



# BRIEFING

## UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern

AUTHORS: DR SCOTT BLINDER  
WILLIAM L ALLEN

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This briefing provides an overview of attitudes toward immigration in Britain. The discussion focuses on two basic questions: whether or not people favour or oppose immigration to the UK, and how many see it as one of the most important issues facing the country.

### Key Points

General reactions to immigration can be examined by using public opinion data, but such responses may be based in part upon confusion about categories of migrants both among the public and in the questions they are asked.

Immigration is currently highly salient and in recent years has consistently ranked in the top five 'most important issues' as selected by the British public.

Approximately three quarters of people in Britain currently favour reducing immigration.

Concern about migration applies to both EU and non-EU migration.

Attitudes to immigration vary for different migration types.

A majority of the British public thinks that migrants are good for the economy, but equal proportions think that Britain's cultural life is either undermined or enriched by migration.

### Understanding the evidence

Asking people about their views on immigration raises a host of issues. Definitions and categories are a particular problem: individual respondents and survey organisations may have different ideas of who 'immigrants' are. Many important issues depend greatly on definitions of who is a migrant. For example, policies often refer to subsets of migrants who have taken a particular path of entry into the country, such as those who come to the UK with job offers.

The data for this briefing come from polls and surveys of representative samples of the adults in Great Britain or the UK, conducted by professional polling firms, academic survey organisations, and NGOs. This briefing relies in particular on the British Social Attitudes, a long-running high-quality survey run by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), which included modules in 2011, 2013 and 2015 with many detailed new questions about immigration.

When conducted according to accepted professional standards, polls and surveys are reliable as snapshots of public opinion, at least for the questions that pollsters or academics choose to pose to the public. But interpreting them always requires care and caution, for they have important limitations and flaws.

### Immigration is one of the ‘most important issues’ facing the British public

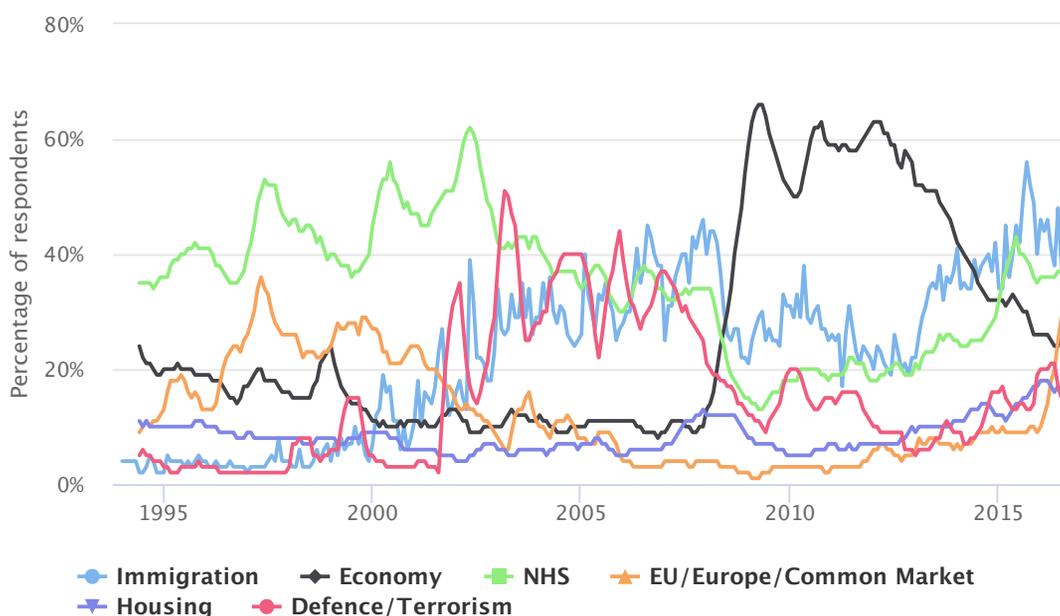
Pollsters and scholars commonly assess levels of public concern by asking people to name the ‘most important issue’ or ‘issues’ facing the nation. Ipsos MORI conducts a monthly poll asking respondents first to name the most important issue, and after they reply they are asked to name any ‘other important issues’. Respondents are not prompted with particular topics. Rather, they simply reply with whatever comes to mind. After assigning each response to one of 47 categories (see our data section for the full list), Ipsos MORI reports how many respondents chose each of these categories for each monthly sample.

