
ENGAGING THE ANXIOUS MIDDLE ON IMMIGRATION REFORM: EVIDENCE FROM THE UK DEBATE

By Sunder Katwala and Will Somerville

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Executive Summary

The United Kingdom is often presented as having particularly hostile attitudes toward immigration compared to other countries. Momentum generated by those who are firmly opposed to the current immigration levels is a major factor behind the upcoming June 2016 UK referendum on membership in the European Union—the centerpiece of the current Parliament (2015-20).

Certainly, immigration is an increasingly salient issue in UK politics and surveys indicate that public trust in the government's ability to manage inflows has fallen to abject levels. Over the past 30 years, migration to the United Kingdom has increased substantially. Between 1993 and 2014, the foreign-born population more than doubled to 8.3 million—growing to represent 13.1 percent of the total population, and with around 80 percent of immigrants settling in urban areas. Immigration emerged as a key political issue in the late 1990s, and from 2013 onwards politics “caught up” with public views, as parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) rose to prominence campaigning on a populist, anti-immigration platform.

Advances in national and comparative polling data allow researchers to closely track attitudes on this topic. The data indicate that the British public for the last decade and a half has seen migration as among the most important issues facing the country, that trust in the government's handling of immigration has dropped precipitously over the same period, and that there is a plurality that favors limiting immigration. However, the polls also reveal that public attitudes toward immigration and immigrants are more nuanced than commonly depicted in the media and political discourse. Though there are substantial minorities of strong opinion for and against immigration, most people fall into the “anxious middle”—they are skeptical about the government's handling of immigration and worried about the effects of immigration on society and the economy. This group is not hostile toward immigrants themselves, especially skilled ones who can contribute to the economy. Furthermore, public opinion is dynamic and, however glacially, changes over time. In the case of the United Kingdom, the public is—slowly—considering what it means to be a country of high immigration. A majority of the public is tough but pragmatic, seeking selective openness.

Public attitudes toward immigration and immigrants are more nuanced than commonly depicted in the media and political discourse.

Nonetheless, the widespread belief that the UK public comprehensively opposes immigration and immigrants often guides policymakers. The recent coalition government (2010-15) introduced tough new legislation (the *Immigration Act 2014*) and its successor Conservative government (2015-present) has drafted new legislation (the *Immigration Bill 2016*) that also projects an image of “tough” control. Politicians have presented other reforms selectively to the public, however. For example, the coalition government did not promote its reforms increasing access to justice for immigrant spouses who have been victims of domestic violence, and demurred to significantly expand resettlement places for refugees. (The coalition government's position on refugee resettlement was also held by the current Conservative government for several months until it was forced to change tack in September 2015 under intense media, civil-society, public, and international pressure.) In contrast, efforts to curb unauthorized access to public services and significantly reduce net migration to the “tens of thousands” were heavily publicized in spite of growing evidence that the public does not believe in government's ability to deliver. Similarly the *Immigration Act 2014* and the current *Immigration Bill 2016* have sought to implement tough rules as part of efforts to reduce inflows and reassure the public, again with limited traction.



This is unsurprising, as efforts to curb inflows have failed before. Shortly after the May 2015 general election, net migration figures reached the highest levels on record, more than three times the government target. Consequently, trust in the government's ability to manage migration—already low—was further undermined. Low trust in government has translated into low trust in the Conservative Party's handling of immigration; previously immigration was a topic on which it had a longstanding lead over all other parties, whereas today it is only the third most trusted political party on immigration.

The EU referendum, often referred to as “Brexit,” is in part a referendum on migration and migration policy, and will have far-reaching effects on how policy will develop through the end of this Parliament and beyond. In the immediate term, both the Remain and Leave campaigns must seek to engage with those in the anxious middle as migration liberals and migration rejectionists have most likely already decided how they will vote (liberals for Remain; rejectionists for Leave).¹ Survey data on public opinion, especially the views and priorities of the anxious middle, will have several policy implications for decisionmakers and reformers. However, whatever the result of the Brexit referendum, changes to how the government develops migration policy are likely. This analysis offers a number of key takeaways for politicians and relevant decisionmakers looking beyond the EU referendum, including the need to:

- **Engage public concerns with workable solutions.** Policymakers and reformers should take care to engage and assuage public concerns instead of dismissing or stoking them, and use the media to reach a broad audience and discuss credible steps to make the immigration system work. These solutions must be plausible; the fallout from the failure to curb net migration underscores the perils of overpromising and underdelivering. For example, public support for certain migrant groups (students, immediate family members, skilled workers) suggests relatively easy ways that policymakers can exhibit governance that is both responsive and responsible, by ensuring that immigration rules meet the needs of universities and employers but are also orderly and well-run. Policymakers can engage legitimate public concerns in three key areas, by (1) ensuring that the system works effectively and makes fair decisions, (2) equipping public services to adapt to an era of high migration, and (3) addressing anxieties that hinge on cultural difference as well as more tangible economic concerns.
- **Represent the anxious middle.** Policymakers should move away from arguments that posit “us” against “them” in favor of a stance that focuses on the best interests of citizens and migrants alike. Also, they might do more to understand the emotional resonance of migration, and communicate their reforms accordingly.
- **Consider broader reforms for better migration governance.** Barring significant tradeoffs (for example it is possible the United Kingdom could choose to leave the European Union and accept restrictions on trade in order to curtail European migration), policymakers have limited tools available to substantially reduce immigration levels. Instead, they can capitalize on a public mandate to improve migration governance by, for example, increasing investment in the immigration system to deliver fast, efficient, and accurate decisions or to tackle exploitation in the workplace.
- **Focus on immigrant integration.** There is strong consensus on the importance of immigrant integration programs, in particular those supporting English-language fluency as a foundation for successful economic and social integration, and those to expand and deepen citizenship. Though fiscal austerity has curtailed funding for such initiatives in recent years, policymakers could consider additional support for national and local integration efforts, encouraging an active integration approach.

1 Sunder Katwala and Steve Ballinger, *How (not) to Talk About Europe* (London: British Future, 2016), www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/EU-report-British-Future.Embargo-6.1.16.pdf.



I. Introduction

Is public opinion hostile to migration and to migrants? This question underpins much of the public discourse on immigration. In the United Kingdom, public opinion on the topic is often depicted as particularly “toxic” in comparative analysis.² Yet there is now strong evidence from a range of polling data that suggests a more nuanced picture. Despite the existence of segments of the public that are strongly for or against migration to the United Kingdom, the majority of respondents hold a temperate view:³ they support lowering immigration to the United Kingdom, but oppose cutting certain migration inflows or reneging on core humanitarian commitments.

It would be more accurate to describe the public as anxious, conflicted, and worried about the impacts of migration.

The majority of the public is skeptical about the UK government’s handling of migration, but these views do not equate to hostility towards migrants themselves. A majority holds generally “pro-migrant” views, with broadly held commitments to welcoming and integrating incomers who can contribute positively, and to treating both citizens and migrants fairly. Clearly, characterizing public attitudes as “hostile” is inaccurate: it would be more accurate to describe the public as anxious, conflicted, and worried about the impacts of migration. These are important distinctions that are often lost in the public discourse surrounding immigration.

Instead, the erroneous assumption that the UK public is comprehensively hostile toward immigration and immigrants stretches across the political spectrum, with far-reaching effects for political discourse and migration policy. It also provides key rationales—i.e., democratic legitimacy and responsiveness to public opinion—for migration skeptics who advocate a more restrictive immigration regime. Migration supporters, too, do not question this assumption, as they attribute the “toxic” public debate to myths and misunderstandings spread by the media,⁴ and focus on ways to shift and correct public perception. These beliefs have significant implications for policy: a *responsive* government might seek to mitigate and reduce such hostility, perhaps at the expense of other areas of public policy such as health or education, while a *responsible* government might act to lessen the erosion of public trust and counter the rise of populism.⁵

This report analyzes polling data in an attempt to paint a more accurate picture of public opinion on immigration—focusing on the concerns of the “anxious middle” that forms a majority yet is under-represented in public debates. It then examines several drivers of public opinion in the United Kingdom, before considering how recent migration policy changes can be linked to public opinion—or, crucially, what policymakers perceive to be the public will. Finally, the report draws out lessons for policymakers in designing policies and reforms that represent the interests of the majority—and that can achieve a broad consensus—meeting both responsive and responsible government priorities.

