

Reality Check

What voters really think about
immigration

Jim Blagden

ONWARD >

About Onward

Onward's mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity, build national resilience, and strengthen communities across all parts of the United Kingdom.

We are not affiliated to any party but believe in mainstream conservatism. Our vision is to address the needs of the whole country: young and old, urban and rural, for all communities across the UK – particularly places that have too often felt neglected or ignored by Westminster.

We believe in an optimistic conservatism that is truly national – one that recognises the value of markets, supported by a streamlined state that is active not absent. We are unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, putting power closer to people, and supporting the hardworking and aspirational.

Thanks

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About the author

Jim is Head of Politics & Polling at Onward, focusing on the changing values and voting patterns of the electorate and the future of the Union. His previous work identified 'Workington Man' as the key swing voter ahead of the 2019 election.

About this poll

With our partners, Stack Data Strategy, we conducted a poll to understand the public's view of immigration. We surveyed a nationally representative sample of 4,005 people across Great Britain. The fieldwork: 14th November – 2nd January 2023.

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Executive summary



Immigration is a top public priority. In the immediate aftermath of the vote to leave the EU, its salience rapidly fell but has steadily risen throughout 2022 and 2023. As the overall levels of net migration have risen in the post-Brexit era, so too have public concerns. With net migration reaching 745,000 in 2022, a watershed moment has been reached.

Much of the UK's migration debate has been split into whether "control" is the central motivation or "numbers" – do people just want a greater sense of control over their borders, or do they prioritise reducing numbers? This research, conducted between November 2023 and January 2024 by Onward and Stack Data Strategy, seeks to examine the public mood on this question, whether it is a false dichotomy, how people feel about current levels of migration and what they would like to see change.

The polling shows that perceptions of net migration levels are significantly out of kilter with reality. When we asked participants to give us their estimate of current levels of net migration, the average response was 70,000 – just less than a tenth of 2023 actual levels. This suggests that people are completely unaware of the true scale of immigration.

Most people think that, even at this much reduced number, perceived levels are unacceptable. On average, respondents said that the level of immigration is 2.8x too high. For those who guessed immigration was 100,000, for example, the median value for their right level of immigration was 35,000.

This was not merely confined to older voters. Across every single political and demographic group, a majority said immigration is too high – including among 18-24 year olds, degree holders, Remain voters and Londoners.

On the question of control versus numbers, the research shows that a majority of those who want to control migration also want to restrict it: 57% of respondents are both 'controllers' and 'reducers' who want overall levels of migration to drop as well as tighter restrictions on the types of migration. Only 4% of people think controls on migration should be used to increase it. Over half believe that overall levels would reduce if the Government exerted control over migration.

We have also examined support for control and reduction of migration by each constituency. Almost 9 in 10 (88%) constituencies have a preference for both

lower numbers and tighter controls on immigration. The preference for higher immigration and relaxed controls is concentrated in only a few areas – mostly cities. Clacton in Essex has the highest support for reducing migration (66%), whereas Bristol Central is the most liberal place in the country, with 55% wanting higher levels of immigration and a more relaxed system. Of the 75 seats where people prefer higher immigration and relaxed controls, most of them (52) are in London

Concerns about the levels of migration are rife across all ages. This research has found that there is not much difference between 40-year-olds' views of immigration and 75-year-olds. Younger cohorts have more favourable views on the cultural impact of migration than their elders. Every political and demographic group believes that immigrants receive more than they pay in taxes. The same is true on public services, with around a third stating that migration has helped the NHS and two-thirds stating it has harmed it.

Although older demographic cohorts state much higher concerns – especially on economic matters – younger voters do not automatically say they are in favour of migration for these reasons. In fact, 62% of 18-24 year olds want fewer migrants and have more sceptical views than older generations on its potential economic benefits. But they do state they are in favour of migration for its cultural benefits.

There are also split opinions on where migration to the UK should come from. Just under half (49%) say that the Government should prioritise immigration from countries with similar cultures to Britain. The most popular countries of origin for migrants were Australia, Germany and Poland, while Pakistan, China and Somalia ranked last. For occupations, doctors, nurses and scientists proved to be the most popular options; hospitality staff, cleaners and barbers were the least popular. Yet looking at the types and professions of migrants to the UK over the last few years, people are not getting what they want.

Migration is particularly important for the Conservative party: since 2020, there has been a fifty-point gap between how important its voters place the issue versus the Labour Party. Every single corner of the Tories' voting coalition – the party's continuing supporters and those who have flipped to Reform, Labour and Lib Dems – care much more about immigration than the average voter. Those who currently aren't sure how to vote are especially hawkish on numbers.

A new, better model of migration is vital for revising the Conservatives' electoral prospects and it is imperative for the Government to make tangible, clear progress on reducing migration. With such a stark difference between perception and reality on levels of migration, it's no surprise that the public are in favour of tough measures.

Immigration is rising up the agenda



In the run-up to the Brexit vote, people expected immigration to fall if Britain left the EU. In June 2016, two-thirds (64%) of people expected immigration to be lower outside the EU, 28% did not think it would make a difference, and only 7% expected it to be higher. This quickly fell to around 40% expecting immigration to be lower and 50% expecting no change. But the share of people expecting higher immigration never exceeded 10%.¹

This reduction did not happen. Although net migration did fall in the immediate aftermath of the vote to Leave, it is now twice as high as it was in 2016. In the year ending June 2016, net migration was 321,000.² But seven years later, after the introduction of a new points-based immigration system, net migration stands at 672,000. The British have modified their assessment. In a stark reversal, half of people now think that immigration is higher than it would have been had the UK remained in the EU, as Figures 1a and 1b show below.³

Figure 1a: If Britain were to leave the EU, do you think immigration to Britain would be higher, lower, or wouldn't it make much difference?⁴ 2021

Source: *WhatUKThinks*

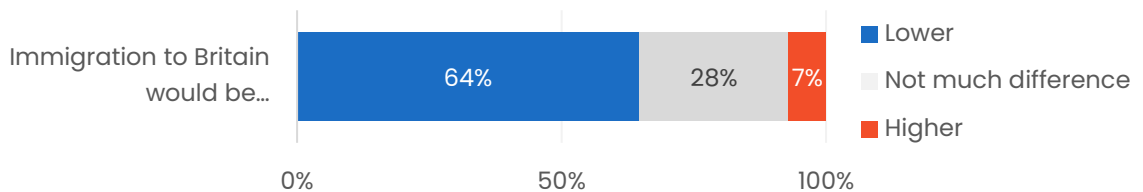
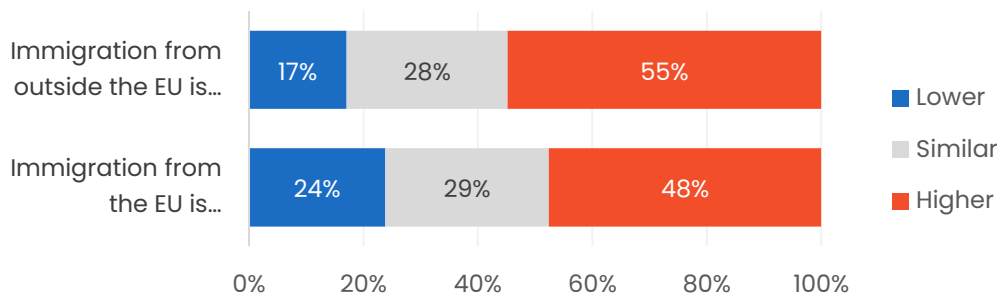


Figure 1b: In your opinion, with the United Kingdom outside of the European Union, is immigration into the United Kingdom from [the European Union/outside the European Union] now higher, lower, or similar to what it would be otherwise?⁵ 2023

Source: *UKICE*



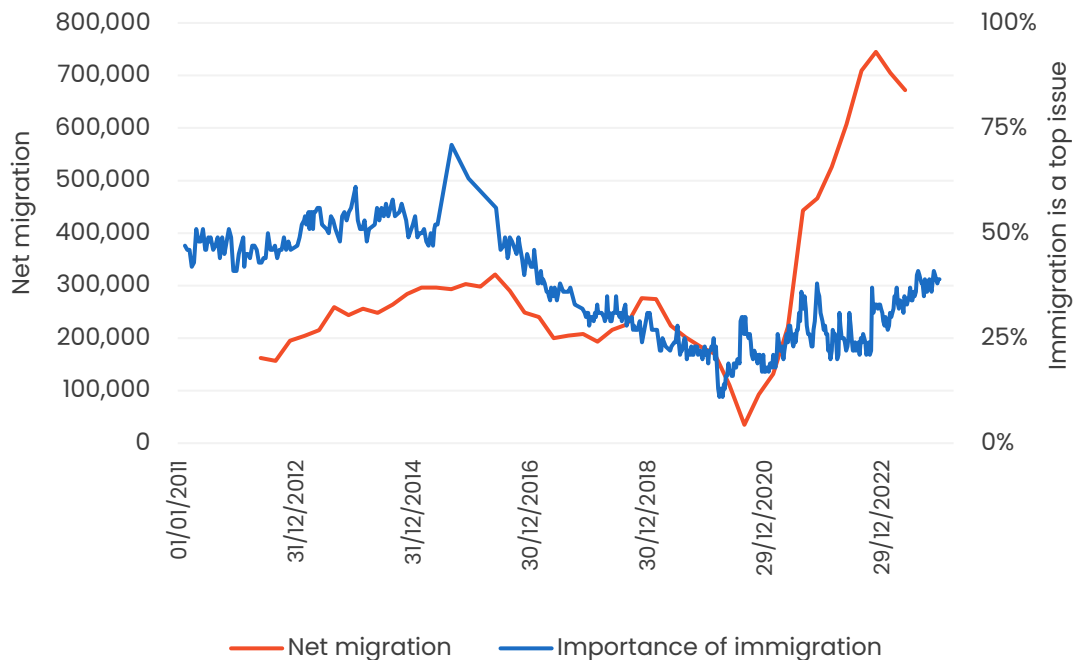
Alongside this, immigration has now reached a level of salience not seen since 2017. As a top issue facing the country, the importance of immigration declined immediately after the vote to leave the European Union and fell to its lowest point ever when the pandemic hit in early 2020. But those who initially thought that Brexit had ‘fixed’ the issue are now realising that it hasn’t, with the salience of immigration rising steadily over 2022 and 2023.

The public reacts ‘thermostatically’ to policy. For example, the restrictive pre-1997 policy regime, with consistent near-zero levels of net migration, led to falling concern and softening attitudes towards immigration. But New Labour’s liberalisation, and the corresponding rise in net migration led to increasing dissatisfaction and opposition.⁶

In more recent data, it looks like the salience of immigration tracks changes in net migration levels, as Figure 3 shows below. The Brexit referendum was the high-water mark for public concern over immigration. The vote to leave the EU itself seems to have lowered the salience of immigration, with the public reacting thermostatically to changing political conditions.

