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Influencing Migration Policy and Public Debate through Targeted Communications

LESSONS FOR RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS
AS TO WHAT, WHO, HOW, AND WHEN TO ENGAGE

 Helen Dempster

Abstract

Migration research is taking place within a rapidly evolving, contested, and polarized space. It is difficult for researchers who are seeking to influence policymaking on migration to communicate their research, and see their findings translated into action. Arguably, one reason for this lack of translation is that many researchers ignore the outsized role that the public has within migration policymaking. This paper focuses on how researchers can best communicate their findings to policymakers and the public by interrogating what they produce (translating long and complex reports into nuanced narratives, combining facts and emotion-based arguments); who they target (tailoring findings to those in the 'conflicted' middle); how they disseminate it (using mediums that appeal to a researchers' target audience); and when they disseminate it (engaging with the policy adoption process throughout).

Influencing Migration Policy and Public Debate through Targeted Communications: Lessons for Researchers and Practitioners as to What, Who, How, and When to Engage

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Introduction

Governments use the term ‘evidence-based policymaking’ to signal a seemingly positive shift from ideologically driven policies to those based on rigorous research (Sutcliffe and Court, 2005).

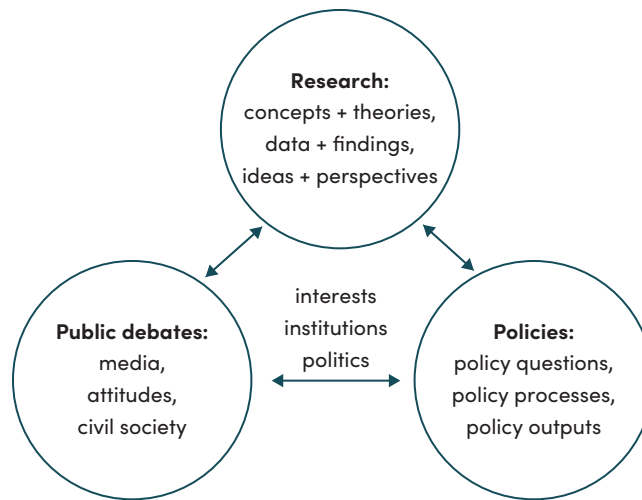
This shift, theoretically, opens the door to researchers and practitioners seeking to use their findings to shift migration policy and public debates. It is also an implicit signal to the public that having policies be based on objectivity is inherently a good thing, and that people should put their faith and trust in expert opinion.

It is arguable whether such evidence-based policymaking ever existed but, if it did, it is currently in peril (Oliver et al., 2014; Liverani et al., 2013). Recent years have seen a surge in populist sentiment and a reversion towards ideologically driven policymaking. While experts are broadly still trusted by the public over other groups of people such as politicians and journalists, they do not command majority support (Edelman, 2020). Some evidence suggests that large sections of the public feel facts and evidence should be less relevant than common sense in policymaking (Le Conte, 2020).

Such a dynamic affects all areas of policymaking, but perhaps migration policy most of all. In many cases, immigration, asylum, and integration policies are far from reflecting the academic consensus. Migration is a highly emotive and value-driven subject, one that overlaps with a range of other complex policy issues. As a result, it is difficult (and increasingly so) for migration researchers and practitioners to communicate their research to policymakers and see their findings translated into action.

Arguably, one reason for this lack of translation is that many researchers ignore the outsized role that the public has within migration policymaking. Even sympathetic policymakers are unlikely to enact evidence-based policies if the majority of their public disagrees with the evidence. This relationship, between research, public debates, and public policy, is complex and interconnected (Figure 1). As Ruhs et al. (2019) mention, researchers do play a role; they “can influence public debate and policymaking by producing research, and/or by providing ‘expert’ commentary in public debates (e.g. through commenting on migration issues in the media) and ‘expert advice’ to policy-making processes (e.g. as short-term advisors or longer-term ‘seconded experts’).” But the public and policymakers also influence each other, and researchers, alike.

FIGURE 1. There is a dynamic relationship between research, public debate, and policies



Source: Ruhs et al., 2019.

This chapter is primarily aimed at researchers who are seeking to influence policymaking on migration, though many of the lessons should resonate with practitioners working within this dynamic. It explores why such actors need to interrogate *what*, *how*, *who*, and *when* they communicate their research to policymakers and the public, essential questions to answer if this research is to achieve real policy impact.

Research

Migration research is being produced at an astonishing rate and by an ever-increasing list of players (Pisarevskaya et al., 2019). That, coupled with a fast-paced media and policy landscape, makes it difficult for individual pieces of research to penetrate and influence migration policymaking. And yet, researchers do not make it easy for themselves, creating long reports full of nuance and abstract concepts which can be impenetrable for both policymakers and the public. Academic researchers should be aware of the context in which their research is taking place and the audiences they are seeking to influence, tailoring their research accordingly.

