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What is the Liberalizing Potential of Higher Education? An Analysis of Academic Fields and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment Across 32 Countries

Maureen A. Eger[1,2] | Mikael Hjerm[1] | Paolo Velásquez[3,4]

[1]Department of Sociology, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden | [2]Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA | [3]Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK | [4]Institute for Future Studies, Stockholm, Sweden

Correspondence: Maureen A. Eger (maureen.eger@umu.se)

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ABSTRACT

The link between educational attainment and attitudes towards out-groups stands out as one of the most consistent statistical associations in the social and political sciences. However, a recent analysis of survey data from the United States finds that the relationship between higher education and out-group prejudice depends on the content of education. In this Research Note, we replicate that study's analysis of tertiary-level academic majors within a European context and extend it to include academic specializations below the tertiary level. Our analyses of European Social Survey (ESS) data, spanning 32 countries and over 120,000 respondents, reveal substantial variation in the association between field of study and anti-immigrant prejudice. Specifically, we find that individuals with degrees in arts, humanities, and social sciences express more positive views towards immigrants than those with degrees in other fields. A similar, though less pronounced, pattern emerges among individuals with lower levels of educational attainment. These findings challenge simplistic and politicized notions of the impact of higher education, offering a more nuanced understanding of educational attainment and its so-called "liberalizing effect."

1 | Introduction

Social and political science research has long documented that those with higher education tend to hold more liberal sociopolitical attitudes (e.g., Feldman and Newcomb 1969; Campbell and Horowitz 2016; Scott 2022). In particular, the negative correlation between tertiary degree attainment and out-group attitudes is so ubiquitous (e.g., Hjerm 2001) that it has been described as "arguably the most consistent empirical result in the field" (Velásquez and Eger 2022, 606) and "a rare case of scholarly unity" (Weber 2022, 228). Given the robustness of the association, a variety of cognitive, social, psychodynamic, and socioeconomic mechanisms are thought to underpin it (e.g., Jenssen and Engesbak 1994; Van de Werfhorst and de Graaf 2004; Hello et al. 2006; Stubager 2008; Surridge 2016). Increasingly politicized, this robust relationship between higher education and out-group attitudes is cited as evidence of higher education's so-called "liberalizing effect."

However, new research analysing data from the United States General Social Survey (GSS, 2012–2018) shows that the strength of the correlation between education level and out-group attitudes depends on the *content* of higher education (Eger et al. 2024). Specifically, the study finds within-higher-education variation in the relationships among college/university majors and both anti-Black prejudice and opposition to immigration. Those majoring in the arts, humanities, social sciences or law articulate less prejudice and opposition to out-groups.

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Moreover, out-group attitudes among graduates from some academic fields do not differ significantly from those without a tertiary degree. The authors interpret these results to mean that *specific academic disciplines* may be largely responsible for the singularly robust correlation between educational attainment and out-group attitudes found in previous research.

While most previous scholarship on out-group prejudice overlooks variation in educational content, some studies on different, but related phenomena have tested for heterogeneous effects: Brońić and Miles (2021) show moral attitudes vary by academic major in the United States; and, Van de Werfhorst and de Graaf (2004) find that academic fields that emphasize "communicative education skills" are related to support for liberal gender roles, socially responsible organizations, income redistribution, and left-wing parties in the Netherlands. Additionally, other research shows that field of education is related to voting behaviour in Canada (McGregor and Pruysers 2022), Sweden (Valldor-Almstedt 2024), and Western European countries (Hooghe et al. 2025). These tangentially-related studies cast further doubt on the notion that higher education, in general, is liberalizing—or equally so.

Nevertheless, most studies examining variation in academic content have relied on data from a single country, and the ones that rely on comparative data do not analyse prejudice (e.g., Hooghe et al. 2025). Thus, it is unclear whether the relationship between academic fields and out-group prejudice is generalizable beyond the U.S. case. In their conclusion, Eger et al. (2024) speculate that within-higher education differences in out-group attitudes may be larger in countries that, unlike the U.S., do not have a tradition of liberal arts education—an educational model that requires students to take a broad sampling of courses outside their academic major (i.e., general education or distribution requirements). In practice, this means all students are exposed to subjects with both low and high liberalizing potential, which, according to Eger et al. (2024), should dampen between-academic major differences in out-group attitudes compared to higher education systems that do not emphasize both breadth and depth. This implies that comparative analyses might reveal even larger gaps in attitudes across academic disciplines in other institutional contexts.

