



BRIEFING

UK Public Opinion toward Migration: Determinants of Attitudes

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This briefing examines what determines people's attitudes toward migration in the UK. It investigates factors associated with greater or lesser opposition to migration, and begins to address the issue of what causes people to oppose or support migration.

Key Points

Opposition to immigration is widespread, but weaker in certain segments of the population: London residents, younger people, ethnic minorities and foreign-born whites, and those with university degrees are less likely than others to favour reducing immigration.

For many years, more British people have been willing to accept migrants from Europe and Australia than from India, Pakistan, and the West Indies. Surveys show that younger generations of Britons are less likely to differentiate migrants by region of origin, and might be more accepting of migrants overall.

Those who oppose immigration are likely to have negative perceptions of migrants' impact on British jobs, crime rates, and culture.

Research provides strong evidence that opposition to immigration comes from feelings of threat to one's group – especially to national identity or culture. Researchers continue to debate the impact of economic class, fiscal policy concerns, education, prejudice, and values.

Understanding the evidence

The main "attitude" investigated here is a preference for increasing or reducing immigration to the UK, or for keeping it the same. This question is frequently used in academic and government surveys such as the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA), British Election Study (BES), and Citizenship Survey, as well as in polls by firms such as Ipsos-MORI, YouGov, and ICM and in European cross-national surveys such as the European Social Survey.

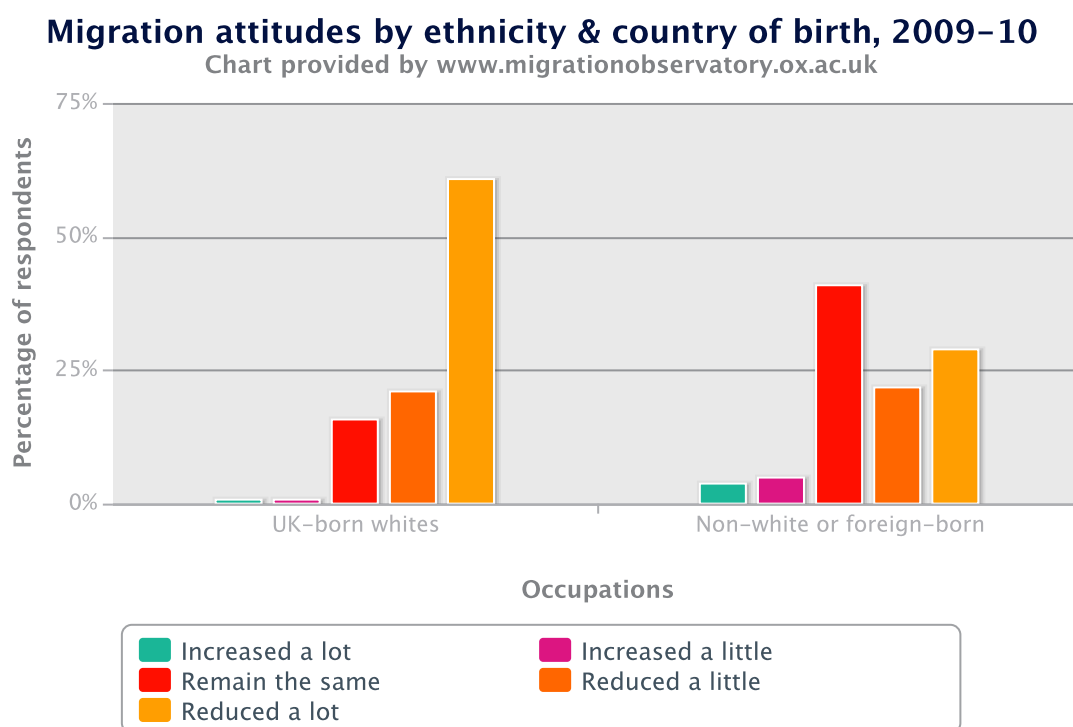
The main sources for this briefing are the academic British Attitudes Survey and the government's Citizenship Survey from 2009-10. Unlike most opinion polls reported in the media, these surveys ask questions about a large number of characteristics and opinions for each individual respondent, and make this information available for researchers' use. Therefore, they can be used to analyze what lies behind people's basic preferences for more or less migration to the UK. The brief also draws on the 2002/2003 European Social Survey, which included a sample of over 2000 UK residents aged 15 and over, and on the Transatlantic Trends survey, conducted by the firm TNS opinion on behalf of the German Marshall Fund (a non-partisan American NGO that works to increase cooperation between North America and Europe). All of these surveys are conducted using versions of random sampling techniques so that responses are representative of the larger national population.

