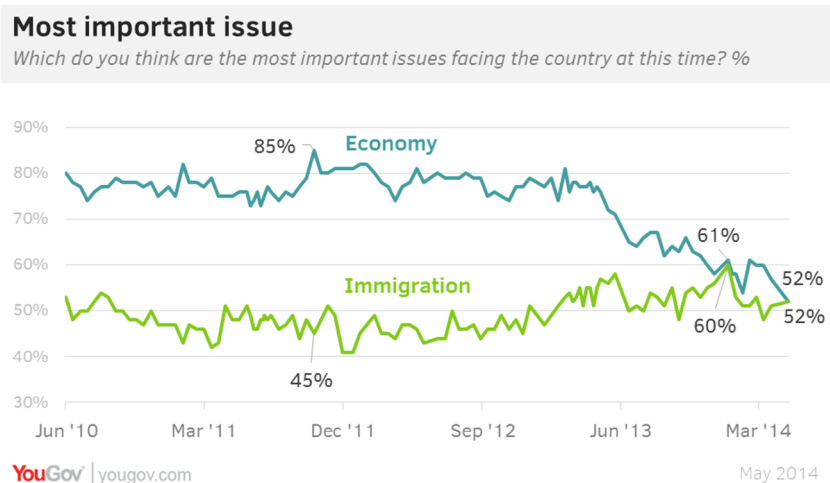


# ‘It’s Immigration Stupid?’

*This article will be appearing as a research paper in Parliament Street and is forthcoming*

Immigration as a policy issue has increased significantly since the 2005 British General Election. Traditionally in British General Elections, immigration has not been a salient issue come General Election time. The issue agenda in the 2001 Election was largely dominated by domestic issues such as healthcare, law and order, education, alongside pensions and taxation. The issue of Immigration alongside Europe was considerably low amongst the public in the 2001 Election.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, there has been a general shift since the 2005 British General Election. Public opinion polls conducted by the British Election Study and Ipsos MORI in the 2005 British General Election highlighted the importance of immigration as the most important issue facing the country and the 2010 British Election embodied a similar trend.<sup>2</sup> The graph in Figure 1.1 below shows how immigration has gradually caught up with the economy as a core issue, and how the economy is no longer seen as the most important issue facing the country. Moreover, current YouGov polls put the NHS as the third most important issue on 33%, with both immigration and the economy on 49%.<sup>3</sup> The salience of immigration as an issue in public opinion is clear, but what about the current party positions and who is perceived to ‘own’ the immigration issue amongst the core political parties in Britain?



Source: YouGov

<sup>1</sup> Cowling, David, [Opinion Polls: Movement on the issues?](#) BBC, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2005

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos MORI, Issues Index: 1997-2006. [The Most Important Issues Facing Britain Today](#) 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2006

<sup>3</sup> [YouGov/The Sun Survey Results](#), 5<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> January 2015

## Salience of Immigration

A number of opinion polls have shown large differences in the public’s perceptions of which political party is best able to handle immigration and is most trusted on this issue. Evidently, immigration has formed a large proportion of UKIP party strategy and the party has predominantly focused on immigration as a strategy to win support from Labour and the Conservative Party.<sup>4</sup> UKIP’s anti-immigrant stance combined with their ‘hard’ eurosceptic strategy has appeared to have worked electorally in the 2014 European Parliament elections. The salience of immigration may be more important during economic downturns, whereby the dominant ethnic-in group in society may scapegoat ethnic-out groups. Furthermore, public opinion data alongside academic research suggests that UKIP are perceived to ‘own’ the immigration issue and have tapped into this large scale discontent towards mainstream political parties that is currently prevalent in British Politics.<sup>5</sup>

The following chart, using British Election Study data, shows how UKIP voters’ attitudes towards immigration differ from those of other parties.

