Attitudes to immigration

Initial findings from Next Steps at Age 32

This briefing paper explores attitudes to immigration among 32-year-olds who are part of a nationally representative study recruited in secondary schools in England, and who now live across the UK countries. Our research examines measures of public sentiment towards immigrants and beliefs about their impact on the economy.

Attitudes to immigration are often an indicator of behaviour towards immigrants, refugees or foreigners in general, but could also indicate attitudes and behaviour towards ethnic minorities more generally[1,2]. Attitudes are also a predictor of voting behaviour and political or ideological support.

Understanding how these attitudes are formed can help to explain behaviour towards immigrants. This knowledge can then inform public policies aiming to improve inter-group relations and to prevent inter-group conflicts[3].

This research is timely as immigration continues to dominate public debate in the UK, driven by political and economic instability and exacerbated by events such as Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent cost-of-living crisis. Globally, immigration remains a salient issue due to the expected growth in migration flows from Africa and the Middle East and growing support of anti-immigrant political figures in the UK, Europe and the US.

This report describes attitudes to immigration among millennials, measured by whether they would like to see the number of immigrants in Britain change, and the extent to which they think immigration is good for the economy. The analyses also look at differences in attitudes between demographic groups (ethnicity, social class and voting behaviour).

The analysis was conducted on an analytical sample of 7,279 Next Steps respondents, of whom 5,961 answered questions on their attitudes to immigration; all results are weighted.

ABOUT THE DATA

Next Steps Age 32 Sweep

Next Steps is following the lives of around 16,000 people in England born in 1989-90. The Age 32 Sweep took place between April 2022 and September 2023. Over 7,000 study members took part in a 60-minute survey, either online or with an interviewer. Data from this and previous sweeps of Next Steps are available to download from the UK Data Service.

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Key findings

- Overall, we see generally favourable attitudes to immigration with 55% of respondents reporting that immigrants are good for the economy, and 67% saying the number of immigrants should stay stable or increase.
- One quarter of respondents hold a neutral position when asked about immigrants' impact on the economy, and less than a fifth (19%) sees their impact as negative.
- Individuals who attained a degree or are in education at age 32 hold more positive immigration attitudes.
- Those who voted 'leave' in the Brexit referendum or who voted for the Conservative Party in the 2019 general election tend to hold more negative attitudes towards immigration.
- On average, respondents born in the UK hold more negative attitudes about immigration than those living in the UK who were born abroad.

BOX 1: MEASURES OF IMMIGRANT ATTITUDES IN NEXT STEPS

1: DO YOU THINK THE NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS TO BRITAIN NOWADAYS SHOULD BE ...?

- **a: Reduced a lot** ☐
- **b: Reduced a little, or** ☐
- **c: Remain the same as it is,** ☐
- **d. Increased a little,** ☐
- **e. Increased a lot** ☐

2: ON A SCALE OF 0 TO 10, WHERE 0 IS EXTREMELY BAD, AND 10 IS EXTREMELY GOOD...

Would you say it is generally bad or good for Britain's economy that immigrants come to Britain from other countries.

Results

Immigration attitudes in the Next Steps data are measured by a general question regarding attitudes towards the number of immigrants in Britain at the moment (referred to as 'general attitudes') and a second question regarding the respondent's perception of immigrants' impact on the economy (referred to as 'economic impact'). These measures, shown in Box 1, have been standardised so that they are both measured on a 5-point scale (0-4). We explore general attitudes and economic impact by education, labour market status, ethnicity, country of birth, gender, and voting behaviour.

What are the overall attitudes to immigration among 32-year-olds?

In Next Steps, most respondents hold similar attitudes about the number of immigrants, and whether immigration is good for the economy.

Figures 1 and 2 present their general attitudes to immigration (number of immigrants to Britain) and their impact on the economy. In both cases, a larger share of the population holds either neutral or more positive attitudes. More than two-thirds (68%) of respondents think neutrally or positively about the number of immigrants in the country: 34% believe the number should remain the same, 22% believe it should increase and an additional 12% believes it should increase significantly (Figure 1).

