

DILEMMAS OF CONTROL:

*What does the public think about
immigration and how should
politicians respond?*

Findings from the Ipsos/British Future
immigration attitudes tracker

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British
Future...

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British Future is an independent, non-partisan think tank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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I. Introduction: Increasing volume, decreasing trust

The four years since the last general election have seen the biggest overhaul of UK immigration for half a century, with the end of free movement from the EU and a new points-based system for work and study. Immigration levels have been more volatile than ever before. They fell dramatically, disrupted by the pandemic, before rebounding to record levels last year – partly due to exceptional levels of immigration from Ukraine and Hong Kong but also because of Government policy choices.

Shifts in asylum flows and policy have been even more dramatic. The rising numbers of people crossing the Channel in small boats have made asylum, rather than immigration for work, the dominant immigration theme in politics, the media and for much of the public.

Such major changes, across many areas of immigration policy, have generated significant shifts in public attitudes too. The Ipsos tracker offers an authoritative overview, sustained over time, of continuity and change in public attitudes. These patterns of shifting attitudes are nuanced, complex and starkly polarised along party political lines.

The salience of immigration had fallen dramatically after 2016, partly reflecting the ‘control dividend’ of the new post-Brexit points system – but it has begun to rise again, particularly given the visible lack of control in the Channel.

The Government has actively promoted the higher profile of immigration – and has succeeded in raising its salience, particularly with voters who are most sceptical of immigration. Yet this strategy brings political risks, drawing public attention to an issue on which public satisfaction with the Government’s performance is at its lowest level since this tracker survey began in 2015.

Despite record levels of immigration to Britain, people are more divided than in the past over whether or not to cut the numbers. Historically, two-thirds of people had supported reducing immigration levels, varying little when immigration was high or low. This latest 2023 wave of the tracker survey took place a couple of months after the highest-ever net migration figures were released. Just under half of respondents favoured reducing the overall level of immigration to the UK, though this represented a rise from 42% to 48% between 2022 and 2023, suggesting that political and media discussion of the record levels had some impact.

There is now a stark polarisation over how far overall numbers matter. Most Conservatives want to see reductions, with a much narrower appetite to cut the numbers from Labour supporters.

The tracker data demonstrates why the claim that a persistent public demand for lower immigration is ignored by political and economic elites is too simplistic. Rather, both politicians and the public are grappling with the dilemmas of control. Attitudes towards migration are softer and more pragmatic when examined in detail – with distinct views about different flows of immigration.

So the dilemma of controlling numbers is that broad majorities of the public are reluctant to reduce some of the flows that contribute most to overall immigration levels. Half of those migration sceptics who want significant reductions in numbers would, for instance, exempt migration to work in the NHS or social care.

The public sees both the pressures and gains of immigration. The balance of attitudes tilts towards seeing a positive, pragmatic case for many flows of migration in specific sectors – for example those working in health, social care and other roles with labour shortages – even though more general top-of-mind opinions have become more negative recently. But there is low confidence that the Government is handling immigration competently and fairly, especially when it comes to asylum.

There is a still greater polarisation along demographic and political lines when it comes to questions of asylum.

There is broad frustration at the response to Channel crossings – but there is a significant split by political perspectives. Those on the right are frustrated by the Government’s failure to meet its promise to stop the boats; while supporters of the opposition are equally frustrated by a lack of compassion and a lack of control.

The Rwanda policy splits opinion, with a plurality but not a majority in favour, and majorities sceptical that it could work, or be a good use of resources. The Government’s new ‘Illegal Migration Act’ is much less well known than the Rwanda policy. Its underlying principle – that those who come to the UK by irregular routes from Europe should not be able to claim in the UK – splits the public evenly. Conservative supporters are broadly in favour while most Labour voters are opposed, believing that asylum claims should be decided on their merits, regardless of how people came to the UK.

As Britain enters an election year and with public attitudes divided along party lines, we should expect to see a noisier and more heated immigration debate, despite the nuance in overall public opinion. The shifting picture of public attitudes presents different challenges for politicians of different parties. Yet there is a common need to better understand where the public is coming from, in all its nuance and complexity – and to work to rebuild damaged public trust in the capacity of politicians and the Government to manage it well, in the interests of new arrivals to Britain and the communities that they join.

2. About this report and the immigration attitudes tracker

This report presents new findings from the Immigration Tracker conducted by Ipsos for British Future. This nationally representative survey of 3,000 adults (18+) across Great Britain, conducted online between 14 July and 8 August 2023, is the latest of 15 waves of research into public attitudes to immigration since 2015.

As a tracker survey, the Immigration Tracker enables changes in attitudes to be identified over time as political, economic and social contexts change. Data have been weighted by age, gender, region, social grade and educational attainment to match the profile of the population.

British Future has analysed public responses to a range of questions, looking at differences by characteristics such as age, gender, social class and region as well as political allegiances. Where questions were asked in earlier waves of the tracker, we have looked for movement over time.

The full tables showing the findings of this wave of the tracker are published online by Ipsos at <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/immigration-tracker-september-2023>

We have also examined how responses to policy questions vary by people's broad perspectives on immigration. Our previous work has found that, while some people are strongly opposed to immigration and others are strongly in favour, most people typically hold a mix of views. We asked people to give a 0-10 score to indicate whether they feel immigration has had a positive or negative impact on Britain (with 0 very negative and 10 very positive) and used these scores to segment people into three groups: 'migration sceptics', 'migration liberals' and the 'balancers' who sit somewhere in between. The largest group of respondents to the immigration tracker survey are balancers, giving a score of 4-7 (44%). Roughly a fifth are 'migration liberals', giving a score in the upper reaches of 8-10 (21%); while a slightly higher proportion are 'migration sceptics', giving a score of 0-3 (28%). These classifications are used to shed light on responses to some more detailed areas of policy and differ slightly from the categories used by Ipsos when showing trends over time.¹ Both scales are used within the analysis of the report.

The Immigration Attitudes Tracker project is funded by Unbound Philanthropy and the Barrow Cadbury Trust. We are grateful for their ongoing support.

3. Public attitudes in a period of record net migration

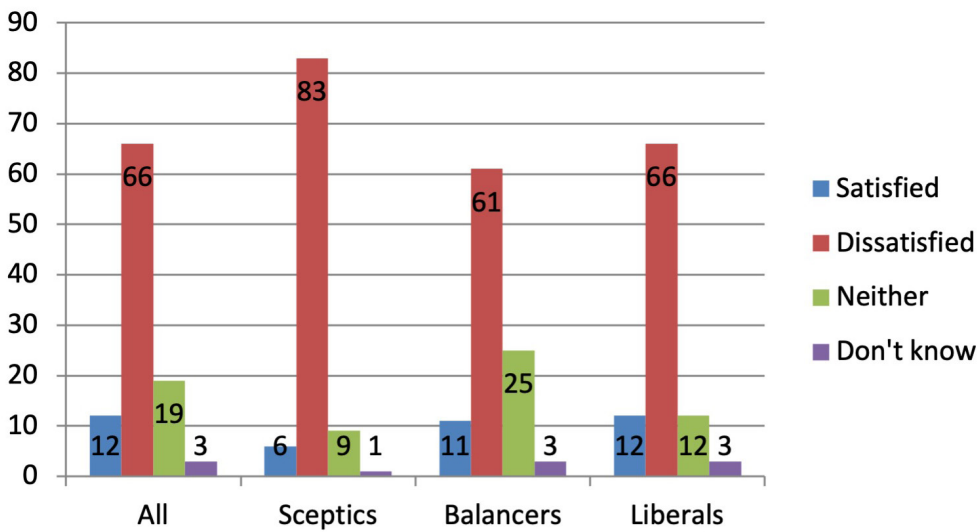
It is ten years since the then Prime Minister David Cameron committed the Conservative Party to renegotiating the UK's membership of the EU and to an in-out referendum² and seven since the British public voted to leave. For many, immigration was at least part of their decision to tick the Leave box. In the passing years, attitudes shifted in a positive direction. In 2023, more people still view immigration positively than negatively – by 43% to 37% – though the proportion seeing immigration as having a negative impact has risen by 8 points since 2022, most likely reflecting the heightened salience of asylum and lack of an effective response from the Government.

The last year has been a remarkable one for immigration in a number of respects. Record numbers of people have arrived in the UK on small boats and the Government has positioned channel crossings for asylum at the top of its agenda. Separately the UK has seen record levels of net migration via official routes. Successive attempts to reduce numbers of asylum seekers have failed. The Government has continued to press ahead with policies and commentary on the theme of keeping 'illegal' migrants out. It is not surprising that this has impacted on public attitudes towards migrants. It has also undermined trust and satisfaction with the Government with regard to immigration policy.

The tracker includes questions about immigration in general, about attitudes towards migration for work, and towards asylum seekers and refugees. As we show in Chapter 3, attitudes towards migration for work are stable and generally positive, while those towards migration in general are not. A recent survey by the Migration Observatory found that two-thirds (65%) of people see the term 'immigrants' as referring to asylum seekers and refugees and only 38% think of immigration for work.³ Concern about small boats, and the Government's response to this type of migration are therefore likely to have been the principal influence on attitudes.

Two-thirds of people (66%) are dissatisfied with the way the Government is dealing with immigration, the highest level in the tracker's history. This dissatisfaction cuts across party politics, with only a fifth (22%) of Conservative supporters satisfied with the Government on immigration and most Tories (56%) dissatisfied. Almost three quarters (73%) of Labour supporters are dissatisfied. People with more negative views about immigration, across political allegiances, are more likely than those with more balanced or liberal views to be dissatisfied with the Government: only 6% of migration sceptics are satisfied with the Government's handling of immigration.⁴

Fig.3.1: Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way the current government is dealing with immigration? Migration sceptics, balancers and liberals

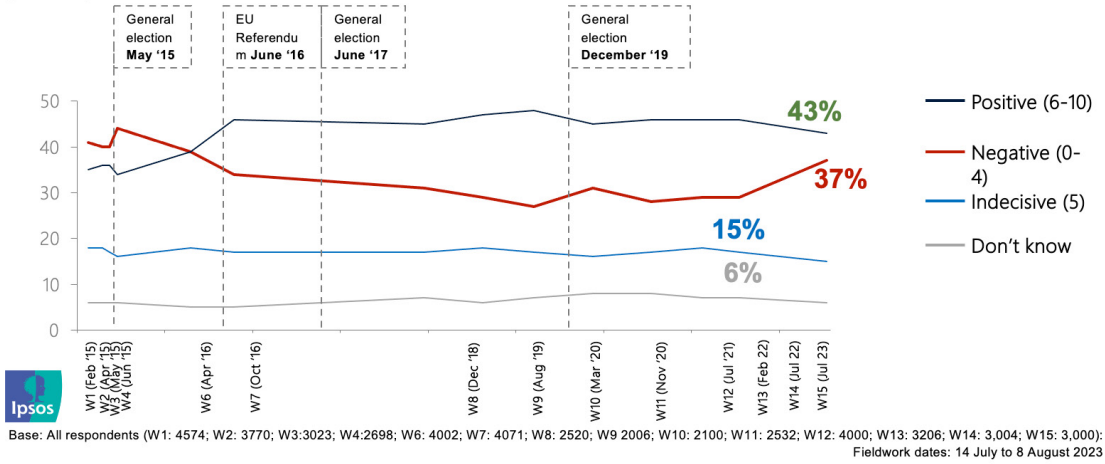


Asylum applications increased by 19% in the year to June 2023, totalling 78,768 – the highest number for twenty years.⁵ Concern about small boats, alongside repeated Government announcements, failed policy interventions and media coverage, are likely to explain the increased salience of immigration among the public. At the time of the survey in August 2023 it was fifth in the Ipsos issues index, identified as a top concern by 23% of the public: its salience increased gradually during 2023, up 11 points since February 2023 and up 6 points since May 2023.⁶ However, while creeping up in salience, it is still considerably lower than concerns about inflation and prices, which tops the list as a worry for 37% of the public. This reflects the cost of living crisis: 37% of tracker respondents said they are finding it difficult or very difficult living on their current income, up 5 percentage points since 2022.

