

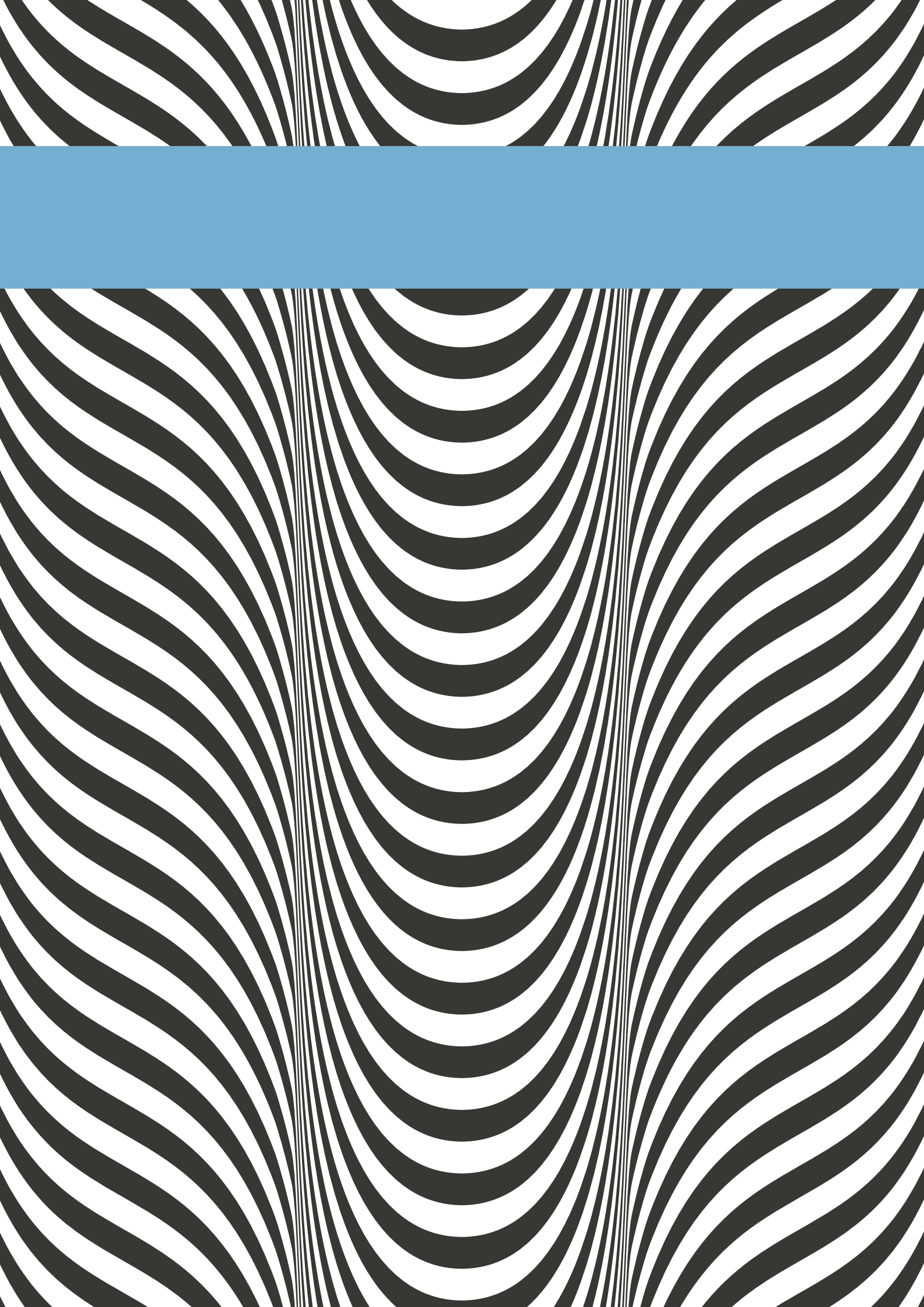


Perceptions and Reality

10 things we should know
about attitudes to
immigration in the UK

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Perceptions

and

Reality

10 things we should know about attitudes to immigration in the UK

Ipsos MORI has completed a major review of attitudes towards immigration for Unbound Philanthropy (please see: www.ipsos-mori.com/immigration-review). The review is designed to be as comprehensive and balanced as possible, to act as a resource for those interested in public opinion on immigration.

This summary document picks out 10 key messages from the full review.

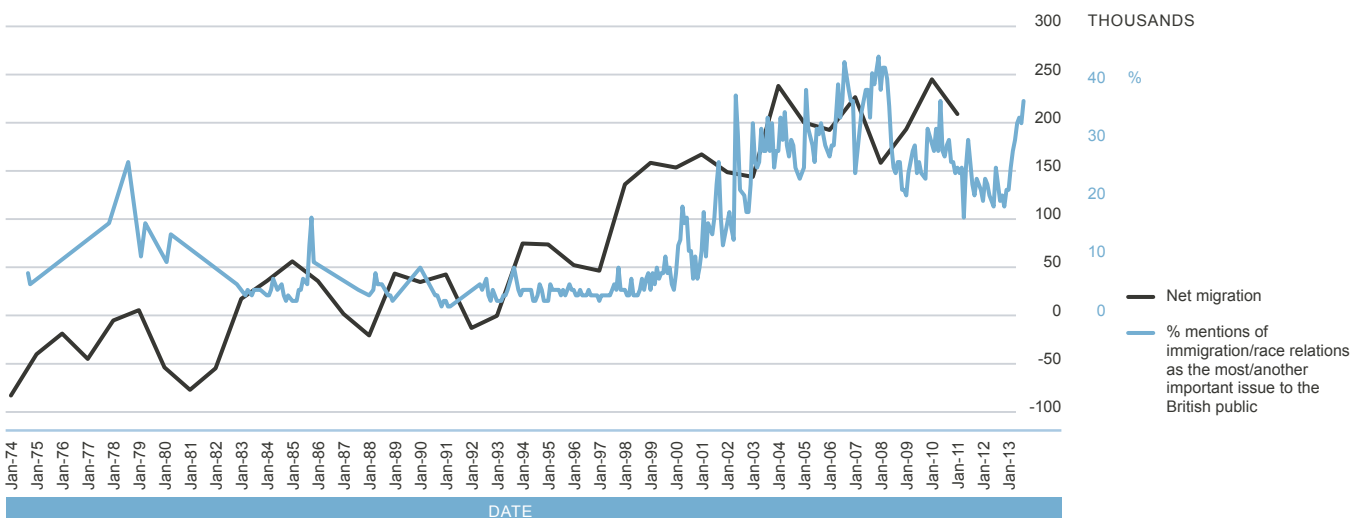
1. We weren't always this worried about immigration...

National concern increased following the rise in numbers...

The surge in concern about immigration as a national issue in the early 2000s (as measured by Ipsos MORI's Issues Index) followed rather than preceded the increase in immigrant numbers. In fact, there was a lag: it took a while for the public to notice and become concerned about the steep increase in net migration from 1999 onwards.

Of course, the relationship is far from perfect, and it is not possible from this simple pattern to say that the increase in numbers is directly driving views. But the relationship is clear enough to conclude that the number of immigrants is important to public attitudes.

Figure 1: Immigration as an important issue by UK net migration, 1974 - 2013

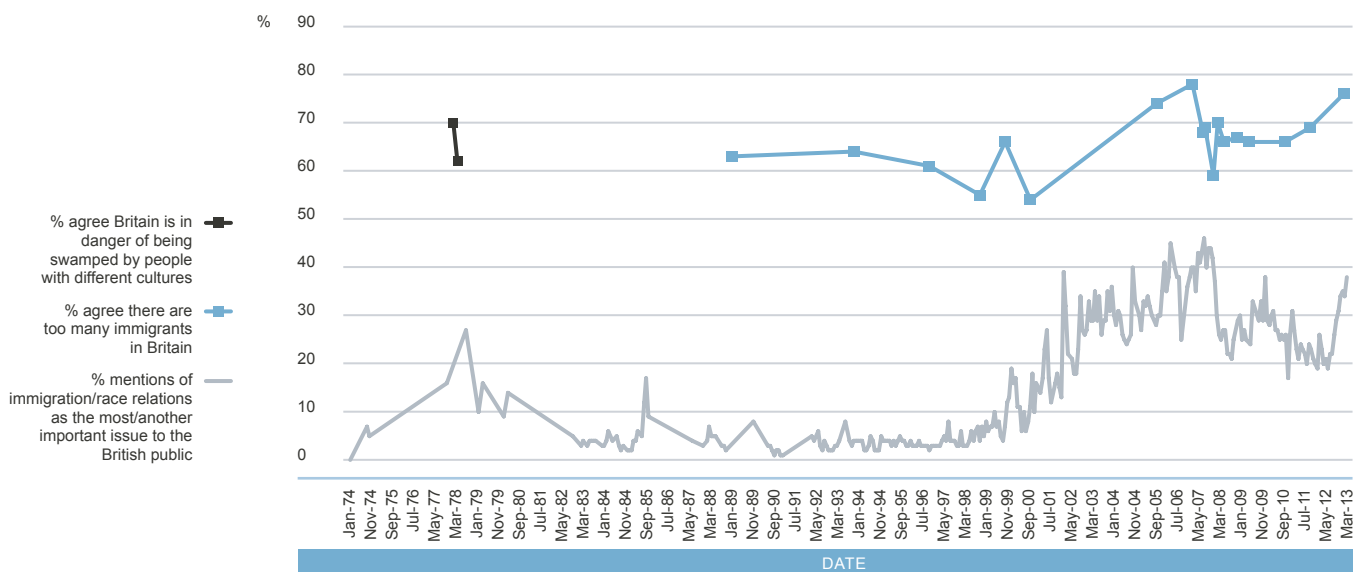


...but the majority have been against immigration for much longer...

