

The negative campaigning in Rochester and Strood may have long-lasting implications for attitudes towards immigrants and the poor

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What impact may the Rochester and Strood campaign, which was primarily about immigration and its impact on the welfare system, have on the way its citizens perceive and interact with one another?

Trude Sundberg looks at the research and argues that political campaigns coloured by anti-immigrant sentiments potentially have a long-lasting negative impact on citizens' concern towards the living conditions of others in their community, particularly impacting their judgement of the poor and negativity towards immigrants.



As the country's political and media focus moves away from Rochester and Strood, at least for the time being, we should take a moment to consider what its impact on the community of Rochester and Strood will be. In other words, what impact may a campaign focused on anti-immigration have on the social cohesion and the glue holding people together in this community? How will this impact people's concern for each other, and more specifically, their concern for immigrants, the poor and those receiving state benefits?

Before I begin, it is important to note that this is about more than just another UKIP victory. The negative effects on the community are related to the presence of anti-immigration arguments in all the main parties. This has also been true of the Labour party, even if their arguments around the need to limit immigration were and are softer, and they had a much more positive view of the impact of immigration than others in the Rochester and Strood by-election. Secondly, the focus on immigration in politics is not new in the UK (see [here](#) for an article in *The Economist* from 2001). What we do see, however, is an increasing hostility in debates on the topic. This is important as it may bring with it a more negative impact onto people's attitudes.

Attitude research scholars have had a long-standing interest in the relationship between immigration and its impact on support for the welfare state, people's concern for each other and judgement of groups such as welfare claimants. As I wrote about in a [short preview](#) leading up to the by-election, research has shown that a focus on anti-immigration sentiments in an election by both politicians and the media, especially when combined with a negative focus on welfare claimants, has divisive effects on societies. But, perhaps, rather cynically, this was its intention.

If we look at evidence from the US, [Alesina and Glaeser](#) and [Gilens](#) show how negative political and media coverage of the 'blacks' being a dominant group amongst the poor and welfare state claimants, leads to an overall harshening of public attitudes towards the poor. As a result, they identify patterns of decreased social solidarity and social cohesion in communities, as well as stronger negative stereotyping of both 'blacks' and the poor. In other words, the mix of negative media coverage of immigrants and welfare claimants, as seen in the debate nationally and in Rochester and Strood, could bring with it more negative attitudes towards not only immigrants, but also to the poor. These negative stereotypes are dominated by characterising the poor as lazy, or using British terminology; as 'skivers' and 'scroungers'. Hopkins [builds on this](#) research and finds that it is the dominance of anti-immigration arguments, in politics and the media, that is crucial in contributing to these negative effects. However, in Rochester and Strood, the one thing that is different from the US experience [identified by Hopkins](#), is that it does not have a higher than normal influx of immigrants nor a higher than average immigrant population.

A second area of studies related to social cohesion includes studies analysing people's concern for the living conditions of different groups in society. Across Europe, citizens rank the different groups similarly based on their concern for these groups, in descending order of concern they are ranked; the elderly, the sick and disabled, the

unemployed, and lastly, immigrants (see the [work of Van Oorschot](#) on this). In other words, immigrants and the unemployed are ranked as the least deserving groups.

Thus, a further negative coverage and political campaigning may have further negative impact on solidarity with these groups, and people's concern for them may become even lower. However, on a positive note, we do find that higher immigration as well as higher levels of education can have a positive impact on people's concern for immigrants. This is something I also found in [my study](#), and is reflected in a [recent article](#) in the *Financial Times* showing that higher immigration is related to more positive attitudes towards immigrants. This may explain why UKIP do well in a locality such as Rochester and Strood, with its lower than average immigration and thus more negative attitudes towards immigrants. What it further points to is that it is a 'symbolic' threat and cultural threat rather than a 'real' threat that may be important when explaining people's attitudes and views towards immigrants. This means that the negative impact of immigrants may be based on [misperceptions](#) of the amount of immigrants and the size of their threat, as well as their perceived potential negative impact on the culture and society, rather than on 'real' higher numbers of immigrants.

Overall then, the question is, what lies in the future for Rochester and Strood? What does research suggest in terms of the impact of attitudes and social cohesion in its communities? And what will Mark Reckless do, if anything at all, to mitigate these potential negative effects of such a divisive campaign? Sadly, research suggests that the long-lasting effects of this campaign may well be increased negative attitudes towards the poor, immigrants and welfare claimants. Especially as the pending election looks set to continue where they left off, with an increased presence of anti-immigrant rhetoric. However, we could hope that the community, through engaging more with the topic of immigration and immigrants themselves prove research wrong.

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