

Ipsos MORI  
Social Research Institute



# Perceptions and Reality



Public Attitudes to immigration  
in Germany and Britain

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## **About Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute**

Ipsos MORI Public Affairs works closely with national governments, local public services and the not-for-profit sector. Its c.200 research staff focus on public service, policy and reputation issues. Each has expertise in a particular part of the public sector, ensuring we have a detailed understanding of specific sectors and policy challenges. This, combined with our methodological and communications expertise, helps ensure that our research makes a difference for decision makers and communities.

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Both the British and German governments are committed to a policy of attracting the best and brightest skilled migrants from around the world, in an effort to cultivate high-skilled, globally competitive economies. Yet, this similarity of purpose at a policy level stands in direct contrast to the very different ways the debate about immigration plays out in both countries.

To the British public, immigration is currently the most important issue facing the country. The Ipsos MORI Issues Index, which has tracked views on public policy issues for several decades, shows a rising preoccupation with immigration from the late 1990s onwards (Figure 1). Immigration was overtaken during the recession amid economic concerns, but has since resurfaced as the most important issue to Britons.

In Germany, by contrast, the salience of immigration has tracked at a much lower level, although with recent increases in migrant numbers the issue has become more important to people over the last 18 months. Figure 2, which is based on Eurobarometer trends, shows this clearly, but also highlights just how much of an outlier Britain is.

Figure 3 (overleaf) shows the difference in opinion between the two countries is probably partly due to numbers; Britain has a larger foreign born population than Germany and had higher levels of net migration throughout most of the 2000s. However, there has been a steep upward trend in net migration in Germany since 2009, surpassing the UK significantly in 2012 and 2013.

Population density is higher in Britain, even more so in England, and a greater proportion of the British population live in urban centres than in Germany, which is where immigrants tend to settle.

But there are other factors at play, as our new generational analysis of European Social Survey data shows.

Figure 4 shows opinion has gone on very different paths in the two countries, both overall and between generations. In Britain, we have seen largely flat and, on balance, negative views of the economic benefits of immigration. But this hides a growing generational divide in Britain, where Baby Boomers in particular have shifted from being the most positive to the most negative over the last 10 years. In contrast, the two younger generations have become increasingly convinced about the economic benefits of immigration, although note there are still as many negative as positive among these younger cohorts.

The German pattern is very different. Overall opinion was actually similarly negative in 2004, and there was a similar if smaller generational divide, where the young were more positive than the old. But since then there has been a quite remarkable shift in both of these patterns; the public in Germany has become much more positive and the generations have come together in this view.

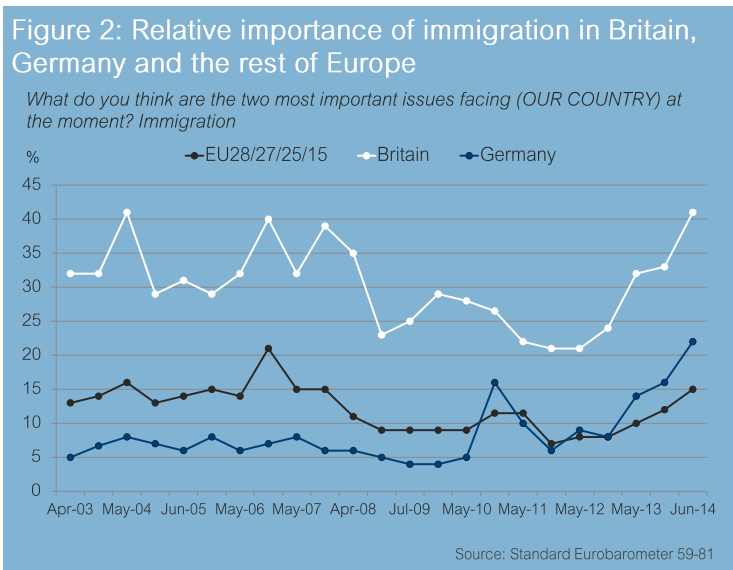
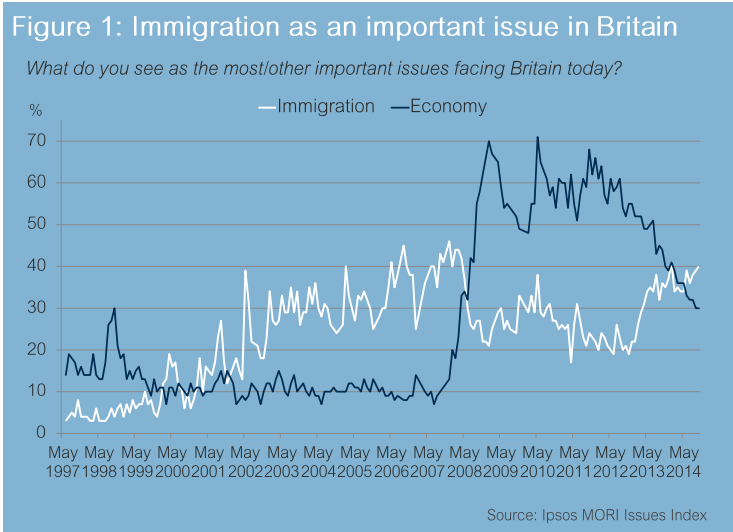


