Has Brexit affected the way Britons think about immigrants? The recent 'national mood' on immigration

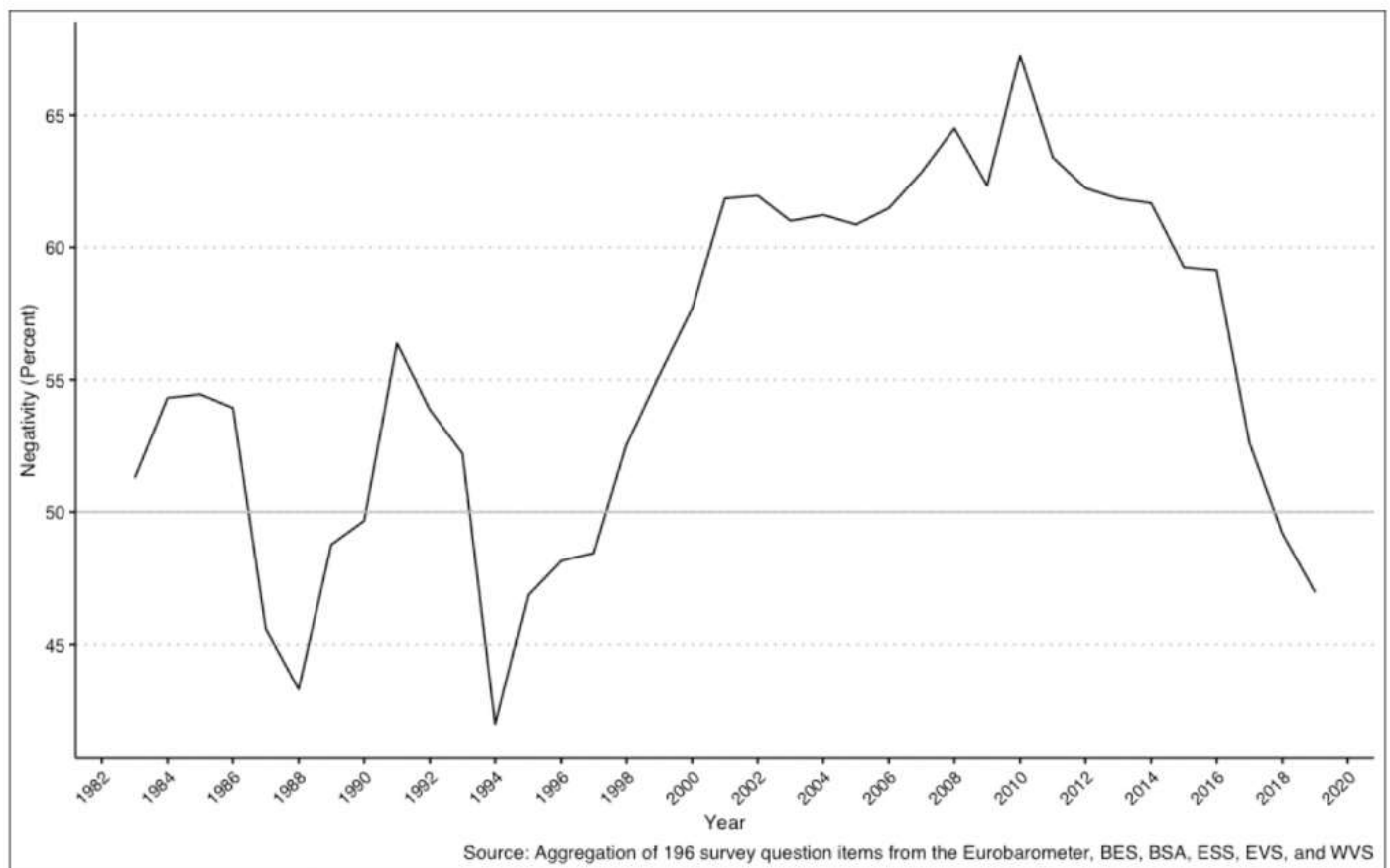*Did Brexit cause an increase in anti-immigrant hostility?* **Patrick English** *collates various survey results to answer this question in the negative. He also finds that Brexit itself does not seem to have caused opinions to become more positive either.*

Back in 2018, I wrote a piece showing how British public opinion on immigration had changed since the 1980s by analysing responses across waves of repeated, high-quality research surveys carried out in Britain. Then, the research showed that British opinions toward immigrants and immigration had been softening dramatically over the last decade since a peak in public hostility around 2010.

