

Immigration

“Fewer but better”? Public views about immigration

The period since the late-1990s has seen the largest inflow of immigrants to Britain in history. How has the public reacted to this? Does it support the Coalition’s approach in wanting to see immigration reduced and how does it think immigration has affected British society? Do attitudes to different types of migrants vary?

Scale and impact

Demands for a reduction in overall immigration have increased while views about the impact of migration have grown more negative.



Three out of four (75%) respondents advocate a **reduction in immigration** overall, a rise from 63% since 1995. 51% want a large reduction.

Negative economic impact



Negative cultural impact



The proportion who view the economic **impact of migrants** negatively increased by nine percentage points between 2002 and 2011, from 43% to 52%. Negative judgements about the cultural impact of migration increased by 15 percentage points during the same period, from 33% to 48%.

Migrant characteristics

The characteristics of different types of migrants are strongly linked to people’s attitudes towards them. Migrants’ qualifications are paramount in predicting attitudes, regardless of countries of origin.

>50%



<20%



More than 50% of respondents regard **professional migration** as a good thing, regardless of whether it is from Eastern Europe or Pakistan, but less than 20% feel positively about **unskilled labour migration** from these regions.

Around two-thirds of respondents are neutral or positive about the **migration of students** from any of four regions in the world into Britain if they have good grades, but less than one third feel the same way about students with bad grades.

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Introduction

Immigration has reshaped British society in the post-war era, and in recent years has consistently been at the top of the political agenda. As an island nation with a global imperial legacy, the question of who we let into our country and why has a unique resonance in Britain. Attitudes towards immigration say something about our understanding of the fundamental relationship between citizens and the state, fairness and human rights.

Ever since social surveys and opinion polls began to ask questions on the topic in the 1960s, the British public has always favoured a reduction in the numbers of immigrants, even during periods when immigrant inflows have been low (Blinder, 2011b). However, the history of British immigration is one characterised by a gap between public attitudes and public policy (Hansen, 2000), with government's ability or willingness to reduce net migration often constrained. During the last century, a desire to extend and equalise subjecthood during the British Empire, a business need for cheap, unskilled labour and regional institutions and international laws all played a part in shaping policy in this area. Following large-scale immigration from Commonwealth countries in the 1950s, a more restrictive policy gradually evolved through a series of legislative reforms starting with the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act and ending with the 1981 British Nationality Act. Migration flows were tempered rather than halted or reversed; while primary migration more or less ceased, family reunion inflows continued. A shift in emphasis was marked by the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act and the incorporation of the European Convention for Human Rights (ECHR) in 1998, representing a new, more open approach driven by the election of New Labour and the realities of globalisation (Somerville, 2007). Labour migration controls were relaxed and tools to restrict asylum were initially limited during this period. Yet a backlash was just around the corner. The number of people seeking asylum in the UK increased threefold from 1996 to around 85,000 in 2002 (Blinder, 2011b). The institutions set up to deal with this particular inflow of migrants were unable to cope and the press and public felt the system was open to abuse and had lost its integrity. The political salience of the issue was not lost on the government or the press.¹

In 2003, data collected by the British Social Attitudes survey on public attitudes towards immigration reflected the negativity surrounding the issue, with public opposition increasing sharply from the already high levels recorded in 1995. On the heels of the collection of these data, Britain experienced a large wave of immigration from Eastern Europe following the accession of eight countries (the A8 countries) to the EU in 2004 – which contributed to net migration peaking in that year at 245,000. The extent of this migration was not foreseen by the British government. Around 13,000 arrivals were anticipated (Dustmann et al., 2003), yet in 2004, 54,000 arrived as long-term migrants. While the nature of A8 migration is varied and often temporary, the population of A8 citizens in the UK is now estimated by the Annual Population Survey to be 872,000 (Vargas-Silva, 2012).

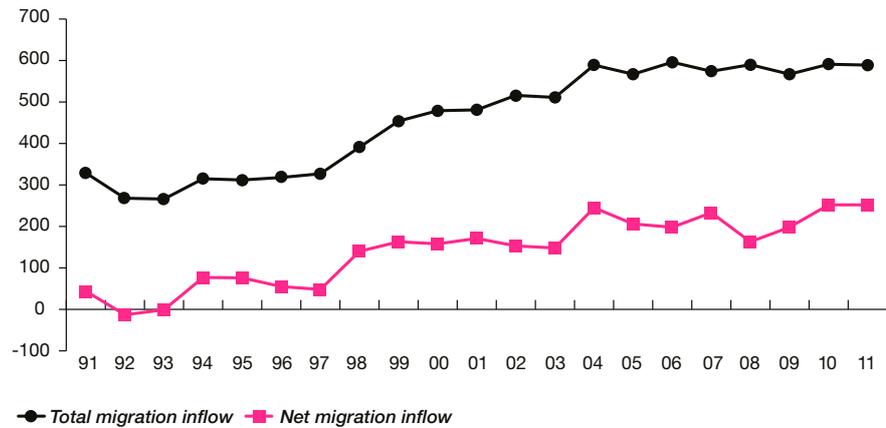
Coalition policy has been focused around an attempt to cap the overall level of net migration

Since then, there has been a strong shift towards greater restriction in both policy discourse and policy implementation, which began under Labour and has continued under the Coalition. Coalition policy has been focused around an attempt to cap the overall level of net migration and a move to systems that aim to increase government control over migration flows to achieve this goal. Debate continues over the economic impact and fairness of this approach. Firstly, a points system is now in place for economic migrants, which distinguishes between migrants in terms of age, earnings, qualifications and employment to determine entry. According to the Migration Advisory Committee, students will be equally affected. The stated aim here is to attract the 'brightest and the best' despite concerns over the broader economic impact of this policy (Ruhs, 2011; Cavanagh and Glennie, 2012).

