



REPORT

Thinking Behind the Numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain

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Executive Summary

For half a century opinion polls have consistently shown that the public in Britain favours a reduction in immigration. But answers to basic questions about people's preferences for reducing, increasing or maintaining prevailing levels of immigration provide only a very partial understanding of the British population's views on this issue.

To try to build a more detailed understanding of public attitudes to immigration the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford commissioned polling firm Ipsos MORI to ask a series of questions about immigration and immigrants to a representative sample of 1,002 adults living in the Britain. The survey took place during 2-8 September 2011.

The survey questions were designed to address two key issues: First, who do people have in mind when thinking and answering questions about "immigrants"? Second, do people's views about reducing, increasing or maintaining the number of immigrants coming to the UK vary across specific groups of immigrants?

Our poll supported previous findings that a large majority of people in Britain favour cuts in immigration. 69% of respondents to the survey we commissioned said they want immigration reduced. But it also found that the public's views on immigration are complex and nuanced in a way that previous polls have failed to capture, and that these views vary substantially depending on which immigrant groups the public is considering.

This report does not take a position on whether and how immigration policy should respond to public opinion. In line with the aims of the Migration Observatory, the report is focused on providing new data and analysis, suggesting relevance to policy debates but not arguing for specific policies.

Key Findings

Public perceptions of immigrants:

- When thinking about immigrants, respondents were most likely to think of asylum seekers (62%) and least likely to think of students (29%). In current official (ONS) statistics, students represent the largest group of immigrants coming to the UK (37% of 2009 immigrant arrivals) while asylum seekers are the smallest group (4% in 2009).
- Respondents tended to think of immigrants as those who come to the UK permanently (62%) rather than those who come to stay temporarily (fewer than 30%). This differs from the internationally-agreed definition used for official UK statistics, which classifies anyone who comes to the UK for more than a year as a long-term migrant.
- When thinking about immigrants, people in Britain most commonly think about foreign citizens – 62% normally think about non-EU citizens and 51% about EU citizens (excl. British) – rather than people who were born abroad and acquired British citizenship after moving to the UK (40%). Very low proportions of the public have in mind British citizens moving (11%) or returning (7%) to the UK. Similarly, few people normally have in mind the UK-born children of immigrants to Britain (12%).

Public preferences for reducing migration:

- In line with previous polls our findings showed that about seven in ten members of the British public (69%) support reduced immigration.
- Among respondents who want immigration reduced overall, 54% said that they would like reductions either "only" (28%) or "mostly" (26%) among illegal immigrants, while just over a third (35%) supported reductions equally among legal and illegal immigrants.
- There is widespread agreement on reducing illegal immigration – even among those who do not express a preference for reducing overall immigration 60% support reducing illegal immigration while only 12% do not.
- There is more support for reducing permanent immigration (57%) than temporary immigration (47%).
- There is majority support for reducing immigration of low-skilled workers (64%), extended family members (58%), and asylum seekers (56%).
- There is minority support for reducing immigration of high-skilled workers (32%), immediate family members (41%), and students (31% for university students; 32% for further education students; and 33% English language students).

Implications for policy debates:

1. There are significant differences between preferences for reducing specific groups of immigrants

There is no question that a large majority of the public supports overall reductions to immigration levels. But there are considerable differences between preferences for reducing specific groups of immigrants. Policies that respond to the overall public preference for reduced immigration without taking account of these differences may reduce immigration in ways that a majority of the public does not support.

2. Preferences for reducing immigration are not focused on the numerically largest groups

Some of the immigration categories that are largest numerically generate the least opposition among members of the public, whereas some categories that are small in numbers generate high levels of public opposition. For example, students are among the most numerous immigrants coming to Britain in recent years, but among the least likely to generate opposition. Asylum seekers and extended family members generate majority opposition, but comprise small shares of in-flows in recent years.

3. Preferences for reducing immigration are strongest where policy faces more constraints

Low-skilled workers and asylum seekers were among the most popular targets for reductions to immigration in the survey results. But effectively all low-skilled labour migration to the UK comes from within the EU, thus limiting government control. Regarding asylum, Britain (like most nations) has signed international conventions on the treatment of refugees and cannot turn away those seeking asylum without first determining the validity of their claim.

4. Opposition to immigration is often focused on illegal immigration

Even among those who would like to see overall immigration kept the same or increased, a majority (61%) would like to see illegal immigration reduced, suggesting a very broad consensus. On the other hand, for those who would like to see immigration reduced overall, a majority (54%) would like reductions focused "only" or "mostly" on illegal immigration. Opposition to illegal immigration may therefore account for some of the general preference for less immigration.

5. Public opinion favours temporary over permanent immigration

Public opinion seems more concerned with permanent as opposed to temporary immigration. Just over half of respondents supported reducing permanent immigration, while just under half supported reductions in temporary immigration. This is reinforced by questions about perceptions of who immigrants are—less than a third of the public reports having temporary immigrants in mind when normally thinking about immigration.

6. There can be a mismatch between views of immigrants in public perceptions and official statistics

Members of the public and the government may be thinking about different things even when both are talking about "immigration." Categories such as temporary immigrants and students loom large in official statistics, but less than a third of the public has in mind either of these categories when thinking about immigrants.

1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation and aims of this study

Opposition to immigration remains widespread among members of the British public. Over the past few years, opinion polls have consistently found – and the survey commissioned for this study confirms – that a large majority of adults living in Britain would like to see immigration reduced. These preferences tend to be both strong (more people prefer to reduce immigration “a lot” than “a little”) and salient (immigration has been among the five most-named issues in monthly polls for most of the 2000’s, in Ipsos-MORI’s issues index.) This is true in absolute terms and in comparison with similar immigrant-receiving countries in Europe and North America (Transatlantic Trends 2011).

This report explores two key questions that are rarely asked but are fundamental to understanding public attitudes to immigration and to debating their policy implications. First, when members of the public are thinking about “immigrants,” who do they have in mind? For example, do they have mainly in mind students, workers, family members, or asylum seekers? Are they thinking more often about temporary or permanent workers? Legal or illegal immigrants?

Second, while we know that there is widespread support for reducing the number of immigrants coming to Britain, we do not know if this preference applies across-the-board to all types of immigration or if it differs for specific groups of immigrants? If the latter, how do members of the public distinguish between various types of immigrants? Where is opposition most focused? Which types of immigration are relatively likely to be tolerated or positively encouraged?

Neither of these two basic questions has been subject to systematic research. On the first question, there has been some cursory attention to the problem that survey respondents will understand “immigration” in different ways. Some surveys have defined immigrants more precisely as, for example, people “who come here to settle” (National Centre for Social Research 2003). More often, however, polls and surveys leave respondents to define “immigrants” implicitly however they choose, and express opinions toward whatever group or groups of people come to mind when thinking about “immigrants.”

On the second question, again only limited prior research examines whether public preferences apply equally to all types of immigrants, or if public opinion distinguishes between different groups of immigrants. Ford (2011) has shown the level of opposition to immigration is different for different sub-groups of immigrants, differentiated by region of origin, in surveys from 1983–1996. Other distinctions between groups of immigrants seem to matter for public opinion as well, but this has been explored only in limited ways. For example, occupation: Public opinion seems supportive of immigration among doctors and nurses (Transatlantic Trends 2011) whereas opposition to low-skilled labour immigration is widespread cross-nationally (e.g. Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010).

The two questions analysed in this report are highly relevant to public and policy debates about immigration. To interpret public attitudes toward immigration accurately, it is important ask to what extent public perceptions of “who is an immigrant” match up with the definition used in official statistics on migration (e.g. in measuring immigration, emigration and net-migration) and in policy-making. If there is a mismatch – an open empirical question explored in this report – immigration policy may be acting on a different group of people than “immigrants” as most members of the public think of the term. Moreover, if given the opportunity, members of the public might be able to express more nuanced preferences to policy-makers.

Public attitudes to immigration have clearly been a focal point in public debates about immigration policy during the past decade. However, to what extent public opinion and public policy affect each other is an empirical question. It cannot be assumed that policy follows public opinion. There is also disagreement about the extent to which and

how public opinion should affect policy. This report does not take a position on whether and how immigration policy should respond to public opinion. Its purposes are to provide new data and analysis and to discuss what these data may add to debates about policy, rather than to argue that specific policies should follow from public opinion.

