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**Imagined Immigration: The Different  
Meanings of “Immigrants” in Public  
Opinion and Policy Debates in Britain**

Scott Blinder

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**Abstract**

Public opinion research on immigration attitudes has largely overlooked the question of how survey respondents understand the term “immigrants”. This paper investigates latent perceptions of immigrants, termed “imagined immigration”, among members of the British public. Using novel survey data, I examine who members of the British public have in mind when they think of “immigrants”. I find that public perceptions of immigration diverge significantly from the set of people identified as immigrants in government statistics and targeted by restrictionist policies. In particular, public perceptions focus on asylum seekers and permanent arrivals, while mostly ignoring international students, the largest group of immigrants to Britain and a target of new restrictive immigration policies. I also show that many common perceptions of “imagined immigration” are strongly associated with individual preferences for reduced immigration, suggesting that imagined immigration should be considered in future research as a possible determinant of anti-immigration policy preferences.

**Keywords**

Immigrant, public opinion, Britain, imagined immigration

**Author**

Scott Blinder, University of Oxford, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society and Nuffield College.

Email: [scott.blinder@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:scott.blinder@compas.ox.ac.uk)

*“Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine.”*

–Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922

Scholars, policy-makers, and mass media share a concern with public opinion toward immigration. Academic surveys and commercial pollsters query European and American publics about the level of immigration: Are there too many immigrants coming to their country? Should this number be reduced? Majorities often express negative attitudes toward immigration when asked such questions, particularly in the US and Great Britain. But prior to having an attitude toward something, especially a complex and contested concept such as “immigrants”, one must have some conception of what that attitude object is (Cook 1985). With the notable exception of attitudes toward immigrants of different races or ethnicities (e.g. Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008), little research explores attitude-holders’ underlying conceptions of who immigrants are.

This paper argues that attitudes toward immigration in fact measure attitudes toward “imagined immigration”, related to but distinct from actual immigration. I define “imagined immigration” as the latent understandings among members of the public of what the word “immigrants” means, and who it represents. Survey respondents’ latent understandings or mental images of immigration help them make sense of questions about immigration, so that they can provide the responses that ultimately make up public opinion (see Lippman 1922; Zaller 1992; Alvarez and Brehm 2002). Using a unique data set focused on the British case and collected for this purpose, I map out key elements of imagined immigration, and demonstrate the potential effects of these images on immigration policy preferences.

I further argue that imagined immigration has two crucial consequences. First, I show that public conceptions of immigrants diverge sharply from the way the state “sees” (Scott 1999) or measures immigration. This finding has important implications for policy debates, as well as for scholarship on the weakness of public opinion as an input into decision-making on immigration (Freeman 1995, 2006; Lahav and Guiraudon 2006; Statham and Geddes 2006). Even as states try to address public concern about “immigration”, the lack of a shared understanding of immigration may be another reason why states have trouble fulfilling public demands for restrictive immigration policy. Second, I demonstrate a strong association between mental images of immigrants and attitudes toward immigration levels. This finding suggests that scholarship on the determinants of immigration attitudes might produce more complete explanations by taking imagined immigration into account. Although demonstrating a causal relationship is beyond the scope of this paper, the results show a clear association between perceptions of immigration on one hand and immigration policy preferences on the other.

## **“Pictures in our Heads” and the Antecedents of Public Opinion**

The notion of “imagined immigration” has roots in classic conceptions of public opinion (Lippmann 1922; see also Gamson et al. 1992). Lippmann (1922) centres his inquiry around the notion of “pictures in our heads”. Democratic citizens are expected to have opinions about political issues, yet they often lack direct experience with crucial political events or actors. Lippmann describes a fictional citizen attempting to understand the events of World War I from hazy mental images constructed from second-hand reports. Attitudes about the war, he shows, were necessarily about “pictures in the head” of the war rather than the actual war, distant and unknowable for most.

I argue that public opinion toward immigration is directed toward “pictures in our heads” of immigrants rather than immigration *per se*. To be sure, immigration in contemporary Britain is not nearly so remote as foreign wars were a century ago; many citizens have some direct contact with immigrants, for example. Yet no individual can directly experience or apprehend the phenomenon of “immigration” as a whole. Sources of information about immigration—whether direct experiences, social interactions, or media sources—provide only incomplete depictions of any large-scale social phenomenon. Even official data sources struggle to capture seemingly simple facts about immigration as a whole, such as the number of migrants coming to a given country (Raymer and Willekens 2008). And whereas governments may “see” immigration through statistical measures (Scott 1999), people construct political opinions from more textured and varied sources of information (Zaller 1992; Alvarez and Brehm 2002). We can distinguish, then, between “statistical immigration” as seen and measured by the state and “imagined immigration” as constructed by citizens interpreting their social and political world.

Scholarship on immigration attitudes, however, has rarely taken up Lippmann’s problem in earnest (although see Wong 2007). Again, research on attitudes toward immigrants of different racial or ethnic groups is an important exception, often addressed through experimentation or unobtrusive measures of “implicit attitudes” (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Pérez 2010). But, generally, European and American research focuses predominantly on the determinants of opposition to immigration (Citrin and Sides 2008; Ceobanu and Escandell 2010). Studies examine variation in attitudes across individuals (Fetzer 2000; McLaren and Johnson 2007; Sides and Citrin 2007), local or regional geographical areas (Schneider 2008), nations (Citrin and Sides 2008), or economic and cultural contexts (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). Researchers debate whether the causes of such variation are economic (O’Rourke and Sinnott 2006; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; O’Connell 2011), cultural or racial (Dustmann and Preston 2007; Ford 2011), contextual (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004; Schneider 2008), or informational (Sides and Citrin 2007; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008). Many others argue that attitudes to immigration stem from perceived threats from immigrant groups (Quillian

1995; Schneider 2008; Semyonov et al. 2008), which in turn may have roots in the causes listed above—economic, cultural, contextual, or informational factors.

