



COMMENTARY

The Variations Enigma: Regional Differences in Support for Reducing Immigration to the UK

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When the Migration Observatory recently undertook a survey designed to help us to better understand what people in Britain think about immigration, one element that we were keen to examine was regional variations in public opinion around the UK. These regional data are extremely interesting and suggest some pronounced differences between views in different parts of the country.

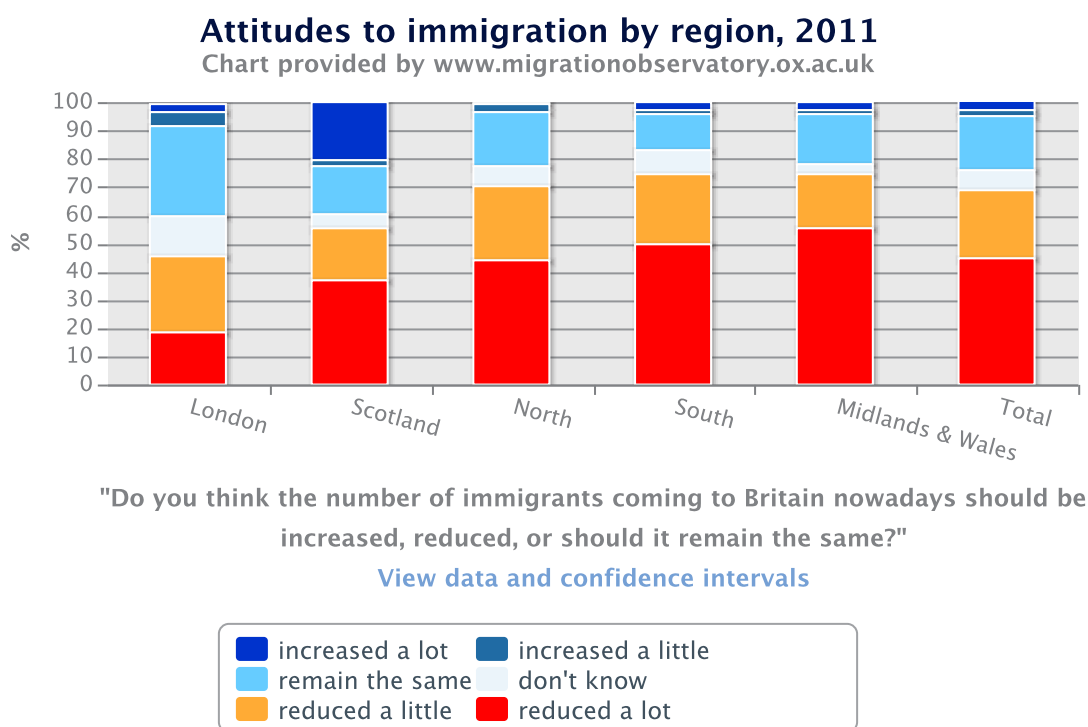
Regional variation in support for overall reductions in immigration:

Our poll – which was undertaken in early September 2011 by Ipsos MORI – asked a representative sample of 1000 adults in Britain a series of questions about who they thought of as migrants, and whether they had preferences for reducing, increasing or maintaining the immigration of particular migrant groups. Choices for reducing or increasing immigration were further distinguished by whether it should be by “a lot” or “a little”.

The regional data have some limitations – the sample size for some regional sub-groups was small and the estimates therefore have a higher margin of error. The percentages we report in this commentary should thus be taken as rough estimates (for the full set of results with approximate confidence intervals, click here). Despite the uncertainty around our estimates, the differences that we report in the text of this commentary are all statistically significant. (This is not true of some of the apparent differences in the figures, so caution should be used in interpreting them.)

One pattern of results is very noticeable. Two areas of Britain – Scotland and London – show less opposition to immigration than elsewhere in the country. In the case of Scotland this is coupled with higher levels of support for substantially increased immigration than anywhere else in Britain – though this is still clearly a minority view even in Scotland. Figure 1 shows these differences.

Figure 1



Source: Migration Observatory/Ipsos Mori, 2–8 Sep 2011

The obvious follow-up question then is “why are there such marked differences in views on immigration in different regions of the country?” There is no clear-cut research evidence on this complex question.

There has been speculation, for example, that areas with the greatest concentration of migrants would see the highest levels of opposition to immigration. However, this is not necessarily the case. For example, London, where more than 30% of the population is foreign-born, has among the lowest levels of support for reducing immigration.

