Attitudes towards migrants in essential jobs: does occupation matter?

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Theories explaining public attitudes towards migration (I)

2 main research traditions:

- ***Economic drivers: labour market competition and fiscal burden***
  - Natives become more hostile against migrants when competition for jobs increase (Meuleman et al., 2009)
  - When there is substitutability between migrant and native workers, native workers are expected to fear migrant workers with the same skills and competing for the same jobs
  - Most researchers find that anti-immigrant sentiment *not only* occurs at similar levels of skill (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007, 2010)
  - But others (Pardos-Prado & Xena, 2019) find that workers with low transferable skills and when their exit options in the labour market are scarce, they will have more negative attitudes towards migrants
  - Fiscal burden hypothesis: higher-income natives should be more opposed to low-skilled immigrants—and more supportive of high-skilled immigrants—than their poorer native-born counterparts (Hanson et al., 2007)

Theories explaining public attitudes towards migration (II)

- ***Social-psychological (social identity) drivers***
  - Attitudes are influenced by symbolic interests such as values and personal identifications with a group (e.g., Davidov et al. 2008, Sides & Citrin 2007).
  - Perceived value threat: fears that immigrants could alter the prevailing way of life or the foundation of national identity reflect a sense of group positioning (Blumer 1958, Bobo 1999) and a desire to preserve the symbolic boundaries between groups (Bail 2008).
  - Visible minorities tend to be more discriminated
  - Levels of educations are associated to more or less favourable attitudes (highly educated report more cosmopolitan attitudes than lower educated respondents, though this could also be partially driven by social-desirability bias, which affects more the highly educated)

Tracking public attitudes towards migrants in 2021

- This project relies on previous research on how public attitudes towards migrants vary depending on migrants' origin/ethnicity and occupational profile

- We know from previous research that natives hold more favourable attitudes towards migrants coming to work in high- rather than low-skilled jobs (**occupation skills dimension)**

- However, the pandemic has made some occupations more visible and valued, regardless of the skills **(essentialness dimension)**

- The pandemic has motivated changes in political and media discussions about migrant workers, especially towards those in key occupations that are now considered fundamental to the country's response to the pandemic, e.g. doctors, nurses, teachers, food industry jobs, care workers, etc.

Do attitudes towards migrants vary according the skills and perceived essentialness of their occupation?

Method:

- Three conjoint survey experiments fielded in 3 waves (January, March and June 2021) with a representative sample of the UK population (4,951 respondents in the first wave)

- Conjoint survey experiments (or factorial surveys, vignette studies) allow researchers to non-parametrically identify and estimate the causal effects of many treatment components simultaneously.

- Respondents choose from or rate hypothetical profiles that combine multiple attributes, enabling researchers to estimate the relative influence of each attribute value on the resulting choice or rating.

Attribute 1: nationality

Migrant profiles shown to respondents can be of 10 different nationalities

Rationale: to explore possible interactions between migrants' occupation and nationality

EU nationalities	Non-EU nationalities
Germany Italy Poland Romania	Australia China India Jamaica Nigeria Pakistan

Attribute 2: occupation

Migrant profiles shown to respondents can be working in 12 different occupations

	LOW or MEDIUM-LOW SKILLED Not eligible for Tier 2 visa	HIGH or MEDIUM-HIGH SKILLED Eligible for Tier 2 visa
ESSENTIAL (+ 40% of workers are considered key workers)	CARE WORKER in a home for the elderly LORRY DRIVER for a supermarket chain MEATPACKER in a factory	HOSPITAL DOCTOR for the NHS SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER LAB TECHNICIAN in a pharmaceutical company
NON-ESSENTIAL (fewer than 20% of workers are considered key workers)	ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT in an accounting business WAITER/WAITRESS in a restaurant WAREHOUSE WORKER for a clothing retailer	IT SPECIALIST in an insurance company SALES DIRECTOR in a homeware retailer ENGINEER in a construction company

Online survey

Respondents are presented with pairs of hypothetical migrants in an online survey

Here are the profiles of two people who could apply to come to live in the UK.

