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## Long Reads

# The Fog of Immigration

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CAMBRIDGE – If France were to give the United States the Statue of Liberty today, one wonders if Americans would still embrace the spirit of its inscription: “Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Given the divisiveness of immigration-policy debates in the US, one suspects that many Americans would prefer to slam shut “the golden door.”

After all, plans to build a full-fledged wall on the border with Mexico have polarized Americans. The US Supreme Court has now upheld the president’s executive order barring travel from certain predominantly Muslim countries (plus North Korea and Venezuela), after lower courts struck down earlier versions for their religious animus. And throughout the summer, headlines have been filled with haunting accounts of migrant children being torn away from their parents at the US-Mexico border and held in cages.

The situation in Europe hasn’t been all that different. The United Kingdom’s bid to withdraw from the European Union was fueled largely by the promise of ending the free movement of people and “taking back control” of the country’s borders. And since 2015 – when one million refugees fleeing violence in the Middle East arrived in Europe – images of migrants corralled in holding areas and drowning at sea have regularly dominated the news cycle in Europe.

At the same time, extremist violence and economic insecurity associated with immigration have opened the door for nationalist parties to take power, most recently in Italy. And just two months ago, immigration shot back to the top of the European agenda after Italy’s new anti-establishment government turned away a rescue boat carrying more than 600 asylum seekers.

## **An Immigration Quiz**

One might think that we would all be well acquainted with the facts about

immigration, given the impact that it has on our politics and societies. But the truth is that Americans and Europeans have a deep misunderstanding of the issue, both in terms of its scale and its social and economic consequences.

For starters, consider your own knowledge of the issue: Do you honestly know how many immigrants there are in your country, where they come from, or what share of them are poor or unemployed? If your answer is “no,” you are hardly alone. In a recent study, my Harvard University colleagues Alberto Alesina and Armando Miano and I surveyed 22,500 native-born respondents from France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the UK, and the US. We concluded that much of the political debate about immigration takes place in a world of misinformation. Across the board, respondents’ attitudes towards immigrants – and thus the policies that they want elected politicians to pursue – are based not on facts, but on widespread misperceptions and falsehoods.

For starters, people’s estimates of the number of immigrants in their country tend to be way off base. On average, the survey respondents in the study believed that there are between two and three times as many immigrants in their respective countries as there actually are. US natives think that legal immigrants make up 36% of the population, yet the real share is just 10% (13.5% if one includes illegal immigrants).

Large discrepancies exist in Germany, France, Italy, and the UK as well. In these countries, the actual share of immigrants ranges from 10-15%, but respondents’ estimations averaged around 30%. Swedish respondents had the most accurate perceptions, but they were still wide of the mark. They guessed that immigrants make up 27% of the population; the actual share is 17%, the highest in our sample.

But survey respondents were not just mistaken about the scale of immigration. They also had a false sense of where most immigrants come from, what religion they follow, and how much they contribute to the economy. On the first two points, we found that respondents overestimated the share of immigrants hailing from regions that the Western media has branded as “problematic,” as well as the share of non-Christian immigrants.

For example, in all countries except France, respondents inflated the share of Muslim immigrants; and in all of the countries surveyed, they underestimated the share of Christian immigrants by at least 20 percentage points. In the US, native-born respondents tend to think that Muslims constitute 23% of the immigrant population while Christians make up just 40%. In reality, 61% of immigrants in the US are Christian, and 10% are Muslim. In the UK, respondents believed that only 30% of immigrants are Christian; the real figure is almost twice that (58%).

### **The Immigrant Dividend**

Furthermore, in all of the countries surveyed, immigrants are believed to be poorer, less educated, more likely to be unemployed, and more reliant on government

transfers than is actually the case. For instance, US respondents thought that 37% of the poor are immigrants, though just 12% are; and they believed that 38% of all those without a high-school degree are immigrants, though the real figure is less than half that (17%).

Moreover, a non-trivial share of respondents in the countries surveyed believed that the average immigrant receives at least twice as much in government transfers as the average native-born citizen.

Respondents were also asked to guess the government assistance received by a native-born man named “John” and an immigrant of the same age, income, and family situation named “Mohammad.” A significant share of respondents – 20% in the UK and Germany, 25% in the US, and 35% in France and Italy – said that Mohammad must be receiving more in transfers or paying less in taxes than John.

And yet, the assumption that immigrants are a major drain on public finances is belied by the data. Because immigrants are typically younger than the general population, they receive significantly less in government transfers if pension payments are included. In Italy, the average immigrant receives 70% less in transfers – including pensions – than does the average native-born citizen, according to OECD estimates; and in the US, the average immigrant receives 35% less.

