

POST-BREXIT IMMIGRATION POLICY: RECONCILING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS WITH ECONOMIC EVIDENCE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Existing research shows consistently high levels of concern among people in the UK over the scale of immigration and its impact on jobs, wages and services. At the same time, that same body of research does not provide much in the way of detail about the nature of these concerns. This is partly because much of the data is from opinion polls which say little about the priorities and perspectives that underlie the aggregate numbers. Moreover, very little research has been carried out on what new immigration policies the British public would like to see once the UK leaves the EU and free movement ends. Our research for this report aims to fill these gaps by providing evidence about how people use and understand information about economic impacts of immigration, and what they might wish to see from new, post-Brexit, policies.

OUR METHODS

We used a range of methods to test a number of hypotheses about the role of evidence in formation, and change, of immigration attitudes. These methods were applied to a purposive sample of 105 participants in a Leave voting area of the UK and with relatively high levels of concern about immigration. Our purpose was to test out ways of getting people to consider the economic evidence by doing a number of exercises with the participants to encourage alternative view-points, counteract in-group favouritism, and ensure that participants felt listened to, before screening a commissioned video summing up the existing evidence on the economic impact of EU immigration on the UK. We also used surveys to measure immigration attitudes at various points.

Our findings should be interpreted with two considerations in mind: Firstly, we encouraged our research participants to discuss the economic impacts of migration – on wages, jobs and services – not their views about immigration more generally, although discussions naturally led to these as well. Secondly, it was not our intention to achieve a representative sample, but to understand a particular set of perspectives on immigration that lie behind the option polls. Because of this, we chose to carry out the research in a Leave voting area where immigration issues might be seen to have played a role in the outcome. With policy makers now wishing to take account of public attitudes in forming new immigration policy, it is important that these are understood.

OUR FINDINGS

1. Immigration attitudes are resistant to statistical evidence about impact

We saw no significant shifts in attitudes in our participants over time, compared to a control group. As such, our results are consistent with existing research suggesting that immigration attitudes are deeply embedded. However, our research does give some indication of why participants might not have changed their attitudes. Our qualitative data suggests participants were working with a clear hierarchy of evidence, in which personal experiences and anecdotes are viewed as more credible sources of information than either media stories or statistical data. Moreover, discussions in the focus groups tended to be framed negatively, with the consequence that positive perspectives on the impact of immigration, presented for example in our video, were viewed to an extent with mistrust. Combined with a lack of trust in the media, many of our participants concluded that it is best to rely on your own evidence, drawn from experiences and the accounts of people you know.

2. It is recognised that EU immigration has economic benefits

While participants saw highly skilled migration as valuable, they also saw low-skilled migration as having an important role to play. In particular, focus group participants readily acknowledged that low-skilled migrants meet labour shortages in sectors such as social care, and often perform jobs considered too unattractive by British people. While recognising the need for immigration more generally, participants also felt that young British people are not given sufficient opportunity to acquire skills.

The main concern about EU immigration is its perceived impact on services, and some participants believed that migrants are a net drain on the public finances and even achieve priority access. They did not argue that EU migrants should not be able to access services such as health and education, but they believed that they should be in the UK to work and should be net contributors through employment and taxation.

Cultural concerns are not prominent in debates about EU migration, although such issues were frequently raised in the focus groups. However, they were largely voiced in relation to settled ethnic minority communities, and involved issues of integration, extremism and crime. This is in line with existing evidence that different groups are associated with different threat perceptions, with EU migrants perceived in economic terms and Muslim ethnic minorities and migrants in cultural and security terms.

3. Control is more important than numbers

When surveyed, our participants said they wanted the Government to use Brexit as an opportunity to reduce the number of EU migrants coming to Britain. However, whenever that preference was discussed in the focus groups, it was framed in terms of a desire to screen out (perceived) low-quality migrants. The distinction between low- and high-quality migrants was not conceived in relation to qualifications and skills, but more widely in terms of economic need and, most importantly, contribution. Control was seen as important to help ensure that people come to contribute (e.g., work or study), rather than to claim benefits or to commit crime. Participants expressed varying opinions on whether future policy should favour EU migrants.

4. Public attitudes can be reconciled with the needs of the economy and employers

In drawing conclusions from our findings, we look at whether public attitudes can be reconciled with the needs of the economy and employers. It could be assumed that the public and employers have opposing values and priorities when it comes to immigration. Our focus group findings suggest that this might not be so. Participants expressed a desire for immigration to benefit the UK economically and in other ways, while also wanting British workers to have opportunities to work, for young people to have training opportunities, and for jobs to be of good quality. None of these is incompatible with employers' perspectives or with policy, which allow employers to continue to recruit migrants. Our focus group participants recognised this.

Employers and the public also show some recognition that, if we want to see EU migration continue, we have to consider the preferences of EU migrants themselves. Developing policy to address the needs and preferences of all three major stakeholders: the public, employers and EU migrants, will be challenging but there is at least some shared ground on which policy can be built.