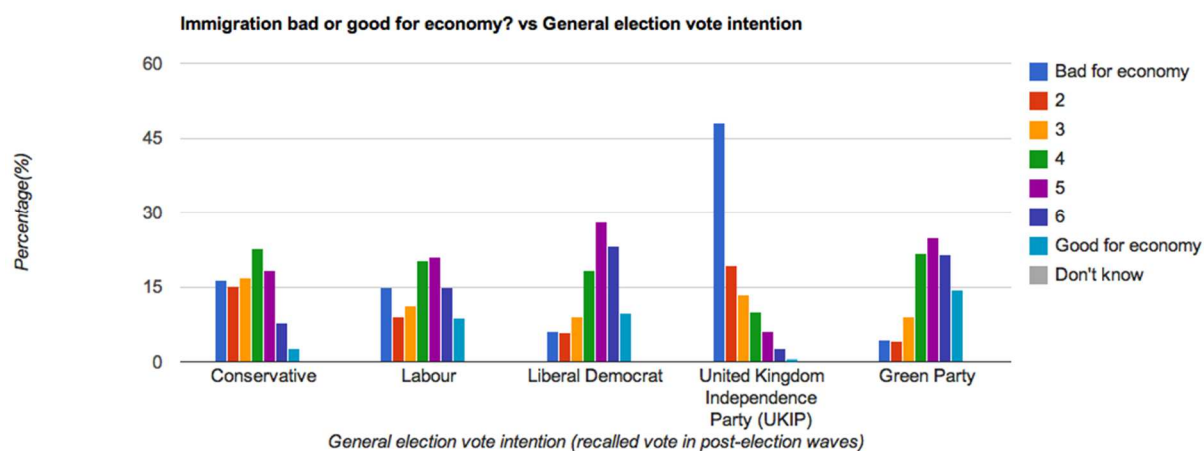


Figure 1.2- Attitudes towards immigration

<sup>4</sup> Ford, Robert, Goodwin, Matthew. *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*. Routledge, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Ford, Robert, Goodwin, Matthew. *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*. Routledge, 2014

## European Polling Trends

Opinion polls conducted by Eurobarometer have shown the increase and salience of immigration across the European Union from 2007-2013 and this further highlights the importance of the issue across European Union member states.<sup>6</sup> The countries with the biggest percentage change from 2007-2013 include Germany, Sweden, Latvia and Lithuania. Germany has seen a 6% difference in the salience of immigration amongst the public from 2007-2013. The Eurobarometer data shows that the United Kingdom continues to lead the way on the salience of immigration, with 32% of survey respondents ranking immigration as the most important issue facing the country. The only other country which comes close to this figure is Malta, with 29% of survey respondents ranking immigration as the most important issue.<sup>7</sup>

In regards to immigration, a different story is shown for Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Labour and the Liberal Democrats have continued to fall further behind on the immigration issue in the eyes of voters. Arguably though, the Conservatives on the other hand have ceded substantial parts of the immigration territory to UKIP. However the Conservative party have not arguably declined on this issue as much as Labour and the Liberal Democrats. One of the major issues surrounding the current immigration discourse in the United Kingdom is that mainstream political parties have tended to see immigration as a no-go area and not publically debated the issue. A core example of this has been Ed Miliband and most specifically Labour's inability to appear credible on the immigration issue.<sup>8</sup> YouGov polling data has shown that a large proportion of UKIP support has a core working class base, thereby suggesting that these voters may have traditionally been former Labour voters.<sup>9</sup>

## Discussion

In terms of the party positions on immigration in the United Kingdom, the following can be outlined. Arguably, a form of 'cordon sanitaire' has taken place, with mainstream political parties largely ignoring the issue in public discourse and seeking to sweep the issue under the carpet. This has arguably exacerbated not only rising concerns amongst the British public, but enabled political parties such as UKIP to gain political capital as a result. Notable

---

<sup>6</sup> Goodwin, Matthew. *'A Breakthrough Moment or False Dawn? The Great Recession and the Radical Right in Europe'*, pp.15-39. In: Sandelind, Clara. ed. *European Populism and Winning the Immigration Debate*, 2014, European Liberal Forum and Fores

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, P.28

<sup>8</sup> The Guardian, *'Labour accused of foul play over immigration polling'*, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2014

<sup>9</sup> Lynch, Philip, Whitaker, Richard. *UKIP is posing important challenges to the Conservatives, but as the Eurosceptic party continues to rise it faces its own dilemmas*. London School of Economics and Political Science. May 8<sup>th</sup> 2014

philosophers such as John Stuart Mill have outlined the importance of subjecting political ideals to rigorous empirical scrutiny, with the idea that false ideas will be debated out of public discourse over time. This may be a feasible policy strategy on immigration that can counteract the electoral threat posed by UKIP. It is therefore imperative that David Cameron and the Conservative Party devise a coherent immigration policy strategy, which can wrestle control of the immigration issue from UKIP in the run up to the 2015 General Election.