For the US, the Hamilton Project finds that, “Taxes paid by immigrants and their children – both legal and unauthorized – exceed the costs of the services they use.” This makes sense, given that the US receives a large share of highly skilled immigrants. The share of legal immigrants with a college degree in the US is around 41%, according to our calculations; and immigrants have been estimated to take out patents at twice the rate of natives. It is little wonder, then, that in 2017, a major study by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded that “immigration has an overall positive impact on long-run economic growth in the US.”

Added dynamism from immigration is not new. Ufuk Akcigit and John Grigsby of the University of Chicago, along with Tom Nicholas of Harvard Business School, find that immigrants also constituted a disproportionately large share of inventors during America’s “Golden Age” of innovation, between 1880 and 1940. And, looking ahead, Jason Furman of Harvard University reminds us that immigrants’ economic contributions will become all the more important as the population continues to age.

Similarly, a number of European countries have succeeded at attracting highly skilled immigrants: 38% of immigrants in Sweden and 48% in the UK have a college education. Yet, in our study, UK respondents tended to believe that only half as many immigrants (25%) have a college degree. Other countries such as

France, Italy, and Germany actually do receive significantly higher shares of less-educated immigrants. But immigrants in these countries still are not as poor or as likely to be unemployed as native-born citizens believe.

### **Not the Strangers You Think**

As our study shows, most people tend to be mistaken about immigration. But it is worth noting that some are far more misinformed than others. Generally speaking, non-college-educated citizens, supporters of right-wing political parties, or those with lower levels of educational attainment who work in immigration-intensive sectors have a greater negative bias in their perceptions of immigrants. On the other hand, people who are acquainted or friends with an immigrant have both more positive and more accurate perceptions about immigrants generally.

Of course, correlation is not causality. Having more accurate views about immigrants could itself be the reason for knowing an immigrant in the first place.

The widespread confusion about immigration across Western democracies has real-world consequences. The public's misperceptions can have a significant impact on policy – and not just on immigration policies, narrowly defined. Social-science research has shown time and again that generosity does not travel well across different ethnic, national, or religious groups.

In our study, for example, we found that simply prompting people to *think* about immigrants reduces their support for redistributive policies such as progressive taxation or social insurance, and even makes them less likely to donate to charities that help low-income people.

We also conducted three experiments in which respondents were given some of the facts about immigration. In the first, respondents were told the actual share of immigrants in their country; in the second, they were shown where the immigrants in their country come from; and in the third, they heard an anecdote about “a day in the life” of a hard-working immigrant woman. In each case, the additional information made respondents more supportive of more open immigration policies.

But what about support for redistribution? Interestingly, we found that giving respondents the facts about the number and origins of immigrants did not increase their support for redistribution, but that showing them just the anecdote of a hard-working immigrant did. This indicates that attitudes toward redistribution are strongly influenced by one's views about the perceived “deservingness” of the poor.

Still, even when respondents are confronted with the facts and a favorable

depiction of an immigrant, their previously held negative views persist, and their support for redistribution declines, if they are also prompted to think in detail about the characteristics of immigrants, such as religion, age, education, or employment levels. In other words, when people are primed to think about immigrants, they tend to show less generosity and empathy toward the poor, and less support for redistribution.

## **Confronting Hard Truths**

Owing to this phenomenon, politicians who already oppose redistribution can gain a leg up simply by playing the immigration card. This has become one of the favored tactics of populists and nationalists, and it points to a very real danger. A failure to correct public misperceptions about immigration could have unintended consequences in a wide range of areas, from taxation and social spending to education and health care.

Making matters worse, no one really knows where misperceptions about immigration come from – at least not yet. Most likely, there are several different sources. One obvious culprit is the media, which could be – unwittingly or otherwise – distorting public perceptions through what it chooses to cover and how. One does not see front-page stories about lawful, honest, hard-working immigrants filing their taxes or picking up their kids from soccer practice. But one does not need to look far to find sensational coverage of immigrants committing crimes or abusing the welfare system.

At the end of the day, immigration is a profoundly complex economic, moral, and social issue. There are no easy answers for how a country should confront the challenges associated with it, just as there is no magical solution that could eliminate the inequality, wars, or natural disasters that drive global migration flows in the first place.

Integrating immigrants into labor markets and creating peaceful, functioning multi-ethnic societies is ultimately the job of politics. But for our politics to work, we first must make sure that we are all working with the facts – not myths and misperceptions.



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2 Commentaries

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