medium effect, and $\eta^2 = 0.14$ a large effect. Analyses and data files are available at <https://osf.io/jh5bq>.

Results

Descriptive results

First, we investigated respondent characteristics. Most respondents were of Finnish nationality, were 55 years or older, had a university degree, earned between 1,000 and 5,000 euros/month, were in a relationship, lived in an urban place, and reported relatively infrequent

contact with asylum applicants (monthly or less). See [Table 1](#) for more descriptive information.

After this, we investigated the variables of primary interest. Of all respondents, 2.0% incorrectly believed that every person entering Finland is an asylum applicant; 17.0% did not know that asylum applicants are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country; and 39.4% held the incorrect belief that asylum applicants are granted refugee status when their asylum application is accepted. With respect to immigration attitudes, the distribution was as follows: strongly favor ($n = 54$), favor ($n = 79$), neutral ($n = 45$), oppose ($n = 43$), and strongly oppose ($n = 34$).

Because responses might reflect polarized beliefs, we visually inspected the distributions of the variables measuring beliefs about the asylum authorities' decisions (See [Figure 1](#)).

Following this, we calculated Spearman's correlations for the variables measuring beliefs about decisions on asylum applications and about asylum applicants' truthfulness. As could be expected, we found that respondents who believed that a high percentage of applications were accepted were likely to believe a high percentage of these were wrongfully accepted ($r = .36, p < .001$) and less likely to believe a high percentage of these were wrongfully rejected ($r = -0.32, p < .001$). Moreover, respondents who believed that a high percentage of applications were accepted were less likely to believe applicants were truthful about their reasons to leave their country and their risk of harm if returned ($r = -0.30, p < .001$ and $r = -0.28, p < .001$, respectively). Respondents who believed a high percentage of applications were wrongfully accepted were likely to distrust applicants' truthfulness about their reasons to leave their country and their risk of harm if returned ($r = -0.71, p < .001$ and $r = -0.71, p < .001$, respectively). Conversely, respondents who believed a high percentage of applications were wrongfully rejected were likely to trust applicants' truthfulness regarding their reasons to leave their country and their risk of harm if returned ($r = .52, p < .001$ and $r = .55, p < .001$, respectively). Unsurprisingly, respondents who believed a high percentage of applications were wrongfully accepted were less likely to believe that a high number of applications were wrongfully rejected ($r = -.40, p < .001$). See [Figure 2](#) for a visual presentation of the correlation matrix.

Next, we investigated the association between attitudes toward immigration and variables measuring beliefs about asylum decisions and applicants' truthfulness. Because the dependent variables were non-normally distributed, we used Kruskal–Wallis tests. For significant omnibus effects, we conducted Dunn post-hoc comparisons with Holm correction.

There was no evidence of an association between immigration attitudes and knowledge, $\chi^2(4) = 6.90, p = .142, \eta^2_H = .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.01, .08]$.

In contrast, immigration attitudes were significantly associated with estimates of the percentage of applications that are accepted, $\chi^2(4) = 31.75, p < .001, \eta^2_H = .11, 95\% \text{ CI } [.05, .21]$. Dunn post-hoc tests indicated that respondents who favored or strongly favored immigration reported significantly lower estimates of accepted applications than those who opposed or strongly opposed immigration (all adjusted $ps < .001$), whereas differences within the pro-immigration and anti-immigration groups were not statistically significant.

A strong association also emerged for beliefs about wrongful acceptance rates, $\chi^2(4) = 113.02, p < .001, \eta^2_H = .44, 95\% \text{ CI } [.33, .55]$. Post-hoc comparisons revealed a graded polarization pattern: respondents who strongly favored immigration reported significantly

Table 1. Participant Descriptives.

