

The Role of Misperceptions in Attitudes to Immigration

Shane Timmons, Celine Fox, Evan Carron-Kee, Keire Murphy & Pete Lunn

15th January 2026



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt,
Gnóthaí Baile agus Imirce
Department of Justice,
Home Affairs and Migration

But first...

- ❖ We did not expect individuals to know precise immigration statistics
 - How do intuitions about immigration facts relate to attitudes?
- ❖ Attitudes are complex
 - Difficult to identify their causes
 - Attitudes ≠ behaviour
- ❖ Perceptions of reality matter
 - Distort democratic debate
 - Increase vulnerability to misinformation
 - Generate or exacerbate social tensions

Relevant Evidence

- Migrants tend to have higher employment rates and are more likely to hold third-level qualifications, but earn less, are more likely to be at risk of poverty and are more likely to experience enforced deprivation.
- Most people fairly or very positive about immigration – higher than in the previous decade and compared to most other EU countries.
- **Intergroup threat theory:** negative attitudes arise when people **perceive** migrants as threatening their group's economic resources, cultural values, or physical safety.
 - Financial strain (e.g., difficulty making ends meet) and general distrust of others are associated with more negative attitudes.
 - Recent increases in share of migrants in communities associated with more negative attitudes, primarily in economically disadvantaged areas.



Research Questions

1. How do the public perceive...
 - ... the size of the migrant population?
 - ... reasons for migration (e.g., international protection vs. employment)?
 - ... migrant characteristics (e.g., employment rates, education levels)?
2. Are misperceptions linked with attitudes?

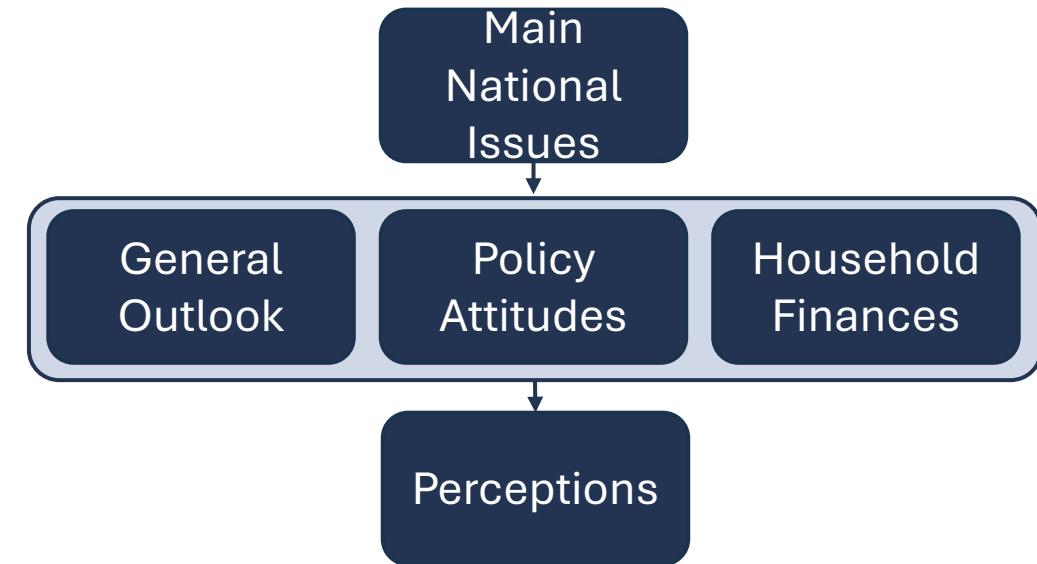


Method

REDC

Ipsos B&A

- 1200 adults recruited to be nationally representative by gender, age, socio-economic status and region
- To reduce bias:
 - Online survey, reducing social desirability bias
 - Neutral invitation, reducing selection bias
 - Attitudes measured before topic was revealed, reducing focalism
 - Careful consideration of question order
 - Perception questions designed using evidence from numerical cognition research
 - Experimental tests of question ‘framing’ (e.g., born outside EU vs. born within EU).



The first section is about society in general.

What do you think are the three most **important issues** facing Ireland?

Issue 1

In general ...

... how pessimistic or optimistic are you?

Very pessimistic

1	2
---	---

Issue 2

Thinking about your household financial situation ...

Very easy

1	2
---	---

Please think about the people in your household in terms of their job, education, money, housing, health, etc. (e.g., worst/no job, least educated, etc.)

Issue 3

... how trustworthy do you think most people are?

Most people cannot be trusted

1	2
---	---

How do you think you compare to others?

More like the least well off

1	2
---	---

Next 

Below is a list of potential **policy issues**. For each of the following, please indicate how **negatively or positively** you feel about them.

Use of facial recognition software in public spaces to identify suspects of serious crimes

Very negatively

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

 Very positively

Adoption of AI and automation technologies in industry to reduce costs, even if there are job losses.

Very negatively

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

 Very positively

Additional taxes for workers on salaries above €100,000 to fund social welfare increases

Very negatively

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

 Very positively

Immigration of people from outside of the EU/EEA for work, education or family reasons

Very negatively

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

 Very positively

Emissions reduction targets on different sectors (e.g., agriculture) to limit the effects of climate change

Very negatively

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

 Very positively

Free trade between countries (i.e., trade without additional taxes (tariffs), quotas or other restrictions)

