

Public opinion on immigration: more malleable than you think

by Alyssa Leng, Ryan Edwards and Terence Wood

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Australian urban housing

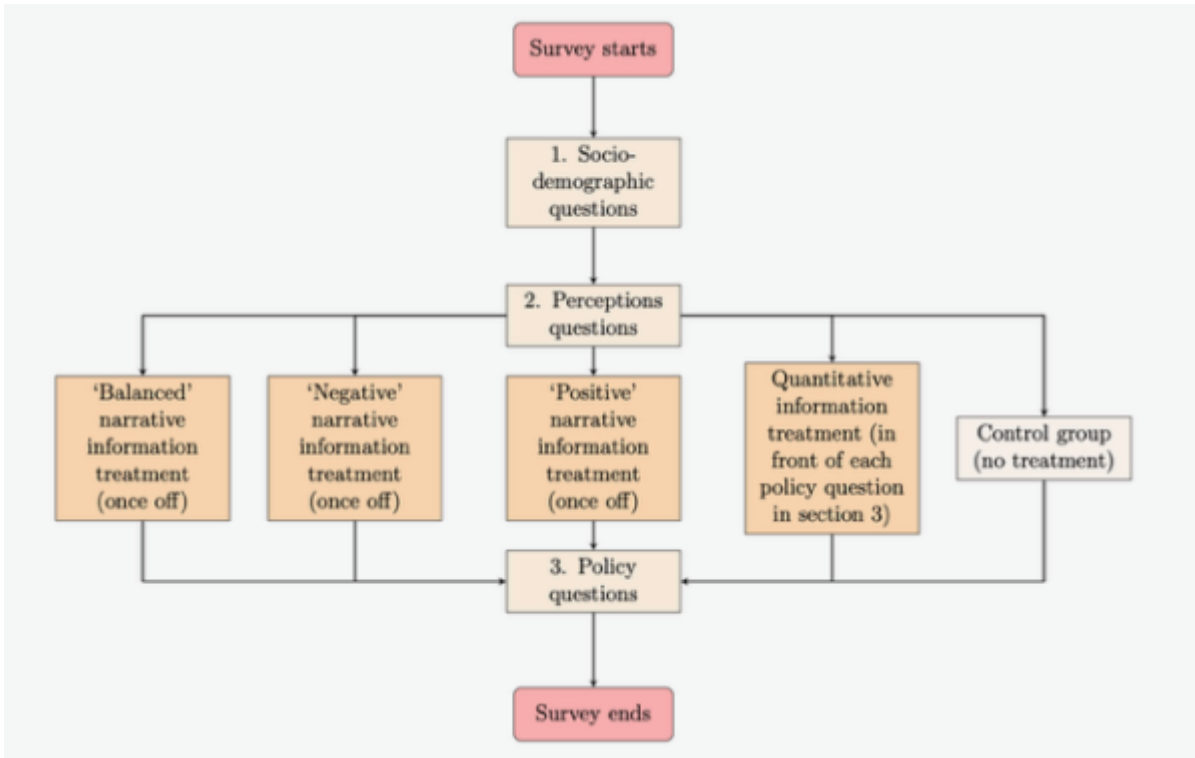
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In previous blogs in this series, we’ve shown that while people in Australia are generally happy with current immigration policy settings toward the Pacific ([part 1](#)), there is less support for the rest of the migration program, apart from skilled migration. People’s perceptions of migrants across the board are also very inaccurate ([part 2](#)).

Does providing people with information change these views? Are people more influenced by quantitative factual information, which might help correct perceptions, or by different narratives on the costs or benefits of immigration? We tested these questions using a randomised controlled trial embedded in a large, nationally representative survey of 5,282 people in Australia. And we found that people’s views on immigration can change, at least in the short term.

To do this, we randomly split respondents into five groups after they answer questions on demographics and perceptions of migrants (see Figure 1). Four are exposed to different types of information “treatments”, and the fifth serves as a clean “control” group, whose responses reflect the baseline preferences of the Australian public (also reported in the last two blogs).

Figure 1: Survey structure and experiment design



Source: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#) (2025).

The first three treatment groups were provided with different *narrative* information on how immigrants affect Australia’s housing market before being asked about their immigration policy preferences. Each narrative reflects often-discussed “positive”, “balanced” and “negative” potential impacts of immigration on housing, and is constructed from actual newspaper headlines and quotes from the *Daily Mail*, the ABC, and the *Financial Review*. The “positive” vignette is shown below (Figure 2) as an example.