Figure 3: Net migration vs salience of immigration

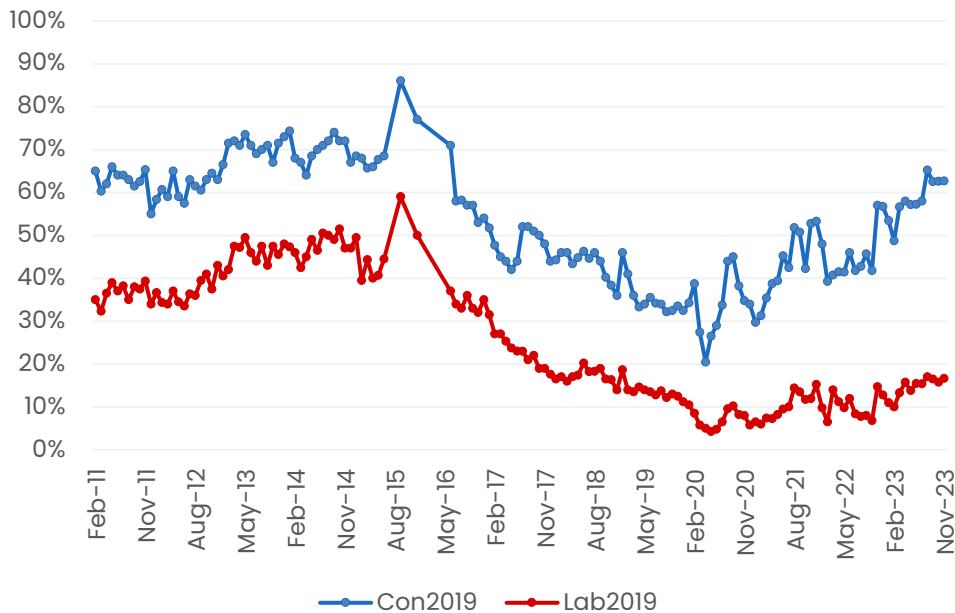
Source: ONS and YouGov



The Conservative Party’s coalition has always cared more about immigration than Labour voters, but the gap has recently grown. Between 2011 and 2020, Conservatives were consistently 20-30 percentage points more likely to cite immigration as a top issue than Labour voters. Since 2020, that gap has grown to 50 points.

Figure 4a: Immigration salience, by 2019 vote

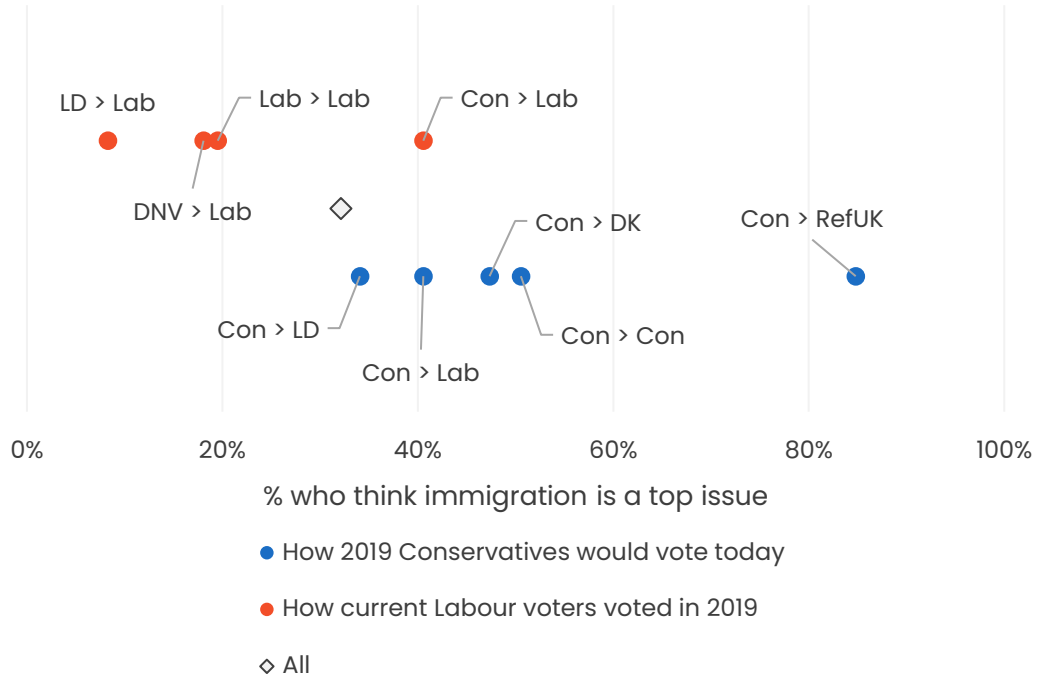
Source: YouGov



Every part of the 2019 Conservative coalition cares more about immigration than the average person. Even among those former Conservatives who say they would vote Labour or Liberal Democrat if an election were held tomorrow, 41% and 34% respectively think immigration is a top issue. Delivering on immigration reform is therefore a crucial component to the Conservatives’ recovery in the polls.

Labour’s gains from the Liberal Democrats are the least concerned about immigration, followed by those who did not vote last time - mostly voters who were too young to participate in 2019 and are part of Labour’s urban graduate base. Ex-Conservative supporters have very different opinions. The Conservative-to-Labour group is more closely aligned with the current Conservative coalition than with the rest of Labour’s bloc. Labour needs to keep these voters on-side and speak to their concerns about immigration.

Figure 5: Salience of immigration among the voters that Conservatives have lost and the voters that Labour has gained since 2019



Control vs numbers

A false dichotomy?



The British public think the level of immigration is too high

Despite some evidence of shifting attitudes over time, concern over the scale of immigration and support for lower numbers remain mainstream opinions in Britain today:

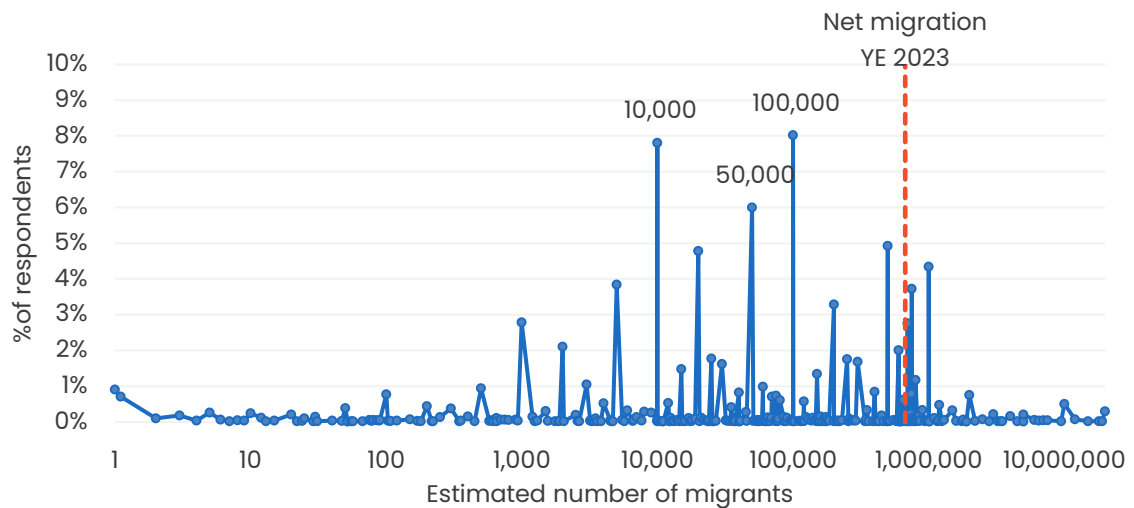
- Ipsos recently found that, by two-to-one, people want immigration reduced rather than increased, although this has fallen from a ratio of around six-to-one in 2015.⁷
- Recent polling from Focaldata found that 58% of people wanted levels of immigration to be reduced, and only 31% wanted it to be increased.⁸
- Similar analysis found that, in every constituency except Bristol West, more people agreed than disagreed that immigration levels are too high; the overall national figures were 57% agreeing compared to 20% disagreeing.⁹

These questions are commonplace, and the results all point in the same direction. But they often assume that voters are sufficiently informed about immigration levels for their answers to be meaningfully comparable. When a respondent says that they think the numbers should increase or decrease, this will be in reference to what they imagine the numbers to be.

Pollsters rarely measure this reference point, which makes interpreting the answers more difficult. Do people know what the level of migration actually is? If you asked them, would they give similar answers?

It seems that most of the population wildly underestimates the current level of immigration. We asked respondents to give us their best guess as to the number of people who migrated to the UK last year. The median guess was 70,000, ten times lower than the 672,000 net migration figure for 2023 and 17-times lower than the gross immigration figure of 1.2 million.¹⁰

Figure 6: How many people do you think migrated to the UK last year including refugees, students and people coming for work?



This provides useful context to ‘higher or lower’ questions. People are completely unaware of the scale of immigration - whichever way you look at it, people vastly underestimate the true number. And we cannot assume that when two different respondents say they want immigration to “stay the same” or “decrease”, they mean the same thing.

The other benefit of this approach is that it does not constrain responses within a specified range, and avoids any bias towards the middle option. People notoriously struggle to conceptualise large numbers, as happened when the public wildly overestimated the scale of Covid-19 deaths, thinking that 1% of the entire population had died from the disease.¹¹

Taking this into account, how does a person’s guess for the current level of immigration compare to their ideal level of immigration? Controlling for how high they think immigration currently is, how much higher or lower do they think it ought to be?

Most people think that immigration is higher than it should be. On average, the level of immigration is 2.8-times too high. For instance, for those who guessed immigration was 100,000 (a very common guess) the median value for their ideal level of immigration was 35,000. Only 16% of people chose a larger figure for their ideal number than their guess for the actual number. Some 9% chose the exact same number, and 76% chose a smaller number.

Across every single political and demographic group in this survey, a majority think that immigration is higher than it should be. Among 18-24s, 62% chose a lower number for their ideal level of immigration, as did 67% of degree-holders, 68% of Londoners, 68% of Remain voters, and 72% of Labour voters.

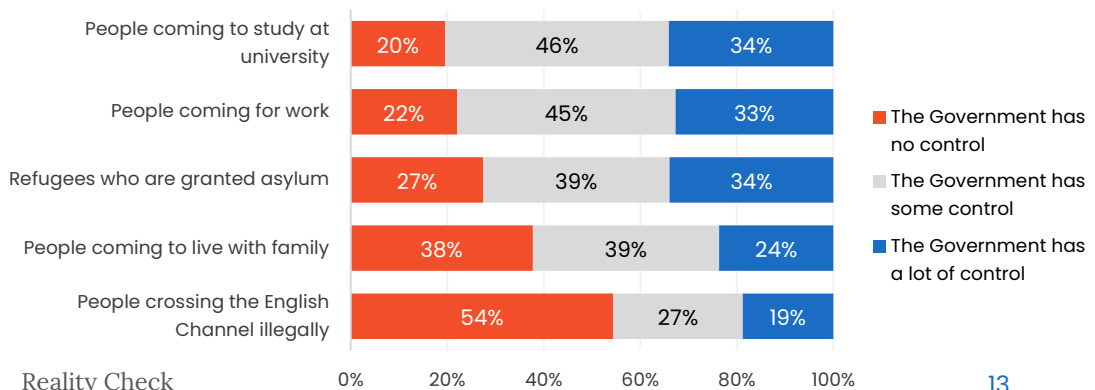
Even for an under-35-year-old Labour voter, with a university degree, living in London, there is a 47% likelihood that they want lower levels of immigration. This is based on a logistic regression, which predicts the likelihood that a person chose a lower number for their ideal level of immigration than their guess for the current level of immigration, as a function of their age, education, region and voting intention. This is because this very specific subsample (30 respondents) is too small to report the raw percentages.

But this does not mean that the remaining 53% want more immigration. The likelihood of this young, graduate, urban, Labour voter wanting more immigration (rather than the same or less) is just 40%. Granted, this is over twice as high as the 16% national average, but still short of a majority.

Most Britons believe the Government already has control over immigration

Most people believe that the Government has some or a lot of control over immigration. Across all four types of legal migration that we asked about in our survey, the most frequent response was that the Government has “some control.” And, with the exception of family visas, respondents were more likely to say the Government has “a lot of control” than “no control.”

Figure 7: Please consider the following types of immigration. How much control do you think the Government currently has over each of them?



Those who think that the Government has less control are more supportive of capping immigration. Support for limiting immigration numbers is a very popular policy, which we discuss in the chapters below. But, whereas 65% of those who think the Government has “a lot” of control over immigration for work support a work visa cap, this rises to 76% among those who think the Government has “no control.”

Similarly, we found that people who think immigration is economically and culturally beneficial are more likely to think the Government is in control. This is true for each of the five types of immigration. For instance, among those who think the Government has a lot of control over immigration for work, 35% think immigrants contribute more in taxes than they receive in benefits. This falls to 21% among those who think the Government has no control. So, satisfaction with the outcomes of immigration is related to satisfaction with the current policy mechanism.

