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The negative campaigning in Rochester and Strood may have long-lasting implications for attitudes towards people seeking a better life and the poor

blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-negative-campaigning-in-rochester-and-strood-may-have-long-lasting-implications-for-citizens-attitudes-towards-people-seeking-a-better-life-and-the-poor/ November 28, 2014

*What impact may the Rochester and Strood campaign, which was primarily about immigration and its impact on the welfare system, have on the way its citizens perceive and interact with one another? **Trude Sundberg** looks at the research and argues that political campaigns coloured by anti-person fleeing violence or economic hardship sentiments potentially have a long-lasting negative impact on citizens' concern towards the living conditions of others in their community, particularly impacting their judgement of the poor and negativity towards people seeking a better life.*



As the country's political and media focus moves away from Rochester and Strood, at least for the time being, we should take a moment to consider what its impact on the community of Rochester and Strood will be. In other words, what impact may a campaign focused on anti-immigration have on the social cohesion and the glue holding people together in this community? How will this impact people's concern for each other, and more specifically, their concern for people seeking a better life, the poor and those receiving state benefits?

Before I begin, it is important to note that this is about more than just another UKIP victory. The negative effects on the community are related to the presence of anti-immigration arguments in all the main parties. This has also been true of the Labour party, even if their arguments around the need to limit immigration were and are softer, and they had a much more positive view of the impact of immigration than others in the Rochester and Strood by-election. Secondly, the focus on immigration in politics is not new in the UK (see [here](#) for an article in *The Economist* from 2001). What we do see, however, is an increasing hostility in debates on the topic. This is important as it may bring with it a more negative impact onto people's attitudes.

Attitude research scholars have had a long-standing interest in the relationship between immigration and its impact on support for the welfare state, people's concern for each other and judgement of groups such as welfare claimants. As I wrote about in a [short preview](#) leading up to the by-election, research has shown that a focus on anti-immigration

sentiments in an election by both politicians and the media, especially when combined with a negative focus on welfare claimants, has divisive effects on societies. But, perhaps, rather cynically, this was its intention.

If we look at evidence from the US, [Alesina and Glaeser](#) and [Gilens](#) show how negative political and media coverage of the 'blacks' being a dominant group amongst the poor and welfare state claimants, leads to an overall harshening of public attitudes towards the poor. As a result, they identify patterns of decreased social solidarity and social cohesion in communities, as well as stronger negative stereotyping of both 'blacks' and the poor. In other words, the mix of negative media coverage of people seeking a better life and welfare claimants, as seen in the debate nationally and in Rochester and Strood, could bring with it more negative attitudes towards not only people seeking a better life, but also to the poor. These negative stereotypes are dominated by characterising the poor as lazy, or using British terminology; as 'skivers' and 'scroungers'. Hopkins [builds on this](#) research and finds that it is the dominance of anti-immigration arguments, in politics and the media, that is crucial in contributing to these negative effects. However, in Rochester and Strood, the one thing that is different from the US experience [identified by Hopkins](#), is that it does not have a higher than normal influx of people seeking a better life nor a higher than average person fleeing violence or economic hardship population.

A second area of studies related to social cohesion includes studies analysing people's concern for the living conditions of different groups in society. Across Europe, citizens rank the different groups similarly based on their concern for these groups, in descending order of concern they are ranked; the elderly, the sick and disabled, the unemployed, and lastly, people seeking a better life (see the [work of Van Oorschot](#) on this). In other words, people and the unemployed are ranked as the least deserving groups.

Thus, a further negative coverage and political campaigning may have further negative impact on solidarity with these groups, and people's concern for them may become even lower. However, on a positive note, we do find that higher immigration as well as higher levels of education can have a positive impact on people's concern for people. This is something I also found in [my study](#), and is reflected in a [recent article](#) in the *Financial Times* showing that higher immigration is related to more positive attitudes towards people seeking a better life. This may explain why UKIP do well in a locality such as Rochester and Strood, with its lower than average immigration and thus more negative attitudes towards people seeking a better life. What it further points to is that it is a 'symbolic' threat and cultural threat rather than a 'real' threat that may be important when explaining people's attitudes and views towards people seeking a better life. This means that the negative impact of people seeking a better life may be based on [misperceptions](#) of the amount of people seeking a better

life and the size of their threat, as well as their perceived potential negative impact on the culture and society, rather than on 'real' higher numbers of people seeking a better life.

Overall then, the question is, what lies in the future for Rochester and Strood? What does research suggest in terms of the impact of attitudes and social cohesion in its communities? And what will Mark Reckless do, if anything at all, to mitigate these potential negative effects of such a divisive campaign? Sadly, research suggests that the long-lasting effects of this campaign may well be increased negative attitudes towards the poor, people and welfare claimants. Especially as the pending election looks set to continue where they left off, with an increased presence of anti-person rhetoric. However, we could hope that the community, through engaging more with the topic of immigration and people themselves prove research wrong.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit:

About the Author

Trude Sundberg is Lecturer in Social Policy and Co-Director of the [Q-Step Centre](#) at the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR), University of Kent.