Most research in this literature tacitly assumes that “immigrants” comprise a coherent, agreed-upon attitude object, toward which individuals can express opinions. The typical dependent variable in such studies is a response to one or more questions measuring attitudes toward immigrants or immigration as a whole. Survey questions typically do not define the term “immigrants” (Crawley 2005), leaving each respondent to answer on the basis of her own unstated conception of who immigrants are. Surveys that do define “immigrants” may do so in ways that contradict official definitions that policy-makers use. For example, the British Social Attitudes survey defines immigrants as permanent settlers in Britain (NatCen 2003), whereas the British government follows the UN definition of immigration in defining anyone who stays in Britain for at least a year as an immigrant. Further, survey questions typically refer to immigrants overall, or to immigrants disaggregated by class (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010) or national (or racial, ethnic, or cultural) origins (Ford 2011). Beyond these sorts of examples, survey researchers have done little to query the meaning of “immigrants” for survey respondents.

We therefore know very little about what people have in mind when they hear the word “immigrants” in the context of a political attitudes survey: are they thinking about workers or asylum seekers? Europeans, Asians, or Africans? Temporary employees or long-term settlers? But meaningful interpretation of attitudes toward “immigrants” requires some understanding of the notions of immigrants that individuals have in mind when answering the survey questions. Without this understanding, we simply do not know what people are responding to when asked for their opinions about “immigrants.”

As an analogy, imagine that social scientists had compiled a large body of knowledge about the causes of people’s opinions about “birds,” but had not investigated whether people are imagining pigeons, goldfinches, peregrine falcons, or penguins when answering questions about their attitudes toward birds in general. In this scenario, if we asked people which birds they had in mind, we would be much better able to explain variation in people’s opinions on whether birds are plentiful or scarce, mainly predators or prey, or mostly beneficial or mostly harmful.

A few recent studies show that specific subsets of immigrants generate different public reactions, suggesting that attitudes toward immigrants may depend on which sort of immigrants one has in mind. For example, attitudes are more positive toward high-skilled immigrants in the US (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010), and, in Britain, toward migrants in particular skilled occupations such as doctors and nurses, or those with the means to support themselves (Crawley 2005, German Marshall Fund 2011). Majority-group Britons also show stronger opposition to immigrants from racial and cultural backgrounds different from their own (Dustman and Preston 2007; Ford 2011). Elsewhere in Europe,

Schneider (2008) finds that greater numbers of non-Western immigrants, rather than more immigrants per se, are associated with increased perceptions of threat across 21 European countries. In the US, implicit attitudes toward Latino immigrants affect Anglo-Americans attitudes toward immigration overall (Perez 2010).

So, specifying particular types of immigrations can create substantial aggregate variation in attitudes toward immigration. But what happens when survey respondents are asked simply about “immigrants”, and are left to supply their own mental picture of who immigrants are? If different sorts of immigrants elicit different attitudinal responses, then measured attitudes toward immigrants *in general* may depend upon which sort of immigrants *in particular* are on individuals’ minds as they respond to survey questions. But little is known about variation in perceptions beyond dimensions of race and class.

### **Relationship to Other Forms of Perceptions or Imagined Communities**

Literatures on immigration attitudes include two other notions of public imaginings or mental images. These conceptions are related, but distinct from imagined immigration as investigated in this article. First, some authors link cultural explanations of anti-immigration attitudes to notions of the immigrant-receiving nation as an “imagined community”, in Anderson’s (1983) famous phrase. Anti-immigration attitudes are more common among majority-group individuals who envision their own ideal national community as more homogeneous or exclusive, or based more on ascriptive characteristics rather than civic participation (Heath and Tilley 2005; Sides and Citrin 2008; Wright 2011). Rather than visions of the nation itself, this paper examines the ways in which members of the political community envision potential newcomers to that community. Of course, insiders may characterize outsiders with distinguishing features that are precisely opposed to insiders’ characterizations of their own group, as optimal distinctiveness theory suggests (Brewer 1991) and studies of immigration discourses confirm (Peberdy 2001; Anderson et al. 2011). The nation as imagined community is therefore a related but distinct construct.

Second, the distinction between perceived and actual or statistical immigration frequently arises in research on public misperceptions of the size of immigrant populations (Hjerm 2007; Sides and Citrin 2007; Wong 2007). Overestimation of immigrant populations may be an important part of public perceptions of immigrants, even if it is more an effect than a cause of attitudes toward immigration (Herda 2010). In this paper, however, I am not concerned with people’s possession of correct information about the size of an agreed-upon group called immigrants. Rather, I focus on how the term “immigrants” calls to mind different sets of people for different members of the public.

## **Hypotheses for Britain's Imagined Immigration and its Relationship with Attitudes**

So, how might members of the public imagine immigration—in possible contrast with government measures? Since the data focus on British attitudes, I focus on the particular features of British public opinion and media discourse to generate expectations. First, imagined immigration will likely include latent beliefs about migrants' citizenship and birthplace, since public perceptions of immigration are intimately connected with notions of national identity (Heath and Tilley 2005). Citizenship and birthplace do not matter for official British migration statistics, however. One need only cross international borders for at least one year to qualify as an immigrant or emigrant, regardless of citizenship or birthplace (ONS 2010). Thus, British migration statistics include the arrivals of British nationals—citizens born abroad or returning from extended stays overseas—who may be overlooked in public perceptions.

