

Talk of a nonexistent ‘tide of hate’ against EU migrants does nothing to help their cause

blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/03/17/talk-of-a-nonexistent-tide-of-hate-against-eu-migrants-does-nothing-to-help-their-cause/

17/03/2017

Some have identified a wave of xenophobia in the UK since Brexit – a ‘tide of hate’ unleashed by the vote.

Jim Butcher argues that EU opinion surveys suggests just the opposite, and that Britons have actually become more positive about migration in the past two years. To talk up the perceived xenophobia of Leave voters is ultimately divisive and does nothing to advance the cause of EU migrants in this country.



The idea that there is a post-Brexit tide of hate has wide currency amongst Brexit's critics. Polly Toynbee in the Guardian has [claimed](#) that ‘Brexit supporters have unleashed furies even they can’t control’ and that post-Brexit ‘those feeling betrayed will lurch even further into racism and xenophobia’. Academic and anti-Brexit campaigner Tanja Bueltmann [referred](#) this month to a ‘wave of xenophobia sweeping across the country’. Scientist Mike Galsworthy has [argued](#) that ‘a rising tide of xenophobia’ will discourage scientists from working in the UK.

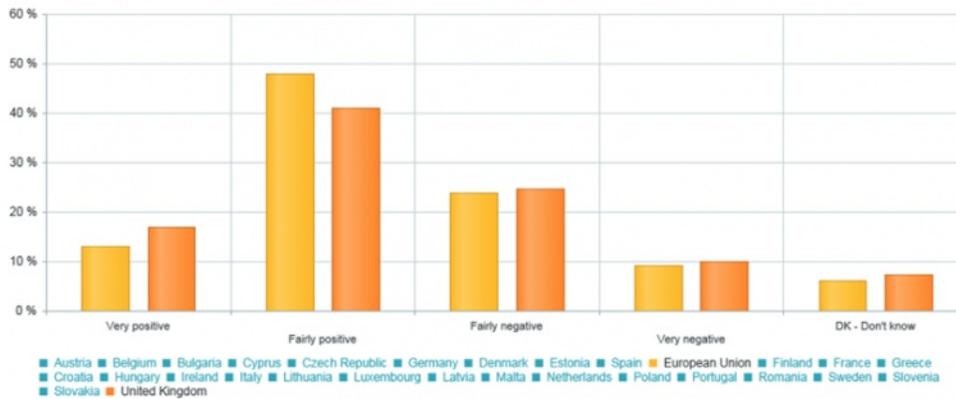


Photo: [monkeyc.net](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Campaigners and some on the Left who opposed Brexit have concurred. The anti-racist Monitoring Group in London [said](#) ‘no person should have been surprised to see the alarming rise of racism and the spread of xenophobia across the country so rapidly after the outcome of the Brexit vote.’ They added that ‘Brexit represents a new, unlike any other, dangerous phase for people of colour and migrants in our country.’ The same sentiments have been expressed at recent demonstrations, on social media and in the universities.

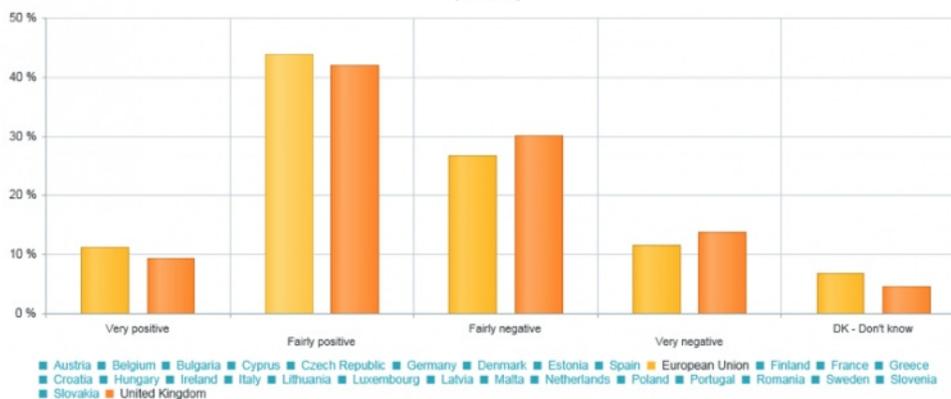
The EU collects data on a variety of social attitudes, including immigration. Whilst the spike in reported hate incidents immediately following the EU referendum has been much discussed, the EU’s data suggests that the notion of a general ‘tide of hate’ or xenophobia is, to say the least, a misreading of the mood. Its EU Barometer survey asks whether immigration (EU and non-EU) invokes a positive or negative feeling for respondents. The most recent figures from November 2016 indicate that the UK is average within the EU with regard to positivity towards immigration from EU member states (see fig.1). If there is a tide of hate, this suggests it is not solely a UK/Brexit phenomenon.

Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you.
Immigration of people from other EU Member States (11/2016)



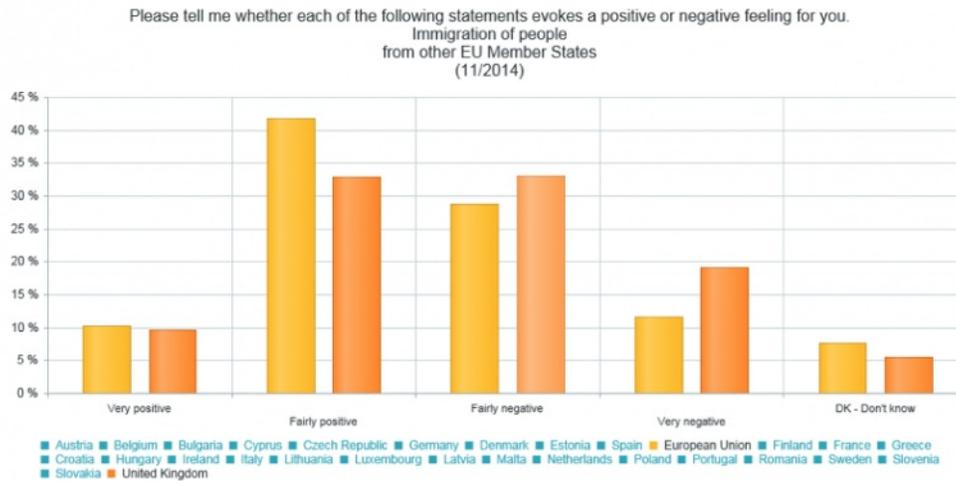
The ‘tide of hate’ thesis is explicitly linked to Brexit, so it is worth considering whether there could be a Brexit effect on the UK figures. A comparison of figure 1 (above) to figure 2 (below) indicates that the UK public actually became more positive towards EU immigration between November 2015 and November 2016, the period covering the campaign, vote and supposedly hate-filled aftermath.

Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you.
Immigration of people from other EU Member States (11/2015)



The EU Barometer reporting of these figures speculates that this increased positivity towards EU immigration may be due to a greater public concern for EU residents and the feeling of insecurity arising from the government’s failure to guarantee existing EU workers residency and employment rights (note that other surveys have indicated around two-thirds of Brexit voters would welcome such a guarantee). That could be a factor, although one that itself partially contradicts the thesis.

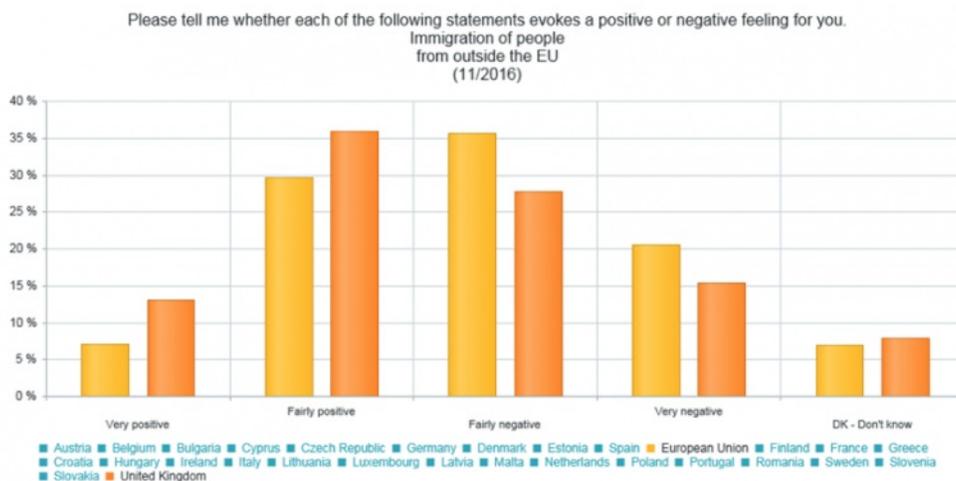
However, the same trend extends back to the previous year too – the changes from November 2014 to November 2015 are similar to those from November 2015 to November 2016 (compare figure 3 below, and figure 1 & 2). In other words, the upward trajectory of positivity with regard to EU immigration is common to the period November 2014-November 2016, not just a feature of the period of the campaign and vote.



