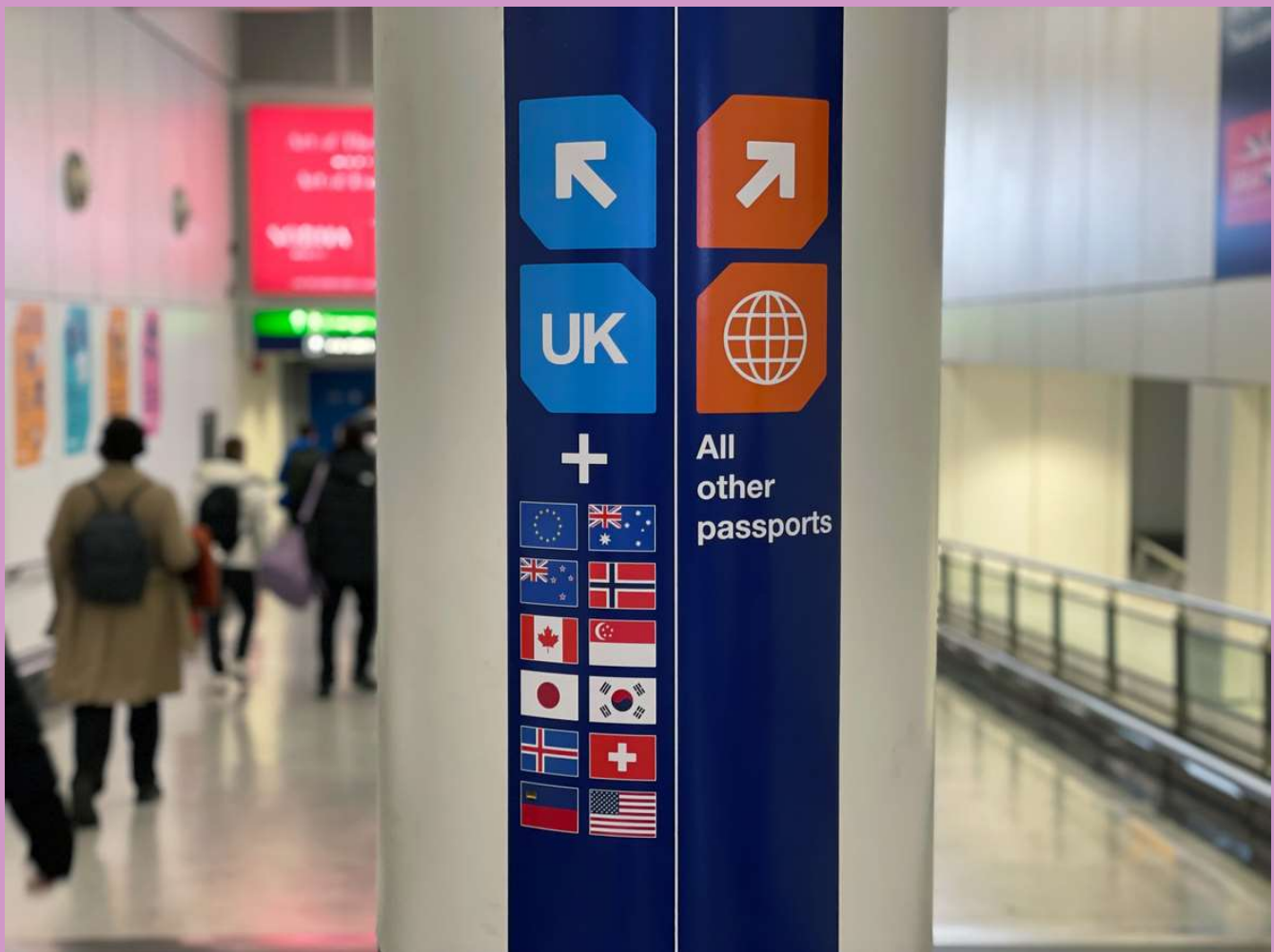


Immigration

Changing attitudes, policy preferences and partisanship

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Immigration

Changing attitudes, policy preferences and partisanship

Migration to Britain and concern about it have been high over the past two decades, despite pledges from successive governments to reduce immigration and the control of immigration being central to the 'Leave' campaign and a priority for the governments who negotiated Brexit. Large changes to policy were introduced at the start of 2021. Using data from three different surveys, this chapter examines how attitudes to immigration have evolved over the past two decades, whether we are seeing increased polarisation in attitudes, and whether the public, and supporters of different political parties, are united or divided over the policy initiatives the current government has taken in response to the recent sharp increase in migration.

Attitudes becoming more positive

From 2014, attitudes to immigration and its impacts have become much more positive, although there has been a slight reversal since 2021.

- In 2014, 14% thought that “many people” of the same ethnic/racial background as the majority should be allowed to come and live in Britain; by 2020/21 this proportion had reached 35%.
- In 2014, 30% thought that immigration had a positive impact on the economy; by 2020/21 this figure had increased to 59%.
- In March 2019, 53% thought that immigration had a positive impact on the economy, down to 40% by June 2024.

Policy preferences link with underlying attitudes

Support for policies enabling or restricting migration vary depending on the context; however, those who are more positive about immigration are more likely to back 'open' policies.

- 56% support the return of free movement rights, while 22% oppose this. 71% think the government should set limits on student migration (29% oppose this).
- Among those who rate the economic impact of immigration positively, 84% support the return of free movement. This is the case for 16% of those who rate its impacts negatively.

Conservative and Labour supporters more divided

Over the past decade, both Conservative and Labour supporters have become more positive about immigration and more supportive of open policies; these changes have been much more marked among Labour supporters, meaning the two groups are more divided now than in the past.

- In 2011, 21% of Conservative supporters viewed the effect of immigration on cultural life positively, compared with 32% of Labour supporters. By 2021, this proportion had increased by nine percentage points for Conservative supporters (to 30%) and by 31 percentage points for Labour supporters (to 63%).
 - Between 2013 and 2024, support for asylum seekers being allowed to work increased by five percentage points among Conservative supporters (from 46% to 51%), compared with an increase of 29% among Labour Party supporters (from 50% to 79%).
-

Introduction

High migration and public concern about it were defining features of the political landscape in Britain for many years prior to Brexit. Net migration rose sharply during the first Blair government of 1997-2001, then surged further in 2004 after Labour granted full settlement rights to citizens of new EU member states, with the latest ONS estimates suggesting it was considerably higher than thought at the time, with perhaps 300,000 arrivals per year (Portes, 2023). High immigration levels have continued ever since, both before and after the EU referendum, with only the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic producing a brief interruption in arrivals (Sumption et al., 2024). This is despite repeated pledges from successive Conservative governments since 2010 to reduce immigration. David Cameron promised to reduce net migration to the “tens of thousands” (Yeo, 2023) but, despite introducing “hostile environment” policies which made life more difficult for illegal migrants in the UK, he did not introduce more restrictive immigration policies during the Coalition government and was unable to negotiate any change to free movement migration rules with the EU. As a result, immigration levels continued to be historically high as the EU referendum approached in 2016.

Immigration was a top political concern among the public for many years before the EU referendum, with between 20% and 45% identifying it as a top political concern in every year between 2002 and 2016 (Ford and Morris, 2022). The desire to restore control over immigration formed a centrepiece of the “Leave” campaign (Evans and Menon, 2017) and, while the “Vote Leave” campaign avoided making any specific pledge to bring down numbers, it promised “A fairer immigration system that is better for Britain, stops discriminating on the basis of where you come from, and instead allows us to pick people on the basis of skills” (Portes, 2024). In the aftermath of the Leave victory, control of immigration was a key priority for the Conservative governments who negotiated Brexit. The government rejected any ‘soft’ approach to Brexit which would keep free movement rules in place, insisting instead on a ‘hard’ Brexit which would return full control over immigration policy to the British government. This approach has been electorally successful for the Conservatives (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020), whose victories in the 2017 and 2019 general elections were driven, in part, by a sharp rise in Conservative voting among the most anti-immigration voters, who had previously driven the rise of UKIP in 2010-15 (Ford and Goodwin, 2014), and who were attracted, in part, by repeated Conservative pledges to reduce immigration (Jenrick et al, 2024).

Once the Brexit transition period was complete, large changes were introduced to the immigration system at the start of 2021. The new system for labour migration applies a uniform ‘points based’ system which awards visas based on various skill and income criteria to migrants without any regard to their country or region of origin. The post-Brexit selection criteria were somewhat less stringent than those applied to non-EU labour migration before Brexit, and the government applied less stringent rules in the NHS and for seasonal agricultural workers from the outset. Rules for social care workers were introduced at the end of 2021, despite concerns expressed by the Migration Advisory Committee (Manning, 2023), to address acute labour shortages in this sector. The liberal pre-Brexit system for student migration was retained unchanged, with universities free to recruit students from abroad in unlimited numbers, and, in 2021, the government reintroduced a post-study work visa enabling student migrants to work in any job for two years after graduation. Along with these more liberal rules on work visas and post-study work visas for students, the Johnson government introduced two major humanitarian visa schemes enabling large numbers of Ukrainian citizens and Hong Kong residents

holding British National (Overseas) status to migrate to Britain in the face of Russian invasion and Chinese political oppression.

