

# Does political discourse matter? Comparing party positions and public attitudes on immigration in England

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## **Abstract**

The United Kingdom 2015 General Election campaign was mostly dominated by the issues of immigration, public debt and income inequality. While most political parties adopted austerity-led programmes in order to reduce the level of public deficit, their stances on immigration vary significantly despite the two main parties converging on a welfare chauvinist frame. This paper compares party positions to policy recommendations formulated by participants in a democratic forum as part of the "Welfare States Futures: Our Children's Europe" project, in order to determine whether recent party pledges on immigration are being used by citizens in a large group discussion over the future of welfare policy in the UK. The analysis shows that while participants are committed to tougher policies in order to reduce existing levels of net migration, most of the policy priorities formulated do not match those of the two mainstream parties (i.e. the Conservative Party and the Labour Party) but rather those of the UK Independence Party. It also demonstrates that participants' individual political preferences do not seem to match their own positions on immigration, and that there is little difference between left-leaning and right-leaning voters.

**Keywords:** Party politics; United Kingdom; public opinion; immigration; democratic forum.

## **Introduction**

The year 2015 marked the start of political change in the United Kingdom (UK). After five years of coalition government between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats under David Cameron, the Conservatives obtained the majority of seats following the General Election held on 7 May 2015. As a result, David Cameron formed a single party majority government. The Conservatives were thus able to adapt their party manifesto into a government programme, which included a pledge to hold a referendum on European Union (EU) membership (held on 23 June 2016, when 51.9 per cent of voters opted for leaving the EU after a campaign mostly focused on the issue of immigration); to cut down net migration ‘in the tens of thousands, not the hundreds of thousands’ (Conservative Party 2015); and to reform the welfare system while cutting down taxes.

While political discourse and party manifesto analyses have mostly focused on their impact on policy-making (see e.g. Schmidt 2002; Leruth 2015) or on how public opinion shapes party stances (e.g. Hills 2002; Adams *et al.* 2004; Norris and Lovenduski 2004; Bale and Partos 2014), few qualitative studies analysed the role of party stances (or more broadly elite discourse) on public discourse (see e.g. Slater 2014).

This paper explores whether political discourse and key statements formulated by political parties are being used in discussions between ordinary people. Using data from innovative democratic forums conducted within the framework of a NORFACE-funded project entitled ‘Welfare States Future: Our Children’s Europe’ (WelfSOC), the paper compares party positions (as laid out in their party manifestos) with policy recommendations formulated by participants in our democratic forums. This paper focuses on the issue that was selected by our participants as the most urging challenge for the future of the welfare state, namely immigration. This issue was also heavily discussed during the 2015 and 2017 General Election

campaigns, and in the context of the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, as a majority of ‘Leave’ voters expressed concerns over immigration (Hobolt 2016). The second section of this paper contextualises the debate: based on the election campaign, it explains why immigration constituted the core of the 2015 campaign and highlights the key stances taken by political parties in England.<sup>1</sup> The third section focuses on the research methods: it explains the added value of democratic forums and why such method can help researchers to understand how political discourse matters to ordinary citizens, by analysing how it is being used in interactions within small and large groups. The fourth section focuses on individual statements and policy recommendations formulated by participants to our democratic forums, and compares them to party positions highlighted in section two. The fifth and final section then concludes by stating that even though a majority of democratic forum participants identified themselves as Labour or Conservative voters and in the centre of the left-right political spectrum, their position and policy recommendations on immigration matched those advocated by the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

### **Party positions and public opinion on immigration: the state of the art**

Public attitudes towards immigration in the United Kingdom have been covered extensively in the existing literature, mostly drawing on data from the British Election Study and the British Social Attitudes surveys (see e.g. McLaren and Johnson 2007; Ford 2011; Ford and Goodwin 2014; for surveys conducted by IPSOS-MORI, see e.g. Duffy and Frere-Smith 2014; Blinder 2015; Blinder and Allen 2017). The starting point of many existing studies is to deconstruct immigration into several groups, either per region of origin (e.g. Ford 2011) or, most commonly, by dissociating economic migrants from refugees and asylum seekers (e.g. Sales

2002; Blinder 2015; Several studies have examined the relationship between political parties and public opinion. Two schools of thought dominate the existing literature: a *bottom-up* approach, where studies have focused on whether public opinion shapes party positions; and a *top-down* approach, examining the influence of party ideology on public opinion.

