

New survey evidence: A majority of the British public supports giving permanent residency to frontline health workers



There have been calls for frontline health workers in the UK to be given permanent residency to acknowledge their role in the fight against Covid-19. [Mollie Gerver](#), [Patrick Lown](#) and [Dominik Duell](#) present evidence from a new survey which indicates a majority of the British public would support this proposal.

The spread of Covid-19 has led to increasing strains on health services, and an increasing need for health workers. According to a [House of Commons report](#) from last year, “overall, 13.1% of NHS staff say that their nationality is not British.” While 65,000 (5.5%) of these are EU nationals who currently have leave to remain and work in the UK, many of the remaining health workers are immigrants with only a temporary right to remain.

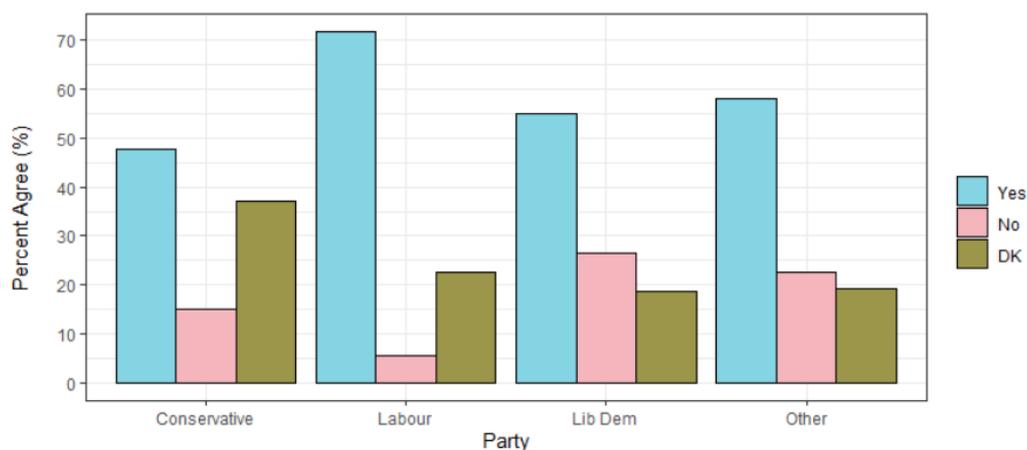
To prevent any loss of workers during the pandemic due to immigration issues, [last month](#) the UK government issued a year-long visa extension to all staff working for the National Health Service (NHS), waiving the normal visa fees. It is also considering whether to waive the immigration [health surcharge](#). A [coalition](#) in parliament has recently called for the government to go further by granting NHS staff permanent residency visas. Some [op-eds](#) agree, arguing that permanent residency is “the least we can do... in repayment for their service and sacrifices.”

An understanding of the public perception of the issue is still developing. While a [recent poll](#) conducted by Focaldata found that most in the UK support citizenship for European nationals on the frontline, there have been no polls concerning immigrants more generally. We conducted such a poll using a Prolific Academic sample of British nationals, which resulted in three preliminary findings.

The majority of citizens (60%) support granting permanent residency to frontline health workers

Examined by party, permanent residency was supported by a vast majority of Labour Party voters (71%) and a plurality of Conservative Party voters (48%). These results are consistent with pre-Covid studies finding that citizens are more supportive of immigrants who will [contribute to the economy and society](#). Most citizens believe that most potential immigrants will not contribute, but the evidence of the current contributions of frontline workers during the crisis is undeniable.

Figure 1: Should frontline Covid-19 workers be granted permanent residency?



Note: Compiled by the authors.

In the survey, respondents were given the option of explaining in their own words why they supported granting permanent residency, and many responded that frontline workers exhibited exceptional sacrifice and bravery. Some even expressed support for granting citizenship. As one respondent wrote:

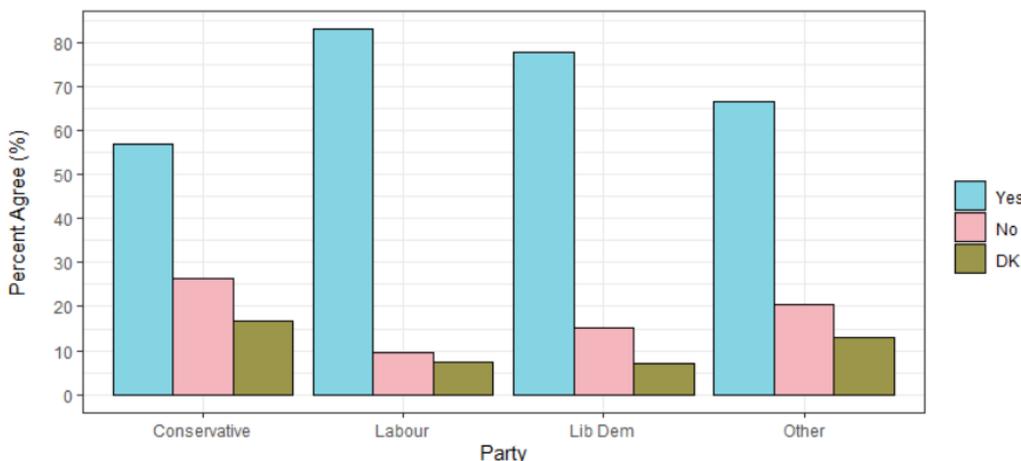
Regardless of their country of origin, all frontline health workers are making huge sacrifices and doing everything that they can to save people and return the UK to a free and thriving society. They have all contributed so much to helping the UK that they should be considered citizens themselves should they want to reside here following the outbreak of Covid-19.

