

Noise and Nuance:

What the public really thinks about immigration

Findings from the Ipsos/British Future
immigration attitudes tracker

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I. Introduction: Noise and Nuance

Immigration continues to dominate British politics – often because it is the issue where politicians most struggle to connect with the public. Attitudes are becoming more negative and trust in government on this subject is low: successive administrations have failed to deliver what they promised or made pledges they could never realistically keep.

A decade of Ipsos/British Future tracker data shows that, even in a polarised era, public attitudes to immigration remain far more nuanced than the political debate usually suggests. There is no single story about what the public think. People hold competing views, often distinguishing between different kinds of immigration.

Politicians frequently misjudge the public mood by appealing to caricatures shaped by the loudest voices. We have identified a large group in the “Balancer Middle”, who see both pressures and gains from immigration. They recognise strains when migration is high but also the contribution it makes to the NHS, universities and the economy. Within this group, age, education and political leanings shape where individuals strike the balance, with growing polarisation between right and left on whether the gains outweigh the costs. Yet much of the national conversation is driven by a vocal rejectionist minority who dominate social media and MPs’ inboxes, but do not represent the full range of public opinion.

Even amid political division, there remains more common ground than many imagine. A majority (57%) support reducing immigration in principle, but views become more conflicted when people consider what that means in practice. Only one in three favour cutting numbers across the board; most do not want fewer international students or fewer visas for skilled and unskilled jobs such as doctors, IT experts, care home workers, fruit pickers or construction workers that keep the economy running. Many people are cross-pressured – wanting control but not crude cuts.

There are striking public misperceptions of immigration numbers. Most people think annual net migration went up last year, when in fact it halved, from 848,000 to 345,000. Only one in six people realise this. Numbers continue to drop, but twice as many people expect then to go up than come down. That disconnect exposes a political risk: ministers insisting numbers are “too high”, even as they fall, may reinforce public pessimism rather than rebuild trust. The tracker suggests public concern is now driven more by perceptions of chaos around asylum and small boats, though total migration levels are also a concern.

No party will regain credibility on immigration if the debate continues as a numbers auction, with the winner promising the lowest figure without a credible plan. Governments need better mechanisms to help parliament and the public understand and weigh the trade-offs that any migration policy involves.

The scale of public misunderstanding also represents a challenge for the media. Broadcasters, tasked with explaining complex issues impartially, often focus narrowly on Westminster clashes over asylum or Channel crossings. That reinforces the false impression that most migrants arrive by boat. In reality, the largest flows are for work, study and family – and a more balanced debate would highlight the social and economic impacts of these routes as well as the challenges of asylum.

There is broad frustration with how the asylum system functions. Protests outside asylum hotels reflect the anger of roughly a quarter of the public who express no sympathy for those crossing the Channel, but they do not represent the majority. Most people still support Britain's role in protecting refugees and want an asylum system that combines control with compassion. There is wide support for a UK-France returns deal that would help create legal routes to replace irregular crossings. If such a system were workable and humane, people would accept substantial refugee numbers arriving in an orderly way. Fieldwork for this report was conducted prior to the Home Secretary's November announcements of major changes to UK asylum policy, including on settlement rights for those accepted as refugees.

On settlement and citizenship, opinions differ on the exact path to permanent status. Radical ideas such as abolishing Indefinite Leave to Remain, or denying those living in Britain the opportunity to ever settle permanently, appeal only to a small fringe.

The dangers of a distorted political debate were on full display this summer, when calls to remove those without legal status escalated into an 'auction of deportations.' Both Nigel Farage and the Conservatives suggested they would follow the example of Idi Amin's dictatorship in proposing the mass expulsion of settled and legal migrants. Such rhetoric spiralled well beyond what even tough-minded voters consider fair.

Labour's initial response focused on practicality, questioning whether such mass deportations could ever be implemented. When it shifted to making an ethical argument – rejecting the idea of deporting settled, law-abiding migrants – it helped restore some moral balance to the debate. Kemi Badenoch later reinforced that line by defending the principle of not applying immigration rules retrospectively.

In an increasingly fragmented party system, all major parties now have negative public ratings on immigration. But this does not reflect blanket disillusionment. Most voters still trust at least one party to manage immigration, though views are increasingly polarised over how much the issue should dominate politics and what tone leaders should strike.

Immigration remains central to Nigel Farage's rise. Reform UK connects with more than a third of the public – particularly those holding the most negative views on the impact of immigration.

His base consists largely of people who still feel immigration is not discussed enough in British politics, though that is a minority view. To expand beyond this group, Farage will need to reach moderate sceptics who are uneasy about immigration but not driven by hostility.

Other voters believe Keir Starmer or Ed Davey are more likely to strike the right balance than Farage. They want governments to manage migration effectively but recognise its benefits to the economy and society. Around a quarter of the public also express trust in the Green Party: research was conducted prior to the election of Zack Polanski, who aims to champion a positive, pro-migration message as a counterweight to populism.

The tracker research suggests the debate may become more contested, with clearer pro- and anti-immigration voices. Yet neither camp completely convinces the ‘Balancer Middle’ – the pragmatic majority who want fairness and competence, not ideological polarisation.

For Labour and the liberal left, the task is to prove they can manage immigration competently and credibly, showing that control depends on international cooperation and that well-managed migration strengthens Britain economically and socially.

For the right, the challenge is to move beyond grievance and sloganeering. Voters want solutions, not scapegoats: a system that recognises legitimate concerns about the pace and scale of change, and the challenges of integration, while treating with decency those who make their home in the UK. The right will only secure credibility if it keeps racism and prejudice out of the mainstream and offers constructive answers.

Immigration will remain a central and contested issue throughout this parliament and into the next election. But the political and media focus needs to move beyond the opposing poles of opinion to engage the views of the Balancer Middle, which are too often drowned out by the noise. The debate will need to shift if our democratic conversation about immigration is to better reflect how the public think about this important challenge in a changing society.

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 3,003 adults (18+) across Great Britain, conducted online from 16 June to 2 July 2025, is the latest of 18 waves of research into public attitudes to immigration since 2015.

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 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/immigration-tracker-november-2025>.

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. 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. Both scales are used within the analysis of the report.

Roughly a fifth of the public (18%) are 'Migration Liberals' who see immigration in broadly positive terms, giving a score in the upper reaches of 8-10. More than a quarter (28%) are 'Migration Sceptics', giving a score of 0-2, who feel more negatively about the impact of immigration on the UK. The roughly half of respondents in between these extremes we have termed the 'Balancer Middle', giving a score of 3-7 (49%). Its breadth makes the Balancer Middle quite a broad church: people who give an immigration impact score of three may hold quite different views to those who give a seven. But our experience over the years has found that people at both ends of the balancer group tend to be able to appreciate the validity of each other's points of view, even if they may not share them.

Understanding the Balancer Middle is important, because without them it is not possible to build a majority coalition of support for a policy. We hope this tracker research aids that understanding.

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

Part One:
Where is the public now?

3. Perceptions and reality on immigration: How the public misunderstands immigration numbers – and how politicians and the media misunderstand the public.

Anyone spending time on social media, or even just watching the news, will have noticed that Britain's immigration debate has become increasingly polarised. The image of angry protesters gathered outside an asylum hotel on one side of the road, with a second group of counter-protesters bearing 'Refugees welcome here' banners directly opposite them, aptly captures the division into two opposing camps. Of course, most of us aren't part of either group – we are at home watching them on TV. And that, perhaps, symbolises our immigration debate even more accurately: because in that debate, the views of the majority who aren't on the barricades can get rather overlooked.

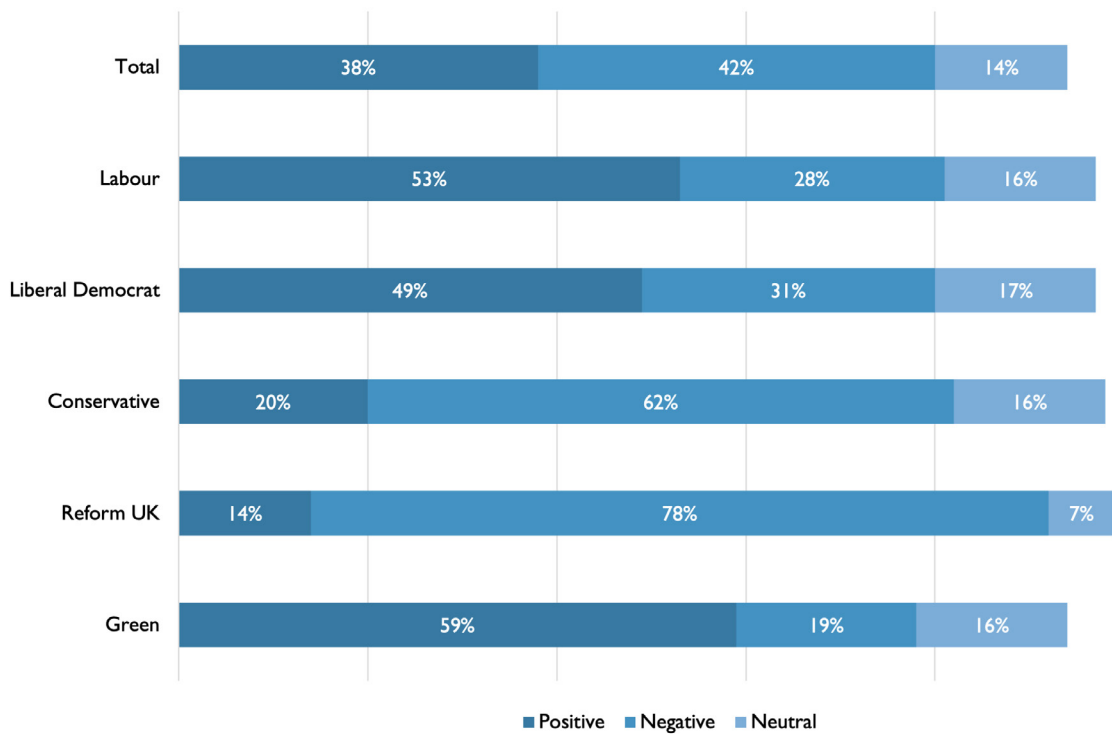
So as well as capturing this growing polarisation in attitudes, with starkly different responses from different generations and political tribes, the tracker survey also looks into the nuance of what people think about immigration: the middling responses, the weighing of pros and cons. It may not give a voice to the silent majority, but it can give us an idea of what this larger, less vocal group is thinking.

Do people think immigration is good or bad for Britain?

The Ipsos tracker, since its inception in 2015, has asked respondents 'On a scale of 0-10, has migration had a positive or negative impact on Britain?' using a scale from 0 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). Ipsos uses these scores to segment people into broad groups reflecting their sentiment towards immigration: positive (6-10), negative (0-4) and neutral (5).¹

People are split relatively equally between those that feel immigration brings positive benefits to the UK and those that feel its impacts are negative, with this year's tracker finding slightly more feeling that immigration has a negative impact (42%) than that it is positive for the UK (38%). More striking, however, is the polarisation by political party: while a majority of 2024 Labour voters (53%) see immigration as positive for the country, as do around half of Lib Dems, almost 8 in 10 Reform UK voters see it as negative, as do 62% of Conservatives.

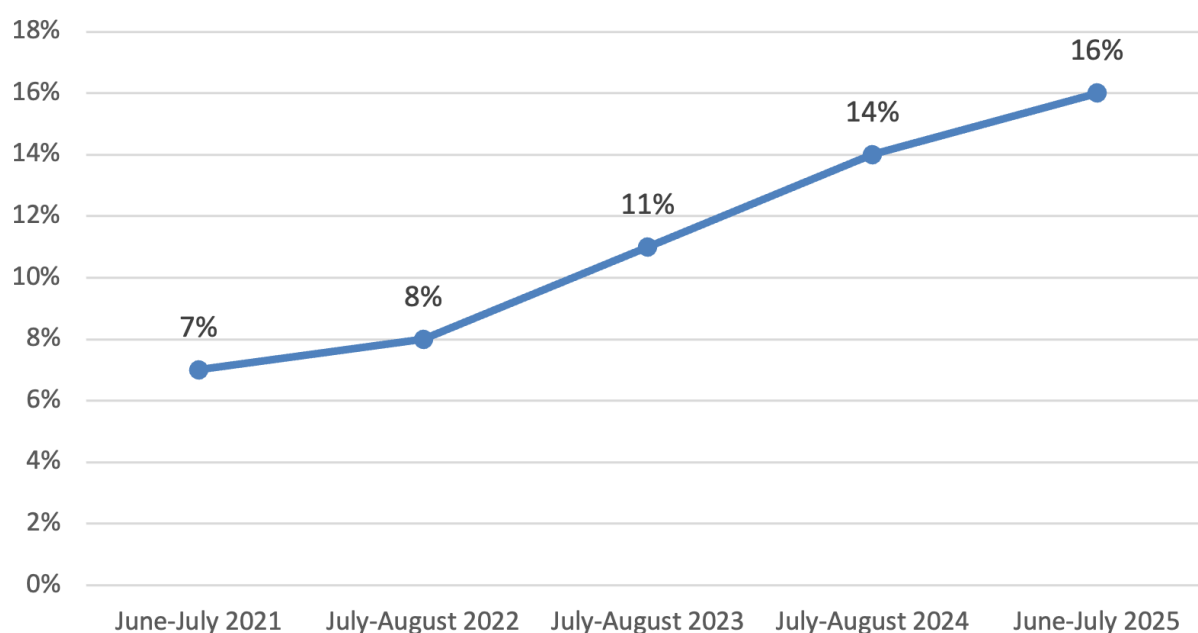
Figure 3.1: Positive and negative sentiment towards immigration, by party



Source: Ipsos/*British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025*, $n=3,003$

An even clearer indication of polarisation can be found when we look at those 0-10 scores in more detail. Past waves of the tracker have tended to show a gentle curve with a bulge in the middle, as more people give moderate, mid-scale scores. Recent waves have shown a growing trend at the negative end of the scale to see no positives at all and give a flat-out zero, with the numbers doubling over the last five years. Choosing the lowest possible score has some elements of protest, suggesting more strongly-held and perhaps therefore strongly-expressed views – which reflects the heat and anger that can characterise debate about immigration, especially online.

Figure 3.2: Zero scores on 0-10 immigration scale since 2021

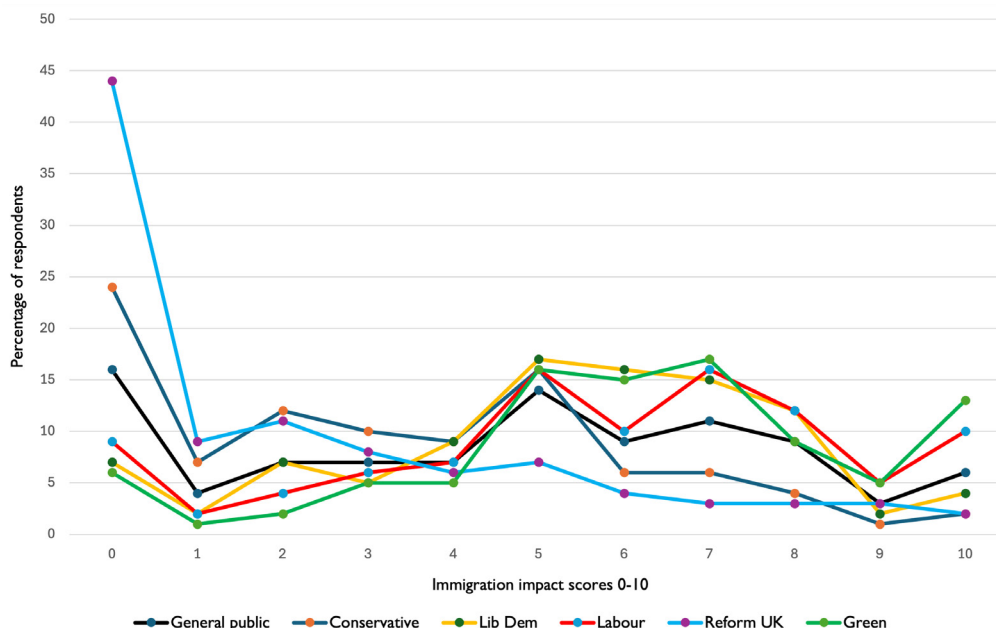


Source: Ipsos/*British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025*, $n=3,003$

There may be more than one reason for this growth in outright rejection of immigration. As we examine later in this report, the heightened visibility of irregular migration and asylum, both through small boat arrivals and hotel accommodation, has driven the salience of immigration more generally, even as net migration numbers have fallen by half. The increasing use of social media as a news source also deprives people of balancing views that set out the pros and cons of the issues being discussed. It may also be the case that the hardening rhetoric of elite voices in the media and politics on immigration has pushed those who previously gave low-but-moderate scores into the most negative camp. Populist politicians would argue that their stance merely reflects public opinion – but as we examine in Chapter 9, the positions of political parties on immigration are often significantly tougher than those of their supporters.

These zero-scoring sceptics have found a political home in the Reform UK Party. Some 44% of Reform UK voters give a zero score, making them outliers on immigration attitudes. Supporters of most parties are balancers, holding a range of views across the spectrum – with Labour and Lib Dem voters more likely to select pro-migration higher scores and Conservatives clustering in the more negative low numbers. Reform voters are different and, as we examine later, hold starkly different views across a range of questions on immigration.

Figure 3.3: Immigration 0-10 scores by 2024 party vote



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, $n=3,003$

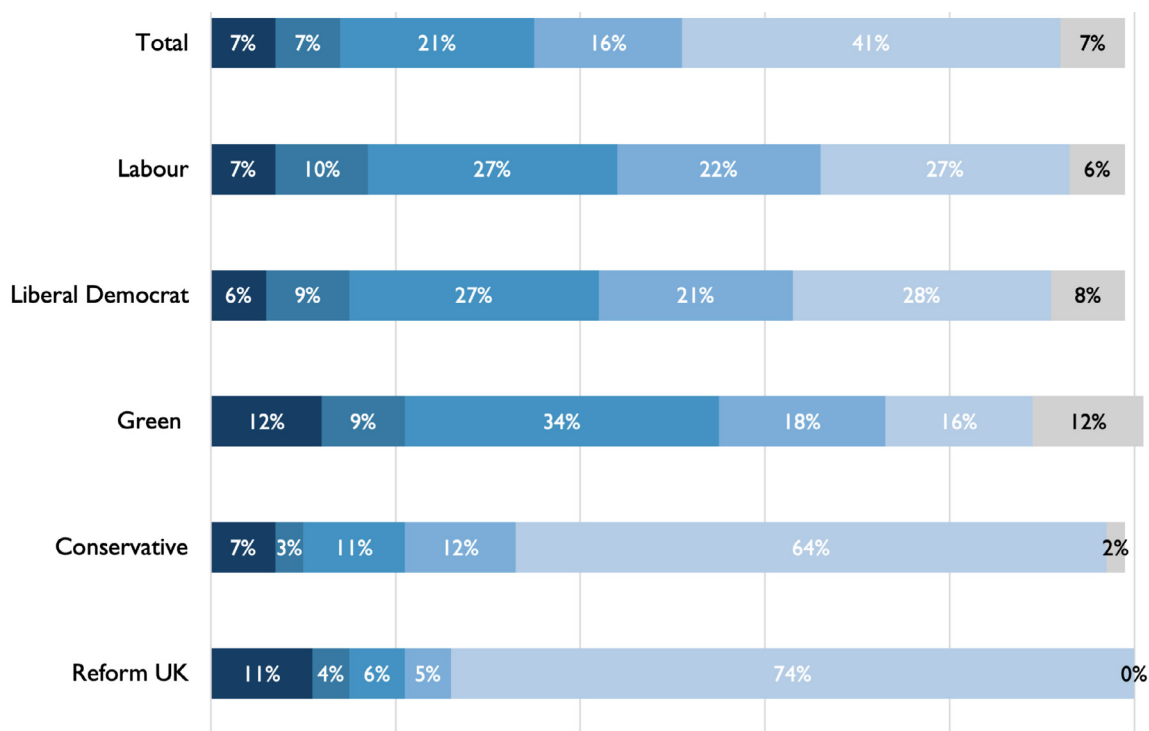
Reform voters also feel quite differently about the nature of our immigration debate in the UK. When asked “Do we talk too much or too little about immigration?” Most of the public is quite evenly split: around a third (35%) think we talk about it too little; a fifth think we talk about it too much (22%); and 29% feel the balance is about right. For those who voted Reform UK in 2024, two-thirds (65%) think we don’t talk about immigration enough, with only 21% feeling the balance is about right and just 7% saying it’s discussed too much.

Do people want more or less immigration?

A minority of people – albeit a growing one – would like to see significant reductions in immigration. This group of fervent immigration sceptics, who want immigration to decrease ‘a lot’, has been growing steadily in recent years – from 25% in January 2022 to 34% in July/August 2023, 38% in July/August 2024 and now 41% in this latest tracker. Demographically they are older – 60% of over-55s compared to just one in five 18-34s (19%) – and more likely to be non-graduates who voted Reform or Conservative in 2024 and Leave in 2016.

A smaller group of around one in seven (15%) sit at the other end of the scale and would like immigration numbers to increase (by a lot or a little). Demographically they look very different to the strong reducers: more likely to be young, urban and university educated. The remainder are divided between the 21% who would prefer immigration to remain at current levels and 16% who would reduce it a little (plus 7% who say they don’t know).

Figure 3.4: Public preferences for immigration numbers to increase, reduce or stay the same

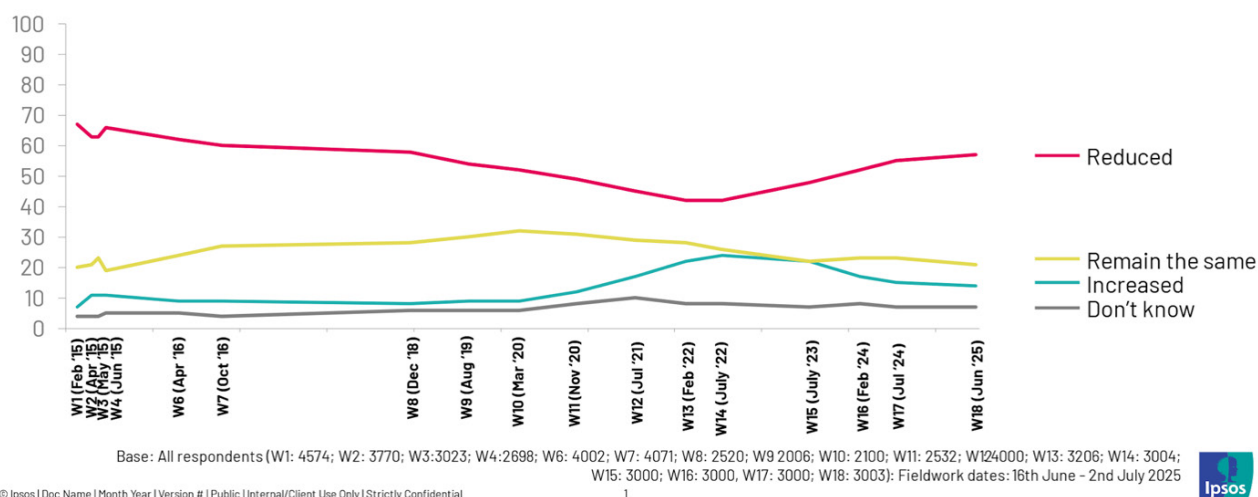


Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Support for reducing immigration is, of course, most prevalent among the ‘Migration Sceptics’ segment who give a negative impact score of 0-2, while a majority of ‘Migration Liberals’ want immigration to remain the same (51%) or increase (27%). The ‘Balancer Middle’ in between tilt towards reducing immigration but less heavily; around a quarter (26%) want immigration to go down a little and 3 in 10 (32%) want big reductions; while a third would prefer it to remain as it is (22%) or increase (13%).