The majority of respondents (55%) believe immigration is positive for the British economy: 38% saying it is good and 17% saying it is extremely good. Around a fifth (19%) think immigration has a negative impact on the economy: with 13% saying it is bad and 6% saying it is extremely bad. A quarter (26%) of respondents hold a neutral opinion (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1: DO YOU THINK THE NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS TO BRITAIN NOWADAYS SHOULD BE...?

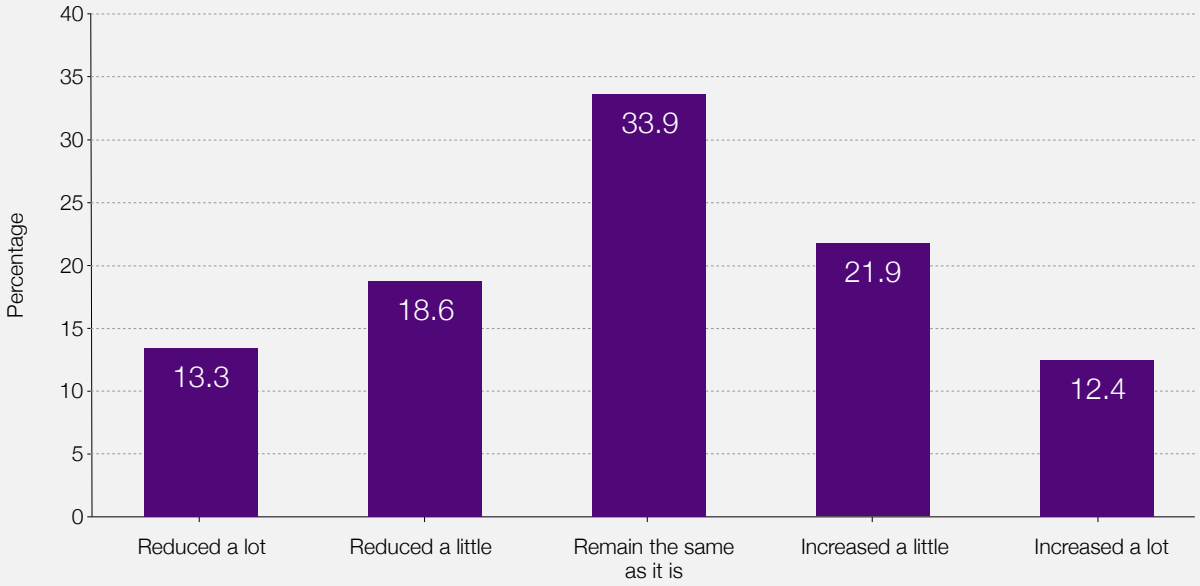
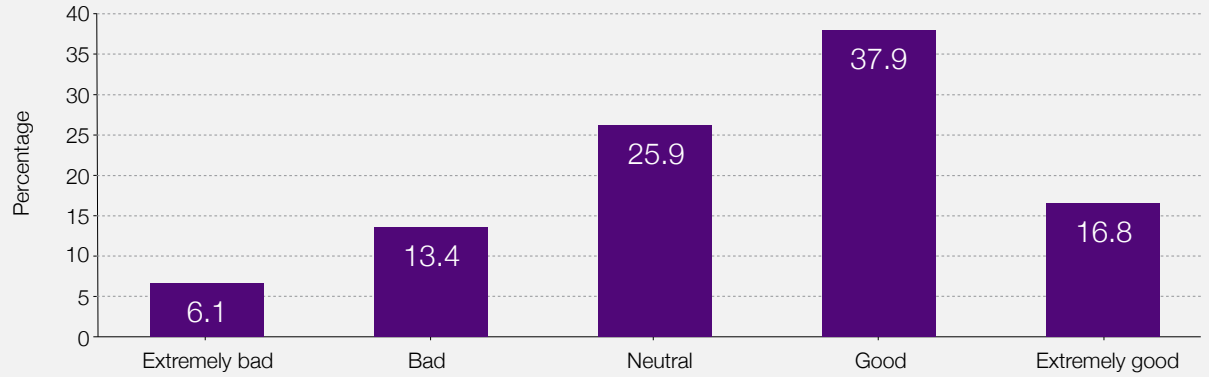


FIGURE 2: WHETHER MIGRANTS ARE GOOD FOR BRITAIN'S ECONOMY?



