

Imagined Immigration:

How People Misperceive Immigrant
Numbers and Characteristics, and
Why it Matters

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Paris, 23 May 2019

Imagined immigration

- Public opinion toward immigration = growing issue for democracies in the US and Europe
- But *who* are the objects of these “public opinions”?
- Who are “immigrants” in the public imagination?

“The world outside and the pictures in our heads”

- “The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be **explored, reported, and imagined.**”...
- “Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be **pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine**”
- Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922

Immigrant definition

- “Someone who changes his or her country of usual residence for a period of **at least a year** so that the country of destination effectively becomes the country of usual residence” (UN definition)
- Complications in everyday language and in other “official” uses
 - Refugees – a type of immigrant, or a distinct category (UNHCR)?
 - Dictionary definitions assume a permanent move, not just a year
 - Does citizenship matter?
 - Paradoxical constructions like “second generation immigrant”

The immigrants in our minds

- What comes to mind when you think of immigrants?
- This is “Imagined Immigration”
 - Different across individuals, groups, cultures, countries
 - Immigration is complex and large scale; unknowable
 - ...even if you are or have been an immigrant yourself, as I have been
 - (although I was often not perceived as one)

Outline for remainder of talk

1. Imagined immigration – empirical research on public perceptions
 - My initial study in Britain
 - Extensions / related research
2. Sources of imagined immigration
3. Implications for research, policy, advocacy

IMAGINED IMMIGRATION: THE BRITISH CASE

In the eyes of the British state, who is an immigrant?

- UK Government uses UN definition:
- “Someone who changes his or her country of usual residence for a period of at least a year so that the country of destination effectively becomes the country of usual residence”
 - Official statistics based on this definition
 - Government targets too (Cameron 2010, May 2015)
 - “...from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands...”

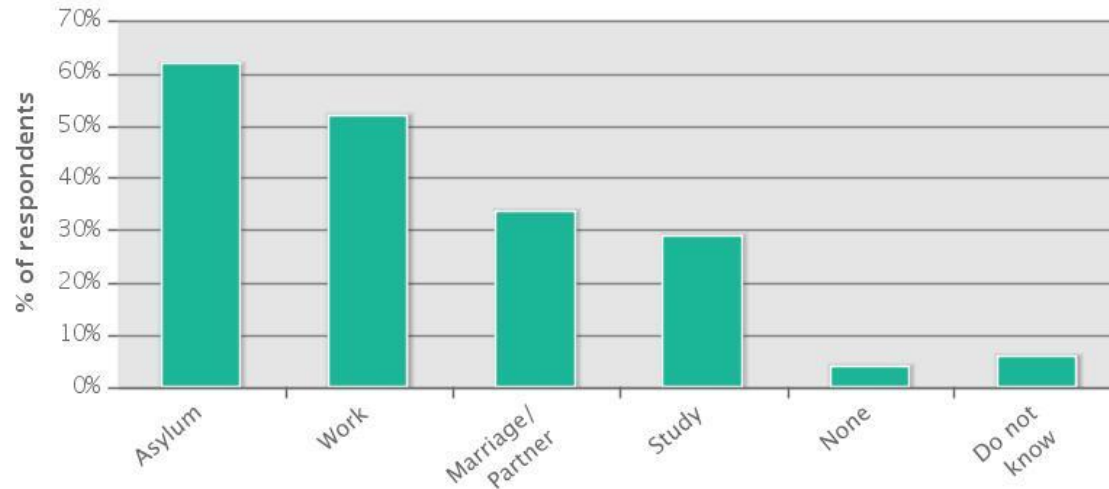
Who are 'immigrants' in public perceptions?