Figure 3: Key statistics – Germany and Britain

		
Foreign born population %, 2013	11.9	12.4
Population density, per km <sup>2</sup>	226	262
GDP per capita, 2013 (US dollars)	40,007	37,307
Urban population %, 2013	74	80
Total fertility rate	1.43	1.85

Sources: World Bank, OECD, ONS, Statistisches Bundesamt, Eurostat

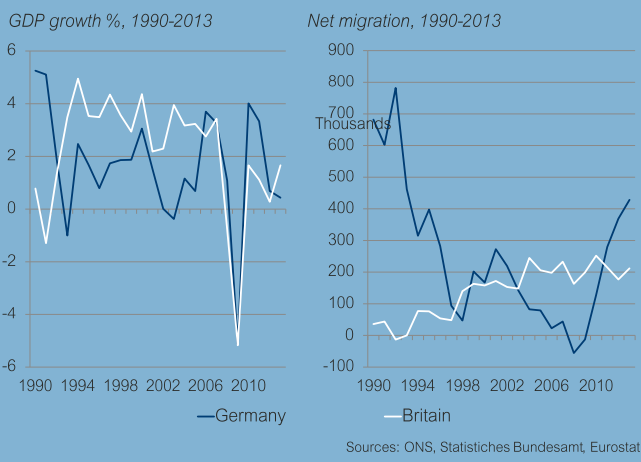
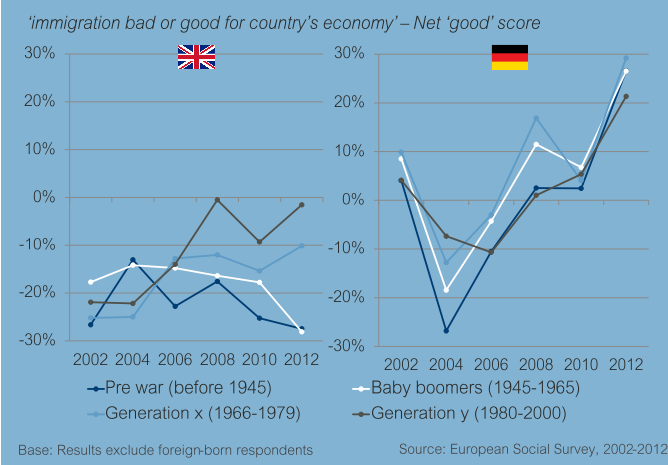


Figure 4: Different generational attitudes on impact of immigration on the economy



There are a number of possible explanations for these contrasting trends. The economic context, for instance, has been different. German economic growth has been stronger post-recession, although there is evidence of a slowdown in Germany in contrast to Britain's positive economic performance over the last year. But assuming that economic growth nullifies concerns about immigration is not borne out by the facts. For instance, in Britain immigration has become more salient as economic concerns have receded (as shown in Figure 1).

