

Immigration and the election: Time to choose

*Findings from the Ipsos/British
Future immigration attitudes tracker*

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

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I. Introduction: Time to choose

This wave of the Immigration Attitudes Tracker, the sixteenth since the series began in February 2015, takes the temperature of public opinion as the UK heads into an election year. This is not an ‘Immigration election’, for all that some political voices might like it to be. Even among Conservative supporters, who prioritise immigration as an issue more than those planning to vote Labour, it is only the third most important issue in deciding their vote, behind the NHS and the cost of living. For Labour voters it comes much further down their list of key concerns. Debates about immigration will be part of the election campaign but look unlikely to decide the result.

An election is a time to choose, for most voters between the two main parties, to decide the next government. Our survey finds attitudes sharply divided by politics, with Labour and Conservative supporters holding contrasting views on key questions.

Some 69% of the public say they are dissatisfied with the government’s handling of immigration, but for very different reasons. Conservative supporters are dissatisfied with failures to reduce Channel crossings and high migration numbers. But Labour supporters say they are dissatisfied because the government is too harsh and creates a fearful environment for migrants who live here, while also expressing concern about Channel crossings. That means the two main parties are under quite different pressures from their own supporters.

We are in a time of high immigration, driven in part by humanitarian responses to conflict in Ukraine and crackdowns on free speech in Hong Kong, and partly by the demands of our economy and public services. Around half the public (52%) would now like immigration numbers to be reduced, with around a third (35%) wanting them reduced by a lot. Around four in ten (39%) would prefer numbers to remain about the same or increase.

Those who want reductions face another choice, about what they would cut. The tracker survey illuminates some of the difficulties that people have in making those decisions. A minority group of ‘sincere reducers’, up to a fifth of the public, are willing to make the tough calls to reduce numbers of workers in public services like care and the NHS, or of international students or short-term agricultural workers. Most people are not in favour of these reductions.

Are voters given enough choice on immigration? A third of the public feels that we need to talk more about immigration but a larger group say it is discussed enough or too much. “We never voted for this” is a common refrain among those most anxious about rising migration numbers, for whom immigration may be the number one issue in the election. Voters have a choice between

a range of parties with distinct policies on migration, from the more open approach of the Greens and SNP to the tough stance of Reform UK. But only the two main parties could realistically form the next government and voters have little information about what sets their approaches to immigration apart. The Rwanda scheme, to remove asylum seekers to Africa, is championed by the Conservative Party but would be scrapped by Labour. That policy may be one of the few clear dividing lines on immigration policy. Conservative voters are supportive while Labour voters are opposed.

The tracker findings illustrate how the public is willing and able to engage with the dilemmas and trade-offs of managing migration to Britain. Immigration is not such a hot topic that it should be kept out of public discourse. Engaging more with voters on how we manage the pressures and gains of migration might help rebuild public trust on the issue. Half of respondents support a proposal to increase accountability through an annual immigration plan that is debated in parliament, with only around one in ten opposed. That might help us to treat immigration as more of a 'normal' issue, like taxation or public spending – with greater public involvement in the choices that we make.

2. About this report and the immigration attitudes tracker

This report presents new findings from the Immigration Attitudes Tracker conducted by Ipsos for British Future. This nationally representative survey of 3,000 adults (18+) across Great Britain, conducted online from 17-28 February 2024, is the latest of 16 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 www.ipsos.com/en-uk/immigration-tracker-march-2024

We have also examined how responses to policy questions vary by people's broad perspectives on immigration. Our previous work has found that, while some people are strongly opposed to immigration and others are strongly in favour, most 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 'balancers' who sit somewhere in between. The largest group of respondents to the immigration tracker survey are balancers, giving a score of 4-7 (47%). Roughly a fifth (18%) are 'migration liberals', giving a score in the upper reaches of 8-10; while around three in ten (28%) are 'migration sceptics', giving a score of 0-3. These classifications are used to shed light on responses to some more detailed areas of policy and differ slightly from the categories used by Ipsos when showing trends over time.¹ Both scales are used within the analysis of the report.

This 2024 tracker has a slightly smaller Scottish sample than in 2023, with 252 respondents surveyed in Scotland this year. This is because Migration Policy Scotland is conducting its own, in-depth research into public attitudes to immigration in Scotland, which will be published later this year.²

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

3. The election politics of immigration

This could be called “the immigration parliament” – having seen much the biggest changes in both immigration policies and immigration flows for decades.

The new post-Brexit immigration system, ending EU freedom of movement, represented the biggest overhaul of the legal migration rules for half a century. The biggest asylum reforms for decades have seen the government legislate the principle that it will deny access to asylum to anybody who comes to the UK without permission – though it has not yet shown how it could operate this, or its unprecedented new UK-Rwanda deal, in practice.

The parliament has also seen both the biggest increases and the biggest reductions in immigration on record.

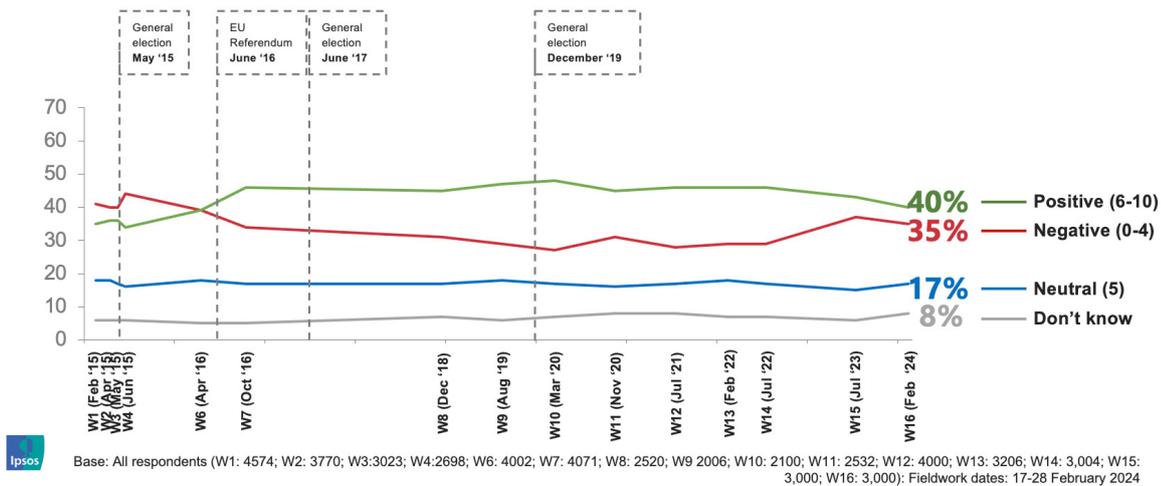
After the temporary disruption of the pandemic, net migration to the UK hit an all-time peak level in 2022. The record rise in immigration was brought about by a combination of the government’s response to unexpected international events and its conscious policy choices to have more liberal post-Brexit immigration rules for non-EU immigration; and also by the unanticipated numbers who came under some of those new rules.

Having delivered record increases in immigration, the government now bills its pre-election policy as delivering “the biggest ever reduction in immigration”. Both of these claims are true, across the parliament, since the government tripled net migration before setting out new policies that might now halve it from that peak level.

So the context of the general election is one of dramatic swings in immigration levels, policies and language – reflecting how immigration politics are volatile and hotly contested. At the same time, immigration policies see the government trying to grapple with the dilemmas of control over which choices to make.

British public attitudes to immigration are warmer than a decade ago – on the economic and cultural contribution of immigration – but confidence in the government has deteriorated, despite its policy hyperactivity throughout this parliament. In 2024, more people think immigration has a positive impact on Britain (40%) than a negative impact (35%) – the mirror image of the 2015 findings, when people felt more negative than positive about the issue. Positivity has fallen slightly (by 3 points) since the last tracker in 2023 and from its March 2020 peak of 48%, with Conservative supporters becoming more critical while Labour voters remain broadly positive.

Figure 3.1: Do people think immigration has had a positive or negative effect on Britain?



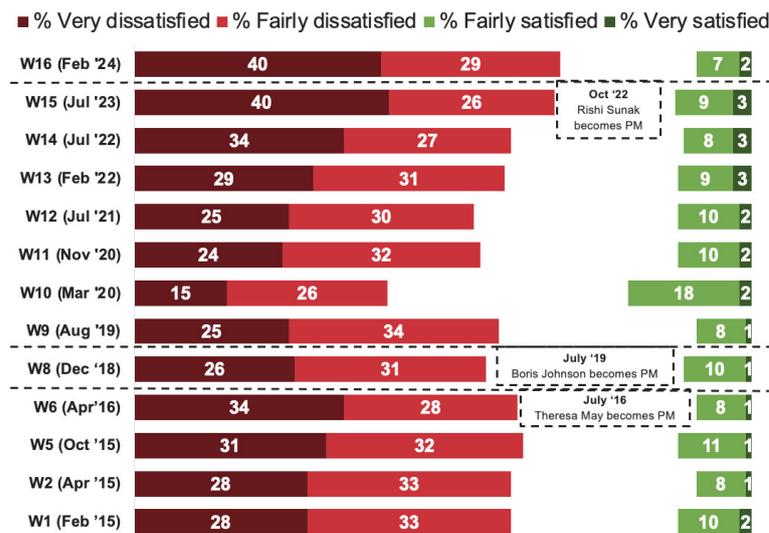
Question: On a scale of 0 to 10, has migration had a positive or negative impact on Britain? (0 is “very negative”, 10 is “very positive”)

Declining trust in government

Public confidence in how government handles immigration has declined, rather than improved, across this parliament. While there are a wide range of views about the balance of pros and cons of immigration, the one area of broad societal consensus is a lack of confidence in the government.

Overall, levels of trust are lower in the government in Spring 2024 than at any time since this Ipsos tracker series began nine years ago. Seven out of ten people are dissatisfied with the government, though this reflects a broad coalition of complaints from different perspectives. Half of those who are dissatisfied say it is because of a lack of control over boats in the Channel (54%) or a failure to reduce overall immigration numbers (51%). At the same time, over a quarter prioritise liberal criticisms of the government being too tough, by creating a negative or fearful environment for migrants in Britain (28%) or not treating asylum seekers well (25%).

Figure 3.2: Dissatisfaction with the government on immigration is at the highest level in the tracker's history



Base: All respondents (W1: 4574; W2: 3770; W5:1941; W6: 4002; W8: 2520; W9: 2006; W10: 2100; W11: 2532; W12: 4000; W13: 3206; W14: 3004; W15: 3000; W16: 3000); Fieldwork dates: 17-28 February 2024

Question: Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way the current government is dealing with immigration?

There is a significant partisan split in the balance of these views, with Conservative supporters much more likely to give migration sceptic reasons for disappointment, and Labour voters having an equal balance of concerns. ‘Creating a negative or fearful environment for migrants who live in Britain’ (42%) is the biggest concern about government policy among Labour voters, though almost as many cite the lack of control over small boats in the Channel (41%).

How much will immigration matter to voters in the election?

Only a minority of voters will see the 2024 general election as “the immigration election”.

Some 37% say immigration will be an important issue for them in deciding their vote in the general election. That ranks it as the 4th most important issue, significantly below the NHS (61%), inflation/cost of living (56%) and also below ‘managing the economy’ (39%).

Figure 3.3: Top 10 issues for the public in the election

Healthcare/NHS/hospitals	61%
Inflation/rising cost of living	56%
Managing the economy/economic situation	39%
Immigration	37%
Public services generally	32%
Crime and anti-social behaviour/law and order	31%
Protecting the natural environment/climate change	29%
Poverty/inequality	29%
Housing	28%
Lack of faith in politicians/system of government	28%
Taxation	28%

Question: Looking ahead to the next general election, which, if any issues, do you think will be very important to you in helping you to decide which party to vote for?

But there is a significant partisan split. A majority of Conservatives (53%) consider immigration an important electoral issue, third behind the NHS and the cost of living – while Labour voters are only half as likely as Conservatives to say that immigration is a key issue for them in the election, with 27% saying it is important in deciding their vote. So immigration is a priority issue for one in four Labour voters – but it comes further down Labour voters’ list of priorities, behind the NHS, Inflation and the cost of living, the economy, public services, crime, poverty, climate, housing, energy policy, education, care for older people and trust in politicians.

If the 2024 general election does lead to a change of government, it will be because the decisive election votes were from those who put other priority issues first – particularly in the case of Conservative 2019 switchers to the Labour Party. At the same time, the minority who do prioritise immigration are divided over what to do about it, and how to square their current frustration with partisan preferences at the ballot box, in the political battle between the Conservatives and Reform.

The public is split on how to get the amount of debate about immigration right. Around a third of people (34%) think we don’t discuss immigration enough, while about a quarter (23%) think we talk about it too much. Three in ten (30%) say we’ve got the balance about right. This has shifted over time. The argument that discussion of immigration is being suppressed has become less popular after the prominence of the issue during and beyond the EU referendum. A public majority of 62% of people felt that immigration was not discussed enough when Ipsos asked this question back in 2011, and this was over 40% in 2022. The

perception that there is too much focus on immigration, among more liberal respondents, has been a minority view throughout. It is possible that some of those respondents who say we “talk too little” are expressing dissatisfaction with policy outcomes, as much as with the volume of the debate. (The question framing does not offer the opportunity for those with sceptical views of government policy to express the idea that there is much talk but no action on the issue, for example).

