

Immigration and the EU Referendum: claims from both campaigns require deeper analysis



(credit: [Martin Deutsch](#))

Laura Robbins-Wright examines how immigration emerged as one of the key issues in the EU Referendum debate and argues that some of the claims from both the Leave and Remain campaigns don't stand up to scrutiny.

A longstanding issue of public concern

This week, Britons finally have the chance to vote on whether the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Union. The referendum follows a protracted and at times tense campaign, and takes place 41 years after the electorate affirmed their desire to remain a part of the European Economic Community (as it was then known) in 1975. The referendum also follows the murder of Jo Cox, the Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen and an active member of the Remain campaign as well as an advocate for refugees.

Immigration has long been an issue of public concern in the UK. Following the end of the Second World War, the government adopted a liberal approach to immigration in order to address the shortage of labour. However, this approach proved short-lived as apprehensions about the flow of immigrants from the Commonwealth and mounting racial tensions encouraged subsequent governments to adopt more restrictive measures in 1962, 1968, and 1971.

Nevertheless, it does not appear that immigration was a salient issue in the lead up to the 1975 referendum. Though Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson attempted to obtain concessions from other EEC Member States in the lead up to the referendum, immigration was not on **his agenda**. Furthermore, while **campaign material** indicates that opponents were concerned about the cost of EEC membership and the impact of membership on employment and trade (not dissimilar to **the concerns** raised by proponents of the current Leave campaign), the available material does not suggest that they were preoccupied by immigration.



Immigration (including long-term, intra-EU migration) continues to be a salient issue in contemporary UK politics, as evidenced during the 2015 General Election. For example, each of the five major national parties – the **Conservatives**, the **Green Party**, **Labour**, the **Liberal Democrats**, and **UKIP** – included references to immigration in their respective manifestoes. These included a commitment from the Conservatives to reduce net migration to the “tens of thousands” and a demand from UKIP to “give our country the breathing space it desperately needs from mass uncontrolled immigration [...]”

A deeper analysis

In contrast to the previous referendum in 1975, debates over immigration have been an indelible feature of the current Leave and Remain campaigns. In February 2016, Prime Minister David Cameron endeavoured to renegotiate the terms of UK membership in the European Union and **successfully secured** a number of changes regarding the free movement and rights of European citizens, including in the areas of family reunification, access to benefits, and criminality. Despite this, both the Leave and Remain campaigns have made claims about immigration that merit deeper analysis.

Would a points-based immigration system work?

For example, the Remain campaign **has argued** that the **Leave proposal** to introduce a points system for immigrants would “double the levels of immigration.” Since the UK adopted a points-based system for non-EU immigrants in 2008, let us assume that the idea is to extend (and perhaps refine) this scheme to immigrants from the EU. However, it is unclear how the Remain campaign has determined that this approach would result in such a dramatic increase in admissions. The points systems that operate in countries like Canada (the first country to adopt such a system in 1967) and Australia are designed to facilitate the migration of individuals who achieve the required number of points.

In practice, both countries have adopted annual targets or quotas in order to limit the number of skilled immigrants they admit. Though the Canadian and Australian targets are more generous than the current UK limit of 20,700 visas for the Tier 2 category, the targets and the number of points required to secure admission can be easily adapted in accordance with changing occupational needs and political priorities. Thus, there does not appear to be any reason to suppose that a decision to extend the points-based scheme to EU immigrants would result in an inevitable and substantial increase in the overall level of migration, let alone a twofold increase in admissions.

Could Turkey join the EU and what would the implications be?

In addition, it appears that some of the claims advanced by the Leave campaign are not entirely factual. For instance, **a graphic** on the Leave campaign website announces that “Turkey is one of FIVE new countries joining the EU” and implies that the UK would receive an inflow of immigrants from the country of 76 million. The graphic also makes a similar conjecture regarding migration from Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Unfortunately, the graphic ignores the fact that Turkey is only a candidate for EU membership.

Furthermore, Turkish accession is far from assured given a **recent report** on the decreasing pace of political reform, the deteriorating security situation, not to mention the fact that current negotiations cannot conclude until the country **removes import restrictions** on Cypriot goods. Moreover, all 28 Member States must give their unanimous consent in order for a country to accede. Given the barriers outlined above, Turkish membership is a remote prospect at present. Elsewhere, negotiations with Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia are **proceeding slowly** and the European Commission has not yet opened a dialogue with Albania even though the country was awarded candidate status in 2014.



Even if these countries joined the European Union tomorrow, it is difficult to estimate how many individuals would choose to move to another European country. In the Turkish case, a number of authors and organisations have attempted to use surveys to determine the percentage of citizens interested in migrating to another country. For example, [a 2006 analysis](#) of Eurobarometer data indicated that 6.2 per cent of Turkish respondents expressed an interest in emigrating. However, the study found that only 0.3 per cent of those surveyed had a firm intention of leaving their country in the next five years.

Research [published in 2013](#) based on the Gallup World Poll suggests that 13 per cent of Turkish respondents were interested in moving abroad, ideally to Germany or the United States. Earlier this month, the non-partisan organisation Migration Watch released an [extensive analysis](#) which theorised that approximately 1.8 per cent of Turks could attempt to move to the UK in the first ten years following accession. This conjecture is based on the assumption that the rate of emigration from Turkey will be similar to the rate of post-accession migration from Poland.

Choosing to migrate is a complex decision

However, though the right to freedom of movement removes a significant administrative and legal barrier to migration within the EU, the decision to migrate is a complex one that can be motivated by more than rights alone. For instance, [a 2007 Eurofound analysis](#) of Eurobarometer data suggested that factors such as age, level of education, employment status, and language ability had a statistically significant effect on the probability that respondents would express an intention to leave their home countries. Though Eurobarometer surveys upon which the analysis was based did not include Turkey, the study illustrates the potential complexity of migration decisions and underscores the fact that more research is needed in order to better understand the migration potential of Turkish citizens and residents of other prospective Member States.

Overall, though public concern regarding immigration is not new, the salience of immigration is a distinguishing feature of the current referendum campaign. Despite the concessions obtained by Prime Minister David Cameron earlier this year, both the Remain and Leave campaigns continue to debate the implications of EU membership for migration to the UK. However, some of the claims advanced by the two campaigns do not stand up when subjected to further scrutiny. Whatever the outcome of the referendum on Thursday, the factors that will ultimately influence the decisions of individual voters will undoubtedly defy superficial characterisations.



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