SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Migration discourses from the radical right: Mapping and testing potential for political mobilization

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Abstract

Radical right-wing groups are often linked to conspiratorial beliefs that can fuel political extremism but understanding how these beliefs translate into real-world action remains a challenge, as these communities tend to operate in insular networks. This study examines how migration-related narratives shape political behaviour among Italy's radical right. Using Facebook's advertising system, we recruited supporters of these movements for an experimental survey. Applying Cultural Consensus Theory (CCT), we measured group consensus on anti-migrant beliefs and tested the impact of media exposure by presenting participants with either positive or negative portrayals of migrants. Our findings reveal two key insights. First, radical right-wing communities exhibit deeply entrenched anti-migrant beliefs that function as cultural truths and are resistant to shifts in media framing. Second, negative media exposure does however amplify support for hostile political actions, including protests and political violence. Conversely, positive portrayals reduce the coherence of anti-migrant consensus but do not significantly lower preferences for confrontational actions. These results suggest that media exposure does not change the core extremist beliefs of radical right-wing supporters but instead triggers emotional responses that shape political behavior. Specifically, negative portrayals of migrants increase support for direct actions, such as protests and political violence, even though they do not reinforce or strengthen consensus on anti-migrant beliefs. This finding underscores that countering violent extremism requires more than just challenging harmful narratives—it also demands addressing the emotional triggers that translate these attitudes into mobilization and political action.

INTRODUCTION

The high level of social mobilization against migrants in Italy, manifested through actions that are often illegal or violent, presents a critical area of investigation. At the heart of these widespread sentiments are the political and symbolic discourses fueled by right-wing parties and movements. These groups capitalize on anger and anxiety, positioning themselves as defenders of the so-called native silent majority. Media messaging, particularly via social networks, poses an important tool for the radical right to distribute such narratives effectively and gauge broader support. This study delves into how such narratives impact societal attitudes and behaviors toward migrants. In particular, it examines how cultural homogeneity within radical political groups and media representations of migrants influences the propensity for political violence among Italy's political rights supporters. This inquiry is situated within a complex landscape where political attitudes toward migration intersect with phenomena such as political violence, anti-democratic behavior, and social mobilization.

Literature extensively documents how anti-migrant attitudes correlate with various forms of anti-democratic behaviors or strong mobilization including racist and xenophobic violence (Renshaw, 2018; Ryepnikowska, 2018), vigilantism by anti-migrant groups (Gardenier & Monnier, 2020) and symbolic violence where migrants are framed as the "other" and subjected to active discrimination and exclusion (Amroussia et al., 2022; Weber, 2016). Concurrently, the rise of right-wing populist and anti-migrant discourses has also led to the normalization of anti-migrant sentiments in public discourses (Kirchhoff & Lorenz, 2018).

While far-right political behavior might pose certain concerns to democratic integrity, the dynamics that are the source of such political behavior are complex and multifaceted. Yet, the literature has often pointed out a series of diverse factors that forge the political attitudes toward migration and minority rights, such as the influence of political elites in shaping public opinion toward stereotypical depiction of marginalized groups (Cyzmara, 2020; McCann & Jones-Correa, 2020), ideological affiliation, a strict association with far-right parties (Rubio-Carbonero, 2020), economic concerns such as job competition and wage stagnation (Cochrane & Nevitte, 2014), cultural fears, such as the perceived threat to national identity and security (Finley & Esposito, 2020) and media representations of foreigners that might enhance or reduce anti-migrant attitudes and beliefs (Schemer, 2012). These elements contribute to the formation of political attitudes, which are subsequently associated with political action. However, while factors like ideology, political elite manipulation, economic concerns, or media influence help to identify why there is a variation of political behaviors toward migrants, they offer little explanation about how these attitudes shape and create political action. In other words, they do not fully elucidate the dynamics involved in the process of attitude formation and expression. To better understand this process, it is necessary to see attitudes as socially and discursively situated. The attitudes most likely to trigger political action are those that are shared among a group and seen as self-evident truths. Understanding the dynamics of political attitudes requires an exploration of the patterns of salience and consensus within a group regarding such attitudes—and in particular, how a group of people prioritizes anti-immigrant attitudes, the degree of agreement within the group, and their shared understanding of these attitudes. These dynamics capture the evolving patterns of agreement within the anti-migrant attitudes, providing deeper insight into how political behavior and actions toward migrants are shaped and manifested.

This article delves deeply into the discursive dynamics of political attitudes and radical political actions. It investigates the influence of group consensus and group salience regarding anti-migrant discourses by employing an experimental survey methodology. Our survey categorized participants into two distinct cohorts based on their initial attitudes toward migrants: like-minded far-right individuals and non-like-minded individuals who are not supporting radical right-wing ideologies. Within each cohort, participants were randomly assigned to

one of three treatment groups: one exposed to a treatment designed to potentially increase agreement and salience of anti-migrant discourses; another group exposed to a treatment that potentially reduces salience and agreement with anti-migrant discourse; and a control group. Through Cultural Consensus Theory (CCT) (Batchelder & Romney, 1986) we were able to measure group levels of consensus and salience for each specific discourse item and the relative individual cultural competency in relation to such discourses (or the degree to which each individual belief aligns most closely with the whole group). Statistical tests identified significant differences across the treatment groups and examined that these dynamics are associated with hostile behaviors. Furthermore, this allowed us to determine whether such behaviors can be prevented through different approaches to public discourses on migrants.