Figure 3.4: Do we talk too much or too little about immigration?



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

The political challenges of securing public trust

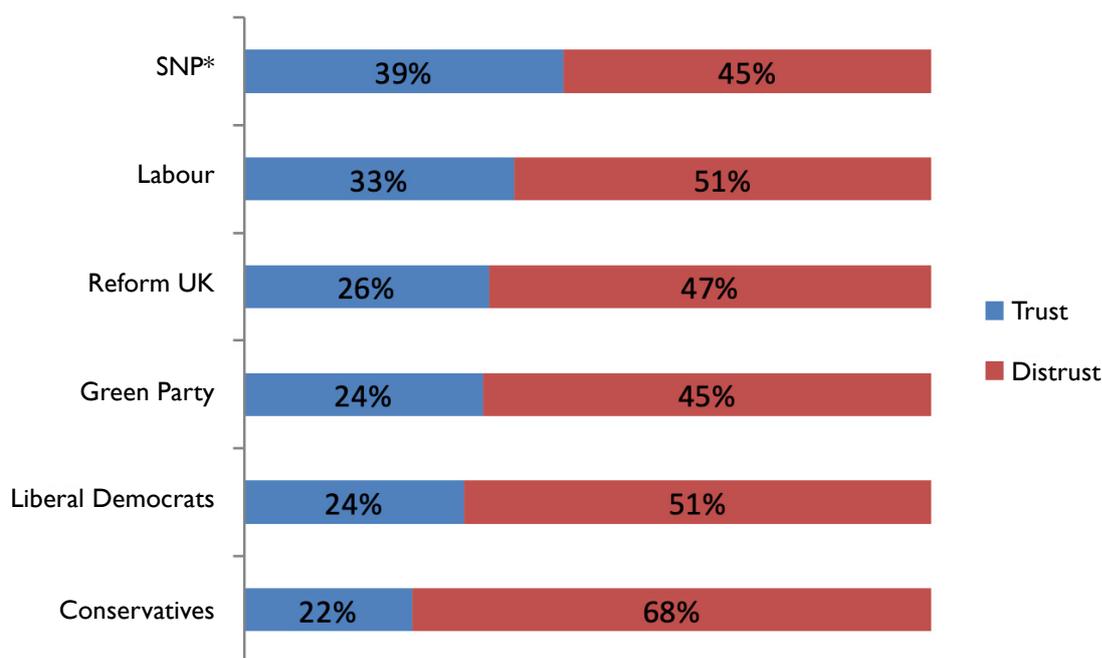
The general election will give voters a choice between parties and candidates to lead the country.

All political parties and leaders struggle for public trust on immigration – with none able to command much confidence across the country. Yet this does not mean that most voters have nobody that they can trust on immigration. Rather, much of the public do have at least one party that they have some confidence in on the issue – yet that trust is dispersed across the party political spectrum. This reflects a wide range of different views about the language, tone and policy choices that different parts of the public – with liberal, restrictionist or balancer views – would want to see on immigration and asylum.

So this Ipsos survey shows that it is not the case that the parties and politicians who take the toughest or most restrictive stance on immigration are the most popular.

Rather, it is Labour, across Britain, together with the SNP in Scotland, who have the most positive (or, more accurately, least negative) public reputations on immigration.

Figure 3.5: How much does the public trust political parties on immigration?



(* SNP score is for respondents in Scotland)

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

A third of the public (33%) trusts Labour on immigration but half (51%) do not. That still gives Labour the least negative overall net score on immigration across the GB-wide parties, with a -18 net score compared to -46 for the Conservatives, who have 22% trust and 68% mistrust on immigration overall.

Labour does have broad trust (64% trust vs 23% distrust, net +41) among those currently intending to vote Labour, slightly higher than its +32 net rating among 2019 Labour voters. A quarter of those intending to vote for the party are sceptical about its approach to immigration and to asylum, though that score combines pressure from both a liberal and a migration sceptic perspective. Labour's lead on immigration also reflects its dominant current position in public attitudes, so that it currently leads on almost every issue, as well as a comparative preference for Labour over the Conservatives, particularly among those with broadly liberal views of immigration.

Reform – with 26% trust and 47% distrust on the issue – appeals more strongly to the quarter of the public with the most negative views on immigration. But Reform struggles not only with those who have liberal views but with the balancer middle too. However, Reform does not begin this election year with nearly so polarising nor so clearly defined a public reputation as UKIP had in 2015 under Nigel Farage. That is partly a consequence of being less well known. More people may make their minds up about the party,

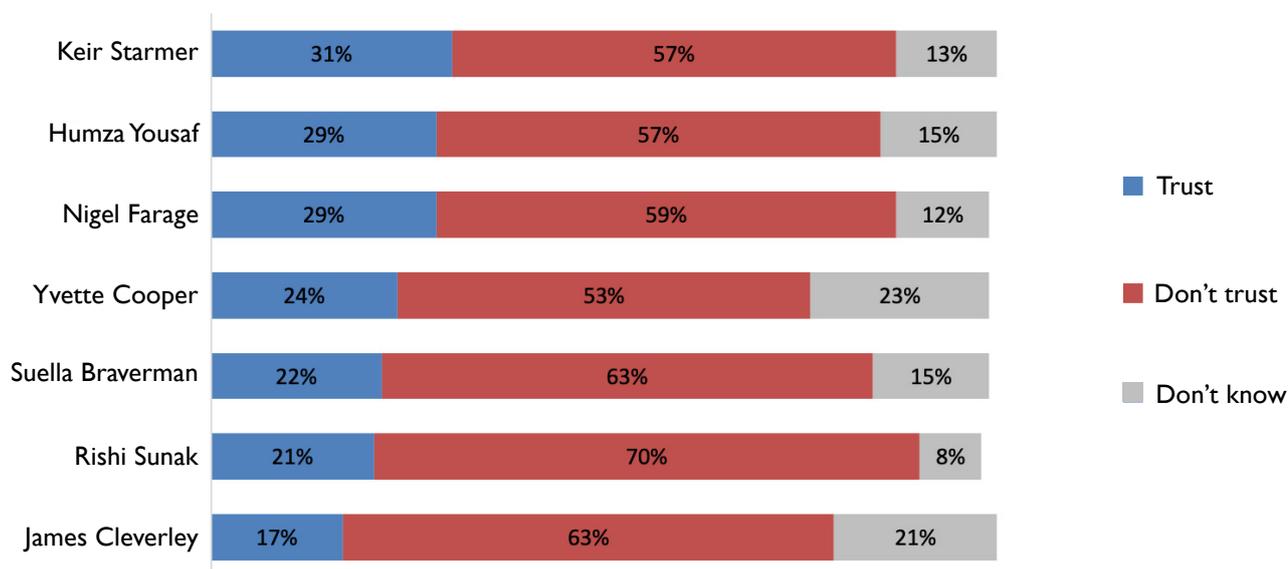
one way or the other, if it has a higher profile closer to the election itself, having recently gained its first Reform MP in Lee Anderson.

The Liberal Democrat and Green parties – with 23% trust – have fairly similar overall scores to Reform, though with the inverse profile of support and scepticism.

The Scottish National Party – among respondents in Scotland³ - comes much closer to a neutral score than any of the GB-wide parties do across Britain, with 39% of Scots trusting the SNP on immigration and 45% disapproving of the party. This reflects softer overall attitudes to immigration in Scotland, as well as broad identification with the party among many of those who support Scottish independence. However, Humza Yousaf, the first Minister, has a lower trust rating than his party. Respondents in Scotland have more negative views of Labour (26% trust, 52% distrust) and the Conservative Party (12% trust, 73% distrust). Labour’s negative score reflects some doubts about the party’s approach at both the liberal and the restrictionist flanks of public opinion in Scotland, as well as from political opponents more generally.

The overall pattern of public trust in political leaders is similar to those of the political parties, though Keir Starmer and Humza Yousaf underperform their party reputation by a significant margin, while Rishi Sunak does so more narrowly.

Figure 3.6: Trust and distrust in politicians on immigration



(* Humza Yousaf score is for respondents in Scotland)

Question: To what extent, if at all, do you trust each of the following politicians when they talk about immigration?

All of the politicians included in the survey were more distrusted than trusted on immigration by the public overall.

Keir Starmer was more trusted than Nigel Farage, but by a narrower margin than Labour's comparative advantage over Reform and other parties. While six out of ten people distrust Nigel Farage on immigration – double the number who trust him (29%) – the Brexit/Reform party founder did score better than the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Home Secretary James Cleverly or his predecessor Suella Braverman, who has now become a prominent critic of the government from the Conservative backbenches.

How will the major parties respond?

Rishi Sunak's delivery headache

The pre-election tracker findings demonstrate the scale of the political challenge facing Rishi Sunak on immigration ahead of the general election – and why increasing the profile of the issue is much more likely to harm than to help his bid for re-election during the election campaign itself.

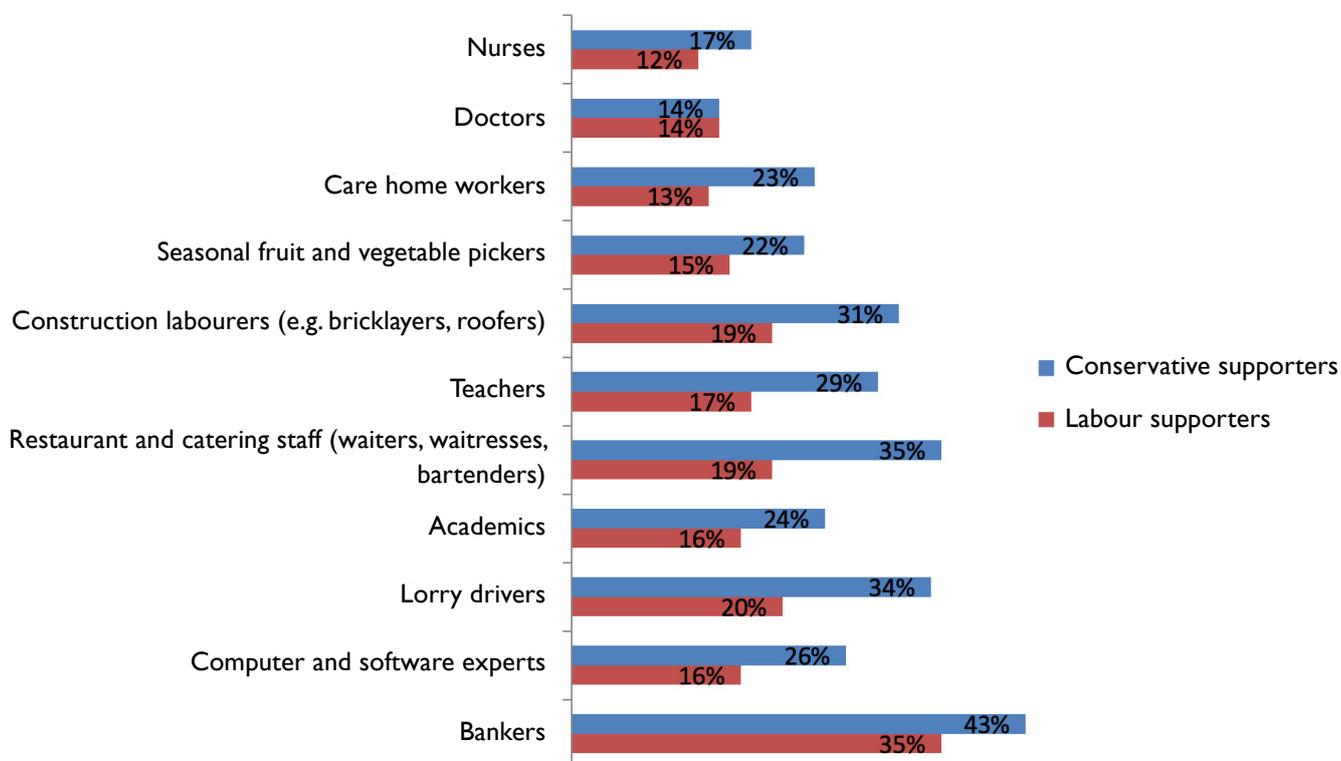
Sunak came to office as Prime Minister with a reputation as a technocrat, committed to delivering on a plan. That has been challenging on the economy and public services like the NHS; but he has faced most challenges on immigration, particularly asylum and Channel crossings. Here Sunak made a clear pledge to “stop the boats” while also committing to reduce overall levels of immigration. Yet after eighteen months in office, Sunak has now become almost equally unpopular on immigration with the most liberal quarter (21% trusted, 74% distrusted, net -53) and the most sceptical quarter (17% trusted, 77% distrusted, net -60) of public opinion on immigration. For liberals, both the voice and policies of the government are much too harsh. For migration sceptics, there is increasing scepticism about the gap between tough talk and the lack of delivery, either on boats in the Channel or overall levels of immigration. Sunak also struggles with the ‘balancer’ middle, with whom he is 25% trusted and 68% distrusted, net -43. This group sees the pressures and gains of immigration – but doubts the government's competence on recognising or addressing either effectively.