Immigration consistently ranks among the top five issues in recent history. As of August 2016, it was the issue picked most often by respondents (34%). The other top five issues that respondents picked that month were the EU/Europe (31%), the National Health Service (31%), the economy (30%), housing (22%), and defence/ international terrorism (19%). Figure 1 tracks the percentage of respondents naming race relations or immigration as one of the most important issues facing Britain, relative to the other five most frequently named issues as of August 2016. These other issues are presented as six-month moving averages to make the chart easier to visually interpret.

Figure 1

#### Immigration among the public's most important issues

Chart provided by [www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk)



Source: Ipsos-MORI Issue Index

Note: Until January 2015, ‘immigration’ included responses of ‘race relations’. After this point, ‘immigration’ became its own category. Data for ‘immigration’ are actual percentages. The other categories report six-month rolling averages.

Figure 1 reveals the rise of immigration from a marginal concern to one of the few most-frequently named issues. Immigration and race relations were rarely mentioned by respondents as one of the ‘most important issues’ facing the country prior to 2000. As recently as December 1999, fewer than 5% of Ipsos MORI’s monthly sample gave a reply that had to do with race relations or immigration. But since then, immigration has become one of the most frequently named issues. Similar patterns emerge in polling over shorter time spans by other polling firms, including Gallup and YouGov.

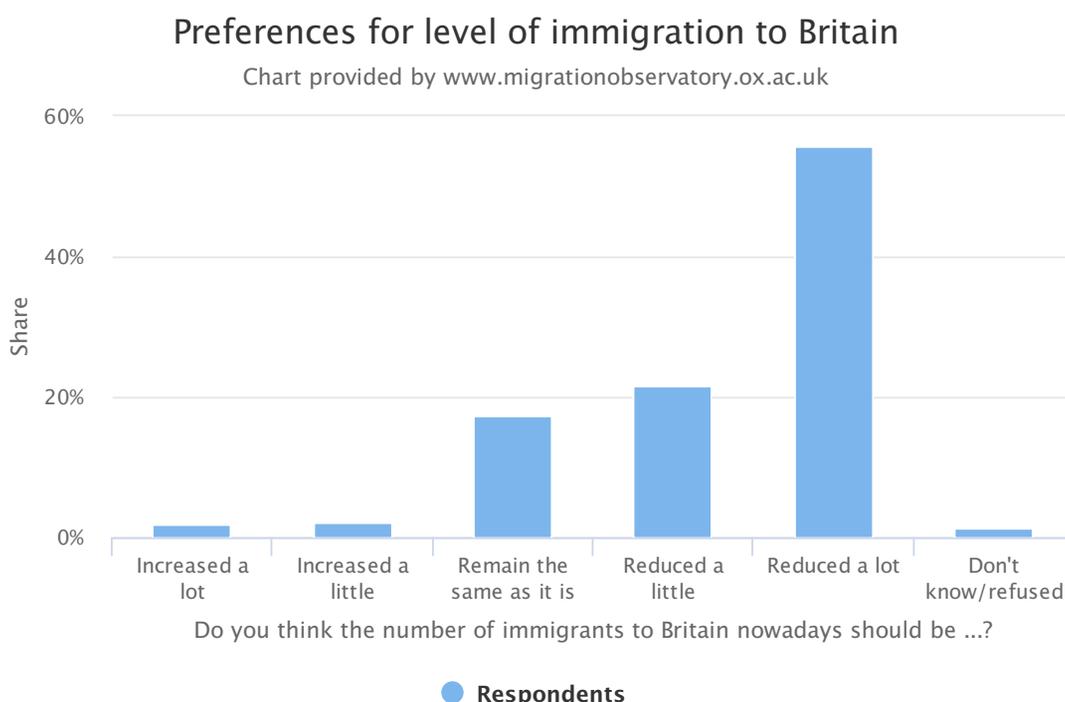
While it is possible that the coding involves some error or uncertainty, the Ipsos MORI results appear reliable (Jennings and Wlezien 2011). However, the ‘Most Important Issue’ coding scheme combined ‘race relations’ with ‘immigration’ and ‘immigrants’ until January 2015, making it impossible up to this point in time to isolate public concern over immigration in particular.

## Immigration is unpopular, with approximately three quarters of the British public favouring reduced levels

Existing evidence clearly shows high levels of opposition to immigration in the UK. In recent surveys, majorities of respondents think that there are too many migrants, that fewer migrants should be let in to the country, and that legal restrictions on immigration should be tighter.