- 1000-person survey, Sept 2011, Migration Observatory/Ipsos MORI
- “When you think about immigrants coming to and living in Britain, which of these groups would you normally think about?” (format: choose all that apply)
 - Q1: Citizenship/birthplace
 - Q2: Reason for migrating
 - Q3: Length of stay

Many think of asylum seekers, labour migrants, not students or spouses

Perception of immigrants: reasons for migrating, Sep 2011

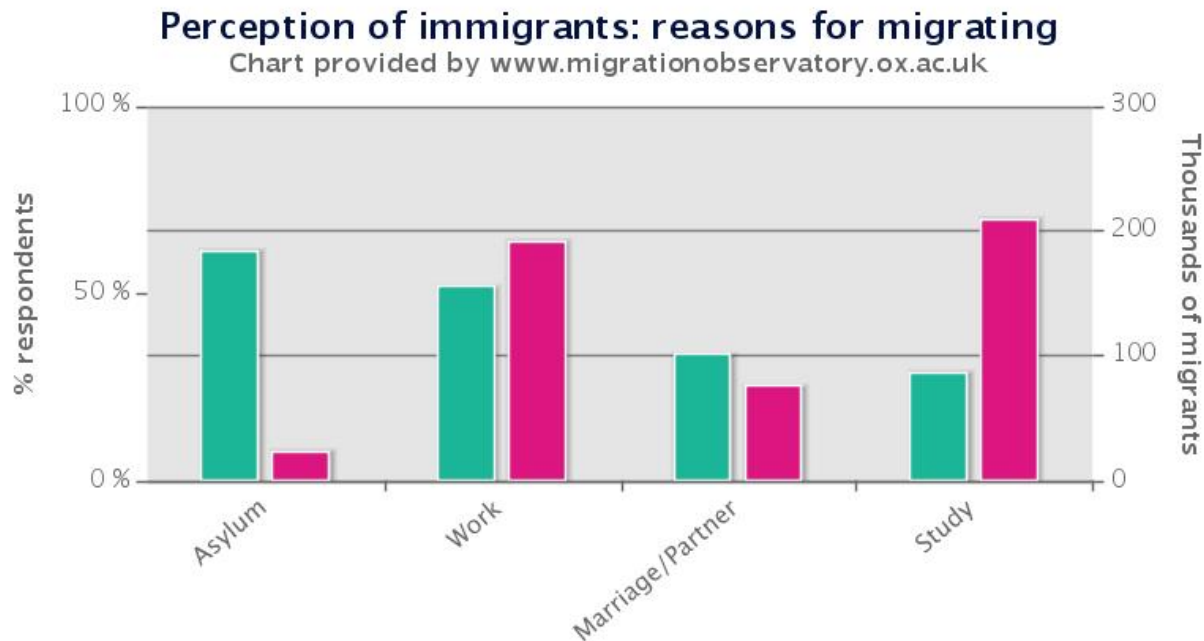
Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



"When you think about immigrants coming to and living in Britain, which of these groups would you normally think about? Please select all the groups that apply"

■ All respondents (n=985 weighted)

Mismatch: perceptions vs. inflows data



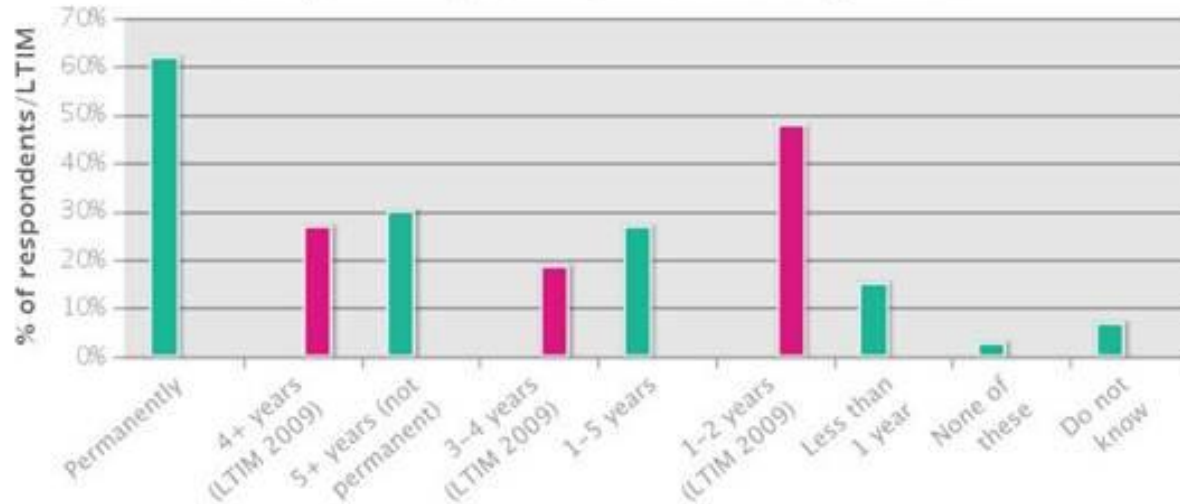
When you think about immigrants coming to and living in Britain, which of these groups would you normally think about? Please select all the groups that apply