The context in which migration research is taking place

While the issues at the heart of migration policymaking have, arguably, remained unchanged, the content within which this policymaking is taking place has rapidly changed. Recent decades have seen a rapid expansion in the amount of information that is available, with the rise of social media and internet-based news fuelling competition for audience share and pushing traditional outlets to become more sensationalist (Becker et al., 2019). This has contributed to increasing polarization within many societies, making it more difficult to come to a consensus on different policy issues such as migration.

Many countries, particularly traditional migrant destination countries, have also seen a rise in populism and populist parties. These parties often reject complex, technical, arguments in favour of simple claims and spontaneous action. In fact, Boswell (2019) argues that this criticism of evidence and experts is a core part of their identity. Instead of engaging with the minutiae of policymaking, these parties promise immediate fulfilment—a “democratic” rather than a “technocratic” settlement. Such views are shared by the public. Edelman’s (2020) Trust Barometer shows that 66 percent of people see academic experts as very or extremely credible,¹ yet their advice is seen as elitist and un-transparent (Hashemi and Muller, 2018).

It is into this context that researchers are expected to influence policymaking and public debate. Whether motivated by an intrinsic desire to see their work relate to the wider world or whether “prodded by shifting financial and professional incentives,” researchers are increasingly called to prove the policy relevance and influence of their work (Allen et al., 2019). In the migration space, this desire for impact has boomed since the ‘migration crisis’ of 2015 (Stierl, 2020). Researchers in this space often present themselves as value-neutral and unbiased, yet by engaging with ‘inherently political’ policymaking, such objectivity can rarely be obtained (Sutcliffe and Court, 2005).² Recently, this positioning has been challenged by critics who believe researchers have accepted and reinforced the way migration issues have been positioned by governments and international organizations as a way of ensuring their research influences these issues (Stierl, 2020).

There is also steep competition for this policy space. University departments are pushing their academics to engage with policymakers and the public (Smith et al., 2020). Advocacy organizations are developing research units to help inform their programming and lend legitimacy to their operations. Think tanks, traditionally occupying this middle space, are being squeezed. To inform their own policies, government departments are setting up their own research functions or engaging consultants. And the amount of migration research commissioned by international bodies such as the European Commission (EC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has increased markedly (Vitorino, 2021; Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019).

Despite this increase, the vast majority of this scholarship still originates from high-income countries (Dražanová and Gonnot, 2022). For example, between 2015 and 2018, the journal *Migration Studies* received 588 manuscripts from 75 countries; 80 percent of these submissions were from just 20 countries, of which 16 can be classified as high-income (Vargas-Silva, 2019). And within these countries, the majority of academics are male and white (Adams, 2020). The English language

1 By contrast, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sit at 44 percent, journalists at 36 percent, and government officials at 33 percent.

2 In addition, there may be good reasons why policymakers may not want to engage with policymakers or the political process, especially on ethical or moral grounds. This chapter assumes that this desire exists, but acknowledges this may not be the case in all circumstances.

dominates, in both migration journals and research dissemination events, and meaningful partnerships with academics in low- and middle-income countries are few and far between. This bias is not surprising: research funding, for example, is concentrated in the Global North (McAuliffe et al., 2019). But such dynamics reinforce the ‘colonization’ of migration research and downplay the experiences of both migrant countries of origin and the migrants themselves (Vanyoro et al., 2019). It also means researchers tend to focus on influencing the policies of high-income countries, rather than interrogating and amplifying the work being done to progress migration policy in low- and middle-income countries.

How to communicate research

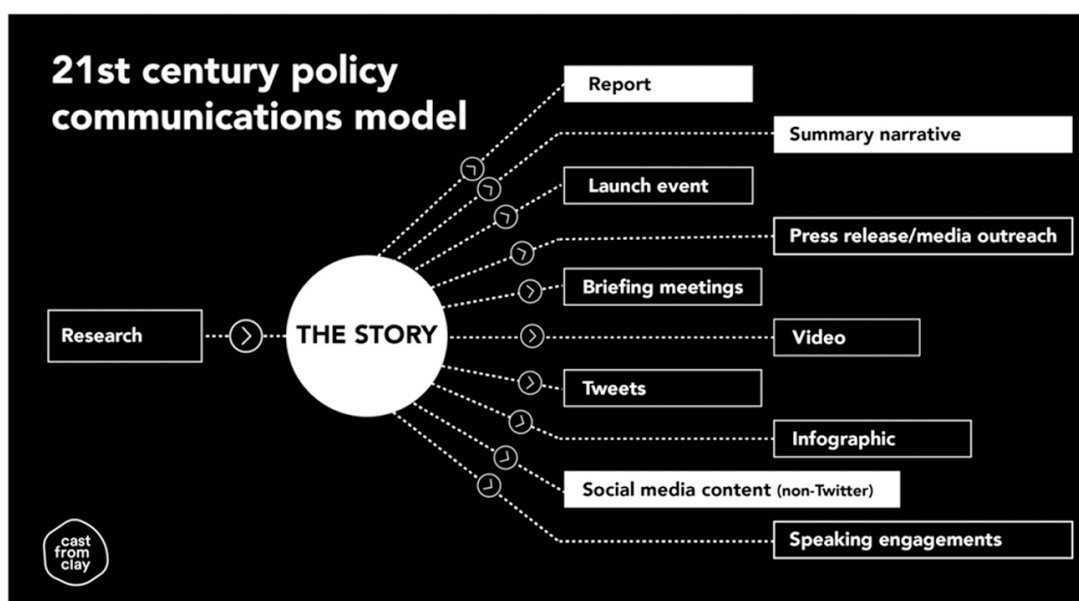
The available evidence base on migration is characterized by considerable gaps and mixed results. Many of the data sources used to measure migration have significant limitations based on what data is being collected and how, hampering the ability of researchers to draw inferences that could be useful for migration policymaking. For example, the Migration Observatory (2011) has remarked that, in the United Kingdom, policymakers do not know the official numbers and characteristics of migrants with different types of immigration status, and therefore cannot measure economic and social outcomes. In addition, many questions fundamental to migration policy, such as the deterrence effect of opening new legal migration pathways, remain unanswered. There are few policy experiments which researchers can analyse and doing so may be expensive, logistically difficult, and politically charged. It can therefore be difficult for policymakers to find the information they need, when they need it, in an accessible and useful format.