The government's response to being under pressure on immigration has been to considerably increase the salience of the issue, particularly with its own voters. That has created a wide and unprecedented gap in the cross-party salience, showing that elite political and media cues matter. But increased salience has correlated with declining trust and confidence in both the government and the Conservative Party – making plans to challenge political opponents over immigration more difficult. The Conservatives are currently simultaneously losing support to Reform among voters who prioritise immigration, and to Labour among voters who prioritise other issues. Increasing the pre-election volume further may exacerbate rather than mitigate these trends.

The government's focus is now on trying to see the Rwanda policy make at least a symbolic start. While the policy continues to divide the public as a whole, it does have greater support among Conservative voters. With such broad public scepticism that there will be any flights to Rwanda this year, this could arguably become one area where Sunak could now exceed low expectations at the end of the parliament. There would be little chance, however, to demonstrate whether the desired deterrent effect would materialise – another area on which there is now broad public scepticism (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6).

The 2023 survey followed high levels of net migration, which peaked at triple the level of 2019. There is now a narrow public majority for reduced numbers, but with a significant partisan split. Seven in ten Conservative voters (71%) want reductions in immigration levels – and 52% want large reductions. Only a quarter of Conservatives, asked at a time when net migration is exceptionally high, do not want to see overall numbers fall (17% maintain current levels, 9% increase). This explains the government's emphasis on its package to reduce migration – estimating that its December 2023 policy changes would prevent around 300,000 people who got a visa to the UK coming under the new rules.

Figure 3.7: Conservative and Labour supporters' preferences for reducing migration into selected occupations



Question: Would you prefer the number of migrants (from any country) from each of the below groups coming to live in the UK to be increased, reduced, or remain about the same?

Sunak is under pressure from his own backbench to do more but there are several constraints on this from both a political and a policy perspective.

Net migration is now on a downward trend, because of the exceptional circumstances that contributed to the 2022 figures, as well as the government's recent policy changes. The latest figures showed a reduction and the final pre-election levels of net migration are likely to be over half a million, though the post-election trend may be towards 300,000 to 350,000 net migration if the current policy mix is retained. But any further policy changes made in office this year will not now show up in the pre-election immigration statistics – because of the time to implement future reforms, and because the May 2024 ONS statistics will report on the year to December 2023. (A December election would include one final set of net migration figures, up to June 2024, so would capture any early impacts of last year's reforms, but further policy changes would not do much now). If the government does make further restrictive changes this year, the likelihood is that these would primarily contribute to whether a Labour government can show that it can bring the numbers down in 2025 and beyond.

Beyond the reductions already announced – particularly targeting dependents of those with student and social care visas – there would be considerably more cross-pressures and trade-offs to implement new restrictions on visas, particularly if these targeted health and social care or student migration. As discussed in chapters four and five, there is a limited appetite from Conservative voters for reducing either flow of migration, despite the desire to see the overall numbers fall.

The Conservatives could make a manifesto commitment to a lower future level of immigration, such as aiming for net migration to come down to below the 250,000 level of 2019 – which was the long-term trend for the first two decades of this century. But the legacy of missed immigration targets and current levels of public distrust means that faith in future pledges may be heavily discounted. A government that was aiming, unsuccessfully, to reduce net migration to the 'tens of thousands' for a decade after 2010, before dropping the policy goal in 2019, might simply revive critiques of its record if it were to repeat that pledge again in 2024.

Keir Starmer's balancer challenge

It is much easier to be Keir Starmer than Rishi Sunak when it comes to the pre-election politics of immigration this year, though Labour's anxieties and historic scars mean it might not feel like that to the party. Yet immigration would be a much more significant challenge in government than in opposition.

While the Labour leader faces significant challenges when it comes to public trust on immigration, the Ipsos tracker data captures several areas of comparative political advantage over the Conservatives in the run-up to the general election. Keir Starmer is under much less pre-election pressure because the issue is

enormously less salient for potential Labour voters than potential Conservatives. Starmer needs to have an effective message on immigration – but the issue currently ranks twelfth overall on the list of priorities of those planning to vote for him.

Where immigration is the focus, Starmer is the first Labour leader in recent times to have a comparative partisan advantage on the issue. However, a hangover effect means that both Conservative and Labour strategists often seem to assume, perhaps through political muscle memory, that immigration is likely to remain an area of Conservative strength and Labour weakness.

Being Leader of the Opposition gives Starmer an opportunity to speak to the widely held public dissatisfaction in the government's handling of immigration issues. Saying that broken promises to stop the boats have led to policies that are wasteful, ineffective and cruel can be heard across a broad coalition of dissatisfaction, for different reasons. Labour's pre-election instinct has therefore been to close down policy differentiation on immigration. There are few policy differences between the major parties on the question of who gets a visa to live, work or study in the UK, though the parties have different policies on asylum, particularly over the high-profile Rwanda scheme.

If Keir Starmer does become Prime Minister, he will have to make decisions and choices, and own the outcomes, in ways that may make that more difficult.

Finding the balance

While Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak would face similar policy challenges if elected, there would be some significant differences in both the intensity and the nature of the political pressure on the Labour leader. If Sunak's headache is that he has not delivered for a Conservative vote that favours a tougher approach, Keir Starmer's challenge is much more of a balancing act of how to secure confidence and consent across a broad range of the British public.

After much talk about a post-2016 realignment in British politics, a Labour winning coalition in 2024 will reach across many of the demographic and cultural divides in British politics – to a much greater degree than Labour's losing vote in 2019, or indeed the Conservative winning coalition too. Labour is tending to advance, in polls and by-elections, more strongly in areas where it was previously weaker. If Labour's pre-election focus has been on its more socially conservative swing voters, winning marginal seats across England, Scotland and Wales requires engaging liberal, balancer and moderately conservative voters.

Starmer's balancer challenge can be exemplified across many aspects of the Ipsos survey. Four out of ten Labour voters would like to cut immigration numbers – but most are content with current levels of immigration, even when asked at a time when they are exceptionally high. The number one reason for dissatisfaction

with the government on immigration, among Labour voters, is that there is a hostile and unwelcoming environment for migrants, though worries about not enough being done to stop small boats in the Channel shares the top spot.

The quarter of the public with liberal views of immigration are on the fence about Keir Starmer on immigration, with 46% tending to trust him and 46% not doing so. He faces more scepticism from the balancer middle, with 36% trust and 51% mistrust. His unpopularity with the most migration-sceptic quarter of public opinion – where his 16% to 77% rating resembles that of the Prime Minister – demonstrates the difficulty of Labour reaching beyond a broad majority into the toughest section of the public.

Asylum

Conservative supporters see a government talking tough and failing to act, while Labour supporters dissatisfied with the government cite a broadly equal balance of frustration at the lack of control and the lack of compassion.

There is a wide partisan gulf on how to deal with those who cross the Channel. Labour voters have more sympathy for the people making those crossings, and most believe that hearing asylum claims in the UK on their merits is preferable to rejecting claims based on people arriving without permission in the UK.

Labour has therefore committed to scrapping the Rwanda plan when it gets into office – though its reluctance to be blamed for delaying the policy over the Safety of Rwanda Bill means that it may be prepared to let the government begin the policy first.

Labour's pre-election message will need to combine control and compassion – but its challenge would be showing what that means in practice if it is elected to govern. It would inherit the growing challenges of a chaotic backlog that, as recent IPPR analysis points out, is only exacerbated by new legislation leaving people in a permanent limbo⁴. Labour would then face the task of showing whether closer cooperation across the Channel can do a better job of managing who can come to the UK to claim; as well as how to repair, reform and rebuild an asylum system that the public can trust.

What to say about numbers?

How high or low would immigration be under a Labour government? One of Labour's perennial election anxieties is how to answer “the numbers question”. The party remains uncertain about what to say in 2024: Labour's current position is to say that immigration should be lower than it is now, while avoiding saying anything much about what it believes the correct level of immigration should be and why.

Labour voters have a broad spread of views about immigration numbers. Four out of ten of those intending to vote Labour would like to see overall levels of immigration fall – and a fifth would like to see large reductions. However, a majority of Labour voters do not want reductions, saying they are either content with current levels of immigration (32%) or want to see it rise further (20%). Those who favour overall reductions have selective views about particular flows.

Keir Starmer and Yvette Cooper may be rather lucky with both the electoral challenge and their potential post-election inheritance on immigration numbers. When net migration was 250,000 five years ago, it was tricky for Labour to address whether it wanted to commit to that being lower. It is considerably easier to answer the question in 2024. The most recent figure for net migration was 670,000 – and the final pre-election figures are likely to remain above half a million.

It would be an unforced error to make any more specific commitment about numbers in the Labour 2024 manifesto than the Conservatives made in 2019: that overall numbers will be lower. While the Conservatives were unable to deliver that, given that UK net migration is now on a downward trend it is likely that Labour would deliver somewhat ‘lower’ migration without needing to do very much proactively. While predictions are uncertain, both the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford suggest that net migration levels could stabilise at around 300,000 to 350,000 without significant further policy changes.⁵ Even if somewhat higher, they are likely to be below the level that Labour will inherit.

Labour has three reasons for refusing to give a precise figure. It does not have a crystal ball about the UK economy, or international events that could affect inflows and outflows. Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has long argued against a net migration target, as too ‘one size fits all’ a measure across different flows of immigration. So, instead of a numbers target, Labour should introduce a new argument. The last decade and a half have seen impossible promises and missed targets but without any structure of parliamentary or public accountability for the commitments that governments make.

A new government could propose a new approach that takes democratic control of immigration more seriously. The tracker survey shows public support for the idea that the government should set out an ‘annual migration plan’ to Parliament each year, like the budget, with MPs debating and voting on the plan. The Home Secretary would report on all migration flows and present the government’s expectations for the coming year, including policy changes, plans to manage migration impacts, and whatever targets or quotas that the government wanted to introduce.

A new annual migration plan could help make immigration a more ‘normal’ policy issue – where those calling for lower migration can propose the means to achieve it, while governments who have

maintained high levels of migration can set out the plans to manage it well. Engaging constructively and accountably with the choices involved in managing immigration, and doing so in full public view on the floor of the House of Commons, might also start to address some of the deficits in public confidence and trust that this government and all political parties currently face.

Figure 3.8: Public support for the government being required to present an annual migration plan to Parliament each year



Question: Some people have suggested that the government should be required to present an annual migration plan to Parliament each year, like the budget, with MPs debating and voting on the plan. This would include the government setting out any immigration targets it wanted to set - for immigration overall or specific sectors, and reporting on its past performance and future policies. To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose this proposal on immigration policy?

4. Beyond ‘the brightest and best’: Migration for work in 2024

Last year saw an increase in immigration to record levels, driven largely by migrants coming for work. In 2023 some 337,240 work visas were granted to main applicants, 26% more than in 2022. The doubling of health and care visas during the year is largely responsible for this change: skilled worker visas otherwise remained similar to 2022 levels.

These record levels led the Government to seek ways of reducing entry to the UK. As one of the migration routes most easy to cut back, three of the five policy changes announced in December 2023 related to migration for work⁶. These were:

- Removing, from the social care worker visa, the right to bring dependants.
- Increasing the minimum salary of sponsored skilled worker visas from £26,200 to £38,700 from April 2024 (with the exception of social care).
- Changes to the shortage occupation list, reducing employers’ scope to recruit from overseas to roles on lower salaries.

These changes were accompanied by the message that employers should ‘focus on recruiting the brightest and best’.

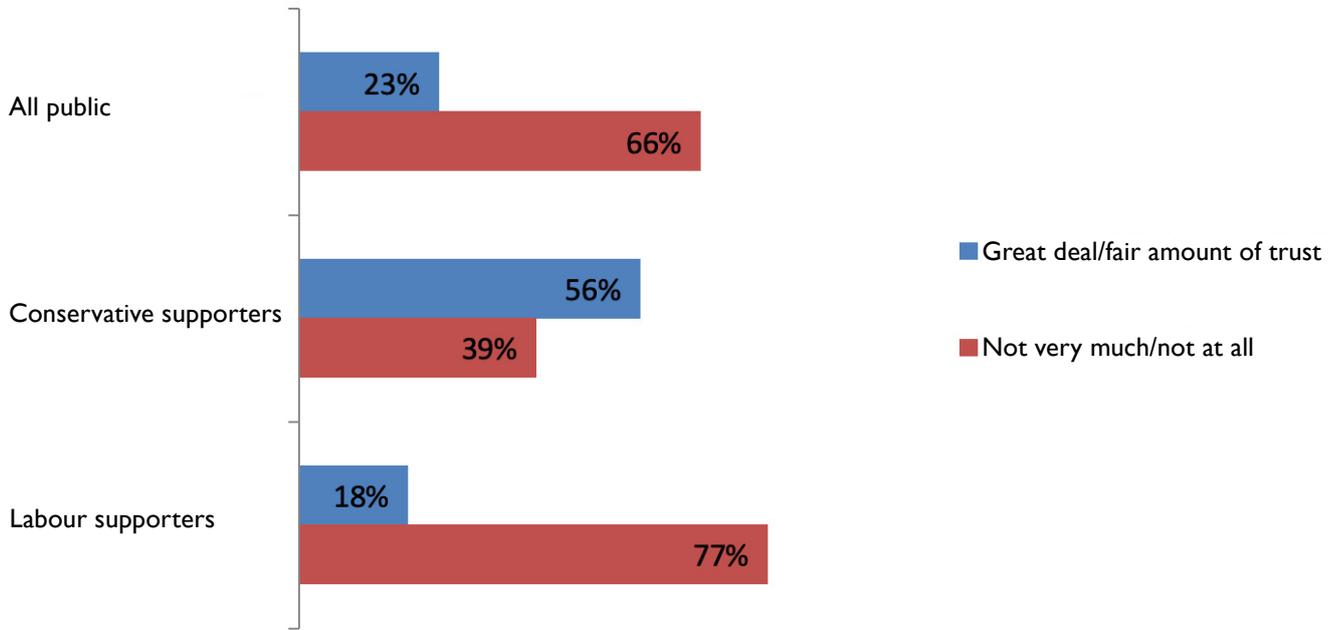
While the public may not have been aware of the detail of the changes, many will have seen the related press coverage⁷ and the Government’s message that net migration should be reduced. The tracker found support for this overall message from the Government’s supporters, but not from Labour voters.