Second, media coverage in Britain has emphasized asylum applicants, and frequently conflated the terms “asylum seekers” and “refugees” with immigrants in general (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008, Innes 2010). Asylum, then, may feature disproportionately in imagined migration. And, third, imagined immigration may refer to permanent rather than temporary migration, given the meaning of the word in everyday language. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines an immigrant as a person “who migrates into a country as a settler,” whereas the UN and UK government definitions only require a one-year length of stay in a new country. While “immigrant” is usually left undefined in survey questions, occasionally questions will offer a definition. The 2003 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey chose something like the dictionary definition, explaining to respondents (in the preamble to their immigration questions) that “by ‘immigrants’ we mean people who come to settle in Britain” (NatCen 2003). This further suggests that imagined immigration to emphasize permanent migrants, even though temporary migrants make up a large share of immigration as measured in government statistics.

The expectations discussed above suggest hypotheses not only for a descriptive portrait of imagined immigration in Britain, but also for possible effects of imagined immigration on individual attitudes toward immigration. Given extensive negative commentary about “asylum seekers” in British media and political discourse, I expect that people who think of immigrants as asylum seekers will have more negative views toward immigrants. Next, in light of public discourse associating immigration with unsustainable population growth and related negative impacts, I expect an association between envisioning immigration as permanent rather than temporary and negative views toward immigration.

Further, given that European opposition to immigration often comes from concerns about national identity or culture (Citrin and Sides 2008), I expect that people who think of immigrants as foreign nationals will be more likely to oppose immigration, while those few respondents who also think of immigration as involving British citizens will have more positive views. In addition, as detailed below, the

data distinguish perceptions of foreign-national immigrants as non-EU citizens or EU citizens. One might expect that images of immigrants as non-EU citizens will be more associated with anti-immigration views. On the other hand, British discourse in recent years has also constructed EU immigration as problematic, so this is not a strong expectation.

## **Data and Methods**

The primary data in the study come from an original survey conducted by the polling firm Ipsos MORI from 2-8 September 2011. The survey was administered to a sample of 1002 participants in Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales). Participants were selected by quota sampling (within small randomly-selected geographical areas) to create a representative sample of the population (age 15 and up) of the Britain.<sup>1</sup> They were interviewed face-to-face using laptop computers, so that respondents could read long lists of response options rather than having to remember them. Results were weighted by age, sex, social grade, region, housing tenure, ethnicity and working status to further refine the match between the sample and the British population.<sup>2</sup> Some elements of the analysis also use data from government statistics on immigration flows from the Office of National Statistics (ONS).

Several variations of one basic question operationalized the “imagined immigration” construct. The basic question asked respondents which sorts of groups they normally had in mind when thinking about immigrants. (“When you think about immigrants coming to and living in Britain, which of these groups would you normally think about?”) Each respondent received three different versions of this question, with substantively different sets of response options. In each case, respondents were instructed to choose as many options as they liked.

The first iteration offered choices that varied birthplace and citizenship (e.g. non-EU citizens; British citizens born abroad; naturalized British citizens; British-born children of non-British citizens). A second item varied newcomers’ length of stay in Britain, allowing respondents to choose permanent immigrants and/or temporary arrivals staying in Britain for more than five years, one to five years, or less than one year. The third item asked about the four main reasons for migration: work, study, family, and asylum.

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<sup>1</sup> Quota samples, though not preferred to probability samples, can be justified as the best available option, particularly if they accurately reflect known population percentages on variables that were not used in the quota base itself (Weisberg 2005: 236-237). In this case, the sample matches up well with large probability samples of Britain on the only three non-quota variables for which estimates were available from a large national probability sample: percentage foreign-born, percentage of foreign nationality, and attitudes toward immigration levels. The government Citizenship Survey estimated 77% (excluding don’t knows) favouring reduced immigration, compared with 74% in the current sample. The government’s Annual Population Survey estimated (as of September 2010, the most recent available) 12% of the British as foreign-born and 7% as foreign nationals, compared with 11% and 7% in the sample.

<sup>2</sup> Weights were generated using a combination of data from the 2001 Census, 2010 ONS mid-year population estimates, National Readership Survey data.



Taken together, then, each respondent indicated a conception of who immigrants are, along dimensions of citizenship, birthplace, length of stay, and reason for migrating.

Responses to the imagined immigration questions serve both as the object of descriptive analysis and as independent variables in multiple regression analysis of the determinants of immigration policy preferences. The methods used are straightforward. Initially, I use descriptive statistics to paint a picture of “imagined immigration” among the British public. Next, I estimate an ordered probit model predicting attitudes toward immigration levels, in order to test hypotheses about the relationship between mental images of immigrants and attitudes toward immigration as a whole. (Ordered probit is used because the dependent variable is an ordinal variable, in which distances between each of the five points on the scale are unknown and not necessarily all equal). In this analysis, the dependent variable is five-point ordinal scale based on responses to a commonly-used survey question asking whether respondents prefer to see the number of immigrants coming to Britain increased (a little or a lot), reduced (a little or lot), or kept the same.<sup>3</sup> The ordered probit analysis includes data only from white British-born British nationals, since ethnic minorities, foreign-born individuals, and foreign nationals to differ from British-born white respondents not only on their attitudes toward immigration, but also in the way those attitudes are formed.

