

BRIEFING: OVERVIEW OF EVIDENCE ON UK PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION

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OVERVIEW

As part of a research report on [UK Public Attitudes to Immigration](#), published by NIESR and Birkbeck, University of London, in October 2018, we reviewed the existing literature on the topic. We have updated this with the most recent evidence thanks to the support of the ESRC through its Impact Acceleration Award. The following topics are covered in the briefing:

- How attitudes have developed over time, and how attitudes are divided
- What drives immigration attitudes: Economic or cultural factors
- How misperceptions and lack of knowledge affect attitudes
- Attitudes towards different types of immigrants

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- British people seem to have **become more positive** about the economic and cultural impacts of immigration, especially since the Brexit referendum, but they still **want to see immigration levels reduced**.
- Most evidence shows that **Britain is highly divided on immigration**, and these divisions are growing. People are divided by age, education and social class.
- People's attitudes are likely **driven by both economic and cultural factors**, but political scientists continue to debate which is more important.
- Many are **highly misinformed** about immigration. People who lack knowledge about immigration tend to view it more negatively. There is still mixed and inconclusive evidence on whether providing information about migration changes attitudes and policy preferences.
- People **prefer some migrants over others**. In particular, this varies by skill-level and perceptions of economic contribution, and there is an 'ethnic hierarchy' based on ethnicity, country of origin, religion and language.

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How immigration attitudes have developed over time

- Coinciding with an unprecedented increase in net migration in the past two decades, **immigration has become a highly salient issue** in the UK in recent years, with more people seeing immigration as one of the most important issues facing the UK.
- The salience of immigration **declined during the economic crisis**, then **rose as economic concerns subsided**. It then **declined following the Brexit referendum**, partly due to rise in salience of related topics such as EU/Brexit ([Ford, 2018](#); [Rolfe et al., 2018](#)).

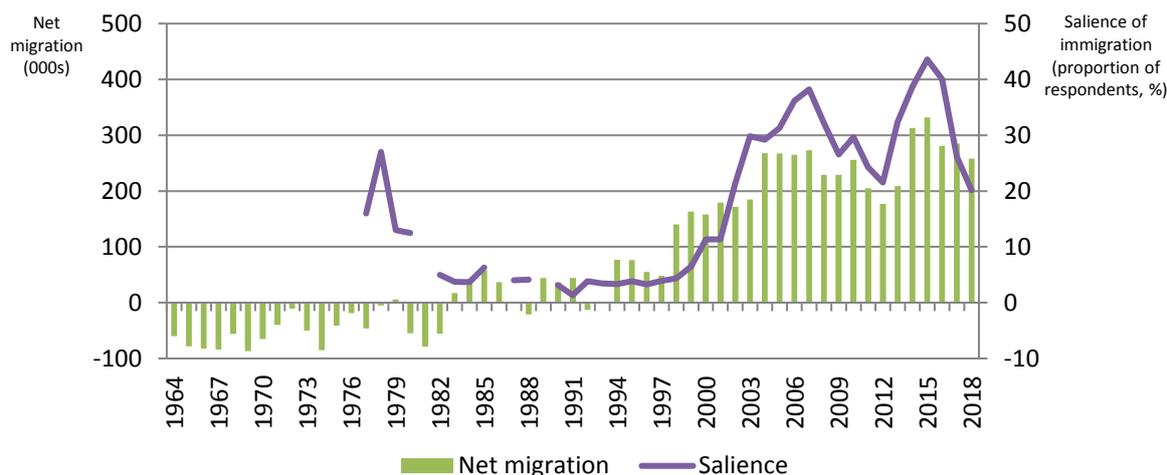


Figure 1. Sources: [Ipsos MORI \(2019\)](#) and [ONS \(2019\)](#).

