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Imagined Immigration: The Impact of Different Meanings of 'Immigrants' in Public Opinion and Policy Debates in Britain

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Public opinion research on immigration attitudes has largely overlooked the question of how survey respondents understand the term 'immigrants'. This article investigates latent perceptions of immigrants, termed 'imagined immigration', among members of the British public. Using novel survey data, I examine who members of the British public have in mind when they think of immigrants. I find that public perceptions of immigration diverge significantly from the set of people identified as immigrants in government statistics and targeted in policy changes. In particular, public perceptions focus on asylum seekers and permanent arrivals, while mostly ignoring international students, a target of new restrictive immigration policies. I also show that variation in individuals' imagined immigration is strongly associated with individual preferences for reduced immigration, suggesting imagined immigration as a new determinant of anti-immigration policy preferences to consider in future research.

Keywords: immigration; public opinion; immigration – Britain; imagined immigration; immigration attitudes

> Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine (Walter Lippmann, 1997 [1922], p. 53).

Scholars, policy makers and mass media share a concern with public opinion toward immigration. Academic surveys and commercial pollsters regularly query European and American publics about the level of immigration: are there too many immigrants coming to their country? Should this number be reduced? Majorities often express preferences for reduced immigration when asked such questions. But prior to having an attitude toward something, especially a complex and contested concept such as 'immigration', one must have some mental representation of what that attitude object is (Cook, 1985; Schwarz, 1998; Wyer and Carlston, 1994). Attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy are known to vary when attitude holders' attention is directed to specific characteristics of immigrants such as race, ethnicity or class (e.g. Brader *et al.*, 2008; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010), but relatively little research investigates attitude holders' underlying conceptions of who immigrants are, in the absence of priming by researchers to focus on a particular category of immigrants.

This article argues that public opinion on the topics of immigration and immigrants measures attitudes toward 'imagined immigration', related to but distinct from actual immigration. The idea of imagined immigration is meant to capture unstated understandings among members of the public of what the word 'immigrants' means, and who it represents. Survey respondents call upon mental images of immigrants to help them make

sense of questions about immigration, so that they can provide the responses to survey questions that ultimately make up public opinion (see Alvarez and Brehm, 2002; Lippmann, 1997 [1922]).

Using a unique data set focused on the British case and collected for this purpose, I map out key elements of respondents' mental images of immigrants. I further argue that imagined immigration has two crucial consequences. First, I show that public perceptions of immigrants diverge sharply from the way the state 'sees' (Scott, 1998) or measures immigration. This finding has implications for policy debates. Even as states try to address public concern about immigration, the lack of a shared understanding of immigration may be another reason why states may find themselves unable to fulfill public demands for restrictive immigration policy. Second, I demonstrate a strong association between mental images or perceptions of immigrants and attitudes toward immigration policy. This finding suggests that scholarship on the determinants of immigration attitudes may produce more complete explanations by taking into account how members of the public imagine immigration.

'Pictures in our Heads' and the Antecedents of Public Opinion

The notion of imagined immigration has roots not only in contemporary work on cognitive representations and attitudes (Schwarz, 1998), but also in classic conceptions of public opinion (Lippmann, 1997 [1922]; see also McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). Lippmann centers his inquiry around the notion of 'pictures in our heads'. Democratic citizens are expected to have opinions about political issues, yet they often lack direct experience with crucial political events or actors. Lippmann describes a fictional citizen attempting to understand the events of the First World War from hazy mental images constructed from second-hand reports. Attitudes about the war, he shows, were necessarily about 'pictures in the head' of the war rather than the actual war, distant and unknowable for most.

I argue that public opinion toward immigrants and immigration is directed toward pictures in our heads of immigrants rather than immigration per se and, further, that these mental representations of immigrants may help determine attitudes toward immigration policy. To be sure, immigration in contemporary Britain is not nearly so remote as foreign wars were a century ago; many citizens have some direct contact with immigrants, for example. Yet no individual can directly experience or apprehend the phenomenon of immigration as a whole. Sources of information about immigration – whether direct experiences, social interactions or media sources – provide incomplete depictions of a large-scale social phenomenon. Even official data sources struggle to capture seemingly simple facts about immigration as a whole, such as the number of migrants coming to a given country (Raymer and Willekens, 2008). And whereas governments may 'see' immigration through statistical measures (Scott, 1998), people construct political opinions from more textured and varied sources of information. We can distinguish, then, between 'statistical immigration' as seen and measured by the state and 'imagined immigration' as constructed by citizens interpreting their social and political world.

Moreover, if mental images of immigration vary descriptively across individuals, then theoretically there is good reason to think that these mental images will affect individuals' judgments about immigration and immigration policy. As noted above, cognitive

representations are necessary precursors to judgments (Wyer and Carlston, 1994), such as the decision to support reduced or increased immigration. Judgments about complex constructs such as immigration might be shaped by cognitive representations in several ways, all rooted in known social psychological mechanisms. It might be that responses are shaped by the most easily recalled information, as in the availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973; compare Zaller, 1992), or by exemplars of a broader construct (Smith and Zarate, 1992). Alternatively, judgments may be shaped by information that more fully constitutes the individual's mental representation of the relevant construct, rather than by mere ease of recall of partial information or of an individual example (Schwarz, 1998). Thus, the hypothesis that cognitive representations of immigrants affect judgments about immigration policy is grounded not only in Lippmann's classic conception of public opinion but also more precisely in contemporary social cognition and the social psychology of judgments.