Recently I was able to update this information with a plethora of new results from the British Election Study (BES), the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, and the European Social Survey (ESS) which were fielded over the past two years. Figure 1 below shows what has changed since then, and how the new information has impacted the model's estimation of the 'national mood' about immigration.

Figure 1: Negative public views on immigration in Britain, from 1983-2019

Source: Aggregation of 196 survey question items from the Eurobarometer, BES, BSA, ESS, EVS, and WVS

The line represents the proportion of survey respondents in each year answering *negatively* when faced with questions regarding their views on immigrants and immigration. The grey line running through the middle of the plot cuts the y-axis at 50% – half of the population having negative feelings toward immigration, with the other 50% holding a more positive perspective. The aggregation is carried out using Jim Stimson's dyad-ratios calculator, which is able to standardise different survey measurements on the same topic. From this, individual survey items can be 'blended together' into a single series, such as above. (The code to run Stimson's calculator in R can be found on my GitHub repository).

What the updated data shows is that the dramatic decline in anti-immigrant sentiments, which had reached a peak (in the study) around 2010, has continued up to the conclusion of the decade. According to the data analysed in this study, a majority of the British public now have positive views toward immigrants and immigration.

When I posted these results on Twitter, they became the subject of quite some discussion among various Brexit tribes (both supporting and against), with much conversation surrounding the impact that Brexit (and specifically, the campaign) may or may not have had on feelings toward immigrants in this country. It is toward this debate that I wish to turn the rest of the article – namely, did Brexit cause an increase in anti-immigrant hostility in Britain?

Firstly, the evidence is quite clear that neither the Brexit campaign nor Brexit itself has caused any increase in negativity or hostility toward immigrants or immigration *in the aggregate sense*. There is nothing in the public opinion data, presented here or indeed elsewhere, that I have seen which would support the hypothesis that Brexit has unleashed some kind of wave of anti-immigrant hostility *when we look at the nation as a whole.*

However, the emphasis above is intended and important. There is nothing to say that just because aggregate levels of hostility toward immigration among the British public have declined, that there could not have been a simultaneous hardening or strengthening of negativity since Brexit among those with deep-rooted, very hostile opinions about foreigners in Britain. Both of these things could be true. Similarly, this measurement is not one of racism, or individual experiences/incidents of racism or indeed discrimination on the grounds of immigrant (origin) status.

Finally, Brexit might not have caused a rise in aggregate anti-immigrant hostility, but there is also little evidence to suggest that it *caused* this drop. For one, attitudes have been softening since 2010, and Brexit comes right in the middle of this near-linear decline. That said, the rate of decline has clearly accelerated since 2016, so perhaps there is some merit in the suggestion the Brexit vote may have 'released some frustration' regarding policy/control over matters of immigration among the population.

Inspecting the quarterly data also gives us some further, more nuanced insight into what the various narratives around Brexit might have done to attitudes surrounding immigrants and immigration. Figure 2 shows a more detailed snapshot of Figure 1, with 100 survey items analysed from 2009 to 2019.