As Figure 3.2 shows, 43% of respondents believe the impact of immigration is positive, while 37% see it as negative. Slightly fewer see the impact of immigration as positive compared to a year ago, while more see it as negative (37% vs 29%).

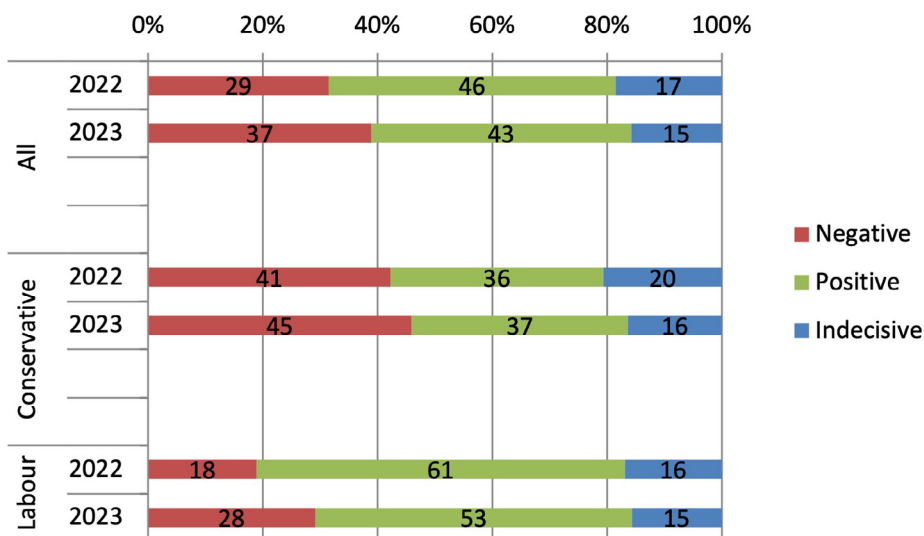
Fig.3.2: Public attitudes to immigration over time

Q On a scale of 0 to 10, has migration had a positive or negative impact on Britain? (0 is "very negative", 10 is "very positive")



As Figure 3.3 below shows, Labour supporters have considerably more positive views towards immigration than Conservatives – though the proportion viewing migration positively has fallen somewhat since 2022, which may be partly due to the growth and change in composition of the Labour supporter group as voters have switched allegiance. Younger people view immigration more positively, with half of 18-34 year olds believing its impact to be positive, compared to a third of people aged 55 and over. Londoners are also more positive than those in the UK as a whole (59% vs 43%). It is most likely that these differences are explained by contact with migrants in everyday life.

Fig.3.3: Has migration had a positive or negative impact on Britain? Conservative vs Labour Party supporters

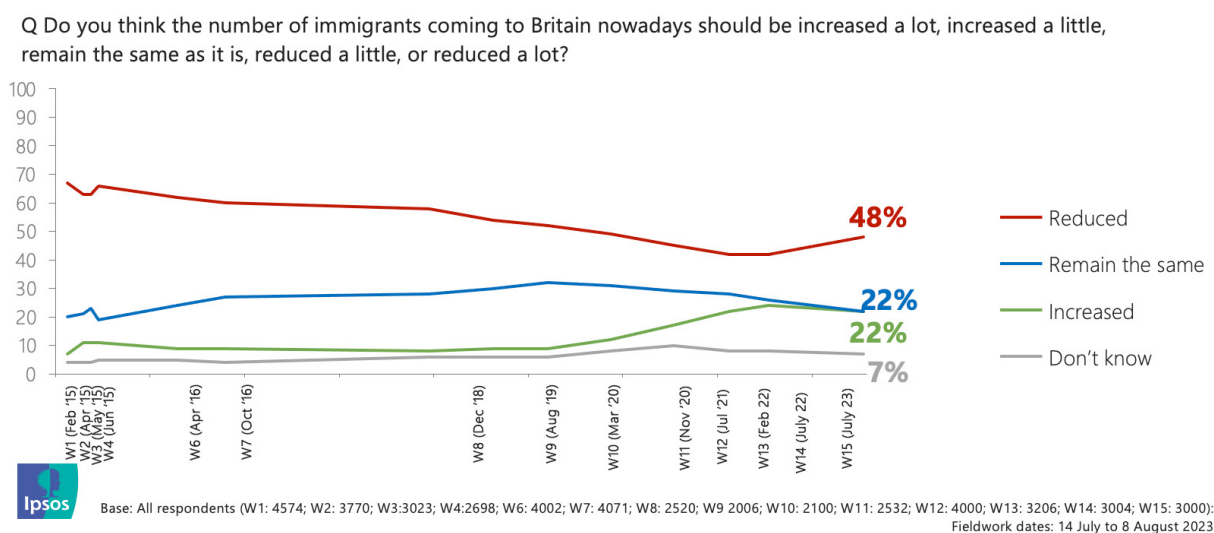


The issue of migrant numbers has been in the news headlines fairly consistently all year.

This wave of the tracker survey was carried out in July-August 2023, two months after the publication in May of figures showing record levels of net migration. The release of the figures was trailed for some weeks, with speculation that the net figure could be as high as one million.⁷ In this period of heightened press attention, Conservative politicians, including the Home Secretary Suella Braverman, warned of the need for urgent action to reduce numbers.

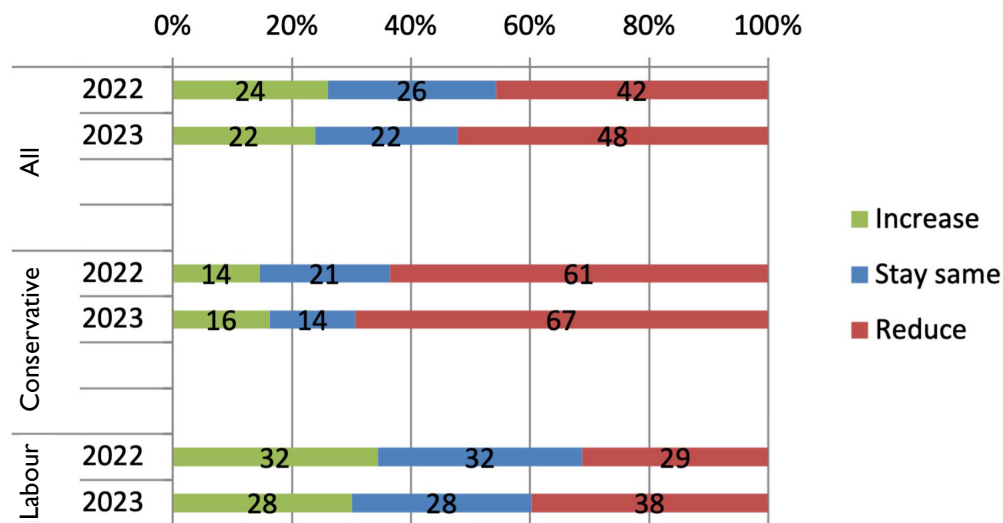
As Figure 3.4 shows, just under half of respondents (48%) said they would like the number of migrants coming to the UK to be reduced, a six-point increase since 2022, while a similar proportion (44%) said they would like numbers to be increased (22%) or to stay the same (22%).

Fig.3.4: Public preference for immigration numbers to be reduced, increased or stay the same, over time



Conservative supporters are fairly firmly in favour of reducing migration, with two-thirds (67%) supporting reductions. In contrast, not much more than a third (38%) of Labour supporters favour reductions, and more than half (56%) say immigration numbers should increase or stay the same (Fig 3.5, below). While Conservative policies aimed at reducing immigration are favoured by their supporters, they have considerably less support among the wider public, particularly among younger age groups. It also looks likely that the views of Conservatives are more affected by small boats than migration for work, since attitudes towards the latter have not changed much since 2022.

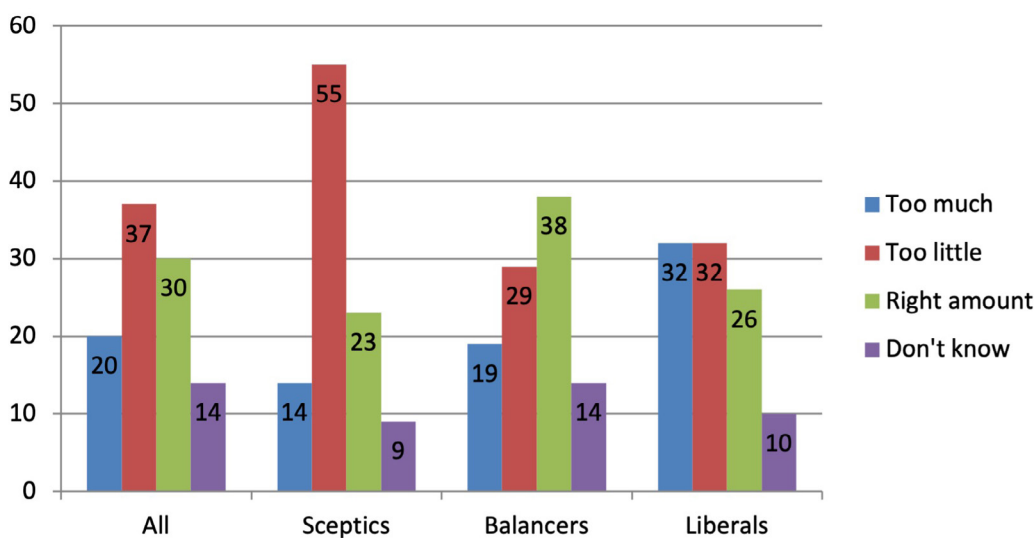
Fig.3.5: Should the number of immigrants coming to Britain be increased, reduced or remain the same? (Including by party support)



In the years leading up to the EU referendum, public figures often stated that immigration was discussed too little. Those who agreed with this statement in earlier waves of the tracker were more likely to oppose than support migration. During 2023 the salience of immigration has increased alongside political attention and press coverage. However, as Figure 3.6 shows, the tracker has found that people are still more likely to say immigration has been discussed too little (37%) than too much (20%) or about the right amount (30%). This is largely explained by a continuation of the view among immigration sceptics that immigration isn't discussed enough, with over half agreeing with this statement. This group has high levels of dissatisfaction with how the Government is dealing with immigration and are likely to want to share their concerns with others. As in previous tracker surveys, older people – a more dissatisfied group on immigration – were more likely than those in younger age groups to feel immigration is discussed too little.