Relationship to Prior Studies of Immigration Attitudes

Scholarship on immigration attitudes has rarely taken up Lippmann's problem in earnest (although see Wong, 2007). Research on attitudes toward immigrants of different racial or ethnic groups is an important exception, often addressed through experimentation or unobtrusive measures of 'implicit attitudes' (Brader *et al.*, 2008; Pérez, 2010). But generally, European and American research focuses predominantly on the determinants of opposition to immigration (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Citrin and Sides, 2008). Studies examine variation in attitudes across individuals (Fetzer, 2000; McLaren and Johnson, 2007; Sides and Citrin, 2007), local or regional geographical areas (Schneider, 2008), nations (Citrin and Sides, 2008) or economic and cultural contexts (Sniderman *et al.*, 2004). Researchers debate whether the causes of such variation are economic (Facchini *et al.*, 2013; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010; O'Rourke and Sinnott, 2006), cultural or racial (Dustmann and Preston, 2007), contextual (Schneider, 2008; Sniderman *et al.*, 2004) or informational (Brader *et al.*, 2008; Sides and Citrin, 2007). Many others argue that attitudes to immigration stem from perceived threats from immigrant groups (Quillian, 1995; Semyonov *et al.*, 2008), which in turn may have roots in the causes listed above – economic, cultural, contextual or informational factors.

Most research in this literature tacitly assumes that 'immigrants' comprise a coherent, agreed-upon attitude object, toward which individuals can express opinions. The typical dependent variable in such studies is a response to one or more questions measuring attitudes toward immigrants or immigration as a whole (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2009). Survey questions typically refer to immigrants overall, rather than particular types of immigrant. Moreover, survey questions typically do not define the term 'immigrants' (Crawley, 2005), leaving each respondent to answer on the basis of his or her own unstated conception of who immigrants are. Surveys that define 'immigrants' may do so in ways that contradict official definitions that policy makers use. For example, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey defines immigrants as permanent settlers in Britain (NatCen, 2003), whereas the British government follows the UN definition of immigration, defining anyone who stays in Britain for at least a year as an immigrant.

A number of recent studies show that specific sub-sets of immigrants generate different public reactions. For example, attitudes are more positive toward high-skilled immigrants in the US (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010) and, in Britain, toward migrants in particular skilled occupations such as doctors and nurses, or those with the means to support themselves (Crawley, 2005; German Marshall Fund, 2011). Majority-group Britons also show stronger opposition to immigrants from racial and cultural backgrounds different from their own (Dustmann and Preston, 2007; Ford, 2011). This fits with the notion of a widely shared ethnic hierarchy in perceptions, including widespread negative stereotypes of ethnic groups that rank lower in this perceptual ranking (Hagendoorn, 1995). Silke Schneider (2008) finds, across 21 European countries, that greater numbers of non-Western immigrants, rather than more immigrants per se, are associated with increased perceptions of threat. On the other hand, the majority of Europeans respond similarly to all (European) migrants regardless of the economic standing of the migrants' countries of origin (Gorodzeisky, 2011), so differentiated responses exist but cannot be taken as given.

Different from the present study, prior studies have worked by specifying or priming a particular picture of immigrants, and directing survey respondents to focus on that particular image. These primed images may involve a subgroup of immigrants, or even stylized individual migrants (Aalberg *et al.*, 2012; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2012; Harell *et al.*, 2012), but the point remains the same: by inquiring about a specific type of migrant, these studies sacrifice the ability to make claims about how immigration is perceived as an overall object of attitudes.

Thus, these recent works are valuable for, among other purposes, the suggestion that attitudes toward immigrants may depend on which sort of immigrants one imagines. Nonetheless, they leave a particular gap – linking the particular to the general – which the present study addresses.[1] If different sorts of immigrants elicit different attitudinal responses, then measured attitudes toward immigrants in general may actually capture responses toward particular sorts of immigrants that are on individuals' minds. What happens when survey respondents are asked about immigrants or immigration and are left to supply their own mental picture of who immigrants are? Are they thinking about workers or asylum seekers? Europeans, Asians or Africans? Temporary employees or long-term settlers? Meaningful interpretation of attitudes toward immigrants would benefit from improved understanding of the notions of immigrants that individuals have in mind when answering the survey questions. Moreover, as social psychological theories of judgment and recall would predict, the sort of immigrants that are imagined may help determine overall judgments about broader questions involving policy toward immigration as a whole.

As an analogy, imagine that social scientists had compiled a large body of knowledge about the causes of people's opinions about 'birds', but had not investigated whether people are imagining pigeons, goldfinches, peregrine falcons or penguins when answering questions about their attitudes toward birds in general. In this scenario, by using a survey question on which birds people had in mind, we would be better able to explain variation in people's opinions on whether birds are plentiful or scarce, mainly predators or prey, or mostly beneficial or mostly harmful. In George Lakoff's (1973) famous example, some sorts of birds (robins, sparrows) are seen as prototypical, while others (chickens, ducks) are more marginal to the category, and still others (penguins) rarely come to mind.

As I will demonstrate, members of the British public clearly view some sorts of migrants as more prototypical than others. This point is relevant for policy as well as academic debate. Policies that respond to public opinion are often, in effect, acting toward the penguins rather than the robins and sparrows. In Britain, public preferences for less immigration have been among the drivers of British immigration policy, including new restrictions aimed at reaching a numerical target for estimated annual net migration. The government has justified new restrictions on immigration with explicit reference to public opinion, tying its drive to reduce net migration as a whole to public concern about immigration (UKBA, 2011a; 2011b). In light of the differences between imagined and statistical immigrations demonstrated below, numerical reductions may seem less directly responsive to public attitudes than they initially appear. This may not make a difference for how one judges these policies normatively, but it does suggest a complication for the professed links between policy changes and majoritarian political demands.

Relationship to Other Forms of Perception or Imagined Communities

The literature on immigration attitudes includes two other notions of public imaginings or mental images. These conceptions are related to but distinct from imagined immigration as investigated here. First, some authors link cultural explanations of anti-immigration attitudes to notions of the immigrant-receiving nation as an 'imagined community', in Benedict Anderson's (1983) famous phrase. Anti-immigration attitudes are more common among majority-group individuals who envision their own ideal national community as more homogeneous or exclusive, or based more on ascriptive characteristics than on civic participation (Citrin and Sides, 2008; Heath and Tilley, 2005; Wright, 2011). Rather than looking at visions of the nation, this article examines how members of the political community envision potential newcomers to that community. Admittedly, insiders are prone to characterizing outsiders by attributing traits or features to them that are chosen precisely in opposition to insiders' characterizations of their own group, as optimal distinctiveness theory suggests (Brewer, 1991) and studies of immigration discourses confirm (Anderson *et al.*, 2011; Peberdy, 2001). The nation as imagined community is therefore a related but distinct construct.