Variable	Men		Women		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age						
18–24	4	3.2	28	21.9	32	12.6
25–34	8	6.3	22	17.2	30	11.8
35–44	5	3.9	9	7.0	14	5.5
45–54	19	15.0	13	10.2	32	12.6
55–64	39	30.7	32	25.0	71	27.8
65 or above	52	40.1	24	18.8	76	29.8
Nationality						
Finnish	127	100.0	125	97.6	252	98.8
Other	0	0.0	3	2.4	3	1.2
Education						
Elementary School	8	6.3	4	3.1	12	4.7
High School	41	32.3	24	18.8	65	25.5
Lower University Degree	34	26.8	44	34.4	78	30.6
Higher University Degree	44	34.7	56	43.8	100	39.2
Monthly Income (€)						
< 1,000	13	10.2	26	20.3	39	15.3
1,000–5,000	81	63.8	81	63.3	162	63.5
5,000–10,000	29	22.9	15	11.7	44	17.3
>10,000	4	3.2	6	4.7	10	3.9
Relationship Status						
Single	40	31.5	48	37.5	88	34.5
In a relationship	87	68.5	80	63.5	167	65.5
Contact with asylum applicants						
Daily	8	6.3	10	7.8	18	7.1
Weekly	26	20.5	21	16.4	47	18.4
Monthly	22	17.3	17	13.3	39	15.3
Yearly	24	18.9	17	13.3	41	16.1
A couple of times	18	14.2	34	26.6	52	20.4
Not at all	29	22.8	29	22.7	58	22.8