Research gaps and relevance

A particular focus of contemporary research on the radical right has been on the strategies and electoral success of parties, though increasingly scholars also focus on the radical right as a social movement (Caiani & Della Porta, 2011; Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019). Studies have shown that the rise of the radical right is not exclusively a demand-side phenomenon driven by public opinion, but rather that the framing of radical right discourses, nationalism, and grievances are shaped by elite political actors (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Consequently, one of the most frequently postulated successes of far-right actors lies in communication strategies that re-frame public discourses and policy conflicts.

Many examples of such successes stem from the area of migration and minority rights: The banning of minaret construction in Switzerland by direct vote, the so-called burqa bans in France and Belgium, the Romaphobia (Cervi & Tejedor, 2020), and the anti-refugee rhetoric in Italy (Iocco et al., 2020) can be seen as examples where migrants were framed as potential threats to security and welfare systems. These broadly publicized policy changes are seen as normalizing or mainstreaming far-right discourses (Cervi et al., 2020; Kallis, 2013; Mondon & Winter, 2020). Mainstreaming and radicalization of far-right discourses have often been shown to be accomplished via social media platforms like Facebook (Heft et al., 2022). Social media platforms are seen as an opportunity to shape identities and attitudes (Ekman, 2019) and to socialize their participants into far-right narratives (Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018). These attempts have been shown to be particularly successful in countries experiencing high migrant influx (Heidenreich et al., 2020), and anti-immigrant violence is generally influenced by the efficiency of government institutions in dealing with migration (Ziller & Goodman, 2020). In this light, studying radical right supporters' attitudes on social media is a promising perspective. Studying such processes is especially relevant in light of warnings about the potential of the radical right to gain votes, influence political outcomes, or even incite political violence.

An obstacle in studying these attitudes is that people with more radical views belong to self-sealing communities, making them hard to reach with traditional research tools like surveys. Studies have shown that community building around conspiracy beliefs (van Raemdonck, 2019), and far-right attitudes (Klein & Muis, 2019) has been particularly successful on social media platforms like Facebook. Such online communities can both lead to the socialization of a particular set of attitudes and mobilize individuals toward political or social action (Rottweiler & Gill, 2022; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018). To reach groups vulnerable to such discourses, this study uses the Facebook advertising system to recruit far-right survey participants. It then examines participants' anti-migration attitudes more deeply by considering different experimental treatments and finally tests the potential for political action.

In applying this design, the study focuses on Italy. The selection of Italy as the focal case for this study is underpinned by its distinctive ideological, geographical, and political

characteristics. Italy's political landscape has undergone significant evolution, notably marked by the mainstreaming of the far-right, beginning with the entry of Berlusconi into politics in the 1990s, and culminating in the election of Fratelli d'Italia's Meloni as Prime Minister (Zulianello, 2022). This historical progression underscores the entrenched presence and influence of far-right ideologies in Italy, distinguishing it within the European context due to its ideological diversity, geographic position, and high levels of social mobilization.

1. *Ideological diversity and strength of the far-right*: The ideological spectrum of Italy's right-wing is notably diverse, encompassing neo-fascist movements like Casa Pound, social right-wing parties such as Fratelli d'Italia, regionalist parties represented by the Northern League and anti-establishment parties such as the Five Star Movement (Monaco, 2023). Italy's diverse right-wing ideologies offer fertile ground for exploring how varied anti-migrant narratives within the radical right shape and influence migration discourse.
2. *Geographic position and migrant influx*: Italy's geographical position as a primary entry point to Europe from North Africa places it at the forefront of the migration influx,[1] establishing it as a critical juncture for migration-related challenges and debates. Italy's strategic location and status as Europe's busiest migration route heighten the relevance of its migration discourse, making it an ideal case study for examining migration management and integration challenges.
3. *High level of social mobilization*: Italy's experience with social mobilization, particularly concerning migration, is another pivotal aspect that underscores its suitability as a case study. The country has the highest absolute level of far-right protest mobilization in Europe, according to Castelli Gattinara et al. (2022), highlighting a significant degree of political activism against migrants. This phenomenon is exacerbated by factors such as the refugee influx to Italy from the Mediterranean (Campo et al., 2024), the economic cleavage between North and South (Ozzano, 2019), and polarized media discourses (Iannelli et al., 2020).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES ON RIGHT-WING DISCOURSES IN ITALY

It is worth noting that while a strong association between negative attitudes toward immigration and right-wing supporters exists, such attitudes are intricately intertwined with a multitude of concerns (Wodak, 2015). Untangling this association requires a thorough exploration of the ideological, social, and symbolic meanings that right-wing actors attribute to the topic of migration.

From a constructivist perspective, discourses play a central role in shaping the symbolic construction of migrants and immigration. These discourses draw upon concerns related to cultural preservation, economic competition, national identity, homeland security, and more. They represent essential elements in human activities as they define the content and strategies of communication between individuals (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006). At a cognitive level, discourses serve as manifestations that reflect personal values and beliefs. Through this cognitive lens, we can discern the substance of these discourses to uncover personal beliefs and values that have been transformed into cultural truth.

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[1]https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2023/12/11/central-med-still-busiest-migration-route-in-2023-frontex_f7629ad4-e4cb-405a-b1aa-b6350844dab0.html#:~:text=The%20Central%20Mediterranean%20from%20north,agency%20Frontex%20said%20on%20Monday.

Yet media significantly shapes public perceptions of immigrants and refugees, as their framing influences both consensus and the salience of these discourses. Studies have shown that media coverage of immigration tends to focus on negative aspects such as crime and terrorism, which can lead to a negative perception of immigrants and refugees (Esses et al., 2013). When media coverage of immigration increases, it tends to become a more relevant issue in the minds of the public and policymakers. This can lead to changes in policy and public opinion. Our study uses Facebook as a recruitment mechanism and then explores the impacts of media messaging on anti-immigration attitudes among the recruited participants, who are very likely to also be exposed to media messaging in their everyday online activity.