- **Public opposition to immigration has been widespread** in the UK. But attitudes towards economic and cultural impacts have become **more positive since the late-2000s and 2010s, especially after the Brexit referendum**, and among all political divides including among Remain and Leave voters ([Ford, 2018](#); [Ipsos MORI, 2017, 2018](#)).
- Overall, the **UK public as a whole now has a fairly balanced, and even positive, view on immigration**. This may seem paradoxical, but it may be due to a **reassurance effect** among immigration-sceptics that the issue is finally being addressed, or a **galvanising effect** among those with positive views. Alternatively, it might be that **public debate has made people more aware of migrants' contributions**, and that the human aspects of migration have been highlighted through the debate about EU citizens' rights and the Windrush scandal ([Ford, 2018](#), [Ipsos MORI, 2018](#)).
- While the salience and actual levels of immigration has changed, and while British people have changed their attitudes on economic and cultural impacts, polling data have consistently shown that a **majority of the British public wants to see immigration levels reduced** ([Ipsos MORI, 2018](#); [YouGov, 2018](#); [Ford & Heath, 2015](#); [Blinder & Allen, 2016](#); [Duffy & Frere-Smith, 2014](#)). There are some suggestions that policy preferences seem to have softened somewhat following the Brexit referendum ([Ipsos MORI, 2019](#); [Blinder & Richards, 2018](#)).

How immigration attitudes are divided

- While the UK public as a whole are now fairly balanced, and even positive, on the impacts of immigration, most people don't actually hold this balanced view: people are either positive or negative ([Ford & Lymperopoulou, 2017](#)). In fact, in a recent survey, **Britain was the most divided country in Europe on immigration**, and these **divisions have been growing** ([Ford & Lymperopoulou, 2017](#)).
- Attitudes are divided along educational, generational and social lines. In particular, **people with higher education tend to have more pro-immigration attitudes**, and **younger generations hold more pro-immigration views than older generations** ([McLaren et al., 2019](#); [Ford & Lymperopoulou, 2017](#); [Braakman et al., 2017](#); [Heath & Richard, 2016](#); [Ford & Heath, 2015](#); [Duffy & Frere-Smith, 2014](#); [Ford et al., 2012](#)).
- Other evidence points out that while around half of the population are at either extreme, the other half tend to get overlooked in the debate: they are **'balancers' who can see both positives and negatives with migration**, but for whom the topic is not an important political issue ([Rutter & Carter, 2018](#); [Katwala et al., 2017](#); [Katwala et al., 2014](#)).

What drives immigration attitudes: Economic or cultural factors?

- In UK and international literature, there is **disagreement on whether immigration attitudes are driven by or rooted in economic or cultural factors**.
- Economic competition theories suggest that opposition to migration will come from native workers who feel they lose out in the labour market to migrants with similar skill sets, or from natives concerned at possible impacts on public finances and services ([Dustmann & Preston, 2007](#); [Facchini & Mayda, 2009, 2012](#); [Braakman et al. 2017](#); [Card et al. 2012](#); [Sides & Citrin, 2007](#); [Mayda, 2006](#); [Scheve & Slaughter, 2001](#); [Dancygier & Donnelly, 2013](#)).
- Survey studies in the UK have found **correlations between anti-immigration attitudes and economic vulnerability and lower levels of economic satisfaction**, which may indicate that economically insecure people may worry more about the competition from migrants ([Ford & Lymperopoulou, 2017](#); [Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014](#); [Duffy & Frere-Smith, 2014](#)).
- Many studies, however, fail to distinguish between **concerns that are self-interested** (i.e. attitudes driven by perceived threat to own material well-being through loss of job, wages, welfare benefits etc.) and **concerns that are socially-minded** (i.e. attitudes driven by concern about impact on broader population, or on the country and its economy) ([Rolfe et al., 2018](#); [Nakata, 2017](#)).
- Studies also often neglect that while economic evidence shows that any negative economic effects on the broader population are very modest at best, all that matters for immigration attitudes is the **perception of negative economic impacts**, driven by perceived local and individual experiences ([Rolfe et al., 2018](#); [Rutter & Carter, 2018](#); [Card et al., 2009](#)).

