



Changing the discourse on migration

by Andrew Curry

The successes of Europe’s far right and hard right parties in recent elections were to a large extent built on political platforms that treat migration and immigrants as a central problem of European and national politics. In response, centrist and progressive parties tend to mimic their language and adopt parts of their policies. This damages their standing with their own voters, and undermines the politics of inclusion that sits at the heart of their political positions. It is also counter-productive. No-one acknowledges this, but migration is almost completely a public good, in that it improves outcomes for society as a whole with few negative effects. Yet it is also the most contentious political issue of our times. The toxic politics that swirl around migration prevent us from gaining the most from it.

This is one of several contradictions of migration. The second contradiction is that there is a big gap between what the data tells us about migration and the public view of it. Only 3.6% of people worldwide live outside of their country of birth, and only one in six of these is a refugee, an asylum seeker, or a displaced person.

But people’s impressions of immigrants are distant from reality. The economist Alberto Alesina and colleagues found in a survey of 24,000 people across six countries—Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, the UK, and the US—that “respondents greatly overestimate the total number of immigrants, think immigrants are culturally and religiously more distant from them, and

economically weaker—less educated, more unemployed, and more reliant on and favored by government transfers—than they actually are.”

The third contradiction is in how countries talk about the difference between “skilled” and “less-skilled” migrants. Skilled migrants are portrayed as more desirable, but any look at labour market data shows migrants doing essential low-paid work, in care homes, health services, farms, sanitation and cleaning services, and transport. This became very visible during COVID-19.

In fact, the dirty truth of immigration is that declining fertility rates and aging populations means that the

world’s richer economies depend on it to make their economies and social fabric work. Britain’s Brexit experiment to “take back control” of its national borders—a political campaign that played on fears of migration—has

seen immigration increase rather than decline after freedom of movement to and from the EU was ended, and skills-based and financial tests imposed on migrants instead.

The starting point for any discussion about migration is the gap between the positive effects of migration and the negative discourse about it. This creates a vicious media cycle, described by Oliveira Angeli, of the Technische Universität Dresden using the example of the debate on the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. It starts with some kind of shock, portrayed as a crisis, which creates increased media salience. This launches

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a media cycle that can never complete itself. The increased reporting and debate “‘activate’ the latent skepticism towards migration that exists in parts of the population,” writes Angeli. The cycle is then reinforced by right-wing parties, who often use inflammatory social media.

Their polling numbers benefit as a result.

In turn this increases mainstream rhetoric about migration as a “problem” that needs to be addressed. Ultimately, this chain of effects leads to a more restrictive migration policy.

This rhetoric increases the gap between what is promised and what can be delivered, because rich economies need migration to function. This creates a rolling news story in which migration is almost always a “crisis,” and always therefore needs to be “controlled.” According to Céline Cantat at SciencesPo in Paris, this “blocks the recognition of migration as a structural feature of today’s world, and the elaboration of long-term, systemic political strategies.”

have the least experience of migrants. Of course, this isn’t the whole story: in some places, such as Dublin, policy and market failures that have priced people out of housing are also blamed on migrants.

Everywhere, the right has prospered in areas where

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there has been economic and social decline, caused by globalisation and other structural economic change. Anti-migrant sentiment is strongest in regions and areas that have seen the most *emigration*. Credible research on Sweden by Rafaela Dancygier and David Laitin shows that the increase in support for the right-wing Sweden Democrats in rural areas is closely correlated with the rate of outward emigration from the region, as people leave for better opportunities in the

cities, and local services decline as a result. In Germany, similarly, Saxony-Anhalt has lost a quarter of its population since 1990. The AfD won 30% of the vote there in the European elections.

