

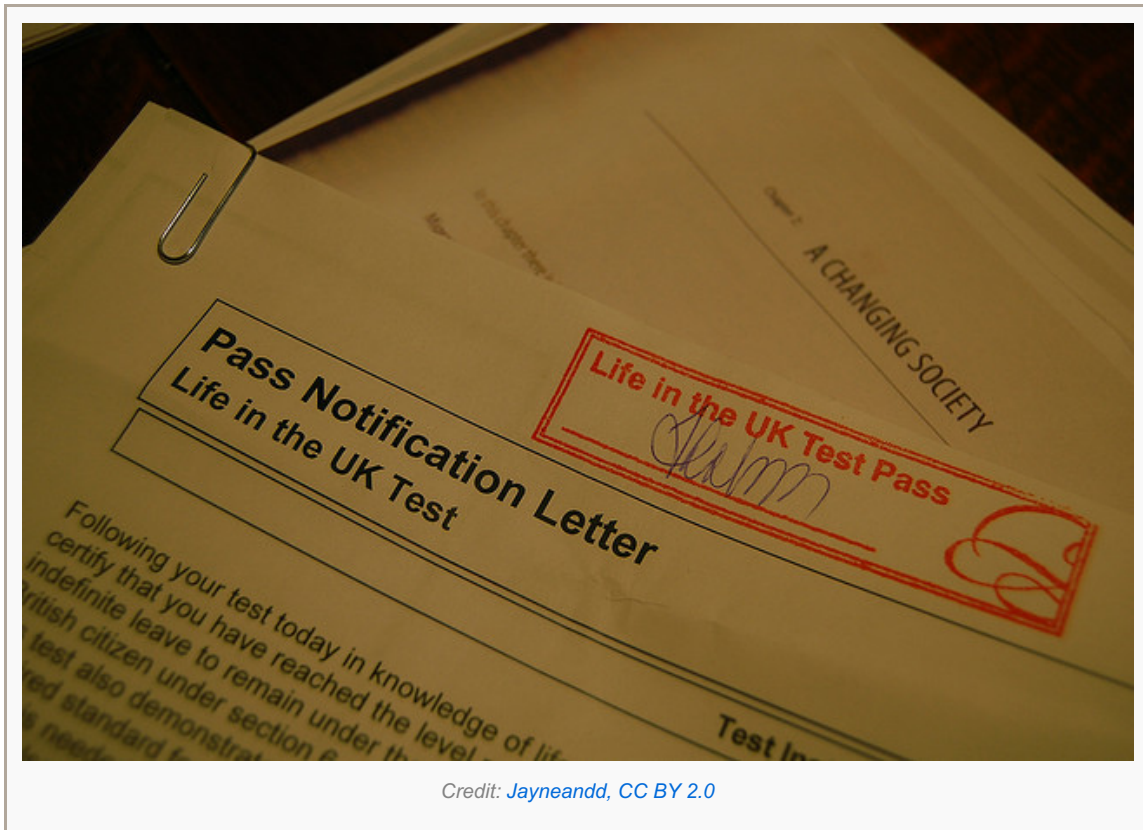
# Economic solutions are unlikely to ease immigration concerns

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Immigration is a huge element of contemporary political debate, and it continues to divide and polarise opinion, while fuelling the rise of UKIP and other radical parties across Europe. Here, **Craig Johnson** and **Sunil Rodger** argue that while hostility to immigration may be in part to do with economics, a sunny economic outlook is unlikely to reassure immigration-sceptics of its worth.*



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Immigration continues to be a dominant feature of political debate in Britain. For the most part, attitudes are negative. In part, this [reflects the idea of immigration as a threat](#). It also generates a feeling of blame, as time and again political parties promise to reduce it yet subsequently fail to do so.

Following the 2015 general election, David Cameron has insisted that his government remains committed to bringing down immigration from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands per year, [blaming the failure to do so in the last parliament on the Liberal Democrats](#). Most of Cameron's interventions on immigration revolve around the economy, and so far much of his EU renegotiation package has [focused on 'benefit tourism'](#). The Conservative 2015 general election manifesto promised a tough stance highlighted in economic terms: "We will insist that EU migrants who want to claim tax credits and child benefit must live here and contribute to our country for a minimum of four years".

Similarly, prior to the 2015 general election Labour also emphasised the relationship between immigration and the economy. Their manifesto promised that immigrants 'won't be able to claim benefits for at least two years', and that they would maintain the cap on non-EU immigrants coming to Britain to work.

However, underlying the argument put forward by both Labour and the Conservatives is that it is primarily economic

concerns that drive anti-immigration attitudes, rather than cultural ones. This is understandable. Economic concerns can often be addressed through facts and figures, whilst cultural concerns veer into dangerous territory and risk accusing voters of prejudice. The latter is fraught with political difficulties, as [Gordon Brown discovered following his meeting with Gillian Duffy](#). By sticking to economic concerns, politicians are on what they believe to be safe ground. And it follows the mantra of 'it's the economy, stupid': make the economic arguments, win them, and voters will reward you.

However, [our research](#) casts doubt upon these arguments. We find that economic concerns have very little effect on voters' attitudes to immigration in Britain. Whether voters are thinking about their personal economic situation or that of the country as a whole, their perceptions of the economy are only weakly related to hostility to immigration. Much more important are concerns relating to identity, class and culture.

This creates a big problem for political parties. In their negative language about immigration, they reaffirm it as something to be fearful of and angry about. In doing so, they set themselves a greater challenge to solve – particularly when their approach to doing so, using economic framing, does not address voters' underlying concerns around culture and identity.

This paradox has been described as one [between beer drinkers and wine drinkers](#). The beer drinkers listen to voters' concerns, while the wine drinkers proclaim the benefits of immigration in an increasingly liberal world. The wine drinkers have a point: studies mostly highlight the [economic benefits that immigration provides](#). However, this is irrelevant if voters are ignored and angered in the process. The cultural arguments for immigration cannot be left out of the mainstream of political debate.

Addressing the cultural and identity aspects of immigration is a very difficult task. Engaging with those who have concerns about immigration risks alienating those who defend its benefits. It is a difficult but '[inconvenient truth](#)' that both sides might have a point. A defence of immigration must accept the concerns put forward by voters about language, identity and community. Increased support for UKIP in recent years reflects those concerns. Only by addressing these can pro-immigration parties begin to tackle the hostility to immigration that exists.

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*Note: this piece represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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