2 Robert Ford, *Parochial and Cosmopolitan Britain: Examining the Social Divide in Reactions to Immigration* (Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2012), www.gmfus.org/publications/parochial-and-cosmopolitan-britain-examining-social-divide-reactions-immigration.

3 Nick Lowles and Anthony Painter, *Fear and Hope: The New Politics of Identity* (London: Searchlight Educational Trust, 2011), www.fearandhope.org.uk/project-report/; Sunder Katwala, Steve Ballinger, and Matthew Rhodes, *How to Talk about Immigration* (London: British Future, 2014), www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/How-To-Talk-About-Immigration-FINAL.pdf.

4 Greg Philo, Emma Briant, and Pauline Donald, *Bad News for Refugees* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

5 Lauren McLaren, “Immigration and Trust in Politics in Britain,” *British Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 1 (2012): 163–85.



II. The Shape of Public Opinion on Migration

Data on public opinion toward migration in the United Kingdom over the past 30 years are surprisingly incomplete, relative to other topics. Historically, surveys have posed questions on immigration on an infrequent, ad hoc basis. Data are increasingly available thanks to new polling and also comparative analyses with other countries.⁶ Yet in contrast to other countries, none of this research on public attitudes is funded by or involves the UK government—surprising, perhaps, when one considers how closely policy takes account of public views.

The idea of a hostile public is based on a simplified account of two factors: (1) a headline measure of whether the public wants more or less immigration, and (2) the salience of immigration in national politics. The overall orientation of public attitudes, backed by good data, is not in dispute:

- **More or less immigration?** A significant majority—70 to 80 percent of the UK public— seeks fewer immigrants⁷ and consistently favors reducing the numbers of migrants coming into the country. This finding has been stable since opinion polling became widespread more than 30 years ago.⁸
- **Immigration's place on the public agenda.** When numbers of new arrivals rise, the public sours on immigration by sending it up the ladder of “issues of importance.” At the time of writing, immigration is considered the number one issue facing Britain, a position it has held in the leading monthly tracker for nine months.⁹ Polls have shown that immigration has been at the top of the public agenda for more than a decade (immigration was cited as one of the top three issues nearly every month during that period). It is worth noting that research shows a time lag between increases in net immigration and public concern.¹⁰

When immigration rises, the public mood changes, and voters demand restrictions.

It is also clear that over the past 30 years policymakers and the government *have responded* to public opinion on immigration numbers. When immigration rises, the public mood changes, and voters demand restrictions—prompting a government response.¹¹ For example, concerns over the volume of immigration from Poland and other Eastern European states in 2004 led to the introduction of the Points-Based System (first proposed in Cabinet in 2005). However, simply equating a public interest

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- 6 See, for example, Robert Ford, Gareth Morrell, and Anthony Heath, “Fewer but Better? British Attitudes to Immigration,” in *British Social Attitudes: The 29th Report* (London: National Centre for Social Research, 2012), www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/1141/bsa29_immigration.pdf; Scott Blinder, “Imagined Immigration: The Impact of Different Meanings of Immigrants in Public Opinion and Policy Debates in Britain,” *Political Studies* 63, no. 1 (2015): 80–100; Bobby Duffy and Tom Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration* (London: Ipsos MORI, 2014), 9, www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/sri-perceptions-and-reality-immigration-report-2013.pdf; Rob Ford and Nick Lowles, *Fear and Hope 2016: Race, Faith and Belonging in Today's England* (London: Hope not Hate, 2016). The vast majority of immigration research has been funded by independent donors.
- 7 Scott Blinder, “UK Public Opinion towards Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Levels of Concern” (Migration Observatory briefing, University of Oxford, July 3, 2014), www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-concern.
- 8 Robert Ford, Will Jennings, and Will Somerville, “Public Opinion, Responsiveness and Constraint: Britain’s Three Immigration Policy Regimes,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 41 no. (2015): 1391–411.
- 9 Ipsos MORI, “Issues Index: 2007 Onwards. The Most Important Issues Facing Britain Today,” accessed April 15, 2016, www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2905/Issues-Index-2012-onwards.aspx?view=wide.
- 10 Duffy and Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality*.
- 11 Ford, Jennings, and Somerville, “Public Opinion, Responsiveness and Constraint: Britain’s Three Immigration Policy Regimes.”



in lower numbers with hostility misses the nuance of how people understand migration and why they consider it a major issue.

In fact, since migration became such an important topic around the turn of the century, the data are clear: the public has become simultaneously *more informed* and *more polarized* in its views on migration. When assessing the extent and scope of public hostility toward migration, it is important to distinguish not only the various “tribes” of public opinion on this topic but also differences in how they view migration on the one hand and migrants on the other—not to mention differences at national and local levels. In short, the story is not a simple one as the UK public engages with and slowly changes its views on the topic of migration (and at various speeds, which is why we are seeing polarization).

A. Tribes of Public Opinion

Detailed polling data suggest public opinion on migration and migrants falls into three groups.¹² Notably, only one can be accurately described as hostile to immigration.

1. Migration Rejectionists

Around one-quarter of the population takes a hostile stance towards immigration.¹³ For example, when asked to rate the overall positive impact of immigration to the United Kingdom on a 0-10 scale, around one-fifth of respondents give a score of zero. This group is distinctive for its comprehensive opposition to migration (i.e. it does not distinguish among different migration flows) and its antimigrant views. One in four migration rejectionists say that their policy preference would be for government to insist that all migrants return to their country of origin. This group tends to be older, white, more male, and without a university education.¹⁴

2. Migration Liberals

A minority on the other side of the spectrum, also amounting to about one-quarter of the population, answers in a completely opposite way. People in this group are relatively young and educated; many live in an urban area and have a relative or acquaintance who is an immigrant. Members of this group rate the overall positive impact of immigration at 7 or higher, are content with current levels of immigration, and are increasingly likely to say that there is too much talk about immigration politics. About 14 percent believe that migration policy should evolve toward the ideal of a borderless world.

3. The “Anxious Middle”

This leaves the majority of the British public in the middle of this spectrum. Unlike in other public policy areas, traditional socioeconomic classifications do not explain how this middle group thinks about immigration. For example, in 2014, 61 percent of the British public endorsed the view that “immigration brings both pressures and economic benefits, so we should control it and choose the migration that is in Britain’s best economic interests.”¹⁵ In comparison, 24 percent supported the statement that “immigration

¹² The analysis and data for this section come from research conducted by different polling companies, including ICM and YouGov between November 2012 and October 2014 for British Future, published in Katwala, Ballinger, and Rhodes, *How to Talk About Immigration*, 10–25. It also draws on a review of Ipsos MORI polling and by a unique Ipsos MORI longitudinal panel. The work is confirmed by other reviews. Analysis elsewhere identifies tribes of public opinion. Ashcroft polling, for example, identifies seven tribes; see Michael A. Ashcroft, “Small Island: Public Opinion and the Politics of Imagination,” Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2013, 44, <http://lordashcrofthpolls.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/LORD-ASHCROFT-Public-opinion-and-the-politics-of-immigration2.pdf>. These findings are also confirmed by the work of Hope not Hate in two seminal reports. See Lowles and Painter, *Fear and Hope: The New Politics of Identity*; Ford and Lowles, *Fear and Hope 2016: Race, Faith and Belonging in Today’s England*.

¹³ Katwala, Ballinger, and Rhodes, *How to Talk About Immigration*, 10–25

¹⁴ Ford and Lowles, *Fear and Hope 2016: Race, Faith and Belonging in Today’s England*

¹⁵ Katwala, Ballinger, and Rhodes, *How to Talk about Immigration*.



is bad for the economy and we should have as little of it as possible,” while 7 percent felt it was “good for the economy and we should have as much as possible.” The middle group is best characterized as anxious and conflicted, rather than hostile. These findings are not particularly surprising when one considers the rapid increase in migrant inflows to the United Kingdom over the past decade and people’s natural predisposition to view foreigners with skepticism.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the center ground of public opinion has identifiable concerns about the immigration system. Welfare and public services mark a dividing line—those who contribute are welcome, those who do not are not. This is reflected in preferences for certain categories of migrants, such as skilled workers, international students, and immediate family members over, for example, low-skilled workers and those seeking asylum.

