



Public Opinion

Public Opinion and Voting: MW 466

Key issues

Immigration levels

- 30 million UK adults (nearly 60% of the UK adult population) support reductions in immigration levels – see our [paper](#) (polling 2018-19).
- Well over half of these (18.5 million) think immigration has been ***much too high*** and/or want to see it ***reduced by a lot*** (polling 2018-19).
- Only a small minority (10%) wish to see immigration increased (polling 2018-19).
- Only a small minority say the UK would be better off if we let in all immigrants who wanted to come here (Ipsos, 2019).

Salience of immigration

- Voters said that immigration was one of the top three issues on which they would base their vote at the next election ([Opinium](#), February 2018).
- The salience of immigration has declined in recent years compared to other issues, including Brexit and the NHS (Ipsos MORI issues index).
- Yet UK respondents still see immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the EU ([Eurobarometer, 2019](#))

Views of approach taken by Ministers / MPs

- Nearly three-quarters of the public supported the government delivering on its **repeated promises to significantly reduce the level of net migration** (Deltapoll, June 2018).
- 57% say they are dissatisfied with how the government is handling immigration (Ipsos MORI, 2019).
- Only 13% of the public trust MPs to tell the truth on immigration either all or most of the time; just 17% trust the government to do the same (ICM, 2018).

Population growth

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) say the UK population is growing too rapidly (YouGov, 2018).
- Almost three quarters (73%) of the public think the UK is crowded (YouGov, 2016).

Housing and public services

- 68% say that migration puts pressure on public services and housing (Ipsos MORI, 2019), while 58% said in a separate survey that immigration places **too much pressure** on these amenities.
- 69% think that the country is in the throes of a housing crisis, and (54%) see immigration as the largest contributor (Opinium, 2017).

Illegal immigration

- 77% of Britons agree that illegal immigration is a serious problem facing the UK (higher than for 12 EU countries - 2018 [Project28](#) poll)
- 70-80% support the 'compliant environment' policies to tackle illegal immigration ([YouGov](#), April 2018).
- 62% of the public say those arriving illegally via the Channel do not need to claim asylum in Britain and should be *returned* to France [[Ipsos](#), 2019, p25]

Social cohesion and identity

- 71% of Britons believe that immigration has made communities where migrants have settled **more divided**, reaching 78% in areas experienced large-scale recent immigration (2018 [poll](#) by Demos).
- 65% think the influx of immigrants will change the culture of the UK (2018 [Project28](#) poll)
- 64% say that too often, migrants don't integrate and follow British customs (Ipsos MORI, 2019).
- A large majority (between 80% and 95%) think it is either very important or fairly important that migrants have an ability to speak English to become 'truly British' (Open Europe / [NatCen](#)).

Views on the level of immigration to the UK

1. A majority of the public would like to see reductions in immigration levels.

- An analysis reputable opinion polls conducted in the period since spring 2018 found that ***an average share of just under 60% of UK adults would like immigration levels reduced***. That is equivalent to 30 million of 52.4 million UK adults (for more, read the full paper: '[Evidential basis for our 30 million claim](#)', August 2019).
- Polling published by the think tank Onward in 2019 found that ***there is net support for reducing immigration in every age bracket, within every ethnic group, and among Remain voters***.
- A 2017 [YouGov poll](#) found that 69% of respondents wanted immigration rules to be tightened, including 61% in London and 60% in Scotland. Only 6% of respondents across the UK wanted immigration rules to be loosened.
- Only a tiny minority (13%) say that the UK would be better off if we let in all immigrants who wanted to come here ([Ipsos](#), 2019).

The salience of immigration

2. Over the past twenty years, concerns about immigration have largely mirrored the scale of inflows, according to Ipsos MORI. However, the Brexit debate which became prominent from 2015/16 onwards may have displaced earlier concern about immigration.

- The salience of immigration has decreased in contrast with issues such as Brexit, healthcare and the environment in recent years.
- Despite this, immigration remained in third place (behind only Brexit and healthcare) when people were asked to identify their 'single biggest concern' ([Ipsos MORI](#), July 2019).
- In February 2018, voters said immigration was one of the *top three issues* on which they would base their vote at the next election (Opinium, Feb. 2018).
- Immigration was named by UK respondents as one of the *top two issues* facing the EU by the biannual Eurobarometer survey. Overall, the issue topped the list of issues in 21 member states, with Malta, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovenia and the Netherlands having the highest proportions of respondents ranking the issue as most problematic ([Eurobarometer](#), August 2019).