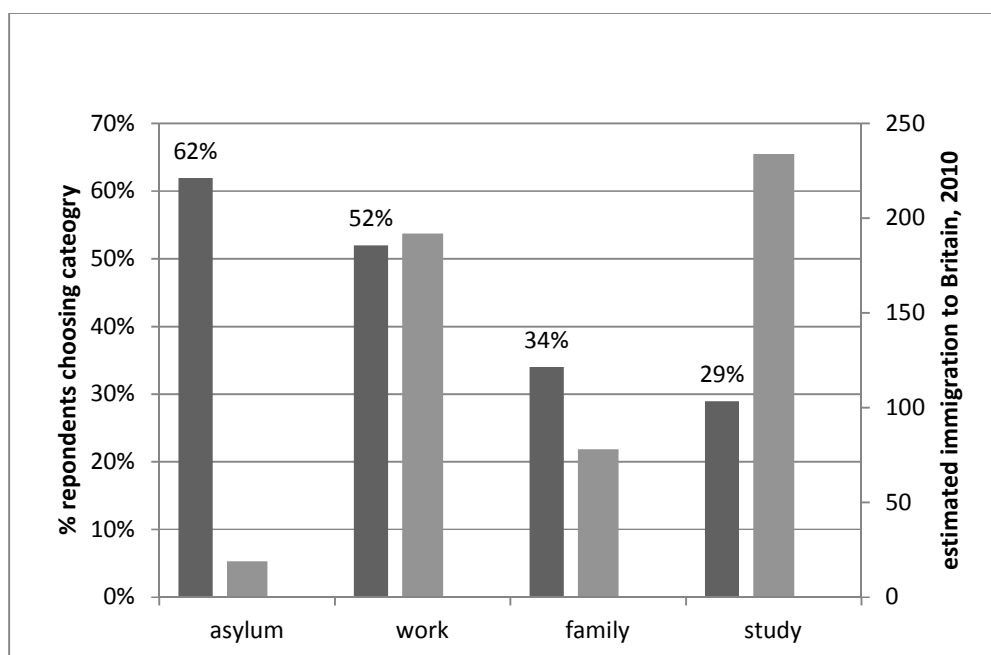
## **Imagined Migration in Britain**

I begin with descriptive evidence on the nature of imagined migration in British public opinion. Several notable findings emerge. First, asylum seekers hold a dominant place in British “imagined immigration,” in contrast with government-measured immigration in recent years. As shown in Figure 1, asylum was the most commonly chosen category for respondents selecting among the four major reasons for migration, chosen by 62% of respondents. Work ranked next, chosen by 52%, followed by spouses at 34% and students 29%.

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<sup>3</sup> The question wording: “Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased, reduced or should it remain the same?” The wording was borrowed from the UK government’s Citizenship Survey.

**Figure 1. Public perceptions of immigration by reason for migrating, compared with statistical estimates of immigration to Britain in 2010**



Notes: Dark-shaded bars represent (weighted) proportions of respondents. Light-shaded bars represent British government estimates of numbers of immigrants (Source: Office of National Statistics).

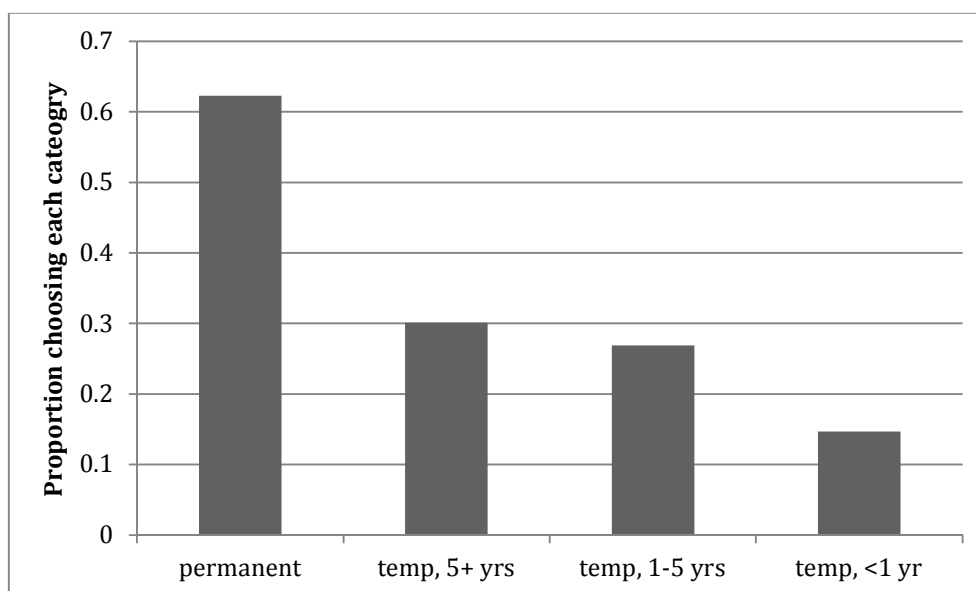
These perceptions contrast sharply with government measures of immigration, as shown in Figure 1, which juxtaposes survey responses with the British government's official 2010 estimates of migration inflows. Asylum seekers are the smallest of the four categories in recent immigration statistics while students are the largest; in public perceptions, these categories are precisely reversed, with asylum seekers the most commonly chosen and students chosen least.

Notably, estimates of immigrant arrivals come from the ONS' International Passenger Survey, which every year interviews thousands of randomly selected passengers arriving in and departing from Britain. These estimates are now a matter of direct policy concern, although the critical number for policy-makers has become net migration (arriving immigrants minus departing emigrants) rather than immigration. The government is currently pursuing the goal of reducing the ONS annual net migration figure "from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands," as then-candidate David Cameron pledged during the 2010 election campaign.

Respondents' images of immigrants appear to focus predominantly on permanent rather than temporary immigrants, again in contrast with the government's statistical counts of immigration. As shown in Figure 2, 62% reported thinking of permanent arrivals to Britain when thinking of immigrants, while less than a third had in mind any of the three temporary categories offered as choices. This held

even for views on people staying coming to Britain for five years or more—long enough for most migrants to qualify for permanent settlement in Britain.