The net consequence of these recent changes has been a very large increase in migration levels in the three years since the end of COVID-19 restrictions, driven, in particular, by large-scale recruitment of health and social care workers from abroad, increased recruitment of students, particularly students coming with dependents, following the introduction of post-study work visas, and a large influx of humanitarian migrants from Ukraine and Hong Kong. The ONS currently estimate that net migration rose from under 100,000 in the COVID-19 period to a peak of over 700,000 in 2023 (Office for National Statistics, 2024).

This sharp increase in migration has brought growing public and political attention (Ford, 2024), and, in particular, rising concern among Conservative voters. The government has responded with a series of restrictive policy initiatives, including a package of more restrictive rules applying to many forms of work, study and family migration announced in autumn 2023 (Manning, 2023). The bulk of recent public and political attention has, however, focused on the asylum system and, in particular, on migrants who cross the English Channel unauthorised on small boats and claim asylum on arrival. Such migrants have generated intense media attention and public opposition, despite forming only a small part of overall migration inflows – repeating a pattern observed in the early 2000s. The government has responded by implementing several pieces of legislation designed to “Stop the Boats” by (a) closing the asylum system to claimants who arrive illegally in Britain and (b) relocating inadmissible claimants to have their claims considered in other countries, beginning with the Central African state of Rwanda.

In this chapter, we examine how attitudes to immigration have evolved during a period which has featured sweeping changes to migration policy alongside persistently high immigration levels, high levels of public concern and repeated government pledges to bring numbers down. We begin by examining how views of the impacts of immigration have evolved over the past two decades. We then seek to understand how the demographic distribution in attitudes is changing, aiming, in particular, to investigate whether we are seeing an increased polarisation in attitudes, or whether demographic change is driving overall shifts. Finally, we consider whether the public is united or divided over the policy initiatives the current government has taken in response to the recent sharp increase in migration.

The analysis in this chapter draws on survey data for people in Britain taken from three different sources. The European Social Survey (ESS) is a cross-national face-to-face survey, which has been carried out biennially since 2002 and seeks to measure the attitudes and behaviour of diverse populations across more than 30 European nations. Traditionally undertaken face-to-face but implemented online since 2020, British Social Attitudes (BSA) has tracked changes in people's social, political and moral attitudes since 1983. The NatCen Panel has been running since 2016, using a combination of online and telephone interviewing, with its respondents recruited from the BSA survey. All three surveys adopt a high-quality approach incorporating probability-based random sampling and ask questions in a consistent manner over time, giving us confidence that any changes observed in the data represent real changes in attitudes.

Attitudes to Immigration over time

We start by considering how attitudes towards immigration have changed over time, drawing on data from all three of our sources. The European Social Survey provides data over a long timeframe from 2002 to 2020/21; BSA provides more recent trend data, covering the period 2013-2023, while the NatCen Panel provides the most up to date readings, between 2019 and 2024.

The European Social Survey has asked the same six questions in a consistent manner for two decades, enabling us to track how attitudes have changed since the beginning of the millennium up until the most recent wave in 2020/21. The questions are split into two groups of three. The first set of three questions seeks to measure people's views on how much inward migration should be allowed, using the form:

Now, using this card, to what extent do you think Britain/the UK should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as most of Britain/the UK's people to come and live here?

[Allow many to come and live here, Allow some, Allow a few, Allow none]

The second and third questions ask about "people of a different race or ethnic group" and "people from the poorer countries outside Europe" respectively.

As shown in Table 1, people's responses to all three questions were broadly stable during the early part of the century. For example, the share saying they would allow many people from the same race or ethnic group to come and live here was 12% in 2002 and 10% in 2012. From 2014 onwards however, we observe a steady increase in this proportion, from 14% in 2014, to 19% in 2016, 24% in 2018, and 35% in 2020/21. Conversely, the proportion advocating allowing "few" or "none" was 35% in 2002 and 40% in 2012. It then began to fall steadily, to 25% in 2016 down to 13% in 2020/21. We observe exactly the same trends with respect to the immigration of people of a different race or ethnic group and also from poorer countries outside Europe. People are consistently more positive about allowing people of the same racial or ethnic group as the majority to come and live in Britain, a pattern that has been explored in detail elsewhere (Ford, 2011).

Table 1 How many of different types of immigrant should be allowed to come and live in Britain, 2002–2020/21

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020/21
Same race/ethnic groups as majority	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Allow many	12	14	12	11	12	10	14	19	24	35
Allow some	53	53	49	52	48	49	51	56	54	52
Allow a few/allow none	35	33	40	37	40	40	35	25	22	13
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2014	1871	2361	2307	2334	2217	2226	1913	2156	1126
Different race/ethnic groups as majority										
Allow many	8	11	9	9	9	8	11	17	21	34
Allow some	43	43	41	45	42	42	47	53	53	50
Allow a few/allow none	49	46	50	46	49	50	42	31	26	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2018	1874	2363	2310	2352	2230	2233	1916	2168	1130
From poorer countries outside Europe										
Allow many	8	10	9	8	9	8	9	15	19	31
Allow some	41	42	37	42	37	36	35	48	49	48
Allow a few/allow none	51	48	54	50	54	56	56	37	32	21
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2020	1866	2361	2310	2350	2227	2225	1920	2168	1135

Source: European Social Survey Rounds 1 to 10, adults aged 15+

The second set of European Social Survey questions focuses on people’s views of the effects of immigration. The first question asks:

Would you say it is generally bad or good for Britain/the UK’s economy that people come to live here from other countries?

Respondents are invited to choose a number between zero and ten where zero means “Bad for the economy” and ten means “Good for the economy”. Two further questions ask whether people think cultural life is undermined or enriched and whether Britain/the UK is made a worse or better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries, again using a scale of zero to ten. In Table 2, we have aggregated responses on the 11-point scale into three groups; those giving a score of 0-3, who hold negative views about the impacts of immigration, those giving a score of 4-6, who we might consider neutral, and finally those providing a score of 7-10, who hold positive views. Across these three questions, we see very similar trends to those observed for the questions about immigration levels. Looking at perceptions of economic impacts, between 2002 and 2012 the proportion holding a positive view (7 to 10) ranged between 17% and 25%, rising to 30% in 2014 and continuing to rise thereafter, reaching 59% in 2020/21. This pattern is repeated across the items relating to the impact of immigration on cultural life and the country as a place to live.

Table 2 Perceptions of the impacts of immigration, 2022-2020/21

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020/21
Bad or good for economy	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
0-3	32	32	33	32	33	34	29	15	15	9
4-6	51	44	42	43	46	43	41	42	39	31
7-10	17	24	25	25	22	23	30	43	46	59
Mean score	4.42	4.65	4.60	4.71	4.56	4.57	4.91	5.87	5.98	6.70
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1995	1853	2348	2308	2356	2233	2232	1927	2181	1137
Cultural life undermined or enriched										
0-3	23	28	31	30	29	27	30	17	18	12
4-6	44	42	39	38	40	40	36	37	33	30
7-10	33	30	29	32	31	33	33	46	49	58
Mean score	5.20	5.06	4.85	4.94	4.98	5.18	5.06	5.90	6.04	6.69
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2000	1839	2347	2312	2340	2206	2220	1924	2170	1138
Country worse or better place to live										
0-3	29	30	32	33	32	30	29	17	18	10
4-6	51	48	46	44	44	45	42	44	39	34
7-10	20	22	21	24	24	25	29	39	44	55
Mean score	4.61	4.68	4.53	4.59	4.63	4.78	4.90	5.65	5.83	6.64
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2019	1854	2361	2324	2356	2229	2229	1933	2170	1141

Source: European Social Survey Rounds 1 to 10, adults aged 15+

These changes are not small. What we seem to have witnessed is a fundamental change in attitudes towards immigration and its effects in a short space of time. Up until 2012, people in Britain were, on balance, negative on each of the three questions about the impact of immigration, with more people giving a low score than a high score. However, from 2014, there has been a major positive shift on all three measures, such that by the most recent round of European Social Survey data collection in 2020/21, positive views outnumbered negative ones by large margins. Indeed, in the most recent round conducted in 2020/21, an absolute majority of people gave positive ratings on each of the questions.

We now turn to our second data source. Since 2011, BSA has carried the first two questions presented in Table 2, regarding the impacts of immigration on Britain's economy and cultural life. The BSA data, presented in Table 3, corroborate the marked liberalisation in attitudes during the middle part of the last decade recorded by the European Social Survey. Looking at the question on the impact on the economy, the proportion giving a positive score increased from 22% in 2013 to 48% in 2017 and 51% in 2022, with a similar trend emerging with respect to the impact of immigration on Britain's cultural life.

Since 2021, the issue of immigration has received greater attention, with record overall migration levels observed in recent years, and the decision of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to focus political attention on this issue (Walsh and Cuibus, 2023). In particular, in January 2023, shortly after

becoming Prime Minister, Sunak made his pledge to ‘Stop the Boats’, a commitment to reduce illegal immigration, as one of his five key pledges to British voters.