Mismatch: migrants' length of stay

Perception of immigrants: length of stay

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



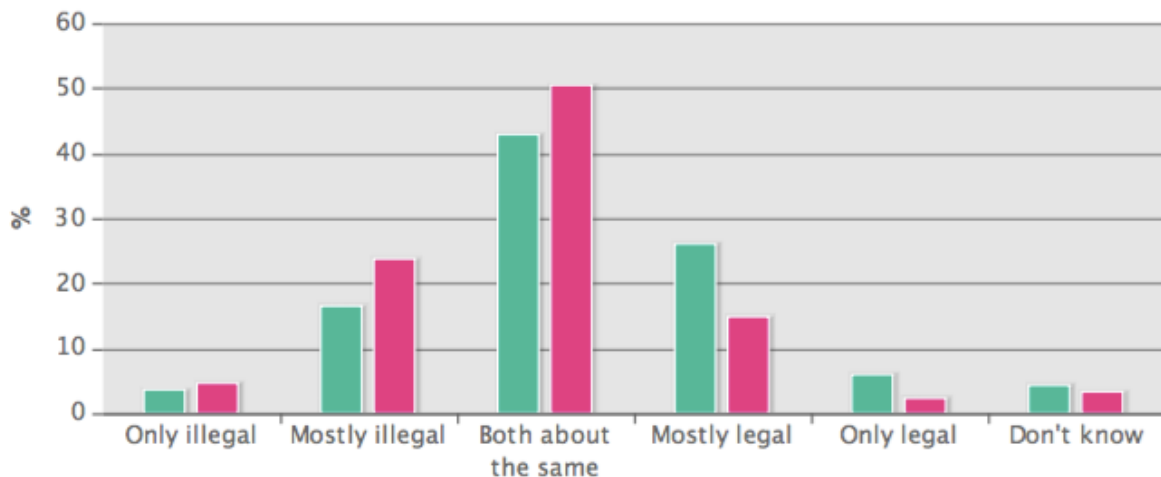
"When you think about immigrants coming to and living in Britain, which of these groups would you normally think about? Please select all the groups that apply"

All respondents

LTIM

Overemphasis on Unauthorized Immigrants

Perceptions of immigrants by legal status



"When you think about immigrants coming to and living in Scotland/Britain, are you normally thinking about legal or illegal immigration?"