However, many other measures of concern about immigration have relatively little relationship with changes in net migration levels. Agreement with the statement that there are “too many immigrants” was 63% in 1989 when immigration was barely registering on the Issues Index and migration figures were still low, as Figure 2 below shows. Going further back, in 1978, up to 70% of the public agreed we were in danger of “being swamped” by other cultures, when net migration was around 0.

This suggests that even if immigration is much reduced, we are still likely to see a high baseline of concern when measuring views through these types of questions: nearly two-thirds wanted a reduction in immigration in 1995 when net migration was running at around 60,000, so there is a good chance we will see agreement with these types of question remain high even if the government can get back down to “tens of thousands”.

Figure 2: Immigration as an important issue compared with other measures of concern about immigration, among the British public

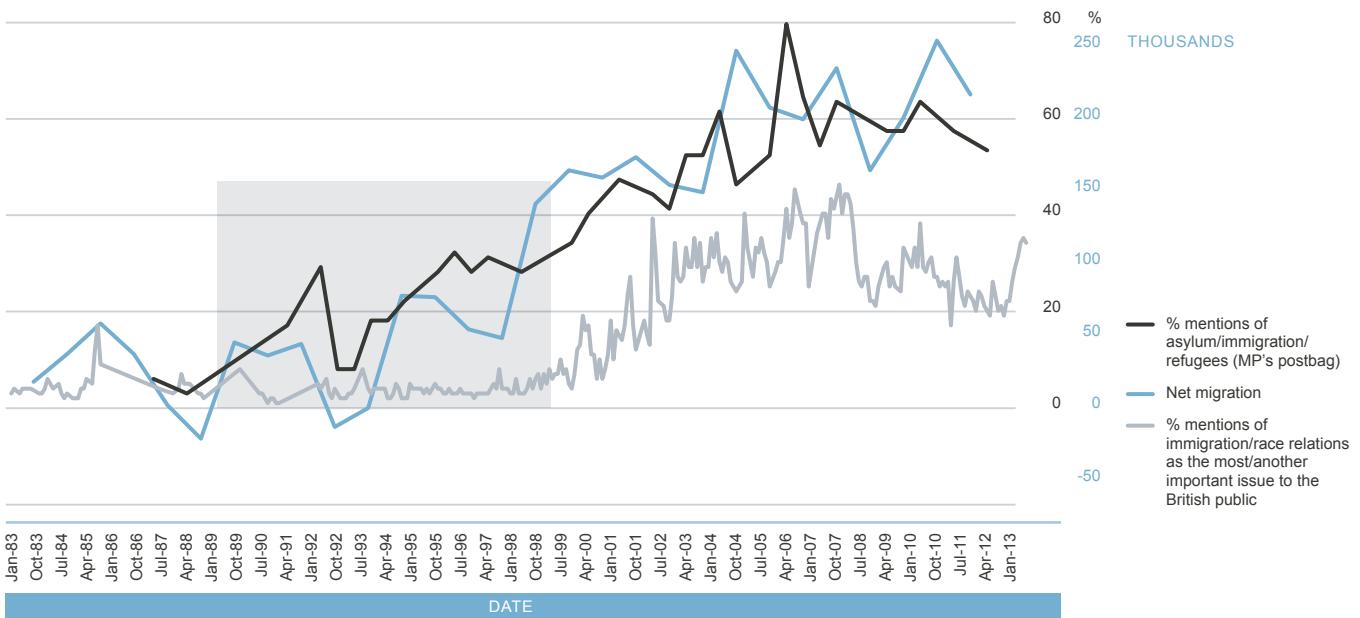


... and people started writing to their MPs before general concern rose

Figure 3 shows net migration levels and the Issues Index results against results from a question on our regular survey of MPs, which asks them what issues their constituents have raised with them (a measure of “MPs’ Postbag”). And it’s clear that the rising salience of immigration reported by MPs appears to pre-date that seen in the Issues Index, and closely matches net migration levels.

It is too strong to say that the MPs’ Postbag data provided an “early warning” of coming national concerns, but it does suggest this more active group who make contact with their MPs were quicker to spot immigration as an issue. Interestingly, we find no similar relationship with other issues: for example, MPs’ Postbag data on crime closely follows the peaks and troughs of national concern, and the consistently high contact with MPs on housing issues seems to be unrelated to the level of national concern.

Figure 3: Immigration as an important issue by mentions of asylum/immigration/refugees to the MPs' postbag question, MPs' Survey, 1983 - 2013



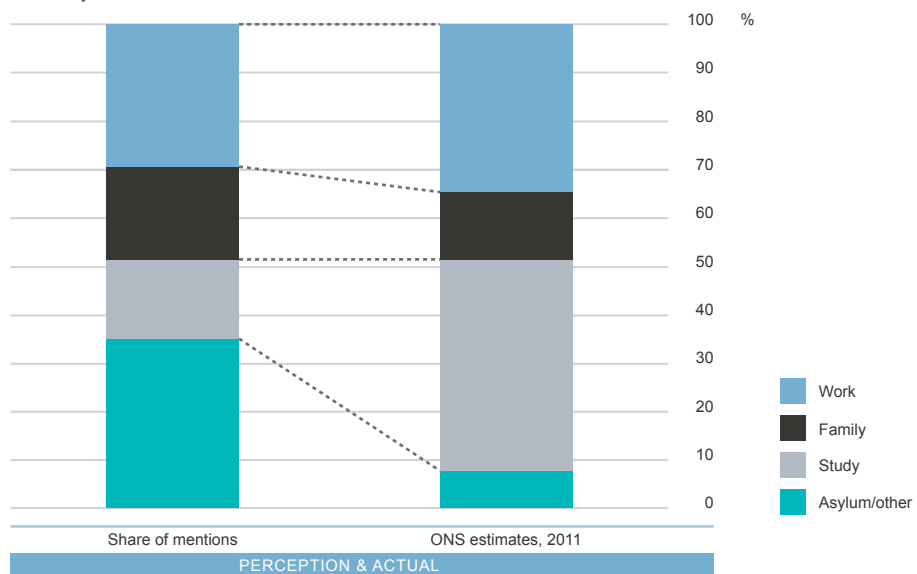
2. People are massively wrong on many aspects of immigration...

...including the size of immigrant populations – but this partly reflects their concerns...

We have a very wrong picture of the scale and nature of immigration. In Ipsos MORI's most recent survey on this, the public's average guess at what proportion the foreign-born population make up of the UK is 31%, compared with the official estimate of around 13%, (which increases to 14% if the central estimate of illegal migrants resident in the UK is taken into account). This is clearly massively out – and while this has been seen across a number of studies, it is still important to remind ourselves that on average people think that three in ten of the population are immigrants.

Figure 4: 'Imagined immigration' vs actual composition of long-term international migration 2011

When you think about 'immigrants', which of these types of people do you normally have in mind?



And these misperceptions are also clear in our view of the make-up of immigrants. The most mentioned are refugees or asylum-seekers, despite these being the least common immigrant type. The least mentioned group were people who come here to study, when in fact students were the largest category of migrant to the UK in 2011. The actual proportions and survey responses are compared in Figure 4 (with the survey responses rebased to represent the share of mentions, to give a clearer idea of relative focus).

So we hugely overestimate the scale of the immigrant population, and our “imagined immigration”ⁱⁱⁱ is focused on groups we are more negative about.