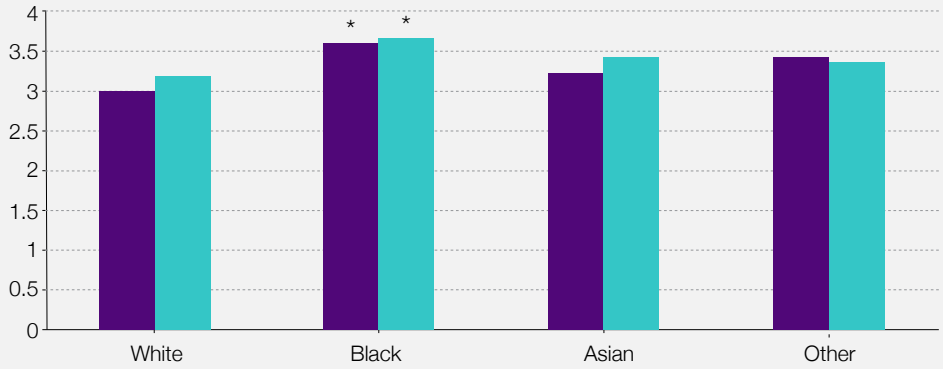
How do attitudes to immigration vary by people's socioeconomic and demographic characteristics?

People's age, ethnicity, personal and family immigration history, educational attainment, job and economic activity impact their attitudes[4]. Our research found members of ethnic minority groups, individuals from migrant backgrounds, those in higher education and people in stable employment tend to be more positive about immigration. This may be due to these groups not fearing labour market competition from immigrants[5].

Black respondents hold the most positive attitudes towards immigration with an average score of 3.6 for their general attitudes to immigration and 3.7 for the perceived economic impact of immigration. White respondents have an average score of 3.0 and 3.2 respectively, while people of Asian and other ethnicities do not hold significantly different attitudes from the White respondents (Figure 3).

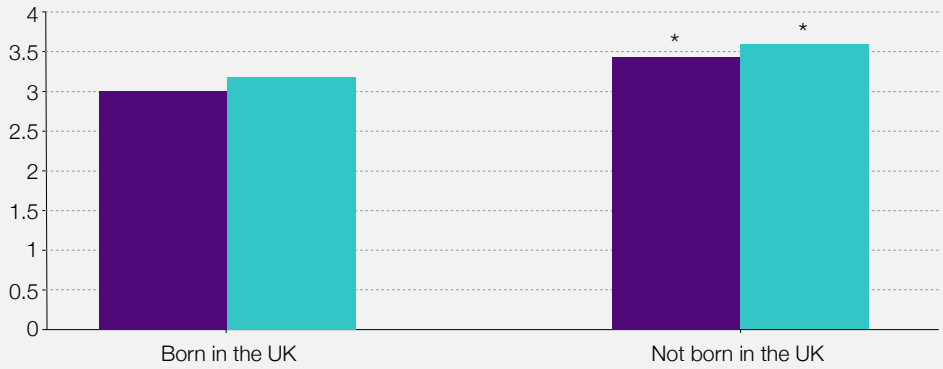
Millennials born abroad hold slightly more positive attitudes to immigration, on average, compared to their peers born in the UK (Figure 4).

FIGURE 3: AVERAGE ATTITUDES SCORES ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS' ETHNICITY (5-POINT SCALE, HIGHER SCORE IMPLIES A MORE POSITIVE SENTIMENT)



Note: An asterisk (*) denotes a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$). This means there is less than a 5% chance that the observed difference occurred due to random chance.