Very negatively

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

 Very positively

Restrictions on rent prices in areas with high rental demand

Very negatively

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

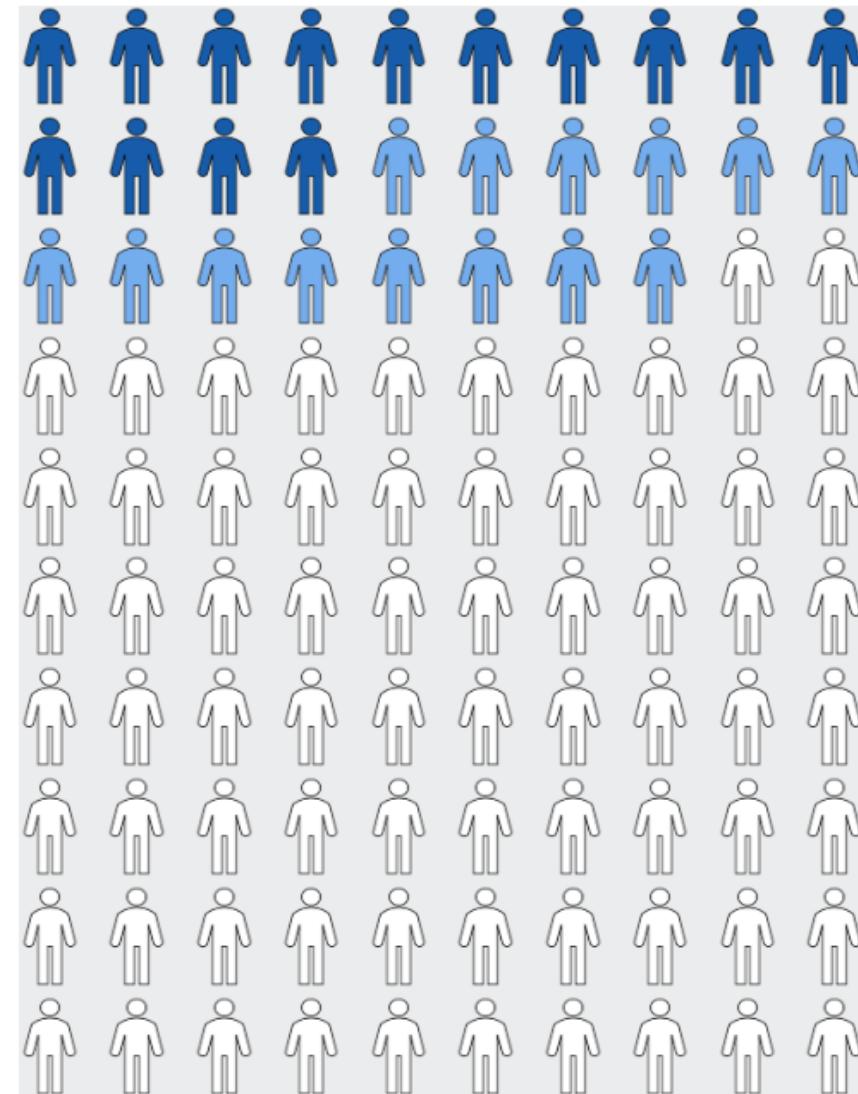
 Very positively



You have said **28** in every 100 adults in Ireland were born outside of Ireland.

What is your best guess for how many people born outside Ireland were born **outside of the United Kingdom (UK), European Union (EU) and North America?**

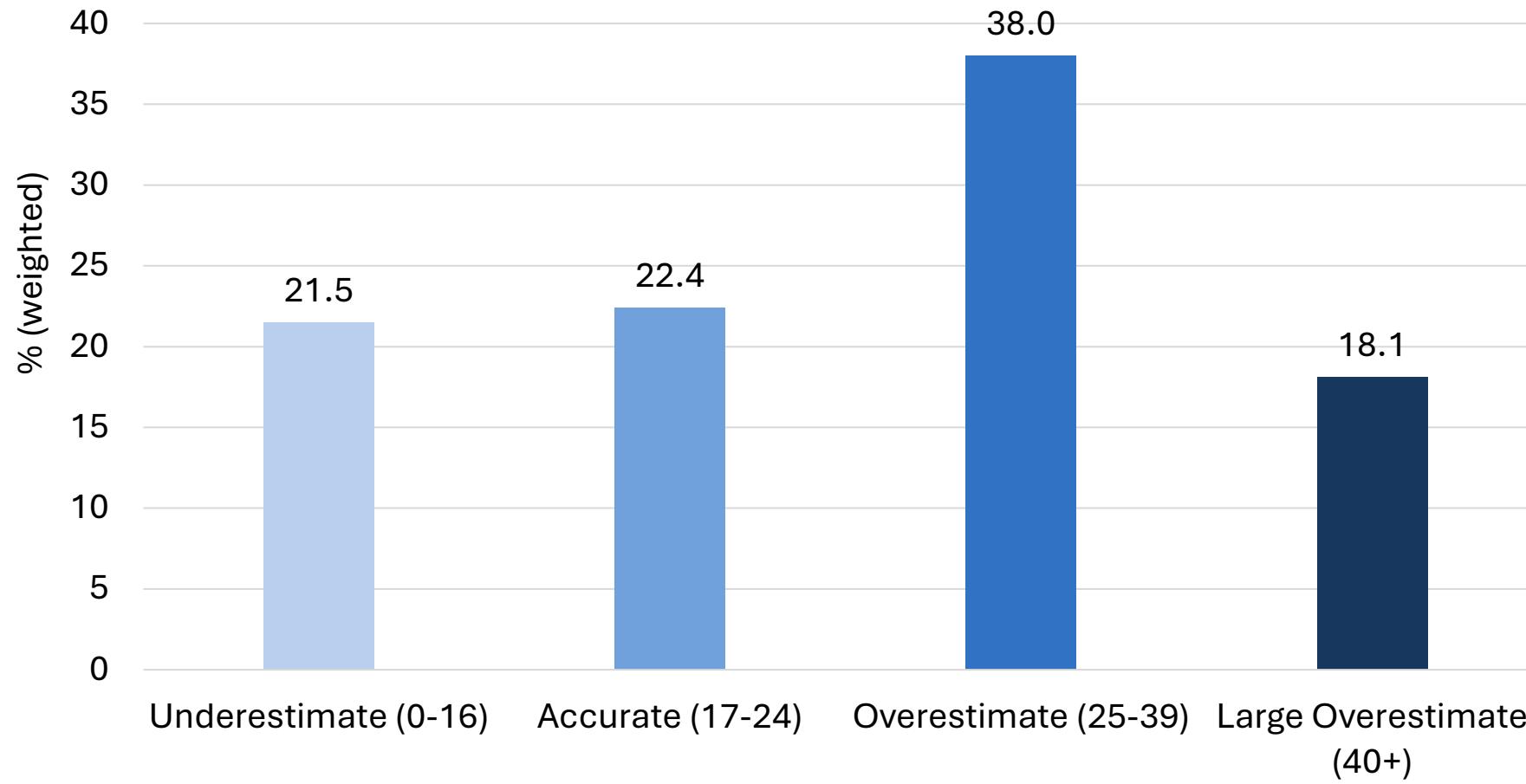
When you have made your final choice, press the confirm button.



