



ASK THE EXPERT
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Public opinion on migrants and migration policies

INTEGRATION



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Ask the Expert Policy Brief

Public opinion on migrants and migration policies

By Zeynep Kaşlı¹

Public opinion on migrants and migration policies

In the last years, along with the increasing politicization of migration in the last decades, public opinion on migration and the role of media in public perception have come under closer scrutiny. So far, academic debates have mainly focused on issues of framing. Scholars of political behavior, political psychology and communication, compiling data in different settings and through the use of different research methods, are pioneers in this field.

This expert brief gives an overview of the current state of the art which could be classified as three strands of research: politicization of migration and formation of what is called public opinion; media's role in shaping public perception and policies through issue framing; and lastly the interdependences between media framings and different sectors of the societies and states.

Politicization of Migration and formation of “public opinion”

Comparative or single case studies across Europe and the US show that migration has been politicized or policy-makers follow public views and demands on immigration at different degrees and at different times ([Blitz 2018](#); [Ford et al 2015](#); [Morales et al 2015](#); [van der Brug et al 2015](#)). On the one hand, despite the seemingly strong public demand for immigration restriction, policy-makers have faced a trade-off between being 'responsive' to public demands and 'responsible' for providing the needs of a flexible, globally integrated economy, as it is the case in the UK since 2004 ([Ford et al 2015](#)). On the other hand, European governments have developed restrictive policies despite public sympathy towards refugees and asylum seekers, proving that the reconnection of security and humanitarian policy is a key characteristic of a 'post-post-Cold War era' ([Blitz 2018](#)).

It is surprisingly the mainstream parties, and especially those in government,

¹ This brief is based on literature compiled via CrossMigration database. The author would like to thank the providers for privileged access to the portal which will be open access by 2020.

that are central players in this process whereas 'challengers,' namely radical right-wing parties, play a relatively limited role. The gap/distance between policies and public opinion on immigration is found to be related to the combination of negative public attitudes with extensive media coverage, and not related directly to the strength of radical right-wing parties ([Morales et al 2015](#)). Yet these parties generally have most 'ownership' on the issue of immigration, which makes them claims-makers in the news regardless of the party size and government status ([van der Brug and Berkout 2015](#)).

Some public opinion studies, however, remind us that there is not a homogeneous public opinion against which the effect of policy-opinion gap or the effect of media coverage on public opinion is observed. For example, although assimilation model gained popularity in Luxembourg between 1999 and 2008 among all groups, native residents are more supportive of this model compared to foreign-born residents and second-generation immigrants with two foreign-born parents who score higher on preferences for multicultural integration ([Callens et al 2014](#)). Similarly the survey experiments underpin the importance of individual differences, such as differences in people's level of empathy which moderates the effects of both threat and humanitarian inducements in the given information envi-

ronment ([Newman et al 2015](#)) or individuals' motivation to control prejudice on key issues of multiculturalism ([Blinder et al 2019](#)). As a recent cross-country study suggests, these results reveal differences in individual's opinion not only across key policy issues, such as support for religious schools, but also across European countries with or without multicultural path of accommodation ([Blinder et al 2019](#)).

This brings us to a methodological note on interpreting public opinion research in general and on immigration attitudes in particular. Based on novel survey data, it has been proven that individuals' perceptions of immigrant and immigration may diverge significantly from what government statistics and policies identify or target as immigrants ([Blinder 2013](#)) and that the acceptance of immigrants is dependent on the perceived presence of immigrants ([Cea D'Ancona 2015](#)). Therefore, the relationship between public imaginaries on immigration and (anti-)immigration policy preferences stands on a slippery slope.

Role of issue framing on public perceptions and policies

Research shows that media framing of immigration may focus on the short-term implications of immigration on the receiving society or economy at the expense of broader societal and global effects. This was apparently the case in the sole focus of Canadian newspapers (2004-2009) on domestic physician shortages and the total disregard of academic concerns over the brain drain of physicians and nurses from developing countries ([Pylpa 2013](#)). Media framing also seem to be instrumental for restrictive policy solutions as it was the case in the global city of Hong Kong where policy-makers refer to media coverage of the causes of requests for asylum and their recommendations for dealing with the “problem” and disregarding how much restrictive immigration policies would affect local economy ([Ng et al 2018](#)).