Can’t get no satisfaction

Attitudes to immigration vary according to motives for arrival, whether for work, study, asylum or to join family. Since most migration to the UK has been for work, it is often at the forefront of people’s minds. The government’s handling of migration for work is, therefore, likely to be a factor in levels of dissatisfaction its approach to immigration as a whole. More than two-thirds (69%) are dissatisfied with the way the Government is dealing with immigration. While the most common reason is its handling of issues of asylum, followed by feeling that immigration numbers overall are too high, 21% of those who are dissatisfied say there are too few migrants coming to fill skills and labour shortages. This is higher among Labour supporters (30%).

Only 23% of people trust the Conservative Party to have the right policies on immigration for work. Most Conservatives trust their party to have the right policies, while more than three-quarters of Labour supporters do not do not trust the Conservatives. This is in line with political divergence across questions about migration for work.

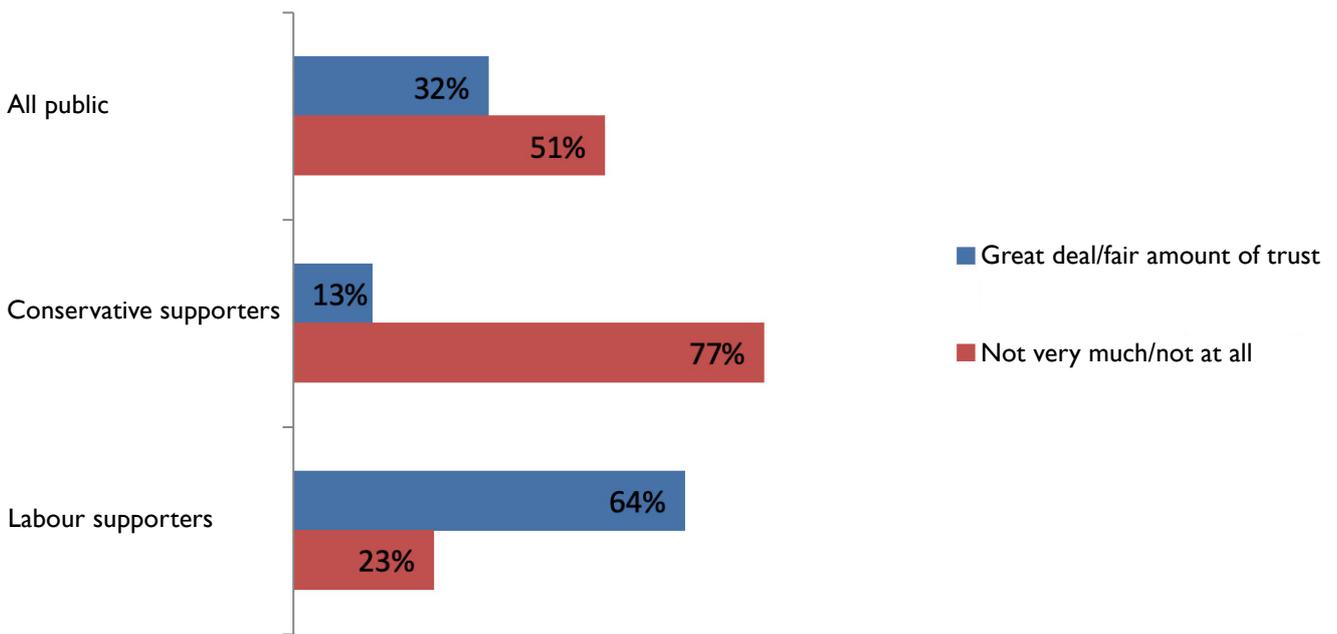
Figure 4.1: Levels of trust in the Conservative Party on immigration for work



Question: To what extent, if at all, do you trust The Conservative party to have the right policies on immigration visas for working in Britain?

When it comes to trust in the Labour party, levels of overall public trust in having the right policies on migration for work are somewhat higher, at 32%, with large differences in responses from Conservative and Labour supporters, as would be expected. However, Labour supporters are somewhat more likely to trust the Labour Party to have the right policies on migration for work (64%) than Conservatives are to trust the Conservative Party (56%).

Figure 4.2: Levels of trust in the Labour Party on immigration for work



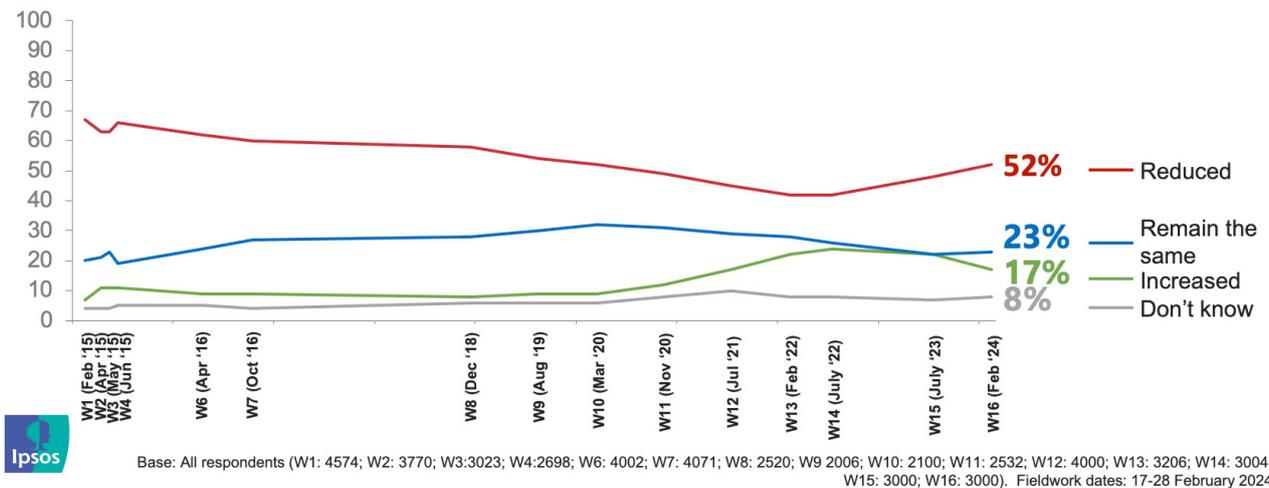
Question: To what extent, if at all, do you trust The Labour Party to have the right policies on immigration visas for working in Britain?

It is to be expected that reasons for trust and distrust with the two main parties on work migration will be varied. However, as we show below, there are some clear public preferences over principles. These include control versus numbers, the importance of health and social care, and of addressing shortages at all levels rather than focusing policy on admitting only ‘the brightest and best’.

Support for reducing numbers – but uncertainty about what to cut

Around half the public (52%) support reducing immigration numbers overall, with around a third (35%) wanting it reduced by a lot. Four in ten people do not want to reduce numbers, with 23% happy for them to remain at current levels and a further 17% hoping immigration will increase. Support for reductions is slightly higher (by four points) than in the last wave of the tracker in 2023, but still significantly lower than the two-thirds who wanted reductions when we first asked this question in 2015 (support for

Figure 4.3: Public preference for immigration numbers to be reduced, increased or stay the same, over time



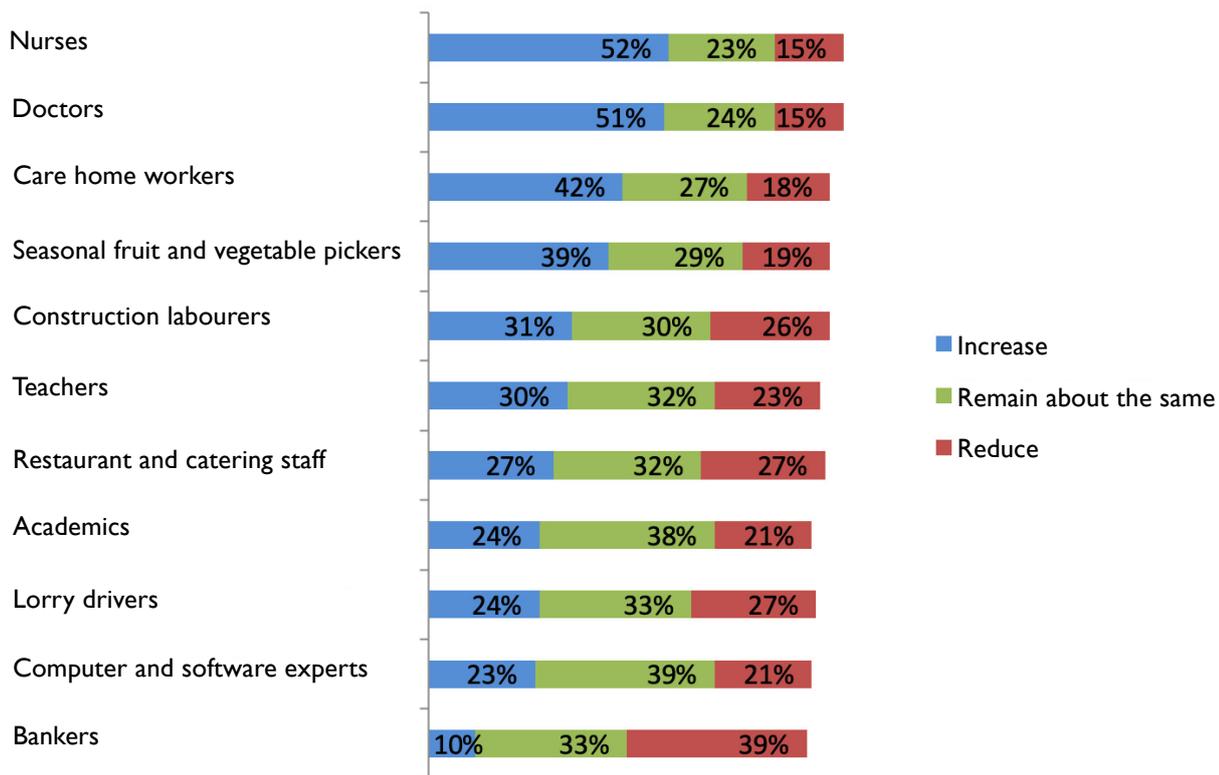
Question: Do you think the number of immigrants coming to Britain nowadays should be increased a lot, increased a little, remain the same as it is, reduced a little, or reduced a lot?

‘reduce’ was at 67% in February 2015, for example).

However, people find it hard to decide what migration they would cut. This applies particularly to immigration for work. Since 2022 the tracker has asked about levels of migration to a range of specific occupations, including some that have been the focus of immigration policy or discussions about shortages. As the Migration Observatory points out, the Covid-19 pandemic raised awareness of the importance of some jobs with low skills, as measured by qualifications and educational requirements. These include care home workers and people in food manufacturing.⁸ But even before the pandemic, research by British Future and the Kings Policy Institute found more than 60% of respondents thought that nursing and care worker jobs should not be subject to a salary threshold, to facilitate migrant recruitment.⁹

Several waves of the tracker have asked respondents what they would like to happen to numbers of migrants taking up jobs in selected sectors, including those of particular social value such as health, and those of economic value, for example in restaurants and construction.

Figure 4.4: What immigration would people keep and what would they cut?



Question: Would you prefer the number of migrants (from any country) from each of the below groups coming to live in the UK to be increased, reduced, or to remain about the same?

As in previous waves of the tracker, most people would like the number of migrant doctors and nurses to increase: 51% would like the number of doctors coming to the UK from overseas to increase (24% remain the same, 15% decrease); and 52% would like the number of migrant nurses to increase (23% remain the same, 15% decrease). Some 42% would like more people coming to the UK from overseas to work in care homes (27% remain the same, 18% decrease).

Respondents may not have been aware that Home Office migration statistics show that almost half of work visas are allocated to health and social care and that their numbers are high¹⁰. Support for recruiting migrants to the sector remains strong. At the same time, the public is likely to expect the main political parties to develop long term plans for the sector, and for social care in particular, where low wages are agreed to be a major factor in recruitment difficulties.¹¹

Older people are more likely than those in younger age groups to support increases in health and social care across the three groups of doctors, nurses and care home staff. This is in line with their preference for an immigration system that addresses skills shortages at all levels, discussed below. It may also reflect experiences of using health and care services by older age groups.

