Even people who think immigration is beneficial back immigration control

A series of in-depth polling weekends held with members of the British public has found strong support for controlling immigration between the UK and the EU and for maintaining food standards and consumer regulations after the transition period.

The Future of Britain project, led by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and published by whatukthinks.org, brought together 385 participants from across the UK over three weekends in May and June 2019 and October 2020.

The Deliberative Poll events, the first of their kind in the UK to be conducted virtually using videoconferencing software, gave participants the opportunity to discuss how Britain should manage immigration, food policy and consumer regulation after Brexit.

Unlike a conventional survey or poll, a Deliberative Poll aims to ascertain participants’ views after they have had the opportunity to consider and debate the issues, including quizzesing experts who represented a variety of viewpoints. Surveys are held before and after each event to measure the impact of the process on people’s attitudes.

Controlling immigration

After debating the issue of immigration controls, almost three-quarters of participants were in favour of requiring EU migrants to apply to move to Britain (73%) in the same way as non-EU citizens, while a similar proportion (74%) expected British citizens to have to apply to migrate to a country in the EU. In contrast, around three in five backed these options before the event, with the deliberation significantly strengthening support for the government’s decision to end freedom of movement.

Reflecting broadly positive attitudes towards migrants, in the post-event survey almost two-thirds said people coming to live here is good for the economy (63%) and enriches Britain’s cultural life (62%), a seven-point increase compared with before the events.

Yet those who expressed positive views about immigration swung in favour of controls on immigration between the UK and the EU. Following the deliberation, around two thirds (65%) of this group said EU migrants should apply to live and work in the EU, an increase from 45% before the events. Similarly, among participants who voted Remain, support for controlling migration from the EU rose from 41% to 57%.

Reasons given by participants as to why the rules for EU and non-EU migrants should be the same included the practicalities of applying a ‘universal’ system and the perceived benefits of judging people on merit and skills, rather than nationality, while for some the change was symbolic of the new separation of the UK from the EU.

“We cannot presume that an increase in the proportion of people who believe that immigration is beneficial will necessarily engender an increase in the proportion who support liberal policies in this area. Indeed, the very opposite happened in the wake of our deliberation. […] Voters may well come to the conclusion that the benefits of immigration are more likely to be realised through a measure of control,” said Professor Sir John Curtice, Senior Fellow at the National Centre for Social Research, who led the research.

Food policy and consumer regulations

Control was a key theme again when participants in the deliberative events discussed what regulations should govern food standards in the UK and what should happen to consumer regulations after Brexit.
The proportion who said the UK ‘definitely should not’ allow the sale of chlorinated chicken increased eleven points to 61%, with a similar increase of eight points to 66% for hormone treated beef.

On the issue of keeping EU regulations on some goods and services, the deliberation led Leave voters to shift significantly towards being in favour of retaining the existing EU rules. After the debates, most Leave voters said they would retain EU regulations on mobile phone roaming charges (56%) and the labelling of geographically specific food (63%), compared with 43% and 36% respectively before the events.

“The fact that these were EU regulations seemingly became less important in some Leave voters’ minds after consideration of the specific issues at stake. As a result, the gap between Remain and Leave voters in their attitude towards the retention of existing EU regulatory regimes was much diminished,” the report says.

Commenting on the research, Sir John Curtice said: “Even if the recent trend towards a more favourable evaluation of immigration remains in place, it cannot be presumed that this will necessarily generate pressure for the introduction of a more liberal immigration regime.”

“Meanwhile, we saw the views of participants who supported Leave and Remain move closer on both immigration and consumer regulations during the deliberation. Perhaps future debates on immigration and regulation will no longer be an extension of the debate about Britain’s relationship with the EU, but rather issues that are discussed on their own merits.”

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Notes to editors

1. The findings reported here are based on analysis of surveys held with 385 people, stratified to be as representative as possible of the adult population, who each participated in one of three deliberative polling events held in May 2019, June 2019 and October 2020. Participants completed two surveys, one shortly before their event took place and the other as it came to an end. The data were weighted to be as representative as possible of the general population. In addition, discussions were transcribed and subjected to qualitative analysis. The version of the briefing materials used in 2020 together with videos of the sessions with experts are available at www.whatukthinks.org/eu.

2. This research, known as The Future of Britain project, was supported by a research grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (https://esrc.ukri.org/) as part of its ‘Governance after Brexit’ programme, which works alongside the ‘UK in a Changing Europe’ initiative.

3. The authors are John Curtice, Senior Research Fellow at the National Centre for Social Research and ‘UK in a Changing Europe’, and Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde; Ceri Davies, Director of NatCen’s Centre for Deliberative Research; James Fishkin, Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University; Robert Ford, Professor of Politics, Manchester
University, and Alice Siu, Associate Director at the Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University.

4. The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), Britain’s largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research (www.natcen.ac.uk).

5. What UK Thinks: EU provides impartial, up-to-date information on public attitudes to the European Union in the wake of the majority decision that the UK should leave the EU (www.whatukthinks.org/eu/).

6. UK in a Changing Europe is an authoritative source for independent research on UK-EU relations (https://ukandeu.ac.uk/).