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A NEW CONSENSUS?

HOW PUBLIC OPINION HAS WARMED TO IMMIGRATION

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CONTENTS

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper explores changing attitudes to immigration over the past decade, in order to help inform the current public debate on immigration policy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SUMMARY

Public attitudes to immigration have warmed considerably in recent years. This paper – drawing on new analysis of attitudes data, including the British Election Study and the Ipsos immigration tracker – explores how views have changed and what this means for the current politics of immigration.

The evidence suggests there is now more scope for a welcoming, flexible, and fair migration system than many realise. Conversely, as with the fall-out from the Windrush scandal, there can be a political cost for cruel and punitive policies which do not accord with the values of the public. In the 2020s, a progressive approach to immigration – far from being an electoral liability – can be an important political asset.

Over the past decade, the public has become strikingly more positive about immigration across a range of indicators. In 2022, around half of the public express positive views about the economic and cultural impacts of immigration, compared with around one-third in 2014. Attitudes have warmed across a broad spectrum of demographic groups. The share of the public now supportive of either increasing immigration or maintaining it at current levels has grown sharply, and a large majority now believe that immigration supports rather than hinders economic recovery – a reversal of the balance of opinion 10 years ago.

Immigration is not as pressing an issue for the public as it once was. While around 44 per cent of the public saw immigration as a top priority in 2015, the average for 2022 so far stands at only around 9 per cent. Though the salience of immigration can and does fluctuate in response to political events and debates, it is unlikely to return to previous highs, as the group of strong migration sceptics most likely to focus their attention on immigration has declined sharply in size over the past decade.

Views on immigration have also become more polarised. While the Conservative electorate has similar views on immigration as it did in 2014, attitudes among the Labour electorate have warmed considerably. There is now therefore a much larger gap in attitudes between Labour and Conservative supporters. This reflects two shifts in the past decade. First, there has been a 'two-speed' liberalisation, with attitudes warming substantially across the public while shifting fastest in the groups that tend to vote Labour (for example, younger voters and graduates). Second, there has been a growing alignment of the most migration sceptical voters with the Conservative party at recent elections, as well as a sharp decline in the share of migration sceptical voters in the Labour electorate.

The liberal shift in attitudes is also evident among the swing voters most likely to switch between parties. This now means that a pro-immigration stance can be an electoral asset for Labour and has a broadly neutral electoral impact for the Conservatives. To illustrate this, we have modelled the potential implications of the Labour and the Conservative party promoting a liberal and restrictive stance on how 'swing voters' open to supporting more than one party may cast their vote. This is a limited model, but it is designed to help illustrate the relative risks and opportunities of adopting liberal and restrictive positions on immigration. We find the following.

- For Labour, around 5 per cent of people would be attracted to the party because of a liberal immigration stance and only around 2 per cent would

be repelled. On the other hand, around 1 per cent would be attracted by a restrictive immigration stance and around 11 per cent would be repelled. Labour would benefit from a liberal stance because it could attract support from the pool of pro-immigration Conservative, Liberal Democrats and Green swing voters, while risking only a small loss from the minority of current supporters with more migration-sceptic views.

- For the Conservatives, around 3 per cent of people would be attracted and around 2 per cent would be pushed away by a liberal policy stance. Similarly, around 2 per cent would be attracted and around 2 per cent would be pushed away by a restrictive policy stance. A liberal immigration stance from the Conservatives would win over some pro-immigration Labour and Liberal Democrat swing voters, but these would be offset by losses of migration-sceptic Conservative swing voters to ReformUK. On the other hand, a restrictive stance would pick up some support from migration-sceptic swing voters, but would lose similar levels of support from pro-migration swing voters to liberal-left parties.

The public favour an immigration system which is well-managed, recognises contribution, and exercises compassion. The evidence suggests that the public prefer a system which has control over who can enter the country, regardless of whether this leads to a significant reduction in numbers, compared with a system simply focussed on bringing numbers down by deterring arrivals.

The public have a nuanced view of different types of immigration. The strongest support is for immigration which brings a clear economic or social contribution – particularly nurses and doctors. There is net positive support for migration into a wide range of professions, though support appears to be weaker where the public are less convinced of the contribution being made – with bankers in particular receiving net opposition. Public support for immigration across some occupational groups has increased substantially since 2020, with large increases for relatively low skilled professions where substantial labour market pressures exist, such as restaurant and catering staff, construction workers, and fruit pickers.

There is also broad support for a compassionate approach to refugees. Around 74 per cent back the principle of accepting refugees fleeing areas of conflict. A majority express sympathy for people crossing the Channel in small boats. However, support for refugees is tempered by concerns that the system might be exploited by others.

The public debate over immigration has shifted considerably in recent years. Concerns over the free movement of people within the EU dominated discussions on immigration during the 2010s. But now the government had ended freedom of movement, the argument that the UK has no control over its immigration policy has less purchase. While immigration levels are still high, public attention to the issue has fallen sharply and attitudes have become more positive. In fact, in some areas the government has adopted a stance on immigration which is tougher than the public's, leading to a number of high-profile U-turns – most recently, the belated introduction of the 'Homes for Ukraine' sponsorship scheme, following an initially tepid and widely criticised response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

There is now scope for a progressive narrative on immigration policy according to the principle of 'rules-based openness'. This approach is based on the idea that the public expects there to be clear rules for immigration which are competently enforced by the government. But within these rules, the increase in liberal and welcoming attitudes means there is considerable scope for generosity and compassion. To illustrate our 'rules-based openness' approach, we propose four key policy initiatives.

1. Reform the points-based system to move away from a strict approach based on skills and salary requirements and allow for exemptions for occupations of particular economic and social value, such as in the logistics, construction and food sectors. At the same time, this approach would maintain the basic principle that EU and non-EU migration should be managed in the same way and not call for a return to freedom of movement.

2. Enable migrants to contribute and integrate by easing pathways to settlement and citizenship. Fees would be capped at a reasonable level and scrapped altogether for children, the 10-year route to settlement would be reduced to five years, and major new investments would be made to support integration and language-learning.

3. Expand the 'Homes for Ukraine' sponsorship scheme to other nationalities to capitalise on the outpouring of public support for refugees. To ensure this approach is 'rules-based', there would be stricter processes in place to address safeguarding concerns and more effective planning to manage long-term accommodation needs.

4. Change Home Office culture to ensure the policymaking process is more transparent and open to scrutiny. Officials would make decisions based on individual needs and circumstances and would have the power to exercise discretion. All decisions would be scrutinised to ensure they are evidence-based and tackle the risks of discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

For much of the past two decades, migration policy has been a source of intense political debate and division. Public concerns over immigration have played a critical role in determining government policy and communications. New legislation seeking to address these concerns has come thick and fast – a total of 10 acts of parliament relating to immigration since the turn of the century. And in 2016, concerns about freedom of movement were one of the decisive factors in the public vote to leave the EU (Curtice 2017) – a choice which has reshaped the UK's politics, legal apparatus, and relations with the rest of the world.

But even as anxieties about immigration were reshaping elite politics and policy, a sea change was occurring in the public – the anxieties themselves were fading away. Over the past decade, there has been a sustained and broad-based positive shift in immigration attitudes. The public are now more relaxed about current immigration levels and more positive about the impacts of migration than at any time for decades. In many cases, attitudes are now more positive than at any point since reliable polling began. This striking and sustained shift in how the public views immigration fundamentally changes the politics of this often polarising issue.

In this short paper – co-authored by IPPR's Marley Morris and Professor Robert Ford – we explore how public attitudes have changed and what this means for the current politics of immigration. In our view, there is now more scope for a welcoming, flexible, and fair migration system than many realise. Conversely, as with the fall-out from the Windrush scandal, there can be a political cost for cruel and punitive policies which do not accord with the values of the public.

Within this new context, we argue that a progressive approach to immigration – far from being an electoral liability – can become an important political asset. In the final section of the paper, we set out how an approach grounded in 'rules-based openness' – one which delivers a flexible, well-managed system that recognises contribution and exercises compassion – can win broad public backing and progress the post-Brexit debate on the politics of immigration.

1.
HOW ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION HAVE TRANSFORMED

CHANGING ATTITUDES

The past decade has seen a substantial and sustained shift in public attitudes to immigration. Across a series of studies and a range of indicators, attitudes have become considerably more welcoming.

FIGURE 1.1: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO THE IMPACTS OF IMMIGRATION HAVE WARMED OVER THE PAST DECADE

Share expressing positive views about the economic and cultural impact of immigration, 2014–202
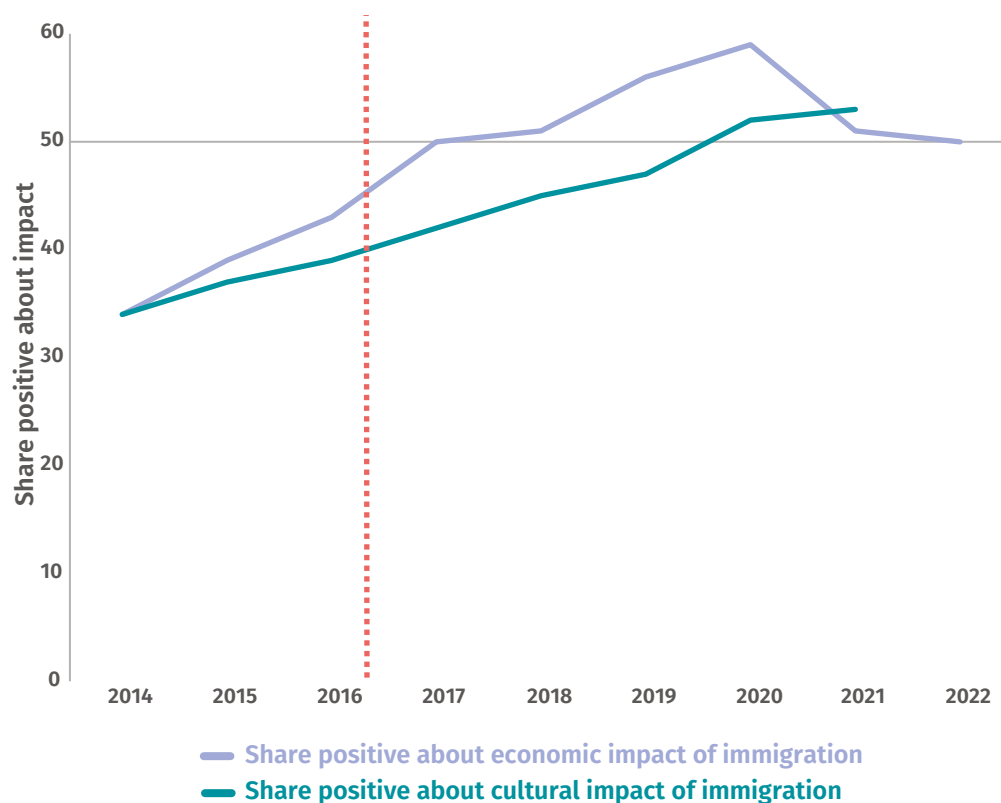
Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study internet panel, 2014–2022

The British Election Study internet panel – an online panel study which has surveyed respondents regularly since 2014 – provides clear evidence of warming attitudes about both the economic and cultural impacts of immigration (see figure 1.1). The chart makes clear that the change in

attitudes is not simply a consequence of Brexit; the positive shift in attitudes begins before the EU referendum and has continued since. Around half of people now rate the economic and cultural impacts of immigration positively, up from around one-third of people just under a decade ago.