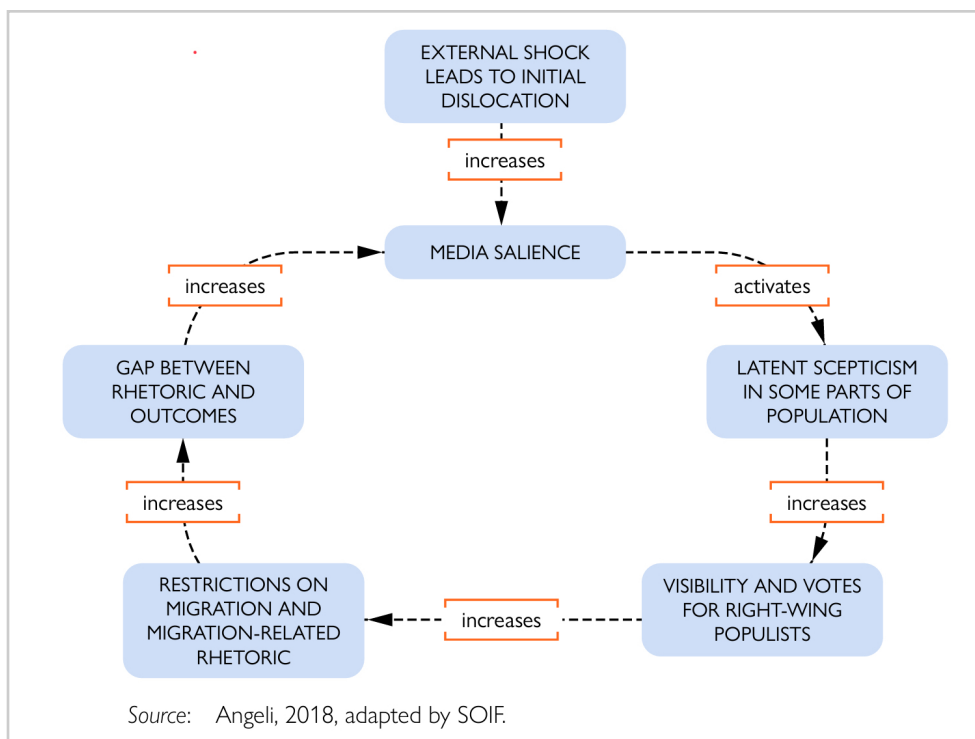
The populist right is skilled at weaving these justifiable economic resentments into a story of elites and conspiracies.

Research also suggests that far-right and hard-right politics thrives among voters who fear that their future will be worse than their past. This may explain why we see some younger voters turning to the right.

Centrist politicians across Europe have yet to construct any kind of hopeful story about their

future.

In practice, migration has large positive effects. There is extensive research that shows that migrants in host countries are over-represented in more innovative economic sectors, are involved in a disproportionate number of patents and start-ups, and create new trade



But migration isn’t always portrayed as a crisis. Cantat points to Ukraine or Afghanistan as examples. This is a political choice.

There is a further contradiction about migration which is seen in social research across multiple countries. The regions with the greatest support for parties that are most hostile to immigration are typically also those that

and investment links. (There are some negative impacts on the wages of lowest paid workers, but these are tiny in comparison and can be addressed by policy).

The enriching cultural impact of migration on food cultures or in music or sports are undisputed. And migrants have often built community organisations in their host countries—when they are allowed to.

The puzzle here is why something that is economically necessary and socially and culturally beneficial has become a lightning rod for political conflict. At one level, this is an old story about ‘othering’ strangers. But there is a political story, because the so-called crisis of migration is also about the crisis of the state in the wake of the third great wave of globalisation in the late 20th century.

This tells us that for parties of the political centre and the centre-left, there are ways to craft a different approach to migration. This involves both narrative and policy. Both require such parties to stop playing at being ‘tough on migration.’ They will never outflank right-wing parties.

The narrative researcher Roy Sommer at the University of Wuppertal says, “The pro-migrant narrative and the anti-migrant narrative are incommensurable.” In other words, you can’t trade them off. American linguist

George Lakoff argues that the difference between conservative political ‘frames’ and progressive ‘frames’ start as metaphors about the family. Conservative ideas are based on the notion of “the strict family”; progressive ideas on “the nurturant family”.

Our current discourse about migration is drawn from “the strict family”: control and discipline. In contrast, the values of the nurturing family include

freedom, opportunity, prosperity, fairness, community-building and trust. The advantages that flow from migration—economic, socio-cultural and civic—political—resonate strongly with these values.

Importantly, they also tell a different story about the purpose of the state which goes well beyond migration. They speak of a state that wants to invest in people and infrastructure for the common good. The policy elements that go with this are about an inclusiveness that reaches out to regions that have been marginalised by structural change. The political challenge for the centre and centre-left is to find stories, policies and actions on migration that include everyone, and which progressive and centrist voters can support. This is not quick work: building new ‘frames’ takes time. But the goal should be to offer *everyone* a future.

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