

Immigration for Realists: How We Misread the Public and the Evidence, and How to Do Better*

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Abstract

Immigration experts have never known more, and rarely mattered less. Restrictionist parties and arguments have become increasingly influential across immigrant-receiving democracies, even as the expert consensus on immigration's benefits has grown more confident. I argue that we, immigration scholars and practitioners, have ourselves contributed to this gap. First, we misread the public: most voters are neither committed xenophobes nor dormant cosmopolitans. Rather, they are conditional supporters willing to accept immigration they see as beneficial to their country. Their underlying preferences are strikingly stable, with opponents usually caring more about the issue than supporters. Second, we misrepresent the evidence on immigration's costs and benefits through selective framing and strategic omission. While the effects of freer human mobility are generally positive, these findings come with qualifications that experts often leave out. Voters who notice a mismatch with their experience have good reason to distrust us, which damages the case for immigration regardless of what the populist far right does. I argue for an immigration realism that takes voters' preferences seriously and reports inconvenient evidence as readily as favorable evidence. Instead of trying to change opponents' minds, we should put more effort into designing demonstrably beneficial policy compromises that can retain majority support.

Keywords: immigration policy, public opinion, trust, misinformation, salience, policy design

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In May 2026, at a global democracy conference at Notre Dame, I was asked to explain why citizens turn away from immigrant rights and how to win them back. Just as the audience expected me to bash right-wing populists and their lies, I told the room something that we–immigration experts–rarely say to each other in public: citizens have turned away in part because they no longer trust the people at our panels, and they are not entirely wrong to withhold that trust. The experts who speak for immigration have, partly through their own choices, eroded their credibility. But we will not win citizens back until we are honest about the trade-offs of the policies we favor.

I have spent the past decade studying why people support and oppose immigration, and I have come to believe that rich democracies have a strong interest in admitting more immigrants, selected well (Kustov, 2025c). The stakes are enormous–the unrealized global gains from enabling more people to move are measured in trillions of dollars a year (Clemens, 2011). When immigration experts lose credibility, we have less chance of persuading the public to support policies that could deliver these gains and improve human well-being. My concern is that we are contributing to this problem ourselves, through how we study the issue and what we tell the public about it. Too often, we soften or withhold inconvenient findings because people who want to turn the public against immigrants will pick up whatever cuts against immigration. I share that fear. But I believe our silence has cost the case for immigration more than candor would have. The cases I describe below include a Nobel laureate who misled television viewers about the effect of immigration on wages, a pro-immigration mainstream that denied the post-pandemic surge at the American border until the official statistics caught up, and scholars who deny, or simply do not know, that foreigners are overrepresented in European crime statistics, all of which can erode people’s trust. Voters can see for themselves when what we tell them does not match what they experience.

This agenda-setting essay addresses immigration experts specifically. By immigration experts I mean everyone whose claims about migration carry the authority of specialized knowledge (Nichols, 2024).¹ Most of these experts, including government officials, share a pro-immigration

¹This includes economists, sociologists, political scientists, and other academics who study human mobility, the think tank and private sector researchers who synthesize their work for policy and business audiences, the lawyers and caseworkers who help migrants through the system, the government officials who decide their cases and enforce the rules, and the policymakers and legislators who write those rules.

consensus: a broad agreement that immigration is, on net, good for the countries that receive it. I explicitly write from inside this consensus, and for the experts and their allies who share it.²

Immigration experts have never known more. Most of us cannot keep up with the growing volume of the new panel data, difference-in-differences studies, conjoint analyses, natural experiments, and meta-reviews that inform our field. We can now say with some confidence what voters want and what migration does. Over recent decades, however, anti-immigration parties and candidates have advanced across nearly every developed democracy. Mainstream parties conceded the issue or fumbled it. This has unfolded amid a broader loss of trust in expertise, which immigration experts cannot reverse on their own.³ What we can do is change how we work and communicate so that we give people fewer reasons to distrust us. Of course, committed opponents of immigration will not take our word for much, and we should not expect them to anyway. But the moderate and undecided voters who make up most electorates, along with the politicians who answer to them, can still be reached, and it is their trust we need to earn. The democratic public ultimately decides whether to trust experts, and that trust has to be earned and maintained.