Secondly, extra-territorial measures have been adopted to reduce the number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK; and increased containment once in the UK aims to increase the number of asylum seekers that can be removed when their claims fail (Blinder, 2011a). Proposals to limit the numbers of immigrants arriving in the UK through family reunification have also been introduced.² The stated aim here is to put a stop to abuses of the system, although concerns remain over potential violations of human rights.

So how have these policies fared? As Figure 2.1 shows, since 2004 both total and net long-term migration have remained broadly steady. Net migration is more volatile, falling to 163,000 in 2008 but then returning to 2004 levels of over 240,000 in 2010, while the total migration inflow remains almost unchanged at just under 600,000 every year. Recent shifts in net migration, the statistic which attracts the most media and policy maker attention, therefore reflect volatility in the number of people leaving the UK, not the number entering.³ It is clear that institutional and political realities continue to make sharply reducing immigration difficult: having opted out of initial restrictions on A8 migrants the government cannot formally control immigration from the EU,⁴ and as a result poorer Central European members such as Poland have continued to provide the largest source of labour migration. The humanitarian requirements of international law and the requirements of the ECHR make draconian restrictions on asylum or family reunion migration similarly difficult to achieve. While the number of people seeking asylum (17,916 in 2010) is now much lower than its 2002 peak, there is debate over the fairness of the government’s approach to influencing this (Asylum Aid, 2010) and the impact of these measures on re-enforcing negative public attitudes (Gibney, 2011).

Figure 2.1 Total and net migration inflow, 1991–2011



Source: Office for National Statistics, Long Term International Migration Estimates
 2011 figure is estimate for year to September
 The data on which Figure 2.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

It is important to gather better and more nuanced information on which migration inflows concern the British public and which do not

So while the shift in policy in the past decade has not yet achieved its stated aims, it does reflect a perception among policy makers that hardening public attitudes towards immigration demand a restrictive policy response. These attitudes are arguably further accentuated by two factors. Firstly, specific incidents – crises or scandals – have highlighted ineffective systems or incompetent personnel who are charged with managing immigration. These incidents may fuel the view that if immigration cannot be managed fairly and for the benefit of Britain, it should be halted completely. Secondly, it is clear that the public perception of contemporary migration flows is very different from that of policy makers. A recent study found that when thinking about immigration, people are far more likely to have in mind asylum seekers, who made up four per cent of immigrants in 2009, and least likely to have in mind students, the largest group in 2009 at 37 per cent (Migration Observatory, 2011). Given the complexity of contemporary migration flows and an intricate and constantly evolving institutional apparatus, it is important to gather better and more nuanced information on which migration inflows concern the British public and which do not, and how these perceptions link with attitudes to immigration per se.

In this context, the data used in this chapter were gathered in part to try to overcome the influence of misinformation, by collecting systematic and unbiased data on the public's views of a contentious and complex issue. They were also collected to try to elicit more nuanced views on immigration among the British public: if there is anti-immigration sentiment, towards which groups is this strongest and among which groups is this most keenly felt? In doing so, the chapter aims to provide an insight into the public response to the government's approach to reducing, or at least better controlling, immigration into Britain.

Views of immigration: inflows and impact

We begin with a review of British attitudes to immigration overall.

The period since the late-1990s has seen the largest inflow of immigrants to Britain in history. There are two ways we can assess how the British public have reacted to this. The first is to examine views of overall migration levels. Do the public want to see immigration reduced, and if so, how steeply? A second is to examine what impacts the public thinks immigration has had on British society. These two kinds of assessment are very different – individuals may favour reductions to immigration even if they feel the impact to date has been limited, because they may worry about future impacts. Conversely, a respondent may concede that migration has had negative impacts, but still support high migration levels, feeling that the benefits outweigh the costs.

The sensitivity of these items to changes in immigration may also vary. Demands for reduction may rise and fall in response to inflows, or alternatively respondents may 'default' to a demand for reductions in migration, irrespective of migration inflows, supporting reduced immigration as a way of expressing their view that any migration is socially damaging. Views about the impacts of immigration may shift in response to changes in settlement levels, often with a time lag as the overall effects of migration may take time to manifest, or respondents may treat the question as a backward-looking judgement on social effects going back over a long time period, in which case responses may not be sensitive to recent events. In short, there are many reasons for treating views about levels and impacts as distinct from each other, and worthy of separate analysis.