Figure 2 – Quarterly estimates of British public negativity on immigration

Source: Aggregation of 100 survey question items from the BES, BSA, ESS, EVS, and WVS
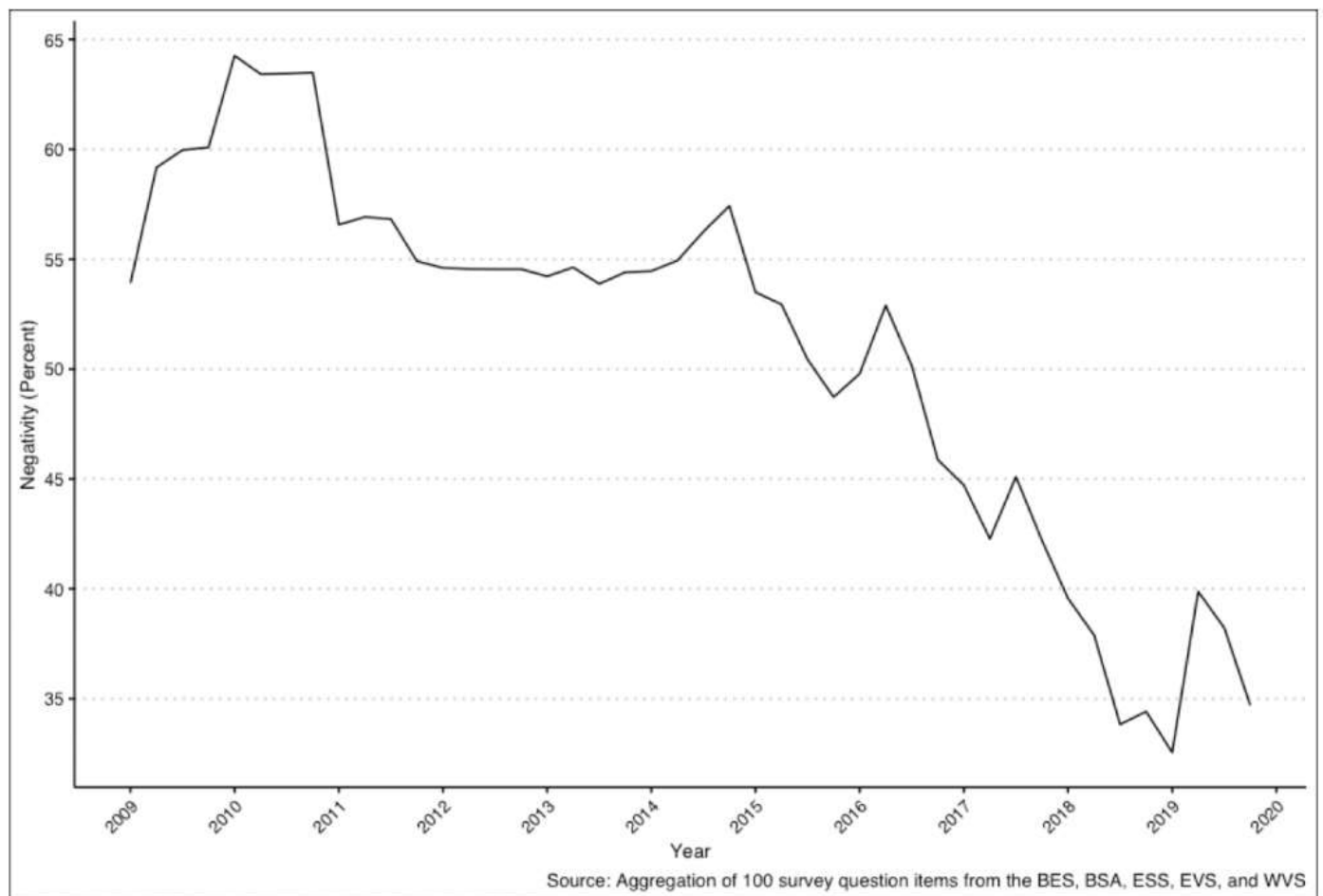
Note: the mean level of sentiment here has shifted downward from in Figure 1, where the series included here and other series stretching back further into time anchor the overall trend line around 5-10% higher.

Here we see in greater detail the average decline in negativity from the turn of the last decade, with the peak around 2010 followed by something more resembling a jagged mountain face than a cliff edge. The sharp, short-term peaks in anti-immigrant mood as we travel down the ten-year slope are seemingly clustered around important electoral events surrounding Brexit: the 2014 European Elections won by UKIP, the build-up to the referendum itself in 2016, the General Election in 2017 where Theresa May sought a parliamentary majority for her Brexit plan, and then the 2019 election campaign featuring Boris Johnson's pledge to "get Brexit done".

Are these moments of intense scrutiny and pressure on Brexit producing these little sparks of negativity among the British public? It seems reasonable to think so – around these moments, media coverage and political commentary around immigration (specifically in relation to the EU) intensifies, parties actively campaign against the current immigration regime, and voters may be connecting immigration closer to their voting intention than they otherwise might, and respond to survey questions accordingly.

Whatever the case, what is certain is that these moments of upturn in the data do not last long. Once the moment passes, the decline in negativity continues – and even arguably picks up pace. Furthermore, given that margins of error apply to these aggregated figures just as much as they do to individual polls, the various quarterly spikes within the last ten years could just be statistical noise.

So, did Brexit cause an increase in anti-immigrant hostility in Britain? There is little evidence in the public opinion data analysed here to suggest that it did – particularly in the medium term. Did it, on the other hand, cause a big increase in positivity? Again, I would argue that it did not. Brexit has coincided with a plummet in British negativity about immigration, the start of which proceeded Boris Johnson's successful attempt to pass a Brexit deal through the Commons, the referendum itself, and Nigel Farage's electoral successes in the early 2010s.

In short, I would say that Brexit has not much at all to do with what Britons think about immigration.

About the Author

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