**Figure 2. Public perception of immigrants, by length of stay in Britain**



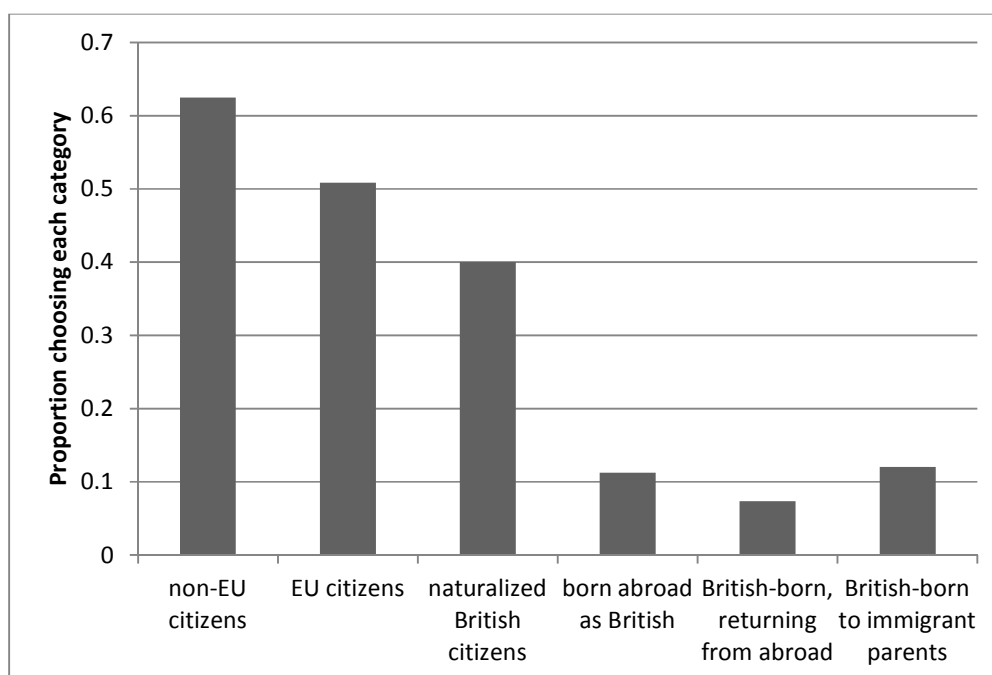
Notes: Bars represent (weighted) proportions of respondents.

Public perceptions on length of stay also diverge from government statistics. Temporary immigrants are much more prominent in the state’s “statistical migration” than in the public’s “imagined migration,” centered on permanent arrivals. By official ONS estimates, migrants coming to stay for four years or less made up 68% of total immigration to Britain in 2010,<sup>4</sup> short-term immigration having risen significantly since 2000.

Finally, as expected, most British people think of immigrants as foreign nationals, and do not have in mind British nationals born abroad. The contrast between perceptions and data is not as stark here, since British nationals comprised only 16% of 2010 immigrant in-flows (ONS 2011). Nonetheless, much of the British public would likely be surprised to hear that British citizens and the British-born can ever be considered immigrants to Britain. Notably, few respondents had in mind the children of foreign-national immigrants, despite prior arguments that British public opinion may conflate immigrants with ethnic minorities (Crawley 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Estimates of migrants’ length of stay rely on intentions of arriving immigrants rather than their actual behavior, but these estimates do include an adjustment for “switching” from original intentions to actual lengths of stay, derived from IPS interviews of departing migrants as they leave Britain (ONS 2010).

**Figure 3. Public perception of immigrants, by citizenship and birthplace**



Notes: Bars represent (weighted) proportions of respondents. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Thus, imagined immigration differs from “statistical immigration” as measured by the state and used for policy-making purposes. It is important to note that these observed discrepancies between state and public might represent actual disagreement about definitions of immigration, rather than pitting accurate state-sponsored statistics against raw public misperceptions. For example, as noted above, the dictionary definition of “immigrant” lends credence to the association between immigration and permanence in public perceptions, in contrast with the UN definition adopted by the ONS. Perhaps this definition represents a common language understanding of immigration, shared by the majority of the public but not used by the state.

Meanwhile, public perceptions of asylum seekers may be grounded in events in the recent past, rather than simply media discourse or imagination in some pejorative sense. Asylum seekers were a very large proportion of immigration flows in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when net migration levels and public salience of the immigration issue both increased dramatically. Although arrival numbers are now quite small, public perceptions may reflect the number of asylum seekers who have already arrived. In this way, public perceptions here may have roots in statistically measured migration, yet still match poorly with the form of statistical immigration that is emphasized in policy-makers’ focus on regulating new arrivals.

### **Association between “Imagined Immigration” and Attitudes toward Immigration**

The descriptive findings above carry their own implications for policy discussions, to which I will return later in the paper. But first I consider the possible relationship between imagined immigration and attitudes or policy preferences. Do these varying conceptualizations of “immigrants” have any possible effect on attitudes toward immigration overall? To investigate this question, I estimated an ordered probit model using several conceptions of imagined immigration, as well as other variables, to predict individuals’ attitudes toward immigration. The dependent variable was a standard question asking respondents if they thought immigration should be reduced (a lot or a little), kept the same, or increased (a lot or a little). Thus, the model predicts responses on a five-point scale, with higher values representing preference for less immigration; positive signs on coefficients thus indicate stronger opposition to immigration.

The results (see Table I) show striking relationships between individuals’ perceptions of immigration variables and their preferred level of immigration to Britain. First, among reasons for migrating, those who imagine immigrants as asylum seekers are more likely to prefer less immigration, holding constant for other perceptions as well as demographic variables and newspaper readership. Perceptions of immigrants as workers were associated with lower probabilities of preferring reduced immigration, although this finding was not robust to specifications that omitted other variables. The perception of immigrants as students or spouses/partners had no statistically significant relationship with preferences.