This is likely why younger, higher-education, politically left-leaning respondents think the Government has more control compared to older, lower-education and right-leaning respondents. In particular, those 2019 Conservatives, who would currently switch to Reform UK are the most likely to think the Government has no control over different types of immigration.

More control means reducing numbers

People who want more control over the composition of immigration also want lower numbers overall. The reverse is also true; those that want more immigration simultaneously want fewer controls. Excluding ‘don’t know’, over half of people (57%) are ‘reducers’ and ‘controllers’. They say they want fewer immigrants to come to the UK overall and they want tighter restrictions on the types of immigrants who come to the UK. Only 4% of people think the Government should tighten controls and also increase numbers. There is no constituency for a policy that prioritises control while also increasing the levels of immigration. People do not balance control against numbers. Rather, the two go hand-in-hand.

Table 1: Control vs numbers, excluding Don't know

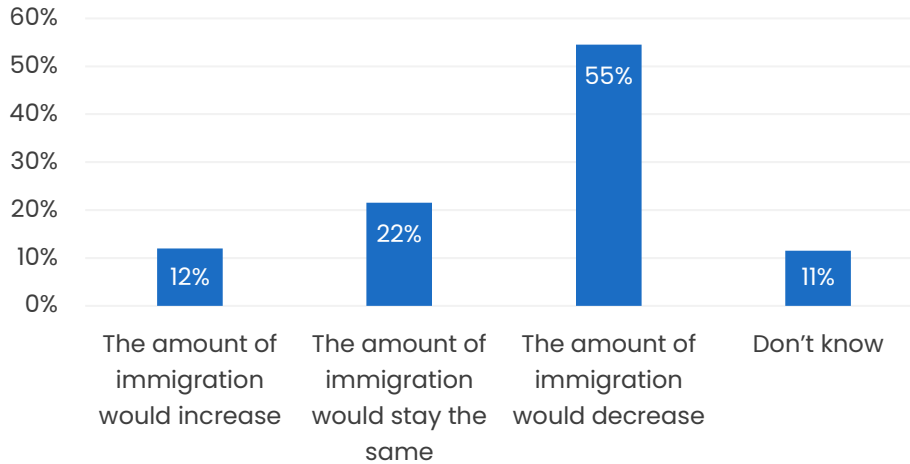
Thinking about how many immigrants the Government accepts into the UK, which of the following comes closest to your view?

		Reduce	Same	Increase
Thinking about how restrictive the Government should be, which of the following comes closest to your view?	Tighten	57%	8%	4%
	Same	4%	13%	2%
	Relax	2%	5%	6%

We also asked this in a different way. If the Government exerted more control over immigration, what would voters expect to happen? Do they associate greater control with higher or lower levels of immigration? A majority of people (55%) said they would expect the numbers to decrease if the Government exerted more control over the numbers and types of immigrants that come to the UK.

Only 12% said they would expect the numbers to increase. But this is the opposite of what happened in reality when the Government gained more control over the immigration system post-Brexit. As we showed in the previous chapter, with greater autonomy, numbers increased dramatically. In the year ending June 2023, net migration was 672,000, three-times higher than the rate before Covid and the changes to immigration policy. Using greater control to increase numbers is out of step with public opinion; when politicians say 'control', people mostly understand that to mean 'reductions'.

Figure 8: If the Government exerted more control over the numbers and types of immigrants who come to the UK, what would you expect to happen?



The 'control and reduce' bloc is electorally powerful

Almost nine out of ten (88%) of constituencies support tighter controls over the types of migrants who come to the UK and also want lower overall numbers. Although 26% of people said they want immigration increased and controls relaxed this is only the most common opinion in 12% of constituencies. Parliamentary arithmetic means that these immigration-sceptic constituencies will make up a majority of any governing party's coalition. The concerns of voters in these seats cannot be ignored.

Figure 9: The immigration restrictors are a very geographically efficient bloc

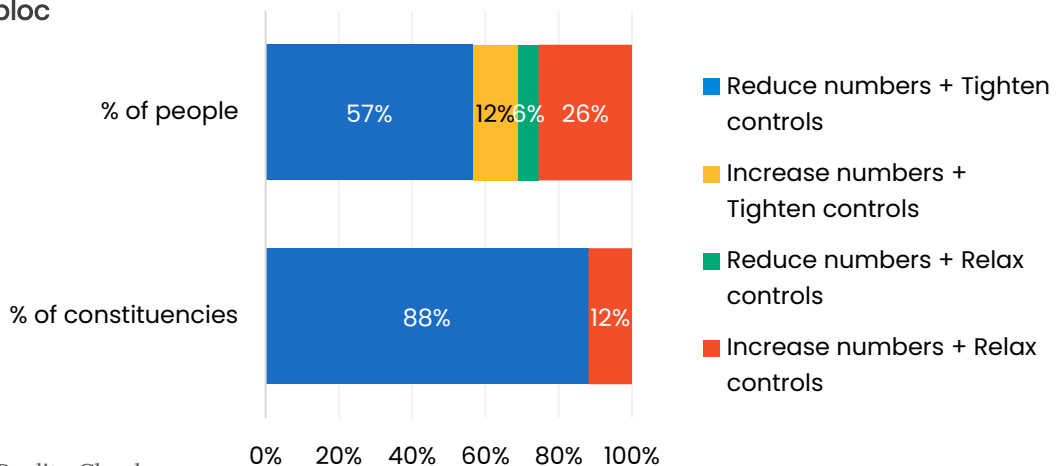


Table 2: Most hawkish and liberal constituencies

Constituency	% of voters who want tighten controls and reduce numbers	Constituency	% of voters who want to relax controls and increase numbers
Clacton	67%	Bristol Central	55%
Louth & Horncastle	66%	Hackney South & Shoreditch	52%
Bridlington & The Wolds	66%	Bethnal Green & Stepney	52%
Staffordshire Moorlands	66%	Bermondsey & Old Southwark	51%
Cannock Chase	66%	Lewisham North	51%

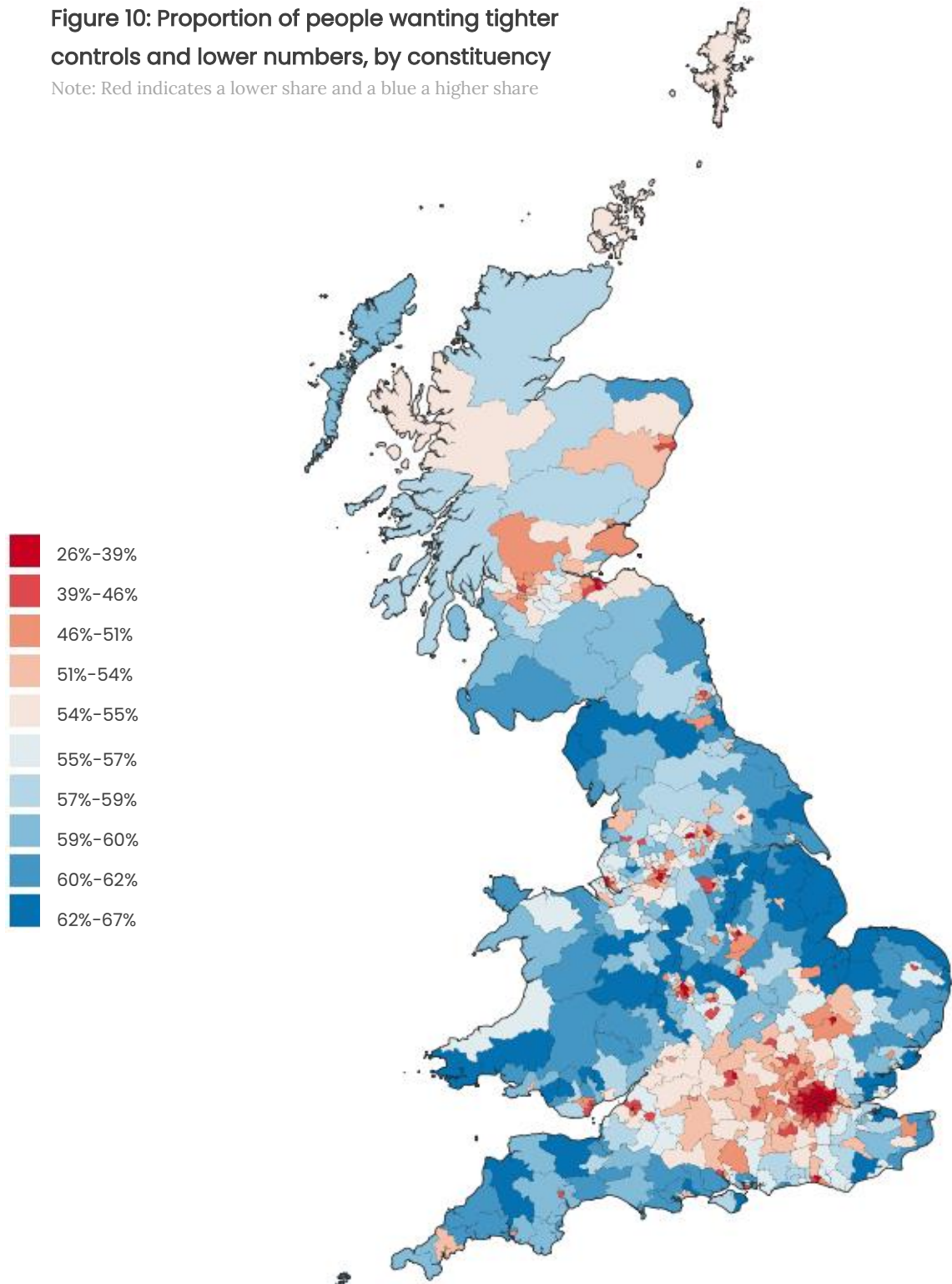
Figure 10, below, shows that the most hawkish places tend to be located along the east coast of England, from Thanet to Blyth, plus large swathes of the rural Midlands.

The preference for higher immigration and relaxed controls is concentrated in only a few areas, mostly cities. Of the 75 seats where people prefer higher immigration and relaxed controls, 52 (69%) are in London. Although people in the Home Counties generally prefer controls and reductions, they are more likely than average to think the Government should relax controls and increase numbers.

Coastal seats are disproportionately likely to be hawkish on immigration. Although only 25% of seats are defined as coastal, this rises to 38% of the 100 most anti-immigration seats. Of the 100 most liberal seats, only nine are coastal.

Figure 10: Proportion of people wanting tighter controls and lower numbers, by constituency

Note: Red indicates a lower share and a blue a higher share



**What do people
think about the
impact of
immigration?**



Unlike the overall level of immigration, the public is more mixed when it comes to the impact on the economy or society. For instance, framing immigration in terms of an economic recovery gives responses a positive spin. Focaldata found that 51% of people believed that “immigrants’ skills and labour are necessary to help the economic recovery” and only 28% believed immigration will damage any economic recovery.¹² On the other hand, the same survey showed only 51% felt some sympathy for those making perilous journeys across the Channel on small boats and 45% felt little or no sympathy at all.¹³

We also know that the youngest generations are growing up with more pro-migration attitudes. In 2022, Onward found that there is not much difference between 40-year-olds’ views of immigration and 75-year-olds’ views. But 18-24 year-olds have much more favourable opinions of the cultural impact of immigration than the rest of the country, as Figure 11a shows below.

Most areas of the country think immigration has undermined British society. Half of all people are immigration sceptics on this cultural question. But the map in Figure 11b shows that immigration sceptics outnumber immigration optimists in 75% of Parliamentary constituencies.