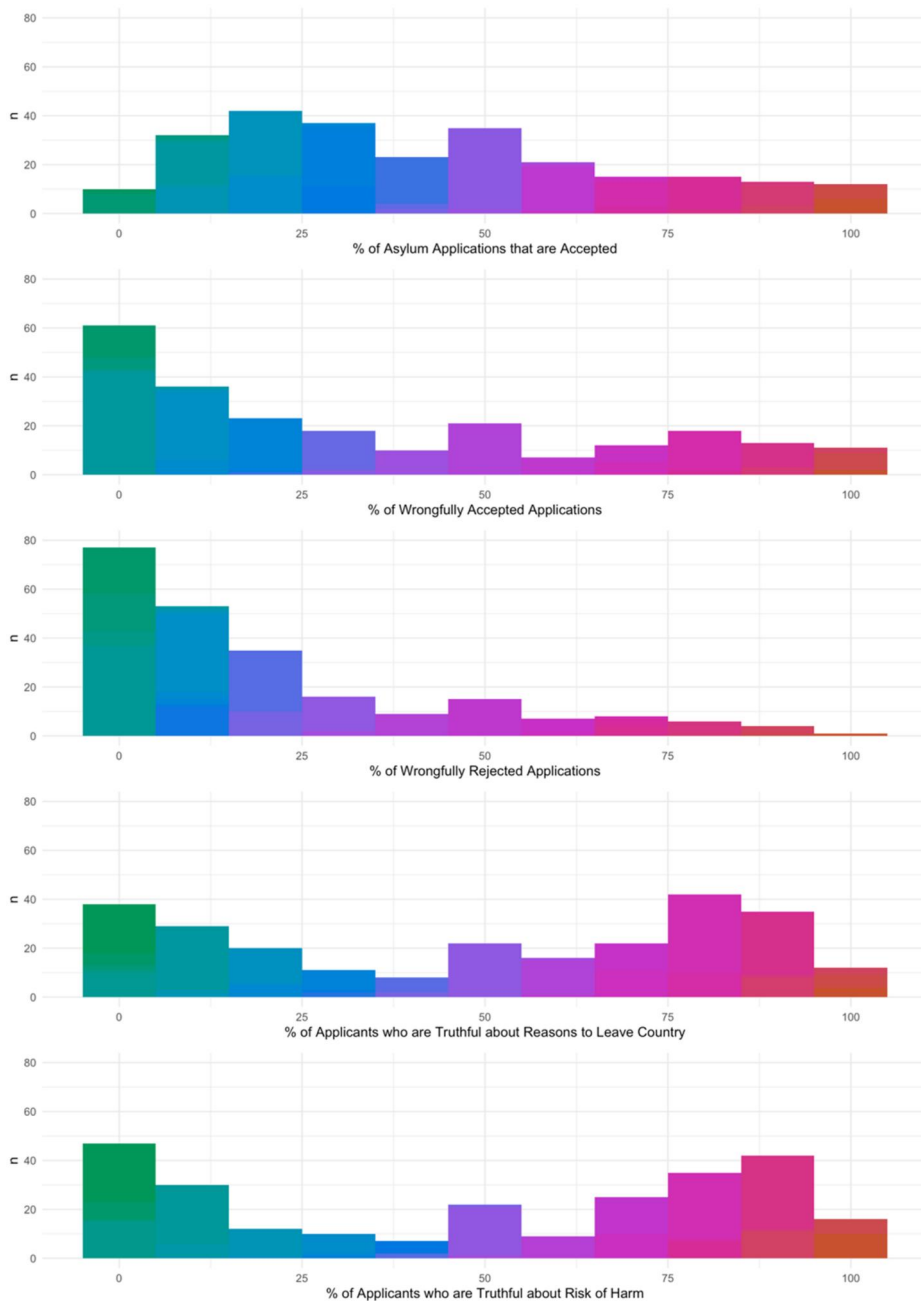


Figure 1. Histograms for respondents' beliefs about the percentage of asylum applications that are accepted, the percentage of asylum applications that are wrongfully accepted, the percentage of applications that are wrongfully rejected, the percentage of asylum applicants that are truthful about their reasons to leave their home country, and the percentage of applicants that are truthful about their fear of harm if returned to their home country.

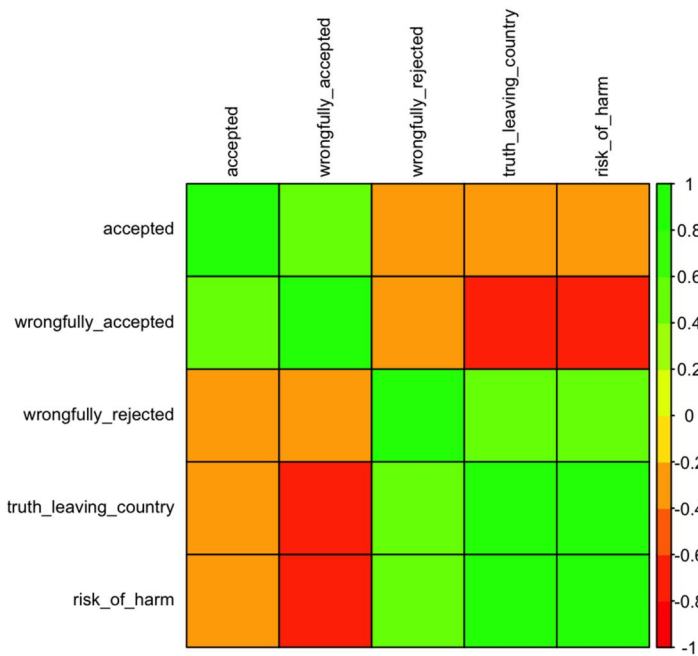


Figure 2. Correlation plot for variables measuring beliefs about decisions on asylum applications and about asylum applicant's truthfulness.

lower estimates of wrongful acceptance than those in the neutral, oppose, and strongly oppose groups (all adjusted $ps \leq .001$). Similarly, respondents who favored immigration reported significantly lower estimates than those who opposed or strongly opposed immigration (all adjusted $ps < .001$). No difference emerged between the two most restrictive groups.

Immigration attitudes were also significantly associated with beliefs about wrongful rejection rates, $\chi^2(4) = 76.90, p < .001, \eta^2_H = .29, 95\% \text{ CI } [.20, .40]$. Post-hoc tests showed that respondents who favored or strongly favored immigration reported significantly higher estimates of wrongful rejections than those who opposed or strongly opposed immigration (all adjusted $ps < .001$), again reflecting polarization between lenient and restrictive immigration attitudes.