While existing international survey data does not allow us to test that hypothesis directly, we can use European cross-national data to scrutinize further the hypothesis that academic fields vary in their liberalizing potential. First, we test the theoretically-derived hypothesis that the content of education helps explain variation in attitudes about different social groups (e.g., Van de Werfhorst and de Graaf 2004; Eger et al. 2024). To do this, we use a 32-country sample from the European Social Survey (ESS 2004, 2006, 2008) to assess how attitudes towards immigrants vary by academic specializations across European countries. Although there have been recent efforts to introduce a liberal arts approach to tertiary education in Europe, it has not been the typical approach to tertiary education in the post-World War II era (Boetsch et al. 2017). Instead, students specialize in a discipline upon matriculation. Thus, among Europeans with tertiary degrees, we expect to find clear differences in attitudes towards immigrants across academic fields between 2004 and 2008.

Second, small differences in the key independent variable found in the ESS facilitates additional comparisons and two novel empirical analyses. In the GSS, only individuals with higher education degrees (i.e., associate, bachelor's, or advanced) were asked about their academic major. In the ESS, the analogous question asks for the academic field of subject of respondents' *highest level of qualification*. As many Europeans already specialize in an academic field during secondary school, we go beyond the U.S. study by assessing how variation in educational content *below* tertiary educational attainment is related to attitudes towards immigrants.

In the next sections, we describe our data and analytical strategy and report our results. Taken together, analyses in this Research Note provide clear evidence that the association between educational attainment and attitudes towards immigrants in Europe depends on the content of education. Further, our comparison of academic fields' relationship with prejudice by level of educational attainment provides early evidence that differences in the extent of academic specialization may amplify or limit education's impact on prejudice.

1.1 | Data and Methods

Our analyses rely on the European Social Survey (ESS), a comprehensive, biennial survey of adults covering 39 countries between 2002 and 2022. This cross-national survey is widely considered one of the best sources of attitudinal data and often used in analyses of anti-immigrant sentiment and other social and political attitudes. In this study, we use the only three rounds that asked about academic specialization: 2004 (ESS2e03_6), 2006 (ESS3e03_7), and 2008 (ESS4e04_5). Our sample includes 124,446 individuals across 76 country-years and 32 countries.

1.1.1 | Dependent Variable

To measure anti-immigrant sentiment, we calculate the row mean of the three items in the ESS commonly used to analyse the phenomenon (e.g., Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020): "Is immigration bad or good for country's economy?)"; "Is the country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants?)"; and "Do immigrants make country worse or better place to live?" The Cronbach's alpha for our 2004-2008 sample is 0.85. The 11-point index is rescaled so negative and positive numbers reflect anti- and pro-immigrant sentiment respectively (mean = 0.07, SD = 2.16, min/max = −5/5). Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported Table 1.

1.1.2 | Key Independent Variables

The first key independent variable is highest level of education. To distinguish between those with and without a tertiary degree, the variable *edulvla* is recoded to be dichotomous. This means that respondents are coded "0" if their highest level of educational qualification is post-secondary, non-tertiary education (i.e., level 4 in the International Standard Classification of

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Education (ISCED)) or *below* (ISCED levels 0–3). Respondents completing short-cycle tertiary education (ISCED 5) or at least a bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) are coded "1". In our sample, 35,492 individuals completed tertiary education and 88,954 did not.

The second key independent variable is educational field, which captures the academic specialization of the respondent's highest education qualification (i.e., highest level of educational attainment). There are 14 categories in the ESS, including "General/no specific field." Table 2 reports frequencies by education level, revealing that 56% of respondents *without* a tertiary degree and 97% of those *with* a tertiary degree report an academic specialization distinct from general education.

Additionally, Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials (Supporting Information S1) reports frequencies of specialization for each country. Among those without tertiary degrees, specialization rates are highest (> 80%) in Iceland, Slovakia, and Germany and lowest (< 20%) in Turkey, Greece, Portugal, and

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics.

	Tertiary degree									
	No					Yes				
	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Index of attitudes towards immigrants[a]	88,954	−0.15	2.14	−5	5	35,492	0.63	2.13	−5	5
Perceived effect on economy	85,890	4.65	2.46	0	10	34,530	5.50	2.37	0	10
Perceived effect on culture	85,964	5.28	2.54	0	10	34,931	6.09	2.54	0	10
Perceived effect on country	85,679	4.63	2.30	0	10	34,429	5.32	2.29	0	10
Educational field/subject	88,954	4.49	4.00	1	14	35,492	6.78	2.91	1	14
Nativity[b]	88,954	0.22	0.57	0	2	35,492	0.31	0.66	0	2
Age	88,954	46.69	18.75	13	91	35,492	45.45	15.33	15	91
Female (ref = male)	88,954	0.53	0.50	0	1	35,492	0.55	0.50	0	1
Labour force status[c]	88,954	2.77	1.85	1	5	35,492	2.08	1.71	1	5
Big city or suburbs (ref = town, village, countryside)	88,954	0.31	0.46	0	1	35,492	0.44	0.50	0	1
ESS round	88,954	3.10	0.84	2	4	35,492	3.15	0.81	2	4