Figure 2: “Positive” narrative treatment

Foreign tradies wanted to fix housing shortfall
 “Australia will fall well short of its target to build 1.2 million homes over five years and should consider boosting the intake from overseas of construction workers to help solve problems, according to economists.”

Source: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#) (2025).

The fourth treatment group was provided with quantitative information from the Australian census about the characteristics of migrants before being asked about their policy preferences. For example, for permanent migration, the fourth group was told, “Out of every 100 migrants who arrived in Australia between 2013 and 2023, 22 were permanent visa holders.” They were then asked: “Going forward, how many permanent migrants do you personally think Australia should accept?”

All groups were then asked about their preferences in relation to different types of migration. The differences between their responses and those of the control group reflect the causal effect of each type of information. This design allows us to compare the (a) relative effectiveness of different types of narratives — for example, does how the media report on a particular issue matter? — and (b) how the effects of quantitative information, which may help to improve the accuracy of peoples’ beliefs, compare to narratives.

We find that migration policy preferences are easily shifted by information, at least in the short term. How information is framed does matter. Narratives tend to be more effective than quantitative facts at shifting public opinion overall, but not when it comes to Pacific migration.

Figure 3 shows that narratives tend to be more effective at shifting views than quantitative information for the migration program at large. The effects however differ according to the type of narratives provided and the type of migration in question. Support for *more* immigration increases by seven percentage points when respondents are shown a brief snippet emphasising how immigrants might help improve housing affordability (the “positive” narrative), but remains unchanged when respondents are shown a “negative” narrative. However, we show in the paper that highlighting potential negative impacts on housing reduces support for *increasing or maintaining* current immigration levels. Quantitative information, on the other hand, tends to generate smaller increases in support than narratives, of about two percentage points.