Fig.3.6: Do we talk too much or too little about immigration?

Do you think that the issue of immigration has been discussed in Britain too much, too little or about the right amount over the last few months?



Overall, tracker findings on the general questions about immigration to Britain show that the positive trend in attitudes apparent since 2015 has levelled off, with some negative views increasing. Slightly fewer see its impact as positive compared to a year ago and considerably more see it as negative: views are slightly more polarised with the proportion in the 'balancer' group falling from 50% to 44%. At the same time, the proportion who would like immigration to be increased or kept the same is roughly similar to those who would like it reduced: among Labour supporters this is 56% vs 38%.

While it might be expected that Conservatives and immigration sceptics would be supportive of the Government's approach to immigration, this is not the case: the majority of the Government's own supporters and more than eight in ten migration sceptics are dissatisfied. This could be explained by the prominence given by the Conservative Government to stopping small boats and its lack of success in achieving this. Record levels of net migration in the year to March 2023 could also be a factor, including international student numbers and work visas. The following chapter looks at attitudes towards these types of migration, while we take a more in-depth view of attitudes to asylum seekers in Chapter 5.

4. Shared ground: workers and students

Since 2016 the trend towards more positive attitudes to immigration has been most apparent in relation to migration for work. Successive tracker surveys have found strong support for work-related migration, in particular to address skills and labour shortages. This support has cut across age groups and political allegiance. The view that migrants' skills and labour were needed both during the pandemic and to assist economic recovery from 2021 are widely held.⁸ Concerns about the economy continue, with inflation and prices at the top of the Ipsos Issues index⁹: this is likely to have sustained the public view that migration for work is a positive benefit, and that migrants are not taking jobs from British workers.¹⁰

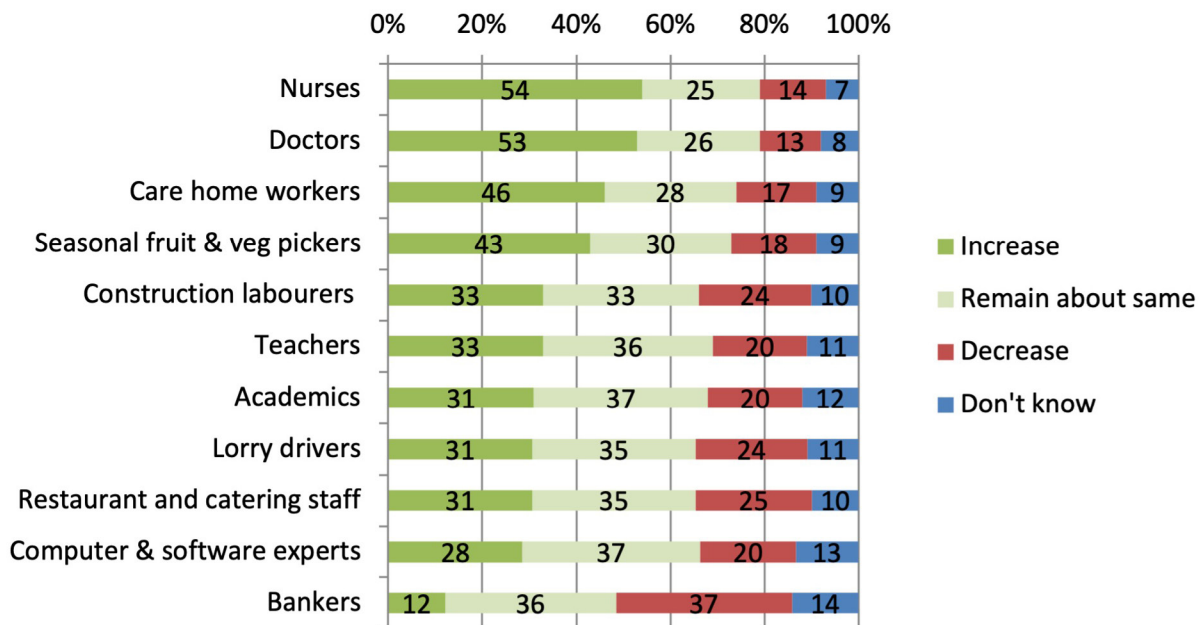
Research consistently finds that the public is positive towards international students, recognising their economic and diplomatic value to Britain.¹¹ Generally student immigration is seen as relatively uncontroversial, since the public regards them as temporary migrants, here for legitimate reasons and to be 'putting in more than they take out'. However, the release in May 2023 of record net migration figures highlighted student migration, and that of students' dependents, in a less positive way.

The publication of high net migration figures put this broad consensus on the benefits of migration for work and study to the test. The tracker survey was carried out just two months after the release of figures showing record levels of net migration, at 600,600, via official routes. A total of 2,112,697 visas were issued (excluding visitor visas). These included 487,771 people coming to take up work visas, amounting to an increase of 76% on the previous year; 477,931 sponsored study visas and a further 149,400 visas to their dependants¹²; 174,000 Ukrainians arriving through the Ukraine visa schemes and 113,500 Hong Kongers on the British National (Overseas) scheme¹³; 65,642 people joining family members; together with 22,648 asylum seekers who were granted refugee status.

Positive attitudes towards migration for work continue

In the current wave of the tracker we asked directly about immigration for specific occupations, repeating the question asked in 2022. Responses changed very little over the year, with some very small increases in support for reduction but with support for increases in certain occupations remaining higher.

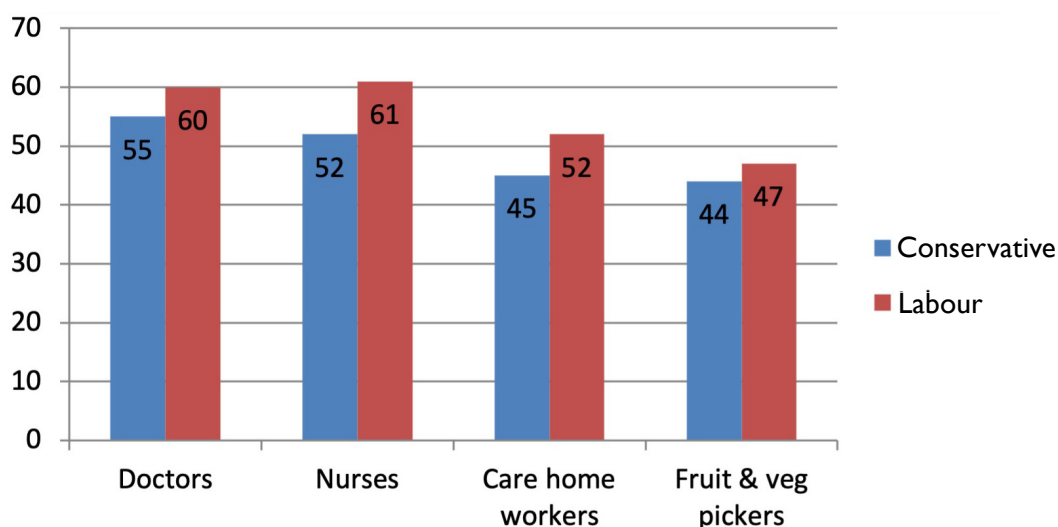
Fig.4.1: Would you prefer the number of migrants doing the following jobs to be increased, remain the same or reduced?



As Figure 4.1 shows, almost eight in ten people would like numbers of migrant nurses and doctors to increase or stay the same and almost three-quarters support this approach for social care workers. There is support for an increase in migrant doctors and nurses from a majority of respondents. Health and care visas represented over half of all worker visas in the year ending March 2023. Although respondents may not have been aware of this, the tracker findings indicate strong support for the approach. There has also been a significant increase in the number of visas granted to nurses and medical practitioners: in the year to March 2023 102,000 health and care visas were granted, up more than two and a half times on the previous year; this rate of increase has continued so that in the year to June 2023 the health and care sector accounted for 57% of all worker visas.¹⁴

Seasonal agriculture work has been in the news at regular intervals during 2023 and was the subject of a public disagreement between the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and the Home Secretary Suella Braverman. In May the Home Secretary’s call for more British people to become fruit pickers to reduce reliance on foreign labour was swiftly followed by a pledge from the Prime Minister to make an additional 10,000 agricultural visas available on top of the 45,000 already allocated to the sector.¹⁵ The tracker shows strong support for migrant recruitment to the sector, with almost three-quarters wanting numbers to increase or stay the same: 43% of the public supports an increase and only 18% support a reduction in numbers.

Fig.4.2: Support for increasing migrant visa numbers (By party support)



As Figure 4.2 shows, levels of support for increasing visas in health and social care and in agriculture differ according to political allegiance, but not by much.

With the exception of bankers, levels of support for increasing or keeping numbers the same are broadly similar across other occupations: construction workers, teachers, IT professionals, hospitality staff, lorry drivers and academics. For each of these, a majority of 65-69% support numbers increasing or staying the same (with more wanting numbers to stay the same than increase), while 20-25% favour a decrease.

In 2021 the Government made it easier for employers to recruit HGV drivers from overseas.¹⁶ In July of this year, construction workers were added to the shortage occupation list, again to make it easier to recruit migrant bricklayers, plasterers and other construction workers.¹⁷ The tracker findings suggest that there would not be public support for reversing this policy to reduce migration to these roles.

Control vs numbers

We have asked tracker respondents over several waves of this survey since 2021 whether they prefer immigration policy to prioritise reducing numbers or achieving control. Since 2021 significantly more people see it as important that the UK government has control over who can or can't come into the UK, whether or not that means numbers are significantly reduced, than that the UK pursues a policy based on deterrence that keeps numbers low. In 2022 control was favoured by 40% of the public, with 27% saying they would prioritise keeping numbers

low. Conservative supporters are consistently more supportive than Labour voters on both options, but in 2022 a majority of Conservatives (53%) said they would prioritise controlling immigration, compared to a third (36%) who would focus on deterrence.