Overall, some 57% of the public think immigration should be reduced, compared to 36% who would prefer the numbers to remain the same (21%) or increase (15%). This figure remains largely unchanged from last year, when 55% wanted to reduce immigration – and still a full ten points lower than the 67% who wanted less immigration when Ipsos first conducted the tracker ten years ago in February 2015. Nevertheless, it is the highest ‘reduce’ score recorded by the tracker since December 2018.

Figure 3.5: Support for increasing/reducing immigration over time



Despite support for reducing immigration numbers, people find it much harder to identify which flows of migration they would be happy to cut. In fact, asked about people coming to work or study in the UK, which makes up more than three-quarters of immigration, a majority of the public want immigration for a range of specific job roles to remain as it is or increase. Most of the public would not reduce the number of doctors, nurses or care workers coming to the UK; nor would they reduce the number of fruit and vegetable pickers, construction workers, catering staff, engineers, lorry drivers, restaurant and catering staff, teachers or students. Only for one role – bankers – do more than a third want reductions. We examine public attitudes to migration for work in more detail in Chapter 5.

Perceptions of immigration numbers vs reality

While a majority would like to see immigration numbers reducing, few are aware that their wishes are in fact coming true.

The last set of net migration statistics, released by the ONS in May this year, showed net migration falling by half on the previous year, from 848,000 in 2023 to 345,000 in 2024.² Yet most of the public (56%) believes that those stats showed an increase in numbers. Only 14% said they had fallen.

Those who most want lower immigration are the least aware of the falling numbers and the most likely to mistakenly believe net migration had increased. Three-quarters of Migration Sceptics (75%) thought net migration had increased between 2023 to 2024, compared to just 42% of Migration Liberals. Some 71% of Reform UK voters thought net migration had increased over this period, with just 12% aware that it had fallen; 67% of Conservatives thought numbers had gone up and just 11% correctly identified that they had fallen.

We asked people why they thought this drop in net migration might have happened. Around 1 in 6 people (16%) thought it was due to fewer people coming here to work, while 15% said it could be down to more people leaving the UK. But a worrying 1 in 5 people (21%) simply refused to believe the numbers had fallen by that much. And among those who care most about immigration, 42% of Migration Sceptics and 37% of Reform UK voters refused to believe that immigration had fallen, even when presented with the numbers from the Office for National Statistics.

This ‘post-truth’ conviction in the face of official figures is worrying for the future of the immigration debate in the UK, if some people choose to disregard statistics that do not correlate with their beliefs. But the finding may also contain a lesson for the government: that reducing net migration further may not get them the credit (nor the votes) that they think, particularly from those who most want immigration to be reduced.

Net migration continues to trend downwards and new figures to be published on 27 November by the Office for National Statistics are likely to show another fall in net migration. Yet 4 in 10 people surveyed (38%) expect net migration to increase in the future, twice as many as think it will fall (16%). Three in ten (31%) think it will remain the same.

One reason why those who feel most negatively about immigration are so dissatisfied with the government’s handling of the issue is that they are the least likely to be aware that numbers are going down. Nearly two thirds of migration sceptics (63%) expect net migration to increase, while only 8% think it will fall. The Balancer Middle are broadly split over whether numbers will remain the same or increase, while Migration Liberals aren’t sure whether the numbers will go up, go down, or stay the same. Similarly, around two-thirds of Reform UK voters (64%) expect net migration to go up and only 7% think it will be lower in the future, unlike voters for other parties.

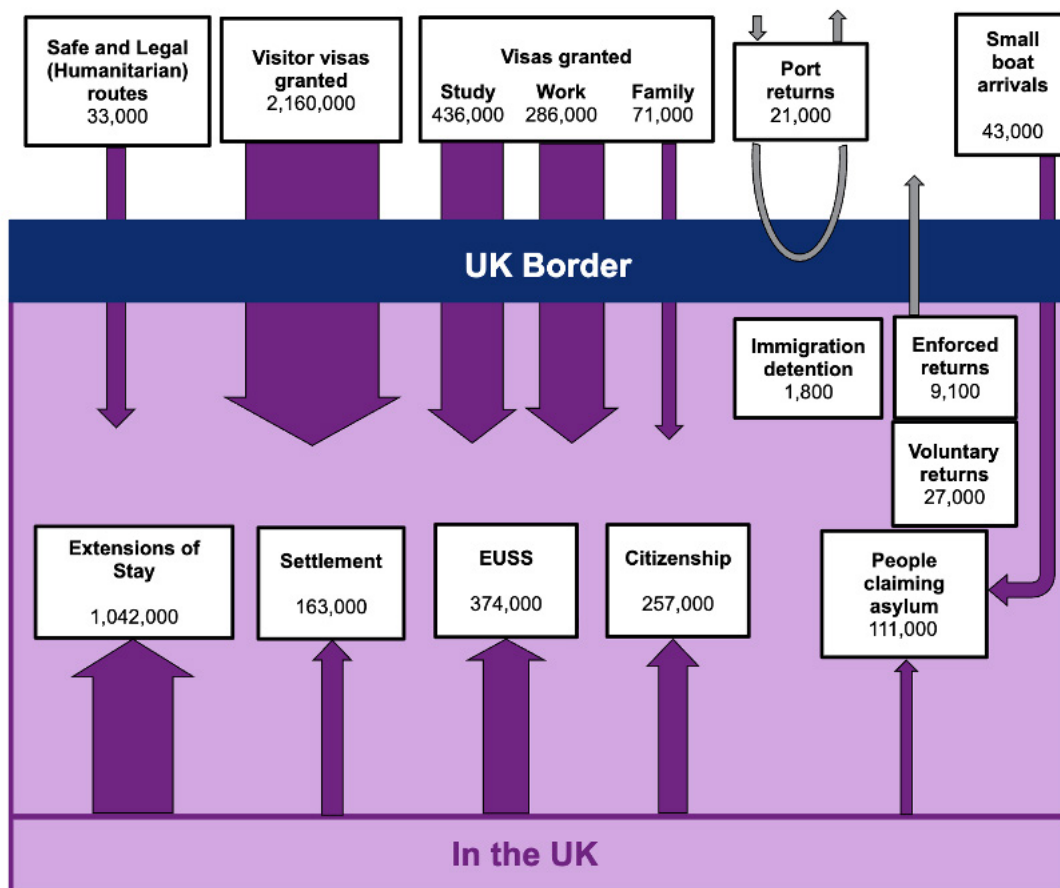
Dissatisfaction with how the government is dealing with immigration is at 56% – an increase from 48% in last summer’s tracker (though still lower than the 69% who felt dissatisfied in the February 2024 tracker under the Conservatives). Of those who are dissatisfied, the most common reason given – by 73% of dissatisfied respondents – is that “The government is not doing enough to stop migrant channel crossings”. The other top reasons given are “Being too generous to migrants/asylum seekers,” (65%) and “Allowing too many people to claim asylum in Britain” (63%).

While 60% of those dissatisfied also say it is because “Immigration numbers are too high”, small boats and asylum are clearly top of mind when people are thinking negatively about immigration. Migration for work and study simply lacks the visibility of people arriving in small boats, images of which we often see on TV news, or people seeking asylum who are housed in local hotels (especially this year after high-profile protests).

One reason for concern about irregular small boat arrivals is the issue of control. On balance, the public prioritises an immigration approach centred on control rather than one aimed at discouraging people from coming to the UK. When asked to choose between the two, 43% 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,*” compared with 33% who support “*Having an immigration system that deters people from coming to the UK so that numbers are as low as possible.*” People arriving in small boats – particularly when politicians have repeatedly said they will stop this happening – are a very visible symbol of a lack of control.

This heightened salience of asylum and irregular arrivals may also explain the significant overestimation of asylum numbers. Most immigration to the UK, by far, is for work or study: as the Home Office graphic below shows, 111,000 people claimed asylum in the year ending June 2025, with 43,000 of them coming to the UK on small boats. But four times as many people came to the UK to study in that period, and more than twice as many came for work.³

Figure 3.6: Summary of the UK immigration system, year ending June 2025



Source: Home Office, October 2025

That is very different to how the public perceives immigration to the UK. The tracker survey finds that on average, people think asylum makes up one third (33%) of all immigration to the UK, more than work (27%) or study (21%). In fact around 14% of immigration was for asylum in the year ending June 2025.

Those who feel most negatively about immigration are most likely to overestimate the proportion of immigration for asylum. Migration Sceptics think half (51%) of UK immigration is for asylum, more than three times the actual proportion. Migration Liberals get closer to the correct figure, estimating 20%. People who voted Reform UK in 2024 believe, on average, that asylum makes up 46% of all UK immigration, while Conservatives estimate 39% and Labour voters 26%. Those who voted Leave in 2016 think, on average, that the proportion of immigration for asylum is 41%, some 15 points higher than the 26% estimate given by the average Remainer.

Similarly, the public also overestimate the proportion of people living in the UK who are immigrants. ONS data from the census says this is around 13%, but on average people think it is twice that, at 28%.⁴ Those with more negative views about immigration give the highest average estimates, with Migration Sceptics believing that 34% of the UK population was born overseas, and Reform UK voters also giving an average estimate of 34%.

Other studies of public perceptions have found similar results, and it can be tempting for migration advocates to conclude that correcting these misperceptions will help them win the argument. Sadly this is not the silver bullet they might think it is. Telling people they are wrong is unlikely to change someone's mind, especially if they dispute the facts. Enough post-mortems of the EU referendum have shown us that. But that is not to say we should give up on facts: correct data is important in public and political debate. The media can play an important role in informing debate and should be fact-checking what politicians say and the assumptions underlying their comments.

That is true, too, of information about public opinion: too many politicians and media producers over-simplify public attitudes and assume that the public is predominantly anti-immigration. The reality, as these tracker findings reveal, is far more nuanced.

4. Asylum: A Dividing Line in British Politics

Few issues stir such strong feelings in Britain today as asylum. More than half the public (56%) say they are dissatisfied with how the government is managing immigration and when they are asked why, the top three reasons given are all related to small boats and asylum.

The public is frustrated at repeated government failures to prevent dangerous Channel crossings in small boats, with attitudes becoming less sympathetic over time. The minority who feel most strongly about asylum – wanting hotels closed, boats stopped and asylum-seekers deterred or denied protection altogether – has become somewhat larger and a lot more vocal and mobilised. Yet they remain a minority: most people are still balancers, believing that Britain should play its part in offering refuge to those fleeing war and persecution.

Framing the asylum debate as a stark choice between control or compassion ups the stakes and divides the public. Yet most would rather not be forced to make that binary choice. Offering the public an approach to asylum and irregular arrivals that merges control *and* compassion can still unlock the balancer consensus – even at a time of such heightened and polarised debate.

Divided sympathies: How small boats polarise the public

Public attitudes on small boats have hardened over time. For much of the last Parliament, most people expressed at least some sympathy for people making irregular Channel crossings, but by the 2024 General Election this had fallen below half. It now stands at 43%, with half the public now expressing little or no sympathy for people crossing the Channel in small boats – a trend that threatens to erode long-term confidence in Britain's humanitarian commitments. Yet the detail of the tracker findings presents a more nuanced perspective.

Images of protests outside asylum hotels and political rows over Channel crossings often paint a picture of hostility towards asylum seekers. That anger is real – but it represents only one side of a wider and more complex public mood.

A quarter of the public (25%) say they feel 'no sympathy at all' for people crossing the Channel in small boats, while one in six (16%) express 'a great deal of sympathy'. The remainder – half the population – form a 'balancer middle' divided between having 'a fair amount' and 'not much' sympathy.

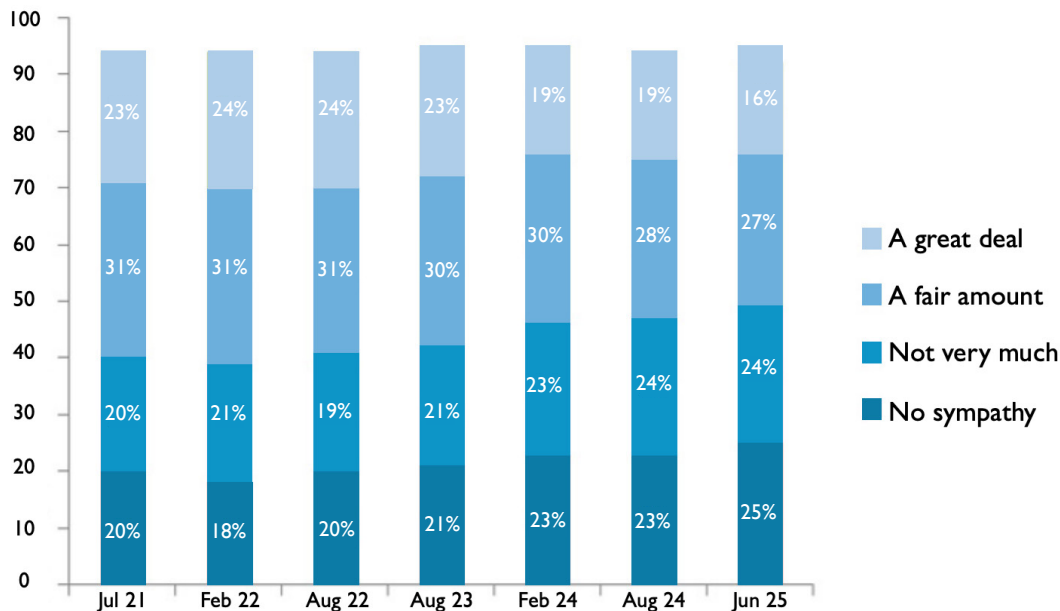
Younger people are more than twice as likely as those aged over 55 to feel sympathetic. Women are also consistently more likely than men to feel sympathy for those making these dangerous journeys. Political differences are stark: **Labour voters are nearly four**

times as likely as Reform UK voters to feel sympathy for those crossing the Channel in small boats.

On sympathy for those making Channel crossings, the ‘Balancer middle’ are torn – 50% feel sympathy while 45% do not. This contrasts with the deeply unsympathetic Migration Sceptics, 88% of whom do not sympathise with people crossing the Channel in small boats; and with Migration Liberals, 77% of whom feel sympathetic.

Figure 4.1: Public sympathy over time for people making Channel crossings

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



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2021-25

A Shared principle: Britain's support for refugee protection

Despite this polarisation, the British public still supports the core principle of refugee protection. Seven in ten (71%) agree that “people should be able to take refuge in other countries, including in my country, to escape from war or persecution,” according to Ipsos’ 2025 Global Attitudes Towards Refugees survey.⁵ Only one in five (21%) disagree.

Support rises and falls with global and domestic events, but the data shows a broad majority still want Britain to play its part. Many are cross-pressured, however, by a feeling that the system

is not working as it should. Irregular boat arrivals, and expensive hotel accommodation, are two very visible symbols of the asylum system's failings.

To secure majority support, the asylum system needs to feel fair and workable, and it must bring asylum under control. Our research finds that public support strengthens when asylum policies combine compassion with control – for example, by offering safe and authorised routes as part of a broader plan to stop dangerous crossings.

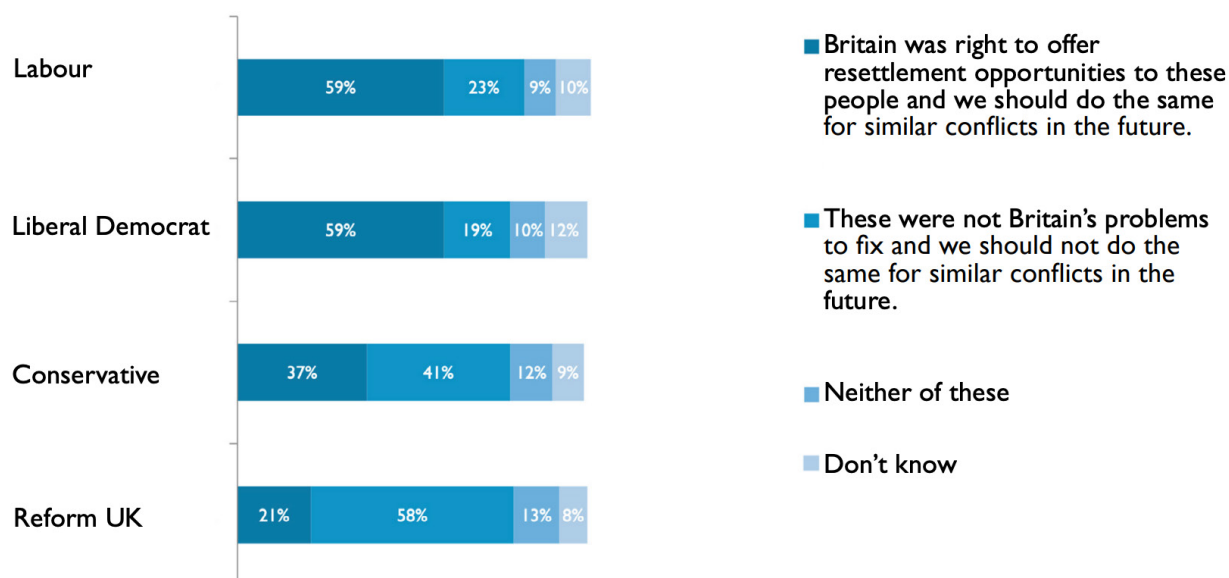
The limits of compassion: When support meets scepticism

Over the past decade, Britain has launched resettlement programmes for people from Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Syria, allowing thousands to rebuild their lives in safety. A plurality of the public backs those efforts: 45% say Britain was right to act and should do so again in future crises, while 31% disagree. A further quarter are unsure.

Views diverge sharply between those most positive and most sceptical about immigration. Three-quarters of Migration Liberals (73%) would repeat these schemes, compared to just 16% of Migration Sceptics. Among the Balancer Middle, half (51%) are supportive, more than double the 23% who would oppose repeating such schemes again. By party, six in ten Labour and Liberal Democrat voters back repeating such efforts, while six in ten Reform voters oppose them. Conservatives are divided on this question.

Figure 4.2: By party: Public support for past humanitarian schemes and repeating them in future

“Over the past ten years the UK has offered resettlement programmes to people fleeing war and crackdowns on democratic freedoms in Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Syria, enabling some people to come and live in the UK. Which of the following comes closest to your view?”

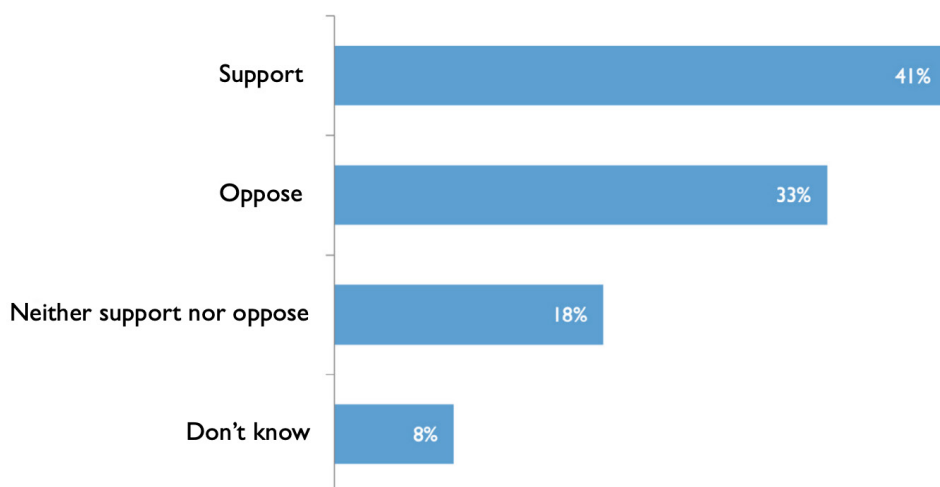


Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Public opinion is also divided over whether to expand legal asylum routes. 41% agree that “the UK should provide more legal routes for those claiming asylum,” while 33% disagree and 26% are neutral or don’t know. A majority of Labour (57%) and Liberal Democrat (56%) voters support the idea; half of Conservatives (50%) and most Reform UK voters (64%) oppose it. Among the Balancer Middle, around half support (47%) and a quarter are opposed (23%).

Figure 4.3: Public support for more legal routes to claim asylum

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



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, $n=3,003$

Four in ten people still favour expanding safe routes even after months of polarised political debate. But compassion alone cannot command a broad consensus unless it is coupled with confidence that borders are under control.

Common ground through control: Backing for a UK–France deal

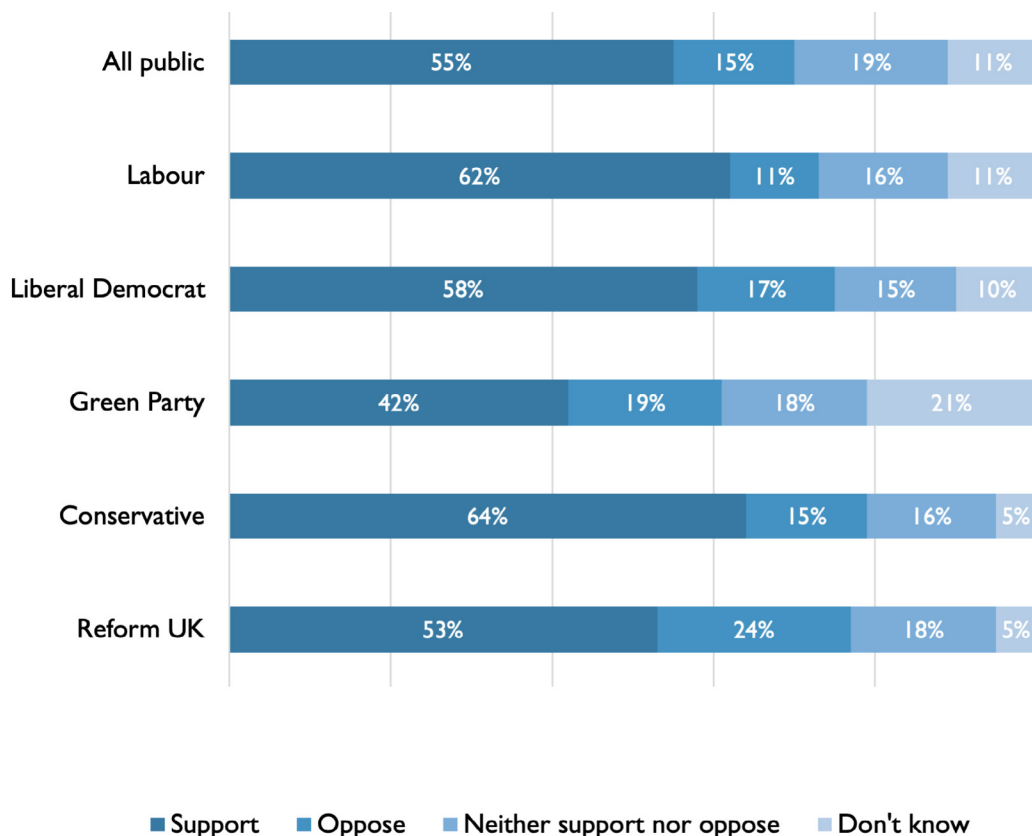
Support grows when proposals combine humanitarian routes with stronger border enforcement. The latest Ipsos findings show 55% of the public back the UK-France ‘routes and returns’ deal, with only 15% opposed. The plan – to admit a capped number of asylum seekers via authorised routes, in return for France taking back those who cross illegally – draws support across party and Brexit divides.