The positive shift in immigration attitudes is broad based and not simply confined to certain demographic groups. There are double digit increases in the share expressing positive views about the economic impact of immigration among respondents aged between 18 and 35 and aged 65 and over, respondents with higher and lower educational qualifications, and white and ethnic minority respondents.

Deep divides in attitudes, however, remain between each of these groups, and attitudes have become more polarised despite a general positive shift. There has been a 'two-speed liberalisation' on immigration: more liberal groups – including graduates and the young – have shifted further and faster, and as a result have created a bigger gap between them and older and less qualified respondents (figure 1.2), even as everyone's attitudes have moved in a liberal direction.[1]

FIGURE 1.2: PUBLIC ATTITUDES HAVE WARMED ACROSS A BROAD SPECTRUM OF DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

Changes in share of selected demographic groups expressing positive views of the economic impact of immigration, 2014–2022
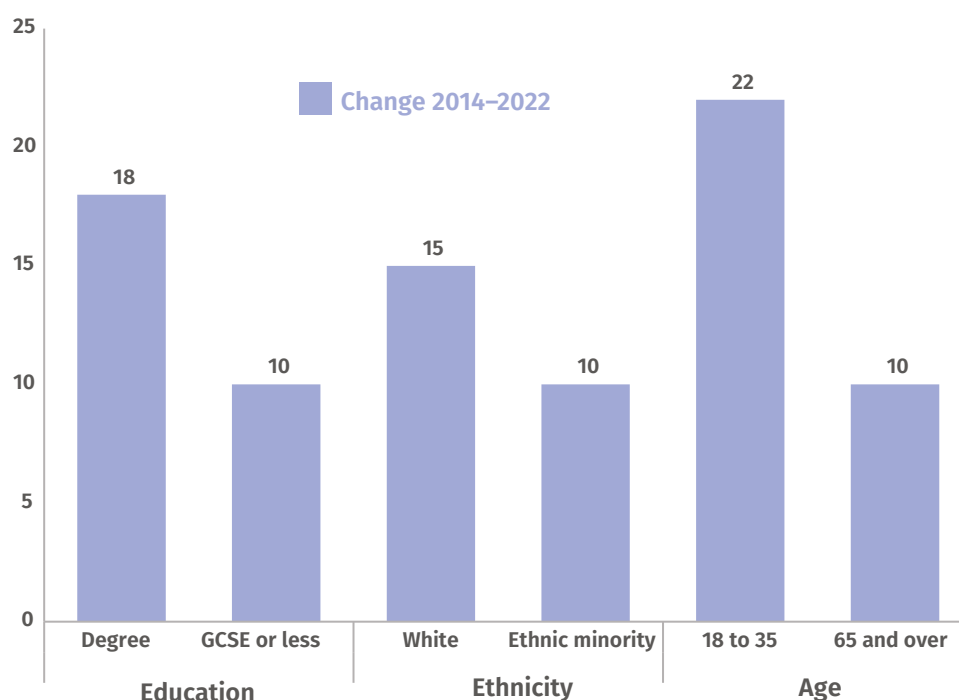
Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study internet panel, 2014–2022

As figure 1.3 illustrates, the warming trend in attitudes has been evident across the regions and nations of Great Britain.[2] The share expressing positive views about the

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1   As figure 1.2 demonstrates, there has been a larger shift in white voters compared with ethnic minority voters (who started off as by far the most liberal group). However, this disguises considerable variations among white voters according to age and education level.

2   Most academic and commercial pollsters do not survey Northern Ireland on a regular basis.

economic impacts of immigration rose by between 12 and 20 percentage points in every region of England and in Scotland and Wales between 2014 and 2022.

Attitudes to immigration are substantially more positive in London than in other regions – this in large part reflects the demographic composition of London, where pro-migration sections of the electorate such as the young, university graduates and people from ethnic minority backgrounds are found in larger numbers. Attitudes are fairly uniform across the rest of England and remain slightly more positive in Scotland than in Wales and England outside London.

FIGURE 1.3: ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION HAVE WARMED ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Changes in share of regions and nations expressing positive views of the economic impact of immigration, 2014–2022
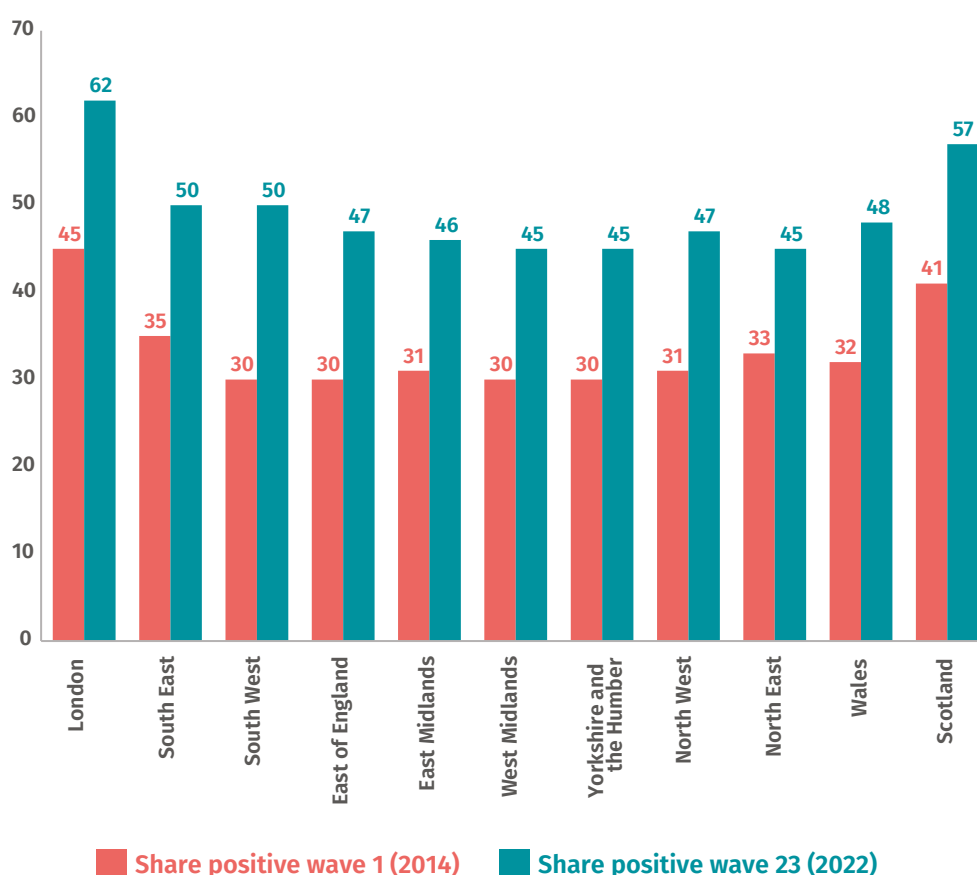
Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study internet panel, 2014–2022

As attitudes to the economic and cultural impacts of immigration have shifted, so have views on the overall levels of immigration. This is particularly notable because for many decades voters have expressed a preference for lower immigration levels, regardless of the actual level of migration (Blinder and Richards 2020). Between 1995 and 2013, the share of voters saying immigration levels should stay the same or increase was typically in the low twenties, and never much higher than 30 percent (Ford et al 2012; Ford and Heath 2014). Whether migration was high or low, the expressed preference of most of the public was always the same: they wanted less.

Since 2013, however, we have witnessed a different dynamic: high migration has continued, but the share of citizens who support retaining or further increasing

immigration levels has risen sharply, as figure 1.4 illustrates. In 2022, for the first time ever recorded, a majority of people with an opinion on the matter said they thought immigration levels should stay the same or increase. This shift has occurred even as overall inward migration has remained very high by historical standards. While there has been a decline in EU migration, non-EU migration rose substantially between 2013 and 2020.[3]

FIGURE 1.4: A GROWING SHARE OF THE PUBLIC DOES NOT SUPPORT REDUCING IMMIGRATION LEVELS

Share saying immigration should stay the same or increase, 2013–2022
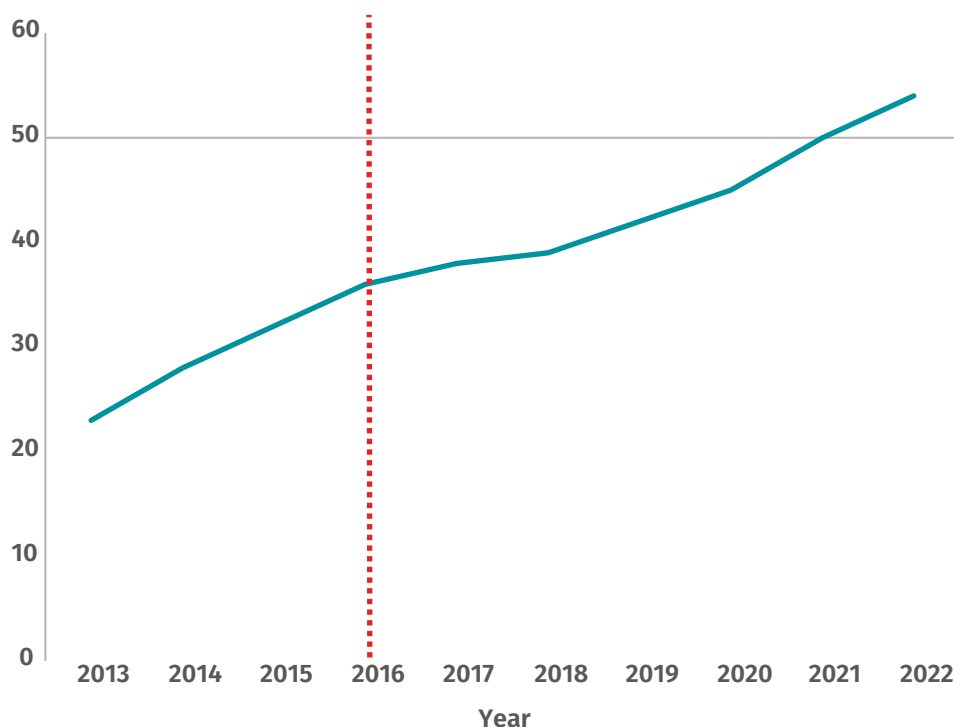
Source: British Social Attitudes/Ipsos immigration tracker, 2013–2022

Taken together, the evidence suggests that this positive shift in views represents a structural trend. Public attitudes have become steadily more positive across a range of demographic groups. This change has taken place over several years of high immigration, began before the Brexit vote and has continued through the post-Brexit period. While some have claimed that attitudes have temporarily softened only because the public are confident immigration is now being well-managed, this argument does not appear to hold water: opinion polling has repeatedly shown widespread dissatisfaction in the government's handling of immigration. Instead, evidence collected by the Ipsos immigration tracker suggests that one of the main factors behind the change in attitudes is a greater perception of the contribution of migrants to the UK (Ipsos 2022).

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3   Since 2020, methodological changes to the way the Office for National Statistics (ONS) measures migration make it hard to estimate migration trends. The International Passenger Survey formed the basis of migration estimates until the Covid-19 pandemic, but the ONS has now revised its approach. Recent estimates have been based on administrative data and statistical modelling. However, the overall available information – including modelled estimates and visa and payroll data – suggests that since 2020 there have been low levels of EU migration and a surge in non-EU migration after a temporary drop during the pandemic. For more information see Sumption and Walsh (2022) and ONS (2022a).

