



Public opinion and immigration: policy briefing

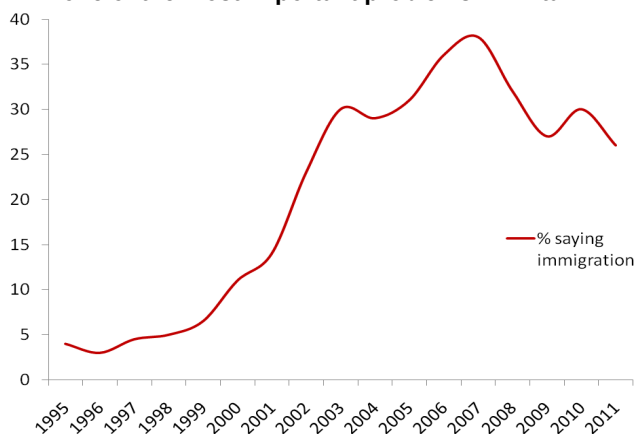
Key messages for policy-makers:

1. Although opinion on immigration among British voters is broadly negative, it is based on low levels of knowledge about immigration, and generally not connected to direct experience of immigration impacts.
2. Political messages influence public opinion on immigration, meaning that negative policy messages are likely to reinforce negative perceptions.
3. Voters lose faith in politicians who over-promise and under-deliver on immigration – and once trust has been lost it is difficult to regain. Offering realistic policy proposals, and delivering them effectively, are more likely to win public trust than promising draconian reforms which cannot be implemented.

1. Public opinion about immigration: Lessons from the polls

1.1 British voters have been broadly negative about immigration for decades. Its importance as an issue spiked in the 2000s but is declining now. In the 1960s and 1970s, 80-90% of voters wanted migration levels to be reduced. Over the past 15 years, with much higher migration levels, 50-65% of voters have similar demands. As Chart 1 shows, the importance of the issue to voters rose rapidly during the Labour government – peaking in 2005-7 when around 35-40% named immigration as one of the two or three most important problems facing the UK today. This figure has declined as the economy and unemployment have taken precedence in the public mind, but the issue remains a pressing concern for around a quarter of voters (IPSOS-MORI, 1995-2011).

Chart 1: Proportion of the public rating immigration as one of the most important problems in Britain



Source: IPSOS-MORI Political and social trends (1995-2011)

1.2 British voters report more negative views about immigration than in comparable countries. The 2010 Transatlantic Trends Survey polled voters in eight rich countries with large migrant populations – the United States, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and the UK. Findings showed British respondents to be the most likely to regard immigration as a problem, to want migration levels reduced, and to favour denying migrants access to education and health services.

1.3 British voters generally have low knowledge about real immigration levels in the UK. Research shows that the British public generally holds an exaggerated view of the scale and impacts of immigration in the UK, consistently estimating numbers of migrants or asylum seekers in excess of official statistics (Crawley, 2005). In 2002, the average public estimate of migration levels was more than double the actual level (European Social Survey, 2002). The proportion of British voters who demand lower migration levels drops by 15% when respondents are presented with real numbers, suggesting a significant portion of current opposition to migration stems from exaggerated views of the situation (Transatlantic Trends, 2010).

1.4 The majority of British voters hold complex and often contradictory views on migration, enabling negative and positive views about immigration to be held at the same time. For example, 51% of respondents in one poll agreed that immigrants came to Britain to work hard and better themselves, but 58% in the same poll agreed that immigration was destroying the British way of life (YouGov, 2010). Similar contradictions occur on other issues. For example, voters recognize migrants' contribution to public service provision, but also worry about the pressures they create as service users. Most British voters do recognize the benefits of migration as well as the costs.

1.5 Opinion polls give a limited picture of voter attitudes, tending to highlight negative feelings about immigration issues. The focus and phrasing of many opinion polls means that, while voter attitudes may be complex, results often highlight negative aspects of their views about migration. Polls often presume the respondent's understanding of terminology is the same as the questioner's, for example referring to "immigrants" as an abstract group without defining this further. Given that public views are likely to be driven most strongly by perceptions of 'problematic' groups such as asylum seekers or extremist Muslims, it is likely that the public understanding of 'immigrants' is different to that of policy-makers. This does not allow for more nuanced analysis of public opinion about groups such as skilled migrant workers or international students.