Scholars have often pointed out that portrayal of minorities in negative roles, such as in relation to crime and terrorism (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman & Rojecki, 2000), contributes to the triggering of negative attitudes as, for example, their de-humanization (Esses et al., 2013), increasing negative stereotypic attitudes (Schemer, 2012) or increasing stereotypical portrayal (Dixon & Azocar, 2007) or bias perception (Dixon, 2008). In terms of discourses, this can be translated into an increase in collective negative perceptions about migrants (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). In this respect, it would be possible to hypothesize that exposure to negative depictions of migrants in the news, where migrants are depicted as being either poor, criminal, or violent subjects, increases the right-wing support consensus and salience of discourses that are linking foreigners to negative stereotypes, attributes, or depiction.

> **H1.** Right-wing supporters who are exposed to news articles that link foreigners to crimes are expected to have a higher level of consensus and more-homogeneous responses towards anti-immigrant, racial and xenophobic discourses (than the other treatment groups).

Additionally, research in the field of literature has highlighted a reciprocal relationship between media exposure and perceptions of immigrants. It has been noted that increased exposure to positive news and representations of minorities can contribute to a reduction in biased racial perceptions and attitudes (Dixon, 2008; Schemer, 2012). As a result, individuals may develop a more inclusive and empathetic outlook, fostering greater acceptance and understanding of immigrants within society. This emphasizes the influential role that media narratives and portrayals can have in shaping public opinion and attitudes toward immigrant communities. While this might be the case for a sample of participants with heterogeneous political views, an effect of positive reframing on migration might still be present but be less strong for specific right-wing groups as also observed by Schemer (2012). In this respect, we can expect that positive news, while not impacting the general consensus toward migrants, might reduce the salience of migrant negative discourses.

> **H2.** Right-wing supporters who are exposed to news articles that link foreigners to positive action are expected to have more-heterogeneous responses towards anti-immigrant, racial and xenophobic discourses (than the other treatment groups).

Increased salience on anti-immigrant discourses can shape public opinion and influence the way people perceive migrants. If these discourses are predominately negative, they contribute to an atmosphere of hostility and animosity toward migrants (Esses et al., 2013). In this respect, it is possible to hypothesize a direct relationship between homogeneous agreement on anti-immigrant discourses and hostile political actions toward migrants either in the form of increased political mobilization, acceptance of anti-democratic practices, or political violence.

> **H3.** Increased salience and consensus on anti-immigrant discourses leads to greater support for hostile political actions towards migrants, including increased

political mobilization, acceptance of anti-democratic practices or political violence.

Research has shown that salience on pro-migrant discourses can shape public opinion and influence the way people perceive migrants. When pro-migrant discourses are consistently positive, they can create a climate of acceptance and inclusion toward migrants (Hansen, 2020). However, the effect of consistently positive pro-migrant discourses on right-wing supporters may be limited. Right-wing supporters may hold entrenched ideologies and beliefs, such as right-wing authoritarianism, nationalism, and neoliberalism, that are not easily swayed by positive pro-migrant discourses (Cheung-Blunden, 2020). In this respect, we did not expect any effect between lower levels of salience and consensus and rejection of hostile behavior.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: CULTURAL CONSENSUS THEORY

The present study employs a cross-sectional experimental survey design to examine the cultural truth, cultural salience, and cultural knowledge pertaining to migration among individuals aligned with right-wing ideologies. The analysis of the survey is conducted in accordance with CCT methodology (Batchelder & Romney, 1986; Romney et al., 1987; Romney & Batchelder, 1986) considering ordinal data case analysis (Anders & Batchelder, 2015).

This process allows us to delve deeper into the shared understandings and perspectives held by right-wing sustainers within the context of migration. By employing CCT methodology, we can unravel the underlying right-wing group consensus and salience that underpins these discourses, shedding light on the complex interplay between individual cognition, collective beliefs, the construction of symbolic meaning, and political intentions.

CCT, strictly defined, encompasses a collection of statistical frameworks that seek to gauge the cultural knowledge and beliefs inherent in a community. It utilizes a model-based approach to aggregating survey responses from informants regarding a specific topic (Batchelder & Anders, 2012). Its central focus lies in the identification of shared patterns of knowledge and the determination of the degree to which individuals within a group concur with specific beliefs or concepts (e.g., Romney & Batchelder, 1986).

In a broader sense, CCT finds its foundations in cognitive anthropology (e.g., D'Andrade, 1984). In this respect, CCT rests upon the premise that cultural beliefs and knowledge are acquired through social learning and disseminated across individuals within a particular social group (D'Andrade, 1984). It essentially posits the existence of a common understanding, or consensus, among individuals regarding the world, society, and culture.

According to CCT, individuals encode cultural knowledge through processes of socialization, encompassing communication, observation, and active participation in cultural practices within their community. This shared cultural knowledge molds the beliefs, values, norms, and expectations of individuals, thus establishing a shared framework of comprehension within the culture.

Consequently, the notion of cultural consensus models emerges, offering estimations for culturally appropriate responses to a network of interrelated questions in situations where the correct answers are not predetermined.

Hence, according to CCT, culture is a quantifiable entity, assessed through the lens of cultural consensus, which scrutinizes whether a specific group shares a consensus regarding answers to a set of questions (Romney & Batchelder, 1986). Such shared knowledge is referred to as "cultural truth" (Batchelder & Anders, 2012) representing the collective understanding among respondents concerning specific aspects of culture. This also implies that consensus knowledge among respondents does not necessarily correspond to factual objective truth.