FIGURE 4: AVERAGE ATTITUDES SCORES ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS' COUNTRY OF BIRTH (5-POINT SCALE, HIGHER SCORE IMPLIES A MORE POSITIVE SENTIMENT)



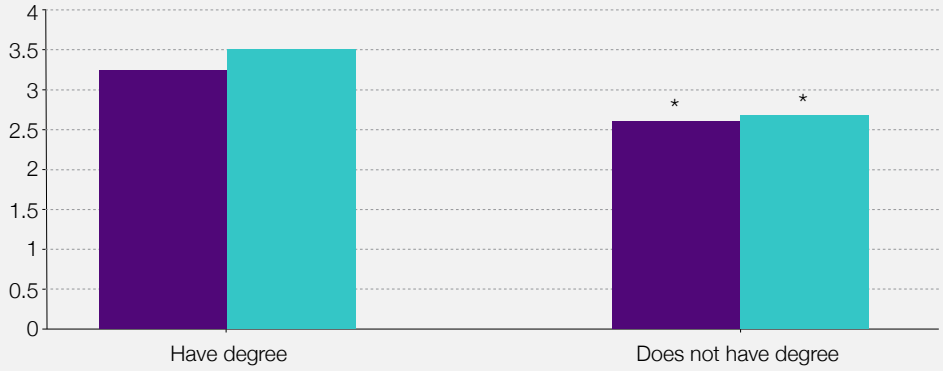
Among those born abroad, we observe an average score of 3.4 for the general attitudes measure and 3.6 for economic impact, while for those born in the UK it is 3 and 3.2 respectively. The difference between these groups might be indicative of the theory of solidarity among immigrants[6].

Those with degree level qualifications or above hold more positive attitudes to immigration with an average score of 3.3 for general attitudes and 3.5 for economic impact, compared to those with below degree level qualifications (Figure 5) who, on average, score 2.6 and 2.7. These findings also align with the existing research[7].

Respondents currently in education hold, on average, the most positive attitudes to immigration with scores for general immigration attitudes of 3.5 and for economic impact of 3.6. Those in full-time or part-time employment have a score of 3.1 and 2.9 for general attitudes and 3.4 and 3 for economic impact respectively. On the other hand, those who are unemployed have a lower score of 2.6 for both measures of attitudes (Figure 6).

As shown in Figure 7, there was no statistically significant difference in attitudes toward immigration between men, women, and individuals who identify as other genders.

FIGURE 5: AVERAGE ATTITUDES SCORES ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS' EDUCATION LEVEL (5-POINT SCALE, HIGHER SCORE IMPLIES A MORE POSITIVE SENTIMENT)



Note: An asterisk (*) denotes a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$). This means there is less than a 5% chance that the observed difference occurred due to random chance.

FIGURE 6: AVERAGE ATTITUDES SCORES ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS' MAIN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY (5-POINT SCALE, HIGHER SCORE IMPLIES A MORE POSITIVE SENTIMENT)