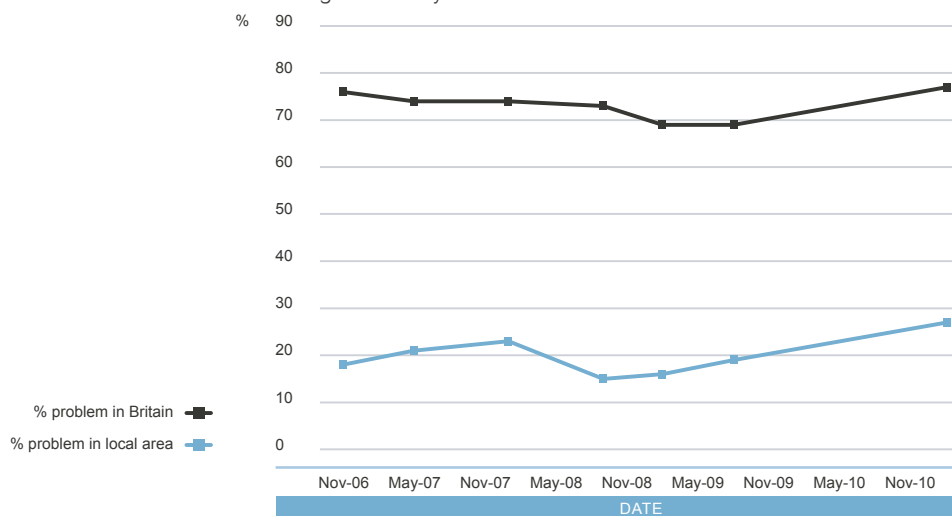
However, we need to be careful to avoid simple conclusions that if we could inform people more effectively about the real scale and nature of immigration that this would shift views significantly. This is not just because of the challenge with this message being heard and believed – although it’s worth noting that when we tell people the real scale of immigration in surveys, the most common response is to not believe the figures.

More importantly, we need to recognise that cause and effect in these type of estimation questions is complex – we partly overestimate the groups that worry us because they worry us, not the other way round. Social psychologists call this “emotional innumeracy”: we don’t just have “accuracy goals” in mind when answering them, we also have “directional goals”: whether consciously or not, we may be expressing our concern as much as trying to get the right answer.

The important practical point here is that “myth-busting” exercises are likely to have limited impact on concern. But equally we shouldn’t give up on better informing the public. There is a significant danger in accepting that our inaccurate picture of immigration is fine because it partly reflects our concerns and emotional reactions: this is just as partial as the view that if we just informed people fully they will all come to a more “rational” view of immigration.

Figure 5: Immigration as a problem in Britain and the local area

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



... there is also a massive gap between levels of local and national concern – but that doesn’t necessarily make immigration a less important issue

Figure 5 shows responses to a tracker survey Ipsos MORI conducted for the UKBA – and it illustrates the consistent c50 percentage point gap between levels of national and local concern about immigration. This is far from unique across policy areas, but

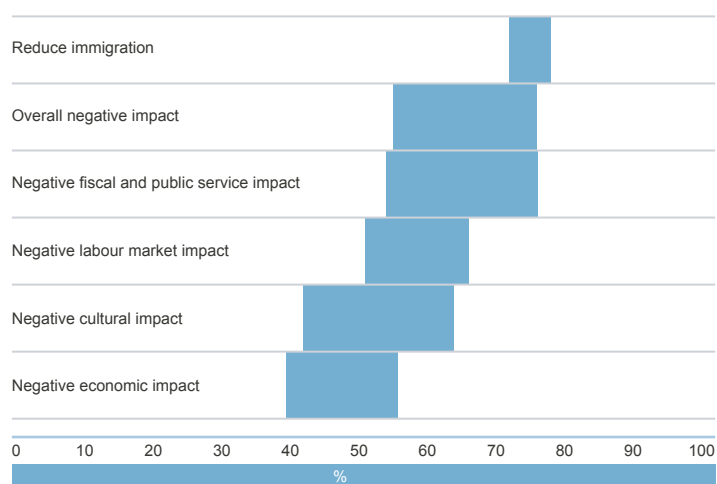
the gap is unusually wide: as a comparison, we typically find a local-national gap with concern about crime of around 30-35 percentage pointsⁱⁱⁱ.

However, this should not lead us to entirely dismiss national concerns as theoretical, a media creation or not impacting on quality of life. For example, people may be basing their opinion on their own personal experience of visiting other areas: we know from detailed questionnaire testing that people often have a very local frame of reference when asked about their “local area” (the few streets around them), and so they may still have personal experience of the impact of immigration that concerns them, in their local town/city or other places they visit regularly.

...our reasons for concern also bear little relationship to “reality”: the most widespread concern tends to be about impact on public services and benefits

We have looked across a very wide range of issues and huge number of questions as part of the review. From this, it’s possible to distinguish a rough picture of the extent of concern about constituent issues around immigration, as Figure 6 shows. Of course, this is crude: there are plenty of exceptions depending on exact question wording, and it provides no indication of strength of feeling within these issues. For example, there may be fewer who object to the cultural impact of immigration, but for many this may be the critical issue (and separate work shows that at an individual level our preferences for cultural unity is the most important driver of overall attitudes to immigration).

Figure 6: Range in public attitudes across multiple surveys towards reducing immigration and its perceived negative impact



However, it does help to identify the focus on the negative fiscal and public service impact of immigration, which is more widespread than economic or even labour market concerns. This bears little relationship to objective assessments of the impact of immigration – immigrants are almost certainly net fiscal contributors, if only because of their younger age profile.

Of course, this perception gap is also entirely understandable. First, people will not have a whole system perspective on the fiscal contribution of immigrants: the tax contribution of immigrants is invisible, but their use of services and receipt of benefits will be visible to many directly and through the media. Second, people will not see the supply of public services as elastic: more money per head may come in as a result of immigration, but local services will not be seen to scale up to reflect the increased numbers, at least in the short-term.

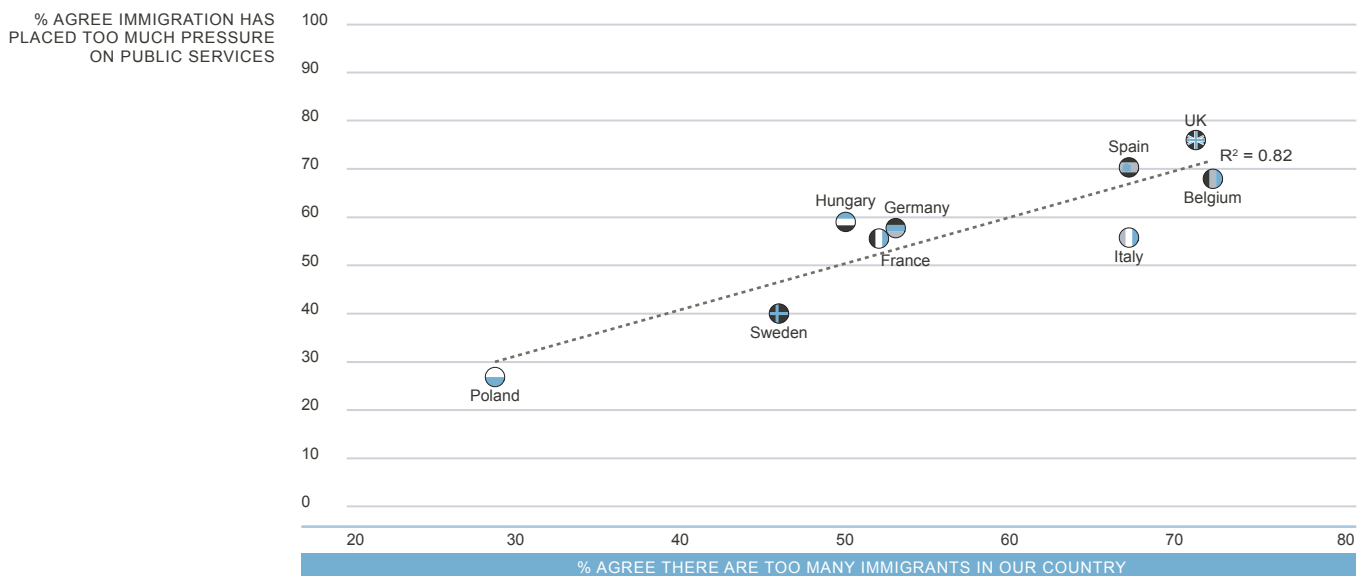
The very high importance placed on pressure on public services is also suggested by simple correlations across international studies. Figure 7 shows, first, the very high agreement in Britain that immigration puts too much pressure on public services (76%). But it also shows the very strong relationship between the belief that there are too many immigrants in the

country and this concern about the impact of migrants on public services. This relationship cannot demonstrate any causal link and is only based on a very small number of country cases - but it is stronger than similar cross-analysis on other issues.

The surveys we've reviewed suggest there is little consensus on discriminating against immigrants in the labour market once they are in the UK: for example, in one survey 45% say that British companies should prioritise British workers, but 47% say that they should give jobs to those with the best skills and qualifications, even if British workers lose out.

However, people are much more willing to discriminate on immigrants' access to welfare benefits and even broader support from public services and the state. This may be explained by our strong sense of fairness, which focuses us on the requirement for people to contribute before taking out (which applies to native-born groups too). The strength of feeling among the public about this aspect of the impact of immigration is added to by the widespread sense that immigrants are actually prioritised over the native population.

Figure 7: Relationship in European countries between the view that there are too many immigrants and the view that immigrants place too much pressure on services



3. We have very different views about different types of immigration

An important limitation of the large majority of survey data on attitudes to “immigration” is that they attempt to sum up views under a single and undefined label, leaving each respondent to answer on the basis of their own unstated conception of who “immigrants” are - which, as we have seen, will often be inaccurate^{iv}.

