Restoring trust in polarised times: Immigration in the new parliament

Findings from the Ipsos/British Future immigration attitudes tracker

September 2024

British Future...

Based on research by Ipsos

Published 2024 by British Future

Fieldwork and data analysis by Ipsos. Analysis and interpretation by British Future.

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Special thanks to Lara Greening for data visualisation.

About British Future:

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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Contents

1. Introduction: Immigration in the new parliament

Britian has elected a new parliament and a new government since the Ipsos/British Future tracker last examined public attitudes to immigration this spring. That change will bring a new dynamic to the immigration debate. This latest research – conducted shortly after the election in unusual circumstances during a summer of violent disorder and riots – seeks to understand how public attitudes will impact on the politics of immigration.

That immigration remains a hotly contested issue was clear in both the election campaign and the debate about the causes and responses to the riots. What the tracker data shows is that, while attitudes towards immigration are becoming increasingly polarised between supporters of different political parties, there is no single public view on the issue.

That may be challenging for those arguing that the riots would never have happened if governments gave the public what it wanted on immigration. There are 'legitimate concerns' held by the public about immigration, and they are uncovered here in the tracker findings – alongside recognition, too, of the gains as well as the pressures that immigration can bring. In the latter section of this report, we set out a series of test to distinguish the 'legitimate concerns' held by some of the public from the 'illegitimate concerns' shouted by a toxic minority outside mosques and asylum hotels.

The polarised politics of immigration is likely to be reflected and often reinforced by the party debates at Westminster during this parliament. Nigel Farage's Reform Party has offered a new political home, and parliamentary voice, to those with the strongest anti-immigration views. The Ipsos data captures just how much Reform voters are outliers among the broader public, being the most vocal about immigration and the least representative of average public opinion on the issue. But other leaders and parties are navigating different coalitions of public support on this contested issue. This presents a challenge to new Prime Minister Keir Starmer, whose instinct is to try to bridge identity divides rather than to deepen them, and to reduce the volume of the immigration debate.

Yet this partisan polarisation is only one part of the story of public attitudes. Many people remain 'Balancers' on immigration – feeling both pressures from population change and pragmatic support for migrants who make an economic and social contribution. They want a system that offers control and compassion, with an orderly, workable and humane approach to asylum and refugees.

Rishi Sunak's government ended with record levels of public dissatisfaction because it failed with every section of the public. It failed on control for the Migration Sceptics, on compassion for the Migration Liberals, and on competence for the Balancer Middle.

Keir Starmer's new government faces pressure over immigration too – but it has a different starting point.

In the short term, dissatisfaction with the government has fallen 21 points from the levels under the previous administration, to its lowest level in four years. Labour has the cautious trust of Labour voters and many of those with liberal views – having scrapped the Rwanda plan and begun to process asylum claims again. The Balancers are unsure, taking a "wait and see" approach but willing to give the new government a hearing. Those with the most sceptical views – especially Conservative and Reform voters – are strong critics, expecting net migration to increase under Labour.

So Keir Starmer begins under the most vocal pressure from those he has least hope of convincing on the issue. The majority (55%) of Nigel Farage's voters want immigration to be the number one priority for the new government, but only one fifth of the public, and 6% of Labour's own voters, agree on it being an overriding priority. They have different expectations of the government's agenda on immigration too.

Most of the public want to see immigration fall from its record levels: 55% now support reductions in overall numbers. But those who would like net migration numbers reduced still struggle with the dilemmas of control – and what migration they would actually cut. There is no flow of immigration for work and study tested that a majority of the public – nor even a majority of Conservatives – would reduce. Large reductions of immigration are not possible without securing public understanding that this must entail significantly cutting the flows of migration that retain broad popularity across the political spectrum.

On numbers, the Labour government will exceed expectations at first. Immigration is almost certainly set to fall significantly over the next 12 months – but this will surprise the public. Just 12% predict that net migration numbers will go down this year – with many more expecting them to stay at current levels or rise further. How far net migration levels halving would change public perceptions and immigration politics remains to be seen.

There is more immediate pressure over asylum. Indeed, the public estimate – on average – that asylum seekers made up more than a third of immigration to Britain, though in reality it is just 7%. Some 39% of Reform voters believe that more than half of migrants are asylum seekers. But the scale of overestimation captures how much the visible lack of control over arrivals in small boats drives public anxiety. The new government needs to demonstrate that it has a workable plan for an asylum system that is orderly, workable and humane.

At present, the starting points for much of the immigration debate often come primarily from the right. How low could numbers go? Could the threat of Rwanda deter people crossing the Channel? If the new Prime Minister doesn't want to be judged on the objectives of his predecessors, he should set out his own agenda and tests of success.

That presents challenges to a Conservative Party seeking new leadership too. Its potential leaders are tempted to promise once again, from opposition, what the party could not deliver in government. That may prove easier with the test of delivery deferred. But there are political risks too in being overly focused on voters lost to Reform. To regain power, they will need voters from the Balancer Middle, who have lost faith in political parties in general on immigration but express more trust in Labour and the Liberal Democrats than the Conservatives or Reform.

To restore public confidence and trust, Keir Starmer also needs to speak to an audience that is broader than his own political tribe. These new findings highlight the shape of UK public attitudes across the full spectrum of views on immigration – including those in the middle whose voices can be drowned out in a noisy and polarised immigration debate.

2. About this report and the immigration attitudes tracker

This report presents new findings from the Immigration Attitudes Tracker conducted by Ipsos for British Future. This nationally representative survey of 3,000 adults (18+) across Great Britain, conducted online from 29 July to 12 August 2024, is the latest of 17 waves of research into public attitudes to immigration since 2015.

As discussed in the introduction, the fieldwork for this survey coincided with outbreaks of violent disorder in towns and cities across the UK from 30 July to 7 August. The timing of the tracker survey was coincidental, and the survey script was finalised prior to the disorder taking place. Nevertheless, it is particularly interesting to take a snapshot of public attitudes during such an unusual period.

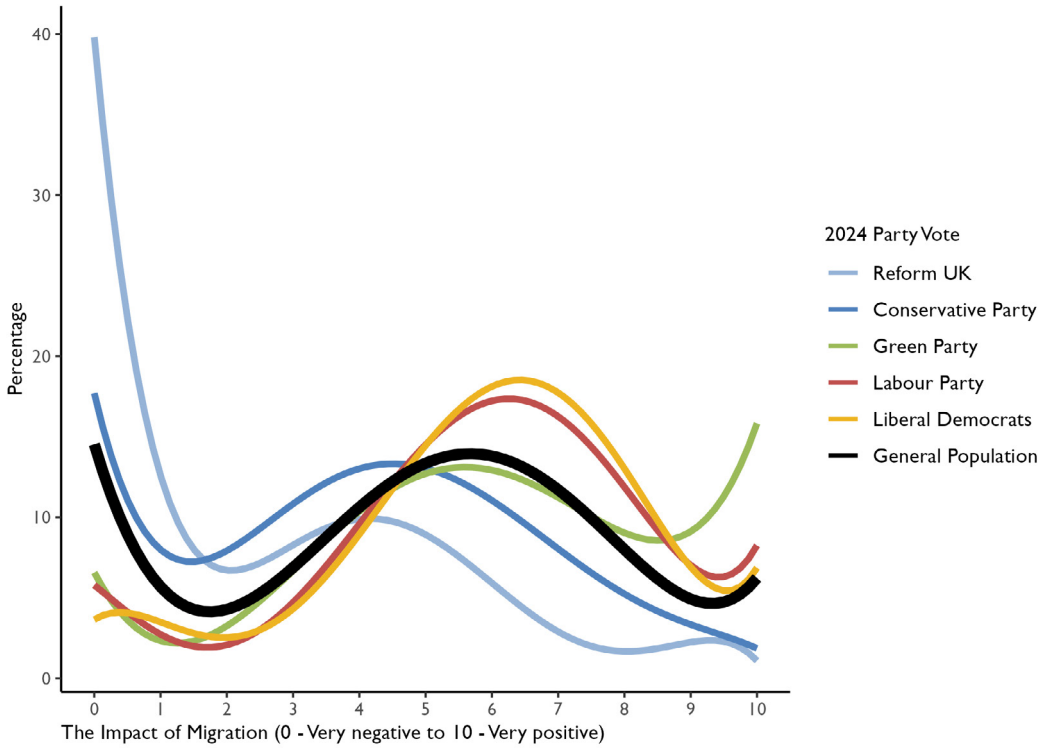
As a tracker, the survey enables changes in attitudes to be identified over time as political, economic and social contexts change. Data have been weighted by age, gender, region, social grade and educational attainment to match the profile of the population.

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

The full tables showing the findings of this wave of the tracker are published online by Ipsos at www.ipsos.com/en-uk/immigration-tracker-september-2024.

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, many people typically hold a mix of views. We ask 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 use these scores to segment people into three groups: 'Migration Sceptics', 'Migration Liberals' and the 'Balancer Middle' who sit somewhere in between. The largest group of respondents to the immigration tracker survey are the 'Balancer Middle' (45%), giving a score of 4-7. Roughly a fifth (18%) are 'Migration Liberals', giving a score in the upper reaches of 8-10; while three in ten (31%) are 'Migration Sceptics', giving a score of 0-3. 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. As Figure 2.1 shows, the 0-10 scores also offer a useful illustration of the shape of public attitudes to immigration and how they differ significantly by party.

Figure 2.1: Positive and negative attitudes to immigration on a 0-10 scale by party



This autumn 2024 tracker has a slightly smaller Scottish sample than in 2023, with 262 respondents surveyed in Scotland this year. Migration Policy Scotland has been conducting its own, in-depth research into public attitudes to immigration in Scotland, published in May this year.[2]

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

Part One:

Immigration attitudes at a time of heightened tension

3. Public attitudes to immigration in the new parliament

This 17th wave of the immigration attitudes tracker sees a continuation of a two-year trend of hardening public attitudes to immigration, following several years since 2016 of attitudes gradually getting more positive. That long-term softening of attitudes has not been completely reversed: people are still significantly more positive than they were in 2015, when the first tracker survey was conducted. But this current snapshot – taken at a time of heightened concern and attention to migration and diversity – shows a rise in support for reducing immigration numbers. Most expert opinion projects that these respondents will get want they want, as net migration is expected to fall over the coming year – though our survey finds that this will come as a surprise to most people, particularly those who most want it to happen.

A decline in overall numbers may not be enough, however, to satisfy those who are concerned about immigration. That is because when most of the public talks about immigration, particularly those most concerned about it, we find that they are thinking about asylum more than migration for work, study or family. This is the aspect of migration that is hardest to control, particularly irregular arrivals by small boats across the Channel. And while it makes up a relatively modest proportion of overall numbers, it is a vivid representation of the 'out of control' migration that most angers those who are sceptical about immigration. As our research finds, control matters to the public when it comes to immigration.

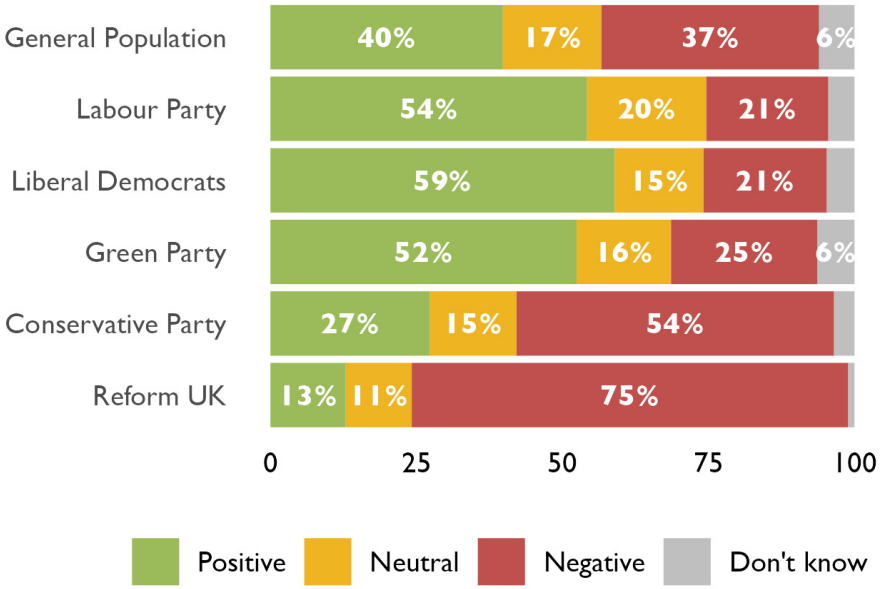
That the migration which most affects public concerns is the hardest to influence through policy is one of two key challenges for the new government. The second is that public attitudes to immigration, and asylum in particular, are becoming more polarised. On a range of questions we found that, particularly by age and politics, responses from younger and more liberal-left respondents were the polar opposite to those from older respondents and those on the political right. If that trend continues it may become harder for a more centrist government to get a hearing. At the moment, however, Britain is not following the large-scale polarisation seen in America. Polarisation is growing but attitudes overall remain mixed and nuanced. The largest group is the 'Balancer Middle', with more moderate views on immigration – willing to consider a more pragmatic approach that blends control with compassion.

Do people think immigration has a positive or negative impact on Britain?

Each wave of the tracker since 2015 has asked people *"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)"*. Ipsos has used these scores to segment people into broad groups reflecting their sentiment towards immigration: positive (6-10), negative (0-4) and neutral (5).

Slightly more people still think immigration has a positive impact on Britain (40%) than negative (37%) but the gap is narrowing slightly from previous waves of the tracker.

Figure 3.1: Positive and negative sentiment towards immigration, by party



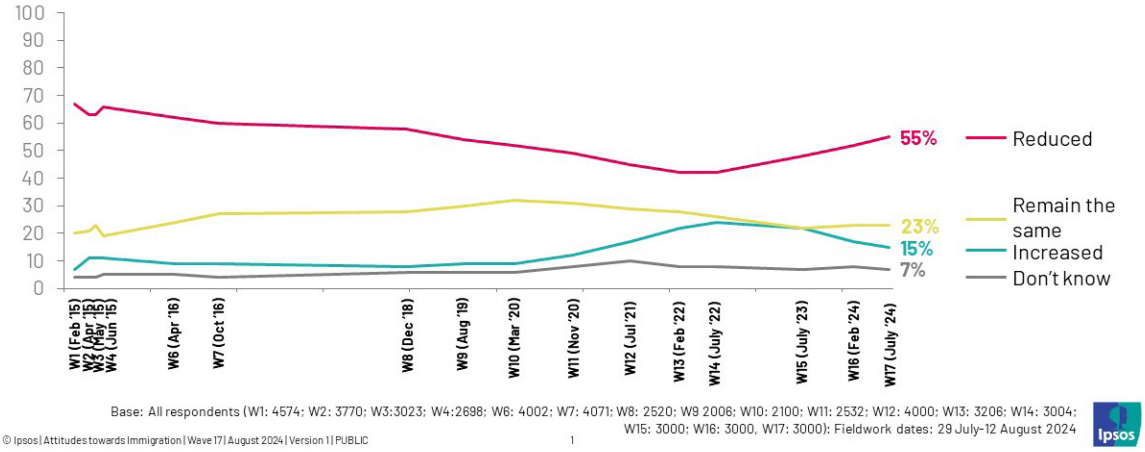
There is significant polarisation by age and politics on this question: those aged 18-24 are 57% positive and 25% negative, while over-65s are 26% positive and 50% negative. The political polarisation is similarly striking. 2024 Labour voters are 54% positive and 21% negative, Lib Dems are 59% positive and 21% negative, Green voters 52% positive and 25% negative. Conservative voters, by contrast, are 54% negative and 27% positive; and Reform voters are 75% negative and 13% positive, with 4 in 10 Reform voters giving the lowest score of zero when asked to rate immigration's impact from 0 to 10.

Yet while supporters of different parties have moved apart, public attitudes overall remain moderate. The largest group is the 45% who give scores from 4-7, which we term the 'Balancer Middle'. The 'Migration sceptic' group, scoring 0-3, has grown to 31% and the 'Migration liberal' segment who score 8-10 is slightly smaller at 18%.

Do people want immigration numbers to increase, decrease or stay the same?

More than half the public (55%) now want to see immigration numbers reduced, with 38% saying they want it 'reduced a lot'. A quarter (23%) of the public are content for immigration to stay at current levels and 15% happy for it to increase. Support for reductions is still much lower than the 67% who favoured cuts to numbers in 2015 when we conducted the first wave of the tracker. But attitudes have shifted over the last 2-3 years: the February 2022 tracker found 42% wanting numbers cut but 50% happy for numbers to stay as they were or increase (compared to 55/38 for reductions today).

Figure 3.2: Public preference for immigration numbers to be reduced, increased or stay the same, over time



Base: All respondents (W1: 4574; W2: 3770; W3:3023; W4:2698; W6: 4002; W7: 4071; W8: 2520; W9 2006; W10: 2100; W11: 2532; W12: 4000; W13: 3206; W14: 3004; W15: 3000; W16: 3000, W17: 3000); Fieldwork dates: 29 July-12 August 2024

Again, there are significant differences by party support. Around half of Labour's 2024 voters (49%) do not support reductions, preferring migration to either remain as it is (31%) or increase (18%). Some 44% of those who voted Labour in 2024 would like to see immigration reduced, with 21% saying they want immigration 'reduced a lot'.

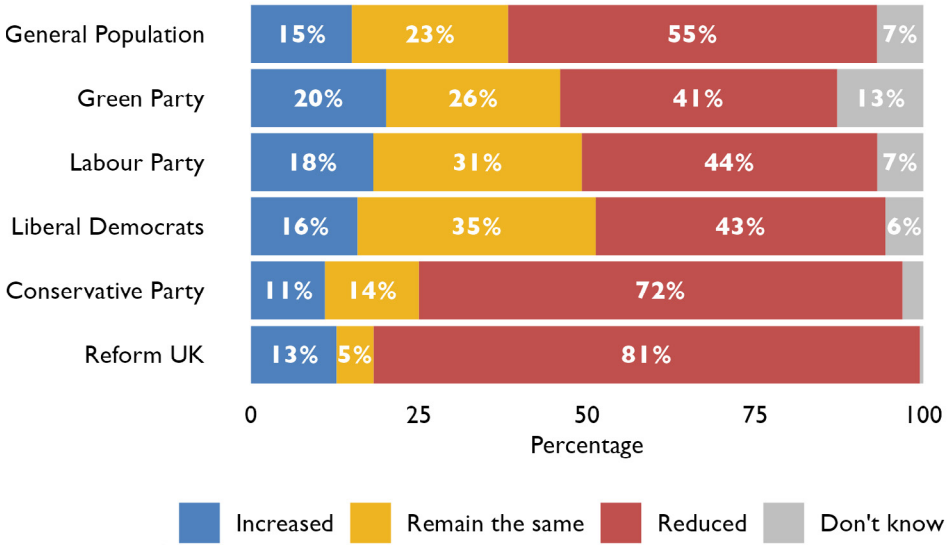
Lib Dems take a similar view, with 51% rejecting reductions, preferring numbers to stay where they are (35%) or increase (16%), and 43% favouring reductions. Green Party voters are the most likely to want immigration to increase (20%) but 41% of the party's supporters would still prefer numbers to go down.

Conservative voters look very different, with 72% favouring reductions in numbers, 58% wanting them reduced a lot. A quarter don't want reductions, content with immigration levels either staying where they are (14%) or increasing (11%).

