



BRIEFING

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

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5th Revision

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This briefing provides an overview of attitudes toward immigration in Britain. The discussion focuses on four questions. First, do people favour or oppose immigration to the UK and is it seen as one of the most important issues facing the country? Secondly, are attitudes changing over time? Third, how does the UK compare to its European neighbours in its views? And Fourth, in light of the public debate around Brexit, how divided are we over attitudes to immigration?

Key Points

- Overall, British views are not favourable towards immigration and a substantial majority would like immigration to be reduced
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- There is evidence from multiple sources showing that attitudes have softened in recent years
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- Immigration was often named as Britain's 'most important issue' between 2001 and mid-2016, but since the EU Referendum people have been more likely to name Europe/the EU and the NHS as their primary concerns
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- British people make clear distinctions between types of migrant with the highly skilled preferred to the unskilled, and those from culturally close countries (such as Australia) preferred over those from countries perceived to be more culturally distant (such as Nigeria)
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- People who voted Leave and people who voted Remain in the EU referendum have very different views on immigration, perhaps supporting the idea that immigration is now a point of political cleavage in Britain
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- Comparing attitudes before and after the referendum from within the same groups of individuals suggests that both Leavers and Remainers have softened in their attitudes towards immigration
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Understanding the Evidence

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 and academic survey organisations. This briefing relies on data from the British Social Attitudes Survey, British Election Studies, the European Social Survey, and the International Social Survey Programme, which are all surveys with a reputation for high-quality based on their sampling and interview procedures. In addition we use polling data from Ipsos MORI which has some of the best available time-series data

available on the 'most important issue' and on 'too many immigrants'. We also use new data from an online survey collected by the Nuffield Centre for Social Investigation to investigate the relation of immigration preferences to Brexit preferences.

Asking people about their views on immigration is not always straightforward. Definitions and categories are a particular problem: individual respondents and survey organisations may have different ideas of who 'immigrants' are. Question wording matters: when people are asked, for example, about whether immigration ought to be reduced, the UK looks rather negative compared to other countries. However, it looks more favourable based on whether people feel that immigration makes the country a better or worse place to live. It is always a good idea to take a holistic approach, rather than relying on just one or two survey questions.

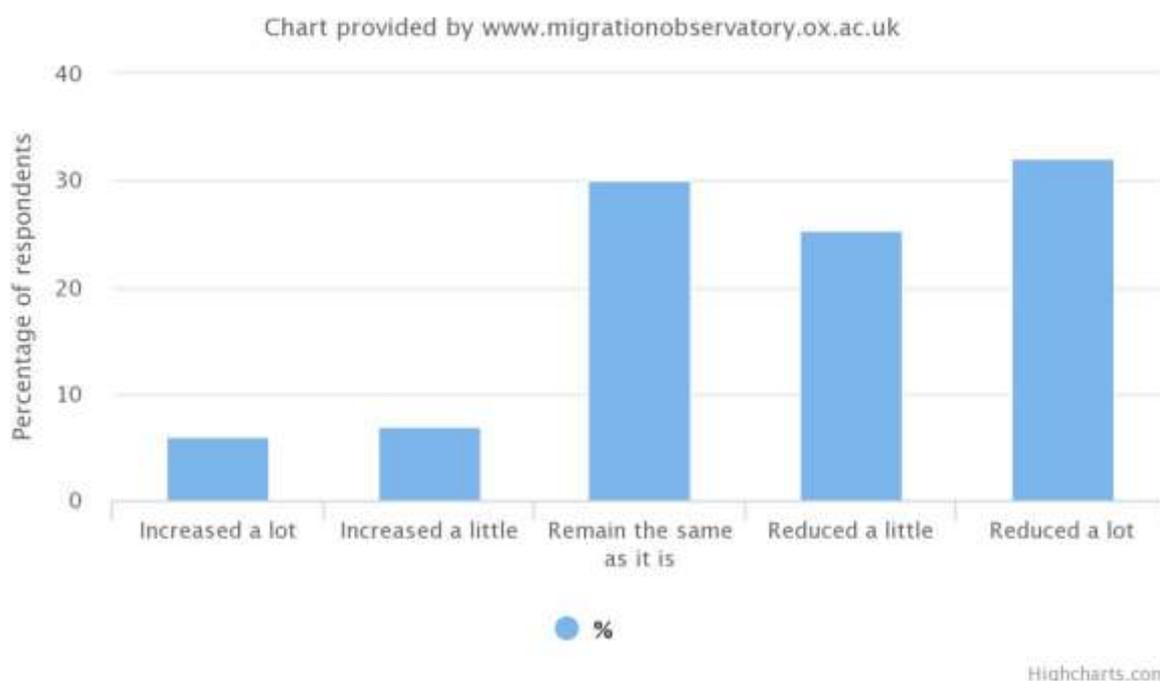
Interpreting social survey data always requires care and caution, for they have important limitations and flaws. In order to address limitations we attempt to corroborate findings where possible with multiple indicators and multiple data sources.

