DATA BULLETIN

*Informing the implementation
of the Global Compact for Migration*

International Organization for Migration (IOM)
The UN Migration Agency

Public opinion on migration

Public attitudes on migration are relevant to the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, insofar as they are likely to influence policymakers, as they aim to create optimal and sustainable migration governance systems – locally, regionally and globally – in the coming years. A correct understanding of what public attitudes towards migration look like and how they influence decision makers is essential in helping States deliver on Objective 17 of the Global Compact, which is to "Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration". In addition to shaping and influencing migration policy, public opinion on migration may influence the degree to which migrants integrate into their receiving communities, with important implications for the ability of States to deliver on other objectives of the Global Compact, including Objective 16, which is to "Empower migrants and societies to realize full inclusion and social cohesion."

Mapping and understanding what shapes public attitudes is particularly critical at a time when immigration is often perceived as one of the most important political issues facing countries around the world, with significant implications for election outcomes and migration policies. Data on public opinion on migration can be a useful indicator of how open receiving societies are towards immigration and ethnic diversity. Meanwhile, the availability and accuracy of data related to migration, and how migration data are presented in the media can affect public opinion: A lack of comprehensive and nuanced information on migration can inflate stereotypical public perceptions of immigration and its effects in host communities. For example, people tend to significantly overestimate the size of the immigrant population in their countries.[1]

What we know about public opinion on migration globally

The data available on public attitudes on migration are more plentiful than ever. Surveys of public opinion on migration are common in many countries and there is a large variation in polls or survey questions that measure public opinion on migration (see some examples below).[2] Typically, these polls tend to ask citizens about their perceptions of immigrants and of the effects of immigration in their countries, as well as about their preferences regarding to migration policies.

Globally, public opinion is divided on the question of whether to increase, decrease or keep present immigration levels

Findings of IOM's "*How the World Views Migration*" report,[3] based on data from the Gallup World Poll collected in 2012–2014, show that on average in countries around the world, 34 per cent of the population would like to see immigration decreased, 21 per cent increased and 22 per cent kept at its present level. Moreover, in every major region of the world – with the important exception of Europe – people are more likely to want immigration

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[1] World Economic Forum (2016). Why you're probably wrong about immigration. Available from www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/why-you-re-probably-wrong-about-immigration

[2] These are in addition to a number of national election studies.

[3] International Organization for Migration, *How the World Views Migration* (Geneva, 2015). Available from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/how_the_world_gallup.pdf (accessed 19 November 2018). This report provides an overview of public attitudes towards immigration globally. Drawing on data from the Gallup World Poll, the report details results from surveys conducted in more than 140 countries from 2012 to 2014 and based on interviews with over 183,000 adults.

GMDAC

IOM´s Global Migration
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Figure 1: Surveys measuring public opinion on migration

Survey	Number of questions	Number of countries	Years covered	Publicly available
Gallup World Poll	6*	160**	2006 - 2017 (1980 · 1990 · 2000 · 2010)	🔒
Pew Global Attitudes Survey	3	60**	2004 - 2017 (1980 · 1990 · 2000 · 2010)	🔒
International Social Survey Programme	12	34	'95 · '03 · '13 (1980 · 1990 · 2000 · 2010)	🔒
World Values Survey	2	100	1981 - 2017 (1980 · 1990 · 2000 · 2010)	🔓
Ipsos Global Trends	2	23	'13 '16 (1980 · 1990 · 2000 · 2010)	🔓
European Social Survey	36	22	'02 · '14 (1980 · 1990 · 2000 · 2010)	🔓
Eurobarometer	2	34	'14-'17 (1980 · 1990 · 2000 · 2010)	🔓

Source: GMDAC research based on publicly available information, 2017.

Notes: * 3 out of 6 questions have only been introduced in 2016.
** The number of countries covered varies by year.

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levels in their countries to either stay at the present level or to increase, rather than to decrease. This contrasts with the negative perceptions of migration often portrayed in the media in certain regions of the world, although this is heavily influenced by national contexts, with countries in East Asia showing particular opposition to immigration.

Indeed, there are large differences in public opinion between regions. People in Europe tend to hold more negative views towards immigration, with the majority (52%) saying immigration levels should be decreased. On the contrary, attitudes towards immigration levels are more positive in the United States (US), with the majority (63%) saying immigration levels should be increased.

More positive attitudes to immigration and ethnic diversity in the US relative to Europe were confirmed in a 2016 poll from the Pew Research Center, with 58 per cent of the people in the US believing that having more people of different races, ethnic groups and nationalities makes the US a better place to live, compared with 22.8 per cent (median percentage) of the European population. However, when disaggregating the European median percentage (22.8%) by country, the figures for Sweden (36%), the United Kingdom (33%) and Spain (31%) were higher than the median percentage for the entire region.[4]

Public opinion differs depending on migrant and respondent characteristics and contextual factors

A host of factors drive public opinion on immigration, though these are often difficult to isolate. Such factors may include the history and size of the immigrant population, its level of ethnic diversity, the origin, religion, and skill level of immigrants,

socioeconomic factors in the receiving country, as well as individual characteristics of the survey respondents, such as age, education and employment status.