Figure 2 shows that a large majority in the 2013 British Social Attitudes survey endorsed reducing immigration. Over 56% chose 'reduced a lot', while 77% chose either 'reduced a lot' or 'reduced a little'. The same question yielded similar results on the British Social Attitudes survey in 2008, adding confidence that these are reliable estimates.

Figure 2



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey, 2013

Another recent global study done by Gallup for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), with survey fieldwork in 2012-13, produced similar results. In the UK sample, nearly 7 out of 10 respondents (69%) thought that immigration levels should be decreased, while only 5% thought that they should be increased.

### Preferences for reduced migration are not new

Opposition to the arrival of immigrants in the UK is not new. Rising concern about 'New Commonwealth' immigration prompted the British Election Study (BES) to begin asking the public about immigration as far back as 1964, although in those early years it did not ask the question to 'coloured' respondents. Throughout this period, the overwhelming majority of people in Britain have agreed that there are too many immigrants in the UK.

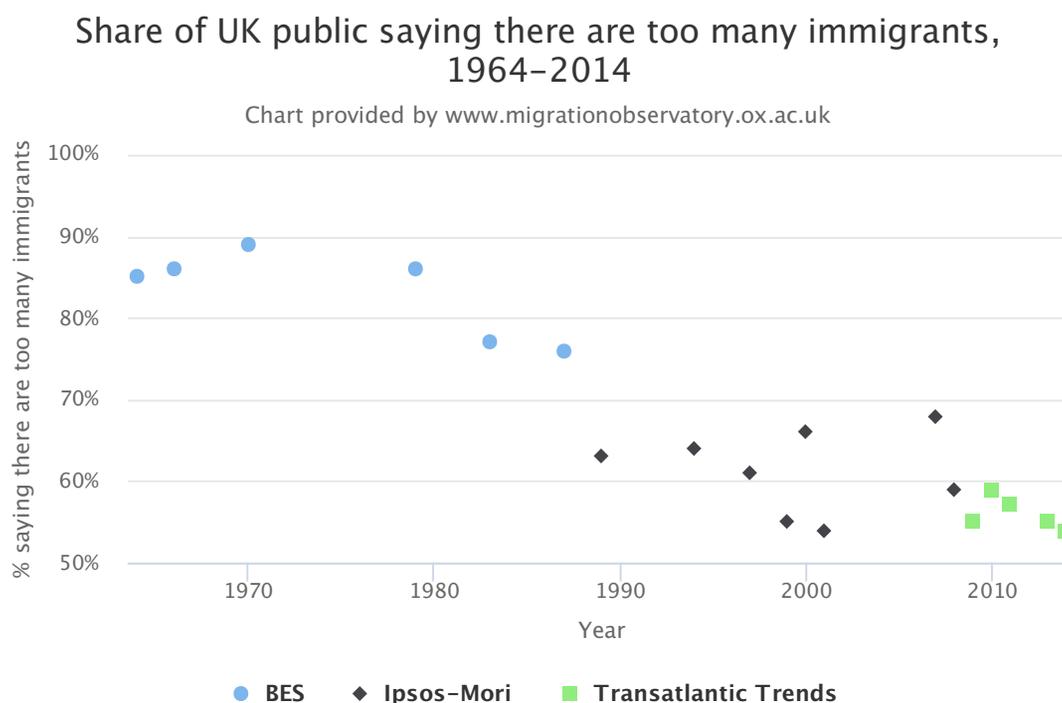
Figure 3 shows that majorities of the British public continue to view immigration as too high. However, the trend line in the figure should not be taken as evidence of a decrease over time in this view, or of dramatic changes in 1983 or 2000. This is because these changes are quite likely attributable to changes in how questions were worded, as well as the response options given to respondents. For example, the beginning of a slight downward trend seen in Figure 4 coincides with a shift from the initial BES question asking if there are too many immigrants in Britain to a different question that asked if immigration has 'gone too far'. This includes a one-time change in 1983 that inverted and further specified the question, asking if 'cutting Commonwealth immigration' had 'gone too far'. Also, for 1983, Figure 3 depicts the combination of two responses that express a preference for less immigration: that cutting

immigration has been ‘about right’ (44%) or ‘has not gone far enough’ (33%) Then, the series returns to an Ipsos MORI question that was similarly worded to the original BES question, but allowed respondents to choose ‘neither agree nor disagree’ (1994–1999) or ‘don’t know’. These changes may help account for the decrease in people responding ‘too many’.

