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Public opinion about immigration policy more related to cultural than economic concerns

Public attitudes toward immigration policy are more influenced by cultural and social concerns than economic ones such as wages and taxes, according to new UCL research.

The research, conducted by David Card, Christian Dustmann and Ian Preston from the UCL Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM) analyses the main factors that drive public opposition to immigration. It is published this week in the *Journal of the European Economic Association*.

The findings show that concerns about economic effects play only a minor role in explaining public opposition to immigration. Concerns about culture and social homogeneity are 2-5 times as important in explaining variation in individual attitudes toward immigration policy as concerns over wages and taxes.

The researchers also found that most of the difference in opinion between more and less educated respondents and between older and younger people is attributable to higher concerns about cultural rather than economic effects among people with lower education and older people.

The research was based on modelling information from a series of questions in the European Social Survey (ESS), which gives an ideal basis to assess the relative magnitude of different concerns.

This survey elicited views on the effects of immigration in specific areas– including relative wages, fiscal balances, and social tensions, as well as the importance of shared religious beliefs, language, traditions, customs and the desirability of immigrant inflows.

Professor Dustmann, one of the authors of the study, said: “Given the modest economic impacts of immigration estimated in most studies, the depth of anti-immigrant sentiment seems unlikely to be solely driven by economics. But what is the relative importance of economic and cultural concerns?”

“This research strongly suggests that it is concerns about culture and social homogeneity rather than economic concerns that are mainly accountable for the way individuals form their views about immigration and immigration policies. This implies that focussing only on the economic costs and benefits when explaining immigration policies to citizens may miss out important channels of concern.

“Concerns about culture and social homogeneity are even more important in understanding differences in attitudes toward immigrants from poorer countries, and toward those of a minority ethnicity.”

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Notes for Editors

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3. The paper 'Immigration, Wages, and Compositional Amenities' is published in the February 2012 print issue of the *Journal of the European Economic Association*, and can be accessed at http://www.norface-migration.org/publ_uploads/NDP_13_12.pdf and <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1542-4774.2011.01051.x/pdf>
4. The study was partly funded by the Nuffield Foundation.
5. The study was carried out by David Card, Christian Dustmann and Ian Preston from the UCL Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM), part of UCL Economics.

About CReAM (Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration):

CReAM is an independent and interdisciplinary research centre located in the Department of Economics at University College London. CReAM's research focuses on the causes, patterns and consequences of international population mobility and movements affecting UK, Europe and associated global processes. CReAM aims at informing the public debate on migration in the UK and in Europe by providing new insight, helping to steer the current policy debate in a direction that is based on carefully researched evidence without partisan bias. For further information see: <http://www.cream-migration.org/index.php>

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