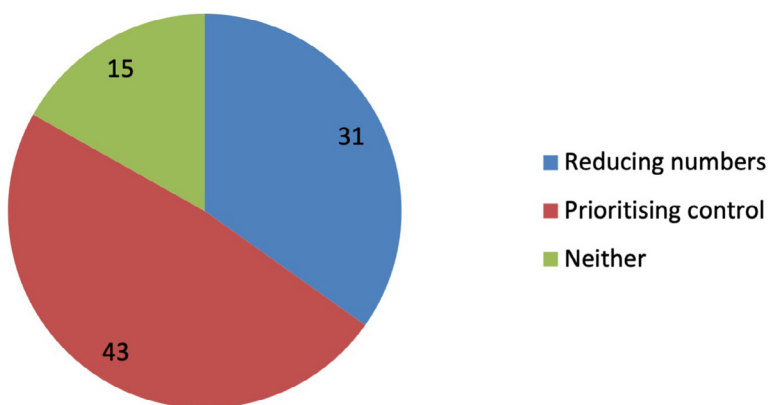
In the latest wave of the tracker we clarified this question, making it more specifically about immigration for work and for study. Respondents were asked whether they felt it was more important that the government prioritise reducing overall numbers, even if that means turning down some people who might have otherwise been offered visas to work in business or public services; or whether the government should prioritise controlling and selecting who it wants to come to Britain, even if that means overall numbers may remain higher.

As Figure 4.3 shows, the most favoured policy on immigration for work is to select who can come to Britain, rather than aiming to reduce numbers.

Fig.4.3: Which is most important, reducing numbers or controlling immigration?

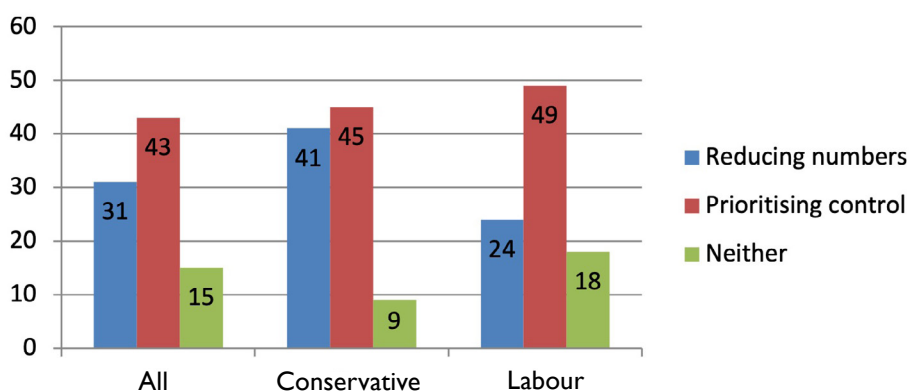
When thinking about the government's immigration policy, which of the following best describes what is most important to you?

- (a) The government should prioritise reducing overall immigration numbers, even if that means turning down some people who might have otherwise been offered visas to work in business or public services.*
- (b) The government should prioritise controlling and selecting who it wants to come to Britain, even if that means overall immigration numbers may remain higher.*



There are some differences by political allegiance, with Conservatives more likely than Labour supporters to favour reducing numbers. However, control is – by a slim margin in the case of Conservatives – the most popular option among supporters of both parties.

Fig.4.4: Support for numbers vs control by political allegiance

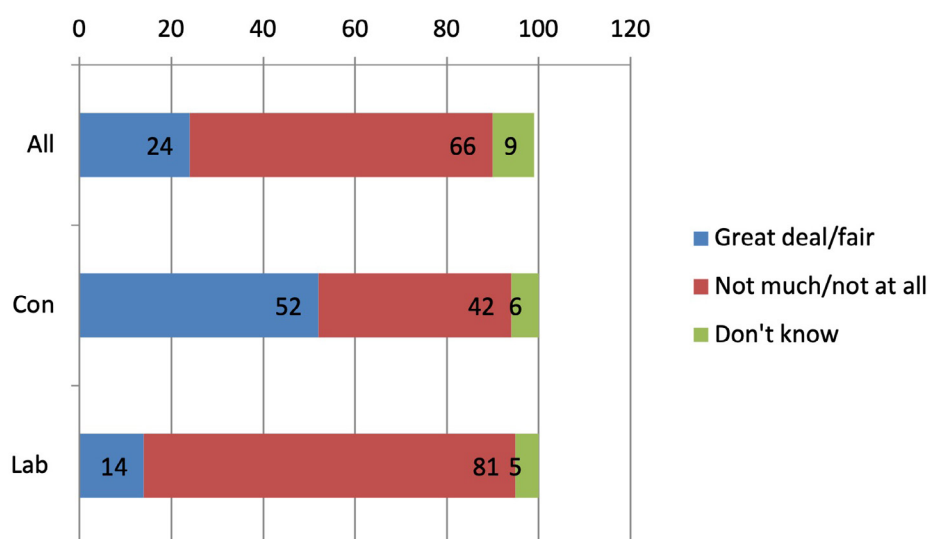


Taken together with support for increasing migration in some occupations and keeping it the same in others, these findings show continuing broad support for work migration, which cuts across political allegiance. This is likely to be from a continuing recognition of the role of migrants in key sectors, in particular health and social care. The public may also be aware of labour market developments including the loss of some EU migrants during Brexit and the pandemic, and the exodus of older people from work, which has increased the number of job vacancies.¹⁸

The tracker responses would seem to endorse current government policy, which involves exerting control over entry via the points-based system. However, almost one in four people who are dissatisfied with the Government's performance on immigration say this is because it is not doing enough to fill shortages. Labour supporters were more likely than Conservatives to have this criticism, at 31% vs 14% of respondents.

A separate question was asked to all respondents about whether they trust the Government to deliver the right policies in relation to migration for work. As seen in Figure 4.5 below, responses show clear differences between Conservative and Labour supporters, but only just over half of Conservatives trust the party they support on this issue. The views of immigration balancers, sceptics and liberals are not substantially different on this question, with sceptics the most critical.

Fig.4.5: How much do you trust in the Conservative Party to have the right policies on migration for work? (Including by party support)



International students

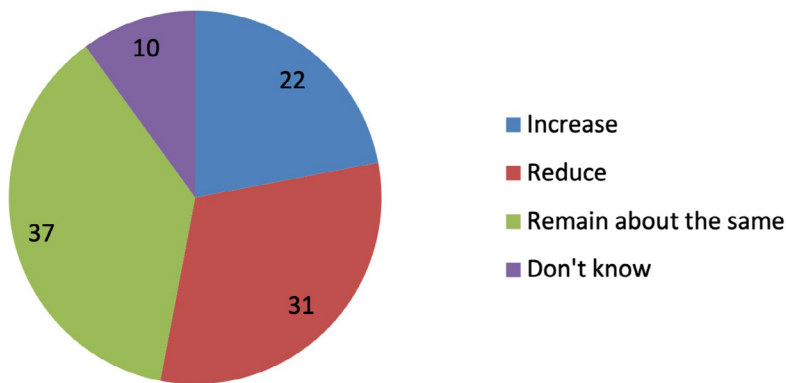
As noted earlier, while attitudes towards international students have largely been consistently positive, the release in May 2023 of record net migration figures put this to the test in a similar way to the figures for migration for work. The figures showed a large increase in migration of students, but particularly of student dependants: in the year to March 2023 477,931 sponsored study visas were issued to main applicants, 22% more than in the year ending March 2022. In addition 149,400 visas were granted to their dependants.¹⁹ The number of dependants in 2019, the most recent pre-Covid, intake, was 16,000. There were particularly large increases in numbers of students, and of dependants, from India and Nigeria, with these two countries accounting for 73% of dependant visas.²⁰

Media reports following release of the net migration figures in May 2023 included a strong focus on the number of students and student dependants. There was media speculation that the student visa route was being used as a way to work in the UK and perhaps to circumvent controls over work visas. Government responded swiftly to change the rules so that international students can bring dependants only if they are on post-graduate research programmes. The ability to switch from study to work visas before studies end was also removed.²¹

Reducing net migration numbers was a strong motivation behind the rule changes. The Government described the changes as the ‘single biggest tightening measure a government has ever done’. The Home Secretary Suella Braverman said the Government

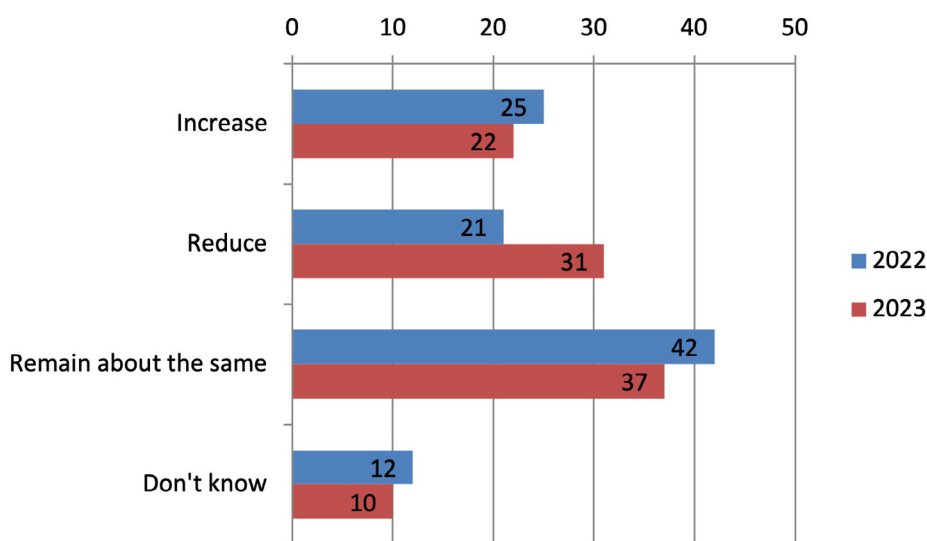
expected the changes to have a ‘tangible impact’ on net migration.²² This represents a change in position: the Government set a target to increase the number of international students to 600,000 by 2030,²³ which has not changed. Yet in December 2022 there were reports that the Government was discussing plans to reduce the number of international students.²⁴

Fig.4.6: Would the public like the number of international students to be increased, reduced or stay the same?



As Figure 4.6 shows, 31% of respondents said they would like the number of international students to be reduced. The most common response was for numbers to remain the same, at 37% with a further 22% preferring numbers to increase. The impact of coverage of the net migration figures is clear when comparing attitudes with those of the previous tracker. As Figure 4.7 shows, support for reducing numbers has increased by ten percentage points.