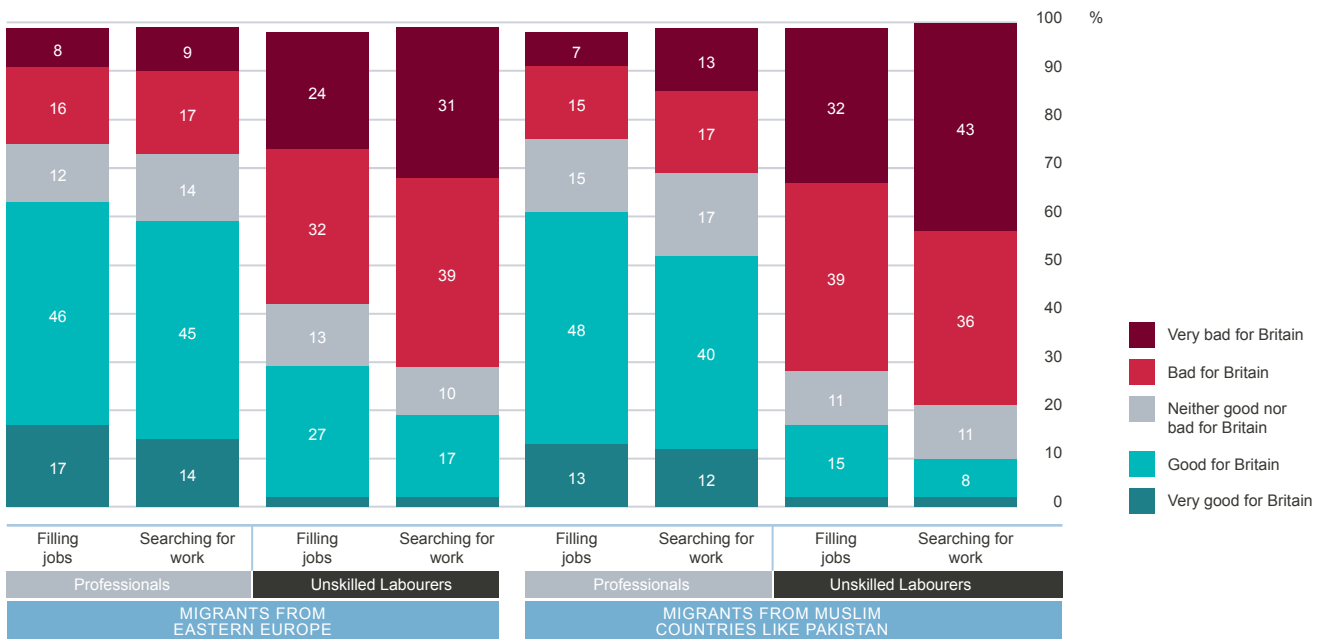
A good illustration of this is seen in the fact that, in two different questions, a majority of us believe that “immigrants” both take jobs from native workers and create jobs. This is not because people are stupid, they will just have a different mental image of immigrants when answering the different questions.

So we need to treat all of these general questions with caution, while not dismissing the concerns they clearly reflect. In particular, we need to look carefully at the less common but important studies on views of specific immigrant groups. These show that immigrants' labour market position, skill level, likelihood of drawing on state resources, their country of origin, their ethnicity, length of stay and legality all affect how we view them.

For example, as Rob Ford's analysis of the 2011 British Social Attitudes Survey illustrates, when migrants were described as professionals, net support for settlement in the UK is very positive, regardless of the migrants' origin or motive for migrating. When migrants were described as unskilled labourers, net support was negative, in each combination with region and motive (as shown in Figure 8).

Figure 8: Views of labour migrants, by migrant characteristics

For each group, please indicate whether you think accepting these migrants is a bad thing or a good thing for Britain.



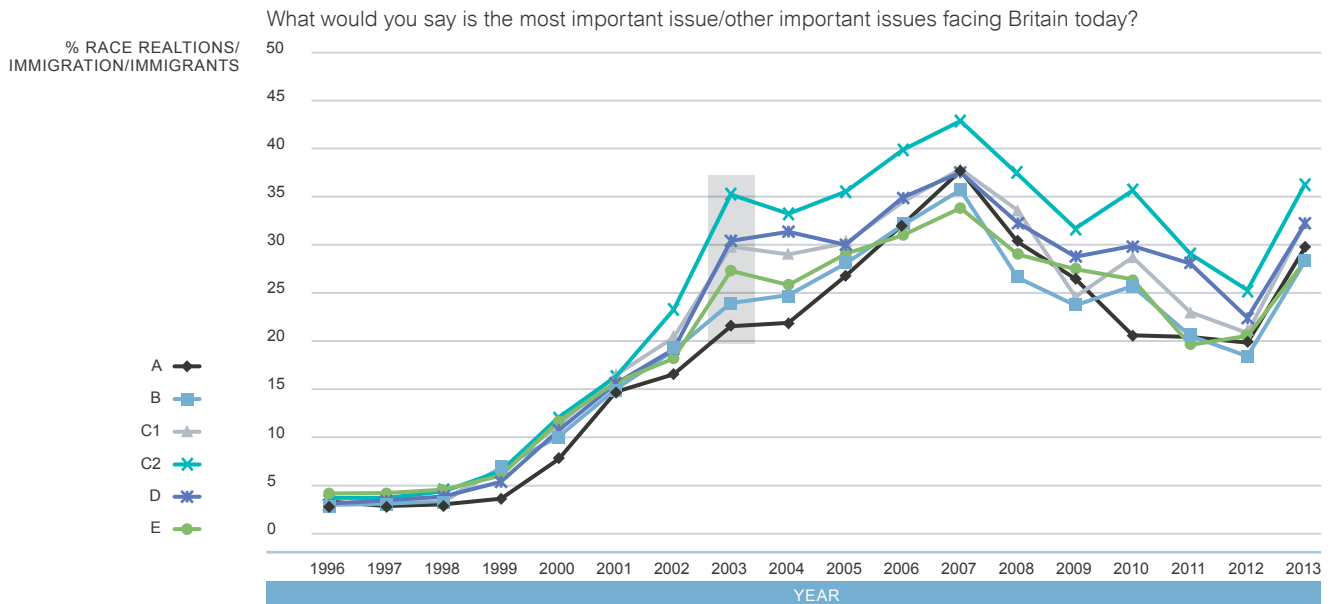
4. Immigration quickly became a class issue – but it is less so now..

It has been argued that too little attention was paid to public concern about immigration, particularly in the early 2000s, partly because elite groups are less affected. This fits with the “policy gap hypothesis” developed by Gary Freeman in 1994, which suggests that, across countries, the more restrictive immigration policy that the public would favour is often not delivered because of the more open perspectives of interest groups both inside and outside government.

And there are clear parallels to this when we look at how concern about immigration developed between social classes. As Figure 9 shows, a gap quickly opened up between the manual classes (for example, C2), at one end and the highest social class at the other (A).

However, this gap was somewhat closed later in the 2000s, and by 2013, there was much less difference between the classes.

Figure 9: Differences by social grade in importance of immigration over time

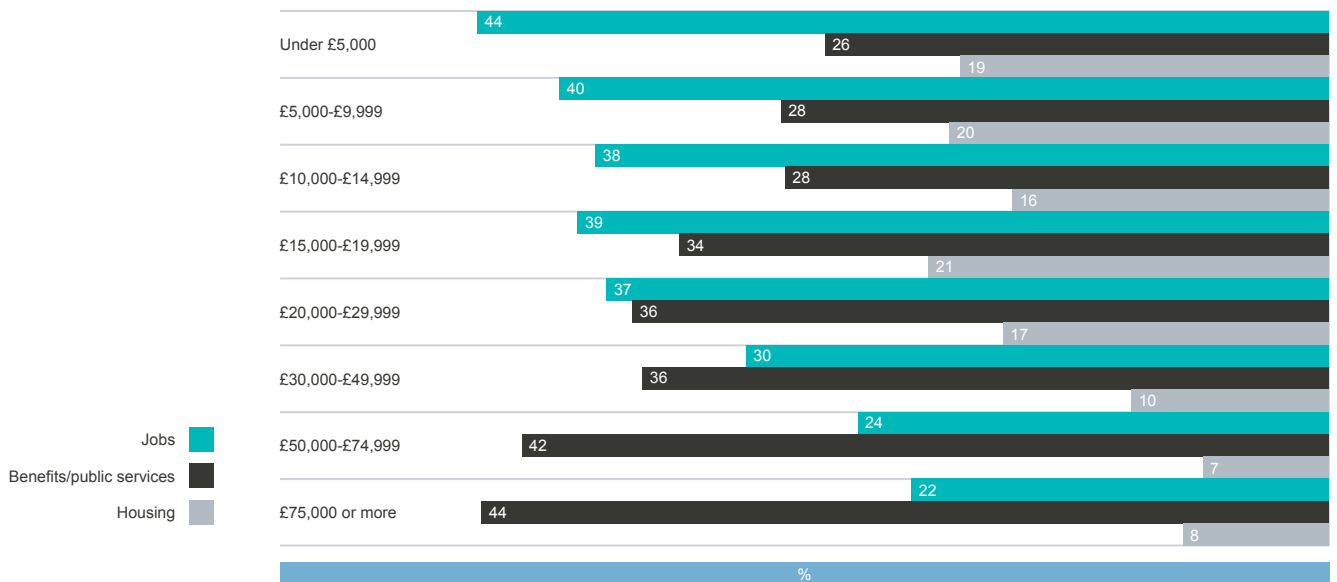


...but different income groups have different reasons for concern...