62% of Labour voters, 64% of Conservatives and 53% of Reform voters support the proposal. It appeals to 62% of Remain and 57% of Leave voters. Among the balancer middle, 61% are supportive and only 10% opposed, with even Migration Sceptics significantly more likely to support (49%) than oppose (28%) the proposal.

Such broad alignment is rare on immigration. The finding suggests that pairing control with compassion can unite groups that have long been at odds on this issue.

Figure 4.4: Public support for a UK–France ‘routes and returns’ deal, including by party

To what extent do you support or oppose the following proposed UK policies on asylum and refugees? “The UK should agree with France a capped number of people that the UK will admit into the UK each year to claim asylum by authorised routes, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission”

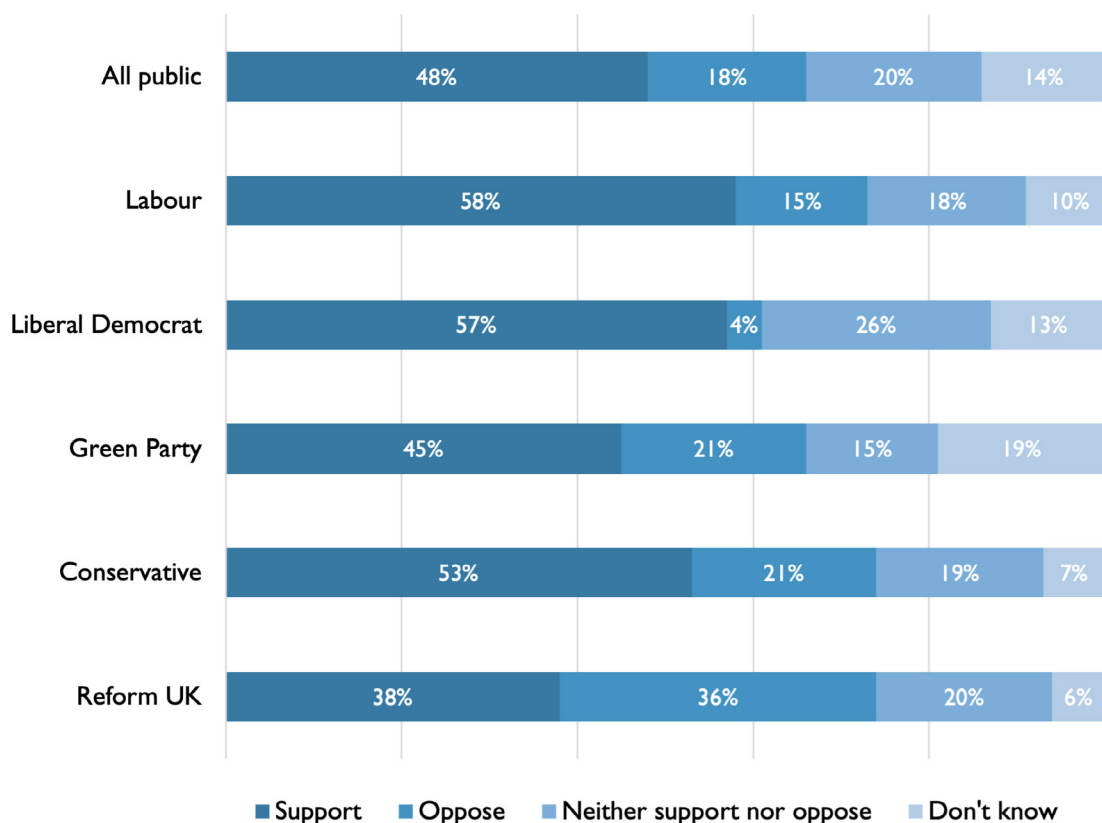


Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, $n=3,003$

Even when the scale of the proposal is increased – to admit up to 50,000 asylum seekers per year – public support remains steady at 48%, more than double those opposed. Majorities of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative voters would still back the plan. Among Reform voters, support narrows to 38% in favour and 36% opposed, leaving the group evenly divided.

Figure 4.5: Support by party for UK-France deal admitting 50,000 refugees

To what extent do you support or oppose the following proposed UK policies on asylum and refugees? - The UK should agree with France a capped number of people that the UK will admit into the UK each year to claim asylum by authorised routes, up to a maximum of 50,000, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission.



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Support at this scale holds across the Brexit divide too, with half of both Leave and Remain voters in favour. The results suggest a strong foundation of public consent for expanding the pilot UK-France scheme – provided it delivers both order and fairness.

Restoring confidence: A practical route forward

The findings point to a way through Britain's asylum deadlock. Amid all the noise and anger over small boats and asylum hotels, there is a balancer majority who would support an approach to asylum that blends control and compassion. A large and vocal minority would still reject such an approach, or indeed most others that fall short of stopping refugee protection altogether. But it is important to remember that this group is a minority. Government and other decision makers should not mistake the most loudly expressed views for the full breadth of public opinion on asylum.

Yet inaction is clearly not an option. Politically, the government needs to deliver reductions in small boat arrivals and asylum hotel

use. A significantly expanded UK-France deal – perhaps ten or twenty times the current pilot’s scale – could command broad support if it is seen to combine firm control with compassion. British Future has examined this in more detail in the recent publication *‘How we could actually stop the boats: Bringing control and compassion back to the UK asylum system’*,⁶ including evidence from the US of how President Biden’s administration deployed a similar approach to achieve an 81% reduction in irregular crossings of the southern border with Mexico from 2023 to 2024. The report makes the case for scaling up the UK-France deal to restore control to the Channel while continuing to provide refugee protection to those in need.

Such an approach could reduce dangerous Channel crossings, rebuild public trust, and reaffirm Britain’s reputation for doing its fair share in global refugee protection. The task now for government is to prove it can make that balance work in practice.

5. Working it out: where does the public stand on migration for work?

Ten years ago, when the first tracker survey was conducted, migration for work was near the top of the political and media agenda. The political spotlight was on free movement, and public concerns centred on migration from the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, mostly regarding impacts on the labour market and wages.⁷ Over time, public concerns about migration for work have been overtaken by concerns about asylum and the issue has lost much of its salience.

Yet the Labour government wants to reduce migration for work, as part of a broader goal to significantly reduce net migration.⁸ Recent policy changes and proposed reforms are designed to make it harder to come to the UK for work: they include raising skills thresholds and English language requirements, increasing costs for employers, and restricting certain visa routes.

Conservative party proposals are vaguer but include plans to reduce labour migration through an annual cap on the number of work visas.⁹ Reform UK proposes to freeze all but ‘essential’ migration, which it defines as ‘mainly around healthcare’¹⁰.

The Liberal Democrats have not proposed to reduce migration for work, stating in their latest policy document that ‘British employers must be able to hire the workers they need’.¹¹ The Green party supports no restrictions on entry for migrant workers with a contract of employment.¹²

People don’t know the scale of migration for work – nor that it is falling

It is clear from successive waves of the tracker that the public is more positive about migration for work than for other reasons, particularly asylum.¹³ The argument that migrants take jobs away from British workers is now a minority view.¹⁴

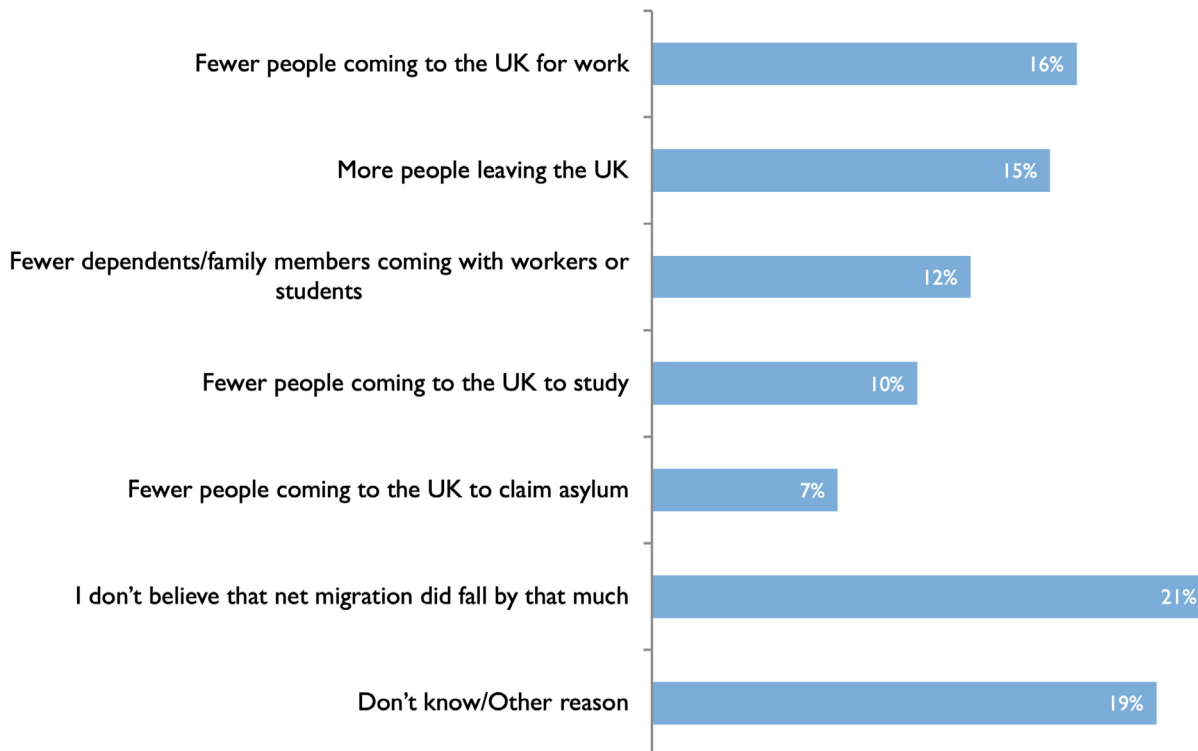
However, it is also apparent that people underestimate its extent. More than twice as many people come to the UK to work than to claim asylum, but the public thinks asylum makes up a bigger proportion of immigration than migration for work. Migration for work makes up around 31% of total immigration but the average estimate is 27%.

Reform UK voters are especially likely to under-estimate the proportion of new migrants arriving on work visas, with the average estimate at 19%. In contrast, Reform UK voters estimated that asylum seekers account for 46% of new arrivals, compared to the actual figure of around 14%.

People are also generally unaware that migration for work has fallen. Tracker respondents were given the net migration figures for

2024 and told it was roughly half that of the previous year. They were then asked what had led to that change. Along with changes to the student visa, changes in work visas were largely responsible for the fall in net migration. However, only around 1 in 6 (16%) of respondents cited ‘fewer people coming to the UK for work’ as the reason for lower net migration. The most common response was ‘I don’t believe that net migration did fall by that much’.

Figure 5.1: Why did net migration fall between 2023 and 2024?



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, $n=3,003$

It could be argued that if the public was more aware of the scale of labour migration, they would be more opposed to it. However, it seems more likely that most people are less concerned about numbers of migrant workers and that their estimates reflect this. This is supported by findings, reported in Chapter 3, that people are more concerned about control and less about numbers. Research has also shown that the public believes skills needs cannot always be met by the domestic workforce.¹⁶

People are generally satisfied with levels of migration to key occupations

Overall, as discussed in Chapter 3, some 57% of respondents say they would like immigration levels to be reduced, 15% increased and 21% kept the same. For migration to specified occupations across the skill range, attitudes are more positive.

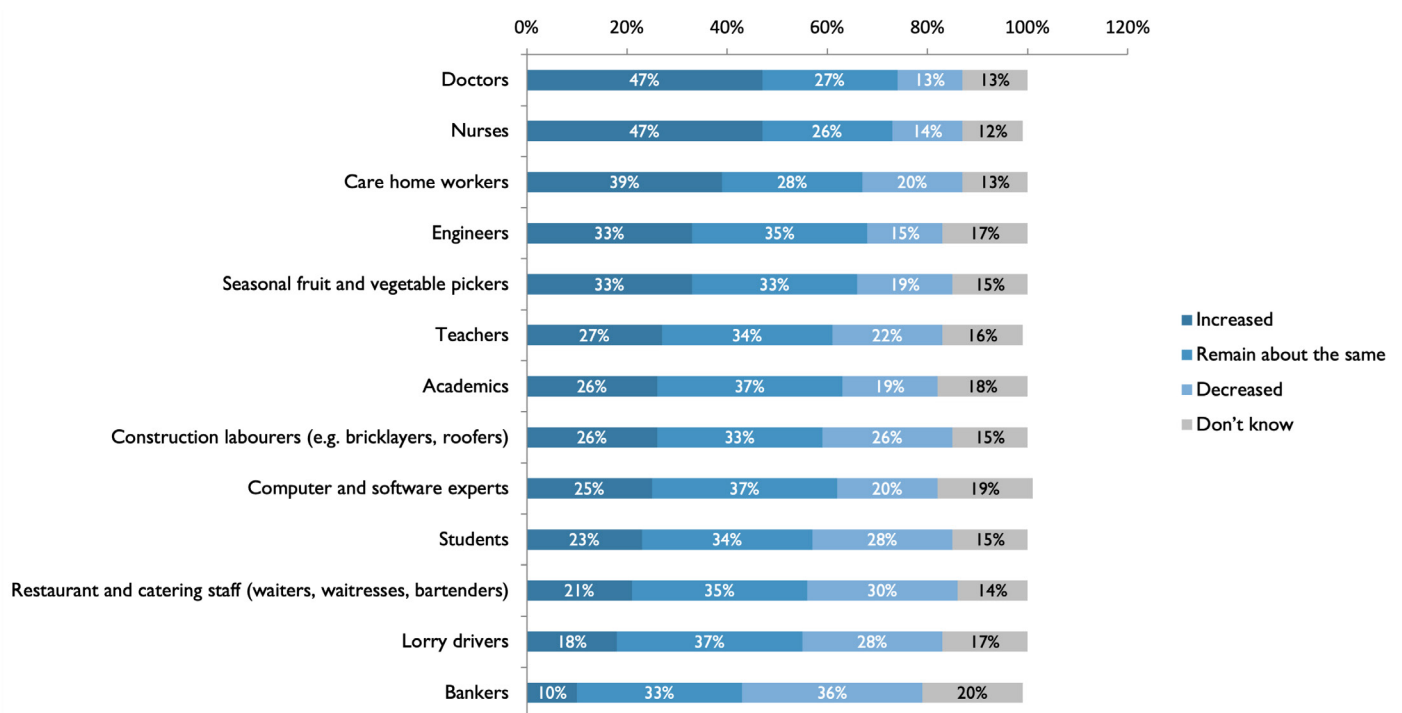
As on other tracker questions, there are differences by age, social class and education: younger people, graduates and those in

higher social grades are more positive. Attitudes to migration for work are more positive than for migration in general: in none of the occupational categories listed is there majority support for reductions, even among those Migration Sceptics who have the least positive views about immigration.

As Figure 5.2 shows, there is minimal support for reductions in any of the groups listed. Only in the case of bankers is there more than 30% support for reducing numbers (36%). Almost three-quarters of respondents believe that the number of new migrant doctors and nurses should increase or stay the same. More than 6 in 10 said the same for engineers (68%), care workers (67%), seasonal farm workers (66%), academics (63%), teachers 61%), and IT experts (62%).

The tracker findings also suggest low levels of public support for the Government's decision to end the care worker visa in July 2025.¹⁷ Employers are still allowed to extend the visas of existing workers, but not to recruit new ones. Should this restriction cause difficulties for the sector, the public is likely to support its re-instatement.

Figure 5.2: Should immigration to these occupations be increased, reduced or remain the same?



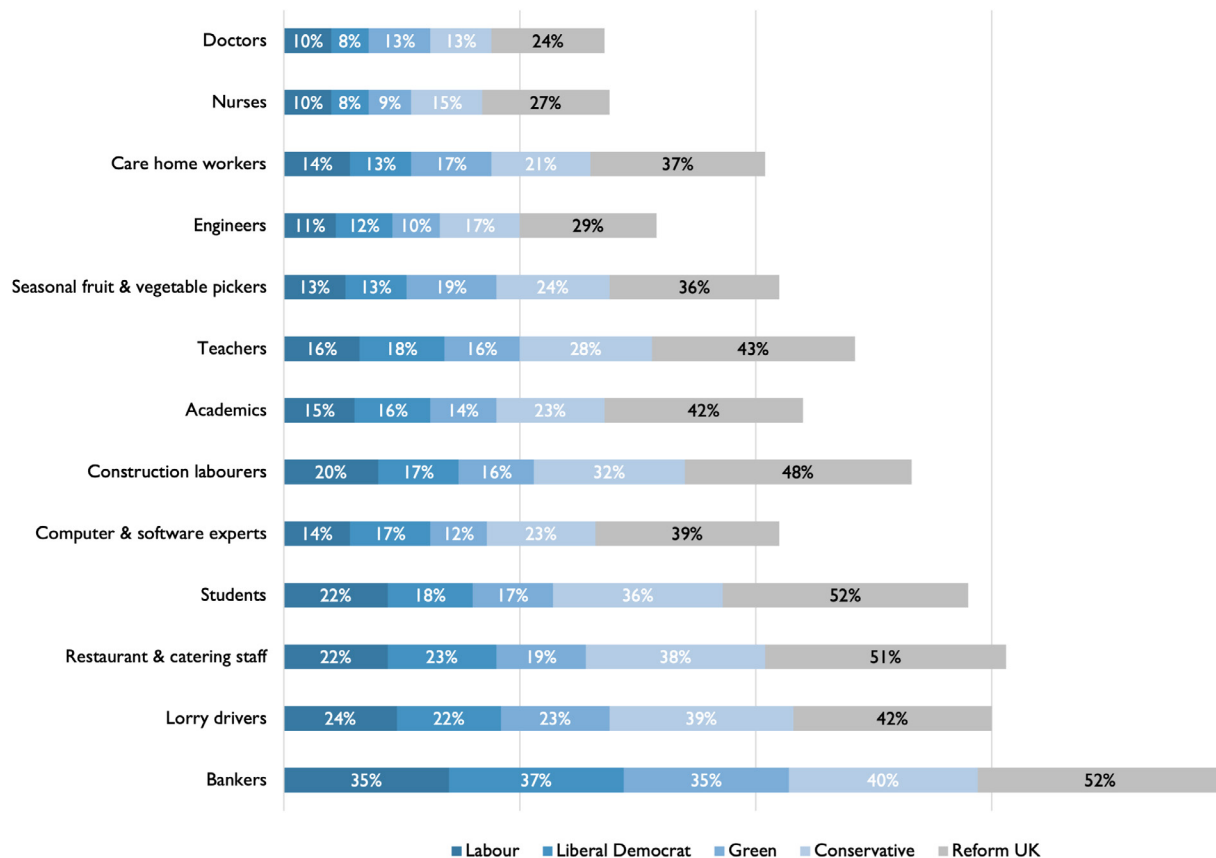
Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

As with other immigration topics, attitudes vary according to political allegiance. Support for increasing or keeping numbers the same is higher among supporters of Labour, the Liberal Democrats and Greens than among Conservatives and Reform UK voters.

Support for reductions is considerably higher among Conservatives, and much higher again among Reform UK supporters. There is a

clear distinction between voters of these two parties when it comes to reducing migration for work. At the same time, many Reform UK voters are less supportive of cuts than the party's policies. Only four in ten or less Reform UK voters favour reducing the numbers of new migrant doctors, nurses, care home workers, engineers, seasonal farm workers or IT specialists. (Though Reform does exclude healthcare workers from its plans).

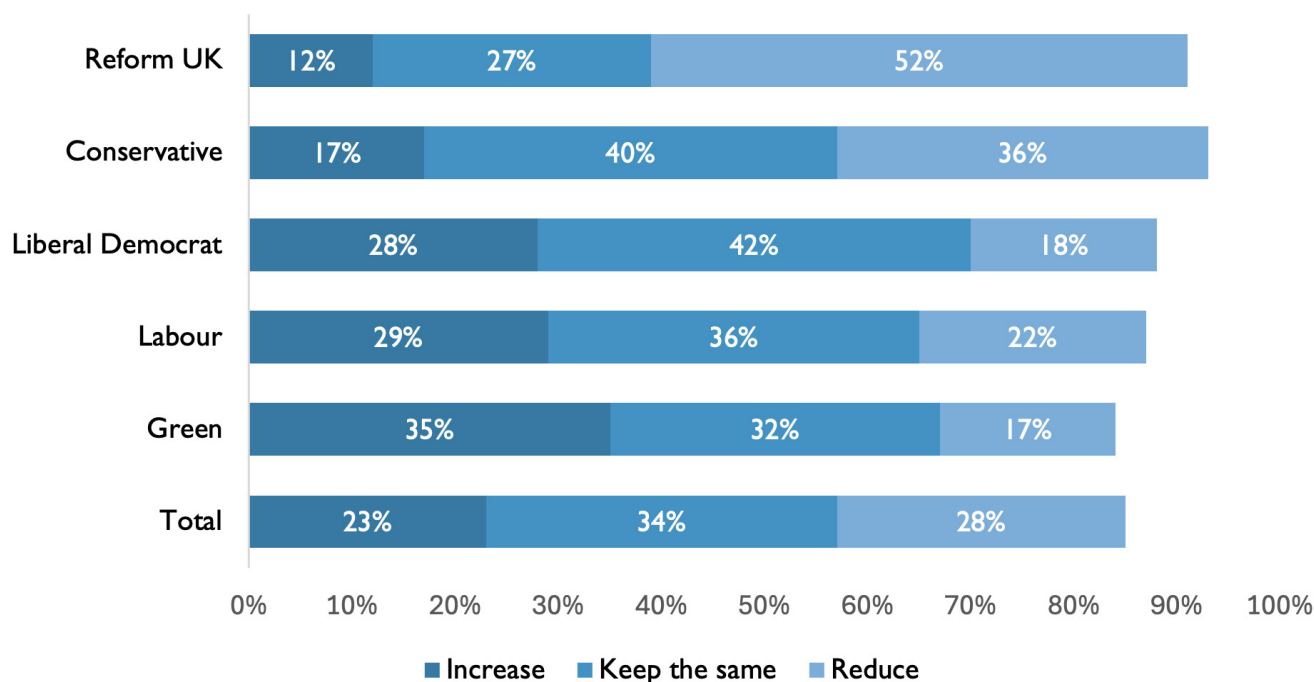
Figure 5.3: Support for reducing new migration into specific occupations – by political allegiance



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

As Figure 5.4 below shows, migration for study is also broadly seen as positive by most members of the public, or they are at least content with the current numbers. Overall, there is no significant change in preferences for student numbers, with 28% of respondents now in favour of a reduction, little changed from 30% in 2024. Reform UK voters are the only group who favour reductions, and more than a quarter would prefer numbers to stay the same. A majority of Conservative voters would keep student numbers the same as now (30%), or higher (17%). Two-thirds of Labour supporters (65%) want international student numbers to stay the same (36%) or higher (29%), with only 22% favouring reductions.

