

Why mainstream parties change policy on migration: a UK case study – The Conservative Party, Immigration and Asylum, 1960-2010.

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We use a detailed study of the reasons behind significant changes in Conservative Party immigration policy over a half a century to see if they can be explained by the three most commonly cited drivers of party change. We find that electoral ‘shocks’ matter but that leaders matter most, while factional turnover is less important than is often thought. We also conclude that any theory of party policy change also needs to take more seriously a) the requirement on parties to react to events in the ‘real world’, particularly when they are in government and b) the fact that, in a competitive democracy, politicians are ideologically and instrumentally motivated to continuously monitor and then to reflect public (and party) feeling, and that this may be every bit as important as the periodic signals that they are sent at elections. This accords with recent cross-national research on parties’ policy changes – research which suggests that election results are less likely to trigger changes than are shifts in public opinion. That said, we also observe significant shifts occurring even when there is broad consonance rather than a marked contrast or mismatch between the electorate’s and the party’s preferences.

Key words: Conservative Party, immigration, asylum, policy, change, parties.