Furthermore, the report focuses on more thoroughly understanding and describing public perceptions of immigrants and attitudes toward specific groups of immigrants. It does not aim to explain the reasons why people have certain attitudes, or why some hold different attitudes to others. The Migration Observatory plans to explore the drivers of public attitudes – which are the subject of a large academic literature – in future work.

1.2 Methodology

To address the two research questions, we commissioned Ipsos MORI, one of Britain's best-known polling firms, to administer our survey on a representative sample of the population. The ten survey questions and survey responses are given in Appendix A. The survey methodology is described in detail in Appendix B. In brief, the sample included 1,002 interviews with people aged 15+ in Britain (i.e. excluding Northern Ireland). Fieldwork took place between 2–8 September 2011. Interviews were conducted face-to-face rather than over the telephone or via the internet. This ensured the highest quality sample possible, and also that respondents would be able to see all the possible choices they could give in response to our questions, rather than having to remember and repeat answers from a list of responses read to them over the telephone.

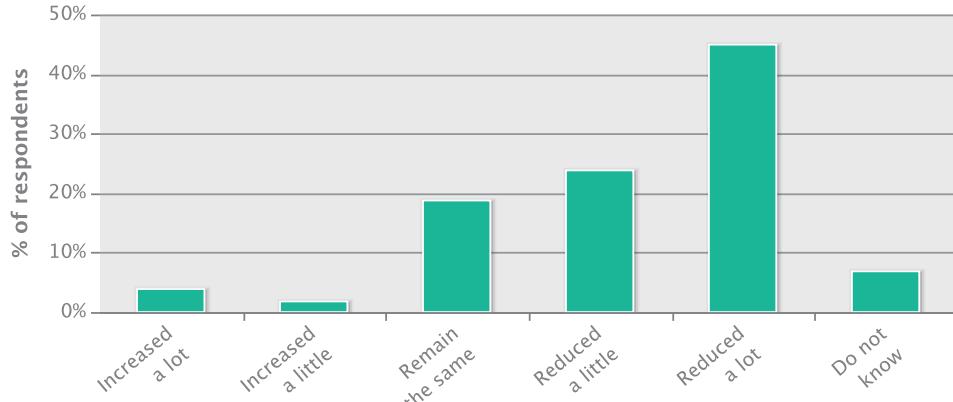
As an additional safeguard to ensure reliability and representativeness, a standard, frequently asked question about immigration levels was included at the beginning of the survey: "Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased, reduced, or should it remain the same?" This wording was borrowed from the Government's Citizenship Survey. This question was placed first, so that the thoughts called to mind by questions about specific types of immigrants would not spill over and influence responses to this baseline question. (The rest of the survey was placed after several other organisations' modules on Ipsos MORI's omnibus weekly survey. None of the questions of other organisations were related to immigration.)

As shown in Figure 1 below, the results show that our sample of respondents was roughly in line with previous research when it comes to overall attitudes toward immigration. 69% of respondents prefer to see immigration reduced, a finding that is comparable to other recent polls and surveys as summarised in Appendix C.

Figure 1

General attitudes to immigration levels, Sep 2011

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



"Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased, reduced, or should it remain the same?"

All respondents (n=985 weighted)

Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2–8 Sep 2011. See Table 1, Appendix A

2 Who do people have in mind of when they think about immigrants?

The Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI survey began its set of new questions by asking members of the public which groups they normally think about when they think about “immigrants.” The question of who is an immigrant is more complicated than it might appear. In official statistics, migrants can be defined as foreign-born persons, foreign nationals and/or by length of stay. Official net-migration statistics are based on movement across borders (counting anyone who moves in and out of Britain for at least a year), while surveys tracking migrants in the UK may count anyone of foreign birth or, slightly differently, of foreign nationality. Furthermore, because they include EU nationals and in some cases some British citizens as well, none of these definitions matches with the definition of a migrant in law, as someone subject to Immigration Control. The questions asked respondents how they normally think of immigrants, as opposed to asking them about the definition of the word. The goal was not to quiz people’s knowledge, but rather to learn how people normally think about immigrants (or at least what comes to mind when they are in the context of answering the sort of survey questions that make up “public opinion”).

The survey included three sets of questions about perceptions of immigrants. First were questions of citizenship, ancestry, and birthplace. Do British citizens born abroad figure in public perceptions of migrants? How about children born in Britain to immigrant parents? And does EU citizenship matter, or are EU citizens as likely as other foreign nationals to be thought of as immigrants? A second question set asked about differences between permanent, long-term, and short-term migrants. A third item addressed the prominence of each of the major reasons for migrating—work, study, family, and asylum—in public perceptions of immigrants.

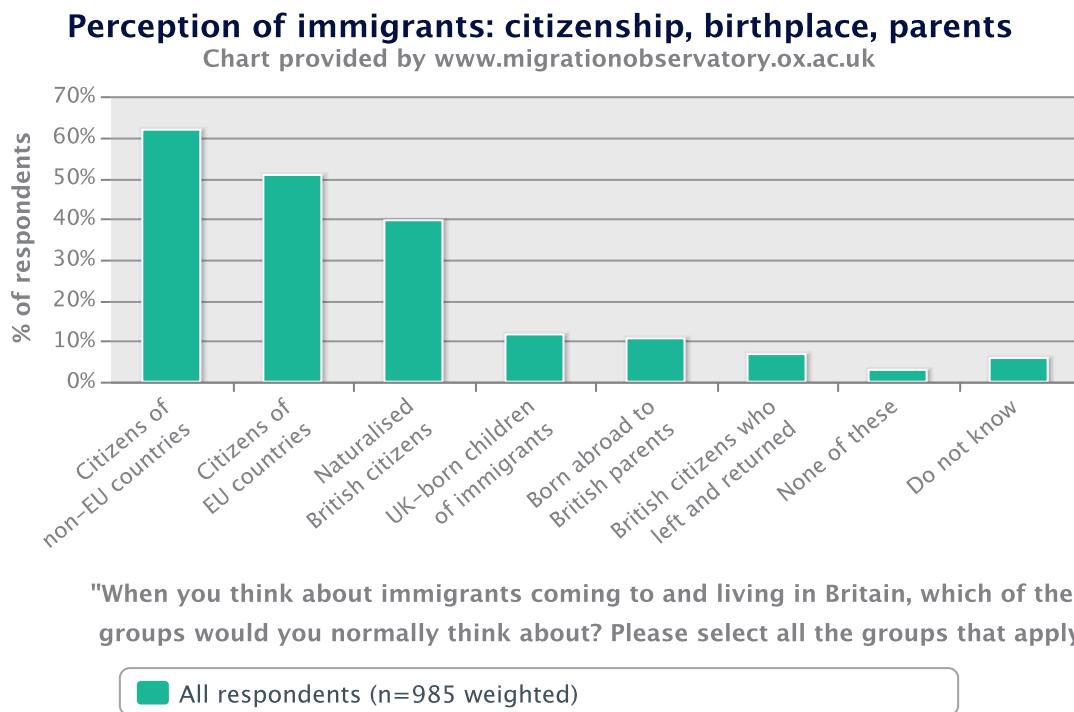
2.1 Perceptions: Citizenship, birthplace, parents

When thinking of immigrants, people in Britain most commonly think of foreign citizens rather than all people born abroad, as Figure 2 shows. When asked to choose which groups of people they would “normally think about” when thinking about “immigrants coming to and living in Britain,” respondents were most likely to choose non-EU citizens (chosen by 62% of our respondents) or EU citizens (51%). (Respondents were allowed to choose as many answers as they liked.)

Less than half of respondents (40%) chose naturalised British citizens. Naturalised citizens count as immigrants under some definitions (birthplace, cross-border movement when they first enter Britain) but not others (nationality, subject to Immigration Control).

Fewer still chose British citizens born abroad to British parents (12%) or British citizens returning from years spent abroad (7%) – though such people are included in net-migration statistics because they have moved across international borders to come to Britain.