I argue that part of this failure lies in how we read public preferences and present the evidence to the public. First, we misread the public and what it wants from immigration policy. A common interpretation in both scholarship and advocacy still treats the existing opposition to immigration as a *deficit* of sorts—of information, contact, empathy, or education. But the best available evidence, which most experts could consult, supports a different view. Most voters are neither committed nativists nor dormant, unrealized cosmopolitans. Rather, they are people who are willing to bear costs for others but who prioritize their compatriots and judge immigration—like any other policy—by what it does for their country. Their preferences are conditional rather than categori-

²The gap between elite and mass preferences on immigration is one of the oldest findings in the literature (Freeman, 1995; Levy et al., 2016; Guenther, 2024). Experts can share the broad pro-immigration view while disagreeing about particular policies or rejecting the specific claims I criticize here. Some have also offered strong correctives from within the field, on why policies fail and on how research relates to advocacy (Castles, 2004; Scholten and Verbeek, 2015; Ruhs et al., 2019). I extend that self-examination to how experts conduct their immigration research and what they tell the public about it.

³Similar concerns arise in other contested fields, from climate and public health to higher education and democratic governance more generally (Nichols, 2024; Heath, 2025; Macedo and Lee, 2025). In June 2026, 38 percent of Americans expressed high confidence in higher education, down from 57 percent in 2015. Confidence among Democrats fell 11 percentage points over the previous year, the largest decline among the partisan groups (Jones, 2026).

cal, strikingly stable rather than malleable, and asymmetric in intensity such that those who want less immigration care more about the issue than those who want more (Citrin et al., 2023; Kustov, 2025c; Dennison and Geddes, 2026). In a democracy, policy has to reflect these preferences to some degree, whatever individual experts think of them. Experts who treat these largely reasonable preferences as a pathology to be cured will keep prescribing treatments that fail.

Second, we misread the evidence, or more precisely, we weigh and report it selectively. It is uncontroversial that the empirical record on immigration is genuinely positive on net. But it should also be uncontroversial that this record is genuinely nuanced: the effects of immigration depend on who moves and under which legal rules, with important benefits and costs to various actors. Yet the evidence that usually reaches the public, after it passes through press offices and advocacy organizations into sympathetic media, is something much cleaner: immigration as a single, abstract good that works for everyone, everywhere, under any policy design. Any suggestion otherwise is treated as suspect. If we say that current immigration policies are an unqualified success, we make it harder to discuss reforms that would produce larger gains or allow more people to move.

Experts who communicate in this way rarely make directly false statements. They mislead through how they frame things and what they do not say, a practice the philosopher Joseph Heath calls *highbrow misinformation*. This kind of misinformation flourishes in institutions where almost everyone shares the same values (Heath, 2025; Williams, 2025; Kustov, 2026c). What concerns me here is how we keep arriving at public claims about immigration that leave out the qualifications in the research behind them. I argue that this follows from what I call the research *laundering pipeline*: the chain of steps just described, at each of which a finding sheds some of its qualifications on its way from the study to the public claim.

If public preferences are stable, conditional, and asymmetric, then the standard advice to do more myth-busting, improve our framing, and encourage more contact with foreigners is mostly beside the point. Occasional successes in correcting false beliefs do not give us a reliable way to build lasting public support for more open immigration policies. We need to rely instead on more honest communication, acknowledging trade-offs and qualifying claims by context. We should

also encourage policymakers to build on the popular core of immigration (i.e., orderly, skilled, and integrated), instead of treating these preferences as suspect.

I conclude this essay with four norms for research practice and public engagement, along with corresponding advice for pro-immigration policymakers. I call this approach *immigration realism*. It asks us to take voters' preferences and the evidence as they are. Our task as experts is to uncover the truth about the world and help policymakers in a democracy use that knowledge to design demonstrably beneficial policy compromises that can sustain their own majorities.

A few important disclaimers before we begin. My argument here concerns how experts communicate and what they do about immigration. But these failures in expert communication and action are unlikely to be a major cause of restrictionist success. I do not aim to estimate the extent of these failures precisely, how much public distrust these failures produce, or how much of that distrust concerns immigration experts specifically rather than mainstream experts and governments more generally. Structural forces, exogenous shocks, and genuine policy failures matter more, and anti-immigration misinformation remains abundant and often far cruder than anything discussed here. The essay is not a both-sides exercise either, since hundreds of publications document nativist myths while almost none catalogue the misleading claims of the pro-immigration mainstream. I am also not asking immigration experts to become more conservative or to abandon their moral commitments. We can favor more open immigration policies while holding claims that support them to the same standards of evidence as claims that challenge them. Whatever contribution these communication failures make to restrictionist success, we can correct them. As experts in a liberal democracy, we owe the public an honest account of the evidence.

Misreading the public and what it wants from immigration

Preference conditionality and the silent majority

The voters immigration experts think they know are a good place to start. A common interpretation in immigration research and advocacy is that immigration attitudes are at bottom about prejudice:

opposition reflects ethnocentrism, racial threat, or misinformation, and the analytical task is to identify which bias is to blame and (potentially) how to correct it (for critical reviews, see Levy and Wright, 2020; Kustov, 2025c; Schmid et al., 2025). The significant role of prejudice in anti-immigration attitudes is well documented. But the evidence supports a broader account.

