

Today's key fact: you are probably wrong about almost everything

Most people around the world are pretty bad when it comes to knowing the numbers behind the news. But how issues such as immigration are perceived can shape political opinion and promote misconceptions

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Many people do not know the real statistics behind the news, an Ipsos Mori report shows. Photograph: Alamy

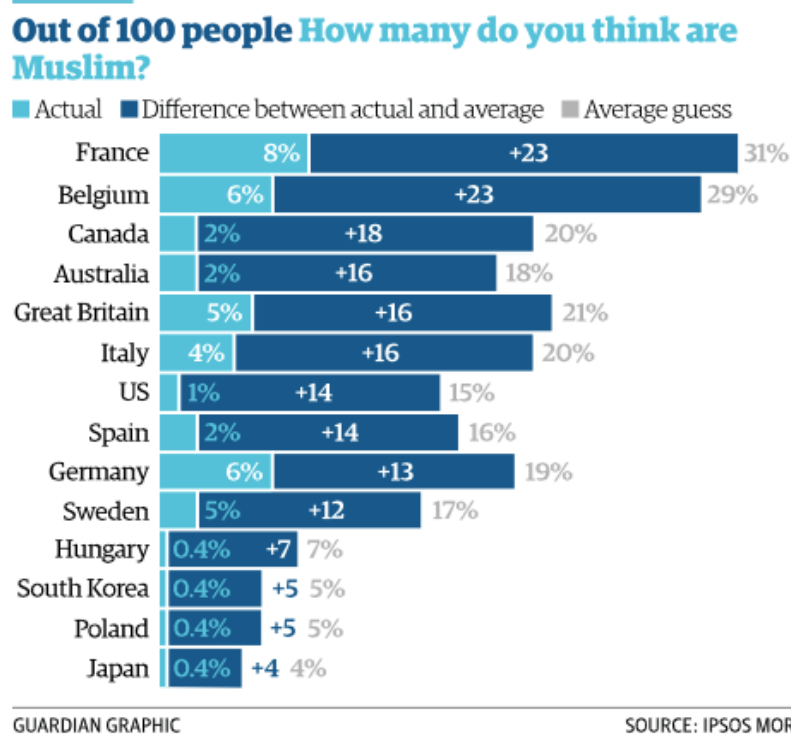
Britons overstate the proportion of Muslims in their country by a factor of four, according to a new survey by Ipsos Mori that reveals public understanding of the numbers behind the daily news in 14 countries. People from the UK also think immigrants make up twice the proportion of the population as is really the case – and that many more people are unemployed than actually are.

Such misconceptions are typical around the world, but they can have a significant impact as politicians aim to focus on voter perceptions, not on the actual data.

Bobby Duffy, managing director of the Ipsos Mori social research institute, said:

These misperceptions present clear issues for informed public debate and policymaking. For example, public priorities may well be different if we had a clearer view of the scale of immigration and the real incidence of teenage mothers.

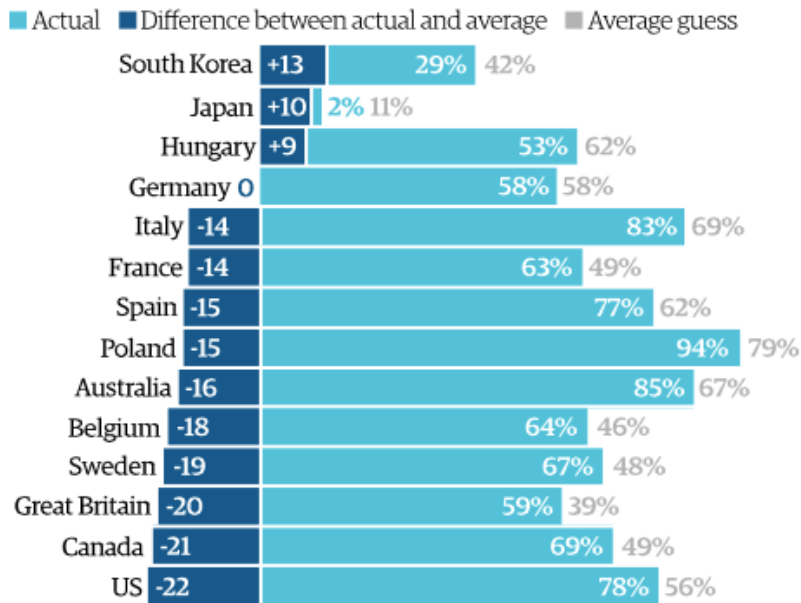
The actual percentage of Muslims in the UK is 5%, but those surveyed by Ipsos Mori said they thought it was 21%.