	Person One	Person Two
Nationality	India	Australia
Occupation	Sales director for a homeware retailer	Hospital doctor for the NHS

Attitudes questions

Admission questions:

- Q1. If you had to choose, which of these two people would you personally give priority to enter the UK? (person 1 or person 2)

- Q2. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means that the UK **absolutely should not** admit the person and 7 means that the UK **absolutely should** admit the person, how would you rate each person?

Impact on the economy questions:

- Q3. If you had to choose, which of these two people do you think would be better for the UK's economy?

- Q4. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means **very negative** and 7 means **very positive**, how would you rate the impact each person on the UK's economy?

Access to benefits/public services questions:

Q5. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means **absolutely should not** and 7 means **absolutely should**, to what extent do you think they should be able to access the following benefits if they need them

      Universal Credit
      Housing assistance
      Primary care

Effect of job skills on preference for admission and on perceived effect on the economy

- The probability of admission of high-skilled migrants is 24% higher than for low-skilled migrants

- Same effects for both questions

Preference for migrants coming to work in high-skilled jobs
Ref. migrants coming to low/medium-low skilled jobs
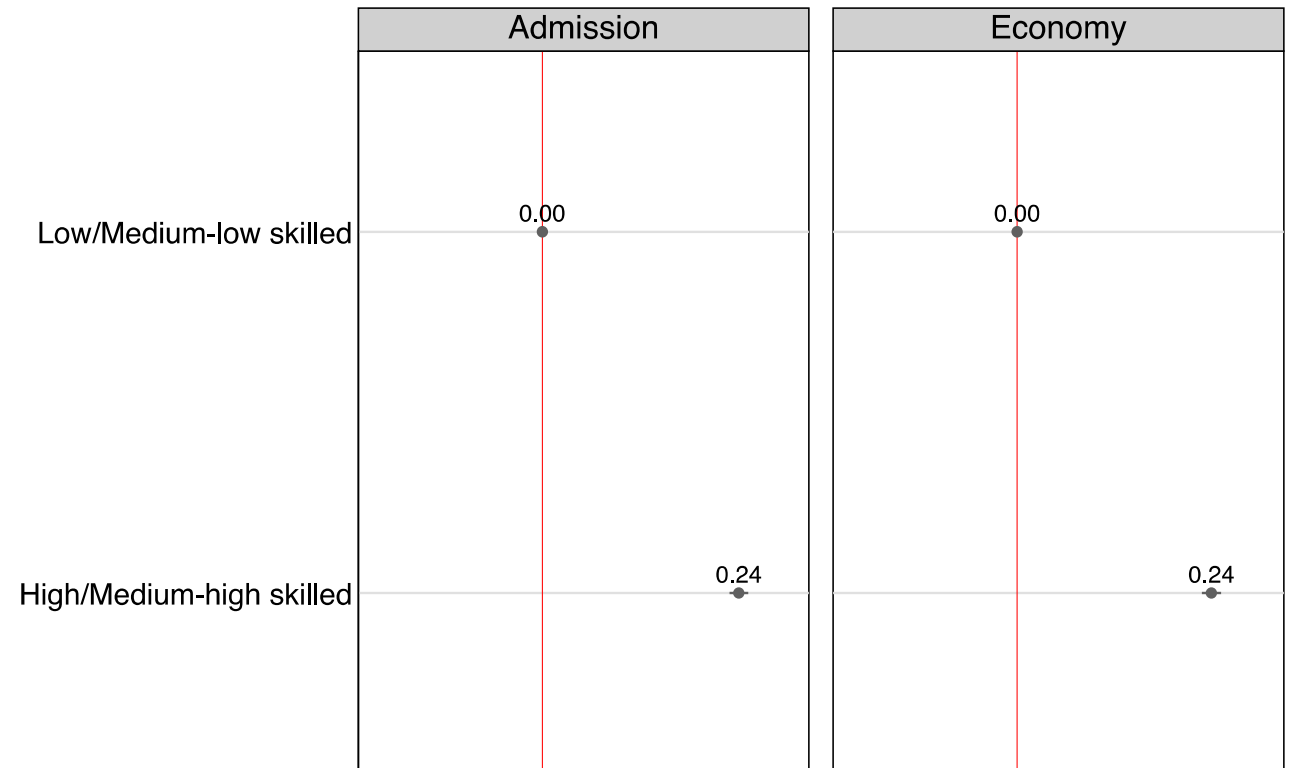
	Admission	Economy
Low/Medium-low skilled	0.00	0.00
High/Medium-high skilled	0.24	0.24