Over this more recent time period, the data in Table 3 provide evidence of a slight reversal in attitudes. The proportions giving a positive score for the impact of immigration on the economy and cultural life both fell in 2023, down from 51% in 2022 to 39%. In summary then, the BSA data corroborate the general liberalisation in attitudes towards immigration that occurred from the middle part of the last decade, revealed by the European Social Survey, but also uncover evidence of a slight reversal in this trend since 2021.

Table 3 Perceptions of the impacts of immigration, 2011–2023

	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023
Bad or good for economy	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
0-3	43	40	28	17	14	20	17	28
4-6	36	38	38	36	38	30	32	33
7-10	21	22	34	48	48	50	51	39
Mean score	4.07	4.25	5.02	5.89	6.00	6.02	6.12	5.25
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3277	3201	2148	1016	3197	3091	2226	1203
Cultural life undermined or enriched								
0-3	40	39	34	24	19	21	16	25
4-6	33	34	35	32	36	31	33	36
7-10	27	27	32	44	46	48	51	39
Mean score	4.37	4.45	4.87	5.62	5.89	5.99	6.24	5.42
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3265	3194	2144	1018	3184	3091	2224	1201

Our final data source, the NatCen Panel, has fielded the same two questions on the impact of immigration on the economy and cultural life since 2019, with a more frequent series of readings and with the most recent data collection taking place in January 2024. As shown in Table 4, these data confirm the slight reversal in the previous positive trend from 2021 onwards, detected from the BSA data. For instance, the proportion giving a positive score on the impact on the economy, having been 51% in 2021 fell to 48% in late 2022 and to 40% in January 2024.

Table 4 Perceptions of the impacts of immigration, 2019-2024

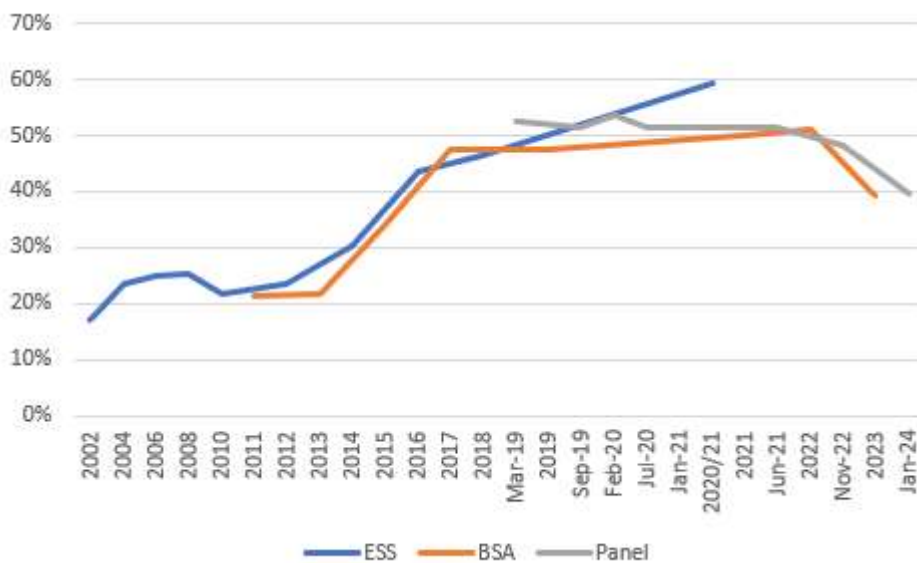
	Mar 2019	Sept 2019	Feb 2020	July 2020	Jan 2021	June 2021	Nov 2022	Jan 2024
Bad or good for economy	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
0-3	12	13	13	14	14	15	16	22
4-6	35	35	33	35	34	34	35	38
7-10	53	52	54	51	51	51	48	40
Mean score	6.32	6.29	6.46	6.12	6.11	6.13	6.05	5.54
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3376	3325	2402	1479	1498	1367	6072	2063
Cultural life undermined or enriched								
0-3	19	18	16	17	16	16	15	21
4-6	35	35	35	35	36	36	36	35
7-10	46	46	48	48	48	48	48	43
Mean score	5.94	5.96	6.13	6.03	6.04	6.09	6.19	5.72
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3406	3327	2395	1475	1422	1361	6073	2062

Source: NatCen Panel

Drawing on all three data sources, Figure 1 presents the proportion of people providing a positive rating (7 to 10) on the impact of immigration on the economy, over the past two decades. It illustrates that the three data sources detect two key trends; there was an increase in positive ratings from around 2014 to 2021, recorded by ESS and BSA, whilst there has been (according to BSA and the NatCen Panel) something of a reversal in this trend since 2021. A very similar pattern is observed when comparing the three sources for the question on the cultural impact of immigration.

Figure 1 Perceptions of the impacts of immigration on the economy, by data source, 2002–2024

Proportion thinking immigration is good for the economy



In summary then, attitudes to immigration and its impacts were generally stable and, on balance, negative in the first decade of the 21st century. This was followed by a large and rapid change which began around 2014 and continued through to 2021, with attitudes becoming markedly more positive. We then see evidence of some retrenchment since 2021 though, on balance, the public remains more likely to be positive than negative about the impacts of immigration, and substantially more so than they were in the early 2000s.

This leads us to question why these changes have taken place. What might have driven the positive shift and slight reversal we have observed? Have these changes occurred to a greater or lesser extent in certain social groups? If we remain generally more favourable towards immigration, is the government's stance out of step with that of the public overall, or is the government responding to distinctive attitudes among its own supporters? We explore these questions in the next section of the chapter.

What is driving long-term changes in attitudes?

This section is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the period up to 2020 when, as we have seen, attitudes to immigration became more positive, and investigates whether those changes were widespread or concentrated among particular groups, focusing on age, educational attainment, contact with immigrants, social values and political party support. The second part examines the period from 2021 onwards, seeking to uncover whether the recent reversal in attitudes reflects any (further) divergence or convergence between groups with these characteristics.

Younger people

We begin by examining how age links with attitudes to immigration. As shown in Table 5, younger people are much more likely to report a positive view of immigration. This is the case for all six of the questions fielded on the ESS. Taking our first measure, in 2020/21, 35% of people thought that we should allow “many” people of the same ethnic/racial group as the majority to come and live in Britain. Support for this view varied substantially by age, from 61% of those aged 15-24 years, down to just 19% of those aged 75 or more – although it should be noted that, for this and the other five items, data is available for fewer than 100 respondents aged 15-24, meaning a degree of caution needs to be applied. This pattern is repeated for all three types of immigrants asked about. We also find the same age gradient in perceptions regarding the effects of immigration. Among those aged 15-24, 64% gave a score of 7 to 10 for effects on the economy, compared with 51% of those aged 75 or more.

Table 5 Attitudes to immigrants and the impacts of immigration, by age, 2020/21

	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
How many of different types of immigrant should be allowed to come and live in Britain							
Same race/ethnic groups as majority	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Allow many	61	40	42	29	28	28	19
<i>Unweighted base</i>	62	117	148	177	199	226	191
Different race/ethnic groups as majority	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Allow many	59	42	40	27	27	22	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	62	116	148	178	200	228	191
From poorer countries outside Europe	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Allow many	55	40	40	24	24	19	14
<i>Unweighted base</i>	62	118	148	178	200	228	194

Table 5 Attitudes to immigrants and the impacts of immigration, by age, 2020/21 (continued)

	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Impacts of immigration							
Bad or good for economy	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Good (7-10)	64	70	62	59	54	53	51
<i>Unweighted base</i>	64	118	151	177	200	229	191
Cultural life undermined or enriched	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Good (7-10)	64	73	62	56	50	49	48
<i>Unweighted base</i>	63	118	149	176	203	231	191
Country worse or better place to live	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Good (7-10)	63	70	59	54	48	45	45
<i>Unweighted base</i>	64	118	152	178	202	230	190

Source: European Social Survey Round 10, adults aged 15+

Such differences raise the question as to whether age played a role in the longer-term changes in attitudes to immigration we have seen. As observed in the previous section of the chapter, most of the attitudinal change in this area occurred since 2014, so we focus our analysis on the last ten years of the survey (between 2010 and 2020/21). In Table 6, we analyse how views regarding whether immigrants from the same ethnic/racial group as the majority should be allowed to come to Britain have evolved for different age cohorts, comparing each age group in 2010 with a group ten years older in 2020. For example, people aged 15-24 in 2010 would have reached the age of 25-34 by 2020, so it is logical to compare the views of this group in 2010 with those of people aged 25-34 in 2020. Equivalent analysis for the other five ESS questions is presented in the chapter appendix (Table A.1).

In 2010, 19% of those aged 15-24 said Britain should allow many immigrants of the same race or ethnic group to come here to live. Ten years later, in 2020/21, the proportion who stated this among those aged 25-34 was much higher, at 40%, an increase of 21 percentage points. While we observe large increases in support for this view across all age cohorts, there is some evidence of a widening of the differences between different cohorts, with increases in support for this view being smaller among older age cohorts. For instance, this view increased by just 12 percentage points among the oldest age cohort (those aged 65-74 in 2010 and 75+ in 2020/21). A similar pattern is observed for age cohorts in relation to the five other ESS questions. This pattern suggests that generational change (or a 'cohort effect') may be one driver of more open attitudes towards immigration, with younger generations, who are persistently more positively disposed toward immigration, gradually replacing older, less supportive ones. More positive views of immigration among younger people are undoubtedly exerting a positive pressure on overall societal attitudes and we might anticipate this to continue into the future. However, more markedly, there is clear evidence of a 'period effect' with the views of all age groups becoming much more positive over time. Nevertheless, the presence of a cohort effect has translated into an increased polarisation in views, with the gap between the youngest and oldest age groups widening.

