

Perceptions and reality: Ten things we should know about attitudes to immigration in the UK

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Looking at the data on attitudes towards immigration, [Bobby Duffy](#) highlights ten significant findings. The data shows deep concern about immigration in general across large parts of the population, while also clearly indicating more nuance in specific views.

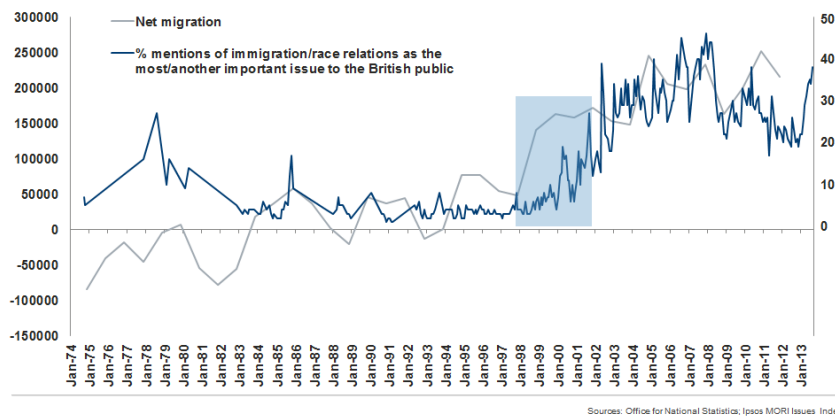


Immigration is one of most frequently covered issues in opinion surveys. With this wealth of data, we should have a clear view of public attitudes, but in practice, questions often seem designed to create more heat than light. From our [year-long review of all attitudinal data](#), the overall picture is one of genuine concern about immigration among a large proportion of the population – but more nuance on specifics, and a number of important gaps between perceptions and reality. Ten key points are worth highlighting:

1. Numbers mattered

The surge in concern about immigration in the early 2000s followed, rather than preceded, the increase in immigrant numbers, as the chart below shows. In fact, there was a lag: it took a while for the public to notice.

Immigration/race relations as an important issue facing country by UK net migration, 1974 - 2013

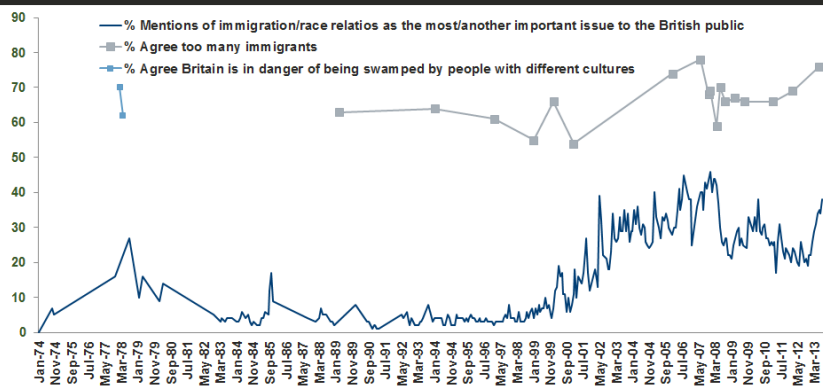


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Sources: Office for National Statistics; Ipsos MORI Issues Index

However, many other measures of concern about immigration have relatively little relationship with changes in immigration levels. For example, agreement that there are “too many immigrants” was 63% in 1989 when immigration was barely registering on questions on the most important issues facing the country.

Immigration as an important issue compared with the trend in the proportion of the British public who agree there are too many immigrants in the UK



Source: Ipsos MORI Issues Index, Ipsos MORI/Gallup polling

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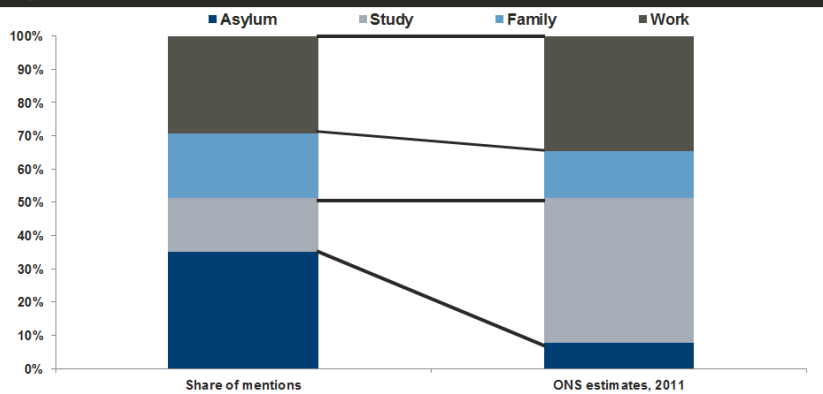