Reform voters are clear where they stand on immigration numbers: 81% want numbers reduced, 75% saying they want them reduced

by a lot. Just 5% would be content with immigration levels staying as they are, while a curious 13% voted for Nigel Farage's party but want immigration numbers to increase.

Figure 3.3: Public preference for immigration numbers to be reduced, increased or stay the same, by 2024 party vote



There is further evidence of polarisation by age on the question of numbers, with over-55s twice as likely to support reductions as those aged 18-34 (72% vs 36%). More than half of all over-55s (55%) would like to see immigration 'reduced a lot'.

But the Balancer Middle is split on the question of reducing immigration. Half of this group (50%) wants immigration reduced, while 45% don't – preferring it to remain at current levels (31%) or increase (14%).

Despite the majority support for reductions in immigration numbers, however, the tracker finds that the public – even those with more negative views on immigration – struggle to identify which flows of immigration they would cut. As detailed in Chapter 5, when respondents were presented with a list of different roles that migrants are coming to fill and asked which flows they would like to increase, decrease or keep the same, support for reductions in most cases is below 25%. Only 18% want fewer migrant social care workers and 14% want fewer nurses from overseas, for example; 19% want the number of seasonal fruit and vegetable pickers reduced; 24% want fewer migrant construction workers and 15% want reductions in the number of migrant engineers coming to the UK.

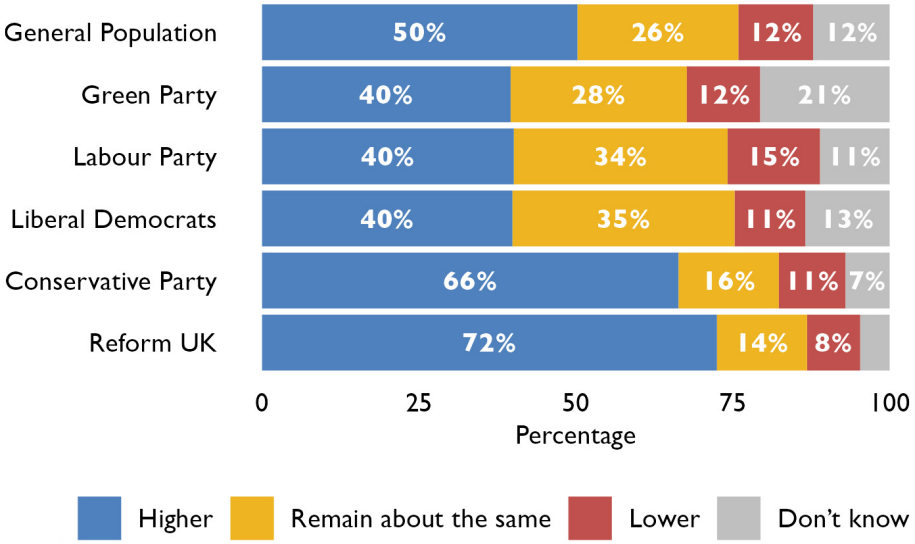
Support among the Balancer Middle for reductions in numbers of migrants coming to the UK to fill specific roles is low, eg 16% for construction workers, 19% for restaurant and catering staff and just 10% for care home workers.

Even among 'Migration Sceptics' who are more negative about immigration, support for reducing the number of migrants coming to fill specific roles is often lower than that for keeping numbers at current levels or increasing them.

Public expectations on net migration: will it go up or down?

For the first time, the tracker asked respondents whether they expect net migration numbers to increase or decrease over the next 12 months. Half the public (50%) expect numbers to go up, a quarter (26%) think they will stay at around the same level and only around one in ten (12%) think they are likely to come down.[3] Much expert opinion expects numbers to fall over the next 12 months.[4]

Figure 3.4: Do people think immigration numbers will go up or down in the next year?



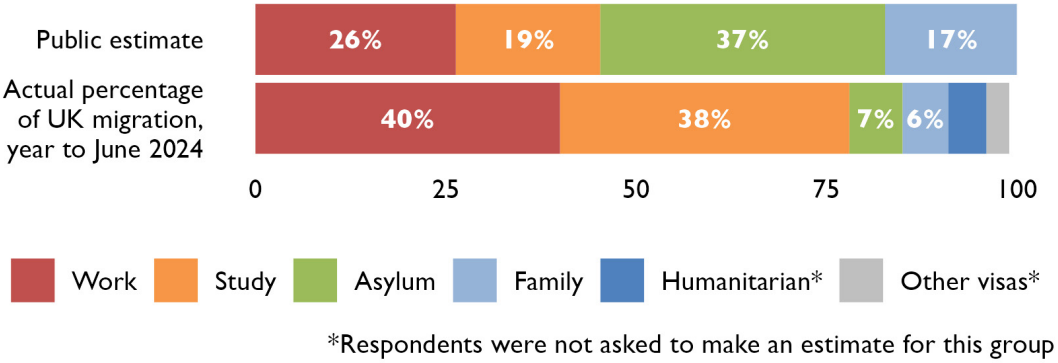
The voters who most want immigration numbers to fall are those most likely to expect them to rise. Reform voters (72%) and Conservatives (66%) are most likely to think numbers will go up over the next year, compared to 40% of Labour, Lib Dem or Green voters. Some 15% of Labour voters are expecting net migration to drop over the next 12 months – as pledged by Keir Starmer ahead of the general election.

Which types of migration do people think account for most of the numbers?

People significantly overestimate the proportion of total migration that is for asylum, believing that it accounts for five times as much of total immigration as is actually the case. On average, the public thinks that people seeking asylum represent more than a third of total immigration (37%): higher than migration to work in the UK (estimated at 26%); to study (19%) or to be with a spouse or other

family (17%). One in five people (22%) think asylum makes up more than half of total UK immigration. In fact, it represented only around 7% of migration in the last recorded year.[5]

Figure 3.5: Which types of migration do people think account for most of the numbers?



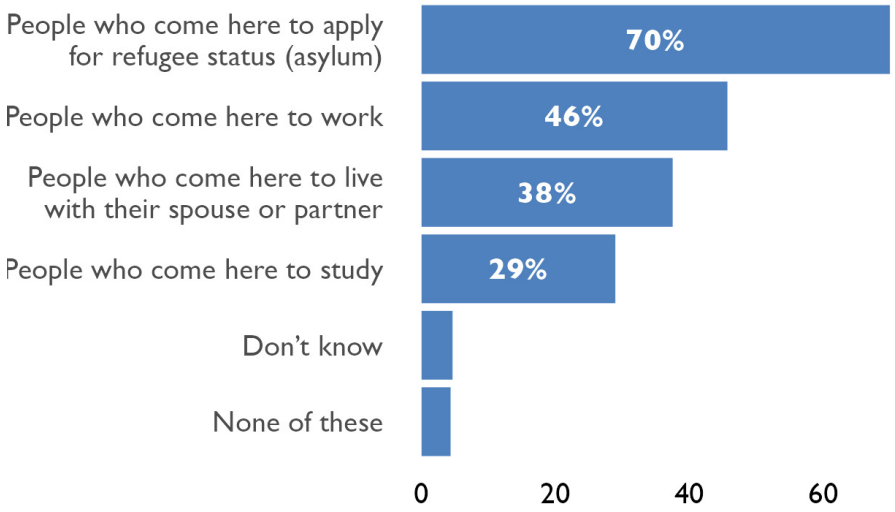
*Respondents were not asked to make an estimate for this group

Migration sceptics are more likely to overestimate the proportion of total immigration that comes from people seeking asylum, estimating that it makes up 47% of the total on average. Migration liberals, who feel most positive about immigration, estimate that it makes up around 19% of the total. Four in ten Reform voters (39%) and three in ten Conservatives (31%) think more than half of UK migration is for asylum.

When people think of 'immigrants,' they overwhelmingly think of people seeking asylum, more than those coming to the UK for work, study or to live with their spouse – despite the fact that asylum makes up a much small proportion of overall migration numbers. Asked *"When you think about 'immigrants', which of these types of people do you normally have in mind?"* Seven in ten people (70%) say they are thinking of 'People who come here to apply for refugee status (asylum)'; while 46% are thinking of those who come for work, 38% mean people who come to live with their spouse and just 29% are thinking of people who come to the UK to study, when thinking of immigrants.

Again, this is most evident among those with more negative attitudes to immigration. Some 84% of Migration sceptics say they are thinking about people seeking asylum when they talk about immigrants, while only a quarter (25%) are thinking of those who come to the UK to work. Migration liberals, with more positive views of migration, are more likely to be thinking of people who come here to work (68%) than those who come seeking asylum (58%).

Figure 3.6: Who are people thinking of when they talk about 'immigrants'?



Do we talk too much or too little about immigration?

Overall, a third of the public (33%) thinks we don't talk about immigration enough, while a quarter (26%) think we talk about it too much. A similar-sized group (29%) think we get it about right.

But how people answer this question depends on their politics and attitudes to immigration. Most Migration Sceptics, who feel more negative about immigration, feel we don't talk about it enough (62%) while Migration Liberals mostly think we talk about it too much (51%). Two-thirds of Reform voters (66%) want to talk about immigration more, along with 46% of Conservatives; yet only one in five Labour voters (20%) think we should talk more about immigration.

Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the government

The new Labour government had only been in power for about a month when Ipsos conducted this tracker survey (29 July-12 August) so we should not read too much into people's responses to our tracker question asking how satisfied they are with how the current government is dealing with immigration.

Nevertheless, the 21-point fall in dissatisfaction, from 69% in February this year to 48% in this July survey, is a striking one.

The fact that satisfaction has only risen by four points, from 9% to 13%, while 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' has spiked from 17% in February to 29% in July, suggests that the public are withholding judgement to see how Keir Starmer's government performs.

Much of this shift, understandably, is among 2024 Labour voters: 22% now say they are satisfied, while 28% are dissatisfied. Five months earlier in February, when Rishi Sunak's Conservative government was still pursuing its scheme to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, dissatisfaction among those planning to vote Labour was at 72% (with 10% satisfied).

The flipside is that 2024 Conservative voters are more dissatisfied than ever. Some 68% now say they feel that way, compared to just 10% who are satisfied with the new government's performance. In February this year, 55% of Conservative supporters were dissatisfied and 16% satisfied with the then-Conservative government's handling of immigration.

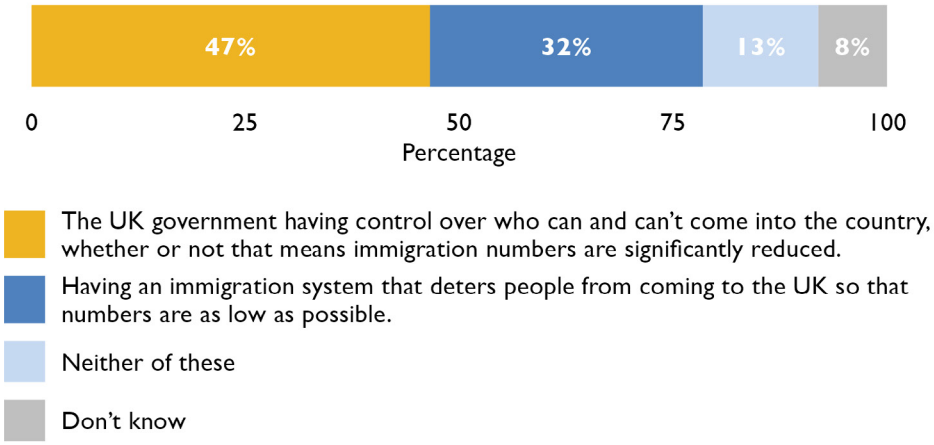
'Not doing enough to stop migrant channel crossings' remains the principal reason for people being dissatisfied – cited by 73% of those dissatisfied. Together with the aforementioned public focus on asylum when thinking about immigration, this underlines where pressure on Keir Starmer's government is likely to come from (though a feeling that immigration generally is too high comes second at 65%).

Control vs deterrence

One reason for concern over irregular arrivals by small boat is the importance of control. The public as a whole prefer an approach to immigration focused on control more than one focused on deterring people from coming to the UK. Asked to choose between the two, 47% prefer *"The UK government having control over who can and can't come into the country, whether or not that means immigration numbers are significantly reduced,"* over the 32% who favour *"Having an immigration system that deters people from coming to the UK so that numbers are as low as possible."*

Labour voters strongly favour control over deterrence by 56% to 21%, meaning they look very much like the Balancer Middle group (control 58%, deterrence 21%). Conservative voters are more on the fence, with little difference between numbers favouring control (46%) over deterrence (44%), but 6 in 10 Reform voters (60%) choose deterrence over control (33%).

Figure 3.7: Do people prefer control or deterrence?



This wave of the tracker sheds light on the mix of views held by the UK public on immigration. Many remain broadly positive but there is a growing hardening of attitudes and, following a period of particularly high numbers, a majority would now like immigration to be reduced. The political tribes are moving apart, with Reform providing a political home for those with the toughest views on immigration, while Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green voters remain more positive. Reform voters want us to talk more about immigration; Labour voters think we already talk about it quite enough. The government's instinct may be to take that latter path – but it should be able to engage voters across the liberal left and Balancer Middle with a constructive agenda for how we manage immigration well.

4. Asylum, Channel crossings and humanitarian routes

The recent tragedy in the English Channel on 3rd September, in which at least 12 people lost their lives, is a reminder of the perilous nature of Channel crossings by small boat, its human cost, and how such dangerous journeys can be no-one's idea of a humane and well-managed approach to asylum.

Asylum and Channel crossings have increasingly come to dominate the political and media debate about immigration. That is true of public discourse too: our research finds that asylum is what most people are thinking about when considering the broader issue of immigration. Alongside this higher salience, public attitudes are also more polarised on asylum than on other aspects of migration and the debate more heated.

So the new government faces a challenge on asylum: its predecessors succeeded in ramping-up attention and expectations that it could 'Stop the boats', but was seen to have failed to do so. But those expectations have not gone away. The instincts of the Starmer government will firstly be technocratic, to try to make the system work more effectively – including by reducing the high costs of housing people in hotels. But with small boat arrivals a daily reminder of a lack of control, it will first have to persuade the public that a new approach can work.

The fieldwork for this wave of the tracker took place at a time of heightened attention to issues of migration and diversity, particularly regarding asylum. The misinformation circulated online that sparked the initial disorder, outside Southport Mosque on 30 July, falsely asserted that the perpetrator of the appalling 29 July Southport murders was a Muslim asylum-seeker who had arrived by small boat across the Channel. On 4 August rioters attacked and set fire to a Holiday Inn Express hotel in Manvers near Rotherham used to house people seeking asylum. Attacks also took place on hotels housing asylum seekers in other parts of the country.

Asylum has a salience and level of public concern that is disproportionate to its share of total immigration numbers. More than five times as many people migrate to the UK each year to study than claim asylum, yet the public estimates that there are twice as many asylum-seekers as international students. As discussed in Chapter 3, on average the public thinks that people seeking asylum represent more than a third of total immigration (37%) while the actual proportion is around 7%. One in five people (22%) think asylum makes up more than half of total UK immigration and four in ten Migration Sceptics (42%) think this is the case.

This represents a challenge for Keir Starmer's new government if it wants to address public concerns about immigration. Among the 48% of the public who are dissatisfied with the way the current

government is managing immigration, around three quarters (73%) cite 'Not doing enough to stop migrant channel crossings' as a key reason for their dissatisfaction. So even if net migration numbers come down over the next 12 months, as they are expected to do, this may have little impact on sentiment, outside of Westminster and broadsheet newspaper editorials, if the government is not seen to be getting a grip on the failures of the UK asylum system and the numbers of irregular arrivals by small boat. When most people think about immigration, they are thinking about asylum – and sympathy for those seeking protection in the UK is in gradual decline.

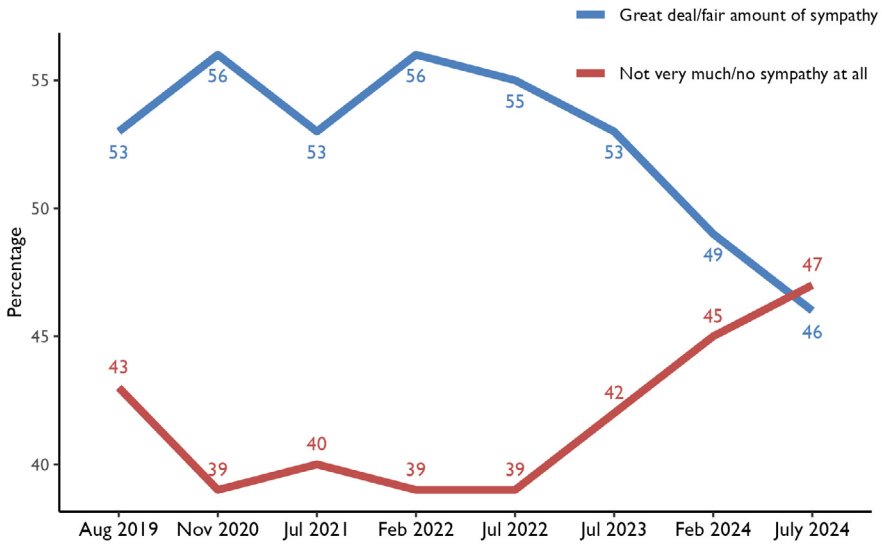
Public sympathy for people crossing the Channel

Fieldwork for this survey was conducted from 29 July to 12 August 2024, so does not reflect public responses to the 3 September tragedy in the Channel.

The UK public is divided on sympathy for individuals crossing the Channel in small boats, with 46% saying they are sympathetic and 47% saying they have little or no sympathy. One in five (19%) has a 'great deal of sympathy' and around a quarter (23%) say they have 'no sympathy at all'.

This is the lowest sympathy score recorded in the eight waves of tracker research since 2019 to have asked this question. Sympathy has fallen by 10 percentage points since February 2022, when 56% were sympathetic and 39% unsympathetic.

Figure 4.1: Tracking public sympathy for people crossing the Channel since 2019

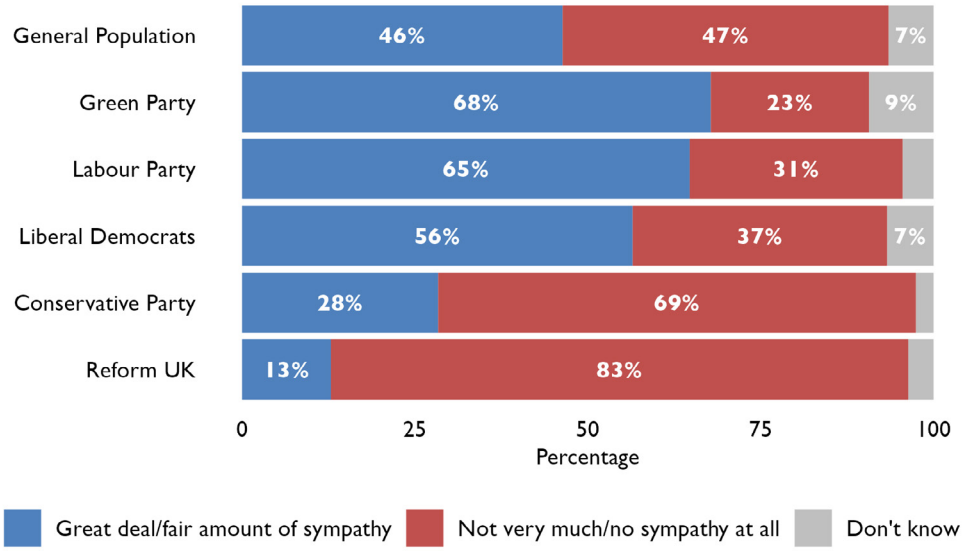


Question: How much sympathy, if any, do you have for the migrants attempting to cross the English Channel by boat to come to Britain?

