



MIGRATION DEBATES

Common Ground on Migration?

Approaches to Compromise-
Oriented Immigration Policy.

Migration Debates. One Topic, Three Perspectives.

This series examines contested issues in migration policy, each with direct relevance to current debates. Contributions come from scholars, civil society actors, and policymakers. Every edition is organized around a central theme, explored through three expert interviews that provide distinct perspectives. In doing so, the series engages with both domestic and international dimensions, offering in-depth analysis, critical evaluations, and clearly articulated political positions.

At a glance

- › Attitudes towards migration are more differentiated than often assumed. Most Germans are neither fundamentally *in favour* nor *against* immigration. Positions can vary depending on the aspects and forms of migration.
- › In recent years, a more restrictive stance towards uncontrolled, irregular immigration has emerged, accompanied by political demands for greater control and limitation.
- › Meanwhile, a majority in Germany still adopt a generally positive attitude towards migration – especially if it is associated with clear benefits for the economy and society.
- › A look at other European countries and the US illustrates how public sentiment can turn against immigration *per se* if the impression arises that politicians are no longer able to effectively control migration.
- › A modified rhetoric alone will not suffice when it comes to winning the support of the broader public. Rather, centrist parties must take its citizens' concerns seriously and translate them into specific migration policy measures that demonstrably serve the public interest.
- › A migration policy orientated towards finding consensus should combine liberal and more regulatory elements to steer immigration in an orderly way and strengthen immigration channels that are in the public interest.

About this Issue

In Germany, scarcely any topic is discussed with as much emotion as migration. Public debate often creates the impression that advocates and critics of immigration are irreconcilably opposed to each other. At the same time, the 2025 Bundestag elections have once again demonstrated that a functioning and sustainable migration and integration policy is among the most pressing challenges, and that can only be overcome with compromise.

But how can compromises be found in the face of hardened positions – compromises supported by the broad public and endorsed by centrist parties? While a majority agrees that migration must be better managed and organised in the future, it remains unclear which consensus frameworks should shape an appropriate immigration policy.

This issue seeks answers. It turns the spotlight on public attitudes, explores room for consensus, and provides impetus for migration policies based on public interest and common ground..

Prof Dr Marc Helbling, Professor for Sociology at the University of Mannheim, highlights how attitudes towards migration are more nuanced than commonly assumed and identifies areas where, despite underlying differences, compromise remains possible.

We speak with **Dr Oliviero Angeli**, Scientific Coordinator of the Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy at the Technical University of Dresden about public attitudes on migration, shifting political demands, and how to respond to populism.

Prof Dr Alexander Kustov, Assistant Professor for Political Science at the University of North Carolina, explains why migration policies are most likely to gain public support when they serve the broad public interest and address citizens' concerns.

INTERVIEW

with
Marc Helbling

Professor for Sociology at the University
of Mannheim

- 1. If you follow the German debate on migration, it often gives the impression of two camps irreconcilably opposed to each other. On the one hand, there is a camp that advocates an immigration policy with as few entry restrictions as possible, and a camp that wants to limit all forms of immigration, on the other. Does empirical evidence support this perception?**

Of course, there are groups that invariably have a very positive attitude towards migration and other groups that are against any form of migration. At the same time, we need to assume that there are many people whose preferences lie between these extremes, and who adopt a more positive stance towards certain groups or regulations and a more negative one towards others. In many cases, though, we cannot know for sure because opinion polls do not always sufficiently differentiate or examine in detail under which circumstances people are in favour of, or against, migration, or which aspects of immigration they tend to advocate or reject. In some cases, distinctions are made, for instance, when questions are posed about different groups of migrants or their characteristics. We know, for example, that political refugees are viewed more positively than those who come for economic rea-

sons and preference is given to the well-educated over the less educated. The question about which migration policy meets with approval has not been sufficiently analysed to date, however.

