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Why Values, not Economics, Hold the Key to the Populist Right - and to Crafting New Migration Narratives



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Why Values, not Economics, Hold the Key to the Populist Right - and to Crafting New Migration Narratives

Eric Kaufmann

Opposition to immigration was the primary driver of the Brexit vote in Britain and Donald Trump's support in the primaries in 2016, even if some who voted for Trump on election day were lukewarm towards their candidate. Norbert Hofer's 48 percent of the second round vote in the Austrian election of the same year, and populist right polls or votes of between 20 and 35 percent across Sweden, Denmark, France, Norway, Switzerland and the Netherlands during 2014-16 show how important right-wing populism currently is in the West. Immigration currently (9/17) ranks second in the Eurobarometer after terrorism as the most important issue for European publics and has been first or second-ranked since 2014. Why this rise - and what lessons does this hold for international policymakers?

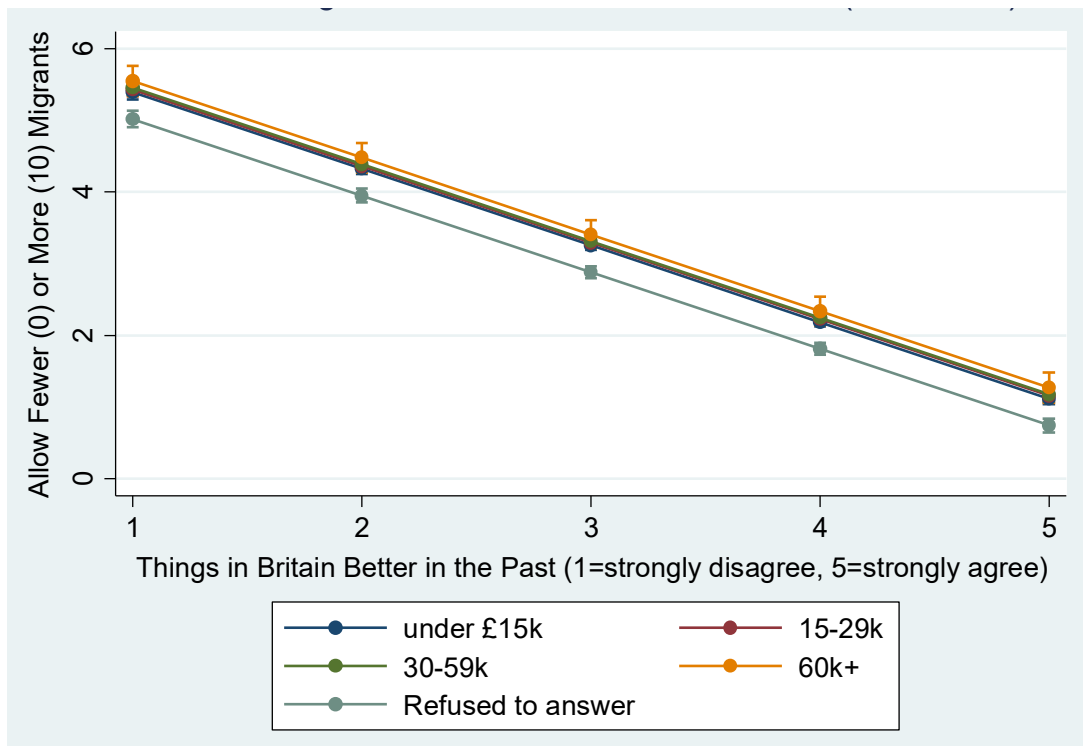
Culture and psychology matter most

A wealth of academic work supports the contention that concern over immigration is the factor most closely associated with support for the populist right in the West. Furthermore, these worries are predominantly cultural and security-oriented, not economic, in nature.¹ Panel studies, which are much more accurate than cross-country comparisons at one point in time, suggest economic differences between countries have no consistent effect on attitudes or populist right voting but the share and increase of immigrants in a country is associated with opposition to immigration and higher populist right support.² Immigration tends to polarize publics by values much more than income. So-called authoritarian values, such as support for strict childrearing or the death penalty, correlate much more closely with opposition to immigration than income or class. So do measures of conservatism such as 'things in my country were better in the past.' Just 16 percent of white Americans who think the past was not better than the present want immigration reduced a lot. This rises to 58 percent among those who say the past was better, and 72 percent among those who strongly agree the past was better.³