Immigration is unpopular, with a clear majority of the British public favouring reduced levels

Existing evidence clearly shows that levels of opposition to immigration in the UK are moderately high. Figure 1 shows that a majority endorse reducing immigration. Those who favour reducing the number of immigrants coming to Britain is 58% (one third say 'reduce a lot' and a further 25% say 'reduce a little'). A further 30% would prefer the number of immigrants to stay about the same, but those favouring an increase are a small minority. The same question asked in a face-to-face survey in 2013 found that 77% favour a reduction in numbers suggesting that attitudes may have shifted somewhat. However, we turn to the question of whether attitudes are shifting over time in more detail in the next section, taking a longer view.

Figure 1

Do you think the number of immigrants to Britain nowadays should be ...



Notes and source: Data collected online in July 2017 by Kantar Public (see Centre for Social Investigation for further details http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/?page_id=960).

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Preferences for reduced migration are not new but appear to have softened in recent years

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 majority of people in Britain have agreed that there are too many immigrants in the UK.

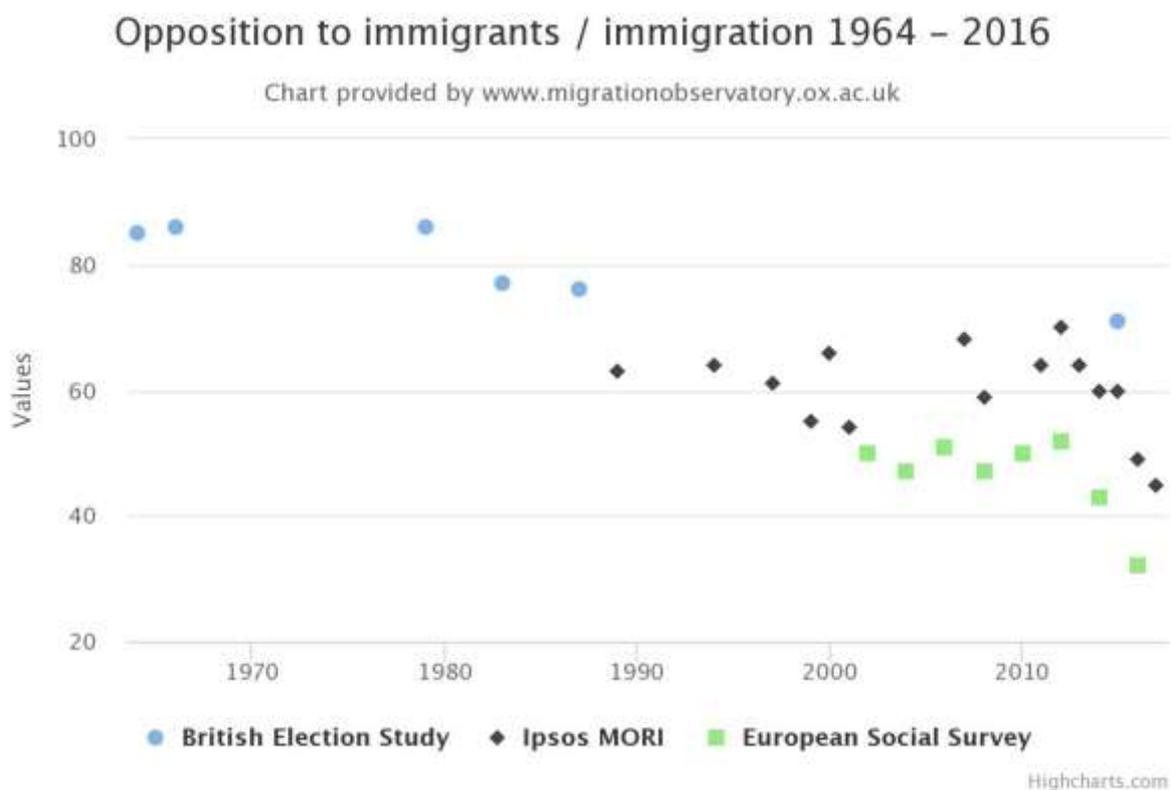
Figure 2 looks at trends in opposition to immigrants/ immigration, however, the variety of available data sources and the changes to question wording over the years mean this cannot be seen as one coherent continuum. The data points derived from the British Election Study (BES) show that opposition to immigration was high in 1964, 1966 and 1979 with 85-86% of people at each of those times reporting that there were too many immigrants in Britain. The data points from 1983 and 1987 were based on slightly different question wording to the rest (see notes under the chart),

so we need to consider these with caution. However, the earlier question was repeated in 2015 where the percentage agreeing that there are too many immigrants had dropped to 71%.

The series from Ipsos MORI data goes back to 1989. Here too we have reason to be cautious in interpreting some of the results as the response options in most years included a 'neither agree nor disagree' answer category, but for some years it did not. Answers tend to be less favourable where there is no neutral answer option and this may explain the spike in 2012, for example. Nonetheless, consistent question wording since 2013 suggests that there has been a recent softening of attitudes with just 45% agreeing that there are too many immigrants in 2017 compared to 64% just 4 years earlier.

Finally, Figure 2 shows the trend from the European Social Survey, which asked a rather different question about whether people of a different race should be allowed to come and live in Britain. This series provides corroborating evidence for a recent softening of attitudes. While the level allowing only 'a few' or 'none' was consistently hovering at around 50% between 2002 and 2012, it had dropped to 43% in 2014 and further to 32% in 2016.