Table 6 Attitudes to immigration, by birth cohort, 2010 and 2020/21

		% allow many from the same race/ethnic group as majority				
		2010	2020/21	Diff 2010– 2020/21	Unweighted base 2010	Unweighted base 2020/21
All		12	35	24	2,325	1,120
Cohort	Age in 2010	Age in 2020/21				
1996–2005	–	15–24	–	61	–	62
1986–1995	15–24	25–34	19	40	21	233
1976–1985	25–34	35–44	19	42	23	329
1966–1975	35–44	44–54	11	29	18	388
1956–1965	44–54	55–64	9	28	19	382
1946–1955	55–64	65–74	10	28	18	404
1936–1945	65–74	75+	7	19	12	332
Pre-1936	75+	–	3	–	–	257

Source: European Social Survey Rounds 5 and 10, adults aged 15+

Higher educational attainment

We also observe large variations in attitudes between groups with different levels of educational attainment. Table 7 shows how views on our six key questions about immigration vary among three groups, those with no qualifications, those with a qualification below degree-level and those with an undergraduate degree or higher and how these have changed over time. We focus on the period from 2014 onwards where comparable data on education data are available on ESS; this is, in any case, the period where most change has been observed.

Two patterns are evident. The first is that higher educational attainment is consistently associated with more positive views towards immigration. Across all measures and years, those with a degree are more positive than those with a lower-level qualification, who in turn are more positive than those with no qualifications. In 2020/21, 45% of those with a degree would allow many immigrants from the same ethnic or racial group as the majority, compared with 31% of those educated to below degree level and 23% of those with no qualifications. These differences will, of course, be related to the differences among age groups observed in the previous section (as higher proportions of younger people are educated to degree level).

The second is that the trend over time towards more positive attitudes is observed across all groups, whilst being perhaps more concentrated among the more highly educated. For example, looking at the proportions who would allow many people of the same race or ethnic group as the majority to come to Britain, among those with no qualifications, this increased by 14 percentage points between 2014 and 2020/21. Among those with a degree, the corresponding increase was 22 percentage points. This pattern is broadly repeated across all three measures with respect to openness to different types of migrants, though not with respect to the three measures of the impact of immigration.

Table 7 Attitudes to immigration by educational attainment, 2014 to 2020/21

	2014	2016	2018	2020/21	Diff 2014 to 2020/21
Same race/ethnic groups as majority – Allow many	%	%	%	%	%
No qualifications	9	9	17	23	+14
Below degree	11	18	21	31	+20
Degree or higher	22	29	33	45	+22
Different race/ethnic groups as majority – Allow many	%	%	%	%	%
No qualifications	6	8	13	23	+17
Below degree	9	14	18	28	+19
Degree or higher	20	27	30	44	+24
From poorer countries outside Europe – Allow many	%	%	%	%	%
No qualifications	6	6	13	18	+13
Below degree	7	14	16	27	+20
Degree or higher	16	24	28	40	+25
Bad or good for economy – 7 to 10	%	%	%	%	%
No qualifications	19	25	28	43	+24
Below degree	23	39	41	52	+28
Degree or higher	51	64	63	75	+24
Cultural life undermined or enriched – 7 to 10					
No qualifications	22	24	28	41	+20
Below degree	26	42	42	51	+25
Degree or higher	56	67	72	73	+17
Country worse or better place to live – 7 to 10	%	%	%	%	%
No qualifications	20	24	27	36	+15
Below degree	21	33	37	47	+26
Degree or higher	50	59	64	73	+22
<i>Minimum unweighted bases:</i>					
<i>No qualifications</i>	468	399	350	194	
<i>Below degree</i>	1,120	945	1,113	514	
<i>Degree or higher</i>	558	513	625	395	

Source: European Social Survey Rounds 7 to 10, adults aged 15+

Overall levels of educational attainment across society are rising over time, as more young people attend university. While the societal-level changes in immigration we have seen have happened too rapidly to be accounted for by the slow increase in educational attainment, nonetheless, as the proportion of the disproportionately immigration-positive degree-educated continues to rise, we might expect underlying immigration attitudes to continue to move in a positive direction.

Greater numbers of immigrants

As noted in the introduction, the first two decades of the 21st century have seen historically high levels of immigration into the UK. Could the large share of people who are immigrants or who have immigrant heritage in the UK be contributing to the overall increase in positive attitudes?

By combining data from the two most recent waves of ESS, 2018 and 2020/21, we can examine the relationship between immigration status and attitudes toward immigration. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as shown in Table 8, we find that those born outside the UK or with parents born outside the UK (first- and second-generation immigrants) hold more positive attitudes to immigration than the group born in the UK to UK-born parents. This relationship is found on all six measures asked on the survey. First and second-generation immigrants hold similarly positive attitudes towards the amount of immigration we should allow. For example, 30% of first and 31% of second-generation immigrants believe we should allow “many” people from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live in the UK, compared to 21% of those whose parents and they themselves were born in the UK. When asked about the effects of immigration on the economy, cultural life and the country as a place to live, second generation immigrants held slightly less positive views than first generation immigrants but were still more positive than those born in the UK to UK-born parents. For example, regarding whether immigration is bad or good for the economy, 71% of first-generation immigrants gave a positive score compared with 58% of second-generation immigrants and 46% of those born in the UK to UK-born parents.

Table 8 Attitudes to immigration by immigrant status, 2018 and 2020/21 pooled

	First generation-immigrant	Second-generation immigrant	Respondent and parents born in UK	All
Same race/ethnic groups as majority	%	%		%
Allow many	34	34	26	28
<i>Unweighted base</i>	438	271	2556	3265
Different race/ethnic groups as majority				
Allow many	33	30	23	25
<i>Unweighted base</i>	442	274	2565	3281
From poorer countries outside Europe				
Allow many	30	31	21	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	443	275	2568	3286
Bad or good for economy				
7 to 10	71	58	46	51
Mean score	7.38	6.51	5.93	6.22
<i>Unweighted base</i>	442	276	2583	3301

Table 8 Attitudes to immigration by immigrant status, 2018 and 2020/21 pooled (continued)

	First generation-immigrant	Second-generation immigrant	Respondent and parents born in UK	All
Cultural life undermined or enriched				
7 to 10	69	57	48	52
Mean score	7.29	6.50	6.01	6.26
<i>Unweighted base</i>	442	274	2575	3291
Country worse or better place to live				
7 to 10	73	48	42	48
Mean score	7.40	6.40	5.78	6.11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	442	275	2577	3294

Source: European Social Survey Round 9 and 10, adults aged 15+

To investigate whether these more positive views could be contributing to the increase in positive attitudes to immigration we have witnessed, we examined the change in the share of survey participants who were first- or second-generation immigrants, presented in Table 9. We observed an increase in the proportion of first-generation immigrants in the survey; however, this primarily took place prior to 2014, after which much of the positive shift in attitudes to immigration occurred. For second-generation immigrants, there has been a smaller increase between 2002 and 2021/22 (from 7% to 10%) – but this proportion has not changed significantly since 2014. While first- and second-generation immigrants are more positive about immigration, the growth in this population is not sufficient to have driven much of the general positive trend in attitudes observed up to 2020/21.

Table 9 First- and second-generation immigrants, 2002-2020/21

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020/21
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
First generation immigrant	10	11	12	12	15	14	17	16	17	17
Second generation immigrant	7	9	8	8	9	9	9	10	9	10
Respondent and parents born in UK	83	80	80	79	76	77	74	74	74	73
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2041	1882	2380	2342	2404	2275	2248	1946	2194	1142

Source: European Social Survey Rounds 1 to 10, adults aged 15+

A rising immigrant population has other effects, however. As more immigrants move into the country, their interactions with those born in the UK could decrease prejudice and therefore lead to more positive attitudes in the population, as is suggested by social contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998). While none of the surveys we have drawn on asked about people's contact with immigrants directly, in 2022 the NatGen Panel asked how much contact participants had with "people who are of a different race or ethnic group from most British people". If we look just at the question which asks how many immigrants should be allowed from a "different race or ethnic group as most British people", as shown in Table 10, we see that those who had most contact with people from different ethnic and racial

groups were most likely to say we should allow many immigrants, whereas those who had less contact were least likely to do so. This is consistent with what we may expect if social contact with people from different groups does make people more likely to hold more favourable views towards these groups. However, it is important to note that this is only a broader example of the social contact theory rather than a direct explanation of immigration attitudes, as the majority of people who identify as black and minority ethnic in the UK were born in Britain.