In fact, recent research by YouGov suggests that concerns about overly inflexible or inhumane migration policies are now becoming, perhaps for the first time, a major contributor to public disapproval of the government's migration record (English and Mann 2021). The migration system is no longer only criticised for being too liberal; for many voters, the main problem is now that it is not liberal enough.

PERCEPTIONS OF IMMIGRATION AND THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY

One of the most striking shifts in public opinion has been the sea change in perceptions of the role immigration plays regarding economic recovery. When asked by British Future in 2012 – in the aftermath of the global financial crisis – whether they thought immigration was more likely to drive or damage economic recovery, negative views outnumbered positive ones by more than two to one. Yet when asked the same question a decade later, in the context of the post-Covid-19 recovery, the ratio had reversed. A substantial majority of respondents now saw immigrants' skills and labour as helping economic recovery, while less than one-quarter saw immigration as more likely to damage growth prospects by taking jobs away from British residents (figure 1.5).

It is possible, of course, that perceptions may change again as the current cost of living crisis develops, particularly if the labour market loosens and unemployment rises. But this striking shift in perceptions of immigration from a hindrance to a help is consistent with the broader positive shift seen across other attitudes. Far from being seen as a drag on economic growth, immigration is now viewed by most as a means to speed recovery.

FIGURE 1.5: BETWEEN 2012 AND 2022, THERE HAS BEEN A SEA CHANGE IN PUBLIC ATTITUDES ON THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Perceptions of whether immigration will help or damage economic recovery, 2012 and 2022
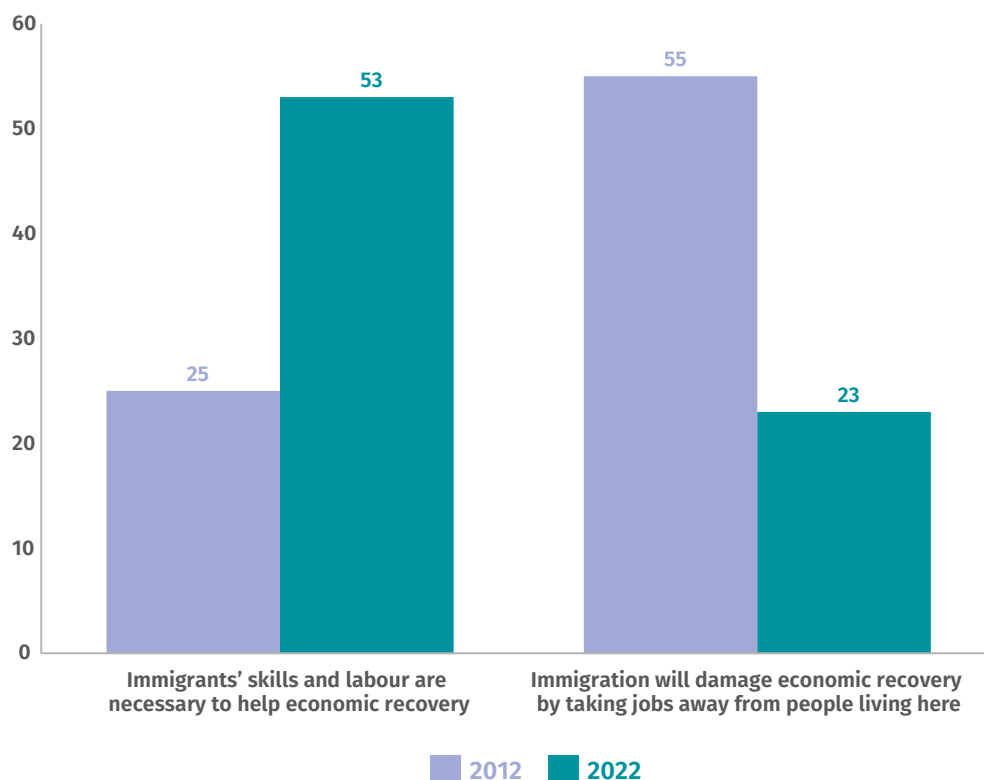
Source: Rolfe et al 2022

FALLING SALIENCE

Alongside the recent shift in attitudes, in the past few years there has also been a dramatic decline in the public's focus on immigration as a policy priority. This is often described as a reduction in salience – the extent to which an issue is considered significant by the public. The share of people naming immigration as one of the most important issues facing the country has been around 9 per cent on average over 2022 so far, compared with an average of 44 per cent in 2015 (figure 1.5).

FIGURE 1.6: THE SHARE OF RESPONDENTS VIEWING IMMIGRATION AS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING THE COUNTRY HAS FALLEN SHARPLY SINCE 2016

Share of the public naming immigration as one of the top issues facing the country, 1997–2022

— **Immigration one of the most important problems (Ipsos series)**
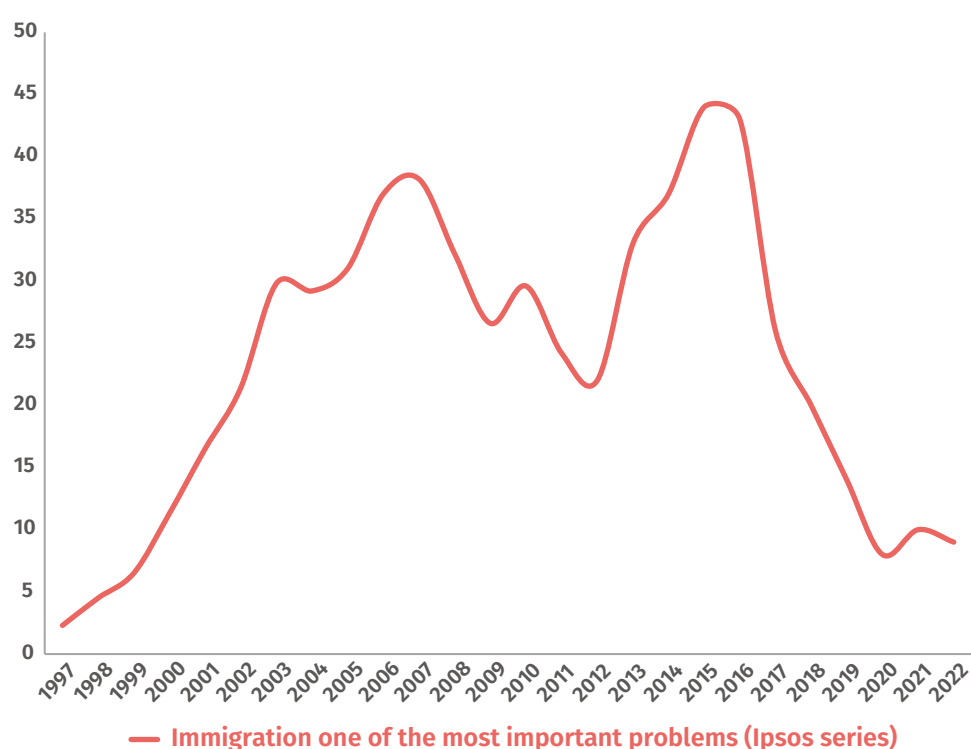
Source: Authors' analysis of Ipsos issues index (annual average figures, 1997–2022 (2022 figure for January–September only))

The contrast between the issues prioritised by the public in the first half of 2016 and in the first half of 2022 is striking (figure 1.7). In the run-up to the EU referendum, immigration was the biggest issue on people's minds, followed by the NHS, the economy and the Brexit debate itself. But by 2022, attention to immigration had collapsed. People in the first half of 2022 were instead focussed on inflation, Covid-19, and a lack of faith in politicians – three issues which had barely registered just a few years ago. The only common focus of attention in both periods is the economy – though even here the nature of these concerns has changed. Worries about unemployment, pensions, and housing have declined, while concerns about inflation have rocketed to their highest level in 40 years.

Of course, the salience of a particular policy issue is inherently relative and fluctuates over time in response to events and changing conditions. When there are other more pressing matters affecting their lives, the public may be less likely

to place immigration as one of the major issues facing the country, even though their underlying concerns remain. This is partly why immigration fell in salience between 2007 and 2012: for many, the financial crisis and recession displaced immigration as a top issue. Immigration concerns then rebounded later in the 2010s as the acute phase of the economic crisis receded.

FIGURE 1.7: WHILE IMMIGRATION WAS A PRIORITY ISSUE IN THE FIRST HALF OF 2016, THE TOP ISSUES FOR THE PUBLIC IN THE FIRST HALF OF 2022 WERE INFLATION, COVID-19, AND A LACK OF FAITH IN POLITICIANS

Share of the public naming selected issues as a priority, January–June 2016 and January–June 2022
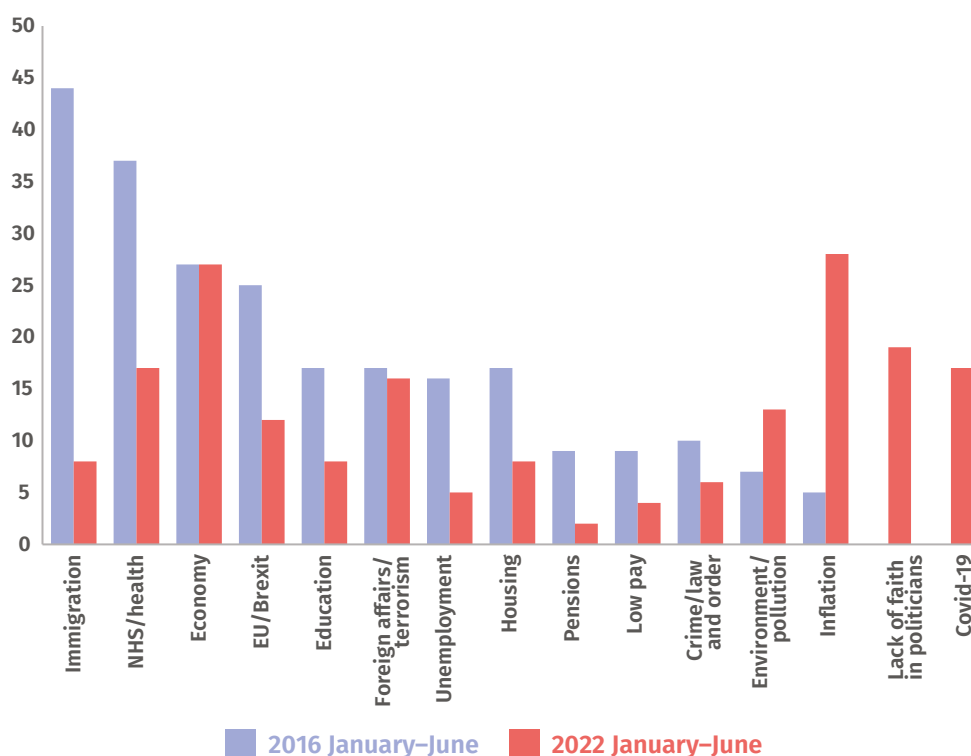
Source: Authors' analysis of Ipsos issues index

It is possible that such a dynamic may kick in again if other issues – such as inflation, the pandemic, and recent economic tumult – fade, enabling latent concerns with immigration to reassert themselves. But it is important to distinguish between salience, which can vary according to the issue of the day, and underlying immigration attitudes, which have followed a clear and sustained trend towards greater positivity over the past decade. A strong rebound is less likely now, unless the established broader trend of warming attitudes sharply reverses, because, so far, it has always been the voters with the most negative views of immigration who are most prone to emphasise the issue as a political priority (Kustov 2022). Such voters are much thinner on the ground now than they were a decade ago.