Figure 5.4: Attitudes to international students by political allegiance

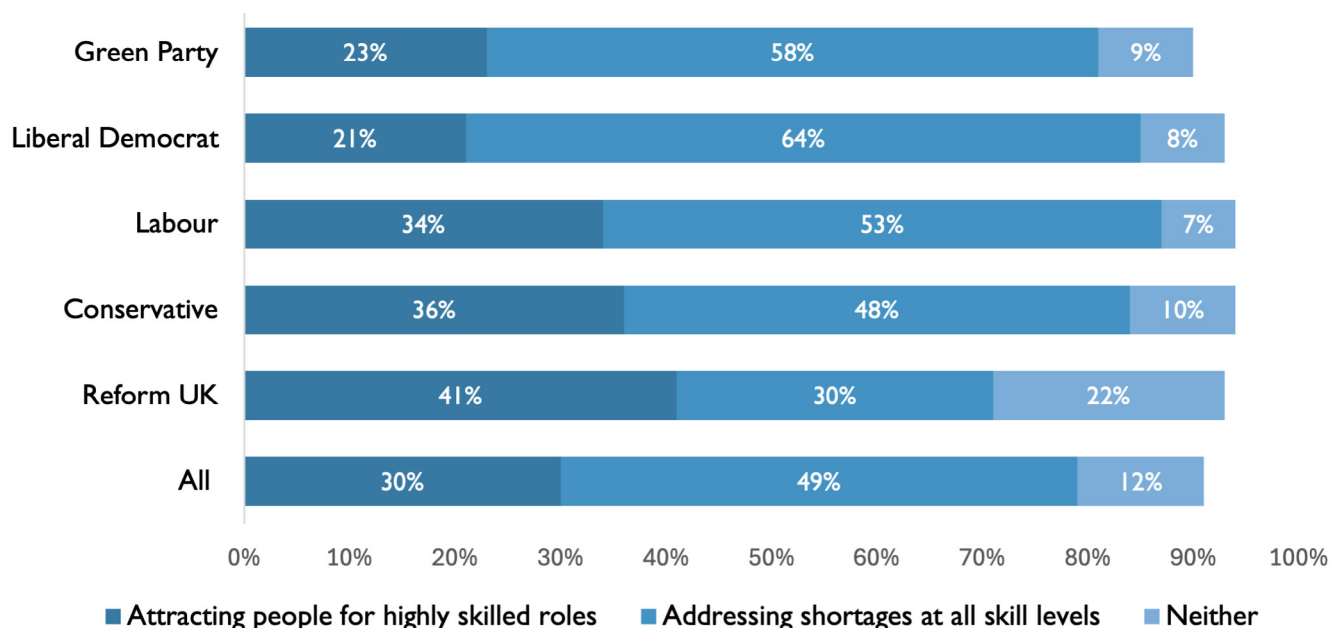


Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Priority when allocating work visas

We asked survey respondents who should be given priority for work visa allocation. As Figure 5.5 shows, almost half of respondents would prioritise addressing shortages at all skill levels, while less than a third (30%) felt that priority should be given to people in highly skilled roles. On this question there is general agreement by political allegiance, with voters of Reform UK an outlier in favouring visa allocation for highly skilled roles. As discussed in Chapter 6, this aligns with Reform UK's central policy to abolish Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) with an increase in the number of highly skilled entrepreneur and investor routes for migration. The tracker findings indicate that this would not have a strong appeal to voters of other parties.

Figure 5.5: Who should be given priority for work visas?



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

The government's more moderate White Paper proposal is to raise the skill level of work visas. This process began in July 2025 with a reduction in medium-skilled jobs eligible. This new list will be in place until the end of 2026 and is subject to ongoing review by the independent Migration Advisory Committee.¹⁸ Although it is likely that the public would support ongoing review of skill shortages, the emphasis on highly skilled roles does not align with the preferences of most of the public, other than those who voted Reform UK in 2024.

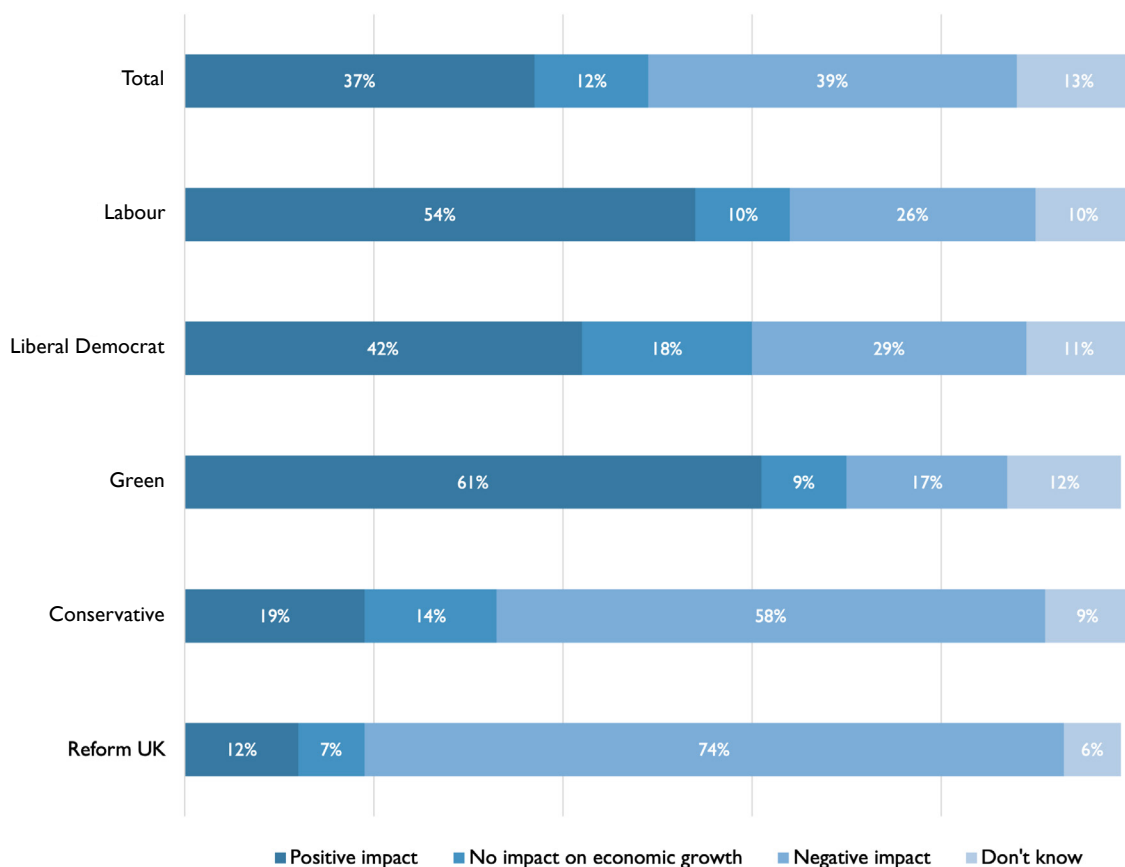
Migration and economic growth

Respondents were asked about the impact of immigration on economic growth. On this respondents were evenly split, with almost 4 in 10 seeing its impact as positive and a similar proportion viewing it negatively. Young people aged 18-24, graduates and ethnic minorities are much more likely than others to say the impact of immigration is positive rather than negative or neutral.

As shown in Figure 5.6 below, views on this topic are highly polarised by political allegiance. Labour and Green voters are more likely to say that immigration has a positive impact, rather than neutral or negative. Conservative and Reform UK voters are much more likely to see its impact as negative than positive: three times as likely in the case of Conservatives and six times as likely in the case of Reform UK voters.

Along with other responses to questions about migration for work, these findings suggest that supporters of right-leaning parties are less convinced of the economic need for migration than other voters.

Figure 5.6: What impact, if any, has immigration had on economic growth in the UK?



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Conclusions

It is apparent that when people express a preference for reducing levels of immigration, they often do not have migrant workers in mind. The emphasis in current political and public debate is on asylum seekers arriving in small boats. Across a range of occupations – including doctors and nurses, engineers, seasonal agricultural workers, care home workers, building labourers and teachers – the public continues to support maintaining current levels of migration or even allowing it to increase.

On many issues relating to migration for work, as well as migration more generally, voters of Reform UK are outliers. They are much more likely than voters of other parties to favour reductions in migration across a range of occupational groups. However, only for two of our listed job roles – bankers and catering hospitality staff – does a majority of Reform UK voters support reductions. Supporters of Nigel Farage's party are also the only group to support reductions in international student numbers, but still only around half support this measure.

The government's immigration White Paper proposes a number of changes which the tracker findings suggest are not supported by their voters, in particular:

- The ending of the care worker visa is not in line with public support for increasing the number of migrant care workers or keeping numbers the same. Therefore, should this decision be found to affect the availability of care services, the government would have broad public support for re-opening the route.
- The government's plan to increase the skill requirements for visas and only to allow visas for medium skilled jobs in exceptional circumstances is out of step with public attitudes (except for voters of Reform UK). The tracker shows a public preference for migration policies to fill gaps at all skill levels rather than prioritise those with high-level skills.

Much political discussion on migration is focused on whether Labour risks losing votes to Reform UK if it does not tackle small boat crossings and reduce net migration. The tracker findings suggest that Labour's 2024 voters are unlikely to drift toward Reform UK over migration, given the wide gulf between the parties' supporters. Labour voters tend to be more liberal on immigration than the government, particularly regarding proposals in the White Paper. Instead, Labour's electorate aligns more closely with the outlooks of the Liberal Democrats and Greens, whose generally positive, if less detailed, stances on migrant workers and immigration could prove more appealing. On migration for work especially, these parties appear a greater long-term threat to Labour than Reform UK.

6. Becoming British: proposals to raise the bar for Indefinite Leave to Remain

Until recently, with the exception of the post-Brexit status of EU citizens, the subject of settlement and citizenship had not been a strong theme in political and public debate on immigration. That all changed this year, with Labour, the Conservatives and Reform UK all apparently seeking to outdo each other in making it harder to become British. Rather than being about who can come to the UK, focus has shifted to whether Britain should keep the migrants it has already attracted. This has meant a return to debates about the value, or otherwise, of migrants to the UK.

One of the key proposals of the Government's White Paper on immigration, published in May 2025, is to extend the qualifying period for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) and for citizenship.¹⁹ The White Paper states the principle of 'earned settlement' and proposes to increase the period of eligibility for settlement to 10 years. In her speech to the party's annual conference in September, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood announced new conditions on citizenship, which can be given a year after ILR. In addition to the current requirement to show continuous lawful residence, new conditions will include higher English proficiency, evidence of community contribution, employment and no benefit claims. The detail of the changes will form part of a consultation before implementation.

The Conservative Party proposed a similar change to ILR earlier in the year. Its paper 'Rebuilding Trust: our new immigration policy'²⁰ proposed extending the route to 10 years, followed by a requirement to wait a further five years for citizenship. It proposes similar exclusions, for example in relation to benefits, contribution and criminal record.

Taking these proposals a step further, at Reform UK's party conference in September leader Nigel Farage announced the party's plan [to abolish ILR](#) rather than extend the route.²¹ The party proposes requiring current and future migrants to apply for a new visa every five years under tougher rules.

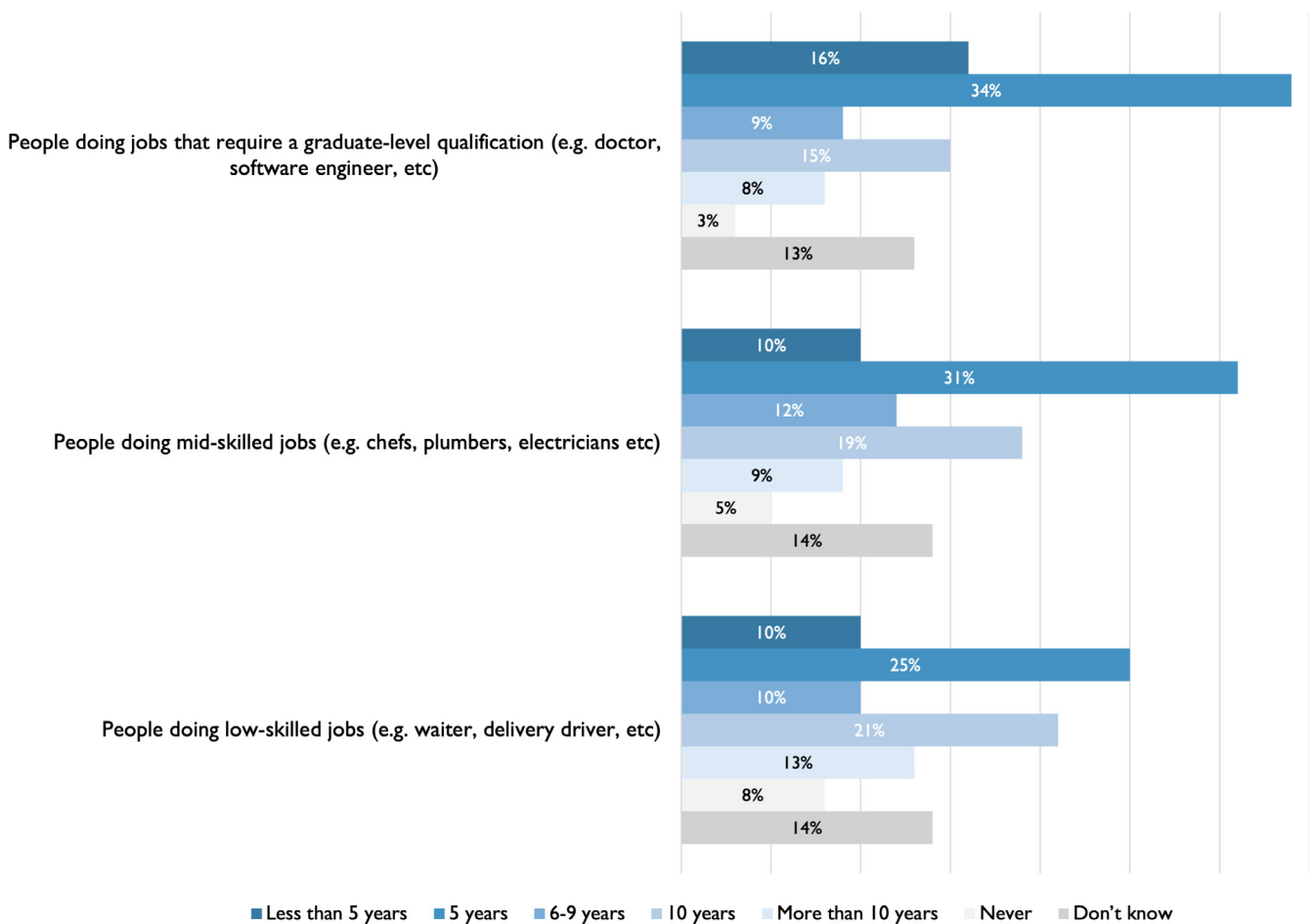
The other two main parties have indicated their opposition to proposals to change the route to ILR. The Green Party has announced its opposition to proposals in the White Paper to extend the route, arguing for a five-year period of eligibility for all.²² The Liberal Democrats have made no announcements for new policies on ILR or citizenship this year, including in its recent policy review.²³

We put the issue of ILR to tracker respondents in a simplified form, asking their preferences for the length of time a migrant to the UK should have to live and work in the UK before they can have permanent residence, and then citizenship. The government's proposals also include an assessment of 'contribution'. We therefore

asked respondents to state their preference for ILR policy in relation to migrants' occupational status: firstly people in graduate jobs, e.g. doctors or software engineers; people doing mid-skilled jobs, e.g. chefs, plumbers and electricians; and people doing low-skilled jobs, e.g. waiters and delivery drivers. They were asked how long people should have to wait until they become eligible for permanent settlement, with options ranging between five years or less and never.

How long should people wait to settle and become British?

Figure 6.1: How long should people have to wait until eligible for permanent settlement?



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

As Table 6.1 shows, in the case of highly skilled migrants, the most popular option was five years or less, where half of respondents chose this option. Four in ten opted for five years or less for mid-skilled workers (41%, vs 45% who chose options longer than 5 years including 'never') and just over a third chose this for low-skilled migrants (35%, vs 52% who chose options longer than 5 years including 'never'). The government's proposal for 10 years was

supported by around one in five in the case of mid- and low-skilled migrants, and only one in six for high skilled. Few respondents said that migrants should wait more than 10 years. The option of removing ILR and never allowing permanent settlement, as proposed by Reform UK, has very low levels of support, at 3%, 5% and 8% respectively for the named skill categories.

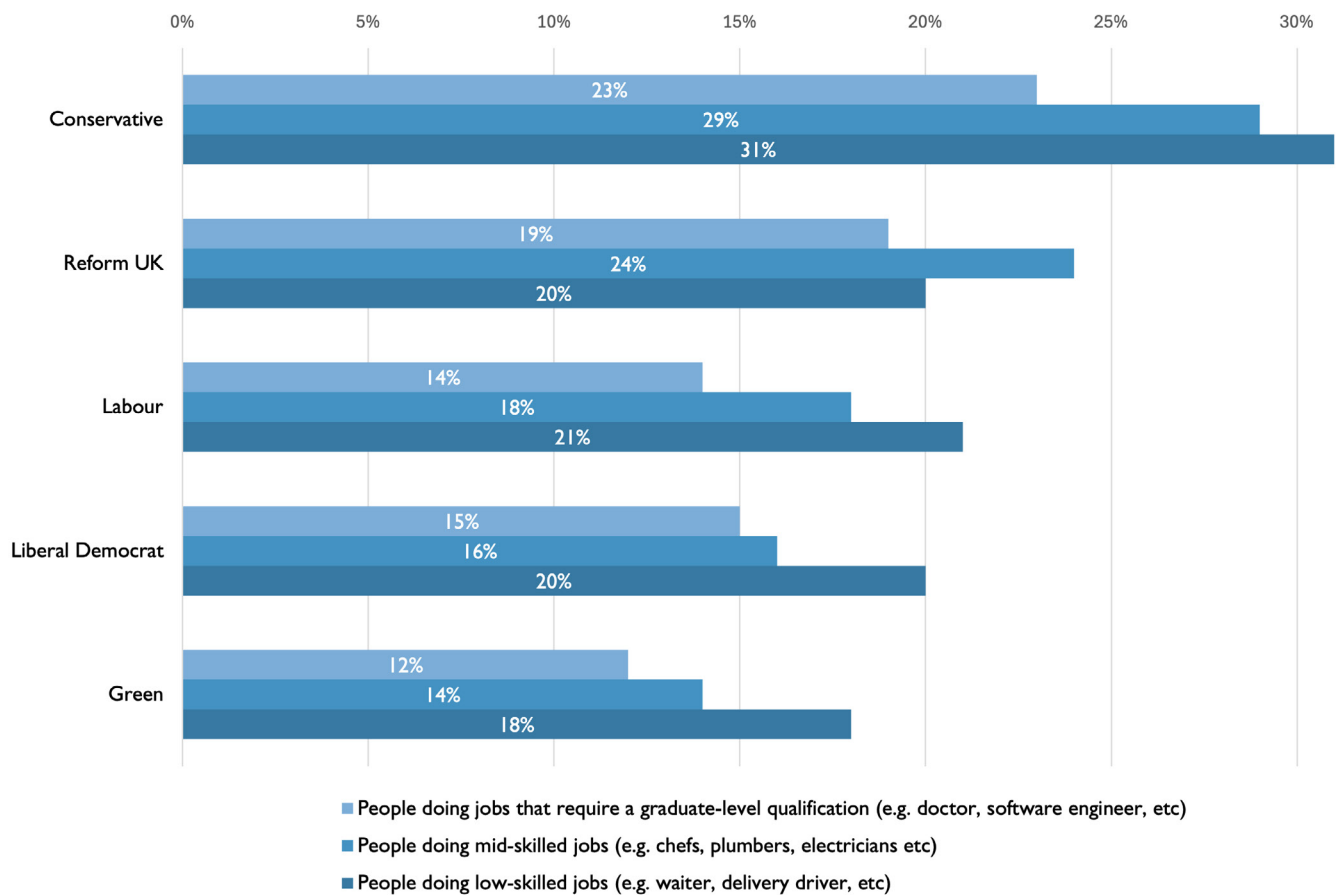
Younger people have more liberal views on this question than older people, being more likely to prefer a period of five years or less; older respondents are more likely to prefer a period of more than five years. Ethnic minorities are also more likely to favour a period of less than five years than white respondents: in the case of high-skilled workers, ethnic minorities were particularly likely to favour a wait of less than five years (27%) compared to white respondents (15%). This may result from greater understanding of the personal and societal benefits of settlement, either personally or through family members who have come to the UK and settled here.

While age and ethnicity are clearly significant, the most striking differences on the question of settlement are by political allegiance. ILR within five years or less is the most popular choice among Labour voters, for highly skilled (58%) and mid-skilled migrants (47%), though five years or more is preferred for low-skilled workers (47%).

Ten years has some appeal to Conservatives, but less to Labour voters

Both the Labour and Conservative parties now have a policy of extending the qualifying period for ILR to 10 years. As Figure 6.2 below shows, the proposal has reasonably strong support among Conservative voters. It also appeals to Reform UK supporters, but they are more likely than Conservatives to favour even more stringent options including more than 10 years or never. The 10-year option has much less appeal to Labour voters than keeping the requirement at five years or reducing it. Extending the period to 10 years also has limited support among those who voted Liberal Democrat or Green in 2024. Note that the figures in the chart below do not show the proportion who support waiting for even longer than 10 years or never; however that equates to 8-15% of Labour voters, so still not as many as those who prefer an option less than 10 years. For Conservatives between 12%-28% want more than 10 years, and for Reform UK voters it is 25%-45%.

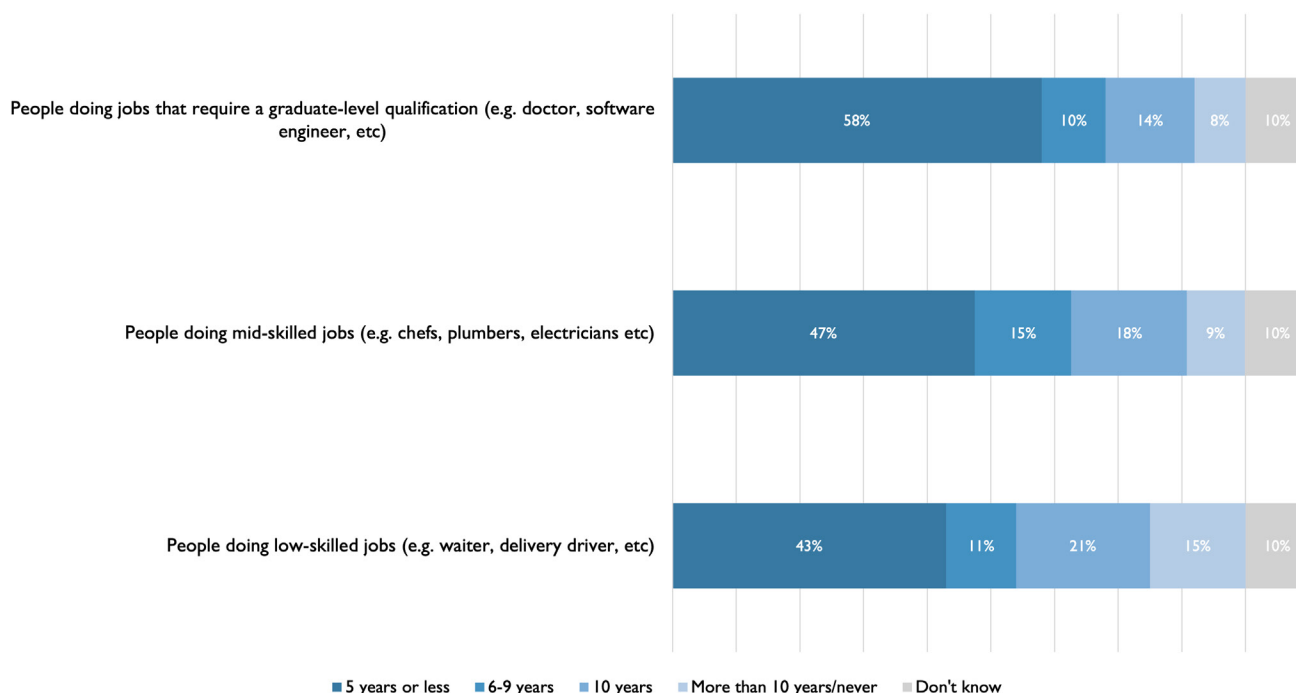
Figure 6.2: How long should people have to wait until eligible for permanent settlement? % choosing 10 years, by 2024 vote



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

As Figure 6.3 shows, the Labour government's own supporters would prefer to retain the current policy of five years for ILR for most work migrants, or to reduce it. For low-skilled migrants, Labour 2024 voters are somewhat more divided: 43% support ILR at five years or less, while 47% choose options over five years.