Scotland England

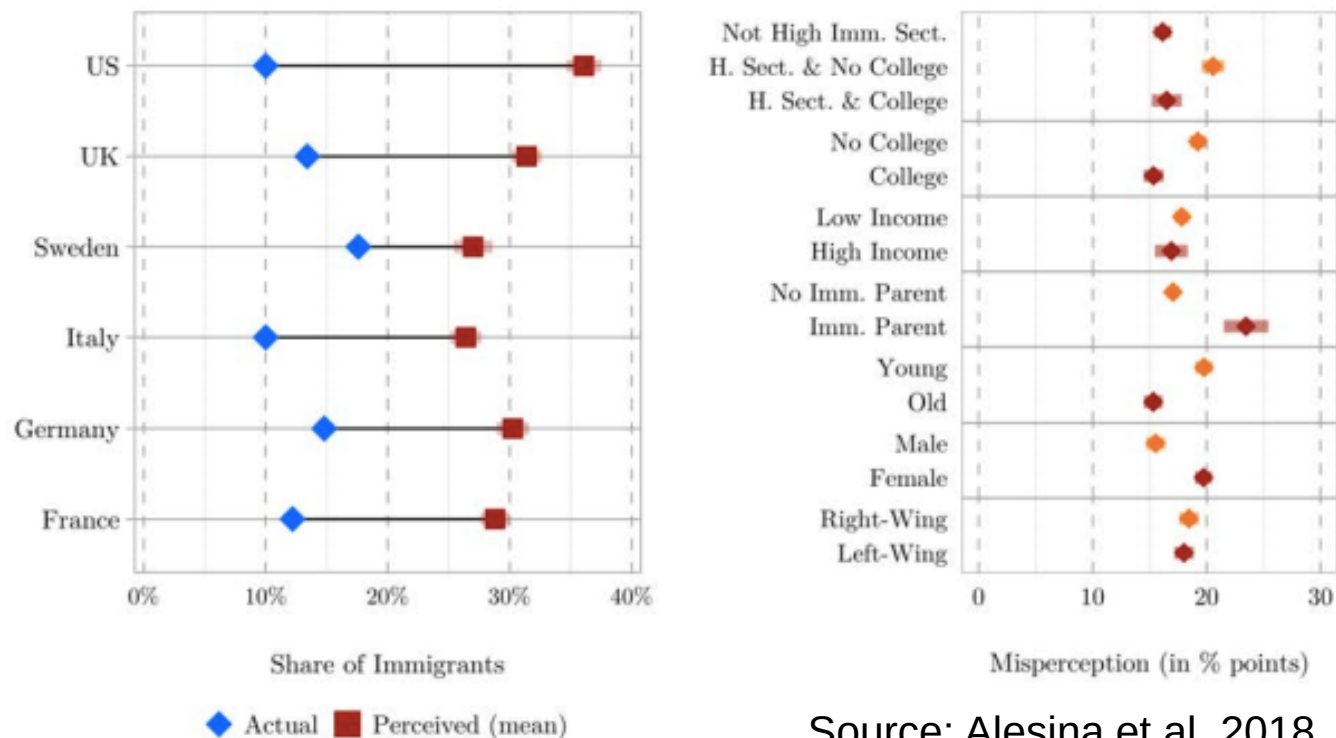
UK policy implications

- Discussions of “immigrants” or “migrants” are not necessarily about *all* migrants...
 - Asylum, labour > students, spouses
 - Permanent > temporary
 - Eastern Europe, Asia > W Europe
- ...but in government statistics & numerical policy targets, all migrants count equally
- Reducing student migration, temporary migration not likely to meet restrictionists’ policy demands

Misperceptions – a broader phenomenon

- Evidence from multiple countries
- Most common: overestimation

FIGURE 6: PERCEIVED VS. ACTUAL SHARE OF IMMIGRANTS



Source: Alesina et al. 2018

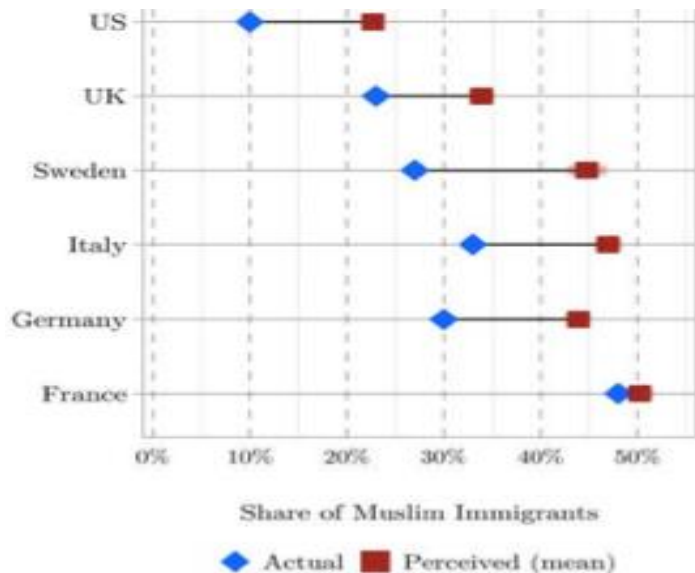
Notes: The left panel shows the average perceived share of immigrants (red squares) and the actual share (blue diamonds) in each country. The right panel shows the average misperception (perceived minus actual share) of the share of immigrants by groups. Groups are defined by the indicator variables listed to the left: the mean misperception when the indicator is equal to 1 is represented by the orange or red diamonds. The shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals around the mean.