For a better explanation we might look at the differing ways in which the political and social narrative around immigration has been shaped by both countries' experiences of dealing with immigration over the last decade.

In Britain, several senior Labour politicians have acknowledged that they "got it wrong"<sup>1</sup> on immigration while in office in the 2000s, as unprecedented levels of immigration affected some communities that were ill-equipped to deal with rapid population change. Unlike in Germany, restrictions on the A8 were not left in place after their Accession in 2004, which led to a significant increase in EU immigration to Britain.<sup>2</sup> A liberal immigration policy was sold to the public as bringing economic growth and benefits to Britain – but economic and tax contributions are not clearly perceptible to the man or woman on the street. What was more evident to many was the increasing pressure of a growing population – fuelled largely by immigration – on public services, housing and local areas. Outside of the more affluent and cosmopolitan areas of Britain, the changing cultural profile of some towns has generated anxiety and concerns about social trust and cohesion. The view among large sections of the British public is that the economic gains of immigration, to the extent they exist, do not outweigh its negative aspects.

The Coalition's response in coming to power was to pledge to slow the rate of immigration to the "tens of

thousands" annually by 2015. But it has proved impossible to deliver on this, as growing EU immigration from Southern Europe has pushed the most recent immigration figures a long way from the target. According to recent polling by Ipsos MORI, three-quarters of the public are not confident David Cameron will reduce net immigration to the tens of thousands annually.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-18539472>

<sup>2</sup>

[http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Migration%20Flows%20of%20A8%20and%20other%20EU%20Migrants%20to%20and%20from%20the%20UK\\_0.pdf](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Migration%20Flows%20of%20A8%20and%20other%20EU%20Migrants%20to%20and%20from%20the%20UK_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3475/Labour-support-lowest-since-before-2010-general-election.aspx>

The failure by sections of the political class to acknowledge the negative aspects of immigration in the 2000s, coupled with the inability of the Coalition to deliver on its pledge to cut immigration has eroded public trust on this issue: just a quarter of Britons (25%) feel the government has been doing a good job on managing immigration<sup>4</sup>, and recent Ipsos MORI polling shows the majority of people (56%) think the job that the current government is doing on immigration is no worse or better than the previous Labour government (25% say a better job, 12% say a worse job). This has helped fuel the remarkable rise in support for the anti-immigration UK Independence Party.

Contrast this with Germany, where over half the population (54%) feel the government *is* doing a good job on immigration (Figure 5). The different situation in Germany seems to be underpinned by a consensual awareness among Germans of the economic need for immigration, as shown in the generational analysis. Lower historic rates of net migration (emigration even exceeded immigration in 2008 and 2009) coupled with a low birth rate in Germany have made clear to politicians and policymakers the need for immigrants to support an ageing population and bolster a shrinking labour force. People of all generations seem ready to accept this argument, recent polling data in 2014 showing that the proportion of Germans who think immigration is a necessity for the national labour market has doubled since 2004, from 27% to 53% now.<sup>5</sup>

The media in Germany also has a largely supportive tone. On the left, there has always been an ideological commitment to openness and freedom of movement, whereas the right are more persuaded by the economic and demographic arguments mentioned above. In Britain, by comparison, the media's liberal left have been more circumspect recently, such is the strength of the tide in favour of restricting immigration. The right are generally critical of all parties on the issue, reflecting the view of most people in Britain that more can, and should, be done on control.

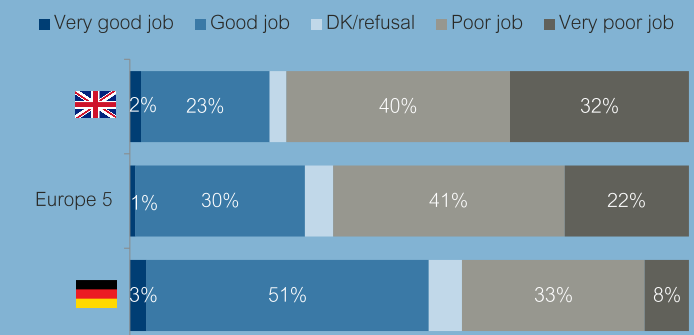
Yet, the contrast between this seemingly dispassionate, consensual view in Germany, largely supportive of government policy, and the highly partisan, fractious, anti-establishment debate in Britain cannot be attributed alone to geo-demographic trends and the simple number of migrants that have been let in.