While salience has overall fallen sharply since the EU referendum, there is some evidence of a recent uptick in concerns concentrated among Conservative voters (YouGov 2022). Recent episodic spikes in salience appear to be related to concerns over Channel crossings. The concentration of concern among Conservatives also points to the growing partisan divergence in both attitudes to immigration and

attention to the issue – a topic we turn to in more depth in the next chapter of this paper.

THE UK IN COMPARISON

The shift in British attitudes is particularly stark when understood in an international context. Using the European Social Survey – a pan-European survey of public attitudes over time – we have compared how British trends compare with those in other European countries.

When the European Social Survey first began in 2002, attitudes in the UK were relatively sceptical – only around one-quarter of respondents saw immigration as economically beneficial, while less than half saw immigration as culturally enriching.

The situation was transformed by 2018 (figure 1.8). Compared with other countries surveyed, the UK saw the largest increase in positive views about economic impacts and the third largest positive shift in views about cultural impacts. It is one of only four countries in the study to see double digit positive shifts in both economic and cultural perceptions – the others being Ireland, Portugal, and Spain. Most European countries surveyed have seen more modest positive shifts in economic assessments, and many – including Poland, Sweden, Finland, and Italy – have become more negative about the cultural impact of immigration.

FIGURE 1.8: BETWEEN 2002 AND 2018, THE UK SAW SOME OF THE LARGEST INCREASES IN POSITIVE VIEWS ABOUT IMMIGRATION COMPARED WITH OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES SURVEYED

Change in share of public saying immigration is good for the economy (purple) and enriches culture (turquoise) 2002–2018
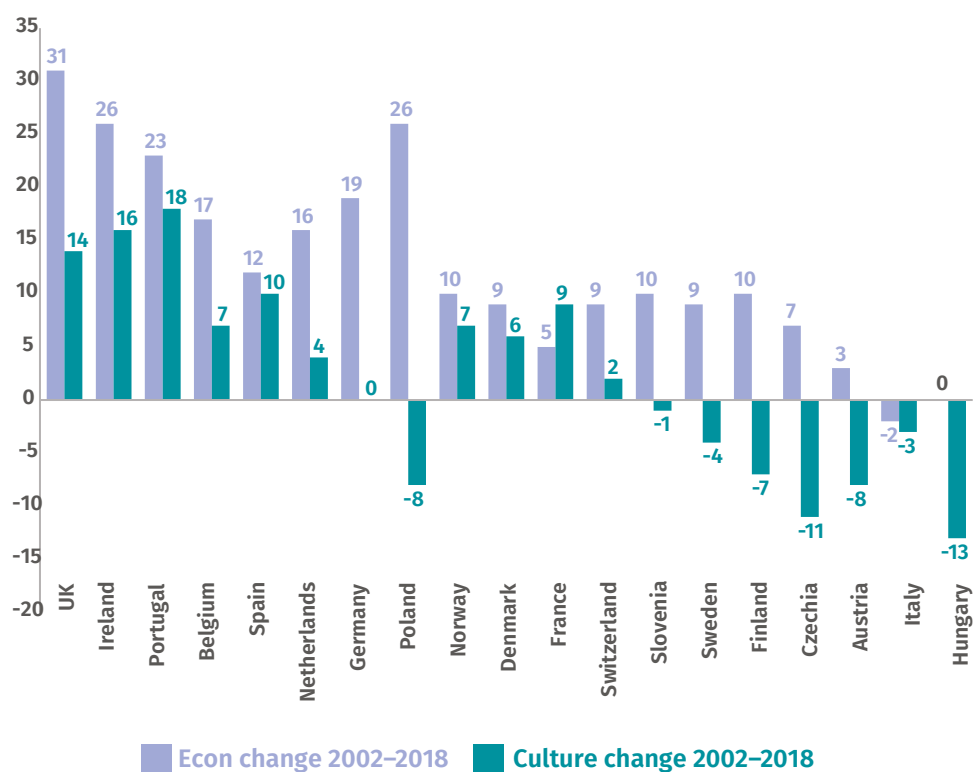
Source: Authors' analysis of the European Social Survey (2002–2018)

By 2018, the UK had become one of the most enthusiastic of all European countries surveyed about the economic effects of immigration – and was more positive than average regarding cultural impacts too (see figure 1.9 below). And while data for more recent comparisons are not yet available, the continued positive shift in attitudes in British survey data suggests that the UK has likely cemented its status as one of Europe's most pro-migrant societies over the last four years.

FIGURE 1.9: BY 2018, THE UK WAS ONE OF THE MOST SUPPORTIVE OF EUROPEAN COUNTRIES SURVEYED ABOUT THE ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF IMMIGRATION

Share of respondents in different European countries with positive views about the economic effects of immigration (purple) and the cultural effects of immigration (orange)

Immigration good for the economy 2018 (%)

Immigration good for culture 2018 (%)
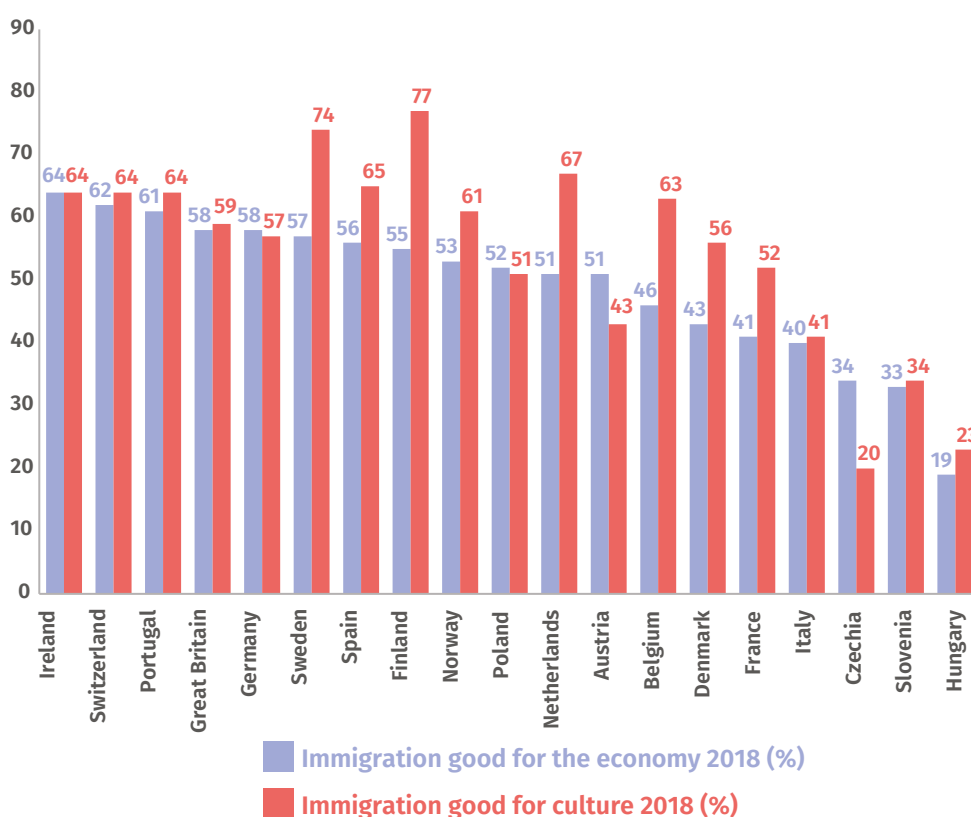
Source: Authors' analysis of the European Social Survey (2018)

2.
WHAT THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE FOR IMMIGRATION POLITICS MEANS FOR LABOUR AND THE CONSERVATIVES

GROWING POLARISATION

Attitudes to immigration have become more politically polarised as they have warmed. A large majority of Labour supporters in the British Election Study now express positive views about immigration in the most recent waves, a huge increase from 2014, when less than half expressed positive views. Conservative supporters became more positive about immigration in the years immediately after Brexit, but that change has since reversed. The rapid shift among Labour's support base has therefore resulted in a steadily widening gap between a now strongly pro-migration Labour electorate and a persistently more sceptical Conservative electorate (figure 2.1). The gap in the level of positive attitudes between the parties has nearly tripled from 15 points in 2015 to 42 points in 2022.

FIGURE 2.1: THERE HAS BEEN GROWING POLARISATION IN ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION BETWEEN LABOUR AND CONSERVATIVE SUPPORTERS

Share of Conservative and Labour voters expressing positive views about the economic impact of immigration 2014–2022
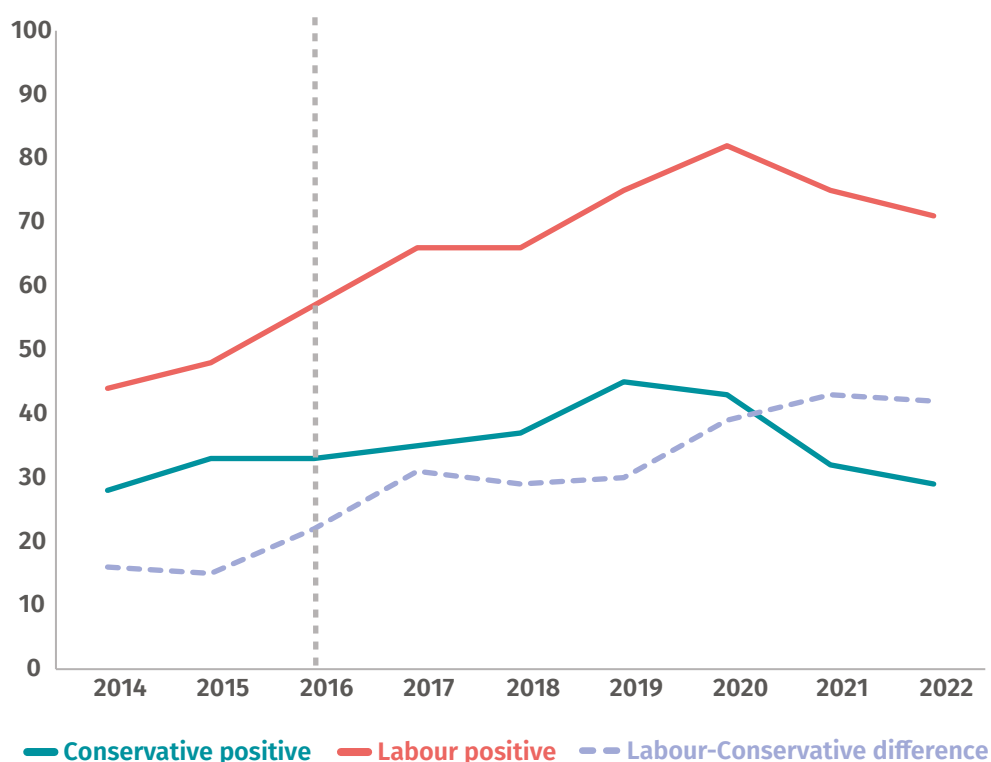
Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study internet panel (2014–2022)

This increased polarisation reflects two shifts in the last decade. First, as illustrated in the previous section, there has been a 'two-speed liberalisation', with a larger increase in pro-migration views among sections of the electorate which tend to vote Labour, such as younger voters and university graduates. Second, there has been a growing alignment between immigration views and vote choice, in particular due to the Conservatives consolidating support from more migration-sceptic voters (Sobolewska and Ford 2020).

IMPLICATIONS FOR LABOUR AND THE CONSERVATIVES

The transformation in public attitudes over the past decade sets the scene for a very different political debate on immigration within and between the two main parties. In the 2000s and 2010s, immigration created a serious dilemma for Labour, which had a pro-migration reputation and activist base but also needed to appeal to sections of the electorate who were intensely migration sceptical. These challenges for Labour presented opportunities for the Conservatives, who could (and did) win over new support from migration sceptics by portraying Labour as out of touch with the public mood on immigration.