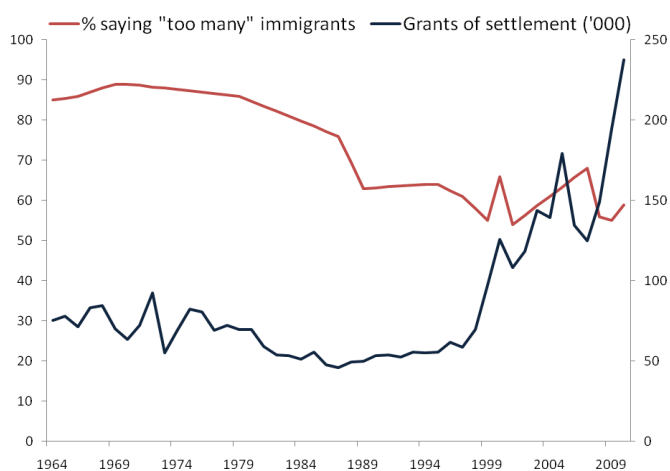
2. Factors shaping public opinion

2.1 Voters who are more positive about migration tend to be younger, more highly educated and to have more social contact with migrants. Voters who were themselves migrants, or are the children of migrants, tend to express more positive attitudes towards migration, as do Londoners. Social class has little impact on attitudes once education is controlled for, and there is little evidence that those living in publicly owned housing are more hostile to migrants.

Contrary to popular belief, there is little consistent evidence of higher hostility to immigrants among groups who face most economic competition from them (e.g. workers in industries or regions with many migrants, or using government resources such as housing also used by migrants). Although general economic insecurity is associated with higher opposition to migrants, this is true regardless of whether any realistic threat from migrants exists. Culture matters more than economics in explaining opposition to migration – it is voters worried about British identity who are most opposed to migration, not voters worried about jobs and wages.

2.2 Public attitudes towards migration are generally not driven by direct experiences. When voters are asked if migrants have a negative impact *nationally* (on jobs, crime, local services), around 60-70% say yes. When asked about the same impacts locally only around 10-20% reports a problem (IPSOS-MORI, 2008; YouGov, 2009). Voters seem to perceive migration as something which causes problems elsewhere. As voter opinions are not rooted in direct experience, they are likely to be driven by indirect information sources such as the media. Consistent with this, voters who report regularly reading newspapers which regularly run negative stories about immigration report more negative views than voters from similar social and political backgrounds who do not read such papers.

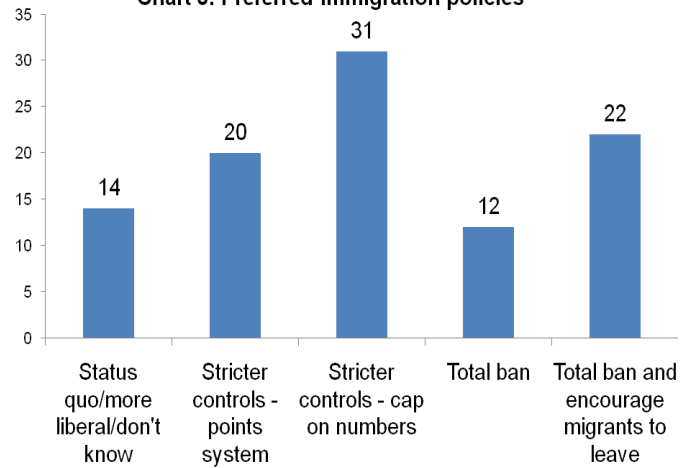
Chart 2: Settlement grants & demand for lower immigration



Sources: British Election Study, British Social Attitudes, IPSOS-MORI, YouGov, Transatlantic Trends (Compiled by Dr Robert Ford)

2.3 Public views about migration are not related to actual migration flows. There is little relationship between current migration levels and demands for reduced migration either over time or between countries. Chart 2 (below left) shows that the proportion of the electorate reporting immigration levels to be 'too high' remained stable at 50-60% over the past 15 years despite a significant increase in the level of long term settlement grants. This indicates that voters are more likely to be swayed by other factors than by actual immigration levels. As chart 3 (below) shows, there is also a wide spread of opinion about the best overall migration policy. Around a third of those polled in September 2010 favored the Coalition "cap" on economic immigration; another third would prefer Labour's "points system" or a more liberal approach, while the final third favoured a total ban.

Chart 3: Preferred immigration policies



Source: YouGov Sept 2010

2.4 High immigration flows do not necessarily result in negative public opinion. Evidence from other countries supports the conclusion that public backlash is not an inevitable reaction to a period of high immigration. Several other countries (Spain, Ireland, Canada) experienced large scale migration waves during the 1990s/2000s without a sharp increase in public hostility.