Opposition to immigration widespread, but varies by demographic groups

The preference for reducing migration is a majority view among virtually all segments of British society. But it is still possible to distinguish segments in which this preference is particularly common, and other groups in which favourable attitudes toward migration are less unusual. This section focuses on the 2009–10 Citizenship Survey, but other surveys such as the BSA yield similar patterns.

First, as discussed in the briefing on ‘UK Public Opinion Toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern’, UK-born whites are most likely to favour reduced migration. Ethnic minorities and the foreign-born (including non-UK born whites) are less likely than UK-born whites to favour reductions to migration rates, especially large reductions, as shown in Figure 1. But these groups are still more likely to favour less migration rather than more. Age also matters.

Figure 1



Source: 2009–10 Citizenship Survey

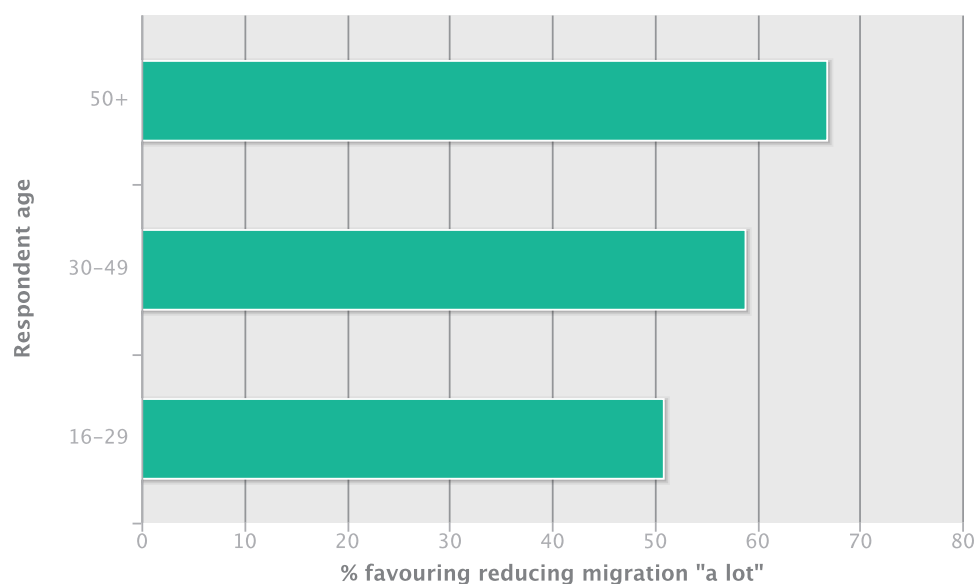
The next set of figures examine attitudes toward migration among UK-born white survey respondents, broken down into different demographic categories. As shown in Figure 2, opposition to migration is more common among older people (aged 50 and over) than younger people, although recent results from the UK government’s Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study suggest that children and teens became less tolerant as they came of age in the 2000–2010 decade.

Figure 2

Occupation, income, and education are also associated with opposition to migration. As Figures 3 and 4 show, opposition to migration becomes more common when moving from higher levels of education and income to lower levels. But opposition to immigration is hardly the exclusive province of lower classes. Thirty nine percent of non-UK born white respondents earning £75,000 per year reported preferences for “a lot” less migration.