Consider figure 1, which shows that White British people who strongly agree that things in Britain were better in the past score towards the most restrictive on a 0-10 scale of admitting immigrants while those who most disagree rank above a 5, meaning they are happy with the current level. By contrast, the tight cluster of lines for income levels shows that being rich or poor makes no difference to immigration opinion when one controls for orientations to the past. Only among those who refused to answer the question do we find a significant effect.

- 1 Hainmueller, J. and D. J. Hopkins (2014). "Public Attitudes Toward Immigration." *Annual Review of Political Science* 17: 225-249.
- 2 Hatton, T. J. (2016). "Immigration, public opinion and the recession in Europe." *Economic Policy* 31(86): 205-246; Davis, L. and S. S. Deole (2015). "Immigration, Attitudes and the Rise of the Political Right: The Role of Cultural and Economic Concerns over Immigration."; Stockemer, D. (2017). "The success of radical right-wing parties in Western European regions—new challenging findings." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 25(1): 41-56.
- 3 Policy Exchange-YouGov-Birkbeck survey, 16-17 August 2016. Data at: https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/aage6nsrqj/PolicyExchangeResults_160907_Authoritarianism_US.pdf

Figure 1. Allow more migrants, Income and Conservatism (BES 2017)



Source: British Election Study Internet Panel Survey wave 7-9.⁴

Social psychology, in the guise of deep cultural orientations, is key to whether an individual supports or opposes immigration. It is possible to map people’s values across a large battery of questions in two-dimensional space, as has been done by psychologist Shalom Schwartz and by Cultural Dynamics, a values research firm.⁵ These exercises show that opponents of immigration tend to cluster in one section of the map which Cultural Dynamics term ‘Settlers.’ Settlers prefer security and stability over novelty and change. By contrast, ‘Pioneers’ value novelty and experimentation, and tend to be pro-immigration and universalist in outlook. A third group, ‘Prospectors,’ tend to be materialistic and oriented toward success and display, and are more agnostic on the issue.⁶ While age and education are somewhat predictive of values, most value differences are intra-group, and are rooted in genes or early childhood experiences.

A rural-urban divide?

Maps of England, America, the Netherlands and Austria all showed islands of liberalism around large cities and college towns, with most of the countryside painted in the colours of populism. Pundits rapidly jumped to the conclusion that rural voters, who had the least contact with immigrants and diversity, were most hostile. Thus many turned to ‘left behind’ explanations based on economic stagnation or popular discontent with metropolitan elites. In fact there is precious little evidence that either is an important driver of anti-immigration or populist right sentiment. The BES asks a battery of five questions on anti-elitism such as ‘the people not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions’ or ‘politicians in the UK parliament need to follow the will of the people.’ None of these items sorts Leavers from Remainers: socialist Corbyn supporters and Greens also tend to agree. In America, a small survey I conducted in March 2017 showed that more Clinton than Trump supporters resented the American elite. Most Clinton supporters disliked American elites for being rich and powerful while most Trump voters disliked them for being ‘politically correct.’

⁴ Fieldhouse, E., et al. (2017). British Election Study, 2017: General Election Results Dataset [computer file], July.

⁵ For examples, see www.cultdyn.co.uk/

⁶ Rose, C. (2011). What Makes People Tick: The Three Hidden Worlds of Settlers, Prospectors and Pioneers, Matador.