Figure 11a: Attitudes towards the cultural impact of immigration, by age

Source: Onward (2023) *Missing Millennials*

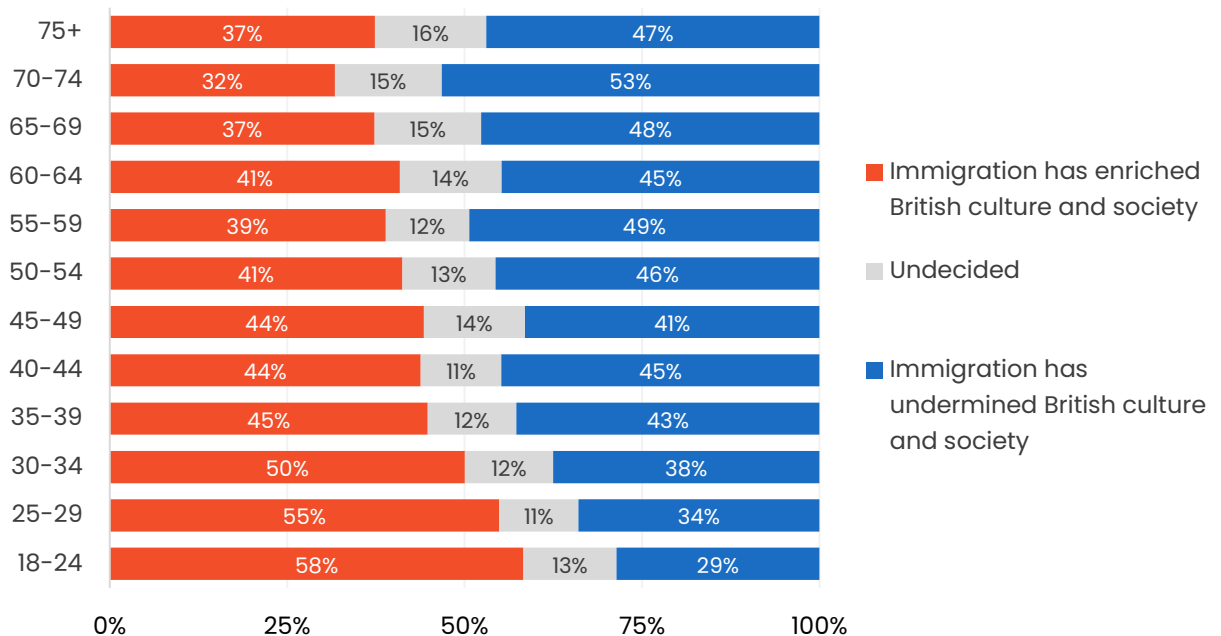
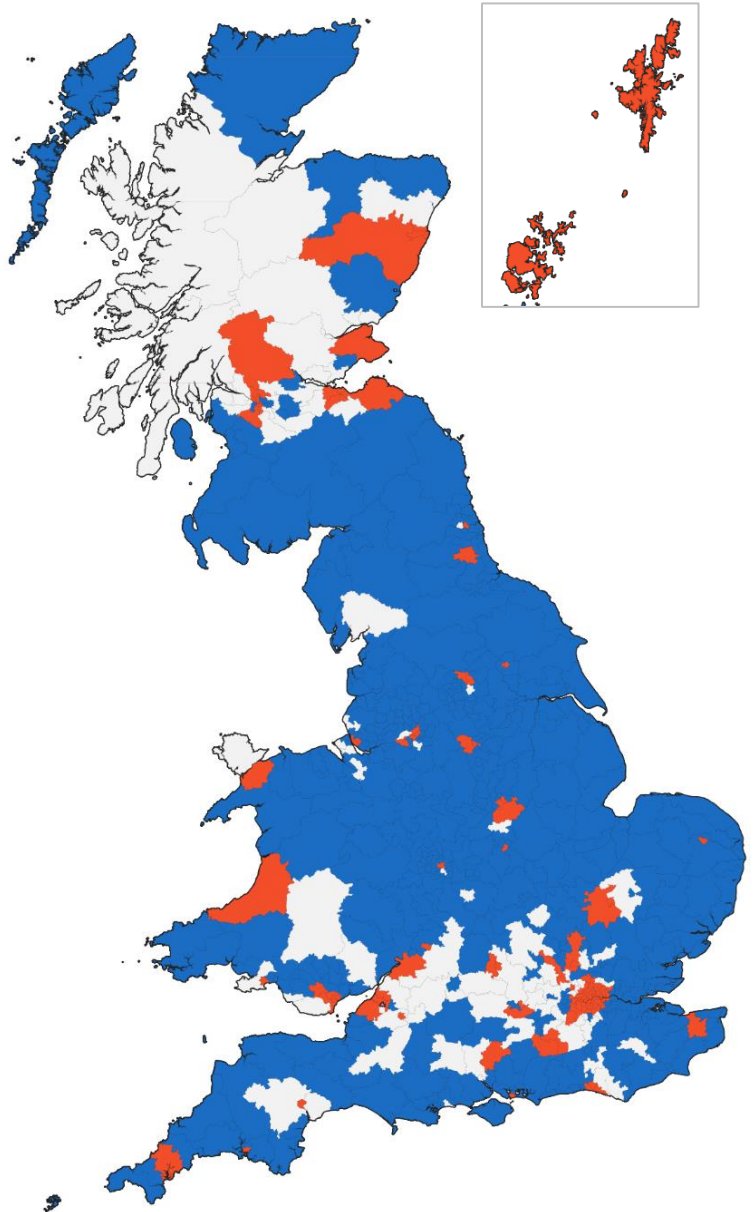
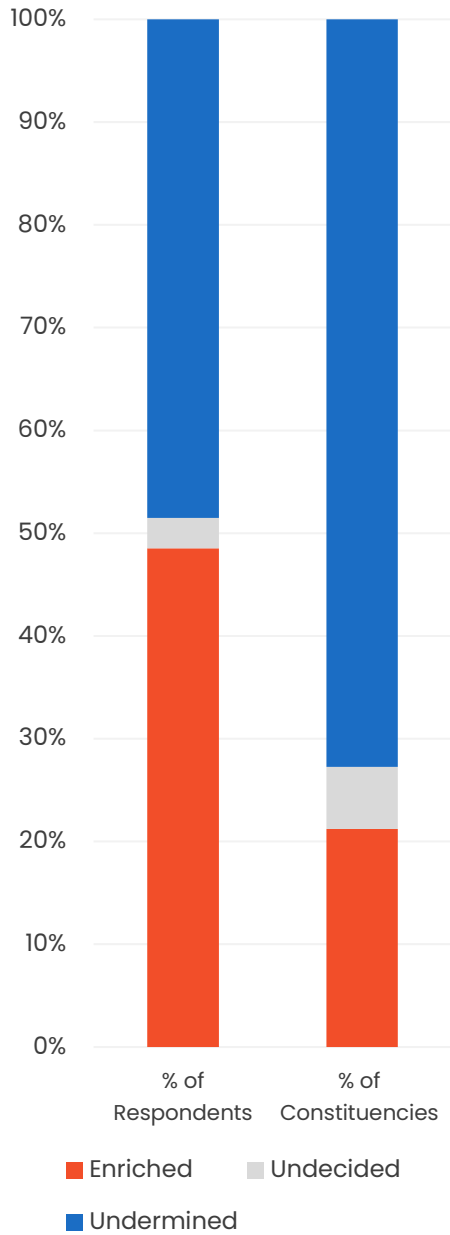


Figure 11b: The immigration-sceptic coalition is very geographically efficient

Source: *Onward* (2022) *After the fall*

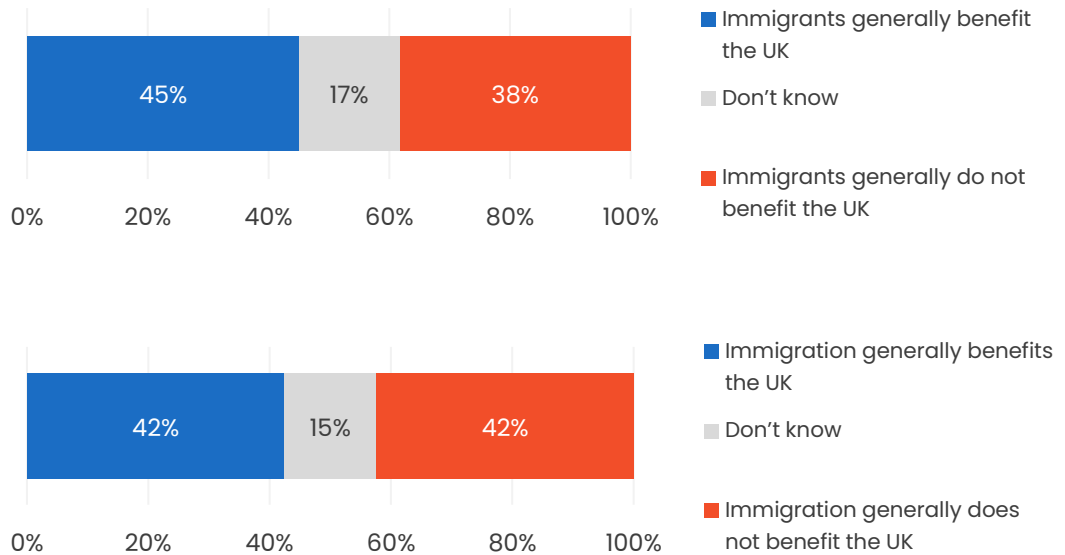


The public's opinion of immigration has worsened recently. Since mid-2022, people have become less likely to think that immigration has benefited the country. This increasing scepticism also holds for generally more liberal groups like 18-24s, ABC1s, Londoners, and Labour and Remain voters.¹⁴

This is also reflected in Onward's polling. We found that the public are evenly split on whether immigration generally benefits the UK. And if the question is phrased in terms of "immigrants", rather than "immigration", people tend to be slightly more positive.

Figure 12: Which of the following statements comes closer to your view?

Note: We split the sample to ask 2,000 people the first question on "immigrants" and the other 2,000 people the question on "immigration"



Onward's polling shows that Britons are, on the whole, quite pessimistic about immigration. But there are some contrasting views to be found. In short, most people do not think that immigration policy is working very well - regardless of politics, age, or education. We discuss our findings in the sections below.

Most people are unconvinced of the economic benefits

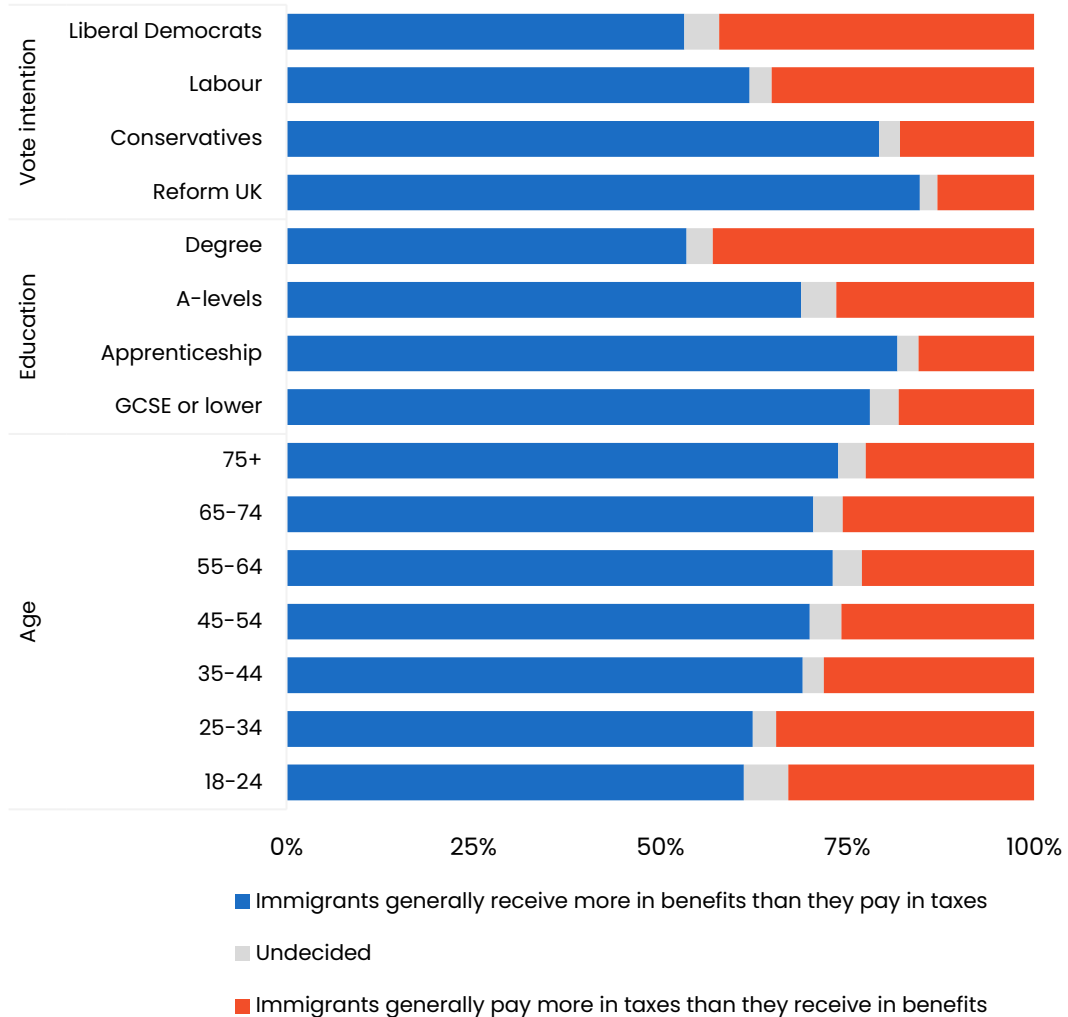
The British public are very sceptical about the economic benefits of immigration. By two-to-one Britons think that immigration generally costs rather than benefits public services like the NHS. And by the same large margin, people think that immigrants generally receive more in benefits than they pay in taxes.