Figure 2



Note and Sources: British Election Studies 1964, 1966, 1979, 2015 (*Do you think that too many immigrants have been let into this country or not? Yes/ no*), 1983, 1987 (*Do you think that immigration has gone too far? Yes/ no*); 1989-2017 data are from Ipsos-MORI (*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "There are too many immigrants in Britain"* 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; European Social Survey 2002-2016 (*Allow immigrants of a different/ race ethnicity to come and live in the UK*, response categories 'none' and 'a few' combined).

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Immigration is perceived to be one of the 'most important issues' facing the British public, though its salience has declined since the Brexit referendum

An alternative way to monitor public views on immigration is by asking people to name the 'most important issue' or 'issues' facing the nation. This approach assesses the salience of immigration as an issue, rather than directly measuring people's attitudes toward immigration. 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'. Unlike the other survey questions reported here, 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 Ipsos MORI reports how many respondents chose each of these categories for each monthly sample.

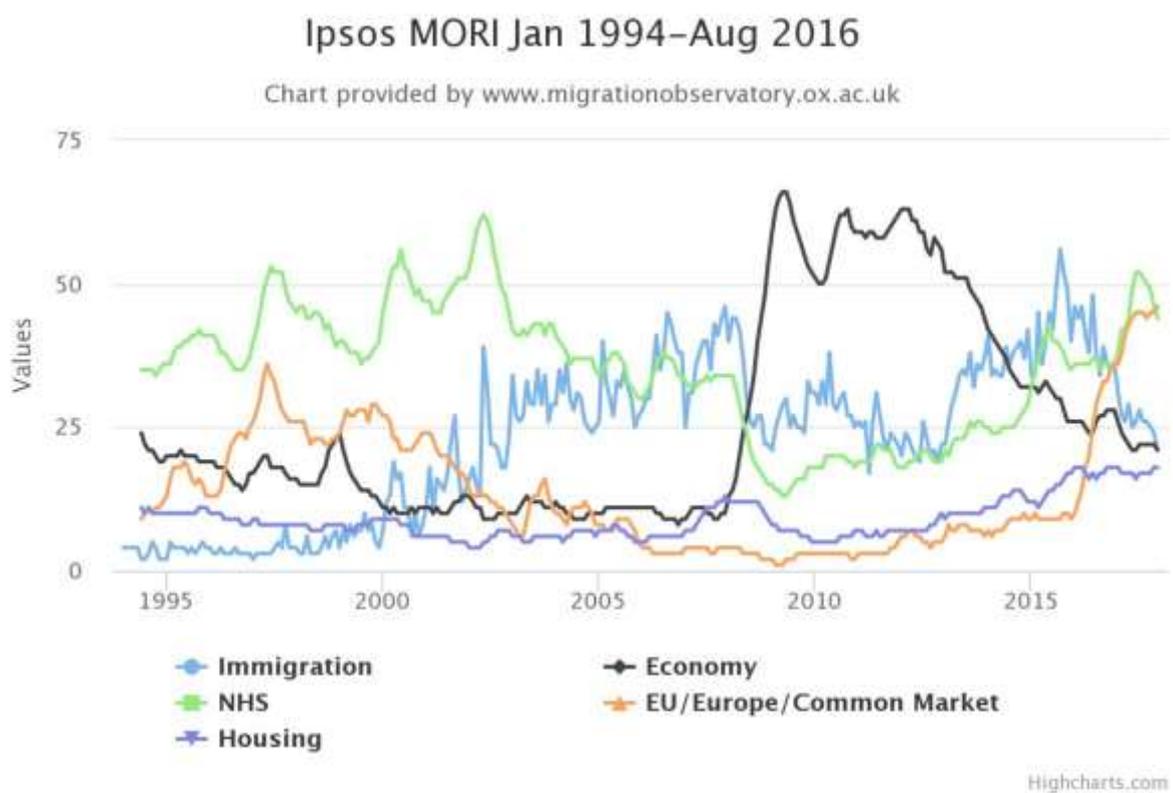
Figure 3 tracks the percentage of respondents naming race relations or immigration as one of the most important issues facing Britain, relative to four other most frequently named issues. These other issues are presented as six-month moving averages to make the chart easier to visually interpret.

In the year or so before the EU referendum, between June 2015 and June 2016, immigration was consistently named as the most salient issue facing the country, peaking at 56% in September 2015. In 1994, which was the starting point of this data series, less than 5% of respondents thought of immigration as a concern, and it remained rarely mentioned prior to 2000. The increasing rate of immigration from the EU since the accession of the "A8 countries" to the EU was accompanied by a clear change in public mood between 2001 and 2016. Immigration was displaced as

primary concern by the economy during the recession years but quickly returned to prominence.

Since the EU Referendum in June 2016, however, immigration has been mentioned by far fewer people, falling from 48% in June 2016 to 21% in December 2017. Over this same period, it is perhaps not surprising that Europe/ the EU has increased in salience. As of December 2017, 46% mentioned this as a concern, with a further 44% mentioning the NHS (as respondents can name more than one issue if they want to, the total comes to more than 100%).

Figure 3



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.