There are sharp divides by immigration attitudes, reflecting the polarising nature of asylum as an issue. Some 83% of Migration Liberals sympathise with those crossing the Channel, with 54% saying they have 'a lot' of sympathy for this group. Sentiment among Migration Sceptics is the near-exact inverse: only 10% are sympathetic towards Channel migrants, with 86% unsympathetic and 55% having 'no sympathy at all' for this group. Those in the Balancer Middle of migration opinion tend to be more sympathetic (56%) than unsympathetic (37%).

While Labour voters have sympathy for Channel migrants, by 65% to 31%, as do Lib Dems by 56% to 37%, some 69% of Conservative voters say they have little or no sympathy with those crossing the channel, as do 83% of Reform voters.

Figure 4.2: Sympathy for people crossing the Channel, by party



The new government was quick to act on asylum after it was elected, making good on its election promise to scrap the Rwanda scheme and spend the money saved on a new Border Security Command. Polling by Focaldata for British Future immediately after the election found that half the public (50%) and two-thirds (67%) of the voters who elected Labour to power approved of the new approach, with only one in five (20%) disapproving of this headline policy.[6]

Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has also said she will reduce the use of expensive hotel accommodation for people seeking asylum by hiring more caseworkers to process claims more quickly, and set up a returns and enforcement unit to fast-track asylum removals to safe countries – both policies that the Focaldata poll found to have majority support.[7]

Yet there could be a relatively low ceiling on the impact that returns and enforcement can have on numbers of small boat arrivals, given that both are approaches that have been tried before by previous administrations. This government may need to look for a longer-term response.

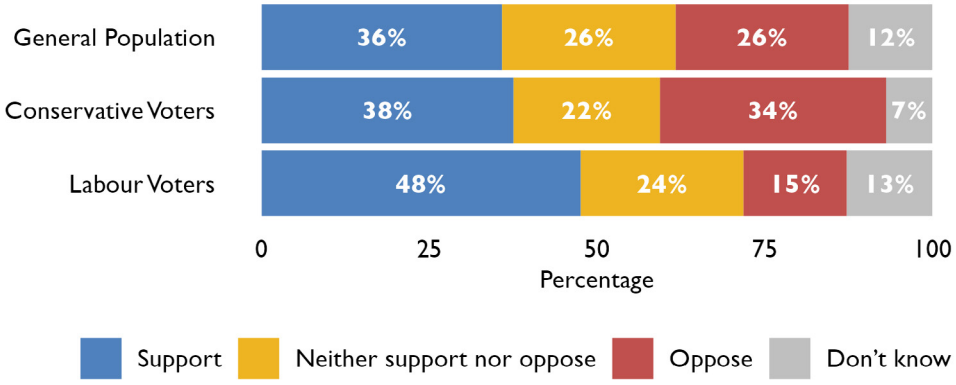
A new deal with France

One option under consideration is a deal with France, whereby the French authorities agree to take back those crossing the Channel in small boats in return for the UK agreeing to take a larger number of people seeking asylum through a regularised route that would not require unauthorised Channel crossings.

We asked tracker respondents whether they would support such a proposal, that: *"The UK should negotiate a new deal with France where France agrees to take back those who cross the channel without permission, in return for the UK agreeing to admit significantly more people than they do now who wish to claim asylum here."*[8]

A quarter of the public (26%) were opposed to the proposal, while a larger number were supportive (36%). A further quarter (26%) were on the fence, neither supportive nor opposed. Around half of Labour voters (48%) support this idea, with just 15% opposed; and Conservative voters too are slightly more supportive (38%) than opposed (34%). The Balancer Middle is twice as likely to support the idea (40%) than oppose it (19%).

Figure 4.3: Support for a new asylum deal with France



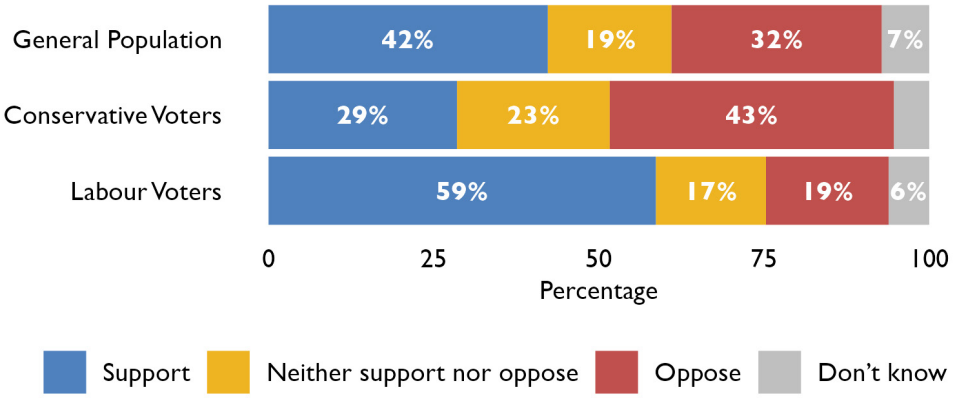
The findings suggest that the foundations are there for the government to build public consent for such a deal with France, if it can persuade the fence-sitters that its plan would be effective. Communicating the policy will be key. The last time Labour approached this idea, ahead of the election, the Daily Mail ran a headline stating (without foundation) that Labour's approach "Could mean taking 100,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy,"[9] after which the party backed away from the proposal.

Increasing legal routes

One reason for the rise in numbers of people coming to the UK via irregular routes, such as on small boats, to claim asylum, is the lack of regular 'legal' routes to do so – such as family reunion or other bespoke humanitarian schemes. Tracker respondents were asked, therefore, if they would support the UK providing more

legal routes for people to claim asylum legally in the UK. This was supported by 42% of the public, with around one in five (18%) 'strongly supportive'; and opposed by 32% (with 18% 'strongly opposed'). Six in ten Labour voters (59%) would support the opening up of more legal routes, along with around half of Lib Dem voters (52%). One in five Labour voters (19%) were opposed.

Figure 4.4: Support for more legal migration routes



"The UK should provide more legal routes for people to claim asylum legally in the UK"

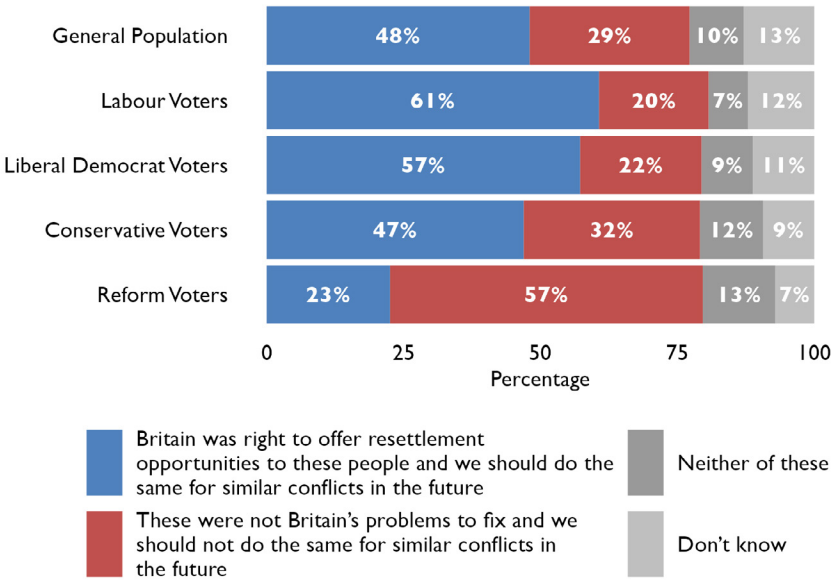
Support for more legal routes was particularly high among Migration Liberals, at 78%, while two-thirds (66%) of Migration Sceptics were opposed and a plurality of the Balancer Middle supportive (49% support, 21% oppose, 24% neither).

Humanitarian resettlement

Over the last decade the UK has also provided humanitarian resettlement programmes for specific groups, including people fleeing war and crackdowns on democratic freedoms in Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Syria. Previous polling has found strong public support for schemes to support Hong Kongers and Ukrainians in particular. The tracker finds that support for this humanitarian assistance outstrips opposition. Around half the public (48%) say that Britain was right to offer this protection to people, and that we should do the same for other conflicts in the future; while 3 in 10 (29%) say they were not Britain's problems to fix and we should not offer such assistance in future.

Six in ten Labour voters (61%) were supportive of such humanitarian schemes and want to see them used again in the future, as were 57% of Lib Dems, while a fifth of Labour voters (20%) were opposed. A plurality of Conservative voters was also supportive (by 47% to 32%) and around a quarter of Reform voters (23%) were supportive too, but the majority (57%) were opposed.

Figure 4.5: Support for UK humanitarian resettlement schemes



Rwanda

While the previous Conservative government's Rwanda scheme has now been scrapped without any removals to Rwanda having taken place, we also asked respondents about the policy. At a time of heightened tensions, including over asylum, and in summer months when small boats crossings tend to peak, support for this policy, widely communicated as a 'deterrent', was slightly higher than in past waves of the tracker. A third of the public (33%) were strongly supportive and a further 17% tended to support the proposal, to *"refuse permission to seek asylum in the UK to anybody who has crossed the Channel without permission. Those who do so could be sent to Rwanda to apply for asylum there instead."* Just over a quarter of people were opposed to the idea (27%), 16% of them 'strongly opposed' – including a plurality of Labour voters, who were opposed to the Rwanda proposal by 40% to 33%.

An irony for the Starmer government, having scrapped the Rwanda scheme, is that a summer of higher Channel crossings, which would likely have shown the 'deterrent' effect of Rwanda to be ineffective, can now be portrayed as evidence for why it was needed. The new Border Force will take time to set up and act against smuggling gangs, and there are a range of views as to how effective this will be. Further policy responses may be required if images of people arriving on UK beaches without permission continue to fuel perceptions that immigration is out of control.

The challenge for the government, and others in civic society committed to the UK's responsibilities to protect refugees, is to demonstrate that the UK asylum system can be made to work in a way that is both effective and fair. If it is able to strike that balance, it may be able to take some of the heat out of the asylum debate and start to build broader and sustained consent for an approach that combines control with compassion.

5. Immigration for work

The election debates and media coverage included a strong focus on immigration. The most prominent and contentious discussions were about asylum and small boats, with migration for work featuring much less. The Conservatives rarely talked of migration for work, except in relation to general plans to cut overall net migration levels. Migration for work did feature in Labour Party communications, including in its manifesto, speeches and press announcements. This included a general commitment to reducing net migration, but also specific policies aimed at reducing migration for work through boosting skills of UK workers.[10]

The new government aims to link migration policy and visa controls to policies on skills and the labour market. It wants to do this in partnership with key stakeholder organisations, including Skills England, a new government agency focused on post-16 skills and regional development.[11] Labour also plans to expand the work of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). As a first step it will commission the independent body to review recruitment of migrants to IT and engineering sectors, which are relatively high users of work visas.

The new government has been given a head start on reducing immigration

Labour has been given a head start on plans to reduce immigration levels, as a result of policy changes enacted by the previous government. In response to record levels of net migration in 2023, Rishi Sunak's government introduced a series of policy changes at the end of the year, which included changes to work visas. The salary threshold for a skills visa was raised and the right of care workers to being dependants was removed.[12] As a result of these changes, the number of work visas issued has fallen during 2024. It is too early to tell whether this will continue. However, it seems unlikely that employers in sectors such as health and social care will be able to meet their needs through domestic recruitment, at least in the short term.

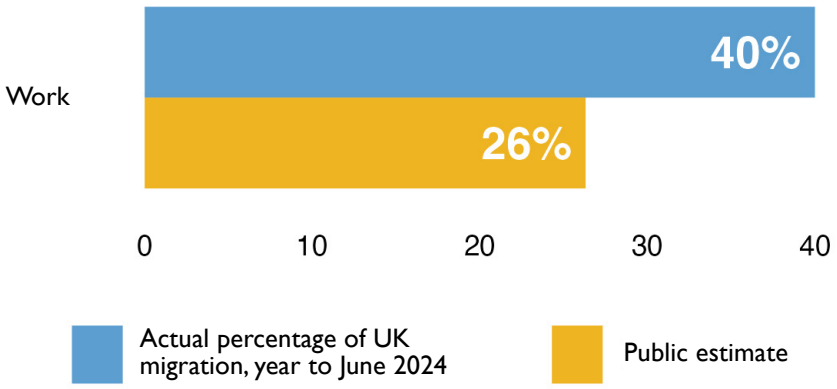
Migration for work is underestimated

Ten years ago, when asked who they thought of as a migrant, people were most likely to say an Eastern European migrant coming to work in the UK via free movement.[13] Twenty years ago people would be more likely to think of ethnic minorities. As discussed in Chapter 3, this latest tracker found work migrants and asylum seekers have now swapped places in the public consciousness: only 46% now think of a 'migrant' as someone coming to work; 70% think of an asylum seeker. Younger people, graduates and people in higher social grades are more likely than others to think of migrants as people here to work.

Migration figures for the year to June 2024 show migrants entering on work visas accounted for 40% of all migration to the UK.[14] Student visas made up a further 38%. Both the growth and predominance of these two routes for the UK visa system is widely underappreciated, and people frequently overestimate the proportion who arrive as asylum seekers.

Survey respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of migrants who are here on work visas, and those who are here on other visas or as asylum seekers. We found that people under-estimate the proportion arriving in the UK on work visas: one in five (21%) believe it to be between 0 and 10%. Those who guess more than the actual figure of 40% form only 14% of respondents. In contrast, and as discussed in Chapter 3, while asylum seekers are only 7% of migrants to the UK, a third (33%) of the public believe they make up at least 40% of new arrivals. These responses may indicate that people over-estimate the numbers of migrants whom they are most concerned about – and that these are generally not those arriving on work visas.

Figure 5.1: Public underestimates how much immigration is for work



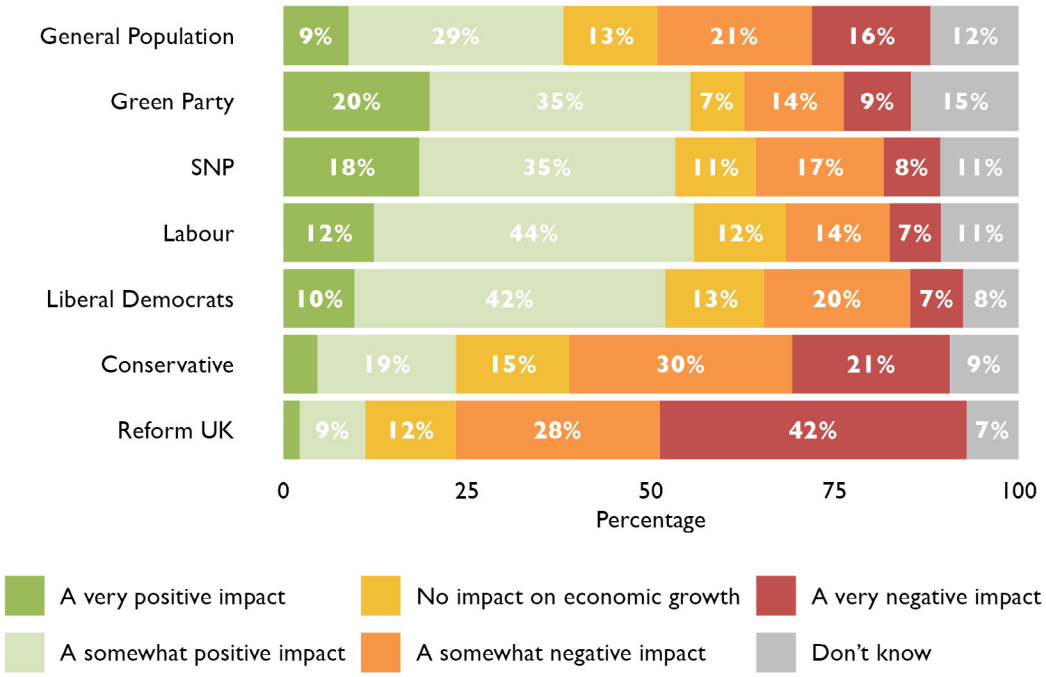
Migration and the economy

Migration has helped address skills shortages and contributed to economic growth in the UK for many decades. While in the past there was public concern about migrants substituting for UK workers, this is not a current narrative. Previous British Future research has found the view that immigration damages economic recovery by taking away jobs from people already living in the UK was supported by 55% of the public in 2012, but only 23% by 2022. An alternative statement that 'immigrants' skills and labour are necessary to help Britain's economic recovery' was supported by 53% of the public in 2021, up from 24% in 2012.[15]

The tracker survey asked about the impact of migration on economic growth – not specifying whether for work or other reasons. Almost equal proportions of respondents saw its impact as positive (38%) or negative (37%). As Figure 5.2 shows, views on this topic are polarised by political allegiance. A majority of

Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP and Green supporters believe that migration has a positive impact on growth. Only one in five Labour supporters see its impact as negative, and around one in four of Liberal Democrat, SNP[16] and Green voters. Views of Conservative and Reform supporters are the opposite: a majority believe migration has a negative impact on growth.

Figure 5.2: Do people think immigration helps or hinders economic growth?



Opinions on this issue also vary considerably by age, gender and education. Young people are more likely than those in older age groups to believe migration impacts positively on growth: a majority (53%) of those aged 18-34 see its impact as positive, compared to only 26% of the over 55s. Others who see its impact as more positive are graduates (58% vs 31% of non-graduates), men (44% vs 33% of women) and Londoners (51%).

The public supports increasing or retaining migration levels to key occupations and sectors

The new government has made a commitment to reduce levels of migration. Given that migration for work accounts for four in every ten visas, reducing overall numbers could entail admitting fewer migrant workers. In theory at least there is public support for reducing net migration levels, as discussed in Chapter 3. However, public support for reduced immigration is confined to a minority when people are asked about sectors and occupations, rather than migration in general. This applies particularly where occupations are those which people encounter in everyday life. The tracker

survey has therefore included a question over several waves asking whether numbers to selected occupations should be increased, reduced or kept the same.

The latest tracker finds responses have changed little since the last survey in February 2024. Reductions in numbers to most of the occupations listed were supported by only one in five, or fewer, respondents.

