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Is it time to turn down the volume on the migration debate?

Loudly opposing restrictive migration policies is counterproductive; a quieter, more honest approach might be better suited for shifting the debate

Benjamin Franklin famously pronounced that 'in this world, nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.' But there is at least one other certainty: migration.

Human migration has been around for as long as humans, so it significantly predates taxes (if not death). But, as is the case with both death and taxes, the story of human migration tends to be told somewhat negatively.

So, what should organisations or individuals that want to see more humane or moderate policymaking do to challenge this prevailing negative reporting? There is no silver bullet that will shift migration narratives, but new analysis highlights that trying to change the debate by shouting louder than those favouring restrictive migration policies is counterproductive and feeds public perceptions of migration as a 'crisis'. Instead, less noise and more honesty – on both sides of the debate – are needed.

An increased salience and crisis framing of migration

In many European countries, migration debates in media have focused on refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants. However, data from Eurostat shows that in 2022, 3.7 million first residence permits were issued in the EU: 42 per cent were for work, 24 per cent for family members, 13 per cent for education and only 11 per cent for asylum.

So, the vast majority of migration is both legal and fairly uncontentious. Despite this, Europe has seen a rise in populist politics in which migration is key. Soundbites such as 'take back control' or 'protecting our

European way of life' are wielded by politicians in migration debates to gain media attention, with the rhetoric of mainstream politicians and the far right starting to blur together with descriptions of 'invasions' and 'floods' of migrants.

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This has increased the salience of migration, with a framing that suggests migration is all about the movement of the global poor, and that 'immigration is in perpetual crisis'. This increased salience and crisis framing benefits far-right parties, which, in turn, appears to pull mainstream policymakers closer to far-right positions.

Migration, of course, brings positive and negative outcomes, and reasonable people may differ on the best policies to manage it. But the problematic side of the issue has become so dominant in public debates that we tend to see it as being what 'migration' is: we don't discuss the international football transfer market in terms of 'migration' (though it absolutely is). The EU has arguably compounded the problem by helping embed 'migration' as a dirty word, eschewing the idea of intra-EU 'migration' and preferring euphemistic language such as 'mobile EU citizens'.

So, now, the very idea of 'migration' has been made into a problem. As a result, those who try to balance or offset negative stories with more positive ones can actually serve to turn *up* the volume of the migration debate and increase the sense among the public that 'migration is a really big deal'. This crisis framing can fuel demand for rapid and radical 'solutions' that will commonly be restrictive.

Finding a way forward

A first recommendation to counter this trend is to try, where possible, to turn *down* the volume of the migration debate rather than adding to the noise. Efforts to shift media debates to reduce demand for restrictive policymaking may be more effective if they focus on long-term strategic approaches to reduce the salience of migration as a topic. There is evidence that this works, perhaps surprisingly, from the UK:

In the run-up to the Brexit referendum, endless UK news stories provided alarming tales about high levels of EU migration, from

speculation about the welfare bill to worries about crime and tales of towns filled with residents who could barely speak English. These contributed to public concerns about immigration being 'out of control' and then to Brexit.

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In the three years after the Brexit referendum (2016–2019), immigration and net migration remained at much the same levels as they had been before. But the UK now faced new economic and political challenges, which meant that the visibility of migration in the news dropped sharply and with it public concerns about immigration.

The softening of attitudes was so notable that, by 2019, analysis by Pew found that, among European countries, the UK was the most positive about the benefits of immigration. Policy followed suit. The post-Brexit immigration system, while much more restrictive for EU citizens, significantly liberalised policy for much of the rest of the world, making it easier for people to come to the UK to work or study. The migration response to this liberalisation was so significant the pendulum may now be starting to swing back the other way.

A second recommendation relates to demanding political honesty. Promises of simplistic and unachievable 'solutions' to migration issues have poisoned debates and fostered a culture of political dishonesty on both the right and left of the migration debate — including promises to stop flows of migration through deterrence policies and claims that more 'safe and legal routes' will stop people from making risky journeys to European countries. Evidence shows that both claims are misleading. Expectations of political honesty should be something that unites conservatives and progressives and should pave the way for more moderate and sustainable policymaking. Political and civil society organisations favouring more liberal migration policies cannot detoxify the debate with their own unrealistic 'symbolic' policies. Reaching this goal requires finding common ground to appeal to audiences with conservative values, rather than to try to 'change their minds'.

Journalists, politicians and activists are rarely made accountable for using misleading terminology in migration

Finally, better public policymaking needs clarity and more neutrality in the language that we use about migration. Vague or incorrect terms can place people at specific risk and undermine their legal status and rights. It also leaves audiences to create their own imagined version of what a 'migrant' is — creating policy debates focused

almost exclusively on the mobility of the poor and ample space for unrealistic bogeymen to be created in the minds of audiences. The most obvious examples here are depictions of asylum seekers as 'illegal immigrants'.

Asylum seekers invariably enter countries without legal permission, because few countries offer visas for the purpose of seeking asylum. On this basis, it is internationally agreed, under the Geneva Refugee Convention, that asylum seekers are *legally* present and shouldn't face sanctions for their entry.

Journalists, politicians and activists are rarely made accountable for using misleading terminology in migration debates. Here's a link to a great glossary (that I wrote): use it, and call out those who don't.



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