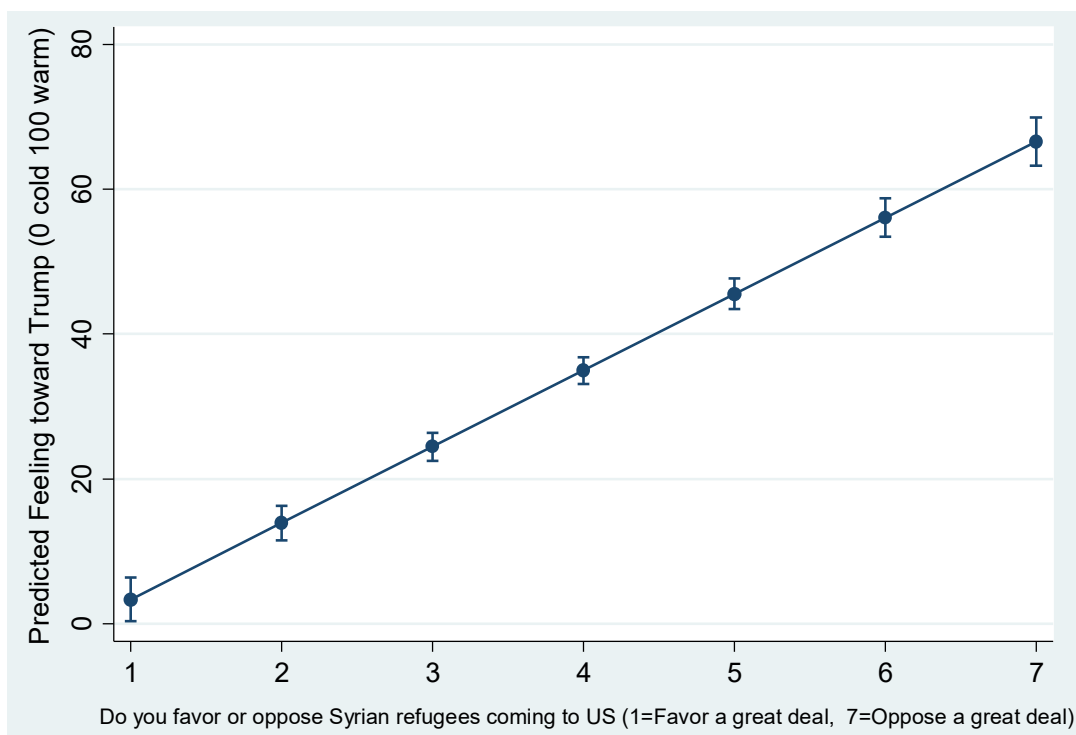
Inequality – tied to the ‘left behind’ theory - is a concern of Remain and Clinton supporters not Leave voters and Trump supporters.⁷ Free Trade exercises the populist right much less than immigration.

Thus ideology and values, not elitism, lie at the heart of today’s polarized politics. Hence it is no surprise that when it comes to immigration and populism, it is hard to fit a paper clip between a white working-class Londoner and a white working-class Briton from rural England. As in the past, rural-urban differences are largely illusory: cities like London and Paris have more young people, ethnic minorities and professionals with degrees than the countryside. These demographic components, not the cosmopolitan atmosphere of these cities, underlies the difference. In diverse neighbourhoods, contact with immigrants does produce somewhat higher toleration among local whites, but this is counterbalanced by heightened threat perceptions about immigration in the ‘halo’ of whiter exurban zones which tend to ring diverse cities and districts.⁸

Refugees and immigrants

Public opinion tends to be more favourable when surveys ask about ‘immigrants’ than the more abstract ‘immigration’, and especially when questions focus on a particular person, such as Syrian child Aylan Kurdi whose body was found on a beach. Most western publics do not, however, draw sharp distinctions between refugees and immigration. They support refugees in principle, but also include refugee inflows as part of immigration. Those who oppose immigration often oppose refugees and vice-versa. When refugees are Muslim, polarizing effects are especially severe because sensationalized security and liberty concerns blend with cultural worries. No question in the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) pilot survey identified Trump support during the Republican primaries as well as that on Syrian refugees. Those who most opposed admitting the Syrians ranked Trump a 70 and those most supportive scored him nearly zero (figure 2).