### *Bottom-up approach*

Bottom-up studies have analysed the effect that public opinion has on political parties. In a comparative analysis of eight Western European countries, Adams *et al.* (2004: 608) used data from the Comparative Manifesto Project and Eurobarometer survey data on citizens' left-right self-placement to show that 'political parties shift their ideological positions in response to public opinion when opinion clearly shifts away from the party'. They also found out that parties do not adjust their ideologies based on past elections results. Schumacher *et al.* (2013) nuanced these findings, demonstrating that party position change as a response to public opinion depends on the party's organisational balance of power. In a study of the evolution of the UK Conservative Party's immigration policy, Bale and Partos (2014) highlighted that even though party leadership played the most significant role in shaping the party's stance over the five decades covered, changes in policy direction are in most cases driven by 'the need to respond to party and public feeling, whether it be triggered by particular cases or by developing trends' (*ibid.*: 616-617). In a study of British New Labour between 1997 and 2002, Hills (2002) analysed whether the party's new social security policy was shaped by opinion surveys and focus groups, drawing on data from British Social Attitudes survey. The author found out that for a significant list of social security policy areas, New Labour's stance has evolved in line with public opinion, while only a minority of policies have been out of line with public

attitudes. This indicates that public opinion could have shaped social security policy, although Hills does suggest that there might be other interpretations of his results.

According to Freeman's (2002) analysis of the 'gap' between public opinion and public policy in liberal democracies, the public tends to hold restrictive views on immigration, but public opinion is 'slower to mobilize and crystallize' (Freeman 1995: 884), while immigration policy is shaped by an 'overwhelmingly admissionist' organised public consisting of employers, ethnic advocacy groups, and human rights organisations, which form the basis of the 'organised public'. Yet, Freeman (1994) also argued that the United Kingdom is a 'deviant case', given that until the election of a Labour government in 1997, immigration policy was restrictive in line with public opinion (see also Hansen 2000; Statham and Geddes 2006; Hampshire 2009). Some scholars, however, claimed that such UK exceptionalism may be overstated (see e.g. Somerville and Goodman 2010 for a nuance between economic migration and asylum policy). In a recent analysis of immigration policy regimes using British Social Attitudes surveys, Ford *et al.*'s (2015: 1408) findings suggest that public opinion and public policy are indeed interconnected: '[r]estrictive policy change on immigration is a response to public demand, but it is an incremental process even in periods of intense public concern [...] Conversely, liberal policy change has occurred when the public is quiescent, and proceeded through sweeping reforms, often with unintended consequences'.

### *Top-down approach*

As far as the issue of immigration issue is concerned, many studies established that political parties are the agenda-setters and influence public opinion. In an article examining the role of the 'organised public' in the United Kingdom using newspaper sources, Statham and Geddes

(2006: 266) argued that domestic immigration policy is determined top-down by elites: 'it is their dominance over the political environment and the opportunities and incentives it produces which decisively shapes the level and contents of pro-migrant and anti-migrant collective action'. Their findings thus contradict Freeman's work on the influence of the organised public over elites in the UK. In an excellent quantitative analysis of radical right-wing parties and voters in six West European countries, Rydgren (2008) focused on 'anti-immigration' and 'anti-immigrant' frames which dominate the ideological programme of such parties, and discovered that frames linking immigration to social tension and criminality are very effective for mobilising voter support, unlike other frames such as welfare chauvinism or those which link immigration to job losses.

Both schools of thought have been dominated by quantitative analyses of the relationship between party positions and public opinion by using structured surveys (e.g. Ford *et al.* 2015), while others have used a mixed methods approach (e.g. Adams *et al.* 2004). While survey research makes a significant contribution to research for example, by highlighting the 'gap' between public opinion and public policy on immigration across Europe, it also suffers from limitations. Firstly, survey research tends to 'reify aggregated individual responses, either implicitly or explicitly, into a 'collective actor', a 'general public' who 'acts' to influence immigration policies' (Statham and Geddes 2006: 249). Secondly, structured surveys are relatively weak in exploring issues that are not contained within the prior assumptions of the researchers involved in the formulation of survey questions. Thirdly, surveys are weak in identifying 'non-attitudes'. Some respondents may have no strong views either way but construct a response because they feel it is required by the interview situation (Goerres and Prinzen 2011).