However there are very different reasons given for concern, depending on economic and social class factors, as our new analysis of the Citizenship Survey suggests (as shown

Figure 10: Reasons given among people who view immigration as a problem in Britain, by income

And why do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be reduced? Why else?



in Figure 10). For example, concern about immigrants as a drain on public service resources rises significantly with income, while job-related concern declines as income rises. Concern about housing is at a similar level for those with incomes below £30,000 per year, and significantly lower for those with incomes above that level.

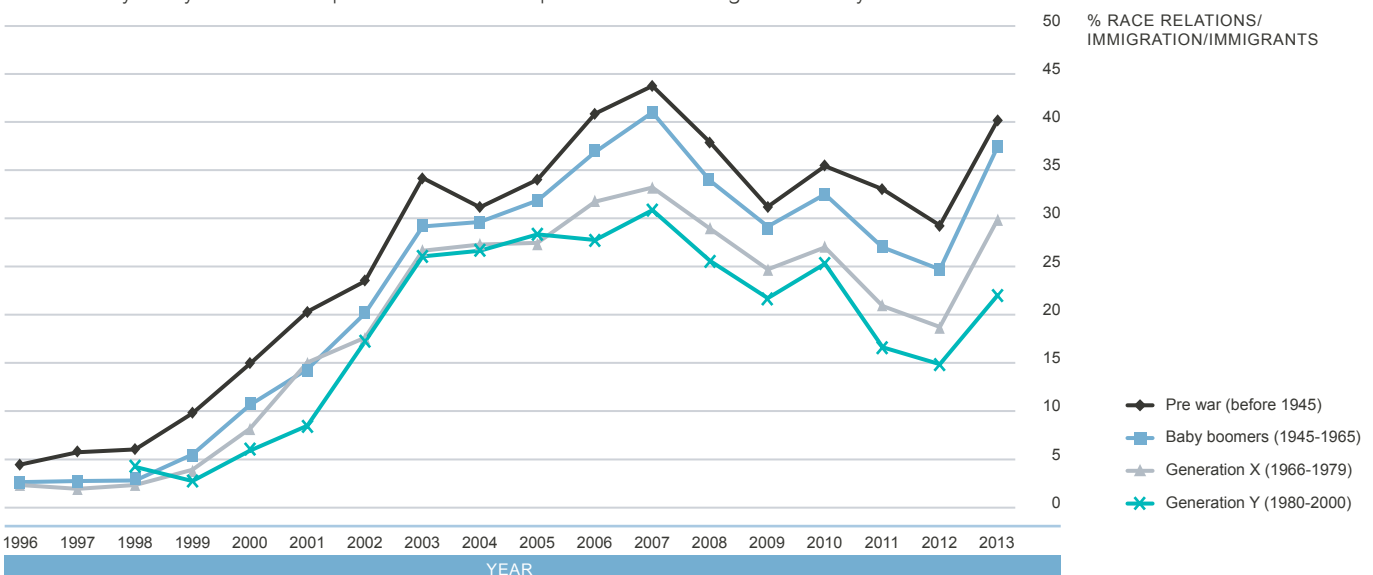
On the one hand, this is very explainable, as better-off groups are less likely to be affected by the employment and housing pressures that immigrants are seen to bring for others. But it also highlights the slightly counter-intuitive point that it is actually the better-off who are most likely to say the reason for their concern is immigrants' impact on public services and benefits.

5. Immigration has also increasingly become a generational issue...

New analysis of Ipsos MORI's Issues Index also shows the importance of age and generation to attitudes on immigration (as shown in Figure 11). Each generation was similarly unconcerned in the mid-1990s, with concern increasing for all in the late 1990s, but at varying rates. In particular, a generation gap opened up, with the oldest cohort most likely to be concerned and the youngest least: by 2013, the pre-war generation were nearly twice as likely as generation Y to consider immigration a problem.

Figure 11: Differences by generation in importance of immigration over time

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



...but views change as we get older too – particularly among baby boomers...

And our new generation-based analysis of British Social Attitudes Survey and European Social Survey questions paints a similar picture – but also highlights the shifting position of baby boomers as they age. As we can see in Figure 12, there is a relatively

large gap on calls to reduce immigration between the pre-war generation and the rest of the population in the mid-90s, but the baby boomers in particular then move closer to this oldest group. This suggests that a lifecycle effect (where concern increases with age) may be working alongside these generational differences (and this is confirmed in our more detailed analysis of Ipsos MORI data).^v

Figure 12: Attitudes to reducing immigration by generation in BSA 1995-2011

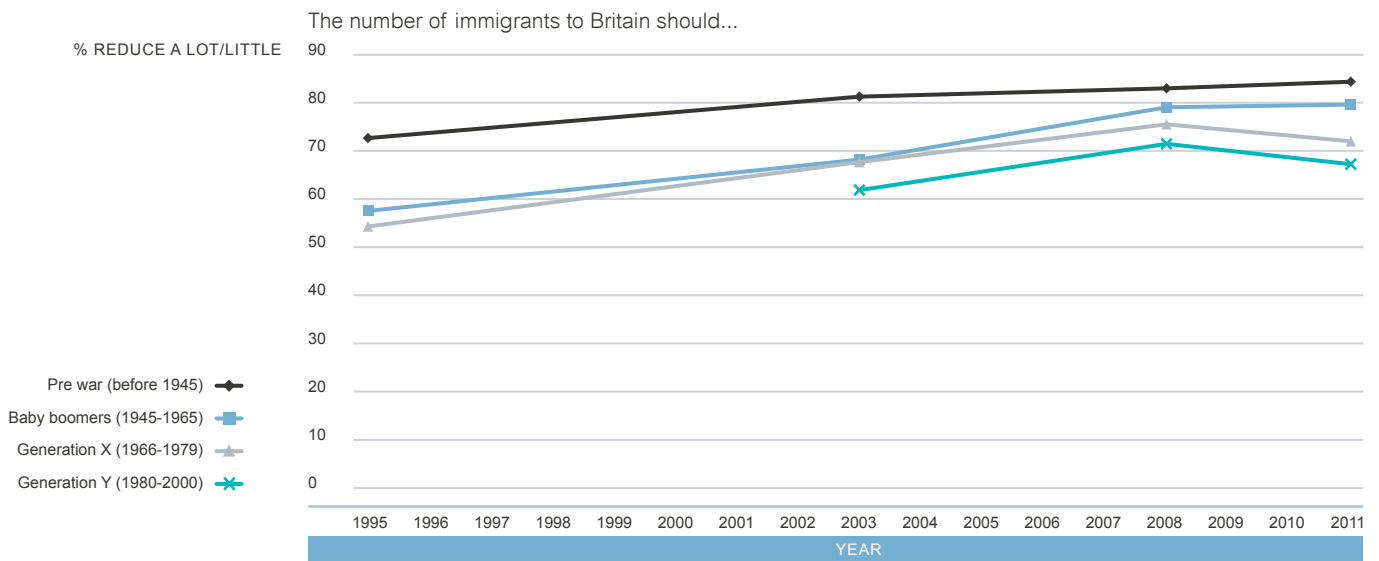
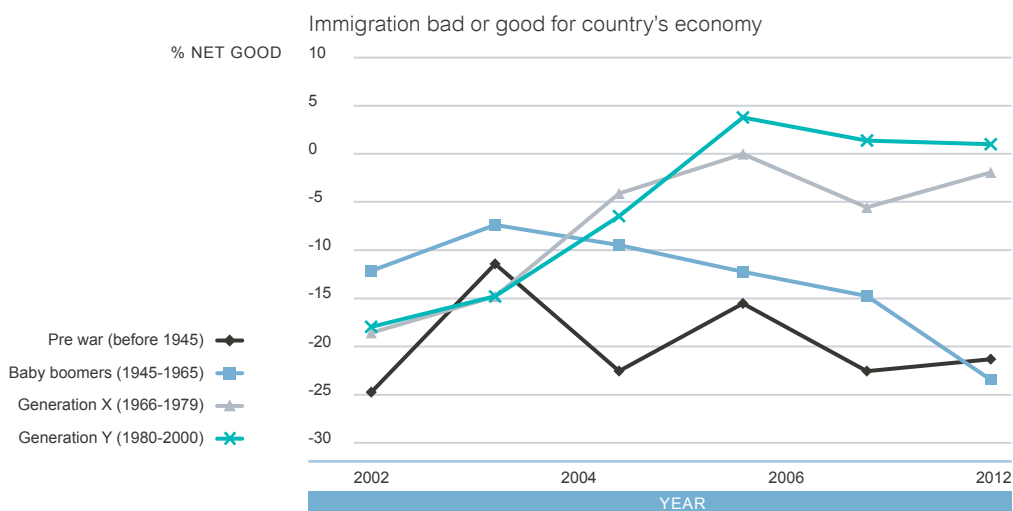


Figure 13: Generational differences in assessments of economic impact of immigration over time



And there is an even more marked pattern when we look at views of the economic impact of immigration. Figure 13 shows that respondents in the younger generations have become more positive in recent years, while those born before 1945 have remained negative. However, the key shift is the changing position of baby boomers: this cohort was the most positive in 2002, but is the most negative ten years on. There is now a

significant generational divide on attitudes to the economic impact of immigrants.