Figure 6.3: Labour party supporters' preferences for settlement qualifying period



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003.

Never say never

Reform UK has proposed ending ILR altogether. Among the public overall, this has very little support. Few respondents said that high and medium-skilled migrants should never be allowed to settle in the UK (3% and 5% respectively), with 8% feeling that low-skilled migrants should never be allowed to settle in the UK.

Among Reform supporters, the proposal to deny settlement also remains a minority view. It was expressed most strongly in relation to low-skilled workers, where around one in five (21%) said this group should never be allowed permanent settlement. At the same time, only 12% of Reform voters support ending ILR for medium-skilled migrants and only 6% for the highly skilled.

On settlement all the main parties are out of step with their voters

The Conservatives are proposing extending the wait for ILR to 10 years and increasing the qualifying period for the next step – to citizenship – by a further five years. Extending ILR to 10 years does have more support among Conservatives than with supporters of other parties. However, the party's proposals go beyond 10 years in reality, by including a further five-year wait for citizenship. A period

of more than 10 years has low levels of support among Conservative voters: only 10% support this for highly skilled migrants, 12% for medium-skilled and 19% for low-skilled. A small proportion of Conservatives favour ending ILR altogether – meaning Reform UK’s proposals on this issue are unlikely to appeal.

For Reform UK voters, the policy of ending ILR has support only in relation to low-skilled migration, where it is favoured by 21% of Reform UK voters. For this group, it is likely that these voters would support a temporary or ‘guest worker’ policy. However, in the case of high and medium-skilled workers ending ILR has low support (see above). Proposals of 10 years or more, however, have higher levels of support among Reform UK supporters than for other voters.

At the same time, restrictions on settlement of highly skilled workers are less strongly supported by Reform UK voters, with around 4 in 10 (39%) in favour of a qualifying period of five years or less for this group. This reflects our other findings that a majority of Reform UK voters would not reduce the numbers of high and medium-skilled workers coming to the UK to do specific jobs (see Chapter 5). Low levels of support for ending ILR may therefore reflect a stronger sense of realism among Reform UK’s voters than its leadership. If these ILR policies are aimed at attracting a wider public to the party, they are even less likely to be successful.

Labour’s policy also looks to be significantly tougher than its supporters would like, at least for highly and mid-skilled workers. For highly skilled migrants, five years or less is preferred over a longer period by 58% to 32% among Labour 2024 voters, though their views are split for mid-skilled (47% to 42%), and reversed for low-skilled (43% to 47%). Labour’s new proposals could also turn off young people and ethnic minorities. A number of opinion polls throughout the year suggest that Labour is losing support to the Liberal Democrat and Green parties.²⁴ Its stance on settlement, along with its language on immigration more broadly, could be a factor in this drift. To stem this flow the government could use the White Paper consultation period to review the potential political costs of proceeding with this proposal.

Part Two:
The politics of immigration

7. Labour's Balancer Challenge: Lessons from a testing year in power

Keir Starmer's Labour government has struggled for public trust in its first eighteen months in office across many issues - but often found immigration the most challenging issue of all. Governing parties face different challenges to those in opposition, as they can be judged on what they do, not just on how they talk about immigration.

Overall, immigration numbers did fall sharply: net migration halved in 2024 from record levels, and is falling significantly again in 2025. Numbers would be an area where the government considerably exceeded public expectations – but it can expect little or no credit for doing so while so few people are aware of the change. One lesson from the Starmer government's first year is that the actual number of people given visas to come to Britain appears unlikely to have as much impact on the public politics of immigration as the visible lack of control over small boats in the Channel and asylum accommodation in hotels.

The government has found asylum to be much its most challenging issue. Its predecessors had promised and failed to 'stop the boats'; Labour preferred to talk about trying to 'smash the gangs' but made little progress on the numbers of unauthorised crossings. The government scrapped the Rwanda scheme and had to begin to process asylum claims to start to shrink the backlog that it inherited, with tens of thousands of asylum seekers in hotel accommodation. The government did secure the principle of a new routes and returns deal with France – and must now demonstrate that cooperation can deliver a workable, humane solution to deterring unauthorised Channel crossings.

The government's political language was often as sharply contested as its policy choices. The launch of its immigration white paper, pitching both more control and reduced numbers, was largely overshadowed by a controversy about the language used to launch it. The Prime Minister later said he regretted his own comments. How to respond to the populist challenge over immigration also became more sharply contested this Autumn, especially once the opposition parties proposed to abandon human rights conventions, and sought to make mass deportations increasingly central to the political and policy debate. The Labour government's initial choice was to argue primarily that Nigel Farage's proposals were unworkable in practice, rather than to make the principled case against an argument to effectively abolish asylum and refugee protection entirely. Yet it shifted to making an ethical argument against proposals to deport legal and settled migrants.

After a challenging first year in office, the Prime Minister hit the reset button this Autumn. His reshuffle saw a change of Home Secretary, with Shabana Mahmood replacing Yvette Cooper and

the replacement of the entire Home Office ministerial team, in the hope that new eyes could bring new energy to potentially intractable challenges.

Immigration is not the priority concern of most of those who put Keir Starmer into government. It features in the top three issues for just a fifth (19%) of the voters considering voting Labour at the next general election. Most people who are unlikely to ever vote Labour at the next election say it is their priority (56%). But the fear in Downing Street is that a failure to establish and show control of immigration may make it impossible to get a hearing on anything else. The debate over both the voice and policies of the Labour government remains contested – but there are important lessons from the experience of its first eighteen months in office about how to get its narrative, policy and politics right if Labour is to pursue a social democratic, Balancer-facing agenda on immigration.

Labour in office: what does the public think so far?

There is widespread public dissatisfaction with how the Labour government is managing immigration – with just 14% satisfaction and 56% dissatisfaction in the July 2025 tracker findings. Yet trust levels for the Labour Party on immigration (29%) are about twice as high as satisfaction with the Labour government. That there is no significant gap in the reputation of the Labour leader and Prime Minister Keir Starmer (28%) and his party (29%) demonstrates that the gap between satisfaction with the government and trust in the Labour party primarily reflects differing responses when a partisan cue is involved. The parties have distinct public reputations on immigration – and some respondents, even when dissatisfied with the government, may wish to signal which of the political parties most and least reflect their values on such a hotly contested issue.

The breadth of mistrust in the government primarily reflects the continuing long-term pattern of successive governments struggling for public trust on immigration. The latest government dissatisfaction score is moderately less intense than the 9% satisfaction and 69% dissatisfaction of the previous Conservative government in February 2024. That had softened to 13% satisfaction and 48% dissatisfaction with Labour in the July 2024 survey, just a month after the General Election. (29% of respondents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, waiting to see what difference a change of government would make).

Trust scores of 28% for Keir Starmer – against 63% mistrust – and 29% for the Labour Party, with 62% mistrust, also reflect a significant ‘costs of governing’ deterioration over the last year. Negative scores of net -18 in February 2024 and net -14 shortly after the party’s general election victory in July 2024 were enough to give Labour a better comparative score than its main political rival, but Labour has now lost that comparative advantage during its brief time in government.

Figure 7.1: Trust in Keir Starmer and the Labour Party on immigration

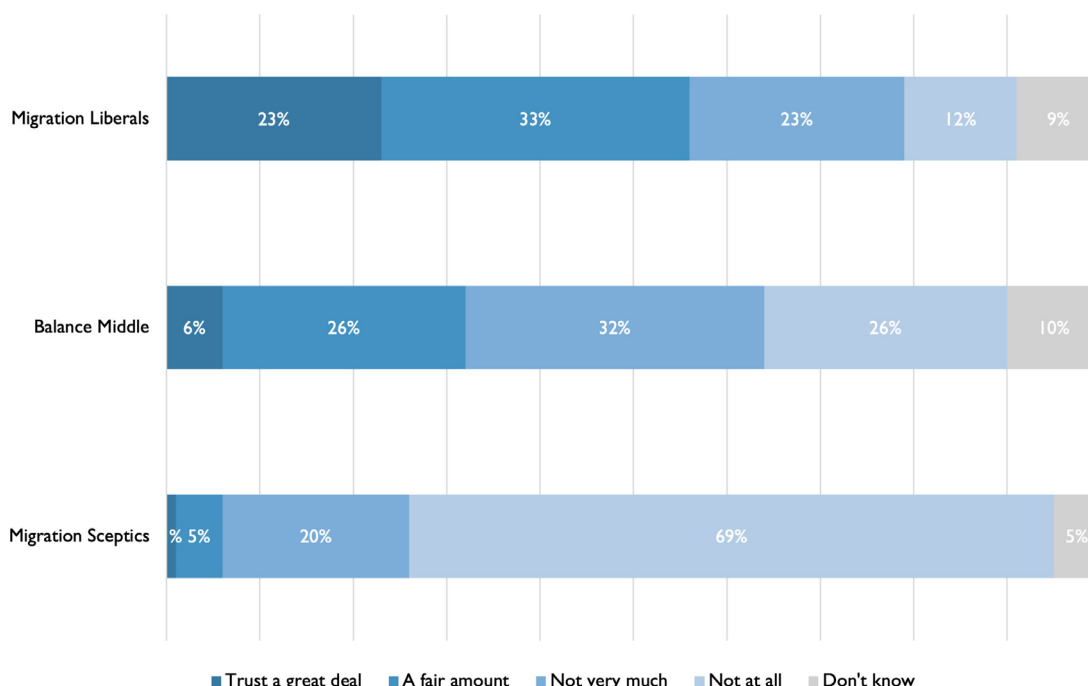
	Keir Starmer (Trust/distrust)	Net	Labour Party (Trust/distrust)	Net
July 2025	28%/63%	-35	29%/62%	-33
July 2024	35%/50%	-15	37%/50%	-13
February 2024	31%/57%	-26	33%/51%	-18

Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

One thing that did change is the distribution of support and scepticism in the government’s performance. Under Labour, the July 2025 data show considerably higher levels of satisfaction with the government from those holding more liberal views of immigration (37% satisfaction to 26% dissatisfaction) than from the Balancer Middle (13% satisfaction to 49% dissatisfaction) or the most anti-migration section of the electorate, whose 2% satisfaction and 92% dissatisfaction score is almost unanimously critical. A similar pattern is also reflected in the party reputation scores, where Labour is at least somewhat trusted by most people in the most pro-migration segment of opinion.

Even under pressure in office, there is a significant contrast between a large section of the Balancer Middle – around one in three – being somewhat supportive of Labour, or being moderate sceptics who may continue to give the government a hearing, and those with harder views, who have mostly made up their mind about Labour entirely in a way that seems much less likely to change.

Figure 7.2: Trust in Labour on immigration, by immigration attitudes



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, $n=3,003$

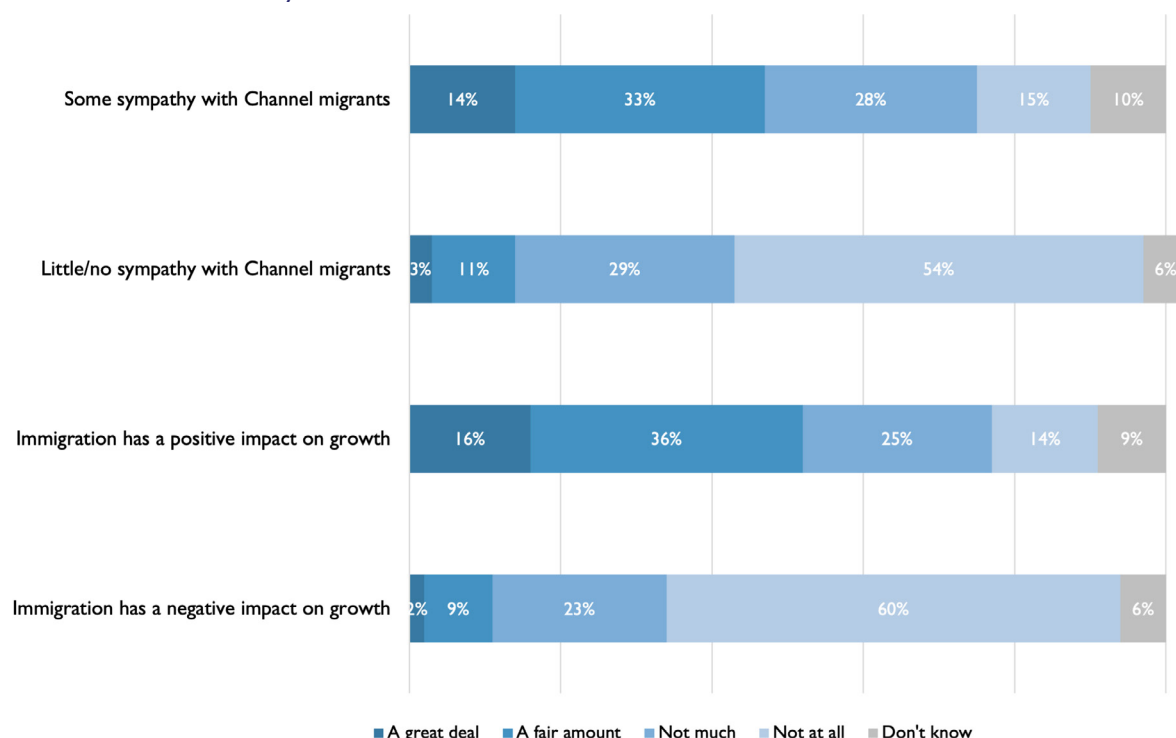
That pro-migration respondents are those with most trust in the government may indicate that Labour's early decisions in office – such as scrapping the Rwanda scheme and starting to process asylum claims – were noticed by a significant section of pro-migration opinion as a contrast with its predecessors. Those decisions may contribute more to the public reputation of the government among this group than some of the heated arguments in politics and the media, where pro-migration voices are often critical of the government's tone of voice and policy approach.

Pro-migration support for Labour also reflects a distinct and persistent comparative reputational advantage among liberal voters for Labour over the right-wing parties, particularly among those who voted Labour. But there are significant differences by party support – with Liberal Democrat and Green voters being considerably more critical of Starmer than Labour voters.

There is mildly more trust in Labour among those with a positive view of the economic contribution of immigration than among those who are sympathetic to asylum seekers – suggesting that the government's robust voice on asylum control may have turned off those with pro-refugee views more than its sceptical views about immigration levels have alienated those who value the economic gains. Yet in both cases, Labour's more sceptical voice on both work migration and asylum has not shifted the party's broadly pro-immigration reputation as much as some commentary might suggest.

Figure 7.3: Lack of trust in Labour among anti-immigration voters

To what extent, if at all, do you trust each of the following political parties to have the right immigration policies overall? - The Labour Party



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

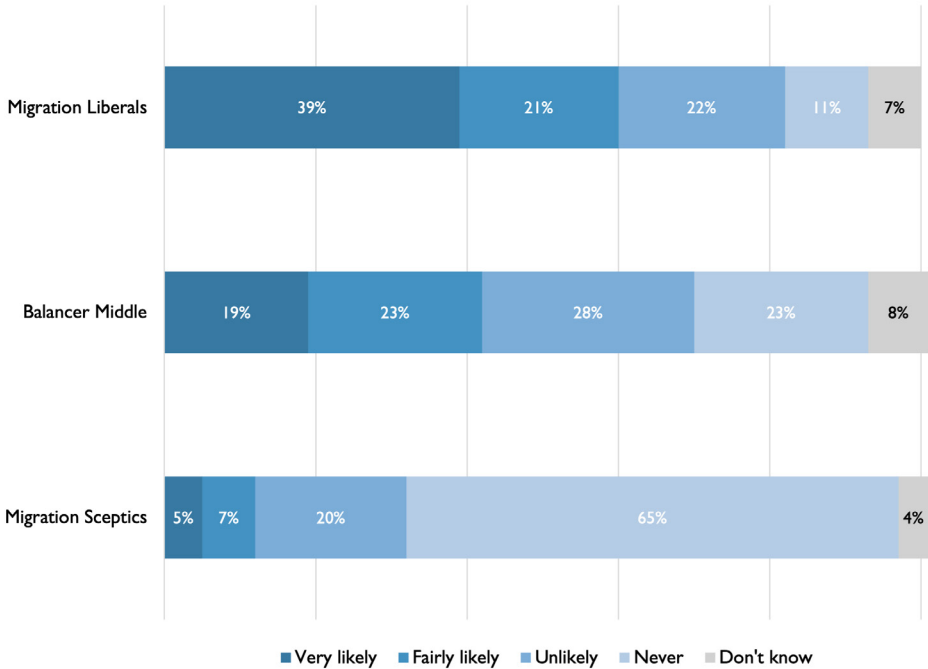
Who is engageable for Labour – and who isn't?

The Prime Minister has distinct but overlapping roles in government and politics. As head of government, he should seek broad public consent for immigration choices that reflect national interests and values. The tracker data shows most people are open to engagement on asylum policy, provided the system is seen as orderly and humane. There is support for an immigration approach based on control and contribution, but governments must still show how they balance the trade-offs of immigration control with the public's mix of scepticism about numbers and pragmatic acceptance of migration for work and study. However, a significant vocal rejectionist minority of the public would be unlikely ever to be satisfied by any approach to immigration that a government could realistically deliver or that a majority of the public would support.

But the public is more polarised over the politics of immigration than questions of policy. As the leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer has a somewhat narrower coalition of engageable voters. He does need to reach across both the Migration Liberal and Balancer Middle segments of the electorate, which means spanning potential Labour voters who view the pressures and gains of immigration somewhat differently. However, potential Labour voters also tend to be much more open to attempts to bridge and

balance those perspectives than the toughest anti-migration voters – most of whom are beyond the reach of any Labour-led political project.

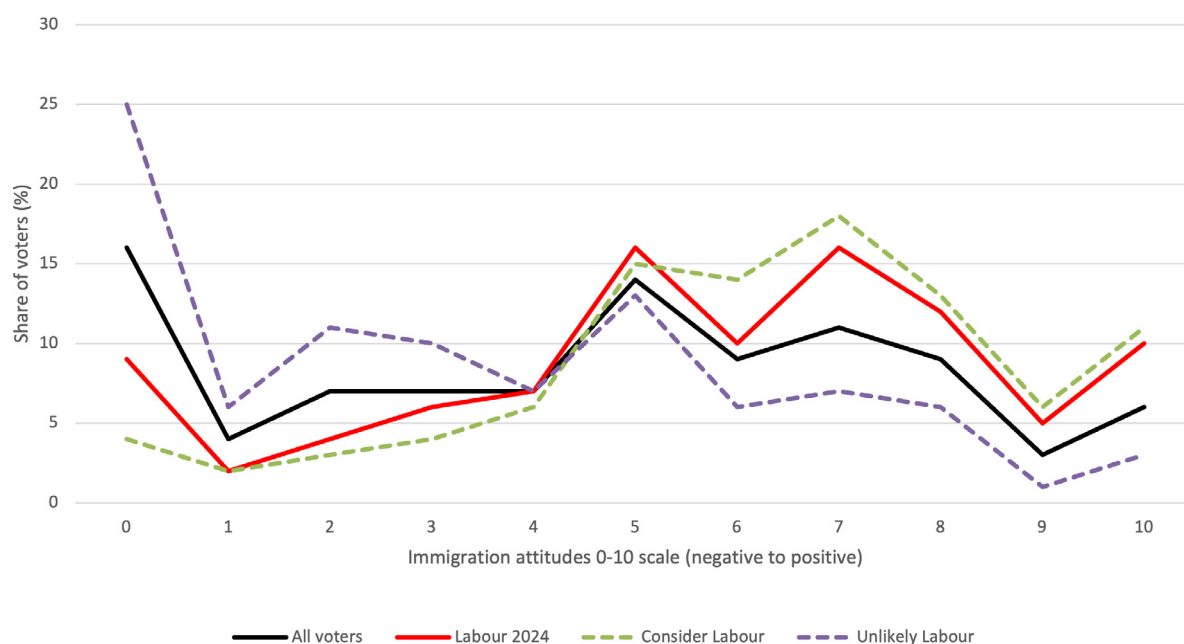
Figure 7.4: Who can Labour engage? Likelihood to consider voting Labour, by immigration attitudes



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

It would make political sense for Keir Starmer to try to prioritise those parts of the electorate willing to give his government and the Labour Party a hearing, as he seeks to secure broad enough support to secure re-election. Those who did not vote Labour in 2024 but who are open to supporting the party are mildly more pro-immigration than those who did vote Labour: this is partly a product of Labour performing more poorly with ethnic minority voters in 2024 than in most recent elections, and losing some vote share among younger voters.