Only a few studies are solely based on qualitative methods. Yet, discursive and interactive rather than pre-structured methods are better equipped to highlight such aforementioned 'non-

attitudes' and give the opportunity for participants to frame the debate. This paper offers a 'third way' and demonstrates the strengths of democratic forums as a research method to investigate the relations between political parties as public policy actors and public opinion, as ordinary citizens are given the opportunity to speak freely about a range of issues with very limited input from researchers. The following section introduces democratic forums as a tool for investigating this relationship.

### **Democratic Forums as an Innovative Research Method to Investigate Public Attitudes**

The democratic forum approach derives from concerns about the limitations of conventional social science methodology and also from more participative approaches in democratic theory. Democratic forums are group discussions, typically with 30 to 40 participants and typically extended over two or three days. The research topic is loosely defined and the group process is designed to allow participants to have greater control over the range of issues to be discussed. A deliberative, decision-making element is generally included, in order to give a purpose to the discussion and stimulate the exchange of opinions.

Political and social scientists have become interested in the democratic forum method for two main reasons. First, conceptions of democracy have shifted away from that of a system for managing consent from a largely passive electorate to one of democracy as an active institutional framework for promoting more widespread deliberation and citizen engagement (Chambers 2003; Carpini *et al.* 2005; Mouffe 2009; Dryzek 2010). Second, some attitude theorists have moved away from a positivist concept of attitudes as original to an independent individual to a more social concept of attitudes as developed through interaction and expression in debate. This approach sees attitudes as social constructs, shaped through interaction and best

understood as characteristics of individuals in social contexts than simply as individual attributes (Brown 2011). From this perspective, conventional interview responses are inevitably shaped by the interaction between a researcher (interviewer, questionnaire-designer) and an interviewee. Democratic forum discussions are the product of a group interaction between citizens who frame the discussion with very limited input of researchers and moderators. Accordingly, democratic forums differ from other qualitative research methods such as focus groups for five main reasons: the length of discussion (a minimum of two days); the number of participants (between 30 and 40); the breadth of the topic discussed (unlike much more defined issues discussed in focus groups); the very light touch of moderation, allowing greater control of the discussion by participants; and the introduction of a more deliberative, problem-solving element to the discussion in order to stimulate the exchange of ideas and give a purpose to the exercise.

Democratic forums permit researchers to examine unprompted discussion and see how attitudes change and what influences or strengthens them and how political and other cleavages emerge within the group. Researchers can also consider the sources of information people use to reinforce their positions, from expert, politicians or media debate through to the experiences of family members, neighbours or acquaintances. Democratic forums are typically large enough to allow political cleavages reflecting those in the population to emerge and to be observed during the deliberations.

The strengths of democratic forums entail corresponding weaknesses. They do not allow representative sampling, and so offer an imprecise guide to the pattern of opinions and cannot be directed to consider specific aspects of an issue according to a researcher or survey



commissioner's presuppositions. They offer a useful alternative approach to gain insights into the complexity of attitudes especially in areas where attitude structures may not be well understood or may be subject to change.

*Case study: Democratic Forums in the United Kingdom*

As part of the NORFACE-funded WelfSOC project, we conducted a two-day Democratic Forum exercise in Birmingham in October 2015, i.e. five months after the General Election and four months before the start of the EU referendum campaign, and at a time when immigration was high on the political agenda. The group contained 34 people, broadly representative of the English population, all of whom attended the full event and received a small financial incentive for doing so. As part of the recruitment process, each participant was asked to answer a series of socio-economic and political questions, including their party preference (if a General Election was to be held at the time of recruitment) and self-placement on the left-right spectrum. Eight participants identified themselves as Conservative voters, ten as Labour voters, three as Liberal Democrats voters, and two as UKIP voters while the remaining eleven participants were undecided. Furthermore, the majority of participants (18) identified themselves in the centre of the left-right spectrum, three on the left, two on the right, one as centre-left and another as centre-right, while the rest (10) were undecided. Active party members were excluded from the selection during the recruitment process, and participants were not expected to have a particular interest for politics or to have read the most recent party manifestos. Each participant was given a random number ranging from 40 to 90, in order to track individual statements. The two days of discussion were a mixture of plenary sessions and break-out group discussions in three groups of 11 to 12 participants to facilitate interaction. They took place over two days spaced two weeks apart. As the WelfSOC project aims at

examining the aspirations, assumptions and priorities of ordinary people about the future development of welfare, a broad definition of welfare policy was provided by the lead facilitator at the very beginning of the event, in order to make sure that all participants understand the context and objectives of the discussion.<sup>2</sup>

