

Thermostatic public opinion: why UK anti-immigrant sentiments rise and then fall



Contrary to popular narratives, there has been a collapse in anti-immigrant hostility in Britain, evident since the run up to the 2016 referendum. [Patrick English](#) explains how the success of the BNP and UKIP may have caused this fall and argues that recent changes may be seen as confirming the 'thermostatic' character of British public opinion.

The Britain of today, it has been said, is far more sceptical and hostile toward immigration than the 'forward thinking', multicultural 'cool Britannia' [inherited by Tony Blair in the 1990s](#). This claim certainly may have [held up to evidence](#) leading up to the turn of the decade, but what if now, rather than 'more hostile than ever', the British public is in fact becoming more open and tolerant of immigrants and immigration?

While it is often remarked that an ever-growing dissatisfaction with immigration underpinned the mobilisation and success of the BNP and UKIP, what if – almost completely paradoxically – a recent collapse in anti-immigrant hostility was in fact caused by the rise of these two parties? Lastly, what if – despite assertions to the contrary – trends in British immigration opinions have very little at all to do with the Brexit vote, and Brexit came at a time when immigration attitudes were already rapidly softening?

This is exactly what my latest research into British public opinion on immigration suggests. As part of a wider project about the political experience and representation of ethnic minority and immigrant origin groups in Britain, I have collected and extensively analysed trends in public opinion toward immigration over the last four decades. Figure 1 documents change in public opinion toward immigration in Britain since the early 1980s according to an aggregated measurement of almost 200 different survey questions from six international and national-level survey sources.

Figure 1: Public opinion on immigration in Great Britain (%)



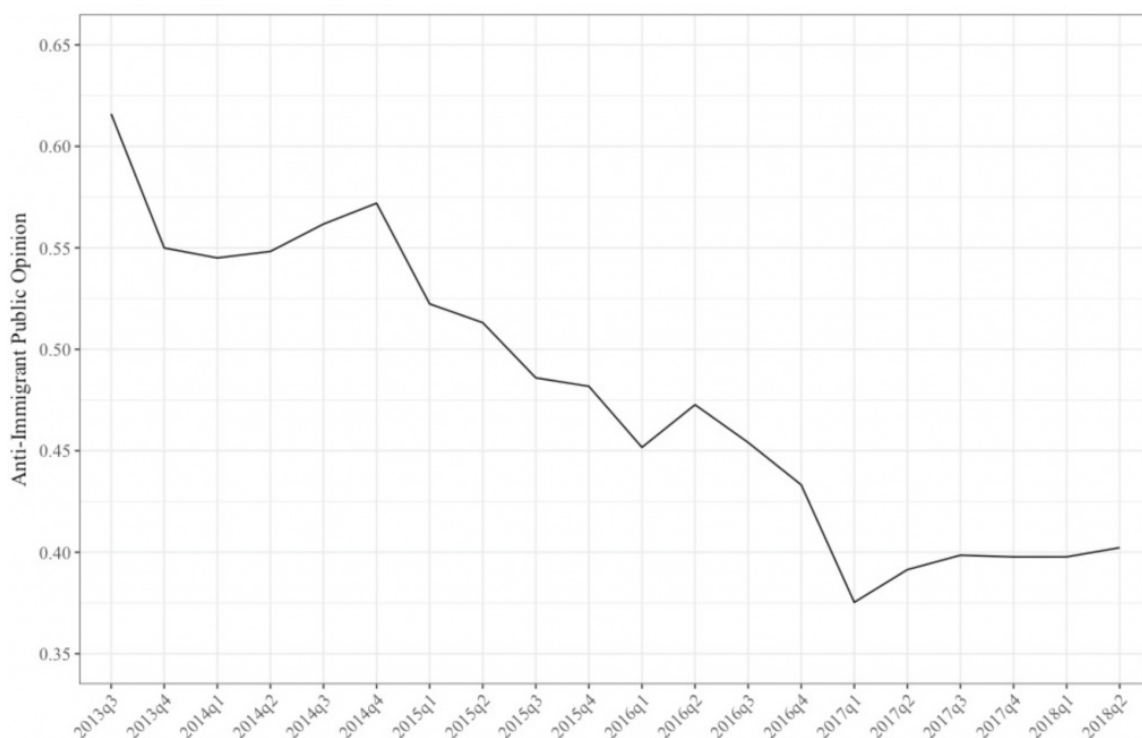
Source: *Stimson Dyad-Ratios algorithm estimation on 173 public opinion marginals. 27 question item series. Estimated line has Eigenvalue score of 66%, mean of*

55.5, and standard deviation of 6.1.

The data, coming from the British Election Study, the British Social Attitudes survey, the European and World Values Studies, the European Social Survey, and the Eurobarometer, are 'blended' together using the [Stimson dyad-ratios algorithm](#). (For more information on this method of aggregation and its advantages over single-source or one-poll research and reporting, see [Stimson \(2018\)](#), [Jennings \(2009\)](#) and [English \(2018\)](#).) Public opinion in Figure 1 ranges from 0 (completely open and tolerant of immigration) to 1 (completely hostile and anti-immigration).