Second, the distinction between perceived and actual or statistical immigration frequently arises in related research on public misperceptions of the size of immigrant populations (Hjerm, 2007; Sides and Citrin, 2007; Wong, 2007). Overestimation of immigrant populations may be an important part of public perceptions of immigrants, even if it is more an effect than a cause of attitudes toward immigration, as some have argued (Herda, 2010). These studies form a critical backdrop for the present one, as they point to the potential importance of perceptions of immigrants for shaping broader attitudes about immigrants and immigration. This study takes up a related but distinct concern with perceptions of who immigrants are, rather than with assessing possession of correct information about the number of immigrants. Thus, I not only ask about disaggregated categories of immigrants, I ask respondents about the sort of people they normally visualize when thinking about immigrants, instead of asking them to guess at the proportion of immigrants that each subgroup constitutes. Further work, however, might link these concerns – overestimation of immigrant populations might be linked to particular sorts of images of who immigrants are.

Hypotheses for Britain's Imagined Immigration and its Relationship with Attitudes

So how might members of the public imagine immigration – in possible contrast with who counts as an immigrant in public policy? Since the data pertain to British attitudes, I focus on features of British public opinion and media discourse to generate expectations. First, I hypothesize that public perceptions of immigrants will likely feature latent beliefs about immigrants' citizenship and birthplace, since common understandings of immigration are intimately connected with notions of national identity (Heath and Tilley, 2005). Citizenship and birthplace do not matter for official British migration statistics, however. One need only cross international borders for at least one year to qualify as an immigrant or emigrant, regardless of citizenship or birthplace (ONS, 2010). Thus, British migration statistics include the arrivals of British nationals – citizens born abroad or returning from extended stays overseas – who may be overlooked in public perceptions. While these comprise a small share of overall immigration numbers, they make up a significant share of emigrants. In any given year or quarter, therefore, they can be the difference between an increase or decrease in net migration, a key marker for policy makers.

Second, I expect that asylum seekers will feature in imagined immigration, with a prominence disproportionate to their actual numbers. Media coverage in Britain has emphasized asylum applicants, and frequently conflated the terms 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees' with immigrants in general (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008). Third, I expect that images of immigrants are more likely to involve permanent rather than temporary migration, given the meaning of the word in everyday language. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines an immigrant as a person 'who migrates into a country as a settler', whereas the UN and UK government definitions only require a one-year length of stay in a new country. While 'immigrant' is usually left undefined in survey questions, occasionally questions will offer a definition. The 2003 British Social Attitudes survey chose something like the dictionary definition, explaining to respondents (in the preamble to its immigration questions) that 'by "immigrants" we mean people who come to settle in Britain' (NatCen, 2003). This further suggests that public perceptions of immigration will be more likely to emphasize permanent immigrants, even though temporary migrants make up a large share of immigration as measured in government statistics.

The expectations discussed above suggest hypotheses not only for a descriptive portrait of imagined immigration in Britain, but also for possible effects of these underlying perceptions on individual attitudes toward immigration, or more precisely immigration policy preferences. Discussion of asylum seekers in British media and political discourse is not only frequent but also often negative and even distorted (Leveson, 2012). I therefore hypothesize that people who think of immigrants as asylum seekers will be more likely to prefer reduced immigration levels, all else being equal. Second, in light of public discourse associating immigration with unsustainable population growth and related negative impacts, I expect an association between envisioning immigration as permanent rather than temporary and support for reducing immigration. Third, given that European opposition to immigration often comes from concerns about national identity or culture (Citrin and Sides, 2008), I hypothesize that people who think of immigrants as foreign nationals will

be more likely to prefer less immigration, but the few respondents who think of immigration as involving British citizens will be less likely to prefer reduced immigration.

In addition, as detailed below, the data distinguish perceptions of immigrants as non-EU citizens or EU citizens. One might expect images of immigrants as non-EU citizens to be associated with anti-immigration views, since non-EU immigrants include many from non-white racial/ethnic backgrounds, traditionally less tolerated among members of the British public (Ford, 2011). On the other hand, non-EU immigrants span majority and minority racial categories as well as a variety of class strata, suggesting that non-EU migrants might fit at a number of levels on respondents' perceived ethnic hierarchy (Hagendoorn, 1995). Further, a large majority (70 per cent) of British Eurobarometer respondents in 1997 expressed preferences for identical levels of restrictions on EU and non-EU immigration (McLaren, 2001). Since then, and especially since the arrival of large numbers of Eastern European migrants after the 2004 EU expansion, British public opinion (Ipsos MORI, 2010) and political and media discourse (Rasinger, 2010) have increasingly constructed EU immigration as problematic. Thus, there are no clear prior expectations for whether perceptions of immigrants as non-EU or EU nationals will be associated with preferences for less immigration.

Data and Methods

The primary data in the study come from an original survey conducted by the polling firm Ipsos MORI from 2 to 8 September 2011. The survey was administered to a representative sample of 1,002 participants in Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales).[2] They were interviewed face to face using laptop computers, so that respondents could read lists of response options rather than having to remember them. Results were weighted by age, sex, social grade, region, housing tenure, ethnicity and working status to refine further the match between the sample and the British population.[3] Some elements of the analysis also use data from government statistics on immigration flows from the Office of National Statistics (ONS).

Several variations of one basic question operationalized the imagined immigration construct. The basic question asked respondents which sorts of groups they normally had in mind when thinking about immigrants ('When you think about immigrants coming to and living in Britain, which of these groups would you normally think about?'). Each respondent received three variations of this question, with substantively different sets of response options, presented in the same order for each respondent.[4] Respondents were asked to select as many options as they liked for each question.

The first iteration offered choices that varied birthplace and citizenship (e.g. EU or non-EU citizens; British citizens born abroad; naturalized British citizens; British-born children of non-British citizens). A second item varied newcomers' length of stay in Britain, allowing respondents to choose permanent immigrants and/or temporary arrivals staying in Britain for more than five years, one to five years or less than one year. The third item asked about the four main reasons for migration: work, study, family and asylum.