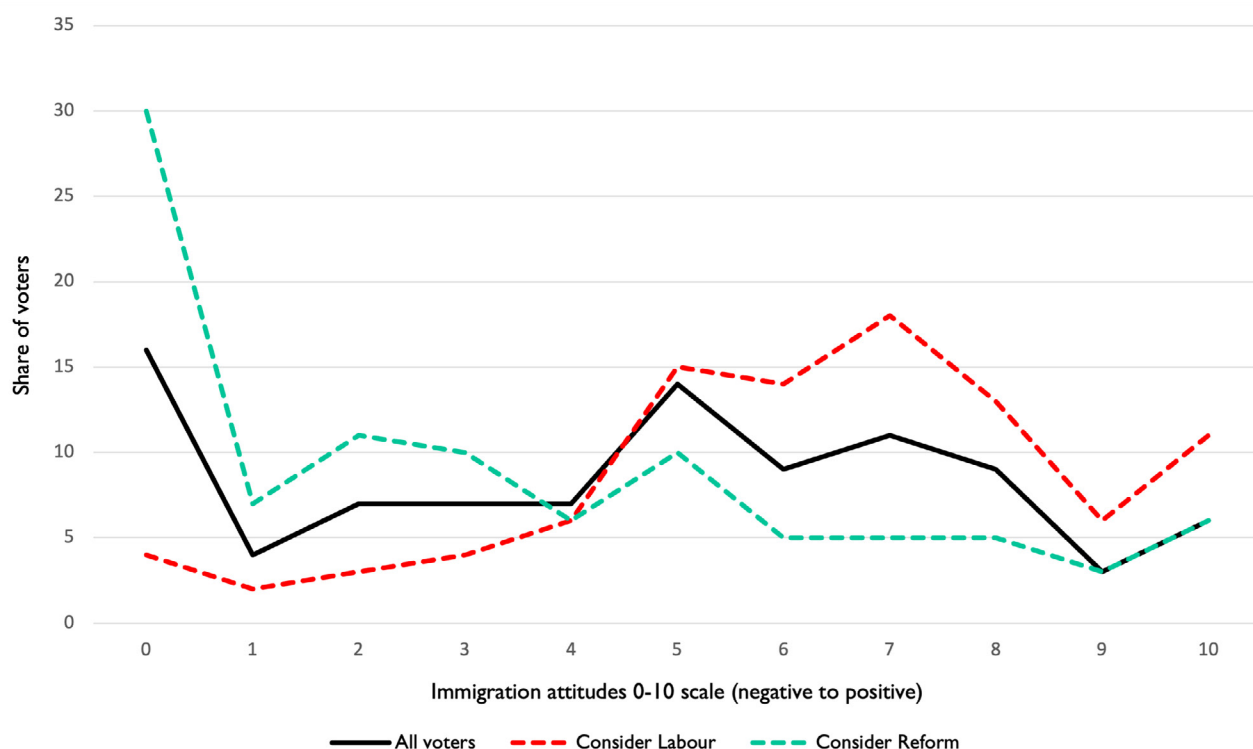
Figure 7.5: Who will consider Labour? Percentage of voters who will consider voting Labour, by immigration attitudes scores



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Labour's potential voters have a broad range of views on immigration but tend to be more pro-immigration than the average. The largest share of the voters who are not considering Labour have more negative views about immigration. If Keir Starmer's 2025 conference speech is correct in suggesting that the next election may be a contest primarily between Labour and Reform, then the contrast becomes particularly sharp. Both parties are competing for some voters in the middle: these might be among Labour's most conservative voters, while being more liberal than most who would consider Reform. But attitudes to immigration have a broad correlation with whether people would or would not consider these two rival parties.

Figure 7.6: A tale of two electorates? How Labour and Reform considerers differ on immigration



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, $n=3,003$

Finding a bridging voice on immigration

The Prime Minister got into trouble over his White Paper launch this Spring because his language was deliberately much tougher than the White Paper he was recommending. Keir Starmer ended up regretting using the phrase “island of strangers” to talk about the risks of failing to get integration right, and writing about the “incalculable damage” of high levels of immigration in the foreword. Yet the principles of that White Paper – controlling migration to bring the record numbers down, while welcoming contributors, managing impacts and promoting cohesion – could resonate across a Labour electoral coalition which includes pro-migration liberals, moderate migration sceptics and many ‘Balancers’ in between. Starmer could have talked about the damage to political trust of governments saying one thing and doing another – without mischaracterising the pressures of high immigration levels as doing incalculable damage to British society, echoing the hard right’s language of existential threat.

The tracker data captures why getting the language on immigration right is challenging when trying to engage across Labour’s electoral coalition. While voters on the right want to see an even higher priority given to the subject, Labour supporters are the most divided over whether we talk too much or too little about immigration. A quarter (24%) think that there is too little discussion of immigration but three in ten (31%) think it is getting

too much attention. Labour voices would struggle to bridge that divide if the party is stuck debating whether it should engage with the topic of immigration or seek to avoid it. Rather, the challenge is to find the balancer voice that can engage with the pressures and gains in a way that is clearly distinct from political rivals who are much more strongly critical of immigration.

It is significant that Starmer has offered his most effective argument to bridge his broad balancer coalition about immigration on two occasions when he directly addressed his own Labour tribe about the argument he believes Labour must make to reach more sceptical voters. When speaking from Downing Street, Starmer's political communications have tended to place much less emphasis on engaging with both his pro-migration base as well as the need to reach the Balancer Middle beyond it.

At the 2024 party conference, speaking after the six days of riots and disorder that summer, Starmer defended 'legitimate concerns' on migration and the need to bring numbers down. Unlike his White Paper speech, nobody had accused him then of echoing Powellite views as his argument was fused with a repudiation of the racism of the riots alongside a clear statement that it was 'toxic' to blame the migrants who had come to Britain for policy failures of the government. Yet that message had gone missing in the White Paper foreword.

Similarly, his 2025 conference speech talked to his party about the danger of appearing unwilling to listen to legitimate concerns about migration and integration, but combined this with a vocal challenge to racism. Starmer made the case for control and compassion, declaring that "asylum for people genuinely fleeing persecution is the mark of a decent, compassionate country," alongside an assertion that "secure borders are also vital for a decent, compassionate country."

So the Labour government's voice did shift this Autumn, to place more emphasis on the ethical argument about whether proposals for abolishing asylum and promoting mass deportations were right or wrong in principle. If that shift were to be sustained, the strategic implication is that Labour would seek to further differentiate its principles and practice on immigration from those of its rivals on the political right.

Labour's strategic goal is to defuse the salience of immigration. To do that, it needs to engage constructively with the issue. Avoiding the topic will not help reduce the salience of immigration, but rather allow the centre-left to be defined by its opponents; it is also incompatible with the need to challenge efforts to erode boundaries and norms on prejudice. Finding workable answers to controlling and managing immigration is most likely to help reduce the issue's salience – but it is certainly not in the government's interest to amplify claims that the UK is the "destination of choice" for asylum seekers across Europe, fuelling public misperceptions and giving unnecessary ammunition to opponents.

How much do numbers matter?

Labour has overseen a significant reduction in immigration levels, with net migration falling by half, though the public has not noticed that anything has changed. What are the lessons for its approach to numbers for the rest of the parliament? Is it that overall numbers matter less to the public than politicians and the media tend to think – or could the government find a more effective way to communicate its choices and their outcomes that might be understood by the public?

With immigration at exceptionally high peak levels, Labour found it easier than the centre-left parties usually do to talk about numbers. When net migration was at 900,000 it was easy to say that was at an unsustainably high level, though the Labour frontbench did not want to identify what it thought a more sustainable level would be. Would this government keep saying that at 350,000 or 300,000? What about if it was 200,000 – with political opponents saying it should be net 100,000 or net zero?

Labour was understandably cautious about setting immigration targets, given how past governments' promises had backfired. Yet this caution meant missing the chance to frame its approach strategically. Having inherited record immigration that was already declining, the government could have pledged to halve net migration within two years – something achieved in just six months – and gained credit for delivering on it. That could also have provided an opportunity to shift the way we talk about what numbers mean in immigration policymaking.

No other major democracy makes the net migration statistic so central to politics as Britain. Leading government figures were sceptical about net migration as a measure – seeing it as too crude a measure for choices about the immigration that can make a positive contribution to the UK. Net migration targets do not differentiate over what helps or hinders growth. The government knows how many visas it has issued but does not control emigration, making it difficult for targets to be met.

Yet overall inflows to the settled population do make a difference to housing demand. Supply is unlikely to keep up when net migration is running at over 1% of the population (685,500), let alone the peak rate of 1.5% under the Conservatives. The previous peak had been an inflow of 0.5% of the population in 2016. This government could realistically adopt that as a future ceiling for future policy planning.

It could be possible for politicians to reduce numbers further. But that would require serious answers about the social care and NHS workforce and how to fund universities. They would also need to account for the hole in the public finances if governments reduce income from international students, visa fees and the NHS surcharge. So the past two decades show the limits of 'pick a number' sloganising about immigration levels if there is no serious

mechanism in government or parliament to bring together the choices that decide them.

What is needed is a framework for more accountable future decision-making. There is an emerging new consensus about this among policy thinkers. The Institute for Government has proposed a new Immigration plan, with a broad consensus of support from centre-left think-tanks including IPPR and Labour Together, as well as the Centre for Policy Studies and Onward on the centre-right and non-partisan groups like British Future and the Institute for Government itself. Politicians from Robert Jenrick to Yvette Cooper have supported the proposal when in opposition. The question is who will support greater accountability when they are in power, not just in opposition. It is in this government's strategic interests to do so, since their 2029 challenge will involve communicating the changes that they have made, defending the immigration they are trying to keep, and promoting a debate in which all political voices need to demonstrate whether they have the means to meet their pledges.

The lesson of 2024 is that the public will find it more difficult to notice falling immigration than rising immigration. What is visible is the presence of migration – ten million people born abroad, one in six people in society – and ethnic diversity more broadly. Whether the rate of change is 150,000 or 250,000 is not something that people can perceive directly, except through media or political communication. Labour's own message has emphasised primarily why it thinks the scale of immigration is too high rather than how it seeks to balance the pressures and gains of immigration as the numbers fall back to more normal levels.

A vision for 2029

Fast forward to the Spring of 2029: what argument would a Labour government want to make about its vision and record on immigration and asylum?

The government could speak confidently on immigration if it could point to clear results – such as cutting small boat crossings by three-quarters and ending hotel use for asylum seekers. This would require making the UK-France deal a functional returns guarantee, closing the Channel route and breaking the smugglers' model. It would involve expanding controlled, vetted routes for genuine refugees, supported by community sponsors, while at the same time increasing returns of those with failed claims, in an orderly and humane way.

Such an approach to controlling immigration could help ensure that citizens were engaged in debates about how to manage the pressures and gains of immigration, in ways that are fair to those coming to Britain and the communities that they join too.

That would enable the government to make a principled political argument about means as well as ends. The route to delivery on refugee protection would be through cooperation not isolation; by

respecting international obligations, rather than ripping up every treaty; and by Britain playing its part in protecting people seeking freedom from persecution, rather than sending them back to the torturers they had fled from. This would be a confident basis on which to reject calls to pull out of the European Convention on Human Rights, putting the broader framework of the UK-EU post-Brexit relationship back to square one.

A Labour argument should demonstrate a belief in sovereign control of borders, welcoming the UK's fair share of refugees too, and managing the pressures and gains of immigration in the economy and society in ways that reflect Britain's interests and values. It could include an approach to rights and responsibilities that set clear expectations for temporary migrants, while proactively encouraging those planning to settle for the long term to become citizens, and celebrating it when people chose to do so.

If the Labour government could demonstrate such results, it could make a case for what control, cooperation and compassion had delivered. This could offer a sharp contrast with the failures of the previous government to do what it had said – or the populist prospectus of Reform to scrap asylum entirely, abolish human rights protections and slash immigration below the level of emigration, with the aim of shrinking the UK population.

Doing this would not end the political arguments between the parties at the general election over asylum and refugee protection, or the overall levels of immigration. But it would mean the Labour government could create a framework that required its opponents to be clear about the means as well as the ends of delivering on slogans and soundbites about how low net migration could go.

The policy and political challenges of delivering such change within this parliament seems daunting in the face of low and faltering public trust. But the core of Labour's Balancer challenge is to defuse the heated public politics of immigration and show how governments can deliver a balanced and workable agenda on one of the most hotly contested issues. Getting that right could help show how a centre-left government can rebuild democratic confidence and offer a viable alternative to the populist agenda in politically polarised times.

8. The Conservative Challenge: Can an Opposition rebuild trust?

The Conservative party in opposition remains haunted by its handling of immigration in government. The party pledged to reduce overall numbers but increased them to record levels. It made stopping the boats one of its highest profile commitments, but its ever-tougher language, legislation and policies failed to achieve that. That the Conservative governments got it wrong on immigration was one thing that those with sharply diverging views on immigration could agree on. Though it had promised control, the party in government lost confidence on all fronts: the government was far too open for migration sceptics, much too harsh on refugees for liberals, while failing to offer either control or competence to the balancers in between.

The 2025 British Future/Ipsos tracker confirms that the long hangover from its time in office continues for the Conservatives. All parties and leaders can struggle for public trust on questions of immigration, but the Conservative Party and leader Kemi Badenoch have lower trust scores and higher mistrust scores than their political rivals, having carried that unhappy reputational handicap from office into opposition.

The Conservative response has been to disown and break with its recent past – declaring itself to be under new management, though there is significant continuity in personnel and policies. Despite its troubled reputation with the public, the party wants to talk loudly about immigration, making ‘Strong economy, strong borders’ the slogan of Kemi Badenoch’s first conference as leader. The political priority has been to have the most restrictionist approach to immigration as possible, with the voice and policy agenda of the Conservative Party becoming ever more closely aligned to that of Nigel Farage’s Reform UK Party. In opposition, the Conservatives have recommitted to the objectives and policies – from targets to cut overall numbers to the Rwanda plan on asylum – that the party could not deliver in office. It has adopted much tougher new policies on settlement and citizenship and a new policy of mass deportation and remigration at unprecedented scale – though the party leadership retreated from this as the extraordinary scale of its proposals came under scrutiny.

The Conservatives in government over fourteen years came unstuck by making promises on immigration that it did not keep. Opposition can seem easier than government – in that slogans about policy solutions do not get put to the test in real time. The Conservatives in opposition have been in third place in the opinion polls, and feel under existential threat as rarely before, so have seen immigration as primarily a political question, placing little weight on how far the policies proposed would be workable in government. Yet it is not clear that the approach of competing to

be the most vocal champions of a restrictionist politics of minimal immigration and mass deportations can work politically for the Conservative opposition either. The party's record and reputation present a significant barrier to how far it can hope to compete with Nigel Farage for the most anti-migration quarter of public opinion. This has generated a much tougher anti-immigration position on questions of contribution, citizenship and remigration than Conservative voters would propose.

The Conservative trust deficit on immigration

The Conservative Party and party leader Kemi Badenoch have both the lowest trust and highest mistrust scores of the different parties – with the party trusted by 24% and mistrusted by 66%. That is little changed from the 22% to 68% score in February 2024, while in office, or the 24% to 67% score soon after the party's General Election defeat in July 2024.

Kemi Badenoch's personal trust score on immigration is 22% trust and 65% mistrust (net score -43) in the 2025 survey. Badenoch is now better known than during the 2024 tracker survey, when she was one of the Conservative Party leadership contenders. She then had a personal rating of 18% trust and 59% mistrust – a net score of -41 – when all of the final four leadership candidates had quite similar net scores. Even as Leader of the Opposition, Badenoch's own score seems to primarily reflect the broad party reputation, rather than any distinct reputation of Badenoch herself in her first year in the role.

24% trust is low for a major party – though, arguably, that score might even mildly exceed low expectations for a party that only secured 24% of the General Election vote. Most of those who did vote Conservative in 2024 do continue to express some level of trust in the party on immigration. This may reflect party allegiance and loyalty from some of those who stuck with the Conservatives during its worst result. Tory voters prefer the party's voice to what many right-leaning voters may perceive as Labour's pro-immigration instincts. But the Conservative Party now has no advantage over Reform UK among 2024 Conservatives. So the Conservatives can still get a hearing from much of their loyal segment of the electorate, but may struggle more beyond it, in different directions.

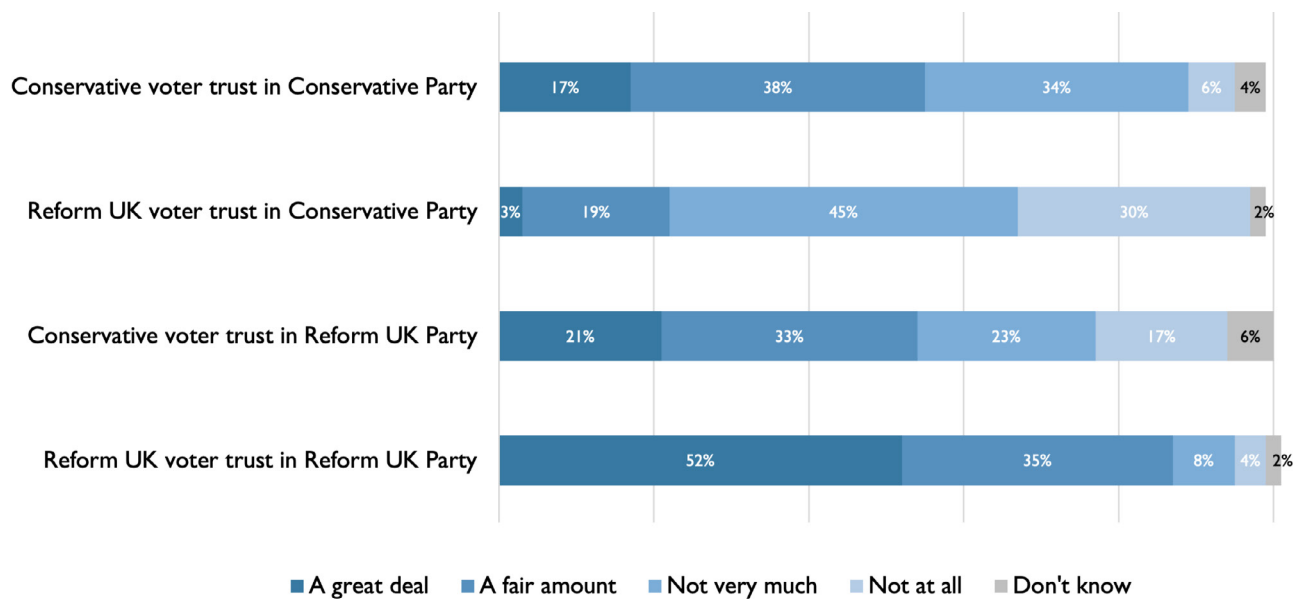
Can the Conservatives hope to compete with Reform UK on immigration?

The Conservative strategy in opposition is to compete with Nigel Farage over their comparative ability to deliver on controlled and reduced immigration, and increasingly on pledges of deportations too.

Yet the Ipsos tracker data shows why Nigel Farage has a considerable structural advantage over the Conservatives when it comes to a high-profile argument within the right over who they trust to get tough on immigration. There is a stark asymmetry between how the voters for each of these parties see the rival contenders.

Figure 8.1: Party trust on immigration among right-leaning voters

To what extent, if at all, do you trust each of the following political parties to have the right immigration policies overall?



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Many of those who voted Conservative in 2024 are inclined to give both parties a hearing. Conservative voters give a trust rating 55% trust to 40% distrust for their own party on immigration and a 55% to 39% trust rating for Reform UK on the issue. Yet the contrast with Reform UK voters is stark. Among those who voted for Reform UK recently, Nigel Farage's party is overwhelmingly trusted – by 86% to 12% – and the Conservative Party strongly mistrusted by 22% to 75%.

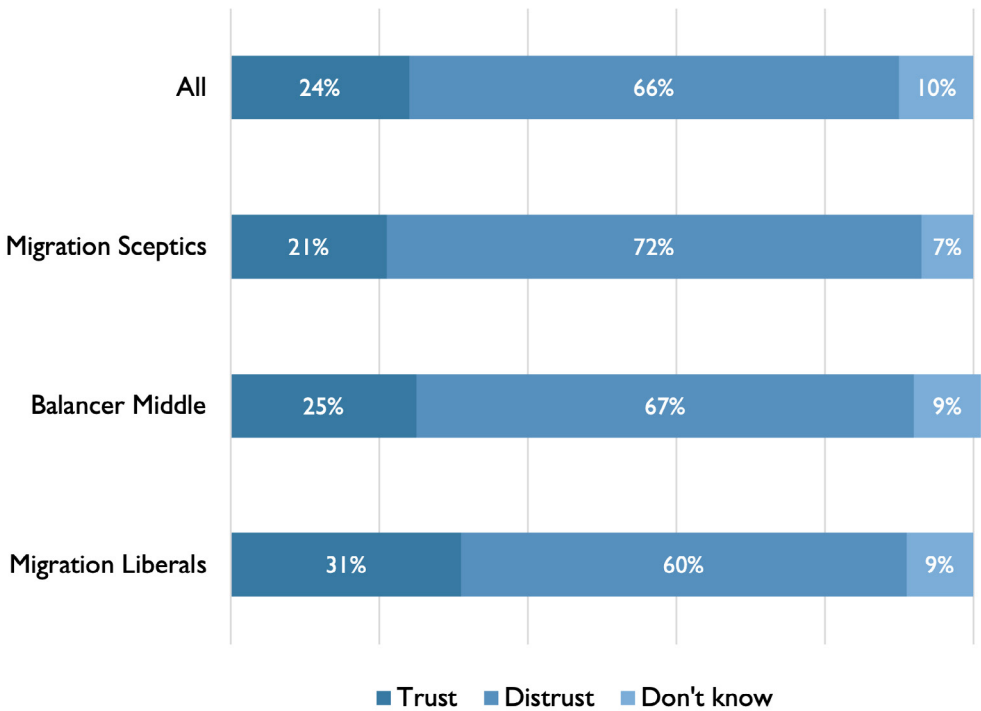
Those Conservative 2024 voters who say it is likely they would vote for Reform UK next time still trust the Conservatives on immigration, by 53% trust to 45% distrust, so many are open to giving their former party a hearing. But they trust Reform UK by a much wider margin, of 84% trust to 13% distrust. The Conservatives may struggle to win these potential switchers back with an appeal based primarily on immigration – rather than locating that within a broader set of arguments and issues.

Nigel Farage has a particularly strong advantage over the Conservatives among most of the quarter of the electorate with the most negative views about immigration – where the Conservatives are mistrusted by 72% and trusted by just 21%, while Reform UK is trusted by 62% and distrusted by 29%. Both the Conservatives and Reform UK face scepticism from the ‘Balancer Middle’, and both are mistrusted by most of those with pro-migration views.

What might seem counter-intuitive is that the Conservatives in 2025 have somewhat more trust among the most pro-migration section of society than the most sceptical. That is partly a non-exit effect: the party was more likely to retain more liberal pro-market Conservatives, who did not find Reform UK attractive – such as the minority of Conservatives who voted Remain in the EU referendum. Yet the Conservatives currently have very similarly negative ratings among Reform UK and Liberal Democrat voters: 19% of Ed Davey’s voters have some trust in the Conservatives on immigration – 4% a great deal, 16% a fair amount – along with 22% of Nigel Farage’s voters, while 74% of Liberal Democrats and 75% of Reform UK voters have little or no trust in the Conservatives. The Lib Dems struggle badly with the anti-migration quarter, but lead the Conservatives among the Balancer Middle, showing how Conservative MPs and candidates will face challenges in the centre and on the right, having lost 65 seats to the Liberal Democrats in 2024.

This data presents a clear dilemma for Conservative strategists. Immigration is the top priority issue for many of the voters who switched to Reform UK in 2024. Half (50%) of Conservative voters think immigration tends to be discussed too little, along with 65% of Reform UK voters, but only 35% of the public thinks this overall. But when both parties prioritise immigration and compete to take the toughest line possible, Nigel Farage’s party appear more likely to benefit from this argument – particularly due to the record and reputation of the Conservative Party with the most strongly anti-migration voters.