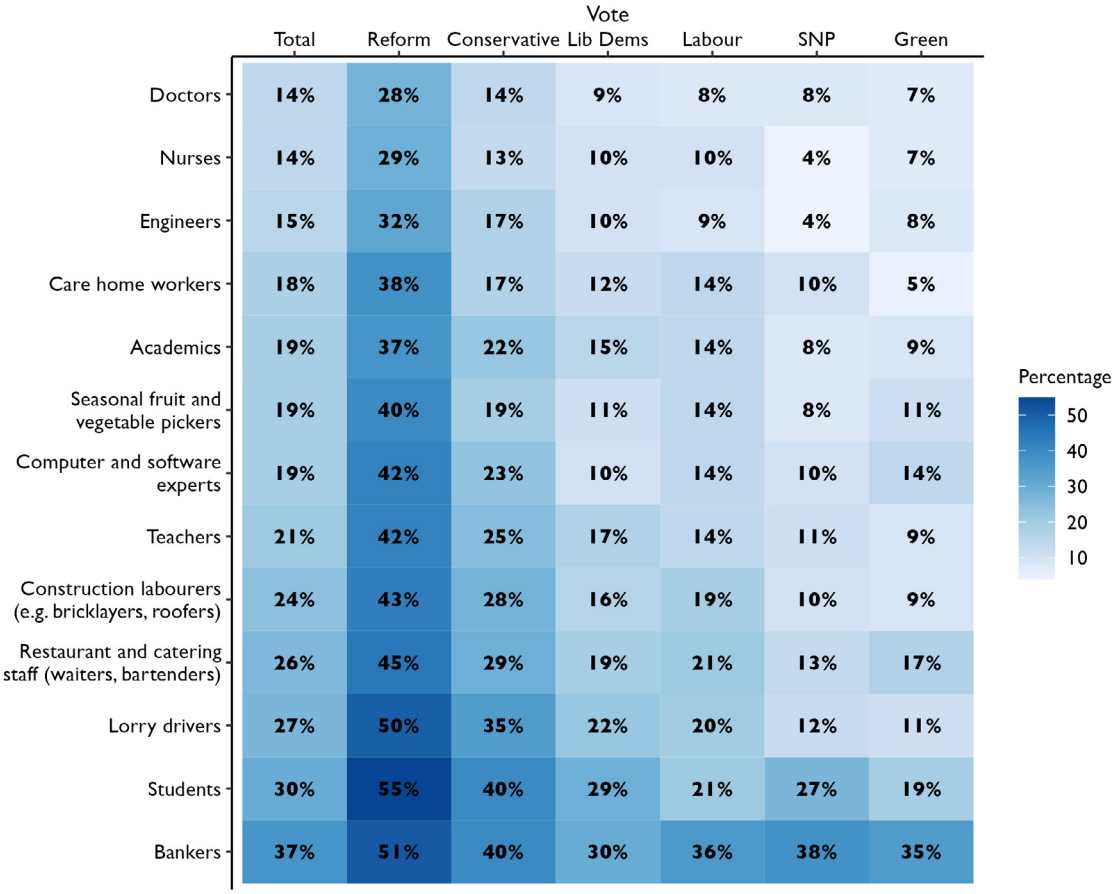
Migration to medical and nursing roles continues to be most supported. As Figure 5.3 shows, only one in seven (14%) support reductions and around three-quarters support numbers for both doctors and nurses either increasing or staying the same. Migration for care work is also strongly supported with only 18% favouring reductions and 70% of the public supporting either an increase (42%) or keeping numbers the same (28%). Similarly, two thirds of the public are opposed to reductions in numbers of vegetable and fruit pickers (68%) and teachers (66%), preferring their numbers to stay the same or increase.

Engineers were included in the list for the first time, because of the importance of the engineering and construction sector to achieving the growth objectives of the new government. Engineers are among the occupations where migration is most strongly supported by the public: only 15% favour reductions, while 70% would either keep numbers the same (34%) or increase them (36%).

Migration for construction, hospitality and IT jobs, all sectors with an important role in economic growth, is also supported (at least at current levels). Occupations with less support are lorry drivers and bankers. These sectors and occupations are essential to the UK economy but are less visible and, in the case of bankers, viewed negatively for other reasons.

Political allegiance is a weaker predictor of responses to this question than for other migration issues. Only a minority of Reform voters support reductions to most specific roles, though they are more favourable than voters of other parties. Most Conservatives would prefer to keep migration levels as they are or increase them than reduce, with Labour and Lib Dem the least in favour of reductions. There are differences in degree, but broad consensus that cuts should be avoided.

Figure 5.3: Support for reductions in migration to specific roles, by party



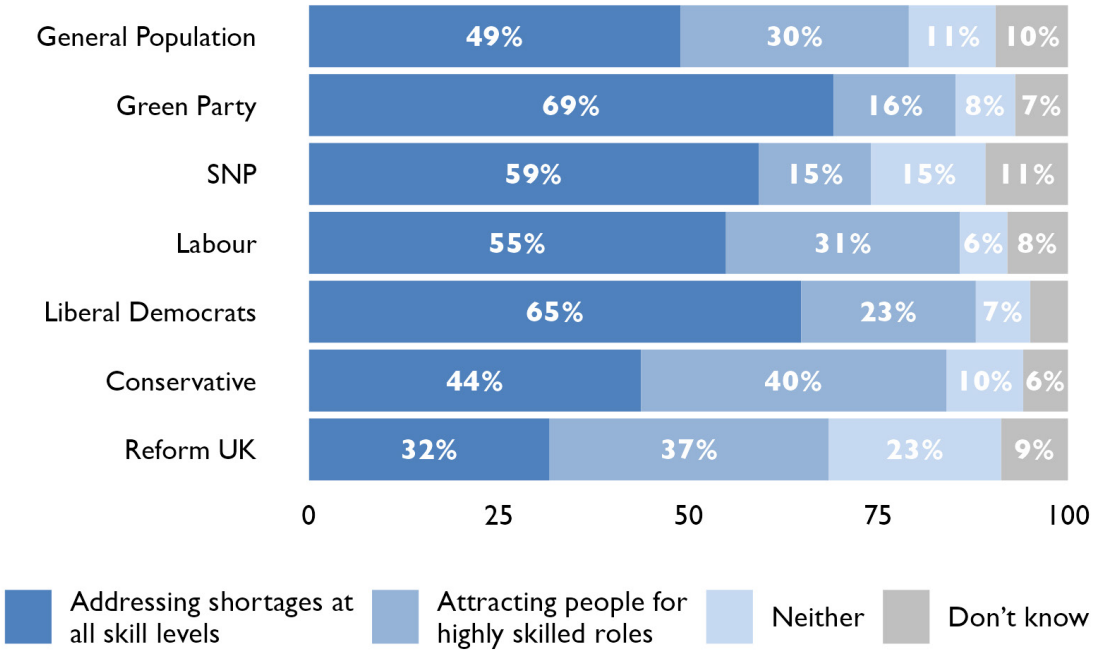
This question also asked about numbers of international students. The latest ONS migration statistics show these have fallen slightly as a result of policies introduced by the last government. The tracker finds that just over one in five (21%) support an increase in international students, 30% support a reduction while 36% would prefer numbers to stay the same. Labour voters (21%) are around half as likely to support reductions than Conservatives (40%). Overall support for reducing international student numbers has fallen by 5 percentage points since the last tracker in February 2024, from 35% to 30%, with small increases in support for increasing numbers or keeping them the same.

Responses to this survey also indicate public interest in migration to meet UK economic or social needs, rather than level of skill and qualification. The tracker also asked what the government's priority should be when allocating work visas: attracting people for highly skilled roles or addressing shortages at all skill levels. As Figure 5.4 shows, we found the second of these the preferred option, with half (49%) favouring a wider approach and less than a third (30%) preferring highly skilled roles to be prioritised.

Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green Party voters were much more likely to favour giving visas to people of all levels of skill than the highly skilled. Conservatives were almost equally split between the

two options (40% vs 44%). Reform voters were similarly divided at 37% vs 32% but almost a quarter favoured neither, likely reflecting their preference for very tight restrictions on entry.

Figure 5.4: People prefer migration to address shortages at all levels, not just high-skilled



Migration for work: Labour's challenges and opportunities

The tracker's findings on work visas show that levels of support for migration to work in most roles continues from previous waves. This may be seen as unexpected given that the public has become slightly more sceptical overall, and also given the rise in salience of immigration in recent months.[17]

Immigration has fallen slightly in recent months, most likely as a result of measures taken by the previous government. The most impactful of these has been the change in social care visas, which prevents visa holders from bringing a spouse or a child. The Labour government has stated its intention to reduce levels of net migration, including for work, which makes up four in ten new arrivals. However, there are few occupations where it can do so with public consent.

The government may seek to reduce migration for work by prioritising the most highly skilled occupations. However, policies focused on 'brightest and best' have little support among the public. The current tracker, along with previous waves, has found public recognition of the need for migration to fill skills gaps at all levels. The Labour government should break from the previous government's stance that the public favours highly skilled migration and opposes immigration for people in lower-skilled roles.

The Labour Party prioritised its agenda for economic growth in the general election campaign, with a central message that it will only be able to deliver change if it can regenerate the economy and increase the public finances. Election polling by Ipsos[18] found strong support for Labour's policies on education and skills. Boosting the skills of UK workers is part of the new government's plan, alongside reducing migration for work. However, most people do not believe that migrant workers are a barrier to this strategy: previous research by British Future has found that less than one in four people agree with the statement 'immigration damages economic recovery by taking away jobs from people already living in the UK'.[19]

Labour's messaging on migration for work should stop positioning training of UK workers and recruiting migrants as opposing strategies. The tracker findings suggest that people would support a strategy towards migration for work which allows gaps to be filled to the benefit of the economy and services. In some sectors, for example social care, these gaps are currently very large and reducing migration is not a realistic short-term prospect. In others, such as engineering, the public recognises that the skills of migrants are likely to be needed to achieve economic growth. The Labour Government should therefore be confident about stating the need for migration, alongside boosting UK skills, to achieve its economic and social goals.

The tracker has consistently found that the existence of shortages is viewed by the public as the main criteria which should guide policy on migration for work. Labour's plans to expand the work of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) may help to identify areas where investment in UK workers' skills is most needed, and where reliance on migrants can be reduced. As the MAC carries out sector reviews, it should not assume that the public favours tighter restrictions for migration for work, and take account of the balanced and realistic views of the public on this issue.

Part Two:

The politics of immigration in the new parliament

6. After the riots: How to engage with "legitimate concerns" – and differentiate them from those with no legitimacy

The rioting which took place across five days in July and August was the most significant episode of public disorder since 2011 and the most concerted effort at organised racist violence for decades.

The fieldwork for this latest wave of the immigration attitudes tracker took place from 29 July to 12 August, during the disorder and its immediate aftermath. It offers a snapshot of how the country as a whole was thinking about immigration issues during that period – with results showing that public attitudes remained nuanced and mixed over the pressures and gains of immigration, even at such a heated moment.

The tracker does not include responses to the violence and disorder itself, and so this chapter presents British Future's own analysis and recommendations for how to respond to these events. Other attitudes research about this was published shortly after the riots, including by YouGov[20] and by More in Common[21]. This shows broad public disapproval of the disorder and violence, with 85% of people disapproving, according to YouGov. Some 7% of people said they were in favour of the disorder and 10-15% of people expressed tacit sympathy for those involved in violence and rioting.

Beyond that toxic, pro-violence fringe, there has been a contested political and media debate about the causes and responses to the riots – and particularly about the role of immigration politics and policy. Did this disorder bubble up from simmering frustration about how politicians were too afraid to debate immigration, and anger that governments had failed to take action to reduce immigration? Or was the violence stoked up by some of the incendiary language of those who rarely seem to talk much about anything else?

One significant focus of debate has been on the legitimacy of talking about 'legitimate concerns' about immigration in the wake of the riots. This argument risks becoming a further source of polarisation, where those with different views talk past each other. Whatever the language chosen to express it, getting this distinction right – between legitimate concerns and those without legitimacy – is important in principle and practice.

So how should politicians and the media, those in civic society and the broader public think and talk about the role of both legitimate concerns and illegitimate prejudices?

1. There are legitimate concerns, which people may hold, about handling immigration well in a democratic society. To talk about 'legitimate concerns', legitimately expressed, governments need to set out clearly what is illegitimate in our democracy too.

Properly understood, legitimate concerns are a two-way street. It is important to clarify what must be permitted as legitimate speech and to set out what must be excluded too. That means navigating at least two competing types of concern about putting the boundaries in the wrong place. One is that legitimate debate might be closed down too quickly, so that mainstream views are stigmatised as extreme or racist. The other is that politicians could pander to racist violence and prejudice – giving respect to illegitimate views instead of legitimate ones – if we do not set out firm boundaries to exclude hatred, racism and xenophobia.

So it is important to be clear that the violence and disorder of the summer of 2024 was an orgy of *illegitimate* concerns. Thuggish racist violence is not political protest. It must be appropriate to challenge not only violent acts but language that dehumanises people – such as "invaders" and "men of fighting age" – and which clearly offers moral oxygen to those seeking to socialise people towards the kind of shocking violence seen in attacks on Muslims and asylum seekers.

It is not xenophobic to favour reductions in the overall levels of immigration – unless the arguments made are rooted in prejudice. Nor is it off-limits to worry about immigration levels, the pace of change, the pressures on housing or public services and what is going right or wrong on inclusion and integration. These concerns, about the pressures of migration and how to manage it fairly for those who come to Britain and the communities they join, can also be widely held by those who combine them with pro-migrant views.

It would be a strategic error for politicians and civic voices who want to build coalitions of public support for refugee protection and anti-racism in Britain to characterise all concerns about migration as a foil for xenophobia. This would put confirmation bias ahead of the evidence of what people think and why – characterising public audiences who are engageable and persuadable as unengageable rejectionists.

2. Legitimate concerns are expressed through legitimate means.

Legitimate concerns are expressed democratically, not through violence or threats of violence.

It is not plausible that the angriest, violent fringes are amenable to the real-world policies that governments could or should actually implement. "Give me my manifesto or we will be attacking the police and an asylum hotel," is a threat to be policed and prosecuted, not something to be listened to with respect.

This is widely, if not universally, recognised. YouGov reports that one in six people do consider those involved in the disorder to have 'legitimate concerns' while a majority of the public regarded racism and a penchant for violence to be among the main motivations. A broader minority of over a third of people (35%) said they supported protests (as opposed to disorder), while 54% said they were opposed to these too. Six out of ten people said that immigration policy had played some role in the protests and disorder.[22]

The government should engage and respond to legitimate concerns, legitimately expressed – not because of the disorder and violence, but as a way to combine policing and prosecutions of those who break the law with clarity about the scope for lawful and democratic voice on immigration.

3. Legitimate concerns address future policy choices, not those of the past.

Legitimate concerns are about the future of policy, not past policy. The scale and pace of immigration is an important part of the contemporary democratic debate. The crucial boundary is that all constructive debate is about future policy and future migrants. The 2021 census shows that ten million people – one in six of the population – were born abroad and have made a life here. It is not legitimate to contest the settled presence of past migrants.

Every mainstream political voice recognised that principle after the 2016 EU referendum. Ending free movement for a new points-based system after Brexit was a legitimate choice on future policy – as long as the more than 3 million Europeans here were welcome to stay.

This is an argument rejected by the extreme far right fringes of the debate, who continue to contest the immigration of 1948 to 1968, seeking to legitimise debates about the repatriation of settled migrants and even British-born minorities, making arguments like "we were never asked" about the settled fact of Britain as a multi-ethnic society.

It is not legitimate to call someone racist or xenophobic if they sincerely want a constructive debate about future immigration policy. But it is entirely legitimate to not accept racist arguments being legitimised. It is a legitimate concern to have your status

and rights respected by the state – which did not happen to the victims of the Windrush scandal. There are legitimate concerns that politicians need to be fair to those coming to Britain and also to the experience of the communities that they join. There are legitimate concerns about being recognised as equally British, as a citizen of the country where you live. And it is a legitimate concern to expect democratic governments to recognise racist violence as racist, in order to have an ethical and effective response to it.

4. Legitimate arguments about immigration in 2024 should be capable of resonating with, rather than only being about, members of ethnic minority groups.

A fair test of legitimate concerns in the Britain of the 2020s is that arguments about how we handle migration and integration should be voiced in ways that are capable of appealing to white, Asian and Black British people alike. Many sceptical arguments about immigration – about the pace of change, pressures on services and the rights and responsibilities to get integration right – succeed in doing this.

But there are arguments about demographic change that fail this test, if they regard a rising ethnic minority population as in itself a danger or an existential threat. The Great Replacement theory, which posits an elite conspiracy to displace the white majority population, is one virulent example, deployed by extreme groups as an effort to radicalise people. Some political voices fail this test by conflating ethnic diversity with migration and integration – for example, making arguments that cities like London, Manchester or Birmingham have become unrecognisable to British people if the white British share of the population drops below a 50% majority. This argument makes little sense to those from ethnic minority backgrounds, in those cities and beyond, who regard themselves as equally British.

Misinformation about the suspect in the Southport murders being Muslim or an asylum seeker fuelled efforts to mobilise a violent response. To focus on this being inaccurate – and hatred being misdirected – misses the point that violence targeting groups of migrants and minorities would have been equally wrong had those false rumours been true. The murder of children is a deeply shocking and rare event – whether carried out by the school caretaker in the Soham murders of 2002, or the Welsh-born son of migrants who came to Britain from Rwanda a generation earlier (the background of the suspect charged with the Southport killings). Those who posit that this shocking crime demonstrates a broad failure of integration or multiculturalism in Britain, with little information yet in the public domain before the trial, do not seem to have explained why this exceptional case reflects the reality of a multi-ethnic Britain. Any proper assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of integration in Britain should depend on overall patterns, not exceptional cases.

5. Legitimate concerns are about your right to a voice in the democratic debate, not the right to be given everything that you demand.

A government that seeks to bridge, rather than polarise, on immigration should commit to engaging in good faith with arguments made in good faith – including those that it agrees and disagrees with. What it can also ask of those seeking to get a hearing for their 'legitimate concerns' is that they recognise that there are different views of immigration – and that not everybody agrees with their perspective either.

The tracker findings demonstrate why the claim that a persistent public demand for lower immigration is simply ignored by political and economic elites is too simplistic.

Most people do now want lower overall immigration but there are significant disagreements about this too. Almost four out of ten people would like to see large reductions in the numbers, but a similar number doubt the need to reduce overall numbers at all. Those who want reductions are reluctant to reduce the flows that contribute most to the high numbers. Contested political arguments reflect public attitudes, rather than being an elite repudiation of an imagined overwhelming public consensus.

A useful, practical way to signal a democratic openness to the debate about legitimate concerns would be to introduce more visible opportunities for public voice and parliamentary accountability in migration policymaking. A yearly, Budget-style debate on an annual government immigration plan could be a centrepiece of such efforts.

The elected government should listen with respect to its democratic opponents, including the Conservatives and Reform, the Lib Dems, Greens and others. But it does not have to agree with or accept the proposals from opponents' manifestos that were rejected at the ballot box. This would help to communicate that 'legitimate concerns' are about a right to have your voice heard, not a right to get everything you want.

Engaging with 'illegitimate concerns'

It is important to be clear about the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate concerns when it comes to the democratic debate about immigration policy. Yet the government also needs a strategy to address 'illegitimate concerns'. The initial focus has been on rapid and visible prosecutions and sentencing of those breaking the law. That should be augmented by a long-term strategy concerning the one-in-ten people who supported or sympathised with the riots, providing the moral oxygen of tacit consent for violence.

This is not a challenge that can be addressed through changes to immigration policy. If net migration does halve next year, it would be naïve to think that this would make any difference to those chanting Tommy Robinson's name outside the local mosque

to intimidate those going to pray there. Nor would reducing net migration to the tens of thousands, whatever the pros and cons of that immigration policy for other reasons.

While misinformation played a role in the targeting of both asylum seekers and Muslims, the reason that misinformation is shared and believed is primarily due to threat perceptions – driven by fears and prejudices towards the groups being targeted, as well as efforts by extreme actors to stoke those prejudices. Tackling the causes of violent disorder requires a stronger effort to unpack the causes of fear, hatred and prejudice, to underpin a sustained effort to tackle racialised grievances and illegitimate concerns.

7. The lessons of political failure on immigration: The Conservatives in government and the new challenges of opposition

The last Conservative government lost public confidence in its handling of immigration. This made a distinct contribution to the dramatic scale of the Conservative defeat in the 2024 general election, though the government's record on the economy, public services and political trust were just as important in the party losing office.