The first day consisted of a 'naïve' discussion of challenges to the future of welfare policy, in order for participants to discuss and formulate themes they consider as the most important ones in response to the question. Following a short brainstorm session during which participants were tasked to think of problems and challenges for the future of welfare policy, participants voted in order to select five of those issues to be discussed throughout the day. These were (in order of preference): immigration; lack of money and welfare state financing; unemployment; population ageing; and lack of/access to education. Five break-out discussions of 30 minutes each then took place throughout the rest of the day in order to discuss each of these five themes. The first day was concluded with a plenary session where all participants shared the conclusions to their discussions and were given the opportunity to raise questions or request information to the research team. The second day took place two weeks later, in order to give participants the opportunity to reflect on the issues covered during the first day. A stimulus pack containing information requested by the group drawn mainly from official statistical sources, covering immigration, resources and public spending on welfare, unemployment, population ageing and access to educational opportunities, was distributed between the meetings and introduced and discussed at the beginning of the second day. The second day was structured around the five broad themes which formed the basis of the comparative study: income inequality; immigration; gender; intergenerational issues; and labour market. These themes corresponded closely to those generated spontaneously in the first day forum with the exception of gender. The participants, divided into the same three break-out groups as on Day

1, were asked to formulate a series of policy recommendations on each of these themes – these are used in the analysis below. At the end of the event, participants presented their policy recommendations in a plenary session for discussion and vote. Interactions were audio and video-recorded, with note-taking by three observers providing a check, so that all statements could be traced a specific identified individual.

In order to analyse the relations between party positions and policy recommendations made by participants to our democratic forums, we start from a top-down approach by assuming that political parties play a decisive role in shaping public opinion on the topic of immigration. We thus hypothesise that democratic forum participants will adopt a similar stance on immigration as the one advocated by the party they support.

A 2014 British Election Study expert survey also showed (somewhat unsurprisingly) that parties ranked by experts as right-wing are more opposed to immigration than left-wing ones (see Figure 1). Based on the expert survey data and in line with the top-down approach, we hypothesise that participants who identified with the right side of the political spectrum will hold more restrictive views on immigration.

**Figure 1. Expert Survey of party placements on the left-right scale and immigration**



*Source: British Election Study 2014. Stance on immigration calculated both in terms impact of immigration on the country's economy and culture.*

### **The 2015 UK General Election: immigration as a key issue**

After five years of Conservatives – Liberal Democrats coalition government between 2010 and 2015, the 2015 UK General Election campaign focused on austerity measures, the need for budget balance, immigration and welfare reforms (Taylor-Gooby *et al.* 2017). The Liberal Democrats, who were heavily criticised by public opinion for being considered as responsible for the rise of tuition fees in higher education despite their 2010 pledge not to do so, were consistently predicted to be facing major losses of seats. The same polls predicted that Conservative and Labour parties would fail to secure a majority of seats in parliament, and would thus have to rely on smaller parties (such as the Scottish National Party) in order to form

a coalition (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016). The radical right UKIP, which gained two seats through defections, which the incumbents were able to hold in the ensuing by-elections held in 2014, was perceived as the main challenger to Labour and the Conservatives in a significant number of constituencies and consistently polled at around 15 per cent of voting intentions at the national level, thus posing a threat to both mainstream parties (Goodwin and Milazzo 2015).

### *Controlled immigration as a key issue for most parties*

Immigration, and most particularly immigration from European Union countries was framed as one of the most urgent issues in the 2015 General Election campaign. In 2015, 11 per cent of the UK population was foreign-born, in line with other Western European countries such as France and Germany. However, net migration has consistently been on the rise, reaching a record of 298,000 in the year ending September 2014 despite the 2010-2015 coalition government's pledge to reduce these figures. Even though most immigrants come from non-EU countries (47 per cent in 2014), most of the debate targeted EU citizens coming to the United Kingdom (37 per cent in 2014; with the remaining 16 per cent being British nationals returning to the UK).