Attitudes to immigration by age group, 2009–10

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



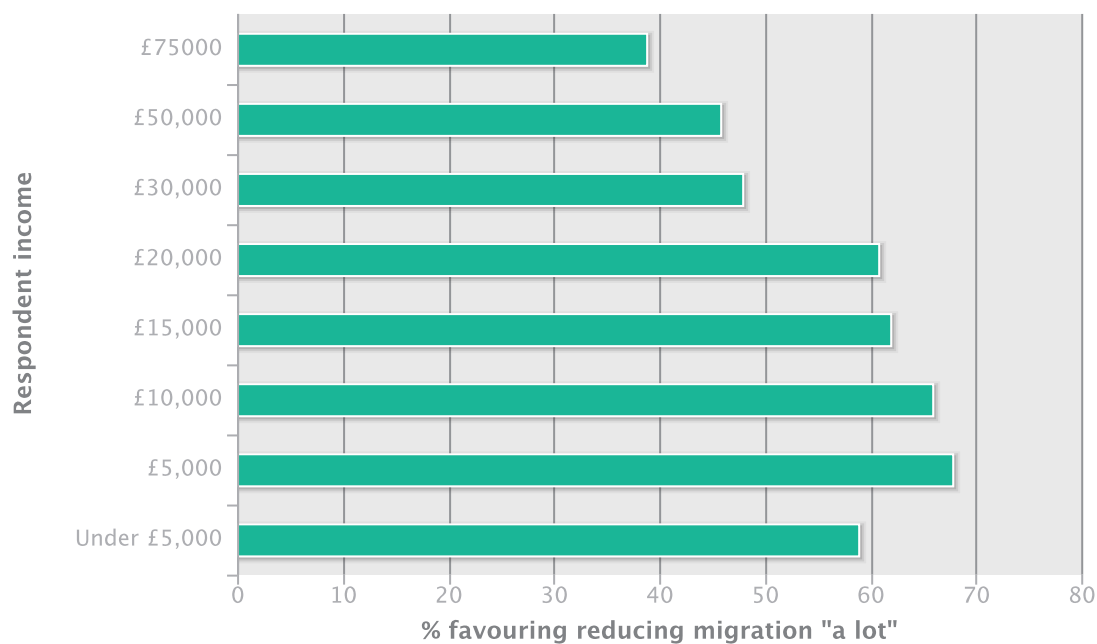
Source: 2009–10 Citizenship Survey. UK–Born white respondents only

In contrast to age, income, and education, gender appears to make little or no difference on this issue. Preferences for reduced migration were equally common among men as among women among UK-born white respondents in both the 2009–10 Citizenship Survey and the 2008 BSA (not depicted here).

Figure 3

Support for reducing migration 'a lot' by income, 2009–10

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



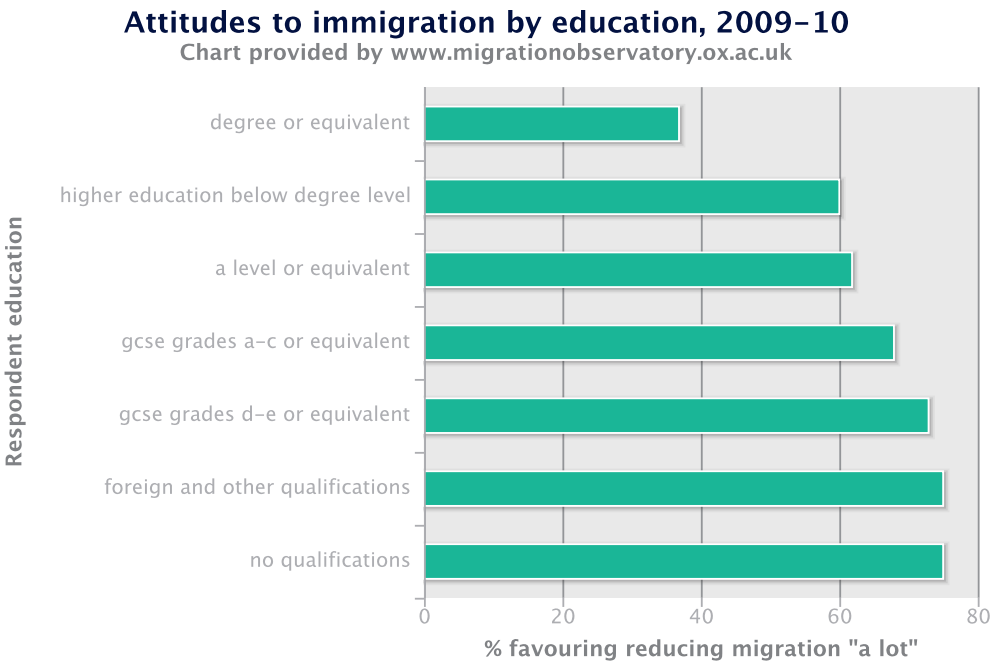
Source: 2009–10 Citizenship Survey. UK–Born white respondents only

Figure 4

Place of residence is also associated with migration attitudes in at least two ways, as seen in Figures 5 and 6. First, opposition to migration is more common outside of London than within it, even when focusing only on UK-born white British residents of London. Indeed, London is the only region in which fewer than 80% of UK-born whites favour reducing migration.