The reliability of such cultural truth derives from its presupposition of a homogeneous and shared cultural understanding of an item within a community. This understanding can be measured by the extent to which individuals offer similar responses to similar items on different occasions, determining the salience of such items within the group. However, if notable heterogeneity in item responses exists, it indicates that not all dimensions of shared cultural knowledge hold equal importance across the group (Anders & Batchelder, 2015). This phenomenon is termed "cultural difficulty," highlighting the varying levels of consensus within the community.

Within a group, cultural truth and cultural salience are shared and possessed by individuals. Yet such cultural competence represents how each individual is aligned to such collective cultural truth. Yet, while cultural truth provides insights into the dynamics of cultural consensus by revealing the shared understanding among respondents regarding specific aspects of a domain, cultural difficulty arises from the realization that not all dimensions of shared cultural understanding are equally salient and unanimously agreed upon within the community. Finally, an individual's cultural competence indicates the degree of comprehension of culturally correct responses of each individual.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

To capture the diverse discourses on migration prevalent in the public sphere, the survey adopted the Q-methodology idea of "concourse" (Stephenson, 1953) to build a survey considering a selection of statements that are representative of diverse discourses (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006). The survey encapsulated the nuanced perspectives that emerge within right-wing groups considering internal discourses. The final survey's statements were built based on a larger concourse of statements that were extracted through web information extraction tools and Large Language Model (LLM). The web information extraction was operated utilizing a Facebook profile under the common Italian name "Antonio Rossi." Through this profile, we engaged with multiple right-wing Facebook groups, as, for example, "Lega Salvini Premier," "Destra e Patriotti," or "Fratelli d'Italia." Our approach involved liking these groups and requesting membership to gain access to their content.

As a member of these groups, we embarked on a detailed examination of posts, guided by keywords that encapsulate the dichotomy of "US" versus "THEM," as delineated by Caiani and Kröll (2017). Our search strategy involved filtering posts within our avatar profile's search parameters specifically tailored to our selected groups, focusing on keywords reflecting socio-economic, welfare, security, and cultural-identitarian dimensions. The keywords employed for identifying relevant posts for example included:

- Under the category THEM: "foreigners", "clandestine", "Muslims", "EU," "left-wing", "terrorists", "criminals".
- Under the category US: "Italians", "work", "sovereignty", "integration".

Through this process, we collected 253 anti-migrant posts. After discarding posts that were nonsensical, anachronistic, non-phrasal, contentless, context-dependent, or containing inappropriate or insulting content, we curated a preliminary selection of 150 statements relevant to our study. These were then first reduced to 50 statements with the help of LLM, and then to 10 statements through researchers' coding.

These 150 statements were refined to an intermediary dataset of 50 statements with the assistance of LLM (i.e., ChatGPT-4o), which categorized these pre-selected statements into discursive themes as identified by Fernandes-Jesus et al. (2023). These themes are briefly outlined as follows:

- *Exclusion by Differentiating Immigrants*: Framing migrants as guests who, despite their contributions, must adhere to native customs and face social exclusion.
- *Multiple and Intersected Identity Threats*: Viewing immigration as a multifaceted threat to Italian cultural, economic, and existential security, thereby legitimizing anti-immigration sentiments through perceived threats to white, Italian, and national identities.
- *Justifying Exclusionary Solidarity Based on Ownership Rights*: The notion that native citizens have the prerogative to prioritize over immigrants in resource and welfare allocation, rooted in the belief that non-migrants are the legitimate "owners" of the country and its cultural heritage.

This categorization was achieved by uploading the Fernandes-Jesus et al. (2023) article and the anti-migrant statements to ChatGPT-4o with the prompt: "Considering the anti-migrant thematic categorization from Fernandes-Jesus et al. (2023) [uploaded in ChatGPT4o], please cluster the provided Facebook posts and comments into the outlined categories." While ChatGPT-4o might seem to be a non-reliable instrument, empirical research shows that, in fact, it can partially automate the research and identification of prototypical discourse sentences that constitute a discourse (Gilardi et al., 2023). The reliability of ChatGPT choices was checked by running the same prompt at different times, and VPN locations. In addition, we conducted a manual plausibility check to see whether the results were logically consistent with the prompt.

To form a final set of 10 statements, these 50 resulting statements underwent coding by five independent coders. To assist the coders with the coherent framework, we asked LLM to identify an underlining framework across the sub-selected 50 statements using the idea of System Justification Theory (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994), which considers individuals as defenders of the status quo, even if this conflicts with their own interests. ChatGPT-4o proposed four further subcategories of "cultural threat," "economic burden," "security threat," and "conspiracy theory" perspective. Coders then grouped similar statements according to the proposed subcategories (Table S1).

In addition to Q-statements, we also incorporated three hypothetical scenarios that exemplified varying degrees of anti-immigration attitudes manifested in actual political behavior (Table S2). These scenarios delved into political mobilization, anti-democratic actions, and political violence. Regarding political mobilization, our focus was on the potential participation in anti-immigration demonstrations. Concerning anti-democratic behaviors, we presented a scenario where the Government disregards the rule of law, as exemplified by the case of the Italian government refusing to allow a migrant ship to dock in the country. Lastly, the political violence scenario explored the possibility of storming and occupying an asylum home. For each of these scenarios, respondents were asked about their perception of legitimacy, willingness to actively participate, and whether they would publicly take a stance in favor or against such actions.

For participant recruitment, we utilized the Facebook advertising system to specifically target individuals who share anti-immigration sentiments.

Initially, we aimed to analyze the interest criteria by mapping information, focusing on the interests of members in Facebook groups sympathetic to the radical right through automated services. However, we encountered challenges due to the limited availability of public and searchable profiles. Many members of right-wing groups belong to private groups (where only members can view the participants and content) or have set their profiles to private, restricting access to non-friends.