The *How the World Views Migration* report found that certain sociodemographic characteristics are more consistently associated with favourable or opposing attitudes to immigration. For instance, adults with a university degree are typically more likely than those with lower levels of education to want to see immigration kept at its present level or increased in their countries.[5]

The report also found that people's views about their personal and their countries' economic situations correlate with their views of immigration: Those who perceive economic situations as poor or worsening are more likely to favour lower immigration levels into their countries, and vice versa.[6]

[4] Pew Research Center, "Europeans not convinced growing diversity is a good thing, divided on what determines national identity", 11 July 2016. Available from www.pewglobal.org/2016/07/11/europeans-not-convinced-growing-diversity-is-a-good-thing-divided-on-what-determines-national-identity (accessed 19 November 2018).

[5] International Organization for Migration, *How the World Views Migration* (Geneva, 2015) Available from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/how_the_world_gallup.pdf (accessed 19 November 2018).
[6] Ibid.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards immigration by region (%)

IN YOUR VIEW, SHOULD IMMIGRATION IN THIS COUNTRY BE KEPT AT ITS PRESENT LEVEL, INCREASED OR DECREASED?
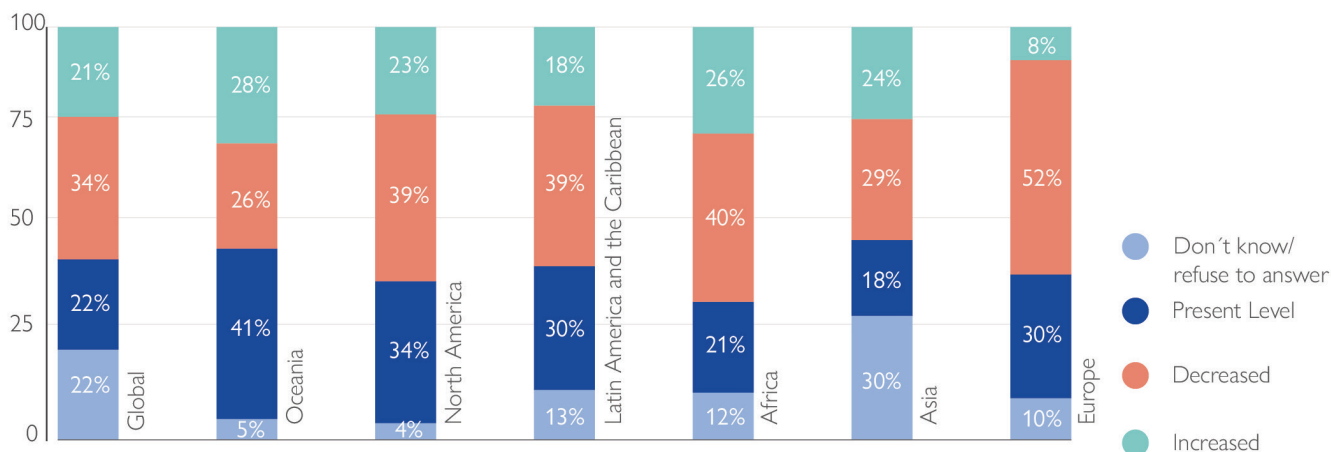
Notes: *Total group results are weighted by population size. Figures might not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Source: International Organization for Migration, *How the World Views Migration* (Geneva, 2015). Available from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/how_the_world_gallup.pdf

Case study: European attitudes on immigration are multidimensional

Public opinion on immigration is nuanced along a number of dimensions. This is evident, for instance, in results of surveys asking whether Europeans are positive about immigrants from outside the European Union, compared with immigrants from other European Union member States. Although European attitudes on both groups of immigrants have become markedly more positive in recent years, there is a consistent 40–50 per cent gap between the two approval rates. Another example of nuanced attitudes on migration includes the overwhelming support among Western countries for accepting refugees,[1] compared to the relative low acceptance of low-skilled labour migrants, as shown by the European Social Survey (2014).

Evidence that citizens' attitudes towards immigration are nuanced can be found not only in surveys revealing differing opinions depending on migrants' reason for moving — asylum, family reunification, study, work, etc.—but also in the opinions expressed regarding the qualifications people find necessary for immigrants to be allowed entry. As shown in Figure 3, Europeans overwhelmingly regard immigrants' commitment to adopt the country's way of life and development of linguistic skills as vital conditions for entry; their employability and education levels are seen as slightly less important, and having a Christian background or being of a certain ethnicity are considered far less important in determining whether to accept or exclude them, as shown below. These results are in line with other findings from the political science literature.[2]

Nuances in public opinion about migration are also evident in responses to the European Social Survey's question "Do you believe that immigrants have a good or bad effect on the following issues?". The issues included crime, government budgets, jobs, quality of life, the economy and culture. There are important differences in the perceived impact of immigration across these areas among Europeans – immigration is seen as having a particularly negative impact on crime, jobs and the economy, as opposed to culture and quality of life. However, these results ignore the fact that Europeans have vastly different views of the effects of different groups of immigrants on each of these issues.