- 2. You address precisely this question in your studies. Your research indicates that, despite opposing positions, public attitudes to various migration policy measures are more nuanced than is often assumed. How did you get to this conclusion?**

Firstly, in a study, we asked more specifically whether the implementation of a number of different regulations would be supported or not. This revealed that many people are not always categorically in favour of a liberal or restrictive policy. Rather, certain principles can be identified that are particularly important to the various camps. For instance, people on the right-wing spectrum place particular emphasis on border control and selectivity in access, whereas aspects such as participation rights and equal opportunities are of great importance on the left-wing spectrum. This weighting plays a decisive role in the assessment of political measures.

3. To what extent does this create room for compromise?

For example, people on the right-wing spectrum are willing to allow more immigration if there is stricter control over who enters the country and under which circumstances, whereas those on the left are prepared to restrict immigration, if, in turn, participation rights are strengthened. Above all, there is consensus with regard to integration requirements. Both the left- and right-wing camps support clear guidelines on language acquisition or participation in integration courses. When it comes to integration into working life, both camps also agree that immigrants with the prospect of staying should be given appropriate opportunities on the labour market.

4. Faced with the arrival of many refugees once again, more people in Germany are worried about the impact on the welfare state, the housing market, and education system. Scepticism has increased even among those who are generally in favour of immigration – various opinion polls tell us that a majority is calling for greater order and control in immigration policy.

We know that immigration is primarily viewed as a problem when large numbers of people arrive in a very short space of time. This gives rise to a feeling of being overwhelmed, both on a personal level and with respect to the infrastructure. We witnessed this a decade ago following the 2015 refugee crisis and again recently in the wake of the Russian war of aggression and the refugee movement from Ukraine. The system then becomes severely overwhelmed; at least in the short term. It is understandable that a tense situation on the labour and housing market can lead to a change in attitudes. Immigration highlights underlying issues and may exacerbate problems, even if it is not the cause.

These worries should be taken seriously. Having said that, greater calls for more restrictions and controls on entry are not necessarily synonymous with a more restrictive stance towards all aspects of migration and integration. A large group of people are still fundamentally in favour of immigration and aware that crucial infrastructure sectors, such as construction or care, would not function without immigration. It is therefore not always clear whether the goal is to allow fewer entries overall, or to better control who enters the country under what circumstances.

5. Do you think that this differentiation is sufficiently accounted for in the public debate?

If we critically examine public discourse, it unfortunately becomes clear that there are far too many generalisations and the political debate, in particular, constantly lumps the different types of immigration together. Over the past few years, we have predominantly witnessed this in the asylum debate, where, for instance, the distinction made between those seeking protection and those illegally residing in the country is not sufficient, even though people may have entirely different attitudes towards the respective groups. That quickly gives rise to a simple categorisation into the for or against camp, but this does not always reflect reality. For example, there is still widespread acceptance of taking in politically persecuted people. War and displacement are seen as legitimate reasons for entry, while economic reasons are deemed less legitimate. At the same time, this rather abstract support might also diminish when a large number of people come at once.

6. What takeaways can be drawn for the outlines of an immigration policy based on consensus?

First of all, it is important to recognise that opinions differ and that we must distinguish between different forms of immigration and dimensions of migration policy. Over the past decade, a large number of people have arrived from outside the EU for humanitarian reasons. This shapes the picture, and reinforces the impression that immigration is uncontrolled. Refugees are also the most politicised. Yet, attitudes towards migration are strongly dependent on context. If, after events such as the attacks in Solingen or Aschaffenburg, there are increasing calls for restrictions and deportations, these demands do not invariably have to relate to all aspects of migration policy. Current legislation may be considered to be sufficiently restrictive, with deficits seen primarily in its implementation. At the same time, liberalisations in other areas, such as the immigration of skilled workers, could continue to meet with approval. It is precisely these positive aspects of migration, which are crucial for the economy and society and where there is public consensus, that should be emphasised more strongly.

INTERVIEW

with Oliviero Angeli

Scientific Coordinator of the Mercator Forum
Migration and Democracy at the Technical
University of Dresden

1. Your research deals with social and political polarisation. How pronounced is polarisation about immigration in Germany, and what are the fault lines?