Beyond “innumeracy”

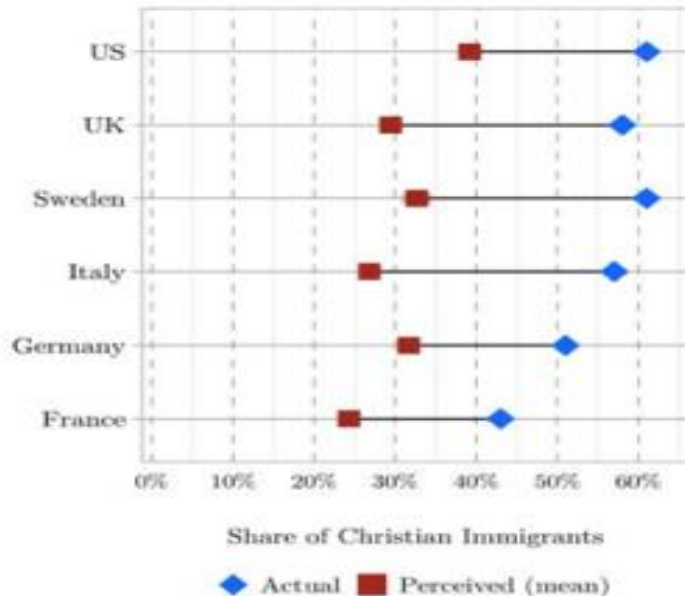
- Not just that people are bad with numbers
- Misperceptions are systematic, directional

Perceptions vs. reality: immigrants' religion

Muslims overestimated
(except in France)



Christians underestimated

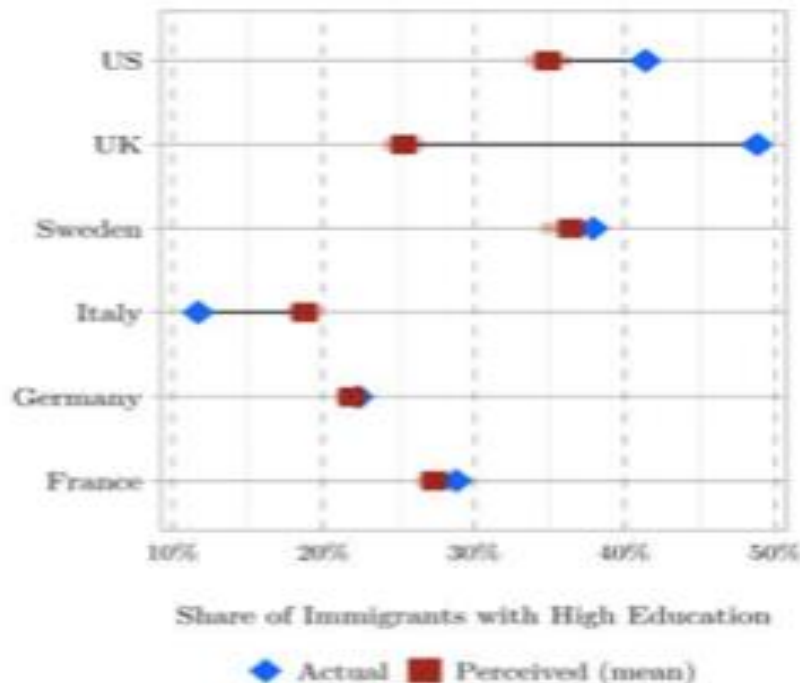
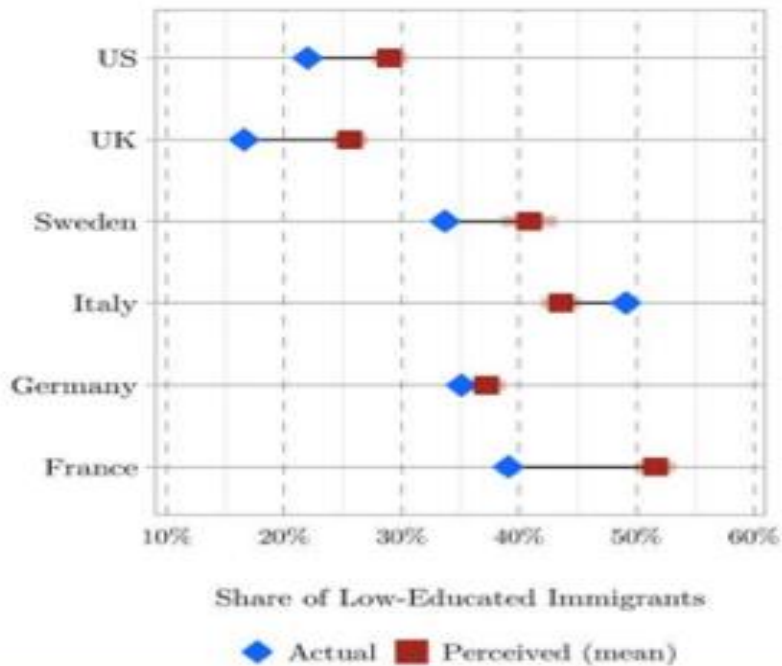