Nobody could dispute that the Conservatives made promises about immigration that they failed to keep in government – both on immigration numbers in general and pledges to 'stop the boats'. The more contested question is why. Was this mainly a failure of political will – simply giving little priority in government to taking the party's manifesto commitments seriously – or did it reflect real trade-offs with other important goals? Was this primarily a failure of competence, of proving incapable of delivering in practice what the government was trying to do? Or was the foundational problem not thinking harder about the pledges made in the first place and making promises that were always likely to prove impossible to keep?

Which lessons to take from the Conservative record could have an important impact on how the new Labour government seeks to secure public trust. It could influence, too, what the Conservatives decide to say they would do on immigration and asylum as they seek the votes to try to return to government.

The Conservative record on immigration

The Conservatives spent almost a decade pledging, in the 2010, 2015 and 2017 general elections, to more than halve annual net migration from around a quarter of a million to "tens of thousands". But changing the party of government in 2010 made little difference to the long-term pattern of net migration. Indeed, the number of people in the UK born abroad rose from 5 million to 7.5 million between the 2001 and 2011 census,[23] with New Labour mostly in government, and from 7.5 million to 10 million between the 2011 and 2021 census, under Conservative-led governments.[24]

Failure to deliver on this pledge did not prevent the party's re-election in 2015, 2017 or 2019. There was an immigration revolt in 2015, with Nigel Farage's UKIP Party securing similar levels of support to Reform in 2024, yet David Cameron won a surprise overall majority by focusing on the economy and winning votes and seats from Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats. But immigration was

to play a crucial role in his failure to persuade the public to remain in the EU in 2016. The issue of whether or how to deliver Brexit then dominated, so most migration sceptic voters backed the Conservatives for that reason.

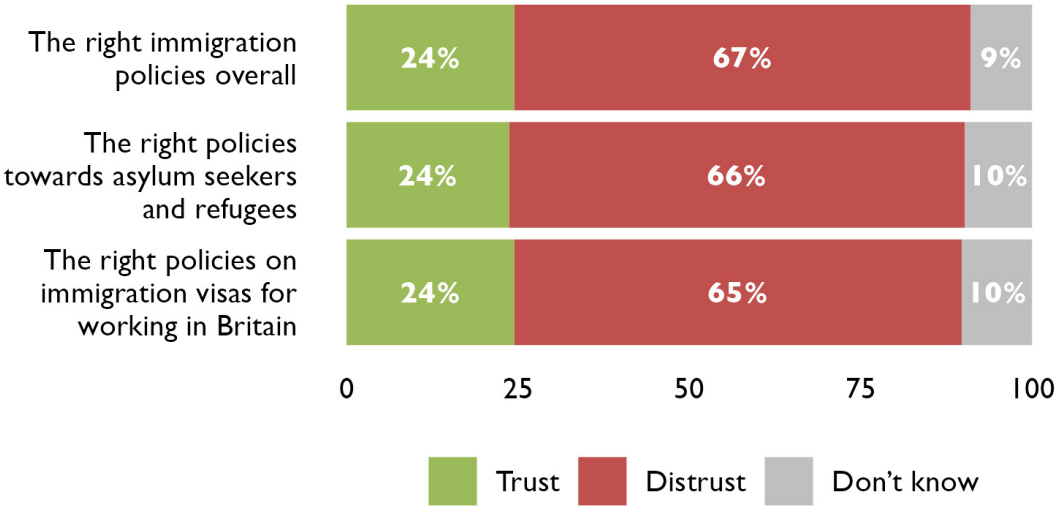
Having become a political albatross for the government, the "tens of thousands" target was ditched in 2019 under Boris Johnson, who said he wanted to move away from the idea of immigration as a "numbers game" on taking office in July 2019. Johnson believed that controlling immigration did not necessarily mean reducing it – reflected in combining the end of EU freedom of movement with a considerably more liberal approach to non-EU migration for work and study. Johnson did reintroduce a vaguer commitment – "overall numbers will fall" – into his December 2019 manifesto. In fact, net migration tripled, to a record level in 2022, with the final pre-election figure being net 680,000. This unprecedented spike in net migration resulted from both circumstance and choice. The numbers were exceptionally high for exceptional reasons – including responses to the war in Ukraine, China's crackdown in Hong Kong and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. But higher migration was also the direct result of government policy choices, including significantly liberalising immigration from outside of the EU while ending freedom of movement.

The Johnson and Sunak governments broadly took the view that the public would accept high flows of migration if this was chosen in a post-Brexit system. But this was an agenda pursued in the context of a visible loss of control over Channel crossings and asylum, where the government made bold and absolute promises to 'stop the boats' and failed to deliver. Most of Rishi Sunak's pledges – to reduce inflation and NHS waiting lists – were incremental offers to make progress. The one bold and absolute slogan, "Stop the boats", meant that the most memorable promise was the hardest to keep. Driving up the salience of Channel crossings while failing to reduce them proved the worst of all worlds politically.

The electoral impact of immigration in 2024

The Conservatives won 14 million votes in 2019 yet fewer than 7 million in 2024, with their vote share dropping from 43% to 24% on a reduced overall turnout. This was the lowest Conservative vote share and number of seats won in the century since universal suffrage. Immigration played an important part in a tale of two sets of defecting voters. The Conservatives lost about a quarter of their 2019 voters to Nigel Farage's Reform Party on their right. Our tracker finds that 72% of Reform voters say immigration was a significant factor in their vote. Simultaneously, the Conservatives lost another quarter of their 2019 votes to the centre and to their left – primarily voters for whom immigration was a lower priority than the economy, the cost of living and the NHS. Losing either group alone was enough to cost the Conservatives office. It was losing both at once that saw the party suffer a landslide defeat.

Figure 7.1: How much do people trust the Conservatives on immigration?



Two-thirds of the public do not trust the Conservative approach to immigration. Dissatisfaction with the party's record and performance was not confined to Migration Sceptics. Rather, this view is now evenly spread across those with different attitudes to immigration – by 69% of those with the most sceptical views of immigration, 66% of those with the most liberal views, and by 67% of the Balancer Middle in between. Within these different segments, the perception of a loss of control, a lack of compassion and a failure of competence will be prioritised differently – but each contributes to the broad level of public mistrust.

Half of those who stayed with the Conservatives (50%) said that immigration was a factor in their vote, compared to just 10% and 14% for Labour and Liberal Democrat voters. Loyal Conservatives did continue to see the party as comparatively better on the issue, tending to see the Conservatives as having the right approach to the issue by 62% to 31%. That most of those (57%) who had voted Conservative in 2019 now held the opposing view confirms how dominant mistrust on immigration was across the range of groups who deserted the party. Reform voters (20% trust, 76% distrust) are just as negative about the Conservatives as Labour voters (19% trust, 75% distrust) on immigration.

The Conservatives were somewhat more likely to lose their most immigration-sceptic voters, but not by a dramatic margin. This post-election wave of the tracker finds that the narrower Conservative 2024 vote is somewhat more centrist on immigration than in 2019, but not by a dramatic margin, because of significant defections on all flanks.

Figure 7.2: Which votes did the Conservatives lose?

	Migration Sceptics	Balancer Middle	Migration Liberals
Share of population	31%	45%	18%
Proportion of Conservative 2024 voters	44%	42%	10%
Proportion of Conservative 2019 voters	48%	42%	8%
Total 2019 voters (estimate)	6.7 million	5.9 million	1.1 million
Total 2024 voters (estimate)	3 million	2.8 million	676,000
Proportion of voters retained/lost	45% retained, 55% lost	47% retained, 53% lost	61% retained, 39% lost

n= 510 Conservative 2024 voters and n 934 Conservative 2019 voters who voted in 2024

These estimates, using recalled 2019 voting behaviour, suggests the Conservatives shed around 55% of their most migration sceptic voters, compared to 53% of those in the balancer middle and 39% from the smaller group of Conservative voters with more liberal views on the issue, who made up one in ten of the party's 2024 vote.

The leadership contest and the dilemmas of control

The Conservative Party's troubled brand means the leadership candidates and the next party leader will face a challenge to get a hearing beyond the party faithful when they talk about immigration.

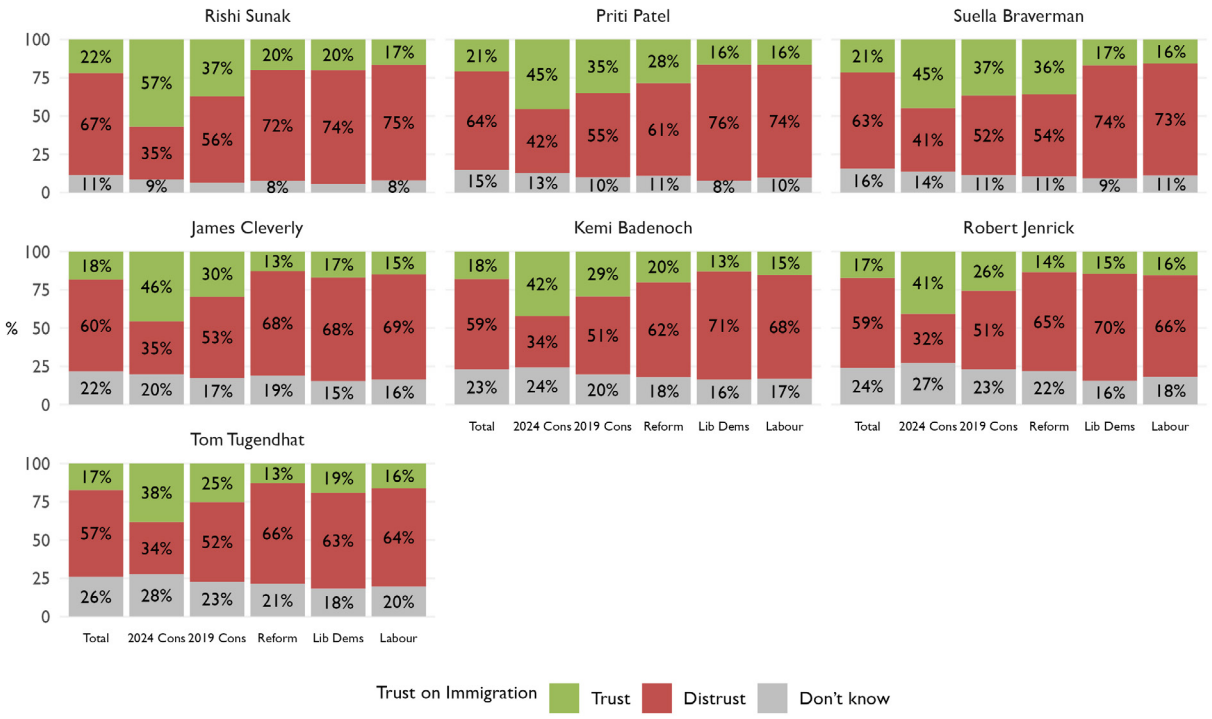
The tracker includes findings about public attitudes to the four final candidates for the party leadership, as well as Priti Patel, eliminated in the first round of voting; Prime Minister Rishi Sunak; and former Home Secretary Suella Braverman.

All four of the final candidates polled have a similarly negative public rating when respondents were asked if they trust them when they speak about immigration. Despite their different arguments and approaches, each of the leadership candidates tested has a similar negative net rating of between net -40 and net -42, each combining lukewarm approval from loyal Conservative 2024 voters with a negative rating among those who had voted for the party in 2019.

One silver lining for several candidates is that, with the exception of former Home Secretary Priti Patel, other candidates surveyed have a 'Don't Know' rating of over 20%. This suggests they may be able to shift and reshape their public reputation, for better or for worse, as they become better known during the contest and, for the next leader in particular, beyond it.

Suella Braverman, the former Home Secretary, who abandoned her potential leadership candidacy due to insufficient support, polls significantly better with Reform voters – with 36% approval and 54% disapproval – than the leadership candidates. But there is a price associated with that stronger appeal on the populist right, of greater scepticism among both Conservatives and the supporters of opposition parties. Priti Patel also does mildly better than her rivals with Reform voters but mildly worse with Conservative and other voters. That pattern suggests that the political dilemma about how far it is possible to appeal across both the populist right and the centre-right at the same time appears to be a real one.

Figure 7.3: Trust in Conservative politicians on immigration among different groups



Columns indicate trust on immigration scores among: All public; 2024 Conservative voters; 2019 Conservative voters; Reform voters; Lib Dem voters; and Labour voters.

Every candidate will be a migration sceptic this summer during the 2024 Conservative leadership contest, which will see a consensus that immigration levels are unsustainably high and should be reduced significantly. Yet the leadership candidates may often have an understanding of the Balancer Middle and the dilemmas of control, as they were each not just supporters of government policies that increased immigration, but often also among the most influential advocates and champions of specific decisions to invite more immigration to Britain.

Priti Patel was the first to be knocked out of the leadership race, as this report was being finalised. As Home Secretary from July 2019 for three years under Boris Johnson, she played a key role in designing the post-Brexit system. Patel had a reputation as an immigration sceptic, reflected in her being the pioneer of the Rwanda scheme. On immigration, she was an advocate of a controlled, selective and often liberal policy, having campaigned for more visas for curry houses during the 2016 referendum. Patel was an enthusiastic champion of student migration and the post-study graduate visa in particular. After leaving office, Patel remained a vocal champion of the post-graduate visa when the government was considering reversing it in the last couple of years.

James Cleverly, Home Secretary for the final eight months of the Sunak government, is instinctively a liberal Tory 'balancer' on immigration, combining his belief in both the economic and cultural benefits of immigration with an argument that reducing the pace of change could help to secure public confidence and consent in those gains. Having campaigned for Brexit, with an emphasis on Britain's global engagement beyond Europe, Cleverly was enthused by the long-term softening of public attitudes towards immigration reported in this tracker series after the 2016 referendum, writing in 2019 that it demonstrated the opportunity for a "long overdue, grown-up debate about our need and appetite for immigration".[25] In the 2024 leadership campaign, Cleverly is emphasising his experience, including that he was the Home Secretary responsible for the December 2023 policy changes – particularly on dependents' visas – which has led to a reduction in the numbers this year.

Tom Tugendhat is saying in the 2024 leadership contest that he would favour reducing net migration to around the 100,000 figure. One of Tugendhat's proudest achievements is that he was first to propose the British Nationals (Overseas) visa as a backbencher, securing government support for a new offer to Hong Kongers. "184,000 Hong Kongers have chosen to make the UK their home. I could not be prouder of the difference that you are making," he told a Lunar New Year gathering of Hong Kongers in January.[26] This is not something that his leadership rivals could credibly challenge him over, since Priti Patel, James Cleverly and Robert Jenrick have all been vocal champions of this policy. There was unanimous support for the new Hong Kong visa in the House of Commons, with not a single MP speaking publicly against it. That breadth of support is striking, since the British Nationals (Overseas) visa for Hong Kongers represents one of the largest voluntary expansions of immigration to the UK in recent decades, happening to come into force on 30th January 2021 on the first anniversary of Brexit. The policy retains broad public as well as political support.[27]

Kemi Badenoch was recently challenged over a 2018 Commons speech in which she championed student migration and promoted lifting the cap on skilled work visas from outside of the EU to give greater certainty to business.[28] Badenoch's argument, during the debate on the 2018 Green Paper on the post-Brexit system,

reflected that adopted by the government. Badenoch has said that she became more critical of immigration levels during her 2022 leadership bid.

Robert Jenrick is the leadership candidate who is most open about having changed his mind on immigration, to the extent of accusing past Conservative governments of deliberately deceiving the public. Jenrick argues that Conservative politicians "knew full well that they couldn't keep their promises" until the UK left the EU and ended free movement, though he had himself been an advocate of a Remain vote in that 2016 referendum, having been re-elected as an MP in 2015 on the manifesto including the 'tens of thousands'" target. Jenrick also now says that "these were promises that politicians deliberately broke by liberalising our system even further," under Boris Johnson's government, in which Jenrick served in Cabinet as the Communities Secretary. "Frankly, those decisions were two fingers up to the public who haven't forgotten or forgiven", he wrote this April ahead of the general election, having resigned from the government.[29]

How low could immigration go?

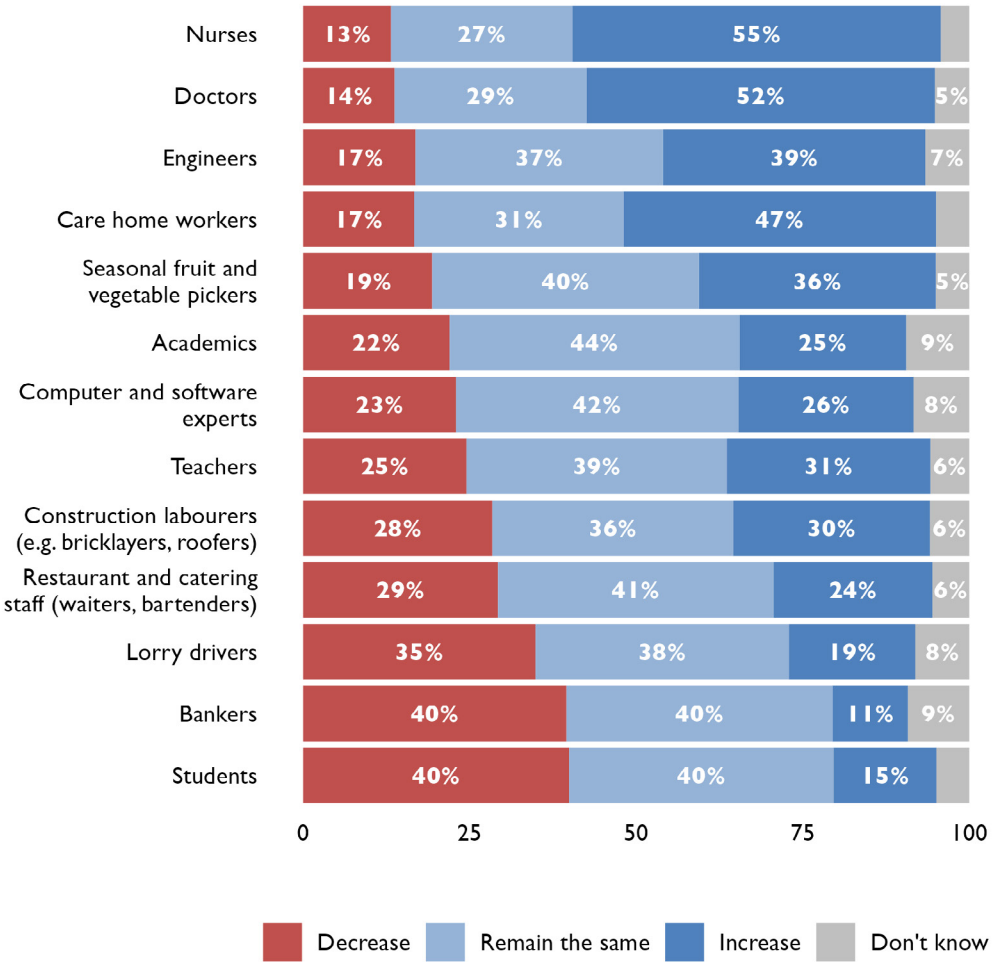
Robert Jenrick has taken the strongest position on immigration so far in the leadership contest, proposing both a legal cap on the level of immigration and that this should be set at the "tens of thousands" level. While in government he had, at a Policy Exchange fringe meeting in October 2023, voiced the case against a cap. "Much as I love the Home Office, I am nervous about the idea of the Home Office choosing a cap, dictating to every sector of society. That does seem quite risky to me, quite a statist idea," while saying he was open to the idea.[30] There has been little detail on how an annual cap would work in practice. The Conservative 2024 manifesto proposed an annual cap but added that the Migration Advisory Committee should advise on its level. The MAC had previously been highly critical of an overall cap, saying that target levels were for government, not the MAC, to set – adding that it was better to make specific decisions about the rules for specific visa routes, as this is how migration can be reduced in practice.

