

# Xenophobia Britannica? Anti-immigrant attitudes in the UK are among the strongest in Europe

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/10/21/xenophobia-britannica-anti-immigrant-attitudes-in-the-uk-are-among-the-strongest-in-europe/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/10/21/xenophobia-britannica-anti-immigrant-attitudes-in-the-uk-are-among-the-strongest-in-europe/)

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*Tim Vlandas had hoped the referendum would have been the end of the obsession with immigration. Brexit would allow the UK to 'take back control' of its immigration policy, thereby nullifying the need for politicians to talk about it on an almost daily basis. He argues, however, that in fact the reverse is happening. Having decided to leave the EU, the vote is increasingly interpreted as a call to end immigration almost entirely and, furthermore, it is discussed even more often and more negatively than before the referendum.*



Instead of just imposing immigration controls if the government wishes to do so, we now hear a flurry of xenophobic policy proposals which are ironically unlikely to have any noticeable effect on immigration flows. There were suggestions that companies would be 'named and shamed' for hiring foreigners. Other ideas included preventing the government from seeking advice from non-UK citizens about Brexit-related matters, presumably for 'security' reasons. Immigrants should not, we are told, "take jobs British people could do".

These proposals are economically illiterate as they implicitly accept the lump of labour fallacy that there is a fixed quantity of jobs in the economy. They are also clearly nationalist insofar as they posit work should be shared first and foremost among 'deserving' natives, that we must identify and count foreigners, and that both companies and the government should not rely on foreigners to advise or work for them, at least in some instances. The question remains, however, whether these policy proposals and this obsession with immigration represent the preferences of the wider population? Or put differently, is it the case that the UK is noticeably more sceptical of immigration than other European countries?

## Is the UK noticeably more sceptical of immigration than other European countries?

To investigate this question, I turned to the survey data available from the European Social Survey; without a doubt one of the best cross-national academic surveys available. The 7<sup>th</sup> wave of the ESS was carried out in 2014 and covers 20 countries of western and eastern Europe (one is not an EU member: Switzerland). I analysed the responses to the available questions on immigration. For each question, I then ranked countries according to their responses as a rough indicator of where the UK sits in Europe. Obviously, a more complex analysis could be – and should be – carried out, but the following discussion gives us a first glance at the magnitude of the anti-immigration sentiment in the UK.

### Ethno-nationalism, racism and multiculturalism

Concerns about immigration do not seem to be primarily driven by ethnonationalism, i.e. a conception of the nation being premised on a certain ethnicity and/or religion. Or put differently: these questions are not where the UK ranks worst.

- Do people think "it is important for immigrants to be white"?

In the UK 1.4 percent of respondents thought it was 'extremely important' for someone to be white in deciding whether someone born, brought up and living outside the country should be able to come and live here. It is difficult to assess in and of itself whether this is high, but we can say that this is the 10<sup>th</sup> highest response (Hungary scores highest with 13.1 percent of respondents believing this is extremely important).

This only captures those respondents that selected 10 on a 10 points scale ranging from 0 'extremely unimportant' to 10 'extremely important'. We can broaden the net by adding all those that selected 6 to 10: 7.7 percent in the UK did so, which again ranks them 10<sup>th</sup>, compared to more than 40 percent in Hungary and Lithuania (the two countries with the highest two percentages).

- Do people "want to allow Muslims to come and live here"?

Overall, 17.3 percent of UK respondents answered 'allow none' to the question: how many Muslims should be allowed to come and live in one's country? This is a very high percentage, but it still ranks the UK 13<sup>th</sup> with the top 2 countries (the Czech Republic and Hungary) having more than 55 percent of respondents choosing none. As much as 13 percent in the UK chose to 'allow many to come and live here' and 42 percent chose 'allow some' while 27 percent chose 'allow a few'.

- The importance of customs and traditions

Overall, 12.1 percent of respondents in the UK 'strongly agree' it is better for a country if almost everyone shares the customs and traditions, which ranks it 10<sup>th</sup> (the Czech Republic ranked first with 29.5 percent), while 30.7 percent 'agree', 25.5 percent 'neither agree nor disagree', 25.9 percent 'disagree', and 5.8 percent 'strongly disagree'.

- Close friends from a different race or ethnic group

The following question is clearly not about immigration but may tell us something about interaction between people: "Do you have any close friends who are of a different race or ethnic group from most [country] people? IF YES, is that several or a few?" In the UK, 21.7 percent responded 'Yes, several' which is the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest share after Sweden and Switzerland, and 36.9 percent said 'Yes, a few', but 41.5 percent said 'none at all'.

- Good contact with different race or ethnic group

The UK has ranked 13<sup>th</sup> worst in terms of the percentage of respondents who responded that 'contact with a different race or ethnic group' is 'extremely bad' (Hungary and the Czech Republic were the two highest). It does, however, rank high in terms of the percentage that responded that it was 'bad' (as much as 6.3 percent).

## **Anti-immigration and negative perceptions of immigrants**

- Anti-immigration and negative perceptions of immigrants

As much as 17 percent of respondents in the UK want to 'allow no' immigration from poorer European countries (3<sup>rd</sup> after Hungary and Lithuania) and 31.9 percent say 'allow a few'. Only 10.1 percent think we should allow many to come and live in the UK.