**Table 1. Estimated effects of perceptions of immigrants on preferences for reducing immigration**

<u>Variable</u>		<u>Coef.</u>	<u>S.E.</u>
<b>Perceptions of immigrants: reason for migrating</b>	Work	-0.29*	0.11
	Spouse/Partner	-0.20	0.11
	Student	-0.06	0.12
	Asylum	0.28*	0.12
<i>Excluded: None/Don't Know</i>			
<b>Perceptions of immigrants: length of stay</b>	< 1 year	0.17	0.16
	1 - 5 years	0.04	0.12
	Temp, 5+ years	0.09	0.11
	Permanent	0.33*	0.12
<i>Excluded: None/Don't Know</i>			
<b>Perceptions of immigrants: citizenship &amp; birthplace</b>	EU citizens	0.38*	0.11
	Non-EU citizens	0.05	0.11
	Naturalized British citizens	0.08	0.10
	British citizens born abroad	0.10	0.18
	British citizens returning from time lived abroad	-0.63*	0.23
	British-born children of foreign nationals	0.16	0.16
<i>Excluded: None/Don't Know</i>			
<b>Demographics:</b>	Age	0.008*	0.003
	Sex (Female)	-0.20*	0.09
	Working class (social grade C2DE)	0.18	0.11
	Education (Univ degree)	-0.57*	0.11
<b>Region of residence:</b>	London	-0.21	0.19
	Scotland	-0.95*	0.18
<b>Daily newspaper readership:</b>	Broadsheet	-0.36*	0.14
	Mid-market	0.64*	0.16
	Tabloid	0.12	0.15
<b>Model cutpoints</b>	Cutpoint1	-1.75	0.25
	Cutpoint2	-1.57	0.25
	Cutpoint3	-0.47	0.25
	Cutpoint4	0.33	0.25
	n = 728 Log-likelihood = -761.32 Wald chi-sq = 160.43*		

Table Notes: Coefficients estimated by ordered probit, with robust standard errors. Asterisks indicates statistical significance (\* =  $p < .05$ ).

Second, those who had in mind permanent rather than temporary immigrants were more likely to prefer reduced immigration. In addition, within the citizenship and birthplace perceptual categories, imagining immigrants as EU citizens was positively associated with a preference for reduced immigration. Meanwhile, the few respondents who imagine immigrants as British citizens were less likely to favor reduced immigration.

Several demographic variables had detectable relationships with immigration attitudes as well, largely in line with previous results in the literature (e.g. McLaren and Johnson 2007, Sides and Citrin 2007). Older, less-educated, and working-class respondents were more supportive of reduced immigration, all else remaining equal. Women appear less likely to support reductions to immigration, although this finding was less robust: it did not appear in the simple bivariate correlation between gender and preferences, nor was it consistently significant in model specifications with different combinations of variables.

Reflecting political divisions among British newspapers, broadsheet readers (*Guardian*, *Times*, *Financial Times*, *Independent*) were more favorable toward immigration while readers of mid-market newspaper readers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* were more supportive of reductions. Tabloid readership (*Sun*, *Mirror*, *Star*, *Record*) did not have a significant estimated effect compared with the baseline of reading no daily newspaper.

Despite the robust findings, the model has limitations that should not be surprising, as this study aims to open new ground for investigation rather than to settle an old debate. Notably, the data collection was not embedded in a large-scale political attitudes survey, so the model cannot include correlates of immigration attitudes such as partisan preferences or ideology. In addition, the question of causal direction is beyond the scope of this paper, without the availability of longitudinal data, comparative data, and/or controlled experimentation to help discern causal impact and direction. However, the clear association between perceptions and preferences, even when controlling for demographic correlates and media consumption, suggests a strong case for further investigation.

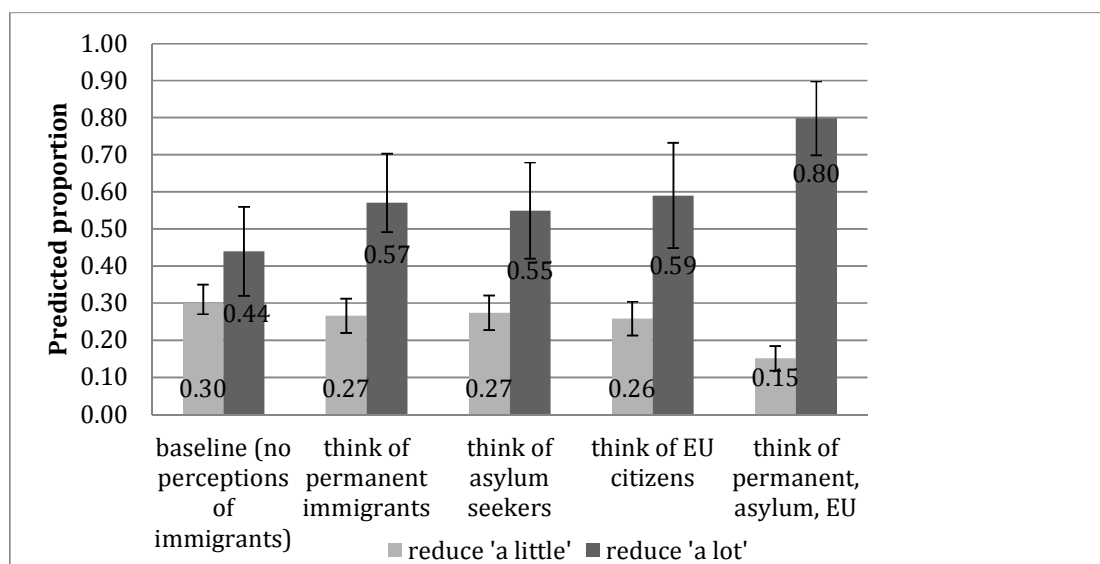
## **Magnitude of Effects of Imagined Immigration Variables**

Table I shows the variables associated with attitudes toward immigration, and the direction of each relationship, but ordered probit coefficients do not straightforwardly convey the size of the effects. As an aid to substantive interpretation, Figure 4 shows the magnitude of the effects of imagined migration on attitudes to immigration. These predictions use the coefficients estimated in the model in Table I to calculate the predicted probability of preferring reductions to immigration for hypothetical survey respondents. These calculations assumed hypothetical respondents who varied on how they reported