Figure 2. Trump rating and Opinion on Syrians (US Whites), ANES Pilot - Jan 2016



Source: ANES Pilot Survey, January 2016.

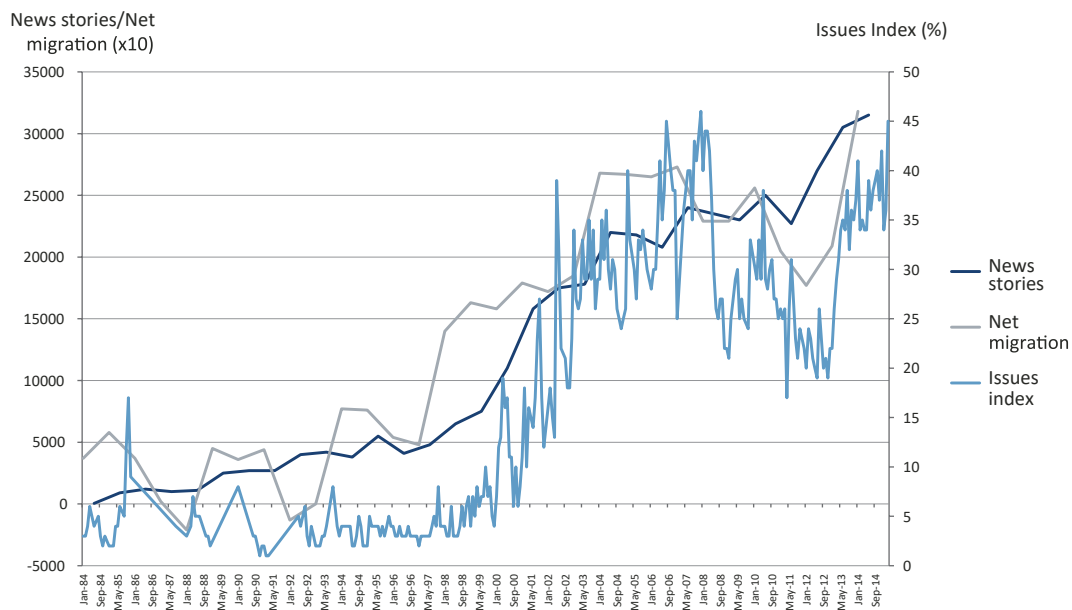
7 Kaufmann, E. (2016). 'Trump and Brexit: why it's again NOT the economy, stupid'. LSE British Politics and Policy blog.

8 Kaufmann, E. and G. Harris (2015). "'White Flight' or positive contact? Local diversity and attitudes to immigration in Britain." *Comparative Political Studies* 48(12): 1563-1590; Rydgren, J. and P. Ruth (2013). "Contextual explanations of radical right-wing support in Sweden: socioeconomic marginalization, group threat, and the halo effect." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(4): 711-728.

When do conservatives become politicized?

The value divides which underlie immigration opinion do not automatically translate into political action. A change in the rate of immigration, heightened media coverage or cues from political leaders are typically required in order to activate conservative ‘Settler’ opinion. The *rate* of immigration is extremely important: rapid increases in immigration are often correlated with the heightened *salience* of immigration. That is, the issue moves up people’s list of priorities and receives more media coverage, though it is not possible to tell whether the media is reflecting or shaping public opinion. Figure 3 shows a high correlation between smoothed time series for net migration, salience of immigration and media stories on immigration in Britain between 1984 and 2015.⁹

Figure 3. News stories about immigration, those mentioning immigration as an issue and net migration over time



Source: Ipsos-Mori ‘Shifting Ground,’ 2015, p. 5.