N= 4,951 respondents, 3 trials per respondent
Linear probability models with clustered and robust SE

Compared to German migrants (baseline group):

Effect of nationality on preference for admission

Preferences are most negative towards Chinese migrants, followed by Pakistani, Romanian, Nigerian and Indian migrants

Jamaican and Italian migrants are not evaluated differently than German migrants in terms of preferences for admission.
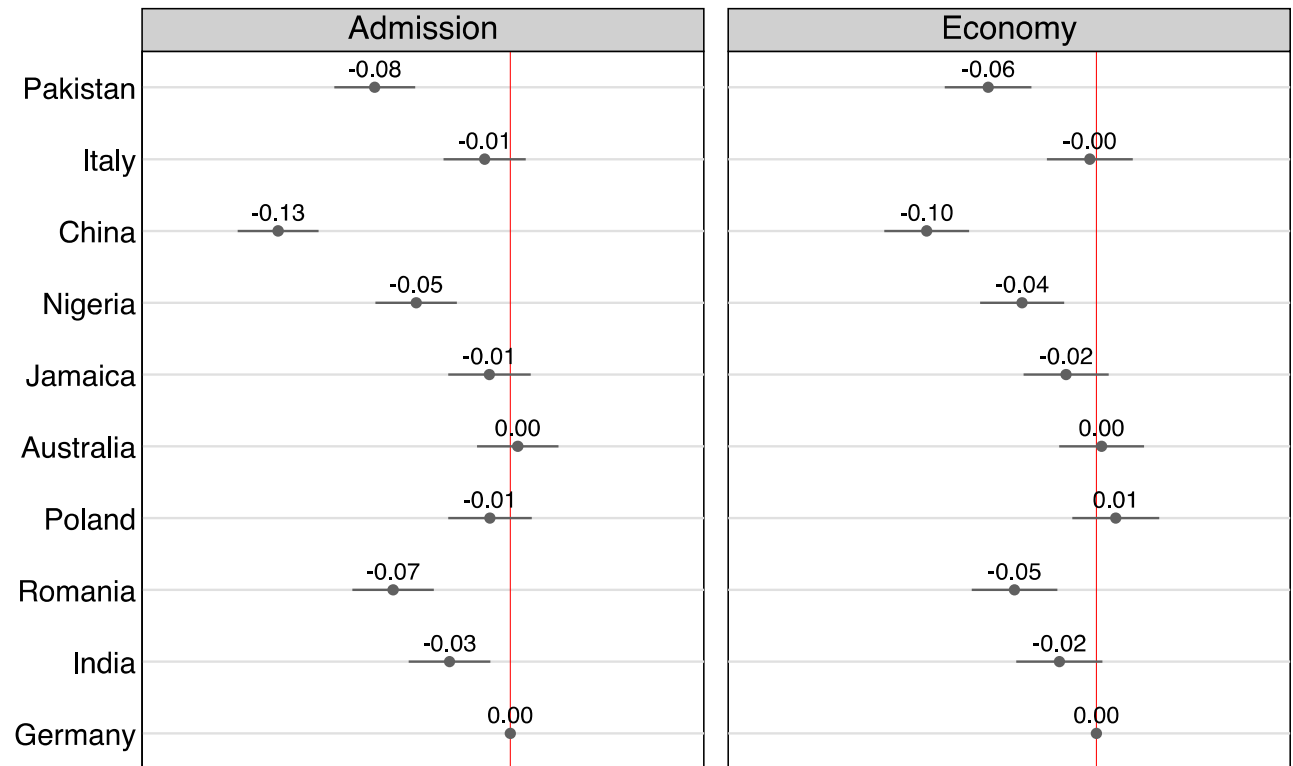
Effect of nationality on expected benefits on the economy

Similar pattern, except for Indian migrants

Jamaican, Italian and Indian migrants are not evaluated differently than German migrants in terms of their expected benefit on the economy