Table 10 Attitudes to allowing immigration of people from a different race/ethnic group as majority, by contact with people who are of a different race or ethnic group from most British people, 2022

	Never	Less than once a month	Once a month	Several times a month	Once a week	Several times a week	Every day	Total
Different race/ethnic groups as majority	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Allow many	6	10	9	19	15	16	23	18
Allow some	48	49	55	52	48	56	42	48
Allow a few/allow none	46	41	36	30	37	28	35	33
<i>Unweighted base</i>	32	162	121	315	181	588	749	2148

Source: NatGen Panel, November 2022

A rise in libertarian attitudes

A further potential explanation for changes in attitudes to immigration is that they might be part of more general changes in attitudes and values, in particular the rise of social liberalism seen in recent years (Curtice and Ratti, 2022). We have used data from BSA's 'libertarian-authoritarian' scale, a long-established measure which asks six questions across domains including the death penalty, traditional British values and morality, to classify people as more socially libertarian or more authoritarian. The scale runs from 1 to 5 where 1 is the most socially liberal and 5 is the most authoritarian. We have classed a score of 1 to less than 3 as libertarian, 3 as neutral and higher than 3 to 5 as authoritarian. Further information about this scale is available in the Technical Details.

As shown in Table 11, between 2011 and 2021, there was a major shift in the proportion of people who were classed as libertarian or authoritarian. In 2011, 85% were authoritarian and only 10% were libertarian. The proportion of libertarians steadily rose each year so that, by 2021, the proportion had more than tripled to 31%.

Table 11 Proportions classified as libertarian and authoritarian, 2011-2020/21

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Libertarian	10	11	14	14	17	20	21	22	22	31	31
Neutral	5	6	6	6	6	7	7	8	7	6	8
Authoritarian	85	83	81	80	77	73	72	70	71	62	61
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2813	2789	2773	2352	3610	2356	3213	3024	2587	3956	6228

As might be expected, libertarians are, in general, more pro-immigration than authoritarian. As shown in Table 12, in 2011, 52% of libertarians gave a positive score for the effect of immigration on the economy, and 60% did so for its effect on cultural life, whereas the proportions were 17% and 22% respectively among authoritarians. In 2021, when overall attitudes to immigration were most favourable, we see that both groups had become more positive toward immigration, albeit with a bigger increase among libertarians. The proportion of libertarians attributing a positive score for the effect of immigration on the economy had increased by 27 percentage points (to 79%) and by 18 percentage points among authoritarians (to 35%). The increases for the effect on cultural life were 19 and 11 percentage points. among libertarians and authoritarians respectively.

Table 12 Attitudes to immigration by libertarian-authoritarian scale, 2011 and 2021

	Libertarian			Authoritarian		
	2011	2021	2011-2021 diff	2011	2021	2011-2021 diff
	%	%		%	%	
Bad or good for economy						
7 to 10	52	79	27	17	35	18
Mean score	6.14	7.80	1.66	3.80	5.11	1.31
<i>Unweighted base</i>	256	1046		2410	1816	
Cultural life undermined or enriched						
7 to 10	60	79	19	22	33	11
Mean score	6.88	8.03	1.15	3.99	4.95	0.96
<i>Unweighted base</i>	256	1048		2404	1817	

Source: *British Social Attitudes, 2011 and 2021*

There are two factors at play here. First, socially liberal values have become more prevalent over the last 10 years and those who are more liberal are more likely to have positive attitudes to immigration. What is more, the rise in positive views towards immigration has been greater among those who are socially liberal. So, the socially liberal are both becoming a larger group and show a greater positive shift in immigration attitudes than their more authoritarian counterparts.

Political partisanship

Next, we used BSA data to investigate if attitudes towards immigration, which are known to be generally more favourable among Labour supporters, have become more polarised over time; this issue is also examined in our chapter on the changing dividing lines of Britain’s electoral politics. Table 13 shows that, in 2011, 21% of Conservative supporters gave a positive score for the effect of immigration on cultural life, compared with 32% of Labour supporters. By 2021, positive scores had increased among both groups, with the increase being much larger among Labour supporters. The proportion giving a score of 7 to 10 for cultural life had increased by nine percentage points for Conservative supporters (to 30%) and by 31 percentage points for Labour supporters (to 63%). The majority of Labour supporters in 2021 held positive views on immigration, whereas still only around a third of Conservative supporters did so. We should note, however, that political party support is not static over time. People may switch allegiance, partly in response to the stances taken by particular parties, which might relate specifically to their stances on immigration policy. The attitudes of Conservative supporters also shifted less than Liberal Democrat partisans and (to a lesser extent) non-partisans during this decade, suggesting the increase in polarisation is due to a divergence between Conservative supporters and other groups (see the chapter appendix Table A.2 for supplementary analysis).

It might be that the observed divergence between Conservatives and Labour supporters over this decade could be due to voters with the most negative immigration views becoming more willing to adopt Conservative partisanship during this period (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020; Fieldhouse et al, 2020).

Table 13 Attitudes to immigration by political party affiliation, 2011 and 2021

	Conservative			Labour		
	2011	2021	2011-2021 diff	2011	2021	2011-2021 diff
	%	%		%	%	
Bad or good for economy						
7 to 10	15	35	20	29	65	36
Mean score	3.87	5.15	1.28	4.53	6.94	2.42
<i>Unweighted base</i>	913	984		1031	983	
Cultural life undermined or enriched						
7 to 10	21	30	9	32	63	31
Mean score	3.90	4.77	0.87	4.85	7.07	2.22
<i>Unweighted base</i>	913	985		1028	982	

2021 onwards

In the final part of this section, we examine whether any of the factors considered previously may have contributed to the reversal in the positive trend in attitudes towards immigration observed since 2021. In the previous analyses, we unearthed evidence of a widening in attitudes between some demographic groups. That leads us to question whether, since 2021, these differences have narrowed

again, or whether, instead, the retrenchment in attitudes has taken place primarily among those groups that were already less positive, thereby polarising attitudes further.

For groups defined by age, educational attainment and libertarian-authoritarian attitudes, it appears that attitudes to immigration have moved in a negative direction across all groups since 2021, and thus cannot be seen to have polarised further. Turning first to age, we see that the reduction in positive attitudes has occurred across all age groups. Here there is no strong evidence that changes have been concentrated in either younger or older groups, so the differences between age groups observed in 2021 were still very much evident in 2023.

With respect to educational attainment, we note that the recent negative shift occurred across all groups, albeit to a slightly greater degree among those with no qualifications. For example, among those educated to degree-level, the proportion giving a positive score on the economic impact of immigration on the economy fell by nine percentage points compared with a drop of 16 percentage points among those without any educational qualifications, as shown in Table 14.

Table 14 Attitudes to immigration by educational attainment, 2021 and 2023

	2021	2023	Diff 2021 to 2023
Bad or good for economy – 7 to 10	%	%	%
No qualifications	30	14	-16
Below A-level	28	18	-10
A-level	48	40	-8
Other HE	46	31	-15
Degree or higher	72	63	-9
Cultural life undermined or enriched – 7 to 10			
No qualifications	29	16	-13
Below A-level	28	20	-8
A-level	46	35	-11
Other HE	44	35	-9
Degree or higher	69	61	-8
<i>Minimum unweighted bases:</i>			
<i>No qualifications</i>	<i>166</i>	<i>101</i>	
<i>Below A-level</i>	<i>537</i>	<i>210</i>	
<i>A-level</i>	<i>400</i>	<i>142</i>	
<i>Other HE</i>	<i>421</i>	<i>176</i>	
<i>Degree or higher</i>	<i>1498</i>	<i>545</i>	

Turning to focus on libertarians and authoritarians, we find that the decrease in positive attitudes to immigration between 2021 and 2023 was similar for both groups. The proportion giving a positive score for the effect of immigration on the economy dropped by 12 percentage points among

libertarians and ten percentage points among authoritarians over this period. The corresponding decreases for the effect of immigration on culture life were 13 and nine percentage points respectively.

Between 2011 and 2021, we saw that the difference in attitudes to immigration between Conservative and Labour supporters grew as immigration values became more favourable but also diverged, a process of “two speed liberalisation”, with larger shifts among Labour supporters (and others) than among Conservatives. Looking now between 2021 and 2023, we can see in Table 15 that, rather than a further polarisation of views, a similar decrease in favourable immigration views occurred among supporters of both parties. Shifts in partisanship could, however, be part of the story here – the last few years have seen substantial Conservative to Labour switching, perhaps resulting in a larger portion of Labour supporters holding more negative views of immigration, and a rise in support for the strongly anti-immigration Reform UK, who may have taken some of the most anti-immigration voters out of the Conservative electoral coalition, reducing the negative shift seen among Conservative partisans.

Table 15 Attitudes to immigration by political party affiliation, 2021 and 2023

	Conservative			Labour		
	2021	2023	2021-2023 diff	2021	2023	2021-2023 diff
	%	%		%	%	
Bad or good for economy						
7 to 10	35	24	-11	65	53	-12
Mean score	5.15	4.22	-0.92	6.94	6.23	-0.72
<i>Unweighted base</i>	984	253		983	439	
Cultural life undermined or enriched						
7 to 10	30	24	-6	63	55	-8
Mean score	4.77	4.10	-0.67	7.07	6.54	-0.52
<i>Unweighted base</i>	985	253		982	440	

Drawing our observations from this section together, we can conclude that there is evidence of a strong move toward more positive attitudes to immigration from the middle part of the last decade to 2020. This was then followed by a slight reversal of this trend. These changes have been accompanied by a slight widening in the gaps between those with different characteristics. This is more evident with respect to educational attainment, where we observe a certain degree of increased polarisation between graduates and those with no qualifications, and with respect to partisanship, with increased polarisation between Conservative and Labour supporters.