You selected: 14

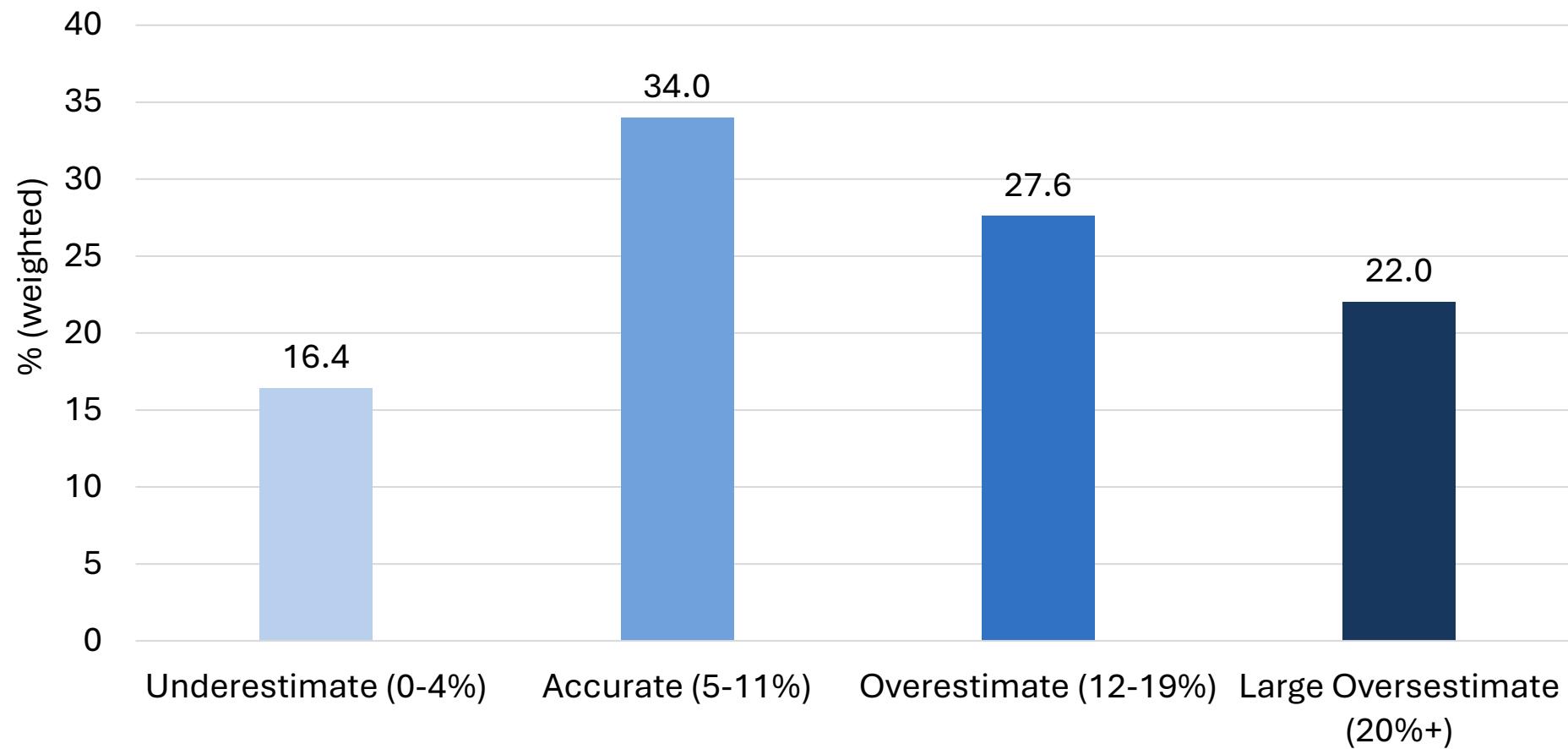
Results

Out of every 100 adults living in Ireland, what is your best guess for how many were born abroad? [19-22%]

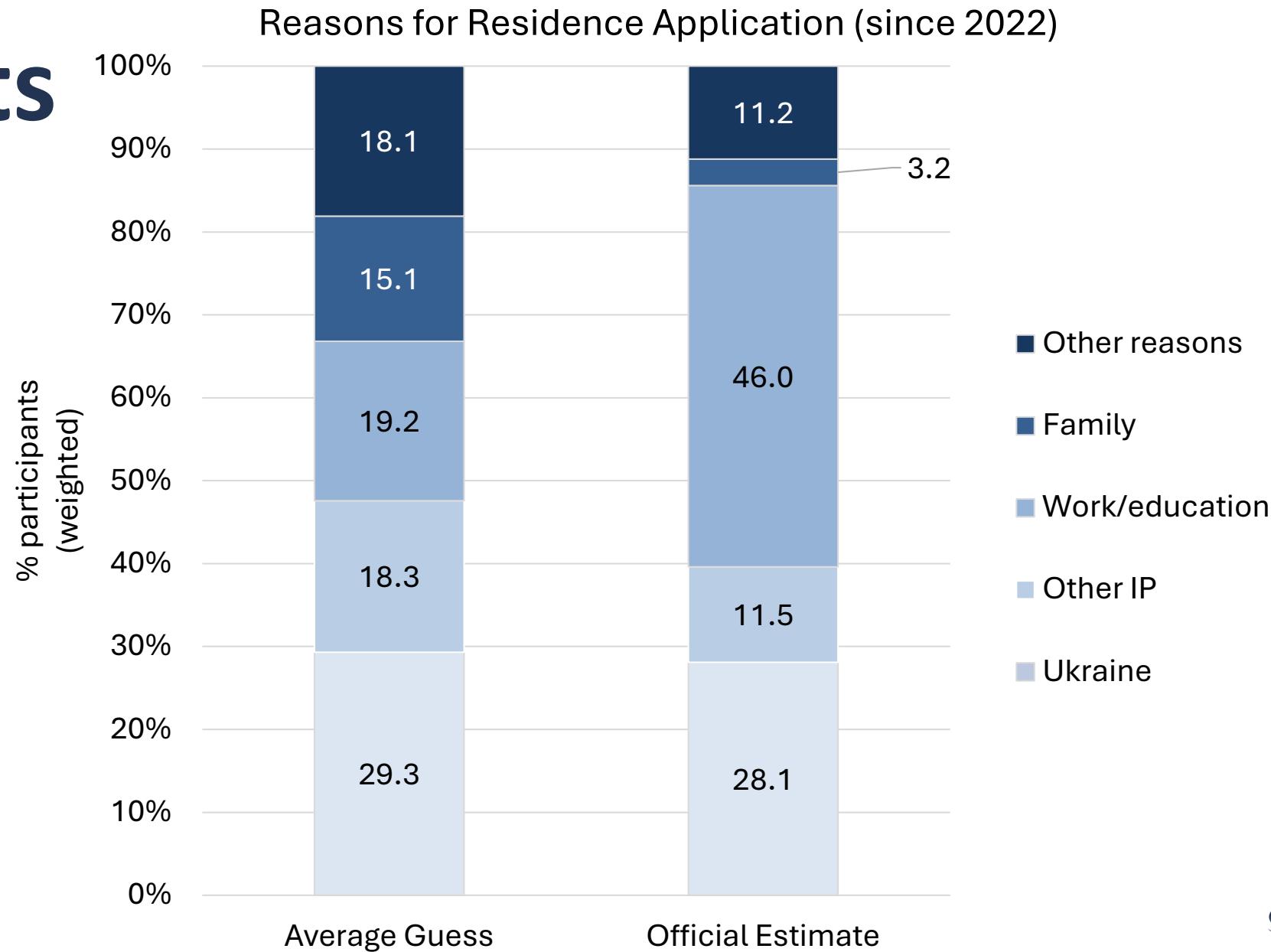


Results

Out of every 100 adults living in Ireland, what is your best guess for how many were born outside the EU/UK/North America? [7-9%]