Taxes and benefits

Every political and demographic group believes that immigrants receive more than they pay in taxes. But some groups are more optimistic about how much immigrants contribute. Younger people (aged 18 to 34) are more positive about immigrants' contributions compared to all other age groups by about ten percentage points (33% compared to 23%). Having a degree-level qualification makes someone twice as likely to see immigrants as contributing more than they receive compared to having no or few qualifications

This also splits along party lines. Some 37% of 2019 Labour voters believe that immigrants pay more than they receive, but only 16% of 2019 Conservatives believe this. Of the 2019 voters who have defected from the Conservative Party to Labour, 27% believe that immigrants pay more than they receive. Of those 2019 Conservatives who now don't know how they are voting, 14% believe immigrants pay more than they receive.

Figure 13: A majority of every age, education, and political group thinks that immigrants receive more in benefits that then pay in taxes

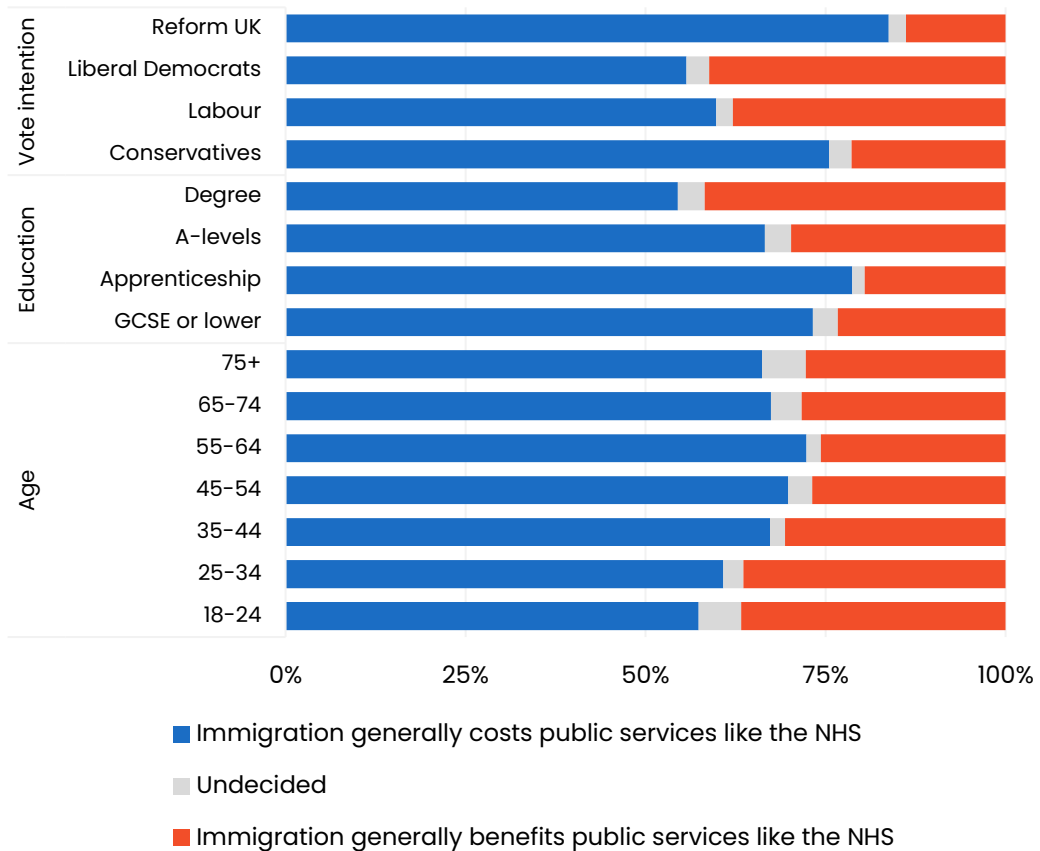


But the overwhelmingly pessimistic opinion about immigrants' contribution does not chime with the data. Studies on migrants' fiscal impact make assumptions about the number of migrants, their use of public services, and staffing levels in public services amongst others. Where immigrants come from can make a difference. For example, Oxford Economics found that European Economic Area (EEA) migrants have a net fiscal contribution of £4.7 billion annually, while non-EEA immigrants cost £9 billion annually.¹⁵ Skill level, age and earnings are all also important determinants.¹⁶

Public services and the NHS

Of the public as a whole, roughly a third (30%) believe immigration benefits public services like the NHS while two-thirds (66%) believe that immigration costs public services like the NHS. While voters from neither party view immigration as being a net benefit for public services, 2019 Labour voters are twice as likely as 2019 Conservatives to see it as a benefit (40% vs 19%). New Labour voters defecting from the Conservatives are much less positive about immigration compared to long-term Labour voters (24% vs 39%). But they are still more positive than Conservative to Don't Know (15%).

Figure 14: A majority of every age, education, and political group thinks that immigration generally costs rather than benefits public services like the NHS



Another key dividing line is education. There is generally a positive relationship between a person's education level and their view of immigration. Those with no formal qualifications overwhelmingly view immigration as a cost to public services (79%) but those with degree-level qualifications are much more likely to see the positives (42% see immigration as beneficial). Age has less impact on people's views of immigration. The view that it helps public services stays fairly consistent at around a third, a bit higher for 18-to-34s (37%) and lower for older people aged over 65 (28%).

Concern for public services and the NHS is at, or near, the top of the list for both the drawbacks and benefits of immigration. A total of 47% of people view working in key sectors like the NHS as one of the main benefits of immigration and 53% say that one of the main drawbacks of immigration is pressure on public services. There are two reasons why this might be. Firstly, the NHS boosts salience in both directions. 54% of people selected health and the NHS as a top issue facing the country, so it is no surprise that the impact on the NHS is at the forefront of voters' minds when thinking about immigration. Second, the public is able to see both sides when it comes to public services. 41% of those that view immigrants as generally costing public services also believe that immigrants are important to the public sector workforce and 34% of those who believe that immigration benefits public services also believe that it increases pressure on the NHS.

Cultural arguments for immigration are more popular, but also more polarising

The public is equivocal about where they would prefer migrants to come from. Overall, 49% say the Government should prioritise immigration from countries with similar cultures to Britain; 41% prefer a variety of cultures. But this is a wedge issue for the Labour Party: 44% of those who intend to vote Labour in 2024 believe the Government should prioritise similar countries versus 45% that support a variety. The Conservatives do not have this same problem. 55% of Conservative voters want to prioritise immigration from similar countries versus 37% that support a wider variety.

The gap between different educational groups is limited. Those with no qualifications and degree level qualifications are equally likely (45%) to support immigration from a variety of countries. But the preference for immigration

from similar cultures or a variety of different cultures splits along generational lines. Among Generation Z and Millennials, there is a majority preference for variety but for those aged over 45 there is a majority preference for immigration from similar cultures.

A small majority of the British public (56%) believe that immigration undermines the cultural and social life of our communities. But a large minority (41%) says it enriches our communities. As we have seen above, some groups are more positive about the cultural impact of immigration: those with degree-level qualifications (57%), people aged 18 to 34 (54%) and Labour voters (51%).

Across every educational level, a majority of people believe that immigrants retain their home culture rather than adopt British values. But the polling does show a steep age curve on this issue. People under 35 are much more likely to say immigrants adopt British values (39%) than 18% of those over 75. There is also a political split, with a third of Labour voters believing that immigrants tend to adopt British values compared to just a quarter of Conservative voters.

How people feel about the social impact of immigration and what countries they want the Government to prioritise can be partly explained by their perception of integration. As Figures 15a and 15b below show, for those who believe that immigrants do not adopt British values and culture, 62% see immigration as undermining communities and 57% want to prioritise countries with similar cultures.

For them, immigration brings division. If migrants do not integrate, they retain the customs of their home countries, which undermines the social life of the community, and thus they want the Government to prioritise culturally similar (rather than diverse) immigrants.

But those whose experience of immigration has been one of successful integration are twice as likely to support a variety of countries over culturally similar countries. And they are more likely to believe that immigration has enriched our communities.

Figure 15a: Social impact of immigration by view of whether immigrants adopt British values or retain their original country's values

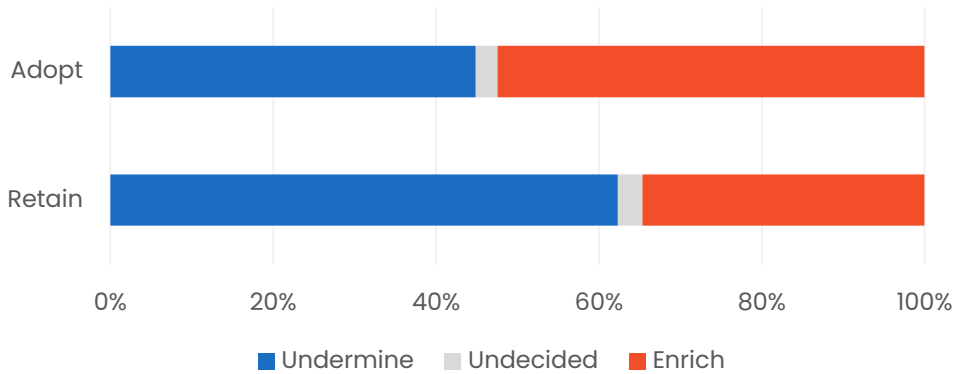
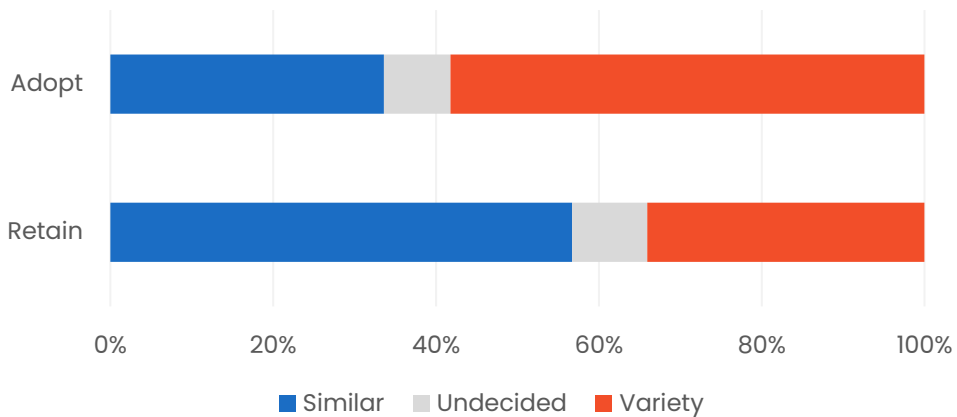


Figure 15b: Prioritise certain countries for immigration by view of whether immigrants adopt British values or retain their original country's values



Young people like immigration for its cultural benefits, but are concerned about housing and wages

Despite a majority believing that immigrants cost the UK more than they contribute, the top three benefits of immigration identified were all economic. Respondents were able to pick three out of a six possible benefits of immigration. 49% chose filling skills gaps in the economy, 47% chose working in key sectors (like the NHS), and 30% chose paying taxes that fund services.