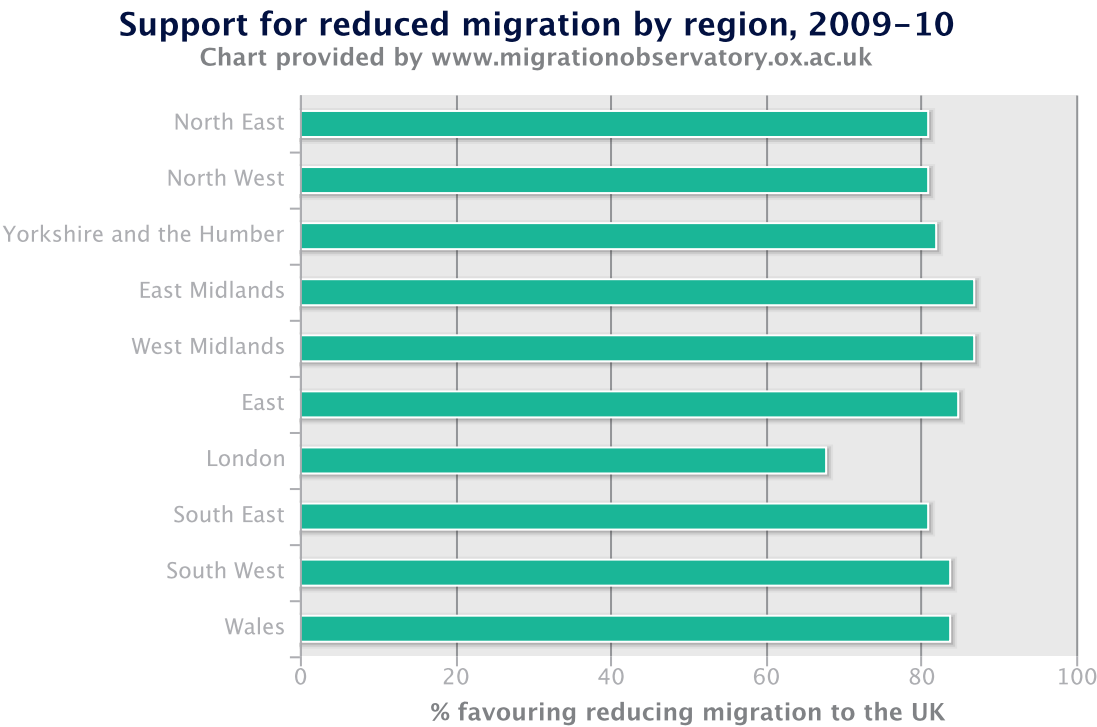
Second, perceptions of local neighbourhoods matter as well, but only in a limited way.

People who view their neighbourhood as a place where people of diverse backgrounds get along well are indeed less likely to prefer reduced immigration. However, only 16%% of white UK-born respondents view their neighbourhoods as problematic in this way, so negative perceptions of one's own neighbourhood can play only a limited role in creating opposition to migration (which clearly runs well above 16%). Furthermore, even among those respondents who view relations between diverse groups in their neighbourhoods as being more cooperative, a majority are still in favour of reducing immigration "a lot".



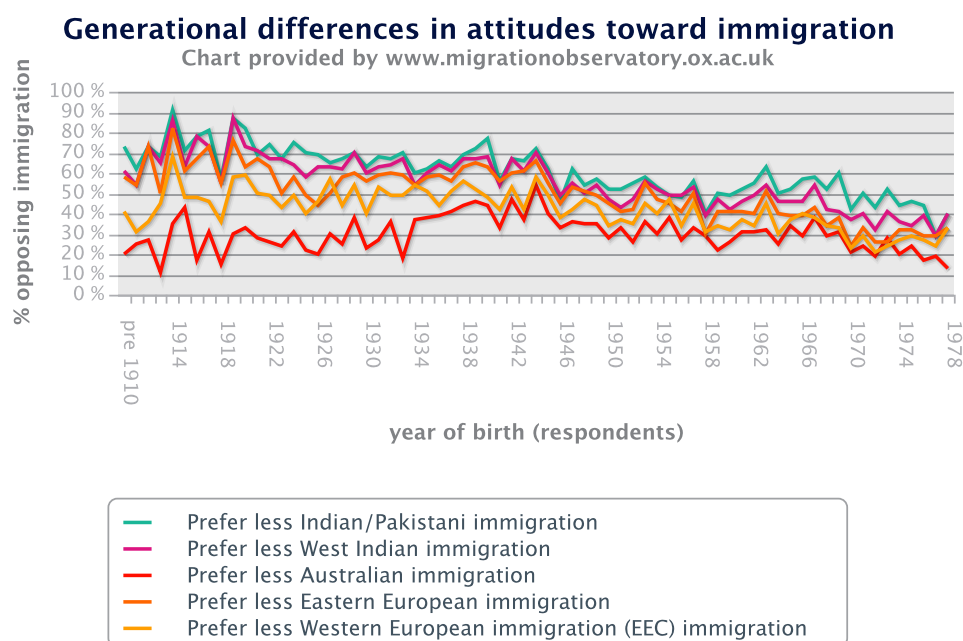
Source: 2009–10 Citizenship Survey. UK-Born white non-students only