Preference for migrants from different countries of origin
Ref. migrants from Germany

N= 4,951 respondents, 3 trials per respondent
Linear probability models with clustered and robust SE

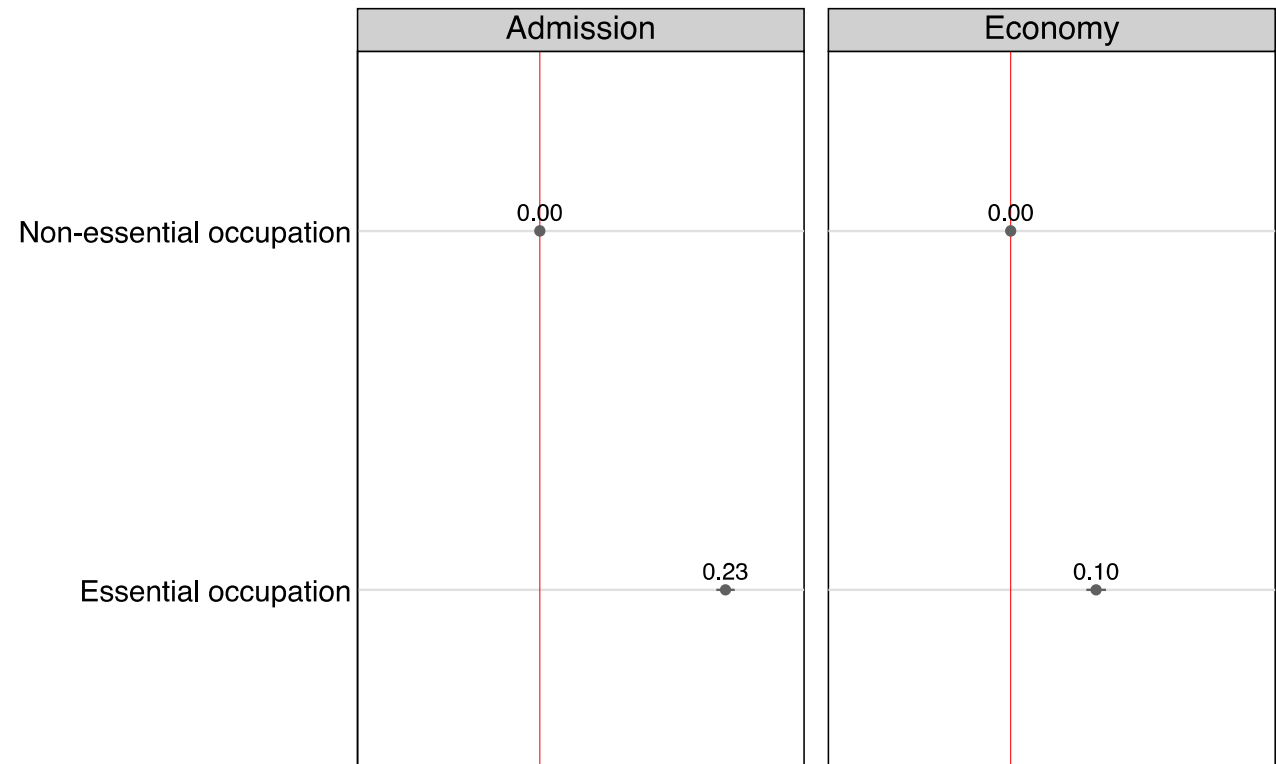## Effect of job essentialness on preference for admission

Migrants working on essential occupations are on average 24% more likely to be supported for admission than those in non-essential jobs

Effect of job essentialness on expected benefits on the economy

Surprisingly, the premium associated to coming to work in an essential occupation is smaller (10%)

Preference for migrants coming to work in essential jobs
Ref. migrants coming to non-essential jobs

Admission	Economy

Non-essential occupation — 0.00 — 0.00

Essential occupation — 0.23 — 0.10

N= 4,951 respondents, 3 trials per respondent
Linear probability models with clustered and robust SE

The essentialness premium varies depending on occupation skills

On preference for admission

The premium associated to working in an essential occupation is larger for migrants in high-skilled jobs than those in low-skilled jobs