75%

of respondents advocate a reduction in immigration overall

To explore the public's views about levels of migration, we asked respondents:

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

Table 2.1 presents the answers provided in 2011 and on the three occasions that this question has been asked previously. It highlights a sustained increase in demands for lower overall immigration since the question was first asked. The proportion of respondents favouring some reduction in migration rose from 63 per cent in 1995 to 72 per cent in 2003 and 78 per cent in 2008, just before the onset of the economic crisis. Since then, there has been a small decline, with 75 per cent of respondents in 2011 advocating a reduction in immigration overall and 51 per cent wanting a large reduction. Most of the increase in demand for reduction thus dates to the late-1990s/early-2000s, and the balance of public concern has remained broadly stable since 2003. However, the overall balance of opinion remains strongly in favour of the Coalition's stated policy aim of lowering immigration levels. It is worth noting, however, that nearly 40 per cent of respondents also supported large cuts in migration in 1995, when net migration inflows were very low. Part of this overall demand for reduction therefore seems to be insensitive to present migration levels – and may perhaps instead reflect a 'default preference' for reduced migration in all circumstances.

Table 2.1 Views of immigration levels, 1995–2011

	1995	2003	2008	2011	Change 1995– 2011	Change 2003– 2011
The number of immigrants to Britain should ...	%	%	%	%		
... increase a lot/a little	4	5	4	3	-1	-1
... remain the same	27	16	17	18	-9	+2
... reduce a little	24	23	23	24	0	+1
... reduce a lot	39	49	55	51	+12	+2
<i>Weighted base</i>	987	873	2236	3311		
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1078	881	2239	3311		

Turning to impacts, we consider two broad spheres in which these can occur: culture and economics. The perceived cultural impacts of immigration have become more salient as concerns over Muslim integration and Islamic extremism have grown, following riots in Muslim areas in 2001 and terror attacks in 2005 and 2007 (although, in practice, these were committed by British-born extremists). Meanwhile economic concerns have grown with reports arguing that migrants were outcompeting native Britons for scarce jobs, an anxiety which can only be magnified in the harsh economic climate following the recession of 2008–2009.

To explore public perceptions of the impacts of migration, we asked respondents:

On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is extremely bad and 10 is extremely good, would you say it is generally bad or good for Britain's economy that migrants come to Britain from other countries?

[0 Extremely bad for economy, 5 Neither, 10 Extremely good for economy]

And on a scale of 0 to 10, would you say that Britain's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by migrants coming to live here from other countries?

[0 Cultural life undermined, 5 Neither, 10 Cultural life enriched]

A decade of high migration levels, and prominent political debates about the effects of immigration, have not been well-received by the British public

Table 2.2 presents the answers provided in 2011, compared with data from the 2002 European Social Survey, which asked almost identical questions.⁵ Although the British in the early-2000s strongly favoured reductions in migration levels, their views about migration impacts are more evenly divided: the net rating of the economic impact of migration was modestly negative (-17), while the net rating of the cultural impact was positive (+11). Much of the demand for reduction seen in 2003 may have reflected concern about the likely future effects of continued high migration rather than a perception that immigrants had already had significant negative effects.

In 2011, the public's verdict on impacts was more downbeat. The net rating of economic impacts fell five points to -22, while the net rating of cultural impacts swung more sharply, falling 25 points to -14. The largest increases in both cases were in the share judging migration's effects as very negative (i.e. "extremely bad for the economy" or "cultural life undermined"). A decade of high migration levels, and prominent political debates about the effects of immigration, have not been well-received by the British public. Despite the hard economic times, it also seems that it is concerns about culture which have risen the most over the decade. However, despite this negative shift, nearly half of respondents (48 per cent) perceive the economic impact of migration to be neutral or positive and slightly more than half (51 per cent) feel the same way about the cultural impact. Even after the largest and most sustained inflow of migration in British history, the public remain much more evenly divided when they think about the effects of the migrants who have already settled than when they are asked about whether more migrants should be allowed into the country.

Table 2.2 Views of the economic and cultural impact of immigration, 2002 and 2011⁶

Views of immigration impacts	2002	2011	Change 2002-2011
Economic impact	%	%	
Very good	2	5	+3
Good	24	25	+1
Neither good nor bad	28	18	-10
Bad	32	31	-1
Very bad	11	21	+10
Net rating (good-bad)	-17	-22	-5
Cultural impact	%	%	
Very good	6	8	+2
Good	38	26	-12
Neither good nor bad	22	17	-5
Bad	24	27	+3
Very bad	9	21	+12
Net rating (good-bad)	+11	-14	-25
<i>Weighted base</i>	1995	3311	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2052	3311	

Source for 2002: European Social Survey

Having looked at views about inflows and impacts separately, we now move to consider the relationship between the two. Table 2.3 examines whether overall views about immigration's effects and demands for reduced inflows are more closely related to judgements about economic effects or about cultural effects. Views about immigration's effects were summarised using responses to the following question included on the 2011 survey:

Using this card, please tell me on a scale of 0 to 10 how good or bad you think the settlement of migrants in the last ten years has been for Britain?

[0 Extremely bad, 5 Neither, 10 Extremely good]

Overall opinion of the settlement of migrants is negative, with 60 per cent of respondents rating the impact negatively, and only 24 per cent holding a positive view (a net negative rating of -36). Interestingly, this overall rating is more negative than ratings of either the economic or cultural impacts of migration, so many respondents were negative about migration overall despite being positive about its economic or cultural effects.