It is worth noting the relationship between the perceptions I have measured and 'implicit attitudes', which have attracted growing interest in political science, often involving implicit measurement techniques such as the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald *et al.*, 1998) and

Affect Misattribution Procedure (Payne *et al.*, 2005). The perceptions discussed in this article, although measured by explicit self-report, are normally implicit or latent in the everyday sense of the term. Most survey respondents presumably do not have a well-formulated definition of immigrants in mind in their everyday lives, nor do they formulate an explicit definition when providing the answers to survey questions about immigration. On the other hand, this does not preclude introspection that can turn the implicit into the explicit.

The perceptual questions were designed to prompt respondents to introspect in this manner. This would be a problematic technique if used to elicit attitudes toward immigrants, as responses would reflect motivations to respond without prejudice, whether to create a favorable impression to observers or to live up to internalized normative commitments against prejudice (Plant and Devine, 1998). However, the perceptual questions do not ask for normative judgments, and so are unlikely to lead to incongruities between explicit self-reports and implicit cognitive or affective mental associations (Nosek *et al.*, 2010). This data collection thus shows that certain implicit perceptions and beliefs can be interrogated effectively with conventional, less costly self-report measures. On the other hand, I did not ask about the more normatively loaded categories of race, ethnicity or religion, wishing to avoid the possibility that normative considerations would influence responses to even perceptual questions about minority groups that are often subjected to prejudice and discrimination. Implicit measures might be more appropriate here, even for assessing perceptions as well as attitudes.

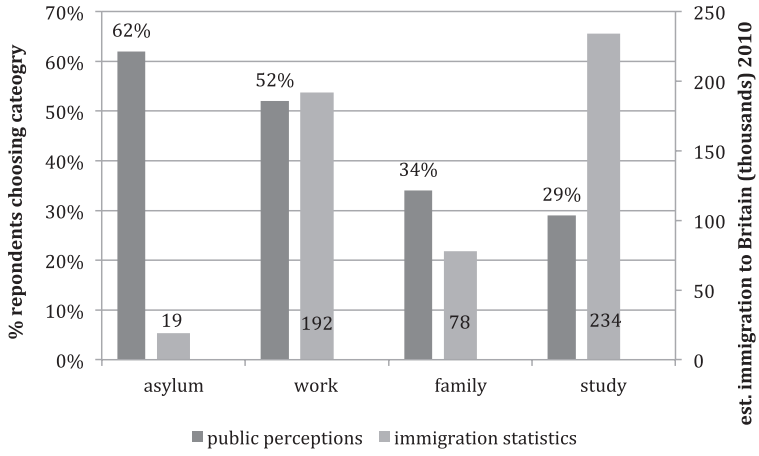
Responses to the imagined immigration questions serve both as the object of descriptive analysis and as independent variables in multiple regression analysis of the determinants of immigration policy preferences. The methods used are straightforward. Initially, I use descriptive statistics to provide a picture of imagined immigration among the British public, and to compare this picture to immigration as measured by official statistics and used to formulate policy targets. Next, I estimate an ordered probit model predicting attitudes toward immigration levels, in order to test hypotheses about the relationship between mental images of immigrants and attitudes toward immigration as a whole. Ordered probit is used because the dependent variable is a five-point ordinal scale, in which distances between each of the five points on the scale are unknown and not necessarily all equal.

The dependent variable comes from responses to a common survey question asking whether respondents prefer to see the number of immigrants coming to Britain increased (a little or a lot), reduced (a little or lot) or kept the same.[5] In Anastasia Gorodzeisky and Moshe Semyonov's (2009) useful classification, this item measures preferences for excluding foreigners from the social system, rather than exclusion from the system of rights once permitted to enter. This question was asked at the beginning of the survey, so responses could not have been primed by the imagined immigration questions. Priming is not a threat to validity in the reverse direction, because the notion of imagined immigration refers to what comes to mind precisely when thinking about immigration in general, especially in the context of a public opinion survey.

Imagined Immigration in Britain

I begin with descriptive evidence on perceptions of immigrants in British public opinion. Several notable findings emerge. First, asylum seekers predominate in British imaginings of

Figure 1: Public Perceptions of Immigration by Reason for Migrating, Compared with Statistical Estimates of Immigration to Britain in 2010



Sources: Ipsos MORI/Migration Observatory; Office of National Statistics.

immigration, in contrast with their role in government-measured immigration in recent years. As Figure 1 shows, asylum was the most commonly chosen category among the four major reasons for migration, chosen by 62 per cent of respondents. Work ranked next, chosen by 52 per cent, followed by spouses at 34 per cent and students 29 per cent.

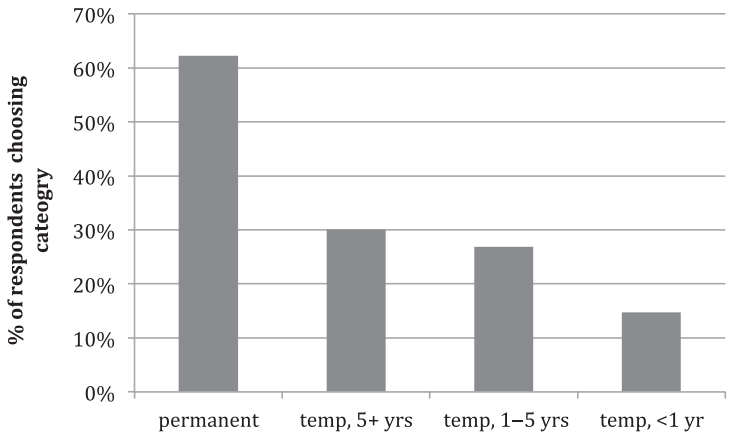
These perceptions contrast sharply with government measures of immigration. Figure 1 juxtaposes survey responses with the British government's official 2010 estimates of migration inflows. Asylum seekers are the smallest of the four categories in recent immigration statistics while students are the largest. In public perceptions, these categories are precisely reversed, with asylum seekers the most commonly chosen and students chosen least.