2. There are a number of “perception gaps” on immigration

The public have a very poor understanding of the scale and nature of immigration. Surveys regularly show we think between a quarter and third of the population are immigrants – when the actual figures are closer to 13%. And these misperceptions extend to our view of the make-up of immigrants. The most mentioned are refugees or asylum-seekers, despite these being the least common immigrant type. The least mentioned group are people who come here to study, when in fact students were the largest category of migrant to the UK in 2011.

However, it’s very wrong to conclude from this that if only we could re-educate the public through “myth-busting” they won’t worry about immigration. Our misperceptions are as much a result of our concern as our concern is a result of misperceptions – *cause and effect run both ways*.

‘Imagined immigration’ versus actual composition of long-term international migration 2011



Source: ONS Long-term International Migration Estimates; Ipsos MORI/Oxford Migration Observatory, Nov-2011

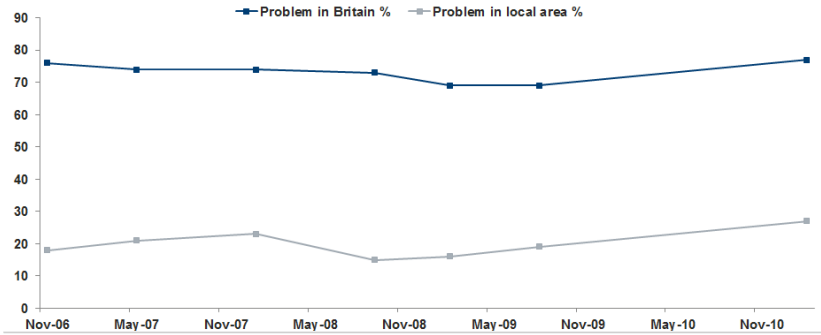
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There is also a significant gap between our views of immigration as a national or local issue. Indeed, for nearly a decade concern about immigration as a national issue has been around 50 percentage points higher than local concerns about immigration. This is not unique across policy areas, but the gap is unusually wide on immigration

Immigration as a problem in Britain and the local area

Overall how much of a problem, if at all, do you think immigration is in Britain at the moment?
And how much of a problem, if at all, do you think immigration is in your local area at the moment?



Source: Ipsos MORI/UKBA, 2006-2009, Ipsos MORI February 2011

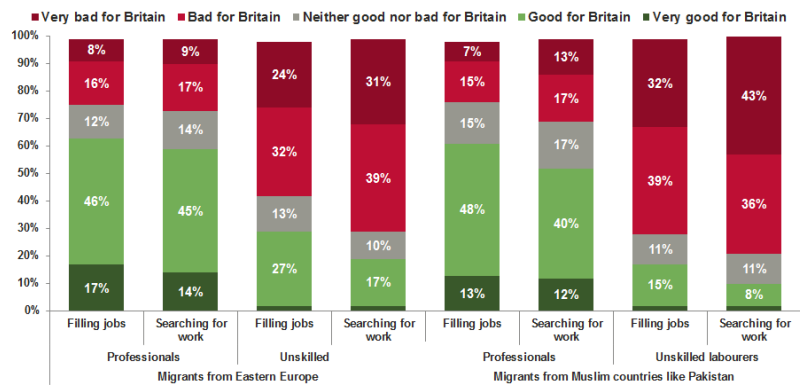
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3. Very different views about different types of immigration

When we look at views of specific immigrant groups there is much more variation. These show that immigrants' labour market position, skill level, likelihood of drawing on state resources, their country of origin, their ethnicity, length of stay and legality all affect how we view them. For example, [research has shown](#) that when migrants are described as professionals, net support for settlement in the UK is positive, regardless of the migrants' origin or motive for migrating (whether to fill a job or search for work). When migrants were described as unskilled labourers, net support is negative, in each combination with region and motive.