Figure 5



Source: 2009–10 Citizenship Survey. UK-Born white respondents only

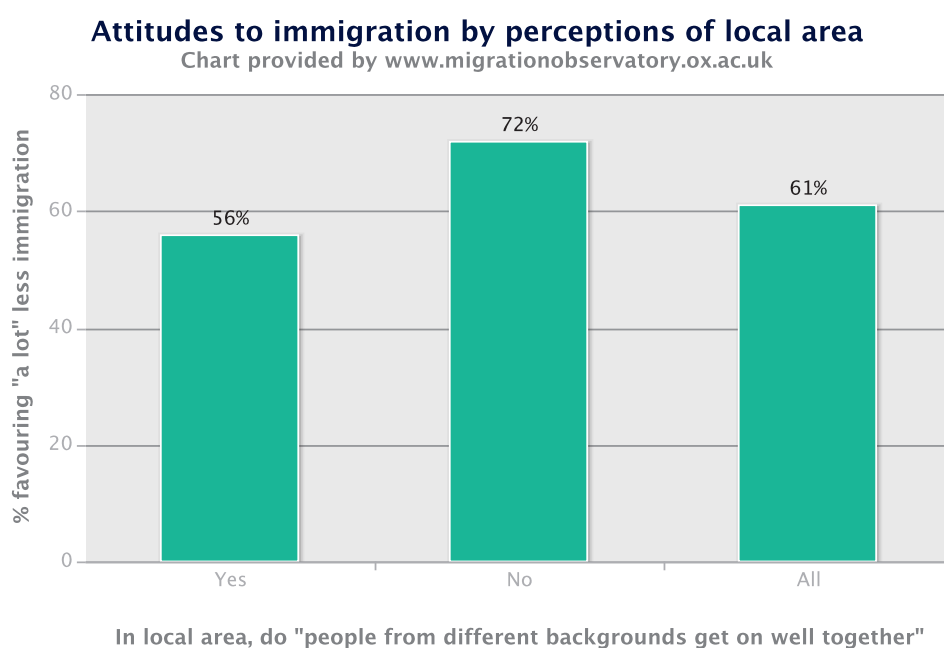
Figure 6



British people express preferences for richer migrants and those from Europe and Australia

Attitudes toward migration may also depend on the origins of the migrants themselves. Data from the 1983–1996 BSA surveys, as analyzed by Robert Ford (2011), show that negative attitudes toward immigration were more common when focusing on migrants from the “Indian sub-continent” (a phrase commonly used by government and other sources to refer to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) and from the Caribbean, as opposed to migrants from Europe and Australia. This difference appears to have decreased with generational change, however. Ford’s analysis shows both the greater opposition to migration from the Indian subcontinent and the West Indies as well as the diminishing (but not elimination) of these differences among younger cohorts (see Figure 7).