6. Where we live matters too...

Using the 2010/11 Citizenship Survey, we have grouped respondents by their local authority into 12 clusters of area types developed by the Home Office^{vi}. Figure 14 confirms that White Britons living in the “Superdiverse” and “Cosmopolitan London/periphery” clusters are least likely to want to reduce immigration a lot, whilst “Northern manufacturing and industrial towns” and areas of “low migration” are amongst the keenest to see immigration reduced a lot (as seen in other work, areas with less experience of migration tend to be more worried).

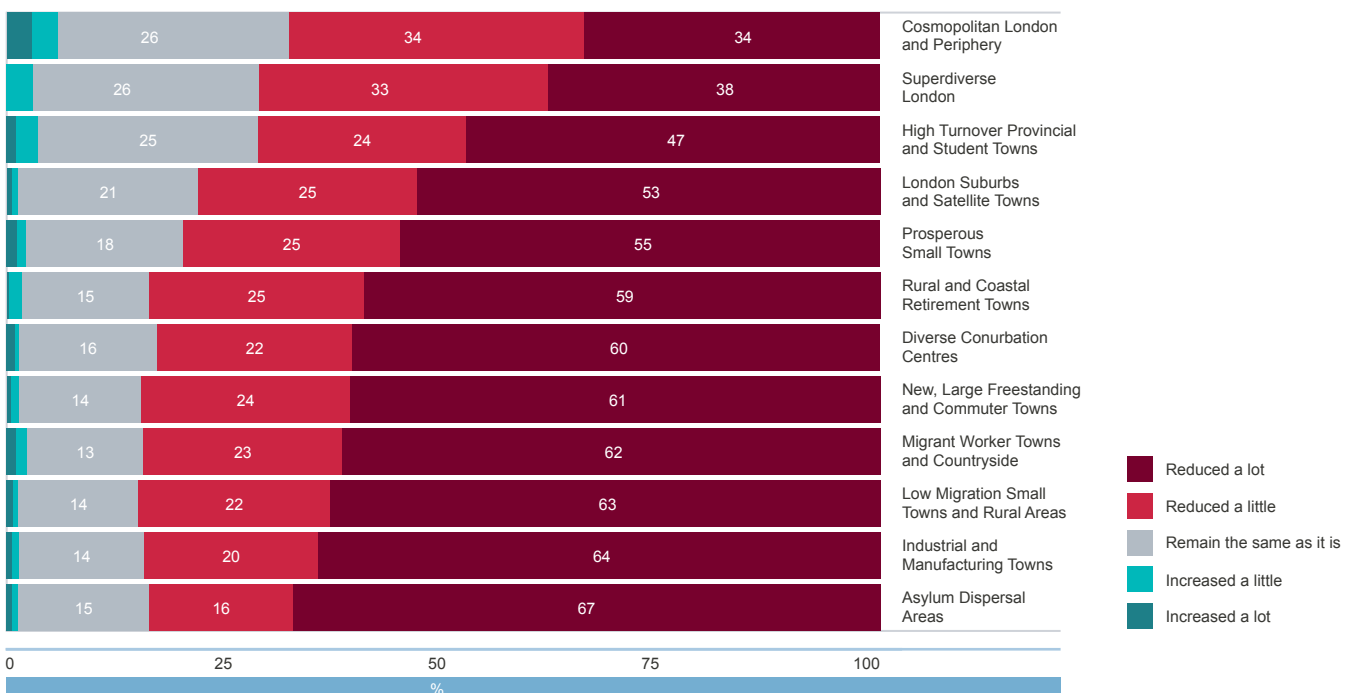
However, those most in favour of reducing immigration “a lot” are White Britons living in “asylum dispersal areas”. These are areas with high worklessness and high social housing levels where the perceived threat of competition for resources from asylum seekers is likely to be keenly felt (places like Bolton, Portsmouth, Swansea and Rotherham).

...but even in “cosmopolitan” and “superdiverse” areas the majority still call for reductions in immigration

However, perhaps the most striking pattern in this analysis is that even in already-diverse areas that are best equipped according to this classification, still around two thirds of the population would like to reduce immigration levels – although this is much more likely to be only “a little”.

Figure 14: Attitudes on the level of immigration among White British people born in the UK, by twelve clusters created from Home Office cluster analysis

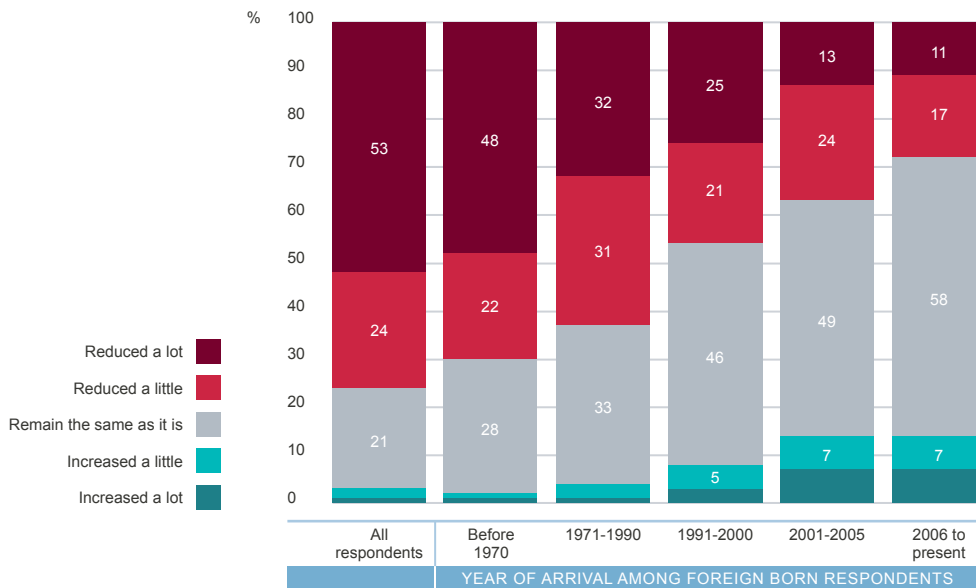
Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a little, remain the same as it is, reduced a little, or reduced a lot?



7. Immigrants worry about immigration too, particularly those who've been here for 20+ years

Figure 15: Attitudes to the level of immigration by people not born in the UK and their year of arrival

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



The attitudes of immigrants themselves towards reducing immigration also shift over time – and they tend to become closer to the average for the UK population the longer they have been in the country. For example, 70% of those immigrants who arrived pre-1970 call for at least some reduction in immigration (as shown in Figure 15). While this is not quite as high as the aggregate national picture, it is much closer to it than recent immigrant groups.

Indeed, there seems to be something of a step-change in attitudes

between the 1991-2000 immigrants and the 1971-1990 immigrants, where a clear majority of the latter are in favour of reductions, while the more recent group are closer to those who have arrived since 2000 in their attitudes. This may be a function of both length of time in the UK and the different types of immigrants that arrived during these periods.