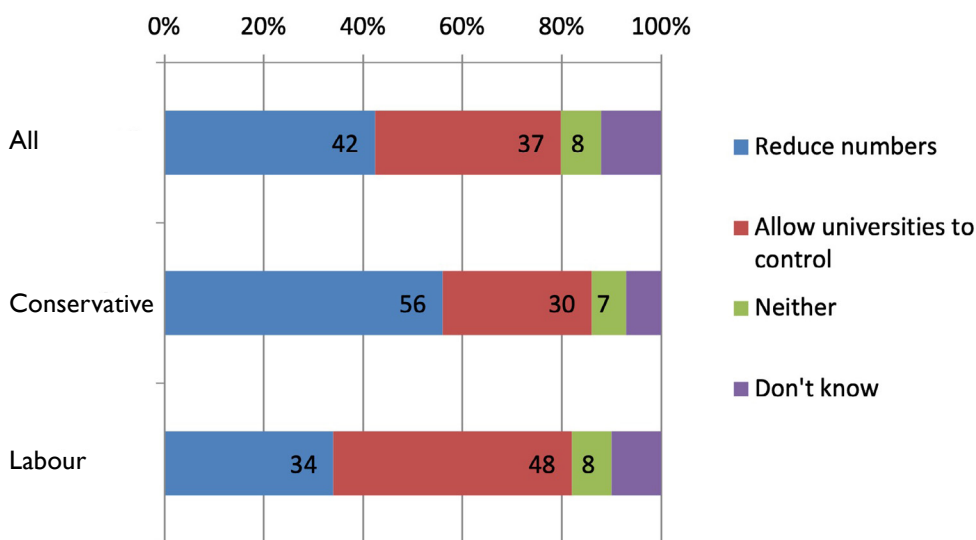
Fig.4.7: Would the public like the number of international students to be increased, reduced or stay the same? (2022 vs 2023)



Views on international student numbers are divided along party political lines, with Conservative supporters more likely to support reducing student numbers. While 44% of Conservatives would like student numbers to be reduced, this falls to 24% among Labour supporters, of whom 26% would like migration for study to increase.

Given the complexity of current arrangements and future plans, we asked a question aimed at measuring public support for centralised limits or for autonomy on the part of Higher Education Institutions. Respondents were asked whether they supported a government policy that places a limit on the number of international student visas, even if this means less income from international students for universities and their local areas; or whether they would allow universities to decide how many international students they enrol, even if this means net migration remains high.

Fig.4.8: Is it more important to reduce student numbers or to allow universities to control who they offer places to? (Conservatives vs Labour supporters)



As figure 4.8 shows, reducing numbers is the more popular option overall, but Labour and Conservative supporters are split between preferring universities to control entry, or for numbers to be cut. Younger people and graduates are also more likely than others to prefer universities to control entry rather than for international student numbers to be reduced.

Attitudes towards international students suggest that the coverage of record migration, followed by the government response to reduce numbers, has influenced attitudes. The tracker did not ask about student (or worker) dependants, which has attracted the

most controversy. Changes introduced by the Government in the wake of the statistics may reduce international student migration, or they may just reduce the number of dependants. The next wave of the tracker will assess the extent to which opinion has been swayed in the short term or whether it is part of a longer-term change in attitudes.

5. Contested terrain: refugees and asylum

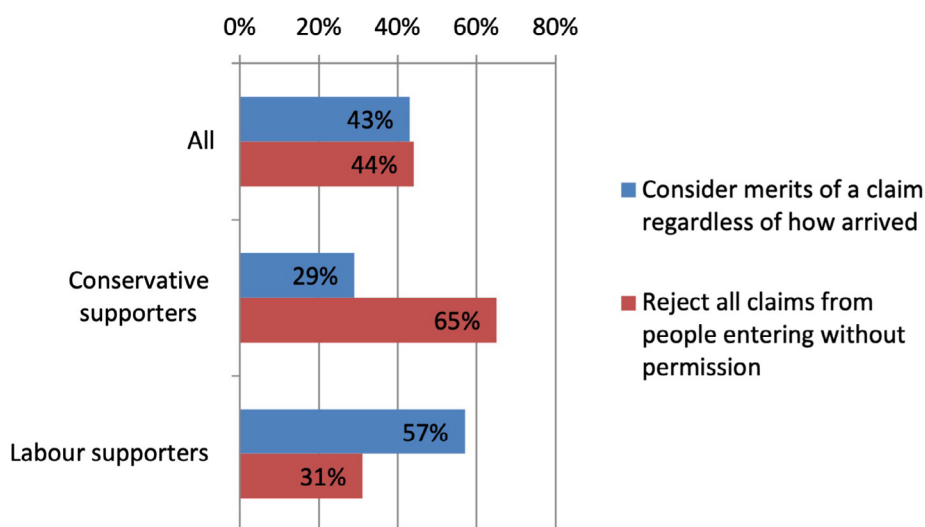
Public and political debate about immigration has become increasingly dominated by the issue of asylum and irregular arrivals in the UK by small boats across the Channel. This partly reflects the continuing volume and media optics of irregular arrivals by small boat, a frequent focus of media coverage; and also the Government's turning up the heat of the asylum debate with regular media briefings and headline-grabbing policy proposals.

The result has seen an increase in salience of asylum and Channel crossings, cited by 27% of the public in recent Ipsos polling²⁵ as one of their most important priorities – though still lagging behind the cost of living at 67% and the 58% who prioritise the NHS. Yet our tracker finds the public divided over what to do about this issue, unconvinced by the policies of the Government towards it, and with doubts about the Opposition's agenda too

Headline policies like the Government's new Illegal Migration Act and the Rwanda scheme divide the public, with sharply differing opinions held by Conservative and Labour supporters. The Illegal Migration Act says that the UK will refuse to consider an asylum claim from anyone arriving without permission across the Channel, and will seek to remove them. This approach splits the public down the middle. Some 44% agree that 'The UK Government should reject all asylum claims from people who enter without permission, even if some of those claims would be deemed valid on their merits.' Yet 43% think that 'The UK Government should consider the merits of someone's asylum claim and then make a decision, regardless of how people have arrived in the UK.'

Responses are split on party political lines. Conservatives support the principle behind the new legislation by two to one, with 65% supporting the rejection of claims by irregular arrivals and 29% preferring them to get a hearing in the UK. Support among 'Undecided Conservatives', those likely to vote for Rishi Sunak's party at the next election but not entirely sure, is somewhat weaker at 56%, with 34% preferring to hear claims in the UK. Most Labour supporters, including those not fully decided on their vote, would prefer asylum claims to be heard in the UK regardless of how people arrived here, by 57% to 31%.

Fig 5.1: Should the UK hear asylum claims from people arriving by irregular routes?



The new policy also divides by generation, with 18-34s favouring hearing people's claims by 55% to 26%, while 59% of over-55s support rejecting the claims of anyone arriving without permission. Men are more likely than women to support the rejection of these asylum claims, part of a growing split by gender that we examine in more detail below.

One corollary of the polarising effect of this policy is to turn up the heat yet further in our immigration debate. On this question of hearing claims in the UK or rejecting them on the grounds of irregular arrival, three-quarters of migration sceptics support rejecting claims, while three-quarters of migration liberals support hearing them. This only seems likely to fuel a polarised and angry debate between these two camps, in which the views of the 'Balancer' group in the middle – who split 45/40 in favour of hearing people's claims regardless of how they arrived in the UK – can struggle to get a hearing.

Alongside the Illegal Migration Act, the Government is also pursuing efforts to operationalise its Rwanda scheme, whereby people entering the UK without permission and seeking asylum could be deported to Rwanda and told to lodge an asylum claim in the Rwandan system instead. The scheme has been mired in legal disputes, having been ruled unlawful by the Court of Appeal, and to date no deportations to Rwanda have taken place.

The workings of the proposed Rwanda scheme are frequently misdescribed, including by the national media and on occasion by MPs and Government ministers. So this latest wave of the Immigration attitudes tracker sought to examine what the public understands by the Rwanda scheme, setting out three versions of a UK-Rwanda scheme (plus a 'No asylum deals at all with Rwanda' option) and asking which they preferred.

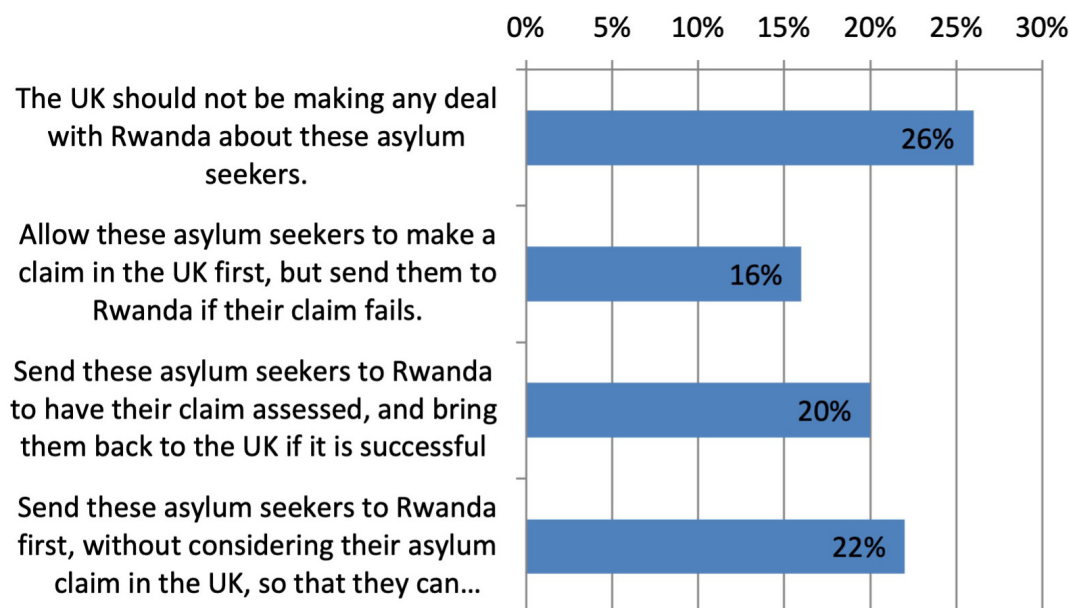
Only 22% choose the Government's scheme – to deport people to Rwanda without hearing their claim, and let them apply for asylum in the Rwandan system instead.

Some 36% choose a version of the Rwanda scheme that is different to the one on offer. One in five people (20%) support using Rwanda for offshore processing, where people are sent there to have their claims heard and those who are successful are brought back to the UK to live here. A further 16% would process claims here in the UK but send people to Rwanda if their asylum claim is unsuccessful.