Britons meanwhile underestimate the proportion of Christians, believing it is 39% when the correct figure is 59%. People in the US similarly overestimate the proportion of Muslims in the population, thinking it is 15% when it is actually 1%. They believe 56% are Christian when the true figure identifying themselves as such is 78%.

On immigration, British people think on average that immigrants make up 24.4% of the population when it is actually about 13%, according to the 2011 census.

Out of 100 people How many do you think are Christian?

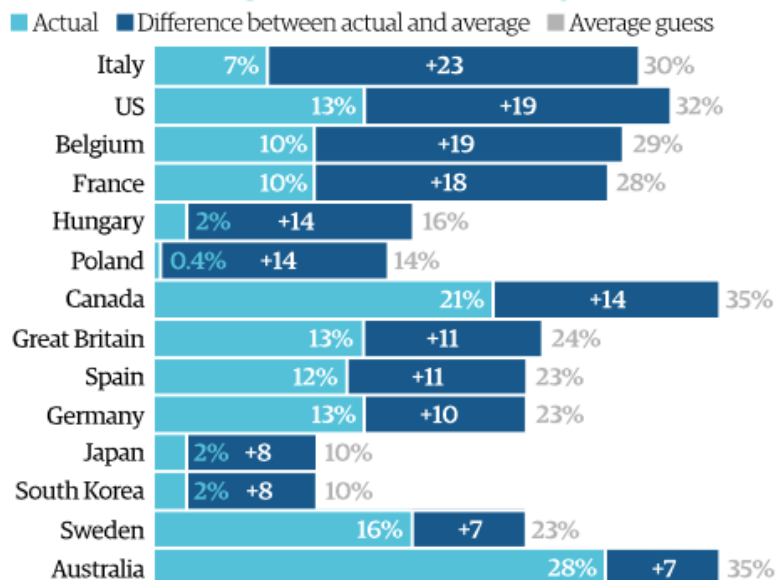


GUARDIAN GRAPHIC

SOURCE: IPSOS MORI

According to Ipsos Mori's political monitor from September, 30% of British voters identified asylum and immigration as one of the issues that would be very important to them come next May's elections. This puts immigration, alongside the economy and the NHS, at the top of voters' concerns. The 14 countries surveyed all overestimated immigration to a certain degree.

Out of 100 people How many do you think are immigrants to this country?



GUARDIAN GRAPHIC

SOURCE: IPSOS MORI

If anything the overall data shows the UK in a comparatively favourable light. Britain is the fifth least ignorant nation out of the 14 surveyed, and Britons showed more self-knowledge than Australians, Belgians, Canadians and French people.

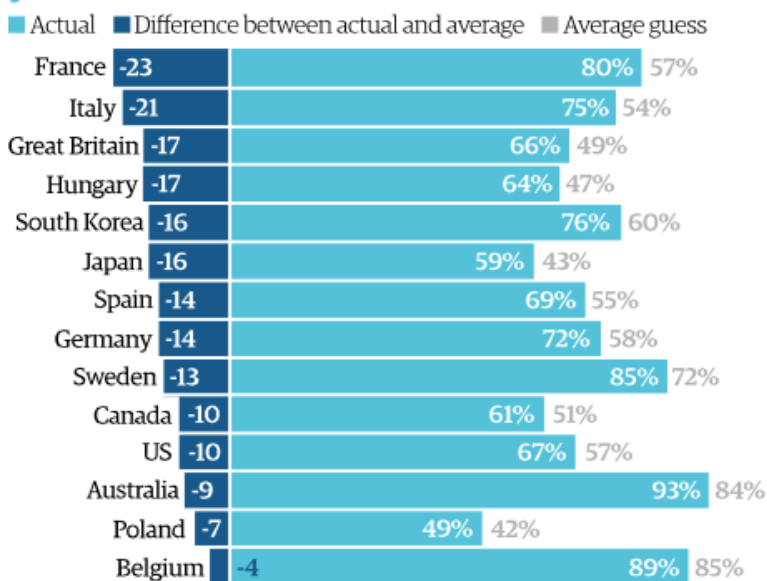
Index of ignorance Ranked by most accurate



GUARDIAN GRAPHIC

SOURCE: IPSOS MORI

Out of 100 eligible voters How many do you think voted in the last election?