Figure 3: Effects of information on support for more immigration

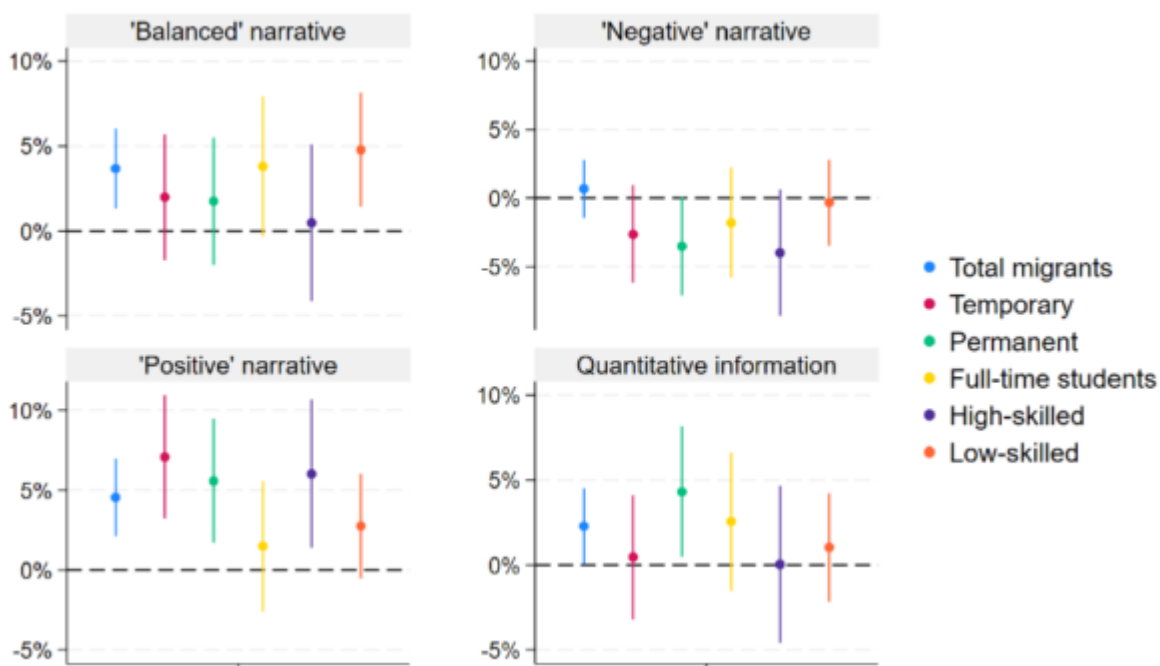
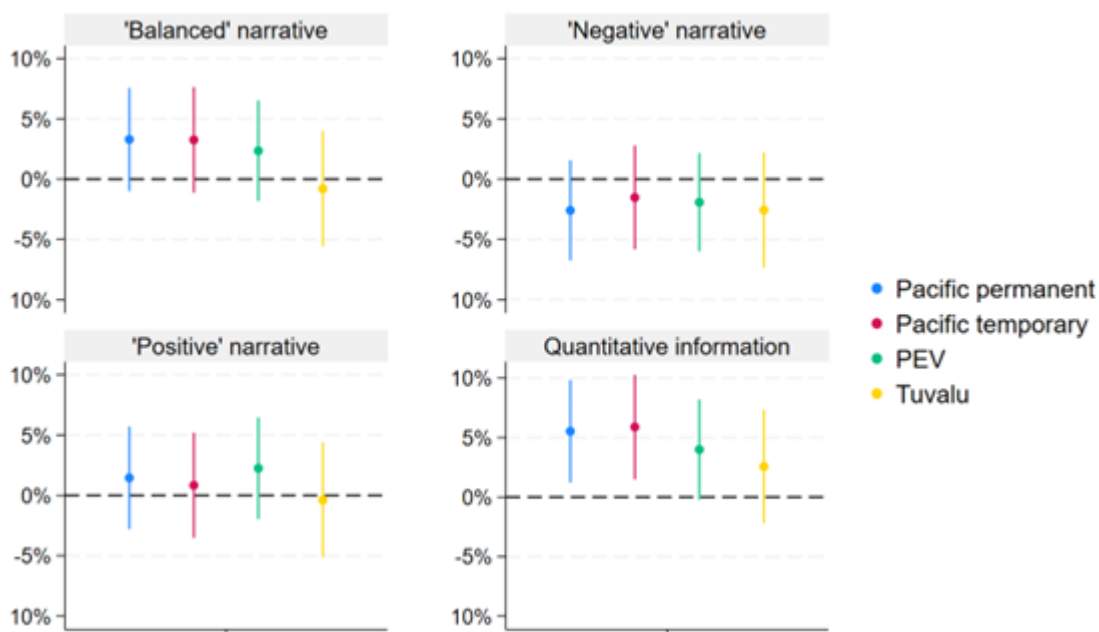


Figure notes: dots represent the estimated treatment effects on the likelihood of respondents supporting “more” of different types of migration. The vertical lines are 95% confidence intervals. Source: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#) (2025).

Figure 4 shows that for migration to Australia from the Pacific, providing people with different narratives around housing doesn’t have a statistically discernible effect on their migration preferences. Given how few Pacific migrants respondents perceive there to be living in Australia, this is unsurprising.

Figure 4: Effects of information on support for more immigration from the Pacific



Source: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#) (2025).

Figure note: Dots represent the estimated treatment effects on the likelihood of respondents supporting “more” of different types of migration. The vertical lines are 95% confidence intervals.

That said, providing people with accurate factual information substantially increases support for different types of migration from the Pacific. The magnitude of these effects is around five percentage points, and they appear to hold across both temporary and permanent migration from the Pacific. Given the relatively low levels of Pacific migration awareness discussed in our first blog, it is probably easier to shift views with basic information than for the overall migration program, where beliefs and preferences are likely more entrenched.

One caveat on our results is that we measure only the short-run effects of these information treatments. But, overall, our work shows that immigration policy preferences in Australia are not set in stone. Public opinion on immigration in Australia can be shaped by providing even small snippets of information, whether

narrative or quantitative. It's incumbent then on the government, media and researchers to communicate carefully and accurately on the issue.

Read [part 1](#) and [part 2](#).

Download the full [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#).

Author/s:

Alyssa Leng

Alyssa Leng is a research officer at the Development Policy Centre.

Ryan Edwards

Ryan Edwards is an Associate Professor of Economics and the Deputy Director of the Development Policy Centre at The Australian National University.

Terence Wood

Terence Wood is a Fellow at the Development Policy Centre. His research focuses on political governance in Western Melanesia, and Australian and New Zealand aid.

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