Source: European Social Survey, Rounds 2, 3, 4.
[a]Row mean of 3 variables; rescaled to reflect negative and positive views.
[b]0 Native-born with native-born parents (84%), 1 Native-born with one or two immigrant parents (7.4%), 2 Foreign-born (8.6%).
[c]1 Paid work, 2 Education, 3 Unemployed looking for a job, 4 Unemployed not looking for a job, 5 Not in labor force.

TABLE 2 | Academic field by highest level of educational attainment.

	Tertiary degree			
	No		Yes	
	N	%	N	%
General/no specific field	39,494	44.4	966	2.72
Art, fine/applied	1300	1.46	909	2.56
Humanities	1332	1.5	2562	7.22
Technical and engineering	15,550	17.48	6779	19.1
Agriculture/forestry	3360	3.78	957	2.7
Teacher training/education	1493	1.68	4785	13.48
Science/mathematics/computing etc	1755	1.97	2567	7.23
Medical/health services/nursing etc	4177	4.7	4280	12.06
Economics/commerce/business administration	9013	10.13	6155	17.34
Social studies/administration/media/culture	1545	1.74	2456	6.92
Law and legal services	254	0.29	1131	3.19
Personal care services	7179	8.07	943	2.66
Public order and safety	780	0.88	514	1.45
Transport and telecommunications	1,722	1.94	488	1.37
Total	88,954	100%	35,492	100%

Source: European Social Survey, Rounds 2,3,4.

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Cyprus. Table S2 in the Supplementary Materials (Supporting Information S1 indicates that 11% of respondents whose lowest level of educational attainment is below secondary (ISCED 0–1) report an academic specialization. This statistic is 33% for those whose highest level is lower secondary (ISCED 2), 74% for upper secondary (ISCED 3), and 95% for post-secondary, non-tertiary (ISCED 4).

1.1.3 | Control Variables

In our analyses, we control for important demographic characteristics, such as age and sex. We also create a trichotomous measure of nativity by combining information from three variables: the nativity of the respondent and their mother and father. The resulting categories are: native-born with two native-born parents; native-born with one to two immigrant parents; and foreign-born. Additionally, we include a five-category variable of labour force status: paid employment; pursuing education; unemployed looking for a job; unemployed not looking for a job; and not in the labour force. We also include a dichotomous variable capturing whether the respondent lives in an urban/suburban or more rural area. Finally, we control for ESS round.

1.1.4 | Estimation

We use three-level mixed effects regression models, appropriate for the analysis of pooled, cross-sectional and cross-national data (Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother 2016). In these models, which were run in Stata/SE 18.0, individuals are nested in country-years, nested in countries (N_1 = 124,446 individuals; N_2 = 76 country-years; N_3 = 32 countries). We also include a fixed effect for survey year. See Supplementary Materials for full algebraic model and results tables.

2 | Results

Figure 1 reports the point estimates for having completed a tertiary degree ("yes" on the *y*-axis) compared to the reference category, no tertiary degree ("no" on the *y*-axis), on attitudes towards immigrants. The first and simplest model (M1) includes only this dichotomous measure of tertiary educational attainment and dummies for survey round. The second model (M2) also controls for individuals' demographic characteristics, and the final model (M3) also controls for academic specialization. Not surprisingly, the effect of tertiary education is significant and positive across all models. However, once we consider the content of education, higher education's average effect decreases substantially. Indeed, the magnitude of its effect size decreases by 25% between M1 and M3 and by 18% between M2 and M3. This novel empirical finding implies that some academic fields contribute more than others to the larger educational effect in M1 and M2.

Figure 2 echoes Eger et al.'s (2024) main finding of heterogeneous educational effects. Like Figure 1, the reference category in Figure 2 is no tertiary degree. While all tertiary academic specializations are associated with more positive attitudes towards immigrants, point estimates vary considerably. The largest point estimate (humanities) is four times larger than the smallest (personal care services). Further, the academic fields associated with the most positive attitudes are arts, humanities, and social sciences. This pattern is also consistent with research on other sociopolitical attitudes like support for civil liberties (Selvin and Hagstrom 1960), political identification (Hanson et al. 2012), and moral attitudes (Brońić and Miles 2021).