Views of labour migrants, by migrant characteristics



Source: British Social Attitudes, 2011

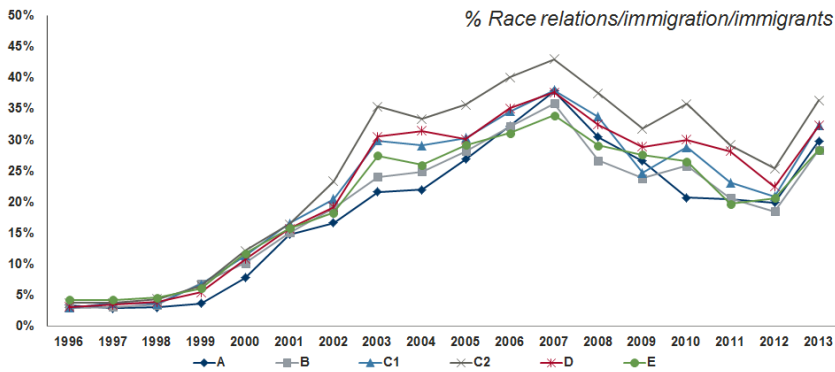
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4. Immigration was a class issue

A gap opened up between social classes on concern about immigration in the early 2000s, with the manual working classes most concerned and the highest social class least concerned. However, this gap has closed significantly, so that by 2013, the gap between skilled manual classes and professionals had halved, and the top social class was no longer the least concerned group.

What would you say is the most important issue/other important issues facing Britain today?

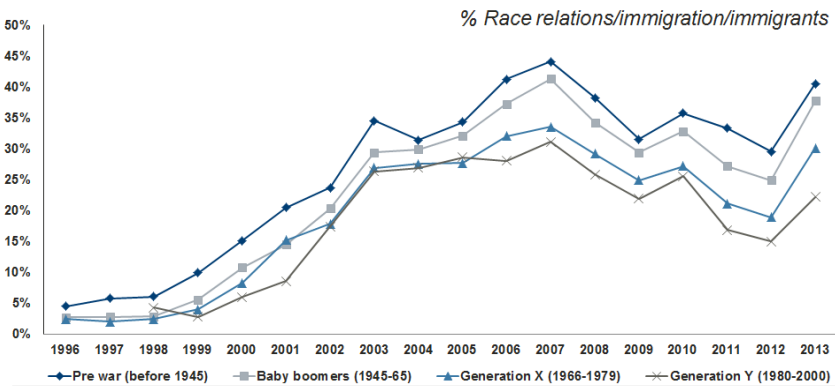


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5. Immigration is now more of a generational issue

In contrast, a clear generational gap has started to open up: by 2013, the generation born pre-1945 were nearly twice as likely as generation Y (born 1980-2000) to consider immigration a problem.

What would you say is the most important issue/other important issues facing Britain today?

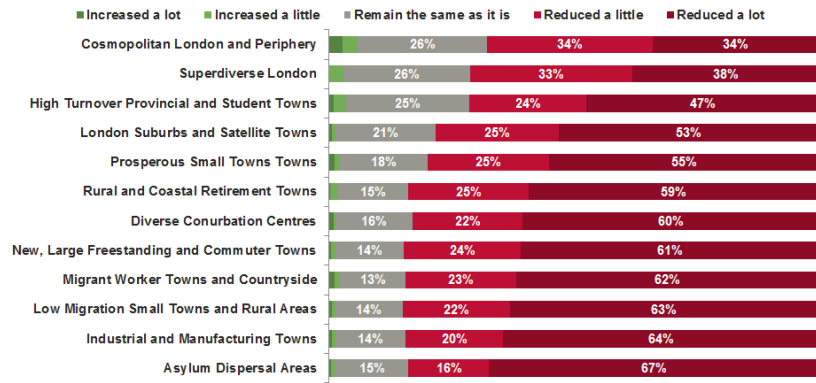


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6. Where we live matters

Areas with the lowest immigrant numbers often express the greatest concern about immigration. So, for example, in the 10% least ethnically diverse wards, the proportion of the White British population who think that immigration should be “reduced a lot” is 64%. This falls steadily as ethnic diversity rises, so that in the 10% of most diverse wards the equivalent “reduced a lot” figure is 44%. However, the White British population living in “asylum dispersal areas” are the most likely to want immigration significantly reduced, as the chart below shows.

Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a little, remain the same as it is, reduced a little, or reduced a lot?



