

# Migration: What we think we want

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**We are far more open towards immigration than some people might have us believe, a new survey shows.**

If there is one issue that has been influencing democratic elections over the past year, it's immigration. It was one of the dominant talking points in the Brexit referendum in the UK, the presidential elections in the US and France, and the general elections in the Netherlands and Germany. On balance, this is understandable.

After all, many OECD countries, large and small, are struggling with how to manage their recent unprecedented high levels of migrants and refugees. OECD countries received about 1.6 million asylum applications a year in both 2015 and 2016, the greatest number since the Second World War. And nearly 75% of these applications were made in an EU country.

Countries have to find a way forward. As well as the humanitarian aspects involved, they must respect long-standing international commitments and obligations to process refugees according to specific rules, such as those agreed under the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention. However, the impact of public disquiet cannot be underestimated, with some claiming that migrants and refugees are receiving more benefits than the native-born do, or are taking their jobs, and crowding their schools, health systems and public housing.

The trouble is, there is plenty of evidence to show these claims are misplaced, as Peter Sutherland, UN Special Envoy on Migration from 2006-2017, has noted. Still, political parties espousing strongly anti-immigrant views have gained ground and though not every election has gone their way, their voices remain prominent in the debate.

But are these voices really representative of how most people feel about migration or are they just the loudest? Knowing more about this can help inform better policymaking.

Dominik Hangartner of the London School of Economics and co-director of the Stanford-Zurich Immigration Policy Lab has looked at this question and shared his findings recently at an OECD New Approaches to Economic Challenges seminar. His project investigated what types of asylum seekers the European public were willing to accept, what kind of socio-cultural, economic and/or political preferences shaped native-born people's attitudes to migrants and refugees and to what extent these attitudes varied across social groups and countries.

To do this, a survey was conducted in 15 countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. People were asked to choose between hypothetical profiles of asylum seekers, with nine randomly varied attributes: age, language skills, previous job, religion, consistency of their story, vulnerability, reason for migration, country of origin and gender. Participants looked at profile pairs and were asked, "Which of the two applicants would you personally prefer to be allowed to stay?"

Among respondents in all education and skill levels and in all countries, the survey found highly consistent attitudes about what kind of migrants and asylum seekers citizens would prefer to welcome. The vast majority (about 80%) were willing to accept the "right" kind of newcomer; only a very small minority of participants wanted no immigration at all.

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But who is this acceptable migrant or asylum seeker? For most respondents, it would be a young skilled man who speaks the local language, and who was able and willing to become economically active in his new home. He would be someone vulnerable and in need, fleeing persecution with a clear and consistent asylum story. Respondents also expressed religious preferences, and placed little emphasis on the country of origin.

However, what kind of migrants and refugees to accept is only part of the challenge. European policymakers are also grappling with where to process asylum seekers and where to resettle those whose claims are successful. The principle of processing seekers in the first country that they enter has been seen as unmanageable by countries and unfair by many citizens.

To address this, Mr Hangartner asked survey participants how, in their opinion, should the number of asylum applications per country be determined, and offered three choices: the status quo (the "Dublin regulation", where allocation is based

on first entry to Europe); the same number of asylum seekers for all EU countries; or, allocation proportional to each country's ability based on their size, population, GDP, unemployment and prior record.

Most participants preferred a proportional system based on each country's capacity, rather than the current policy of first entry point into Europe. For Mr Hangartner, the results show that Europeans care deeply about the fairness of the system chosen, not just the consequences of the policy for them personally or for their countries.

Could such a proportional system really be established? Where would the most skilled workers go, the ones most able to participate in the economy? How would they be distributed both across and within countries? And as a participant at the event pointed out, can policymakers develop a more compelling case for accepting refugees and asylum seekers when so few fully correspond with the survey's preferred profile?

There are grounds for optimism, though. Notwithstanding the religious bias shown in the responses, Mr Hangartner's survey sends a signal to policymakers that the loudest voices in this debate may not represent all citizens, that migration is in fact welcome and that perhaps consensus can be built. In the context of upcoming revisions to the EU's Dublin Regulation and of the nearly 1 million asylum applications currently pending in the EU, this matters more than ever. *Kate Lancaster*

The survey reported in this article is an independent survey, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the OECD, or its member or partner countries.

## References and links

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OECD work on the role of local authorities in migrant integration, visit <http://www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/migrantintegrationincities.htm>

OECD “Strength through Diversity” project, visit <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/strength-through-diversity.htm>

OECD New Approaches to Economic Challenges, <http://www.oecd.org/naec/>

The Stanford-Zurich Immigration Policy Lab, <http://www.immigrationlab.org/>

The EU Dublin Regulation: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/examination-ofapplicants\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/examination-ofapplicants_en)