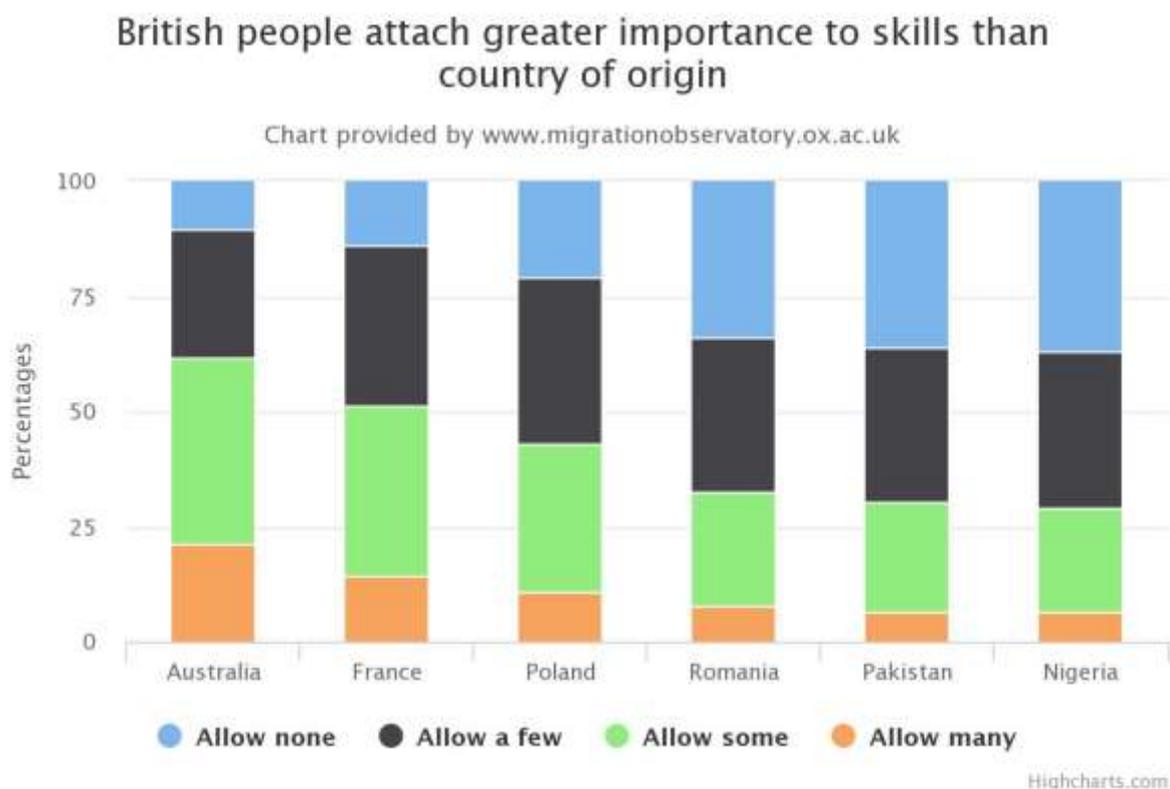
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Preferences for different type of migrant: origin, similarity, skill level

Despite the clear opposition to overall immigration, more specific questions in surveys have revealed that preferences depend on the type of immigrant in question. The ‘type’ of immigrant can be considered in terms of country of origin (which implicitly provides information on religion, language, culture and other indicators of ‘social distance’), but also in terms of the migrants’ skill levels.

British people make clear distinctions between immigrants based on their country of origin – see Figure 4. Just 10% of a 2017 sample (surveyed online) said that no Australians should be allowed to come and live in Britain compared to 37% saying that no Nigerians should be allowed. In between are France (similar to Australia) Poland (more middling), and Romania and Pakistan (more similar to Nigeria). Such patterns have sometimes been described as an ‘ethnic hierarchy’ (Ford, 2011). At the preferred end of the scale are those who are white, English-speaking, Europeans and Christian countries while at the least preferred are non-whites, non-Europeans and Muslim countries. Romania is an interesting anomaly. Despite being a European and Christian country, opposition to immigration from Romania is at similar levels to opposition to immigration from Pakistan. This may reflect an association with Roma (Allen, 2014).