Base: White British respondents born in the UK. Sources: Citizenship Survey, 2010/11; Home Office, Social and Public Service Impacts of Migration at the Local Level (July 2013)

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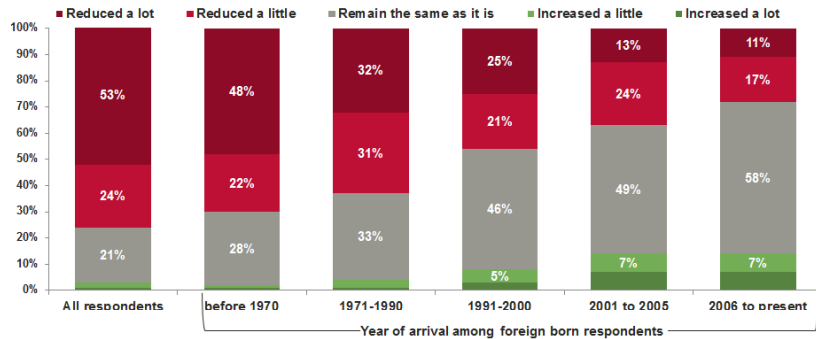


7. Immigrants worry about immigration too

The attitudes of immigrants themselves towards reducing immigration also shift over time – coming closer to the average for the UK population the longer they have been in the country, as the chart below shows. This is likely to be a function of both length of time in the UK and the different types of immigrants that arrived during these periods.

Attitudes to the level of immigration by people not born in the UK and their year of arrival

Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a little, remain the same as it is, reduced a little, or reduced a lot?



Base: all respondents, and foreign-born respondent only. Source: Citizenship Survey 2010-11

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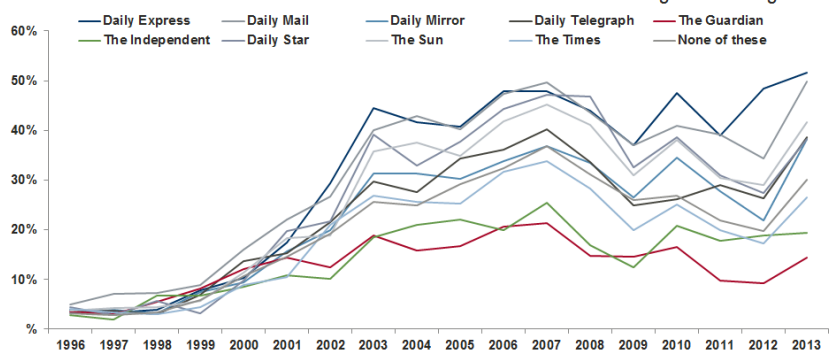
8. The newspaper we read says a lot about our attitudes to immigration

Newspaper readership provides one of the widest ranges in levels of concern of any single characteristic: in 2013, 52% of Express readers said that immigration was one of the most important issues facing the country, compared with only 14% of Guardian readers.

Differences by newspaper readership in importance of immigration over time

What would you say is the most important issue/other important issues facing Britain today?

% Race relations/immigration/immigrants



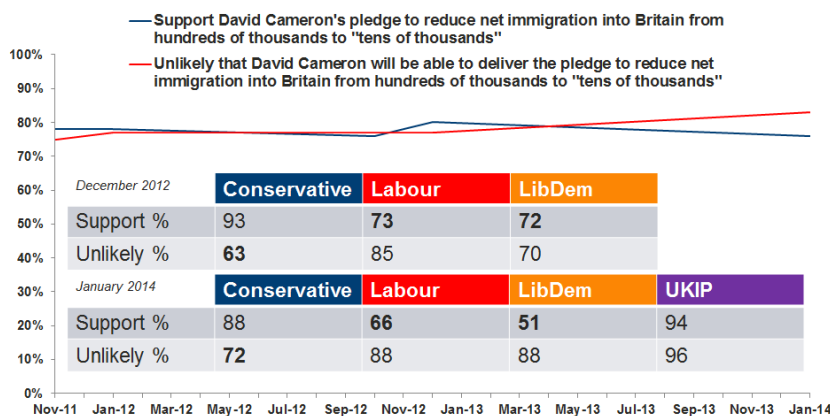
Source: Ipsos MORI Issues Index, 1996-2012

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Of course this doesn't prove a causal effect – and this is just about impossible to fully unpick.

9. We like targets, but have little faith in them

Around eight in ten of the population have agreed that the government should set strict limits on the number of immigrants since we started asking this question back in 2006. It is no surprise then that there is similarly widespread support (from around 80%) for the government's current pledge to reduce net migration to "tens of thousands". But it is also clear that people (increasingly) doubt the government will be able deliver this, as the chart below shows.



