

National Institute of Economic and Social Research

Politicians must listen to changing public opinion on migration

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The British electorate fundamentally supports immigration when they can see that foreign-born workers are economically beneficial and socially useful rather than simply because they are high-skilled, according to an election briefing by the National Institute of Social and Economic Research (NIESR).

Recent research by NIESR has found that people tend to express support for low-skilled migrants when asked about specific jobs rather than in generic terms as low-skilled, and readily acknowledge the contribution of some low-skilled professions in filling important labour market shortages in both the public and private sector. This contradicts the perception of public hostility to migrants that has led previous governments to enact and propose tight restrictions of people coming to Britain.

The briefing also highlights evidence suggesting immigration has had little or no impact on the jobs or wages of UK native workers, that immigrants overall pay more in taxes than they take out through using public services such as health and education (mainly because they are young, healthy, typically in work), and are likely not a contributor to high and rising house prices, which are driven partly by a shortage of new homes being built.

“Overall, recent immigration has had small positive impacts on public finances, possibly some positive effects on productivity, and no or little impact on overall employment and wages,” said Andrew Aitken, Senior Economist at NIESR. “It is not migrants’ fault if governments have failed to meet the need for more public services, housing, infrastructure, as a result of a growing population – both natural increase and migration – particularly given the overall net positive contribution to the public finances by migrants.”

“Immigration has fallen a bit off the radar during this election. It is unfortunate that it has not been debated more because the next parliament will have a unique opportunity and responsibility to press the reset button on immigration and shape a new system that addresses public concerns,” said Johnny Runge, a senior social researcher at NIESR. “Opinion polls show that Brits see immigration as less of an issue today than before the referendum, but immigration is never far away from public consciousness, and it could quickly reappear in the public debate, especially if the future immigration system is not deemed to respond to public concerns.”

Chiara Manzoni, Social Researcher at NIESR, added: *“Recent data shows a decline in net migration from the EU, and we know that significant numbers of EU and other migrants work in public services such as health and education, and therefore these and other sectors are more vulnerable to the potential effects of Brexit.”*

- Immigration has been part and parcel of Britain throughout the last thousand years, but there has been a substantial increase in net migration during the past two decades. Immigration has fundamentally changed the UK population; now made up of 14% foreign-born people.
- According to the available evidence, immigration has generally had a small impact on most easily measurable outcomes such as wages, employment, and productivity. Immigration appears to have had a positive impact on public finances, with migrants generally contributing more on average to public finances through taxes than they consume in welfare payments and public services.
- The impacts cannot be seen in isolation from government policies. Successive UK governments have not responded adequately to the rise in population levels – both natural increase and from net migration, by failing to invest adequately in public services, infrastructure and housing. As a result, the UK public do not associate immigration with positive impacts, which has arguably driven anti-immigrant sentiments.
- The UK is often used as a posterchild of anti-immigrant attitudes, but public opinion has actually become more positive in the past two decades. And while the UK is divided on immigration, there is also a lot of common ground, particularly the preference for high-skilled workers and those migrants who contribute positively to the UK economy and society.
- Significant uncertainty over the actual numbers of immigrants in the UK make informed debate and analysis of immigration policy difficult.

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Notes for editors:

This full General Election Briefing on “Past, Present and Future of Immigration” can be found [here](#).

NIESR’s microsite containing briefings, podcasts and vodcasts on the General Election can be found [here](#).

This briefing is supported by the [Nuffield Foundation](#).

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