More generally, widespread support for migration to health and social care reflects public priorities, reflected in their top election issues discussed in Chapter 3. The NHS ranks as the most important issue, selected by 61% of respondents, while immigration scores much lower at 37%. Other responses to the question on specific occupations reflect judgements about economic and social importance, with reasonably strong support for migration to roles in construction, hospitality and seasonal agricultural work: these are also sectors that have reported skills and labour shortages.

Migration to the finance, IT and HE sectors continues to be seen as less essential than elsewhere, despite the contribution of these sectors to the UK economy. This may reflect views that these are well-paid and desirable jobs where recruitment should not be difficult.

Across all of the occupations listed, respondents were more likely to support numbers remaining the same or increasing than they were to support reductions. Support for reductions was slightly higher than in the 2023 tracker, by around 2 percentage points for each occupation. This is largely accounted for by stronger support for reductions among Conservative supporters in occupations including teaching and hospitality. There are low levels of support for reductions in occupations including nursing, medicine, care work, and seasonal agricultural work. In some occupations divergence is greater, for example in hospitality and road haulage,. At the same time, there is no majority among Tory supporters for reducing numbers of any of the occupations listed. In every case except for bankers, Conservative support for reductions is no higher than around one in three voters.

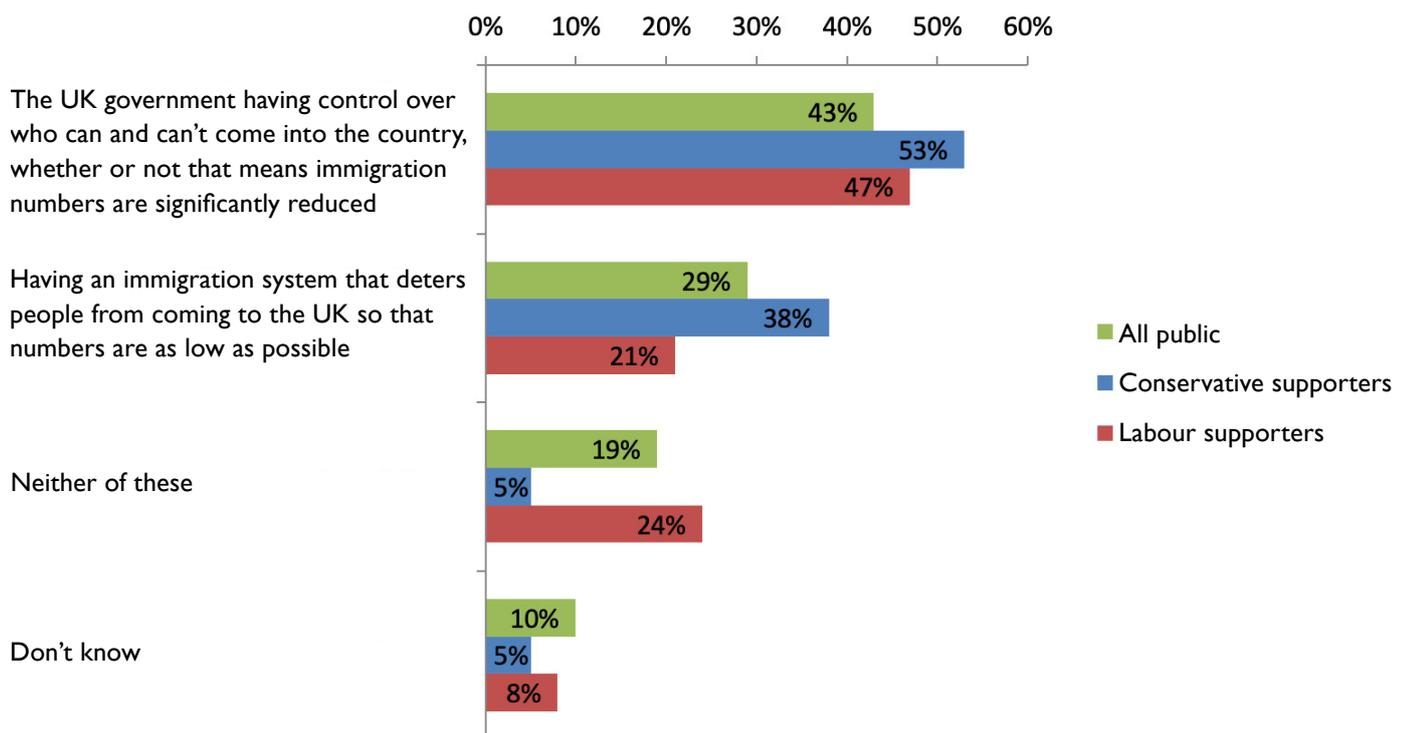
Control versus Numbers

We have asked respondents over several waves of the tracker survey since 2021 whether they prefer immigration policy to prioritise reducing numbers or achieving control. In the most recent waves we have asked: ‘Which of the following statements is most important to you? – 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; or having an immigration system that deters people from coming to the UK so that numbers are as low as possible?’

Each time, significantly more people have seen it is as important that the UK government has control over who can or can’t come into the UK, whether or not that means numbers are significantly reduced, than that the UK pursues a policy based on deterrence that keeps numbers low. The latest survey found 43% of respondents expressing a preference for control, and 29% for reducing numbers. A further 19% said neither option is important to them. These preferences are broadly similar to previous waves of the tracker.

While both Conservatives (53%) and Labour supporters (47%) prioritise control over deterrence, there is some divergence by politics on this question. Nearly four in ten Conservatives (38%) would prefer a system that focuses on deterring people from coming to the UK, while only a fifth of Labour supporters (21%) agree with them. Prospective Labour voters are actually slightly more likely (24%) to choose ‘neither of these’. Those opting for this choice are more likely to be Migration Liberals, viewing immigration as having a positive impact on the UK.

Figure 4.5: Do people prefer an approach to immigration that emphasises control or reducing numbers?



Question: When thinking about the government's immigration policy, which of the following statements is most important to you?

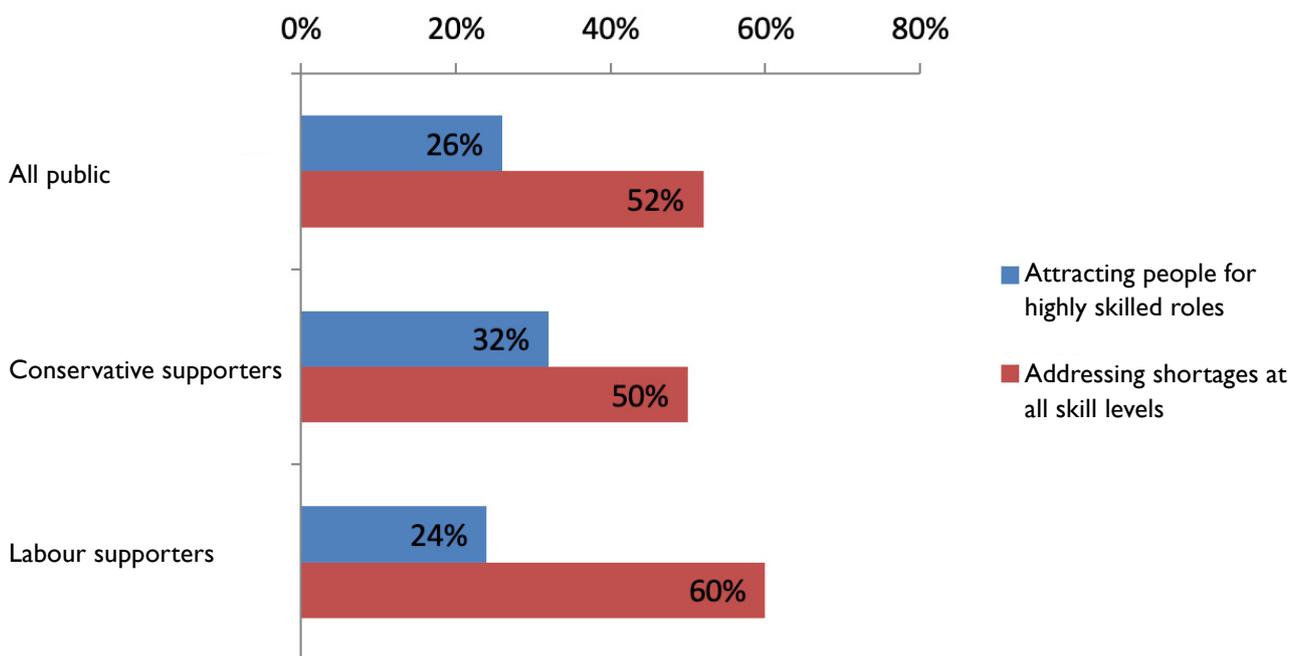
Addressing skills shortages or prioritising the ‘brightest and best’?

There has been some media and political debate over the last year about whether the post-Brexit ‘points-based system’ is having the promised effect of prioritising highly skilled workers, and indeed whether doing so is even advisable given the labour needs of the UK economy.

In this wave of the tracker we included a new question about what the Government's priority should be when allocating work visas: whether to focus on attracting people for highly skilled roles, or to address shortages at all skill levels. A majority (52%) said the priority should be addressing shortages at all levels, which was twice as popular as prioritising highly skilled migration (26%).

Previous research has found that people are more positive towards migrants with high levels of education and in highly skilled roles, than those with lower levels of education and in lower skilled roles. However, responses to our question suggest that it is social or economic need, rather than skill, which is most important to the public. As we showed earlier, this principle is also reflected in views about increasing or reducing migrant numbers in specific sectors and occupations.¹²

Figure 4.6: Should the Government’s policy when allocating visas be about attracting people for highly skilled roles or addressing shortages at all skill levels?



Question: Which, if either, of the following do you think should be the government’s priority when allocating work visas to immigrants coming to the UK?

There is broad agreement, across demographic groups, that addressing shortages at all skill levels should be the priority, although older people are more likely than younger age groups to favour addressing shortages at all skill levels. There are some differences by political allegiance, with Conservatives more likely than Labour supporters to favour policies around highly skilled migration. Yet the overall picture is one of political consensus, with both Labour and Conservative supporters preferring an immigration policy that prioritises addressing shortages at all skill levels.

This suggests that, if they aim to develop immigration policy in line with public preferences, both Labour and Conservative politicians should end their long-standing emphasis on attracting the so-called ‘brightest and best’. As discussed in Chapter 3, respondents say they will give priority to economic issues in deciding how to vote, and may be aware that shortages of labour and skills across sectors

may slow down economic growth. A points-based system that more accurately reflected shortages and did not exclude jobs at lower skill levels (than the current requirement for intermediate RFQ3 level qualifications¹³) would meet public preferences more closely than the current system.

Implications for policies leading up to the general election

Immigration policy for work has focused on ways of bringing numbers down. Politicians believe that this is what the public wants. Yet while around half the public (52%) say they would like migration to be reduced, this is not seen clearly in attitudes to migration for work. People find it hard to say what immigration they would cut.

The tracker findings suggest that, if they aim to develop immigration policy in line with public preferences, both Labour and Conservative politicians should end their long-standing emphasis on attracting ‘the brightest and best’. The public say they will give priority to the NHS and economic issues in deciding how to vote. Some may therefore be reticent to support reductions in immigration that would deprive public services, or indeed the wider economy, of skills and labour that they need.

The findings also suggest that measures to prevent social care workers from bringing dependents with them are unlikely to be popular, if this results in fewer people taking social care jobs in the UK and care homes not having enough staff. The research suggests that emphasis on salary levels in general, rather than addressing shortages and need, may also not be in alignment with public thinking.

Attitudes to migration for work vary considerably between Conservative and Labour supporters. Those intending to vote Conservative are more likely to agree with government policies intended to reduce immigration numbers. However, attitudes of Labour voters to migration for work have remained positive, despite this being a period characterised by high immigration numbers and political and media debate about reducing levels. This gives the Labour Party scope to develop policies for work that align with immediate and future economic and social needs.

5. Under pressure: Immigration for study and family

In the wake of record immigration figures during 2022 the Government introduced a suite of reforms to the visa system aimed at reducing numbers. These included reforms to student visas and to the family migration route. Recent research by Migration Observatory finds the public holds broadly positive attitudes to both these migration routes: only 21% believe that family migration should be made more difficult and 18% in the case of student visas.¹⁴

International students have contributed to high levels of ‘long-term’ immigration in recent years. According to the latest government figures, published in February 2024, a total of 457,673 sponsored study visas were granted in 2023. This was a small reduction of 5% on the previous year but higher than in 2019 before the Covid-19 pandemic. As discussed later, post-study visas via the Graduate route reduced by 15% on the previous year.