Even when researchers feel they have evidence-based answers to pressing policy questions, they often (perhaps unwittingly) put that research out of reach. Most researchers produce incredibly long and complicated reports, which they put at the centre of their communications campaign (Muller, 2018).³ There are two issues with this approach. Firstly, policymakers and the public are unlikely to read and digest such long reports; the World Bank found that 31 percent of its policy reports had never been downloaded (Doemeland and Trevino, 2014). Secondly, these reports often espouse evidence and facts that fail to engage with contradictory positions, at the expense of producing arguments and theories, despite it being the latter that many policymakers and members of the public want (Haselswerdt and Rigby, 2021). As Avey and Desch (2014) state: “despite their jaundiced view of cutting-edge tools and rarefied theory, the thing policymakers most want from scholars are frameworks for making sense of the world they have to operate in.”

3 A scan of the latest reports from the top 20 think tanks in the United Kingdom and United States found that the reports were 42.5 pages long on average.

Therefore, some commentators have suggested we need a new policy communications model. Here, the work of the United Kingdom-based research communications agency Cast from Clay is particularly relevant. Their directors bring experience from research and policy communications, as well as private sector-based advertising and marketing. As a result, their model attempts to apply private sector thinking to public sector research communications (Figure 2). It puts the ‘story’ at the heart of the communications campaign, by translating research findings into a range of products all using a similar narrative. This narrative should set out causal relationships between actions and events, be relatively coherent, consistent with available information, comprehensive, and confirm to quite strict criteria of scientific validity (Boswell et al., 2011).

FIGURE 2. Researchers and practitioners should be employing a new policy communications model



Source: Muller (2018).

This narrative should therefore bring together both facts and emotion-based arguments. The most compelling narratives about migration-related issues, argues Boswell (2011), “are not based on technocratic arguments about economic costs, skills shortages, or demographic trends. Instead, they are informed by more visceral concerns about identity, belonging, fairness, and entitlement.” They turn emotionally neutral language into evocative language through what are often simple turns of phrase. In doing so, researchers and practitioners should recognize the ways that migration is commonly discussed, while subtly trying to shift the language that is used (Box 1) (Brooks Masters, 2020).

BOX 1. How to talk about diversity: Welcoming America

Welcoming America is a non-profit focused on building a movement of inclusive communities. They have published several toolkits aimed at practitioners having difficult conversations with people about race, belonging, and immigration. For example, they hypothesize the following criticism: “We can barely take care of the people we have. There are already too many Americans struggling to find jobs. We have too many problems we can’t solve as it is without bringing more people into this community.”

In responding, it can be tempting to fall back on facts. Immigrants are highly skilled, educated, and entrepreneurial. They launch new companies at twice the rate of native-born Americans, *creating* jobs for locals. In this way, immigration actually has a small, but positive, effect on the labour market outcomes of native-born workers. Yet such narratives can appear abstract to people who feel they have lost their job to an immigrant or feel their family member has missed out on a school place or medical treatment due to new inflows of people.

Instead, Welcoming America aims to make immigration more relatable by emphasizing both history and contributions. Part of their proposed answer is as follows:

“Think about our grandparents and great grandparents—many who moved here from someplace else like the newcomers today. A hundred years ago, they helped build the Greatest Generation. The New Americans coming today can help do the same thing if we give them an opportunity. Whether it’s the brilliant innovator producing new technologies, the small business owner creating jobs in our neighborhood, or the janitor cleaning our schools, does it matter whether they were born in India or Mexico, as long as they are contributing to making America and our community stronger?”

Sources: Welcoming America, 2020; Fwd.us, 2020; and Costa et al., 2014.