A quarter of the public (26%) reject all forms of the Rwanda scheme, agreeing that 'The UK should not be making any deal with Rwanda about these asylum seekers.' Four in ten Labour supporters (40%) choose this option, compared to 9% of Conservatives.

The Government's scheme is more popular with Conservative supporters, 37% of whom chose it from our list, compared to only 13% of Labour supporters. Yet nearly half (46%) of Conservative supporters prefer one of the two alternative versions of the Rwanda scheme that are not being proposed by the Government.

Fig 5.2: What version of the Rwanda scheme, if any, would the public prefer?

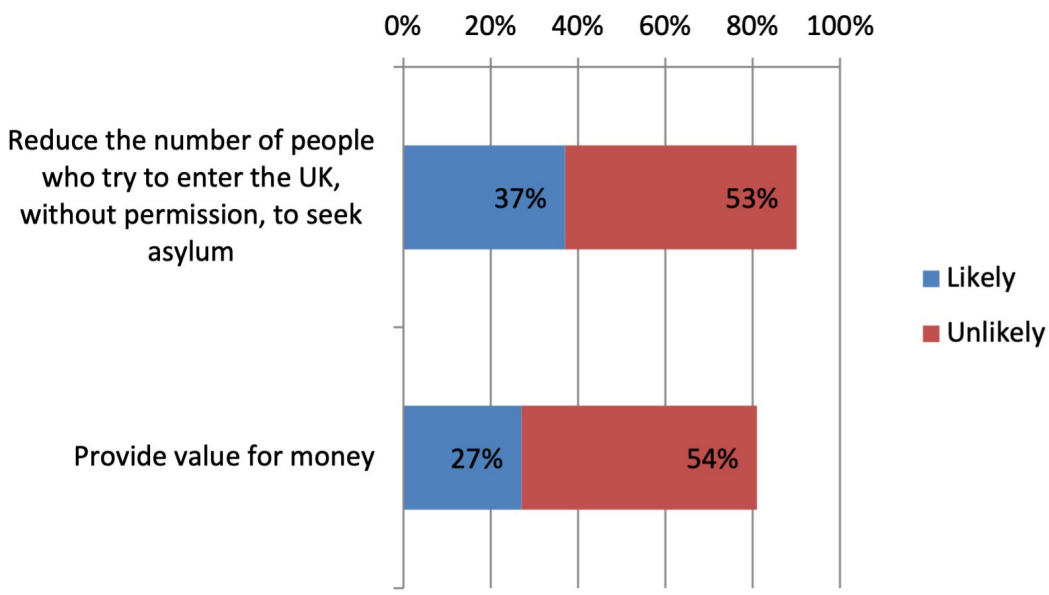


These new findings suggest that there may be misunderstanding among the public as to exactly what the Rwanda scheme entails. Some may believe that it would be used as either an offshore processing site for UK asylum claims or a deportation location for those whose claims have failed; others may prefer the policy to shift in that direction. While only around 3 in 10 people oppose the Rwanda proposal, there is no majority in favour of it either. A further tracker question, describing the Rwanda scheme and asking if people support or oppose it, found a similar response to previous polls: 28% strongly support and 19% tend to support the Rwanda scheme, while 29% are opposed and 16% say they neither support nor oppose it.

Public opinion is pessimistic about the likely outcomes of the Rwanda scheme, should it get off the ground. Most of the public (53%) thinks that the Rwanda scheme is unlikely to reduce the number of people who try to enter the UK, without permission, to seek asylum. Just 37% think it is likely to achieve this key aim of the policy. And only around a quarter of the public (27%) think the Rwanda scheme is likely to provide value for money, with 54% thinking it is unlikely to do so. Conservative voters are split on this question, with 43% feeling that the Rwanda scheme is likely to offer value for money and a similar 41% believing it is unlikely to do so.

Fig.5.3: Public views of the Rwanda scheme’s effectiveness and cost

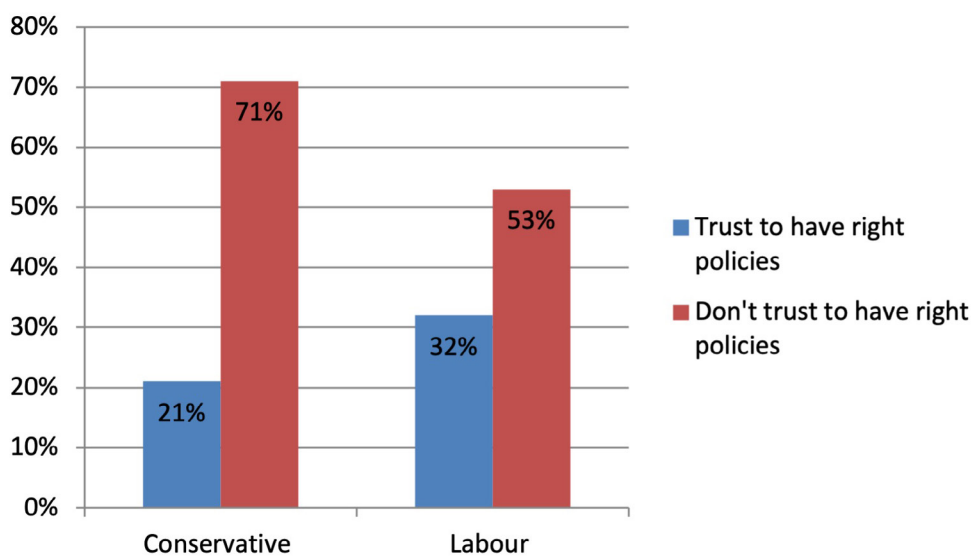
Do you think the Rwanda scheme is likely or unlikely to...



Division and dissatisfaction over policy is manifested in the tone of the asylum debate and attitudes to the issue more broadly – including a lack of trust in politicians to get a grip. As discussed previously, only 12% of people say they are satisfied with how the Government is handling immigration, with 66% saying they are dissatisfied. For that two-thirds expressing dissatisfaction, the most-cited reason is ‘Not doing enough to stop channel migrant crossings’, chosen by 59%. That is followed by ‘Immigration numbers are too high’ (48% of those who are dissatisfied) and ‘allowing too many people to claim asylum’ (47%). This is a small increase on the 2022 tracker which found 61% of the public dissatisfied and 55% of those citing ‘not doing enough to stop channel migrant crossings’ as a key reason.

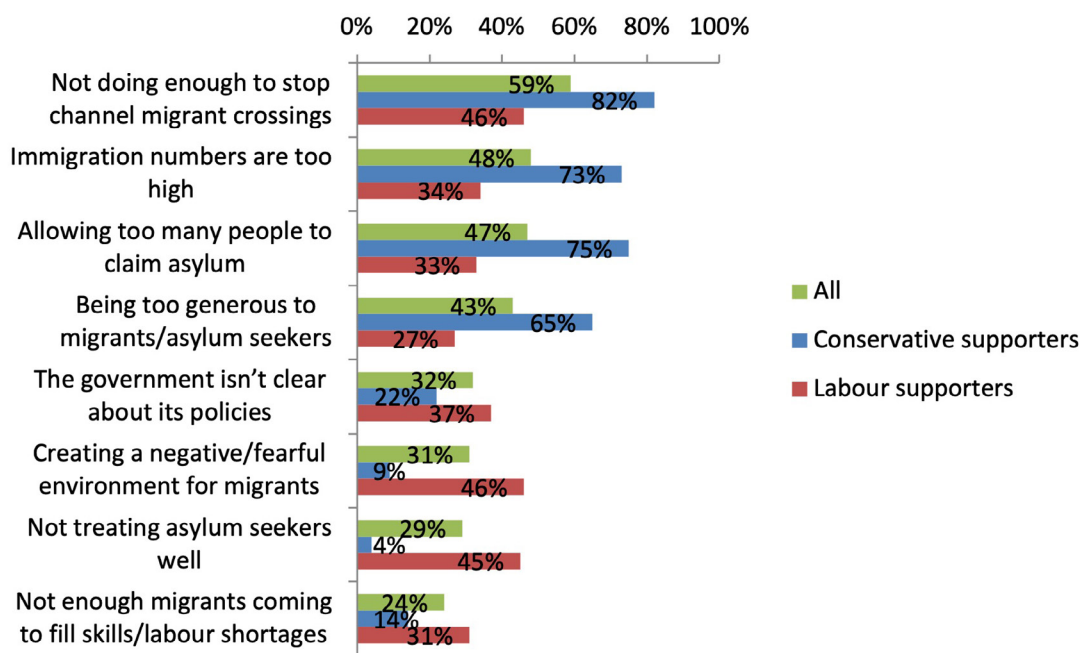
Neither of the main political parties is trusted to have the right policies on asylum. Just 22% say they trust the Conservative Party to have the right policies towards asylum seekers and refugees overall, with 70% saying they do not. On this the Labour opposition is slightly more trusted, by 34% of the public, yet it is still distrusted on the issue by 52% of people. The findings are almost identical on the specific issue of migrants crossing the channel: 21% say they trust the Conservatives to have the right policies and 71% say they don’t; while Labour is trusted by 32% and not trusted by 53%.

Fig.5.4: Public trust in the main political parties on the issue of Channel crossings



This party split is also reflected in the reasons that people give for dissatisfaction with the Government's performance on immigration. As one might expect, Labour supporters are more likely to be dissatisfied (73%) than Conservatives (56%). But the reasons cited are very different. For Labour supporters, 'Creating a negative or fearful environment for migrants who live in Britain' (46%) ranks alongside 'Not doing enough to stop channel crossings' (46%) and 'Not treating asylum seekers well' (45%) as the principal reasons for dissatisfaction. For Conservatives, however, 'Not doing enough to stop channel migrant crossings' is cited by 82% of those dissatisfied. Just 4% choose 'Not treating asylum seekers well.'