Similarly, immigration attitudes were strongly associated with beliefs about applicants' truthfulness when describing their reasons for leaving their home country, $\chi^2(4) = 118.41, p < .001, \eta^2_H = .46, 95\% \text{ CI } [.36, .58]$. Dunn tests indicated that respondents who favored or strongly favored immigration reported significantly higher perceived truthfulness than those who opposed or strongly opposed immigration (all adjusted $ps < .001$).

A comparable pattern emerged for perceived truthfulness regarding risk of harm if returned, $\chi^2(4) = 124.05, p < .001, \eta^2_H = .48, 95\% \text{ CI } [.38, .59]$, with pro-immigration respondents reporting significantly higher trust than anti-immigration respondents (all adjusted $ps < .001$).

Overall, the post-hoc analyses revealed a consistent polarization pattern: respondents with more lenient immigration attitudes perceived the asylum system as more restrictive and

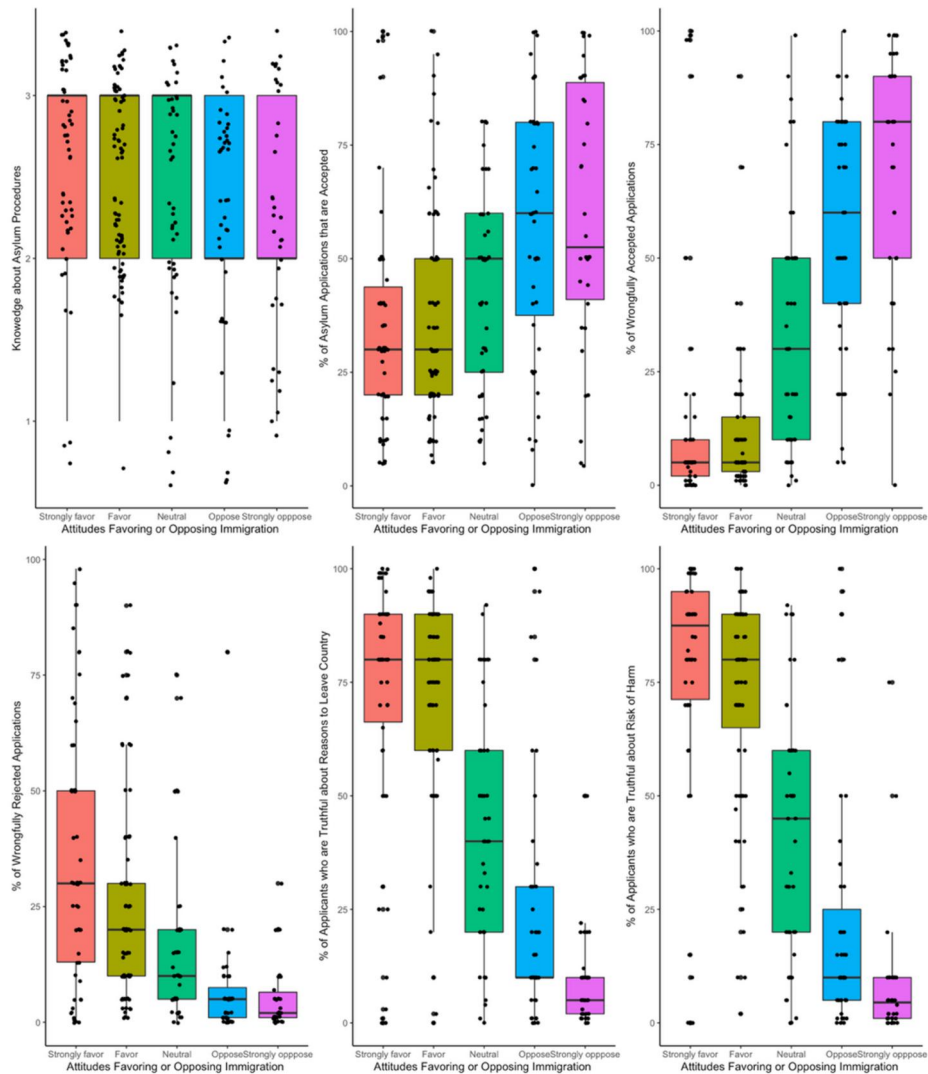


Figure 3. Boxplots illustrating the association between immigration attitudes (strongly favor, favor, neutral, oppose, strongly oppose) and, from top left to bottom right panel, knowledge about asylum procedures, the percentage of applications accepted, the percentage of wrongfully accepted applications, the percentage of wrongfully rejected applications, applicant truthfulness regarding reasons for leaving the home country, and applicant truthfulness regarding risk of harm if returned. Colors correspond directly to immigration-attitude categories shown on the x-axis. Boxes represent interquartile ranges, horizontal lines indicate medians, and points represent individual observations. Omnibus differences were tested using Kruskal–Wallis tests, followed by Dunn–Holm post-hoc comparisons. Group sample sizes and statistical tests are reported in the results section.