We found similar appeals to frontline workers’ sacrifice amongst other respondents, including those who endorsed only permanent residency.

The vast majority of citizens (70%) support granting free medical care to all irregular migrants

A second migration-related issue during the pandemic concerns how to handle those who are in the UK without permission to remain legally, known as irregular migrants. Just as citizens support greater rights for migrants battling Covid-19, they support greater medical rights for irregular migrants living amidst Covid-19. Such support was found amongst 57% of Conservative voters, 83% of Labour voters, 78% of Lib Dem voters, and 67% of non-affiliated respondents.

Figure 2: Should irregular migrants be given access to the NHS during Covid-19?



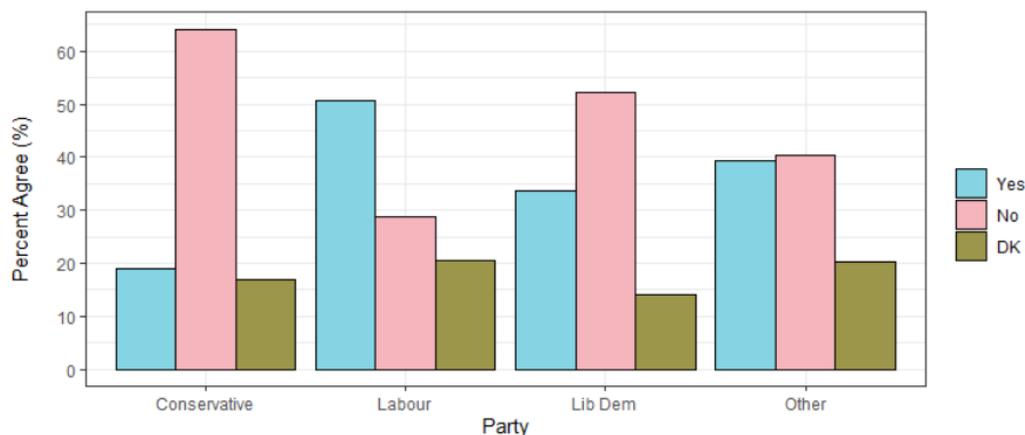
Note: Compiled by the authors.

When we asked respondents why they support medical care for irregular migrants, the majority explained that such care was important for slowing down the spread of the virus, but many also highlighted that it was important for protecting the rights of irregular migrants. Some appealed specifically to the value of protecting the British people, while others appealed to the value of fairness. As one respondent wrote, “No one deserves to die from Covid-19 more than anyone else because of how long they’ve lived in the UK.”

Only a minority of citizens (36%) think the government should temporarily suspend action against irregular migrants

These include a slight majority of Labour voters (51%) and a small minority of Conservative voters (19%).

Figure 3: Should the UK government temporarily suspend actions against irregular migrants during Covid-19?



Note: Compiled by the authors.

In some ways, this might seem inconsistent with the finding that most Conservative voters support irregular migrants having access to free medical care. Irregular migrants might avoid seeking medical care if they fear deportation. However, so long as the UK places a firewall between NHS services and immigration control forces, irregular migrants could access medical care while still being subject to potential deportation in areas far away from medical centres. Whether such a firewall would be supported by citizens is a question we hope to explore in future research.

Limitations

We find the data presented above to be illuminating, but the results are still preliminary and should be treated as such. This is partly because a significant percentage do not know what they think, and might have formed their opinions since we released the survey. For example, it could be that many more people support permanent residency than the above results suggest, or it could be that far fewer people support permanent residency than the above results suggest.

Importantly, we noticed that our sample under-represented certain groups compared to the latest data from the national census, and so we weighted certain groups' opinions more heavily to account for their potential under-representation in the sample. For example, our sample was slightly younger than the average age in the UK, and so the responses from the relatively few older respondents were weighed more heavily in the results. This is very common in opinion polls – known as 'survey weighting' – and is an effective way of addressing selection bias in sampling, but ideally, we would simply collect a more representative sample. We intend to conduct another survey in the very near future which is nationally representative and probes more deeply into other elements of these issues.

For now, what does this mean for policy?

While the data is preliminary, it still has important relevance for immigration policies. A major barrier in introducing policies is the difficulty of establishing how popular the policies are. During a global pandemic, members of parliament might support granting permanent residency rights to healthcare workers, but if the public opposes such rights, this might remain politically infeasible.

The above data suggests it is not: our initial assessment is that the public is generally supportive of allowing frontline healthcare workers to remain in the UK indefinitely, either for practical reasons or because they view their behaviour during the pandemic as exemplary and worthy of recognition. If this is prudential and justified for public health, and also an effective method of recognising the work of frontline workers, then parliament should seriously consider its implementation.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Andrew Parsons / No 10 Downing Street](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

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