We, therefore, focused on a second selection criterion based on geographic location (Italy), demographic targets (males and females above 18 years old), and possible interests tied to potential radical right supporters, including affiliations with subcultures like "Ultras," themes of "Patriotism," and support for soccer teams with significant radical right fan bases, such as

"Hellas Verona" or "Lazio." The Facebook advertising campaign was initially directed toward these specific subgroups of users and later adjusted to reach a broader audience, utilizing an appealing ad system with images that evoked patriotic elements in response to the low response rate (Figures S1 and S2). As part of our ad campaign strategy, we created a new Facebook group page titled "La voce degli italiani" [The voice of the Italians]. This page was necessary for running ads on Facebook and served as a central hub for information and engagement. As a complementary strategy of data collection, we posted our survey advertisement link directly to public Facebook groups that aligned with far-right-wing ideologies and interests such as "Giorgia Meloni" or "Matteo Salvini" public pages.

The ads sent through the Facebook group page were designed to capture the attention of potential far-right wing sympathizers with profile pictures that were AI-generated considering the key words "Italian flag," "people," "patriotism," "heroic realism." By clicking on the ads, users were directed to a survey link. On the first page of the survey, participants were informed about the number of questions and the estimated completion time. Participants were also asked to provide their socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, education level, ideology). This allowed us to subgroup participants according to their political preferences and collect control variables for our analysis.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGIES

To infer on the results, we divided the participants into three groups: a first treatment group in which participants were invited to read headlines news in which a foreigner was responsible for a heinous crime (Figure S6); a second treatment group in which participants were invited to read headline news reporting a heroic act accomplished by a foreigner (Figure S7) and a control group that did not receive any treatment.

Our hypothesis testing was divided into two analytical steps:

1. To assess the direction of anti-migrant discourses (H1 and H2), we first examined the disparity in cultural salience and consensus toward such discourses. This analysis determines if there are any notable shifts or significant post-treatment differences in consensus and salience regarding anti-migrant items, as per CCT. By comparing the directional changes in item responses between the two treatment groups and the control group, we can evaluate the variation in discourse consensus and salience between the treatments and the control. Once the directional differences were established, we proceeded to test the cultural competence of each group's respondents using unpaired difference tests.
2. H3 was tested separately using multivariate multiple-regression analysis, considering three dependent variables related to political behavior: political mobilization, government anti-democratic behavior, and political violence. The relevant predictor on discourses' cultural consensus and saliency was measured as individual group competence in anti-immigrant attitudes, identified through CCT analysis of 10 considerations on anti-migrant discourses within each treatment and control cohort.[2] Additionally, we included five control variables in the regression.

Sample and data quality

To ensure data quality and participant completion, a response was considered complete only if survey progression reached 100%. Control for response uniqueness was implemented by

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[2]As outlined in the OSF registration we decided to operate a regression for each cohort as the variable 'cultural competence' is independently measured within each cohort group.

checking for repeated IP addresses and location coordinates. The sample size of 493 radical right-wing respondents (Table S4) was obtained through a sub-stratification of a larger sample, taking into account variations in self-reported political preferences (on a left–right axis), gender, education, and age. We monitored the balance on these variables while the survey was in the field, with the ambition of obtaining a sample that deviates from representative population surveys by 20 percentage points.

Based on previous experiences with narrow population targets, such as supporters of conspiracy theories (Iannelli et al., 2020), we anticipated being able to gather a dataset of 1000 complete respondents within a timeframe of 53 days. Our fieldwork time was a bit longer collecting 950 responses in 66 days (from July 21 to September 24, 2024). Population sample details are in the online appendix.

To ensure sufficient statistical power, we conducted an a priori power analysis using the GPower3.1.9.7 software (http://www.gpower.hhu.de/) which was pre-registered in OSF repository (Veri & Maier, 2024, https://osf.io/5k8dh). Our data sample overtook the pre-registered minimum number of 400 participant threshold by collecting an overall full respondent dataset of 950 respondents: 496 radical right cohort and 454 non-radical right cohort. For data collection details, raw data, and replication files, see https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/18KTPN and https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UG4GTE.

Results: Effects on group discurses consensus

The analysis was carried out considering the right-wing and the non-right-wing cohort. To assess the direction of anti-migrant discourses, respectively the response to a treatment depicting bad news on migrants (H1) and good news on migrants (H2), we first checked whether there were any notable treatment shifts in cultural consensus regarding anti-migrant items, as per CCT (Figure 1). Then, to test significant differences in both consensus and saliency, we relied on the individual cultural competence of the group's respondents using the Wilcoxon-unpaired test. Each treatment group was tested independently against the control group, and independently against the two treatment groups (Table 1).

As displayed in Figure 1, we observed virtually no differences in response direction and confidence between treatment levels. This implies the existence of cultural truths in both the right-wing and non-right-wing cohorts which were not altered by treatment. In addition, right-wing respondents are symmetrically opposite to the non-right-wing cohort. This highlights a unique and opposite cultural truth on migrants between political cohorts across all spectrums of anti-migrant discourses proposed by Fernandes-Jesus et al. (2023). Group "cultural truth" here refers to the alignment of right-wing participants with anti-migrant views, while non-right-wing participants tend toward a more accepting stance on migration (Table S8). The results also highlight that the underlying cultural consensus is not easily altered by the means of reading good or bad news about migrants in both cohorts, showing that cultural consensus is deeply ingrained in people's minds.

To check the degree of cultural saliency—or how homogeneous responses are—we ran a Wilcoxon-unpaired test considering differences in individual cultural competencies on the group cultural truth. This corresponded to anti-migrant discourses in the right-wing cohort and opposition to anti-migrant discourses in the non-right-wing cohort (Table 1).