8. The newspaper we read says a lot about our attitudes to immigration – although it may not cause them

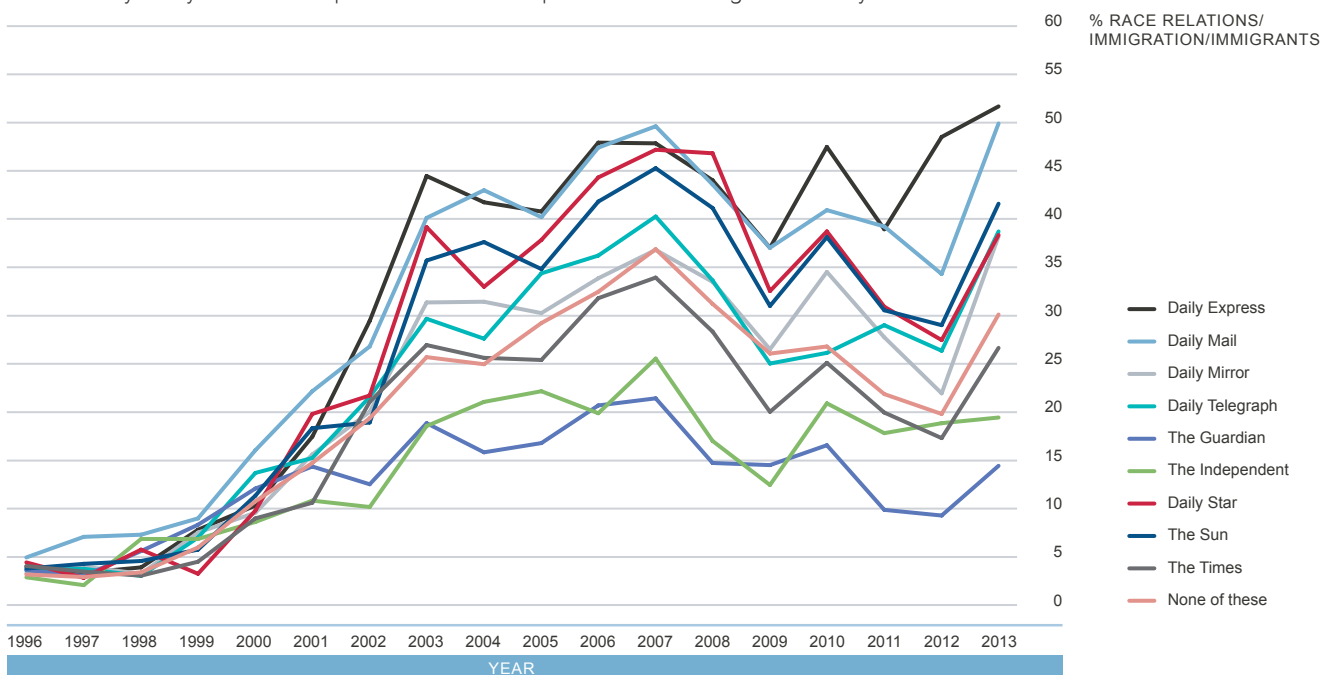
Our new analysis of the salience of immigration by newspaper readership in Figure 16 shows we now have a wider dispersal of views on immigration by newspaper readership than any other variable we have been able to identify – with Daily Mail and Express readers at one end and Guardian readers at the other. It is worth noting that Mail and Express readers did not have significantly higher levels of concern about immigration in the mid-1990s: there does not seem to be something innate in readers of these papers to view immigration as a top issue regardless of conditions.

Of course, the patterns in the following chart may also partially reflect differences in the make-up of readers of these newspapers, and it is therefore more meaningful to look at variations after controlling for other characteristics. Ipsos MORI attempted to do this in a

study from 2005 and one key point stood out: newspaper readership is much more likely to be significantly related to concern about immigration, after controlling for other demographic differences, than any other issue measured (including health services, defence/terrorism, education and crime). Indeed, the four most important predictors of concern about immigration were all whether people read particular newspapers.

Figure 16: Differences by newspaper readership in importance of immigration over time

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



This still does not prove a causal effect (people partly choose newspapers that reflect their already formed views), but it seems clear that there is a reinforcing interaction between the public, politicians and the media, with cause and effect running in all directions.

However, some media coverage does seem to unreasonably exaggerate and scare-monger - and there is enough evidence to suggest that the media have an independent effect on views of immigration and therefore that the accuracy and balance of their coverage needs careful scrutiny.

9. We like targets, but have little faith the government will meet them

Around eight in ten of the population have agreed that the government should set strict limits on the number of immigrants since we started asking this question back in 2006. When people are asked about the specifics of what these limits should be, answers are less consistent – but the general theme of “fewer” is clear.

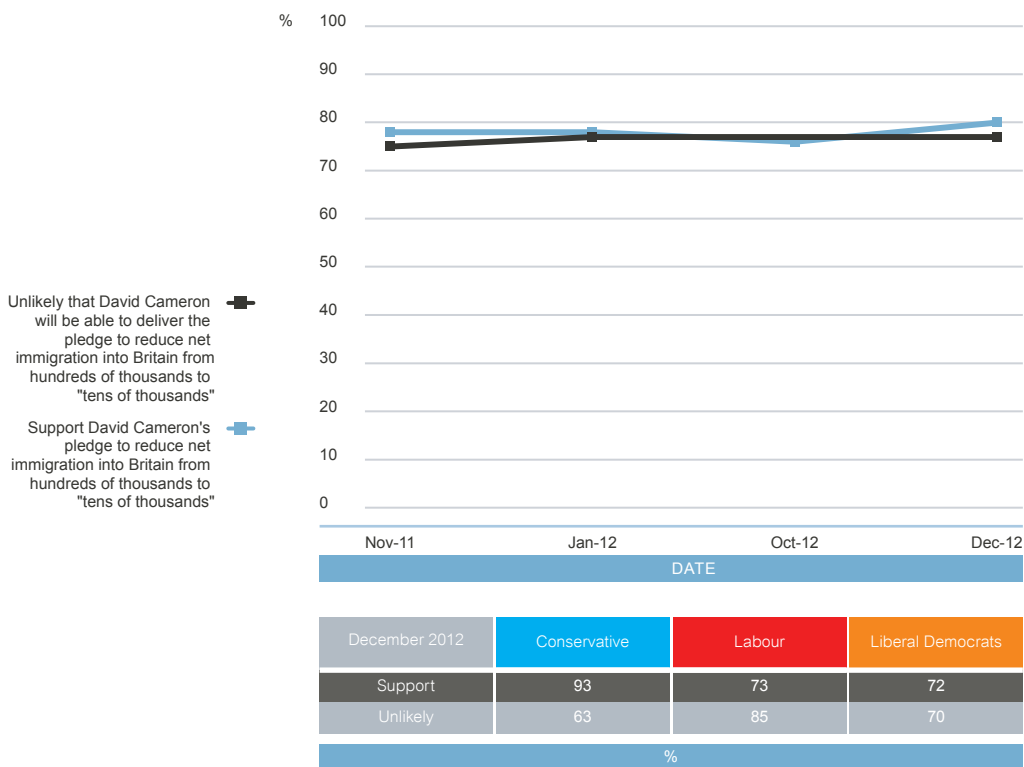
It is no surprise then that there is similarly widespread support for the government's current pledge to reduce net migration to "tens of thousands". But it is also clear that people doubt the government will be able deliver this – an almost identical proportion of around eight in ten think it is unlikely (as shown in Figure 17). This varies between the supporters of the different parties, but it is notable that a majority of Labour and LibDem voters still support the aim, and a majority of Conservative voters don't believe it will be achieved.

This lack of faith may reflect the poor rating of government policy and implementation: around seven in ten have consistently rated government as poor between 2006-2013.

However, some may also doubt the government's ability to deliver because they are

conscious of our lack of national control over a large proportion of immigration, particularly the third that originate from the EU. And this is something that particularly bothers UK residents: we have much greater support for national sovereignty on immigration and border control than other countries. Expectations are therefore high – and can only be currently met by reducing aspects of immigration that are relatively lower concerns to people or that they positively support (and that have positive economic benefits), such as students and skilled workers.

Figure 17: Level of support for and confidence in David Cameron's pledge to reduce immigration to the "tens of thousands"



10. UKIP supporters have broken away in their level of concern

Finally, it is worth highlighting the changing position of party supporters on their levels of concern about immigration over time, using new analysis from Ipsos MORI's political aggregate dataset. Figure 18 suggests three key points. First, UKIP voters actually started with similar levels of concern about immigration to Conservative voters in 2002 (the first time there were sufficient UKIP voters to identify separately). However, since then they