But young people do not agree. As Figure 16a below shows, 18-to-24 year olds are extremely sceptical about the economic benefits of immigration. 25% of this age group believe immigration helps fill gaps in the economy, compared to 37% of those aged over 75.

Instead, younger people are more likely than average to choose the social and cultural benefits of immigration compared to older people. 39% of 18-to-24 year-olds saw the greatest benefit of immigration as introducing new ideas, customs and cultures to the UK compared to just 15% of those aged over 75.

Figure 16a: Drawbacks of immigration for those aged 18-24 and 75+, compared to national average

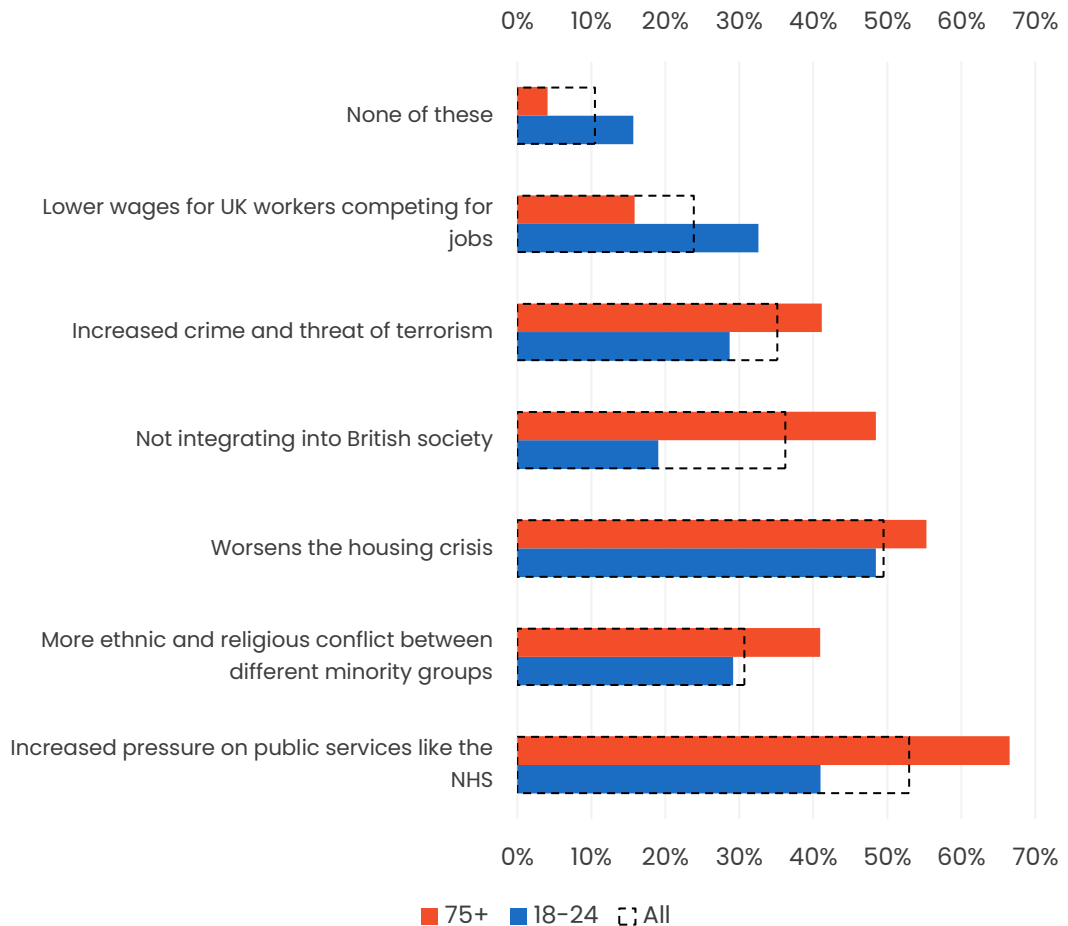
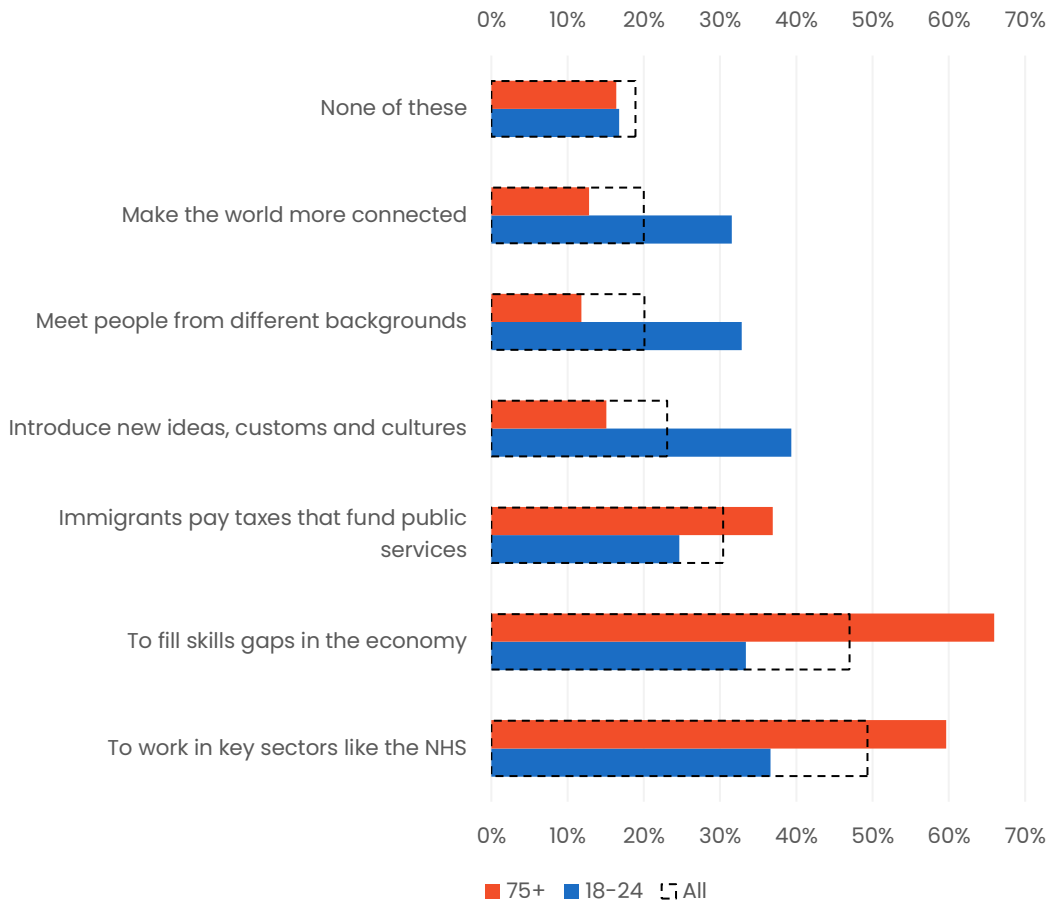


Figure 16b: Drawbacks of immigration for those aged 18–24 and 75+, compared to national average



The overall drawbacks of immigration are more mixed between economic and social concerns. A total of 53% chose pressure on public services, 49% viewed it as worsening the housing crisis, while a failure to integrate and an increase in crime and terror offences were the next highest (36% and 35%).

But the age gap persists when looking at the drawbacks of immigration. Despite viewing the greatest benefit of immigration as filling skills gaps, 67% of those aged over 75 see the greatest drawback of immigration as pressure on public services - this is far higher than the 41% of 18-24s who said the same.

This reflects the high salience that public services - like healthcare - have for older people. Similarly, 18-to-24-year-olds are more likely to be concerned about low wages (33%) than those aged over 75 (16%).

What next?

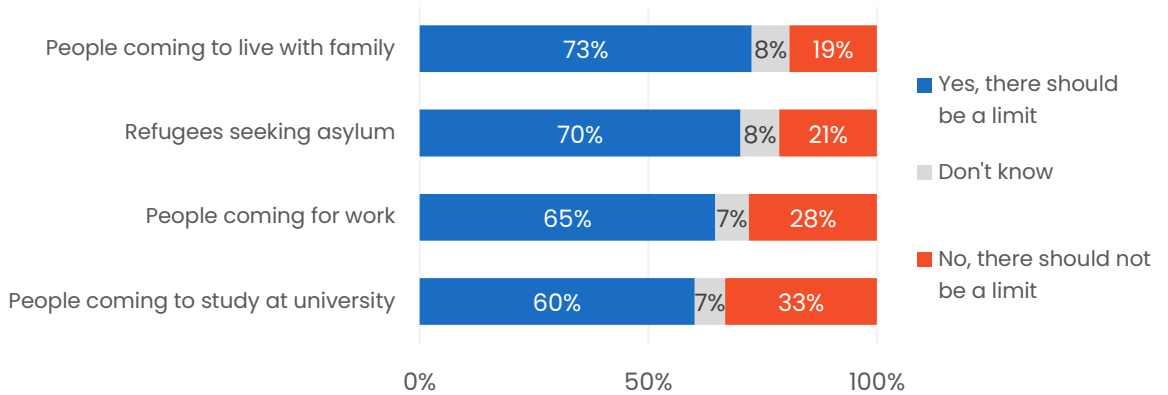
What principles should
guide policy?



People want limits on immigration

Limits on immigration are popular across the board, whether for work, study, family or asylum. By at least two-to-one, respondents supported a cap on every type of migration. Family visas are the most popular type to cap, with 73% wanting it limited. This is followed closely by refugees, with 70% wanting the numbers to be limited. Britons are slightly more open to work-related migration and students, but the clear preference is for a limit.

Figure 17: Thinking about the number of people who come to the UK for different reasons, do you think that there should be a limit on each of the following?



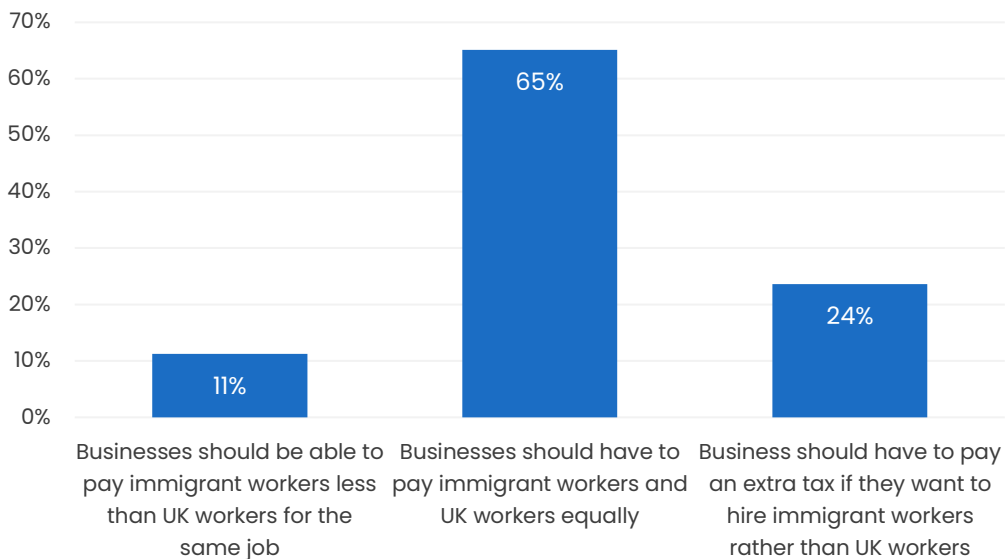
Voters are the least concerned about capping the largest sources of immigration. The Government issued 486,107 sponsored study visas granted to main applicants in the year ending September 2023, but only 60% of people want to cap that number. Respondents were most enthusiastic about capping refugee numbers and family-related visas, which are the two lowest sources of immigration. These results do not tell us at what level the cap should be set, or the mechanism for setting it, only that the vast majority of the public support it in principle.