Student migration reached an all-time high in 2022, with more than 484,000 study visas issued. In 2023 the Home Secretary announced new restrictions for international students. These included removing the right to bring dependents – a spouse and children – with the exception of students on post-graduate research courses. This measure, and the message that numbers of international students had risen since the end of the pandemic, was widely reported.¹⁵

Most survey respondents may not have been aware of changes to the student visa. However, it is possible that the public will have been aware of the increase in numbers announced back in May 2023. The issue of international students also hit the headlines in February 2024 over a Sunday Times investigation on admissions practices for international students.¹⁶

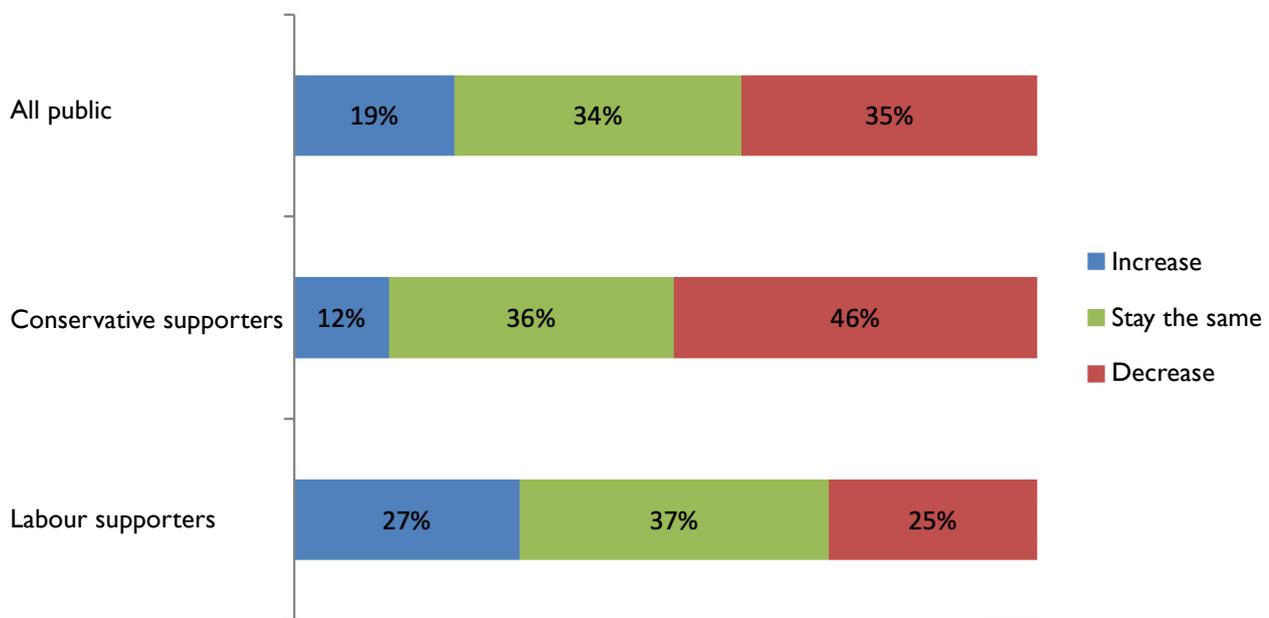
Previous research, including from British Future, has shown broadly positive attitudes towards student and graduate visas. The public has recognised their benefit to the economy and for the UK’s international relations. They are also correctly regarded as often staying here temporarily, rather than as permanent migrants, and many people therefore think they should not be included in net migration figures.¹⁷ Understanding current public attitudes on these migration routes is important since, as with migration for work, it may be wrongly assumed that Government messaging and policy changes regarding migration for study are widely supported.

Around one in three people (35%) are now in favour of reducing student migration to the UK, a small increase from the 31% reported six months previously in the 2023 tracker. However, most of the public (53%) is not supportive of reductions. A third would

prefer numbers to remain the same (34%) and a further fifth (19%) would like to see numbers increase. Younger people (aged 18-34) are more likely to favour an increase in student migration than older people (aged 55+).

As with questions on other migration flows, for example for work, responses differ by political allegiance: nearly two-thirds of Labour supporters are not in favour of cutting international student numbers, with 37% preferring numbers to stay the same and 27% wanting them to increase. While more Conservatives support reducing student numbers (46%) they are as likely to oppose reductions, with 36% wanting numbers to stay where they are and a further 12% preferring them to increase.

Figure 5.1: Do people want the number of international students to increase, decrease or stay the same?



Question: Would you like the number of international students coming to the UK to be increased, reduced or to stay the same?

Attitudes among Labour supporters have remained stable since the last tracker survey in August 2023. The preferences of Conservatives, however, have become somewhat more negative over that period, perhaps as a result of government messaging landing primarily with Conservative supporters.

Younger respondents aged 18-24 are the most positive towards student migration, with a third (34%) supporting increases to student numbers and a further 37% happy with the current high

levels. Just 20% support reductions, compared to 45% of the over-65s. This finding may run somewhat counter to the narrative that international students are taking the university places of UK students, who would largely come from this age group, or worsening their experience of higher education.

Moving on up: views on the post study visa

Before the introduction of the Points Based System in 2021, students who wanted to extend their stay in the UK generally had to switch to another type of visa, not necessarily one for work. The Graduate visa¹⁸ was introduced in 2021 with the stated aim of allowing the UK to retain the ‘brightest and best’ international students to stay in the UK and contribute economically and socially. The visa allows students to live and work in the UK for a period of two years after graduating, and three years for students completing PhD study. They are allowed to work in any job, without skill or salary restrictions.

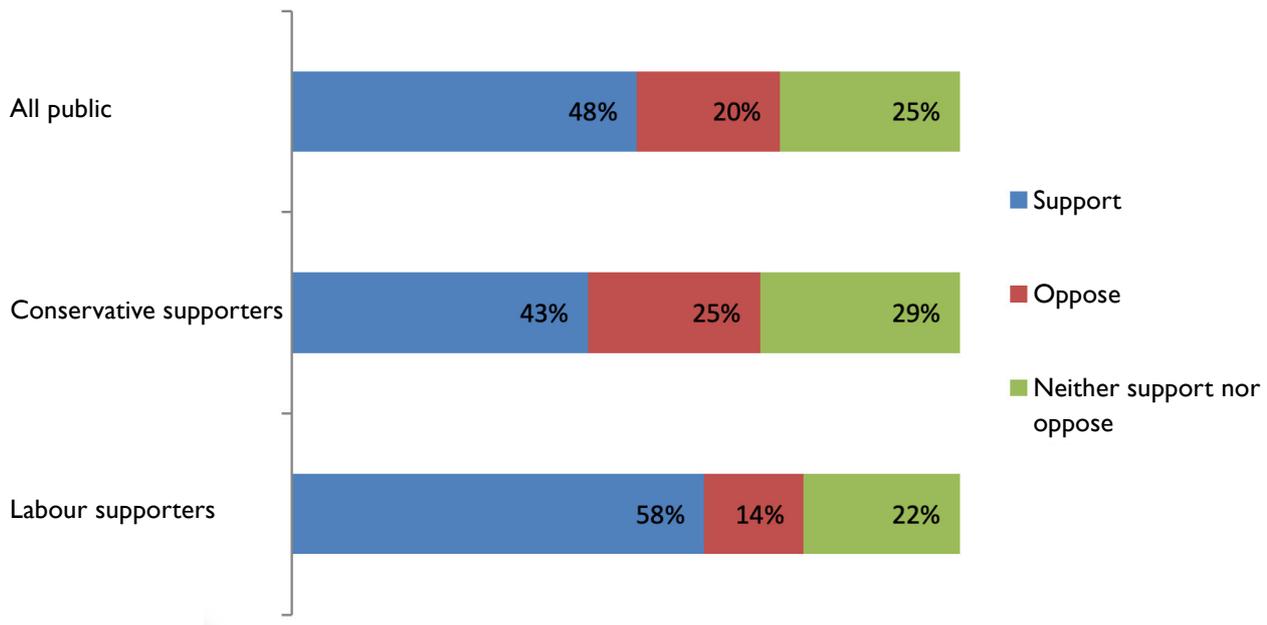
The Graduate route has proved to be popular, with take-up high since it was introduced. Some 129,000 Graduate visas were granted in the year ending September 2023¹⁹, up from 73,000 in 2022.

The Home Secretary has now asked the Migration Advisory Committee to review the Graduate visa to ‘ensure it works in the best interest of the UK and to ensure steps are being taken to prevent abuse’, with the MAC asked to report back in May this year²⁰. The review refers to concerns that graduates are not entering skilled jobs, even though they are not required to under the visa’s terms.²¹ The public is likely to be largely unaware of the government’s concern about the visa and of the forthcoming review.

Tracker respondents were asked the extent to which they support or oppose international students being able to apply for a two-year post study visa. This is a new tracker question, so it is not possible to look at trends. Around half (48%) support the current policy of international students being allowed to apply for a two-year Graduate visa. A fifth of people (20%) are opposed, with a quarter (25%) saying they neither support nor oppose the visa.

The largest difference in support for the Graduate visa is by political allegiance. As Figure 5.2 shows, Labour supporters are much more likely to support the visa than Conservatives. This reflects the general attitudes of the two groups to immigration, as shown by responses to many of the tracker questions.

Figure 5.2: Support and opposition to the two-year Graduate visa



Question: To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose international students being able to apply for 2-year post study visas?

There are also differences by age and by education level in attitudes to the Graduate visa: 56% of younger people (18-34) support the visa, compared to 43% of over 55s. Support from graduates is, not surprisingly, higher at 60% compared to 43% among non-graduates.

Overall, there is public support for the Graduate visa, though many will have little knowledge of this policy, other than that it is for temporary stays after graduation. This support may be because graduates, as a group, are seen to be making a contribution and not necessarily staying long term.²² We would recommend that the MAC consider public attitudes as part of its forthcoming review of the Graduate visa, including through commissioning further research.

Family visas

People arriving on family related visas form a significant group of migrants to the UK. This route allows entry for partners, children and other dependants of British citizens or non-British settled migrants in the UK. It also includes people wishing to join a relative with refugee status or humanitarian protection in the UK.

Numbers have increased in recent years, with more than 82,395 visas issued in the year ending September 2023. This was more than double the number in the previous year and the highest number on record. The increase is likely to be explained by the fall in applications during the Covid-19 pandemic, and also by the

backlog of applications that has built up in recent years. Despite the circumstances suggesting that the increase is temporary, the government has introduced changes to the rules on family migration as part of its wider objective of reducing migrant numbers.

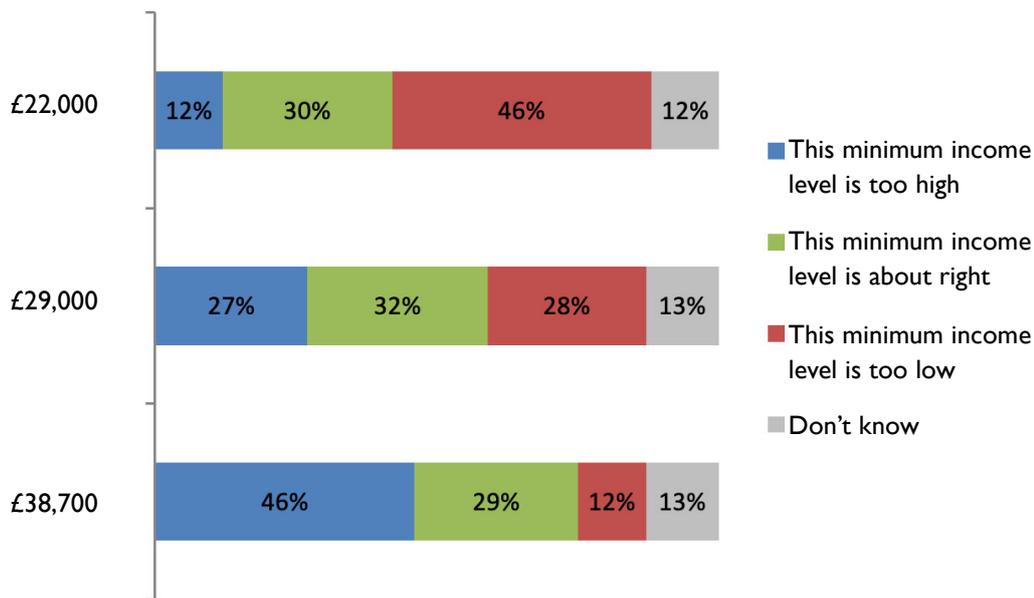
The stated intention of the change is “to ensure people only bring dependants to the UK they can support financially.”²³ From April 2024 people who want their non-British husband, wife or civil partner to live with them in the UK will have to earn more than £29,000 per year, nearly £10,000 more than the previous minimum income requirement of £18,600 per year. The government plans to increase this threshold to £38,700 by early 2025. This would bring the minimum income salary threshold, for British people wishing to bring in dependants, in line with the salary required for the Skilled Worker visa. The rationale for making this link is not clear since salaries for skills visas have been set in line with median full time pay for skilled jobs.

Researchers at the Migration Observatory have calculated that a much smaller number of people will be eligible to bring dependants on the family visa.²⁴ They estimate that around 70% of UK workers earn below the proposed higher threshold of £38,700, compared to around 25% who earn less than the previous threshold of £18,600. Women and part-time employees are much more likely to fall below the higher thresholds.

For the first time the tracker asked people their views on family migration. Using the Migration Observatory estimates, we asked respondents which minimum income level they thought were appropriate, out of three options:

- £22,000 – meaning those earning the national minimum wage full-time would earn enough to bring their spouse or partner to live with them in the UK.
- £29,000 – meaning around 50% of the UK working population would earn enough to do so.
- £38,700 – meaning around 30% of the UK working population would be eligible.