### Concern about migration applies to both EU and non-EU migration

A recent survey conducted by Transatlantic Trends (2014) across 13 European countries asked whether people were concerned about the levels of immigration from within the EU and from outside the EU. Figure 3 places the UK alongside nine other countries. It shows that people in some countries, including Greece, Italy and France, were most concerned about immigration from non-European countries. Levels of concern about EU and non-EU immigration were roughly similar in other countries, however, including the UK.

Figure 3



Source: Ipsos-MORI and Transatlantic Trends

Note: Note and Sources: 1964–1987 data are from the British Election Study (BES); 1989–2008 data are from Ipsos-MORI who asked about ‘immigrants’; while 2009–2014 data are from Transatlantic Trends who asked about ‘people not born in the UK’. More precisely, the BES question was ‘branching’, asking first a yes or no question about whether there are too many migrants and then a follow-up question assessing the strength of that opinion, while Ipsos MORI’s was a single question with response options arrayed on a 5-point scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Also, Ipsos MORI allowed a ‘neither’ response in some years but not others. Thus Ipsos MORI’s versions allowed more respondents to opt out of the question, depressing opposition to immigration but also depressing assent to immigration.

These changes in how questions are worded, how answers are followed up, and whether a ‘neither’ option was offered, suggest the need for healthy scepticism for any single polling result. Seemingly minor differences can noticeably influence results. For example, the relatively low anti-immigration sentiment in 1999 resulted from an unusual number of respondents choosing ‘don’t know’ (13%), which in turn seemed to lead Ipsos MORI to re-introduce the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ option. It is not clear why the 2001 response was similar to 1999.

### Concern about migration applies to both EU and non-EU migration

A recent survey conducted by Transatlantic Trends in 2014 across 13 European countries asked whether people were concerned about the levels of immigration from both within and outside the EU. Figure 4 places the UK alongside nine other countries. It shows that people in some countries, including Greece, Italy and France, were

most concerned about immigration from non-European countries. However, levels of concern about EU and non-EU immigration were roughly similar in other countries, including the UK.