Current immigration attitudes: policy preferences and polarisation

General preferences and specific policy choices

So far, we have painted our picture of public opinion with a broad brush, gauging people's general sentiments about overall migration flows and their effects. But immigration policymaking is about concrete choices applied to particular flows of migrants. For example, the government's recent response to high migration levels and rising public concern has been to introduce greater restrictions on the ability of particular groups – such as the dependents of students or care workers – to migrate; toughening up the criteria such as income or qualifications that workers or family migrants need to meet in order to receive a visa; and changing the legal rules around asylum so that those arriving via irregular routes are excluded from the system (Manning, 2023).

While political conversations about immigration often focus on aggregate outcomes, it is a range of specific policy choices which deliver these outcomes. It is therefore useful to examine people's views about these policy questions, and to assess how these views vary by voters' partisan leanings. To do this, we utilised a series of questions asked on the January 2024 wave of the NatCen Panel, looking at three broad policy areas: the recruitment of workers and students; asylum policy; and policy towards settled migrants.

The recruitment of workers and students

With regards to labour migration, we asked respondents about the possible return of free movement rights abolished after Brexit and about the recruitment of migrants into the NHS and student migration. In terms of free movement, we asked the following question, offering respondents an answer scale ranging from “strongly support” to “strongly oppose”:

When the UK was in the EU, both British and EU citizens had “freedom of movement rights”, which allowed them to move freely to live and work in each other's countries.

Do you support or oppose the return of free movement rights?

Regarding NHS recruitment, respondents were told that:

When the NHS recruits more doctors and nurses from other countries, they fill vacancies more quickly. This brings down waiting lists. However, recruiting from other countries can push down NHS salaries and increases overall migration levels.

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

The NHS should be free to recruit as many doctors and nurses from other countries as they want to fill vacancies more quickly.

The government should set limits on the number of doctors and nurses the NHS can recruit from other countries.

We used a similarly formatted question with regards to student migration. Respondents were informed that:

When British universities are free to accept as many students from abroad as they want, this delivers more income for universities to spend on research and teaching. However, large numbers of foreign students may put pressure on local housing and resources and encourage universities to focus on courses which recruit higher paying students from abroad.

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

***Universities should be free to recruit as many students from abroad as they want.
The government should set limits on the number of students universities can recruit from abroad.***

In Table 16, we present overall responses for each of these items, and show how responses relate to views about the general economic impact of immigration. It should be noted that the same patterns as those reported below are also evident if we use other measures of general immigration attitudes such as views of overall numbers or cultural impacts.

We find an overall majority in favour of restoring free movement rights, with 56% supporting their return (and 31% strongly supporting this) while 22% oppose (and 8% strongly oppose) their return. This majority reflects both intense support for free movement policies amongst those who rate the economic impact of immigration most positively (84% support, 7% oppose) but also majority support amongst those taking a middle view on economic impacts (59% support, 22% oppose). However, a majority of those who are most negative about economic impacts oppose the return of free movement (16% support, 51% oppose).

There is also a substantial majority (59%) in favour of allowing the NHS to recruit as many migrants as it needs, with views of this policy again closely related to views about the overall economic impacts of immigration. The overall majority reflects the fact that those with positive views about the economic impact of immigration are both more numerous and express a stronger preference on the issue.

Views about university recruitment of migrants operate in the opposite direction. Around seven in ten people believe the government should set limits on student migration, with overwhelming support (93%) from those with the most negative views about economic impacts, and a large majority of support (75%) for government controls among those with middling views on economic impacts. The proposition even enjoys majority (55%) support among those with the most positive views about the economic impact of migration. The public, regardless of their views of migration overall, clearly do not believe universities should have as much freedom to recruit migrants as the NHS.

Table 16 Attitudes to labour and student migration, overall and by views about the economic impact of immigration

	All	Bad or good for economy 0-3	Bad or good for economy 4-6	Bad or good for economy 7-10
Support or oppose the return of free movement rights?				
Strongly support	31	5	17	59
Support	25	11	32	25
Neither support nor oppose	22	33	30	8
Oppose	14	26	17	5
Strongly oppose	8	25	5	2
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2066</i>	<i>445</i>	<i>752</i>	<i>866</i>
View on recruitment of migrants into the NHS				
The NHS should be free to recruit as many migrant workers as it needs	59	34	53	79
Government should set limits on NHS migration	41	66	47	21
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2060</i>	<i>443</i>	<i>750</i>	<i>865</i>
View on recruitment of migrants by universities				
Universities should be free to recruit as many students as they need	29	7	25	45
Government should set limits on student migration	71	93	75	55
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2058</i>	<i>444</i>	<i>748</i>	<i>864</i>

Source: NatCen Panel

Asylum policy

On asylum migration, the NatCen Panel included three questions, covering the general principle of offering asylum, whether asylum seekers should be able to work while their claims are processed, and the use of detention centres to house asylum seekers while their claims are considered.¹ The first two questions asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the first two items, presented in Table 17, namely:

Asylum seekers who have suffered persecution in their own country should be able to stay in Britain.

Asylum seekers should be able to work in Britain while their cases are considered.

¹ A randomly selected half of respondents were additionally told the average waiting time for a decision on asylum claims on the work and detention questions. This did not have a big impact on responses, but those asked this question have been excluded from Table 17.

Regarding detention centres, respondents were asked the following question:

Some people argue that asylum seekers should be kept in detention centres while their cases are considered, to prevent their disappearance. Others argue that detaining asylum seekers against their will is not acceptable in any circumstances.

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

Asylum seekers should never be held in detention centres

Asylum seekers should be held in detention centres only when there is a strong risk of disappearance

Asylum seekers should normally be held in detention centres, but exceptions should be made for vulnerable groups like children and the elderly

Asylum seekers should always be held in detention centres

Overall views and views broken down by general migration perceptions are presented in Table 17. A majority of people support the general principle of accepting asylum seekers fleeing persecution, with 53% in favour and 20% against. There is a large majority in favour of this principle amongst those with the most positive views about the economic impact of immigration (80% agree, 6% disagree) and a near-majority against the principle in the smaller group with the most negative views (18% agree, 49% disagree). Those with moderate views about economic impacts are slightly more likely to be in favour of the asylum principle (46% in favour, 17% against).

There is stronger and broader support for the principle of allowing asylum seekers to work while their claims are processed, with 63% backing this policy and 22% being opposed to it. The policy enjoys near-universal support among those with positive views of the economic impact of immigration (86% agree, 6% disagree). Those with middling views are also strongly in favour of letting asylum seekers work (52% agree, 26% disagree), while those with negative general views are evenly split on this matter (35% agree, 38% disagree).

The public takes a nuanced view on detention centres, with relatively few people either rejecting them entirely (15%) or supporting their universal use (14%). The most popular option is to use them only when there is a strong risk of disappearance (45%) though a substantial minority favour more general use, but with exceptions for vulnerable groups (26%). The balance of support for these two options varies strongly with general migration attitudes. Those who are most positive about its economic impacts favour either never using detention centres (25%) or only using them when there is a strong risk of disappearance (56%), while those who are most negative favour either universal use (39%) or with exceptions only for vulnerable groups (34%). Those with moderate general views about immigration fall somewhere in between these two perspectives. Once again, these patterns are replicated if we analyse attitudes to asylum migration by other general attitudes to immigration.

Table 17 Attitudes to asylum migration, overall and by views about the economic impact of immigration

	All	Bad or good for economy 0-3	Bad or good for economy 4-6	Bad or good for economy 7-10
Asylum seekers who have suffered persecution in their own country should be able to stay in Britain.				
Strongly agree	22	2	10	45
Agree	31	16	36	35
Neither agree nor disagree	27	32	37	14
Disagree	13	28	13	4
Strongly disagree	7	21	4	2
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2062	445	749	865
Asylum seekers should be able to work in Britain while their cases are considered.				
Strongly agree	22	8	10	39
Agree	41	27	42	47
Neither agree nor disagree	15	18	22	7
Disagree	13	20	19	5
Strongly disagree	9	28	7	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1040	232	357	450
View on use of detention centres				
Never use detention centres	15	5	9	25
Use only when strong risk of disappearance	45	22	48	56
Use detention centres, exceptions for vulnerable groups	26	34	32	16
Always use detention centres	14	39	11	3
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1037	230	357	449

Source: NatCen Panel

Policy towards settled migrants

On the rights of settled migrants, we make use of two items concerning access to social and political rights, along with individual items concerning perceptions of the right level for citizenship fees and of the minimum income that should be required to qualify for a family reunion visa.

The two items concerning the qualification periods for migrant access to social and political rights are presented in full in Table 18. Under current policy, settled migrants need to be working and paying taxes for between five and ten years before they get access to full social rights under indefinite leave to remain (and sometimes longer to secure full political rights through citizenship) (Fernandez-Reino et al, 2023). We found that people tend to favour a somewhat shorter qualification period – 65% favour full social rights after three years or less, while 55% back full political rights within the same period.