Figure 5.3: Views on level of minimum income requirement for people wanting to bring family members to the UK



Question: The government has recently changed the rules on family migration which will come into force in April 2024. If you are a British citizen and want your non-British husband, wife or civil partner to live with you in the UK, you will have to earn more than £29,000 per year (the previous minimum income requirement was £18,600 per year). The government plans to increase this threshold to £38,700 by early 2025. Migrants must still be able to speak English and will not be able to access benefits or social housing. Which, if any, of the following best reflects your opinion on the minimum income requirement thresholds for a British citizen to earn in order for their non-British spouse/partner to be eligible for a visa to live in the UK?

As Figure 5.3 shows, almost half of the public (46%) believes the proposed level of £38,700 is too high; 29% think it is about right and 12% think it is too low.

There is more divergence on the interim level of £29,000. Just over a quarter (27%) of the public think it is too high, 32% think it is about right and 28% think it is too low.

We also asked people their opinions on a minimum income requirement of £22,000, meaning those earning the national minimum wage full-time would earn enough to bring their spouse or partner to live with them in the UK. Some 46% of the public thought this minimum income requirement was too low, while 30% thought it was about right and 12% thought it was too high.

These responses suggest no overall agreement on the most appropriate minimum income level for those wishing to bring family members to the UK. However, with almost half of respondents believing the proposed £38,700 is too high, this is not a favoured option.

As with all immigration routes, Conservative and Labour supporters have different views on rules for family visas.

Conservative supporters are much more likely than Labour voters to support the £38,700 level, with 43% believing the level to be about right, while 58% of Labour supporters believe it to be too high.

Unless the Conservatives win the general election, the first level increase to £29,000 will be in place, but not necessarily the second since this is due for implementation in 2025. While Conservative supporters are more inclined to see this £29,000 level as too low (41%) or as about right (39%), Labour voters were slightly more likely to see the threshold as too high (36%) or about right (33%) than too low (20%).

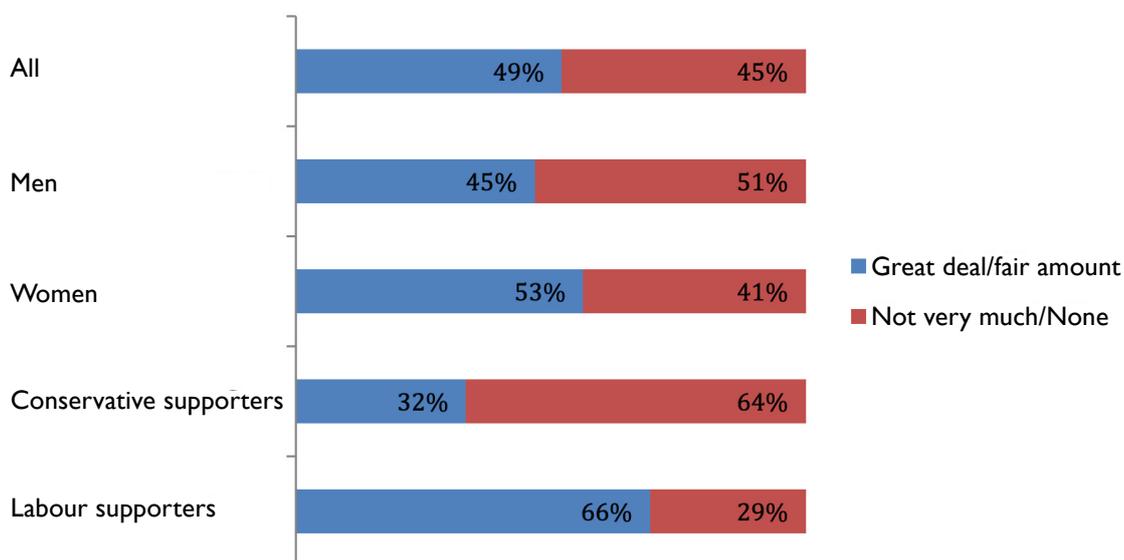
The Government has provided no credible rationale for the planned rise of the minimum income requirement to £38,700. It does not command majority public support and its likely consequence will be to keep some families apart. A future government should review the requirements of the family visa, which also take into account savings. This review should aim to establish a logical and workable set of criteria for this visa route, including an Equality Impact Assessment.²⁵

6. Shelter from the storm: Attitudes to asylum and refugees

While immigration for work has fallen significantly from the headlines since the Immigration Attitudes Tracker was first published ahead of the EU referendum in 2015, the opposite can be said for asylum. Back then public concern was focused on EU migrants coming to work under free movement rules, arriving on coaches and Wizz Air flights from Poland and Romania. Today, migration from the EU has fallen dramatically and there is more public anxiety focused on people crossing the Channel in small boats to claim asylum. Home Office figures published in February²⁶ state that 29,437 people arrived in the UK on small boats in 2023, with Afghanistan the most common country of origin.

Around half the public (49%) say they have a ‘great deal’ or ‘fair amount’ of sympathy for migrants attempting to cross the Channel to come to Britain, a slight decrease (4 points) from the 2023 tracker. Some 45% say they have ‘not very much or no sympathy at all’. Women are more sympathetic than men, with 53% feeling sympathy with those crossing the Channel, compared to 45% of men.

Figure 6.1: How much sympathy do people have for migrants crossing the Channel?



Question: As you may know in recent years there has been an increase in the number of migrants trying to cross the English Channel in small boats to reach Britain. Some of them are fleeing war-torn countries and seeking asylum in Britain, while others are people who are seeking jobs and better lives. How much sympathy, if any, do you have for the migrants attempting to cross the English Channel by boat to come to Britain?

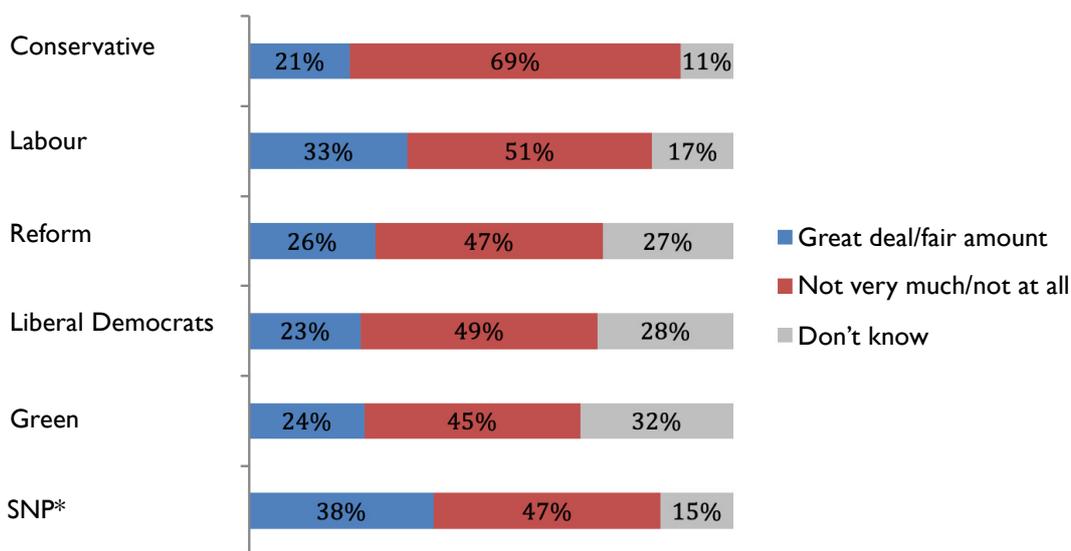
The topic of asylum epitomises the sharp polarisation by politics across a range of immigration issues, with some of the starkest attitudinal divides between supporters of rival parties. Nearly two-thirds of Conservative supporters (64%) are unsympathetic towards people crossing the Channel, including 31% who say they have no sympathy for them at all. Attitudes among prospective Labour voters are quite the opposite: two-thirds (66%) are sympathetic, while only 29% say they do not feel sympathy for Channel migrants.

The ‘small boats’ issue remains one of high salience, driven both by the visibility of new arrivals and the government’s news grid. Rishi Sunak made ‘stop the boats’ one of his five pledges to the electorate and while Home Secretary James Cleverly has been less active in courting media headlines than his predecessor, the government still appears determined to keep Channel crossings on the news agenda. Some may question the wisdom of driving up the issue’s salience, when the failure to stop Channel crossings remains the most-cited reason for 69% of the public saying they are dissatisfied with the government’s handling of immigration.

Asylum and the election: who to trust?

Given the likely focus on asylum in the general election, this wave of the tracker asked respondents how much they trust the competing political parties ‘to have the right policies towards asylum seekers and refugees’.

Figure 6.2: How much do people trust political parties on asylum and refugee policy?



* SNP score is for respondents in Scotland

Question: To what extent, if at all, do you trust each of the following political parties to have the right immigration policies towards asylum seekers and refugees?

We found that only a fifth of people (21%) trust the Conservatives on asylum, while a striking 69% say they distrust Rishi Sunak's party on the issue. One reason for such high distrust is that it extends to some of the party faithful too: only 50% of Conservative supporters (and just 29% of those who voted Conservative in 2019) trust the party to have the right policies on asylum.

Keir Starmer's Labour Party fares slightly better, trusted by a third (33%) of the public overall on asylum and distrusted by 51%. While that means Labour shares a negative net trust score with their political rivals, albeit a less dramatic one, they are doing better at shoring up support among their own supporters on this issue. Two-thirds (65%) of those who intend to vote Labour say they trust the party on this issue, while around a quarter (23%) do not.

Reform UK, which will likely place the issue at the heart of its election campaign, is trusted by a quarter of the public (26%) to have the right policies towards asylum seekers and refugees, and distrusted by nearly half (47%). Those scores are similar to those of the Liberal Democrats, trusted by 23% of the public and distrusted by 49%; and the Green Party (trusted by 24%, distrusted by 45%). The Scottish National Party fares the best of all, with 38% of people in Scotland saying they trust the SNP on asylum and 47% saying they do not²⁷.

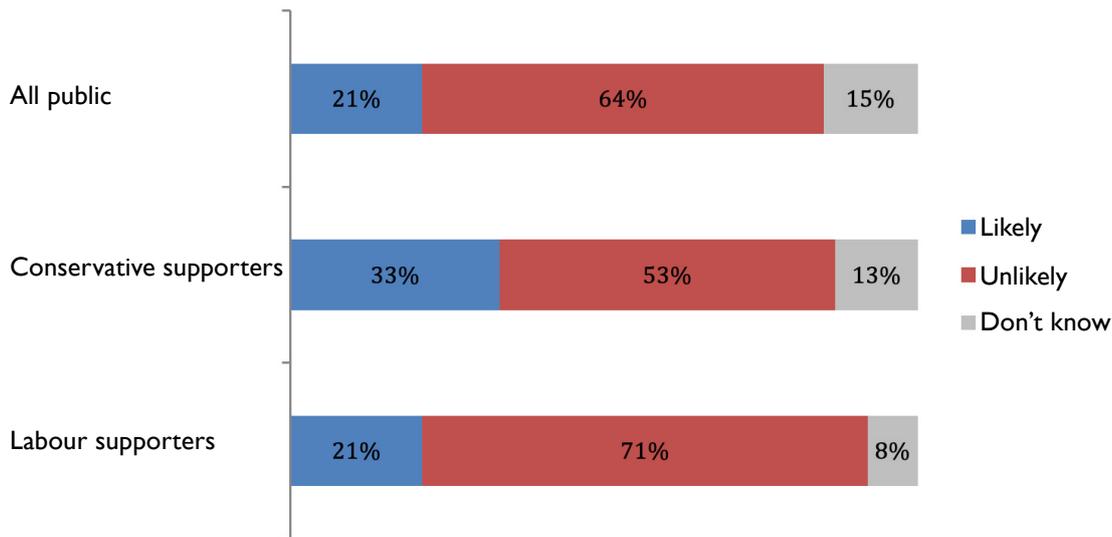
The Rwanda scheme

The centrepiece of government policy on asylum is the Rwanda scheme. Agreed in April 2022 by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the policy seeks to remove to Rwanda people who have claimed asylum in the UK after arriving by irregular routes. The government says that this will act as a deterrent to reduce the numbers crossing the Channel by small boat.

The Rwanda scheme has been controversial since its inception. After a series of injunctions and court battles, it was ruled unlawful last year by the UK Supreme Court, which found that Rwanda was not a safe country to which people seeking asylum could be removed. In response the government signed a new treaty with Rwanda, asserting that this would make removals to the country safe. It is also laid new legislation, the Safety of Rwanda Bill, before parliament, requiring UK courts and other bodies to treat Rwanda as a safe country to which asylum seekers could be removed.

To date, no asylum-seekers have been removed to Rwanda. Our survey finds nearly two-thirds of the public think that will still be the case by the end of the year, with 64% feeling it is unlikely that any flights to Rwanda will have taken off by the end of 2024. A fifth (21%) think removals to Rwanda are likely this year, with Conservative voters only slightly more positive: 33% think we will see flights take off before the year's end.

Figure 6.3: Do people think removals to Rwanda are likely to happen this year?



Question: How likely or unlikely do you think it is that this [Rwanda] policy will successfully send people to Rwanda before the end of 2024?

The tracker finds similar levels of support and opposition for the Rwanda scheme as other surveys, with no majority in support or against the policy. Some 47% of respondents say they support the Rwanda scheme, with 29% saying they are opposed to it. Opinion is divided by politics, with support among Conservatives (75%) more than double that of Labour supporters (31%).