Figure 8.2: Trust in the Conservative Party on immigration, by attitudes

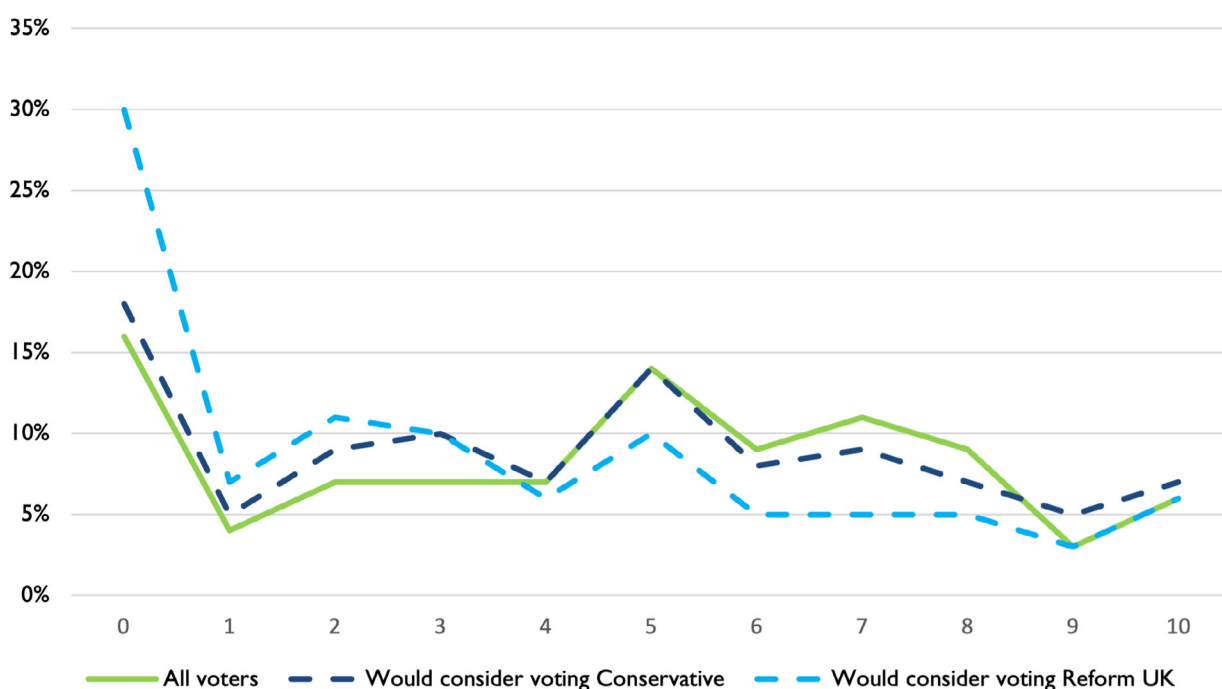


Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

What do Conservatives want on immigration?

Most Conservative voters are sceptical about the scale and pace of immigration, though they reflect the general pattern of public opinion more closely than Reform UK voters – particularly in having fewer anti-migration rejectionists, and more mainstream and moderate sceptics.

Figure 8.3: Comparing immigration attitudes among voters considering Reform UK and the Conservatives



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Promises to cut numbers turned into a headache for the Conservatives in office – due to the dilemmas of control, where a pledge to cut immigration in general could be undermined by the particular cases for immigration for the NHS, social care, the economy and universities. Three-quarters of Conservative voters want reduced overall numbers – and two-thirds would now prefer large reductions in immigration. However, only around a third on average of these ‘sincere reducers’ across the 13 specific job categories asked about are willing to will the means of reducing immigration by identifying work sectors of migration that they would cut. Most Conservative voters prefer not to reduce the numbers in any of the particular categories of work and study visas tested in the tracker survey – from nurses and care workers to construction workers, lorry drivers and engineers. Four in ten Conservatives (40%) were willing to cut the number of visas for bankers. Some 36% of Conservatives were willing to reduce the numbers of international students, with 16% supporting large reductions in student numbers – but most Conservative voters would not reduce the numbers of people coming from overseas to study at British universities.

On citizenship and settlement, the Conservatives are proposing new rules which are much tougher than the instincts of the general public, or indeed of Conservative voters. The party’s proposal is that nobody would become eligible for Indefinite Leave to Remain until they had been in the UK a decade – and that only

those earning over £38,700 would have the opportunity to settle permanently and become citizens. Conservative voters are more likely to think that eligibility should remain at 5 years for those in graduate jobs – a view held by 48% of Conservatives. Tory voters are, however, more likely to think that those in mid- and lower-skill jobs should have a route to citizenship closer to 10 years than 5 years.

Only 4% to 9% of Conservatives holds the view reflected by the party's new policy that there should be no route to ILR or citizenship for those in medium or lower-skilled jobs. Three-quarters of Conservative voters would want those on mid-skill jobs to qualify within a decade; and two-thirds think that those terms should be available to those who come to work in lower-skilled jobs.

The Conservative Deportation Bill tabled in the House of Commons in May by Shadow Home Secretary Chris Philp set out a much tougher policy than this. The Bill set out the Conservative policy that only those earning above £38,700 on skilled work visas would have a right to pursue ILR and a path to citizenship. With an income threshold for citizenship set at £38,700, medium and lower-skilled workers and refugees who were allowed in would be unlikely to have any route to settlement and citizenship. Future refugees would have no route to citizenship either.

Yet those new settlement rules were the more moderate aspect of the proposed legislation, which also promoted a mass deportation agenda of unprecedented scope and scale – proposing that any non-citizens currently in the UK who did not meet the new salary thresholds, or who had ever accessed state support, would have to leave (with the exception of the EU settled status cohort, protected by a legally binding UK-EU withdrawal treaty).

The little-noticed bill would make the UK the first country to deport legal migrants with settled status since Idi Amin's Ugandan dictatorship expelled the Ugandan Asians half a century ago. It would have revoked the right to live in the UK for up to 400,000 people who had Indefinite Leave to Remain. The Bill also proposed to remove the legal status of everybody who arrived under Boris Johnson's administration who were not in the top half of the income distribution – including removing the legal right to live in the UK for anybody who goes on to secure permanent status during this parliament.

The Bill appeared to signal that the Conservative Party of 2025 wanted to restore its credentials on immigration by talking much less about who Britain lets in and much more about who to kick out. Yet the policy largely escaped scrutiny until the Autumn, when an interview by junior whip Katie Lam, promoting the policy as necessary to promote 'a more culturally coherent people', generated controversy. Within a fortnight, the Conservative Party had said that the Deportations Bill was no longer party policy. Conservative

leader Kemi Badenoch accepted the principle not to apply retrospective changes – suggesting that her junior colleague had misunderstood the policy, though Lam was accurately describing the impact of the draft legislation tabled by Shadow Home Secretary Chris Philp.

The debacle over the bill showed that the performative politics of atonement for the Conservative record are leading the party to propose much harsher policies on immigration and remigration than the British public – or Conservative voters – would think fair or want enacted in their name.

The Conservatives have historically thought of immigration as an area of comparative political advantage. The party continues not just to try to navigate the policy dilemmas of immigration and the political challenges of mistrust – but to try to increase its salience yet further. Yet its efforts to do so since the General Election may have done more to reinforce the party's trust deficit on immigration than to resolve it.

9. Farage's Populist Challenge: Can Reform UK morph from insurgency to power?

Nigel Farage can claim to have done more than anyone else to have set the immigration agenda in the opening eighteen months of this parliament. After entering the House of Commons for the first time in 2024, with the party winning 14% of the vote and 5 seats in parliament, Reform UK have increased their support to consistently lead recent opinion polls in an increasingly volatile and fragmented party system.

Reform UK does not seek to present itself as a single-issue party, but immigration is the issue that the party itself, as well as its voters, most prioritise. Nigel Farage argues that he is the political leader who is saying what the public wants to hear on immigration – and what the political elites have refused or failed to deliver for far too long. Yet the British Future/Ipsos tracker data demonstrates a more complex reality. A third of the public (35%) trust Nigel Farage on immigration but a majority of people (55%) distrust him on this subject. And Reform UK voters are mostly outliers, not simply just in the intensity of their opposition to immigration, but in holding the opposite view from the median voter on several key immigration policy questions. The data demonstrates that Farage resonates on immigration by strongly articulating the most vocal minority view within a divided public, rather than being a tribune for how most people think.

Successfully targeting a third of the vote could offer Nigel Farage a path to power, particularly in an increasingly fragmented party system. Yet the Reform UK leader's challenge may change shape if he is serious about attempting the transition from a populist insurgent outsider party to making a genuine bid for government. Farage has reflected the views of the most anti-immigration quarter of the public but struggles to persuade the 'Balancer Middle'. An attempt to double his share of the vote mostly involves targeting more moderate voters – at least the more migration sceptic end of the broad Balancer Middle – than those who dominated his 2024 electoral coalition. Whether Reform UK could win an election by mobilising a third of the vote will also depend on whether or not those opposed to Reform UK are motivated enough by the prospect of Nigel Farage in Number 10 to coalesce around alternative candidates at the constituency level.

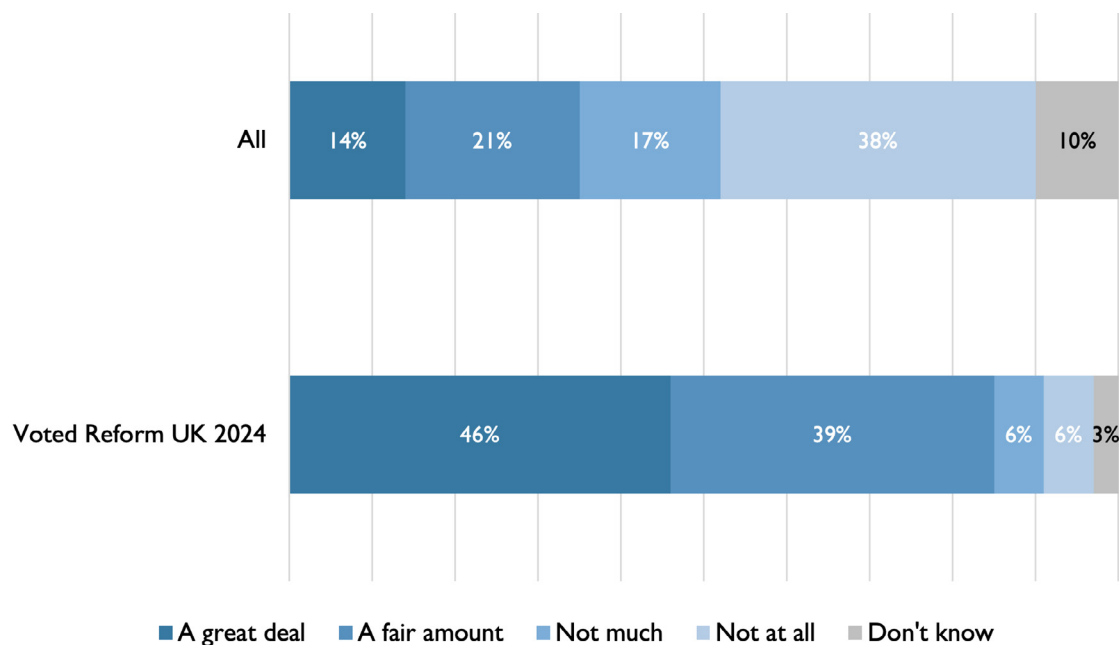
Yet it is an open question as to whether the next stage of Farage's pitch for power should involve doubling down on an insurgent populist radicalism, an attempt at reassurance, or efforts to combine the two. Farage continued to move to the right on immigration during the summer and Autumn of 2024. A new focus on mass deportations – extending this to legal and settled migrants – saw a greater willingness of his political opponents to challenge the principles, not just the practicality of Reform UK's proposals.

It remains to be seen how far this willingness to contest Reform UK's attempt to frame the immigration debate is sustained.

Who trusts Reform UK on immigration – and who doesn't?

Around a third of the public trust Nigel Farage on immigration – while a majority do not. Farage's polarising reputation is reflected in his having more respondents voicing a 'great deal of trust' in him on immigration – 14% – than the other party leaders in this survey; but also the highest score for 'no trust at all' at 38%. His net trust score of -20 in 2025 gives Farage the least negative net score, comparatively, of the five leaders, due primarily to the deterioration of Keir Starmer's score since becoming Prime Minister.

Figure 9.1 Trust in Nigel Farage on immigration



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, $n=3,003$

The tracker data series shows that Farage did somewhat improve his public reputation on immigration after returning to the party leadership in June 2024 and winning a seat in parliament at the July 2024 general election.

Figure 9.2 Trust in Nigel Farage and Reform UK on immigration 2024-25

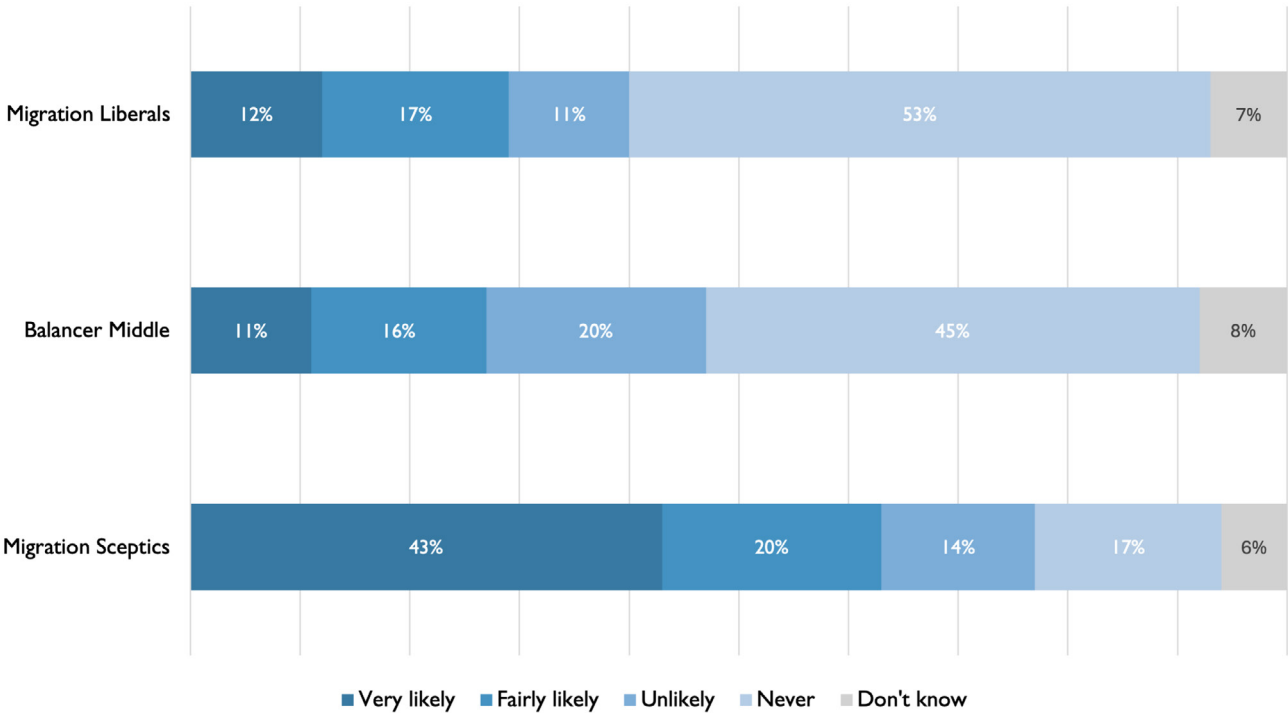
	Nigel Farage (Trust/distrust)	Net	Reform UK (Trust/distrust)	Net
July 2025	35%/55%	-20	38%/51%	-13
July 2024	33%/55%	-22	34%/52%	-18
February 2024	29%/59%*	-30	26%/47%	-21

* *Farage was not the party leader in February 2024, but was included in the tracker survey as the party figure best known to the public.*

Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Reform UK is much the dominant party among those with the strongest anti-immigration views. Six in ten of those with the most negative views on immigration say they are very or fairly likely to vote for the party at the next election. Just over a third of these voters plan to consider the Conservatives, and around one in eight will consider centre-left parties. Most, but not all, of the Balancer Middle and those with liberal views on immigration are sceptical of Farage.

Figure 9.3: Likelihood to consider voting for Reform UK at the next election, by immigration attitudes



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Popular tribunal or vocal minority? How Reform UK voters compare to the broader public on immigration

Reform UK's populist pitch derives much of its energy from claiming to be the only party willing to speak up for how most people think about immigration. Yet the British Future/Ipsos tracker data provides stronger evidence for regarding Reform UK voters as vocal outliers rather than the authentic voice of the public as a whole.

Reform UK's argument will strike a chord with a majority of the public on reducing overall numbers – though the party's voters hold this view with much more intensity than others in their desire to see large reductions in immigration (including 10% more than 2024 Conservatives). But on many immigration questions, Reform UK voters are out of step with the majority of the public. Reform UK voters are the only group where majorities declare no sympathy at all for asylum seekers in small boats; who oppose resettlement schemes in emergencies, such as those in Ukraine, Afghanistan in Hong Kong; and who want to reduce the numbers of international students coming to Britain.

Figure 9.4: How Reform UK voters are outliers in their attitudes to immigration

	All	Reform UK 2024 voters	Conservative 2024 voters	Labour 2024 voters	Lib Dem 2024 voters	Green 2024 voters
Immigration is not talked about enough	35%	65%	50%	24%	27%	13%
Zero on 0-10 score for impact of immigration	16%	44%	24%	9%	7%	6%
Immigration as a top 3 priority for the government	40%	78%	62%	26%	31%	19%
Want to reduce overall immigration numbers	57%	79%	77%	49%	49%	34%
Want large reduction in immigration numbers	41%	74%	64%	27%	28%	16%
Would reduce student visa numbers	28%	52%	36%	22%	18%	17%
No sympathy at all for asylum seekers in boats	25%	55%	37%	16%	14%	11%
Great deal/fair amount of sympathy for asylum seekers in small boats	43%	15%	25%	54%	58%	67%
Prioritise Controlling or reducing immigration	Control +10	Reduce +27	Reduce +4	Control +26	Control +26	Control +35
Support resettlement (Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan)	Support +14	Oppose -37	Oppose -4	Support +36	Support +40	Support +38
Feel that immigration is positive or negative for growth	Negative -2	Negative -62	Negative -39	Positive +28	Positive +13	Positive +44
Trust Nigel Farage on immigration	35%	85%	50%	26%	19%	17%
Don't trust Nigel Farage on immigration	55%	12%	43%	69%	75%	79%

Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

This outlier dynamic helps explain how Nigel Farage's populist insurgency won a sixth of the vote in 2024. There was space for a party positioned further right than the mainstream, but the reluctance of others to echo his agenda stemmed from more than elite-public divides or policy costs – it also reflected the real limits of how far such politics could credibly be taken. Other parties that offer a contrasting voice and agenda to Reform UK often have at least as strong a claim as Nigel Farage – or even a stronger one – to be closer to the centre-of-gravity of how the British public really thinks about immigration.

Will Nigel Farage seek to radicalise or reassure next?

Nigel Farage has now won four million votes several times – with UKIP, the Brexit Party in 2019 and now with Reform UK in the 2024 general election. There are many voters who have voted for Nigel Farage two, three or four times in national elections. These high levels of trust in Farage from those who have supported him in the past shows how difficult it will be for other parties to compete for Reform UK loyalists while Nigel Farage is on the scene and his party is doing well in the polls.

Yet Farage's prospects of seriously competing for power depend on trying to double his share of the vote at the next General Election. That means his political fate in 2029 will depend much less on retaining the four or five million voters who have been happy to support him before – and much more on securing the support of another four or five million new voters who have mostly chosen not to, when given the chance in the past.

There were different kinds of Reform UK voter among the 14% of the electorate who voted Reform UK in 2024. The party's base includes a hardcore of rejectionist voters. More in Common characterise a quarter of the Reform UK 2024 vote as 'radical right': their research shows this group questions basic democratic norms, exemplified by the fifth of Reform UK voters who endorsed the violence during the 2024 riots, or the third who approve of Tommy Robinson and are sceptical about Nigel Farage's decision to exclude him for racist views and a history of violence. This radicalised group may be considering Reform UK alongside overtly extreme parties.

The majority of the party's 2024 voters are 'disillusioned populists' who tend to hold strongly socially conservative views on questions of immigration, integration and identity, alongside some commitment to foundational democratic norms, such as opposing violence and believing the party should do more to exclude racist candidates.

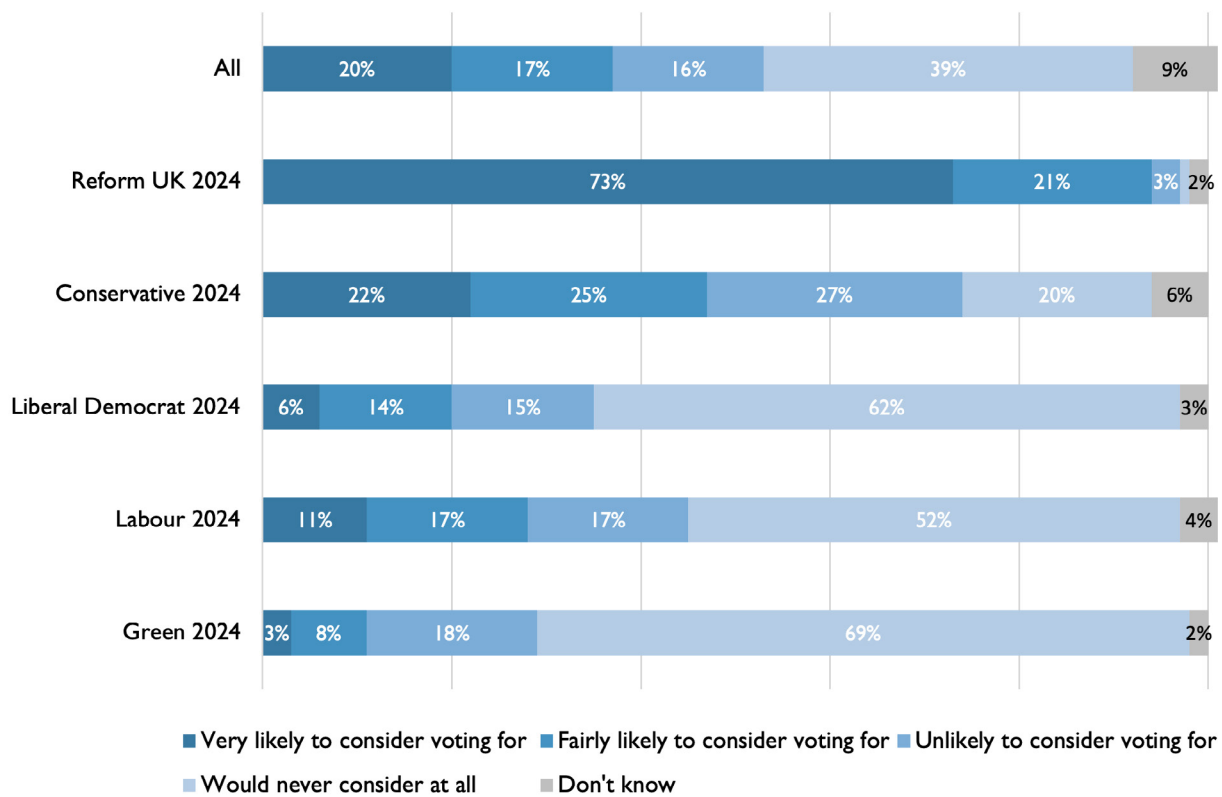
Though Reform UK is much the most popular party among those with anti-immigration views, it is not quite the case that all its voters oppose immigration. Around a fifth of Reform UK voters would not want to reduce the overall numbers of those coming

to Britain, so must be backing the party for reasons other than its agenda on immigration. A small niche of Reform UK voters is drawn from the most liberal quarter of the electorate, reflecting a small libertarian Eurosceptic strand of opinion that has remained with the populist party.

The target voters needed to take Reform UK from 14% to 28% or above are, overall, more moderate and mainstream voters than the party's existing electoral base. The current opinion polls show that many of these voters are giving Reform UK a hearing – but securing their votes as part of a pitch to govern the country is a higher bar.