- Unpacking immigration preferences towards different types of immigrants

We can unpack this further by analysing differences between high and low skill immigration. Responses are quite different when comparing whether to allow professionals from poorer countries and whether to allow unskilled labourers. Only 6 percent of respondents in the UK want to 'allow no' professionals from poorer European countries (11<sup>th</sup> highest) compared to 35.1 percent for labourers (3<sup>rd</sup> highest), and 19.9 percent want to 'allow a few' professionals compared to 28.7 percent for labourers. Policy proposals that want to limit immigration into the NHS or highly skilled occupations may not have as much popular support. Questions about the importance of good educational qualifications for immigration provide consistent answers: 75.5 percent believe the educational qualifications of immigrants is 'important' (which ranks it 5<sup>th</sup> highest in the sample, after Austria, Germany, Estonia and Lithuania – the answers are ranked from 0 'extremely unimportant' to 10 'extremely important' and I added the numbers who chose 6 to 10).

- The importance of language and skills

Respondents in the UK attached a particularly high importance to language: 84 percent chose 6 to 10 in response to the question about the importance of speaking the country's official language, where 0 is 'extremely unimportant' and 10 is 'extremely important'. This placed the UK 2<sup>nd</sup> highest after Austria. As much as 38 percent responded that language was 'extremely important' by choosing 10. Equally, respondents emphasised the importance of skills: 83.3 percent chose 6 to 10 in response to the question of whether work skills needed in the country is an important aspect of immigration, where 0 is 'extremely unimportant' and 10 is 'extremely important'. This ranked the UK 2<sup>nd</sup> highest among countries surveyed and 27.2 percent responded that it was 'extremely important' by choosing 10.



### Concerns about immigration related to the 'way of life', jobs, public services and crime

Responses indicate that British citizens think it is important that immigrants should be committed to society's 'way of life': 85.7 percent chose a number between 6 and 10, where 0 is 'extremely unimportant' and 10 is 'extremely important'. This ranked the UK 6<sup>th</sup> highest among the countries considered in the ESS and 31.2 percent thought it was 'extremely important'. But respondents were also concerned about whether immigrants take jobs away from the country. Respondents could choose any number between 0 'take jobs away' and 10 'create new jobs': 37.1 percent chose a number between 0 and 4 (those which on balance think immigrants take jobs away more than they create jobs), while 8.2 percent chose 0 (definitely think that they take jobs away). This placed the UK in the 6<sup>th</sup> highest position.

Moreover, many respondents were convinced that immigrants take out more than they put in in terms of taxes and public services – contrary to what the evidence suggests. Indeed, 42.8 percent chose a number between 0 and 4, where 0 is 'generally put in less' and 10 is 'generally take out more'. This ranked the UK 6<sup>th</sup> worst in the countries under consideration in the ESS. The ESS also asked respondents: Compared to people like yourself who were born in [name of a country], how do you think the government treats those who have recently come to live here from other countries? 19.7 percent responded 'much better' which ranks the UK 1<sup>st</sup> highest (followed by Ireland and France) and 26.4% responded 'a little better'.

Finally, the UK was 7<sup>th</sup> in terms of the percentage of people that believe immigrants make the country's crime problems worse with 53.1% choosing a number between 0 and 4, where 0 is 'crime problems made worse' and 10

'crime problems made better', and 8.7% chose 10, the most convinced expression of immigrants making crime worse.

## **There is a strong anti-immigration preference among a significant part of the UK's population**

### **Misperceptions**

Overall, there is a strong anti-immigration preference among a significant part of the population, which is rooted in associations between immigration and a number of problems including higher crime, way of life, and insufficient jobs and public services. These associations clearly helped the Brexit camp and play into the hands of the far right, which has long promoted these associations. Misperceptions seem to abound about the effects of immigration. But even the assessment of the number of foreigners in the country is widely off the mark for most people. Indeed, when asked, "out of 100 people how many were born outside the country?" 3 percent said 60, about 9 percent said 50, about 9 percent said 40, more than 10 percent said 30, and more than 10 percent said 20, just to give some examples. In reality, a recent House of Commons library briefing paper placed the percentage of people living in the UK who were born outside the UK at 13 percent ([Hawkins, Oliver \(2016\) House of Commons, library, briefing paper, migration statistics, Number SN06077, 5 September 2016](#): page 18). More than 40% of respondents grossly over-estimate the number of immigrants in the country.

The survey data reveals that the UK has among the highest anti-immigrant survey responses, especially within Western Europe. These results suggest that recent policy proposals tap into widespread anti-immigration sentiment, which may, of course, have been created by the media and political discourse that has been framing the issue so negatively for a long time now.

At the same time, the problem seems to be not just about whether immigration should or should not be restricted, and if so how, but more importantly about how to promote a more facts-based discussion of immigration. The fact of the matter is that a large part of the electorate has now wholeheartedly embraced anti-immigration attitudes.

*Note 1: Design weights are applied throughout.*

*Note 2: I use the exact language and wording of the ESS for simplicity.*

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. Image credit: (CC BY 2.0).*

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