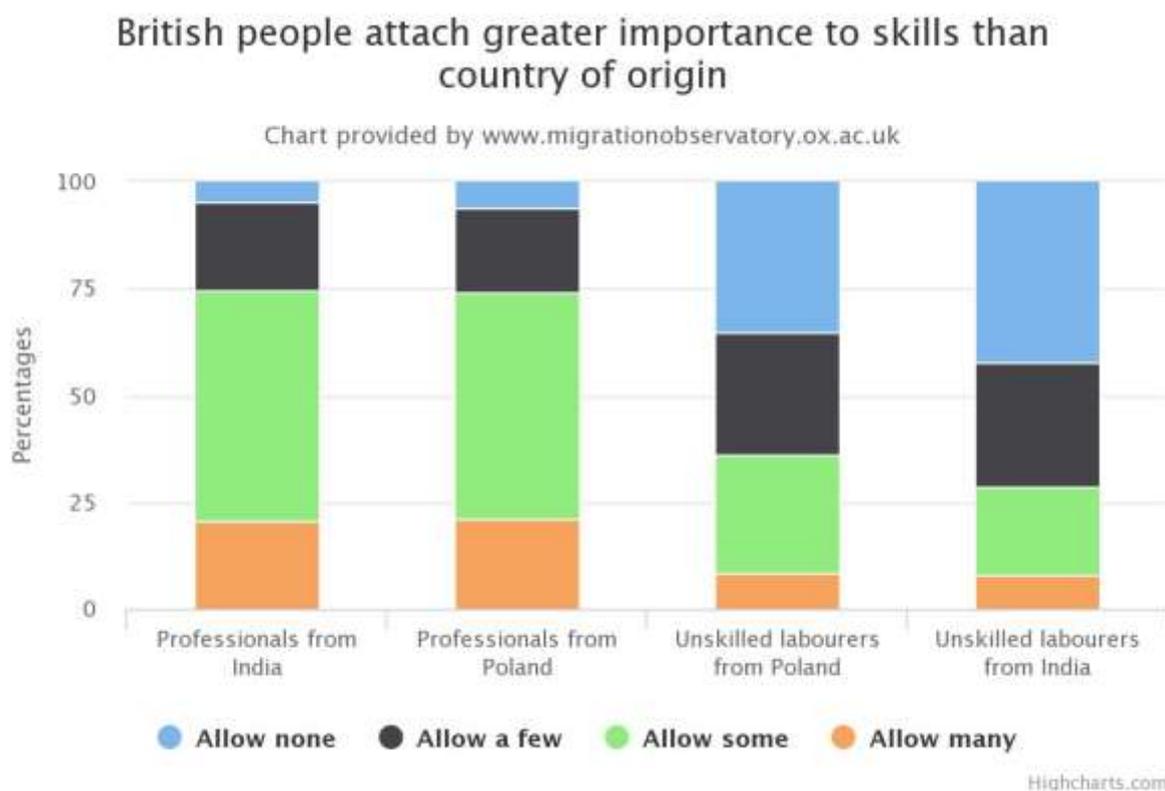
Figure 4



Source: Centre for Social Investigation Brexit survey conducted by Kantar Public, 2017. Question asked was: *After Brexit, one major issue which will arise will be the sort of immigration that is allowed. So, to what extent do you think the UK should allow people from the following countries to come and live here?*

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Figure 5



Source: European Social Survey, 2014. Question asked was: *please tell me to what extent you think Britain should allow professionals/ unskilled labourers from Poland/ India to come to live in Britain?* NB: Sample was split so that respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four questions.

However, country of origin is not the only factor that people take into account when considering preferences on immigration. In the European Social Survey in 2014, British respondents reported how many immigrants should be allowed based on a question that specified both the country of origin (Poland or India) and the skill level (professional or unskilled labourer). The results revealed that when migrants are professionals opposition is low, and when migrants are unskilled opposition is high – see Figure 5. Further, when asked about professional immigrants, British people do not appear to distinguish between countries of origin. Just 5% say allow no

professionals from India and 6% for Poland. When it comes to unskilled labour migration, there is a slight preference for people from Poland (35% 'allow none') over people from India (42% 'allow none'). So figures showing average opposition towards immigration from Poland as shown in Figure 4 (21%) mask variation depending on skill level (6% for skilled, 35% for unskilled).

This British preference for highly skilled migrants fits with other research showing that, when asked about what criteria should be applied to incoming migrants, British people attach high importance to skills, but lower importance to skin colour and religion (Heath and Richards, 2018).

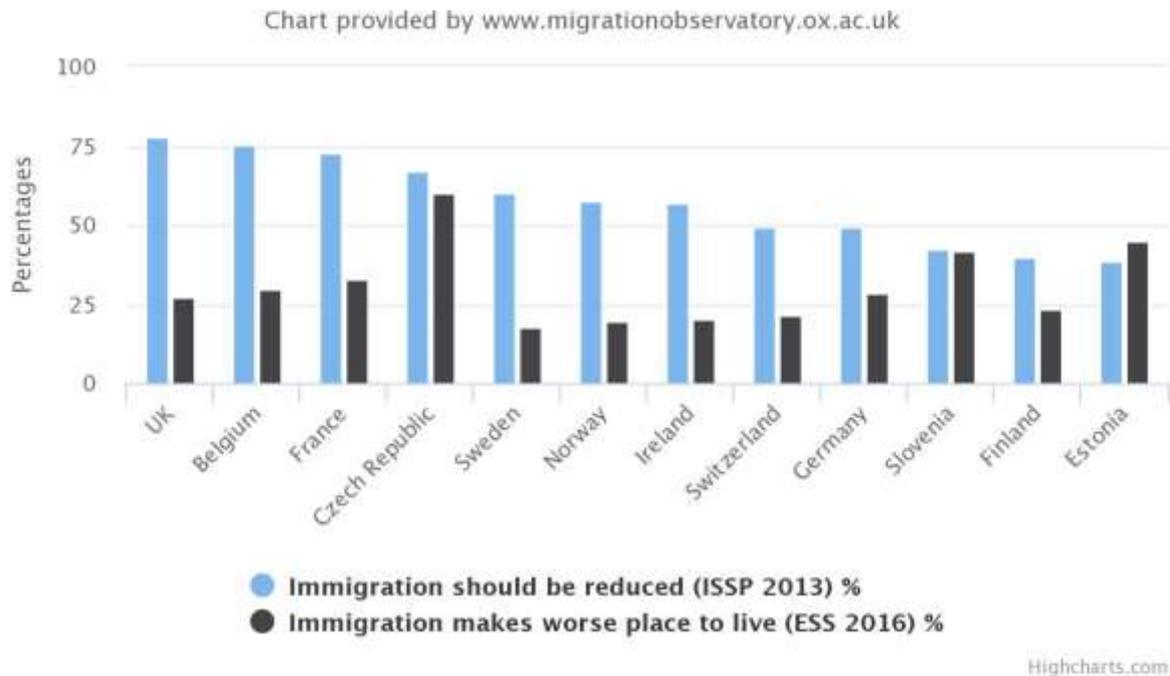
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How do British attitudes towards immigration compare to elsewhere?

