



COMMENTARY

Opinion Polls – A Vital Tool or a Sledgehammer to Crack a Nut?

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www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

When opinion polls have been telling us for years that about three quarters of British people want to see reductions in immigration, does this mean the government should take dramatic action, or is there more to “public opinion” than meets the eye?

February’s Transatlantic Trends survey of opinion in Europe and the Americas reveals that British people are more opposed to immigration than all of the other countries surveyed – even though several of these countries have higher levels of immigration and illegal immigration than the UK.

>> Listen to Scott Blinder’s [interview about British public opinion toward immigration](#)

This won’t surprise those who study attitudes toward immigration in the UK. For the last decade opinion polls have found that British people rank immigration as one of the most important issues affecting the country and about three quarters of British people would like to see it reduced.

>> Read our briefing on [“UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern”](#)

So is there a profound problem that we need to address? And if so is it a problem with immigration policy, or with British people’s response to migrants? The big challenge in answering this is that opinion polls, while a valuable snapshot of people’s views are, at best, a blunt instrument, and at worst can be misleading or manipulated.

So, while it’s reasonable to take it from the years of survey data that the Migration Observatory has looked at that British people are, fundamentally, keen to see a “reduction in immigration”, what we don’t know is exactly what they mean by this.

Firstly, we don’t know what trade-offs people are willing to accept. The NHS employs a large number of migrant workers, for example, from cleaning staff to consultant surgeons.

If a question asks: “would you like to see immigration reduced?” the answers you receive will give you a vastly different picture about British people’s attitudes to immigration from a question that asks: “Should the NHS be able to recruit healthcare staff from abroad?” But existing polls have not added caveats – like whether people would still prefer reductions to migration if that meant limiting NHS recruitment.

This illustrates that people can have a tendency to construct two rather vague groups in their minds “good migrants” and “bad migrants” – those people that we do want, and those that we don’t want – which makes understanding people’s opinions about actual migrants even more difficult.

One of the hardest issues to grasp when looking at people’s attitudes to migration and migrants is who people are thinking about when they answer a survey question about immigration. Are people thinking about American bankers working in the city of London, Somali asylum seekers fleeing persecution or third generation British Indians who have never left the UK?

Without knowing this we can’t really know whether we are dealing with issues of race, class, religion, economics, culture or migration.

It is fundamental that policy makers both listen and respond to public opinion about key issues – but this is much harder than it sounds. It’s hard to say, for example, whether reducing immigrant numbers would actually reduce public opposition to immigration. The real challenge is unpicking what public opinion really is – and while opinion polls play a role in this, they provide only one-dimensional answers to three-dimensional questions.

>> Watch the policy primer interview on [“Public Opinion and Public Policy: Complexities of the Democratic Mandate”](#)



The Migration Observatory

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



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk

Press contact

Rob McNeil

Senior Media Analyst

robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk

+ 44 (0)1865 274568

+ 44 (0)7500 970081

