

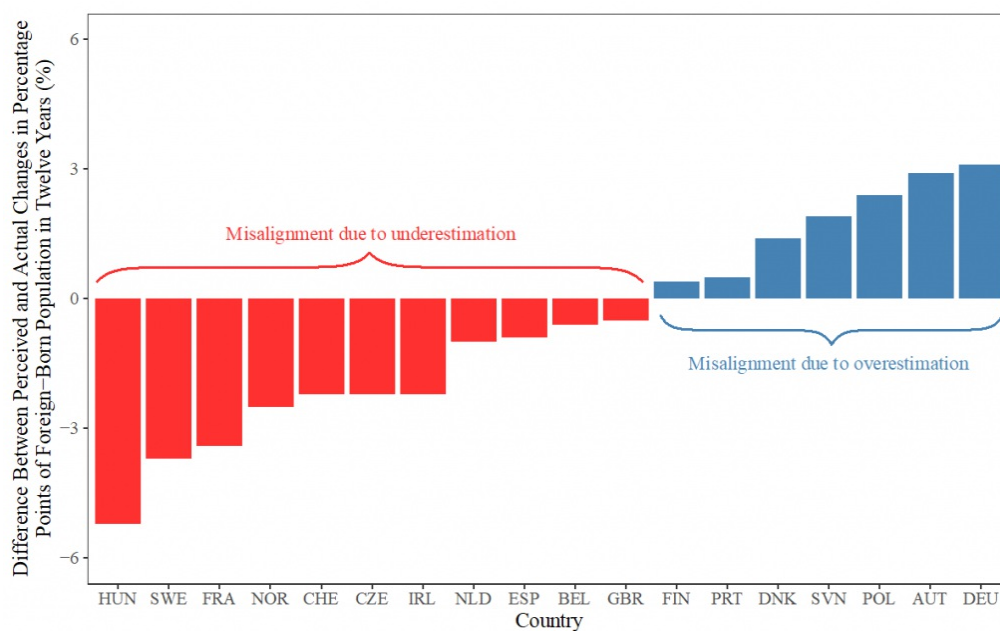
# There is no evidence that immigration boosts Euroscepticism in EU member states

A number of studies have established a strong link between anti-immigration and Eurosceptic attitudes. But does this relationship imply that more immigration increases Euroscepticism in EU member states? Drawing on a new study, **Eddy S. F. Yeung** demonstrates that higher immigration levels do not necessarily lead to stronger public Euroscepticism.

Does immigration boost public Euroscepticism in EU member states? Much of the anti-immigration rhetoric featured in Eurosceptic discourses would lead us to believe the answer is yes. Indeed, past research has [established](#) a strong link between anti-immigration and Eurosceptic attitudes, and recent work has [attributed](#) the electoral success of right-wing, Eurosceptic parties to their emphasis on anti-immigration stances. However, it remains theoretically and empirically unclear whether higher *actual* levels of immigration would necessarily increase public Euroscepticism.

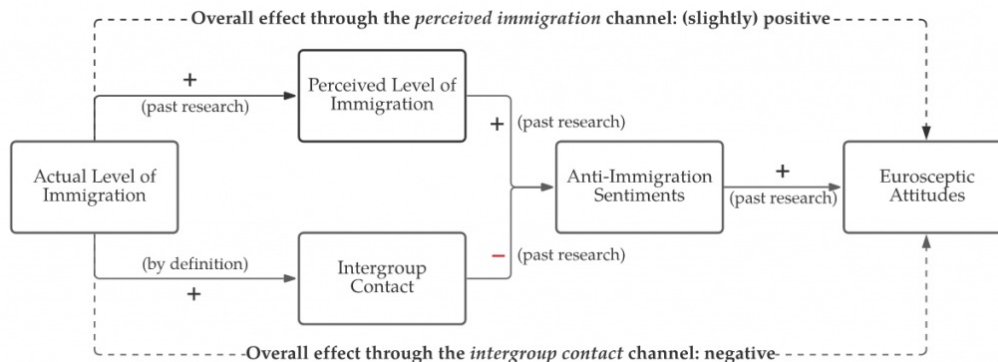
One theoretical problem with the assertion of a positive link between actual immigration levels and Euroscepticism is that it assumes public knowledge of actual immigration levels. This assumption, however, is unlikely to be satisfied given the misalignment between actual and perceived levels of the immigrant populations in EU member states (Figure 1). Another theoretical problem with this assertion is its failure to consider [intergroup contact](#). Under this framework, positive contact between immigrants and local citizens may reduce anti-immigration sentiments, which can decrease public Euroscepticism in turn.

**Figure 1: Misalignment between actual and perceived changes in foreign-born population size**



**Note:** The y-axis shows the perceived change in percentage points of the foreign-born population in twelve years minus the actual change in percentage points of the foreign-born population. Data on perceived changes are from Round 1 and Round 7 of European Social Survey – the only two waves that asked about the perceived size of the foreign-born population. Data on actual changes are from the OECD.