Several policy initiatives in Germany since the mid-2000s have dealt head-on with the thorny issue of how best to integrate newcomers into society. Integration is a federal government priority in Germany, which is in strong contrast to the largely non-interventionist multiculturalist position of British governments, where integration initiatives have found most impetus at the local level.

From 2005 Germany enacted a step-change in integration policy with a fundamental reform of its aliens law. A key purpose was to offer "integration courses" for immigrants (courses in German language, culture, law, history) and make them obligatory for new and unemployed immigrants. Further, since 2006 Chancellor Angela Merkel has held an annual Integration Summit, attended by representatives of all social groups with an interest in integration, including immigrant organizations. Regular checks are made to ensure that the most important result of the first Integration Summit, the "National Integration Plan", is being implemented. It contains concrete goals as well as over 400 measures for government, business, and social actors that focus on education, the development of language skills and incorporating migrants into the labour market. The Plan includes restrictions and sanctions against immigrants that refuse to integrate. At the most recent Summit, Chancellor Merkel said that Germany wants to be an "integration country".<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 5: Attitudes towards government's managing of immigration**

*Thinking about the steps that have been taken to manage immigration, would you say that the government has been doing a very good job, a good job, a poor job, or a very poor job?*



Europe 5 includes Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the UK

Source: Transatlantic Trends, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Transatlantic Trends, 2013

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/afd-anhaenger-ticken-anders-als-der-rest-der-bevoelkerung-13222075.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article116591541/Merkel-fordert-fuer-Migranten-geistige-Offenheit.html>

This has taken place in Germany against the backdrop of sustained economic growth, falling unemployment (the number of immigrants unemployed has halved since 2005) and demographic change, as described earlier. The conditions for a more positive outlook among Germans are certainly there. Even so, the federal government's commitment to making integration work, through a process of carrot and stick that makes visible to newcomers and natives alike that Germany will actively support those who come to contribute and integrate and penalize those who do not, seems to resonate with the public.

In Britain, the general distaste for government intervention into matters of culture underlies British policymaking in a way that is not the case in Germany; among the public, "openness" and "tolerance" are values people tend to mention most when asked about what it means to be British. Yet, when it comes to integrating newcomers this can be both a blessing and curse: demanding little in the way of integration can lead to a build-up of tension among some groups that influence much wider views.

In recent years the political narrative of "muscular liberalism" has gained credence in Britain. Suited to Britain's political tradition and a time of fiscal austerity, the onus is placed on immigrants to take it upon themselves to contribute, learn the language and respect British values; beyond this, they are free to live as they wish. Of course, it is hoped that a deeper form of commitment and belonging to Britain is forged over time, but this should happen largely organically, and has not been primarily the responsibility of central government to facilitate.

While in Germany, then, immigration and integration are treated as two sides of the same coin, in Britain the focus is considerably on "who" and "how many".

So, for a variety of reasons –geo-demographic, economic, political, cultural and ideological– those wishing to encourage a more positive public discussion on immigration in Britain cannot hope to quickly and simply transplant the German political narrative to Britain and expect the same result.

Yet the changes in British opinion from the late 1990s remind us nothing is constant – Germans should beware how quickly views can shift if the number of migrants rises considerably and there is a perception of lack of control. Recent increasing inflows of low-skilled workers from other parts of the EU may begin to test the perception that the government in Germany has dealt effectively with immigration over the last few years.

For Britain, it is hard to see how the engrained suspicion of politicians' motives and competency in managing this issue effectively can be overcome. The German experience suggests that a greater focus on integration might be an important element of the response, particularly in the longer-term. But with the immediate pressure of an upcoming election, and with immigration now so tied into the growing sense that elites ignore the concerns of ordinary citizens, the "numbers and control" narrative will continue to dominate.

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