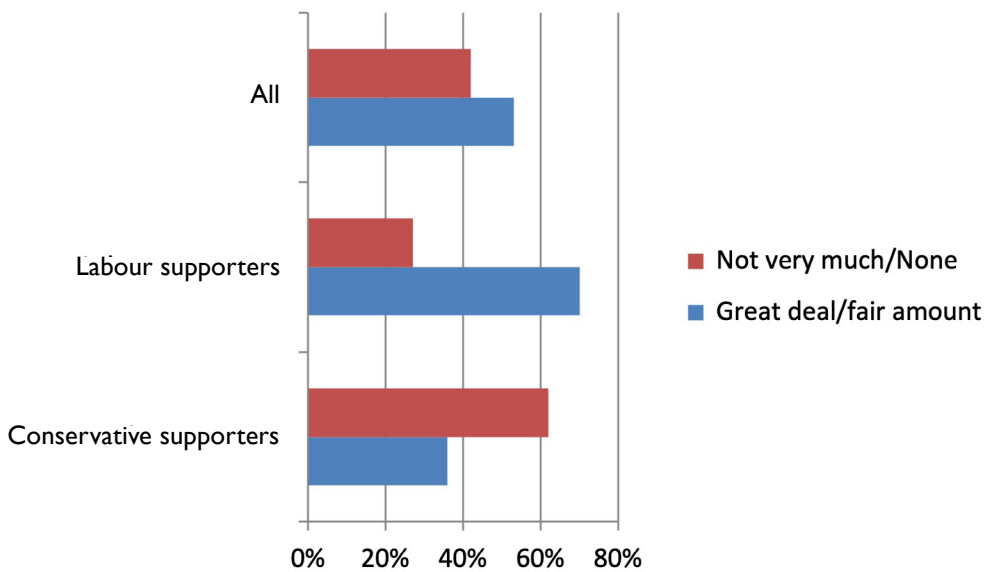
Fig.5.5: Why are people dissatisfied with the Government's approach to immigration?



Policies that divide opinion along party political lines are turning up the heat in the asylum debate. While most of the public (53%) still says that they feel sympathy for those attempting to cross the channel, even this most basic question divides respondents by party politics. Some 69% of Labour supporters say they are sympathetic and 27% unsympathetic. Among Conservatives the picture is flipped, with 36% expressing sympathy and 62% unsympathetic.

Fig.5.6: Divided public sympathies to people making Channel crossings

“How much sympathy, if any, do you have for the migrants attempting to cross the English Channel by boat to come to Britain?”



The chaotic and dangerous scenes at the Channel, with frequent reports of people losing their lives trying to get to the UK, are nobody’s idea of a well-managed migration system. We know from previous waves of the tracker that the public does want an asylum system that shows compassion towards people seeking safety, but they also want control. The seeming lack of control over Channel crossings by small boats – amplified by Government briefings emphasising the urgency with which something must be done, but with little apparent impact – is undermining public trust in the immigration system.

As the UK heads towards a likely General Election in 2024, the debate on asylum and Channel crossings only looks set to become more heated and divisive. This may or may not help serve the electoral interests of politicians: certainly such a high-profile approach, with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak making ‘stopping the boats’ one of the five pledges on which he should be judged, has attracted more public attention. Yet such escalation seems unlikely to help address high levels of public dissatisfaction with the Government on asylum and distrust that either of the main parties has the answers. And it seems equally unlikely to help address the very serious challenges currently facing the UK’s asylum system.

Is gender emerging as a new indicator of attitudes to refugees and asylum?

Age, education and ethnicity have tended to be the main indicators of attitudes on asylum broader immigration attitudes. While less pronounced, there is evidence in this latest wave of the tracker of a trend for women to feel differently to men on questions about asylum.

Women are significantly more sympathetic than men towards migrants trying to cross the Channel by boat. The majority of women (58%) say they feel sympathy, compared to 46% of men.

This more sympathetic approach is also seen in women's attitudes towards key asylum policies. Women are more likely to say that we should hear people's asylum claims and decide whether they can stay in the UK regardless of how they arrive (47% to men's 38%) while men are more likely to support rejecting those who enter without permission without hearing their claim (50% to women's 38%).

Women are also less likely to support the Government's Rwanda scheme, with 44% supportive compared to 53% of men. On this issue women are no more likely than men to oppose the Rwanda scheme – 30% of women are opposed and 29% of men – but they are significantly more likely to be on the fence about the Rwanda proposals, with 19% saying they 'neither support nor oppose' compared to 13% of men.

6. Immigration and the election: how the shifting politics of immigration have become more polarised

Immigration is back in the headlines, heading into the final year before a general election. If that sounds like a familiar story, the politics of immigration in the 2024 General Election may reflect both continuity and change as public attitudes to immigration are shifting, though in nuanced and complex ways.

The salience of immigration, having dropped dramatically, is now rising again, though unevenly across political perspectives (see Figure 6.1).

With net migration spiking to record levels, overall immigration numbers have become a prominent political debate again – yet the public is more evenly divided than before the last election about whether or not overall immigration levels should fall, placing more emphasis on controlling and selecting immigration than on reducing it.

There is a more heated argument about asylum – with broad disapproval of Government performance but competing views about what to do about small boats and asylum seekers who cross the Channel.

The nuanced trends reported in the tracking data present a conundrum: if public attitudes towards immigration have softened over the long term, why is the politics of immigration becoming sharper and more heated at the same time?

Today's senior politicians and advisers have formative experiences of the issue from past periods of sharp polarisation over immigration. Intuitive muscle memory and the use of past political playbooks may generate a lag effect in political responses to shifting attitudes.

But a more important explanation is that attitudes towards immigration have become, over time, both more positive – although that is now flattening-out – and also starkly polarised.

There is now a significant gap between the supporters of the major parties on several key issues – from the salience of immigration, choices about immigration levels, and the right way to handle asylum seekers. So different leaders and parties across the political spectrum face both common challenges and distinct pressures – and so may well believe it is in their interests to pursue different responses in the pre-election arguments over immigration.

Governments and political parties are struggling for trust

Two-thirds of the public are dissatisfied with the Government's handling of immigration (66%) – with just 12% satisfied. Conservative supporters are dissatisfied by 56% to 22%, and Labour supporters by 73% to 8%. This has been a sustained theme in public attitudes, with dissatisfaction slightly increasing in this most recent survey, though there was a significant short-term dip in dissatisfaction in March 2020, after the General Election decided the question of Brexit.

Responses to trust in the two major political parties on immigration and asylum demonstrate that public trust is in short supply across the political spectrum.

The Conservatives had at least a fair amount of trust from 23% of the public to have the right immigration policies overall, but not very much (31%) or no trust at all (38%) from seven out of ten respondents (69%) – a net mistrust score of -46.

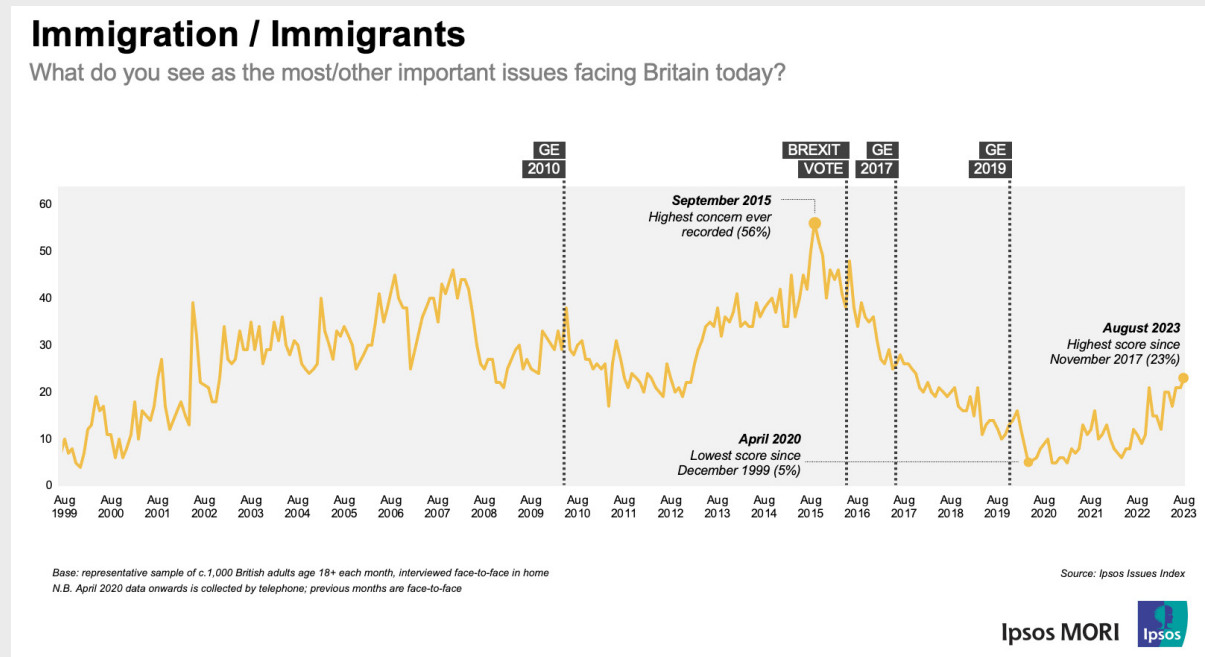
Labour fared a little better on having the right immigration policies overall, with a fair amount of trust from 33% of respondents, but most expressed not very much (27%) or no trust (26%) in the party – so that the opposition's net mistrust score is -20. Those results did not vary by more than a few percentage points when people were asked about trust in the parties on their policies towards immigration overall, on visas for working in Britain, on refugees and asylum, and on those crossing the Channel.

Labour's comparative advantage over the Conservatives comes from a better score from those intending to vote for the party, where 60% have at least a fair amount of trust in the party to have the right immigration policies, with 30% being more sceptical – a net +30 score from Labour supporters. By contrast, the Conservatives have a weak net score of just +6 from their own supporters, where 51% express a fair amount of trust, and 45% express not much trust or none at all.

Trust in Labour to have the right immigration policies is higher among those who are more positive about the impact of immigration on Britain, though there are mixed views of the party across the spectrum of attitudes. Labour is trusted to have the right policies on immigration by 59% to 32% among the most pro-migration section of the public, a net trust score of +27, with a score of -19 among the balancer middle and -56 among the toughest anti-migration section of the public. The Conservatives are currently rated negatively across each of these segments on having the right immigration policies, being mistrusted by 26% to 69% (-43) among the pro-migration quarter and net trust scores of -57 among migration sceptics and -43 for the balancer middle.

How much will immigration matter? The rise and fall of salience

Fig.6.1: Salience of immigration over time



The public salience of immigration has fluctuated dramatically over the last decade, peaking in 2016 when 56% of the public saw immigration as a priority, but falling to single figures for much of this Parliament. Salience has risen again this year.

The rising salience of immigration is a consequence of and contributor to the increased polarisation of immigration politics. The rise in salience has been sharply asymmetric – heavily concentrated among Conservative supporters (who have become a smaller segment of the electorate since the party has trailed by a wider margin since the 2022 Truss premiership).