The new environment of rising migration liberalism has reversed this opportunity structure. The pursuit of draconian immigration policies may remain popular with the shrinking hard core of migration sceptic voters, but risks looking out of touch with the much larger, growing cohort of pro-migration voters. Conversely, there is now scope for pro-migration policies to chime with the warming public mood and win over support from swing voters.

FIGURE 2.2: FORMER LIB DEM AND CONSERVATIVE VOTERS STRONGLY CONSIDERING LABOUR TEND TO HAVE MORE POSITIVE ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION

Share of Conservative and Liberal Democrat 2019 voters with positive views of the economic impact of immigration, by willingness to consider a future Labour vote
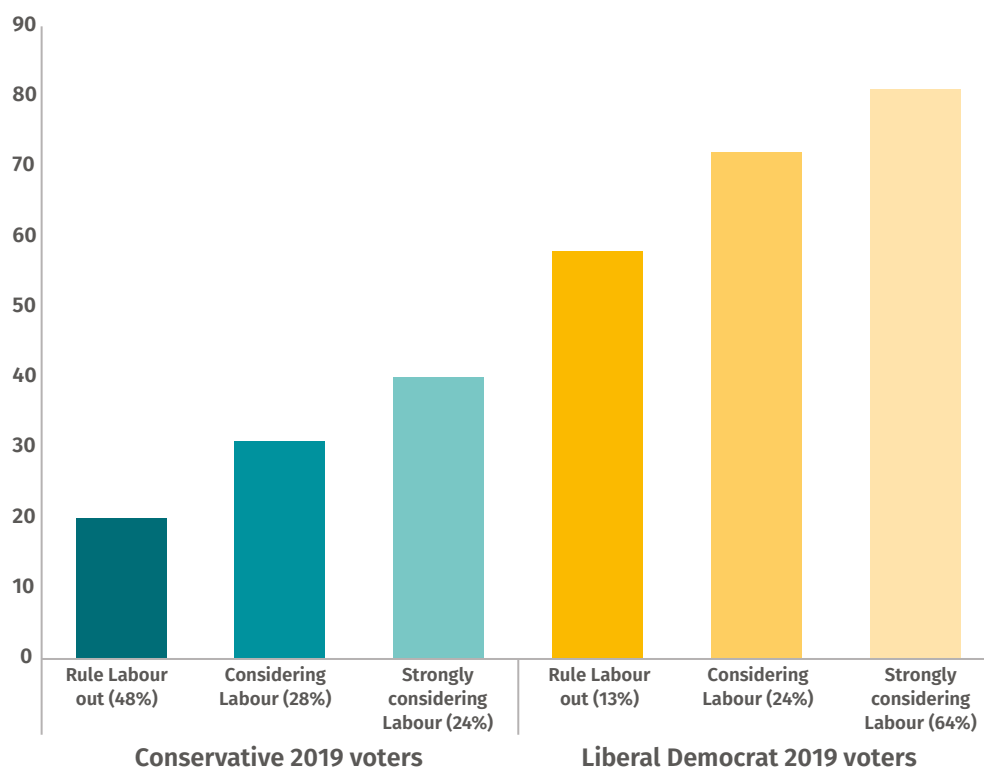
Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study internet panel (2022)

Figure 2.2 provides one illustration of the implications for Labour from the liberal turn in migration attitudes, by looking at how immigration attitudes line up with the willingness of 2019 Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters to consider a future Labour vote. We split both parties' voters into three groups based on their willingness to vote Labour in future: those who rule out ever voting Labour, those who would consider a vote for Labour (rating it between one and four out of 10) and those strongly considering Labour (rating them at five out of 10 or higher). The chart shows the percentage of voters in each of these groups expressing positive views about the economic impact of immigration.

For both parties, we see the same pattern – the voters most open to supporting Labour in future are also the most positive about the impact of immigration. While a fifth of 2019 Conservative voters who rule Labour out entirely hold positive views about immigration, this figure rises to two-fifths among 2019 Conservatives who are strongly considering Labour.

The same pattern is found among 2019 Liberal Democrat voters who are, unsurprisingly, more positive about immigration across the board. Around six out of 10 of Liberal Democrat supporters who rule out a future Labour vote are positive about the economic impact of immigration, but this rises to around eight out of 10 among the majority of Lib Dems who are strongly considering a future Labour vote.

The rising tide of pro-migration sentiment therefore presents a new political landscape for Labour. In a country where far more voters are positive about migration than are migration sceptical, a pro-migration stance can be an electoral asset. There is now scope for Labour to expand their electoral coalition with a progressive stance on migration by combining its very liberal core supporters with more pro-migration switchers from the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, a possibility we explore in more detail below.

There are still longstanding obstacles for such an approach. Key sections of the public continue to be sceptical about migration, and migration sceptics are over-represented in marginal constituencies (Blagden and Tanner 2022). A recent poll of 'red wall' voters by Redfield and Wilton found that, along with the economy, immigration was the issue where respondents were most likely to have no trust at all in Labour (Redfield and Wilton Strategies 2022). Looking ahead to the next general election, the challenge for Labour will be to reassure more migration sceptical voters that they have the competence to manage the immigration and asylum system while also capitalising on the broad shift in public attitudes towards more positive immigration positions.

The warming public mood on immigration poses a different political challenge for the Conservatives. The incumbent party will likely head into the next general election on the defensive, trying to hold together their 2019 winning coalition rather than make new gains. But the liberal shift in immigration attitudes complicates this task, throwing up new dilemmas for a party whose advance in the past two elections has come through consolidating support from migration sceptical voters across the electorate. With migration scepticism in decline, this approach is becoming less viable. The Conservatives need a broader base of support, yet they also fear a challenge on immigration from the right.

As a result, the governing party risks becoming caught between two stools on immigration. Draconian rhetoric and policy risks encouraging the defection of migration liberals to Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Yet a more open and flexible approach could risk a backlash from a different quarter, alienating the former UKIP and Brexit party voters the party won over in 2019 and opening up space for a renewed challenge to the party on its right flank.

Share of 2019 Conservative voters strongly consider the Liberal Democrats or Reform UK, by views of the economic impact of immigration

■ **Share strongly considering Liberal Democrats**
■ **Share strongly considering Brexit Party/Reform UK**
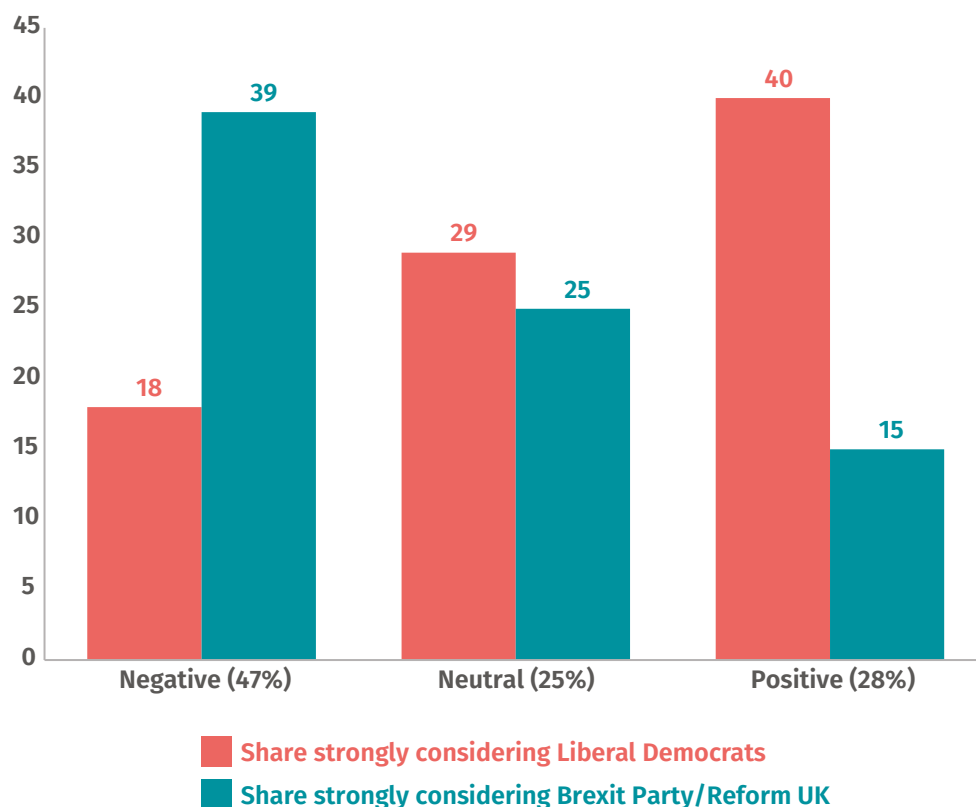
Source: British Election Study internet panel (2022)

Figure 2.3 above illustrates this dilemma, showing the proportion of 2019 Conservative voters with different views of immigration who were in May 2022 strongly considering a future vote for the Liberal Democrats or Reform UK. The left-hand side of figure 2.3 shows that around four in 10 migration-sceptical Conservative supporters would strongly consider a future vote for Reform UK. These voters constitute nearly half of the Conservative support base in the latest BES data and are over-represented in the more socially conservative 'red wall' seats the Conservatives won from Labour in 2019. A liberal stance on immigration would be electorally risky for the Conservatives in such seats, as it could provoke an exodus to Reform UK or a similar radical right competitor, splitting the migration sceptic vote and damaging the Conservatives' prospects.

Yet the right-hand side of the chart demonstrates the other horn of the Conservative dilemma: the appeal of the Lib Dems – as with Labour – is strongest among the three in 10 Conservative voters with positive views of migration. Such voters, in turn, are heavier on the ground in better-off, graduate-heavy, and socially liberal 'blue wall' areas, where incumbent Conservative MPs are most likely to face a strong challenge from the Liberal Democrats in the next general election. A stance on immigration which is too hard-line risks alienating migration liberal voters and jeopardising

Conservative prospects in 'blue wall' seats, which have already been drifting away from the party in the last two election cycles (Ford et al 2022).

HOW SWING VOTERS MIGHT RESPOND TO DIFFERENT POLICY STANCES: A SCENARIO ANALYSIS

We can illustrate the overall effects of these different cross-pressures by using data from the British Election Study internet panel to identify the relative size of swing voter groups who could potentially be attracted or repelled by liberal or restrictive policy stances on immigration. The most recent publicly available wave of the British Election Study panel is from May 2022 and includes information on respondents' current vote preferences, their openness to supporting different parties in future, and their views of immigration. We can combine this information to estimate how many swing voters might be influenced by Labour or the Conservatives promoting a particular policy stance.

We define the voters potentially attracted by a stance as those who:
• currently back another party
• are already open to in future supporting the party promoting the policy stance
• and have views on immigration which fit the stance.

Conversely, voters repelled by a policy stance are defined as those who:
• currently back the party promoting the policy stance
• are open to supporting a different party in future
• and have views on immigration at odds with the stance.