This section considers whether the UK is more negative in its immigration outlook than other countries in Europe. Figure 6 shows two different measures for 12 countries: The first shows 2013 data on the percentage of people expressing a preference for reducing immigration levels. At 77%, the UK was the most anti-immigration of these countries, though over 70% of people in France and Belgium also favour a reduction. Slovenia, Finland and Estonia show more favourable results – though it should be remembered that some of these more favourable countries received small numbers of immigrants compared to countries in Western Europe and other Nordic countries.

Figure 6

Comparative: attitudes vary according to wording about 'stocks' or 'flows'



Source: International Social Survey Programme, 2013; European Social Survey, 2016.

As a further way of characterising countries we include a second measure from the European Social Survey based on people's views on whether immigration "makes the country a better or worse place to live". By this indicator, the British public looks more welcoming with just a minority (27%) saying "worse" (choosing 0-4 on the 0-11 scale), a little lower than publics in Belgium, France and Germany and far lower than in the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia.

These two measures can be thought of as capturing opinion on future migration *flows* and current *stocks*. It is possible for countries to be rather positive about the stocks of immigrants already present but to be rather negative towards the idea of continuing flows. Sweden, for example, is the country with the most favourable views on immigration making the country a better place to live, but even here 60% would like future levels of incoming migrants to be reduced.

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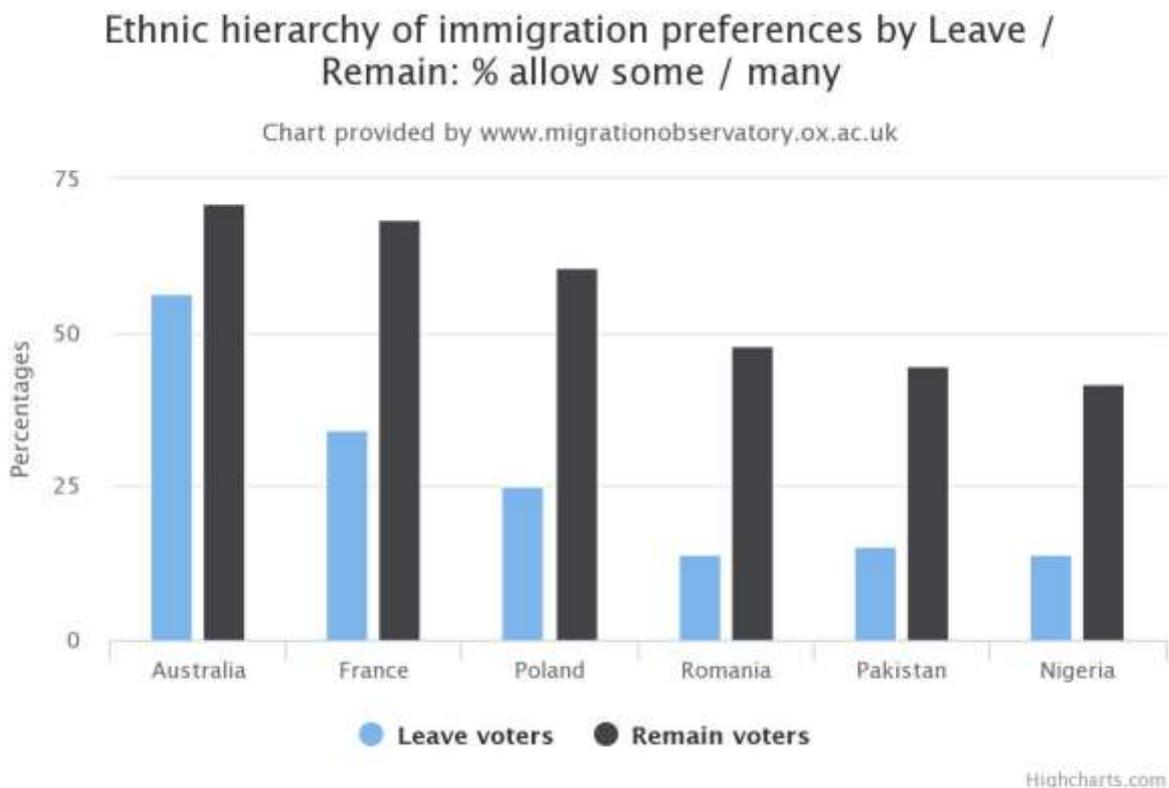
Immigration attitudes and Brexit

Brexit is commonly thought of these days as major divide in British Society. Leave voters and remain voters have different visions for the future of the United Kingdom,

and immigration plays a key role in those visions. Remain voters are, on average, more socially liberal and pro-immigration while leave voters are more socially conservative and anti-immigration. It is now also well established that older people tend to be less favourable towards immigration and more likely to have voted for Britain to leave the EU, while those with more education are more pro-immigration and more likely to have voted remain (see e.g. Kunovich, 2004; Hobolt, 2016).