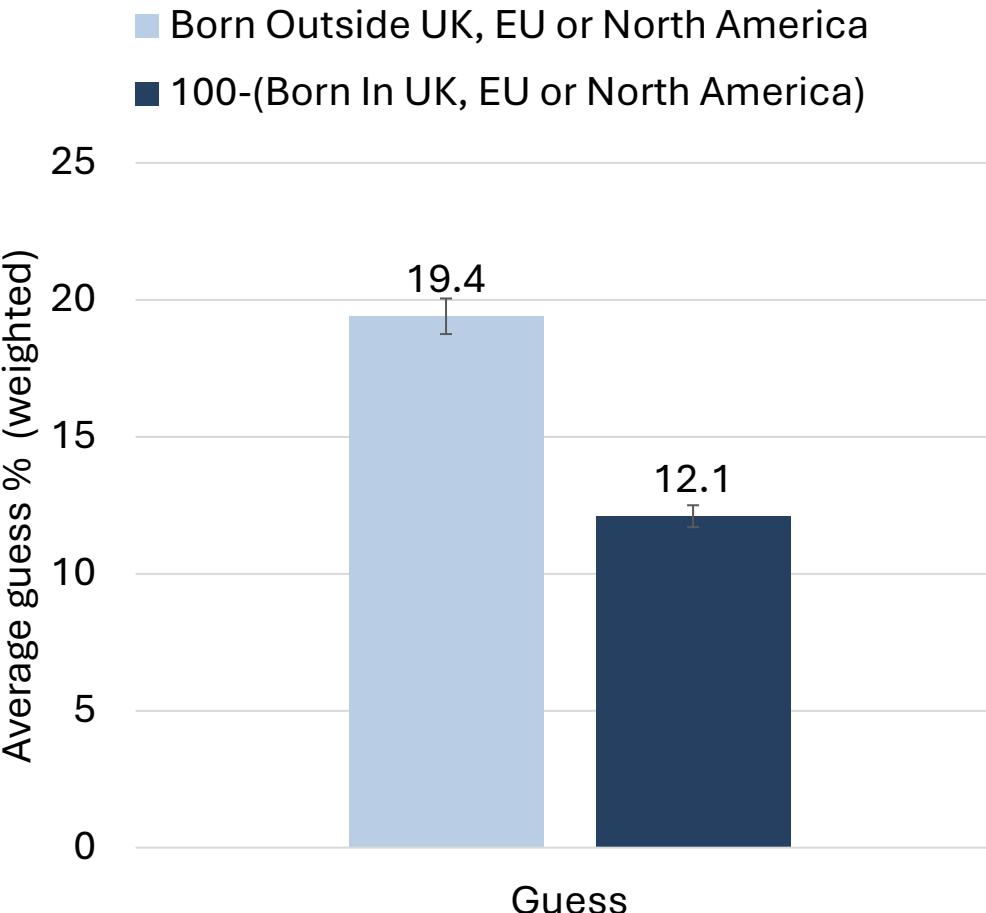


Results



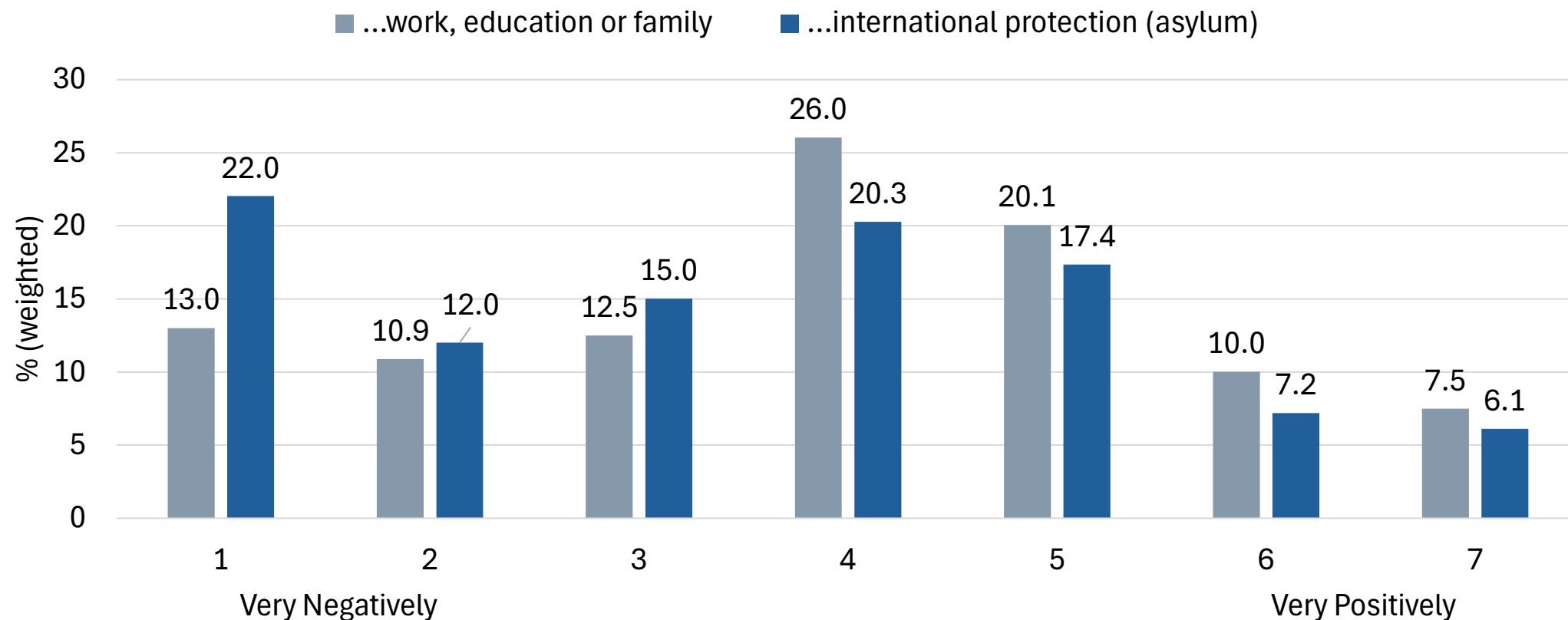
	Official Estimate %	Participant Guess %
Share of Overall Population Born Abroad	18.8-21.7	27.8
Share of Overall Population Born Outside EU, UK and North America	7.0-9.2	13.5
Share of Overall Population Who Are Men Born Abroad	10.0	15.3
Share of Recent Migrants Born Outside EU, UK and North America	72.3	55.8
Share of Residence Applications: Ukraine	28.1	29.3
Share of Residence Applications: Other International Protection	11.5	18.3
Share of Residence Applications: Work/Education	46.0	19.2
Share of Residence Applications: Family	3.2	15.1
Employment Rate – Born in Ireland	72.7	67.5
Employment Rate – Born Outside Ireland	76.8	51.5
Tertiary Education – Born in Ireland	42.2	43.6
Tertiary Education – Born Outside Ireland	58.5	34.4
Social Housing Uptake – Born in Ireland	9.2	36.7
Social Housing Uptake – Born Outside Ireland	6.1	43.8
Prison Population – Irish	79.3	66.7
Prison Population – Non-Irish	20.7	28.2
Prison Population – Non-EU, UK or North American	7.7	18.5