Pulling these three pieces of information together, we can get a sense of how different proposals may affect 'swing voters' whose support is currently in the balance and who have clear pro or anti-immigration preferences. For example, in a liberal policy stance scenario, pro-immigration swing voters will be attracted from other parties, while immigration-sceptic swing voters among the party's current support base will be pushed away. We carry out this calculation in two ways – first for each pair of parties in isolation, and then cumulatively across all the parties where we have 'propensity to vote' data.[4]

Our exercise aims to give an indication of the electoral potential of liberal and restrictive immigration stances in the current climate of opinion, but it is important to emphasise that it is a very simplified model. Voting does not take place in a vacuum, and many of the potential switchers we identify will have other compelling reasons to stick with their current party or will simply not regard immigration as an important issue. Conversely, many of the potential gains or losses identified here might occur anyway regardless of whether the parties promote an immigration policy stance, as other motives pull voters into a party's orbit, or push them away. Given this, the figures here should not be thought of as estimates of likely changes in support, but instead as illustrations of the relative size of the swing voter pools who would find a particular immigration stance potentially attractive or alienating.

Table 2.1 presents the results of this exercise for Labour. A liberal immigration policy stance is a net advantage in party competition with the Conservatives, as the pool of pro-migration Conservative swing voters attracted by the stance is, at 1.0 per cent of the total sample, nearly twice as large as the pool of migration sceptical Labour swing voters pushed towards the Conservatives (0.6 per cent).

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4   Voters with neutral opinions of immigration don't change their views, nor do voters who are strongly committed to the proposing party or its competitor. Full details of the calculation process are available from the authors on request.

The potential for net Labour gains from other liberal-left parties is even greater, with net gains from the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, and the SNP and Plaid Cymru – reflecting the pro-migration mood among swing voters from all of these parties. By contrast, net losses to the strongly migration-sceptic ReformUK are limited because few Labour voters see them as an attractive alternative.

Putting these effects together, 5.3 per cent of the respondents in the sample are both pro-migration and open to backing Labour in future – a large pool of swing voters who would find a liberal policy stance attractive. Only 1.7 per cent of the sample are Labour swing voters with migration-sceptic views, whose support might be jeopardised by a liberal policy stance. A liberal stance offers Labour substantial opportunity to gain support from other parties without putting many of its own voters at risk.

TABLE 2.1: POTENTIAL LABOUR GAINS AND LOSSES FROM A LIBERAL OR RESTRICTIVE STANCE IN IMMIGRATION POLICY (% OF PUBLIC)

Competitor party	Labour liberal stance	Labour restrictive stance
Conservatives		
Swing voters attracted from Con to Lab	+1.0	+0.8
Swing voters pushed from Lab to Con	-0.6	-1.6
Potential gain/loss from stance	*+0.3*	*-0.8*
Liberal Democrats		
Swing voters attracted from Lib Dem to Lab	+2.4	+0.2
Swing voters pushed from Lab to Lib Dem	-1.1	-7.7
Potential gain/loss from stance	*+1.3*	*-7.5*
Greens		
Swing voters attracted from Green to Lab	+1.4	+0.1
Swing voters pushed from Lab to Green	-0.7	-7.4
Potential gain/loss from stance	*+0.8*	*-7.3*
SNP and Plaid Cymru		
Swing voters attracted from SNP/PC to Lab	+0.4	+0.1
Swing voters pushed from Lab to SNP/PC	-0.1	-0.6
Potential gain/loss from stance	*+0.3*	*-0.6*
ReformUK		
Swing voters attracted from ReformUK to Lab	+0.1	+0.1
Swing voters pushed from Lab to ReformUK	-0.5	-0.8
Potential gain/loss from stance	*-0.4*	*-0.6*
Cumulative gains/losses		
Swing voters attracted from other parties to Lab	+5.3	+1.4
Swing voters pushed from Lab to other parties	-1.7	-11.4
Net potential gains/losses from stance	*+3.6*	*-10.0*

Note: Cumulative figures are not necessarily the sum of individual party transfers because voters can be open to supporting multiple different parties.
Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study internet panel wave 23 (May 2022)

The implications of a restrictive stance are quite different. While Labour would improve its standing with some Conservative and other swing voters, the pool of competing party supporters who are both migration sceptical and open to a Labour vote is quite small, limiting the scope for gains. By contrast, the pool of pro-migration Labour voters who are open to other parties is large, meaning that

a restrictive stance would entail antagonising a large group of existing supporters without attracting many new swing voters. The combined pool of swing voters attracted by a restrictive stance is around 1.4 per cent of the sample, much smaller than the pool of migration liberal Labour swing voters alienated by such a stance (11.4 per cent). For every migration sceptic swing voter attracted to Labour from other parties by a tough migration policy stance, up to eight migration liberal Labour swing voters would be pushed towards other parties.

In table 2.2, we work through the same two policy stance scenarios for the Conservatives. Perhaps surprisingly, we find the Conservatives do not stand to make substantial gains from a policy shift in either direction, as the pools of swing voters attracted and repelled by each stance roughly cancel each other out. A more liberal stance on immigration attracts pro-migration swing votes from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, offset by net losses of migration-sceptic Conservative voters to ReformUK. Cumulatively, a more liberal stance would increase the Conservatives' appeal with pro-migration swing voters, summing to 3.1 per cent of the sample, while hurting Conservative prospects with migration sceptical swing voters among their own party, summing to 2.4 per cent of the total sample. The overall effect is a very small net gain.

TABLE 2.2: POTENTIAL CONSERVATIVE GAINS AND LOSSES FROM A LIBERAL OR RESTRICTIVE STANCE IN IMMIGRATION POLICY (% OF PUBLIC)

Competitor party	Con liberal stance	Con restrictive stance
Labour		
Swing voters attracted from Lab to Con	+1.6	+0.6
Swing voters pushed from Con to Lab	-0.8	-1.0
Potential gain/loss from stance	*+0.8*	*-0.3*
Liberal Democrats		
Swing voters attracted from Lib Dem to Con	+1.0	+0.3
Swing voters pushed from Con to Lib Dem	-0.8	-1.1
Potential gain/loss from stance	*+0.2*	*-0.9*
Greens		
Swing voters attracted from Green to Con	+0.3	+0.1
Swing voters pushed from Con to Green	-0.6	-0.8
Potential gain/loss from stance	*-0.3*	*-0.7*
SNP and Plaid Cymru		
Swing voters attracted from SNP/PC to Con	+0.1	+0.0
Swing voters pushed from Con to SNP/PC	-0.1	-0.1
Potential gain/loss from stance	*+0.0*	*+0.0*
ReformUK		
Swing voters attracted from ReformUK to Con	+0.1	+0.6
Swing voters pushed from Con to ReformUK	-1.5	-0.6
Potential gain/loss from stance	*-1.4*	*+0.0*
Cumulative gains/losses		
Swing voters attracted from other parties to Con	+3.1	+1.6
Swing voters pushed from Con to other parties	-2.4	-1.9
Potential gains/losses from stance	*+0.7*	*-0.3*

Note: cumulative figures are not necessarily the sum of individual party transfers because voters can be open to supporting multiple different parties.
Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study internet panel wave 23 (May 2022)

Perhaps unexpectedly, there are also few net gains available to the Conservatives from a more restrictive stance on migration. Most migration sceptics already back the party, so there are few anti-migration swing voters available to attract, and the modest gains the party might make are offset by net losses of migration liberals among the party's existing support base. Swing voters attracted by a restrictive stance sum to 1.6 per cent of the total sample, while voters pushed from the Conservatives to other parties sum to 1.9 per cent. The overall effect is broadly neutral.

It might seem paradoxical that the Conservatives – who have benefitted electorally from restrictive migration stances for much of the past 20 years (Sobolewska and Ford 2020) – no longer have a clear electoral incentive to adopt hardline migration stances. It may also seem paradoxical that Labour, whose recent decline has been concentrated among more socially conservative and migration sceptical parts of the electorate, now stand to gain far more from a liberal than a restrictive stance.

The resolution to both paradoxes is straightforward: a dramatic change in context brings with it a dramatic change in electoral incentives. There are now far more of those with pro-immigration attitudes (50 per cent of the 2022 British Election Study sample) than with anti-immigration attitudes (30 per cent). The imbalance is sufficient to make a liberal stance electorally profitable for Labour and to eliminate the electoral upside to hard-line stances for the Conservatives.

Labour's current support is, as we have seen, already overwhelmingly pro-migration. But a liberal stance still attracts far more swing voters from the pro-migration electorates of other parties than the party risks losing from its minority of migration sceptic swing voters.

The Conservatives' existing support base is strongly migration sceptic. Yet the analysis suggests that any gains from a restrictive stance by winning over additional migration-sceptic swing voters are offset by losses of pro-migration swing voters to liberal-left parties.

We must be careful to caveat the conclusions from this limited exercise. The data was collected in May 2022, when Conservative support was much higher, and Labour support much lower, than has been typical in the most recent polling available at the time of publication (autumn 2022). The balance of support in the current Labour and Conservative voter coalitions may be changing as Labour have sharply advanced and the Conservatives have slumped. Labour may already have won over some of the 'low hanging fruit' we identify, while the Conservatives may have shrunk to a more committed core. On the other hand, disaffection with the Conservatives among more liberal Tory supporters may also have intensified, increasing the pool of swing voters in this group. Things may of course change again in future – the Conservatives may renew themselves under their new leadership, while on the other hand a reinvigorated challenge from the currently moribund ReformUK could once again generate competition on the Conservatives' migration sceptic right flank.

Our scenarios also use only a single broad measure – perceived economic impacts – to capture views of immigration. While the same positive shift is evident across multiple indicators, other measures of opinion, particularly more polarising or contentious ones, could still paint a somewhat different picture. Moreover, the story would change if the liberal shift in public mood reversed – for example, in response to the cost of living crisis or the rise in Channel crossings. Our exercise highlights how the recent large positive shift in public attitudes has potentially important electoral implications. Yet, while the shift is large, long running and broad based, a reversal in the trend in changed circumstances remains possible.

Our scenarios also assume that migration is equally important to supporters and sceptics. This has not been the case historically: opponents of migration have given the issue much more weight than supporters (Kustov 2022). While there is some evidence that this balance is now shifting – with, for instance, significant numbers voicing pro-migration criticisms as the reason for their dissatisfaction with the government's record (English and Mann 2022; Ipsos 2022) – it is quite plausible that migration sceptics will continue to weigh the issue more heavily when making their political choices. Voters may now be more likely to be pro- rather than anti-migration, but among those who care most, the balance may still be in favour of the sceptics. However, even if this is true, the overall salience of migration has declined, so the segment of the electorate which is both migration-sceptic and worried about it is now smaller than in past elections.

3.
WHAT THE PUBLIC NOW THINK ABOUT IMMIGRATION POLICY

So far in this paper we have spoken of immigration policy in broad brushstrokes, contrasting liberal or pro-immigration stances with restrictive or migration-sceptic ones. But immigration is a complex area of policy, covering multiple pathways for people to enter and stay in the UK. There are many routes for people to live and work in the country – covering migration for work, study, and family reunion – alongside the asylum system and pathways for resettled refugees. While most of the public are not necessarily aware of the full details of the immigration system, there is a considerable body of work showing that voters are aware of and responsive to some of the core principles framing immigration policy. In this chapter, we explore these attitudes in more depth.

As has long been argued, the public's positions on immigration are remarkably nuanced (Rutter and Carter 2018). While deep disagreements remain between immigration liberals and hard-liners, there are also several areas of broad public consensus. In short, most of the public favours a system which is well-managed, recognises contribution, and exercises compassion.