Respondents' images of immigrants appear to focus predominantly on permanent rather than temporary immigrants, again in contrast with the government's statistical counts of immigration. As shown in Figure 2, 62 per cent reported thinking of permanent arrivals to Britain when thinking of immigrants, while less than a third had in mind any of the three temporary categories offered as choices. This held even for views on people coming to Britain for five years or more – long enough for most migrants to qualify for permanent settlement in Britain.

Public perceptions on length of stay also diverge from government statistics. Temporary immigrants are much more prominent in the state's 'statistical migration' than in the public's 'imagined migration', centered on permanent arrivals. By official ONS estimates, migrants coming to stay for four years or less made up 68 per cent of total immigration to Britain in 2010,[6] shorter-term immigration having risen significantly since 2000.

Finally, as expected, most British people think of immigrants as foreign nationals, and not as British nationals born abroad. The contrast between perceptions and data is not as stark

Figure 2: Public Perception of Immigrants, by Length of Stay in Britain



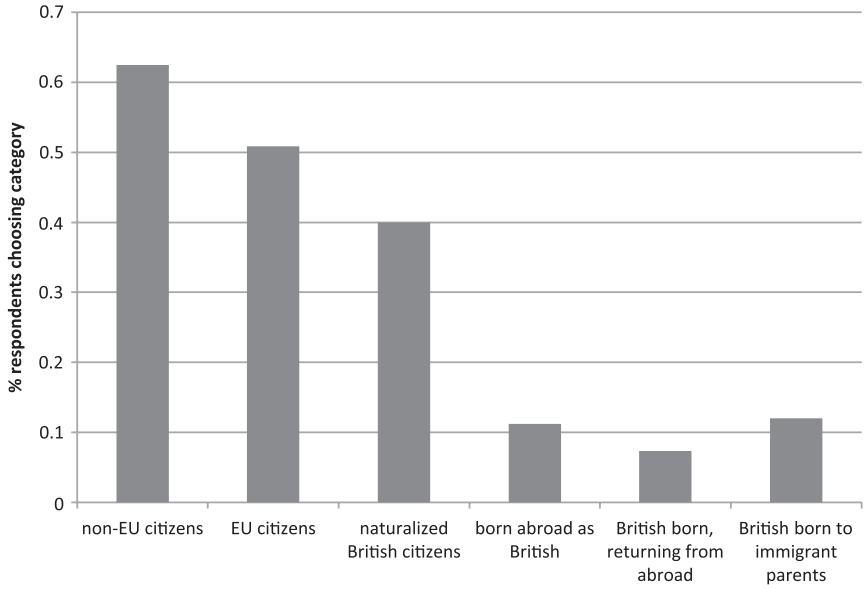
Sources: Ipsos MORI/Migration Observatory.

here, since British nationals comprised only 16 per cent of 2010 immigrant inflows (ONS, 2011). Nonetheless, many members of the British public would probably be surprised to hear that British citizens and the British-born could ever be considered immigrants to Britain. Meanwhile, both non-EU and EU nationals appear prominently in mental images of immigration. Sixty-two per cent of respondents said they thought of non-EU nationals, and 51 per cent said the same for EU migrants, as shown in Figure 3. Both EU and non-EU migrants also made up significant shares of 2010 inflows: an estimated 54 per cent of arriving migrants were non-EU nationals and 30 per cent were EU nationals. On this basis, one might argue that public perceptions somewhat overemphasize EU nationals.

Figure 3 also shows that a large minority (40 per cent) of respondents had in mind naturalized British citizens when thinking of immigrants. By way of comparison to national figures, non-UK-born British citizens made up an estimated 4.7 per cent of the British population as of the end of 2010, about 41 per cent of the total foreign-born population (Anderson and Blinder, 2011). This might be interpreted as evidence that naturalized citizens are represented in imagined immigration and statistical migration in about the same proportion. This element has less relevance for immigration control policy, however, since it is based on data on population stocks rather than the inflows that are subject to policy targets and interventions. In addition, few respondents had in mind the children of foreign-national immigrants, despite prior arguments that British public opinion may conflate immigrants with ethnic minorities (Crawley, 2005).

Note that the official statistics on immigration flows cited above are a matter of direct policy concern. The Conservative-led coalition government is currently pursuing the goal of reducing 'net migration' below 100,000 annually, as party leader David Cameron pledged during the 2010 election campaign. The statistic the government has targeted is calculated from the estimates of immigration flows cited above, subtracting estimates of

Figure 3: Public Perception of Immigrants, by Citizenship and Birthplace



Source: Ipsos MORI/Migration Observatory.

emigration from the same source (the International Passenger Survey, which every year interviews thousands of randomly selected passengers arriving in and departing from Britain).

Thus, imagined immigration differs from the statistical immigration that is measured by the state and used for policy-making purposes. These observed discrepancies between state and public might represent actual disagreement about definitions of immigration, rather than pitting accurate state-sponsored statistics against raw public misperceptions. For example, as noted above, the dictionary definition of 'immigrant' lends credence to the association between immigration and permanence in public perceptions, in contrast with the UN definition adopted by the ONS. Perhaps this definition represents a common language understanding of immigration, shared by the majority of the public but not used by the state.

Meanwhile, public perceptions of asylum seekers may be grounded in events in the recent past, rather than simply media discourse or imagination in some pejorative sense. Asylum seekers were a very large proportion of immigration flows in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when net migration levels and public salience of the immigration issue both increased dramatically. Although arrival numbers are now quite small, public perceptions may reflect the number of asylum seekers who have already arrived. In this way, public perceptions here may have roots in statistically measured migration, yet still match poorly with the form of statistical immigration that is emphasized in policy makers' focus on regulating new arrivals.

Association between Imagined Immigration and Majority-Group Policy Preferences

The descriptive findings above carry implications for policy discussions, to which I return later. But first I consider the relationship between perceptions of immigrants and attitudes or policy preferences. Do varying conceptualizations of immigrants have any relationship with policy preferences toward immigration overall? To investigate this question, I estimated an ordered probit model using several conceptions of imagined immigration, as well as other variables, to predict majority-group individuals' preferences for reducing, increasing or holding constant the level of immigration to Britain. Descriptively, responses lean strongly toward the preference for less migration. Some 69 per cent of respondents expressed the view that immigration should be reduced, either 'a little' (24 per cent) or 'a lot' (45 per cent, the modal response). Only 6 per cent preferred an increase. White British-born British nationals are the subject of the main analysis here; among this group, the preference for less immigration is even more widespread, with 74 per cent preferring reduced immigration, including 51 per cent for reducing 'a lot'. (Full details including cross-tabulations are in the online Appendix.)