Turning to this study's second unique empirical contribution, Figure 3 illustrates the relationship among various academic fields and attitudes towards immigrants among two sub-samples —those *with* (M6) and *without* (M5) tertiary education (N = 35,492 and N = 88,954, respectively). In this figure, the reference category is social sciences. Results reveal four things. First, the patterns are strikingly similar for both sub-samples,

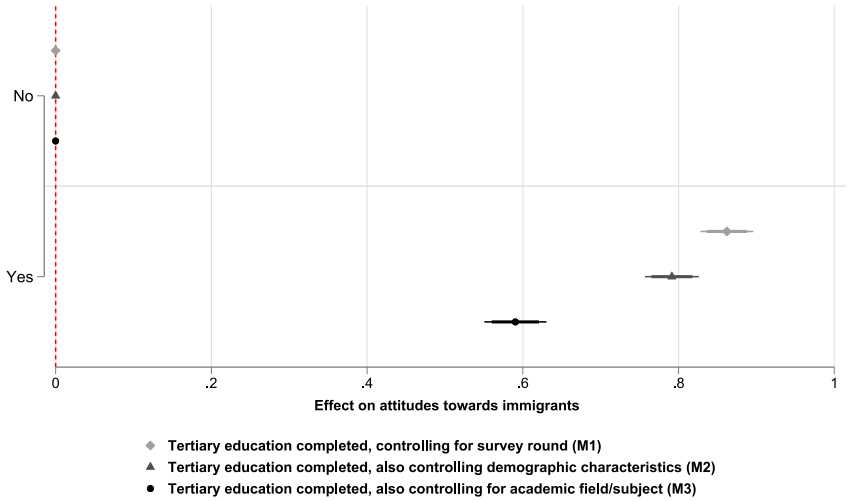

FIGURE 1 | Higher education and attitudes towards immigrants. Point estimates with 99 and 95% confidence intervals. Reference category = no tertiary education. M1-M3: N_1 = 124,446 individuals; N_2 = 76 country-years; N_3 = 32 countries. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

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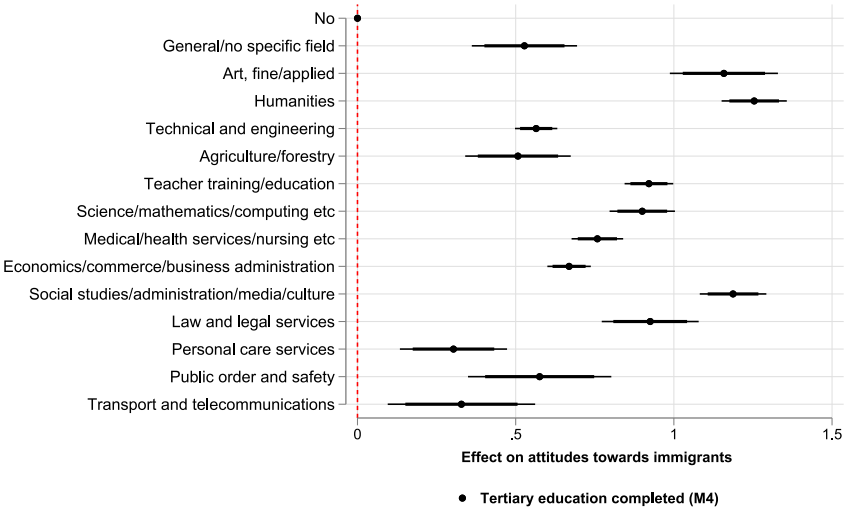

FIGURE 2 | Between-education-level differences in attitudes towards immigrants. Point estimates with 99 and 95% confidence intervals. Reference category = no tertiary education. M4: N_1 = 124,446 individuals; N_2 = 76 country-years; N_3 = 32 countries. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