MANAGING THE SYSTEM

Past studies have shown that the public place a strong preference on having a controlled and well-managed system of immigration (Rutter and Carter 2018; Ahlstrom-Vij et al 2018). Crucially, this is not simply a question of limiting numbers: when asked whether they prefer an immigration system based on controlling who can enter the country, regardless of whether this leads to a significant fall in numbers, or an immigration system based on deterring arrivals to ensure numbers are low, the public opt for the former option by nearly two to one (Ipsos 2022). While the public tend to have greater confidence in a system where the government exercises control, this does not translate into a demand for crude caps or reductions.

The public's preference for a well-managed system is evident from a recent deliberative study of public attitudes. This study found that, after deliberating post-Brexit choices for immigration policy, discussants became more positive about the effects of immigration, but were also more supportive of introducing requirements for EU citizens to apply to move to the UK. The discussants appeared to coalesce around the view that immigration had been beneficial for Britain's economy and enriched its culture, but that controls for both EU and non-EU citizens were necessary to secure and maximise these benefits. As with the above survey, this did not equate to a belief that caps were the answer: discussants tended to express a preference for using selection criteria over imposing strict numerical limits during the deliberations (Curtice et al 2021).

RECOGNISING CONTRIBUTION

The analysis so far has focussed on the public's perceptions and attitudes towards immigration in general. While this gives us a picture of the overall mood on the issue, the public are also highly responsive to the specific characteristics and circumstances of different immigrants (Ford and Heath 2014; Ford et al 2012). In particular, the public recognise and respond to the potential contribution different types of immigrants can make.

Public attitudes are remarkably nuanced in this regard and more subtle than existing migration policy. Under the current points-based system for work migration, the main eligibility criteria are the skill level and salary of the occupation for which is the applicant is being sponsored. While in some respects this accords with the public's instincts, polling suggests voters take on board a lot more than skills and salary in assessing migrants' potential contributions.

Some of the strongest pro-migration views among the public relates to NHS workers (figure 3.1). There is widespread support for higher migration of nurses, doctors, and care workers, even though these professions involve widely varying levels of formal qualifications and pay rates. The government's February 2022 decision to enable employers to sponsor care workers for the health and care worker visa is therefore likely to enjoy strong public support.

FIGURE 3.1: THE PUBLIC ARE MOST SUPPORTIVE OF IMMIGRATION OF NURSES AND DOCTORS AND LEAST SUPPORTIVE OF IMMIGRATION OF BANKERS

Net share favouring increases vs decreases in immigration according to eleven groups, 2022 (covering occupation and other reasons for immigration)
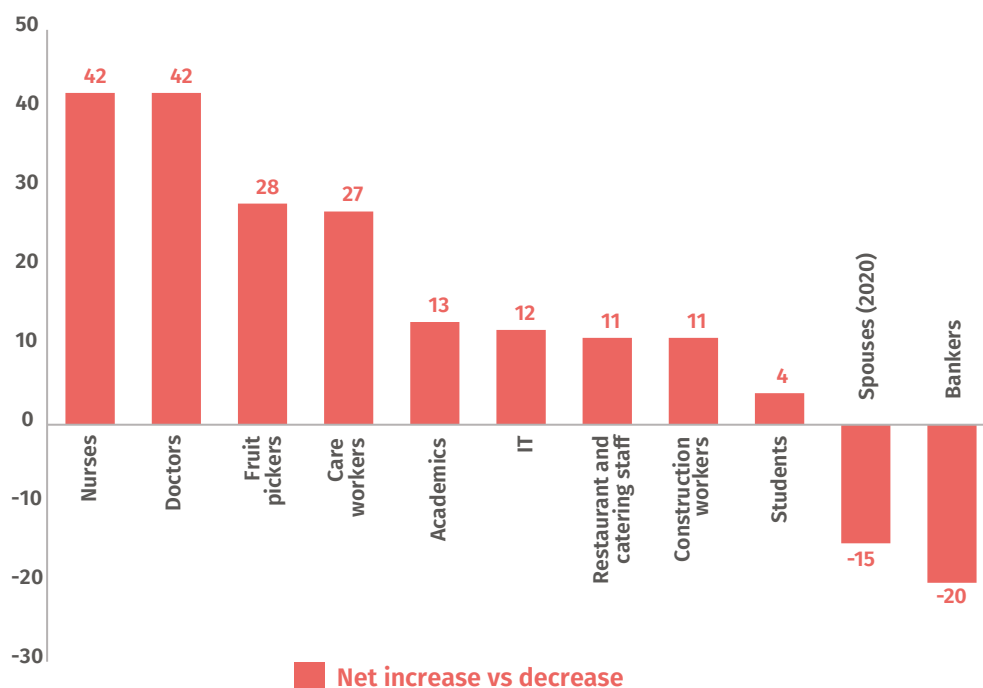
Source: Authors' analysis of Ipsos immigration tracker (2022)

There is also considerable support for higher migration of fruit pickers, as well as net positive support for academics, IT workers, restaurant and catering staff, and construction workers, encompassing a range of salary and skill levels. Conversely,

bankers are the group the public least favour in spite of their typically high earnings. This suggests that attitudes to migration according to job type reflects perceptions of whether overseas workers would meet a pressing economic or social need, rather than simply the job's salary or skills requirements. For example, the particularly hostile stance on bankers presumably reflects negative public views about the profession and its social contribution. The public doesn't see the benefit of more bankers; it does see the benefit of more care workers.

Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests that the public place particular value on immigration which makes a clear economic or social contribution to the UK. Where occupations offer substantial economic or social gains and the demand for labour is clear – for example, in the NHS and social care sector – there is strong public support for more immigration. Where these conditions are not so evident, support is weaker. Crucially, this contribution is not simply interpreted in terms of fiscal payments – bankers may make a considerable contribution to the Treasury if they are on high salaries, yet they have little public support.

The Ipsos immigration tracker asked about ten migration groups in both 2020 and 2022, enabling us to look at how views of different migrant groups have shifted during the period of Covid lockdown and post-Covid recovery. Figure 3.2 shows the change in net support for each group.

FIGURE 3.2: THERE HAS BEEN A SHARP INCREASE IN SUPPORT FOR IMMIGRATION FOR RELATIVELY LOW-SKILLED OCCUPATIONS SINCE 2020

Change in net share favouring increases vs decreases in immigration from 10 groups, 2020–22
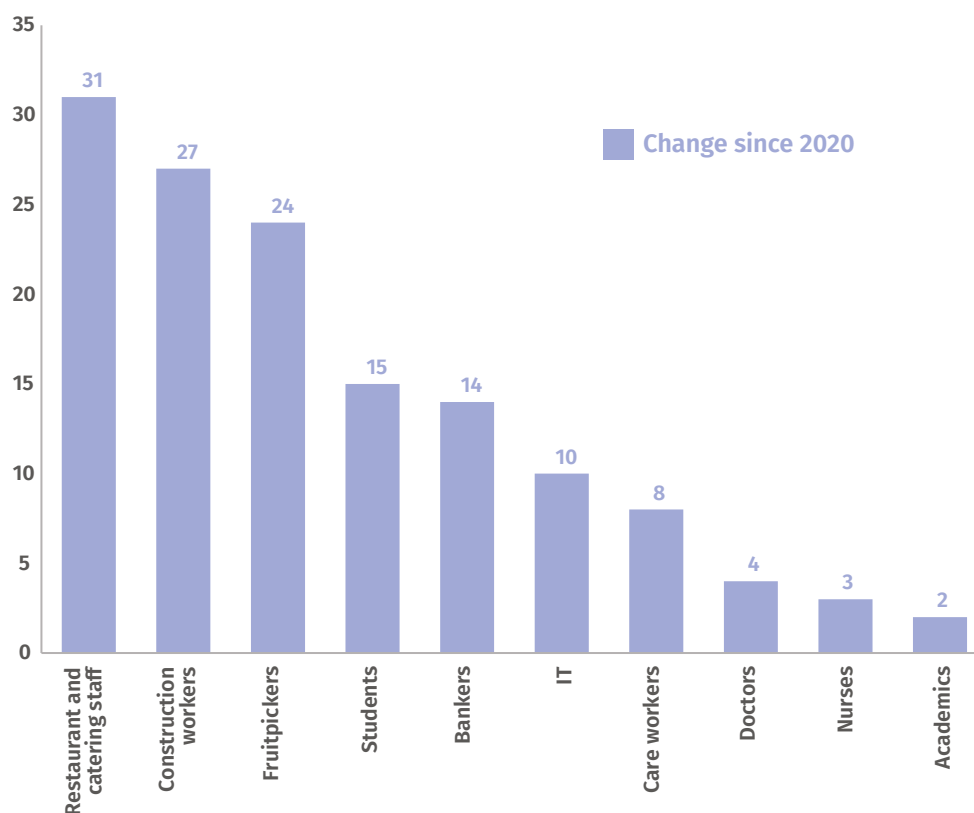
Source: Authors' analysis of Ipsos immigration tracker (2020 and 2022)

As with the analysis in chapter 1, we see positive shifts in attitudes to every group, but with some notable differences between them. The largest positive shifts have come in views towards migrants working in relatively low-skilled occupations – hospitality staff, construction workers, and agricultural labour. These are jobs which voters were formerly more sceptical about. Since 2020, however, there have been widely reported problems with recruitment and filling vacancies across the economy, especially in hospitality (ONS 2022b). There is also evidence that the pandemic has encouraged the public to value the role of migrants working in 'essential' lower-skilled jobs (Hewlett et al 2020). It seems that, post-Covid-19 and in light of recent shortages, an already pro-migration electorate has become less selective in its preferences and significantly more supportive of increasing migration into lower-skilled work. Whereas before health workers and the highly skilled were strongly favoured, now there is almost as much support for fruit pickers as NHS workers.

EXERCISING COMPASSION

The British public favour an immigration system which welcomes people expected to make an economic or social contribution to the UK. But contribution is not the only consideration for the public. There is also a broad public consensus in favour of a compassionate system which offers refuge in response to humanitarian crises. The principle of accepting refugees fleeing countries in conflict enjoys strong public backing (around 74 per cent). Support is even broader for welcoming Ukrainian refugees to the UK (around 78 per cent). This support cuts across the political spectrum: large majorities of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative voters all favour taking in refugees from Ukraine (Tryl and Surmon 2022).

FIGURE 3.3: THE PUBLIC TAKE A BROADLY COMPASSIONATE AND PRAGMATIC VIEW ON ASYLUM POLICY, THOUGH VIEWS ARE NUANCED AND SENSITIVE TO FRAMING

Share taking asylum supportive and asylum restrictive views on various aspects of asylum policy

Item	Share asylum supportive	Share asylum restrictive	Net positive-negative
Allowing asylum seekers to work would reduce their dependence on state support (July 2021)	66	10	+56
Asylum seekers may have useful skills/experience and should be allowed to work (July 2021)	58	15	+43
Being allowed to work would help asylum seekers learn English and integrate (July 2021)	58	17	+41
How much sympathy for Channel boat migrants? (Great deal/fair amount vs not much/none) (Feb 2022)	56	39	+17
An asylum system that is fair even if that means allowing more asylum seekers vs an asylum system that deters people from seeking asylum (Feb 2022)	46	32	+14
Increase the number of refugees UK takes in via UN resettlement schemes (July 2021)	31	35	-4
Giving asylum seekers right to work could attract people without a genuine claim to the UK (July 2021)	17	54	-37

Source: Authors' analysis of Ipsos immigration tracker (2021–22)

On the more contested issues of the asylum system and small boats crossings, recent polling from the Ipsos immigration tracker suggests that the public are more

pragmatic and responsive than the polarised elite political debate would suggest (figure 3.3). A majority of the public express sympathy for people crossing the English Channel in small boats. Moreover, the balance of public opinion is firmly tilted towards an asylum system focussed on fairness, not deterrence, even if this means more asylum seekers come to Britain.