Very similar patterns have been noticed in the Netherlands, Spain and Germany.¹⁰ Once immigration is salient, political actors move in to cater to the new political demand. When mainstream parties find immigration too toxic to handle for ideological or reputational reasons, populists may enter this terrain. This could be for ideological reasons or to exploit an electoral opportunity. In Germany, for instance, Frauke Petry’s transformation of the AfD from a libertarian party into an anti-immigration one in 2015 led to a dramatic jump in party fortunes, which correlates with Germany’s considerable refugee inflows during the crisis.¹¹ Once the populist right succeeds in this space, this prompts centrist parties to attempt to match populist rhetoric – as occurred to an extent in the Netherlands with the PVV and in Britain with the Conservatives in 2017 - in order to win back these votes, which shifts the policy consensus towards restriction.

9 Ipsos-Mori ‘Shifting Ground,’ 2015, p. 5. www.unboundphilanthropy.org/sites/default/files/shifting-ground-attitudes-to-immigration-2016.pdf

10 Dennison, J. et al. (2017). "The Dutch aren’t turning against immigration—the salience of the immigration issue is what drives Wilders’ support." LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog.; Boomgaarden, H. G. and R. Vliegthart (2009). "How news content influences anti-immigration attitudes: Germany, 1993–2005." European Journal of Political Research 48(4): 516-542.; Morales, L., et al. (2015). "The gap between public preferences and policies on immigration: A comparative examination of the effect of politicisation on policy congruence." Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 41(9): 1495-1516.

11 Kappe, R. (2016). Media attention, party positioning and public support for right-wing populist parties: The emergence of the "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD) party in Germany. Elections, Political Parties and Public Opinion (ePop) conference. University of Kent.

Policy solutions

Any attempt to address such anxieties must therefore focus more on cultural than traditional economic solutions such as directing resources to high-immigrant areas. Most who oppose immigration and refugees do not live in such places and even those who do are more motivated by a sense of cultural dislocation than by actual material deprivation. In order to reach cultural conservatives, those who wish to keep the doors at least somewhat open need to speak to their concerns.

First, this means attempting to address factual misperceptions about the size and growth of immigrant and Muslim populations. These may not matter to ‘Pioneers’ or what David Goodhart calls ‘Anywheres’, whose sense of identity is tied to self-exploration and mobility. However it does matter to the ‘Somewheres’ who comprise perhaps half the population of many western countries.¹² No West European country will be more than 10 percent Muslim in 2030. In 2050, France is projected to be 10.4 percent Muslim. Yet Ipsos-Mori’s 2016 ‘Perils of Perception’ report shows the average French person thinks France will be 40 percent Muslim in 2020, a few years from now, instead of the actual 8 percent. Across Europe, the average overestimate of 2020 Muslim share is 25 points.¹³ Previous work by Bobby Duffy and Tom Frere-Smith at Ipsos-Mori shows that people across the West routinely overestimate immigrant share by a factor of two or three.¹⁴

Attempts to spread demographic literacy can help counteract claims by viral videos whose warnings of Muslim takeover are believed by many.¹⁵ A recent survey experiment finds that when people are given accurate information about the share of foreign born in their country then asked a month later what the share is, they adjust their estimates 12 points closer to reality.¹⁶ Pew Forum projections, based on the best immigration, fertility and switching data we have, show that the rate of Muslim growth in Europe is tapering. In 2050, no West European country will be more than 12.4 percent Muslim, far lower than most think is the case today.¹⁷ This needs to be more clearly presented to conservative audiences, preferably by a trusted figure.

There is also an important role for telling a story about immigration in which inflows may leave the country relatively unchanged. After all, if history is our guide, it is far from clear that immigration leads to a wholesale change in the ethnic composition or culture of a society. Consider the following passage, which I had one third of a sample of 1500 White British adults read:

Immigration has risen and fallen over time, but, like the English language, Britain’s culture is only superficially affected by foreign influence. According to Professor X of the University of London, a large share of the children of European immigrants have become White British. Historians tell us that French, Irish, Jews and pre-war black immigrants largely melted into the white majority. Those of mixed race, who share common ancestors with White British people, are growing faster than all minority groups and 8 in 10 of them marry whites. In the long run, today’s minorities will be absorbed into the majority and foreign identities will fade, as they have for public figures with immigrant ancestors like Boris Johnson or Peter Mandelson. Britain shapes its migrants, migration doesn’t shape Britain.