Cultural competence, expressed as a mean standard error, delineates the extent to which an individual's comprehension aligns or diverges from the group's interpretation of truth. This deviation is also adjusted by the item salience parameter. If an individual's response closely aligns with the collective understanding of truth, their cultural competence standard error posterior mean would be low, indicating minimal deviation and strong convergence in agreement with the group. Conversely, a high standard error posterior mean value signifies a significant deviation, meaning the individual's response is rather distant from the group truth. Table 1 shows that
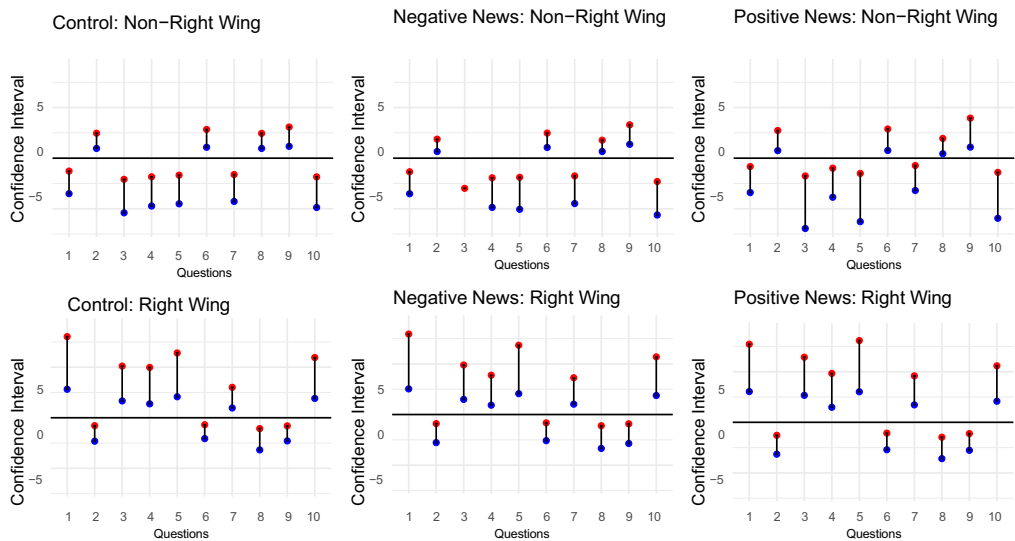
FIGURE 1   Respondent cultural truth consensus.

TABLE 1   Wilcoxon-unpaired test cultural competency.

Cohort	Treatment group	Mean	Variance	*p*-Value positive vs. negative	*p*-Value positive vs. control	*p*-Value negative vs. control
Right-wing	Positive media exposure	3.33	2.13	<.001***	<.001***	.7305
	Negative media exposure	2.37	1.09			
	Control	2.15	.47			
Non-right wing	Positive media exposure	9.54	203.02	.1821	.2305	.4885
	Negative media exposure	11.50	307.53			
	Control	13.18	498.71			

***$p < 0.001$.

within the right-wing cohort groups, the control group has the lowest mean value (2.15) denoting the strongest homogeneous responses. This suggests the highest degree of cultural competencies in agreeing with anti-migrant discourses among all cohorts. The treatment groups exposed to positive and negative news with, respectively, a mean value of 3.33 and 2.37 display a stronger disagreement level over group cultural truth. Surprisingly, these patterns indicate that exposure to negative migrant representation does not influence anti-migrant consensus, *failing to support H1*. Specifically, right-wing supporters exposed to news articles linking foreigners to crimes do not exhibit stronger individual competences toward anti-migrant discourses compared to the other treatment groups. In contrast, our directional expectation set out in *H2* on participants having fewer individual competences within the right-wing cohort exposed to positive news *is sustained* by our analyses. In this respect, the positive treatment group results are less cohesive than the control, with the difference being significant (*p*-value <.001). This aligns with the expectation of Guess and Coppock (2020) that exposure to differing views can lead to attitude updating rather than participants becoming more entrenched in their original beliefs.

The same trend is not observed in the non-right-wing cohort, where news exposure shows no substantial differences compared to the control group. However, it is noteworthy that cultural competence within the non-right-wing cohort is significantly more heterogeneous than in the right-wing cohort, suggesting the existence of multiple consensual truth combinations within this group, presumably due to their broader ideological diversity.

Exploratory analysis: Treatment and action preferences

This exploratory analysis examines whether exposure to positive or negative portrayals of migrants influences anti-migrant preferences, specifically regarding political mobilization in the form of anti-migrant protests, anti-migrant institutional actions, and anti-migrant political violence.

Table 2 reveals that individuals exposed to negative portrayals are more likely to support direct actions, such as protests and violent confrontations against migrants, compared to both the control group and those exposed to positive portrayals. While negative exposure does not increase cultural consensus on anti-migrant attitudes (as discussed above, see Table 1), it does heighten preferences for hostile actions (Table 2). Positive portrayals, on the contrary, reduce consensus on anti-migrant discourse but do not significantly decrease support for violent actions compared to the control group. While positive portrayals do not reduce support for direct actions (protests or violence), they appear to channel motivations toward institutional anti-migrant actions in the form of voting for an anti-migrant government ($p = .09401$), potentially redirecting negative sentiments to less confrontational forms of action.

These findings suggest a potential hypothesis: within the radical right cohort, negative portrayals do not amplify anti-migrant consensus (likely already at a ceiling) but instead act as a catalyst for direct action. Notably, this effect is absent in the non-radical right-wing cohort, where both positive and negative portrayals have minimal impact on political action preferences (Table S9). This difference likely stems from the non-radical cohort's lack of pre-existing anti-migrant sentiments, meaning they lack the ideological framework necessary for these portrayals to evoke intense, confrontational behaviors.