On expected benefits on the economy

Opposite pattern: the premium associated to working in an essential occupation is larger for migrants in low-skilled jobs

Effect of essentialsness across job skills

Ref. migrants coming to essential & high-skilled jobs
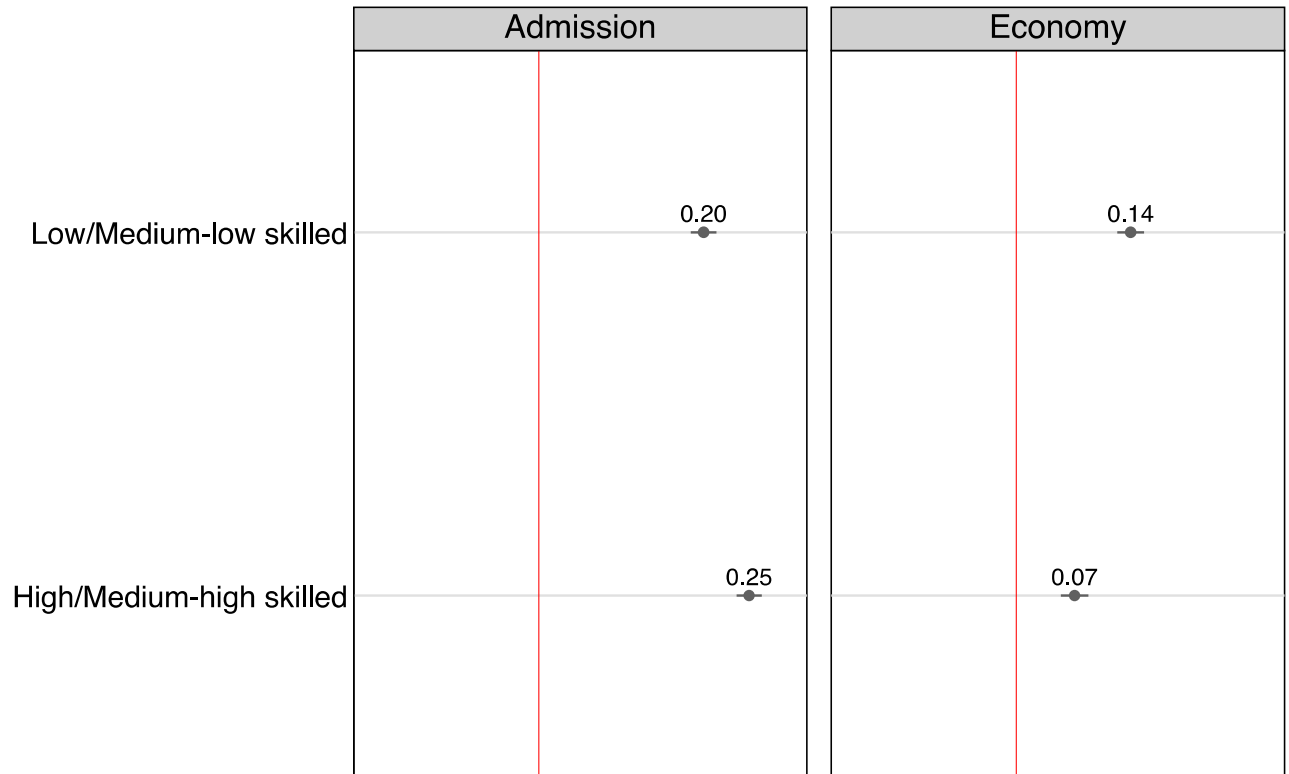
Admission	Economy
Low/Medium-low skilled — 0.20	0.14
High/Medium-high skilled — 0.25	0.07

N= 4,951 respondents, 3 trials per respondent
Linear probability models with clustered and robust SE

Discussion

- Previous literature only considered job skills as a relevant dimension conditioning attitudes, finding that migrants in low-skilled jobs are generally evaluated more negatively than migrants in high-skilled jobs

- However, the perceived essentialness of an occupation also conditions public attitudes. Will this effect disappear over time?

- We also find that respondents report most negative attitudes towards Chinese migrants. This is new: the covid19 pandemic has likely increased prejudice towards this group in all Western countries