Figure 9.5: Which voters would consider supporting Reform UK in the next election?

Likelihood to consider voting Reform UK, by 2024 vote



Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Conservative 2024 voters are split evenly on whether to consider voting Reform UK in the next election. Those who are considering Nigel Farage's party are not that different from many existing Reform UK voters in their scepticism on immigration – though they are distinctly less likely to be rejectionists holding the toughest possible views on the issue. Reform UK has made much of its ambition to win traditional Labour voters, not just votes from within the right. But the party has a smaller target market among Labour 2024 voters than Conservatives, with around one in ten Labour 2024 voters seriously considering voting Reform UK, and over a quarter willing to consider doing so.

That minority of Labour 2024 voters who are willing to consider Reform UK are closer in profile to the general public in their views on immigration than they are to the 2024 Reform UK vote. They comprise a mix of more moderate Migration Sceptics and Balancers than those who voted for right-of-centre parties in 2024.

Yet since the 2024 General Election, Farage has moved rightwards, especially on deportations and remigration. He had ruled out adopting the theme of mass deportation of every person without legal status, in the summer of 2024, on grounds of both practicality and political reputation.

“It’s a political impossibility to deport hundreds of thousands of people. We simply can’t do it. For us, at the moment, it’s a political impossibility. I’m not going to get dragged down the route of mass deportations or anything like that. If I say I support mass deportations, that’s all anybody will talk about for the next 20 years. So it’s pointless even going there,” he told Stephen Edgington in September 2024. By the summer of 2025, Farage had changed his mind about that. After Farage’s call for mass deportations of all of those here without legal status was criticised as ‘weak sauce’ by Elon Musk, the Reform UK leader expanded the threat to up to two million people. He proposed to abolish Indefinite Leave to Remain entirely – including reneging on commitments made to those told Britain was their permanent home.

So the radicalisers seem to be winning the war for Farage’s ear on immigration. Despite the latent pressure from the electorate to move towards the centre, there are few voices of reassurance or moderation in Reform UK’s internal debate to counter online and ideological pressure to radicalise.

How much does Reform UK’s reputation on racism matter?

Nigel Farage’s history shows that he believes it is essential to maintain a boundary between a populist political movement with mainstream credentials and the radical right.

In facing recurring problems with extreme and overtly racist candidates in leading UKIP, the Brexit Party and Reform UK, Farage has persistently emphasised his commitment to recruiting ethnic minority candidates, speaking openly of the importance of visible diversity in providing a reputational shield for his parties. “Let this picture of me on this stage be UKIP’s clause four moment. I don’t care what you call us, but from this moment on, please do not call us a racist party”, Farage said in 2013 at a UKIP event designed to provide optical proof of his recognition of the multi-ethnic reality of modern Britain.

Farage has tended to be among the more moderate leaders of a west European populist party, compared to the German AfD or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. Marine Le Pen took Farage as something of a model in her efforts to detoxify her French political

movement from the racist roots of her father’s National Front party.

Farage took over a UKIP party which was founded on Eurosceptic rather than ethno-nationalist principles. Though he had several reasons to want to leave UKIP and create a new party, the occasion of his leaving UKIP was over his successor Gerard Batten’s embrace of Tommy Robinson. Farage warned in 2019 that marching alongside Tommy Robinson would make UKIP a “new BNP”. As Reform UK leader, Farage has continued to insist on the exclusion of Tommy Robinson, and those who openly support Robinson. Farage’s opposition to Tommy Robinson was the cause of the breakdown of his relationship with billionaire Elon Musk, the increasingly radicalised owner of Twitter/X, who Farage had been pursuing as a potential major donor to the party.

Yet the reputational question over racism within Reform UK has continued to recur. Focaldata research for British Future in July 2024 found that Reform UK’s public reputation on racism was worse than UKIP’s in 2015.²⁵ More recent YouGov research found that a plurality of voters, with views split by party politics, and seven out of ten ethnic minority voters in Britain, believe that the party’s policies and agenda are motivated by prejudice.²⁶

Could there be an ‘anybody but Farage’ factor?

That 37% of respondents are willing to consider Reform UK in 2029 makes it thinkable that Nigel Farage could become Prime Minister. But that very ‘thinkability’ may prove Farage’s biggest barrier once voters need to choose a government, given his polarising reputation and Brexit’s fading appeal.

Figure 9.6 : Trust in Nigel Farage on immigration – by likelihood to vote Reform UK in 2029

	All	Voted Reform UK 2024 (14%)	Consider Reform UK (37%)	Unlikely to consider Reform UK (55%)
A great deal	14%	46%	35%	2%
A fair amount	21%	39%	43%	8%
Not much	17%	6%	13%	19%
Not at all	38%	6%	5%	63%
Don’t Know	10%	3%	4%	8%
Trust /Distrust net score	35% / 55% (-20)	85%- / 12% (+28)	78% / 18% (+60)	10% / 82% (-81)

Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

Nigel Farage's reputation as a polarising figure is well established, exemplified by the "Farage paradox" during the 2016 EU referendum: spikes in UKIP support, such as after their 2014 European Elections victory, often coincided with increased backing for remaining in the EU, reflecting how his high profile could undermine the party's core goal. His visibility risked alienating undecided voters crucial to the Leave campaign, prompting Vote Leave leaders to deliberately limit his national media presence. Nevertheless, Farage led his own campaign, potentially boosting overall Leave turnout despite his polarising reputation and unpopularity among mainstream median voters.

The Farage paradox presented a particular challenge to a campaign with a winning post of 50%. If British politics had a French style presidential run-off system to decide who governs, then Nigel Farage's chances would be considerably reduced. The Westminster first-past-the-post system does present an opportunity for Farage to win on a third of the vote – but it would depend on whether and how far the anti-Farage majority of the electorate respond to that prospect.

10. Beyond the Yellow Wall: Can the Liberal Democrats take on the populists?

The Liberal Democrats made significant gains in the 2024 General Election – going from 11 to 72 MPs – to become the largest third party in the House of Commons for over a century. The party had a liberal manifesto on immigration, but it tended not to prioritise this issue during the 2024 General Election campaign.

Its dramatic gains came mainly from demonstrating where the party was the best placed rival to the Conservatives, as voters coalesced around the Liberal Democrat candidate in just about every Lib Dem target seat. 60 gains from the Conservatives represent a new “Yellow Wall” in British politics, particularly in the Home Counties across the south of England, which creates difficult cross-pressure for a Conservative Opposition primarily worried about losing voters to its right.

Ed Davey’s conference speech this Autumn suggested a rebalancing of the Liberal Democrat strategy ahead of the 2029 General Election, with the party keen to promote itself as a strong opponent of, and viable alternative to, the populist right. The slogan “Don’t let Trump’s America be Farage’s Britain” took advantage of the fact that a liberal opposition party can be a vocal critic of Donald Trump in a way that the Labour government cannot, while the right-of-centre opposition parties would not want to.

Major 2024 gains from a quiet liberalism on immigration

In the last general election, the party tended to see immigration – which was Reform UK’s core campaign issue, and one where the Conservatives sought to attack centre-left rivals – as an issue to neutralise rather than to focus on. So the Lib Dem election campaign prioritised issues such as public services, social care and an environmental campaign against dumping sewage.

The Liberal Democrats did run on a more liberal and considerably more detailed immigration policy agenda than the Labour Party in 2024. The Lib Dems 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, seeing this as a staging post for negotiating access to the single market and a return to free movement.

The party’s liberal manifesto agenda on immigration rarely came under significant fire at a national or constituency level during the campaign. That was partly a reflection of the core themes of the 2024 general election – in which the major challenge for the

Liberal Democrats was to compete to be noticed, and to establish where they were the most effective anti-Conservative option at the constituency level. That the Liberal Democrats converted 12% of the vote into 72 seats, while Reform UK took 5 constituencies on 14% of the vote, demonstrated that a long-term, trusted local presence could be more effective than national media profile when it came to convincing voters about who to send to parliament.

Who trusts the Liberal Democrats on immigration?

In this tracker research, 28% of respondents trust Ed Davey on immigration. That includes six out of ten 2024 Liberal Democrats (58%); 40% of Labour supporters and a third (32%) of Green Party voters; 16% of Conservatives and 9% of Reform UK voters.

Ed Davey is trusted by half (49%) of the most pro-immigration section of the public, but he has a 10% to 80% trust deficit with the most anti-migration quarter of the electorate: that is the mirror opposite of the support profile of Nigel Farage. Both Davey and his party have a mixed reputation with the Balancer Middle – being trusted by 30-33% of this group, ahead of the Conservatives though similar to Reform UK.

But the Liberal Democrat vote is not a pro-migration mirror image of the Reform UK vote: it is much closer in profile to the general public, because most 2024 Liberal Democrat voters were drawn from the Balancer Middle alongside liberal voters. So half of 2024 Liberal Democrats would like to see overall immigration numbers fall, though they prioritise controlling migration over reducing the numbers, and would not reduce visas for study or work. A plurality of Lib Dem voters (42%) think immigration is good for growth, though 29% don't think so. Lib Dem voters are split almost equally on whether there is too much (30%), too little (27%) or about the right amount (32%) of discussion of immigration. A majority of Lib Dems (54%) are at least fairly sympathetic to asylum seekers crossing the Channel, preferring support for resettlement schemes and an expansion of safe routes to the UK as a way to bring more control to the UK immigration system while upholding commitments to refugee protection.

Figure 10.1: Liberal Democrat voter attitudes to key immigration questions

	Lib Dem 2024 voters	All
Would like to see overall immigration numbers fall	49%	57%
Prioritise controlling migration over reducing numbers	51%	43%
Think immigration is good for growth	42%	37%
Talk about immigration too much/about right/too little	30%/32%/27%	22%/29%/35%
Sympathetic to asylum seekers crossing the Channel	54%	43%

Source: Ipsos/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker 2025, n=3,003

So the Liberal Democrats could be 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’ in the south of England and beyond.

These Lib Dem successes represent a difficult cross-pressure for the Conservative Party. Much of the debate within the Conservatives is about the existential threat from Reform UK on their right, and how far the party can win back voters lost to Nigel Farage. Yet any Conservative strategy which went beyond survival to making gains to compete for power would need to win back seats lost to the Liberal Democrats, where crucial blue/yellow swing voters are most often located in the centre of the electorate.

Can the liberals stop the populist right?

“So it comes down to us – or Nigel Farage” was Ed Davey’s claim to his party conference in Bournemouth about “the battle of ideas for the future of our country”. That reflected the ambition to voice a liberal alternative that risked getting crowded out of the public debate – but it is unlikely that the election will become a binary battle between the Liberal Democrats and Reform UK at a national or local level.

There were 3.5 million Lib Dem votes and 4 million for Reform UK in 2024. Around a third of the public tend to approve of each party, giving them each a target pool of ten million voters: 33% say they would consider voting Liberal Democrat while 36% would consider voting for Reform UK. The overlap between those thirds of the electorate is slim: 3% of Reform UK voters are strongly likely to consider the Liberal Democrats, while 6% of Lib Dems are strongly likely to consider voting Reform UK.

In most Lib Dem seats, there seems little prospect of a credible contest from a party other than the Conservatives. So most Lib Dem incumbents are likely to be tactical beneficiaries if Reform UK are rising at the expense of the Conservatives, where their Conservative challengers face the difficult task of containing losses on their right while competing for swing voters in the centre.

But the Lib Dem influence over the rise of Reform UK is limited largely because, in polarised times, the voters for the two parties look like chalk and cheese. This is also true of the electoral map. Reform UK were not the runners-up in any of the 72 Liberal Democrat seats and finished within 20% of a Lib Dem winner in only two constituencies. The Lib Dems lost their deposits in the four constituencies that Reform UK won – finishing fourth, fifth or sixth. There are no Lib Dem-held constituencies in the top 100 Reform UK target seats – though Newton Abbot in Devon would be Reform UK's 102nd target if the seats were ranked arithmetically – and just four Lib Dem seats are in the top 200 Reform UK target seats.

While they have limited appeal to the Reform UK voter, Liberal Democrats would want to maximise the turnout of voters sceptical about the populist right, including narrowing the age gap in turnout. Liberal Democrat incumbent MPs will need younger voters – not just newly enfranchised sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds – to understand what they stand for in the constituencies that they can defend or gain.

The new Lib Dem MPs could become an increasingly important voice for liberalism in the parliament. Their political need to engage a liberal and Balancer winning electoral coalition at a constituency level gives the party a strong interest in constructing a broad 'majority liberalism' – capable of securing wide public consent and so able to take on the populists more confidently, by challenging their claim to speak for the majority.

Defending the contribution of managed migration, promoting controlled and safe routes to manage asylum more effectively, and defending the UK's support for human rights protections and the multilateral cooperation needed to provide workable solutions, could be the basis for a moderate majority of liberal and balancer voters.

While the party can make an important contribution to a more confident liberal response to the populist right, it is unlikely that they have the reach to do so alone.

II. Conclusion: Recommendations for constructive reforms and decent boundaries in polarised times

People disagree over the right choices to make about immigration. It is part of democratic politics that different parties should propose different ideas and policies at the general election about who gets to come to Britain, reflecting different public views. The political parties can be challenged to pursue their competing perspectives about how to get immigration, citizenship and integration right in a constructive way that respects different views, while protecting foundational norms about democracy, fairness and excluding racial prejudice from political polarisation.

The following recommendations set out a series of options for constructive reforms that are controlled, managed and fair – and which could help to increase public confidence and consent in the choices made about immigration and asylum, integration and citizenship.

1. Hold a yearly Migration Day in parliament to review the government's annual immigration plan

Much public frustration about immigration has arisen from governments making promises that were not kept. Governments left a gap by avoiding having any framework for parliamentary and public accountability linking manifesto slogans to the policy choices needed to deliver them.

With net migration falling back from record peaks to its pre-Brexit level, the government has an important opportunity to change that. The Home Secretary should present an annual immigration report, in the style of a Treasury Budget, on the flows and impacts of the previous year, and the government's projections, expectations or targets and policy choices for the following year.

Different political parties could use the annual migration report to the Commons to introduce and track different types of targets – such as the gross immigration cap suggested by the Conservatives, or the net zero target of Reform UK. If this government does not believe that an overall net migration target or cap is sensible, it should set out the aims and objectives it does want to be judged against in different areas of immigration. The annual report could, ideally, be underpinned by a broader three-year strategy, analogous to how a Comprehensive Spending Review provides a medium-term framework for the Treasury's relationships with spending departments. There is a consensus among think-tanks across a wide spectrum of views that this would be a constructive approach.²⁷

This framework could be used by governments pursuing different kinds of pro-immigration, migration restrictionist or balancer policy agenda, provided they take their own public pledges seriously, and can accept that parliamentary accountability can play a useful role in engaging the public in the choices being made about how to handle the pressures and gains of immigration fairly.

2. Increase control of asylum in the Channel – prioritising making the UK-France deal work

The UK-France deal reflects a ‘routes and returns’ principle that offers the best shot at reducing the number of small boats crossing the Channel without permission. But the pilot won’t significantly reduce numbers, or disrupt the smugglers’ business model, while those crossing the channel know there is only a small chance of their being affected.

The pilot needs to be scaled up in order to test its potential to provide an orderly and humane way for people to claim asylum in the UK, while disrupting the smugglers’ business model. The government must prioritise overcoming the legal and practical hurdles to deploying the UK-France deal at the scale needed to make returns the most likely outcome alongside the viable controlled alternative. A ten-fold increase to 500 slots for controlled arrivals and returns each week would make the chances of an unauthorised crossing being futile more likely than not. If the government was to lose the UK-France deal, then the chances of devising, implementing and delivering an alternative model to stop the boats during this parliamentary term would seem to be vanishingly slim.

Efforts to further deepen UK-French cooperation in the Channel could include joint permission for each side to enter each other’s waters, to proactively save and return every boat to ensure no lives are lost. Juxtaposed UK-French controls in Dover would enable rapid returns, outside the most exceptional cases, alongside a controlled route that is accessible and equally rapid. Control, cooperation and compassion can disrupt the smugglers’ business model and close down the dangerous, unauthorised route. It can provide the controlled alternative for Britain to play its part in a way that could secure broad public consent for refugee protection.

3. End the use of asylum hotel accommodation in 2026

The government has pledged to end the use of hotel accommodation for asylum seekers by 2029. It should aim to do so within six to twelve months. Its most important route to doing so is to expedite its decision-making about those in the backlog to significantly reduce the numbers, which would place less pressure on attempts to commission alternative large-scale sites, such as military bases, which face significant practical hurdles of local consent and cost, and so are likely to prove a slower route.

The government can halve the use of hotels by making a one-off decision to give temporary leave to remain for 30,000 asylum seekers from the five countries with high acceptance rates, as proposed by the Refugee Council.²⁸ This can give those who have little or no chance of being returned both the right to work and the responsibility to house themselves, making a major contribution to reducing the cost of hotels.

The government should consider the recommendations of the Home Affairs Committee for reforming the housing of people seeking asylum.²⁹ It should use the break clauses in its contract with asylum suppliers to ensure fairer rules for the location of people seeking asylum, and address the risks to cohesion from the lack of local notice and communication.

4. Be clear about the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate concerns

It is not prejudiced to talk about the scale and pace of immigration, the choices about who to admit and why, or how to manage the pressures fairly – provided those debates exclude racism and treat those who come to our country with fairness, dignity and respect. A useful test of a legitimate debate about immigration and integration in today's Britain is that the arguments made by mainstream parties should recognise the equal voice and status of white, Asian and Black citizens, rather than talking about demographic change in ways that treats ethnic difference as an existential threat. Rules for settlement and integration should strike a fair balance between the rights and responsibilities of British-born and naturalised citizens, and those who want to become British.

5. Rule out retrospective loss of permanent status

The government should be clear that it is wrong in principle to make retrospective changes to people's status. This principle has always been adopted during major policy changes, such as the end of free movement after Brexit, the ending of Commonwealth free movement in the 1970s, or the introduction of the British Nationality Act. All parties should be challenged to respect this foundational principle in their future policies.

It is good that Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch has now said this is a principle that the Opposition will adopt, withdrawing the Deportations Bill proposals for the widespread revocation of Indefinite Leave to Remain for those who already have it. The Reform UK party should drop its policy to strip ILR from up to 400,000 people. The proposal discriminates against people from outside Europe – by recognising a fairness principle against retrospective changes for European nationals with settled status, but failing to apply that to people from India, Pakistan and Nigeria and other countries in the Commonwealth and beyond.

6. Provide routes to settlement for those already in the UK

The government is now embarking on its consultation about the processes and timetables for citizenship and settlement. Its proposals should provide routes to settlement for those who have come to the UK since 2020, while considering the criteria for different timelines. The consultation should take account of the impacts of changes to settlement and citizenship rules, both on the lives of those seeking status and on employers in the private, public and voluntary sectors.

The White Paper states that contributions to UK society will be considered as part of the ‘Point-Based System’ for determining eligibility for shorter routes to settlement. There is a strong case for including volunteering, on a non-mandatory basis, as a relevant factor for reducing the qualifying period for ILR, such as through evidencing regular voluntary work with a registered charity for a minimum 12-month period.

7. Have a real-world debate about removing those without legal status

Having immigration rules means that enforcement is legitimate. There is a broad political and public consensus about deporting foreign criminals who commit serious crimes, and about removing asylum seekers whose claims have failed, when it is safe to do so.

There is an increasingly simplistic debate in which politicians offer slogans about mass deportations – making pledges that they know are impossible to keep, proposing to deport several hundred thousand people with no increase in state capacity nor agreement of cost. The public has a strong preference for legal over illegal immigration but also holds different intuitions about different types of case – such as children born in the UK and those who have lived here for many years compared to more recent arrivals. They would naturally prioritise removals capacity towards those who present a risk to public safety.

In a period of high immigration, with concern about the lack of control of asylum policy, it is difficult for governments to acknowledge that there is no realistic way to remove all of those without legal status, so there are few attempts to produce more grounded evidence about the options. The Home Affairs Committee and Public Accounts Committee should consider conducting a joint inquiry to inform policy and public debate about deportation policies. This should consider the principles, practicalities and priorities of how to manage those without legal status. This could involve clarifying the practicalities and likely costs for different types of returns programmes – voluntary and enforced – that could be practical in the real world. It could also scrutinise the efficacy, legitimacy and rules of existing controlled regularisation routes to legal status where people have been in the UK for a decade with no realistic prospect of return.

8. Reject and challenge attempts to legitimise the use of ‘remigration’ to dissolve decent boundaries against xenophobia and racism

The use of the term ‘remigration’ refers primarily to the voluntary or forced repatriation of legal migrants. It is also a far-right code for expelling ethnic minorities from Britain. There is a transnational push to legitimise the term in mainstream politics – and it is used by the German AfD and by President Donald Trump. The promotion of the term is a concerted attempt by the far right and extreme voices within the populist right to dissolve anti-racism boundaries, using the term to blur the boundaries between legitimate enforcement of immigration rules with extreme proposals that millions of legal and settled migrants should be forced to leave.

Far right and extreme groups campaign for ‘total remigration’ to argue that UK-born minorities should be encouraged or forced to leave the country to reverse the demographic changes in society over the last twenty-five, fifty and indeed seventy-five years. Given the racist and xenophobic aims of many of those promoting the term, there should be a concerted effort in mainstream politics and the media to reject the attempt to legitimise it as part of mainstream political and media discourse.

9. Update the government’s hate crime strategy and fill the gaps on cohesion

Important gaps remain in the absence of government thinking about cohesion, hatred and prejudice at the national level. This comes at a time when there is a visible resurgence of racism, both online and offline, reflecting the mobilisation of rejectionist sentiment towards asylum seekers, migrants and ethnic minorities.

There is an increased focus on antisemitism and increasing efforts to fill the gaps in policy and practice on anti-Muslim prejudice, including work to build a consensus on a definition. The government’s Pride in Place strategy could make an important contribution to building meaningful connection locally in many locations, but is not designed to address some of the national challenges.³⁰

The government needs an actionable strategy to address hate crime and racism. It had a hate crime strategy in the post-Brexit period, from 2016 to 2020, but successive Prime Ministers have not found the bandwidth to renew it since. A strategy needs to recommend effective responses to hatred targeting asylum seekers in particular, to draw the line between legitimate political protest and the use of intimidation, threats and dehumanisation that socialises violent attacks. This has been a gap in previous strategies from government and civic society towards racism and hate crime. The government needs to ensure regulators use their powers to keep online platforms within the law.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) should develop a measurement framework for a long-term cohesion strategy for England. While the UK has strong data on demographic and socio-economic facts about education and work, there is much less rigorous and regular data collected to understand sentiment within and between different groups in our society – including perceptions and patterns of warmth or indifference, fear or prejudice across lines of difference. These underpin the social norms and attitudes that strategies to tackle the underlying causes of all forms of prejudice and hate crime would seek to target, track and shape over time – reducing the tinder which extremists of all stripes will be trying to kindle around national or international events.

A modest amount of around £75,000 per local authority per year would support all local authorities to implement tension monitoring networks that spot conflicts upstream, and to develop local social cohesion strategies. The Northern Ireland administration, Welsh and Scottish Governments should also update their cohesion and hate crime strategies.

12. Notes and references

1. British Future also uses these scores to segment the public into three groups, 'Migration Sceptics', 'Migration Liberals' and the 'Balancer Middle'. Details of this segmentation are set out in Chapter 2.
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British Future...

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

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