Results on political actions

H3 proposes a strong link between anti-migrant discourse and support for anti-migrant actions, namely on how negative portrayals may drive preferences for hostile actions. To this end, we conducted a multivariate analysis (Table 3), examining attitudes toward hostile actions, and connected them with levels of individual competence on anti-migrant cultural truths. The analysis controls for demographic variables and ideology. Additionally, since ideology likely moderates the effect of anti-migrant competence by providing a pre-existing framework for anti-migrant discourses, an interaction term was included.

To improve interpretability, we centered the ideology variable due to an interaction in our model. The scale starts at 8 (right) and goes to 11 (radical right), so centering shifts the mean to 0, providing a meaningful reference point within the right-to-radical right spectrum. We adjusted the interpretation of the anti-migrant cultural competence variable by inverting its sign, without re-coding it. Higher values represent a stronger consensus on anti-migrant issues. As a robustness check, we ran a Tobit model which provides similar (stronger) results (Table S7).

The analysis reveals significant insights into how salience and consensus on anti-immigrant discourses influence support for hostile political actions toward migrants.

A consistent finding across *positive exposure* to migrant news and the *control group* is the negative interaction between ideology and anti-migrant competence. The interaction implies that as individuals become more ideologically extreme, the additional effect of competence in

TABLE 2 Wilcoxon-unpaired test, hostile actions: Radical right.

Hostile action preference	Treatment group	Means	Variance	*p*-Value positive vs. negative	*p*-Value positive vs. control	*p*-Value negative vs. control
Political violence	Positive	1.85	35.18	.1724	.6879	.08395^
	Negative	2.44	35.13			
	Control	1.61	32.86			
Anti-migrant government	Positive	5.29	17.02	.3516	.09401^	.779
	Negative	5.28	19.91			
	Control	6	12.89			
Political mobilization	Positive	3.67	26.95	.008**	.5282	.0049**
	Negative	5.15	20.60			
	Control	3.65	26.91			

^$p < 0.1$.

**$p < 0.01$.

anti-migrant discourse on supporting hostile actions diminishes. In other words, individuals who are already radicalized may have reached a saturation point; being further aligned with anti-migrant cultural competence does not significantly increase their support for anti-migrant actions. Furthermore, in the case of extreme violent anti-migrant confrontations, neither cultural competence nor ideology plays a significant role. This suggests that factors driving violent actions may be less connected to ideology and alignment with anti-migrant discourses, potentially involving other emotional or situational triggers instead.

In contrast, exposure to negative migrant news shows that both ideology and anti-migrant competence influence hostile actions. This indicates that negative news exposure tends to override the saturation effect observed in the control and positive treatment groups, suggesting that increased salience and consensus on anti-immigrant discourses lead to greater support for hostile political actions toward migrants, *supporting H3*. This aligns with the idea that negative media exposure intensifies reactions, especially among those with high competence in anti-migrant discourse and extreme ideological stances. It is also important to highlight that within the negative treatment group, we observe a stronger influence of both consensus on anti-migrant discourses and ideology on the most direct forms of action, namely violent behavior and social mobilization. This suggests that negative portrayals of migrants fuel direct bottom-up mobilization.

When comparing these findings to the non-right-wing cohort ([Table S10]), the effect observed in the radical right is absent. In the non-right-wing group, negative news does not significantly increase violent actions among right-leaning individuals, suggesting a lack of the expected emotional shift toward violence. However, center-right individuals still show relatively higher support for violence, even with pro-migrant views—a trend consistent across treatments. These results could reflect a limitation of the survey instrument, which was designed primarily to detect anti-migrant consensus, rather than specifically capturing pro-migrant discourses.

DISCUSSION

Our analyses reveal two key points.

First, neither exposure to negative nor positive portrayals of immigrants leads to greater consensus on anti-migrant discourse. Rather, news exposure slightly increases heterogeneity indicating attitude updating among some but not all participants.

Second, right-wing individuals exposed to negative news are more likely to support and actively participate in direct hostile actions. Negative media exposure thus intensifies willingness

TABLE 3 Preferences for hostile actions regressions: Right-wing cohort.

Response	Variable	Control	Positive treatment	Negative treatment
Violence behavior	Competence	.89 (.61)	.34 (.30)	1.71*** (.42)
	Ideology	1.03 (1.08)	−.37 (.93)	2.41* (1.01)
	Education	−.47 (.40)	−.51 (.43)	.26 (.42)
	Age	−.06 (.77)	1.53* (.64)	1.00 (.66)
	Gender	1.26 (.93)	−.60 (.97)	−1.40 (.97)
	Ideology * Competence	−.02 (.45)	−.46^ (.25)	.51 (.34)
	Intercept	4.78 (3.94)	−1.39 (3.30)	1.51 (3.34)
	R^2	.086	.1326	.2028
	df	176	156	140
	F-statistic	2.76	3.976	5.936
Mobilization	Competence	1.21* (.54)	.77** (.28)	1.04*** (.35)
	Ideology	−.48 (.96)	−.56 (.84)	2.22* (.85)
	Education	.37 (.35)	−.47 (.39)	−.30 (.36)
	Age	−.94 (.68)	.12 (.58)	−.44 (.56)
	Gender	−.89 (.83)	−.58 (.88)	−.80 (.81)
	Ideology * Competence	−.41 (.40)	−.25 (.23)	.53^ (.29)
	Intercept	8.63* (3.50)	7.50* (2.98)	9.98*** (2.80)
	R^2	.08654	.06367	.1511
	df	176	156	140
	F-statistic	2.779	1.768	4.154
Anti-migrant government support	Competence	1.31*** (.38)	.57* (.22)	1.14*** (.34)
	Ideology	−.65 (.68)	−.64 (.67)	1.07 (.81)
	Education	−.18 (.25)	−.37 (.31)	−.07 (.34)
	Age	−.12 (.49)	.69 (.46)	−.10 (.53)
	Gender	.84 (.59)	−.65 (.69)	.45 (.77)
	Ideology * Competence	−.65* (.29)	−.46* (.18)	.01 (.27)
	Intercept	9.40*** (2.49)	5.85* (2.36)	8.05** (2.67)
	R^2	.1874	.1555	.1776
	df	176	156	140
	F-statistic	6.765	4.787	5.038

