

What's with the attitude? We were all migrants once!

Renae Dixon and Jacques Poot

National Institute of Demographic and Economic Analysis (NIDEA), University of Waikato

26 June 2017

Integration, adaptation, segregation, discrimination, diversity, multiculturalism, etc. We come across words like these frequently in academic writings about immigration, but also in the media. Particularly the latter use such terms often in an emotionally charged way. It appears that views and attitudes on immigration have become more polarised. Overseas that has become clear for example from the political debate surrounding Brexit in the UK and the election of President Donald Trump in the US.

But what about Aotearoa New Zealand? During the last few years immigration has been increasing, leading to a record level of net migration (arrivals minus departures) of around 70,000 per year – more than double the natural increase (births minus deaths) of the New Zealand population. Since World War II, migration has accounted on average for only about one quarter of population growth. To find periods in which migration contributed as much to population growth as it does at present you have to go back to colonial days, or even further to the arrival of the first waka! However, much of the immigration growth in recent years is driven by temporary migration.

It is therefore not surprising that immigration politics is big at present, reinforced by the lead-up to the September 23 General Election. A recent [survey](#) by UMR Research has attempted to quantify how New Zealanders feel about immigration. In an online [article](#), David Hall muses over the survey results and comes to the conclusion that attitudes towards immigration are generally quite positive, but also that about one quarter of New Zealand citizens regard immigration very negatively. That's not all that different from what a similar survey found in Britain.

However, attitudes towards immigration vary with demographic variables like age and ethnicity and also with political views and citizenship. In this commentary we delve a bit deeper into how New Zealand attitudes towards migration compare with those in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. We also briefly ask whether the perceptions of New Zealanders regarding the impacts of migration are consistent with what scientific research has discovered.

[Kendra Cherry](#) defines an attitude as referring to “a set of emotions, beliefs, and behaviours toward a particular object, person, thing or event. Attitudes are often the result of experience or upbringing, and they can have a powerful influence over behaviour.” Attitudes can either be a result of previous experience early in a person's lifetime or can be a product of everyday exposure to current events, social conditions and interactions. Here we will focus on the latter.

Some media, particularly internationally, have been influential in recent years in promoting and perpetuating a less than favourable discourse of immigrants and immigration. To assist in encouraging attitudes based on objective information and the full spectrum of opinions, it is important to identify factors that influence public attitudes towards immigration (and that are external to the role of the media). This can also be helpful for creating policies which aim to promote social cohesion and greater acceptance of, for example, cultural diversity. There is a large literature that has identified what kind of socio-economic and demographic factors are important in shaping

attitudes with respect to migration. Here we focus on four [key factors](#): political affiliation, education, age and geographic clustering.

Political affiliation

There is a raft of [local](#) and [international](#) literature which suggests that there is a correlation between a person's political ideology and a preference for liberal immigration policy. Those who hold more social-democratic and left-wing political views regarding well-being and equality tend to be significantly more likely to view immigration positively than those on the political right. In general, right-wing voters are less tolerant of immigration and see immigrants as a burden. That is also very clear in the recent UMR Survey in New Zealand, in which – as we move from the political right to the left (starting with NZ First, then National, then Labour and then the Greens) – attitudes become more positive towards immigrants, but not necessarily towards increasing the level of immigration. The survey suggests that particularly those voting National favour temporary migrants who have less access to social security. This attitude is undoubtedly driven by the expected economic gains from this type of migration for New Zealand businesses.

Education

Local and international [literatures](#) indicate that the more educated a respondent is, the more positive the attitude towards immigration. For example, those with no tertiary qualification are less likely to see the economic and cultural value immigrants can generate than those who do hold a tertiary qualification. In essence, the higher the level of qualification and skills, the more likely a person tends to view immigration as desirable and the more accepting the person will be of diversity.

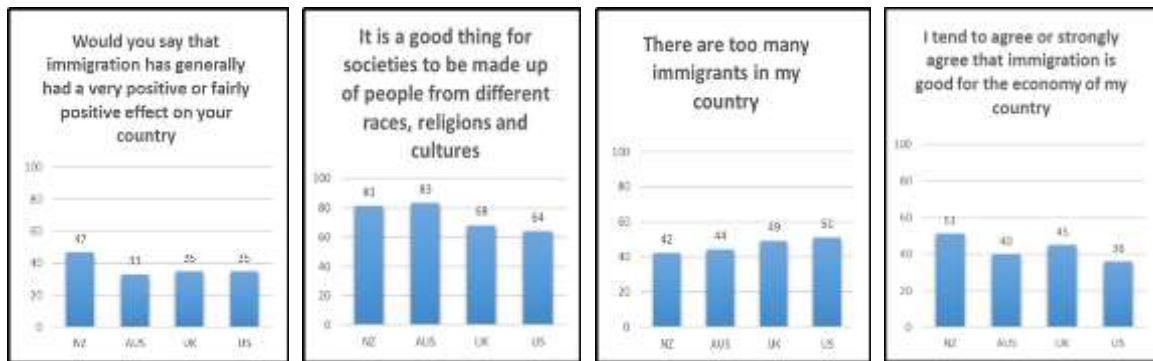
Age

Age plays a pivotal role in attitudes towards migration. Teenagers and young adults tend to be more accepting of immigrants, mainly due to their lived experiences in an internationally mobile and diverse cultural environment. The older people are, the less likely they are to believe that growing ethnic diversity is good for their country.

Geographic clustering

Increased and frequent contact with individuals from other ethnic or cultural groups (so-called “bridging”) leads to higher levels of trust and greater acceptance of groups other than the majority group. Several authors comment that those who have greater contact within workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods, perceive fewer threats and intergroup anxiety, and consequently are more likely to be accepting of immigrants. There are clear linkages between the volume of immigration a country or region experiences and how comfortable residents are with cultural diversity.