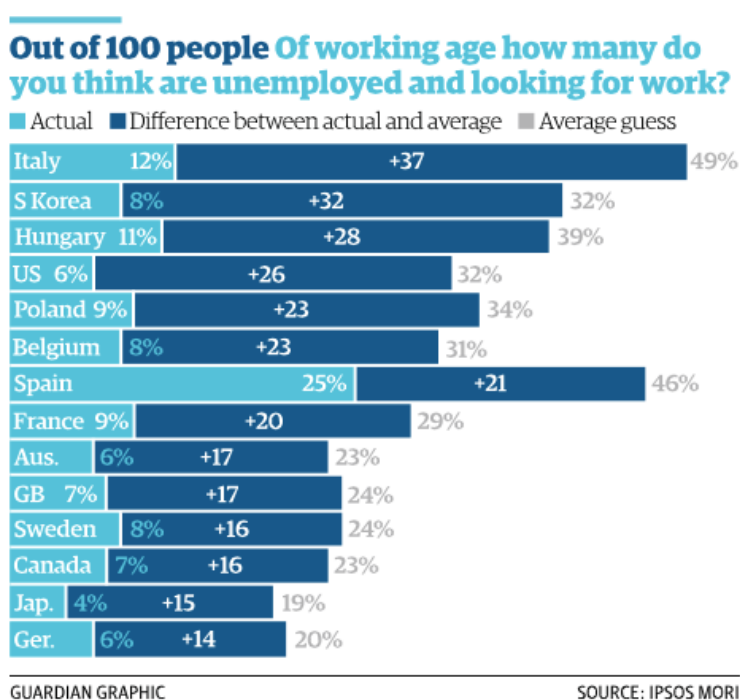
GUARDIAN GRAPHIC

SOURCE: IPSOS MORI

Italians were the most ignorant among those polled, while Swedes were the best informed. It is probably not a coincidence that trust in politics – by one measure at least, voter turnout – is high and stable in Sweden, and falling in Italy.

The majority of the countries Ipsos Mori surveyed also got it wrong on issues such as unemployment (usually overestimated), voter turnout (usually underestimated) and murder rates (a mix).

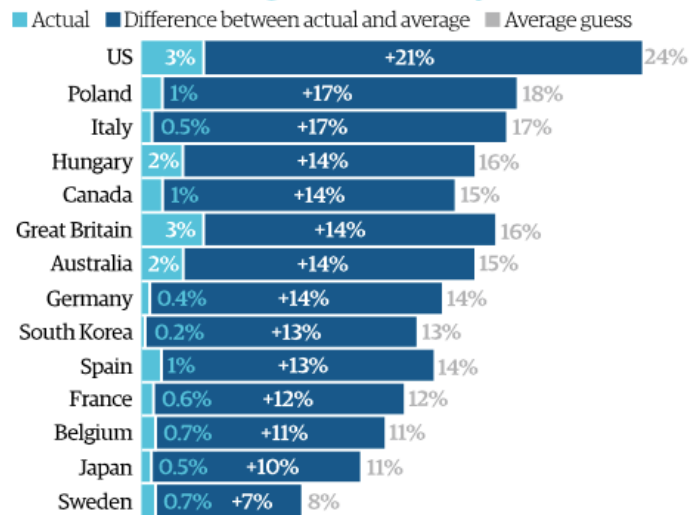
Britons believe 24% of people are unemployed, an estimate over three times higher than the actual rate.



But each country has its blind spots. Germans think teen pregnancy is 35 times worse than it is (0.4% of girls aged 15-19 give birth each year there). South Koreans believe their life expectancy is 89 (it's actually 80) and Spain is the only country to underestimate its youth unemployment rate, which stands at a pretty extreme 56%.

Australia is among the countries where people are mistakenly likely to say the murder rate is rising, while the UK is one of the only places that gets this specific metric right.

In your opinion What percentage of girls aged between 15 and 19 give birth each year?