60%

rate the settlement of migrants as bad for Britain

Table 2.3 shows that both areas of concern clearly have a strong relationship with overall judgements about migration impacts and demands for reduction: more than eight in ten of those who are negative about the economic or the cultural impact of immigration also view immigration negatively overall, and want it reduced. However, we also see more evidence of a ‘default’ demand for reduction in immigration levels: over half of those rating the economic and cultural impacts of immigration as “good” still want to see inflows reduced, and more than three in ten of those who rate the impacts as “very good” feel likewise. This finding demonstrates how different the issues of immigration levels and its cultural impacts are in the public mind.

Table 2.3 Overall assessments of immigration and immigration levels, by perceptions of economic and cultural impact⁶

	% with negative assessments of immigration overall	% wanting immigration reduced	Weighted base	Unweighted base
Economic impact				
Very good	12	35	148	130
Good	21	54	819	752
Neither good nor bad	43	74	498	610
Bad	85	90	1029	1040
Very bad	94	93	687	745
Cultural impact				
Very good	15	31	252	211
Good	33	64	871	821
Neither good nor bad	52	74	571	604
Bad	77	89	888	893
Very bad	95	93	682	736

How have perceptions of the impacts of immigration changed across the public as a whole? One possibility is that anxieties have become more widespread, spreading from social groups who were already concerned about migration impacts to other groups who were previously sanguine about its effects. Another is that immigration attitudes have become more socially polarised, with groups who were already negative about migrants becoming more anxious while those who were unconcerned remain so. A third possibility is that concern about migration has become more socially differentiated, with different groups expressing different anxieties. Citizens who are in economically marginal positions may worry more about economic impacts, while those in more secure employment may focus on cultural impacts.

We explore the links between economic and cultural anxieties and judgements about immigration impacts by comparing the attitudes of groups who are more or less likely to feel culturally and economically threatened by immigration. It has been assumed that those with lower or less secure incomes, and those in jobs exposed to immigrant competition, will be more economically threatened by migrants, while cultural threat will be concentrated among those with more negative views of diversity, such as the racially prejudiced, those with low education levels and those with no close social contact with migrants from different cultures.

Table 2.4 presents the results of this analysis. Several key messages emerge. Firstly, even in 2002 there were significant social divisions in judgements about immigration. More economically threatened groups, such as poorer and working class Britons, gave more negative assessments of both the economic and cultural impacts of migration than economically secure groups. For example, less than four in ten of those from a professional occupational group saw immigration as having negative economic impacts, compared with more than five in ten of those from a routine occupational group. The same is true of groups more likely to perceive cultural threat from immigration, such as those with low education levels or admitting to some racial prejudice: such groups are 15 to 25 percentage points more negative about both forms of impact than more cosmopolitan groups such as those with degrees or those with some migrant heritage.

Secondly, attitudes have socially polarised over the decade: in nearly every case, the negative shift in assessments of immigration impacts is much larger for the groups that were already threatened more by migration. The proportion of those with a degree who think immigration has a negative effect culturally has risen by seven percentage points between 2002 and 2011, compared with a 20-point rise for those with no educational qualifications in the same period, who already held more negative views. The British in 2011 are thus much more internally divided about immigration than they were in 2002. Majorities of the more threatened groups are consistently negative about immigration impacts, while among more secure groups most remain positive or neutral.

Finally, this polarisation is more evident on views about the economic impact of immigration. Economically comfortable and culturally more cosmopolitan groups show little change in their assessments of economic impacts, but economically and socially insecure groups have become dramatically more hostile. By contrast, all groups have become at least somewhat more negative about the cultural effects of migration, although this change has been more marked for those groups likely to feel more culturally threatened by immigration. This may reflect the dual impact of both immigration and recession on the more economically marginal groups in society. As the recession has taken hold, the experiences of more economically marginal groups such as those with low or insecure incomes may have diverged from the more secure groups in society, as both their general economic anxiety and their specific concerns about immigration have risen.

 **As the recession has taken hold, the experiences of more economically marginal groups may have diverged from the more secure groups in society** 

Table 2.4 Negative views of immigration impacts, by economic and cultural characteristics, 2002 and 2011⁷

% negative assessments of immigration (0–4)	Economic impact			Cultural impact		
	2002	2011	Change 2002–2011	2002	2011	Change 2002–2011
Economic characteristics						
Class						
Professionals	36	40	+4	26	37	+11
Routine	51	62	+11	40	56	+16
Income						
Top quartile	39	39	0	24	37	+13
Bottom quartile	47	61	+14	40	54	+14
Subjective income						
Comfortable	40	48	+8	30	44	+14
Struggling	47	62	+15	33	58	+25
Cultural characteristics						
Education						
Degree or higher	26	30	+4	17	24	+7
No qualifications	51	66	+15	42	62	+20
Migrant heritage						
1st or 2nd generation migrant	30	29	-1	18	26	+8
British born, British parents	46	58	+12	36	53	+17
Racial prejudice						
None ⁸	36	42	+6	26	35	+9
Some or a lot	59	71	+12	48	68	+20

Source for 2002: European Social Survey

Less migration or more selective migration?