There are two sides to polarisation on the topic of immigration. Ideologically, i.e. in terms of substantive differences between the political camps, it tends to be decreasing in Germany. After all, especially regarding asylum and irregular migration, a more restrictive stance has become increasingly prevalent in recent years – across virtually all constituencies. Affective polarisation, i.e. the emotional demarcation between camps, paints a very different picture. Our data shows: hardly any other country in Europe is emotionally as deeply divided on the topic of migration as Germany. AfD supporters, in particular, view migration as a central marker of identity and thus fiercely distance themselves from others.

And this is precisely where the danger lies: in areas where ideological differences become less significant, conflict and demarcation themselves become the agenda. It is no longer about what you want, but rather who you are against.

2. The topic of migration has gained significantly in importance in Germany since 2015. During the campaign ahead of the last Bundestag election, migration was one of the most decisive policy fields in the polls. How has public opinion on migration changed over the last decade?

A distinction must be drawn between the fundamental attitudes on migration and political demands. General attitudes – namely whether migration is assessed positively or negatively overall – remain relatively stable. This is because such attitudes are deeply rooted in personality traits and value orientations and are not easily changed. Even drastic experiences such as the refugee crisis in 2015 can do little to alter this. By contrast, the political demands are far more dynamic. Nowadays, even those who are generally open to migration advocate more controls and more effective deportations than was the case ten years ago. In other words: a general openness to migration does not automatically translate into liberal demands for open borders or a generous right of asylum.

3. Can we speak of a shift in the mainstream position on immigration?

Talking about a shift in the mainstream position can create the impression of permanent change. In reality, political positions on migration tend to run in cycles. As early as the 1990s, there was a phase in which restrictive positions became much more predominant – followed by a more liberal phase. Today, calls for control, limitation and enforcement are once again very present – whether it is here to stay remains to be seen. The new phenomenon for Germany actually lies on the right fringe: since 2015, the AfD has been a party that has strongly pursued the issue of migration. For them, migration is disproportionately more important because their electorate is largely united in its critical stance on migration. This coherence gives the AfD an advantage when mobilising voters – while also representing a strategic disadvantage for parties such as the CDU and SPD, whose electorates are much more heterogeneous as regards migration.

4. The whole of Europe is experiencing a rise of populist actors who openly oppose immigration and whose positions on immigration find favour with many voters. How can this be explained?

We need to look at the bigger picture: since the 1970s, post-materialist transformation has characterised the political lines of conflict in Europe. Issues such as equality, environmental protection, and migration have become central points of contention, and have brought about a new cultural divide. Like no other party, the Left embodies these post-materialist values: cosmopolitanism, open-mindedness, open borders, when it comes to migration. Here, migration is regarded as an expression of social diversity and international solidarity. The AfD is on the opposite side of the spectrum, as a kind of counter-reaction to this change in values. It deliberately positions itself against cosmopolitanism and presents itself as a bastion of traditional values, cultural homogeneity and national self-assertion. Both parties gain visibility due to their clear and unequivocal positioning. Having said that, the potential for mobilisation is unevenly distributed: The proportion of citizens critical of migration is far larger and easier to mobilise than those who identify with a very liberal migration policy. That is why, compared to the Left, the AfD disproportionately benefits from the politicisation of the issue.

5. How do you believe the centrist parties should act to assert themselves under pressure from populist actors and find support among the population?

There is no panacea for all centrist parties – particularly because they have different political orientations. This much is clear, however: the high salience of migration primarily benefits the radical right, which consistently claims the issue for itself. Yet, simply remaining silent or ignoring the issue would also be a mistake. What is more important here is that the centrist parties set the right topics and the right tone. Most people are not wholly opposed to migration – this only applies to a small minority. The majority adopt a more pragmatic position: they advocate migration when they feel that it benefits the country. This is precisely why the issue of labour migration and its contribution to the economy is a key topic. When the centrist parties show that migration can be controlled, they enforce orderly procedures, and at the same time make the benefits for the country visible, they deprive the populists of their audience.

6. Looking ahead – along which lines of consensus could compromises be found in the democratic centre?

Migration is often regarded as a divisive issue. Yet, positions are not so far apart: virtually all parties emphasise the importance of labour migration and that integration requires clear rules. Compromises are even possible on the contentious issue of asylum – consensus remains difficult, though, because migration is strongly overshadowed by fears and resentments, which are mainly fuelled by the radical right. On the other hand, celebrating diversity is not enough; especially in the East, you will not reach many people this way. Centrist parties must develop a narrative that is based on public interest and views migration as a question of Germany's own prosperity and future. This is the only way to convey that social security is not possible without immigration.