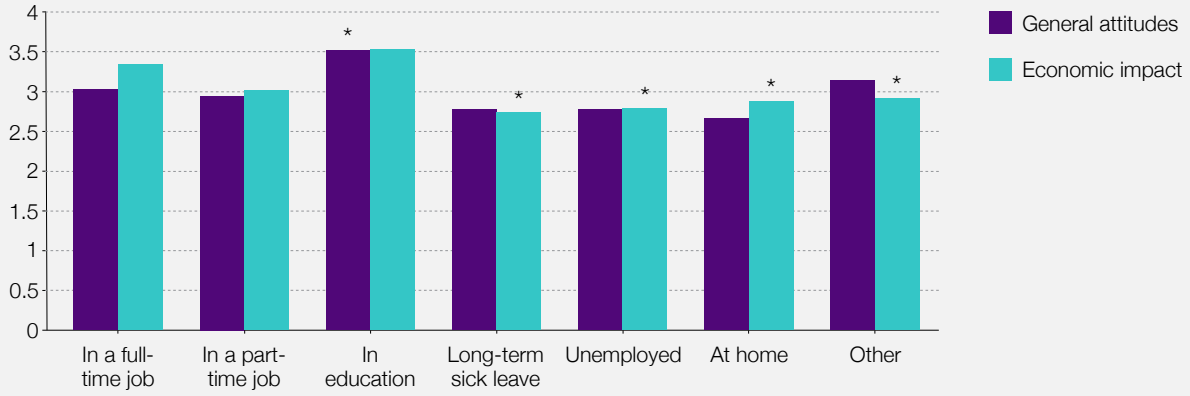
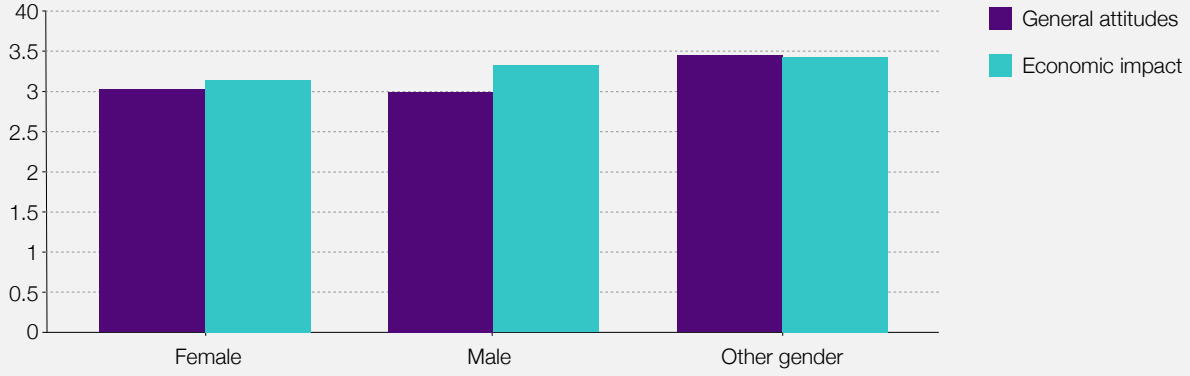


FIGURE 7: AVERAGE ATTITUDES SCORES ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS' GENDER (5-POINT SCALE, HIGHER SCORE IMPLIES A MORE POSITIVE SENTIMENT)



Those who voted to remain in the EU have a much more positive view of immigration.

No gender difference in attitudes to immigration among 32-year-olds.

How do attitudes to immigration vary by respondents' voting behaviour?

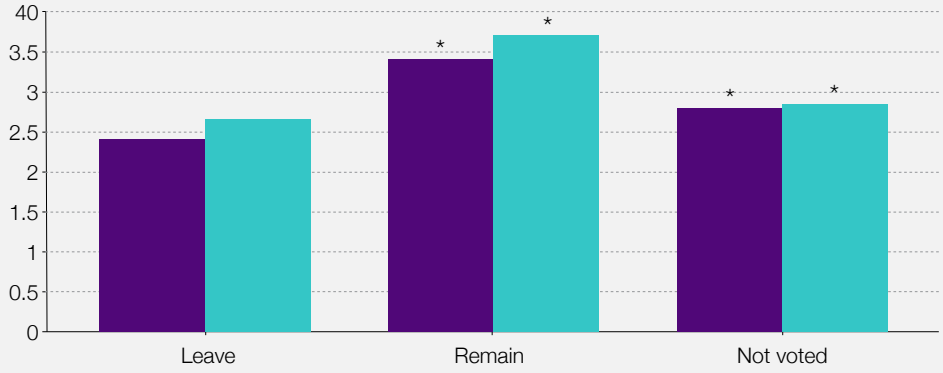
Turning now to the relationship between voting behaviour and attitudes to immigration, we look firstly at how respondents voted in the 2016 EU referendum and the general election in 2019.

Figure 8 shows that those who voted to remain in the EU have a much more positive view of immigration compared to those who did not vote and those who voted to Leave the EU (i.e., for Brexit). This finding is in line with immigration being one of the main themes of public discussion pre-referendum[8].

Those who said they voted for the Conservative Party in the general election in December 2019 have, on average, less positive general attitudes to immigration (2.6) compared to any other non-voters or voters of other parties. These results align with the existing research showing the Conservative Party's and their voters' support of restrictive immigration policies[9]. When it comes to attitudes in terms of economic impact, the results are the same (Figure 9).