Figure 3: Answers to the question "To what extent are the following important qualifications for accepting or excluding immigrants?"
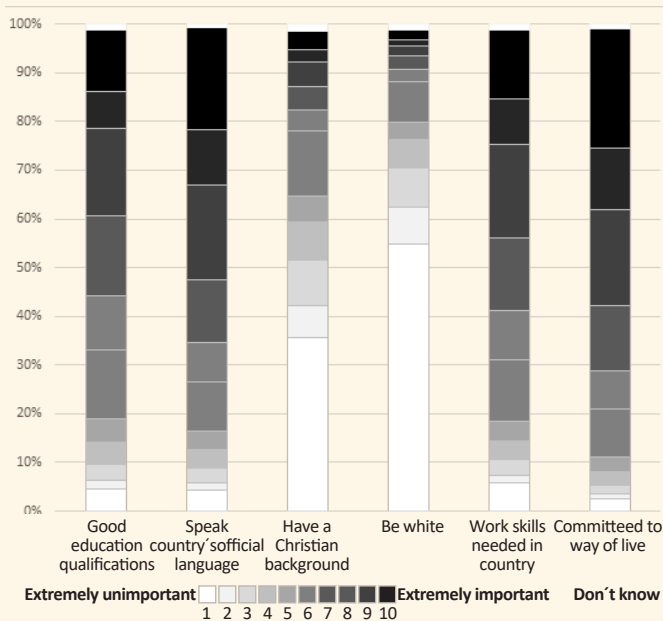
Source: European Social Survey, 2014.

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1   Pew Research Center, "A majority of Europeans favor taking in refugees, but most disapprove of EU's handling of the issue", 19 September 2018. Available from www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/19/a-majority-of-europeans-favor-taking-in-refugees-but-most-disapprove-of-eus-handling-of-the-issue (accessed 19 November 2018).
2   See, for example, Taylor and Francis Online, "Acceptable and Unacceptable Immigrants: How Opposition to Immigration in Britain is Affected by Migrants' Region of Origin", 26 April 2011. Available from www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369183X.2011.572423 (accessed 19 November 2018).

Data challenges

Understanding public opinion about migration and what factors influence perceptions of the phenomenon is important for countries and the international community to foster a constructive and balanced public discourse, including through the promotion of independent and accurate media reporting, and of information campaigns on the actual impacts of migration, and to effectively counter xenophobia and stigmatization of migrants, as laid out in Objective 17 of the Global Compact for Migration.

Public opinion surveys should better capture nuance of public opinion on migration

One of the major shortcomings of surveys on attitudes about immigration (with important exceptions) is the tendency to treat "immigration" as a singular issue. By using the vague term "immigration" to describe what is – and what citizens recognize to be – a broad topic, the responses to various questionnaires aimed at understanding public attitudes towards migration may be biased. For example, questionnaires can include questions such as "Do you think immigration is good or bad for the national economy?". While these questions are of course useful for analysing broad trends over time, and between countries and individuals, focusing on them only ignores increasing evidence that voters have nuanced views of different types of immigration. Moreover, several cognitive biases may lead respondents of surveys to respond with particularly risk-averse – i.e. anti-immigration – answers when confronted with immigration as a singular issue. The tendency to treat migration as a singular issue in attitudinal data is reflected in its singular use by both academic researchers and policymakers. However, survey experiments that randomly vary the characteristics of migrants find that the preferences of respondents are highly responsive to such variation.

In addition to better capturing the nuance of public opinion by specifying type of migration in surveys, **data collection on attitudes about migration needs to address some common challenges in survey methodology:**

(a) **Data may not be representative:** Data from opinion polls should be collected in a random sample so that everyone in the population being studied has an equal chance of participating. Otherwise, the results could be biased and not fully representative of the population.

(b) **Respondents may interpret the same questions differently:** Different respondents understand or interpret the same survey questions differently. This is considered a measurement error. For example, the word "migrant" in a survey can mean different things to different people. Some may think the term refers to asylum seekers, while others would associate it with labour migrants or irregular migrants.

(c) **Data do not always show why the public holds certain views on migration:** Public opinion polls on migration provide insights into public views on migration-related issues, but they do not always explain why people hold certain views or what could prompt them to change their minds.

(d) **Questions in polls tend to focus on immigration rather than emigration:** This means surveys that focus on people's attitudes towards immigration are less relevant to countries with low immigration and high emigration rates. Therefore, in order to gauge a population's general views on emigration, surveys should include questions about emigration or returning migrants.

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