Adapted from Alesina et al. 2018

Perceptions vs. reality: immigrants' education

Low-education overestimated

High-ed underestimated (some)



Adapted from Alesina et al. 2018

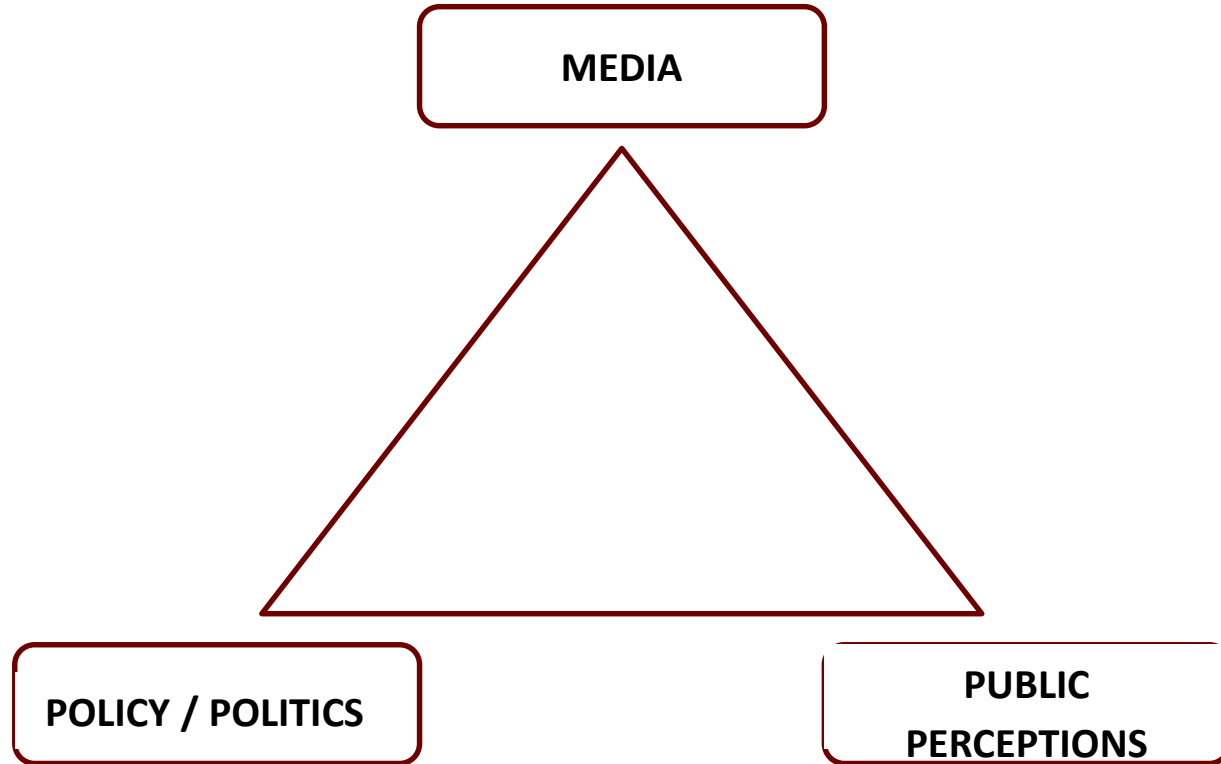
More imagined immigration

- Number of immigrants - overestimated
- Identities (nationality, ethnicity, religion)
 - In Finland, 20% think Somalis are their largest immigrant group (Herda 2015) but there are 4x as many Russians
 - “The average American believes the United States is 39% black, 26% Jewish, 33% Latino, 38% foreign born and 25% gay” (Gallagher 2014)
- Legal status
 - More “worry” about “illegal” immigration
 - (Transatlantic Trends’ survey of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, US, UK)
- Voluntary vs. involuntary
 - “stronger perception that most migrants decide themselves to migrate was associated with lower endorsement of cultural rights” (Verkuyten et al. 2018)

SOURCES OF IMAGINED IMMIGRATION

Imagined immigration

- How did those images get there?
 - Personal experience (first hand / second hand knowledge)
 - Personal networks
 - Word-of-mouth
 - Socialization – parents, education, etc.
 - **Media**
 - **Traditional news media**
 - **Social media**
 - **Politicians working through media**
 - **Entertainment media**



Portrayals in destination countries

- Most are neutral or negative
 - Both developed and developing world
- Most common frames
 - Humanitarian, economic
 - Also prominent: 'socio-cultural', security
- See Allen, Blinder, McNeil 2017 *World Migration Report* chapter for review

Negative frames/themes

- Economic
- “they” take “our” jobs and/or abuse the welfare system



Migrants become informants to provide valuable 'intel' against mafia

By Jorge Valero | EURACTIV.com

Aug 30, 20

Negative frames: security (crime, terrorism)

The New York Times

MS-13 Gang Member Pleads Guilty in Quadruple Murder Highlighted by Trump



context]

Editing Assign
https://mood

NEWS

IMMIGRATION & THE BORDER

Only six immigrants in terrorism database stopped by CBP at southern border from October to March

The low number contradicts statements by Trump administration officials.

Daily Mail

FAMILY HOLIDAYS FROM £15 HUNDREDS OF EUROPEAN & UK LOCATIONS

4,000 FOREIGN MURDERERS AND RAPISTS WE CAN'T THROW OUT