Given the strength of public feeling about migration, it is no surprise that the Coalition has prioritised reduction and control. But a focus solely on aggregate attitudes can be misleading – does the public want all forms of migration reduced, or are they more accepting of migrants they perceive as having more to offer? The government emphasises both ideas in its migration policy, pressing for an overall cap on numbers but also pushing for stricter regulation of migrant qualifications through reforms such as tightening the points system and imposing English language criteria. In this section we focus on answering two questions. Firstly, how responsive is the public to differences in the characteristics and region of origin of migrants? Secondly, how do anxieties about the economic and cultural impacts of immigration affect the patterns of selection? For example, do those who worry about economic impacts place greater stress on economic selection criteria, while those who worry about cultural impacts stress selection by origin region?

To test the effect of these influences, we conducted a series of survey experiments. Respondents were given brief descriptions of three migrant groups and, in each case, asked whether they regarded settlement of migrants like this as good or bad for Britain. What respondents did not know was that each group description they saw was randomly varied. Each respondent was asked one question about labour migrants, one about students and one about family reunion migration. Respondents were read the introduction below and were then asked three different questions, with the characteristics in brackets being randomly allocated:

I would now like to ask you about some of the groups of migrants who come to settle in Britain. For each group, I would like you to indicate whether you think accepting these migrants is a bad thing or a good thing for Britain.

[Highly qualified professionals/Unskilled labourers] from [East European countries like Poland/Muslim countries like Pakistan] [who have been recruited to fill jobs where there are labour shortages/who have come to Britain to search for work].

Students with [good grades/poor grades] from [West European countries like Germany/East European countries like Poland/Muslim countries like Pakistan⁹/East Asian countries like China].

Migrants from [West European countries like Germany/East European countries like Poland/Muslim countries like Pakistan/African countries like Nigeria] bringing over their wife and children after living in Britain for [3 years/10 years].

[0 Extremely bad, 5 Neither, 10 Extremely good]

Because respondents were randomly assigned to different group descriptions, when we compare their responses we can be confident that any statistically significant difference is the product of having been asked about different groups.

Despite being negative about migration overall, Britons are in fact supporters of professional migrants

The results of the first such experiment, focusing on labour migration, are shown in Table 2.5. Here we varied three characteristics of the migrant group – their qualifications (professionals or unskilled labourers), their region of origin (Eastern Europe or Muslim countries such as Pakistan) and their reason for migration (to fill jobs or to search for work). All three of these factors have substantial effects on attitudes, and the very large differences in reactions to different kinds of migrants demonstrate how misleading it is to speak of public views about “immigrants” as a homogenous group. The largest impact comes from migrant qualifications: in every condition where the migrant group is described as “professionals” supporters outweigh opponents by 20 points or more. For example, net support for professional migrants from Eastern Europe is +39 when they come to fill jobs, and +33 when they come searching for work. When migrants are described as unskilled labourers, opponents outweigh supporters by even greater margins. For example, net support for unskilled labourers coming from Eastern Europe to search for work is -51; for similar migrants coming from Pakistan the figure is even lower: -69. Respondents take migrants’ qualifications very seriously: despite being negative about migration overall, Britons are in fact net supporters of professional migrants, regardless of their circumstances or origins, but are strongly opposed to unskilled labour migration, again regardless of circumstances or origins.

Table 2.5 Views of labour migrants, by migrant characteristics⁶

	Migrants from Eastern Europe				Migrants from Muslim countries like Pakistan			
	Professionals		Unskilled labourers		Professionals		Unskilled labourers	
	Filling jobs	Search- ing for work	Filling jobs	Search- ing for work	Filling jobs	Search- ing for work	Filling jobs	Search- ing for work
Settlement of these migrants is ...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... very good for Britain	17	14	2	2	13	12	2	2
... good for Britain	46	45	27	17	48	40	15	8
... neither good nor bad for Britain	12	14	13	10	15	17	11	11
... bad for Britain	16	17	32	39	15	17	39	36
... very bad for Britain	8	9	24	31	7	13	32	43
Net support (good–bad)	+39	+33	-27	-51	+39	+22	-54	-69
<i>Weighted base</i>	437	449	390	391	381	442	414	407
<i>Unweighted base</i>	422	447	397	405	372	436	420	412

Region of origin and motive for migration also have robust, albeit smaller, effects on how migrants are perceived. Net support for migrants coming from Muslim countries such as Pakistan is on average lower than identically-described migrants coming from Eastern Europe, suggesting that concerns about cultural difference significantly reduce support for migrants. However, this effect is smaller for professionals searching for work, and not observed at all for professionals coming in to fill jobs. This is an important nuance that public debate has completely failed to recognise, and it suggests that a positive economic profile can override cultural concerns (or possibly that cultural concerns are weaker in relation to professionals – perhaps because they are seen to be ‘more like us’). The reason for migration has a similar effect, with support for migration consistently lower when migrants are described as searching for work rather than filling jobs where there are labour shortages. For example, net support for Muslim professional migrants is +39 when they come to fill jobs, but falls to +22 when they come to search for work. The gap is once again larger for unskilled labourers than for professionals, and is larger still for unskilled labourers from Eastern Europe: net support falls from -27 for those filling jobs to -51 for East Europeans coming to search for work. This suggests particular public sensitivity about the inflow of labourers from the A8 countries, the principal source of unskilled labour migration in recent years.