Figure 2



Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2–8 Sep 2011. See table 2, Appendix A

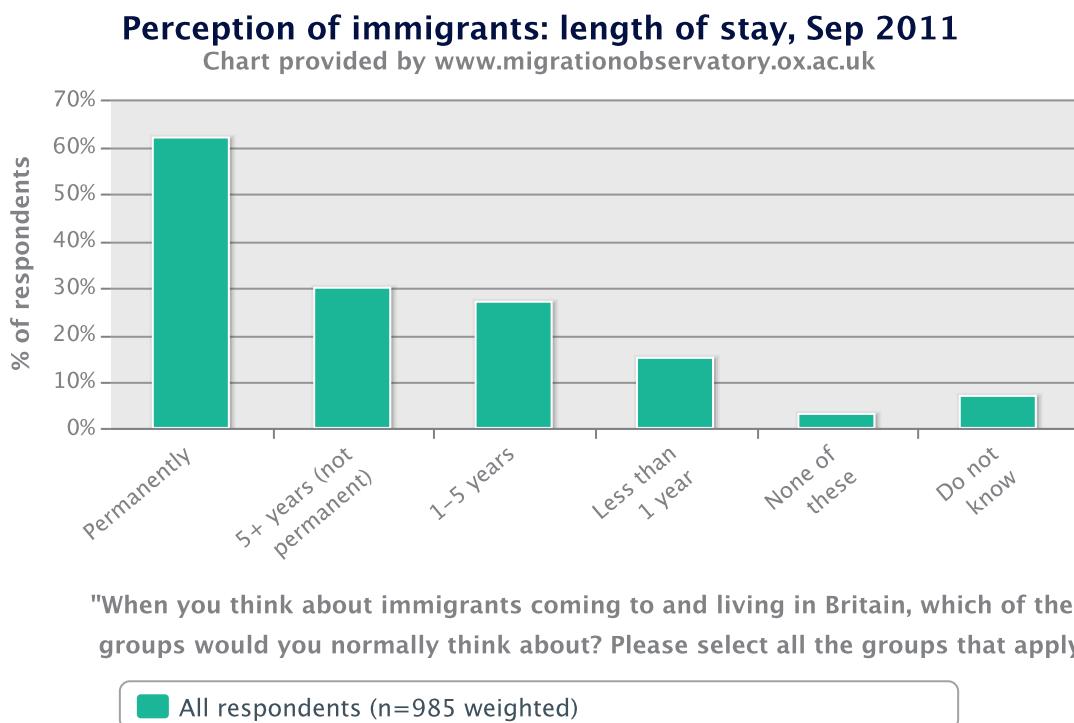
Notably, we found similar results when asking about people born in Britain to parents who had come to Britain as foreign nationals. This group was named by 11% of respondents as coming to mind when thinking about immigrants. Members of this category may or may not be foreign nationals, and, depending on their parents' status, may or may not be subject to Immigration Control, so under some definitions, some would qualify as immigrants. But by the birthplace criterion or the "movement" criterion used in official net-migration statistics, UK-born children of immigrants do not themselves qualify as immigrants.

2.2 Perceptions: Length of stay

By the international definition of migration—used by the UK government in official statistics on immigration, emigration, and net-migration—anyone who moves across national boundaries for at least one year is considered a "long-term international migrant." Less than one-third of the public in Britain, however, say that they normally are thinking about temporary migrants when thinking about "immigrants."

Members of the public appear more likely to think of permanent immigrants rather than temporary ones when thinking about immigrants, as Figure 3 shows. A majority (62%) said that they normally thought about people coming to stay in Britain permanently, while the temporary migration categories were each chosen by 30% or fewer. There was no statistically significant difference in perceptions of people staying for between one and five years, and of people staying for more than five years but not permanently. Responses fell to 15% for people staying less than one year.

Figure 3



Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2-8 Sep 2011. See table 3, Appendix A

Although permanent immigration predominates in public perceptions of immigrants, temporary immigration accounts for the majority of annual arrivals according to ONS data (in LTIM Table 2.09). In 2009, an estimated 48% of immigrants came for a stay of one to two years, and another 19% came to stay for three to four years, while 27% came to stay for more than four years (6% were unsure). These data are based on the intentions that people report to the International Passenger Survey when they arrive, but ONS makes an adjustment for estimated "switchers" who stay longer or shorter than initially planned.

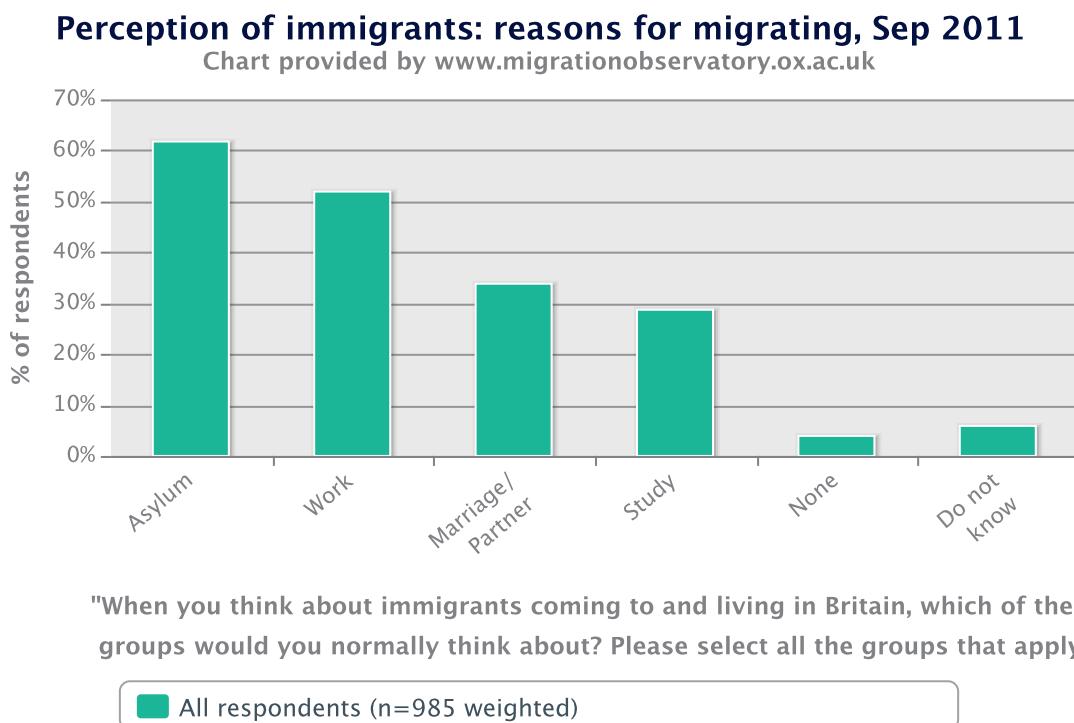
2.3 Perceptions: Reasons for migrating

Immigrants to Britain are commonly classified by their reason for migrating, whether for work, study, family, or asylum. Separate policies are developed to address each of these groups. But which types are most prominent in the minds of members of the public? Or are they all equally relevant? We asked respondents which of these groups they normally thought of when thinking about immigrants, and allowed them to choose as many of the four options as they liked.

As shown in Figure 4, asylum was the reason most commonly chosen by our respondents (62%), with work also chosen by a majority (52%). A smaller proportion chose family (34%) – more precisely in this case, to live with a spouse or civil partner. Study was the reason chosen least often, by 29%.

Public perceptions differ dramatically from ONS data on migrant arrivals. In 2009, ONS Long-Term International Migration (LTIM) data estimated that 37% of immigrants arriving came for the purpose of formal study, while 34% came for work, 13% for family, and 4% for asylum. (The remainder came for other or unknown reasons.)

Figure 4



Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2–8 Sep 2011. See table 4, Appendix A

There are a number of possible reasons why public perceptions of immigrants do not match up with immigration statistics.

First, members of the public form their impressions of immigration from some combination of direct personal experiences, conversations with friends, family, and others, news coverage, and even entertainment media that include portrayals of immigrants. None of these sources pay attention to subgroups of migrants in direct proportion to their numbers, nor should they be expected to do so. Media attention and policy debates have often focused on asylum (subject of several major policy changes in the 2000's) and labour migration (target of the much-debated "cap"); this might have some impact on public perceptions of who immigrants are.