asylum applicants as more truthful, whereas respondents with more restrictive immigration attitudes perceived the system as more permissive and applicants as less truthful. See Figure 3 for visualizations.

Gender and age differences in immigration attitudes and asylum beliefs

In the final step, we examined gender differences using Welch's independent-samples *t*-tests and age differences using Kruskal–Wallis tests.

No significant gender differences emerged in knowledge, $t(241.38) = -1.12$, $p = .264$, $d = -0.14$, 95% CI $[-0.38, 0.11]$, or beliefs about the percentage of accepted applications, $t(247.81) = 1.31$, $p = .193$, $d = 0.16$, 95% CI $[-0.09, 0.43]$. However, men reported significantly higher estimates of wrongfully accepted applications than women, $t(237.31) = 5.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.70$, 95% CI $[0.43, 0.97]$, $M = 42.58$, $SD = 33.91$ versus $M = 21.26$, $SD = 26.28$. Conversely, women reported higher estimates of wrongfully rejected applications, $t(251.29) = -3.12$, $p = .002$, $d = -0.39$, 95% CI $[-0.64, -0.16]$, $M = 24.65$, $SD = 23.85$ versus $M = 15.74$, $SD = 21.78$. Women were also more likely than men to believe asylum applicants were truthful about their reasons for leaving, $t(249.95) = -5.18$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.65$, 95% CI $[-0.93, -0.40]$, $M = 61.23$, $SD = 30.81$ versus $M = 40.10$, $SD = 34.15$, and their risk of harm if returned, $t(248.86) = -5.42$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.68$, 95% CI $[-0.98, -0.42]$, $M = 62.43$, $SD = 31.88$ versus $M = 39.33$, $SD = 36.01$. Additionally, men were more likely to oppose immigration than women, $\chi^2(4) = 16.31$, $p = .003$.

