



# Has the UK become more positive about immigration?

Public opinion: MW 479

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## Summary

(i) In the midst of suggestions that the public has become less negative about immigration over the past decade, it is clear that stark divisions remain regarding perceptions about the impact of immigration (36% saying it is negative and 35% saying positive, according to YouGov in Feb. 2020). The key question for immigration policy is whether or not the public wish to see controls tightened or loosened.

(ii) On this latter point the evidence is clear. The average of seven reputable polls published between the Spring of 2018 and mid-2019 suggests that around 30 million adults in the UK support a tightening of rules. This was backed up by two further polls conducted in August 2019 by Ipsos and November 2019 (YouGov) which found that 54%-55% of the public (or 28-29 million people) wanted the scale of immigration to be reduced. Another poll, conducted in June 2020, found that a similar share - 54% - think immigration has been too high over the past decade. **Remarkably, only 5% thought it had been too low** (YouGov, July 2020).

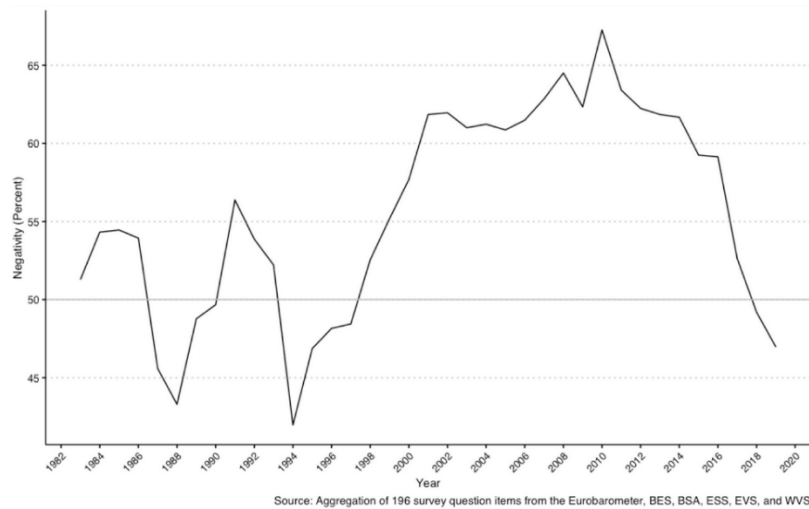
(iii) Meanwhile, comparing actual net migration (fig 2) with negative public views (Fig 1 below) shows a rapid rise in negative views from 1998 to 2000 as immigration rose sharply. There was then a sharp fall in two phases, one in 2010 and the other in 2016. This clear pattern suggests that Conservative promises to reduce net migration on their election in 2010 and after the Brexit referendum in 2016 were widely believed and that this was a factor in reducing public concern about immigration in general.

(iv) Other factors include:

- the wording of poll questions about the costs and benefits of immigration.
- a considerable improvement in the labour market from 2010 until 2020.
- a considerable increase since 1998 in the non-UK born, and migrant-descended population. As Ipsos notes: *“Countries with [a] higher proportion of immigrants tend to have more positive views about immigration.”*
- the influence of educational institutions and the BBC
- a change in editorial policy at influential organs of the press.

**(v) It follows that a failure to tighten up on the rules and deliver real immigration control risks a sharpening of divisions in society.**

1. Figure 1 shows the changes in negative public views on immigration, 1982-2019, (Reproduced from LSE blog by Paul English, May 2020).



2. The sharp drops in negative views in 2010, after the election of the Conservatives, and after the referendum in 2016 contrast with the continuing high net migration. It could well be argued that the public believed the Conservative pledges to reduce immigration and, accordingly, became less concerned about it. Equally, Ipsos polling suggests that the outcome of the referendum was understood by a significant number of people to mean that EU migration would be brought under control (see par. 5(a) below), thus somewhat relieving public concerns. EU net migration in 2015 was the most significant portion of non-British net migration (216,000 versus 154,000 - or 62,000 higher).

## Survey results

3. A recent London School of Economics blog reviewed results from the British Election Study, the British Social Attitudes survey, and the European Social Survey. We have reviewed some of the polls. There were a number of irregularities with question wording and sampling. Some, for example, may have biased the results by focussing on “migrants” rather than on “immigration”, discouraging respondents from giving a negative response. Another poll used “migration” which, of course, is ambiguous because it can refer to emigration as well as immigration. Another poll excluded respondents over 65, which seems extraordinary.