Second, differences might stem from the rapidly changing nature of migration to Britain. It may take time for perceptions to catch up with changing realities. For example, although asylum seekers are a small proportion of the total now, they accounted for much of the rapid rise in migration in the late 1990's and early 2000's, when immigration became a highly salient political issue. Students, on the other hand, have been the largest group of immigrants in net-migrations statistics only since 2009, though their numbers have been rising for some time.

Third, members of the public might not think often about students when thinking of immigration simply because students are the group most likely to be temporary migrants, and, as shown above, a majority of the public normally thinks about immigrants as permanent rather than temporary.

3 Preferences for changing the number of immigrants coming to the UK

Shifting away from the question of perceptions, the next section of the survey examined whether members of the public prefer to see particular types of immigration reduced, kept the same, or increased. The goal was to see whether, and to what extent, public preferences for changing levels of immigration applied differently to different groups of immigrants. It might be that attitudes toward most groups of immigrants are fairly similar, and that findings about the acceptance of immigrant doctors and nurses (Transatlantic Trends 2011) are truly exceptional

cases. On the other hand, there might be important differences in how major groups of immigrants are viewed. Students, for example, have become crucial to policy proposals and debates, but we know very little about whether reducing student immigration will satisfy public demand for less immigration – indeed, in the previous section we found that less than a third of our respondents reported thinking of students when they normally think about immigrants.

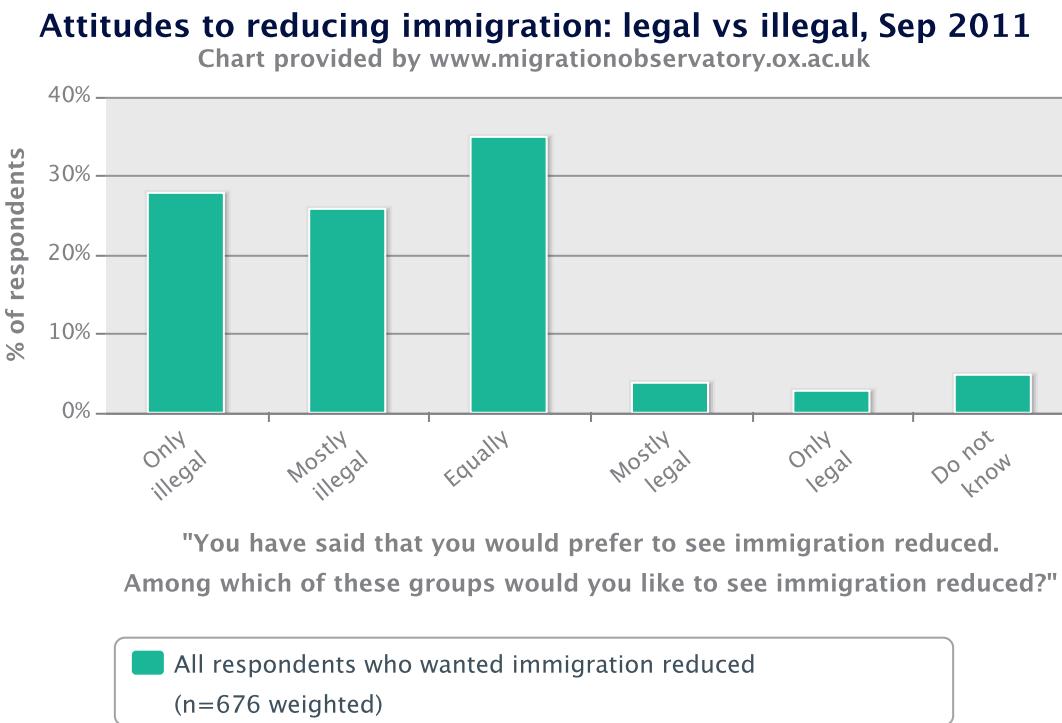
The survey asked about preferences for reducing, increasing, or not changing immigration defined in three different ways: by legal status, length of stay, and reason for migrating.

3.1 Preferences: Legal status

Although policy debates usually revolve around the terms for legal immigration, some evidence suggests that illegal immigration is a more widespread concern among members of the public. In a 2010 survey, 71% said that they were “worried” about illegal immigration, twice as many as the 35% who were worried about legal immigration (Transatlantic Trends 2011). Deporting more illegal immigrants, along with a cap on immigration, ranked as the two most popular of several possible means of slowing population growth in a Sun/YouGov poll (2010). Like these prior surveys, we asked about “illegal immigrants” simply because it seems to be the term most understood by members of the public and most used in non-specialist public discourse.

All respondents were asked for their views on illegal immigration, but questions were phrased differently depending on each respondent’s attitudes to immigration overall. Those who prefer less immigration overall were asked whether they would like to see reduced immigration “only” or “mostly” among illegal immigrants, equally among both groups, or “only” or “mostly” among legal immigrants.

Figure 5

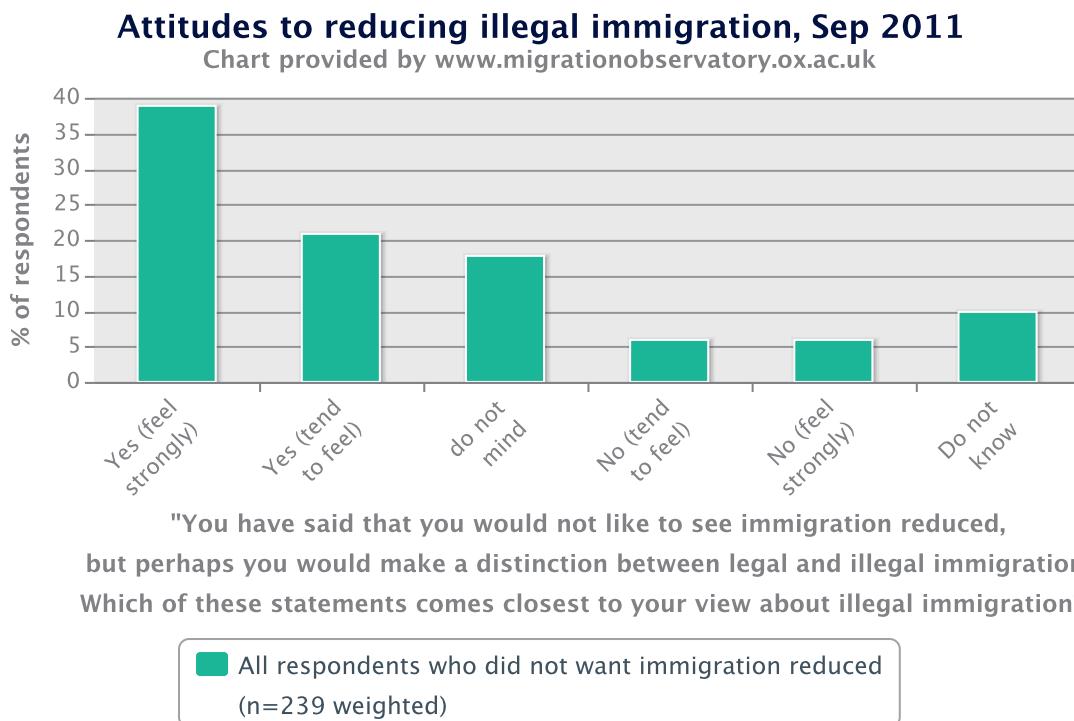


Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2–8 Sep 2011. See table 5. Appendix A

Results show that a majority of those favouring reduced immigration are more focused on illegal than legal immigration. Among those who want overall immigration reduced, a majority (54%) said that they would like reductions either “only” (28%) or “mostly” (26%) among illegal immigrants. Just over a third (35%) supported reductions equally among legal and illegal immigrants.

Those in favour of increased or constant levels of immigration were asked a different version of the question. They were asked if they support reducing illegal immigration even though they do not wish to reduce immigration overall. Results indicate widespread support for reducing illegal immigration, even among this group that did not wish to see immigration reduced overall. Among respondents who wish to see the overall level of immigration kept the same or increased, a clear majority (61%) nonetheless prefer to see illegal immigration reduced, and 39% felt strongly about this preference.