Framing Effects



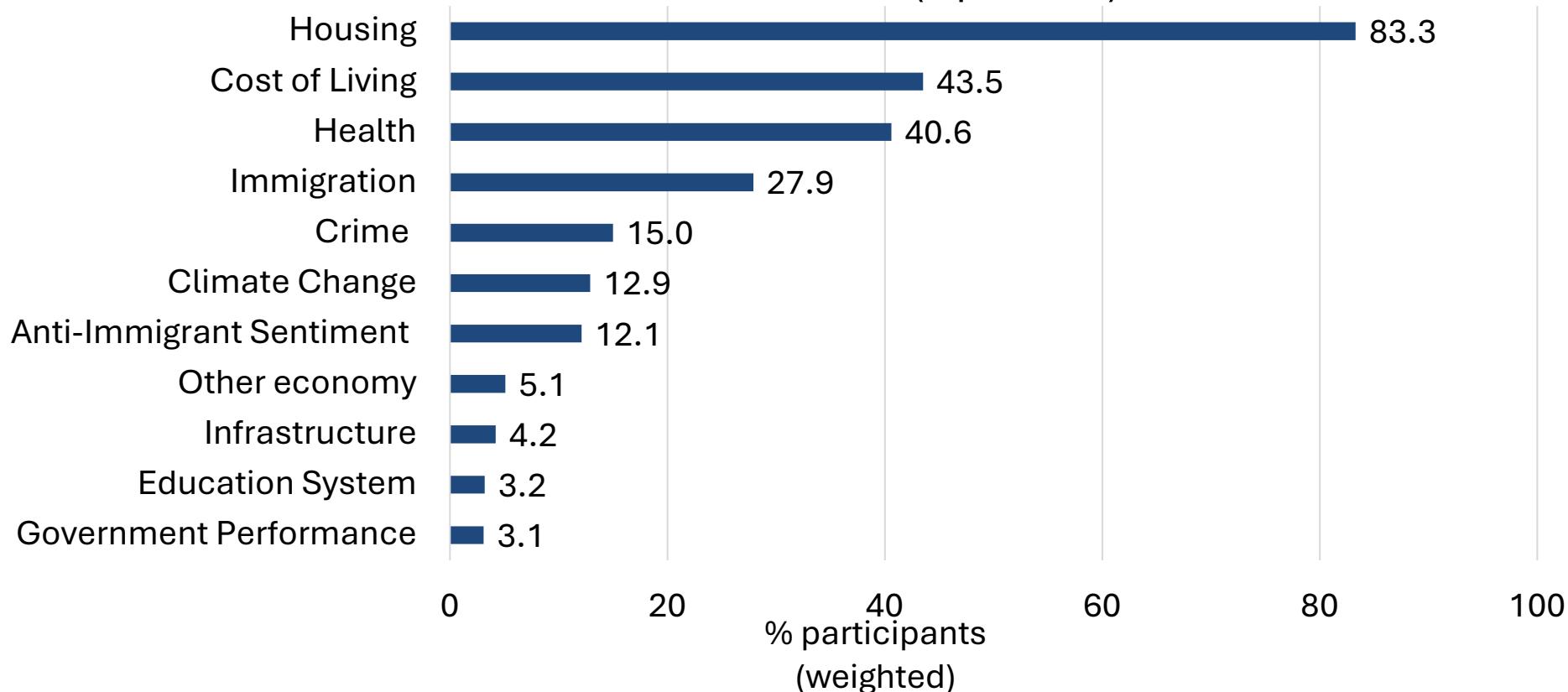
Attitudes

Please indicate how negatively or positively you feel about...
Immigration of people from outside of the EU/EEA for...