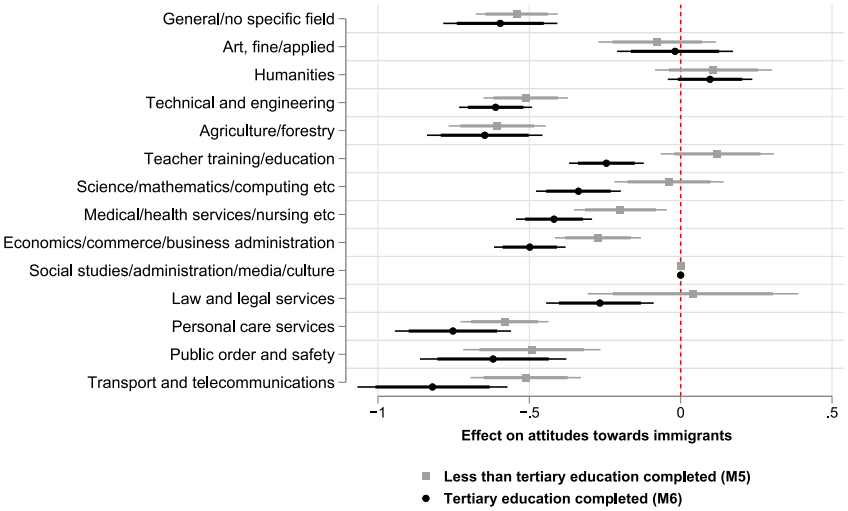

FIGURE 3 | Within-education-level differences in attitudes towards immigrants. Point estimates with 99 and 95% confidence intervals. Reference category = Social studies/administration/media/culture. M5: N_1 = 88,954 individuals; N_2 = 76 country-years; N_3 = 32 countries. M6: N_1 = 35,492 individuals; N_2 = 76 country-years; N_3 = 32 countries. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

despite cross-national differences in secondary and tertiary education. Second, the magnitude of the educational effect on outgroup prejudice among those with tertiary degrees is greatest for art, humanities, and social sciences—a result consistent with findings from the U.S. (Eger et al. 2024). Third, for both levels of educational attainment, there are some academic specializations whose relationship to immigration attitudes is roughly equivalent to completing general education with no specific field. These subjects are technical and engineering, agriculture/forestry, personal care, public order and safety, and transport and telecommunications.

Fourth, there is less attitudinal dispersal among those without a tertiary degree. In other words, there is a larger difference in attitudes between those who specialized in arts, humanities, or social sciences and those who did not among college/university graduates. Moreover, for those without tertiary education, more specializations are not significantly different from the reference category (i.e., social sciences). Because diplomas attained at the primary, secondary, and sometimes post-secondary level still tend to require completion of coursework outside of one's primary academic field (i.e., one who specialize in science, math, or computing still completes some humanities, art, and/or social science courses and vice versa), it makes sense that variation in effects sizes below the tertiary level should be less substantial than at the tertiary level. We interpret this as early evidence that the extent of specialization (i.e., breadth versus depth) may amplify or limit education's impact on prejudice, but we caution that more research is necessary.

3 | Conclusion

In this cross-national analysis of Europeans' attitudes towards immigrants, we find heterogeneous educational effects by academic specialization, echoing recent findings from a U.S. study on

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academic majors and anti-immigrant and anti-Black prejudice (Eger et al. 2024). Additionally, our analysis offers two novel empirical insights. First, the magnitude of the "liberalizing effect" of higher education on anti-immigrant sentiment decreases substantially after controlling for the content of education. Second, there is greater attitudinal dispersal across specializations among those with tertiary degrees, meaning higher education graduates are even more polarized in their attitudes towards immigrants than those with a lower level of educational attainment. Taken together, these results undermine the notion that all tertiary education is liberalizing in regards to attitudes about immigrants.

Although we cannot address causality with these data, our study provides a more nuanced perspective on the statistically robust association between educational attainment and out-group attitudes: the relationship between education and attitudes towards immigrants depends on academic content. These results challenge the assumption that higher education's liberalizing potential is monolithic and echo recent research on academic fields and out-group attitudes (Eger et al. 2024) as well as voting behaviour (Hooghe et al. 2025). Our goal is that this research note spurs future research on prejudice and the content of education, including the extent of specialization (i.e., depth vs. breadth), at different levels of education.

Despite access to higher education expanding in Europe and education emerging as a new political cleavage (Ford and Jennings 2020), recent research shows little evidence of attitudinal polarization between older and younger generations or even that younger generations are the most liberal (Schäfer 2022). That education has heterogeneous effects based on its content may be key to understanding such trends. To facilitate future work on this and related research questions, national and international survey programs should make asking about academic fields and the degree of specialization in one's academic programme (i.e., presence/absence of liberal arts model) standard practice going forward. Such investments are essential for advancing our understanding about the mechanisms linking education to sociopolitical attitudes as well as other sociologically relevant and political phenomena.

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Ethics Statement

This research entails neither the collection of primary data nor processing of sensitive personal data and is therefore exempt from the requirements of Sweden's Ethical Review Act.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

This research relied on analyses of secondary data, which are publicly available at https://ess.sikt.no/. For information on the survey programme's methodology, see https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/methodology-overview. Code to reproduce the analyses are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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