**Figure 4**

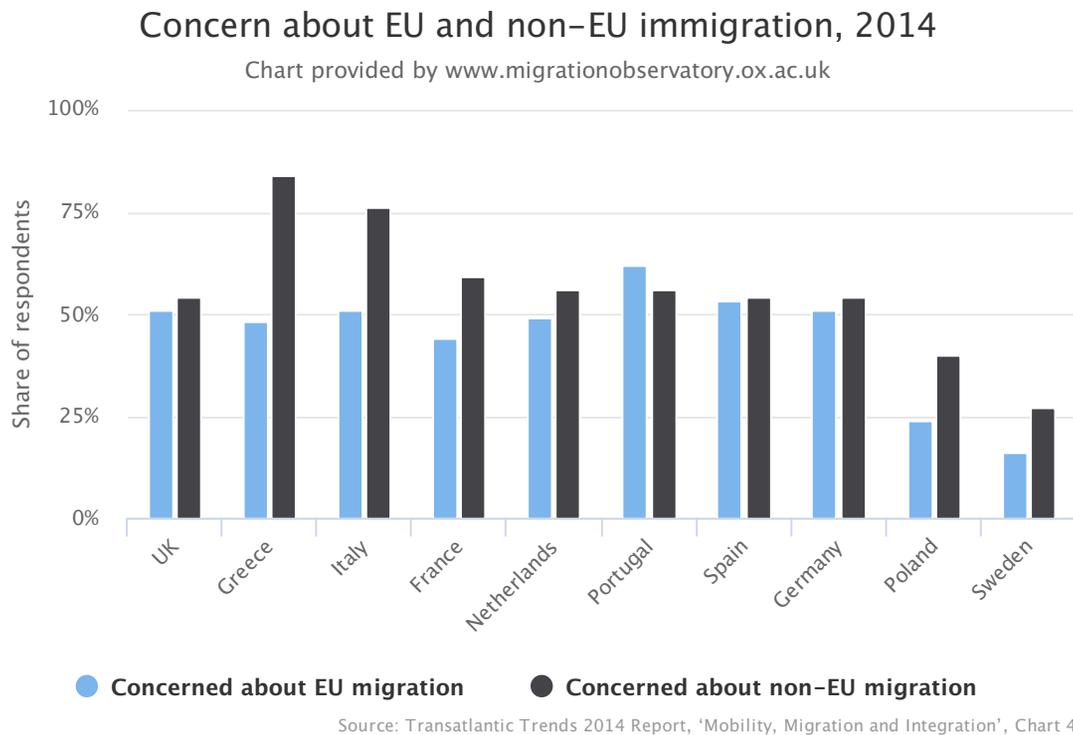
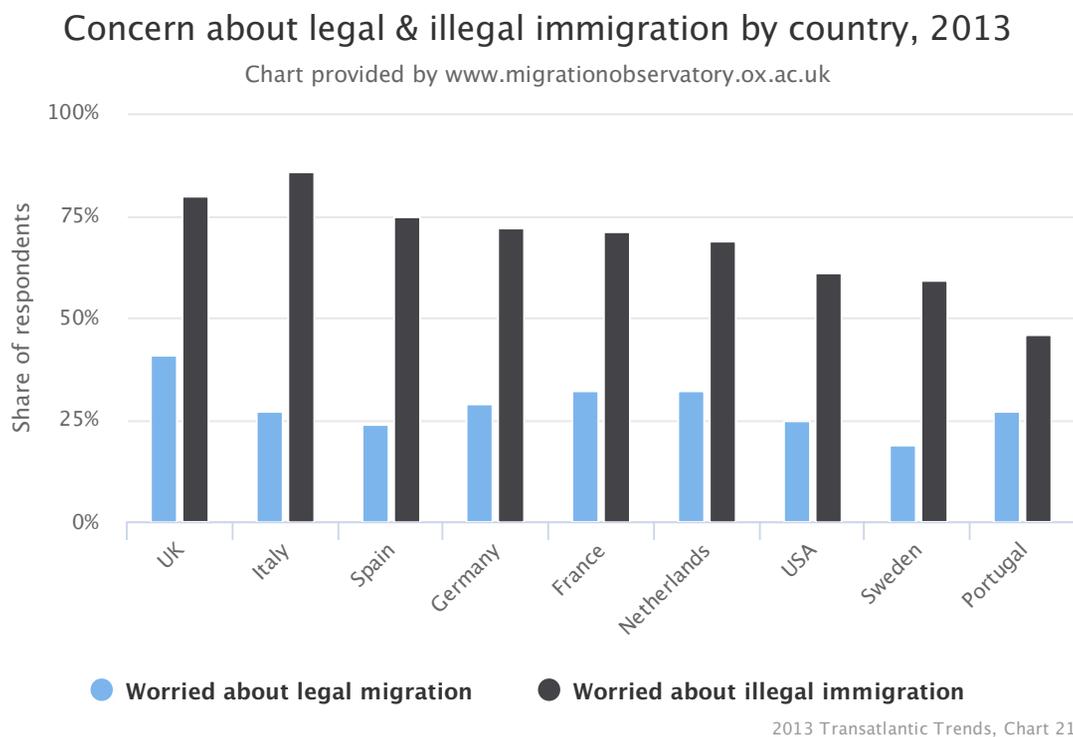


Figure 5 shows how more people in Britain than in several comparable countries are concerned about immigration, whether legal or illegal.