As we saw in a previous chapter, people who support capping different types of immigration tend to think that the Government has less control over the system. So introducing some form of cap could reassure those voters who see immigration as 'out of control' that the Government is serious about bringing down the numbers.

People want a fair deal for both immigrants and UK workers

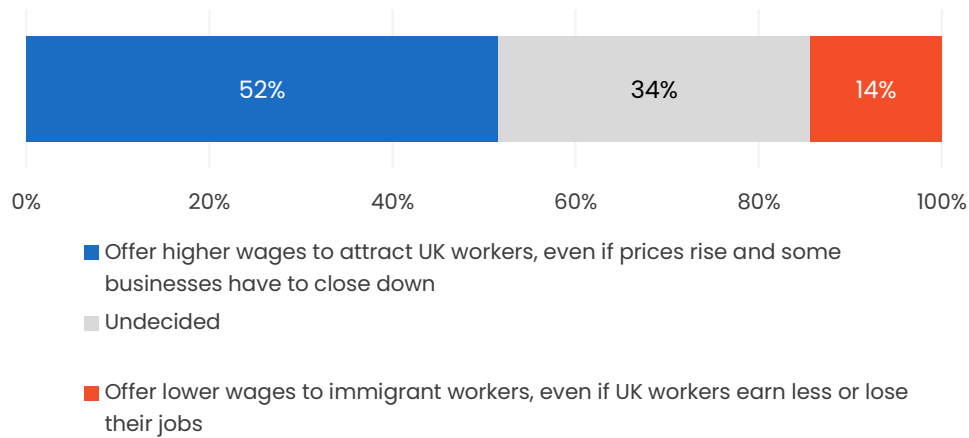
By an overwhelming margin, the public wants immigrant workers to be paid the same as UK workers. In a three-way choice between businesses paying migrants less, paying them equally, or paying an extra tax to hire migrants, 65% of respondents chose equality. Only 11% think companies should be able to undercut UK workers by hiring cheap labour from abroad. There is slightly more support for forcing businesses to pay an extra tax to hire immigrants (24%), but this is still quite a niche opinion.

Figure 18 People want immigrants to be paid the same as UK workers



We see a similar pattern when respondents consider the thorny issue of filling job vacancies. The public show a clear preference for offering higher wages to UK workers, even if that makes prices rise. But there was a high level of uncertainty here, with 34% of people responding “don’t know” to this question. Either people have yet to make up their mind or they don’t fully understand the trade-off. This issue seems much more open than those discussed above.

Figure 19: Some businesses say they are struggling to fill job vacancies. In those situations, how would you prefer they respond?

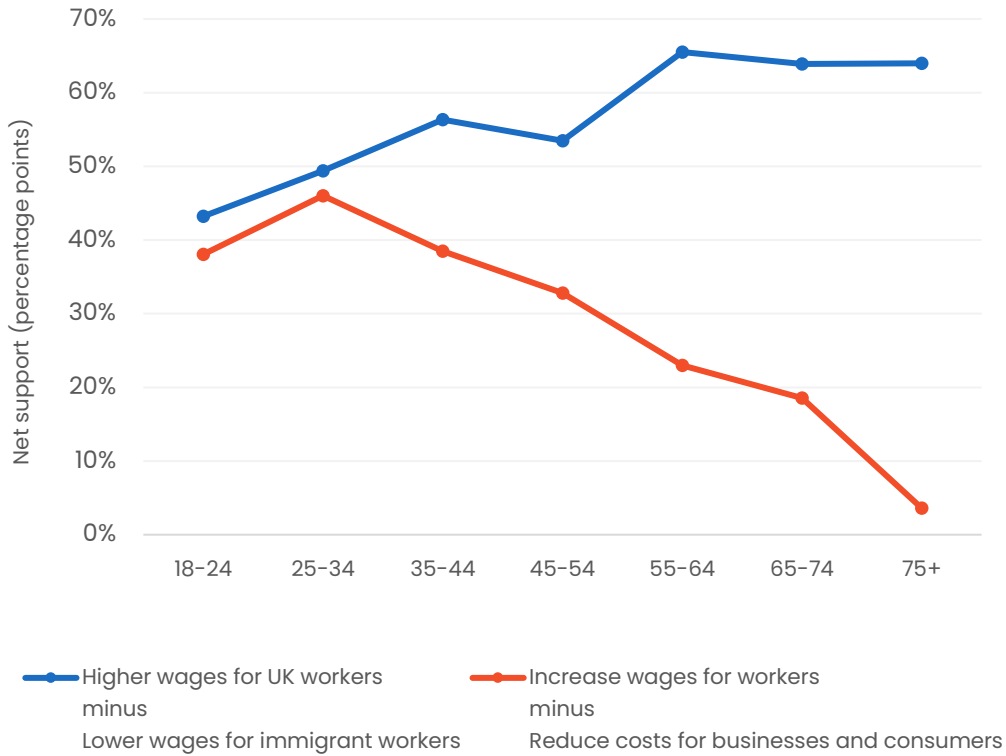


There is no difference between Conservatives and Labour on this question. Both groups of voters show the same preference for offering higher wages to UK workers. This is one of the few issues on immigration not polarised by political affiliation. But there is a small difference by age. Although younger people have a clear preference for offering higher wages to UK workers (72% of 18-24s chose this option, excluding don't know), older people aged over-75 are more likely to express this view (82%).

But this age pattern reverses when we ask a more general question about wages versus prices. Where young people are consistently pro-workers, older people's opinions differ depending on whether they are asked about immigrants or UK workers. As we showed above, younger people show moderately strong support for offering higher wages to attract UK workers rather than cutting costs with cheap migrant labour.

And they back this up with a similarly clear preference for high wages for workers over low costs for consumers and businesses on our more generalised question. But, where older people show a very strong preference for higher wages for UK workers when the alternative is hiring immigrant workers (net support is +64), they are split 50:50 on whether we should, in general, prioritise workers' wages or costs for consumers (net support is only +4). It looks like their opposition to immigration is in tension with a lack of interest in workers and greater inclination to side with businesses and consumers.

Figure 20: The age curve on workers' wages reverses when factoring in immigration



How should policy balance culture and economic benefit?

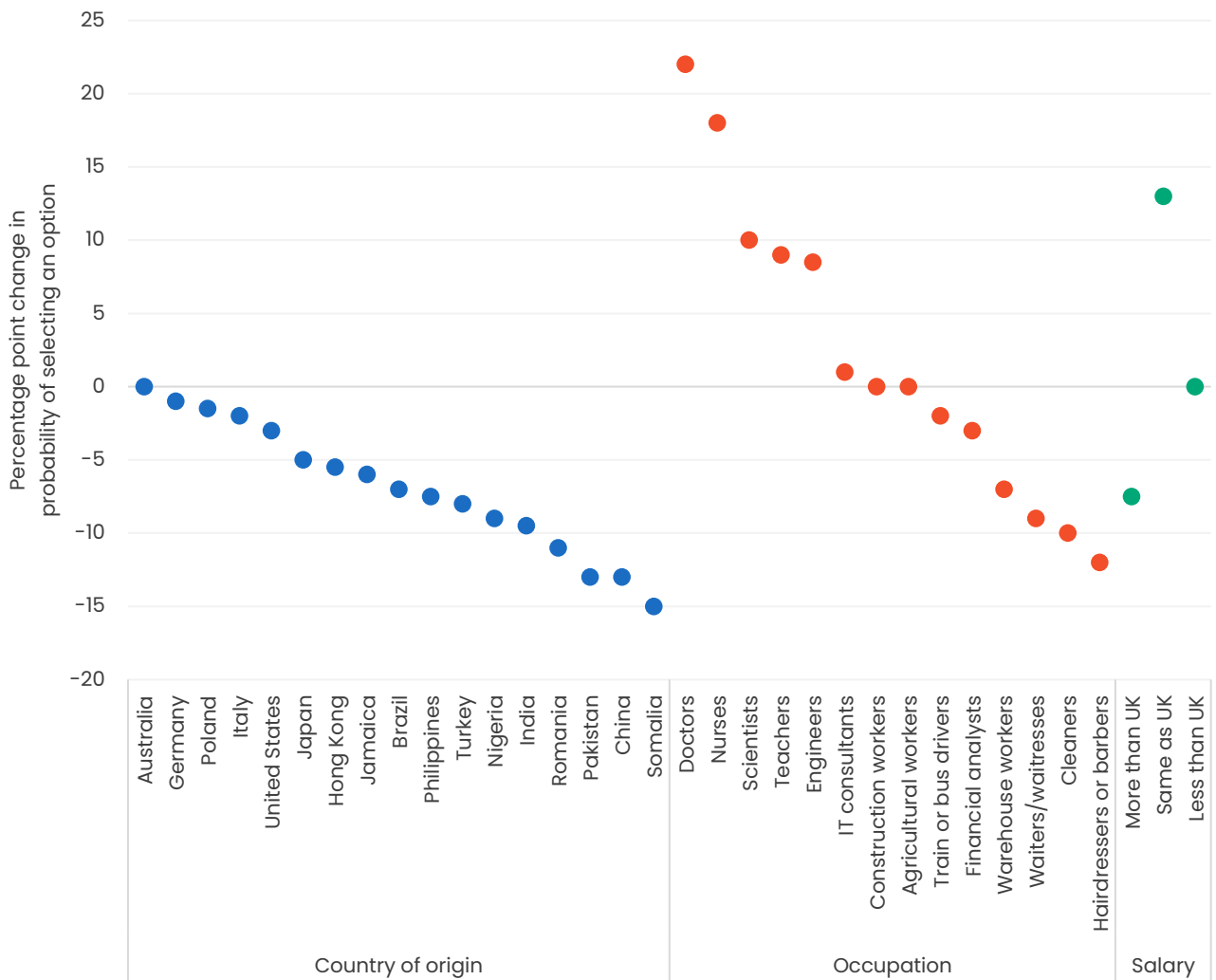
To isolate attitudes towards immigrants' cultural background from their economic characteristics, we used a conjoint experiment that tests the relative influence of these competing factors. Similar methodologies have been used in the US and South Korea and found that people have strong preferences for highly-educated immigrants working in highly-skilled and respectable professions.¹⁷

Respondents in our poll were shown eight randomly-selected pairs of migrants describing some hypothetical characteristics of people who might come to the UK for work. For each pair, they were asked to select the set of characteristics that they would personally prefer someone coming to the UK to have.

Overall, the ideal economic migrant would be someone from Australia who is coming to work as a doctor and earns the same salary as the UK equivalent. As Figure 21 shows below, the effect sizes on occupation and salary are larger than those for country of origin. So, when thinking about economic migration, people’s top concern is migrants’ contribution to the economy, rather than their cultural background.

Figure 21: Effects of immigrant attributes on their probability of being selected

Notes: For each attribute, the variable level without a point estimate is the baseline. All other estimates show percentage change compared to that baseline.



Occupations cluster into four distinct buckets. The most-desired occupations are, by a large margin, doctor and nurse. These are followed by scientist, teacher and engineer, a set of highly-skilled and respectable careers. The next cluster includes a curious mix of highly-skilled and well-paid jobs like IT consultant and financial analyst right alongside lower-wage manual labour jobs like agricultural workers, construction workers, and train or bus drivers. The least popular occupations are all at the low-skill, low-wage end of the spectrum: warehouse worker, waiter, cleaner, hairdresser.