In its 2015 General Election manifesto, the Conservative Party (2015: 29) pledged to 'keep [their] ambition of delivering annual net migration in the tens of thousands, not the hundreds of thousands'. While immigration is framed as having a positive impact on the United Kingdom by bringing 'real benefits to Britain – to our economy, our culture and our national life' (ibid.), the party stated its willingness to tackle uncontrolled migration which, in their views, 'puts pressure on schools, hospitals and transport; and it can cause social pressures if communities find it hard to integrate' (ibid.). The party programme emphasised six key policies: first, to

reduce EU migration by reforming welfare rules, preventing EU citizens from claiming tax credits and child benefits if they have not lived in the UK for a minimum of four years; second, to negotiate with the EU in order to strengthen border control and introduce stronger powers to deport criminals; third, to keep on cutting immigration from outside the EU by introducing tougher visa rules; fourth, to include tougher rules to deport illegal immigrants; fifth, to tackle people trafficking and exploitations; and finally, to tackle the negative effects of high immigration on public services (e.g. 'health tourism') and in local communities.

Controversially and in contrast to policies advocated for the past 10 years<sup>3</sup>, the Labour Party also insisted on tougher immigration controls in its 2015 manifesto. Even though the programme also emphasises the benefits of immigration for the United Kingdom ('[o]ur economy and our society benefit from the talent and investment of people who come here, including university students coming to study'; Labour Party 2015: 66), it criticises the Conservative Party's failure to reduce net migration and targets high levels of low-skilled migration. The party pledged: to strengthen British borders by recruiting an additional 1,000 borders staff and by introducing stronger border controls in order to prevent criminals from entering the UK; to introduce full exit checks; to decrease the number of short-term student visas; to keep the existing cap on non-EU migrants; to tackle people trafficking and exploitation of migrants; and to prevent all immigrants to claim benefits for at least two years. In sum, as far as immigration is concerned, the Labour Party's manifesto mirrors pledges from the Conservative Party. This is not a new phenomenon, as Hansen (2014) demonstrated.

The existing coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats, offered a milder stance on immigration, and the party manifesto did not emphasise this issue as much as all other parties. While it is acknowledged that immigration 'boosts our economy and helps staff our public services, especially our NHS' (Liberal Democrats 2015: 126), the party also stresses weaknesses in the current system that lead to abuses as they 'undermine confidence in it' (ibid.). In order to fix

these issues, the party proposes to restore full entry and exit checks, to double the number of inspections on employers, to separate students within official immigration statistics, and to condition unemployment benefits to knowledge of English.

The UK Independence Party has always had a tough stance on immigration since its creation as a single issue, anti-EU party in 1993. UKIP began to press the issue of immigration from the 2010 General Election onwards. Unsurprisingly, the party's 2015 manifesto was heavily focused on the issue as well as on EU membership. In contrast to other parties, the UKIP programme does not acknowledge the benefits of immigration for the UK; instead, it states that '[i]mmigration from the EU and the UK Parliament's Treasury Select Committee reveals how immigration has driven down wages and led to job losses for British workers' (UKIP 2015: 11). It claims that one house needs to be built every seven minutes in order to meet demand, and emphasises that immigration puts strain on healthcare and schools. It also highlights that according to opinion polls, immigration is consistently perceived as one of the top three issues for voters. And the manifesto to further state: '[o]ur current immigration rules ignore the wishes of the British people. They discriminate in favour of EU citizens and against the rest of the world' (ibid.). As a result, the party proposes to leave the European Union and thus to end the freedom of movement of people; to increase the number of border agency staff by 2,500; to establish an Australian-style points based system limiting high-skilled work visas to 50,000 per annum; to limit access to non-urgent healthcare services and benefits to immigrants who have worked for a minimum of five consecutive years; and to prevent criminals from entering the country and deporting migrants who commit crimes in custodial sentence.

These pledges appear to reflect differences in public attitudes. The 2015 British Election Survey shows that by the time of the election 84 per cent of Conservative voters as against 63 per cent of Labour voters and 66 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters believed too many immigrants had been allowed to enter the country (British Election Study 2015). The

proportion of Labour and Lib Dems voters who believed that immigration had been excessive is striking and may help explain why party manifestos made concessions to curb immigration. Our democratic forum data allows us to explore public attitudes in some details and examine why people had moved against immigration.

### **Empirical analysis: comparing party pledges with policy recommendations formulated by democratic forum participants**

On both days of discussion, immigration constituted one of the key themes identified by participants. All participants believed that current immigration levels are unsustainable for the United Kingdom and that something needs to be done in order to lower existing numbers. Yet and as expected, the majority of participants made a difference between ‘economic’ immigration and refugees. As one participant put it: ‘we are a tiny island and we haven’t got room for everybody that wants to come here. Especially the people who want to come to make money, [...] the people who are trying to get here from Syria and all that, that’s different, they are refugees’ [UK-44, Conservative voter, centre]. Allowing refugees to enter the country did not constitute the core of the discussion: as a result, participants did not formulate policy recommendations related to refugees. As far as ‘economic’ migration is concerned, while party and government positions were not explicitly mentioned, several participants made statements similar to the discourse used by UKIP and this was reflected in the policy recommendations advocated by the group.