**Figure 5**

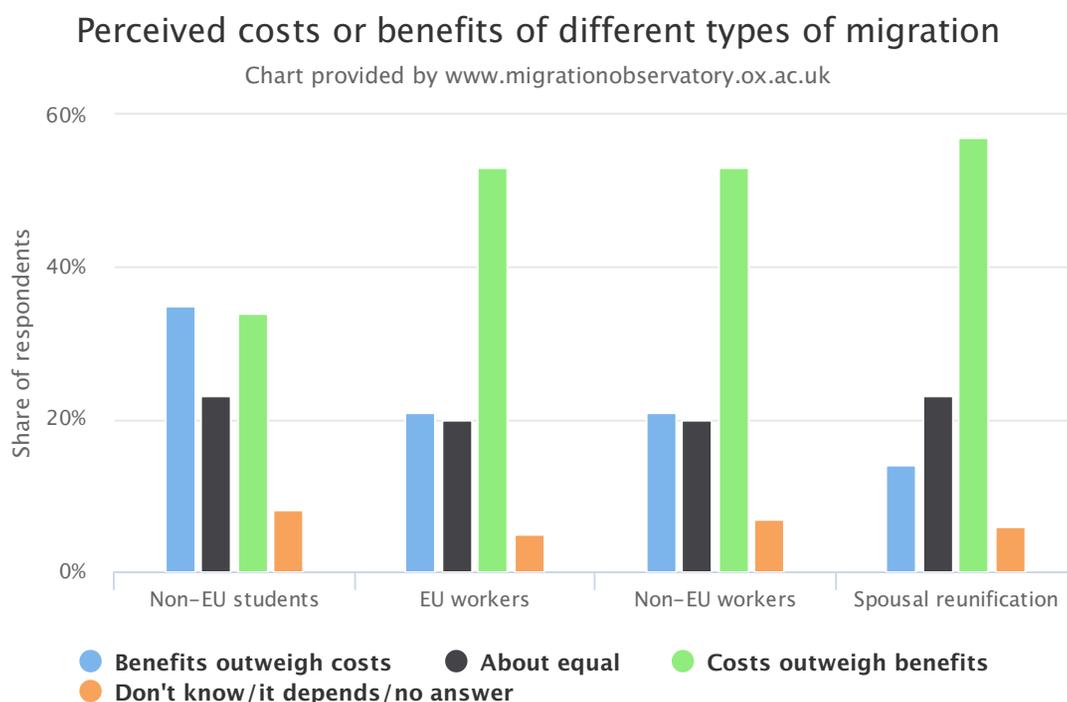


### More popular migrants: skilled workers, neighbours

Despite the clear opposition to overall immigration, more specific polling questions reveal that attitudes depend on the type of immigrant in question. For example, a 2011 Migration Observatory/IpsosMORI study found that attitudes toward low-skilled labour migrants, extended family members, and asylum seekers were much more negative than attitudes to high-skilled migrants, students, and close family members. This general pattern was found again in a Migration Observatory/YouGov study conducted in both Scotland and England/Wales. Prior to that study, a 2010 survey found that 72% supported admitting more doctors and nurses from other countries to cope with increasing health care demands, while 51% supported admitting more care workers to help the burdens of an ageing population (Transatlantic Trends 2010).

In 2013, the British Social Attitudes survey asked about the costs and benefits of different types of migration: students, spouses, and labour migrants from within and outside the EU. Figure 6 shows the results of this question. As with previous findings, students were the least negatively-viewed. Similar proportions of respondents saying that they are a net positive for Britain as said that they are a net negative. Labour migrants were more likely to be seen as a net negative, and were viewed similarly whether from within or outside the EU. Finally, spousal reunion migrants were the most negatively viewed by this measure, with 14% seeing them as bringing more benefit than cost, against 57% seeing such migrants as bringing more cost than benefit.

Figure 6



Note that the finding on spousal reunion diverges from Migration Observatory findings, but in a way that may be explained by the question at hand. Observatory surveys have asked whether migration of spouses and partners should be increased, reduced, or kept the same, and found that only a minority supported reductions. This does not necessarily mean that such migration is seen as beneficial for Britain: some respondents may feel that migration of spouses carries costs but should be permitted nonetheless.

Aside from students and high-skilled migrants, those living in a person's own neighbourhood seem the most popular – or at least least negatively-viewed – among the British public. In something of a paradox, while vast majorities view migration as harmful to Britain, few claim that their own neighbourhood is having problems due to migrants.

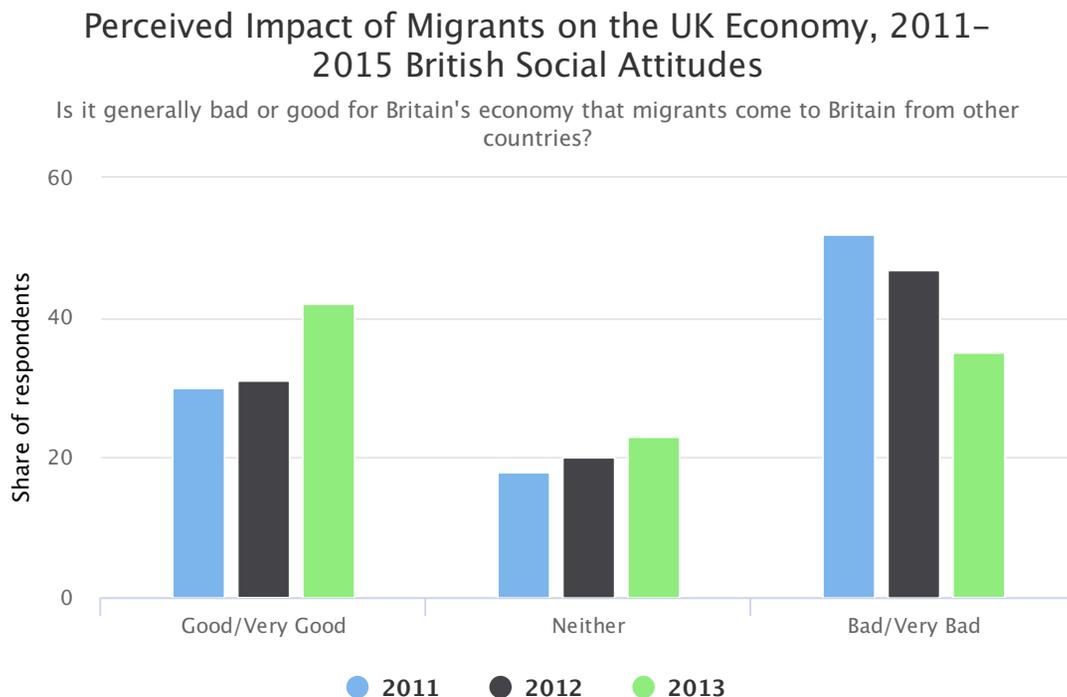
For example, in an Ipsos MORI poll commissioned by the Sun newspaper in 2007 only 15% said that migrants are causing problems in their own neighbourhood, while 69% said that migrants were not having a strong local impact, either good or bad (Ipsos MORI 2007). This finding is even more convincing given that the question defined immigrants as “refer[ing] to both illegal and legal immigrants, from the EU or somewhere else”. Later, the Citizenship Survey 2008–2009 found that approximately 85% think that people of diverse backgrounds get along well in their local area. Moreover, residents of London, where migrants are most heavily concentrated by far, are less likely than residents of other regions to favour sharp reductions in migration to the UK. This finding holds even for white UK-born Londoners.