Table 2.6 shows us how the differences discussed above appear to reflect individual views about the general economic and cultural impact of migration. Those who are more negative about immigration's economic impact discriminate more strongly in favour of professional migrants and those with jobs, as we might expect. Specifically, those who think the economic impact of migration is negative have a net preference for professionals over labourers of 45 percentage points, while for those who are positive about the economic effects of migration the figure is 10 points lower at +35. They are less likely, however, to discriminate in favour of East Europeans over Muslims. Those with stronger cultural concerns about immigration are also more likely to favour professional migrants over labourers, perhaps because they perceive highly educated professionals as more able to integrate. However, despite widely documented anxieties about the integration of British Muslims, respondents who are more negative about the cultural effects of migration do not discriminate more strongly against Muslim migrants than those who are positive about the cultural impact of migration.

Table 2.6 Patterns of preference for different migrant groups, by views of the economic and cultural impact of migration

	Net preference for professionals over labourers	Net preference for those with jobs over searching	Net preference for East Europeans over Muslims	Weighted base	Unweighted base
Respondents who think economic impact is positive	+35	+7	+15	966	882
Respondents who think economic impact is negative	+45	+11	+5	1714	1785
Difference in net preference (positive–negative responses)	-10	-4	+10		
Respondents who think cultural impact is positive	+37	+8	+6	1122	1032
Respondents who think cultural impact is negative	+47	+8	+8	1567	1629
Difference in net preference (positive–negative responses)	-10	0	-2		

Net preference is defined as the difference in net support between the more preferred and less preferred groups

The evidence from our first experiment shows the public take distinctions between labour market migrants seriously, and respond to them regardless of how they feel about the economic and cultural impacts of immigration. We next turn to our final two experiments, to explore whether the same is true of student migration and family reunion migration.

As noted previously, the largest group of migrants in the past few years has been students coming to learn in British colleges and universities. Yet there is little evidence on how the public regard such migrants. In our survey experiment, as shown earlier, we varied two characteristics: their grades (good or bad) and their region of origin (Western Europe, Eastern Europe, East Asia or Muslim countries). The results are presented in Table 2.7. Two findings are apparent. First, qualifications are a central factor driving reactions to student migrants. Supporters of students with good grades consistently outnumber opponents, regardless of region of origin, while opposition to the entry of students with bad grades is very strong, again regardless of where they come from. For example, net support for students from East Asia is +24 when they have good grades but -63 when they have poor grades. Our experiment thus suggests the British favour admitting students from all quarters of the world, as long as they are strong performers.

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It is also clear that region of origin matters little: it has no impact in the “bad grades” condition and only Muslim students are regarded differently in the “good grades” condition, with net support lower by about 10 points, though it remains positive. This suggests concerns about cultural difference and integration do not have a strong impact on public reactions to student migrants, although there are clearly some reservations about Muslim students. We cannot say for sure why this is, but it seems likely that the more transitory nature of student migrants¹⁰ and the higher levels of education and English language skills students must have in order to study in Britain, contribute to a perception that most students do not pose serious integration problems, though media stories about extremism on university campuses may have increased concerns about Muslim students. However, although those with positive grades are positively regarded, student migrants are on balance slightly less popular than professional workers.

Table 2.7 Views of student migrants, by migrant characteristics⁶

	Student migrants with good grades			Student migrants with bad grades				
	From West Europe	From East Europe	From Muslim countries	From East Asia	From West Europe	From East Europe	From Muslim countries	From East Asia
Settlement of these migrants is ...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... very good for Britain	9	7	8	7	2	1	1	1
... good for Britain	41	43	35	44	9	9	9	9
... neither good nor bad for Britain	20	17	22	19	17	14	13	15
... bad for Britain	18	21	20	20	42	45	44	44
... very bad for Britain	10	12	13	7	29	30	30	29
Net support (good–bad)	+22	+17	+10	+24	-60	-65	-64	-63
<i>Weighted base</i>	414	415	379	421	419	410	396	457
<i>Unweighted base</i>	412	414	396	421	426	400	394	448

Our third survey experiment examined public views about family reunion migration. We varied two characteristics – how long the primary migrant had been in the country (three years or 10 years), and which region they came from (Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Africa or Muslim countries). Table 2.8 shows that three stories emerge from the results. Firstly, respondents are consistently negative about family reunion migration. Regardless of where the relatives are migrating from, or how long the primary migrant has been in the country, the balance of opinion is negative. Note that our question focuses on whether the settlement of family is “good or bad for Britain” so it is possible that many respondents would support admitting family members on other grounds – compassion or human rights, for example – while still regarding their admission as negative for Britain. Nonetheless, the public clearly do perceive more problems with family reunion migrants than they do with economic or student migrants. This may relate to a perception that the family reunion migration system is more open to abuse,¹¹ that family reunion migrants impose more economic costs or that the migration of relatives poses more problems for integration.