We found a significant association between age groups and knowledge, $\chi^2(5) = 14.10$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2_H = .04$, 95% CI $[.00, .12]$. Dunn–Holm post-hoc comparisons indicated that respondents aged 65 and older reported significantly higher knowledge than those aged 25–34 ($p = .024$). No age differences emerged for beliefs about the percentage of accepted applications, $\chi^2(5) = 9.46$, $p = .092$, $\eta^2_H = .02$, 95% CI $[-0.00, .09]$. However, age was significantly associated with beliefs about wrongful acceptance rates, $\chi^2(5) = 1.24$, $p = .014$, $\eta^2_H = .04$, 95% CI $[.01, .11]$, with Dunn–Holm post-hoc comparisons revealing that respondents aged 55–64 reporting higher estimates than those aged 18–24 ($p = .026$). A similar association was found for beliefs about wrongful rejections, $\chi^2(5) = 41.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_H = .15$, 95% CI $[.09, .24]$, where Dunn–Holm post-hoc comparisons indicated that respondents aged 18–24 reported significantly higher estimates than those aged 25–34, 45–54, 55–64, and 65+ (all $ps \leq .009$). Beliefs about asylum applicants' truthfulness also varied by age. Regarding applicants' truthfulness in describing the reasons to leave their country, $\chi^2(5) = 26.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_H = .08$, 95% CI $[.04, .17]$. Dunn–Holm post-hoc comparisons indicated that respondents aged 18–24 reported significantly higher perceived truthfulness than those aged 45–54, 55–64, and 65+ (all $ps \leq .008$). Regarding applicants' truthfulness in describing the risk of harm if returned, $\chi^2(5) = 23.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_H = .07$, 95% CI $[.04, .16]$. Again, Dunn–Holm post-hoc comparisons indicated that respondents aged 18–24 reported significantly higher perceived truthfulness than those aged 45–54, 55–64, and 65+ (all $ps \leq .002$).

Discussion

In the current study, we explored how personal immigration attitudes, gender, and age influence individuals' beliefs about asylum authorities and their decisions, as well as their perceptions of asylum applicants' truthfulness. In line with the theory of motivated cognition (Kunda, 1990), which posits that people are likely to interpret and process information in ways that support their pre-existing beliefs, our findings reveal strong relationships between these individual factors and asylum-related beliefs. Specifically, we found that respondents with more lenient immigration attitudes were more likely to believe that a

lower proportion of asylum applications were accepted, that fewer accepted applications and more rejected applications were incorrect, and that asylum applicants were more truthful in their claims. In contrast, respondents with more restrictive immigration attitudes held the opposite beliefs, which aligns with existing research on motivated cognition and the influence of ideological preferences on information processing (e.g. Jost et al., 2014; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

Motivated cognition and immigration attitudes

Our findings are in line with the central tenets of motivated cognition theory (Kunda, 1990), and how ideology shapes immigration attitudes (Hannuksela et al., 2024), particularly in how respondents' ideological preferences shaped their views on the asylum system. Those with more lenient immigration attitudes tended to believe that asylum authorities were too restrictive, a higher percentage of asylum applicants were truthful, that decisions to accept were more accurate, and that decisions to reject were more inaccurate. This suggests that individuals with more lenient immigration attitudes may approach information about asylum authorities through a lens of empathy and fairness, interpreting the asylum system as being less receptive to genuine asylum applicants. In contrast, those with more restrictive immigration attitudes were more likely to overestimate the number of accepted asylum applications and question the truthfulness of asylum applicants. Importantly, the different beliefs could not be explained in terms of different levels of knowledge, providing stronger evidence of motivated cognition. Motivated cognition theory suggests that this bias is not merely a reflection of information deficits but a mechanism that reinforces ideologically motivated beliefs. It highlights the role of emotional and affective responses to immigration-related issues, which often go beyond factual information. Our findings are also in line with previous research (Canetti et al., 2016; Mancini et al., 2020; Pedersen & Hartley, 2017), which reflects a broader conservative ideological inclination to perceive the asylum system as overly permissive or prone to misuse by asylum applicants.

Gender differences in beliefs about the asylum process

The gender-related differences we observed in respondents' beliefs about asylum authorities and asylum applicants add further nuance to the discussion of immigration attitudes. In line with previous research (Polacko et al., 2024; Ponce, 2017), we found that men were more likely than women to hold restrictive views about asylum, with these views extending to their perceptions of asylum applicants' truthfulness and the accuracy of asylum decisions. Female respondents, who generally exhibited more favorable attitudes toward immigration, were more likely to believe that asylum applicants were truthful and that asylum decisions were fairer. This aligns with findings of previous research (Kobayashi & Tanaka, 2025; Shrestha et al., 2025) that suggested that women are often more empathetic and humanitarian in their approach to immigration, viewing asylum applicants through a lens of vulnerability rather than suspicion.