Figure 6



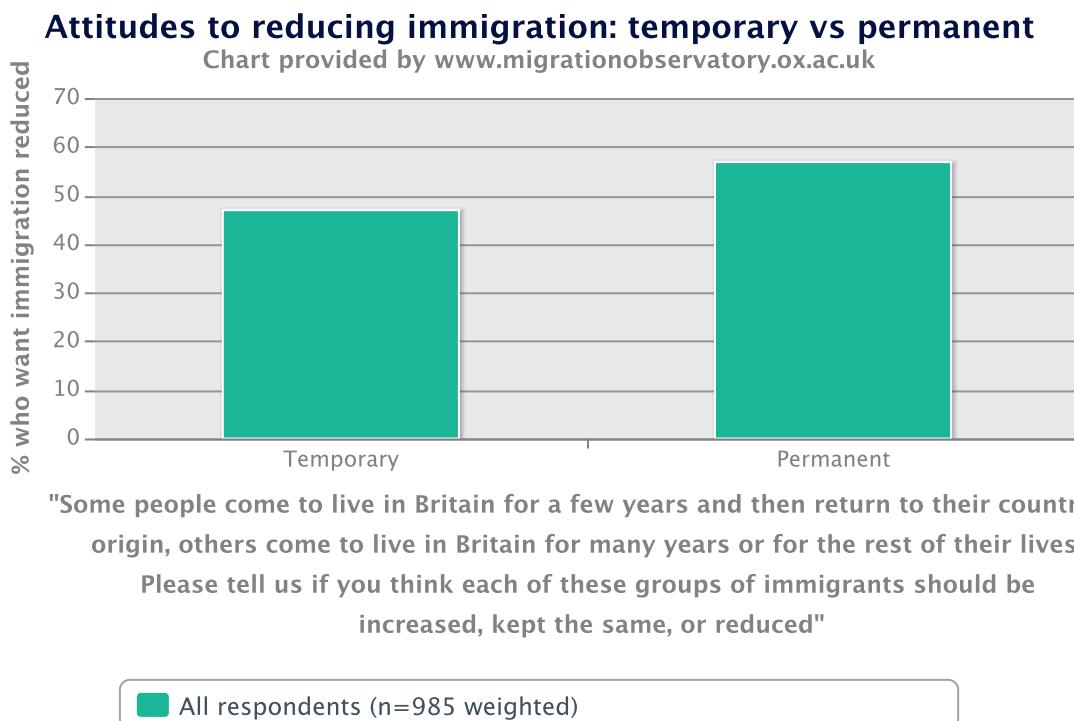
Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2–8 Sep 2011. See table 6, Appendix A

We don't know how members of the public understand the term "illegal immigrant." The definition of illegal immigration and even the term itself are matters of controversy. We also do not know whether the survey responses above are driven simply by greater opposition to illegal rather than legal immigration, or if overestimation of the relative size of the illegal immigrant population plays a role. Recent evidence suggests that many members of the public believe that a great deal of immigration is illegal – in one 2010 survey, 38% in one 2010 survey said that most immigrants are in Britain illegally (Transatlantic Trends 2011). Of course, even experts have limited knowledge of the size of the illegal immigrant population, but the best available estimates suggest that legal immigrants outnumber illegal immigrants by about ten to one. (Gordon and colleagues [2009] estimated a population of illegal or "irregular" immigrants in the UK and their UK-born children of 417,000 to 863,000 [central estimate 618,000] at the end of 2007. This contrasts with the estimated stock of 6.5 million total immigrants in the UK for 2007 and almost 2 million in London (Rienzo and Vargas-Silva 2011).

3.2 Preferences: Length of stay

The difference between permanent and temporary immigration has grown in policy relevance in 2011, as the coalition government seeks ways to "break the link" between shorter-term migration and permanent UK residence in order increase out-flows and thus reduce net-migration. We find that more people prefer to reduce permanent immigration than temporary immigration. As Figure 7 shows, 57% support reductions to permanent immigration (38% 'reduced a lot'), while 47% support reducing temporary immigration (10% 'a lot').

Figure 7



Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2–8 Sep 2011. See table 7, Appendix A

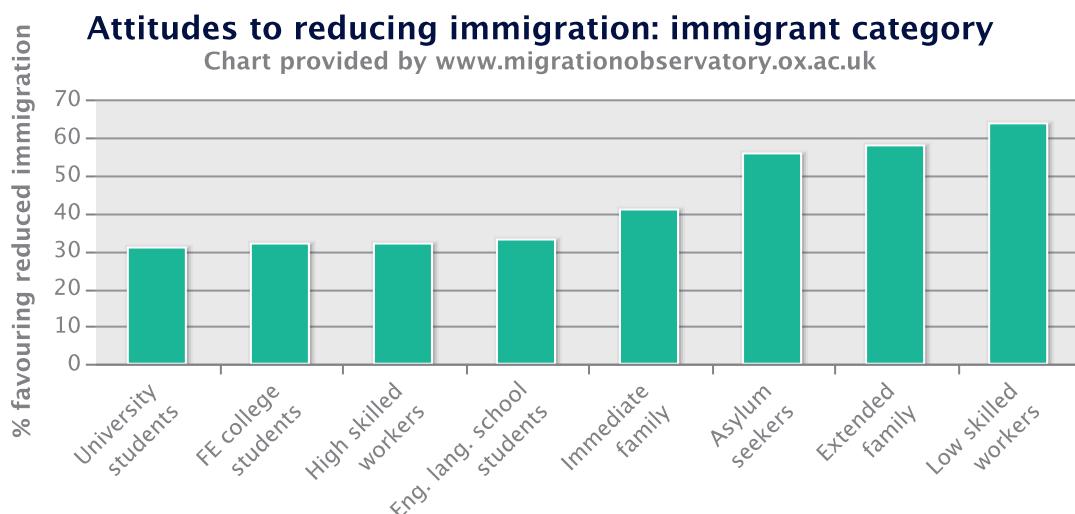
3.3 Preferences: Reasons for migrating, with sub-groups

Our next set of questions asks about migrants by reason for migration, dividing several of the main groups into sub-groups. Previous research suggests that certain sub-groups of migrants are particularly unwelcome, while others are more likely to be tolerated or even encouraged in at least one case (doctors and nurses) (Transatlantic Trends 2011, Ipsos MORI/UKBA 2009). Policy changes, too, have made such distinctions, for example by insulating university students from efforts to reduce the number of international students, and by the "exceptional talent" visa.

On the other hand, if the aim of immigration policy is defined by a numerical goal, then each person is weighted equally—or, if the goal is defined by net-migration, then each person who will stay in Britain is weighted equally. But how do members of the British public feel about this? Are they more inclined to make distinctions among migrants according to why they are coming, and what they will do in Britain? Or does a concern with numbers take precedence over these finer distinctions?

Research on public opinion in general often finds that, for many policy issues, members of the public do not have detailed or nuanced views. Immigration, however, might well be different. It has been a highly salient issue for years, and many aspects of immigration have been covered frequently in mass media and subjected to intense political and policy debate. What we discovered may be surprising, both for understanding the distinctions that did matter to people, and for some that did not.

The results suggest noteworthy differences in public attitudes toward asylum seekers, workers, students, and family members. Asylum seekers remain one of the least popular groups of migrants, with a majority (56%) favouring reductions (38% 'reduced a lot'). Respondents did not have the opportunity to differentiate attitudes toward asylum seekers perceived to have legitimate claims, and those who perceived not to have legitimate claims. Prior polling has done this, however, and has shown that the perceived legitimacy of claims matters a great deal to public opinion. In an Ipsos MORI poll in February 2011, 65% said that Britain should accept fewer asylum seekers, but clear majorities of those same respondents agreed that "we must protect refugees who need a place of safety in Britain" (64%) and that "we must protect genuine asylum seekers who need a place of safety in Britain" (73%).

Figure 8¹

"Policies on immigration often affect specific groups of people coming to Britain.

For each of the following groups, please tell us whether the number of people coming to Britain should be increased, reduced or kept the same."