The anxious middle roughly splits in two: those who are anxious about job security and wages for themselves and their children, tend to be low- to middle-income, may be part of a minority community, and live outside London; and a group that is anxious about changes to the dominant national culture, and tends to be wealthier, and live in or near London. This second group currently focuses its concerns on the integration of Muslim immigrants.¹⁷

B. A Generational Gap

Above all, the polarization of opinion on this topic is driven by age. A generation gap in attitudes toward immigration opened up in the 2000s, and by 2013 the prewar generation was nearly twice as likely as those born after 1980 to consider immigration an important issue facing Britain.¹⁸ Age is thus the key predictor: migration rejectionists tend to be older, migration supporters younger.

Factors of age, education, and social connection to immigrants cluster together geographically. Britons living in cities or in the orbit of London are least likely to support reducing immigration on a significant scale, though they may still want to see some reduction. Meanwhile, strong support for significant reductions can be found among Britons living in manufacturing and industrial towns in northern parts of the United Kingdom, and areas that have till now received few immigrants.

Polling from 2014 and 2015 suggests that politics has “caught up” with these trends. Today, voting for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) is the biggest predictor of hostile attitudes toward immigration, while those who favor a liberal immigration system tend to vote for the Green Party.¹⁹

C. Identifying Public Concerns on Migration and Migrants

In the United Kingdom, public opinion differs sharply on how the government is handling immigration and attitudes toward migrants themselves, which are broadly supportive.

Polling data suggest most people are unimpressed by the record of successive UK governments in handling immigration. For example, the recent coalition government was criticized for its failure to meet its net migration target of letting in fewer than 100,000 people per year, and the Labour government of 1997-

16 This predisposition is supported by evidence from psychology, neuroscience, and sociology. See, for example, Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2011). More specifically, the roots of decisionmaking in neuroscience have shown how people react differently to ambiguity, and how ambiguity often leads people to make cognitive judgments based on familiarity. See Ming Hsu, Meghana Bhatt, Ralph Adolphs, Daniel Tranel, and Colin Camerer, “Neural Systems Responding to Degrees of Uncertainty in Human Decision-Making,” *Science* 310, no. 5754 (2005): 1680–83; Robert B. Zajonc, “Mere Exposure: A Gateway to the Subliminal,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 10, no. 6 (2001): 227.

17 Katwala, Ballinger, and Rhodes, *How to Talk About Immigration*.

18 Duffy and Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality*, 17.

19 Authors’ correspondence with Ipsos MORI.



2010 was criticized for not imposing restrictions on labor mobility after the EU expansion of 2004, which resulted in a significant inflow of migrants from Eastern Europe, and Poland in particular.²⁰ This criticism of governance is not necessarily antimigrant. For example, in 2013, a clear majority expressed the view that the Polish migrants who began coming to the United Kingdom in 2004 had “made a positive contribution to Britain,” with only 20 percent disagreeing.²¹

The data also indicate that immigration is a “state of the nation” issue: the topic is raised far more often by people asked to identify issues facing Britain as a whole than those asked about issues affecting their family or the area where they live.²² This is not to deny the negative effects of immigration perceived by many people: in a 2013 poll, some 36 percent said they or their family had been directly affected by immigration.²³ Specific social classes report specific concerns. For example, low-income households are more likely to cite negative effects on access to social housing, wages, and jobs. In contrast, pressures on public services (such as access to schools or wait times at doctors’ offices) are reported widely across socioeconomic groups. Acknowledging and addressing these concerns is important, but it is also noteworthy that most people expressing such concerns do not report personal impacts from migration. At a local level, especially where there is contact with immigrant communities, the views expressed are positive.

The place of immigration in the national debate also helps explains its role in creating the conditions for a referendum on the future of UK membership in the European Union.

Given that immigration is a state-of-the-nation issue, it is worth noting the importance of political leadership in addressing relevant concerns—concerns that are in large part determined by how senior leaders set the agenda. The place of immigration in the national debate also helps explains its role in creating the conditions for a referendum on the future of UK membership in the European Union. While political factors—internal Conservative Party dynamics and the rise of UKIP—have contributed, the incompatibility of EU membership and political promises by the British government on restricting migration made the referendum a reality.²⁴

It remains challenging to draw policy lessons from the nuanced viewpoints of the UK public. Longitudinal analysis suggests that public opinion, especially for the segment categorized as the anxious middle, is not fixed, and is influenced by political allegiance, external events, and leadership. For example, more than one-third of voters changed their stance on migration (if only slightly) during the 2015 general election campaign.²⁵ In spite of the nuance, there are clear implications for policy design—covered in more detail later—that include disaggregating categories of migrants, ensuring pragmatic solutions, and investing in integration.

20 Following Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004, several hundred thousand Polish nationals moved to the United Kingdom; the 2011 census recorded a tenfold increase in the Polish-born population from 2001. See Migration Observatory, “Pole Position—New Census Data Shows Ten-Fold Growth of England and Wales Polish Population,” (press release, December 12, 2012), <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/pole-position-new-census-data-shows-ten-fold-growth-england-and-wales%E2%80%99-polish-population>.

21 Katwala, Ballinger, and Rhodes, *How to Talk about Immigration*.

22 Duffy and Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality*.

23 Ashcroft, “Small Island.”

24 Will Somerville, “Brexit: The Role of Migration in the Upcoming EU Referendum,” *Migration Information Source*, May 4, 2016, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/brexit-role-migration-upcoming-eu-referendum.

25 Ipsos MORI, *Shifting Ground: Changing Attitudes to Immigration in the Long Term and During Election Campaigns*, Report no. 1 (London: Ipsos MORI, 2016), 15, www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/publications/1822/Shifting-Ground-Views-on-immigration-during-the-long-term-and-during-election-campaigns.aspx.



III. A Fresh Look at Some Drivers of Public Opinion on Migration

The formation of public views is a complex process beyond the scope of this report. This section focuses on three specific factors that are particularly relevant to the United Kingdom (though the causal relationship is not always clear), but are not intended to explain attitudes, rather to explain part of the picture. These are: (1) long-term migration trends, (2) the realignment of British politics, and (3) media coverage.

A. Long-Term Migration Trends in the United Kingdom

Migration emerged²⁶ as an issue of public debate in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as immigration to the United Kingdom significantly increased. Up until 1980, the United Kingdom was a country of emigration, with an overwhelmingly white population. In the past 30 years, the UK public witnessed a significant increase in both gross and net immigration: humanitarian migration (especially between 1998 and 2003), student and labor migration from outside the European Union (from 2000 on), and a major spike in labor migration from the European Union—especially Poland—from 2004 onward. Immigrants tend to be concentrated in urban areas: 80 percent move to one of the United Kingdom’s 59 largest cities, while 40 percent to 50 percent move to London.²⁷

Britain’s foreign-born population—and its diversity—have grown faster than that of almost any other country in Europe or North America in the past 30 years. From 1993 to 2014, the foreign-born population in the United Kingdom more than doubled, from 3.8 million to 8.3 million people, rising to 13.1 percent of the total population.²⁸ Each year, more than half a million people enter the United Kingdom as long-term immigrants (i.e., intending to stay for more than a year). These figures have remained constant over the past decade; however, they include groups such as international students who many would not regard as “immigrants.”²⁹ The United Kingdom is also an increasingly diverse society: one report predicted that one in five UK residents would be from a minority community in 2051, and the Government Foresight Office has made similar projections of a strong growth in diversity.³⁰

Britain’s foreign-born population—and its diversity—have grown faster than that of almost any other country in Europe or North America in the past 30 years.

Polling data indicate that numbers of arrivals, media coverage, and salience of public opinion are correlated—and that they broadly follow an approximate sequence: higher numbers prompt greater coverage, followed by a rise in public concern.

26 Migration, especially understood as race relations, was a top political issue in the 1960s and 1970s, but had not been a consistent issue at the top of the political and public debate through most of the 1980s and 1990s.

27 Centre for Cities, “The Immigration Reform: A Policy Briefing,” January 2014, www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/14-01-08-The-immigration-reform-A-policy-briefing.pdf.

28 Cinzia Rienzo and Carlos Vargas-Silva, *Migrants in the UK: An Overview* (Oxford: Migration Observatory, 2016), www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migrants-uk-overview.

29 Blinder, “Imagined Immigration.”

30 Philip Rees, Pia Wohland, Paul Norman, and Peter Boden, “Ethnic Population Projections for the UK, 2001-2051,” *Journal of Population Research* 29, no. 1 (2012): 45–89; Foresight Future Identities, *Final Project Report* (London: The Government Office for Science, 2013), www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/273966/13-523-future-identities-changing-identities-report.pdf.