It is also clear that region of origin has a larger impact on reactions to family reunion migrants than it did in the previous two experiments. Net support for settled migrants from the least favoured regions – Africa and the Muslim world – bringing over their relatives is around 30 points lower than it is for migrants bringing relatives from Western Europe, the most favoured region. Eastern Europe falls half-way between these two extremes. Perhaps this is because family members from such regions are regarded as less likely to speak English or to work. They may therefore be regarded as more culturally different, posing greater integration problems, than family members settling from elsewhere within Europe. Further work is needed to probe the nature of these concerns and examine which policy options, if any, would assuage them.

Respondents also recognise, and respond to, the length of time a migrant has been settled in the country. Net reactions to migrants settled for 10 years bringing over family members are between 13 and 17 points less negative than when the primary migrant has been in Britain for three years. This is not because respondents feel obliged to express a more favourable view of the longer-settled migrant – each respondent answers only one question on family migrants, so the difference is purely the result of whether they were randomly assigned to answer about a long-settled or more recently-settled migrant. While further work is needed to understand the reasoning being applied here, respondents clearly recognise and respond to a longer period of settlement in the country. This may reflect a commitment to reciprocity – rewarding longer commitment to Britain with more favourable treatment – or it may reflect a perception that the families of migrants with longer residence in Britain are less likely to pose integration problems or economic costs. Finally, it may reflect a perception that longer-settled migrants are less likely to abuse the family reunion migration system.

The more favourable reactions to longer-term residents do not result in more equitable treatment of migrants from different regions, however. The ‘ethnic hierarchy’ in reactions to the different regions remains precisely the same, with West Europeans regarded most favourably, followed by East Europeans with net support around 15 points lower, with Africans and Muslim migrants a further 12–20 points behind. White Europeans are consistently preferred to non-white Africans and Muslims, and richer West Europeans preferred to poorer East Europeans. Culture, race and economics may all play a role here. Finally, given the heated public debate about Muslim integration in Britain, it is noteworthy that reactions to migrants explicitly labelled as “Muslim” are no more negative than those to “African” migrants. Although many migrants from the latter group are Muslim, respondents did not show extra hostility to a group explicitly labelled as “Muslim” than to a non-white migrant group whose religious affiliation is not highlighted.

Table 2.8 Views of family reunion migration, by migrant characteristics⁶

	Migrants bringing over their family after living in Britain for three years				Migrants bringing over their family after living in Britain for 10 years			
	From West Europe	From East Europe	From Africa	From Muslim countries	From West Europe	From East Europe	From Africa	From Muslim countries
Settlement of these migrants is ...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... very good for Britain	3	1	2	1	4	3	2	5
... good for Britain	22	19	11	13	30	26	17	17
... neither good nor bad for Britain	24	18	16	14	25	18	17	19
... bad for Britain	33	31	38	33	22	31	35	26
... very bad for Britain	16	29	31	38	18	21	27	31
Net support (good–bad)	-24	-40	-56	-57	-6	-23	-43	-35
<i>Weighted base</i>	460	386	389	412	399	392	407	466
<i>Unweighted base</i>	459	389	392	414	407	399	403	448

Conclusions

The flow of migrants into Britain over the past 15 years has been the largest in British history. The public has reacted to this with strengthened demands for a reduction in migration and increasingly negative views about the cultural and economic impact of migrants on Britain. But even more strikingly, there has been a polarisation between different social groups in their concerns about immigration. While all groups have become more concerned, the trend has been greater among the less qualified and among less-skilled workers.

We have also sought here to move beyond aggregate views about immigration inflows and impacts to gain a more nuanced understanding of reactions to more specific groups of migrants. In three experiments, we looked at how migrants' characteristics were linked to public reactions. What emerges is a broadly pragmatic response: Britons are not opposed to migration across the board, but strongly favour migrants they perceive as being socially beneficial and easy to integrate. It is also clear that, despite the widespread concerns about cultural impact, qualifications trump origins. So professionals and high-quality students are regarded positively, regardless of where they come from, while unskilled labourers and poor-quality students are opposed, regardless of where they come from. Culture comes to the fore in the case of family reunion migration, where the economic case is less clear-cut and where difficulties of integration might be perceived as greater.

The Coalition's goal with immigration policy has been clear from the outset: less immigration overall, and a more selective policy on who is allowed to enter. Immigration minister Damian Green has spoken of a need to end an "addiction to foreign workers" and to focus on toughening selection criteria so Britain has "fewer and better" migrants.¹² Among the criteria that have been debated are more stringent skills criteria for economic migrants, tougher English tests for family reunion migrants and stricter qualification requirements for students and accreditation tests for the institutions admitting them. Our evidence suggests that the broad outlines of this approach are in line with public opinion – more than anything, what sways British voters in favour of migration is the perception that migrants are highly-qualified.