However, there are also clear limits to public sympathy for refugees and asylum seekers. Opinion is divided on the idea of resettling more refugees via UN schemes, with a slight majority against. Views on allowing asylum seekers to work while their claims are being assessed vary according to framing: while most people agree that asylum seekers may possess useful skills and experience and should have the right to work, a majority also express concern that the policy could attract people who do not have a genuine asylum claim. Public sympathy for refugees is real, but fragile – with strong support for the principle of assisting refugees tempered by concern that generous policies will be exploited by others. To reinforce generous and sympathetic instincts, the public need reassurance that supportive asylum policies will not be exploited.

4.
BUILDING A PROGRESSIVE CONSENSUS FOR POST-BREXIT IMMIGRATION POLICY

The public favour an approach to immigration which is well-managed, prioritises contribution, and exercises compassion. Over the last decade, attitudes have become considerably warmer, and the public now support the idea that immigration can help drive economic recovery. In the final part of this paper, we explore what our analysis means for building a new consensus for immigration policy after Brexit.

UNDERSTANDING THE POLICY CONTEXT

It is first important to note that – even without a broad shift in public attitudes – the immigration policy landscape post-Brexit would be radically different. The debate over immigration controls was a central issue in the EU referendum campaign. as Leave campaigners argued that a nationally controlled immigration system was impossible within the EU because the UK was required to accept the free movement of people, enabling near-unrestricted movements between member states. This proved an effective – perhaps a decisive – argument.

But in the years since the vote for Brexit, the UK has exited the single market and ended the free movement of people. There is now a unified immigration system, decided by the UK government, which applies the same rules to both EU and non-EU citizens. The argument that the UK has no control over immigration policy is therefore now far harder to sustain.

The composition of immigration has also changed considerably over the past decade. Under freedom of movement, the UK experienced high levels of EU migration, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe. However, net EU migration has fallen sharply since 2016, while net non-EU migration has increased (Sumption and Walsh 2022). While reliable data from 2020 onwards is limited, this trend may well have escalated further since the end of freedom of movement and the opening up of new routes for non-EU citizens.[5]

Yet despite some pessimistic predictions, continued high aggregate migration and a shift from EU to non-EU migration have not generated a public backlash. In fact, public attitudes have become more positive since 2016, just as this shift has taken place. This reiterates the message from the previous section that public preferences on immigration tend to focus on exercising control rather than restricting numbers.

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5   See footnote 3 for a further discussion.

OVERSHOOTING PUBLIC OPINION

The end of freedom of movement – alongside parallel immigration policy developments – has also had broader effects on the political debate. In the 2000s and 2010s, a key consideration among policymakers was how to respond to intense public concern about high immigration levels, despite limited options for controlling some forms of migration. Since then, attitudes have warmed while policy has in some areas tightened, opening up an inverse risk: policies now perceived as too restrictive could face their own public backlash.

In recent years, hard-line positions on immigration have a number of times been the focus of negative media and public attention. Perhaps the most high-profile was the Windrush scandal, which exposed the catastrophic impacts of the government's 'hostile environment' policies on many members of the Windrush generation and their children. Media reporting on the scandal revealed that many people who had every right to live in the UK and had lived here for decades were being barred from accessing work, housing, and public services because they could not prove their status (Gentleman 2020; Qureshi et al 2020). The scandal highlighted concerns about the implications of immigration policy for racial inequalities and exposed Home Office thoughtlessness on the matter of race (Williams 2020). After the scandal came to light, a majority of the public said they were ashamed of how the Windrush generation had been treated and backed an immigration system which prioritised protecting those with a legal right to be in the country over one which prioritised deporting irregular migrants (Ipsos 2018).

The Windrush scandal is not the only occasion where the government has had to U-turn in response to a growing public backlash. In 2015, the government introduced a new resettlement scheme for Syrian refugees in response to media and public outrage over a lack of action in response to the mass exodus of citizens fleeing a bloody civil war. More recently, an initially tepid policy on Ukrainian refugees was strengthened after facing widespread criticism that it was out of kilter with public opinion, with the government setting up a more generous approach in the form of the 'Homes for Ukraine' sponsorship scheme.

Yet there are still a number of areas where government policy is more restrictive than the public's instincts. The public tend to favour providing migrants with full access to benefits more quickly than under current policy. Even before the recent shift in public opinion, most people supported a qualifying period of three years or less for both EU and non-EU citizens (Ford and Heath 2014). A recent study by the Migration Observatory found that, when asked whether migrants should access universal credit after five years of residency, the average score by respondents was around 4.7, where 1 meant 'absolutely should not access' and 7 meant 'absolutely should access' (Broadhead and Ruiz 2021).[6] Yet under current rules, many migrants on the '10-year' route to settlement must wait 10 years until they can access benefits.

Similarly, the public support a more generous policy on citizenship. In 2020, a study found that around 43 per cent of the public believed that the costs for non-EU adults to become citizens were too high, compared with 16 per cent who thought they were too low and 28 per cent who thought they were about right. A majority supported fee discounts for particular groups, including frontline workers and those who had worked in Britain and paid taxes for over five years. Most people thought that children of non-UK citizens who were born and brought up here should either not have to pay anything for citizenship or should be granted it automatically after five years of residency (Arslanagic-Wakefield 2020).

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6   The score was 4.7 for both migrants in high and medium-high skilled jobs and migrants in low and medium-low skilled jobs.

As discussed in the previous section, public attitudes to work-based immigration also do not align with the current rules of the points-based system. There is now net positive support for increasing immigration of fruit pickers, restaurant and catering staff, and construction labourers – occupations which for the most part are not eligible for a skilled worker visa. Analysis by the Migration Observatory suggests that, while the public in general favour admitting people into higher-skilled work, they also value jobs considered 'essential' during the Covid-19 pandemic (such as care workers and supermarket lorry drivers) (Fernández-Reino 2021).

RULES-BASED OPENNESS

The analysis in this paper suggests there is space for a new progressive narrative on immigration policy which is capable of securing public support. According to the research laid out here, the public broadly accept the principle of 'rules-based openness' for immigration policy. That is, the public expects there to be clear rules for immigration, which are competently enforced by the government. But within these rules there is considerable scope for generosity and compassion.

To guide an approach to immigration which captures 'rules-based openness', we propose three broad principles, drawing on our analysis of public attitudes.

1. Immigration policy should be grounded in well-defined and transparent rules. There should be rules making clear the pathways for entering the UK, securing work, study, and family sponsorship, and becoming permanent residents and citizens. The rules should be administered and enforced quickly and effectively.

2. In designing these rules, the government should exercise compassion. Eligibility requirements should be determined in line with what the public would consider reasonable if applied to themselves. Home Office decisions should be made fairly and without discrimination.

3. Immigration rules should do everything possible to support and reward contribution. Policy should be designed to maximise contribution by facilitating long-term settlement and integration.

These principles accord with the views of the majority of the public. As detailed in the previous section, most people tend to be in favour of a rules-based, well-managed system – though not necessarily one controlled through caps on numbers. A strong priority is placed on contribution – the public tend to prioritise welcoming those who are able to make a significant economic or social contribution to the UK. And – provided they feel that the rules are not being unfairly exploited – the public is sympathetic to a generous and compassionate approach to those most vulnerable, including through resettling refugees.

What might this approach to immigration – following 'rules-based openness' – mean in practice for policy? There are a few immediate areas which would lend themselves to policy change.

First, we would expect a different approach to the points-based immigration system. For a 'rules-based' approach to work, immigration for EU and non-EU citizens must be carefully managed. For this reason, the basic contours of the points-based system would remain in place and there would be no return to freedom of movement.

But this does not mean there would be no reform. Rather than largely determining eligibility on the basis of salaries and skills requirements, greater weight would be placed on the social and economic contribution of the job being sponsored. In practice, this would mean that occupations critical to the government's social and economic policy would be eligible for a skilled

worker visa, even if they do not currently meet the skills requirement. There has been a recent shift in this direction with the government's relaxation of rules for care workers. Building on this reform, the new policy could extend exemptions to other critical occupations, such as key in-demand jobs in the logistics, construction, and food processing industries. In return, employers would be expected to uphold additional sponsor duties such as paying the living wage, as IPPR has previously argued.

Second, a 'rules-based openness' approach would help migrants to contribute and integrate by easing pathways to settlement and citizenship. In particular, application fees would be capped at a reasonable level (and scrapped entirely for children), the '10-year' route to settlement would be shortened down to five years, and a simplified pathway to citizenship would be introduced for all those with permanent residence. To help make it easier to contribute to the UK and their local community, this approach would make a major investment in more financial support for migrants to take language and citizenship courses as a critical step towards settling in the UK.

Third, our approach would build on the recent public outpouring of support for Ukrainian refugees under the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme, which arranges households with spare rooms or accommodation to host Ukrainians. (So far there have been over 100,000 arrivals under the scheme (Home Office 2022).) The scheme would be expanded to other nationalities, responding to public compassion and empathy for refugees while also supporting people to integrate into local communities. As argued by British Future and More in Common, the scheme could initially focus on support for Afghan refugees (Katwala et al 2022). To ensure this approach is 'rules-based' and to address some of the deficiencies with the existing scheme, there would be stricter processes in place for ensuring hosts are suitable, addressing potential safeguarding concerns, and planning long-term accommodation arrangements. This could help to galvanise support for refugees by involving local communities, while also ensuring that systems are better-regulated and organised than currently.

Fourth, our approach would also lead to a change in Home Office culture. Under the principles of 'rules-based openness', the Home Office would simplify the immigration rules and make its policymaking process more transparent and open to scrutiny. Learning the lessons from the Windrush scandal, officials would make decisions based on individual needs and circumstances and would have the power to exercise discretion where appropriate. All policy and operational decisions would be scrutinised to ensure they are evidence-based and tackle the risks of discrimination.

Finally, perhaps the greatest challenge for a 'rules-based openness' approach to post-Brexit immigration politics is developing a response to the Channel crossings. The rise in small boats making the dangerous journey across the Channel – together with the government's poor handling of asylum applications in recent years – risks undermining confidence in a rules-based immigration system, particularly among the declining but still large minority of migration sceptics in the electorate. As detailed above, there are specific concerns over the asylum system, where the public perceive risks that good intentions will be exploited. The government's response so far – from trying to turn back the boats to forming an agreement with Rwanda to deport asylum seekers – has proved divisive and ineffective. To secure public confidence on this issue, politicians will need a convincing plan to reduce the small boat crossings, make fair and efficient asylum decisions, and improve safe and legal routes for refugees. IPPR will be planning more detailed work on how to respond to this challenge in the coming months (see Morris and Qureshi 2022).

CONCLUSION

There has been a rapid shift in public attitudes to immigration over the past decade. Around half of the public now see immigration as having a positive economic and cultural impact on Britain, compared with a third in 2014. A majority believe that immigration can help to drive economic recovery. The share of people in favour of maintaining or increasing immigration is at an all-time high. And the recent upswell of public support for Ukrainian refugees exhibits the potential for a generous and humane approach to the asylum system.

Our analysis of public opinion lends itself to an approach to immigration following the principle of 'rules-based openness'. The public expect there to be clear rules for immigration which are managed and administered effectively. But within these rules there is considerable support for an approach which treats people with compassion, rewards contribution, and helps integration. A new agenda which embodies this approach could help to rebuild public confidence in the immigration system and reshape the politics of immigration for the 2020s.

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