More recently, the 2013 BSA found that London residence and friendships with migrants are strongly correlated with a view of migration as having a positive impact on Britain, both economically and culturally (Ford and Heath 2013). This suggests that much of the opposition to migration comes from general concerns about the country as a whole rather than from direct, negative experiences in people’s own communities.

### Mixed beliefs about economic and cultural impacts

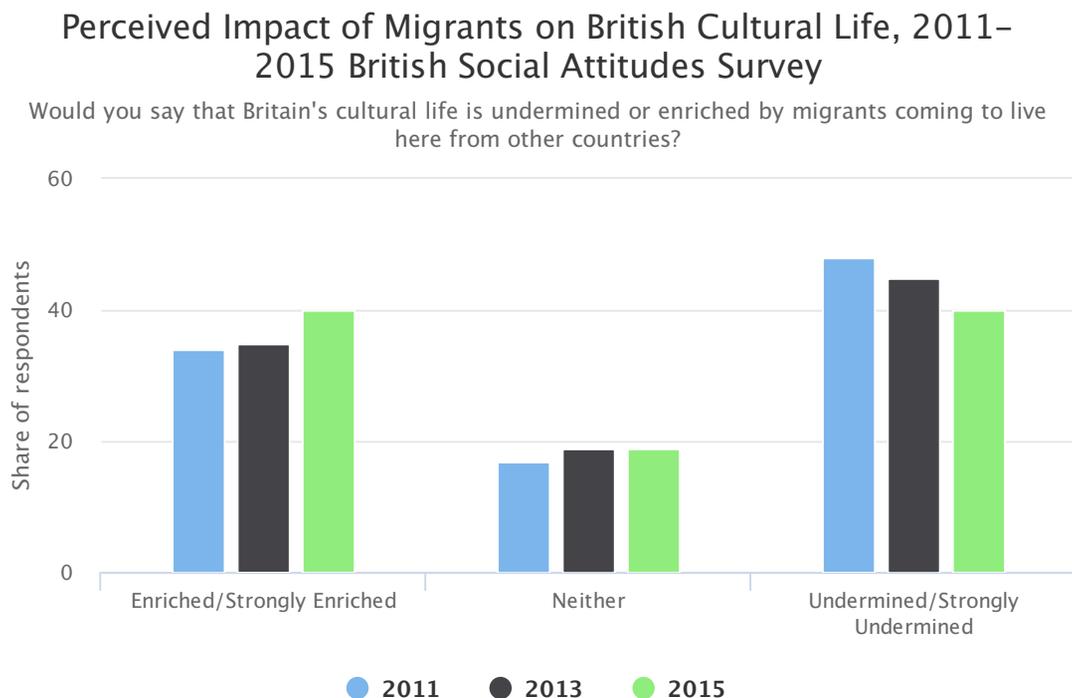
When specifically asked about the impacts that migration has on the economy and cultural life, the British public has changed its views across recent studies. Figures 7 and 8 show results from the 2011, 2013, and 2015 BSA surveys that asked about these aspects. In 2011 and 2013, most of the public thought that migrants had negative effects on the economy (52% and 47% respectively), but this reversed in the 2015 BSA when 42% thought that migrants were good or very good for the economy. When asked about cultural impacts, most respondents in 2011 and 2013 thought that migrants undermined rather than enriched Britain’s cultural life (48% and 45% respectively). However, in 2015, equal proportions chose either response to the cultural life question.