Beginning in 1980, just over half of Brits would be considered to be generally hostile or negative about immigration. This falls, rises, and falls again by about 0.1 points over the late 1980s and early 1990s, before a low point in 1994 is followed by a meteoric rise in anti-immigrant hostility right up until the mid-2010s. A peak in 2010 'levels off' to a mean of around 0.6 in the 2000s before suddenly and sharply plummeting through until 2018. Right in the middle of this sharp decline in public hostility toward immigration is the Brexit vote. We can visualise this remarkable 'cliff edge' in anti-immigrant sentiments in another way via Figure 2. This uses exactly the same data as Figure 1 but the time period is restricted to between 2013-2017 and the data are analysed quarterly instead of annually.

Figure 2: Quarterly public opinion on immigration in Great Britain (%).



Source: Dyad-Ratios algorithm estimation on 51 public opinion marginals. 12 question item series. Estimated line has Eigenvalue score of 92%, mean of 47.9, and standard deviation of 7.0.

The fall from the early 2010s high through to the end of the study period is no less dramatic in this graph than the previous one. Here, the aggregated index score falls from its initial peak in an almost linear fashion with only a slight rise at the end of 2014 providing any significant deviation. By the time that the referendum comes along in the third quarter of 2016, aggregate public hostility toward immigration has already declined – and will continue to do so afterwards – by almost 20%.

The two graphs provide strong evidence substantiating the claims made by many commentators and academics in recent months: that attitudes toward immigration [have indeed been softening](#) since the time of the EU referendum. However, it also provides strong evidence that this softening has been much larger and more dramatic than previously thought; and has been taking place since *well before* the 2016 vote – disputing the idea that the Brexit vote has any causal connection to the recent reversal of a long-term trend in rising hostility toward immigration – [as suggested recently by Michael Gove](#) among others.

So how can we explain the rises and falls in aggregate anti-immigrant sentiment over the past 40 years? I argue that the findings evidence the existence of a [‘thermostatic’ character](#) to British public opinion, in that aggregate public opinion is responding to movements and changes in policies, discourses, and mobilisation regarding immigration.

Firstly, we can understand the rising hostility toward immigration across the late 1990s and 2000s as a ‘reaction’ to increasingly multicultural and liberalising diversity and immigration policies in the New Labour period. This was a period where ‘multiculturalism’ reigned supreme – the result of a movement which had been in place since the 1960s, when Britain (along with many other Anglophone nations) [abandoned the assimilationist approach](#). Labour governments introduced meaty legislation aimed at protecting minority and disadvantaged individuals and communities from discrimination – [culminating in the Equalities Act of 2010](#) – and famously allowed [‘open immigration’](#) from the 2004 EU accession countries (mostly from Eastern Europe) when other EU countries chose to enact temporary restrictions. As we can see from the rising public hostility toward immigration over the same period, the British public were signalling that this might have all been ‘too much’.

Riding this wave of anti-immigrant public opinion, [the BNP gained unparalleled success](#) for a British far-right party, culminating in 2008 and 2009. Between these two years, the party campaigned on an unashamedly and proud anti-immigration platform and won a London Assembly seat, two seats at the European Elections, and had around 50 local councillors dotted around the country. In 2014, UKIP won 163 council seats in the local elections, won the European Elections (taking a plurality of 28% of the vote and 24 MEPs), and were heading for their best result at a General Election the next year, (13% of the vote, 1 MP). But there was a sea change underway in immigration opinions.

After the success of the BNP and the rise of UKIP, David Cameron’s 2011 declaration of the [‘failure of multiculturalism’](#) and his [‘war’ on its proponents and policies](#), and a very public ‘battle’ between those in favour of immigration and those against it in mainstream politics, it appears that *pro-immigrant sentiments* grew in response.

If we understand public opinion as involved in a symbiotic, responsive, [‘thermostatic’ relationship](#) with the political environment – where movements ‘too far’ in one direction by either one will be [reciprocated by a movement in the opposite direction](#) by the other – we can in turn understand the recent dramatic positive change in public opinion toward immigration as a response to the environment created by the BNP, Cameron’s ‘war’ on multiculturalism, and (latterly) the rise of UKIP. It, in turn, was ‘too much’.

This could involve a ‘crystallisation’ of latent pro-immigrant attitudes – people being stirred into taking an openly positive stance who were never comfortable with the restrictive position in the first place – and also the movement of ‘soft anti-immigrant’ view to ‘soft pro-immigration’ views. Both of these would be easily detectable in aggregate survey analysis.

And what does this mean in the context of Brexit? For one, it certainly does not mean that the Brexit vote itself was caused by a rising tide of anti-immigrant hostility, or that it was some culmination of a mass public movement against immigration. If we return to Figure 2, the Brexit vote came slap bang in the middle of the rapid decline in anti-immigrant sentiments from 2010 to 2017. For another, it also suggests that Brexit has had nothing to do with the recent ‘cooling off’ of hostility toward immigration. Rather, the ‘cooling off’ has been much longer and larger in trajectory than this, and the Brexit vote happened in the context of this wider movement.

About the Author



Patrick English is Associate Lecturer in the College of Social Sciences & International Relations at the University of Exeter.

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