## Factors that might have induced more positive views of immigration

4. Ipsos suggests that the share of the public saying immigration has had a positive effect has increased since 2011. There may be number of reasons for any change of attitude:

- a. **Lower EU numbers since the 2016 Referendum and the perception that Brexit will lead to less immigration.** An Ipsos poll from November 2019 suggested that 24% of those with a more positive view of immigration said it was because they believed fewer immigrants will come to the UK once Britain leaves the EU, while a further 14% said it was because there are fewer immigrants coming to the UK now. Similarly, the initial drop in negative perceptions after 2010 could well have been the election of the Cameron government promising to reduce net migration.
- b. **A major increase in size of migrant and migrant-descended population as share of the total UK population since 2001.** The LSE's analysis suggests that the share of the UK public with negative views about immigration has fluctuated between a peak to trough range of about 20% over two decades. As Ipsos notes: "*Countries with [a] higher proportion of immigrants tend to have more positive views about immigration.*" There has been an increase from 12% to 20% in the migrant and migrant-descended share of UK adults aged 16 since 2001. This has implications both for the political impact of immigration and for community cohesion. One poll suggested that 78% of the public in areas experiencing large-scale immigration said it had made these communities more divided (Demos, 2018).
- c. **Changes in the strength of the labour market.** Hostility was highest in 2010 while the UK labour market was still relatively weak following the economic crisis. In contrast, the proportion saying that '*immigrants in the UK have made it more difficult for people of your nationality to get jobs*' has dropped by 24% (from 62% to 38%). This suggests that economic factors may play a pivotal role in perceptions of immigration, and that currently rising unemployment may have an impact in turning views more negative again (Ipsos, September 2017).
- d. **Influence of educational institutions and the media.** Finally, an Ipsos poll points to the power of the media and education in shaping perceptions. Of those who said they had become more positive about immigration, half attributed it to more 'positive discussion' about immigrants over the past few years. This may have been reinforced by the changing media approach to the topic, for instance the even stronger bias of the BBC towards the immigration lobby and the substantial change of tone towards the topic by the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* from 2018. The Windrush affair has also made commentators more cautious about advocating basic immigration control.

## Continued strong public concern about scale of immigration

5. Other polls have found that views of the impact of immigration are divided:

- 36% said they thought the impact that immigration had had on the UK was negative, with 35% saying it was positive (YouGov in February 2020). However, another poll conducted later in 2020 by YouGov found that marginally more people said the impact of immigration over the past ten years was positive than negative.
- By a margin of nine percentage points, UK respondents said that the costs of immigration outweighed the benefits (YouGov, February-March 2019).
- An Open Survey conducted for the National Conversation in 2018 found that marginally more people

believed immigration had been negative for the UK than positive.

- In May 2018 44% of those surveyed in a poll said immigration had been negative for Britain, compared to 43% who thought it had been positive (Demos, 2018).
- While 30% believe immigration is good for the standard of living for people already living in Britain, 36% disagreed (Ipsos, November 2019)

6. The crucial question for policy, however, is whether the government should seek to tighten immigration control overall. We know that a clear majority in the UK said they were keen to see immigration levels reduced prior to the onset of the Covid-19 crisis. The average of seven reputable polls published between the Spring of 2018 and mid-2019 suggests that around 30 million adults in the UK supported a reduction in immigration. This was backed up by two further polls conducted in August 2019 by Ipsos and November 2019 (YouGov) which found that 54%-55% of the public (or 28-29 million people) wanted immigration to be reduced.

7. Strong concerns among the majority of the public about immigration and immigration policy are also elicited by different polling questions. One, conducted in July 2020, found that 54% of the public think immigration has been too high over the past decade. Only 5% thought it had been too low. Another, conducted in 2018, found that 52% of the public said immigration policy was *'too weak'*, with just 12% saying it was *'too strict'* (YouGov, 2018).

## Conclusion

8. The public have mixed views about the impact of immigration. Recent shifts in views may have been influenced by a number of factors (listed in paragraph 5 above). However, most continue to have strong concerns about a perceived lack of effective immigration control, while only 4% say immigration has been too low. In fact, as a 2019 report by the think-tank Onward in 2019 underlined, there is net support for tighter immigration rules among people of all ethnic groups and age groups.

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