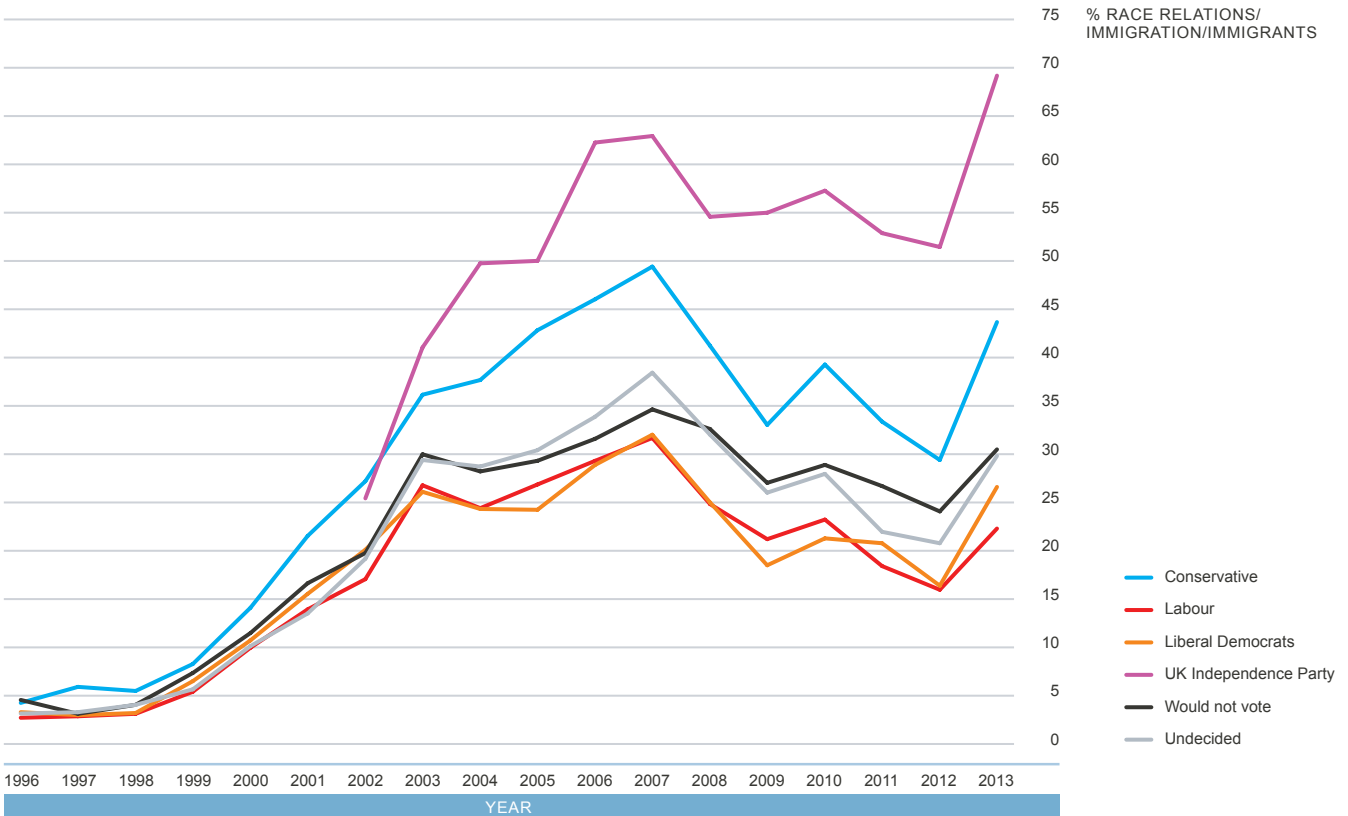
have grown away from the Conservatives and all other voters in their immigration focus. This will no doubt be partly due to UKIP's shifting emphasis, but also a refinement of their supporter base, as they have attracted more supporters who have a particular concern about this issue.

Second, it is notable how closely Labour and LibDem supporters have tracked throughout the entire period, with LibDem supporters a long way from supporters of their Coalition partners.

And finally, those who say they are undecided on how to vote tend to be closer to Labour and LibDem views than the Conservatives.

Figure 18: Differences by voting intention in importance of immigration over time

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

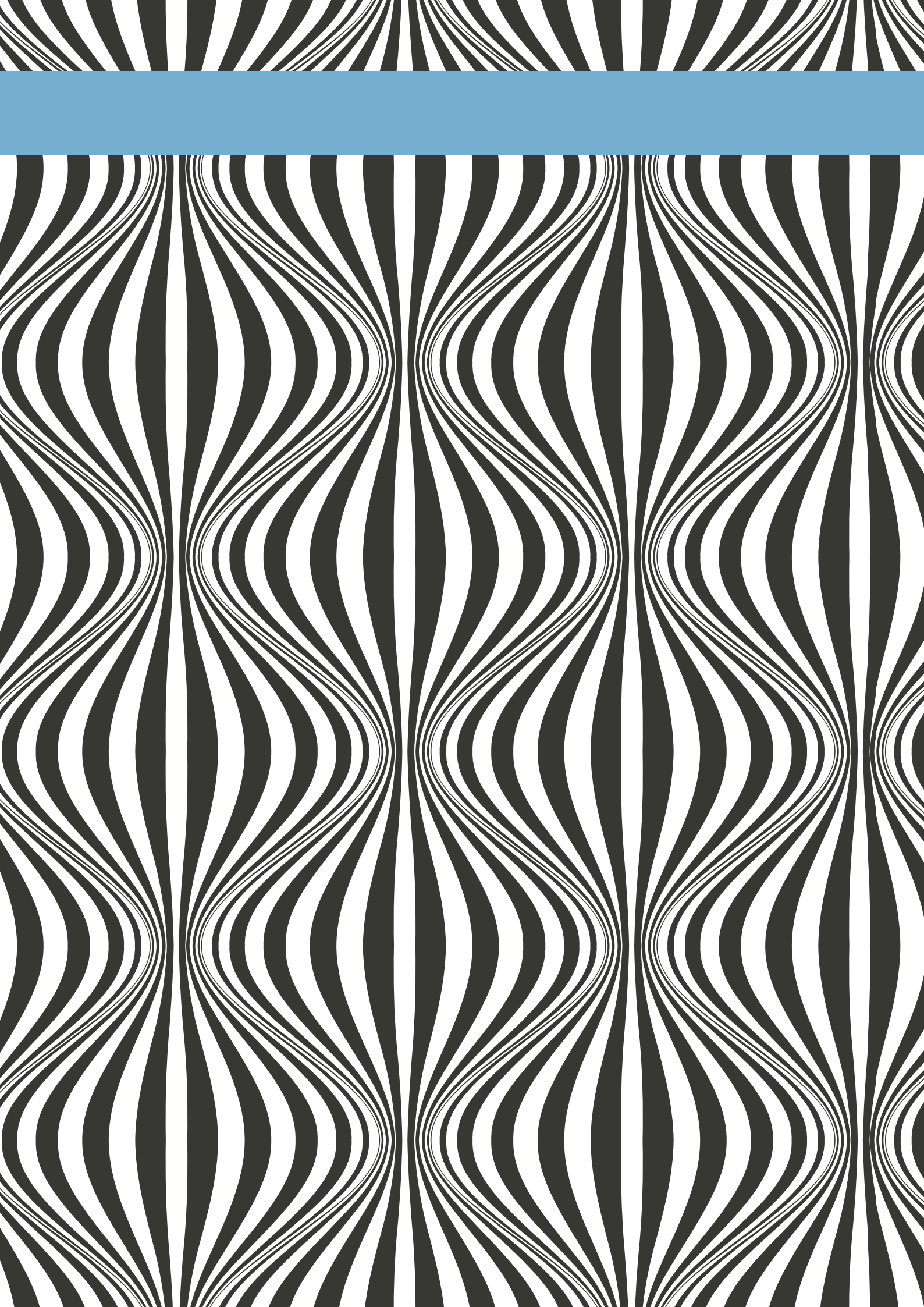


Report sources

- Figure 1:** Office for National Statistics; Ipsos MORI Issues Index
- Figure 2:** Ipsos MORI Issues Index; Ipsos MOR/Gallup polling
- Figure 3:** Office for National Statistics; Ipsos MORI Issues Index; Ipsos MORI MPs' Survey
- Figure 4:** ONS Long-term International Migration Estimates; Ipsos MORI/Oxford Migration Observatory, September 2011
- Figure 5:** Ipsos MORI/UKBA, 2006-2009; Ipsos MORI, February 2011
- Figure 6:** British Social Attitudes; European Social Survey; Transatlantic Trends; Citizenship Survey; Ipsos MORI; YouGov
- Figure 7:** Ipsos Global @dvisor, June 2011
- Figure 8:** British Social Attitudes, 2011
- Figure 9:** Ipsos MORI Issues Index
- Figure 10:** Citizenship Survey, 2010/11
- Figure 11:** Ipsos MORI Issues Index
- Figure 12:** Ipsos MORI reanalysis of British Social Attitudes
- Figure 13:** European Social Survey, 6 rounds 2002-2012
- Figure 14:** Citizenship Survey, 2010/11; Home Office, Social and Public Service Impacts of Migration at the Local Level (July 2013)
- Figure 15:** Citizenship Survey, 2010/11
- Figure 16:** Ipsos MORI Issues Index
- Figure 17:** YouGov/Sunday Times, November 2011, January 2012 October 2012, December 2012
- Figure 18:** Ipsos MORI Issues Index

End notes

- i. Gordon, I. Scanlon, K. Travers, T. Whitehead, C. (2009) Economic impact on the London and UK economy of an earned regularisation of irregular migrants to the UK. GLA Economics, Greater London Authority, London. Their central estimate for the number of irregular migrants in the UK in 2007 was 618,000.
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- ii. Blinder, S. (2013) Imagined Immigration: The Impact of Different Meanings of 'Immigrants' in Public Opinion and Policy Debates in Britain. Political Studies.
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- iii. For example Ipsos MORI/RSS, June 2013, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/ipsos-mori-rss-kings-perils-of-perception-topline.pdf>
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- iv. Crawley, H. (2005) Evidence on Attitudes to Asylum and Immigration: What We Know, Don't Know and Need to Know. COMPAS Working Paper WP-05-23, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society.
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- v. Ipsos MORI (2013) Understanding Society: Generations.
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- vi. Home Office, Social and Public Service Impacts of Migration at the Local Level, July 2013.



Further information

The full review – Perceptions and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration – is available at www.ipsos-mori.com/immigration-review.

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