*Policy recommendation #1: ‘Introducing an Australian-style points-based system to cap immigration’*



The first element of convergence in the discussion on immigration is the need to cap immigration. In the participants' views, capping immigration is necessary in order to avoid mass unemployment, especially due to existing inflows of unskilled workers:

'It's an issue because it's probably restricting our British citizens from having access to you know, like education, to job opportunities. It's simply because, you know we have Europeans and other people from around the world coming in and it's restricting and taking all the opportunities that we could possibly have' [UK-40, no party preference, centre].

'It's our little island' [UK-41, no party preference, centre].

'The amount of unemployment is going to increase because they're not monitoring which, the people coming into the country. It's not being monitored, so you're having more unskilled, unemployable people coming in' [UK-51, UKIP voter, centre].

Mass immigration was also perceived as putting a strain on public services, especially the National Health Service (NHS):

'There needs to be a cap to some extent [...] I mean if you just keep admitting [unclear] people, there's people in that you don't know what they're going to do when they get here. Just letting them in is like 'here you go, door's open'. I can see why people would want to come here, free healthcare, free education, there are lots of benefits, but then the Government does need the benefit back somehow instead of take, take, take.' [UK-62, Labour, centre].

[...]

‘We looked at public services in terms of the NHS suffering due to overcrowding so pretty much a link on from that and not having enough resources to cope. Housing, another issue due to overcrowding, not enough housing. The sort of lack of control and regulations in terms of letting in skilled and unskilled people into this country. That’s going to pose a problem, in terms of, I guess having an equal society in many respects, as to where are they placed and that being the problem, specifically with the unskilled migrants coming over to this country, not having anything really to offer but taking up space in the country so that was that. Some of the solutions that we noted down where, again having some kind of system in place and all the, I guess at the borders, looking at say, can you, having a team of people to sort of, I guess monitor the numbers that are coming in, in some way. We don’t know how, we kind of didn’t come to sort of conclusion on that’ [UK-83, no voting preference, no self-placement]

*Moderator:* So monitoring rather than restricting?

‘I guess I think both really. Restricting in terms of who can bring something specific, something valuable into this country [...] only allowing a certain quota, in terms of the size of our population and the fact that we’re a small island and maybe having some kind of consensus with the EU so that we [want] some kind of agreement with everybody - everybody’s doing their bit to take in a certain quota so that was one of our solutions. So talked about a tracking system, controlling who comes in and out. We looked at benefits being given, [...] benefits being given to those coming over to this country who have been allowed to come in. If they’re willing to contribute something, if they say they don’t have a specific skill or can’t find a job, that they’re going to get benefits on the basis that they can maybe do some, either charitable work or voluntary work so they’re actually putting

something in and contributing in some sense and that in some respects is an incentive, that if they're doing it for free, that they're more likely to want to go out and get a job and actually get paid for it so it's an incentive to get them out into the workforce [...]' [UK-83, no voting preference no self-placement]

One country that was often taken as an example to change the UK immigration policy is Australia:

'I think the big thing [...] is let people in that have got a skill that we need' [UK-84, Conservative voter, centre].

'Yes, a points-based system' [UK-90, Conservative voter, left-wing].

'Very similar to Australia' [UK-83, no party preference, no self-placement].

'The thing is with Australia though they're not within the EU, are they? They haven't got an open door policy like we have' [UK-84, Conservative voter, centre].

'So we need some sort of system that looks at our society in general and says what do we need and then hand pick people and [...] they have got to have a skills set that they are bringing in' [UK-67, Labour, no self-placement].

'I would agree' [UK-62 Labour, centre].

The introduction of an Australian-style points-based system to cap immigration was formulated as such by the spokespersons of break-out groups:

‘We feel that we don’t monitor it closely enough now and that some sort of monitoring needs to be brought in, i.e. maybe an Australian type system where you have to put something in in order to come here and if people are going to come here, we discussed that there are a lot of people that we know of personally that come here not able to speak the language but perhaps there should be some sort of encouragement to learn the language if you’re going to come here so that everybody can converse and talk and you can do a job openly, without needing translators etc. So stricter border controls, making the right people come to the country’ [UK-44, Conservative voter, centre]

[...]