In Figure 7 we show the ‘ethnic hierarchy’ (the same items as Figure 4) split by support for Leaving and Remaining in the European Union. The difference between the two groups is stark. Taking Polish immigration as an example, 61% of Remainers would allow ‘some’ or ‘many’ to come and live in the UK, compared to just 25% of Leavers. The difference is smaller for Australians, where the majority of Leavers would allow some/ many. Note that despite the differences, both sides express a preference for some migrants over others.

Figure 7



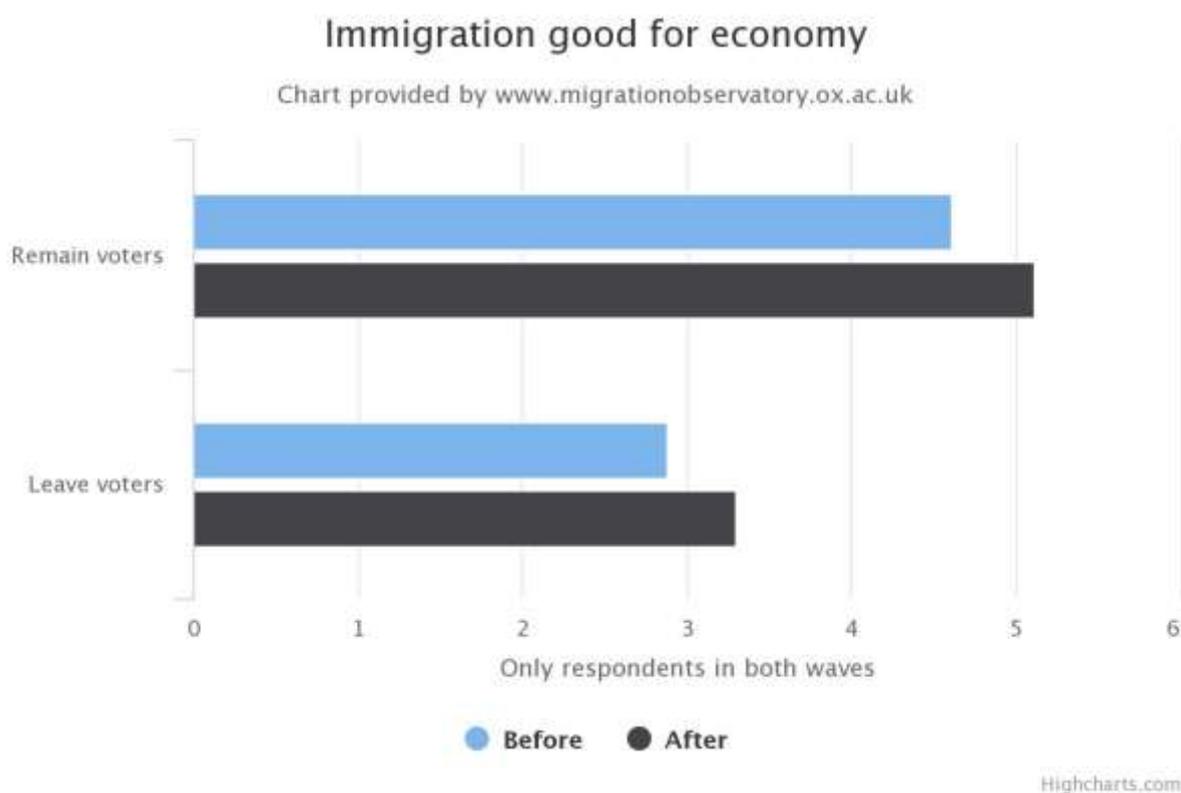
Source: as Figure 4; See Carl et al. (forthcoming)

Given the evidence for a recent softening of attitudes toward immigration among Britons, it seems pertinent to ask whether this change had anything to do with the vote leave the EU?

Figure 8 shows data from the online panel version of the British Election Study – which shows the extent to which people changed their views before and after the referendum, on three different questions about immigration. The first question asked whether immigration had a positive impact on the economy and it is evident that both leave and remain voters shifted their views in a positive direction and by a similar amount. On the matter of culture, on the other hand, we find that the Remain voters became more positive but the views of the Leavers were the same before and after the referendum. Finally, in response to a question about incoming workers from EU countries, it is the Leavers who had the greater shift towards becoming more pro-immigration. A closer examination of this question revealed that a large number of Leavers shifted from an unfavourable position to a neutral position (a full 25% placed themselves at the mid-point of the scale after the referendum compared to just 13% before).