GUARDIAN GRAPHIC

SOURCE: IPSOS MORI

These miscalculations will resonate very differently depending on other factors. One of these is the saliency of issues – the more a voter believes an issue to be important, the more they are likely to vote for a party they trust on that issue. The most recent Eurobarometer, an EU-wide survey carried out by TNS, found that immigration was a top-three issue of concern for voters in the UK, Malta, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, Bulgaria and Belgium.

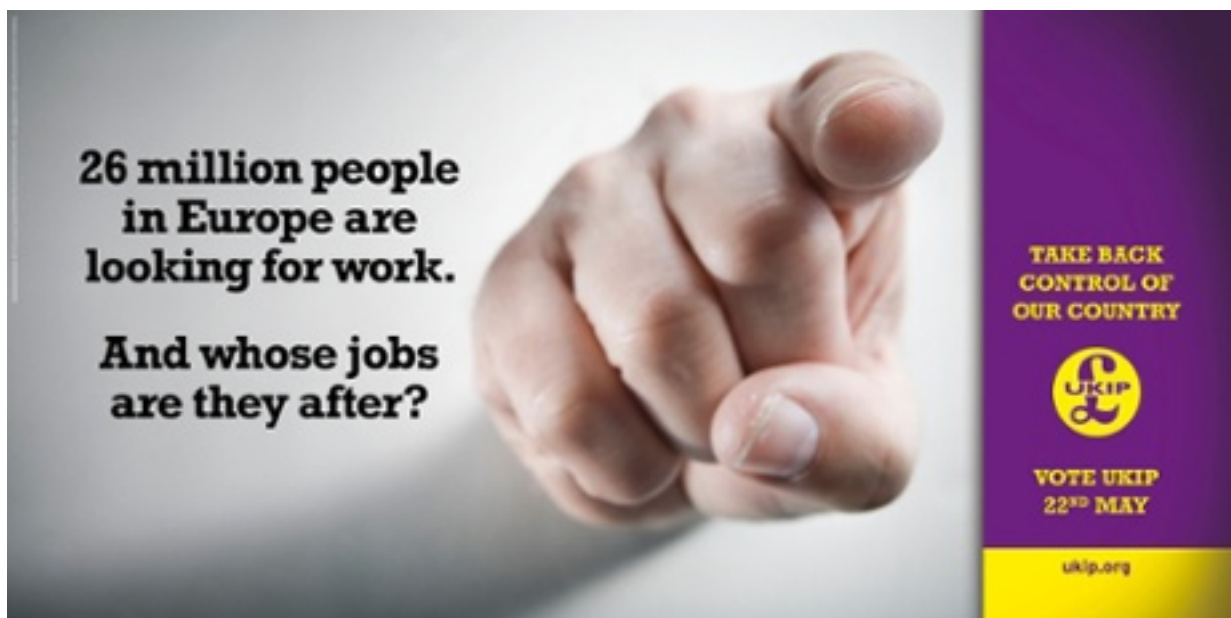
As in Britain, about 13% of the population in Germany are immigrants but Germans think the figure is actually about 10 percentage points higher. Yet a study by the [German Marshall Fund](#) from 2013 found that 64% of people in the UK see immigration as a problem compared to 29% who see it as an opportunity.

In Germany those numbers flip almost perfectly, with just 32% seeing immigration as a problem compared to 62% viewing it as an opportunity. Last week, Angela Merkel's CDU party organised [a summit for immigrants](#), and the German chancellor spoke of the importance of immigration and of Germany as a "country of integration".



Angela Merkel at the integration conference in Berlin. Photograph: Christian Marquardt/NurPhoto/Corbis

By contrast, over the weekend, the UK's defence secretary, [Michael Fallon](#), talked about British towns being “swamped” by immigrants in controversial comments that he was forced to row back from.



A Ukip poster. Photograph: Ukip/PA

It is one thing for public opinion to be shaped by the perception of issues and another when politicians choose to make promises and write policies to feed and satisfy misconceptions.

As Duffy puts it:

The real peril of these misperceptions is how politicians and policymakers react. Do they try to challenge people and correct their view of reality or do they take them as a signal of concern, the result of a more emotional reaction and design policy around them?

Clearly the ideal is to do a bit of both – politicians shouldn't misread these misperceptions as people simply needing to be re-educated and then their views will change – but they also need to avoid policy responses that just reinforce unfounded fears.