The model predicts responses to this policy question; positive signs on coefficients indicate stronger opposition to immigration. The results shown in Table 1 show striking relationships between individuals' perceptions of immigration variables and their preferred level of immigration to Britain. First, among reasons for migrating, those who imagine immigrants as asylum seekers are more likely to prefer less immigration, holding constant for demographic variables, newspaper readership and other perceptions. Perceptions of immigrants as workers were associated with lower probabilities of preferring reduced immigration. This finding was slightly less robust, losing statistical significance (at the $p < 0.05$ level) in specifications that omitted responses to the other perception questions, although it was robust to specifications omitting any of the control variables. The perception of immigrants as students or spouses/partners had no statistically significant relationship with preferences.

Second, those who had in mind permanent rather than temporary immigrants were more likely to prefer reduced immigration. In addition, within the citizenship and birthplace perceptual categories, imagining immigrants as EU citizens was positively associated with a preference for reduced immigration. Meanwhile, the few respondents who imagine immigrants as British citizens were less likely to favor reduced immigration.

As noted above, the study was not undertaken with strong expectations about the impact of EU and non-EU perceptions, so any explanations offered for this pattern of findings are necessarily speculative and *post hoc*. Given that disclaimer, one might argue that EU (or more specifically Eastern European) migration has been constructed as a problem for Britain under that terminological label, while other widely disliked immigration flows from places outside Europe are less often discussed as a single category called non-EU migration. In other words, non-EU migrants from Africa or Asia may still be less tolerated than EU migrants, as in Robert Ford's (2011) examination of older data, but these negative associations may not have transferred to the general 'non-EU' label.

Several demographic variables had detectable relationships with immigration attitudes as well, largely in line with previous results in the literature (e.g. McLaren and Johnson, 2007;

Table 1: Estimated Effects of Perceptions of Immigrants on Preferences for Reducing Immigration

	Variable	*Coef.*	*S.E.*
Perceptions of immigrants: reason for migrating	Work	–0.29*	0.11
	Spouse/partner	–0.20	0.11
	Student	–0.06	0.12
Excluded: None/don't know	Asylum	0.28*	0.12
Perceptions of immigrants: length of stay	<1 year	0.17	0.16
	1–5 years	0.04	0.12
	Temp, 5+ years	0.09	0.11
Excluded: None/don't know	Permanent	0.33*	0.12
Perceptions of immigrants: citizenship & birthplace	EU citizens	0.38*	0.11
	Non-EU citizens	0.05	0.11
	Naturalized British citizens	0.08	0.10
	British citizens born abroad	0.10	0.18
	British citizens returning from time lived abroad	–0.63*	0.23
Excluded: None/don't know	British-born children of foreign nationals	0.16	0.16
Demographics	Age	0.008*	0.003
	Sex (female)	–0.20*	0.09
	Working class (social grade C2DE)	0.18	0.11
	Education (univ degree)	–0.57*	0.11
Region of residence	London	–0.21	0.19
	Scotland	–0.95*	0.18
Daily newspaper readership	Broadsheet	–0.36*	0.14
	Mid-market	0.64*	0.16
	Tabloid	0.12	0.15
Model cutpoints	Cutpoint1	–1.75	0.25
	Cutpoint2	–1.57	0.25
	Cutpoint3	–0.47	0.25
	Cutpoint4	0.33	0.25
	$n = 728$		
	Log-likelihood = –761.32		
	Wald chi-sq = 160.43*		

Notes: Coefficients estimated by ordered probit, with robust standard errors. Asterisks indicate statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). Data are for white British-born respondents only.*

Sides and Citrin, 2007). Older, less educated and working-class respondents were more supportive of reduced immigration, all else remaining equal. Women appear less likely to support reductions to immigration, although this relationship was less robust: it did not appear in the simple bivariate correlation between gender and preferences, nor was it statistically significant in model specifications that omitted the perception variables education or daily newspaper readership.

Reflecting political divisions among British newspapers, broadsheet readers (e.g. *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Financial Times*) were more favorable toward immigration. Readers of mid-market papers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* were more supportive of reductions. Tabloid readership (*The Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Record*) did not have a significant estimated effect against the baseline of reading no daily newspaper.

The main findings are robust to alternative specifications as well, except in the few instances noted above. They remained consistent when estimating the models with or without demographic controls, and when estimating by ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, including when estimating robust standard errors. More notably, almost all of the findings are robust to models that reincorporated the cases that are treated as missing data and excluded from the initial analysis, which runs on 728 of the original 1,002 cases.