...and, yes, you can blame human rights again

Jim Davidson arrested by Savile police

...and, yes, you can blame human rights again

Negative frames: 'cultural' threat



Germany's biggest tabloid attacks Islam



Bild editor-in-chief Kai Diekmann said there was no room for such comments in Bild publications but stopped short of an apology. Photo: DPA

Positive coverage

- Counter-narratives, counter-imagery
- Often generated by activist immigrants themselves, and their allies,
- Can also come from local, human interest reporting
- Or from politicians and parties with pro-immigration platforms and supporters



Positive portrayals: local media

- Local news: human interest stories, community oriented
 - Evidence from Spain, Netherlands
 - Anecdotal evidence from US, UK – sympathetic deportation cases
- Corresponds with difference in public opinion
 - Immigration perceived as a national problem
 - Local diversity seen as neutral or positive

Petition aims to stop deportation of married Irish woman in Australia

Ray O'Hanlon @IrishEcho | Sep 15, 2017

450 /       



HOME » CULTURE » TV AND RADIO » X FACTOR

Simon Cowell to help X Factor reject Gamu Nhengu fight deportation

Simon Cowell has pledged to help X Factor reject Gamu Nhengu and her family fight plans to deport them.



Image 1 of 2

Simon Cowell has ordered his lawyers to support Gamu Nhengu Photo: PA

By Rebecca Lefort
11:27AM BST 09 Oct 2010

News > Local

Pioneer Valley activist Eduardo Samaniego deported to Mexico



X Factor

News » Zimbabwe »
Celebrity news »
TV and Radio »
Immigration »

In X Factor



X Factor: where are they now?



Does Grimmy have the X Factor?

iego addresses about two hundred people gathered under an xton, Sept. 5, 2017, to hear the stories of those affected by the rney General Jeff Sessions earlier in the day. STAFF FILE PHOTO »

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC
OPINION, POLITICAL ACTION**

Implications of Imagined Immigration

- 1. Research:
 - a) Careful interpreting what polls means; leverage from examining perceptions of who immigrants
 - b) impact on policy preferences toward “immigration”
- 2. Policy: misguided responses to restrictionist public opinion
- 3. Advocacy: A route for long-term public opinion change?