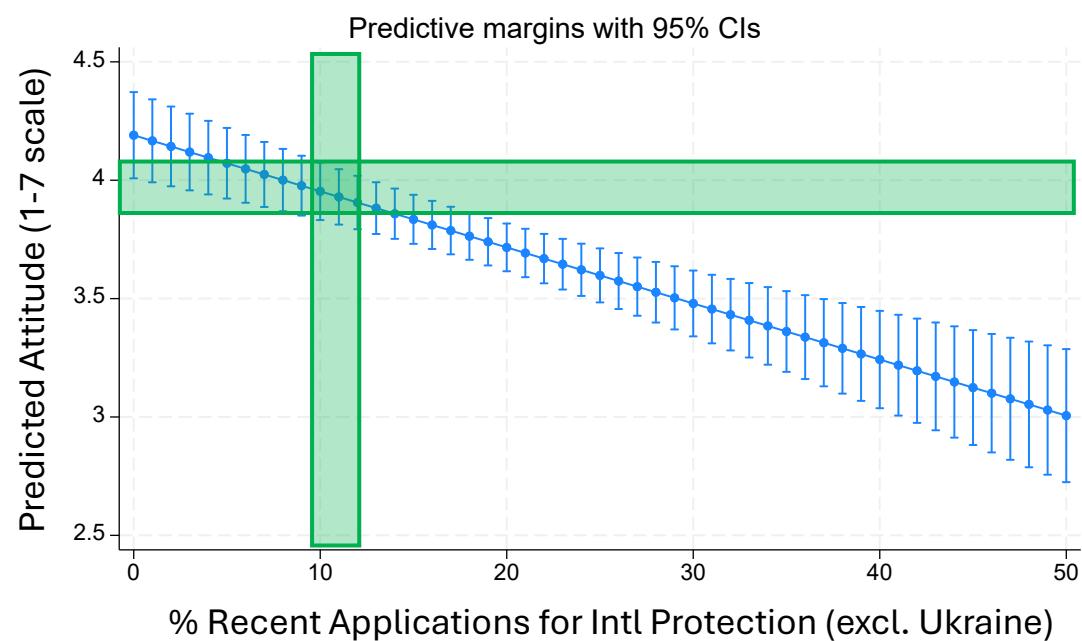
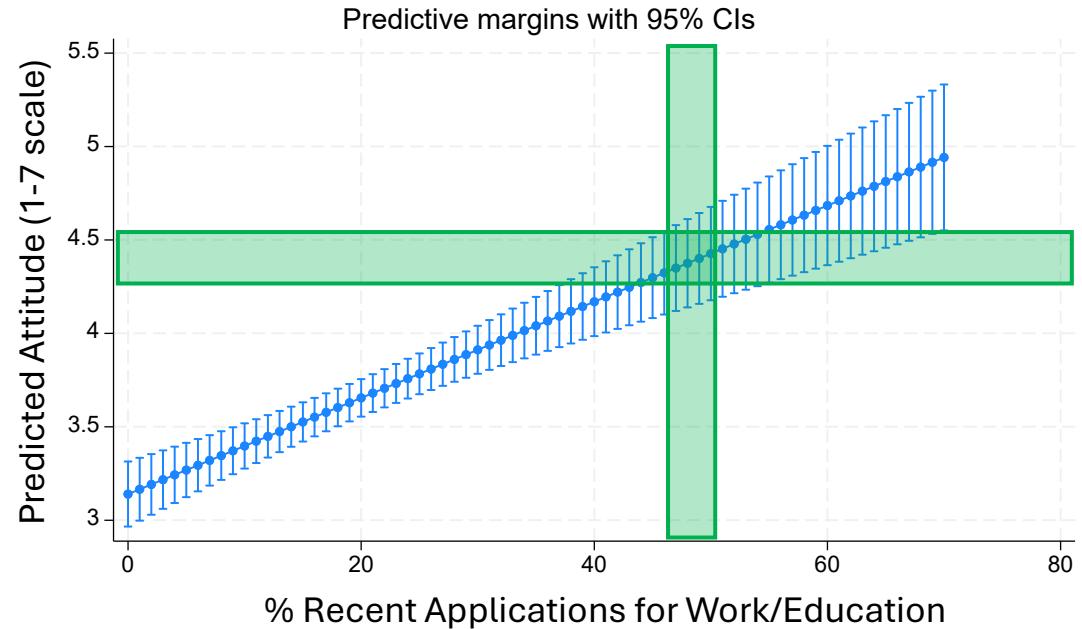
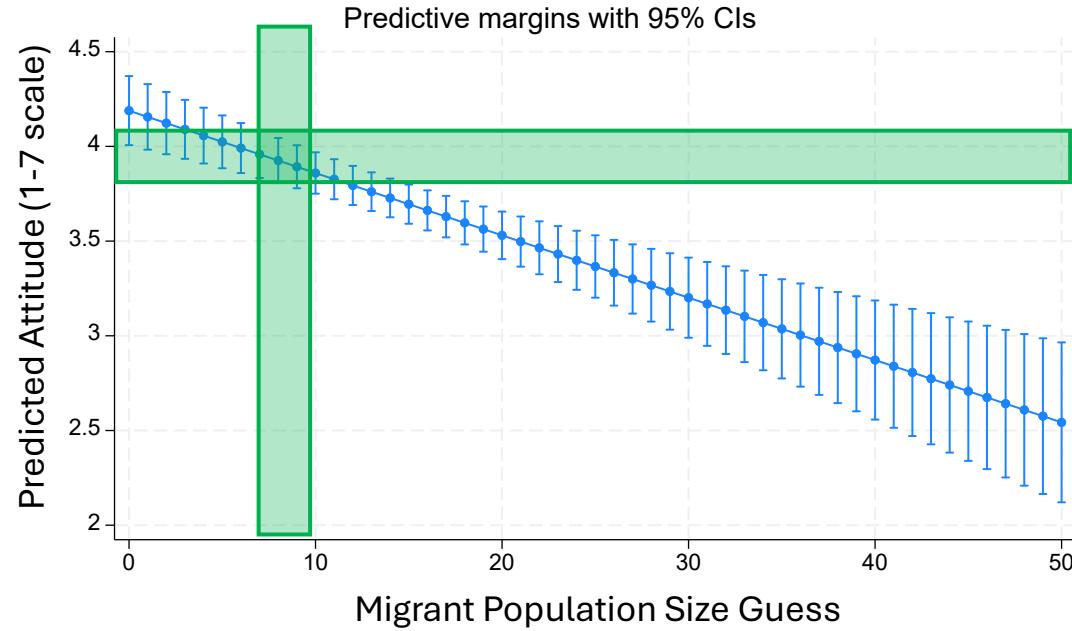


Main National Issues

What do you think are the three most important issues facing Ireland at the moment? (Open Text)