All respondents (n=985 weighted)

Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2-8 Sep 2011. See tables 8 and 9, Appendix A

Students generate less opposition, with about a third of respondents favouring reductions to each of three types of students that we asked about (15% – 19% 'reduced a lot'). Respondents were asked separately about three types of students: university students, English language school students, and further education students. Results showed no statistically significant differences in the level of opposition to immigration by each of these three groups. Even though recent policies and debates have hinged on distinctions between different types of educational institutions, these distinctions did not make any detectable difference in public opinion.

When considering immigration based on work or family reasons, on the other hand, public opinion very much depended on further details about the precise type of immigration at stake.

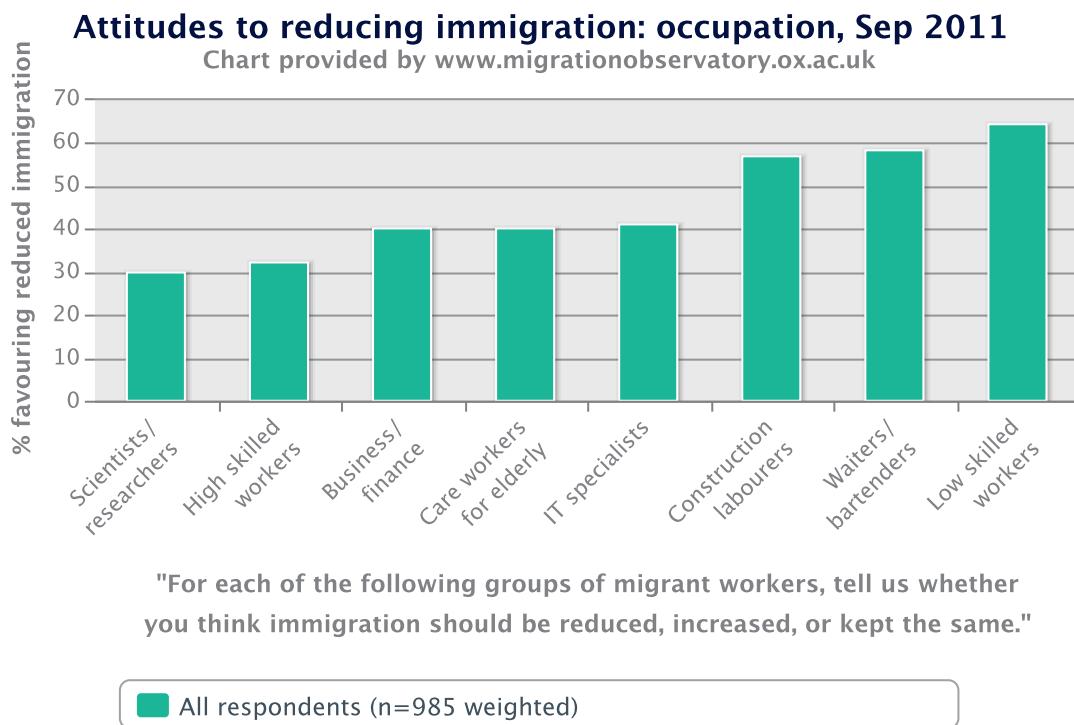
For family members, we asked separately about immediate family members (defined as husbands, wives, partners, and children under age 18) and extended family members (exemplified by grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and children over age 18). This distinction turned out to be a relevant one in public opinion: while 41% favoured reductions to immigration by immediate family members, 58% did so for extended family members. Indeed, extended family members were about as likely as asylum seekers to be rejected by members of the public, while there was not majority support for reducing immediate family members' immigration.

When considering labour migration, members of the public are more likely to want to reduce the number of low-skilled than high-skilled immigrants, both when asked about skill levels in general, and when asked about immigrants in particular high- and low-skilled occupations. In general terms, 64% support reducing immigration among "most low-skilled workers", compared with 32% for "most high-skilled workers." Indeed, of all the sub-groups we asked about, low-skilled immigrants generated the most support for reduction. In contrast, high-skilled immigrants—on a par with international students—were the most likely to be accepted.

The picture remained the same for questions about specific occupations representing high, medium, and low levels of skills: business and finance professionals, scientists and researchers; IT specialists and elderly care workers; and construction labourers and restaurant staff. (Occupation titles were chosen to reflect different skill levels according

to SOC codes.) The results followed skill levels, though not perfectly. Opposition was most common for construction labourers (57% for reducing) and restaurant staff (58%). Next were IT specialists (41%), care workers (40%), and the higher-skilled business and finance professionals (40%), while scientists and researchers generated the least opposition (30% for reducing, and 24% for increasing, the highest number we registered for any subgroup).

Figure 9



Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI, 2–8 Sep 2011. See table 9, Appendix A

A key finding emerging from the responses to the above set of questions is that public support for reducing immigration was higher on the initial, general question about immigration as a whole than for any single category we asked about, with one critical exception: illegal immigration. While 69% of our sample wish to see immigration reduced, there was less support for reducing immigration even of low-skilled immigrants, the least popular subgroup of legal immigrants in our survey.

These findings suggest that many members of the public have more complex views about reducing immigration than can be detected by a simple yes or no question. While about a third of the public supports reducing immigration even for the most popular types of migrants (students, high skilled workers), and a somewhat smaller group do not wish to reduce immigration at all, the rest of the population makes finer-grained distinctions that are disguised in simple questions about overall numbers.

4 Implications for policy debates

UK policy-makers clearly pay attention to public attitudes to immigration. Government impact assessments for changes to labour and student immigration policy, for example, list public concern about immigration and confidence in the immigration system among the benefits of new policies (UKBA 2011a, 2011b). In light of this, the survey results described above have important implications for public policy debates about immigration in the UK. We focus on six key themes emerging from the analysis.

4.1 Significant differences between preferences for reducing specific groups of immigrants

There are big differences in support for reducing different groups of immigrants. There is no question that a large majority of the public supports overall reductions to immigration levels. But public opinion is not limited to this single top line result. A majority support reductions to some but not all types of immigration, whereas about a third seems to support reductions across-the-board. This points to a challenge for policy-makers who hope to deliver what majorities of the public demand. If they wish to respond to public demand, policy makers may well need to take these differences into account. Policies that respond to the overall public preference for less immigration might do so in ways that a majority of the public do not support.

4.2 Preferences for reducing immigration are not focused on the numerically largest groups

A second challenge for policy is that some of the immigration categories that are largest in numerical terms generate the least opposition, while some of the categories that are small in numbers can generate high opposition. For example, students are among most numerous immigrants coming to Britain in recent years, but among the least likely to generate opposition. Asylum seekers and extended family members generate majority opposition, but comprise small shares of in-flows in recent years. In contrast with the situation in the late 1990's and early 2000's, asylum seekers represent less than 5% of annual immigration according to 2009 ONS estimates. Extended family members make up only about 6% of family immigrants who settle in the UK (see the Migration Observatory briefing on 'Settlement in the UK'). Policies toward such groups may be very responsive to public opinion without having great impact on overall immigration levels.

4.3 Preferences for reducing immigration are strongest where policy faces more constraints

Another dilemma for government policy is that the majority's preferred targets for reduction are often the areas where policy-makers are most constrained. For example, of all types of legal immigrants, low-skilled workers were the most frequently targeted for reductions by our respondents. But effectively all low-skilled labour migration to the UK comes from within the EU over which the government has no control. Tier 3 in the Points-Based System (PBS), intended for admitting low-skilled workers from outside the EU, has been closed since the PBS began. In addition, shortage occupation lists for admitting non-EU workers have been tightened, and skill requirements raised.

Asylum is another popular target for reduction (even after several restrictive policies in the 2000's and a sharp decrease in numbers since the mid 2000's), but Britain (like most nations) has signed international conventions on the treatment of refugees and cannot turn away those seeking asylum without first determining the validity of their claim.

4.4 Opposition to immigration is often focused on illegal immigration

A key finding is the widespread support for reducing illegal immigration. Even among those who would like to see overall immigration kept the same or increased, a majority (60%) would like to see illegal immigration reduced, suggesting a very broad consensus. On the other hand, for those who would like to see immigration reduced overall, a majority (54%) would like reductions "only" or "mostly" on illegal immigration. Thus, opposition to illegal immigration may account for some of the general preference for less immigration. As noted above, we cannot be sure if this stems from a concern with numbers—based on perceptions that the number of illegal immigrants is very high—or from a more values-based objection to illegal immigration, or perhaps from a combination of both.