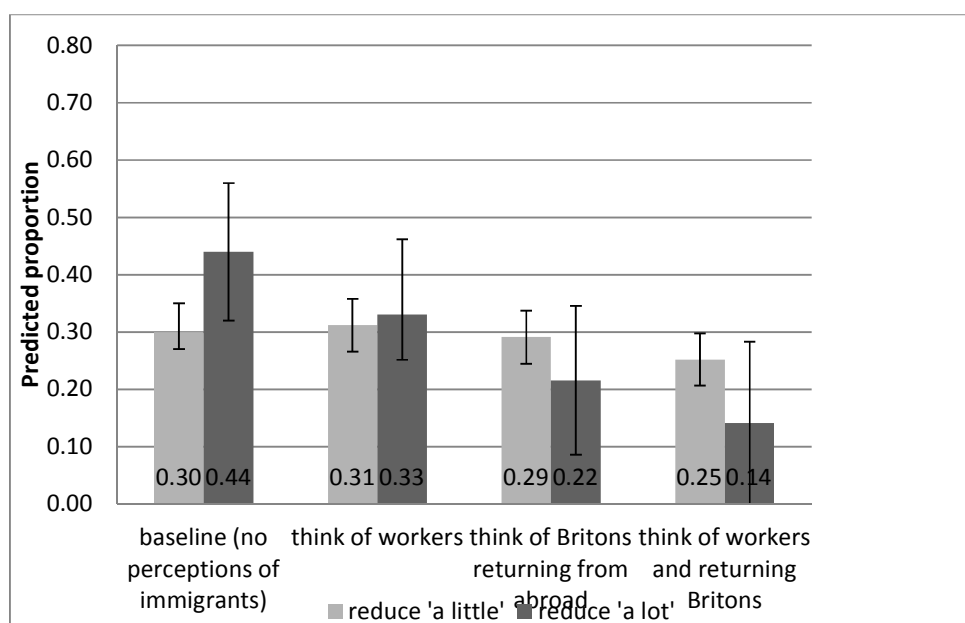
thinking of immigrants, but were otherwise identical on all other characteristics included as variables in the model.

**Figure 4. Predicted probability of preferring reduced immigration, for respondents with varying perceptions of immigrants**

**4a. Perceptions of immigrants associated with more support for reductions**



**4b. Perceptions of immigrants associated with less support for reductions**



Note: Predicted probabilities calculated from model estimates reported in Table I. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Baseline predicted probabilities are for a hypothetical median respondent with no reported perceptions of immigrants on any of the three dimensions queried.



As shown in Figure 4, the effects of the imagined immigration variables were substantively significant as well as statistically significant. According to the estimated model, a hypothetical median survey respondent (a 48-year-old male with a managerial occupation but no university degree who does not read a daily newspaper, and had no particular image of immigrants in mind) had a predicted 74% probability of supporting reduced immigration, including a 30% predicted probability of preferring to reduce immigration “a lot”. For a similar individual who has permanent immigrants in mind, the predicted probabilities rose to 84% (57% “a lot”). Imagining immigrants as asylum seekers or EU citizens raised these predicted probabilities to 82% (55% “a lot”) and 85% (59% “a lot”), respectively. For a hypothetical respondent combining these three perceptions, all of which are associated with opposition to immigration, the predicted probabilities rise all the way to 95% (80% “a lot”).

Other images of immigrants had substantively sizable relationships with more positive attitudes toward immigration. Predicted probability of preferring less immigration fell to 64% (33% “a lot”) for those who imagined immigrants as workers, 51% (22% “a lot”) for those who imagined immigrants as British nationals returning from years abroad, and just 39% (14% “a lot”) for those who said that they had both of these images in mind. Varying mental images of immigrants, therefore, have a substantively large as well as statistically significant relationship with preferences for levels of immigration. These relationships were highly robust as well, as they remained consistent when estimating the models with or without demographic controls, and when estimating by OLS regression, including when estimating robust standard errors.

## Discussion

The above evidence demonstrates two critical points about “imagined migration”. First, public images of immigration diverge dramatically from “statistical immigration”, or immigration in the eyes of the state. In particular, British public perceptions highlight asylum seekers and permanent immigration. Temporary immigrants, including most international students, are much more common statistically in estimates of in-flows in recent years, though not necessarily in the stock of migrants resident in Britain at any one time. Second, individual variation in imagined immigration is associated with variation in attitudes toward immigration as a whole. In particular, viewing immigrants as asylum seekers and permanent immigrants—the very categories that appear much more frequently in imagined immigration than in statistical estimates—is associated with support for reducing immigration levels. In remainder of this section, I examine the implications of each of these findings for policy debates and for scholarship on public opinion.

For policy-making, the implications are immediate and potentially troubling. In Britain, public preferences for less immigration have been among the drivers of British immigration policy. These policies now include a specific target for its statistical estimate of annual net migration. The government has justified new restrictions on immigration with explicit reference to public opinion, tying its drive to reduce net migration as a whole to public concern about immigration (UKBA 2011a, 2011b).

In light of differences between imagined and statistical immigrations, numerical reductions may not respond to public attitudes as directly the policy linkage implies. When governments seek to reduce “immigration”, the set of people they define as immigrants (and target for reductions) may differ significantly from the set of people that members of the public have in mind when they express a preference for less immigration. For example, the British government has enacted new restrictions on student migration and plans to propose new restrictions on family migration (UKBA 2011b, 2011c), even though these groups do not seem prominent in the British public’s collective image of immigration. Only a minority of respondents claimed to think about students or spouses/partners when thinking of immigrants, and those who do think of students are less likely to want to see immigration reduced overall. This observed gap between public and state conceptions of immigrants is in keeping with prior research showing that public opinion at the national level is not closely correlated with numbers of immigrants (Sides and Citrin 2007), but the findings here demonstrate more directly that the immigration opposed by the public differs from immigration measured by government statistics and targeted by restrictionist policies.