Spain, for example, accepted over 5 million immigrants between 2000 and 2010, including large inflows from Romania and North Africa. This is a larger influx proportional to population than that experienced by Britain, yet Spanish voters are less likely to believe immigrants take jobs from natives or to name immigration as an important problem, and much more likely than Britons to support making legal migration easier as a way to reduce illegal immigration (Transatlantic Trends, 2010). This indicates that there is no inevitable feed through from high migration inflows to public hostility to immigration.



3. Government immigration management and public opinion

3.1 The Labour government and public opinion.

When Labour entered government in 1997, immigration was not a matter of significant public concern (MORI, 1995-1997). By 2003, immigration was at the top of the agenda and between 70 and 80% of the public rated Labour's performance on the issue negatively (MORI, 2003). Voters' ratings of Labour on this issue remained strongly negative for the rest of its term in office (MORI, 2007; YouGov, 2010). Sharp increases in public concern followed the widely reported 'crisis in the asylum system' (2001-3) and unanticipated levels of immigration from European Union Accession 8 countries (2004-6).

It is likely that negative public opinion on these occasions was strongly influenced by the political management of these situations, rather than just arising as a result of the migration flows themselves. In both cases, the Labour government repeatedly made promises concerning immigration management which the public believed that they had broken (MORI, 2003). On asylum, assurances that the system was being improved were undermined by fresh media stories about mismanagement and a backlog of legacy cases. The arrival of EU Accession 8 nationals at a much higher rate than anticipated again led to rising concern that the government had lost control of the issue. Subsequent declines in both migration flows, and improvements in monitoring and management systems, did little to improve voter satisfaction (YouGov, 2010).

3.2 The Coalition government and public opinion.

Public opinion of the Coalition government immigration policy began positively, with 79% of the public approving of its target to substantially reduce net migration levels, including through a new cap (numerical limit) on economic migration to the UK (YouGov, 2011). However, the public is skeptical that the cap will work: in April 2011, 60% of voters thought that the cap was likely to fail (YouGov, April 2011). This is likely to have been influenced by deep seated public distrust of government effectiveness in this area, and also by growing media speculation that the Coalition government has overstated its ability to reduce net migration to the UK.

The Coalition now faces a significant risk in terms of public opinion on immigration management. Recent research indicates that policies announced so far could achieve half of the reduction needed to meet its target, and that the Coalition would have to introduce "unrealistic and unpalatable" reforms in order to reach its goals (Migration Observatory, 2011). If it fails to do so, regardless of whether the immigration system is otherwise run sensibly and efficiently, the public is likely to perceive the Coalition as having poorly managed the immigration system. Experiences under Labour indicate that, in this case, a public backlash would be likely and subsequent efforts to show effective management of immigration would be unlikely to win back trust.

4. Lessons for policymakers

4.1 Don't oversimplify the issue – voters accept it's complex. Research shows that voters are not monolithically opposed to all migration; they are quite positive about some forms of migration and conflicted about other forms. The public clearly understands that there are benefits to migration as well as costs. By oversimplifying the issue, politicians risk increasing public concern. Instead, they might benefit from being more open about the complexity of the issues and the difficult trade-offs involved in policy decisions. For example, migrants may put pressure on certain government services (schools, housing) but migrant labour also helps relieve pressure on other government services. It is likely that voters will understand such trade-offs, but only when they are made aware of them.

4.2 Political messages about immigration matter because they influence public opinion. Research suggests that politicians and other elites can influence public opinion on migration. Voters in countries with prominent anti-immigration political parties or newspapers are more likely to blame migrants for social problems such as crime and housing shortages, regardless of actual migration levels (Ivarsflaten, 2006). Separate research has shown that the most negative voters are often the most persuadable – and that they can be mobilized to support immigration provided that positive messages come from trusted sources (Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2007). There is a need for credible sources of information about migration and its effects, currently being met by media and other sources pushing a negative and often exaggerated narrative about migration. It should be possible for policymakers to fill this gap, but they will need to gain public trust first.

4.3 Voters lose faith in politicians who over-promise and under-deliver on immigration. Although the public may support ambitious targets on immigration initially, they lose faith in politicians who fail to meet their targets. Once public trust is lost on this issue, it is hard to win back. Although voters favour the Conservatives over Labour on this issue, a large group (25-30%) says they do not trust any political party on migration policy (YouGov, 2010). Draconian policy proposals and harsh rhetoric are unlikely to have any more success now than they did in the Blair-Brown government. Such proposals can't be delivered without unacceptable cost, and voters will notice and punish broken policy promises. While some voters will never be convinced, most will respond to mature discussion about the costs and benefits of migration and to balanced, achievable policy proposals. The process of rebuilding trust should start here.

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