More than seven out of ten Conservative voters want lower immigration, with 58% now favouring large reductions. Only a quarter (25%) are content with immigration levels either staying where they are (14%) or increasing (11%). But the tracker shows the challenges of delivering this in practice.

When asked to identify where those cuts might fall, most Conservatives are controllers rather than reducers. Fewer than one in five would reduce visas for nurses, doctors or care home workers, who accounted for nearly half the work visas issued last year. More would favour an increase in the numbers coming to do those jobs. Indeed, in none of the thirteen examples did a majority of Conservative voters choose to reduce numbers. Four in ten were willing to do so in the case of both students and bankers. This data

suggests that fewer than a third of Conservative voters are 'sincere reducers' – if defined as those prepared to will the means as well as the end – while most appear more interested in controlling and selecting immigration as much as reducing.

Figure 7.4: Which migrant groups would Conservatives like to see reduced?



It would be impossible to have large reductions in immigration without significant cuts to many of the areas where the public, including Conservative voters, are happy to maintain numbers. Any sustained effort to decrease popular flows of migration would depend on a much deeper agenda to address the causes of high migration – including social care funding models, NHS training and broader questions of political economy. Reducing student and graduate visas would also require either a different university funding model or a willingness to shrink the size of the sector to reduce migration.

The Conservative approach to immigration numbers may depend on the record of the new government. Net migration may well fall back to around 300,000 a year but Keir Starmer's government seems unlikely to have a proactive agenda to drive it down towards the old Conservative target of the "tens of thousands" or the

Reform aim of net zero immigration. The next Conservative leader will have to decide how much priority to give to reducing immigration in principle and in practice.

Challenges for the Conservative opposition

In the short-term, the Conservatives may now find the politics of immigration easier in opposition than in office. The slogans and soundbites that struggled when tested in government may prove more serviceable in opposition. Calls for lower immigration will face less immediate pressure over the trade-offs and choices needed to achieve them in practice. It will be easier to challenge Labour over asylum and Channel crossings than to deliver a workable plan. Indeed, the failure to begin the Rwanda scheme may allow the party to claim that the main problem was that it was not yet tried.

Nevertheless, the Conservatives in opposition face at least three significant challenges in the current leadership contest and beyond it.

Firstly, to start to get a hearing again. How does an opposition party begin to secure a hearing with the public, given its battered reputation, both on immigration and more broadly, when oppositions can mostly only talk rather than act too? The tracker's findings confirm that the potential Conservative leaders face a significant challenge in starting to earn a hearing beyond the loyal core of their 2024 voters.

Secondly, to talk about immigration in a way that appeals across the audiences whom the centre-right can hope to engage. What tone of voice and political agenda would be needed to help it regain many of the voters lost to its right over immigration without exacerbating other core challenges to its future electability – including votes lost in the centre, and the increasing generational chasm in the Conservative vote?

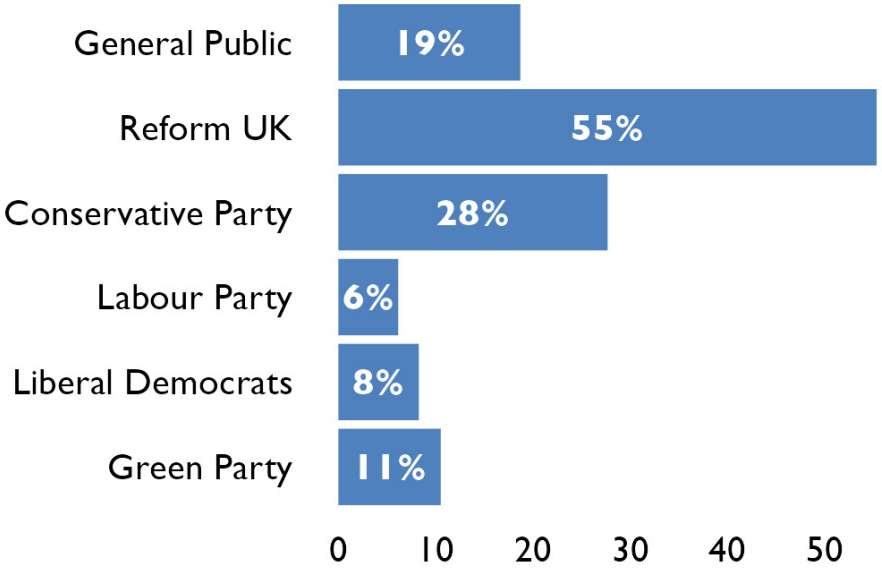
The final challenge is the future policy agenda. The Conservatives need to reconstruct, within a single term, a broad enough electoral coalition to be trusted to govern again. The next leader will need to decide whether this will be built, this time round, on promises that could be kept in office.

8. Keir Starmer's balancer challenge: Could the increasing polarisation of immigration politics be checked?

Keir Starmer has spoken about wanting to be a bridger rather than a polariser on issues of identity and culture – including on immigration. Yet many will doubt whether it is possible to defuse the heated politics of immigration. The general election campaign and its aftermath capture several of the forces that are driving an increasing polarisation in the party politics of immigration and identity. They include the rise of Reform on the right and how the Conservative leadership candidates are now responding to it, along with some signs of a potential counter-mobilisation on issues of identity to Labour's left too.

The loudest pressure on Keir Starmer over immigration comes from his strongest political opponents – those who both argue that immigration should be the overriding priority of the government, but who are almost certain to remain vocally dissatisfied with whatever choices the Labour government makes.

Figure 8.1: Who thinks managing immigration and asylum should be the new government's first priority?



One in five people (19%) think that managing immigration and asylum should be Keir Starmer's top priority, including most Reform voters (55%) and over a quarter of Conservatives (28%). But only 6% of Labour voters agree. Most people are more likely to want Starmer to make the NHS or the cost of living his top priority.

Most of the government's supporters do not prioritise the issue of immigration with the same intensity as its vocal opponents – but they do have clear expectations of how the government should act on immigration that contrast sharply with those of the government's strongest critics. Keir Starmer's aim should be to engage the broader group willing to give the new government a hearing on the issue of immigration.

Immigration in the 2024 general election: Labour's unusual comparative advantage

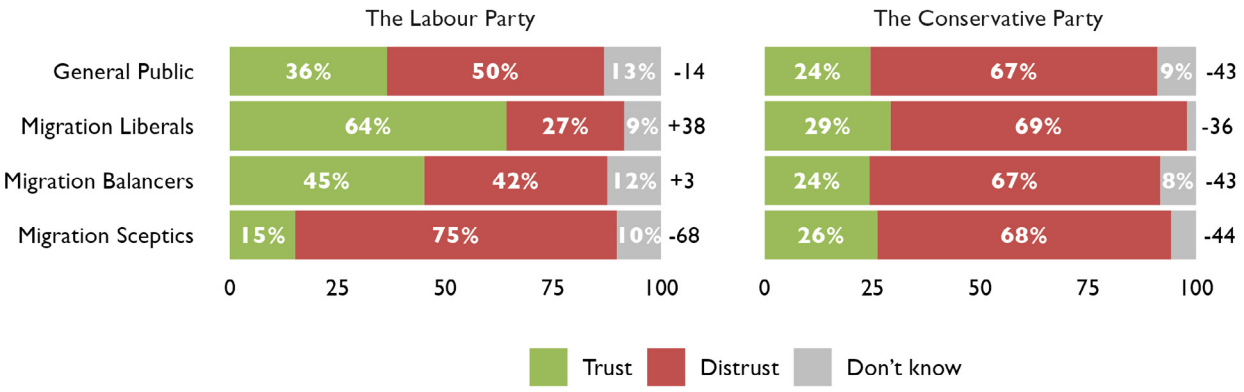
Political muscle memory within both major parties habitually assumes that the issue of immigration will be a potential asset to the Conservatives and a potential liability to the Labour Party. But Labour fears and Conservative hopes that immigration could prove a significant vulnerability to Labour simply did not materialise during the 2024 campaign. In fact there can be little doubt that immigration helped Labour more than it hindered the party in the 2024 general election.

That was somewhat by default, given the scale of dissatisfaction with the Conservatives on the right. The dramatic rift within the political right – in which immigration played a central role – wreaked half of the damage to smashing the Conservative's 2019 electoral coalition to pieces. Yet the focus on the drama of the Reform revolt on the right overshadows the extent to which Labour had a substantive comparative advantage on immigration – not just because those with sceptical views were angry at the government, but because the half of the electorate that voted for centre-left parties preferred Labour's approach to that of the Conservatives.

Labour did not win the general election on the issue of immigration: it won on the general message of change, on a comparative advantage in public perceptions of the potential Prime Ministers, on the cost of living, and on a dominant reputational advantage on the NHS and public services. But Labour was comparatively the more trusted major party on immigration in the 2024 general election because of a substantive preference for Labour's approach to immigration over that of the Conservatives – by Labour voters, by many others among the majority of the voters who supported centrist or left-leaning parties rather than the Conservatives or Reform.

The Conservatives hold a comparative advantage over Labour among the most migration sceptic group, despite their dissatisfaction with the government's record. The party will hope and expect to strengthen this in opposition, without the pressures of office. But Keir Starmer's opportunity and challenge is not with the most loyal Conservatives and Reform voters, but with the rest of the electorate closer to the political centre on immigration.

Figure 8.2: Labour's comparative advantage on public trust on immigration



The coalition of (almost) everywhere: how the geography of the 2024 general election will influence the politics of immigration

Labour's 2024 general election result was a crushing yet curious victory – with a winning electoral coalition that was both one of the broadest and also the shallowest in modern times.

The new electoral map suggests Labour has a "coalition of everywhere" – making sweeping gains across Scotland, winning back every 'Red Wall' seat lost in 2019, being the first party since universal suffrage to have the most seats across every nation and region. The party won seats it had not won in a century in some of the gains it made in counties like Cheshire, Somerset and Norfolk.

Yet this 1997-style landslide of 412 seats was won on the lowest turnout since 2001 and a lower vote share than in 2005, or for any previous winning government.

Labour's game plan for a Commons majority, to win people and places that were not already onside, was executed to perfection when reaching out. But that message, that the party was prioritising people and places who do not habitually vote Labour, was also heard by those who normally do.

So Labour won slightly fewer votes in 2024 than 2019 – with a slightly higher vote share on a lower turnout. The Ipsos tracker data does not suggest that Labour made significant advances among those with the toughest and most sceptical views of immigration – but rather that it made more gains with the Balancer Middle.

Figure 8.3: Migration attitudes among Labour's 2024 vote and (recalled) 2019 vote

	Migration Sceptics	Balancer Middle	Migration Liberals
Labour 2024	15%	53%	28%
Approx votes	1.5 million	5.1 million	2.7 million
Labour 2019	16%	48%	32%
Approx votes	1.6 million	4.9 million	3.3 million

The 2024 general election result – particularly the incredibly broad geography of the Labour landslide – gives Starmer a stronger political self-interest to go with that ethos of seeking to reduce the temperature of debates about both asylum in particular and immigration in general.

The breadth of Labour's electoral coalition means that a broad range of views are held by those who voted Labour or would consider doing so next time.

They include many voters with strongly liberal views, many in the broad Balancer Middle of public opinion, and some with more sceptical views of immigration – though Labour-voting Migration Sceptics tend to voice sceptical views that are more pragmatic than existential, in contrast to those who say they would never consider supporting Labour.

Labour did lose a significant number of votes among those with more liberal views on immigration. One significant contributor to this was its significant loss of votes and vote share nationally among ethnic minority voters, and among the under 30s too. Ethnic minorities are twice as likely (32%) as white British voters (16%) to be in the 'Migration Liberal' segment of the population, though around half of ethnic minorities (48%) are in the "Balancer middle". Support for a more vocally progressive approach on asylum and refugees was one factor in the Green Party's victory in Bristol Central and in Brighton – though other domestic and foreign policy issues, particularly Palestine, were more prominent where independent candidates gained votes and seats from Labour.

Different MPs have different local electoral contexts. Around half of Labour's MPs have the Conservatives in second place, with a quarter each seeing Reform or a left-wing challenger party (such as the Greens or the SNP) as their main constituency rivals. This may generate something of a tug-of-war in the balance of emphasis of the party's voice and policy – but the test of success for Labour's 2028 coalition will be whether it can maintain a bridging coalition across different voters and geographies again.

Trust in Labour on immigration

Politicians of all parties have struggled for trust on immigration, in government and in opposition. Labour enters office with a lukewarm reputation on trust – with many voters sceptical of the

party but much less intensely than for the outgoing government. Many are, however, willing to give the new government a hearing for its agenda.

The tracker data shows that the election campaign, the result and becoming the government had mildly positive impacts on public trust in the new Prime Minister and Home Secretary (who unsurprisingly has a higher "don't know" score than the party leader) when they talk about immigration. It has had a similar effect on trust in the Labour Party on immigration for work and asylum.

The change may reflect a combination of factors. More people will have heard the party's arguments, as well as the political attacks on them, during the campaign; there is the bonus of success from winning the general election; and there will be an instinct from some to give the new government a chance. Whatever the causes, the mildly positive shift demonstrates that there was no significant public backlash to Keir Starmer's initial decision to scrap the Rwanda scheme and hear asylum claims – or at least that those unhappy about these decisions were already critical of Labour and have remained so.

Figure 8.4: How trusted is Labour and its key voices on immigration?

	Trust Keir Starmer on immigration	Trust Yvette Cooper on immigration	Trust Labour on immigration overall	Trust Labour on immigration for work	Trust Labour on asylum
A great deal	10%	5%	9%	11%	10%
A fair amount	25%	21%	28%	28%	27%
Not much	23%	24%	26%	25%	26%
Not at all	27%	25%	24%	22%	24%
Don't know	14%	24%	13%	14%	13%
Net trust (August 2024)	**-15**	**-22**	**-14**	**-10**	**-13**
Net trust (Feb 2024)	**-26**	**-29**	**-18**	**-19**	**-18**

The change of government has seen levels of mistrust in the government reduce to a lower level than in recent waves of the tracker: Labour is trusted by 36%, distrusted by 50% for a net trust score of -14. In February this year the public was 68% distrusting and 22% trusting of the Conservative government, a net trust score of -46. This shift is largely because Labour voters have moved from mistrust of a Conservative government towards a balanced "wait and see" attitude towards the party they voted for. Conservative and Reform voters do not trust Labour on immigration, but many did not trust the Conservatives either: in the February 2024 tracker, 40% of Conservative supporters did not trust their party on immigration.

This new wave of tracker research finds that Labour is most trusted on immigration by the Migration Liberal group with the most

positive views on the issue, 64% of whom trust Labour and 26% do not, a net trust score of +38. The Balancer Middle is more on the fence, marginally more trusting (45%) than distrusting (42%), a net positive score of +3. Migration Sceptics really do not trust Labour to deliver what they want on immigration, with 80% saying they don't trust the part in power, with 12% trusting for a net trust score of -68.

The party is trusted on immigration by 68% to 22% among Labour voters. Lib Dems are on the fence, 43% trusting Labour and 43% distrusting the party; with a more negative trust rating among SNP and Green voters. Some 17% of Conservative voters do trust Keir Starmer's Labour on immigration, but 78% do not; while 86% of Reform voters don't trust the party in power on this issue.

Labour's parallel challenges on immigration

The timing of the general election has put the Starmer government under more pressure over asylum, while offering it more breathing space on the question of immigration numbers.

On asylum, the Conservatives called the general election before the Rwanda scheme could begin. Its timing looked like a vote of no confidence from Rishi Sunak in the Rwanda plan actually working as a deterrent. Holding a July election meant deciding not to find out if sending the first plane or two to Rwanda would stop the boats in August and September this year. Yet this puts the Starmer government under greater pressure. Ironically, the same Channel crossings that might have provided visible proof that the Rwanda plan would not act as a deterrent are now being used to argue that scrapping the scheme was a mistake – increasing the pressure on the new government this summer and autumn.

Continuing or scrapping the Rwanda scheme was a clear clash in principle, policy and practice between the two main parties at the general election. Labour sought an electoral mandate to scrap the Rwanda scheme, committing to put the resources into strengthening cooperation on border security. It also set out its commitment to processing the backlog of existing asylum claims, arguing that this would help to contain and reduce the accommodation costs of having tens of thousands of people stuck in limbo. Beyond its commitment to a significant effort to tackle smuggling gangs – preferring to use the slogan "smash the gangs" rather than "stop the boats" –Labour's manifesto was silent on how it might pursue ambitions to negotiate new arrangements about who gets to claim asylum where, arrangements to promote family reunion, or a broader 'routes and returns' deal with France.

On immigration numbers, the election timing means that Keir Starmer can expect to oversee a significant reduction in net migration over the next 12 months. This reflects a combination of the unwinding of several exceptional factors that drove peak levels, and Labour's decision to maintain the changes that the Conservatives introduced in December 2023.

On reducing immigration numbers, Keir Starmer has an opportunity to exceed public expectations. Only 12% of the public expect net migration numbers to come down over the government's first year in office. Half of the public expect that the numbers will go up, and a quarter that they will remain at existing levels. Two-thirds of Conservatives and 72% of Reform voters expect that Labour will increase overall levels of immigration. Since the public are unaware that migration levels are set to fall, it may prove challenging for the Conservatives to argue that they deserve the credit for it. It remains to be seen if the public notice or believe that immigration has reduced: one of the challenges for using net migration as a key measure and political message is that politicians and the media tend to overestimate how much the public are following the data.

Starmer is not, however, under as much pressure from his own voters to cut the numbers. Half of Labour voters do not want to see overall numbers fall, though 44% would like to see the numbers reduced.

The Labour manifesto had little to say about immigration policy beyond asylum. It had five short paragraphs, beyond saying that net migration should fall, without proposing any particular aim for the level of immigration. The manifesto did not set out any thinking on its framework for future policymaking, beyond a brief discussion of seeking to organise more joined-up thinking about future skills and migration policy. It made no particular commitments or positions on any visa route, from social care to the graduate visa.

If Labour does not believe in a numerical net migration target then it might use the breathing space of lower numbers to set out its broader policy objectives and aims, perhaps with an annual 'Immigration Plan' presented to Parliament.

It could consider, too, reforms to the citizenship process, encouraging more foreign nationals who are legally resident in the UK to become British citizens – a proposal supported by 40% of Labour voters in this survey, with 28% preferring to keep citizenship rules as they are and 16% wanting it made harder to become a British citizen (compared to 30%/27%/23% respectively for the wider public).

Public trust in political promises on immigration is low, but politicians have underestimated the public's willingness to engage seriously and pragmatically with the dilemmas of control. If Keir Starmer and Yvette Cooper do not want to be judged by the aims and objectives of the government that they have replaced, they need to set a framework for what this government is trying to achieve, so it can be held accountable for its own immigration policy goals, not those of its opponents. That would be a foundation for a pitch to a moderate majority of the public – as Labour takes on the challenge of seeking to rebuild public consent for how to manage the immigration that Britain chooses to keep.