4.5 Public opinion favours temporary over permanent immigration

Public opinion seems more concerned about permanent as opposed to temporary immigration. A majority of respondents supported reducing permanent migration, while just less than half supported reducing temporary migration. The difference is not overwhelming in substantive terms – 57% prefer reducing permanent immigration, compared with 47% who want to reduce temporary immigration – but it is statistically significant.

The concern about permanent rather than temporary immigration is further reinforced by questions about perceptions—less than a third of the public reports thinking about temporary immigrants when normally thinking about immigration. This suggests that attitudes toward permanent immigration are more central to overall discontent with the level and type of immigration. On the other hand, prior research finds that a majority of the public prefer to give legal immigrants the “opportunity to stay permanently” over requiring immigrants to return to their country of origin after a temporary stay (Transatlantic Trends 2011), a distinct question but also relevant to this policy issue.

4.6 There can be a mismatch between public perceptions and definitions of immigrants in official statistics

A final theme is that public opinion and the government may be thinking about different things even when both are talking about “immigration.” Net-migration statistics include all people who move to or from Britain for as little as as one year. But less than a third of the public has temporary immigrants in mind when thinking about immigrants. Similarly, international students are named by less than a third of the public as part of their normal conceptions of immigration, perhaps because of their frequently temporary stays in Britain.

5 Further Research

As with any research project, this study is a contribution to the debate, rather than the last word on the subject. As such, we conclude by noting questions for further research that follow from this report’s findings.

In keeping with prior findings (Transatlantic Trends 2011), we found that legal status of immigrants matters greatly for public opinion. But how broadly or narrowly does the public perceive “illegal immigrants”? Do members of the public usually envision clandestine border-crossing? Or does the image of illegality include those who entered legally but overstayed their right to remain, or violate conditions of their stay (by, for example, working more hours than they are permitted to work on the terms of a student visa)? Finally, do members of the public understand “illegal immigrant” as referring strictly to the violation of immigration law, or does the term bring up associations with criminality in general?

A majority of those who prefer less immigration said they would like to see “only” or “mostly” illegal immigration reduced. But this too raises further questions. Does this pattern come from overestimation (i.e. supporting reduced illegal immigration because that is where the numbers are high)? Or does it come more from a value-based decision that illegal immigration is simply wrong, whereas legal immigration is not so morally troubling?

Second, the survey found mismatches between public opinion and available policy tools for reducing particular types of immigration. But how would members of the public resolve such dilemmas, if they were presented with a scenario in which their preferred ways of reducing immigration were not practical, given legal and political constraints and better data on the numbers of immigrants in different groups? How many would choose to reduce immigration in other ways (for example, by deciding that it is fine to reduce student immigration even if they hadn’t initially preferred to)? How many would take the opposite approach, deciding to tolerate higher levels of overall immigration rather than revising their attitudes toward immigrant sub-groups? Public opinion research rarely gathers data about the choices people would make in the face of policy trade-offs (Blinder 2011), but it is certainly possible in principle. Indeed, when asked to make trade-offs explicitly, public attitudes can turn out to be more consistent than often imagined (Hansen 1998).

Finally, our questions about the most prevalent implicit conceptions of immigrants raise questions about where these conceptions come from, and why they do not always match up with the actual numbers of immigrants in particular categories. The Migration Observatory plans to undertake research on media and politicians’ portrayals of immigration that may provide some clues as to the origins of public perceptions of who immigrants are.

Endnotes

1. The survey responses presented in Figure 8 are all from question 8 in Appendix A except for responses about high and low-skilled workers which are from question 9 in Appendix A.

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Appendix A: Survey questions and responses

Where results do not sum to 100, this may be due to multiple responses, computer rounding, or weighting.

Question 1. Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased, reduced or should it remain the same?

Base: All respondents

Detailed results	%
Increased a lot	4
Increased a little	2
Remain the same	19
Reduced a little	24
Reduced a lot	45
Don't know	7
Condensed results	%
Increased (combined)	6
Remain the same	19
Reduced (combined)	69

Question 2. When you think about immigrants coming to and living in Britain, which of these groups would you normally think about? Please read out all the letters that apply.

Base: All respondents

	%
B Citizens of non-EU countries	62
A Citizens of EU countries (excluding Britain)	51
C People who came to Britain as foreign nationals and became naturalised as British citizens	40
F People born in Britain to parents who came to Britain as foreign nationals (sometimes known as the "second generation")	12
D British citizens who were born abroad to British parents and then moved to the UK	11
E British citizens who were born in Britain, moved abroad for several years, and then returned to Britain	7
None of these	3
Don't know	6

Question 3. Some people come to Britain from other countries to visit; others come to live here temporarily; still others come to stay permanently. When you think about immigrants, which of these groups of people are you generally thinking about? Please read out all the letters that apply.

Base: All respondents

	%
D People who stay in Britain permanently	62
C People who stay in Britain for over five years but not permanently	30
B People who stay in Britain for between one year and five years	27
A People who stay in Britain for less than one year	15
None of these	3
Don't know	7

Question 4. People come to Britain for different purposes. When you think about “immigrants,” which of these types of people do you normally have in mind? Please read out all the letters that apply.

Base: All respondents

	%
D People who come here to apply for refugee status (asylum)	62
A People who come here to work at paid jobs	52
B People who come here to live with their spouse or civil partner	34
C People who come here to study	29
None of these	4
Don't know	6

Question 5. You have said that you would prefer to see immigration reduced. Among which of these groups would you like to see immigration reduced?

Base: All who think the number of immigrants coming to Britain should be reduced (676)

	%
Only illegal immigrants	28
Mostly illegal immigrants	26
Equally among illegal and legal immigrants	35
Mostly legal immigrants	4
Only legal immigrants	3
Don't know	5

Question 6. You have said that you would not like to see immigration reduced, but perhaps you would make a distinction between legal and illegal immigration. Which of these statements comes closest to your view about illegal immigration? Please read out the letter that applies.

Base: All who think the number of immigrants coming to Britain should be kept the same or increased (247)

Detailed results		%
A I feel strongly that illegal immigration should be reduced		39
B I tend to feel that illegal immigration should be reduced		21
C I don't mind whether illegal immigration is reduced or not		18
D I tend to feel that illegal immigration should not be reduced		6
E I feel strongly that illegal immigration should not be reduced		6
Don't know		10

Condensed results		%
	Illegal immigration should be reduced (combined)	61
	I don't mind whether illegal immigration is reduced or not	18
	Illegal immigration should not be reduced (combined)	12

Question 7. Some people come to live in Britain for a few years and then return to their country of origin; others come to live in Britain for many years or for the rest of their lives. Please tell us if you think each of these groups of immigrants should be increased, kept the same, or reduced.

Base: All respondents

	(1) Temporary immigrants (staying in Britain for a few years)	(2) Permanent immigrants (staying in Britain for most or all of their lives)
Detailed results	%	%
Increased a lot	5	6
Increased a little	5	4
Remain the same	31	22
Reduced a little	19	20
Reduced a lot	28	38
Don't care	2	2
Don't know	10	9
Condensed results	%	%
Increased (combined)	10	10
Remain the same	31	22
Reduced (combined)	47	57

Question 8. Policies on immigration often affect specific groups of people coming to Britain. For each of the following groups, please tell us whether the number of people coming to Britain should be increased, reduced or kept the same.

Base: All respondents

	(1) University students	(2) Students coming here to learn English in language schools	(3) Students in other courses of study (further education)	(4) Non-British immediate family members (husbands, wives, partners, and children under age 18) of British citizens and permanent residents	(5) Non-British extended family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, children over age 18) of British citizens and permanent residents	(6) Applicants for refugee status (asylum)
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Detailed results						
Increased a lot	5	5	4	5	4	5
Increased a little	10	11	10	6	4	6
Remain the same	42	40	42	36	23	22
Reduced a little	16	14	15	15	19	18
Reduced a lot	15	19	17	26	38	38
Don't care	3	4	3	3	2	2
Don't know	9	8	8	9	9	10
Condensed results						
Increased (combined)	15	16	14	11	8	10
Remain the same	42	40	42	36	23	22
Reduced (combined)	31	33	32	41	58	56

Question 9. For each of the following groups of migrant workers, please tell us whether you think immigration should be reduced, increased, or kept the same.