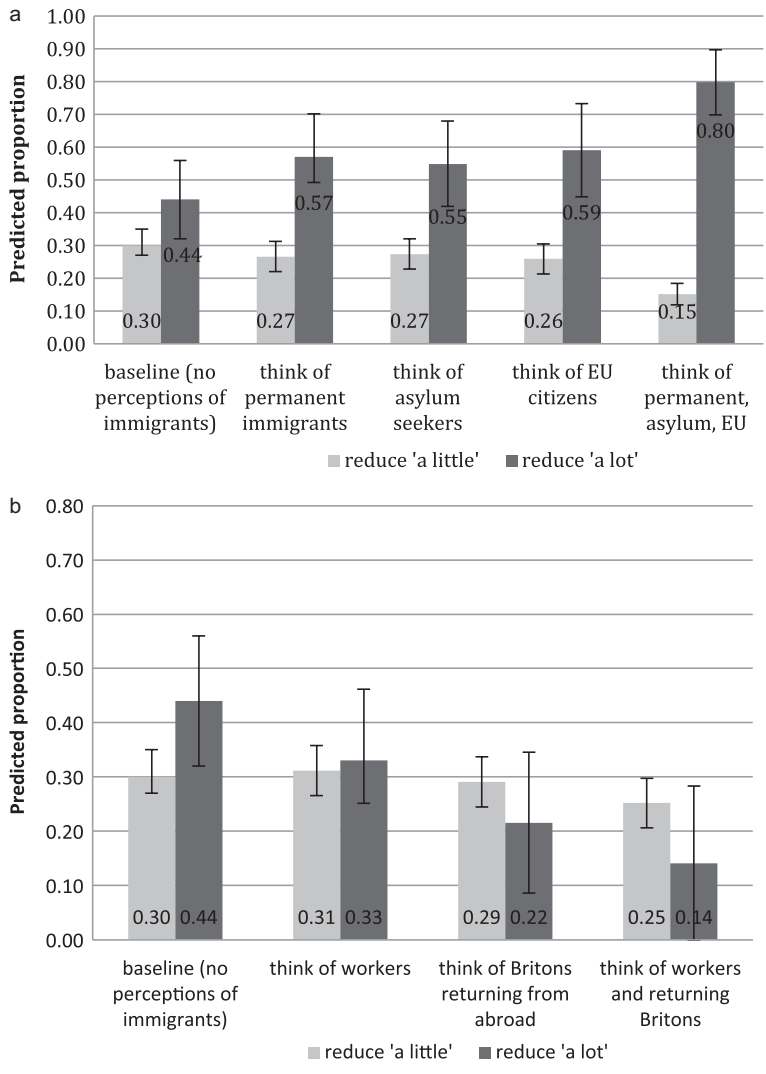
The missing data in the main model stem from three primary sources. First, 7 per cent of respondents (71 cases) answered 'don't know' to the dependent variable item and were excluded from the initial analysis. Running the same model but coding these responses at the midpoint of the dependent variable scale did not change the substantive results at all. Second, 41 respondents did not record a response for daily newspaper readership and were missing from the initial analysis; recoding these responses as 'no daily newspaper' and repeating the same analysis yielded, again, no substantive change. Third, the initial analysis was based on the responses of white British-born British citizens only, as foreign birth, foreign nationality and minority ethnicity are all associated with a different outlook on immigration issues, including higher levels of support for immigration and potentially different determinants. While migrants and ethnic minorities are far from homogeneous in support of an open immigration policy, there are certainly aggregate-level differences between these groups and white British-born British citizens, and it would not be safe to assume that the same model would explain the determinants of attitudes for both groups. There were not enough people of foreign birth, foreign nationality and/or ethnic minority status in the sample to conduct a separate analysis of these respondents, so they are omitted from the analysis. The substantive results did not depend on the omission of these cases, however.

Magnitude of Effects of Imagined Immigration Variables

Table 1 shows the variables associated with attitudes toward immigration, and the direction of each relationship, but ordered probit coefficients do not convey the size of the effects straightforwardly. To help substantive interpretation, Figure 4 shows the magnitude of the effects of mental images of immigrants on attitudes to immigration. These predictions use the coefficients estimated in the model in Table 1 to calculate the predicted probability of preferring reductions to immigration for hypothetical survey respondents. These calculations assumed hypothetical respondents who varied on how they reported thinking of immigrants, but were otherwise identical on all other characteristics included as variables in the model.

The effects of the imagined immigration variables were substantively significant as well as statistically significant. According to the estimated model, a hypothetical median survey respondent (a 48-year-old male with a managerial occupation but no university degree who does not read a daily newspaper, and had no particular image of immigrants in mind)

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Preferring Reduced Immigration, for Respondents with Varying Perceptions of Immigrants
a. Perceptions of Immigrants Associated with More Support for Reductions
b. Perceptions of Immigrants Associated with Less Support for Reductions



Notes: Predicted probabilities calculated from model estimates reported in Table 1. Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals. Baseline predicted probabilities are for a hypothetical median respondent with no reported perceptions of immigrants on any of the three dimensions queried.

had a predicted 74 per cent probability of supporting reduced immigration, including a 30 per cent predicted probability of preferring to reduce immigration 'a lot'. For a similar individual who has permanent immigrants in mind, the predicted probabilities rose to 84 per cent (57 per cent 'a lot'). Imagining immigrants as asylum seekers or EU citizens raised these predicted probabilities to 82 per cent (55 per cent 'a lot') and 85 per cent (59 per cent 'a lot'), respectively. For a hypothetical respondent combining these three perceptions, all of which are associated with opposition to immigration, the predicted probabilities rise all the way to 95 per cent (80 per cent 'a lot').

Note that these predicted probabilities do not depend on the attitude holder conjuring up an image of an individual migrant who simultaneously embodies all of these characteristics at once (asylum, EU and permanence). A person may well perceive that immigration to Britain prominently features both EU migrants and asylum seekers, even while realizing that individual migrants can only be one or the other. Thus, the predicted probabilities in Figure 4 have substantive as well as statistical meaning.

Other images of immigrants led to reduced likelihoods of preferring less immigration. The predicted probability of preferring less immigration fell to 64 per cent (33 per cent 'a lot') for those who thought of immigrants as workers, 51 per cent (22 per cent 'a lot') for those who thought of immigrants as British nationals returning from years abroad, and just 39 per cent (14 per cent 'a lot') for those who said that they had both of these images in mind.

Discussion

The above evidence demonstrates two critical points about imagined migration. First, public perceptions of immigration in Britain diverge dramatically from statistical immigration, as measured by the state and targeted in immigration policy. In particular, British public perceptions highlight asylum seekers and permanent immigration. Temporary immigrants, including most international students, are much more common statistically in estimates of inflows in recent years, though not necessarily in the stock of migrants resident in Britain at any one time. Second, individual variation in perceptions of immigrants is associated with variation in attitudes toward immigration as a whole. In particular, viewing immigrants as asylum seekers and permanent immigrants – the very categories that appear much more frequently in imagined immigration than in statistical estimates – is associated with support for reducing immigration levels. In the remainder of this section, I examine the implications of each of these findings for policy debates and for scholarship on public opinion.