So, in policy terms, findings on imagined immigration suggest that policy-makers may misread the existing evidence on public opinion if they follow a numerical logic in restricting immigration. I do not deny that majorities of the public in Britain (and in many other European nations) wish to see immigration restricted. The point is, rather, that blanket reductions to statistical immigration can subsume sub-groups of immigrants that do not figure prominently in public perceptions of what constitutes immigration.

While I have demonstrated this point in the British case, it may well have relevance in immigration policy debates in other nations. In the US, for example, “illegal immigrants” may play a similar role to that of asylum seekers in the UK. American perceptions of “immigrants” seem to focus disproportionately on “illegal immigrants”, (Segovia and Defever 2010), much as British perceptions seem to focus disproportionately on asylum seekers. This suggests that measures of attitudes toward immigrants in the US will be similarly distorted by perceptual emphasis on a part of the whole.

In addition, the British findings suggest that public attitudes might be responsive to “education” framed neither as persuasion nor as simple numerical facts, but rather as varied depictions of what sorts of people actually make up the category “immigrants.” Information or narratives portraying immigrants

who come to Britain as students, or whose stay is only temporary, may help shift public images of immigrants, which might in turn have an effect on policy preferences.

Shifting from policy to research implications, because measures of attitudes toward “immigration” capture attitudes toward imagined immigration, researchers might profitably incorporate “imagined immigration” into investigations of the causes of immigration attitudes. Since imagined immigration varies across individuals, assessing these perceptions at the individual level may help developing better models of individual attitudes toward immigration. Of course, much will depend on future research aimed at discerning causal links. Perceptions of immigration might influence policy preferences, as in classic conceptions of public opinion or political socialization (Cook 1985), but there are other possibilities. For example, the relationships observed here might also stem from the reverse causal pathway, if pre-existing attitudes toward immigrants develop first and then shape perceptions of who immigrants are.

Imagined immigration might also provide an avenue into linking media research to public opinion on immigration. Given the results above showing association between imagined immigration and attitudes to immigration, perceptions might be causal mechanism through which media coverage and elite rhetoric indirectly influence attitudes. In politics in general, media coverage is more often effective at agenda setting rather than persuasion: telling people not what to think, but what to think about (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Segments of the British media have been essentially encouraging people to think about asylum seekers, for example, when they think about immigrants (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008). American media coverage focused on “illegal” immigration might play a similar agenda-setting role. Further research might examine whether media coverage and political rhetoric encourage particular ways of imagining immigration, and then test whether such media portrayals shape imagined immigration.

Finally, it is worth noting the relationship between the latent perceptions I have measured and the sorts of “implicit attitudes” that have attracted growing interest in political science, often involving implicit measurement techniques such as the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al. 1998) and Affect Misattribution Procedure (Payne et al. 2005). The perceptions discussed in this paper, although measured by explicit self-report, are normally implicit or latent in the everyday sense of the term: most survey respondents presumably do not have a well-formulated definition of “immigrants” in their minds in their everyday lives, nor do they formulate an explicit definition when providing the answers to survey questions that comprise public opinion toward immigration. On the other hand, this does not preclude introspection that can turn the implicit into the explicit. The perceptual questions were designed simply to ask respondents to introspect in this manner. This is a problematic technique for eliciting attitudes toward out-groups, because many people’s responses will reflect motivations to respond without prejudice, whether to create a favorable impression to observers or to live up to internalized normative

commitments against prejudice (Plant and Devine 1998). However, perceptual questions do not ask for normative judgments, and so are less likely to lead to incongruities between explicit self-reports and implicit cognitive or affective mental associations (Nosek, Graham, and Hawkins 2010). Thus, the data collected here affirm that certain implicit perceptions and beliefs can be interrogated more efficiently with conventional, less costly self-report measures.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that public opinion on immigration is directed toward “imagined immigration”, constructed differently by different members of the public. I have demonstrated a dramatic divergence between the public’s imagined immigration and statistical immigration as seen by the British state and used to inform policy-making. Asylum seekers and permanent immigrants loom much larger in public perceptions than in the recent net migration statistics that the government has targeted for reductions; the opposite is true of international students, who comprise a large share of immigrant in-flows but are less prominent in imagined immigration.

I have further shown that these differences may have consequences for attitudes toward immigration as a whole. Perceptions of immigrants as asylum seekers, permanent settlers, and EU citizens are strongly associated with preferences for reduced immigration levels. Further study is needed to determine whether this association indicates a causal relationship, and to compare the impact of perception variables with political predispositions.

Finally, the findings suggest that, as long as publics and states see “immigrants” in divergent ways, efforts by politicians to control immigration to fulfill majoritarian public demands face an additional obstacle. Policy changes may target groups that the state sees as immigrants, but that are largely invisible to members of the public. Governments often claim that restrictive immigration policies respond to public demand, but policies, at least in the British case, may act on a different target from what most people think of as constituting immigration. Numerical reductions would appear to be a useful response to public preferences for reducing immigration, but basic questions about immigration levels do not fully capture public attitudes toward and perceptions of immigration. If British policy-makers intend to respond to public attitudes toward immigration—and certainly public opinion is only one consideration of many that determine immigration policy—they might consider that the public image of immigrants focuses on asylum seekers and permanent migrants, which together comprise a fairly small proportion of total immigrant in-flows. A logic of numerical reduction may be less responsive to public opinion than it would appear on the surface. A logic of selection, though surely raising other questions and value judgments, may match up better with public sentiment.

In short, imagined immigration is a previously overlooked issue with relevance for both research and policy debates. Individual variation in imagined immigration, and its relationship with attitudes, suggests a need to reconsider the measurement of attitudes toward immigration overall, as well as the determinants of such attitudes. Likewise, the divergence between imagined immigration and government-measured statistical immigration suggests that policy-makers need to distinguish explicitly and clearly among types of migrants, and between logics of selection and of numbers, if they wish to respond to public opinion toward immigrants and immigration.

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