This contrasts with a more conventional storyline, read by a second group of 500 in the survey:

Britain is changing, becoming increasingly diverse. The 2011 census shows that White British people are already a minority in four British cities, including London. Over a quarter of births in England and Wales are to foreign-born mothers. Young Britons are also much more diverse than older Britons. Just 4.5% of those older than 65 are nonwhite but more than 20% of those under 25 are. Minorities’ younger

12 Goodhart, D. (2017). *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, Oxford University Press.

13 www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2016-12/Perils-of-perception-2016.pdf

14 www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/en-uk/DownloadPublication/1634_sri-perceptions-and-reality-immigration-report-2013.pdf

15 I.e. ‘Muslim Demographics’. www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-3X5hIFXYU

16 Grigorieff, A., et al. (2016). "Does Information Change Attitudes Towards Immigrants? Representative Evidence from Survey Experiments." London School of Economics. www.lse.ac.uk/IGA/Events/PDF/Siracusa/Ubfal.pdf

17 Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life (2011). 'The Future of the European Muslim Population'. V. Skirbekk, Bilal Barakat, Anne Goujon, Samir KC, Eric Kaufmann, Erling Lundevaller, and Marcin Stonawski.

average age, higher birth rate and continued immigration mean that late this century, according to Professor Y, White British people will be in the minority. We should embrace our diversity, which gives Britain an advantage in the global economy.

The first passage seeks to reassure those who are concerned about White British ethnicity, but are open to absorbing newcomers through assimilation. The second seeks to reassure those who are concerned only about British state nationalism and not the ethnic or cultural makeup of the country. Among conservative (Leave/UK Independence Party) voters, those who read the first passage were 20-35 points less willing to sacrifice 5 percent of their income to halt EU migration than UKIP/Leave voters reading the second or no passage.¹⁸

Policy implications: toward a new migration narrative

The lesson is not for policymakers to talk about assimilating new immigrants: this is threatening to immigrants and signals to white conservatives that assimilation is not taking place. Instead, what is recommended is to devise different political communications about immigration for conservatives and liberals/minorities. This 'constructive ambiguity' has long been a currency of politics, and recognizes that there is no single 'hymn sheet' of national identity. Just as people identify with an entity like the Social Democrats in different ways (gender, class, minority ethnicity), they do so with the nation in different ways (civic, ethnic, ideological).

Political communications need to embody this. The attention of conservative audiences can be drawn to successful indices of assimilation – not just language, but intermarriage rates and minority identity shifts toward the majority - which are often considerable but presently go under the radar. Half of French Algerian men marry outside their group, for instance, while many children of East Europeans in Britain identify as White British. The contemporary diversity-with-civic nationalism approach should persist only for liberal or diverse audiences. My research suggests that a sustained campaign of majority reassurance and demographic literacy helps allay fears about the culturally disruptive effects of immigration. Ideally, liberals and conservatives should be free to read what they want to into a government message on immigration. By contrast, as leading social psychologist of authoritarianism Karen Stenner persuasively argues, attempting to sell the merits of diversity - i.e. 'we are all becoming diverse and multicultural' - to conservative audiences is likely to exacerbate authoritarian fears and stiffen resistance.¹⁹ At the international level, an effective strategy to counter growing resistance to migration would be to show greater awareness of the ethno-cultural dimensions of migration and recognise the need to address the cultural anxieties of majority-group conservatives through new, targeted, migration narratives. These should highlight assimilation and continuity rather than change, and correct demographic misperceptions.

18 Kaufmann, E. (2016). 'Can narratives of national identity reduce support for Hard Brexit and Trump?: a survey experiment'. Nuffield College, Oxford.

19 Stenner, K. (2005). *The authoritarian dynamic*, Cambridge University Press.



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