Hearing asylum claims in the UK – or not

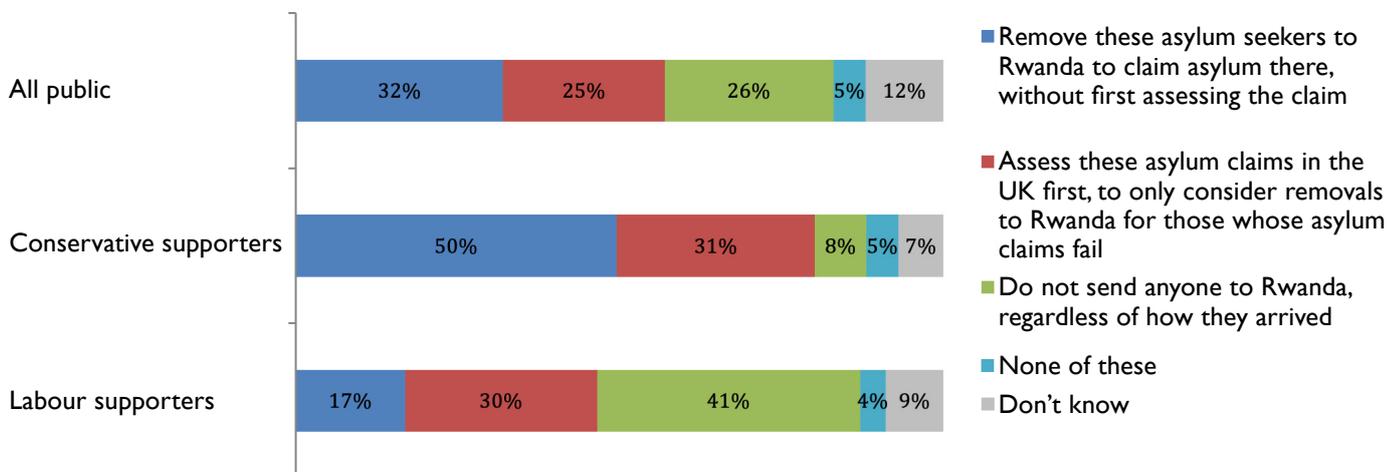
Key to the Rwanda scheme is the insistence that people arriving through irregular routes to claim asylum will not get a chance to have their asylum claim heard in the UK, nor will they engage with the UK asylum system at all. Instead they will be removed to Rwanda, where they can make an asylum claim through the Rwandan system instead. This important principle, often misreported, means that Rwanda is not an ‘offshoring’ scheme, such as that which Italy has recently agreed with Albania²⁸. Nor does the scheme only apply to people whose asylum claims have failed: people with a genuine asylum claim, who would get refugee status in the UK if they were allowed to apply here, would also be sent to Rwanda.

In a new question, the tracker survey asked respondents what they think of this principle. We asked which came closest to their preference: the Rwanda scheme as it stands, with asylum claims heard in Rwanda; a scheme that hears people’s claims in the UK before deciding whether to send them to Rwanda if unsuccessful; or no removals to Rwanda at all.

The responses suggest that some supporters of removals to Rwanda would prefer a system that gives people a hearing in the UK. Only a third of the public (32%) choose the actual Rwanda scheme: “Remove asylum seekers to Rwanda to claim asylum there, without first assessing the claim.” A quarter (25%) prefer a version that would hear claims in the UK first, before considering removals to Rwanda of those whose claims are refused. A further quarter (26%) say that nobody should be removed to Rwanda, regardless of how they arrived.

Three in ten Conservative supporters (31%) would prefer that we hear people’s asylum claims in the UK first, while 50% support the actual Rwanda removal scheme, and 8% are opposed to removals to Rwanda. Labour supporters answer very differently: four in ten (41%) want no removals to Rwanda at all, three in ten (30%) want claims assessed first in the UK, and just 17% choose the government’s Rwanda plan.

Figure 6.4: What version of the Rwanda scheme do people prefer?



Question: The Government has agreed a deal with Rwanda that people who seek asylum in Britain having entered without permission, such as by crossing the English Channel, can be removed to Rwanda and told to seek asylum there instead. [This new policy is not yet in force]. Under the previous system, people who entered Britain to seek asylum without permission could only be removed to another country if their claims for asylum in the UK failed. Which of these options would you prefer for dealing with people who enter Britain without permission and then claim asylum here?

Rwanda – will it work?

We also tested public opinion on perceptions of the likely effectiveness of the Rwanda scheme. Only around a third of the public (32%) think it is likely to reduce the number of people trying to enter the UK without permission to seek asylum, while 56% think it is unlikely to do so. Only around a fifth of people (22%) think the scheme will deliver value for money, while six in ten (60%) think that is unlikely.

Conservative voters are a little more positive about the Rwanda scheme's prospects, but not much. Only 35% think the scheme will offer value for money but they are split on whether it could act as a deterrent: 49% think it is likely to reduce the number of people arriving to claim asylum without permission, while 41% doubt it will deter people from crossing the Channel.

What does the Balancer Middle think of the Rwanda scheme?

The polarising quality of the Rwanda scheme is seen quite clearly in the responses from Migration Sceptics and Migration Liberals, those voices in the immigration debate who feel most strongly about the issue. Some 77% of Sceptics are pro-Rwanda, with a majority (59%) saying they 'strongly support' the Rwanda plan. Two-thirds (66%) of Liberals are opposed, with a majority (54%) 'strongly opposed'.

But where do the 'Balancers', the large section of the public with more mixed and nuanced views on immigration, sit in this highly-charged debate? While around one in five (19%) are strongly supportive, more say that they 'tend to support' the Rwanda scheme (24%) or neither support nor oppose the policy (21%). Around three in ten (29%) of the Balancers are opposed to the government's plans on Rwanda.

In our question offering different versions of the Rwanda scheme, Balancers prefer that people's asylum claims are first given a hearing in the UK, with this option chosen by a third (33%) of respondents, while a quarter (25%) oppose removals to Rwanda and a quarter (24%) support the government's scheme.

Two-thirds of Balancers (64%) consider it unlikely that the government will remove anyone to Rwanda before the end of the year. Most (56%) think the Rwanda scheme is unlikely to be effective in reducing the number of people who try to enter the UK, without permission, to seek asylum, while a third (33%) think it could work. And only a quarter (23%) of Balancers think the Rwanda scheme will offer value for money, with six in ten (61%) feeling it is unlikely to do so.

7. Conclusion: Immigration and the next parliament

The 2024 general election could be a ‘big change’ election. Whatever the political outcome, the large number of retirements means the House of Commons is likely to see an unusually high number of newly elected MPs, even before we factor in the impact of seats changing hands. The probable outcome is that the party leading the government will change at the general election – for just the fourth time in half a century, after 1979, 1997 and 2010. If there is a Labour majority, most of the MPs for the governing party will be newly elected. It will also, once again, be the most ethnically diverse Commons in British political history.

The Conservatives will pursue their slim prospects of re-election. This would take an unprecedented political recovery in modern British politics, since the party faces as big a deficit in the election year opinion polls as any previous incumbent government.

The implications of such a comeback for future politics and policy would be profound – and would depend on what game-changing interventions in domestic or international politics had sparked this miraculous turnaround. A fifth Conservative term would presumably be thought to be a dramatic endorsement for the party’s leadership – and for lower taxes and reduced public spending, as well as lower immigration and an uncompromisingly tough approach to asylum.

If the nation’s choice is for the Conservatives to govern again, the party could claim a clear mandate for the Rwanda scheme. The government would be likely to be able to overcome the legal and practical barriers to beginning the scheme, or seeking to expand it further – and would have the time, post-election, to test its purported deterrent effect in practice. A re-elected Conservative government would have little practical option but to admit the tens of thousands of asylum seekers currently in limbo, before seeking to give practical effect to its restrictive legislation that would refuse future arrivals. The approach to overall levels of immigration would depend on specific choices made about the largest flows. Restricting health and social care visas could still be challenging in the short-term, while a tighter policy on post-study leave and international students would become more likely.

There is considerably more thinking within Conservative circles about the consequences of defeat than victory. The party’s record on immigration would be one of the central topics of a post-election inquest. The dominant theme would be that this has been a disappointing record of failure, contributing significantly to the party’s rejection. Voices on the right of the party are already rehearsing their arguments, that the party would have won had it taken the difficult decisions to drastically cut net migration, or pulled out of the ECHR in order to enact the Rwanda plan and stop the boats. ‘One Nation’ voices within the party will be making

the counter argument, that driving up the salience of immigration with unkeepable promises was fatally damaging to public trust.

Reform UK will struggle to gain even one or two seats, though it will now defend Lee Anderson's constituency in Ashfield. The party's impact will be seen in the incursions it makes into the Tory vote. Commentators and analysts, particularly on the right of the Conservative party, will be studying each constituency result to see how strongly they can make the case that 2019 Conservatives defecting to Reform over immigration cost them the election.

There may be fewer constraints on the Conservative Party further hardening its language and policy in opposition than in government. How the Conservatives balance pressure from inside the party, and concerns about a voter revolt on the right, with the need to broaden their public reach across generations, will influence the politics of the right-of-centre not just in a post-election leadership contest but across the next parliament and perhaps beyond.

How much would change under a Labour government?

While it is considerably more likely that there will be a change of government in some form by the end of the year, there are many known unknowns about what this would mean. Perceptions of the reasons for the election result – whether a majority Labour government or not, or the scale of a narrow or landslide victory – will affect future politics and policy, both generally and on immigration in particular.

What would a Labour government do on immigration? It would certainly have to engage more with an issue that it has typically, in opposition, sought to avoid talking about.

There would be a different tone of voice from government. Leader Keir Starmer has suggested taking the heat out of the public debate, characterising the approach of recent Home Secretaries as seeking to divide by design. The issue may well retain a degree of political and media profile but this will be despite the efforts of the government, not because of it.

On asylum, Labour would have permission to scrap the Rwanda scheme. It would also have sought a mandate to be tough on people traffickers, to hear the asylum claims of those who have come to Britain, and to show how international cooperation in Europe and reforms to the system at home could reduce the number of Channel crossings and create a more effective asylum system. But the party faces difficult decisions about whether or how to bring in new legislation – on what is not one of its key missions for government.

Labour proposes few policy changes on most flows of migration – for work, study and family. It would keep the post-Brexit points system and consider gradual reforms.

Labour will inherit net migration levels falling from their peak levels – towards perhaps 350,000 a year without future policy changes, somewhat above the prevailing average in the first two decades of the century, but perhaps half of the spike to record levels in 2022. There would be much less pressure on Labour, from its own coalition of support, to focus on driving the numbers down further – though that would remain a prominent theme from its political opponents and the media. It is likely that employers will see the election of a Labour government as an opportunity to press for changes to ease migrant recruitment to key sectors where shortages hold back growth.

Labour's coalition of voters is not homogenous on immigration attitudes but it is reasonably consistent. Most Labour voters have fairly liberal views on immigration with a broad coalition of support that reflects the 'balancer' centre of gravity of British public opinion. Labour voters do not prioritise immigration as an issue – but the cross-pressures on Keir Starmer will be in how to maintain support from liberals and the balancer middle against more vocal pressure from the right.

Whatever the result in the coming general election, immigration will not be going away as an issue. We are planning to conduct the next wave of the tracker shortly after the election, to assess the shape of public attitudes facing whichever party is set to govern. Whoever sits in Number 10 would do well to pay attention.

8. Notes and references

1. Categories for this scale used by Ipsos to show trends are negative (0-4), neutral (5) and positive (6-10).
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3. Note that this year's tracker has a smaller sample size of 252 people in Scotland.
4. <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/home-office-chaos-leaves-up-to-55-500-asylum-seekers-stuck-in-perma-backlog>
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6. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9920/>
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11. See <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/public-perceptions-of-health-and-social-care-may-2023>
12. Richards, L., Fernandez Reino, M. and Blinder, S. (2023) *UK public opinion towards migration: overall attitudes and level of concern*, Migration Observatory
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14. Richards, L., Fernandez-Reino, M., and Blinder, S. (2023) *UK public opinion toward immigration: overall attitudes and level of concern*, Migration Observatory
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16. Sunday Times 4th February 2024 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/universities-investigated-over-foreign-students-with-poor-grades-m8st6ldor>
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 21. Gov UK (2023) *The Home office in the media*, <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2024/02/01/reducing-net-migration-factsheet-december-2023/>; and Daily Telegraph, December 2023: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/12/13/migrant-students-two-year-visa-kicked-out-uk/>
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 23. Gov UK (2023) *Home Office in the media: reducing net migration fact sheet* – February 2024
 24. Brindle, B. And Sumption, M. (2023) *How will new salary thresholds affect UK migration?* Migration Observatory
 25. Equality Impact Assessments are often carried out by public authorities prior to implementing policies, to predict their impact on equality. Although they are not required under The Equality Act 2010, they provide evidence of compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty. See House of Commons Library (2020) *The Public Sector Equality Duty and Equality Impact Assessments* for details
 26. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2023>
 27. Note that this tracker had a smaller sample of 252 respondents in Scotland.
 28. The deal was agreed by Albania’s constitutional court in January 2024. See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68132537>

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