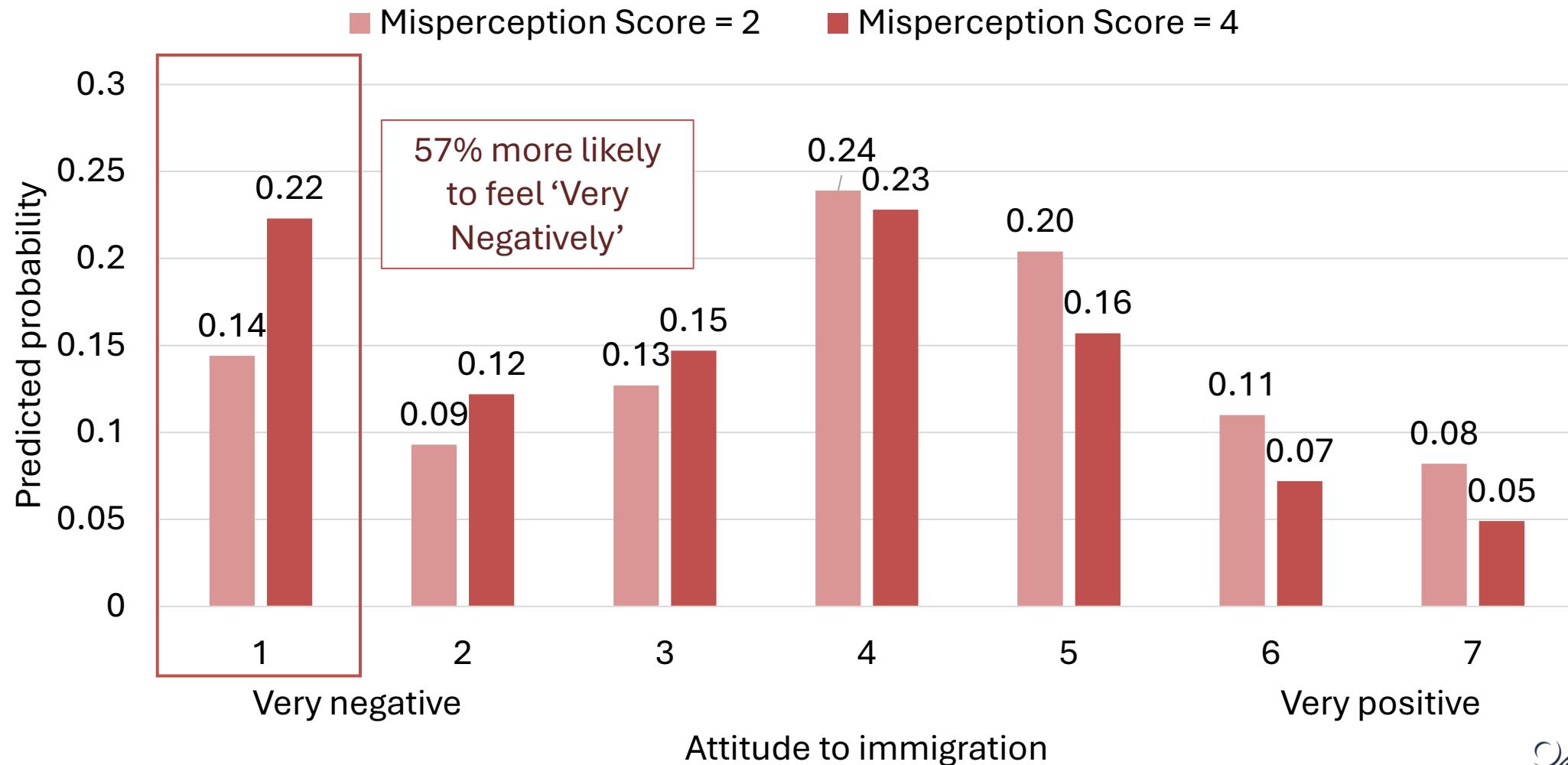


Results

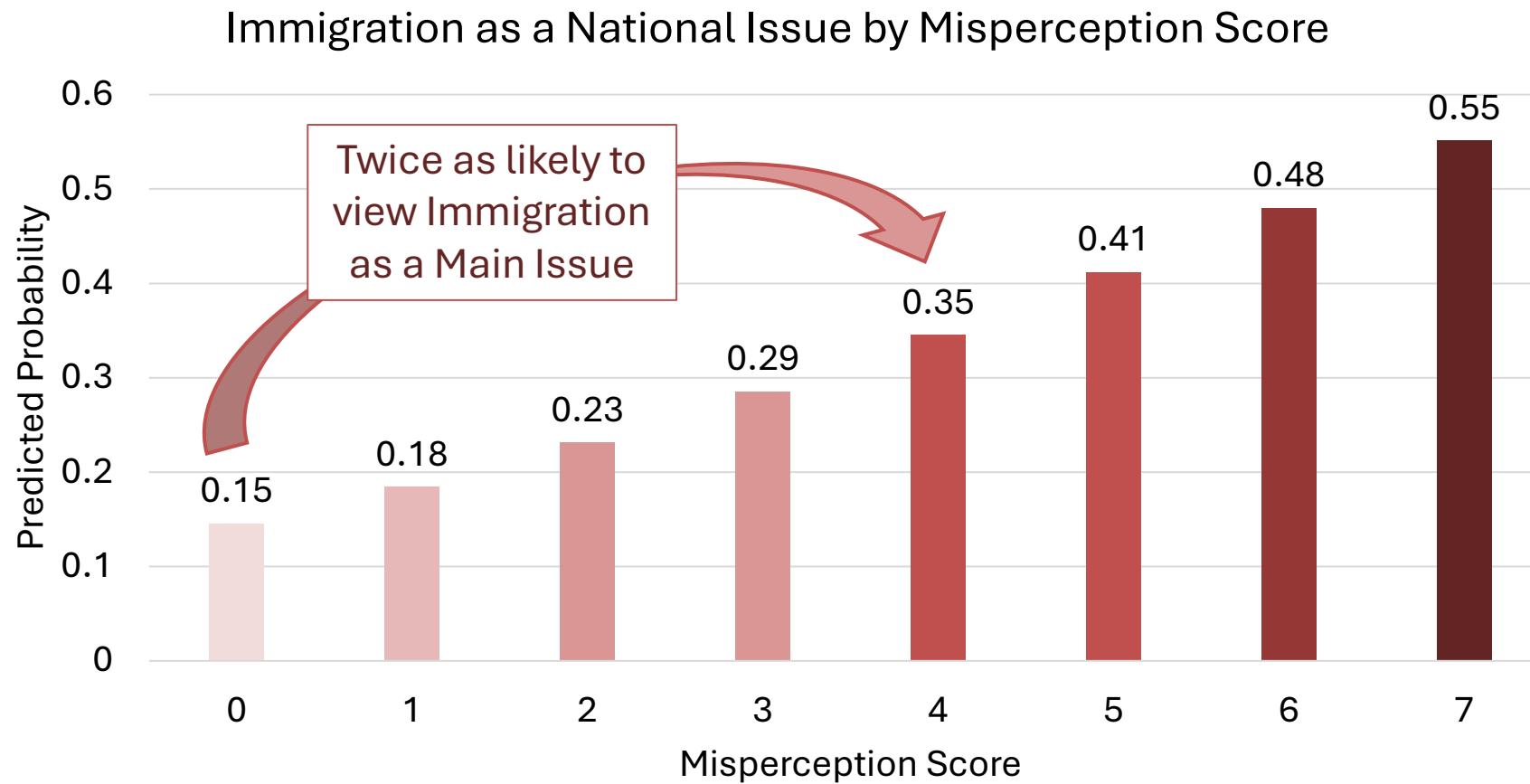


Results

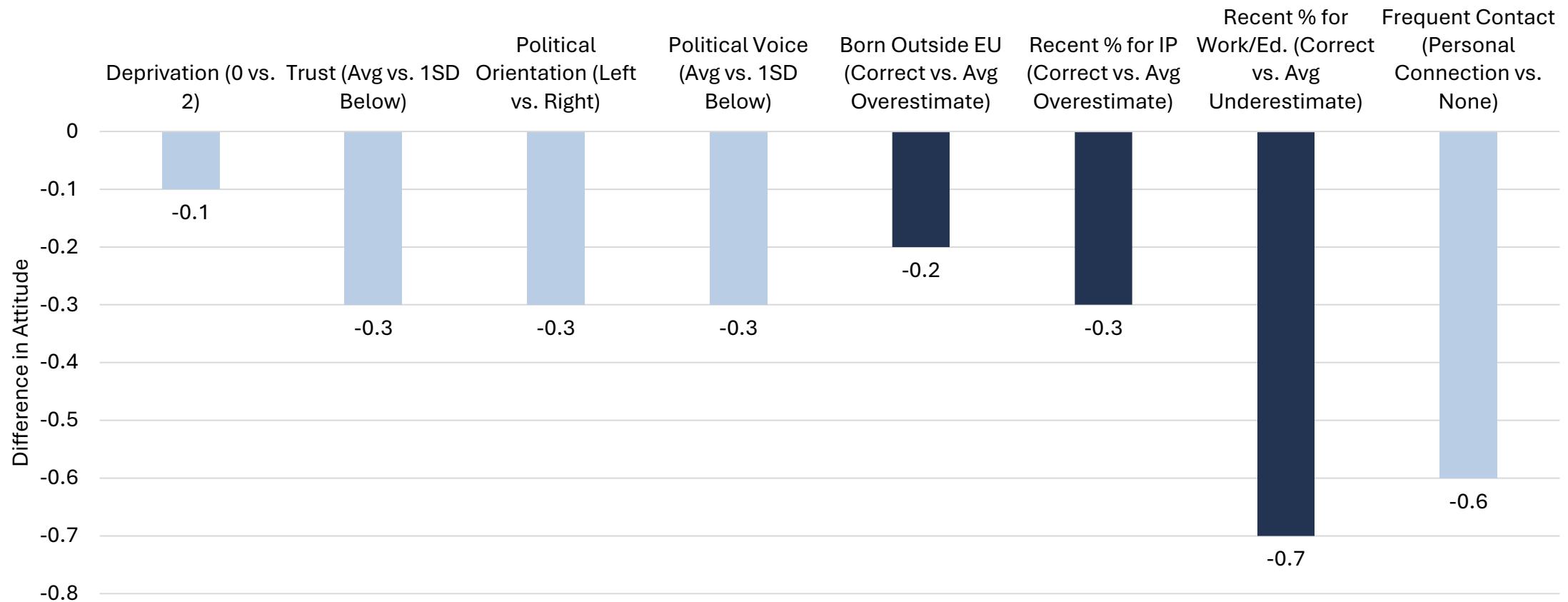
Attitude by Misperception Score



Results



Relative to Other Predictors



Summary

- Misperceptions about the facts of immigration are widespread, systematically biased and strongly associated with negative attitudes
- Most people overestimate the number of migrants living in Ireland and especially the number of migrants from outside the EU, UK and North America.
- Intuitions about migrant characteristics skew towards higher competition for public resources (and criminality).
 - People underestimate migrant employment and education levels
 - They overestimate social housing uptake and criminal activity
 - They also strongly underestimate recent migration for work/education and overestimate migration for international protection



Summary (ctd.)

- Those who hold very negative attitudes to immigration tend to hold more misperceptions
- Majority do not view immigration as a major issue or feel negatively about it
- While we observe no association between income and attitudes, experiencing material deprivation is associated with more negative attitudes
- Pessimism for the future, less trust in others and belief that one's voice is not heard politically are other significant predictors of negative attitudes
- Contact is complicated. If it comes with personal connections like friendship, it's associated with more positive attitudes. Without personal connections, it is associated with more negative attitudes.

Implications

Attitudes are complex and we can't be certain of causality, but...

- Widespread misperceptions matter for informed democratic debate
 - Importance of shared understanding of facts
 - More susceptible to misinformation
- Drawing attention to subgroups of migrants (or immigration in general) may contribute to misperceptions
- Communications that highlight under-recognised facts likely to help (though statistics alone are unlikely to be effective)
 - Not all facts are misperceived (e.g., accurate on % from Ukraine, accurate on Irish-born employment and tertiary education levels)
- Quality of contact with migrants appears to matter (support for integration programmes and local authority integration teams)
- Findings are consistent with intergroup threat theory
 - Social policies that reduce deprivation and promote economic and political inclusion likely to have co-benefits for social cohesion

Thank You

<https://doi.org/10.26504/rs225>



ESRI.i



[Economic and Social Research Institute \(ESRI\)](http://Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI))



Economic and Social Research Institute



@ESRI.ie

[Sign up to our Newsletter](#)