Figure 7



Source: 2015 British Social Attitudes Survey, 'Immigration' Data Tables

Figure 8



Source: 2015 British Social Attitudes Survey, 'Immigration' Data Tables

### Evidence gaps and limitations

The lack of one consistent definition of who constitutes a 'migrant' is a significant problem, making it a challenge to get a realistic understanding of public opinion. For example, one important data source – the Ipsos MORI poll asking people's views on the 'most important issues' facing Britain – is often cited as evidence of the rise of immigration as a key issue for the public. Yet, until January 2015, their results combined 'immigration' with 'race relations' into a single category. Although this evidence is still useful, it cannot isolate the importance of immigration from related but distinct issues involving race relations, such as community cohesion.

In another example, the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) sought to help respondents in a special 2003 module on immigration by providing a definition of 'immigrant' as 'people who come to Britain to settle'. This conflicts with UN or the UK government definitions. Widely reported UK statistics on immigration usually count a migrant as anyone who comes to Britain for at least 12 months – a much larger number of people than the group that the BSA explicitly defines as 'immigrants'.

Gaps also remain in the evidence base simply at the level of describing as opposed to explaining public attitudes toward migration. As noted above, most of the evidence base comes from questions about 'immigrants' or 'immigration', terms which are defined vaguely or not at all. So, the evidence base records responses to immigration as each survey respondent understands and envisions it (Blinder 2013). While official government statistics on net migration define a long-term international migrant as anyone who comes to the UK to stay for at least one year, it is not clear whether or how the public distinguishes migrants from others such as short-term visitors, naturalised British citizens, 'second generation migrants' (children of migrants who themselves are actually native-born British), and ethnic or religious minorities generally. Furthermore, in a media environment that often conflates categories such as refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants (Baker et al. 2008), there is a danger that survey respondents' expressed opinions are based on an image of immigration that highlights only a subset of the full array of migrants to the UK.

Also, there is little polling evidence that assesses what information members of the public already possess. A 2009 BSA item found that the typical survey respondent overestimated 'non-western' migrants as 25% of the

UK population, when the full (western and non-western) foreign-born population is actually only about 11%. But even this basic level of information is rarely assessed in polls. In addition, knowledge of policies and trends is not always widespread. The 2013 BSA module asked several factual questions about immigration policies and trends, and found that less than half of respondents were aware of the much-publicised numerical ‘cap’ on skilled non-EU labour migration (45% said it was true that there is a limit on work permits to migrants from outside the EU, and that these permits are reserved for those with qualifications and English language skills). A large majority (84%) also thought that more people applied for asylum in Britain in 2013 than ten years ago, which is not true. On the other hand, 81% answered correctly that migrants from Eastern European countries in the EU may legally come to Britain to work.

Responses to these knowledge questions indicate that many members of the public are not aware of facts about migration trends and policies. This is not surprising, given that members of the public are often not well-versed in the details of policy in any area – nor should they be expected to be policy experts. So, the evidence base from surveys and polls is most useful as a sense of how people respond to ‘immigration’ when talked about in general, categorical terms. It is less useful as a guide to public preferences for particular policies or categories of migrants.

## References

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## Further readings

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- Hainmueller, Jens and Daniel J. Hopkins. “Public Attitudes Toward Immigration.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (2014).
- Page, Ben. “British Attitudes to Immigration in the 21st Century.” In *Migration, Public Opinion, and Politics*. Edited by the Migration Policy Institute and Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009.

## Related material

- 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](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/reports/thinking-behind-numbers-understanding-public-opinion-immigration-britain)
- Migration Observatory report: Immigration and Independence: Public Opinion on Immigration in Scotland in the Context of the Referendum Debate [www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/reports/scottish-public-opinion](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/reports/scottish-public-opinion)



### 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.



### COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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### About the authors

Dr Scott Blinder  
Research Associate, COMPAS  
[scottblinder@polsci.umass.edu](mailto:scottblinder@polsci.umass.edu)

William L. Allen  
Researcher, COMPAS  
[will.allen@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:will.allen@compas.ox.ac.uk)

### Press contact

Rob McNeil  
Head of Media and Communications  
[robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk)  
+ 44 (0)1865 274568  
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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