These rankings correspond quite closely to the social status that people attach to occupations. Scientists and medical doctors are the most respected professions whereas factory and call-centre workers are the least respected, according to YouGov's polling from 2020.¹⁸

The public strongly prefers immigrants to earn the same wage as UK workers. Compared to earning the same, an immigrant earning less than the UK equivalent is 13 percentage points less likely to be the preferred option. And an immigrant earning more than the UK equivalent is a further 7 percentage points less likely to be chosen.

Country of origin has a smaller, but significant, impact on a prospective migrant's desirability. There is a clear preference for a few select countries from Europe and the Anglosphere: Australia, Germany, Poland, Italy, and the USA. But this does not extend to all European countries. In stark contrast to Poland (the third-most popular), Romania is the fourth-least popular country in our list of seventeen. The only countries less desirable than Romania are China, Pakistan and Somalia.

These preferences for different occupations and countries of origin bear absolutely no relation to the actual migrant population. Australia is the most desirable country for a migrant to come from, but only 113,000 live in England and Wales. Compare this to Pakistan. Despite being the second-least desirable country, it is the third-most popular country for migrants to actually originate from - with a population of 624,000.

Poland is both popular with the public and a large source of the foreign-born population. And Somalia and China are simultaneously unpopular and uncommon. In these rare cases, the public seems to get what they want.

The same lack of relationship holds true for occupations. Jobs with higher shares of foreign-born workers are not necessarily more or less desirable. For example, warehouse workers ranked near the bottom in terms of the jobs that people would like immigrants to do; but 40% of warehouse workers are immigrants, far higher than the national average of 20%. Doctors are the one exception. This occupation is the most popular with the public and also has the largest share of foreign-born workers.

Figure 22a: Correlation between public's preference for different immigrants vs actual foreign-born population: Country

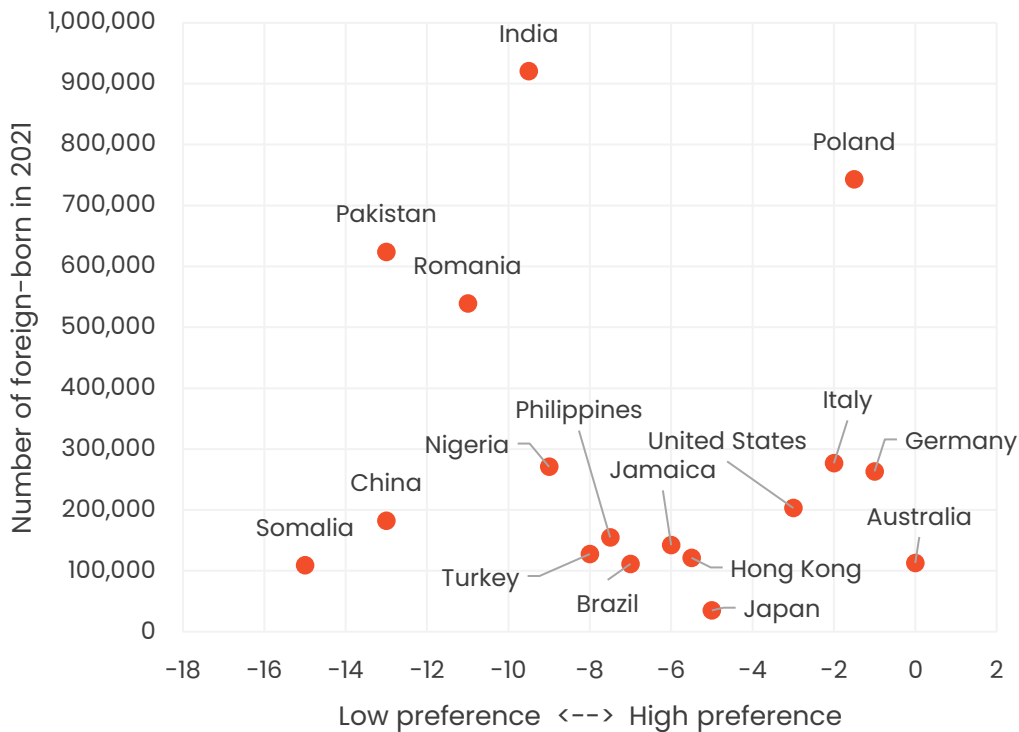
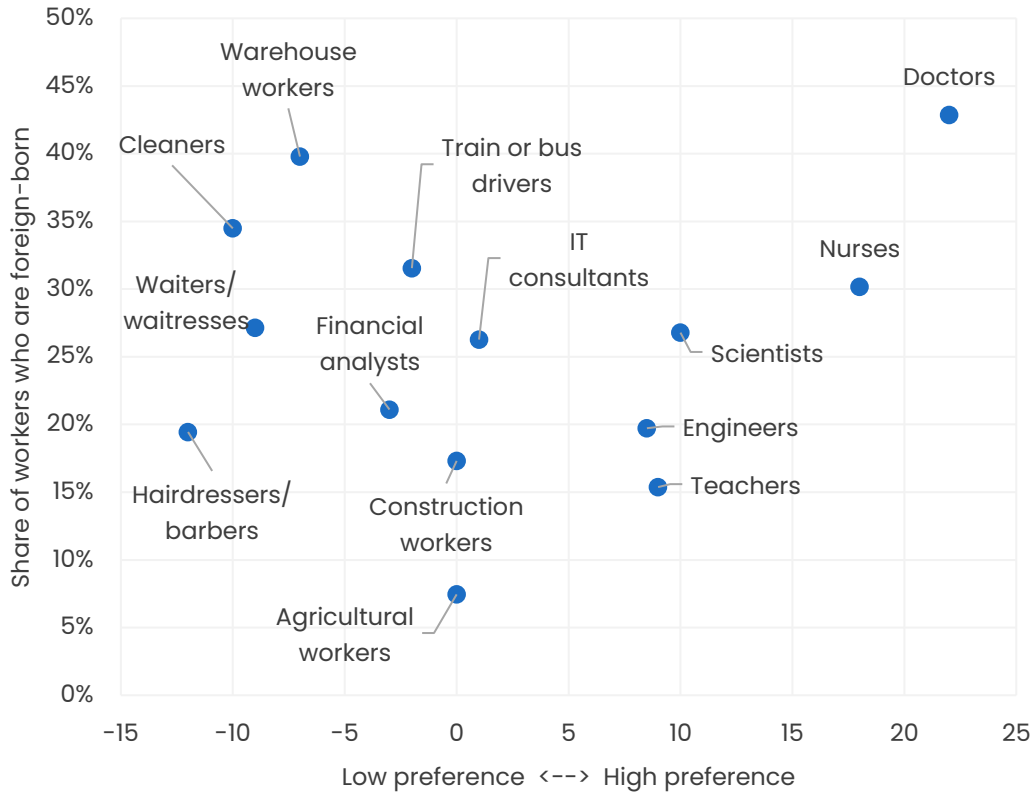


Figure 22b: Correlation between public's preference for different immigrants vs actual foreign-born population:



Politics

What can the parties learn
as we head towards an
election?



Conservatives

The Conservative coalition is not divided on migration: all of their voters are sceptical to differing extent. Even more liberal 2019 Conservative voters, who would defect to Labour or the Lib Dems if an election were held tomorrow, care more about immigration than the average person.

Broadly, those former Conservatives drifting into the “don’t know” column agree with current Conservative voters that immigration is a top issue. But they tend to be slightly more hawkish. 86% of “don’t knows” see immigration as undermining the social life of communities, compared to just 72% of current Conservative voters. And 62% believe countries with more similar cultures to Britain should be prioritised, compared to just 55% of current Conservatives. They are also more likely to want more controls on immigration and to see numbers reduced.

Conservative to don’t knows are more likely than current Conservatives to think the Government has no control over illegal Channel crossings and family unification. And they are equally likely to support drastic measures like a hard cap on numbers. 78% of “don’t knows” support a cap on workers and 90% support a cap on refugees. These voters remain unconvinced by the tough rhetoric, and will likely need reassurance that the Government can and will deliver on promises to bring down immigration levels – both legal and illegal.

Conservative voters are cross-pressured between their dislike of immigration and their preference for businesses and consumers over workers. When the alternative is low-wage migration, Conservatives favour increasing wages for domestic workers. But they are generally much more likely to favour decreasing costs for businesses and consumers over wage increases for workers, when the issue of migration is absent.

Labour

Labour faces a much more delicate balancing act. A large portion (13%) of their current vote share comes from disaffected 2019 Conservative voters. This group sits slightly to the right of the median voter on immigration: softly sceptical but open to hearing the positives.

So Labour needs to internalise three key things about immigration. First, grasp the reality that very few voters want more immigration. Even a young, graduate, Londoner who intends to vote Labour would rather see immigration reduced than increased – and they are far from convinced of the economic benefits.

Second, immigration advocates are electorally insignificant, concentrated in safe Labour seats. There are only 75 seats in which immigration liberals (who want to relax controls and increase overall numbers) outnumber immigration hawks. Focusing on these more liberal voters' priorities would be inefficient and hinder Labour's efforts to build a majority coalition.

Thirdly, although their 2019 base does not care much about immigration, their new voters do. 41% of Conservative to Labour switchers ranked immigration as a top issue facing the country, compared to just 20% of Labour's 2019 voters. These former Conservatives want the overall numbers reduced and think immigration generally costs rather than benefits public services like the NHS. This is very different from Labour's 2019 base who are much more positive about the cultural and economic impacts. But both groups can unite around protecting workers from exploitation. They have a strong preference for filling vacancies by offering higher wages to UK workers rather than lower wages to immigrant workers.

This means that Labour should talk about immigration in the language of workers' rights (including for immigrants) and making sure working-class voters are not undercut or exploited. But there is also room for a pro-integration stance, emphasising shared British values and the positive contribution that immigrants make to society and wider culture.

Endnotes



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- ¹ John Curtice (2021) Has Brexit been a success? The public's perspective, WhatUKThinks, p.19, [link](#)
- ² ONS (2023) Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2023, [link](#)
- ³ John Curtice (2023) Sovereignty, economy, immigration: still the three pillars of the Brexit debate? UK in a Changing Europe, [link](#)
- ⁴ John Curtice (2021) Has Brexit been a success? The public's perspective, WhatUKThinks, p.19, [link](#)
- ⁵ John Curtice (2023) Sovereignty, economy, immigration: still the three pillars of the Brexit debate? UK in a Changing Europe, [link](#)
- ⁶ Ford, Jennings, Somerville (2015) Public opinion, responsiveness and constraint: Britain's three immigration policy regimes, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*
- ⁷ Ipsos (2022) Attitudes towards immigration, [link](#)
- ⁸ James Kanagasooriam (2022) Bi_Focal #2, [link](#)
- ⁹ UnHerd Britain 2023, [link](#)
- ¹⁰ ONS (2023) Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2023, [link](#)
- ¹¹ FullFact (2020) Why this poll gives a misleading view on how many people the public think Covid-19 has killed, [link](#)
- ¹² James Kanagasooriam (2022) Bi_Focal #2, [link](#)
- ¹³ James Kanagasooriam (2022) Bi_Focal #2, [link](#)
- ¹⁴ YouGov, Has immigration in the last 10 years been good for Britain? [link](#)
- ¹⁵ Oxford Economics, [link](#)
- ¹⁶ Migration Observatory, [link](#)
- ¹⁷ Denney et al, Jens Hainmueller & Daniel J. Hopkins (2015) The hidden American immigration consensus: A conjoint analysis of attitudes towards immigrants, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59, No. 3
Steven Denney & Christopher Green (2021) Who should be admitted? Conjoint analysis of South Korean attitudes towards immigrants, *Ethnicities*, Vol. 21, Issue 1
- ¹⁸ YouGov (2020) Scientists and doctors are the most respected professions worldwide, [link](#)

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