INTERVIEW

with Alexander Kustov

Assistant Professor for Political Science at
the University of North Carolina

1. For many years, the United States was seen as the ultimate immigration country, but this perception is shifting. Under the Trump administration, migration policy became markedly harsher – even affecting highly skilled individuals, including those educated at American universities. What factors might explain this development?

It is important to recognize that U.S. immigration policies had become dysfunctional long before President Trump took office. Decades of failed attempts to reform and expand legal immigration eroded public trust. Combined with persistent illegal migration across the southern border, this undermined any remaining confidence that the government could manage immigration effectively. Trump did not innovate or improve on policy design but, like many right-wing populists in Europe, capitalized on widespread concerns neglected by mainstream politicians, raising the salience of immigration to his benefit. Many of his actual immigration policies, like family separation and the Muslim ban, proved deeply unpopular, even with many conservatives. Despite occasional rhetorical support for skilled immigration, his administration, influenced by openly anti-immigration figures such as Stephen Miller, also made it harder to attract top talent. In effect, a grid-locked system and rising polarization created a vacuum that President Trump filled by mobilizing resentment.

The Biden administration's response has often reinforced rather than repaired the problem. By oscillating between occasional symbolic toughness and humanitarian gestures, without addressing the underlying dysfunction, it deepened the cycle of backlash and counter-backlash. The absence of visible, demonstrably beneficial reforms under both Democrats and Republicans has left many voters unconvinced that the system is under control. This dynamic is not unique to the United States but reflects a broader pattern in many rich democracies, including Germany, where governments of both left and right have failed to satisfy voters on immigration, generating distrust and fuelling populism.

2. We can observe a similar trend in European countries. Public resentment is turning not just against specific forms of migration posing challenges for the welfare state and social cohesion, but against immigration in general. What is your assessment of this dynamic?

Perhaps in a perfect world, people would treat work immigration, border control, and asylum rights as separate issues. In practice, public opinion and political debate rarely make these distinctions. Instead, voters and elites bundle diverse concerns about foreigners in their country

into a single category of “immigration.” So, when a certain crisis hits while dominating headlines, the negativity spills over to immigration as a whole. This explains why even countries with strong labor demand have become more restrictive. Another factor is the widespread distrust of governments’ capacity to manage this ‘immigration bundle’ effectively. Across Europe, as in the United States, publics consistently report low confidence in how immigration is handled. These perceptions are not baseless: many systems are decidedly not designed to attract and retain the productive workers countries need, reinforcing the impression that immigration is not being managed in the broader public interest. In such contexts, even modest immigration flows can feel overwhelming, producing a swing in favor of restrictions. But what looks like a shift in fundamental preferences is better seen as a reaction to weak governance. When voters do not see immigration as demonstrably beneficial and under control, skepticism hardens into general opposition.

3. Your research suggests that, even amid rising scepticism toward immigration in most liberal democracies, certain kind of immigration still receive widespread acceptance. Which types of immigration are we talking about?

Across contexts, high-skilled immigration is perhaps the ultimate type of mobility that commands broad support. Doctors, engineers, and other professionals are consistently viewed as assets because their contributions are intuitive: they fill meaningful jobs, pay taxes, and integrate well. As a lot of empirical research shows, this support does not just reflect an absence of labor competition or some kind of prejudice but a recognition of clear benefits to society. Immediate family and targeted labor migration can also attract support when structured and orderly. Even humanitarian admissions can win majority backing when framed as serving national interests. For example, Canada’s private refugee sponsorship program – reflected in Germany’s new NesT initiative – shows that when willing citizens are directly engaged in resettlement on their own dime, humanitarian migration gains more legitimacy. The common thread is not a particular migrant category but smart policy design: pathways that appear organized, purposeful, and beneficial.

4. Advocates of a migration policy guided by humanitarian principles often express concern that an approach primarily focused on economic benefits could negatively impact particularly vulnerable groups – those who may not meet purely economic criteria. Is this a legitimate concern?