Views on this matter varied quite strongly by views about the general impact of immigration. One way to compare groups with different views about immigration is by looking at the minimum qualification period which would enjoy majority support among each group. Among those who are most positive about the economic impact of immigration, that period is one year – 65% favour full social rights after

a year or less, and 51% full political rights after this period. A majority of those with middling views on the economic impacts of immigration favour a qualification period of three years or less (62% backing this for social rights, 54% for political rights). A minimum five-year qualification period is needed to secure majority support from those with the most negative views about the economic impacts of immigration – 65% support full social rights after this period, and 55% full political rights. Very long qualification periods or permanent exclusion of settled migrants are unpopular options across all groups.

Table 18 Attitudes to settled migrants' access to social and political rights, overall and by views about general economic impacts

	All	Bad or good for economy 0-3	Bad or good for economy 4-6	Bad or good for economy 7-10
When should migrants who are working and paying taxes in the UK be able to access the same welfare benefits as UK citizens?				
Immediately	27	11	23	41
After 1 year	20	10	20	24
After 3 years	18	17	19	18
After 5 years	19	27	22	12
After 10 years	8	21	7	1
Never	3	11	2	0
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2067	445	752	866
When should migrants who are working and paying taxes in the UK be able to gain the same rights to political participation as UK citizens?				
Immediately	17	5	12	29
After 1 year	18	9	19	22
After 3 years	20	14	22	20
After 5 years	23	27	27	18
After 10 years	10	23	8	3
Never	6	19	4	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2063	445	752	866

Source: NatCen Panel

To assess views regarding the fees charged to settled migrants seeking to acquire citizenship, respondents were told that:

Currently, people who want to apply for British citizenship must pay a fee which the government sets.

The government estimates that processing one citizenship application costs £505. The current fee is £1,500, meaning a profit for the government of £995 per application.

They were then asked:

Which do you think is the right level for this fee?

There should be no fee.

The fee should be set to cover the costs of running the application process only.

The fee should cover costs and make a profit for the government

Similarly, regarding the minimum income for those sponsoring family reunion visas must earn to qualify, respondents were informed that:

British citizens and settled migrants who want to bring spouses or family members to live with them in Britain must earn a minimum income set by the government to qualify for a family visa.

They were then asked:

What do you think this minimum income should be?

No minimum income requirement

Under £20,000

Between £20,000 and £28,000

Between £28,000 and £35,000

Between £35,000 and £45,000

Over £45,000

Responses to both of these items are presented in Table 19. With regards to citizenship fees, a 56% majority favour a fee which covers costs. A substantial minority (38%) back a fee which makes a profit for the government, while the idea of no fee has little support (5%). Setting fees to cover costs only is the majority position of those with positive (67%) and middling (55%) views about the economic impacts of immigration, while a majority (56%) of those with negative views about these impacts favour a fee which makes profits for the government.

There is a wide spread of views about the minimum income required to qualify for a family visa. As with qualification periods, we can summarize these views in terms of the minimum required to achieve majority support in each group. Overall, 52% support an income threshold of £28,000 or less. The same threshold gets majority support among those with positive views of the economic impacts of immigration (72%) and those with middling views (50%), while among those with negative views of its economic impacts, 49% back a threshold of £35,000 or less, while 73% support a threshold of £45,000 or less.

Table 19 Attitudes to citizenship fees and minimum income for family visas, overall and by views about general economic impacts

	All	Bad or good for economy 0-3	Bad or good for economy 4-6	Bad or good for economy 7-10
What is the right level for citizenship fees?				
No fee	5	3	4	8
Cover costs only	56	41	55	67
Cover costs and make profit for government	38	56	41	25
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2059</i>	<i>443</i>	<i>750</i>	<i>865</i>
Minimum income to qualify for a family visa				
No minimum income	13	4	8	23
Under £20,000	12	3	13	16
£20,000-£28,000	27	13	29	33
£28,000-£35,000	23	29	24	20
£35,000-£45,000	14	24	17	6
Over £45,000	11	28	9	3
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2063</i>	<i>444</i>	<i>743</i>	<i>863</i>

Source: NatCen Panel

Partisan polarisation in policy preferences

We noted earlier that partisan groups have become more distinct in their general immigration preferences, with Labour supporters (and others) showing a much larger positive shift between 2014 and 2021 than was observed among Conservative supporters. In Table 20, we examine whether this partisan divide in general immigration attitudes is also evident in policy preferences. To simplify presentation, we divide each policy question into two sets of options – more “open” preferences and more “restrictive” preferences. We summarize support for the open and restrictive options in each partisan group, and then present a net figure to show the balance of opinion, with a negative figure indicating the balance favours restrictive options and a positive figure indicating net support for open options.

We observe large Conservative-Labour partisan divides for all of our policy questions. In a majority of cases (six out of 10) the balance of opinion among Conservative partisans favours restrictive policy, while Labour partisans favour open policy options. Three of the remaining four cases – the general asylum principle, asylum seekers working while their claims are processed, and qualification periods for social rights – involve net support for open policies among both partisan groups, but stronger support for the open options among Labour Party supporters. There is only one case of supporters of both parties supporting the restrictive policy option (though with stronger support among the Conservatives) – namely, government controls on student migration.

Liberal Democrat supporters generally hold similar attitudes to Labour supporters, while voters without a political party attachment tend to fall between Labour and Conservative supporters, though, in most of the cases where Conservatives on balance favour restrictive policies, those who don't support a

particular political party on balance favour more open options (but by smaller margins than those seen for Labour supporters).

Table 20 Partisanship and restrictive vs open views on each immigration policy

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	None	All respondents
Free movement rights					
Restrictive (opposed)	42	11	6	21	22
Open (support)	35	76	85	48	56
Net (open – restrictive)	-7	+65	+79	+27	+34
<i>Unweighted base</i>	395	578	103	764	2038
NHS recruitment					
Restrictive (govt controls)	54	26	25	45	41
Open (free recruitment)	46	74	75	55	59
Net (open-restrictive)	-8	+48	+50	+10	+18
<i>Unweighted base</i>	395	578	103	763	2035
University recruitment					
Restrictive (govt controls)	82	62	64	73	71
Open (free recruitment)	18	38	36	27	29
Net (open-restrictive)	-64	-24	-28	-46	-42
<i>Unweighted base</i>	391	576	103	763	2031
Asylum principle					
Restrictive (reject)	33	8	9	21	20
Open (support)	39	76	76	43	52
Net (open-restrictive)	+6	+68	+67	+22	+32
<i>Unweighted base</i>	395	577	102	763	2035
Asylum seekers working					
Restrictive (reject)	32	13	2	25	23
Open (support)	51	79	83	56	63
Net (open-restrictive)	+19	+66	+81	+31	+40
<i>Unweighted base</i>	200	295	49	383	1022
Detention centres					
Restrictive (wide/universal use)	51	24	27	45	40
Open (limited/no use)	49	76	73	55	60
Net (open-restrictive)	-2	+52	+46	+10	+20
<i>Unweighted base</i>	199	295	49	382	1019
Social rights qualification					
Restrictive (5 years or more)	41	18	21	34	31
Open (3 years or less)	57	78	75	59	65
Net (open-restrictive)	+16	+60	+54	+25	+34
<i>Unweighted base</i>	395	578	103	765	2039

Table 20 Partisanship and restrictive vs open views on each immigration policy (continued)

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	None	All respondents
Political rights qualification					
Restrictive (5 years or more)	57	25	32	42	39
Open (3 years or less)	41	70	62	48	55
Net (open-restrictive)	-16	+45	+30	+6	+16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	395	578	103	765	2039
Citizenship fees					
Restrictive (make profit)	61	30	25	36	38
Open (none or cost only)	39	70	75	64	62
Net (open-restrictive)	-22	+40	+50	+28	+24
<i>Unweighted base</i>	395	578	103	759	2033
Family visa minimum income					
Restrictive (over £28k)	70	29	30	54	48
Open (under £28k)	30	71	70	46	42
Net (open-restrictive)	-40	+42	+40	-8	+4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	393	576	103	758	2027

Have policy preferences become more polarised over time?

We have seen that Conservative and Labour supporters are quite polarised in their migration policy preferences, with supporters of the Conservative party generally favouring restrictive policy options while Labour party supporters generally favour more open policies. Is this division a persistent feature of the political landscape, or something new? There are a handful of policy questions which were asked in exactly the same form in the January 2024 NatCen Panel module and in earlier BSA modules run in 2011 and 2013. In Table 21, we look at the changes in policy preferences among Conservative and Labour supporters to examine whether the policy preferences of those supporting the two governing parties have become more polarised over the past decade.

In each of the four cases, preferences have indeed become more polarised by partisanship. In three of the four cases, this reflects “two speed liberalisation” – the balance of opinion has shifted towards more open policy options over the past decade, but the shift is much larger among Labour supporters than among Conservative supporters. Support for the more liberal options rose by between 20 and 29 percentage points among Labour supporters, but by only three to seven points among Conservative supporters. In the final case, access to social rights, Labour supporters have become a great deal more open in their policy preferences, while Conservative supporters have become slightly more restrictive.