Recent studies on public opinion suggest that it is vulnerable to various types of framing and cue effects. For example, press portrayals seem to match public perceptions of migrants, with “illegal immigrants” and “failed asylum seekers” as predominant depictions in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in the UK (2010-2012) ([Blinder and Allen 2018](#)). Yet media framing is also found effective in swaying public opinion, for example in the

US where a majority of Americans support harsh immigration policies while also supporting deferred action for undocumented college students during the DREAM Act campaign ([Haynes et al 2016](#)). Similarly, a survey experiment shows that humanitarian concern significantly decreases support for restrictive immigration policy in an information environment which evokes both threat and countervailing humanitarian concern regarding immigration ([Newman et al 2015](#)).

An adjacent literature draws attention to individuals’ interaction with news coverage for opinion formation or relative importance of media framing across different migration-related issues. A survey experiment conducted in Switzerland shows that voters responded to frames and cues by increasing support for the position that is in line with their pre-existing partisan attachment and this “reinforcement effect” was most visible among low knowledgeable voters that identified with the party that owned the issue ([Bechtel et al 2015](#)). Another survey experiment conducted in the US, just one week after President Donald Trump signed a controversial executive order to reduce the influx of refugees to the United States, reveals that participants in refugee-dense counties are less responsive to threatening frames ([Ferberda et al 2017](#)). The positive impact of proximity is complemented by the findings of the Concordia Discors project conducted across Europe on

the role of the local dimension in media representations of immigrants and ethnic minorities as it shows that neighborhoods with their own shared sense of a vital narrative are better able to structure media representations, control and frame news referring to them against moral panic fostered elsewhere ([Pogliano 2016](#)). This brings us to the final point on the relationship between media and public opinion, that is, media autonomy.

Media autonomy and issue framing

Recent studies show that media autonomy, a key aspect of freedom of expression, has different implications on this matter. It is important to pay attention to especially social media communication, regardless of its representative power, as it allows to observe attitudes and grievances that would be harder to observe otherwise in opinion surveys or experiments. For example, in Portugal, where politics and mainstream media have been resistant to the recent spread of populism, social media is the only milieu that allows the introduction and dissemination of populist views or styles of communication in the public debate, and that amplifies the visibility of this kind of discourses as much as they are linked to the local/national political and social changes ([Salgado 2019](#)). Similarly, a recent study based on internet searches in 3099 U.S. coun-

ties (2014-2016) reveal that anti-Muslim searches are strongly associated with pro-ISIS searches, particularly in communities with high levels of poverty and ethnic homogeneity; settings where minority groups are isolated and therefore highly visible or compete with majority groups for limited financial resources ([Bail et al 2018](#)).

Scholars looking at the autonomy of newspapers, more conventional media sources, assess them in terms of their relationship with the government and differences across scales. A comparative study of British regional shows that the regional media, unlike the national media, makes a clear distinction between national and local issues, uses a positive, humanizing frames on especially local topics and a rather negative national discourse on topics such as legislation ([Cooper et al 2016](#)). Ironically, a research on the items of migration coverage in national British newspapers (2006-2015) highlight the role of bureaucratic procedure on what appears as media autonomy by showing that the differences in the use of terms and language between the press and the politicians' preferred lines stem from the routine press interactions with the nonpolitical Office for National Statistics which enable press coverage ([Allen and Blinder 2018](#)).

In sum, media coverage on migration and migration policies has an impact on public opinion, yet this effect varies

across medium and is determined by individual factors, ranging from pre-existing partisanship to proximity to newcomers. Societal conditions that would allow positive contact and thrive pro-immigrant perceptions and experiences seem important to prevent the (re)production and dissemination of disinformation on migration in conventional or new media outlets.

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ReSOMA

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is a project funded under the Horizon 2020 Programme that aims at creating a platform for regular collaboration and exchange between Europe's well-developed networks of migration researchers, stakeholders and practitioners to foster evidence-based policymaking. Being a Coordination and Support Action (CSA), ReSOMA is meant to communicate directly with policy makers by providing ready-to-use evidence on policy, policy perceptions and policy options on migration, asylum and integration gathered among researchers, stakeholders and practitioners.

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