Figure 7



Source: 2009–10 Citizenship Survey. UK born–white respondents only

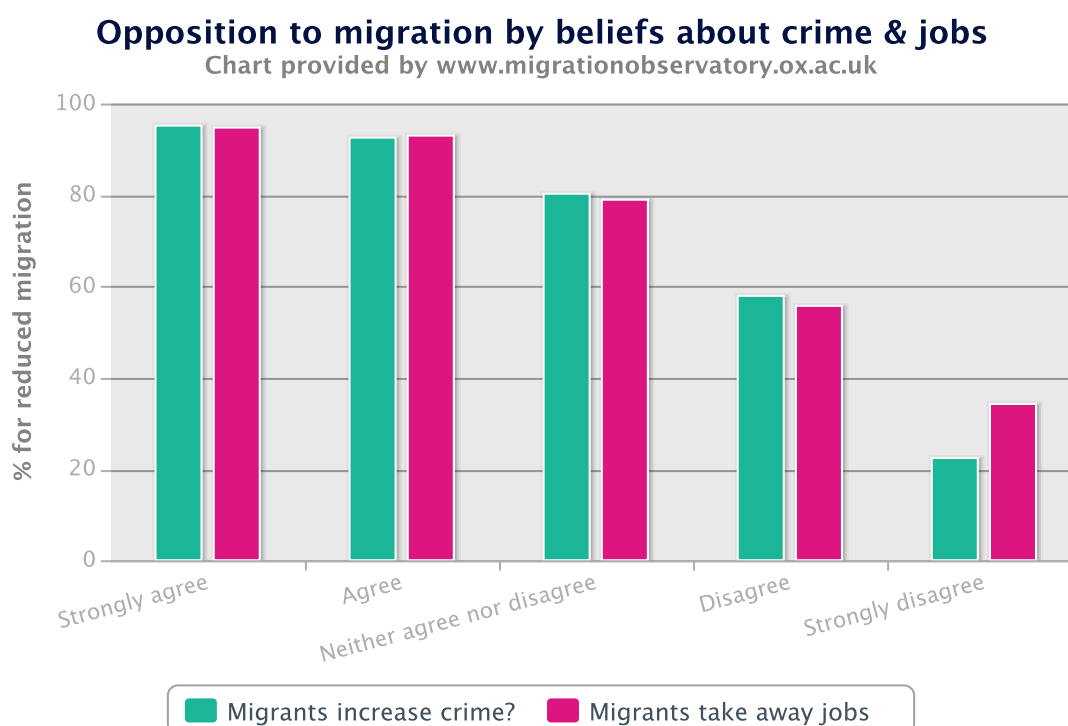
Evidence from the 2002/2003 European Social Survey further supports this view. UK respondents were asked if they would like to see more or less migration to their country if those migrants share the same race or ethnicity as the majority of the country's population, and the same question considering migrants of a different race or ethnicity. A majority of British respondents chose the same level for both majority- and minority-ethnicity migrants. However, a greater number of respondents preferred same-race-migrants than different-race-migrants. Further, there was a significant generation gap among majority-ethnic British respondents. Majority-group British respondents aged 55 and over in 2002 were more likely to have a preference for same-ethnicity migrants than under-55 respondents were, by a margin of 30% to 18% (author's analysis).

However, this evidence base pre-dates the addition of eight Eastern European countries to the EU in 2004 (A8 accession). Post-2004 migration to Britain from Eastern Europe may well have changed how people in Britain feel about immigration from Europe relative to other regions of origin.

Negative beliefs about impact are common but do not explain opposition to migration

Opposition to immigration often accompanies beliefs about its negative effects, but such beliefs about impacts do not fully explain the opposition. The largest group of survey respondents (though not an outright majority) agrees with statements that migrants hurt the British economy, increase crime rates, and disagree that migrants improve British culture by making it more "open to new ideas". Those who believe that migrants have harmful impacts on the economy, society, or culture are more likely to favour reduced immigration. As shown in Figure 8, nearly all respondents who believe that migrants increase crime rates or take jobs from British people favour reducing migration, while less than half of those who disagree with these claims wish to reduce migration.

Figure 8



Source: 2003 British Attitudes Survey

But these beliefs cannot fully account for opposition to migration, as they are less widespread than the overall negative attitude toward migration. For example, in the 2003 BSA survey, 77% of respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that immigration should be reduced. At the same time, only a minority of respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that migrants take jobs from natives (45%) or increase crime (39%). Likewise, only a minority disagreed that migrants are good for the British economy (42%) or make Britain more open to new cultures (29%). (In each

case, more people held negative beliefs about migrants' impact than positive ones, but 25% to 35% respondents chose the neutral option on the scale, claiming to "neither agree nor disagree".)

Cultural concerns explain attitudes better than objective economic position

Survey data can tell us that opposition to migration in the UK is more common among older, UK-born, white, and less educated groups, and is more common when people are thinking about migration from poorer and ethnically or culturally distant nations of origin. But why? This is more difficult to answer.