Table 21 Change in attitudes among Conservative and Labour party supporters, 2011/12-2024

	2011/13 (Con)	2024 (Con)	Change (Con)	2011/13 (Lab)	2024 (Lab)	Change (Lab)
Social rights qualification (2013)	%	%	%	%	%	%
Restrictive (5 years or more)	38	41	+3	36	18	-18
Open (3 years or less)	61	57	-4	63	78	+15
Net (open-restrictive)	+23	+16	-7	+27	+60	+33
<i>Unweighted base</i>	818	395		1052	578	
Political rights qualification (2013)						
Restrictive (5 years or more)	60	57	-3	52	25	-27
Open (3 years or less)	38	41	+3	46	70	+24
Net (open-restrictive)	-22	-16	+6	-6	+45	+51
<i>Unweighted base</i>	818	395		1052	578	
Asylum seekers working (2011)						
Restrictive (oppose)	43	32	-11	39	13	-26
Open (support)	46	51	+5	50	79	+29
Net (open-restrictive)	+3	+19	+16	+11	+66	+55
<i>Unweighted base</i>	926	200		1039	295	
Detention centres (2011)						
Restrictive (wide/universal)	57	51	-6	42	24	-18
Open (limited/no use)	42	49	+7	56	76	+20
Net (open-restrictive)	-15	-2	+13	+14	+52	+38
<i>Unweighted base</i>	926	199		1039	295	

In summary then, while Conservative and Labour supporters have always held distinct policy preferences in the area of migration, with Conservatives supporting more restrictive policies and Labour supporters favouring more open policies, these differences have increased over the past decade, as both groups have become more liberal, but with this trend being much more marked among Labour, compared with Conservative supporters.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have identified a substantial shift towards more positive and open attitudes towards immigration in the period from 2014 to 2021, followed by a partial reversion back towards more negative and restrictive attitudes. While shifts towards more positive attitudes are observed across all social groups, these shifts tend to be larger among the groups whose attitudes are more positive to start with. This “two speed liberalisation” has resulted in a growing social polarisation in attitudes. The recent reversion to more negative attitudes has occurred at similar rates across all social groups, meaning the increase in polarisation has not been unwound.

Views about immigration have also become more polarised by partisanship. This reflects both a larger liberal shift among Labour supporters than Conservatives, and a shift in the basis of party support, with Labour attracting new support over the past decade from groups with more positive views of immigration, while the Conservatives have recruited new supporters from more migration-sceptical groups. The upshot of these developments is a much deeper partisan divide in general views of immigration today than was observed hitherto, something which also feeds into deep and consistent partisan divisions in immigration policy preferences, with Conservative supporters holding more restrictive preferences on every policy item analysed.

The Conservatives’ decision to heavily promote restrictive reforms to immigration as the next general election therefore makes sense in terms of rallying support from the voters they now have, and, in particular, in terms of seeing off competition from Reform UK, a more radical right-wing party who have in the past year mobilised support from voters with the most anti-immigration views by promoting a hardline approach to immigration.

While the Conservatives have been forthright in promoting a restrictive migration stance, Labour have been more reticent on this issue. While their supporters now favour a much more open approach on immigration than in the past, Labour has generally not proposed major reforms to immigration, though they have voiced criticism of some Conservative initiatives such as the “Rwanda scheme”, which party leader Keir Starmer recently pledged to scrap. This approach may also have an electoral logic – voters with positive views of immigration do not see it as a top political priority, and so can be won to Labour’s banner on other grounds. Migration sceptics, by contrast, are much more likely to emphasise the issue, and Labour may therefore be wary of antagonising the more migration-sceptical Conservative to Labour switchers they have recently won over, even if this requires offering relatively little in an area where their core supporters’ views have shifted a lot.

As a result, the political agenda over immigration as the election approaches is largely being set by restrictive Conservative policies and proposals. But the large changes in general attitudes and in partisan polarisation we document here suggest that, if the election results in a change in government, which current polling suggests is likely, one consequence would be a large shift in the electoral pressures faced by policymakers, as a party reliant on more migration-sceptical voters is replaced by one whose support base is much more positive about migration. This will be quite different to the last time a Labour government replaced a Conservative one in 1997 – at which point general immigration preferences were more negative overall, and the partisan divide was not as deep.

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Appendix

Table A1 Attitudes to immigration, by birth cohort, 2010 and 2020-21

Cohort	Age in		2010	2020	Diff	Unweighted	Unweighted
	2010	2020/21			2010–2020/21	base 2010	base 2020/21
% allow many from the same race/ethnic group as majority							
1996–2005	–	15–24	–	61		–	62
1986–1995	15–24	25–34	19	40	21	233	117
1976–1985	25–34	35–44	19	42	23	329	148
1966–1975	35–44	44–54	11	29	18	388	177
1956–1965	44–54	55–64	9	28	19	382	199
1946–1955	55–64	65–74	10	28	18	404	226
1936–1945	65–74	75+	7	19	12	332	191
Pre-1936	75+	–	3	–		257	–
% allow many from different race/ethnic group as majority							
1996–2005	–	15–24	-	59		–	62
1986–1995	15–24	25–34	16	42	25	238	116
1976–1985	25–34	35–44	14	40	26	328	148
1966–1975	35–44	44–54	9	27	17	396	178
1956–1965	44–54	55–64	7	27	20	388	200
1946–1955	55–64	65–74	7	22	15	405	228
1936–1945	65–74	75+	4	16	13	328	191
Pre-1936	75+	–	4	-		260	-
% allow many from poorer countries outside Europe							
1996–2005	–	15–24	-	55		–	62
1986–1995	15–24	25–34	18	40	22	238	118
1976–1985	25–34	35–44	14	40	26	331	148
1966–1975	35–44	44–54	9	24	14	398	178
1956–1965	44–54	55–64	7	24	18	384	200
1946–1955	55–64	65–74	5	19	14	406	228
1936–1945	65–74	75+	3	14	11	327	194
Pre-1936	75+	–	1	-		257	-

Table A1 Attitudes to immigration, by birth cohort, 2010 and 2020-21 (continued)

Cohort	Age in		2010	2020	Diff 2010– 2020/21	Unweighted base 2010	Unweighted base 2020/21
	2010	2020/21					
Bad or good for economy – % 7 to 10							
1996–2005	–	15–24	-	64		–	64
1986–1995	15–24	25–34	24	70	46	238	118
1976–1985	25–34	35–44	29	62	33	338	151
1966–1975	35–44	44–54	23	59	36	397	177
1956–1965	44–54	55–64	21	54	34	396	200
1946–1955	55–64	65–74	21	53	32	402	229
1936–1945	65–74	75+	16	51	35	326	191
Pre-1936	75+	–	9	-		251	-
Cultural life undermined or enriched – % 7 to 10							
1996–2005	–	15–24	-	64		–	63
1986–1995	15–24	25–34	35	73	38	235	118
1976–1985	25–34	35–44	36	62	26	336	149
1966–1975	35–44	44–54	37	56	19	395	176
1956–1965	44–54	55–64	31	50	19	392	203
1946–1955	55–64	65–74	25	49	24	400	231
1936–1945	65–74	75+	24	48	24	325	191
Pre-1936	75+	–	21	-		249	-
Country worse or better place to live – % 7 to 10							
1996–2005	–	15–24	-	63		–	64
1986–1995	15–24	25–34	34	70	35	240	118
1976–1985	25–34	35–44	28	59	32	334	152
1966–1975	35–44	44–54	27	54	27	398	178
1956–1965	44–54	55–64	21	48	27	394	202
1946–1955	55–64	65–74	18	45	27	405	230
1936–1945	65–74	75+	17	45	28	326	190
Pre-1936	75+	–	12	-		251	-

Source: European Social Survey Round 10, adults aged 15+

Table A2 Attitudes to immigration by political party support, 2011-2021

	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	<i>Change 2011-21</i>
Bad or good for the economy – 0 to 3	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Conservative	44	39	26	16	13	26	-18
Labour	37	35	23	12	12	12	-25
Liberal Democrat	25	19	9	5	6	4	-21
None	56	49	46	32	21	33	-23
Bad or good for the economy – 7 to 10	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Conservative	15	17	30	39	41	35	+19
Labour	29	27	41	57	57	65	+26
Liberal Democrat	30	40	49	72	70	80	+50
None	15	18	17	33	37	30	+15
Cultural life undermined or enriched – 0 to 3							
Conservative	47	43	34	32	24	32	-15
Labour	34	35	28	15	13	12	-22
Liberal Democrat	19	15	14	4	7	5	-13
None	49	45	44	37	21	28	-21
Cultural life undermined or enriched – 7 to 10							
Conservative	21	19	26	33	36	30	+9
Labour	32	33	38	55	58	63	+31
Liberal Democrat	46	54	52	64	69	77	+31
None	19	22	19	28	35	31	+12
<i>Minimum unweighted bases</i>							
<i>Conservative</i>	913	813	708	313	954	984	
<i>Labour</i>	1028	1034	610	408	809	982	
<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	252	194	97	64	330	261	
<i>None</i>	606	567	304	106	483	331	

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