In disseminating these narratives, researchers and practitioners should be clear about *who* they are trying to reach and *how* they plan to reach them (Dempster, 2019). The following sections will delve into the two primary audiences for researchers seeking policy impact: the public and policymakers.

Public debates

In recent years, interest in public attitudes towards immigrants and immigration has grown immensely. Public and private polling has increased at local, national, regional, and international levels, albeit with a strong bias towards the Global North. Academics in a range of disciplines have interrogated this data, attempting to draw conclusions as to the drivers of these attitudes. And practitioners have attempted to sway these attitudes, sensing their clear importance to policy development. Even more recently, some have explored whether COVID-19 (and the increased

attention on migrant ‘key workers’) will permanently alter attitudes.⁴ Researchers and practitioners interested in shifting public attitudes towards migration need to understand what these attitudes are, how they are formed, and the best strategies to shift these attitudes through targeted communications and engagement.

What people think about immigrants and immigration

To understand what people think about immigrants and immigration, it is necessary to turn to the various global, regional, and national polls that exist (Dempster et al., 2020). The questions asked in these polls fall mainly within three themes: *numbers* (focusing quantitatively on the number of immigrants currently in a particular society or the number of immigrants that should be allowed in future); *impacts* (focusing on the impact of existing immigrants on host community economies, societies, and culture); and *support* (focusing on gauging intrinsic support, usually by gauging interest in living next to, working with, or marrying an immigrant).

The answers to these polls elicit interesting, yet contradictory findings. Around the world, few want more immigration, yet there are huge variations within and between countries (Connor and Krogstad, 2018). Support for immigration tends to have an inverse relationship with the number of immigrants already in that country, although most people tend to overexaggerate this number (Herda, 2013). There appears to be a disconnect in the way people view the economic impacts of immigrants, depending on the language being used and the frame that it conjures in the respondent. Most people in countries of destination feel immigrants have made the economy stronger (a national-level frame) but still feel that immigrants take jobs away from locals (a local-level frame). These positions are not necessarily contradictory but show the difficulty of communicating the benefits to such groups (Duffy, 2019). There is widespread agreement that immigrants put pressure on social services, a view that may have increased in some countries during COVID-19 (Neidhardt and Butcher, 2020).

We know very little about what people in low- and middle-income countries think about immigrants and refugees, even though nearly half of all migration takes place between these countries and they host 85 percent of the world’s refugees (Dražanová, 2020; Kitimbo, 2019; UNHCR, 2020). For example, a recent analysis of 100 academic papers on public attitudes towards immigration found that 91 percent covered the United States and Europe, and much of the remainder covered countries like Australia and Canada (Thisted Dinesen and Hjorth, 2018). Some recent analysis has started to address this point. For example, Gordon (2022) explores support for free movement in Africa using data from Afrobarometer, and Allen et al. (2022) looks at new data on support for Venezuelan forced migrants in Colombia. Yet a data gap persists, making it difficult for policymakers

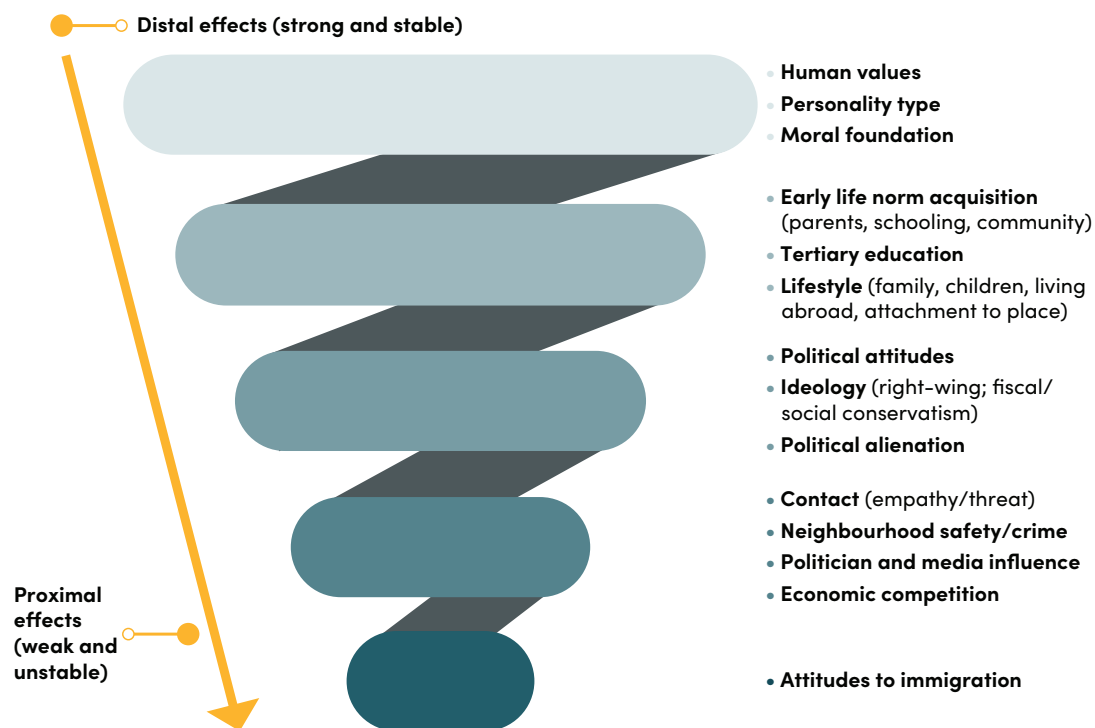
4 This research has found that respondents in the United Kingdom were more likely to prefer immigrants working in essential occupations during COVID-19. See Allen (2022) and Fernández-Reino et al. (2020).