Views of the approach taken by the government and Parliament

3. The public do not have favourable views about the way in which Ministers have dealt with immigration. Nor do many think that MPs tell the truth about it:

- 57% of the public said in December 2018 they were dissatisfied with how the government was handling immigration (Ipsos, 2019).
- Only 13% of the public trust MPs to tell the truth on immigration either all or most of the time (ICM,

2018).

- Only 17% trust the government to do the same (ICM, 2018).
- Despite this, 73% of the public support the government delivering on its repeated promises to reduce the level of net migration from the current 273,000 per year to less than 100,000 per year (Deltapoll, June 2018). This includes majorities of Remain voters, Labour and Liberal Democrat voters and 18-24 year-olds.

4. Many people see the issue of immigration through the prism of policy failure on the part of successive governments, as well as a reluctance by Ministers to act decisively to deliver on election promises.

Views about the costs and benefits of immigration

5. The public have nuanced views on immigration. Some polls suggest that views of the impact of immigration are more negative than positive:

- By a margin of nine percentage points, UK respondents said that the costs of immigration outweighed the benefits ([YouGov](#), Feb-March 2019).
- An Open Survey conducted for the National Conversation in 2018 found that more people believed immigration had been negative for the UK than positive.
- A similar finding was reported by Demos in 2018.

6. Some commentators suggest that views of immigration have become more positive in recent years. However, Ipsos MORI polling suggests that a sizeable portion of those who feel more positive about immigration do so because they believe that:

- a. Brexit had or will reduce the number of EU migrants coming to the UK and/or
- b. The EU migrant crisis which reached a peak in 2015/16 has dropped out of the public headlines.

7. Should post-Brexit immigration changes fail to deliver real control of immigration or a significant reduction in immigration levels, or even lead to an increase, public concern is likely to rise sharply.

Concerns about the impact of immigration

8. The public are concerned about the fact that mass immigration is driving rapid **population growth**:

- A [YouGov global poll](#) (Nov-Dec 2015) found that, out of 17 countries surveyed worldwide, Britain was the most concerned about population growth (with a higher level of concern than those surveyed in Singapore, Hong Kong, Germany, France or China).
- A poll carried out in 2016 by Migration Watch UK found that 73% of the public thought that Britain was 'crowded', compared to just 7% who said that it was not crowded.
- The public also say that the UK's population is rising too quickly. 64% of the public told YouGov this in the summer of 2018.

9. The impact of high levels of immigration on **public services** is also a topic of public concern:

- A July 2017 poll carried out by YouGov found that 58% agreed that immigration has placed too much pressure on public services (See [here](#))
- A 2017 Opinium poll found that 69% thought that the UK was in the throes of a housing crisis. More than half of those who said this (54%) saw immigration as the largest contributor to the housing crisis.

10. Public views about the impact of immigration on **jobs and wages**:

- There is significant net support for the view that, when jobs are scarce, **employers should prioritise people from this country over immigrants** (48% to 23%). [Ipsos](#), 2019.
- Focus groups reflect a strong belief that immigration was a key feature of an unfair labour market, particularly the fact that high immigration has held down wages and reduced training opportunities for local workers ([Open Europe](#), 2017).
- 82% of the public agreed with the following statement: *'The government must enforce the minimum wage so we have a level playing field and employers can't squeeze out British workers by employing immigrants on the cheap'* ([ICM for British Future 17–19 October 2014](#)).

Views on different types of migration

Work immigration

- The public are largely in favour of immigration by highly-skilled workers. 80% told YouGov in spring 2019 that immigration by qualified professionals coming here with a job offer was good for the UK.
- However, by a margin of 64% and 67% respectively, respondents told ICM in 2016 that **lower skilled migration, both from the EU and from outside the EU, should be reduced after Brexit**.
- A 2019 poll by [YouGov](#) found that 87% of respondents said that immigration by those coming here to claim benefits was bad for the UK and that 58% of respondents said that immigration by unskilled labourers coming here to search for work was bad for the UK.