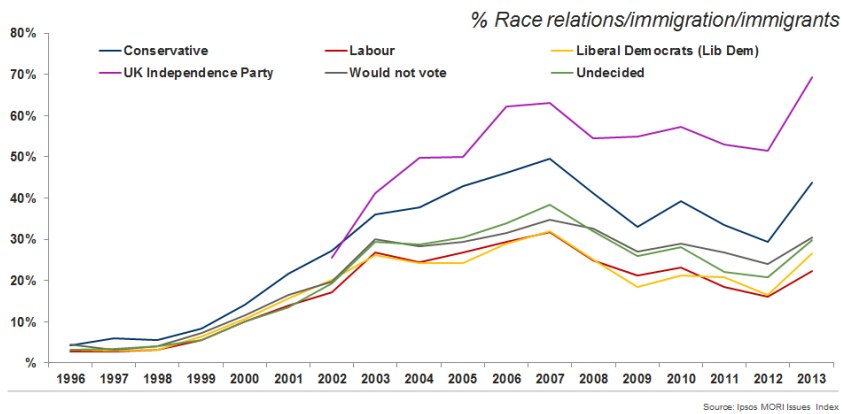
Sources: YouGov/Sunday Times, November 2011, January 2012, October 2012, December 2012, January 2014

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10. UKIP has broken away

UKIP voters had similar levels of concern about immigration to Conservative voters in 2002. However, since then they have rapidly grown away from Conservative and all other voters in their immigration focus, as the chart shows.

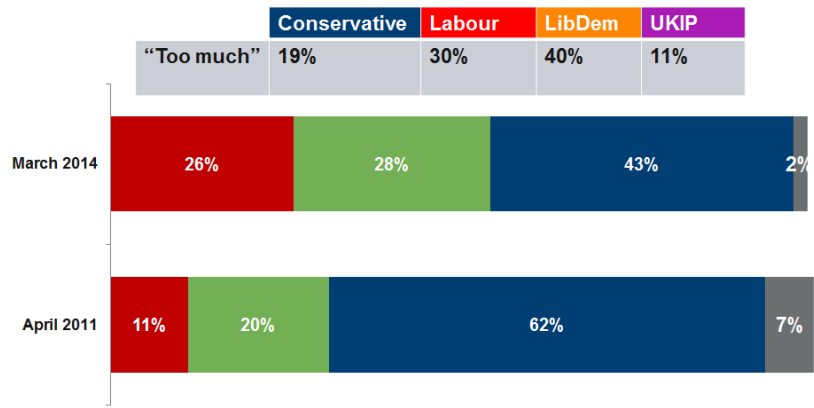
What would you say is the most important issue/other important issues facing Britain today?



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There are broader signs that immigration is becoming a more polarising issue. In particular, the proportion saying we're discussing immigration "too much" has more than doubled in the last three years.

Generally speaking, do you think that the issue of immigration has been discussed in Britain too much, too little or about the right amount over the last few years?



Base: 1,000 British adults 18+, 8th – 12th March 2014 (Ipsos MORI); 2,735 British adults 18+, 14th – 15th April 2011 (YouGov). Ipsos MORI survey conducted by telephone and YouGov survey conducted online therefore comparisons should be made with caution. Source: Ipsos MORI and YouGov

Conclusions

It should be easy to accept that there is deep concern about immigration in general across large parts of the population, while also recognising that there is more nuance in specific views. But it is much more difficult for politicians to communicate that. Trust is so low among so many, with the default position that the political classes do not understand people's concerns, that any sign of playing back a nuanced case risks being seen as not taking the issue seriously enough. It is therefore very difficult to have a conversation that does not end up fuelling concern and the misperceptions that are clear in the attitudinal data.

It seems very likely then that immigration will become more divisive in the coming months. In some sense, it has been strangely unifying, as even those at the more sympathetic end of the spectrum often agreed it has not been treated seriously enough. But as the discussion continues, differences in views are being brought into starker relief. And, as we have seen, not only is there a growing polarisation in attitudes, the groups that are most different from each other have very different current and future electoral weight. In particular, there is a strong generational basis to concern about immigration, with the oldest most concerned – and most likely to vote. But they are also dying out, and being replaced by a much less concerned cohort.

But that reaches way beyond the current electoral cycle, and remains uncertain. The current political response to concern about immigration and the rise of UKIP specifically – more restrictive rhetoric and policy across parties –

seems set to continue. The potential loss of future voters will count for little in the intense fight for every current vote in the coming months.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Bobby Duffy is the Managing Director of the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute and Global Director of Ipsos Social Research Institute. Bobby joined MORI in 1994 after graduating in Economics/Social and Political Science from St John's College, Cambridge, and now leads a team of around 200 researchers in London, Manchester, Edinburgh and Belfast.