- Other studies find that **higher educational levels are correlated with higher support for immigration** ([Ford et al., 2012](#); [Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007, 2010](#)). This is the basis for the literature on cultural factors, in which it is argued that the **opposition to immigration is driven by perceived cultural threats caused by the influx of foreigners with different cultural values and customs**. Cultural concerns are related to perceived threats to national identity, religion, values and beliefs, security threats and crime ([Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007, 2010](#); [Kaufmann, 2018](#)).
- It is likely that both economic, cultural and other concerns are present synonymously, together affecting people's attitudes to migration. Focus group research in the UK shows that people **simultaneously hold economic concerns including about labour market and public service impacts, and cultural concerns often centred around anti-Muslim prejudices** ([Rolfe et al., 2018](#); [Rutter & Carter, 2018](#)).

How misperceptions and lack of knowledge affect attitudes

- People are **highly misinformed about immigration**, particularly about the **proportion of migrants in the population and its composition**, both at the national and local level ([Ipsos MORI, 2014, 2018](#); [Blinder, 2015](#); [Alesina et al., 2018](#); [Ford, 2012](#)).
- **People with higher education tend to have less biased perceptions** on immigration while younger people and women are more likely to overestimate the proportion of immigrants in the population ([Alesina et al., 2018](#); [Grigorieff et al., 2016](#)). People's **misperceptions also seem to be affected by their lived experiences**: those with higher exposure to migrants have been found to be more likely to overestimate the migrant population, such as people with an immigrant parent, people living in areas with higher migrant populations and low-skilled workers in migrant-dominated sectors ([Alesina et al., 2018](#); [Grigorieff et al., 2016](#); [Rutter & Carter, 2018](#)).
- **Misconceptions about the level of immigration are related to anti-immigrant sentiments** ([Alesina et al., 2018](#); [Hopkins et al., 2018](#)). However, it is uncertain whether misperceptions drive anti-immigrant attitudes, or vice versa, or whether a third factor drives both ([Hopkins et al., 2018](#)).
- To test this, studies have provided people with information about migration, and then tested for changes in knowledge, attitudes and policy preferences. Most of this literature shows that **correcting misinformation improves knowledge, but fails to change attitudes and policy preferences** ([Hopkins et al., 2018](#); [Sides & Citrin, 2007](#); [Lawrence & Sides, 2014](#)). This suggests that people update their beliefs about the factual information when presented with new evidence, but interpret these in a manner consistent with their existing anti-immigration attitudes. It is likely that people who, for whatever reason, have anti-immigrant attitudes may report higher estimates of immigration levels to rationalise and justify their argument ([Hopkins et al., 2018](#); [Lawrence & Sides, 2014](#); [Albertson & Gadarian, 2014](#)).

- Other evidence suggests that information leads **people update both their knowledge and attitudes towards immigration, but that they maintain their policy preferences** ([Grigorieff et al., 2016](#)). Breaking with this, our own very recent work in the UK, found **positive shifts in attitudes and policy preferences** (Ahlstrom-Vij et al., *forthcoming*). This is consistent with similar work in Japan ([Facchini et al., 2016](#); [Nakata, 2017](#)). There are no studies on immigration which have found evidence of a ‘backfire effect’ in which people harden their attitudes after being presented with information (though see, [Johnston & Ballard, 2016](#)).