For policy making, there are implications for the nature of democratic demand for less immigration. As noted earlier, the government has explicitly claimed that its drive to reduce the number of immigrants coming to Britain is a response to public opinion, and indeed large majorities do prefer reduced immigrant inflows. But the apparent relationship between public preferences and policy making is complicated by the above findings about imagined immigration. For example, the drive to reduce the overall level of net migration has led to new restrictions on immigration by international students and by spouses and children of British citizens (UKBA, 2011b; 2011c), even though members of the British public are unlikely to have these groups in mind when thinking about

immigration. Only a minority of respondents claimed to think about students or spouses/partners when thinking of immigrants; further, those who do think of students are less likely to want to see immigration reduced overall. This observed gap between public and state conceptions of immigrants is in keeping with prior research showing that public opinion at the national level is not closely correlated with numbers of immigrants (Sides and Citrin, 2007). (To be fair, others have found such associations at sub-national [Pettigrew *et al.*, 2010; Schlueter and Scheepers, 2010] or even national levels [Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2009].) The findings here demonstrate more directly that the sort of immigration opposed by the British public does not match precisely with immigration as measured by government statistics and targeted by policies. A logic of numerical reduction may be less responsive to public opinion than it would appear on the surface. A logic of selection would seem to match up better with public sentiment, though surely raising other questions and value judgments.

In addition, the findings suggest that public attitudes might be responsive to further information or education about immigration, framed neither as persuasion nor as simple numerical facts, but rather as varied and accurate depictions of what sorts of people actually make up the category 'immigrants'. Information or narratives portraying immigrants who come to Britain as students, or whose stay is only temporary, may help shift public images of immigrants, which might in turn have an effect on policy preferences.

Shifting from policy to research implications, the findings suggest that researchers could profitably incorporate imagined immigration variables into investigations of the causes of immigration attitudes. Since mental images of immigration vary across individuals, measuring these perceptions may help develop better models of individual attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy. Of course, much will depend on future research aimed at discerning causal links. Perceptions of immigration might influence policy preferences, but there are other possibilities. For example, the relationships observed here might also stem from the reverse causal pathway, if pre-existing attitudes toward immigrants develop first and then shape perceptions of who immigrants are. Reciprocal causation might be most likely of all, particularly when thinking of perceptions and attitudes developing over time, as individuals absorb information and experience social interactions that bear on their conceptions of immigration. It will be worth including questions on perceptions of immigrants in future studies to see which pathway takes precedence or if evidence emerges for reciprocal causation.

Imagined immigration also provides a way to connect media research to public opinion on immigration. Perceptions might be a route through which media coverage and elite rhetoric indirectly influence attitudes. In politics in general, media coverage and elite rhetoric often work through agenda setting or framing: telling people what to think about (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and, through framing or 'second-level agenda setting', how to think about it (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). Segments of the British media have been in effect encouraging people to think in terms of asylum seekers, for example, when they think about immigrants (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008). American media coverage focused on 'illegal' immigration might play a similar agenda-setting or framing role. Further research might examine media coverage and test, experimentally, whether such coverage can influence cognitive representations of immigrants.

In short, imagined immigration has relevance for both research and policy debates. Individual variation in perceptions of immigrants, and the relationship between perceptions and attitudes, suggests a need to reconsider the measurement of attitudes toward immigration overall, as well as the determinants of such attitudes. Likewise, the divergence between 'pictures in the head' and government-measured statistical immigration suggests that policy makers who wish to respond to public opinion need to distinguish explicitly and clearly among types of migrant, and between logics of selection and of numbers.

Of course, public opinion is but one factor that policy makers may wish to take into account in setting immigration policy. Other factors such as human rights and international conventions (particularly as regards applicants for refugee status) and social and economic impact on both sending and receiving countries may play a significant role as well, and one might argue normatively for the importance of these other factors. However, in democratic political systems in which immigration is a salient issue, public opinion will inevitably have some role in shaping immigration policy. One could argue normatively that on democratic grounds it should matter. But how? Public perceptions of immigrants are highly differentiated, meaning that policies directed to officially defined immigrants as an undifferentiated category are less directly responsive to public opinion than they might appear.

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Notes

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1 One US study successfully bridges this gap, linking implicit attitudes toward Latino immigrants to Anglo-Americans' attitudes toward immigration overall (Pérez, 2010). But this is the exception to the rule, and focuses on just one of many possible aspects of citizens' 'pictures in the head' of immigrants.

2 The participants were chosen by quota sampling, within small, randomly selected geographical areas. Quota samples, though not preferred to probability samples, can be justified as the best available option, particularly if they accurately reflect known population percentages on variables that were not used in the quota base itself (Weisberg, 2005, pp. 236–7). In this case, the sample matches up very well with large probability samples of the British population on the three non-quota variables for which such estimates were available: percentage foreign born, percentage of foreign nationality, and attitudes toward immigration levels. The government's Citizenship Survey estimated 77 per cent (excluding don't knows) favoring reduced immigration, compared with 74 per cent in the current sample. The government's Annual Population Survey estimated (as of September 2010, the most recent available at this writing) 12 per cent of the British as foreign born and 7 per cent as foreign nationals, compared with 11 per cent and 7 per cent in the sample.

3 Weights were generated using a combination of data from the 2001 Census, 2010 ONS mid-year population estimates and National Readership Survey data.

4 I chose not to randomly vary response choice order and question order to avoid spillover into later questions. In this design, it seemed preferable to minimize priming effects in order to generate the most possible usable cases, rather than seeking to create and measure such effects, for two reasons: (a) the response options were complicated in two of the three questions, and needed to be presented in a logical order; (b) the number of cases was relatively small. Thus, the question about reasons for migration was

placed last, as mental images of asylum seekers and labor migrants can be quite strong and might have influenced responses to other questions.

5 The question wording: 'Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased, reduced or should it remain the same?'

6 ONS estimates of migrants' length of stay rely on the stated intentions of arriving immigrants, plus an adjustment for 'switching' from original intentions to actual lengths of stay, derived from IPS interviews of departing migrants (ONS, 2010).

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Appendix S1: Preferred Level of Immigration, Cross-Tabulated with Respondent Characteristics