***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p < .05$.
^$p < .10$.

to engage in hostile behaviors, especially among those who already hold anti-migrant views. The same is not true for non-right-wing individuals, for whom media exposure does not have a great effect. This can potentially be tied to this group not having a homogeneous cultural consensus on migration. It is possible that extreme, escalating action requires the presence of cultural consensus. This is supported by findings that anti-migration cues in news coverage have a mobilizing effect in countries with strong right-wing parties (Hameleers et al., 2018), which is the case in Italy. This finding is crucial because increasing far-right political engagement leads

to increased news coverage (Castelli Gattinara & Froio, 2018), leading to potential shifts in information environments that could impact cultural consensus in the long-term.

These findings reveal a key distinction: while both positive and negative media increase consensus heterogeneity, only negative media strongly mobilizes hostile actions. Positive media has little impact on action, whereas negative reporting on migration drives radical direct behavior.

Here we propose two possible explanations. *First*, the most immediate is that anti-migrant discourses, already strongly present within the radical right cohort, exhibit high levels of consensus. Variations toward even higher consensus are thus challenging to detect statistically. This may explain why effects become observable primarily when respondents are confronted with preferences for extreme actions.

The *second* explanation is rooted in the concept of affective priming effects (Fazio, 2001), which suggests that media exposure amplifies emotional preferences, even when ideological or discursive framing remains constant. These emotional triggers may not necessarily change one's cognitive framing of an issue (like the ideological stance on migration), but they can influence action-oriented preferences, such as support for violent measures.

Emotional responses may thus be central in shaping how migrants' representations influence individuals' willingness to engage in various political actions. Negative portrayals can amplify the feelings of fear that have led people toward right-wing ideologies (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017) thus leading to what others have called indignation mobilization mechanisms (Rone, 2020). They can heighten perceptions that migrants pose threats to safety, culture, or resources. These might lead individuals to feel morally justified in taking confrontational actions—like protests or physical confrontations—to "protect" their community (Duina & Carson, 2020).

This opens the door to what Kahneman (2011) defines as two-system thinking that guides two types of decision-making actions: System 1, fast, automatic, emotional, and responds quickly to stimuli without deep reflection; and System 2, slow, deliberative, rational, which engages in thoughtful analysis and reasoning. Negative news on migrant exposure may activate System 1, influencing immediate preferences for violence while leaving System 2 (deeper reasoning) relatively unchanged. This might explain why preferences for violence shift due to emotional priming, but the framing of discourse remains intact—changing opinions would require deeper, more deliberative cognitive engagement, which is absent in emotionally charged media exposure.

In contrast, in the positive treatment group, anti-migrant discourse competences interact negatively with ideology. Without the emotional priming of negative media exposure, individuals with more anti-migrant knowledge might apply their understanding to support more reasonable actions, such as democratically supporting a right-wing government or participating in political protests. This suggests that, in the absence of strong emotional stimuli, System 2 thinking may play a larger role, allowing individuals to engage in more deliberative reasoning and consider non-violent, democratic avenues for expressing their views.

Limitations

This study has some limitations related to treatment, cultural consensus instruments, and recruitment. Our treatment involved brief news exposure, which may not have been long enough to produce stronger effects, especially on deeply rooted cultural attitudes. People typically consume much more media in their daily lives, often in filter bubbles that reinforce anti-migrant views, possibly diluting the impact of our treatment. Broader studies on news consumption could shed more light on these effects.

Our survey targeted anti-migrant discourses within a right-wing cohort, using the non-right-wing group for comparison. However, the cultural consensus instrument may not fully capture the relevant discourses for the latter group.

Recruitment through Facebook helped reach a sealed-off right-wing community but limited access to younger populations, for whom newer social media are important, particularly in right-wing circles (see, e.g., González-Aguilar et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

This article demonstrates the mobilizing influence of media coverage, especially on participants with pre-existing right-leaning tendencies.

Methodologically, this study presents two key advancements. First, using Facebook ads to access self-sealed far-right communities shows an effective recruitment strategy that could be expanded to platforms like TikTok to, for example, reach younger audiences. Second, applying CCT allowed us to explore how perceived in-group "truths" drive actions, shedding light on the ways shared beliefs within far-right groups are connected with political behaviors.

Empirically, our findings indicate that negative media coverage can prompt political behavior without necessarily altering underlying cultural consensus, revealing that such actions often stem from emotional, reactionary responses. Moreover, exposure to negative migration news was found to significantly increase the likelihood of anti-migrant political behavior. This suggests that while cultural attitudes may shift gradually, negative media can act as a powerful trigger for political action, particularly among those predisposed to anti-migrant sentiments.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
This study was pre-registered on OSF at https://osf.io/5k8dh under DOI https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/5K8DH. Supplementary data and replication files are available on Harvard Dataverse at the following address https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UG4GTE.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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