Age-related differences in asylum beliefs

Our study also sheds light on the role of age in shaping attitudes toward asylum and immigration. Consistent with previous research (Dražanová et al., 2024), we found that older respondents generally held more negative views about immigration and were less likely to trust asylum applicants' claims. This age-related shift in attitudes is well-documented in the literature, with older individuals being more likely to associate immigration with perceived social and economic threats (McLaren & Paterson, 2020). These attitudes might reflect broader generational differences in socialization, where older generations may have been exposed to more restrictive immigration discourses during their formative years.

Conversely, younger respondents—who are typically more educated and socially exposed to multicultural ideas by virtue of their upbringing in an era of increased globalization—tended to hold more positive views toward asylum applicants. This aligns with findings from Jeannet and Dražanová (2019), who demonstrated that exposure to egalitarian political climates during one's impressionable years fosters more favorable views on immigration later in life. Younger individuals, particularly those with higher levels of education, are often more sympathetic to the plight of asylum applicants and less likely to view them as threats to national security or economic stability. These generational differences reflect the evolving political landscape, where younger people are more likely to embrace progressive stances on immigration and asylum (Bohman & Hjerm, 2016).

Implications for policy and future research

Our findings have important implications for the development of immigration and asylum policies. Understanding how individual characteristics—such as personal immigration attitudes, gender, and age—moderate beliefs about asylum authorities can help policy-makers counteract negative and incorrect views of asylum applicants and the asylum system. For example, providing more accurate and balanced information about asylum decision-making processes might be insufficient to simultaneously mitigate the misperceptions held by individuals with restrictive and lenient immigration attitudes. Rather, public education that targets the motivated cognition of different subgroups are more likely to correct misconceptions. Indeed, our study underscores the need for communication that addresses the affective dimensions of immigration attitudes. Simply presenting factual information may not be sufficient to change people's views if their beliefs are deeply entrenched in ideological or emotional responses. A more holistic approach that considers the role of emotional motivations in shaping perceptions of asylum applicants may be necessary.

Future research should continue to explore the interplay between personal characteristics and beliefs about asylum. While our study focused on immigration attitudes, gender, and age as key predictors, other individual factors, such as different aspects of political ideology, socio-economic status, and exposure to immigration-related media, may also play a significant role in shaping beliefs about asylum authorities. Further studies could examine the influence of these factors in more diverse contexts and across different countries to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

Limitations

There are some limitations to the current study that must be acknowledged. First of all, the study is based on a convenience sample. Whereas this might not invalidate the associations uncovered in the study, the levels of measurement describing immigrant attitudes and asylum beliefs might not generalize to the general population. Another limitation is that immigration attitudes were measured with only one item, rendering it impossible to estimate the reliability of this measurement. This could mean that associations are even stronger than the ones estimated in the current study. Finally, two out of three items designed to measure knowledge about the asylum process were too easy, producing ceiling effects and decreasing variability. To some extent, this undermined the possibility to uncover relationships between immigration attitudes and asylum knowledge or discover gender and age-related differences in asylum knowledge. To our best knowledge, the present study is first exploration into the association between immigration attitudes and beliefs about asylum authorities and their decisions, a topic that warrants future research.

Conclusion

The current study contributes to our understanding of how individual factors, such as immigration attitudes, gender, and age, shape beliefs about asylum authorities and their decisions. Within the context of motivated cognition, we provide insights into how people process information about asylum systems in ways that support their pre-existing views. Our findings highlight the importance of considering the ideological and emotional factors that shape perceptions of asylum applicants and the asylum process. As debates over immigration and asylum continue to dominate political discourse worldwide, it is essential to understand these underlying dynamics in order to develop more informed, inclusive, and effective policies.

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