B. The Realignment of British Politics

The British public's faith in government has deteriorated over the past two decades, and dropped precipitously on the topic of immigration. In short, polling data suggest that the public does not trust British politicians and officials to run an immigration regime fairly. This contrasts with countries such as Germany and Canada.³¹

Migration is an increasingly salient political topic, demonstrated consistently by opinion polling that places it as an issue of national importance. Mainstream center-right and right-wing political parties have traditionally enjoyed an electoral dividend from focusing on immigration—albeit through promises to “reduce and manage” new arrivals, coupled with strong antiracist norms, to avoid alienating certain voting blocs. As was done in the previous 2001 and 2005 elections, the Conservative Party put immigration at the center of its 2010 general election campaign. Then, in the 2015 election, the dividend (in votes, not seats) instead accrued to the right-wing UKIP.

UKIP began as an anti-EU party in 1993 and for most of its history was a minor actor. UKIP first broke through as a major political force in the May 2013 local elections, campaigning on a populist and anti-immigration platform, broadening beyond its original single-issue, anti-EU focus. In 2014, UKIP won the most UK seats in the European elections—the first party other than Labour or the Conservatives to win a major election for nearly a century. More recently, UKIP substantially increased its vote share from 920,000 votes (or 3 percent of the vote) in the 2010 general election to 3.9 million votes (or 13 percent) in the 2015 election.³² However, it gained just a single seat in the House of Commons.³³ This followed a concerted effort by other parties to neutralize UKIP's impact. The major parties initially tried to empathize with antimigration concerns and offer tougher policy measures, while also seeking to portray UKIP as a toxic messenger. However, in the final months of the 2015 campaign, in an attempt to deny UKIP salience and a platform, the parties shifted their focus away from immigration to emphasize issues such as the economy and the National Health Service.

The biggest predictor of hostility to migration in 2015 was “voting UKIP.”

In 2002, slightly more than one-quarter of UKIP and Conservative voters cited immigration as the biggest issue facing Britain; in 2013, nearly 70 percent of UKIP voters named immigration—not Europe—as their chief concern, compared with less than half of Conservative voters. This shift was partly due to UKIP's shifting emphasis, and also a refinement of its supporter base.³⁴ UKIP captured the antimigration group (the rejectionists)—attracting more supporters who prioritized this issue in the process—and subsequently helped shape and polarize the political and media agenda on migration, contributing to the decision to offer (and now hold) a referendum on the United Kingdom's place in Europe.

This is borne out in the data. The biggest predictor of hostility to migration in 2015 was “voting UKIP,” whereas in 2005 the three biggest predictors were all associated with newspaper readership (*Daily*

31 German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS), *Transatlantic Trends: Mobility, Migration and Integration. Key Findings from 2014 and Selected Highlights from Transatlantic Trends and Transatlantic Trends: Immigration 2008-13* (Washington, DC: GMFUS, 2014), www.gmfus.org/publications/transatlantic-trends-mobility-migration-and-integration. Some academics have gone further and argued that trust in the immigration system has dropped so far that it has corroded trust in government generally in the United Kingdom. See Lauren McLaren, “Immigration and Political Trust in the UK,” *Political Insight* 4, no. 3 (2013): 14–17.

32 BBC News, “Results of the 2015 General Election,” accessed June 3, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/election/2015/results; BBC News, “Results of the 2010 General Election,” accessed June 3, 2015, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/election2010/results/>.

33 The UK system is First Past the Post (or winner takes all), which works against smaller parties.

34 Duffy and Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality*.



Mail, Daily Express, and the Sun respectively).³⁵ Furthermore, this political shift led to a drop in trust for the Conservative Party—which was ranked the third-most-trusted party on immigration during the 2015 election. Such a fall helps explain why immigration did not feature heavily in the 2015 campaign, contrary to expectations, and underlines how concerted political leadership (albeit for short periods) can significantly alter the salience of immigration in the public debate.

C. Media Coverage of Migration

Growing media coverage of immigration has helped keep this issue on the political agenda. In part the coverage is a response to issues such as long-term migration trends and the realignment of British politics discussed above; also, migration headlines sell newspapers. There is evidence of increasing—and increasingly negative—coverage of immigration in the national press.³⁶ For example, Liverpool University researchers compared press coverage of immigration in 2006 and 2013 by conducting a “framing analysis” of arguments included in more than 500 articles from six newspapers across the political spectrum.³⁷ They found that coverage had significantly increased and that all six newspapers had adopted a narrower and more negative stance on immigration during this period. Another study found that between 2010 and 2012, newspapers described migration in overtly negative terms: across all newspapers immigrants were most often “illegal,” and tabloid newspapers consistently associated them with words like “terrorist,” “suspected,” and “sham.”³⁸ Overall there is an observable pattern of newspapers questioning the legitimacy of immigrants.³⁹ A more recent study noted similar patterns of negative framing and focused in part on understanding whether the direct voices and experiences of migrants were represented by the media. The study found that migrant voices generally were not represented, and when a migrant perspective was included, it was mostly in human-interest stories, especially as victims.⁴⁰

*There is evidence of increasing—and increasingly negative—
coverage of immigration in the national press.*

Content analysis of media coverage also uncovers problems of accuracy and distortion, as well as the use of stereotypes.⁴¹ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that the United Kingdom differs in its coverage of the recent refugee crisis compared to other countries, describing British media coverage as the most negative and polarized.⁴² These findings are noteworthy in light of studies revealing how regularly people miscalculate the size and composition of immigrant populations. A recent study indicated that the

35 Ibid.

36 Alex Balch and Ekaterina Balabanova, “Ethics, Politics and Migration: Public Debates on the Free Movement of Romanians and Bulgarians in the UK, 2006–2013,” *Politics*, November 24, 2014; Alex Balch, “How Has Press Coverage of Immigration Changed?” *New Statesman*, January 21, 2015, www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/how-has-press-coverage-immigration-changed.

37 This analysis sought to establish the range of arguments present in the press coverage. See Balch and Balabanova, “Ethics, Politics and Migration.”

38 William Allen and Scott Blinder, *Migration in the News: Portrayals of Immigrants, Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in National British Newspapers, 2010 to 2012* (Oxford: Migration Observatory, 2013), www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Report%20-%20migration%20in%20the%20news.pdf.

39 Terry Threadgold, *The Media and Migration in the United Kingdom, 1999 to 2009* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute 2009), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/TCM-UKMedia.pdf; Article 19, 2003, www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/publications/refugees-what-s-the-story-pdf.

40 Heaven Crawley, Simon McMahon, and Katherine Jones, *Victims and Villains: Migrant Voices in the British Media* (Coventry: Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, 2016), 5, <http://statewatch.org/news/2016/feb/uk-victims-villains-migrant-voices-british-media-2-16.pdf>.

41 Allen and Blinder, *Migration in the News*.

42 Mike Berry, Inaki Garcia-Blanco, and Kerry Moore, *Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries*, Report prepared for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Cardiff: Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, 2015), 7–9, www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.html.



UK public estimated the foreign-born share of the UK population to be 24 percent—more than twice the official estimate of 13 percent.⁴³ People are often mistaken about the composition of the immigrant population, too. Respondents to another study mentioned refugees and asylum seekers—two of the smallest migrant groups—most frequently, and mentioned students least frequently. (Students comprised the largest migration category to the United Kingdom at the time of writing.⁴⁴)

The evidence base suggests that much of the media is hostile toward immigration. Many academics and immigration advocates frequently bemoan the “partisan” media. While the literature on media effects is significant, it does not clarify whether the relationship of media coverage to public opinion is causal. Data have shown that higher concerns about race and immigration correlate with newspaper readership but again, attributing a cause is difficult as newspapers may be responding to their readership rather than the other way around. It should be noted, meanwhile, that media analyses are often based on a narrow sample, including a focus on print and not other channels, and primacy given to news and politics over culture, sports, and arts.⁴⁵ Further, media reporting—on news and politics in particular—favors crises and victim/villain dichotomies (an interest expressed in social media, too, with boos and cheers, “likes” and “dislikes”). But this simplistic approach does not necessarily mean that people ignore the nuances of the issues at hand.

The literature on media effects ... does not clarify whether the relationship of media coverage to public opinion is causal.