*Moderator:* Any other burning points?

‘I think, just a cap really, just a general cap on how many we can allow into the country. So just having some kind of system in place to cap. There has to be, there cannot be sort of like an open window as to how many people we can keep letting in. They’ve got to cap it some way, there has to be that in place’ [UK-83, no voting preference, no self-placement].

Accordingly, the majority of participants tended to frame economic immigration as having a negative impact on the country, and highlighted the need for selective immigration based on skills shortage in the United Kingdom. The use of Australia as a lead example for the United

Kingdom's future immigration policy is particularly striking, as only UKIP mentioned this policy in its manifesto.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that at the beginning of June 2016 in the context of the UK referendum campaign, the introduction of an Australian points-based system was used by prominent Vote Leave campaigners including Conservative MPs Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, Priti Patel, and Labour MP Gisela Stuart (BBC 2016). This demonstrates that even though UKIP only managed to elect one MP in the 2015 General Election, the party managed to play an important role in influencing policy proposals.

*Policy recommendation #2: 'No benefits should be given to immigrants before residing in the country for a period of minimum two years'*

The second policy recommendation formulated by democratic forum participants focused on welfare chauvinism, i.e. restricting access to benefits for migrants in the United Kingdom, as advocated by the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and UKIP. One break-out group proposed to tackle the perceived abuse of the NHS by conditioning access to healthcare to employer sponsorship, 'or a probation of like two years where they have to support their own healthcare in the country, until they've paid into it sufficiently. It could be longer, could be shorter' [UK-64, Liberal Democrats voter, centre]. This was developed further by another group which extended such restriction to all benefits:

'A similar thing, you've got to work a period between two and five years before you qualify for any benefits. So it's a similar thing. I mean, the benefits, obviously, from our point of view are you only get benefits when you put money into the system. [...] So people can't just come in and work for three months or work for three weeks and be entitled to loads of different benefits. The advantages from our

point of view are that then the benefits will go to the people that have been here long term and who deserve it' [UK-84, Conservative voter, centre].

While the overwhelming majority of participants voted in favour of such policy, only one participant voiced concerns and this led to a small debate in the room:

'Well, my issue is, let's say they've come into the country, fall pregnant and you need some care for that child, you can't support that child. Then that creates problems for the country itself' [UK-67, Labour voter, no self-placement]

'Then they should have stayed in their own country' [UK-47, no voting preference, no self-placement].

'What if you're a refugee, what do you do then, where do you go?' [UK-87, Conservative voter, centre]

'That's a fair point' [UK-84, Conservative voter, centre].

'I suppose that's classed as a refugee package' [UK-44, Conservative voter, centre].

'I think refugee and immigration are two separate issues' [UK-66, Labour voter, centre-left].

'Separate issues, yeah' [UK-44, Conservative voter, centre].

‘In that scenario, you can get the healthcare and you pay for it after’ [UK-69, Labour voter, centre].

‘A healthcare loan’ [UK-84, Conservative voter, centre].

‘Yeah, healthcare loan’ [UK-66, Labour voter, centre-left].

‘And then we could employ a team of people to chase up the people that aren't paying for their loans’ [UK-44, Conservative voter, centre].

‘So more work!’ [UK-84, Conservative voter, centre].

This position on welfare chauvinism is in line with what was promoted by most political parties in the context of the 2015 General Election (with the exception of the Liberal Democrats). There were discussions over the amount of time immigrants should work for (or, as framed by participants, ‘contribute to the system’). While the original policy recommendation stated a period of ‘two to five years’ (as discussed above), participants eventually opted for two years, in line with the position of the Labour Party (which was softer than the Conservatives and UKIP).

*Policy recommendation #3: ‘An ID card system should be introduced so that immigrants using the National Health Service can be tracked down and pay for the use of such services’*

The third immigration-related policy recommendation formulated by democratic forum participants (with unanimous backing) was also related to healthcare tourism, by introducing a European-wide ID card system in order to track non-UK residents who use the National Health Service:

‘It also allows us to charge back to other countries for NHS charges. Because we do that at the moment but not very effectively. So any tourists coming in, you know, if they're ill while they're here, like we would if we went abroad and we pay while we're there, then we'd do the same and charge it back to their countries. Obviously, a disadvantage to that is having to monitor it and how do we do that, and how do we link into other countries' systems. But perhaps it might stop people from scamming the system’ [UK-44, Conservative voter, centre].