Attitudes towards different types of migrants

- There is strong evidence that **people prefer some migrants over others**. People’s attitudes **vary by migrants’ ethnicity, class, skill-level, legality, region and country of origin** etc. ([Ford, 2011](#); [YouGov, 2018](#); [Blinder, 2015](#); [McLaren & Johnson, 2007](#); [Brader et al., 2008](#); [Adida et al., 2016](#); [Hainmueller & Hangartner, 2013](#); [Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014](#)). There is consistent opposition to illegal immigration, asylum seekers, refugees, extended family members and low-skilled workers, compared to high-skilled workers, immediate family members and students.
- The clearest distinction, found in the literature, is the **higher acceptance of high-skilled workers and occupations compared to low-skilled** ([Blinder & Richard, 2018](#); [YouGov, 2018](#)). Recent research suggest that skill-level overrides concerns about other factors such as country of origin and religion ([Blinder & Markaki, 2018](#)).
- The most common interpretation for the higher support for high-skilled migrants is related to the **higher economic benefits of welcoming high-skilled migrants**, due to their ability to support themselves through employment and paying taxes ([Blinder & Markaki, 2018](#); [Blinder & Richard, 2018](#); [Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2010](#); [Crawley, 2005](#); [Ford, 2011](#)).
- But focus group research has shown that **public support centres more around migration that is economically beneficial and socially useful rather than necessarily high-skilled** ([Rolfe et al., 2018](#); [Rutter and Carter, 2018](#); [Newman et al., 2017](#)).). Importantly, low-skilled migration may be understood differently by the public compared to how it is defined in the immigration system, and by experts and policymakers ([Runge, 2019](#); [Home Affairs Committee, 2018](#)).
- People express more support for low-skilled migrants when questioned about specific jobs rather than in generic terms as low-skilled work, and readily acknowledge the contribution of some low-skilled professions in filling labour market shortages ([Rolfe et al., 2018](#); [Rutter & Carter, 2018](#); [Home Affairs Committee, 2018](#)). This research suggests that the term ‘low-skilled’ may carry negative connotations and may be short-hand for other negatively-viewed characteristics such as low-contribution, ‘benefit tourism’ and illegality ([Rolfe et al., 2019](#); [Runge, 2019](#)).
- There is also evidence of an **‘ethnic hierarchy’** by country of origin, and religion, language and cultural factors. Surveys show a clear pattern where **British people are more accepting of White, English-speaking, European and Christian countries** compared to non-White, non-Europeans

and Muslim countries – a pattern which is also found in other European countries ([Ford, 2011](#); [Grodzeisky & Semyonov, 2019](#)).

- **People’s beliefs about the composition of migrants in the UK population is strongly associated with their attitudes.** For instance, those who view immigrants as asylum seekers and permanent immigrants are more likely to support reductions in immigration levels ([Blinder, 2013](#)). However, it is unclear whether this is because the misperception drives negative attitudes; whether the negative attitude leads people to rationalise their view; or it could be a third factor affecting both.
- **Some migrant groups are also associated with specific immigration concerns.** For instance, people tend to express cultural and security concerns about Muslim migrants, and economic and crime concerns about Eastern Europeans ([Hellwig & Sinno, 2016](#); [Stansfield & Stone, 2018](#)).
- Focus group research has shown that people sometimes speak interchangeably about different types of migrants, including EU and non-EU ([Rolfe et al., 2018](#)). This should not be surprising in a media environment where refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are often conflated ([Baker et al., 2008](#)). Surveys that ask about support or opposition to “immigrants”, as an umbrella term, should therefore be cautious. These studies **risk neglecting people’s “imagined immigration”, e.g. what they understand by the term ‘immigrant’ and their beliefs about the composition of migrants in the population** ([Blinder, 2015](#); [Ford, 2011](#)).

Notes

The complete evidence review can be found in the [full report](#). This provides a comprehensive review of the literature, including weighing up different evidence sources, and discussing the debates in the literature in more detail.

Other recent NIESR outputs on UK public immigration attitudes

[Immigration Policy from Post-War to Post-Brexit: How New Immigration Policy Can Reconcile Public Attitudes and Employer Preferences](#) – open-access journal paper by Rolfe, H., Runge, J. & Hudson-Sharp, N. (2019)

[EU migrants contribute to UK public finances, but the money hasn't gone where it's needed](#) – blog by Runge, J. (2019) in *LSE British Politics and Policy*

[Why the government’s crackdown on low-skilled migration is at odds with the public mood](#) – blog by Runge, J. (2019) in *LSE British Politics and Policy*

[This is what the British public really think about migrant workers](#) - article by Rolfe, H (2018) in *The Independent*
[Are Britons Really Softening on Immigration?](#) – blog by Runge, J. (2019) on *Project Syndicate*

[People’s perceptions of EU immigration: It’s the economy, stupid!](#) – blog by Runge, J. (2019) on *NIESR blog*

Other useful overviews on UK public immigration attitudes

Blinder, S. and Richards, L. (2018) [Briefing: UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern](#), Migration Observatory Briefing, Oxford University.