11. This is in line with the general view that the immigration system should prioritise migrants likely to make the most significant economic contribution.

Family immigration

- By a margin of 15% (37% to 22%), respondents said immigration by people coming to join family members who already live the UK was bad for the country. Meanwhile, 35% said it was neither good nor bad.
- An ICM poll conducted in 2016 which found that 58% of respondents were in favour of a reduction in

the number of extended family members coming to the UK, while 41% were in favour of a reduction in the number of immediate family members coming to the UK.

Study immigration

- The public do not favour exempting students from immigration controls (40% of those respondents were opposed to this move, in contrast to 36% who supported it – Open Europe, Dec. 2017).
- By a margin of 19%, the public oppose removing students from the official immigration statistics ([ComRes](#), April 2017).

Refugees

- Public views about refugees are mixed. A YouGov poll published in 2019 found that 29% of respondents felt that immigration by people coming here to flee war or persecution was good for the UK, while 26% felt this was bad for the UK.
- Other polling suggests that **abuse of the asylum route can lead to a drop in public support for accepting refugees**. 2016 polling found that attitudes among the public towards refugees from Syria and Lebanon hardened in the wake of claims by asylum applicants who said they were children but who clearly were not minors (see [BBC report](#)).

EU and non-EU immigration

12. NatCen found in 2017 that 68% of those surveyed support ending the free movement of EU citizens to the UK and of UK citizens to the EU.

13. However, [research](#) by LSE suggests that **the public want to see non-EU immigration reduced even more than they want the level of EU immigration to be cut**. This suggests that government follow-through on its pledge to 'bear down' on non-EU immigration would be popular:

- While voters were content to have a level of EU net migration of between 40,000 and 110,000 (it is currently at about the mid-point of this range – 74,000), they wanted non-EU net migration of between 35,000 and 85,000 per year (it is currently well over twice the upper level of this range - at 232,000).
- As LSE put it: *“British voters prefer EU to non-EU migrants... This pattern of preferring immigrants from inside the EU to those from outside holds across all social groups in our data.”*
- **Britons are also either hesitant or unwilling to see any kind of increase in immigration in order to gain free-trade agreements with a number of non-EU countries after Brexit** ([BMG Research](#), January 2019).

Social cohesion and British identity

14. The public have strong views on certain attributes that new immigrants should have:

- 87% believe immigrants should speak English (NatCen / British Social Attitudes Survey).
- 81% believe they must have work skills that the UK needs (NatCen / British Social Attitudes Survey).
- 74% believe they must have good educational qualifications (NatCen / British Social Attitudes Survey).

15. One poll suggests that a large majority of the public believe immigration has made the UK more divided:

- A 2018 Demos poll found that 71% of Britons believed that immigration has made the communities where migrants had settled **more divided**, reaching 78% in areas that had experienced large-scale recent immigration (2018 [poll](#) by Demos).
- The Demos poll also found that nearly half of Britons (47%) said they wanted to protect British values over multiculturalism, compared to 36% who say 'welcoming different cultures' was more important.

16. There is also concern that Britain's culture and identity is not respected enough and is being changed:

- Demos found that 55% of respondents did not believe the Government was doing enough to promote traditional British values.
- An Ipsos Mori poll published in 2019 found that 64% of respondents had said that, too often, migrants don't integrate and follow British customs.

Illegal immigration

17. Polling points to a high level of public concern regarding the issue of illegal immigration.

- Project28 found in 2018 that **77% of the UK public agreed with the statement that illegal immigration is a serious problem facing the country.**
- In recent years, there has been increased reluctance on the part of government to enforce its 'compliant environment' policies aimed at deterring illegal migrants from remaining in the country. However, a YouGov poll published in April 2018 found that Britons overwhelmingly support these policies.
 - **82%** thought everyone should have to show documents when proving their right to be in the country when **accepting a job.**
 - **79%** thought everyone should have to show documents proving their right to be in the country in order when **registering with a GP.**
 - **76%** thought everyone should have to show documents when proving their right to be in the country when **opening a bank account.**

- **74%** thought everyone should have to show documents when proving their right to be in the country when **renting a place to live**.