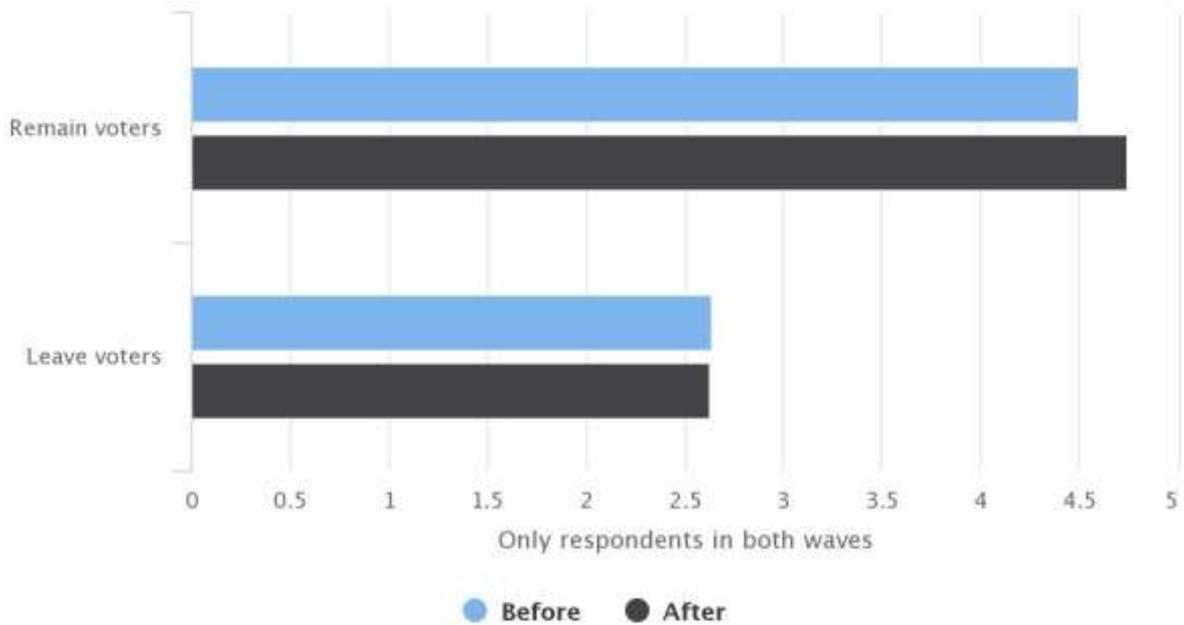
It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the reasons for the changing attitudes. However, we might suppose that both sides had cause to change their views. Factors that may have played a role include the decline in net migration, which received news coverage; or the possibility that Remain voters shifted their views to be more congruent with their political position on the EU.

Figure 8



Immigration enriches culture

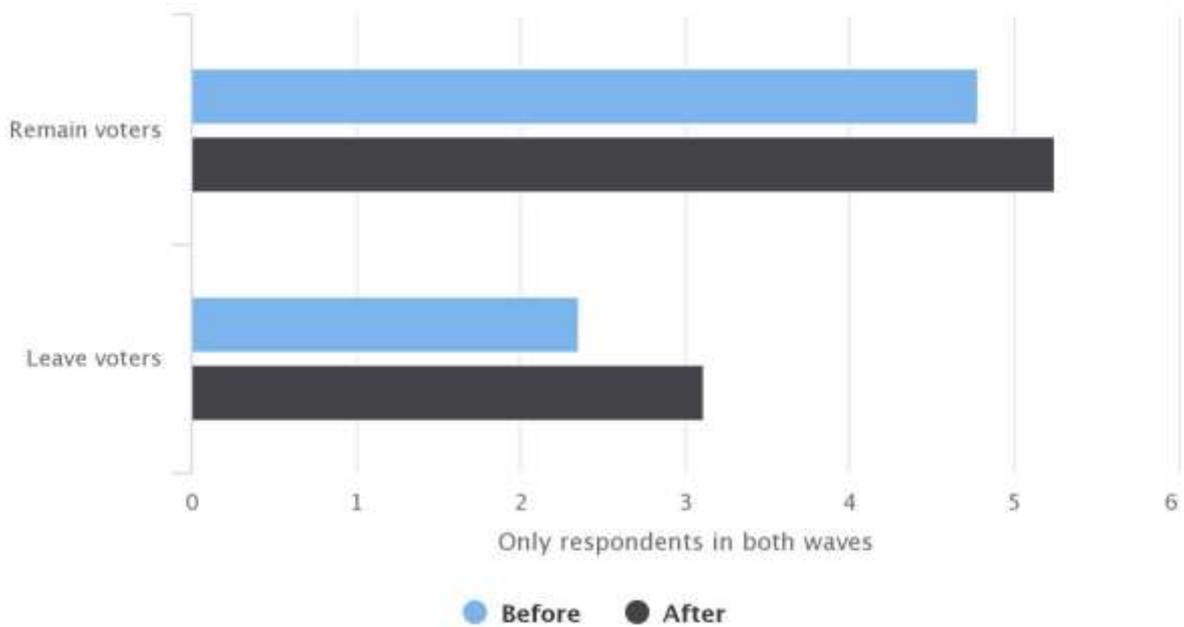
Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



Highcharts.com

Allow more EU workers

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



Highcharts.com

Source: British Election Study Panel (Before = Wave 4, March 2015/ Wave 7 May 2016 and After = Wave 13, June 2016). Before and after groups are the same individuals. Questions: *Do you think immigration is good or bad for Britain's economy? And do you think that immigration undermines or enriches Britain's cultural life? Do you think that Britain should allow more or fewer of the following kinds of people to come and live in Britain?*

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Evidence gaps and limitations

Some of the evidence base comes from questions about ‘immigrants’ or ‘immigration’, terms which are defined vaguely or not at all, and likely to be envisioned differently in the minds of different respondents (Blinder 2015). 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.

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Further Readings

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