Another reasonable conjecture would suggest that London’s diverse population itself is the reason, and that the inclusion of London’s immigrant population in the sample group accounts for the comparatively low opposition to immigration. But again, this is not borne out by our data. Londoners who identify themselves as white and British by both birthplace and nationality are also statistically far less likely to support reduced immigration than white British respondents elsewhere in the country (53% in London compared to 75% in the rest of the country).

Perhaps, then, the concept of the “crowded island” plays a part in the unusually high levels of support for increased migration in Scotland. While parts of the UK are densely populated, Scotland has a comparatively lower population density. But this does not seem to be the whole story, since London, the most densely populated region, is the other area where opposition to immigration is lower than the rest of the country.

Regional variations in attitudes to immigration of specific types of migrants in the UK

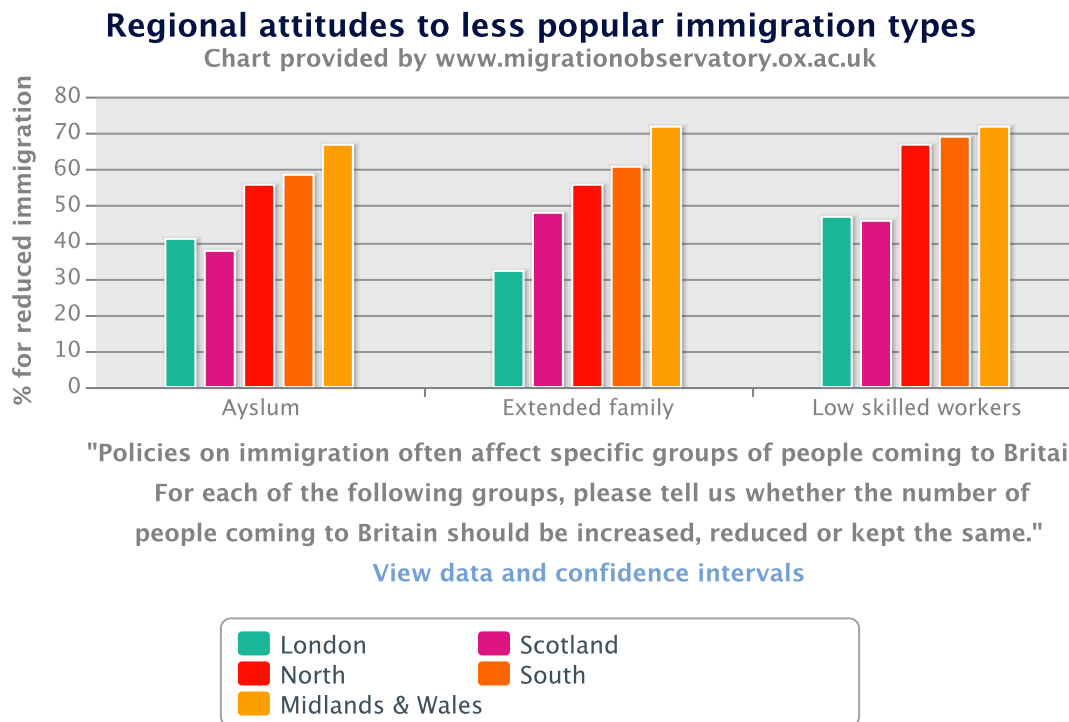
Clearly there are complex reasons and no easy answers to why people in different areas of the country respond differently to general questions about immigration. The differences are also pronounced when looking at views about specific types of migrants.

The Migration Observatory survey asked respondents about their views on several different categories of migrants, differentiated by purpose of stay, including students, asylum seekers, family migrants (differentiating between immediate and extended family) and workers (distinguishing between high and low-skilled workers).

Our survey showed that the highest levels of support for cutting immigration in Britain as a whole, focussed on three areas – asylum seekers, low skilled workers and extended family members.

As shown in Figure 2, Scotland and London again stood out with the lowest levels of support for cutting immigration in these areas, while Wales and the Midlands generally showed the highest levels of support for reductions.