Immigration as an Issue	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Relevant Statistic	Total population born abroad	Population born outside EU, UK and North America	Share of recent residence applications for international protection (excl. Ukraine)	Share of recent residence applications for work/education
Participant Estimate	0.01** (0.005)	0.03*** (0.007)	0.04*** (0.006)	-0.03*** (0.006)
Man (ref: woman)	0.36** (0.141)	0.35** (0.142)	0.33** (0.142)	0.32** (0.139)
Age (ref: 18 to 39 years)				
40 to 59 years	0.81*** (0.165)	0.87*** (0.169)	0.76*** (0.169)	0.76*** (0.167)
60+ years	0.38* (0.194)	0.35* (0.195)	0.26 (0.195)	0.33* (0.191)
Degree or above (ref: below degree)	-0.25* (0.152)	-0.24 (0.154)	-0.31** (0.154)	-0.20 (0.153)
Urban (ref: Rural)	-0.10 (0.148)	-0.10 (0.152)	-0.13 (0.152)	-0.03 (0.149)
Region (ref: Dublin)				
Rest of Leinster	-0.27 (0.214)	-0.33 (0.215)	-0.13 (0.221)	-0.19 (0.215)
Munster	-0.63*** (0.231)	-0.63*** (0.233)	-0.55** (0.238)	-0.50** (0.232)
Connacht-Ulster	-0.20 (0.245)	-0.40 (0.250)	-0.16 (0.253)	-0.31 (0.248)
Constant	-1.42*** (0.309)	-1.50*** (0.292)	-2.18*** (0.318)	0.02 (0.313)
Obs.	1,141	1,110	1,145	1,127

Misperceptions	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3
Relevant Statistic	Total population born abroad			Total population born outside EU, UK and North America			Misperception Score
Outcome (vs. Accurate)	Under-estimate	Over-estimate	Large Over-estimate	Under-estimate	Over-estimate	Large Over-estimate	n/a
Man	0.30*	-0.34**	-1.13***	0.08	-0.35*	-0.46**	-0.11**
(ref: woman)	(0.182)	(0.157)	(0.217)	(0.183)	(0.154)	(0.177)	(0.035)
Age (ref: 18 to 39 years)							
40 to 59 years	0.37*	-0.25	-0.34	0.28	-0.25	-0.23	0.01
	(0.215)	(0.189)	(0.240)	(0.213)	(0.185)	(0.211)	(0.042)
60+ years	0.20	-0.33	-0.93**	-0.48*	-0.46**	-0.44*	0.02
	(0.25)	(0.212)	(0.293)	(0.263)	(0.206)	(0.234)	(0.047)
Degree or above	0.01	-0.55**	-1.19***	-0.09	-0.45**	-0.93***	-0.09**
(ref: below degree)	(0.190)	(0.169)	(0.237)	(0.193)	(0.166)	(0.199)	(0.038)
Urban	-0.10	-0.03	0.12	0.10	0.21	0.17	-0.01
(ref: Rural)	(0.194)	(0.171)	(0.222)	(0.199)	(0.168)	(0.192)	(0.038)
Region (ref: Dublin)							
Rest of Leinster	0.13	0.44*	0.57*	-0.07	0.52*	0.25	0.05
	(0.275)	(0.245)	(0.339)	(0.284)	(0.249)	(0.270)	(0.056)
Munster	0.04	0.34	0.42	0.06	0.36	-0.14	0.02
	(0.287)	(0.256)	(0.359)	(0.292)	(0.262)	(0.295)	(0.059)
Connacht-Ulster	-0.02	0.15	0.78*	-0.10	0.19	0.20	0.07
	(0.319)	(0.284)	(0.373)	(0.326)	(0.290)	(0.309)	(0.06)
Born in Ireland	0.42*	-0.10	-0.39	0.31	0.12	-0.13	-0.02
(ref: Born Abroad)	(0.250)	(0.203)	(0.254)	(0.247)	(0.201)	(0.218)	(0.044)
Constant	-0.81	0.88**	0.46	-1.11**	-0.12	-0.13	1.10***
	(0.419)	(0.354)	(0.461)	(0.414)	(0.201)	(0.218)	(0.077)
Obs.	1,141			1,110			1,200
R ²	0.04			0.02			0.01