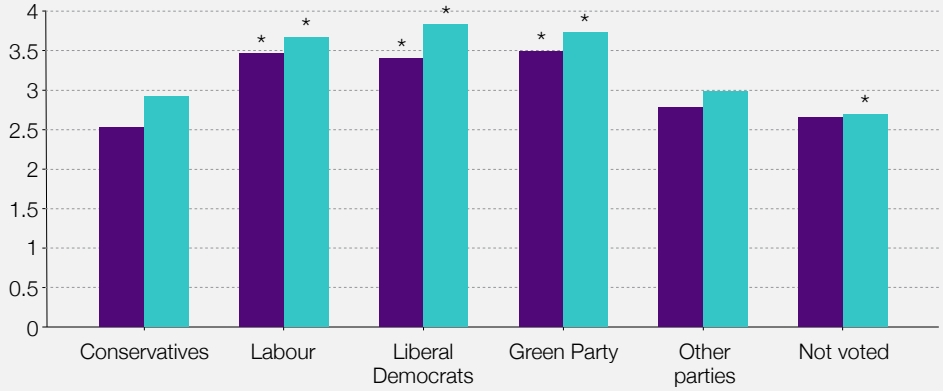
These results are descriptive in nature and focus on the bivariate relationships, that is, the relationship between two variables. Further statistical analyses (e.g., multivariable regression models) reveal that when taking all measures into account that **ethnicity, country of birth, education** and **main economic activity** remain important predictors of immigration attitudes.

FIGURE 8: AVERAGE ATTITUDES SCORES BASED ON VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN EU REFERENDUM (5-POINT SCALE, HIGHER SCORE IMPLIES A MORE POSITIVE SENTIMENT)



Note: An asterisk (*) denotes a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$). This means there is less than a 5% chance that the observed difference occurred due to random chance.

FIGURE 9: AVERAGE ATTITUDES SCORES BASED ON VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION (5-POINT SCALE, HIGHER SCORE IMPLIES A MORE POSITIVE SENTIMENT)



Considerations for policymaking

This briefing paper draws out important findings on millennials' attitudes to immigration, reported between April 2022 and September 2023, a time when the topic was regularly in the headlines and the subject of public debate. The analysis shows relatively positive public immigration attitudes held by majority of this cohort.

We found that the factors most strongly associated with attitudes towards the economic impact of immigration are individuals' economic activity and level of education. We also found that these attitudes are patterned by ethnicity and country of birth, but not gender.

Perceived immigration often creates a more threatening feeling than the actual situation in the country does[10] and can cause feelings of threat from immigrants for some groups. This analysis suggests, that for people with below degree education, those who are out of the labour market, and those with conservative political views tend to hold more negative sentiments towards immigrants, whether the threat to them is real or perceived. This could be moderated by easy-to-process, reliable information. Considering these attitudes and fears and responding to them by running information campaigns about immigrants and integration policies can help moderate negative attitudes and remove false preconceptions about immigrants and their lives in the UK[11].

Opportunities for future research

Future research comparing generational differences in immigration attitudes across cohorts would bring more understanding of this issue and answer the question about how attitudes potentially change across generations. Longitudinal data collection from British cohort studies allows also longitudinal analysis, which can explore period effects of varied social and economic events, such as 1980s recession, 2008 financial crisis, or the so called European migration crisis in 2015.

Future research can explore the influence of the media on immigration attitudes by linking Next Steps to media monitoring data and can also explore geographical variation, showing how places where people live impact their attitudes, potentially due to the number of immigrants in their area.

About Next Steps

Next Steps, previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, follows the lives of around 16,000 people in England born in 1989-90. The study has followed cohort members since secondary school, collecting information about cohort members' education and employment, economic circumstances, family life, physical and emotional health and wellbeing, social participation and attitudes. Next Steps began in 2004 when cohort members were aged 13/14, and was originally managed by the UK Department for Education. Since 2015, the study has been managed by the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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