At least three basic explanations of attitudes toward migration have been researched extensively:

- Contact theory holds that sustained positive contact (i.e. friendships) with members of other ethnic, religious, racial, or national groups produce more positive attitudes toward members of that group.
- Group conflict theory suggests that migrants or minority groups can appear to threaten the interests, identities, or status of the majority (as a group), and that those who feel this sense of threat most acutely will be most likely to oppose migration.
- Economic competition theories suggest that opposition to migration will come from native workers who compete with migrants with similar skill sets, or (conversely) from wealthier natives who feel (or perceive) a financial burden for tax-payers if migrants use public services such as hospitals, schools.

Evidence is quite strong for the first two theories, and mixed for the various economic explanations. Contact theory has support in numerous contexts, including the UK (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Indeed, friendship with migrants is strongly related to favourable attitudes toward migration. In Transatlantic Trends' 2009 survey, for example, among British people with "several" friends from another country, only 27% said that immigration was "more of a problem than an opportunity"; among those with no friends from another country, 78% agreed that immigration was "more of a problem".

One might think that those who start out with more favourable attitudes toward migration are more likely to become friends with migrants. This is probably true, but a great deal of research on contact theory suggests that friendships between members of different groups have an added, independent effect on "intergroup attitudes" (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). This contact may help explain why London residents, even among UK-born majority-ethnic group members, are more favourable toward migration than others – although contact theory requires sustained positive interaction rather than the casual, fleeting contact of passing others in the street.

Group conflict theory also fares well in most analyses (McLaren and Johnson 2007). Perceptions that migrants threaten the national economy (as opposed to one's own individual finances) or national culture are strongly associated with opposition to immigration. Within this general school of thought, some argue for a more "realistic" sense of group conflict (i.e. involving competition for scarce resources), while others suggest that conflict is largely "symbolic" and more closely related to nationalism, particularly a strain of nationalism that emphasizes ethnicity as part of British identity (Heath and Tilley 2005).

The role of individual economic self-interest is more dubious. Economically vulnerable people are more likely to oppose migration, but this statistical relationship weakens or disappears once some form of "group threat" is taken into account. Yet some complex analyses make the case that individual economic interests do help determine migration attitudes. Recent research focuses less on people's actual economic situations and more on their subjective impressions (Card, Dustmann, and Preston 2009). Subjective perceptions—of one's own economic security and of migrants' impact on jobs, wages, and the costs of maintaining the welfare state—do seem related to anti-migrant attitudes. But these subjective perceptions are only loosely related to actual individual economic position.

Evidence gaps and limitations

One commonly stated viewpoint holds the media responsible for generating anti-immigration attitudes. Analyses of media coverage have generally concluded that the media have focused on “illegal immigration” and negative impacts of migration (Saggar and Drean 2001). But there is little evidence either for or against this theory when it comes to actual impact on attitudes. It is extremely difficult to test for media impact on attitudes empirically, because it is virtually impossible to discern whether people learn their political viewpoints from the media sources they rely upon, or if conversely they choose to rely on media sources that reflect their pre-determined political viewpoint. It would seem likely that both processes occur, but research to disentangle one from the other faces formidable challenges and is likely to remain inconclusive. Information about the number and characteristics of migrants might affect attitudes. But while there is evidence that British people on average overestimate the number of migrants coming to the UK, no research to date directly examines whether or not this misinformation actually creates anxiety about migration. It might be that concerns about migration generate a tendency to overestimate the number of migrants as well. One US study found that providing “overestimators” with correct statistics on the number of migrants coming to the US did not lessen opposition to immigration (Sides and Citrin 2007).

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- Sides, John and Jack Citrin. “How Large the Huddled Masses? The Causes and Consequences of Public Misperceptions about Immigrant Populations.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 2007.

Further readings

- Ceobanu, Alin M. and Xavier Escandell. “Comparative Analyses of Public Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration Using Multinational Survey Data: a Review of Theories and Research.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 309–328.
- Citrin, Jack and John Sides. “Immigration and the Imagined Community in Europe and the United States.” *Political Studies* 56 (2008): 33–56.

Related material

- Migration Observatory Briefing – “UK Public Opinion Toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern” www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-concern
- Migration Observatory Report – “Thinking Behind the Numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain” www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/reports/thinking-behind-numbers-understanding-public-opinion-immigration-britain



The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



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