Base: All respondents

	(1) Most high-skilled workers %	(2) Most low- skilled workers %	(3) Business and finance professionals (investment bankers, fund managers, etc.) %	(4) Specialists in IT (Information Technology) %	(5) Care workers for older people %	(6) Construction labourers (bricklayers, roofers, etc.) %	(7) Scientists and researchers %	(8) Restaurant staff (waiters, waitresses, bartenders) %
Detailed results								
Increased a lot	6	3	3	3	6	3	6	4
Increased a little	15	4	9	11	11	6	17	3
Remain the same	39	20	35	33	32	24	36	26
Reduced a little	14	20	16	17	15	20	14	21
Reduced a lot	17	44	24	24	26	37	16	38
Don't care	1	1	3	2	1	2	2	1
Don't know	8	8	10	10	9	8	8	8
Condensed results								
Increased (combined)	20	7	12	14	17	9	24	6
Remain the same	39	20	35	33	32	24	36	26
Reduced (combined)	32	64	40	41	40	57	30	58

Question 10. Which of the following best describes your citizenship and place of birth?

Base: All respondents

	%
British citizen, born in Britain	84
British citizen, born abroad	5
Non-British citizen, born in Britain	1
Non-British citizen, born abroad	6
Don't know	3

Appendix B: Notes on methodology

Fieldwork. The fieldwork was conducted by Ipsos MORI. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in respondents home, using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). With this system, for questions with long or complicated sets of possible responses, respondents were able to look at the list of response options and make their choices by naming a letter.

Selection of respondents. Respondents were chosen by quota sampling, conducted from 157 sample points in England, Scotland, and Wales. Northern Ireland was excluded, as in most polling of British public opinion. (Adding Northern Ireland adds significantly and disproportionately to the expense of polling.) The procedure is designed to produce a representative sample of the adult population of Great Britain, inclusive of all residents aged 15 years and up.

Weighting. While the sample was designed to be representative of the adult population of Britain, further steps are taken prior to analysis to ensure representativeness. Namely, responses are weighted to correct for any divergence between the sample population and the national population. Responses are weighted according to a combination of 2001 Census data, 2010 ONS mid-year population estimates, and 2010 National Readership Survey (NRS) data. Note that the weighted sample size is 985, as opposed to the actual sample of 1002 people.

Noteworthy facts about this sample in relation to others. The Migration Observatory survey was embedded in Ipsos MORI's weekly "Capibus" survey, administered to a representative sample of the adult population of Great Britain. The sample includes non-citizens as well as citizens. Seven per cent of the sample are non-citizens, while 5% are citizens who were born abroad. This is normal practice for polling and survey organizations; figures commonly cited on opposition to immigration will include foreign-born and foreign-national respondents as well, so the sample is comparable to others on this dimension.

Furthermore, although non-citizens and foreign-born citizens were less likely to want reduced immigration on most of our questions, the results do not change substantively if we focus only on UK-born British citizens. Since UK-born British citizens make up most of the overall sample, their attitudes dominate the overall topline results. The UK-born British responses diverge from that of the overall sample by no more than seven percentage points on any single question. With just two exceptions, support for reducing immigration was three to seven percentage points higher among UK-born British citizens than among the population as a whole. The two exceptions: illegal immigrants, and scientists and researchers. Differences here were not statistically significant. On questions about perceptions of immigrants, there were only three statistically significant differences: UK-born British citizens were more likely than other respondents to say they were thinking about permanent immigrants, asylum seekers, and spouses/civil partners.

Third, the inclusion of Scotland makes a detectable difference in our overall results. Unlike the Citizenship Survey, which includes only England and Wales, the Ipsos MORI sample includes respondents in Scotland. Support for reduced immigration is lower in Scotland, which lowers overall opposition to immigration in our results. We preferred the greater coverage from including Scotland to the greater comparability from excluding it from the sample. Results for only England and Wales can still be generated from our data as needed, since the region for each respondent was recorded.

Fourth, the use of face-to-face interviews prevents any problems with the systematic exclusion of households that use only mobile phones and lack a landline.

Finally, the sample reaches slightly younger people than other surveys, but probably not enough to make any substantive difference to the results. For example, the Citizenship Survey includes residents aged 16 and up, while

the Transatlantic Trends Immigration survey includes aged 18 and up. Ipsos MORI's Capibus polls people as young as 15; this was not specially requested or adopted for our project. Young people are the least likely age group to oppose immigration, so a slightly younger sample will be slightly less supportive of reduced immigration.

Margins of Error and Significance Testing. Each result we report, as in any poll or survey, is actually an estimate with a margin of error around it. The margin of error, or "confidence interval," gives a sense of the range in which we can confident that the true value lies, given what we find in our sample. More precisely, imagine the same survey repeated many times under the same conditions with an unbiased sample of the population, producing many estimates with accompanying confidence intervals. The "true" value for the whole population would be included within 95% of these confidence intervals. With a sample of 1002 people (985 in the weighted sample), our confidence intervals around our estimates are no more than three percentage points. For sub-groups of respondents, confidence intervals become larger. We treat the sample as an assumed close-enough approximation of a random sample for the purpose of constructing confidence intervals and significance tests. For a 1000-person sample such as the one in this survey, approximate confidence intervals are +/- 3 percentage points for estimates between 30% and 70%, and +/- 2 percentage points for estimates in the ranges of 10%-20% or 80%-90%.

In the report, when we report differences between sub-groups of respondents, or across different questions, these differences are always statistically significant.

Appendix C: Comparison with previous survey results

The Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI survey was broadly consistent with other polling since 2009 on the general question of whether the level of immigration to Britain is too high, as shown in Table 1. Different organisations have asked different versions of this question, and sample from slightly different populations, so the Observatory survey should not be expected to exactly replicate other results. Moreover, there is a degree of random error inherent in polling and survey research, further diminishing any expectations of a precise match. Nonetheless, it is encouraging that the results do not diverge dramatically from other findings, particularly when taking into account differences in survey procedures.

These differences include question wordings. The Migration Observatory survey used the same wording as the Government's Citizenship Survey, but other organizations ask similar questions in different ways, as Table 1 shows. Sample frames also vary. Ipsos MORI Capibus sample includes Scotland, and also include respondents as young as age 15. These decisions have the advantage of representing a broader population but mark a difference from other surveys that sample only in England, or only in England and Wales, and that only sample from age 16 or age 18 and above. This affects results, because both younger respondents and respondents in Scotland are significantly less likely than others to support reduced immigration.

The difference in sampling explains part of the difference between Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI results and the Citizenship Survey results from 2009–2010. Excluding Scotland raises the percentage favouring reduced immigration to 70%, four percentage points less than the 74% from the Citizenship Survey as shown in Table 1 (Note that the 78% favouring reduced immigration reported in Migration Observatory briefings and charts comes from analysis excluding "don't know" responses, while analyses in this report include "don't know" responses, yielding lower percentage estimates for other responses).

Table 1

Poll/Survey	Question	Sample base	% supporting less immigration
MigObs/IpsosMORI Sept 2011	Number of immigrants: increased, reduced, or kept the same?	age 15+, Great Britain	69% (reduced)
Ipsos MORI Global @dvisor Jul 2011	Too many immigrants in our country	Age 16–64, Great Britain, on-line panel	71% (too many)
Ipsos MORI Feb 2011	"There are too many immigrants in Britain"	Age 16+, Great Britain	64% (too many)
Transatlantic Trends Aug-Sep 2010	Number of immigrants: "too many, a lot but not too many, or not a lot"	Age 18+, Great Britain	59% (too many)
Home Office Citizenship Survey Apr 2009-Mar 2010	Number of immigrants: increased, reduced, or kept the same?	Age 16+, England & Wales	74% (reduced)



The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.

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Press contact

Rob McNeil

Senior Media Analyst

robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk

+ 44 (0)1865 274568

+ 44 (0)7500 970081



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