However, research on framing and priming—i.e., the way a story is presented—can deeply influence a person responds to it.⁴⁶ Political leadership often influences media content, suggesting causal variables in shaping opinion may lie in the political-media nexus rather than the media alone.⁴⁷ For example, Prime Minister David Cameron introduced the net migration target in debates shortly before making it part of the coalition agreement in 2010. Migration Observatory analysis indicates that mention of the term “net migration” in the media increased fivefold between 2009 and 2013, with the media adopting this target as a key measure of success or failure in the government’s handling of migration.⁴⁸ Another study focusing on immigration and social media noted spikes around key government actions (the introduction of a new bill, and a Cameron op-ed in the *Financial Times* on immigration).⁴⁹ The election coverage in 2015 also illustrates this relationship between the national media and political strategy. As UKIP gained support for its anti-EU and anti-immigration platform, the electoral benefits of focusing on immigration diminished

43 This increases to 15 percent if the estimate of unauthorized migrants residing in the United Kingdom is taken into account. See Ipsos MORI, “Perceptions Are Not Reality: Things the World Gets Wrong,” October 29, 2014, www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3466/Perceptions-are-not-reality-Things-the-world-gets-wrong.aspx.

44 The report cites 2009 UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) Long-Term International Migration data, which estimated that 37 percent of immigrants came to study, 34 percent came for work, 13 percent for family reasons, and 4 percent for asylum. See Migration Observatory, *Thinking behind the Numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2011), 9, www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Report%20-%20Public%20Opinion.pdf.

45 Jamie Bartlett and Richard Norrie, *Immigration on Twitter: Understanding Public Attitudes Online* (London: Demos, 2015), www.demos.co.uk/publications/immigration-on-twitter.

46 Bobby Duffy and Laura Rowden, *You Are What You Read? How Newspaper Readership Is Related to Views* (London and Edinburgh: MORI, 2005), www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/240_sri_you_are_what_you_read_042005.pdf; Ipsos MORI, “First Results from Major Longitudinal Survey on Attitudes to Immigration,” April 22, 2015, www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3559/First-results-from-major-longitudinal-survey-on-attitudes-to-immigration.aspx.

47 Crucially, too, media feedback loops with politics and opinion are unlikely to be disentangled. Most political science literature suggests that causal arrows run both ways. Clearly, political leadership on this issue is influenced by and influences the media presentation.

48 Migration Observatory, “Net Migration, the Genie, and the Bottle: Where Next for the Net Migration Target?” (commentary, February 27, 2015), www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/net-migration-genie-and-bottle-where-next-net-migration-target.

49 Bartlett and Norrie, *Immigration on Twitter*.



for the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties. Consequently, these three parties made a concerted effort not to discuss immigration during the 2015 general election. This political strategy was broadly successful—migration became a second-tier media issue during the election. Developments such as the Mediterranean crisis were covered, but media coverage of the 2015 election focused on topics other than migration.⁵⁰ While political leadership naturally has less influence on the media agenda outside the campaign season, this illustrates its role in driving media agendas on migration.

It is also important to note the absence of a counterfactual. In particular, there may be missed opportunities to challenge the dominant media narrative with alternative perspectives. The assumption that there is next to no room for a variety of viewpoints, commonly held among policymakers and the political class, may be erroneous. While there are numerous reasons why alternative narratives are under-represented—for example, an under-resourced nonprofit field, a lack of language skills among newcomers, and the hollowing-out of journalism—this does not preclude their coverage.

IV. The Policy Response: Projecting Tough Control 2010-16

Immigration has been a substantive political issue in the United Kingdom since the late 1990s. And since the UK general election of 2010, immigration has continued to play a central role in British politics.

An acceleration of the alignment of politics to one of tough control began during the May 2010 general election. Immigration was the only issue tackled in all three televised debates, and it was the subject of one of the most memorable 2010 campaign moments, when then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown was recorded privately dismissing a voter who had challenged him on European migration as “bigoted.” While postelection analysis suggests that the Labour government’s handling of immigration was not the decisive reason behind its defeat, political strategists in all three major UK political parties subsequently indicated changes to their immigration policies. And in so doing, they set the parameters that would contribute to the emergence of UKIP as a national political force and the promise (and eventually the required legislation) needed for referendum on the future of the United Kingdom in the European Union.⁵¹

These parameters were the result of agreement between the Conservative Party and the (much smaller) Liberal Democrat Party after they formed a coalition government that lasted for the full five-year term (2010-15). The coalition government sought to portray its handling of immigration as one of tough control. This influenced policy choices, such as the *Immigration Act 2014* or the limited number of resettlement places offered to Syrian refugees prior to September 2015.⁵² It also influenced how the government chose to roll out policies; for example, policymakers promoted efforts to reduce net migration and tighten migration rules (their signature—failed—policy), but did not publicly promote many of their other immigration system reforms.

50 Helen Warrell, “General Elections: Parties Avoid Drawing Attention to Immigration,” *Financial Times*, May 6, 2015, www.ft.com/cms/s/2/7b0b47ee-ef27-11e4-a6d2-00144feab7de.html#axzz3crdXo5Pb.

51 Robert Ford and Will Somerville, “Immigration and the 2010 General Election: More Than Meets the Eye,” in *Immigration under Labour*, eds. Tim Finch and David Goodhart (London: IPPR/Prospect, 2010), www.ippr.org/assets/media/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/Immigration%20under%20Labour%20Nov2010_1812.pdf; Will Somerville, “Assessing the Political Impact of Immigration as the United Kingdom Heads to the Polls,” *Migration Information Source*, April 2, 2015, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/assessing-political-impact-immigration-united-kingdom-heads-polls; Somerville, “Brexit: The Role of Migration in the Upcoming EU Referendum.”

52 The government pledged to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees in the course of the current Parliament (4,000 per year), well below the levels of some other European countries.



Immigration played a less prominent role in the 2015 general election campaign than many anticipated, likely reflecting a conscious decision by the main parties, the Conservatives and Labour, and by the Liberal Democrats. The Conservative strategy was to promote salient issues on which the party had an advantage; over the course of the last Parliament, it had lost its advantage over Labour on the topic of immigration, and now was at comparative disadvantage to UKIP. Labour's approach focused on fairness and tackling exploitation in the workplace, with less attention given to migration numbers or cultural identity issues.

Surveys of attitudes toward immigration both during and after the campaign indicate that public satisfaction with the coalition government's handling of immigration fell to lows last seen in 2007 (under a Labour government), and that the Conservatives trailed Labour as well as UKIP on the issue of immigration.⁵³ A significant majority (86 percent) of those surveyed reported that their concerns about immigration had increased since the 2010 election. Specifically, this increase was reported by 96 percent of those who'd voted for UKIP, by 88 percent of Conservative voters, and by 80 percent of Labour.⁵⁴ Rather than a hardening of attitudes and a tougher overall view of migration, there was some polarization at both ends of spectrum, with more liberal voters increasingly likely to say immigration was being talked about too much, while UKIP voters still thought it was being addressed too little. These surveys support the idea of the three tribes (rejectionists, liberals, and the anxious middle) outlined earlier.

The Conservatives won a surprise majority in 2015 based on leadership and the economy,⁵⁵ and in spite of a poor reputation managing immigration. In fact, Cameron increased the Conservative share of the vote—a feat no prime minister had achieved for half a century. The Conservatives achieved this victory—despite losing an estimated 1.5 million votes to UKIP⁵⁶—by winning a large swathe of Liberal Democrat voters and a historically large number of minority voters, particularly those of Indian heritage and those in southern England.⁵⁷ Previous polling data on voting patterns and attitudes toward immigration indicate that these new Conservative voters had considerably more liberal views on immigration than those deserting the party.⁵⁸ UKIP won 3.9 million votes (or 13 percent) of the 30 million votes cast, compared to the 4.4 million votes (or 27 percent share) it received in the 2014 European elections, in which just 16 million votes were cast.⁵⁹

The Conservative government moved rapidly to set a clear legislative agenda in the aftermath of its 2015 victory. Two efforts stand out and suggest overall continuity with the 2010-15 period, beyond the government's renewed commitment to reach the earlier coalition government's net migration target. First, legislation was announced (the *Immigration Bill 2016*), the thrust of which is an expansion and extension of the 2014 Act, aiming to reduce appeal rights and especially to step up enforcement and reduce access to services for unauthorized migrants. Second, the Conservative government made good on its promise to hold a Brexit referendum and the precursor to that vote (called for June 23, 2016) was a negotiation between the UK government and the European Union for a new deal to remain as a Member State. That new deal in part focused on reducing welfare entitlements for EU migrants.⁶⁰ Thus the current

53 Ipsos MORI, "First Results from Major Longitudinal Survey on Attitudes to Immigration."

54 Ibid.

55 Michael A. Ashcroft, "The Unexpected Mandate: The 2015 Election, the Parties, the People—and the Future," Lord Ashcroft Polls, September 2015, <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Lord-Ashcroft-The-Unexpected-Mandate.pdf>.