Fig.6.2: Proportion who see immigration as a priority issue - By party

Annual averages	Public	Con	Lab	Con/Lab gap	Average issue ranking (public)	Con issue rank	Lab issue rank
2023 (to August)	19%	33%	10%	23%	4th	2nd	9th
2022	10%	19%	6%	13%	9th	4th	13th
2021	10%	16%	6%	10%	9th	5th	12th
2020	8%	11%	6%	5%	9th	6th	13th

Source: Ipsos Issues Index 2020-23

In the monthly Ipsos-UK Issues Index, the average salience among Conservatives this year has been 33% – a rise of 22 points since 2020 – while the salience among Labour supporters has risen just 4 points from 6% to 10% over that same three-year period. So immigration has rebounded in 2023 to once again become a top three issue for Conservative supporters. It has not featured in the top six priority issues for Labour supporters in any of the last 44 months since the General Election.

There are different contributors to the salience of immigration. Actual levels of immigration were closely correlated with rising salience from 2004 to 2016, but that pattern was broken after the 2016 referendum. The sharp partisan divergence suggests that ‘elite cues’ are making a significant contribution – with political voices and media outlets not only responding to public concerns but helping to drive it.

How much do numbers matter? The partisan gap

Our Ipsos tracker has traced a long-term decline in public preferences for reduced immigration. But record levels of net migration recorded in 2022 have seen a modest reversal of this trend. Almost half of respondents (48%) now want to see reductions in overall levels – a rise of 6 percentage points on the 2022 and 2021 figures – though falling short of the broad majority of respondents who favoured lower migration in the tracker from 2015 to 2020.

What may matter most to immigration politics is again the scale of the partisan gap on the question of immigration numbers. Two-thirds of Conservatives (67%) want to reduce overall immigration levels, and nearly half want to see large reductions. By contrast, nearly six out of ten Labour supporters don't want to see overall numbers reduced, with 38% preferring overall numbers to fall. That reductionist minority of the Labour vote has increased by 9 percentage points since 2022. As the party's general support and poll lead has widened significantly since the failure of the Truss government, this is likely to have brought more moderate migration sceptics into Labour's electoral coalition.

Fig.6.3: Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased, remain the same, or be reduced? (By party)

	Reduce (a lot)	Remain the same	Increase (a lot)
Overall	48% (34%)	22%	22% (9%)
Conservative	67% (49%)	14%	16% (8%)
Labour	38% (23%)	28%	28% (10%)

The dilemmas of control in principle and practice

The dilemmas of control appear particularly acute for the Conservatives when it comes to arguments about how far to seek to cut immigration numbers.

Rising net migration has seen Conservative voters more likely to say that overall reductions in numbers matter. Conservative voters also now split almost equally – 41% to 45% – on whether government policy should prioritise reducing numbers, or controlling and selecting who should come. Reducing immigration numbers matters considerably less to Labour voters than to Conservatives. While 24% of the Labour vote prioritises reducing migration numbers, 49% favour controlling and selecting.

Though half of Conservative voters want large reductions in immigration, support narrows when it comes to willing the means of reduced immigration in terms of visas to work and study. In none of the dozen specific categories tested did a majority of Conservatives support reduced numbers – with a preference to increase migration further in some of the specific areas, particularly health and social care, which have contributed most significantly to increased migration.

Most Conservatives favoured increasing the numbers of visas for doctors (55%) and nurses (52%), with just 15-16% wanting reduced numbers of visas for these NHS workers.

18% of Conservatives would reduce social care visas, while 45% were in favour of increasing the numbers and a third were content with them staying at current levels.

On visas for fruit-pickers, just one in five Conservatives favoured reductions and, once again, 44% of Conservatives favoured higher numbers than at present.

30% of Conservatives were willing to reduce the numbers of construction workers, while similar proportions (31%) would increase visas, and 35% would maintain current levels. A similarly balanced pattern held for restaurant and catering staff and teachers.

Some 44% of Conservatives would, however, support decreasing the numbers of international students, while 53% would maintain current levels (36%) or increase numbers further (17%).

Overall, while two-thirds of Conservatives want reduced migration, and half want large reductions, far fewer Conservatives could be classified as “sincere reducers” – with less than a third willing to make reductions across any of the visa categories, save for bankers and students, that we tested. Similarly, many Conservatives may favour reductions in principle but in practice some 45% place more emphasis on selection and control.

Future choices about immigration numbers

There are, broadly, three possible political choices that could be made about overall immigration numbers.

One strategy would be to propose reduced numbers – in principle and practice. This would involve specific commitments to policies to reduce migration. An agenda to do this was set out this summer by the New Conservatives group, which proposed that net migration should come back down to similar levels as in 2019. While there are different views of their specific proposals, the New Conservative group deserves credit for being willing to set out the choices that they would make to achieve that level, reversing several of the post-2019 policies to liberalise post-study visas, health and social care visas. The proposed package of changes

demonstrates that a serious decision to cut overall numbers depends, as a basic principle of mathematics, on being willing to cut some migration that is broadly popular with the public. A sincere reductions strategy would depend on the Government reversing many or all of its post-2019 choices to liberalise various flows of non-EU migration, such as health and social care, agriculture and post-study leave.

A second strategy would be to favour reduced migration in principle – but to continue to make case-by-case choices in practice that can maintain or increase specific flows. This has been the “cakeist” approach of the current Government since 2019, whose official policy has been to reduce migration but whose policy choices to liberalise non-EU migration have, predictably, increased it. One thing that can be said in defence of this approach is that the case-by-case choices often largely reflect broadly pragmatic and permissive public attitudes. But the obvious risk is of further contributing to public scepticism and mistrust in governments on migration if the rhetorical commitment to reductions continues to have little or no weight in policy-making. In practice, this is a “control, not reduce” philosophy of selective migration – and so it would be better to own the framework rather than to propose reductions that are unlikely to materialise.

A third strategy would be to favour a controlled and selective approach to migration – without making commitments to reduce overall numbers, but seeking to put more energy into managing the pressures of migration better. The impact on housing remains, rationally, a widely held public concern. This approach could prioritise domestic training, with a medium and long-term aim to reduce the demand for migration, without making specific commitments. This would be a natural approach for the Labour Party, which has opposed the idea of a net migration target. The opposition has responded to the spike in net migration numbers by talking more about favouring lower numbers, so may also be tempted by the “cakeist” approach. Labour is unlikely to be able to credibly suggest that it can identify current migration routes, favoured by Rishi Sunak and Suella Braverman, that it proposes to restrict on a scale sufficient to bring about considerably lower numbers.

One paradox of the pre-election politics of immigration is that the record levels of net migration in 2022 may ultimately reduce, rather than increase, the pressure on the government over immigration numbers. The spike to net migration at over 600,000 was a combination of exceptional circumstances – particularly the large inflows from Ukraine and Hong Kong – and sustained policy choices. Net migration is therefore likely to be significantly lower in 2023 and 2024 than it was in 2022 – by about a quarter of a million – while being significantly above the net migration levels that the Government said it would reduce in 2019. If net migration is falling towards 350,000, the Government may find it easier to pursue a ‘cakeist’ policy by noting that levels are falling already, without making significant commitments to the level in the next parliament.

The asylum divide

The gulf between partisan views is widest of all on asylum and Channel crossings. Some 69% of Labour voters say they have a great deal or fair amount of sympathy for those crossing the Channel, compared to just a third of Conservatives, though a quarter (27%) of Labour supporters have little or no sympathy either.

By 59% to 29%, Labour voters believe that hearing asylum claims in the UK on their merits is preferable to rejecting claims based on people arriving without permission in the UK. This is nearly the mirror opposite of Conservative views and a majority rejection of the core principle of the new Illegal Migration Bill by Labour supporters.

The immigration issue is perceived differently by those with different political perspectives. For most disgruntled Conservatives, the Government is failing to stop Channel Crossings and has allowed immigration levels to get too high. But the three-quarters of Labour supporters who are dissatisfied with the Government cite a broadly equal balance of frustration at the lack of control and the lack of compassion.

The polarised politics of immigration: how will the parties respond?

This salience data shows why the Conservative Government feels under pressure to address boats crossing the Channel. But it also suggests that the politics of immigration is likely to present more risk than reward to the party if it cannot shift its record and reputation over the months to come.

If immigration is highly salient among potential Conservatives, who are disillusioned with the Government's record on both Channel Crossings and overall levels of immigration, then it could cost the party support. But the flat salience data among Labour supporters and scepticism about the Government's approach in principle and practice suggests that prioritising immigration and asylum is unlikely to be the key to a bid to recover Conservative 2019 voters who currently intend to vote Labour. These are likely to be the decisive voters in deciding who governs after the General Election – and are more likely to prioritise the economy, NHS and public services over immigration.

Meanwhile, Labour heads into the year before a General Election in the historically unprecedented position of being the more trusted of the two major parties on immigration, though this comparative lead is somewhat by default.

The Labour party faces different challenges to the Conservatives. Labour's electoral coalition has a very different balance of attitudes to that of the Conservatives, with a considerably more liberal

centre-of-gravity on the gains and pressures of immigration, on immigration numbers and on issues of asylum and refugees.

Labour's voters are concerned equally about both a loss of control in the Channel and a lack of compassion for those coming to Britain. Though Labour's vote is overall considerably more liberal than that of the Conservatives, the party's electoral prospects depend on bridging a coalition of liberal and 'Balancer' voters with some more 'migration sceptic' voters.

It is unclear whether Labour believes it needs to promise to reduce immigration numbers. To do so may risk repeating the mistake of the current Government, since a Labour Government would be unlikely to have much tighter policies than are currently in place. So a more effective approach would be to promote increased public voice in how to balance the pressures and gains of immigration. A budget-style annual migration day in Parliament, preceded by extensive engagement across nations and regions, could foreground a commitment to managing migration fairly, seeking to engage key sectors in how to strike the right balance between training and migration.

While Channel Crossings continue, the governing party is likely to be under considerably more pressure than the opposition, if the Government does not address public scepticism about its plans by showing that it can implement them and show that they will make a difference.

The opposition can engage a broad audience with a critique of current policy failures, chiming with high levels of dissatisfaction shared by those who oppose the Government's policy in principle and those who think it has failed in practice. Labour's five-point plan on Channel crossings consciously bridges the divide between control and compassion: it is tough on people traffickers while also emphasising the need for international cooperation to design a way for Britain, and other countries, to take a fair share of those seeking protection.

Labour's bigger challenge on asylum would come if it does come to power. Then it would inherit the challenge of delivery – and how to repair, reform and rebuild an asylum system that the public can trust. Labour will seek to defend British participation in the refugee convention but must also set out a practical answer to how to deliver an orderly, effective and humane asylum system that can address the current challenges, particularly dangerous and large-scale Channel crossings.

7. Notes and references

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4. Details of how we segment the public into Sceptical, Balancer and Liberal groups are set out in Section 2, 'About this report and the Immigration Attitudes Tracker' (page 6).
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2023/summary-of-latest-statistics#why-do-people-come-to-the-uk>
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British Future...

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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