It is a legitimate concern, but one that can be mitigated by how policies are designed. The common denominator of popular immigration ideas is demonstrable benefit to the host society, whether through economic contribution or cultural integration, and not the exclusion of vulnerable groups. This logic implies that the debate should not be reduced to “skills versus compassion.” The more productive approach is to design specific pathways that voters can recognize as serving diverse national purposes, whether those are purely economic or not. The relatively positive reception of Ukrainian refugees shows how geopolitical concerns can increase support beyond economic or cultural considerations. The principle of demonstrable benefit is about making better policies, not about weighing the worth of particular individuals. Evidence suggests that systems grounded in demonstrable benefit are better positioned to respond generously in crises. Canada’s relatively selective system – which is often criticized for its selectiveness by humanitarian advocates – has been able to sustain legitimacy while enabling higher humanitarian admissions than most peers. If citizens see immigration filling shortages, revitalizing regions, or strengthening families, they are more likely to extend generosity in emergencies. In this sense, prioritizing national benefit broadly conceived can enlarge, not shrink, humanitarian space in the long run.

5. Among proponents of more migration-friendly policies, there’s a common argument that a shift in rhetoric – placing greater emphasis on the positive contributions of immigration – could help shape public opinion and reduce prejudice against migrants. Is this a valid assumption?

Messaging and information provision matter, but they are not sufficient in a competitive political environment. Voters often care about whether immigration serves national interests, not just whether it is described positively. Every compelling pro-immigration message has a restrictionist counter-message that may resonate more strongly when policies appear mismanaged. Rhetoric can inspire, but without policy credibility, it rings hollow. What makes the Canadian system resilient, for example, is not a superior narrative but a set of policies that clearly align with

national interests and are widely perceived as fair and orderly, despite current challenges. That said, mainstream parties still need to articulate a constructive, positive vision of immigration when implementing reforms rather than ceding the terrain to populists. Immigration will remain a salient issue for the foreseeable future, so the common suggestion among some advocates to simply avoid the topic will not work. Rhetoric can set the tone, but durable persuasion requires governments to demonstrate benefits through visible, well-functioning programs. The only way to reduce immigration's salience as a political problem is to make the system work better.

6. What conclusions can be drawn from this? How can migration policy be designed in a way that it serves national interests while maintaining support from both those who are sceptical about immigration and those who want to live up to humanitarian responsibilities?

The main conclusion is that compromise is indispensable in diverse democracies. Immigration will never be universally popular, but it can be broadly legitimate when policies combine openness with control and deliver benefits visible to ordinary citizens. That means prioritizing demonstrably beneficial channels – skilled labor, student mobility, and structured humanitarian pathways – that reassure skeptics while expanding opportunities. Over time, such reforms build trust and normalize higher inflows, creating political space for more ambitious, yet still widely accepted, humanitarian commitments. The task is not to resolve the immigration debate once and for all but to manage it responsibly – acknowledging trade-offs, minimizing backlash, and sustaining the legitimacy of freer immigration as a long-term feature of democratic societies. Importantly, however, the debate is not only between restrictionists and humanitarians. The largest group is arguably the constituency that wants immigration to function like any other policy: to serve the broad public interest. And in a democracy, it matters less what any of us think individually about the right to asylum or other principles than what most citizens believe collectively, since those voters ultimately shape outcomes. The current representation gaps on immigration will not close on their own, which is why designing credible policies that respond to majority concerns is essential. Well-designed reforms can speak to all three groups by addressing legitimate concerns, protecting the vulnerable, and advancing national prosperity.

Imprint

Published by:

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V., 2025, Berlin

Contact:

Caroline Schmidt

Migration Policy

Analysis and Consulting

T +49 30 / 26 996-3539

caroline.schmidt@kas.de

This publication of the der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. is solely intended for information purposes. It may not be used by political parties or by election campaigners or supporters for the purpose of election advertising. This applies to federal, state and local elections as well as elections to the European Parliament.

Design and typesetting: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

This publication was published with financial support of the Federal Republic of Germany.



The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license:
“Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 international” (CC BY-SA 4.0),
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>.