56 It is estimated that half of additional votes for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) came from people who had voted Conservative in 2010.

57 British Future, "New Research Shows Ethnic Minority Votes Increasingly Up for Grabs," (news release, May 25, 2015), www.britishfuture.org/articles/ethnic-minority-votes-up-for-grabs/.

58 Ipsos MORI, "Changing Attitudes to Immigration during the Election Campaign: Six Key Findings from our Longitudinal Panel of Participants on Their Attitudes to Immigration throughout and after the Election Campaign," May 5, 2015, www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3569/Changing-attitudes-to-immigration-during-the-election-campaign.aspx; Ipsos MORI, "First Results from Major Longitudinal Survey on Attitudes to Immigration."

59 BBC News, "Results of the 2015 General Election," BBC News, "Vote 2014: UK European Election Results," accessed June 4, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/events/vote2014/eu-uk-results. The 2015 results were disappointing for the party, which went into the election with two seats from its by-election victories and ended with just one. Postelection analysis suggested that UKIP could not galvanize voters beyond its core base, and may have repelled the anxious middle.

60 Somerville, "Brexit: The Role of Migration in the Upcoming EU Referendum."



government has not changed course and has continued efforts to project a stance of tough control on immigration, despite evidence suggesting that these promises do not reassure the anxious middle and do not deliver what the public are asking for.

A. Reducing Numbers: the Net Migration Target

In May 2010, the new coalition's agreement contained two pledges. The main pledge was to drastically cut net migration to the "tens of thousands"—a promise that proved popular during the Conservatives' election campaign in 2010, with the party taking a huge lead over other parties on the topic of immigration.

While this pledge drove many policy changes, the coalition government failed to come anywhere close to its target of keeping long-term net migration under 100,000 annually. Despite reductions over certain periods in recent years, net migration in the fiscal year ending September 2015 stood at 323,000—triple the government's target, and slightly higher than when the coalition government took office in 2010.⁶¹ Quarterly data reports since the 2015 general election (August and November 2015 and February 2016) show net migration at around the highest levels on record and broadly stable.⁶² The closest the government came to achieving the target was in the 12-month period ending September 2012, when net migration stood at 154,000. In practice, free movement within the European Union made this target almost impossible to achieve, although it is important to note that the target would *not* have been met even if net EU migration were excluded.⁶³

The coalition government failed to come anywhere close to its target of keeping long-term net migration under 100,000 annually.

The government introduced a series of policy changes to restrict non-European migration and reach this target (mostly through executive actions rather than legislation). These included imposing tough new rules on family union, student, and poststudy visas, and reducing the number of work visas. However, non-European migration to the United Kingdom still remained above 100,000.⁶⁴ Another approach involved trying to persuade unauthorized immigrants to voluntarily contact the authorities for assistance in leaving the United Kingdom, most notably through the high-profile use of "Go Home" vans—vehicles displaying billboards advising unauthorized immigrants to "Go Home or Face Arrest." The campaign triggered a significant popular backlash, in part because of its racial overtones.⁶⁵

61 ONS, "Net Migration to the UK was 318,000 in the Year Ending December 2014, according to the Latest Provisional Estimates," (news release, May 21, 2015), www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/may-2015/sty-net-migration.html.

62 ONS, "Net Migration to the UK was 330,000 in the Year Ending March 2015, according to the Latest Provisional Estimates," (news release, August 27, 2015), www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/august-2015/sty-net-migration.html. The most recent quarterly report (February 2016) estimated the previous year through September 2015 with a net migration to the United Kingdom of 323,000. See ONS, *Migration Statistics Quarterly Report: February 2016* (London: ONS, 2016), www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/february2016.

63 Migration Observatory, "Net Migration, the Genie, and the Bottle."

64 Somerville, "Assessing the Political Impact of Immigration."

65 "Go Home" was a racial slur used in the 1970s and 1980s by National Front supporters against people of color. Many migration rejectionists considered the campaign a step too far, including UKIP leader Nigel Farage, who argued that the vans were both unpleasant and entirely ineffective in addressing illegal migration.



The coalition government's failure to keep its migration-reduction pledge had ramifications for the 2015 election. Research conducted during the campaign indicated that 60 percent of voters thought that the original pledge was a mistake.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the Conservatives retained the target as part of their election manifesto, albeit rephrased as an "ambition" that would "take more time, more work, and more difficult long-term decisions to achieve."⁶⁷ In the weeks after the election, immigration returned to the political and media agenda. Shortly before the release of the record net migration figures in August 2015, Prime Minister Cameron and his reappointed Home Secretary, Theresa May, proposed a series of tough measures as part of the *Immigration Bill 2016*, including cuts to migrant categories favored by the public (including highly skilled migrants) and sanctions against unauthorized migrants (for example, new penalties for illegal employment and curbs on migrants' access to services).⁶⁸

Conservative-leaning newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*, which supported the Conservatives during the 2015 campaign and featured muted coverage of immigration, have since covered the issue extensively. However, approval of further restrictive measures is undermined by deepening doubts that the net migration target can ever be met.

B. Immigration Reforms and Ending Child Detention

The 2010 agreement also contained a second pledge: to end child detention. Families with children are no longer routinely held in immigration removal centers, although prior to their removal or deportation they may be detained for up to 72 hours in a secure "predeparture accommodation" center.⁶⁹ The coalition's pledge did not cover short-term holding facilities at UK ports of entry, where families and unaccompanied children can be detained pending their admission to or immediate removal from the United Kingdom.⁷⁰ While these reforms do not mark an absolute end to child detention, they are nevertheless very different from previous practices.

Outside this policy change, reforms have included efforts to improve the asylum determination system, modify the rules for immigrant spouses suffering domestic violence,⁷¹ and implement institutional changes to how immigration policy is organized. In an adjacent area of reform, the passage of the *Modern Slavery Act* in March 2015 marked a significant change in policy toward victims of trafficking.⁷² Changes to child detention and the treatment of immigrant spouses were not widely promoted by the government and did not feature heavily in public debates.

Institutional reforms included bringing the administration of immigration policy, border control, immigration law enforcement, asylum, and visa policy back under the direct control of the Home Office. The government also introduced a new asylum decision process, the Asylum Operation Model, which was later suspended after botched implementation.⁷³

66 Ipsos MORI, "Changing Attitudes to Immigration during the Election Campaign."

67 The Conservative Party, *The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015: Strong Leadership, a Clear Economic Plan, a Brighter, More Secure Future* (London: Conservative Party, 2015), 29, www.conservatives.com/manifesto.

68 UK Government, "Immigration Bill 2015-16," September 17, 2015, www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-bill-2015-16.

69 Melanie Gower, "Ending Child Immigration Detention" (House of Commons Library Standard Note, SN/HA/5591, September 7, 2014), www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN05591/ending-child-immigration-detention.

70 Families may be detained for up to 72 hours, or one week with ministerial authorization; unaccompanied minors may only be detained for up to 24 hours.

71 See Home Office, "Victims of Domestic Violence" (guidance, May 29, 2015), www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/489203/Victims_of_domestic_violence_v13_0_EXT_clean.pdf; Rights of Women, *Seeking Refuge? Domestic Violence, Immigration Law and "No Recourse to Public Funds"* (London: Rights of Women, 2013), <http://rightsofwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Domestic-violence-immigration-law-and-no-recourse-to-public-funds.pdf>.

72 For details of the act's main provisions, see Home Office, "Historic Law to End Modern Slavery Passed," (news release, March 26, 2015), www.gov.uk/government/news/historic-law-to-end-modern-slavery-passed.

73 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, *An Unannounced Inspection of the Cardiff Asylum Team* (London: Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 2014), <http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Cardiff-Report-FINAL-WEB.pdf>.



Many of these reforms were driven by the view that the government had insufficient control over the levers of migration control and subsequently the numbers admitted. Concern over numbers also precluded any significant resettlement program for Syrian refugees prior to September 2015 (see below for the change to this policy).

C. A Hostile Environment

The *Immigration Act 2014* was a central component of reforms under the coalition government, largely prompted by growing—and organized—anti-immigration concerns, epitomized by the rise of UKIP. Following the results of the May 2013 local elections, in which UKIP leader Nigel Farage successfully tapped into the antipolitics zeitgeist and won 23 percent of the national vote,⁷⁴ the government introduced the legislation, which focused on creating a “hostile environment” for unauthorized immigrants.

The Act imposed restrictions on unauthorized immigrants’ access to services (such as opening accounts at banks, obtaining driver’s licenses, or accessing private rented housing⁷⁵), by making it mandatory to check applicants’ immigration status.⁷⁶ It also reduced the appeal rights for unauthorized immigrants.

However, passage of this restrictive legislation did not halt the rise of UKIP, whose May 2013 election gains were followed by further success in the 2014 European elections (when it became the largest UK party in the European Parliament) and the 2015 general elections (when it gained 12 percent of the popular vote).⁷⁷

The *Immigration Bill 2016*, introduced in September 2015 by the new Conservative government, contained measures that continue the trajectory of the 2014 Act. It was introduced in the first Queen’s speech of the anticipated 2015-20 Parliament and was a surprising addition to the legislative roster. The announcement of tough new legislation was made shortly before the government released record net migration figures, more than three times the stated objective. Beyond the restrictions noted above, the 2016 legislation proposed reduction in support for asylum seekers and a new measure to criminalize illegal working. Parliamentary debates on the bill have not translated into changes in public opinion or in reducing the salience of immigration as a political issue.

It is ... not surprising that the government’s strategy ahead of the referendum was to negotiate a new deal with the European Union, with a particular emphasis on migration.

D. The EU Referendum

On June 23, 2016, voters were set to determine whether to remain or leave the European Union. No small part in the outcome will have been played by migration, which has proved a galvanizing issue for voters (especially UKIP voters) and for a broader segment of the electorate (roughly equivalent to the migration rejectionists discussed earlier).

74 BBC News, “Local Elections: Nigel Farage Hails Results as a ‘Game Changer,’” May 3, 2013, www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-22382098.

75 This program is currently being introduced in phases, starting in the West Midlands.

76 UK Government, “Immigration Act 2014,” last updated May 15, 2014, www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-bill.

77 BBC News, “Results of the 2015 General Election.”



It is thus not surprising that the government's strategy ahead of the referendum was to negotiate a new deal with the European Union, with a particular emphasis on migration. The migration element of the renegotiation mainly restricts the rights of migrants, including limiting in-work benefits (tax credits) for four years and limiting unemployment benefits for migrant jobseekers, restrictions on migrants sending child benefits abroad (indexing payments to the country of heritage), restrictions on the entry of non-EU family members, and future restrictions on free movement for future EU members.⁷⁸

Observers generally reflect that this renegotiation represents a relatively insubstantial change in the UK-EU relationship. Two-thirds of respondents⁷⁹ in recent surveys report that they would vote to leave the European Union in order to restrict migration, suggesting that both migration rejectionists and the anxious middle are driven by a desire to limit flows from Europe. However, when asked whether they would support migration limits if the price was penalties on trading with Europe (the only realistic outcome of Brexit) then support for leaving the European Union drops to under a half, suggesting that the anxious middle remains resolutely pragmatic: tough but selectively open to migration.

E. The Refugee Crisis

In light of the net migration pledge and the government's tough stance, plus the upcoming referendum, it took intense national and international pressure for the UK government to change course on the issue of accepting refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis. Cameron's announcement on September 7, 2015 that the United Kingdom would take in around 20,000 additional refugees by 2020—citing “moral responsibility” as a reason—was striking given that it came just one week after he was heavily criticized for failing to cut immigration or prevent net migration from reaching record levels.

It took intense national and international pressure for the UK government to change course on the issue of accepting refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis.

What changed was an important shift in media and public discourse, sparking a mobilization of positive sentiment toward the refugees. A photograph of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian child who drowned off the coast of Turkey, was widely published on front pages and generated empathetic reporting in both liberal outlets and in newspapers with an otherwise skeptical or rejectionist editorial line on immigration. This demonstrates how individual human stories remain critical tools in shifting public debate. Media coverage was reinforced by considerable online mobilization—1.5 million people signed a petition calling on the United Kingdom to welcome refugees—and large demonstrations in London and other cities whose participants called for a welcoming approach. Political leaders showed an increased interest in separating economic migration from refugee protection. Most striking of all was the lack of mainstream political opposition to the principle of refugee protection (including from skeptical and populist voices on the right); practically no commentator voiced opposition to accepting refugees.

78 Steve Peers, “The Final UK Renegotiation Deal: Immigration Issues,” (EU Law Analysis blog, May 20, 2016), <http://eulawanalysis.blogspot.co.uk/2016/02/the-final-uk-renegotiation-deal.html>.

79 Ipsos MORI, “Britain in the European Union: Attitudes towards the Free Movement of EU Citizens,” October 9, 2015, www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/151009%20EU%20Ref%20immigration%20release%20charts%20v6.pdf.



Under the expansion of the Vulnerable Persons Relocation program, the United Kingdom will accept an additional 20,000 Syrian refugees from Syria's neighboring countries by 2020.⁸⁰ The United Kingdom has opted out of EU plans for an EU-wide refugee resettlement program and relocation scheme.⁸¹

Further analysis might shed light on whether these developments mark a sustained shift in attitudes, though this seems unlikely. Public polls at the time did not suggest any dramatic shift of opinion overall: three out of ten people preferred that the United Kingdom not take in any refugees, showing that the persistently antimigration views of the rejectionist "tribe" remained unwavering.⁸² While seven out of ten people wanted the United Kingdom to commit to refugee protection, only one-quarter wanted the government to adopt a significantly more generous stance. Having acceded to public pressure, the government found itself closely aligned with public attitudes—keen to assert that the United Kingdom would play its role and uphold its responsibilities, yet wary of large commitments or UK participation in EU-wide quota schemes. Current debates in Parliament (at the time of writing) over whether to accept 3,000 refugee children in addition to the 20,000 already pledged, have followed a similar dynamic.

Yet the refugee crisis had changed something important: rebalancing the usual asymmetry between mobilized antimigration sentiment and a more passive liberal minority. Once mobilized, the liberal pro-migration segment had shown that it, too, could shift government policy. And empathetic, humanizing media coverage had been crucial to achieving this.

Nonetheless, in the shorter term, there is unlikely to be change to the UK government approach to the refugee crisis, and certainly not before the referendum. Instead the Home Office is considering tougher rules around spontaneous arrivals (in its forthcoming asylum strategy) while pushing back against expanding the numbers of Syrian refugees as far as it is able to do so (notwithstanding the huge pressure to accept more refugee children, which is currently considered probable by most commentators).

V. Implications for Reformers

Looking forward, UK leaders face an uncertain, fluid landscape—as do politicians and other leaders across Europe and North America—as they consider reforms to migration systems and integration policies. This analysis of public opinion—and its nuances—has implications for political leaders beyond the United Kingdom, both in terms of designing thoughtful and responsive reforms, and ensuring that these reforms gain traction with the media and the center ground of opinion. Policymakers might consider the following:

- **Focus on the anxious middle.** First, it is clear in the UK case that the public and media are not, in fact, overwhelmingly hostile to immigration. While a majority supports lower levels of migration, only around one in four people strongly oppose migration altogether (i.e. could be considered "hostile")—and similar numbers are strongly in favor of migration. Leaders may choose to represent or enlist these two tribes of migration rejectionists and migration

80 The criteria were also expanded to include children and some members of religious minorities, as well as victims of sexual violence or torture, the disabled, and the elderly. See Ben Smith and Melanie Gower, "Syrian Refugees and the UK" (Parliamentary briefing note, Standard Note: SNIA/6805, September 17, 2015), 7-10, www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn06805.pdf.

81 Ibid.

82 Ipsos MORI, *Refugee Crisis* (London: Ipsos MORI, forthcoming). This also applies to the public's views of refugees following the terrorist attack in Paris. See Ipsos MORI, "Paris attacks have not changed Britons' view on refugees much," (poll findings, November 20, 2015), www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3654/Paris-attacks-have-not-changed-Britons-view-on-refugees-much.aspx.



supporters (and minority parties—the Greens or UKIP, for example—may choose to focus on articulating the view of one), but they are unlikely to change the minds of those strongly against or in favor. For example, discussions of UKIP’s polarizing tone and its potential costs to the campaign to leave the European Union have been at the center of domestic debates on the forthcoming EU referendum.⁸³ Instead, and to build support for responsible government, reforms should focus their energy on representing the majority—i.e., the anxious middle. The anxious middle is open to receiving messages about the benefits of migration, as long as such messages are combined with an acknowledgment of the pressures involved—and practical responses.

- **Engage concerns without dismissing or stoking them.** Leaders should engage public anxieties without stoking or dismissing them as a product of misinformation or media scaremongering. The arguments of pro-migration politicians (which often focus on a net positive contribution to the economy) tend to fail because the skeptical middle perceives them as dismissive of concerns regarding migration. Instead, pro-migration politicians should acknowledge these concerns, emphasize migrants’ contributions to the system, and then link levels of migration to increased funding in areas that require change. It is clear that migration stirs emotions in a way that may be alien to the language of some policymakers; serious leaders must therefore communicate their reforms in a way that engages human feeling—through stories and individual experiences—not just through aggregate statistics. Meanwhile, the arguments of migration-skeptic politicians (which often focus on new controls or restrictions, for example, to the welfare system) often stoke public concerns rather than assuage them. This strategy may be intended to demonstrate that government has “got a grip” on immigration—but in fact, it often signals the opposite. Not only politicians but leaders from all walks of life, on every side of the debate, should be welcomed to a dialogue that engages these concerns.
- **Make promises you can keep.** Policymakers must refrain from overpromising and underdelivering, as this damages public confidence. For example, without far stricter controls on all migration, including skilled or student migration—for which there is little political appetite—the pledge to reduce net migration to under 100,000 is not (and never was) attainable. Leaving the European Union could lead to a reduction in net migration, but even this major change would not lead to net migration of under 100,000 absent major economic changes. The government thus set itself up for failure, and consequently it is much harder for it to claim credit for its attempts to fix the immigration system. A recent poll found that 86 percent of the public does not believe the net migration target can be delivered in the next Parliament.⁸⁴ As with any public policy goal, migration policy requires realistic objectives and milestones to mark progress, as well as a credible plan with appropriate resources. One straightforward step would be to design reforms that acknowledge generally positive views of certain migrant groups such as students and highly skilled workers. A 2016 survey, which confirms other findings, finds that 60 percent of respondents favor selective openness to high-skilled workers.⁸⁵ This points to the importance of properly presenting disaggregated data on migration routes while making investments in rapid, accurate, and fair decisionmaking within the immigration system. At its core, public support for the government’s handling of migration is contingent on policymakers having a clear view of the different migration routes and regulating them effectively.
- **Provide workable solutions to people’s concerns.** Policymakers can use the media to

83 The only UKIP Member of Parliament, Douglas Carswell, criticized his party’s tone and called for a more optimistic message that could appeal to 50 percent of the country in an EU referendum, well beyond the 13 percent who had voted for UKIP in 2015.

84 British Future, “Public Wants Immigration Promises that Can Be Kept,” (news release, March 30, 2015), www.britishfuture.org/articles/public-wants-immigration-promises-that-can-be-kept/.

85 Ford and Lowles, *Fear and Hope 2016: Race, Faith and Belonging in Today’s England*, 7.



reach broad audiences and discuss what must be done to make the immigration system work. However, pragmatic workable solutions are essential to real challenges. Leaders who provide workable solutions to the anxious middle, separating the skeptical majority (who have legitimate concerns and want workable answers) from the rejectionist minority (who entirely oppose migration) are more likely to prosper. While there is broad support for reducing immigration, it is far from clear that the public would support the necessary steps to do so at a significant level, even if a credible plan were readily available.

To be effective, solutions must address three questions, each of which offers a key for constructively depolarizing ongoing political and policy debates. First, does the immigration system work effectively? This is a foundational public concern (and of particularly high salience in the United Kingdom and United States). Advocating for an effective and fair system could assuage public anxiety while at the same time providing fair and timely decisions to potential immigrants.

Second, how are communities and public services responding to higher levels of immigration? Short-term population change (however economically and socially beneficial in the long run) creates pressure on local services, such as schools, health services, and housing. Advocating tangible means by which public resources can move more quickly (as advocated by the government in its Controlling Migration Fund)—and be seen to do so—to areas of rapid population change could help reveal net fiscal gains, by showing how the dividends from migration will be shared with the communities that face the most pressing practical challenges. Similarly, innovation and support to help services adapt to the rise in population are likely to be a condition for success.

Third, and perhaps underappreciated by advocates of managing migration, how will an increase in cultural diversity affect national identity? Anxieties around cultural difference are important to address, and not just tangible economic and social impacts.

- **Consider broader reforms to ensure better migration governance.** Instead of simply concluding that high levels of immigration to the United Kingdom are inevitable, it is important to acknowledge that they are the product of certain policy and political choices and are further driven by powerful forces, such as economic disparities, community and family networks, and demographic change. While it remains possible to reduce migration levels—perhaps significantly—this is contingent on a public willingness to make the necessary tradeoffs. Policymakers thus have a number of options available to build a public consensus and manage immigration more effectively. For example, both pro-migration and migration-skeptic parties would support increased investment in the immigration system to deliver fair and effective decisions (for example, on asylum cases) and strengthen efforts to tackle exploitation in the workplace. In a similar vein, the public differentiates among migrant groups—and values several of them more highly than policymakers acknowledge (including students, *immediate* family members, and skilled labor). Policymakers could, therefore, seek to disaggregate the debate on overall numbers to engage the public on choices about who is admitted and why.
- **Increase funding and focus on immigrant integration.** Similarly, there is broad support for immigrant integration—though most of it is on paper and has yet to be seen in practice. Policies on immigrant integration, especially where contact at the local level can be increased (whether through mainstreaming integration or encouraging mixing through civil society) is likely to create a virtuous circle over time of increasing support for integration and migration with public consent.⁸⁶ The current national government tends

86 See Will Somerville and Shami Sagar, *Building a British Model of Integration in an Era of Immigration: Policy Lessons for Government* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2012), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/building-british-model-integration-era-immigration-policy-lessons-government



to see integration as a local responsibility, and thus plays a limited role in relevant efforts; meanwhile, austerity cuts have reduced both the national and local resources available. The twin levers of funding and accountability offer the best way to change this. The 2016 *Immigration Bill* includes a proposal to levy an “immigration skills charge” on certain employers bringing non-EU workers to the United Kingdom, and put these funds toward apprenticeships. A new Controlling Migration Fund will “ease pressure on services and pay for additional migration enforcement.”⁸⁷ This proposal offers a good example of how the central government could alleviate local pressures through funding and holding local actors accountable for positive integration. There is also considerable potential for building consensus, particularly around the role of English-language fluency as a foundation for successful economic and social integration. Importantly, resources to promote integration can assist both migrants and their host communities, expanding opportunities for shared benefits. At the same time, policymakers should take care not to dismiss perceptions of risk to the nation as “imaginary” and regard only local-level concerns as “real.” The issue of whether the immigration system works effectively is a national-level concern that people feel is foundational to handling immigration well. Public anxieties around immigration encompass a mix of economic and cultural concerns. If a sense of national identity and social cohesion matters—and most people believe that it does—then, ultimately, concerns about immigration involve a subjective perception of national well-being.

- **Reduce polarization.** Finally, policymakers should move away from arguments that posit “us” against “them” in favor of a pro-majority stance that simultaneously considers the best interests of citizens and migrants alike. Most of the classic “us-against-them” arguments attempt to mobilize hostility to migration: “there are too many of them;” “they are taking resources that should be ours;” “they aren’t like us, and they don’t want to be.” Yet even benign attempts to offer a counterargument about economic contributions and cultural diversity employ this polarization: “They are good for us.” Integration efforts will be more effective when linked to a positive narrative about the “new us.” Such a narrative affirms an inclusive majority identity, and builds on the growing evidence of the value of interethnic contact in fostering support for immigrants and immigration at a local level. Policymakers should understand that integration in diverse, often fast-changing, societies is not just about migrants. Everyone—citizen and migrant—must know they are integral to the society they share.

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⁸⁷ Home Office, *Single Departmental Plan 2015-2020* (London: Home Office, 2016) www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-single-departmental-plan-2015-to-2020/single-departmental-plan-2015-to-2020.



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The Migration Policy Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic and thoughtful responses to the challenges and opportunities that large-scale migration, whether voluntary or forced, presents to communities and institutions in an increasingly integrated world.

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