in low- and middle-income countries to form evidence-based policies, and for researchers and civil society to hold them accountable to the public (Leach and Hargrave, 2020).

How attitudes are formed

There are numerous literature reviews that aim to explore the different factors contributing to someone’s attitudes towards immigration and immigrants. These literature reviews tend to distinguish between internal drivers (demographics, values, personality type, and approach to threats) and external drivers (media coverage, political rhetoric, and engagement with immigrants themselves) (Ceobani and Escandell, 2020; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Thisted Dinesen and Hjorth, 2018; and Dražanová, 2020). Dennison and Dražanová (2018) show that external drivers have a limited effect on shifting someone’s attitudes towards immigration, as such attitudes are relatively set from a young age by internal drivers (Figure 3). As a result, attitudes to immigration have been relatively stable over time and robust to economic and political shocks (Kustov et al., 2021). Research has found that attitudes in many countries of destination are slowly (but steadily) becoming more positive over time, perhaps as a result of generational shifts, issue salience, and the genuine impact of pro-immigration campaigns (Dennison and Geddes, 2020). Yet, as a result of these internal drivers, even well-targeted campaigns are unlikely to substantially shift a person’s attitudes in the short- to medium-term.

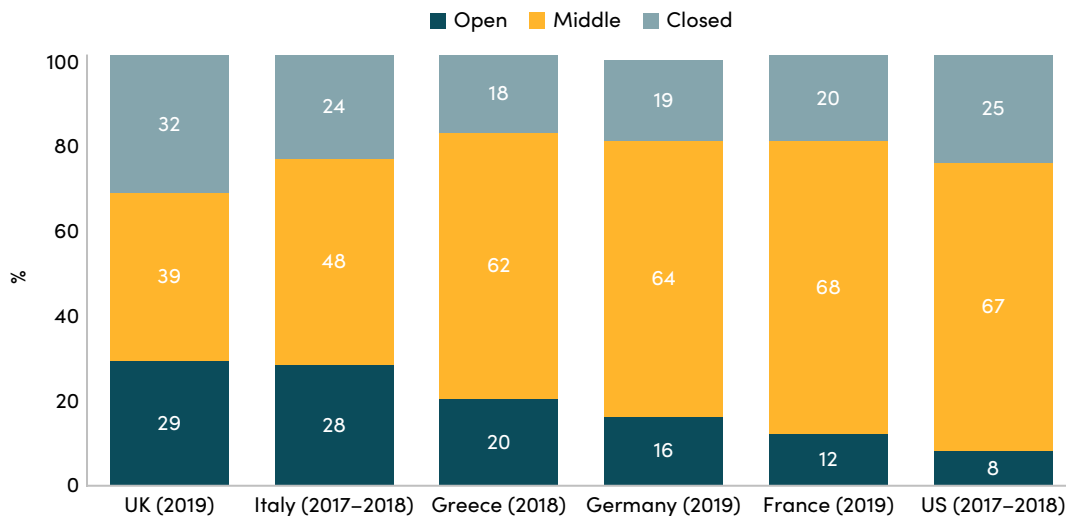
FIGURE 3. Attitudes to immigration are relatively fixed by an early age



Source: Dennison and Dražanová (2018).

A thorough analysis of these drivers is beyond the scope of this chapter.⁵ However, a general shift away from using individual demographics as predictors to looking at values and commonalities across different types of people has taken place in recent decades (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). Those in the private sector have long used values to segment their markets, thereby providing them with more information as to how they can best sell their products (Wind, 1978). Such ‘attitudinal segmentation’ for more social purposes has only recently been conducted. Over the last five years, the NGOs More in Common and Purpose have created six country profiles—in the United Kingdom, Italy, Greece, Germany, France, and the United States (Figure 4)—to group people by the values they hold and their views towards a range of social issues including identity, race, trust, democracy, and immigration (Dempster et al., 2020). Across all six countries, most people fall within a ‘conflicted,’ ‘anxious,’ or ‘exhausted’ middle.⁶ This group is less ideologically driven in their opinions and, when it comes to immigration, can see both the positive and negative impacts (Katwala et al., 2014).

FIGURE 4. Attitudinal segmentation shows most people fall within a ‘conflicted’ middle



Note: Data for Germany totals 99 percent due to rounding.

Source: Dempster et al., 2020.

5 See IOM, 2015.

6 There are a number of different terms that have been used to describe the majority of the population who are neither pro-, nor anti-, immigration. Each of these different terms have their drawbacks, especially when we’re discussing an issue where communications is key. Terms such as ‘anxious,’ ‘exhausted,’ and ‘conflicted’ are pejorative—assuming that group feels this way. As a result, some groups such as British Future prefer to use the term ‘balancers’ to reflect their important role in this debate. In this chapter, I refer to this group as the ‘conflicted’ middle, as their responses to questions on immigration do reflect this reality. But more work could, and should, be done to standardise the terms the sector uses to refer to this group. See Rutter and Carter, 2020.

There are drawbacks to attitudinal segmentation. Critics have pointed out substantial methodological issues, a tendency towards testing explanatory factors in isolation, and a bias towards high-income countries (Dennison and Dražanová, 2018). Social desirability bias has been proven to play a role; a person could hold more negative attitudes towards immigration but be unwilling to express them (Carmines and Nassar, 2021). Such analysis may also not go far enough so as to be helpful to researchers and practitioners. For example, while attitudinal segmentation identifies the values held by the ‘conflicted’ middle in these countries, it does not attempt to craft narratives that would appeal to these values.

Yet combining attitudinal segmentation with what we know about underlying values tells us two things. Firstly, the deep-rooted nature of values means people’s attitudes towards immigration are unlikely to be substantially swayed by political rhetoric, media coverage, and targeted communications campaigns. Such interventions may shift some perceptions but are unlikely to turn someone from anti- to pro-immigration. Secondly, even shifting some perceptions will require researchers and practitioners to understand the values of the groups they are trying to communicate to (often, the ‘conflicted’ middle) and tailor their narratives accordingly (Banulescu-Bogdan et al., 2021).

Speaking to the ‘conflicted’ middle

Why is this important? There are a wide variety of factors that determine policy making on migration, including economic growth, the structure of the welfare system, and party ideology. But in many western democracies it can be assumed that the view of constituents is one factor that feeds into this decision making. The attitudinal segmentation described above shows that the majority of the people in these countries are neither pro- nor anti-migration, but lie somewhere in the middle. Widening the net of people who support immigration should provide these policymakers with a larger consensus from which to build.

Yet research has found that campaigns tend to ignore this group, targeting those who are already pro- or anti-immigration. Dennison (2020) surveyed 106 European and North African campaigns aiming to change attitudes to immigration; 98 were pro-migration and eight were anti-migration. He found that very few of the pro-migration campaigns contained value-based messaging, and those that did appealed to values such as ‘universalism’ and ‘benevolence’ which are values held by those *already pro-migration*. Whereas the anti-migration campaigns all used value-based messaging and appealed to a variety of values. This tends to illustrate that many researchers and practitioners are ‘preaching to the choir’ instead of focusing on those they actually need to shift (see Box 2).

BOX 2. Appealing to the values held by those on the other side: British Future

British Future is an independent, non-partisan, think tank which focuses on integration, immigration, identity, and race in the United Kingdom. Every year, they bring people from different backgrounds together to celebrate Remembrance Sunday, commemorating the contribution of British and Commonwealth soldiers and civilians to the World Wars. Their aim is to move beyond ‘them and us’ to showcase shared contributions.

This approach appears to command majority support; polling found that 78 percent of people felt that recognizing these contributions “would be a positive way to promote understanding of the shared history of today’s multi-ethnic Britain.” It also is in line with research, discussed in more detail below, that shows narratives aiming to shift views on immigration are more likely to work if they are in line with people’s pre-existing values. The groups British Future are attempting to reach with this campaign are traditionalist—patriotic, nostalgic, and aiming to preserve what they feel are the strengths of their society. Such a campaign is carefully designed to appeal to these audiences, rather than people who are already pre-disposed to a multi-ethnic Britain.

Source: British Future, 2019.

To do this, researchers and practitioners should focus on *what* we produce and *how* we communicate it. Researchers should produce digestible findings, packaged into narratives which can be disseminated to the wider public as well as policymakers over long periods of sustained engagement. These narratives could focus on promoting inter-group solidarity, demonstrating how both migrant and non-migrant communities share the same concerns and how immigrants contribute to our communities economically and culturally. Crucially, such demonstrations must include both factual data about these contributions, as well as appeals to the emotions and values of those in the ‘conflicted’ middle (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2018). Solely focused on ‘myth-busting’ through providing facts can have the unintended consequence of reinforcing attitudes (Peter and Koch, 2016). For example, research has shown that providing information about the correct number of immigrants in a society can shift attitudes, but only when coupled with information about the characteristics of the foreign-born population (Blinder and Schaffner, 2019; Grigorieff et al., 2020). To do this, researchers could partner with NGOs to put a ‘human face’ on their data.

Here, the crucial role of the information medium is often ignored. Researchers should work with both traditional and social media, commenting on pressing news stories, achieving coverage of newly published findings, and supporting journalists with facts. In particular, researchers should seek to engage media outlets that do not often cover immigration issues or at least not in an evidence-based way. Researchers should also go beyond the media to engage with messengers within communities

who are trusted by the ‘conflicted’ middle (Neidhardt and Butcher, 2020). These amplifiers, for example, friends, family, faith leaders, and celebrities, enjoy a privileged relationship with the target audience.⁷ It will be easier to convince someone of the value of your evidence if they hear it from one of these messengers.

Policies

For the most part, national governments have control of immigration and asylum policy. The former deals with people moving for study, work, family, and tourism reasons, while the latter deals with people seeking international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention and other frameworks. Both national and local governments have control of integration policy, which helps facilitate migrants’ entrance into their new host society. When researchers talk about influencing migration policy, they are usually referring to the way that these three types of policies are developed and implemented. Influencing these policies requires understanding how they reflect public attitudes and how they are developed, so researchers can engage at the right moment.

Migration policies largely reflect public attitudes

In many countries, there is a profound disconnect between the migration policies that research determines as beneficial and those that are actually in place. For example, evidence suggests that eliminating barriers to labour mobility would contribute 50–150 percent of world gross domestic product (GDP), dwarfing any gains that could be made from eliminating trade and capital flow barriers (Clemens, 2011). Despite this finding, most countries still maintain some immigration restrictions. This could be because of the above discussion on public attitudes to immigration. Policy on migration is not a pure economic conversation; it encompasses value judgements about the type of society we want to live in and the people we want to be part of that society.

And research shows that, by and large, migration policies are in line with what people want. In 2014, Gallup analysed 136 countries and found that in countries with restrictive policies, 61 percent of adults wanted to see immigration levels decrease. In countries with more permissive policies, only 24 percent of people wanted to see immigration decrease (Table 1). Even polls conducted after the 2015 European ‘migration crisis’ show similar alignment (Connor and Krogstad, 2018).

⁷ For example, see the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) project in Greece, engaging youth in the fight against corruption. <https://www.oecd.org/corruption-integrity/case-studies/youth-anti-corruption-campaign-aci.html>

TABLE 1. Attitudes towards immigration largely reflect government policy

	Government Policy on Immigration Levels			
	No Intervention	Lower	Maintain	Raise
Should be increased	15%	11%	23%	23%
Should be kept at present level	20%	22%	23%	20%
Should be decreased	42%	61%	35%	24%
Don't know/refused	24%	7%	19%	35%

Source: Esipova and Ray, 2015.

That being said, people can be broadly in favour of their government's immigration policy, while taking issue with the way that it is implemented. For example, a Quinnipiac University 2019 poll in the United States found that people across the spectrum opposed building a wall at the Mexican border, despite this being part of the government's immigration policy. In addition, as explored above, polling questions such as "do you want immigration levels to increase?" can obscure the dynamics behind this support or dissent. Research has consistently shown more support for specific groups of immigrants, such as students and professionals, than for immigration overall (Blinder and Richards, 2020). Hence, there is a need to dissect this broad support to explore the various elements where there may be more scope to advance policy in an evidence-informed way.

Influencing policymakers

To influence migration policy, researchers need to be aware of the four key dynamics that separate the way they work and what they produce from that of policymakers.

Firstly, researchers don't necessarily aim to solve problems; any conclusions and policy recommendations come with nuance and the need for further analysis. Yet policymakers often want the best policy option simplistically presented to them. Translating complex research to such simple policy options is difficult, especially when the research findings are contradictory to conventional wisdom. For example, evidence has found that emigration rates rise with economic growth (up to a point) (Clemens, 2020). Therefore, investments in improving development in low-income countries are likely, if anything, to increase emigration. Presenting this evidence, without advocating for a reduction in aid, is tricky to do.

Secondly, researchers often fail to acknowledge the multi-disciplinary nature of migration. In most countries, most people are concerned with the impact of immigrants on the availability of jobs and public services. Yet this concern is often a symptom of continued underinvestment by national and local governments, rather than a symptom of immigration. Without acknowledging these interconnected issues, migration researchers risk missing the heart of the issue.

Thirdly, researchers often work on very different timescales from policymakers. They can spend years researching a particular migration dynamic and, if they produce policy recommendations,

these can come too early or too late for the policymaking process (Cairney, 2016). This is compounded by the fact that policy is often created as a reaction to internal and external dynamics, rather than a careful and methodical construction based on the available evidence.

Fourthly, researchers don't often consider how policymakers internalise and act on research findings. It is unlikely that policymakers are going to well receive and act on findings presented to them by researchers at the end of a project. Instead, researchers "need to guide policy makers along a journey that takes them from not having heard of their work to championing it, through the judicious use of content and communications assets" (Muller, 2018). This requires understanding the main stakeholders, identifying their issues of concern, engaging them throughout the research process, and finally, working with them to implement these findings in a way that conforms to the desires of both political actors and the general public. To bolster these efforts, researchers could engage with other mediums that are also trusted by their main stakeholders, such as certain media outlets, to get their messages in the policy domain.

Unsurprisingly, this process takes time. Shifting attitudes is a long-term endeavour that requires sustained and targeted communications over several years. Some researchers are afforded the luxury of being able to focus on such engagement while others are forced (due to funding and shifting priorities) to move onto other projects. Thankfully, it is not the role of one researcher or one organization to change such narratives. The responsibility can, and should, be shared across the whole migration research community. This requires agreeing common narratives throughout the industry and partnering on research and communications more than currently occurs.

When to engage: managing trade-offs

Earlier, I suggested that researchers and practitioners consider *what*, *who*, and *how* when crafting their communication strategies. But there is a final point to consider: *when*. Migration is an issue of strong importance to both policymakers and the public, but the relative strength or 'salience' of that importance waxes and wanes as other issues take priority. When migration is of high salience, policymakers will be under pressure to enact policies that address the 'crisis.' While this could shift policies to be more, or less, evidence-based, it is unlikely there will be time for policymakers to work with researchers to craft something which will have a solid long-term benefit. Of course, if migration is of low salience, it is unlikely there will be any political will or interest in making changes. There is therefore a trade-off here: finding a time when migration is of low salience among the public, but of enough interest *within* government for policymakers to work with researchers on innovative solutions.

This relationship between salience and migration policymaking has been extensively studied. For example, Hatton (2017b) explains that, when an issue is of low salience, "policies can deviate wildly and persistently from voters' preferences." This seems to suggest that policymakers have more space to be innovative in policy design and implementation when the public is looking the other way.

Conversely, when an issue is of high salience, “voters’ preferences will have greater political traction.” For example, high salience has been linked to the rise of anti-immigration political parties and tougher rules on asylum (Dennison and Geddes, 2019; Hatton, 2017a). This suggests that researchers and practitioners seeking to influence migration policy will need to employ different tactics depending on the salience of immigration at the time. If salience is low, direct engagement with policymakers to shift policies may be possible. If salience is high, more direct engagement with the public may be necessary as policymakers are more likely to respond to majority demands.

What drives salience is unclear (Hatton, 2017b). Certainly ‘newsworthy’ tragedies such as drownings in the Mediterranean, child separation at the Southern United States border, and immigration detention conditions in Niger can lead to an increase in media attention on migration issues, and therefore increasing salience (McLaren et al., 2019; Heizler and Israel, 2021). Migration can also be pushed down the list if other issues take priority. For example, in the United Kingdom, the conversation around Brexit led to record high levels of immigration salience between June 2015 and July 2016; this has now easily been overtaken by health and economic concerns due to COVID-19 (Blinder and Richards, 2020).

Conclusion

Researchers and practitioners, whether they are based in academic departments, advocacy organizations, or think tanks, are increasingly seeking to influence policymakers and contribute to ‘evidence-based’ policy. Arguably, migration policy is one of the most difficult fields in which to do this. Migration is a highly emotive and value-driven subject, and one that overlaps with a range of other complex policy issues. The public has strong attitudes on the number and types of immigrants they want to accept and the level of support that should be provided once they arrive. These attitudes are formed at an early age by internal drivers (such as underlying values) and are difficult for external drivers (such as media coverage, political rhetoric, and communications campaigns) to shift (Kustov et al., 2021). Policymakers must understand and respond to these attitudes, meaning migration policy is more aligned with what people think than what the evidence suggests would be most beneficial.

This chapter has attempted to provide researchers and practitioners with an understanding of how to influence migration policy with research findings. It has focused on the best tactics to communicate research to policymakers and the public by interrogating *what*, *who*, *how*, and *when*.

- **What.** The tactics that researchers often use—writing long and complex reports and focusing on ‘myth-busting’—do little to shift attitudes. Instead, researchers should translate their findings into nuanced narratives, combining facts and emotion-based arguments, that appeal to the values held by the people they are trying to convince.

- **Who.** Most researchers target (perhaps unwittingly) people who are already convinced by their findings. Instead, researchers should identify both the policymakers and those segments of the public who could be swayed by well-targeted campaigns (such as those in the 'conflicted' middle) and tailor their findings accordingly.
- **How.** In communicating findings there is a tendency to use familiar mediums, rather than those that appeal to, and are trusted by, researchers' target audience. Instead, researchers should explore alternative mediums and innovative partnerships (such as with faith leaders and social media news websites) to get their message across.
- **When.** Researchers often wait until the end of their research project to hand their findings across to policymakers. Instead, researchers should engage with the policy adoption process, bringing policymakers into the research fold from day one and crafting findings that speak to the issues policymakers have. This process may be easier when immigration is of low salience.

A final note. As previously stated, this is not an individual process. All researchers and practitioners seeking to engage policymakers with research should interrogate where there are opportunities to collaborate and present common narratives, amplify the voices of researchers in the Global South, and move the conversation forward in a more evidence-informed way.

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