Beyond immigration 'innumeracy': information that matters

- Correlation: misperception associated with negative attitudes
- But weak evidence for causation from survey experiments
- This has been taken as evidence that perceptions don't matter
- However...maybe they were using the wrong kind of information - numbers rather than characteristics of immigrants

Media frames changing images, information changing attitudes

- Framing (UK) immigration as high-skilled → lower estimates of 'illegal' immigrants as % of total immigrants (Blinder & Jeannet, 2018)
- Correct information about immigration in-flows (USA) → preference for lower number of immigrant arrivals (Blinder & Schaffner, 2019)
 - NOTE: use of information about flows, not stocks
- Grigorieff et al. 2018: change perceptions/attitudes (USA) with broader package of correct information
 - % foreign born in population, AND
 - % of immigrants who are 1) 'illegal', 2) unemployed, 3) incarcerated, 4) cannot speak English

Policy

- The net migration target
 - Cameron's 2010 campaign pledge: "from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands"
 - Policies on all fronts: labor migration, student migration, family migration
 - Limited migration in ways that didn't matter to public opinion
 - Caused unnecessary harm (exclusion of spouses of British citizens; restrictions on students; administrative work for universities)
 - Conservatives failed to meet target, lost ground with public opinion

Activism matters (Zepeda-Millan 2017)

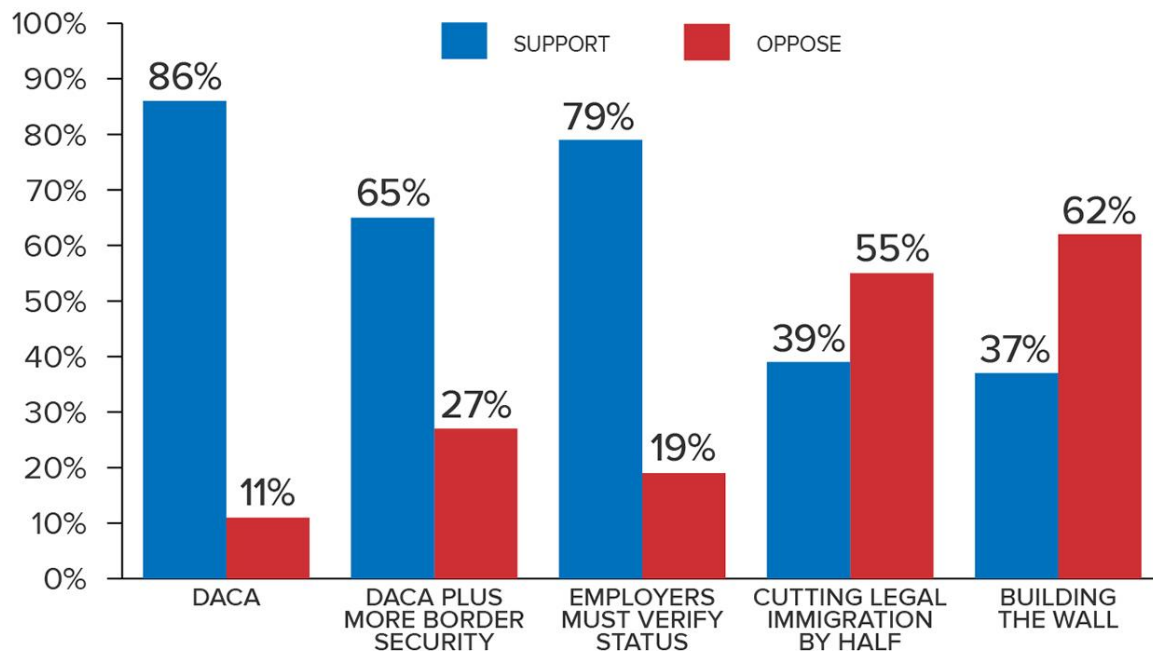


DREAMers → DACA



Overwhelming support for DACA

VIEWS ON IMMIGRATION



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