Figure 2

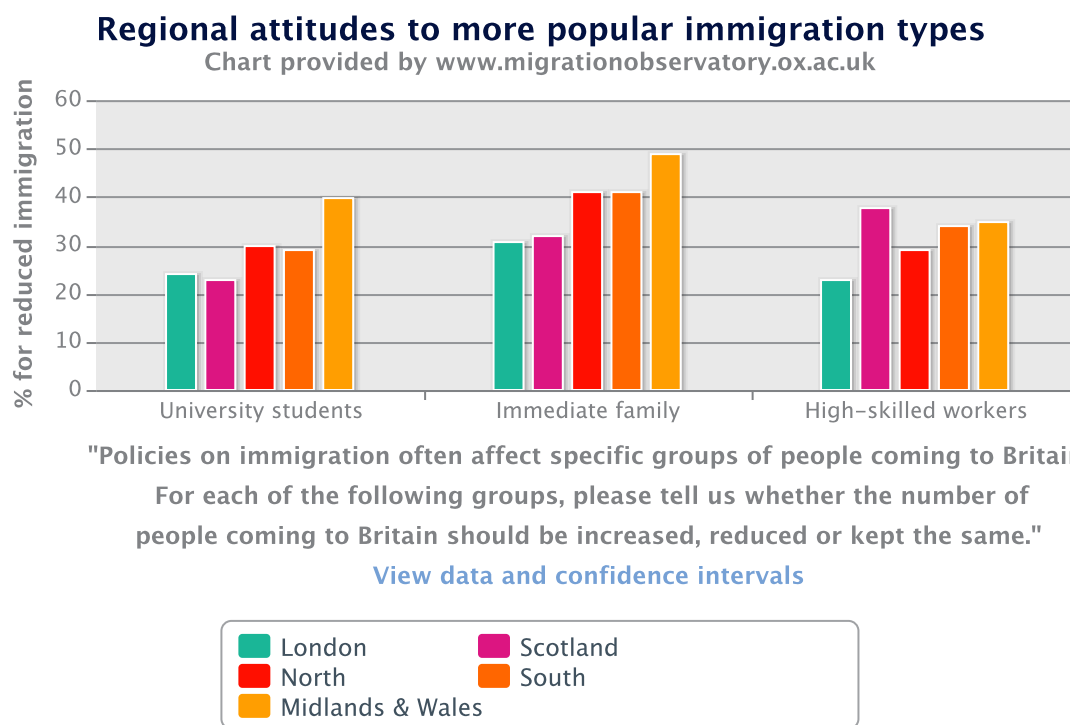


Source : Migration Observatory/Ipsos Mori, 2-8 Sep 2011

Also notable from the poll was the fact that support for increasing immigration is highest in Scotland in almost every category. Support in Scotland for increases in immigration of low-skilled workers was often even more apparent when looking at specific trades – support in Scotland for an increase in restaurant staff, for example, was at 20% compared to a national average of 6%.

The survey also showed that, in most regions, the lowest levels of support for cutting immigration concern high-skilled workers, university students and immediate family members (see Figure 3). Scotland and London have the lowest levels of support for reducing immigration of university students and immediate family members. Surprisingly, Scotland has the highest levels of support of any region for reductions in immigration of high skilled workers.

Figure 3



Source: Migration Observatory/Ipsos Mori, 2–8 Sep 2011

Do changes in immigration relate to changes in public opinion?

So, there are clear differences in public opinion about immigration in different UK regions, and in the demographic make-up of those regions. But there is little evidence that supports the idea that there is a clear link between the number of migrants in or coming to an area, and the level of opposition to immigration.

London and Scotland are generally the least opposed to immigration and the most supportive of increases in migration, but these two areas have massively different experiences of migration – London has by far the largest number of migrants in the country while Scotland has among the smallest.

Data on the public's attitudes toward immigration over time also do not provide evidence of a clear and direct link between immigration or net-migration levels on the one hand, and public support for reducing immigration on the other. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s while immigration was relatively low, opposition was extremely high with 85% or more of people, in a series of surveys from 1964 to 1979, agreeing that too many immigrants had been let into Britain.

How – if at all – preferences for reduced immigration are related to the actual scale of immigration or the number of migrants is an important question for the government, as the coalition's immigration policy is built around reducing net migration, and that policy was – at least in part – driven by negative public opinion toward immigration.

How immigration affects public opinion toward migrants is clearly a complex question that requires more research. But the available evidence does not suggest a straightforward relationship between immigration and public support for reduced immigration. This implies that there is no guarantee that reducing immigration or net-migration will lead to lower public opposition to immigration.



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.

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