So, how do New Zealanders fare in contrast to some other English-speaking immigration countries around the world? We compare New Zealander's attitudes towards immigrants with those of the UK, US and Australia – using the [Ipsos](#) international immigration, refugee and Brexit poll of September 2016. The overall conclusion is that New Zealand is on average relatively more tolerant, accepting, and generally more positive, towards immigration than the other countries considered.



Source: Ipsos international immigration, refugee and Brexit poll. Sept 2016

As the graphs above indicate, 47 percent of New Zealanders say that immigration has a very, or at least fairly, positive effect on the country. This compares with 33 to 35 percent in the other three countries. With respect to acceptance of cultural diversity, New Zealand is slightly behind Australia (81 versus 83 percent) but both are well ahead of the UK and the US (68 and 64 percent respectively). About 42 percent of New Zealanders agree with the statement that “there are too many immigrants in my country”, but this is less than in the other countries. By contrast, more than half of New Zealanders agree that immigration is good for the economy and that is more than in the other countries.

New Zealand

In the 2016 [Ipsos Public Affairs](#) survey, New Zealanders were also asked to identify the most important issues facing them today. The most important issues reported were housing affordability and the cost of living. Overall, immigration was the fourth most important issue. Consistent with the comments made about political affiliation above, right wing voters listed immigration as the second most important issue facing NZ today whilst left wing voters ranked immigration issues at number five.

With respect to the impact that immigration has on culture and identity, many New Zealanders (including many NZ Māori) are very supportive of immigrants retaining their national identity. The 2017 UMR Research survey shows a similar result. Thus said, it is important to recognise that some Māori are wary of increased levels of cultural diversity through rising numbers of immigrants. This unease reflects concerns about the consequential tendency to consider Māori political status in a conventional ‘majority-minority’ setting, perceived competition for scarce economic and cultural resources, and the uncertainty of a bicultural nation as was established in the Treaty settlement. The recent book [Fair Borders](#) delves into this issue in much more detail.

Australia

When Australians were recently asked what were the [biggest threats](#) associated with immigration, they answered: the pressure it places on infrastructure, housing, and the employment market. This is very similar to the opinions of New Zealanders. This is not surprising considering the shared colonial history and similar socio-economic & demographic features of these countries. Like [New Zealanders](#), [Australians](#) are more accepting of immigrants from Anglo-celtic backgrounds and those who are linguistically similar (e.g. Indians and South Africans). Further similarities are found in the belief that immigrants make an important contribution to their economies and contribute positively toward multiculturalism. The two factors which inform Australian attitudes most are the political prominence of immigration issues and local (un)employment levels.

United States

Although not as accepting of immigration as New Zealanders or Australians, Americans are still relatively tolerant, with 54% of participants thinking that ethnic diversity makes their country a [better place to live](#). Literature indicates that the main concern of Americans is that immigrants bring with them terror, acts of violence and instability. In the wake of 9/11, and a large influx of immigrants from the Middle East, Americans see immigrants as being a threat to the safety of society as the greatest concern. Interestingly, the US demonstrates a similar [left/right](#) distinction as the Southern Hemisphere countries. 32% of Republicans say immigrants strengthen American society, compared with 63% of Democrats. Americans are less likely to see the economic value of immigration than Australians or New Zealanders.

United Kingdom

In contrast to New Zealand and Australia, Britons name immigration as the [most important](#) issue presently facing their country. It is followed by issues relating to participation in the EU, the national health system and the economy. Existing evidence clearly shows high levels of opposition to immigration in the UK. In recent surveys, majorities of respondents think that there are too many migrants, that fewer migrants should be let in to the country, and that there should be tighter restrictions on immigration policy.

WHY WE NEED GOOD RESEARCH

Attitudes are not fixed – people can be influenced by new information. In this respect there is growing concern that the more people rely on social media rather than the traditional press or public broadcasting, the more they may find their views reinforced by those in their selected networks and the less they are exposed to alternative views. With respect the impacts of immigration, a huge literature has emerged that emphasises that the impacts of immigration are complex and wide-ranging. Researchers face the challenge of making the findings of scientific research on immigration, referred to as [Migration Impact Assessment](#) (MIA) by some authors, available in an accessible form and in terms that are easily understood.

Besides attitudes towards immigration, the recent UMR survey also investigated the perceptions of New Zealanders regarding positive and negative impacts of immigration. The responses regarding statements that reflect positive or negative impacts of immigration provide some very interesting results. On the one hand, there is strong support for the statement that “immigrants make New Zealand a much more interesting and diverse place to live” (51% agreed, 20% disagreed). New Zealanders also agree that there are benefits from immigration for strengthening international networks, for doing jobs that Kiwis don’t want to do, for obtaining necessary skills and for increasing the variety of food available. On the other hand, it is also strongly believed that immigrants are a major contributor to high house prices in Auckland (61% agree, 13% disagree). Other negatives are that New Zealand infrastructure cannot cope with the current levels of immigration, that immigrants are geographically clustered, and that they push down wages and working conditions.

Some of these perceptions are backed up by research, such as the positive effects of more diverse communities and international networks or the pressures on infrastructure. Other perceptions are not confirmed by research, such as a downward effect on [wages](#) or the significance of immigration (relative to population growth generally) in the [house](#) prices boom.

Public policies are designed with the anticipated political consequences in mind. These political consequences will depend on the perceived impacts of policies, which also influence the attitudes of

individuals. For the sake of the design of policies that enhance the wellbeing of society it is therefore very important that public discourse is based on the latest scientific evidence, both domestic and international, regarding the wide-ranging impacts of immigration. The trend of making such information available in a non-technical and open form, such as by [IZA World of Labor](#), is therefore to be applauded.