Hence, I argue that higher actual immigration levels do not necessarily lead to stronger public Euroscepticism. Figure 2 illustrates the full argument. On one hand, due to misalignment between actual and perceived levels of immigration, the overall effect of immigration on public Euroscepticism through the *perceived immigration* channel is likely to be positive but weak. On the other hand, due to intergroup contact, immigration has a theoretically negative effect on public Euroscepticism through the *intergroup contact* channel. These two effects may cancel each other out, leading to a non-relationship between Euroscepticism and actual immigration levels.

**Figure 2: Ambiguous link between Euroscepticism and actual immigration levels**

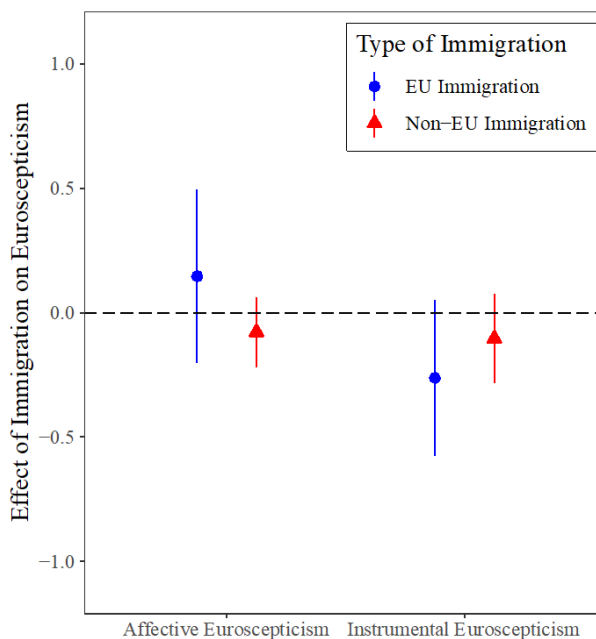
**Note:** The plus/minus sign indicates the positive/negative causal relationship either according to the academic literature or by direct implication.

To test my hypothesis, I analyse [Eurostat's immigration data](#) and [Eurobarometer's survey data](#) over the period 2009–2017. Specifically, I use the former to measure the actual levels of immigration from EU and non-EU member states in different country-years, and the latter to measure public Euroscepticism on both affective and instrumental dimensions.

On one hand, the affective dimension concerns the extent to which the EU conjures up a negative image to the survey respondent. On the other hand, the instrumental dimension focuses on whether the respondent believes that their country's EU membership is a bad thing, and whether they think their country has benefited from being a member of the EU. Because the statistical analysis involves estimation of the country-level effects on individual-level attitudes, I estimate multilevel models to account for the hierarchical structure of the data set.

It turns out there is no evidence that higher actual immigration levels are associated with greater public Euroscepticism. If the common perception that higher levels of immigration increase public Euroscepticism were true, then the estimated coefficients for the two key variables – the level of EU immigration and level of non-EU immigration – would be positive. Figure 3, however, suggests that this is not the case. Instead, the coefficients are mostly negative and statistically insignificant. Thus, there is no systematic evidence that actual immigration levels and public Euroscepticism are correlated in any meaningful way.

**Figure 3: Estimated effect of immigration levels on public Euroscepticism**



**Note:** Affective Euroscepticism and instrumental Euroscepticism each take a five-point scale, with higher values indicating more Eurosceptic attitudes. Explanatory variables – actual immigration levels from EU and non-EU member states – are standardised. Results are obtained from the estimates of multilevel models which include a rich set of theoretically relevant individual-level and country-level characteristics as control variables. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

I additionally test whether the null results are sensitive to alternative measures of immigration levels. I develop two additional measures, with the first pertaining to the percentage change of actual immigration levels and the second based on net immigration numbers. Using the new measures, I again find no evidence that actual levels of immigration and public Euroscepticism are positively correlated.

### Implications for the European project

What all these findings suggest is that immigration does not necessarily boost public Euroscepticism in EU member states. A strong link between anti-immigration and Eurosceptic attitudes does not necessarily translate into a strong link between immigration levels and public Euroscepticism.

This has important implications for the future development of the EU. Due to rising anti-immigration sentiments in Europe and the electoral success of right-wing Eurosceptic parties in recent years, there seems to be a common perception that the future of the European project is at stake: if people dislike immigration and are therefore Eurosceptic, public support for further European integration will inevitably be low.

However, here I argue that it is probably anti-immigration sentiments per se – instead of *actual* levels of immigration – that explain public Euroscepticism. Although further EU enlargement implies even more immigration across EU member states, the future success of the European project is not inherently doomed, since public Euroscepticism can still be low even if immigration levels are high.

Given that imposing stricter immigration restrictions may not be the right way to address public Euroscepticism, future research should study how such sentiments can be appropriately mitigated by public policy efforts. There have been recent efforts by the European Commission to [publicise materials which debunk myths](#) about migration to Europe and the work of the EU in immigration issues. To the extent that preventing EU citizens from overestimating the level of immigration in their country could reduce public Euroscepticism, such policy efforts seem to be very promising, and future research should test their effectiveness empirically.

**For more information, see the author's accompanying paper in [European Union Politics](#)**

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)*

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