Such policy was not advocated by any political parties per se, but is closely related to the issue of tackling abuse of the National Health Service by immigrants as advocated by UKIP. While a majority of participants voted in favour of this policy, some voiced their concerns about the efficiency of this system, but believed that it is an important issue and that there should be a better way to track down healthcare tourists.

## **Conclusion**



Starting from a top-down approach, this paper has compared party preferences on immigration policy in the United Kingdom to policy recommendations formulated by ‘ordinary’ citizens in the context of a democratic forum, which consisted of a mix of small and large discussion groups with very limited input from researchers, thus allowing greater control of the debate by participants. Three policy proposals were formulated: the first one favoured the implementation of an Australian-style points-based system; the second one was related to welfare chauvinism by conditioning access to benefits and services to employment (for a minimum of two years); and the third one dealt with the issue of health tourism. While participants made an initial distinction between two groups of immigrants, the majority of the discussion focused on economic migration, as they expressed some sympathy towards refugees and were more critical of migrants moving to the UK for economic reasons.

Even though more analysis needs to be done in order to determine the extent of the relationship between elite and public discourse, this analysis has demonstrated that the majority of participants have tended to support and formulate policy recommendations close to those advocated by UKIP, even though most of them identified themselves as Conservative and Labour voters and in the centre of the political spectrum. As immigration had played a major role in the 2015 and 2017 elections and was framed as one of the most important issues in the context of the UK referendum on EU membership held a few months after our democratic forum, the data collected by WelfSOC shows that party identification and self-placement on the left-right political spectrum does not match individual preferences on immigration policies, and that there was a broad consensus to favour restrictive policies advocated by the radical right. Forum members overwhelmingly favoured a points-based system as proposed by UKIP (in the context of the 2015 General Election) and the Vote Leave Brexit campaign. In sum, while discussions that took place in the democratic forum were not focused on party politics and gave the opportunity for participants to discuss their priorities for the future of the UK

welfare state openly, our analysis offers a new insight suggesting that UKIP had succeeded in gaining ‘ownership’ of the issue of immigration (Dennison and Goodwin 2015). A wide range of participants seemed in favour of the party’s immigration policy although they did not support the party. This is what appears to lie behind the British Election Survey statistics quoted earlier. Furthermore, given the way policy recommendations were formulated, this analysis attempted to show that public opinion can indeed be influenced by party positions, thus defending the top-down approach. The fact that key policy proposals advocated by UKIP (and, to a lesser extent, the Conservatives and Labour) were used by participants gives some insights on the influence of elites over public opinion. Yet, participants did not explicitly refer to any sources of information when formulating their policy recommendations, and did not acknowledge that a points-based system was advocated by UKIP or used by the Labour government in 2008. It is thus possible that other sources, such as the media or even hearsay, influenced their positions.

This paper does not claim that democratic forums can replace structured surveys as a means of investigating the relationship between party positions and public opinion. Instead, it shows that democratic forums are a useful research tool to identify key concerns and issues for voters in a specific country because they give participants the opportunity to frame the discussion in a stimulating, open environment. In 2016, the Stronger In campaign failed to address most of the citizens’ concerns, including on immigration. As democratic forums give more opportunities for citizens to express their views on a broader topic with very limited input from the research team, they could hold the key to a better understanding of public attitudes and how to address them.

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis focuses on the four largest parties in England: the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the UK Independence Party, and the Liberal Democrats. As the Democratic Forums were held in Birmingham (the third largest metropolitan area in the United Kingdom), regional parties such as the Scottish National Party or Plaid Cymru are not included in this analysis. Furthermore, no participants indicated the Green Party of England and Wales in terms of voting intentions: this party is also excluded from this analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Welfare policies were defined as ‘benefits and services provided by the government in order to meet people’s needs. The main areas are the health service, pensions, benefits for unemployed and low-wage people, benefits for people in work, social housing, childcare provisions, rights to paid leave, social care for older people and, in some countries, schooling. The welfare state is by far the largest area of government spending, and there are many issues to be considered for the future’.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth reminding that the Labour Party allowed full freedom of movement for nationals of the A8 countries that joined the EU in 2004 following the ‘Bing Bang’ enlargement. Tony Blair’s then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, claimed not to envisage any upper limits to immigration.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that a points-based system was introduced by the UK Labour government in 2008 for selecting non-EU economic migrants. Yet this was not mentioned by participants, who only used the expression of ‘Australian points-based system’ as used in UKIP’s programme.