It is worth noting that the UK’s trajectory upwards is steeper than the average – the UK has ‘caught up’ with the EU average over the last two years. Has anyone been arguing that UK citizens have become, relatively within the EU, more positive towards EU immigration over the last 2 years? If they have, I have not seen it.

There is nothing here that supports the ‘tide of hate thesis’. We could speculate that perhaps the greater positivity correlates to the growing contact between EU immigrants as they settle, become workmates, friends and part of communities. That would be one logical explanation worth exploring. However, such optimistic scenarios regarding the British public do not fit the thesis.

The EU also collects figures for people’s positivity and negativity towards non-EU immigration. Whilst this is not directly linked to Brexit (the issue being the rights of EU immigrants), this has not stopped some commentators extending the ‘tide of hate’ thesis to apply to all non-EU nationals in the UK, BME UK citizens and the LGBT community. Yet the UK’s positivity towards non-EU immigration is significantly higher than the EU average (figure 4). Again, as per EU immigration, the trend is upwards in terms of positivity over negativity, over each of the last two 12 month periods measured. I would not describe this as a tide of love. However, to characterise the recent period as a ‘tide of hate’, linked to the EU referendum and its result, seems equally absurd.



People’s level of positivity towards the EU itself as an institution went down in the UK between November 2014 to November 2016, and, whilst not being the lowest in the EU, is significantly lower than the average. People’s views

about the EU itself do not seem to be correlated with a negativity towards EU and non EU immigration. Again, a Brexit effect, whereby opposition to the EU is an expression of hatred or negativity to people from other countries, is not supported at all by the data. Whilst I would certainly not argue 'cause and effect' here, the relationship appears to be a negative one: greater scepticism over the EU, greater positivity towards immigration.

Perhaps it could be argued in defence of the 'tide of hate' thesis that there may be a sizeable and growing core of real hatred at the bottom end of the figures. But the figures do not support that – the 'very negatives' have fallen, both for EU and non-EU immigration, over both the November 14 – November 15 and November 15 – November 16 periods.

I am no Gradgrind when it comes to facts. They exist in a context, and are presented to bolster arguments. The data could be faulty, or indeed the values and beliefs behind the answers could be different in different countries. There will doubtless be a few caveats I have not mentioned. However, the figures must cause a questioning of the 'tide of hate' thesis. There simply isn't any suggestion of it in the EU's own figures.

There is no doubt that a small number of people exploited the aftermath of the vote to shout abuse and worse. There is also no doubt that many EU migrants in the UK felt, and feel, not only insecure but also as if some of the people they live and work with value them less than before. I supported the [One Day Without Us](#) protest at my workplace as an expression of solidarity with my EU colleagues.

Yet the assertion of a tide of hate or xenophobia does a disservice to the cause of solidarity between people of different backgrounds and nationalities. It does this by establishing a dubious moral, rather than political, division between people who voted Brexit and those who voted Remain, the former mischaracterised as irrational and hateful. This assumed xenophobic tide is to be 'called out', shamed, associated with the far right and not taken seriously or argued with.

Anti-Brexit campaigners, academics and journalists need to consider two questions: is the invocation of a 'tide of hate' really a maligning of the motives and rationality of Leave voters by association; and, more importantly, has associating the mass of Brexit supporters with a 'tide of hate' advanced the cause of EU and non-EU immigrants in the UK (or in the EU for that matter) one iota?

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

[Jim Butcher](#) is a Reader in the School of Human and Life Sciences at Canterbury Christ Church University and the author of three books on the politics of leisure travel.

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics