

Attitudes Toward Immigration: An Analysis of Changes and Media Effects in Sweden 2014–2016

The years 2014 to 2016 were a dramatic time. The number of asylum seekers rose sharply as a consequence of a growing flow of refugees across the Mediterranean. This large influx was followed by a substantial tightening up of refugee policy, and the inflow to Sweden was radically reduced. In parallel with this, the debate about immigration and integration became increasingly intense, and immigration established itself as one of the most important social issues on Swedish citizens' agendas. Against this background, the authors of this Delmi report explore how Swedes' attitudes toward immigration changed from 2014 to 2016, and also the relationships between media use and attitudes toward immigration. The authors of the report are Jesper Strömbäck, Professor in Journalism and Political Communication, and Nora Theorin, a PhD student in Journalism Media and Communication Studies at the University of Gothenburg.

Background

In autumn 2015, the Swedish Government (Social Democrats and the Green Party) and the four non-socialist Alliance parties presented an agreement on measures to reduce refugee immigration, against the backdrop of a sharp increase in numbers of asylum seekers arriving to Europe and Sweden in the summer and autumn of that year. In conjunction with this, the public debate intensified and issues related to immigration and integration climbed ever higher on media and citizens' agendas. Not enough is known, however, about Swedes' attitudes toward immigration and how they have changed in recent years. One reason for this is that earlier research has focused on refugee immigration, while there is a lack

of studies investigating attitudes toward other forms of immigration. Furthermore, almost all previous Swedish research is based on cross-sectional studies, that is, studies in which different individuals participate on different survey occasions. This limits the scope to investigate attitudinal changes within the same group of people and at the *individual* level. Moreover, there is always some uncertainty about whether changes in the results of cross-sectional studies are affected by different samples participating on different survey occasions. Currently, there is also a lack of Swedish studies exploring the associations between people's use of media and their attitudes toward immigration. This is nonetheless a relevant question to study, as research from other countries shows that media use can influence attitudes toward immigration.

Aim and questions

The aim of this report is to study Swedes' attitudes toward immigration over the period 2014–2016, and possible associations between people's media use and their immigration attitudes. More specifically, the report seeks to answer five questions: (1) What attitudes do Swedes have toward different forms of immigration? (2) What attitudes do Swedes have toward immigration from different parts of the world? (3) What effects is immigration perceived to have on Sweden? (4) What is the relationship between media use and attitudes toward immigration? (5) How have the attitudes toward immigration changed over time?

Method and data

The present study builds on data from the panel survey *Demokratipanelen 2014–2016* (Democracy Panel 2014–2016). It is a panel survey based on a nationally representative sample drawn from the market research company Novus's 'Sweden Panel', stratified by gender, age group and county. Questionnaires were sent out in the November of each of the three survey years. In all, 2,254 respondents participated on all three occasions. Basing the analyses on these respondents enabled changes to be studied within the same group of people and at the individual level.

Views of different forms of immigration to Sweden, 2014–2016 (percent)

People coming to Sweden...	Very negative	Quite negative	Neither positive nor negative	Quite positive	Very positive	Balance measure
... to escape war and oppression						
– 2014	3	9	22	30	36	+54
– 2015	4	9	24	30	34	+51
– 2016	4	9	25	30	33	+50
...to work						
– 2014	2	5	18	34	42	+69
– 2015	2	4	17	35	42	+71
– 2016	1	4	18	36	41	+72
...to study						
– 2014	1	2	17	37	43	+77
– 2015	1	3	19	37	41	+74
– 2016	1	2	18	39	41	+77
...to be united with family members						
– 2014	9	14	27	27	24	+28
– 2015	9	14	30	25	22	+24
– 2016	9	14	29	25	23	+25

Number of responses: 2,254. The balance measure is calculated by subtracting the percentage giving negative responses from the percentage giving positive responses.

Results

The first question addressed attitudes toward different forms of immigration. The results show that considerably more respondents hold positive than a negative attitude toward immigration. Attitudes differ, however, depending on the form of immigration considered. The most positive views are found regarding people immigrating to study and work. Attitudes toward people coming to Sweden to escape war and oppression and to be united with family members are less positive, but when it comes to these forms of immigration, too, appreciably more respondents are positive than negative.

Number of responses: 2,254. The balance measure is calculated by subtracting the percentage giving negative responses from the percentage giving positive responses.

Regarding the second question, about attitudes toward immigration from different parts of the world, a similar pattern is found: considerably more respondents have positive than negative views of immigration, irrespective of where the immigrants are coming from. Respondents are most positive toward immigration from other Nordic countries, Europe outside the Nordic region and North America, and least positive about immigration from the Middle East and Africa.

The third question concerns the effects immigration is perceived to have on Sweden. A clear majority think that immigration is good both for the Swedish economy and for Swedish culture. At the same time, a significant minority consider immigration to have negative effects, and a majority take the view that, too often, immigrants have customs and traditions that do not fit into Swedish society.

The overall pattern, then, is a positive view of immigration, although there is a critical minority, and attitudes are more divided concerning the perceived effects of immigration on Sweden. These patterns, moreover, remain very stable over the years. As regards the fifth question, about what changes have occurred over time, the results show that the changes between 2014 and 2016 are very small. Overall, opinion – at the aggregate as well as the individual level – exhibited a high degree of stability, not least given the dramatic changes that occurred during the period of investigation. There was a tendency, though, that groups which initially were more positive toward immigration became even more positive, while groups that were initially more negative became even more negative over time. At the group level, the results thus suggest that a slight polarization took place between 2014 and 2016.

The fourth question focuses on the relationship between people's media use and their attitudes toward immigration. Here, the results show that certain relationships do exist. The most clear-cut results emerge for the far-right, anti-immigration, news site *Avpixlat* and the left-wing news site *ETC*, which are found to have a relationship with negative and positive attitudes to immigration, respectively. In addition, use of the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* appears to be related with positive attitudes, while use of the television news show *TV4 Nyheter* and the evening paper *Expressen* are related with negative attitudes. The results also show that certain relationships exist between respondents' media use and changes in their attitudes to immigration, indicating that media use can influence attitudes. However, there are also indications of selection effects, that is to say, of people's attitudes toward immigration being linked to changes in their media use.

How, then, are the results to be interpreted? From the existing literature we know that there are three main models to explain people's attitudes toward immigration and immigrants. Two of them are based on economics and material self-interest: the *Labour Market Competition* hypothesis argues that people's attitudes stem from whether they believe that immigration increases competition in the labour market, while the *Fiscal Burden* hypothesis maintains that attitudes toward immigration can be traced to how welfare and public finances are believed to be affected. In the *cultural explanatory model*, people are guided less by material self-interest. Here, attitudes are affected by whether immigration is perceived as a threat to national identity and/or culture. Our interpretation of the results is that they lend somewhat stronger support to the cultural than to the economic explanatory models when it comes to explaining attitudes toward immigration.

Conclusions and policy relevance

One seemingly surprising conclusion from the study is that attitudes toward immigration, at both the aggregate and the individual level, changed relatively little during the turbulent years 2014–2016. The explanation for this could be that the immigration issue was politicised even before that, making views on immigration stronger and more crystallised. This limits people's receptiveness to

information that conflicts with their own views, which in turn reduces the likelihood of any major shifts in opinion.

An important question of societal relevance is how attitudes toward immigration will develop going forward. In that context, two important factors need to be taken into account. One is how and to what extent the media will report on and articulate immigration and related issues. The other is how the political system will address issues related to immigration. Political rhetoric and how policy is actually framed will also affect how people's attitudes are shaped.

Another question of major societal relevance is the significance of the media in shaping attitudes. According to existing research, people are receptive to the influence of media coverage of different issues. The present study also indicates that there are relationships between what media people use and changes in their attitudes toward immigration, even controlling for gender, age, education, political interest and party sympathies. This could be interpreted as an indication that causal relationships exist, that is to say, that attitudes are influenced in opposite directions by consumption, for example, of ETC and Avpixlat. Our data and our methodology are however unable to control for all the factors that could conceivably affect the results. More research is therefore needed to determine whether causal relationships exist between people's media use and their attitudes toward immigration.



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