In their canonical review, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) emphasize *sociotropic* concerns: whether immigration has a positive or negative impact on others in one's society, economically or culturally. Voters also care about *civic fairness*, meaning what newcomers owe their receiving society and what that society owes them, including contribution, respect for the law, and fair treatment (Levy and Wright, 2020). Humanitarian concern and self-interest matter too, among the many other factors that predict immigration attitudes (Dražanová et al., 2024; Kustov, 2025c; Dennison and Geddes, 2026). These competing motivations can reinforce prejudice, but they can also override or displace it. Either way, the misreading is to assume that prejudice takes priority over these other concerns and factors or that they can simply be reduced to it.

The prejudice-first account is also both too pessimistic and too convenient. Too pessimistic because prejudice is close to a constant of the human condition, so if opposition is mostly racism there is little to be done on any politically relevant timescale. Too convenient because it locates the whole failure in the voters' character or beliefs and none of it in the experts' own choices.

The optimistic reality is that, across rich democracies, the share of voters who would categorically close the border to everyone is rather small, and the share who would open it unconditionally is small, too. In most surveys each side holds roughly 10 to 20 percent of the electorate. So, the large middle—the “silent majority” if you will—is not committed to either extreme.⁴ Their support is therefore conditional on whether immigration appears to be orderly, economically beneficial, and conducive to cultural integration. Because these preferences are conditional, immigration is a domain of political compromise: the voters who resist open-ended admissions will accept, and often welcome, more immigration when it arrives with credible selection and control. Designing

⁴I have characterized these voters elsewhere as parochial altruists or altruistic nationalists: they are willing to bear real costs for strangers, but they weigh compatriots more heavily and judge immigration policy by its consequences for their own society (Kustov, 2021).

that bargain with openness in exchange for order that voters can see is not at all an easy task, but it is, on this evidence, the most promising path to progress.

The conditionality of preferences shows up wherever surveys allow it to (Kustov and Helbling, 2026). Voters across Western democracies consistently prefer skilled to unskilled immigration, legal to irregular entry, and, most generally, admission rules tied to national needs, and all of this holds even among people with various biases. In an April 2024 Economic Innovation Group survey, 71 percent of Trump voters favored increasing high-skilled immigration, alongside roughly three-quarters of all voters (Economic Innovation Group, 2024). In Germany, a 2025 More in Common study found 71 percent support for admitting qualified refugees to fill open jobs, double the 35 percent who supported taking in refugees “in general” (More in Common Deutschland, 2025). And it is not just about attitudes—I am aware of no recorded mass protest in an advanced democracy against the arrival of skilled foreign workers as such, or privately resettled refugees, for that matter.

The experimental record corroborates these points. In factorial survey experiments of immigrant choice, Americans reward the same immigrant attributes—such as education, employment prospects, and English proficiency—and punish the same violations of laws and norms across party lines (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015; Wright et al., 2016). Experiments at the level of immigration policy find the same conditional logic: voters, including many nominal opponents of immigration, support admissions designed and justified around demonstrable national benefits, and that support extends to immigrants from culturally distant origins (Kustov, 2025c; Levy and Wright, 2026). The conditional middle, in short, is waiting to be shown that openness is well governed and justified given their values, a pragmatism that others have documented among voters in both the United States and Europe (Schuck, 2007; Levy and Wright, 2020; Citrin et al., 2023; Dennison and Geddes, 2026).

People’s immigration policy preferences are also conditional on broader institutional environments, not just on immigrant attributes. What voters demand from immigration policy and immigrants reflects other rules and laws that shape the costs and benefits of immigration, from welfare

access to labor rights. As a result, the same conditional logic can settle on different demands under a different institutional structure. Whether conditionality structures opinion the same way outside the Western democracies that produced nearly all of this evidence is a question immigration researchers should treat as a frontier.⁵

Preference stability amidst thermostatic politics

The second misreading concerns attitudinal change. Because headline public opinion on immigration swings, sometimes dramatically, it is tempting to conclude that people’s underlying attitudes are malleable, and that the right information campaign could durably convert those who are “on the wrong side” of the issue. The best longitudinal survey evidence, however, points the other way. Individual immigration attitudes are among the most stable objects in public opinion research, and they barely moved through the Great Recession, the 2015 European asylum crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Kustov et al., 2021; Dennison et al., 2023; Dennison and Geddes, 2026). What people fundamentally want from immigration policy appears to be set early and to persist, whether due to socialization, personality traits, or both.

