









An immigration manifesto **wish list**

The UK public is set to go to the polls to vote for a new government on 12 December 2019. Immigration will no doubt be a hot topic, with political leaders seeking to balance economic and social needs while meeting the expectations of the public. Party manifestos should be published soon and we thought it would be interesting to look at what the public, employer groups and civil society are hoping will be promised. We will update this briefing later and see whether any political parties commit to the same.

WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR:

	Conservative Party An Australian style Points Based System		Labour Party Potential to maintain and extend free movement
	Liberal Democrats Party Stop Brexit and continue free movement		Plaid Cymru Take back control of Welsh migration policy to build the Welsh economy
	The Brexit Party Deliver Brexit and a subsequent skills based migration system		The Democratic Unionist Party Creation of a single, skills-focused immigration policy
	The Green Party A humane immigration system that acknowledges Britain's ongoing role in the global flow of migrants		The Scottish National Party A regional immigration system for Scotland

We asked Sunder Katwala, Director of British Future, what his work on public opinion and immigration has revealed.

IMMIGRATION IN THE MANIFESTOS: WHAT DO VOTERS WANT?

Immigration was central to the EU referendum debate in 2016, its public salience has dropped significantly since, so immigration may have a lower profile during this General Election.

What do the public want? Most people are balancers, seeking both pressures and gains of immigration. The balance of pressures and gains are seen differently by different groups – between cities and towns, and across the generations – influencing how parties and candidates in different places voice their ideas about how future policy can best strike those balances.

The reputation of immigration as a polarising issue also masks a broad public consensus on several aspects of future immigration policy. The emerging cross-party consensus on student, post-study and skilled migration is catching up with where the voters have been for some time.

Low and semi-skilled migration is more politically contested. A scepticism about the pace of change, and broad appetite for more control, is combined with pragmatic support for migration, where needed to fill jobs in care homes, agriculture, tourism and other sectors, if the local impacts of migration can be handled better. To unlock broader support, economic advocates need to say more about how to ensure that what is good for business can work well for the places they operate, and to make the missing links between advocacy on training, skills and immigration.

The public have clear views about what matters in immigration policy, believing that control, contribution and compassion can be combined. Reading party manifestos is much rarer. Politicians often invent symbolic micro-policies that might reassure the public – but few voters ever hear about such initiatives. A points-system is a popular idea – but there has been little engagement with how a British points-system would operate.

In Scotland, two-thirds of the public are supportive of the idea of devolving immigration policy. Regional variations have much lower salience outside Scotland – and scepticism about whether it could work reflects low confidence in the competence of governments, and the intuition that immigration control happens at the borders, rather than in rules and checks in the workplace.

A stronger focus on integration, including actively promoting citizenship, has the potential to command a broad public consensus – but no party has yet managed to give these issues any significant profile in the policy or political debate about immigration, focused heavily on migration for work.

If there is more common ground on immigration choices than is recognised, Brexit itself continues to polarise. The case for keeping free movement as part of the single market – as part of a softer Brexit, or to remain in the EU itself – splits voters largely along referendum and party lines.

Yet the future of immigration policy depends on making choices about Brexit first. If this election leads to a clear parliamentary majority to pass the Withdrawal Agreement, the biggest immigration reform for a generation will be a major theme of the next parliament. Should the election result lead to a new government seeking a further Article 50 extension to renegotiate a softer deal, or to hold a new referendum, or to an extended stalemate, the decisions which are made about Brexit would determine which immigration debate we have next.

WHAT DO EMPLOYERS, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THINK TANKS HOPE THE MANIFESTOS WILL SAY ABOUT IMMIGRATION?

Political policies have to come from somewhere, and the contents of a manifesto will normally have been discussed at length with political stakeholders well ahead of any election. We surveyed 18 trade associations, think tanks and civil society bodies (for instance charities concerned with immigration) and asked what they hope to see in the manifestos.

We asked what new initiative they would most like to see introduced and what existing initiative they would like to see scrapped. To help us identify priorities we asked for one answer to each question, although we were helpfully given lots of ideas. These are the issues that mattered most to our respondents.

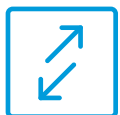
The big themes:



Almost half of our respondents hope that the current government's plan to impose a £30,000 minimum salary on sponsored workers will be scrapped. That is no surprise, we hear it a lot in meetings, particularly outside of London. But it is telling that so many groups think salary is a priority.



Around one third of respondents want the government to lower the cost of UK immigration. Again, no surprise. It can cost over £16,000 in government fees alone to sponsor a married worker with three children.



A visa category for lower skilled workers was a priority for around one third of respondents. Some think those workers should be allowed to stay permanently, others think a shorter period could work. Either way current plans for a one year temporary work visa or two year youth mobility visa – both restricted to select nationalities – is not considered sufficient.



Simplicity was another theme. This was expressed in a variety of ways – digital, streamlined, a need to work for all businesses – but the inference was clear: employers are convinced that the current immigration system needs to change.

Just as important:



There has to be a visa category for self employed workers. You can sponsor self employed people in our existing immigration system, but it can often feel like forcing a square peg through a round hole. We are going to need some capacity for free lancing, a gig economy, contingency and other self employed migrant workers to continue to operate here.



Integration is important. Compelling arguments were made – not for the first time – for a simpler, more affordable route to citizenship; scrapping the minimum salary to sponsor a spouse; scrapping the minimum salary requirement for Indefinite Leave to Remain; a protected legal status for EU nationals (beyond settled status provisions) and greater access to English language lessons for refugees and new migrants. Bound up in this was a call for a physical settled status document, for people uncomfortable about the prospect of an online status.



Powers for nations or regions to vary immigration policy were also suggested. While regional migration tends to be talked about in an economic context, leading thinkers have also identified possible benefits to integration and improved public opinion on migration. We can absolutely see how a regional system could work.



More radically, suggestions that the Home Office should be split up were put forward.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

We expect to see party manifestos published during the week commencing 11 November 2019. We will update our briefing when these are available and help you to explain the possible outcomes in conversations with colleagues.