9. The Farage Factor: The impact of Reform on the immigration debate

Nigel Farage dominated much of the 2024 general election campaign in the media, particularly on the issue of immigration, after his late decision to run as a candidate and take over as the Reform Party leader from Richard Tice. The insurgent populist party talked of its ambition to challenge and overtake the Conservatives for second place – though ultimately finished ten points adrift of the Tories on 14 per cent. The biggest surprise in the exit poll, as voting closed at 10pm on election night, was not its prediction of a widely anticipated Labour landslide, but rather that Reform UK were initially projected to pick up 13 seats. That proved something of a Farage mirage by dawn, but Reform had taken five seats, including its leader finally making it into the House of Commons in Clacton.

Reform's insurgent effort had both exceeded the expectations of many, while falling short of some of the predictions that the party had made for itself. Because Reform has made immigration its dominant focus, it has the potential to reshape the politics of immigration.

The "immigration election" – especially for Reform voters

Nigel Farage declaring the contest "the immigration election" captured the mood of those who voted for Reform. Immigration was easily the top election issue for Reform voters – some 72% cited it in their top 3 ballot-box issues – a long way ahead of the NHS (26%), cost of living (29%) and crime (25%).

Reform voters are clear where they stand on immigration: 81% want numbers reduced, 75% saying they want them reduced by a lot. Around one in five Reform voters (18%) do not support reductions, including 13% who say they would increase immigration to the UK, suggesting that the party retains a small niche of libertarian Eurosceptic supporters, or is picking up some protest voters across a broader spectrum of views.

Who trusts Reform – and who doesn't?

Nigel Farage and the Reform Party are broadly synonymous: the data suggests that the Reform Party's reputation as a fairly new party is primarily the product of perceptions of Nigel Farage, favourable and unfavourable.

A sixth of the population strongly trust Farage and Reform – reflected in the 14% Reform share of the vote. A third of the public trust Farage as a more positive than negative influence when talking about immigration, but just over half of the public

are sceptical of his public voice and contribution, with over a third allergic to this form of populist politics on immigration.

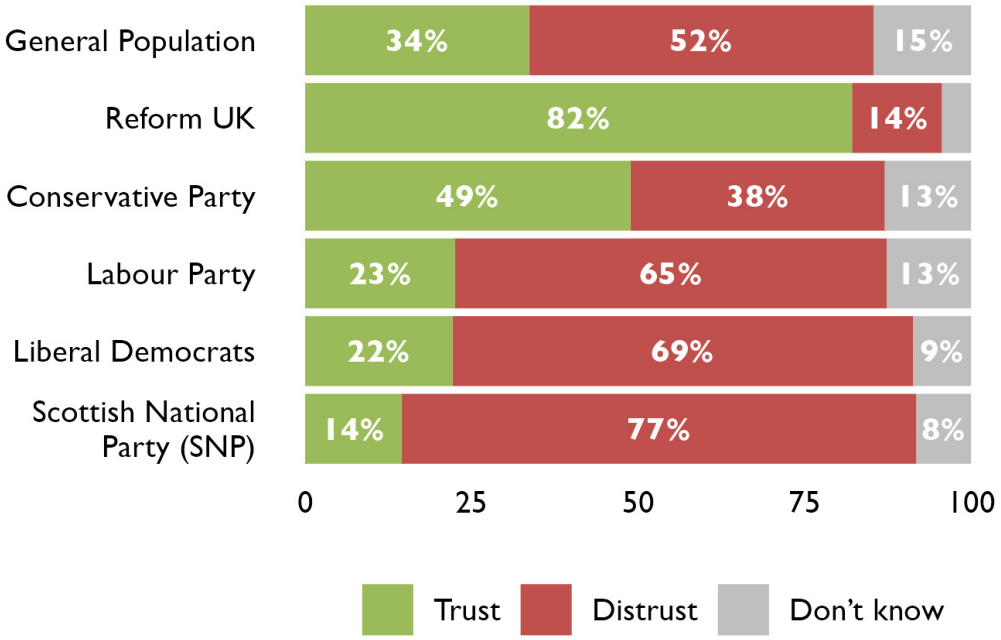
While Farage remains broadly mistrusted when he talks about immigration, these August 2024 findings do represent a slight improvement on his personal score in February 2024, in the previous wave of the tracker, prior to his returning to the leadership of Reform. Farage's personal trust levels on immigration then were 29% trust and 59% mistrust: now he is trusted by 33% and mistrusted by 55%. Reform's current rating of 33% trust and 41% mistrust has seen trust (+7) and mistrust (+4) rise since February, after Farage's return to the leadership, with a reduction in the 'Don't know' score since Farage became leader.

Figure 9.1: How much does the public trust Nigel Farage and the Reform Party when they talk about immigration?

	Trust Nigel Farage on immigration	Trust Reform on Immigration overall	Trust Reform on Immigration for work	Trust Reform on asylum
A great deal	15%	15%	15%	16%
A fair amount	18%	18%	19%	19%
Not much	15%	15%	16%	15%
Not at all	40%	36%	36%	36%
Don't know	12%	15%	15%	15%
Trust/mistrust	33-55	33-51	34-51	35-51
Net	-22	-18	-18	-16

Reform voters strongly trust their party to have the right policies on immigration, by 82% trusted to 14% distrusted (net +68). Reform is trusted on immigration by half of 2024 Conservative voters (49%) but distrusted by 38%, demonstrating a dilemma for the future Tory leadership: how to win back Reform voters without repelling current Conservatives or others. Two-thirds of Labour voters (65%) distrust Reform on immigration, while around a quarter (23%) are attracted by Reform's message.

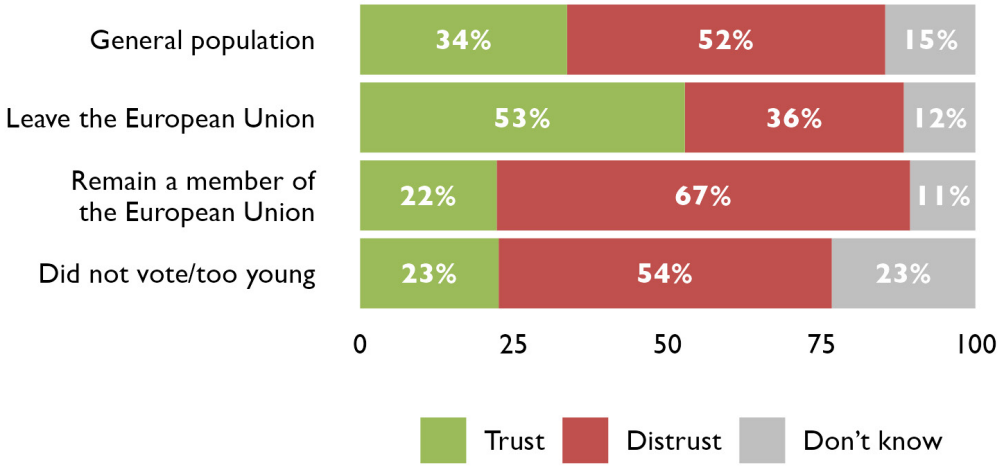
Fig. 9.2: How much do different voters trust Reform to have the right policies on immigration?



Ipsos's separate *How Britain Voted* study finds that Reform won 29% of the vote among those who voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum, and 3% of those who voted Remain. This is reflected in the contrast in perceptions of the party's voice on immigration.

Both Brexit as an issue and the identities arising from the referendum were of much lower salience in 2024 than in 2019, yet this remains a strong predictor of attitudes towards Nigel Farage's Reform Party, the new evolution of the Brexit Party. Reform's difficulty in converting seats into votes reflects the fact that it has a lower ceiling than other smaller parties, both nationally and locally.

Figure 9.3: How much does the public trust Reform to have the right policies on immigration – by EU referendum vote



Reform's election result is strikingly similar to that of UKIP almost a decade ago – with Farage's latest party again winning four million votes, with 14% of the vote on a lower turnout, compared to 13% in 2015. Both Reform in 2024 and UKIP in 2015 secured over 30 per cent of the vote in ten constituency contests. In 2015, UKIP won only a single constituency, Clacton, then held by the former Conservative MP Douglas Carswell, who was often critical of Nigel Farage, particularly over his language on issues of immigration and race. In 2024, Reform was able to be first past the post in five constituencies – primarily due to a more fragmented vote and a lower Conservative share, rather than because it significantly outperformed Farage's best previous result. Reform now has high hopes of building on its 98 second places, though UKIP was second in 120 seats nine years ago.

Why Reform voters are different

Reform's populist pitch derives much of its energy from the ethos that the party is the only one to stand up and talk about how most people really think. What the tracker data demonstrates is how different Reform voters are from median opinion. There is a much more dramatic contrast between the Reform vote and general public opinion than is the case for Green Party or Liberal Democrat voters, for example, whose voters are more liberal.

Figure 9.4: How Reform voters compare to the public and voters of other parties

	General public	Reform	Conservatives	Labour	Lib Dem	Green	SNP
Immigration as top three issue in deciding 2024 vote	**27%**	**72%**	50%	14%	10%	12%	4%
Immigration as number one priority for new government	**19%**	**55%**	28%	6%	8%	4%	11%
Feel immigration is not talked about enough	**33%**	**66%**	46%	20%	24%	22%	18%
Would reduce overall immigration numbers	**55%**	**81%**	72%	44%	43%	41%	41%
Would like large reductions in overall numbers	**38%**	**75%**	58%	21%	25%	24%	14%
Immigration positive or negative impact overall	**Positive +3**	**Negative -62**	Negative -27	Positive +33	Positive +38	Positive +27	Positive +42
Think that over half of all migrants to the UK are asylum seekers	**22%**	**39%**	31%	15%	12%	13%	13%
No sympathy at all for those crossing the Channel	**23%**	**58%**	35%	11%	13%	16%	2%
Support resettlement (Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghans, Syria) and would repeat in future	**Support +19**	**Oppose -35**	Support +15	Support +41	Support +36	Support +48	Support +36

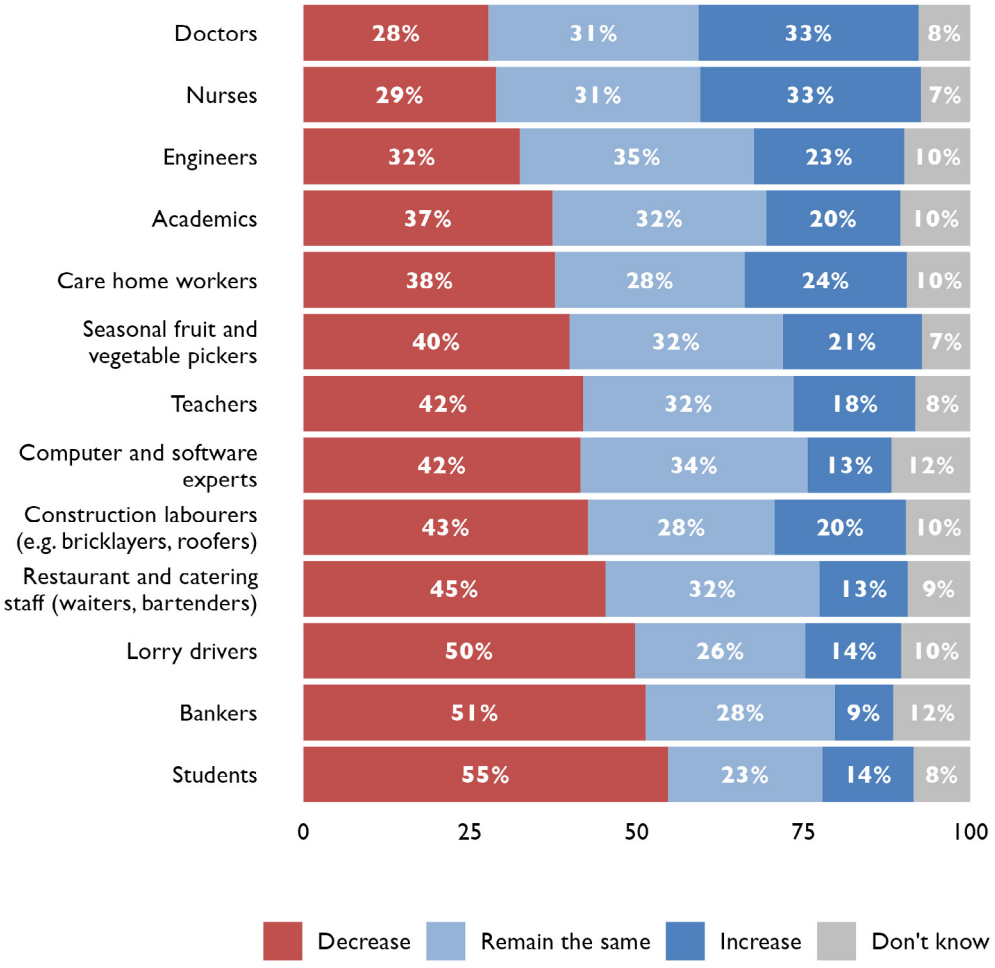
Reform voters are not a monolithic block: mainstream populists and the extreme fringe

Yet the new tracker data also shows that generalising about "Reform voters" may be too simplistic. There are some clear points of broad consensus across the Reform vote – with high levels of trust and support in the leader and the party's sceptical voice on issues of immigration. But there are different strands of opinion on substantive issues.

Over half of the Reform vote can be characterised as **"mainstream democratic populists"**. This group expresses clear commitments to foundational democratic norms.[32]

Most of the mainstream populist voters are Migration Sceptics – who want to see immigration talked about more and the numbers reduced. However, this group are "selective reducers" when it comes to which flows of immigration they would actually cut: as Figure 9.5 shows, for most jobs less than half of Reform voters want numbers reduced.

Figure 9.5: Reform voters' support for reductions in migration to different roles



This group includes a significant number of voters who may conceive of their vote for Reform as mainly a protest vote, or who may be open to different arguments and offers about the best political vehicles to oppose the Labour government or replace it next time.

The next Conservative leader can appeal to the "mainstream populist" half of the Reform vote in a broadly similar way to how they would engage a significant chunk of their own vote. Keir Starmer and the Labour Party have fewer prospects of electoral success with much of this group – and is never likely to engage. However, Focaldata post-election polling for British Future found 29% of Reform voters would consider or have considered voting Labour, largely because of its positions on other issues including public spending and the NHS. [33]

This mainstream populist half of the Reform vote includes a little noticed quarter which has much less interest in immigration – including a niche who vote for the party despite holding much more liberal views on immigration. One fifth of the Reform vote gives little or no priority to immigration as a policy issue. Some 18% of Reform voters say that they are content with the current record levels of immigration and would not seek to reduce the overall numbers. A quarter would favour repeating the large humanitarian resettlement schemes of the last parliament if and when there are future crises and emergencies. These voters are often backing Reform to support a broader shake-up of the party and political system for other reasons. Some voters may choose the party because they back its stance on other issues such as cutting taxation and public spending or holding sceptical views of net zero. Others again may simply have just been casting a 'none of the others' protest vote in this general election.

At least a quarter of the Reform vote can fairly be characterised as "**rejectionist authoritarian'** voters, based on data from other research.[34] This group has views on immigration policy – shut the borders – that mean they are unlikely to ever be content with anything any real-world government would say on the issue. This rejectionist minority within the Reform vote has shaky commitments to core democratic social norms, including rejecting violence and racism.[35]

Research by Focaldata for British Future immediately after the general election found that the public are evenly split over Reform's mainstream credentials.[36] Some 42% see Reform as mainly a mainstream party which should be able to express its view while 43% think it mainly divisive and dangerous. More than a third (37%) see it as a racist party while 33% reject that characterisation and many others are on the fence. Conservative voters were split, with over a third seeing Reform as a racist party and a third rejecting this, with many on the fence.

Nigel Farage vehemently rejects the "far right" label for the party or claims that it is a racist or extreme party. He points out that he has long viewed a *cordon sanitaire* from the extreme racist right as

essential to electoral success. Indeed, Farage quit UKIP to create the Brexit Party — which then became Reform — after Gerard Battern, his successor as UKIP leader, brought Tommy Robinson into the fold. Farage has said that he should be credited with defeating the far right by offering a mainstream alternative. His opponents fear that he could mainstream prejudice and extremism under a more respectable veneer. Reform boasts that it fields candidates of all colours and creeds — yet it had to suspend many general election candidates for racism and extremism. That six out of ten of Reform's own voters wanted stronger action against extreme candidates shows that non-racist credentials matter to most.[37]

Research by YouGov and More in Common found that a fifth of Reform voters expressed support for the recent violent disorder.[38] Reform voters (21%) were four times as likely as the voters of other parties (5%) to be in the 7% who said they supported the violence, while 33% of Reform voters were in the 12% of the public who regarded the disorder as "justified" – a view rejected by 82% of the public. Support for disorder and violence was much more evenly spread by social class, geography and other demographic factors than by politics and worldview – so voting Reform was easily the strongest correlate with support for violence and disorder. The Reform voters were the most divided in their response to the riots – while being overwhelming sympathetic to those protests that were not violent.

The YouGov/More in Common research suggests that approximately 2-3% of the electorate, therefore – one-fifth of the Reform vote – may regret that Reform does not offer an old-school, far-right proposition. A quarter of the Reform vote may prefer a more extreme form of authoritarian, right-wing politics. Hence the attraction of unruly street politics — including violent confrontations over asylum, immigration or Islam. The YouGov and More in Common research found that three-quarters of the Reform vote opposed the violence and disorder, with a quarter agreeing with the majority of the public who characterised it as 'racist' and 'far right'.

The Farage paradox revisited

"That is a mathematical paradox walking out of the door. Every time Nigel Farage's popularity increases nationwide, the support for Brexit decreases nationwide," says the Dominic Cummings character in the dramatization of the Brexit debate *Civil War*. Vote Leave sought to minimise Nigel Farage's role in the official referendum campaign because of the evidence that his support enthused and mobilised the base but made it harder to reach the 50% winning post.

Yet the 2024 general election showed that Nigel Farage is clearly an asset to a party like Reform, which was averaging just over 10% in the opinion polls when he returned as party leader. He was able to mobilise and secure the votes of most of the sixth of the public

who strongly approve of him – and has the potential to reach between a quarter to a third of the electorate.

But Farage's appeal presents more of a dilemma and a conundrum for the Conservatives: a 24% party on the right that aspires to be a 40% party again.

The Reform leader is popular with a majority of the most sceptical third of the electorate on immigration – but struggles for trust not just with those with the most liberal views, but also with the broad Balancer Middle too.

The Conservatives are unlikely to find a path back to power without winning back a fair chunk of Reform's mainstream populist democratic voters – but will find it more difficult to broaden their appeal to govern if they were to become too closely associated with the most polarising voice on the politics of immigration.

10. The new 'Yellow Wall': How the Lib Dems advanced a liberal agenda in the general election

The Liberal Democrats won 72 seats in the 2024 general election, with 12.2% of the vote, a modest increase in vote share of 0.7% percentage points. Their 61 gains made this the most seats won by the Lib Dems or their Liberal predecessors – or indeed any other third-party rival to Labour and the Conservatives – for over a century.

Comparing the performance of Ed Davey's party with that of Reform shows just how effective the Lib Dems have become at operating within a first-past-the-post system they would still like to get rid of. Nigel Farage's party won 14% of the vote but could only convert this into five seats, including that of Lee Anderson who had defected from the Conservatives. The Lib Dems converted a lower share of the vote into their biggest win since the Liberal Party in the general election of 1923, making them parliament's third party by a considerable margin.

It transpired that an effective local presence in key constituencies, built up over years by the Lib Dems, was of more value in winning seats than the higher national media profile of Nigel Farage's polarising party. That was combined with effective targeting of seats, including those where people might vote tactically to defeat an unpopular Conservative government; and a campaign that saw leader Ed Davey take on the role of Blue Peter presenter in a series of picture-friendly stunts that earned his party more media cut-through than in previous years.