Britons are not opposed to migration across the board, but strongly favour migrants they perceive as being socially beneficial and easy to integrate

Our evidence suggests the British public perhaps take a more sophisticated and nuanced view of the issues than politicians seem to recognise at present

While the current policy framework broadly chimes with public demands for less and more selective migration, it remains poorly-designed to address more specific public concerns about different migrant groups. Limits are imposed on groups of migrants who do not concern the public, such as professionals from outside Europe, but are not imposed on other groups who generate concerns, such as East European labourers or family reunion migrants from more culturally-different regions of origin. Partly this reflects the constraints the current government must operate within, in terms of EU treaties and international law. However, it also reflects a tension produced by the desire to deliver a sharp overall reduction to migration inflows when many inflows cannot be controlled. The consequence is a pressure to impose sharp cuts to migration inflows regarded positively (again, students, professionals) in order to meet the overall target because other, less popular, migrant flows cannot be easily controlled by policy (e.g. eastern European workers). Given this tension, more targeted measures and limits focused on the groups which actually generate public concern might be preferable. Our evidence suggests the British public perhaps take a more sophisticated and nuanced view of the issues than politicians seem to recognise at present, and, setting aside the current constraint, Britain would benefit from a policy response which reflected this nuance.

Notes

1. More meetings were called by Prime Minister Tony Blair in relation to asylum between 2001 and 2004 than any other issue apart from Iraq (Spencer, 2009: 359).
2. Speech by immigration minister Damian Green, 15th September 2011, available at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/speeches/family-migration
3. In particular, the sharp fall in net migration in 2008 reflects a major exodus that year following a dramatic deterioration in economic conditions.
4. Though controls are applied to the 'A2' – Romania and Bulgaria – and were recently extended.
5. Respondents to the 2002 European Social Survey were asked the following questions:

***Would you say it is generally bad or good for Britain's economy that people come to live here from other countries? Please use this card.
[0 Bad for the economy, 10 Good for the economy]***

***And, using this card, would you say that Britain's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?
[0 Cultural life undermined, 10 Cultural life enriched]***

6. This table is a transformation of the original data, which asked respondents to rate the impacts of migration on a 0–10 scale. We have coded scores of 0–1 as “very bad”, 2–4 as “bad”, 5 as “neither good nor bad”, 6–8 as “good” and 9–10 as “very good”.

7. Bases for Table 2.4 are as follows:

	Weighted base		Unweighted base	
	2002	2011	2002	2011
Economic factors				
Class				
Professionals	799	1155	802	1177
Routine	459	963	463	955
Income				
Top quartile	716	641	630	799
Bottom quartile	306	657	397	579
Subjective income				
Comfortable	850	493	818	481
Struggling	240	236	262	240
Cultural factors				
Education				
Degree	523	473	524	435
No qualifications	1065	636	1107	743
Migrant heritage				
1st or 2nd generation migrant	330	681	325	600
British born, British parents	1722	2629	1727	2711
Racial prejudice				
None	1304	1338	1288	1328
Some or a lot	746	820	766	831

8. Racial prejudice is measured slightly differently in the two surveys. On the European Social Survey this refers to levels of discomfort about a relative marrying an immigrant from a different ethnic group. On British Social Attitudes respondents were asked to rate their level of racial prejudice, with three categories: “a lot”, “a little” or “none”. The cut points in the European Social Survey data are chosen to reflect the same general distribution as these categories.
9. In our experiments, we repeatedly use “Muslim countries” as a comparison region, usually using Pakistan and Bangladesh as examples. This is for two reasons. Firstly, Muslim countries have been a large source of migrants to Britain for several decades. Secondly, Muslims and Muslim migrants have featured very heavily in recent debates over migration and integration, so much so that some authors have argued they have become singled out as a ‘pariah’ group (Saggar, 2010). We therefore wanted to test if public concerns about immigrants who are clearly labelled as Muslims were stronger than those about immigrants from other regions.
10. A 2010 Home Office report suggested 79 per cent of 2004 student migrants had left the UK by 2010 (Acható et al., 2010).
11. Searches of the websites of Britain’s two largest populist ‘tabloid’ newspapers – The Sun and The Daily Mail – reveal many stories about abuse of the family migration system, focusing in particular on fraudulent ‘sham marriages’ and on the problem of ‘forced’ or ‘arranged’ marriages. These stories also tend to focus on migrants from poorer non-white regions such as Africa and the Muslim countries of the Indian sub-continent, which may explain why support for migrants from these regions is particularly low.
12. Speech by Immigration minister Damian Green, 2nd February 2012, available at: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/speeches/making-immigration-work?version=1

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Appendix

Table A.1 Total and net migration inflow, 1991–2011

Year	Migration inflow	
	Total migration	Net migration
1991	329,000	44,000
1992	268,000	-13,000
1993	266,000	-1,000
1994	315,000	77,000
1995	312,000	76,000
1996	318,000	55,000
1997	327,000	48,000
1998	391,000	140,000
1999	454,000	163,000
2000	479,000	158,000
2001	481,000	171,000
2002	516,000	153,000
2003	511,000	148,000
2004	589,000	245,000
2005	567,000	206,000
2006	596,000	198,000
2007	574,000	233,000
2008	590,000	163,000
2009	567,000	198,000
2010	591,000	252,000
2011	589,000	252,000

Source: Office for National Statistics, Long Term International Migration Estimates
2011 figure is estimate for year to September

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