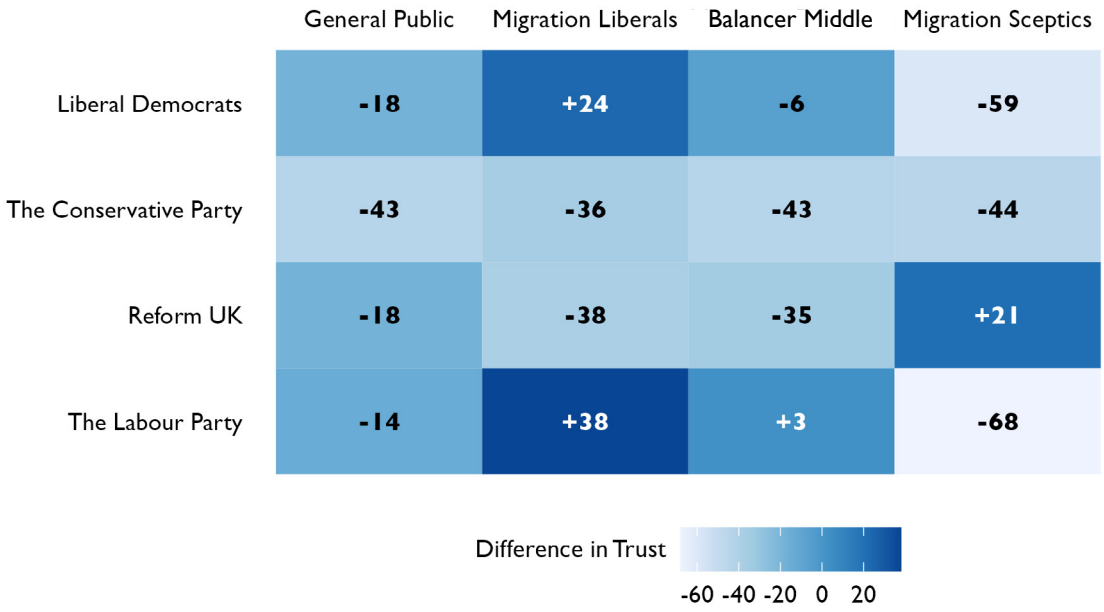
But the strong result also reflects the fact that the Lib Dems' positioning on the centre-left appealed to a significant swathe of the electorate: including longstanding Lib Dem voters, Labour supporters and some liberal Tories too.

Unburdened by the front-runner's fear of slip-ups that saw Labour's 'Ming vase' strategy produce a manifesto light on policy, especially on immigration, the Liberal Democrats ran on a considerably more detailed immigration policy agenda, with a more liberal stance. The party argued that most asylum decisions can be made in three months and that people should have the right to work if it takes longer. Ed Davey's party also stated that it would seek to negotiate the youth mobility deal proposed by the EU Commission, as one staging post to negotiate access to the single market and return to free movement.

This distinctly liberal manifesto on immigration did them little harm at the ballot box. It was not the main reason why most people voted for them, with only 10% of Lib Dem voters saying immigration was an important issue in deciding their vote. But as

Figure 10.3 shows, it was an attractive part of the package to most Lib Dem voters nevertheless: the party is trusted on immigration by 61% of those who voted for them and distrusted by 23%. Nor was it a liability in those seats where Ed Davey's party was in direct competition with the Conservatives, with the Lib Dems strongly preferred to the Conservatives by the Balancer Middle.

Figure 10.1: Trust in political parties on immigration, by immigration attitudes groups



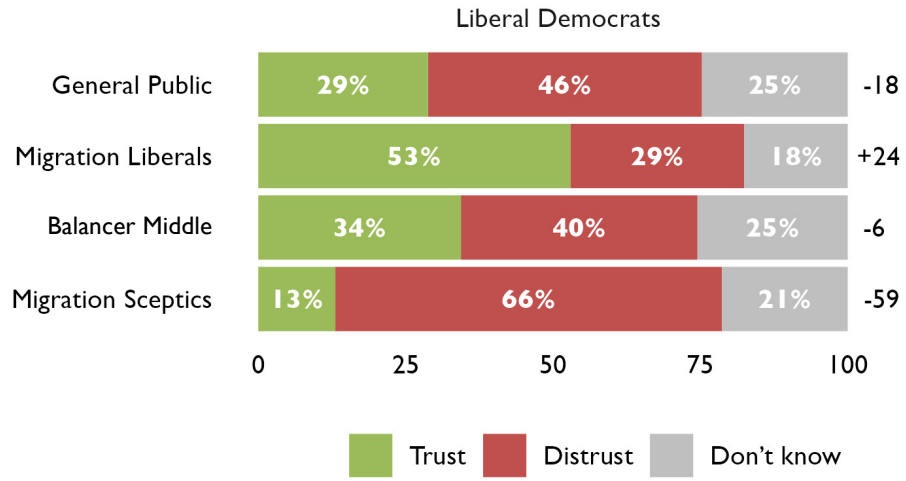
As Figure 10.2 shows, more than half (57%) of the Lib Dem vote in 2024 comes from the Balancer Middle. This reflects both a broadening of their own vote, where they targeted people with more centrist views, and also the Green Party making a strong pitch to compete for the most liberal voters.

Figure 10.2: Party votes by immigration attitudes groups, 2024 and 2019

	Migration liberals	Balancer middle	Migration sceptics
Lib Dem 2024 (and 2019)	**24% (32)**	**54% (53)**	**17% (11)**
Conservatives 2024 (and 2019)	10% (8)	42% (42)	44% (48)
Labour 2024 (and 2019)	28% (32)	53% (48)	15% (16)
Reform	5%	26%	69%
Green	44%	35%	21%
SNP	32%	56%	12%
Plaid Cymru	28%	50%	22%

The new Lib Dem MPs can be an important voice for liberalism in the parliament. A liberal/balancer electoral coalition gives the party a strong interest in championing practical ways to broaden public support for a 'majority liberalism', which can advance and entrench social change in a way that can take the public with them on identity, migration, human rights and related issues. They are an important potential ambassador group for liberal approaches to managing migration and integration and rebuilding sustained support for it, across much of what we can now call the 'Yellow Wall' across the south of England and beyond.

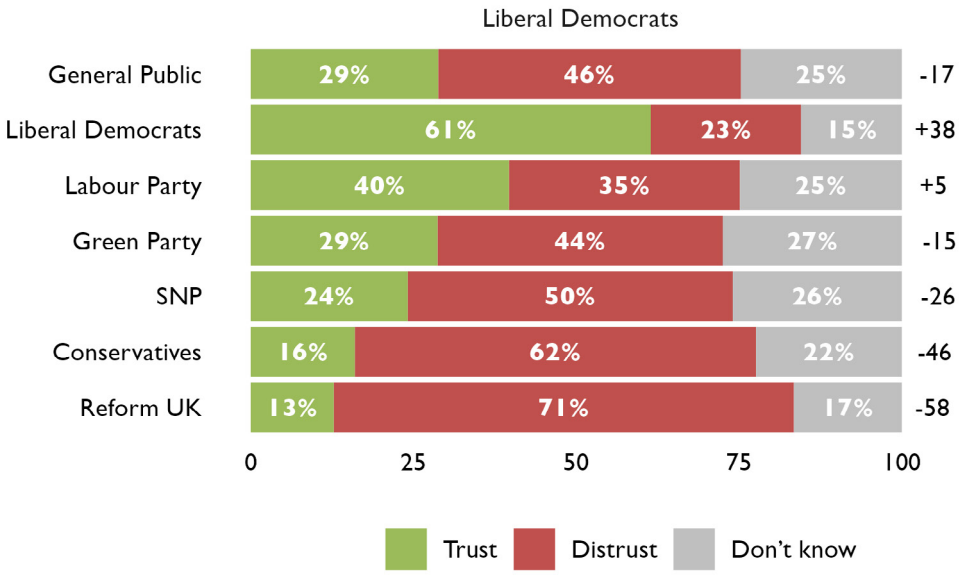
Figure 10.3: Trust in the Liberal Democrats on immigration, by immigration attitudes groups



The Lib Dems have a mixed reputation with the Balancer Middle, doing better with this group than with the general population, with a net negative rating of -6 and many unsure.

The party struggles with the 30% of the electorate with very negative views on immigration, reflected in their negative rating among those Reform and Conservative Party voters with strongly sceptical views of immigration. But the Lib Dems are trusted by a slim majority of those with liberal views on immigration. Some of the mistrust from this group reflects a cross-pressure between party allegiances, among SNP and Green party supporters who hold more negative views of the Lib Dems than Labour supporters.

Figure 10.4: Trust in the Liberal Democrats on immigration, by party



The new 'Yellow Wall'

The Liberal Democrats gained 60 seats from the Conservatives in the 2024 general election. With strong local roots in many constituencies and a well-tested local campaigning playbook, they would back themselves to defend many of these seats in 2028.

This presents a significant challenge for the Conservative Party. The debate within the Conservatives is about how to "reunite the right" and win back Reform UK voters. But if the Conservatives are going to return to government, they will need to win back these seats lost to the Lib Dems – or make extraordinary gains from Labour in seats they have not won for decades.

In Lib Dem/Conservative marginals, each party has a core of support from those with strongly liberal and strongly conservative views – but both parties need to engage with the balancers in between to secure broad enough support to win.

Our tracker findings on party trust suggest that in 2024, the Lib Dem tone and message was considerably more attractive to the Balancer Middle than that of the Conservatives or the Reform Party. The Conservatives will need to appeal to some Reform voters in the Yellow Wall seats, but the Lib Dems will be well placed to hold these seats if the Balancers think the Conservatives have moved sharply to the right.

Political walls have proved to be less sturdy than many had thought, with those of various colours being toppled in recent elections. But if the Liberal Democrats can successfully maintain their Yellow Wall liberal-balancer electoral coalition, they may continue to exert a liberal influence on Britain's immigration debate in years to come.

11. Conclusion: constructive reforms to build confidence and consent

Recent months have seen particularly high-profile debates over immigration, first in the general election campaign and then again as a toxic, racist minority brought fear and violence to the streets. The latest monthly Ipsos Issues Index found immigration to be the number one issue for the public, with concern at its highest level since 2016, albeit with sharp differences in importance by party support.[39]

Overall net migration is expected to fall significantly over the next 12 months[40], but the new Labour government will need to ensure it is seen to engage seriously and pragmatically with the pace and scale of immigration. Introducing opportunities for democratic voice into its policy plans could help improve public trust and drive a more nuanced national conversation.

The visible lack of control in the Channel, along with a highly polarised political debate, has contributed to tougher views on asylum in recent years. Following Labour's manifesto promise to 'smash the gangs', Keir Starmer's record on immigration will likely be judged significantly on efforts to address and reduce small boat crossings. This research finds the foundations of support for the Government to pursue a new cooperation deal with Britain's neighbours, enabling new frameworks for control and more safe and legal routes for those currently making perilous journeys across the Channel.

The tracker finds that Labour is currently slightly less distrusted by the public on immigration than its predecessor. Whether this honeymoon continues will be contingent on setting a proactive new agenda, or the Prime Minister could risk being answerable to the legacy of his predecessors. There will be a risk of some responding to the scenes of riots this summer with calls to slash numbers and 'toughen up' asylum policy. Labour must be careful to avoid conflating the actions of the angriest, most prejudiced fringe with wider opinion and meet the country where they are: acknowledging that many in Britain are 'Balancers', seeing both pressures and gains from immigration. This will involve setting firmer boundaries on *illegitimate* concerns – to exclude hatred, prejudice and misinformation from our public and political debates. At the same time, the new Government must constructively engage with questions of how to make immigration work for all.

The following recommendations set out a series of options for constructive reform in the new Parliament that are controlled, managed and fair.

1. Publish a three-year plan for migration to replace the net migration target, with this plan reviewed every year in Parliament on an Annual Migration Day.

A three-year migration strategy, led by the Cabinet Office with input from the Home Office, devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and other relevant bodies, should replace the last government's net migration target. If the government decides to include numeric targets in its three-year plan, these should be based on robust evidence and treat different types of immigration differently. The plan should be reviewed each year in an Annual Migration Day in Parliament, similar to the existing budget day.

2. Institutionalise public consultation through an official National Conversation on Immigration and Integration.

This should feed into the three-year plan and annual Migration Day in Parliament. We need a sustained and ongoing commitment to public engagement across the nations and regions of the UK, in the form of an official National Conversation on Immigration, comprising citizen panels and surveys across the UK to bring more democratic voice into immigration policy. This public engagement can initiate a conversation in such a way that all voices are heard, not just the loudest. It should be coordinated by the Migration Advisory Committee, in partnership with local authorities, combined authorities and the devolved administrations.

3. Ensure that asylum and refugee accommodation does not become a focus for community grievances and extremist violence.

Those who threaten people seeking asylum must bear the full force of the law. Firmer boundaries are also needed to exclude hate and prejudice from our political debate. However, past examples also demonstrate that where local authorities proactively engage communities about dispersal accommodation plans, providing opportunities to ask questions, this can strengthen public consent for asylum accommodation. MHCLG, the Home Office and Asylum Accommodation and Support (AASC) contractors should work with councils to make sure that local communities are consulted about asylum dispersal. AASC contractors and sub-contractors should always inform local authorities well in advance of placing people seeking asylum in their area. Failure to do this should result in financial penalties.

4. Enable safer arrivals to the UK through a humanitarian visa and negotiating new 'comprehensive cooperation' agreements with France and Belgium.

The Government should introduce a new humanitarian visa allowing people with a prima facie case for asylum to travel to the UK and enter the asylum process. This would help to divert people from criminal gangs and help to reduce dangerous channel crossings. It would be a capped scheme, with the number of humanitarian visas set by Parliament annually, along with the prioritisation criteria. Its success as a diversionary measure would also be reviewed by Parliament.

The visa could be issued at British consulates at locations away from the French and Belgian coasts. By helping significantly reduce Channel crossings, a humanitarian visa could open possibilities for new and more comprehensive UK-France and UK-Belgium cooperation agreements, covering security, police cooperation, returns and systems to share responsibility for people who do not qualify for asylum.

5. Reform, simplify and celebrate the citizenship process, reducing prohibitive fees.

The citizenship process, which remains prohibitively expensive, could do more to encourage those settling long-term to become British. Civic welcoming efforts, such as local conversation clubs to supplement formal classes, could invite existing citizens to play their part – and so catalyse the meaningful social contact that can broaden social confidence, reciprocally, between incomers and the society they join.

While it is reasonable for citizenship fees to cover administrative costs, the Home Office should undertake a review of fee policy, with the aim of reducing financial barriers to the acquisition of British citizenship. Citizenship ceremonies should become higher-profile, public-facing and celebratory events. The *Life in the UK* test should be reviewed and reformed by an independent advisory body. New and long-standing British citizens should be involved in this process.

6. Expand the remit of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) to provide advice on social cohesion and skills gaps.

The remit of the MAC should be expanded to provide the Government with independent advice on social cohesion issues raised by immigration. This approach was trialled in 2011 but has since been sidelined with the committee focusing largely on impacts to the economy, services and the labour market.[41]

This could consider the bespoke funding and support structures needed to assist the successful integration of different cohorts of new arrivals, including people seeking asylum. Independent advice could also assess where existing separate funding streams

and 'welcoming' programmes could be better co-ordinated and joined up, to explore synergies, reduce disparities in services and entitlements between groups, and avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.

Expanding the work of the MAC may also help to identify sectors and industries where investment in workers' skills is most needed, and where reliance on migrants can be reduced. As the MAC carries out sector reviews, it should not assume that the public favours tighter restrictions for migration for work, but rather take account of the nuanced, pragmatic views of the public, which often supports filling skills gaps to the benefit of the economy and services.

7. Publish a national social cohesion strategy and provide funding to implement it.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) should develop a ten-year social cohesion strategy for England. The Northern Ireland administration and Welsh Governments should also update their strategies. The New Scots strategy for integrating arrivals also provides comprehensive indicators and action plans for supporting two-way integration of migrants into communities. The Welsh Government has published a national delivery plan for community cohesion strategy in 2016[42] and provided funding for community cohesion staff based in councils. These approaches offer useful lessons for other UK nations.

A social cohesion strategy for England should lay out a clear set of objectives with an associated action plan for different government departments/bodies and councils. Reconvening the cross-departmental group that met between 2017 and 2019 would help strengthen cross-departmental working, where work to-date has often been siloed.

Government funding should also be offered to all councils in the local government funding settlement to enable them to implement the strategy. A modest amount of around £75,000 per local authority per year would support all local authorities to develop local social cohesion strategies and implement tension monitoring networks that spot conflicts upstream. The national strategy should also set out a measurement framework, which could be used to identify areas at high risk of community unrest. Building on the success of the Integration Action Area programme, the Government should provide funding to a set number of local authorities identified as being at the greatest risk of cohesion tensions or support for extremism.

12. Notes and references

1. Categories for this scale used by Ipsos to show trends are negative (0-4), neutral (5) and positive (6-10).
2. Kyambi, S. and Kay, R. (2024) *Attitudes to Immigration in Scotland: Cautious pragmatism?* Migration Policy Scotland
3. This question was split sampled with half being told the current level of net migration. However it all made a difference of only 2-3 percentage points to the answers.
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5. *Immigration year statistics*, year ending June 2024, Gov.uk, August 2024.
6. See British Future, 14 July, 'Public gives new government a chance on immigration reforms – with space to go further too'
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8. To assess whether there was a framing effect in the question wording, we also asked half the sample a version of the same question but with the UK/France order reversed: *"The UK should negotiate a new deal with France where the UK agrees to admit significantly more people than they do now who wish to claim asylum here, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission."* The difference was negligible, with roughly the same level of support (37%) but slightly higher opposition (32%), in particular from more people being 'strongly opposed' (17%, compared to 12%).
9. Daily Mail 14 September 2023, '*Keir Starmer is accused of wanting to make Britain a 'dumping ground' for EU's unwanted migrants as he moots deal with Brussels to take MORE asylum seekers ahead of meeting Macron in Paris - with his 'PM-in-waiting' tour of Europe overshadowed by row'*
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17. The Ipsos Issues Index August 2024 puts immigration at the top of the public's list of concerns: https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/immigration-seen-biggest-issue-facing-britain-while-concern-about-crime-surges

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19. Ballinger, S., Katwala, S. and Rolfe, H. (2022) Jubilee Britain: after a decade of upheaval, where are we going now? British Future

20. YouGov, *The public reaction to the 2024 riots*, August 2024 https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50257-the-public-reaction-to-the-2024-riots

21. More in Common, *What do Britons really think about the riots?* August 2024 https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/what-do-britons-really-think-about-the-riots/

22. YouGov, *The public reaction to the 2024 riots*, August 2024 https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50257-the-public-reaction-to-the-2024-riots

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24. ONS, *The changing picture of long-term international migration, England and Wales: Census 2021* https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/

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26. Reported in Eastern Eye 7 February 2024 https://www.easterneye.biz/hong-kong-visa-exposes-immigration-dichotomy/

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31. Ipsos, *How Britain voted in the 2024 general election*, July 2024 https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election

32. For example, 59% of Reform voters agree that the party "needs to do more to ensure they don't have candidates with extreme views." Focaldata polling for British Future of 2,502 GB adults, fieldwork conducted 5-8 July 2024 https://www.britishfuture.org/reforms-racist-reputation-worse-than-ukips-in-2015-finds-poll/

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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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