But what about all those dramatic changes Gallup and other pollsters reported over the last several years? Those swings largely reflect the changing policy signals voters are reacting to and transmitting themselves, rather than genuine changes in their underlying preferences. That is, people’s *relative preferences* for more or less immigration behave thermostatically—i.e., adjusting against the perceived direction of policy. When governments are seen as losing control or too lax, demand for restriction rises. By the same token, when restrictionists govern harshly, demand for more moderate policy can swing back, even when people’s underlying *absolute preferences* for orderly and beneficial immigration remain broadly stable (Wlezien, 1995).

The apparent recent back-and-forth swings of immigration views in the United States offer a good illustration. In mid-2020, for the first time in Gallup’s records, more Americans wanted

⁵The near-universal Western preference for high-skilled over low-skilled immigrants, for instance, does not seem to replicate in Singapore—a country where guest worker rules tie rights and permanence to skill and public spending goes to housing and other congestible goods (Cavaillé and Wai, 2026).

immigration increased than decreased, with only 28 percent wanting less. By 2024, the share wanting less immigration had nearly doubled to 55 percent, the highest since 2001. A year later, the numbers had swung back: 30 percent wanted less immigration, a reversal whose timing is consistent with a thermostatic response to the change in administration and perceptions of both restored control and enforcement excesses (Gallup, 2025; Kustov, 2025a).

This pattern has an uncomfortable implication for the expert mainstream's favorite lever of persuasion campaigns. If absolute immigration preferences are stable and headline opinion is thermostatic, then mass information campaigns are aimed at the wrong target. The experimental record confirms that: providing correct information about immigration reliably corrects factual beliefs while often leaving policy preferences unmoved (Hopkins et al., 2019). At the same time, some accurate corrections cut the other way: Germans underestimate the number of asylum seekers in their country, and informing them of the true figure raises stated opposition to immigration (Guenther, 2025). Misperceptions, meanwhile, are bipartisan: pro-immigration respondents hold inaccurate beliefs about the immigration system at rates comparable to opponents (Kustov and Landgrave, 2026).⁶

Issue importance asymmetry and the intense anti-immigration minority

The third misreading is about the intensity of people's views on immigration as an issue. Even where experts acknowledge that immigration preferences are conditional and stable, they tend to treat the distribution of opinion as the political bottom line. That is, if a majority supports some liberalization, the majority should eventually prevail. But preferences on issues only move people's political behaviors when they actually care about those issues (Le Corre et al., 2026). On immigration, issue priorities run against openness: voters who want less immigration consistently consider the issue more important, donate based on their preference, and vote on it more readily

⁶It is important to clarify here that prejudice toward immigrants already in the country, as a group, is a related but distinct object. The interventions best documented to move it, notably perspective-taking and intergroup contact, are not well suited for shifting preferences toward immigration policy (Abascal et al., 2021; Kustov and Landgrave, 2026). Reducing animus is a worthy end in itself, but the politics of immigration is more informed by people's distinct *policy* preferences.

than voters who want more (Kustov, 2023, 2025b; Kirkizh et al., 2023).

This issue importance asymmetry in part explains why restrictionist minorities so often dominate ostensibly pro-immigration majorities. It also helps explain a pattern others have documented: the rise of anti-immigration parties across Western Europe has tracked how much voters prioritize immigration more closely than it tracks hostility toward immigrants, which has, if anything, declined (Dennison and Geddes, 2019).

The literature on populist rhetoric supplies a further qualification of this phenomenon. One comfortable explanation for the restrictionist tide holds that voters have been manipulated by populists' appealing rhetorical style with the us-versus-them framing and some anti-elite theatrics. In experimental work with Yaoyao Dai, we find that the populist style itself moves voters remarkably little; what moves them is substance, above all positions on immigration and related issues (Dai and Kustov, 2024; Kustov and Dai, 2026). Other candidate choice experiments in Germany and the United States find the same substance-over-style pattern (Neuner and Wratil, 2022; Castanho Silva et al., 2023). Candidates of the populist right win immigration votes because many voters substantively agree with restrictions regardless of how these restrictions are framed. Treating restrictionism as a style problem mistakes the diagnosis and licenses exactly the wrong cure: more humanitarian counter-framing, when the actual deficit is the substantive credibility of mainstream parties on the issue.

A related common misreading, and in some ways a more condescending one, treats popular opposition to immigration and the anti-immigration vote as false consciousness, with immigrants serving as scapegoats for economic grievances related to austerity or inequality. The fact, however, is that people vote for anti-immigration parties because they dislike immigration or how their governments have managed it (for evidence on the AfD, see Schröder et al., 2026). Economic grievances and other factors can certainly influence these views without making voters' stated immigration concerns irrelevant.

Moving between is and ought

At this point, the empirical facts about public opinion I describe above are increasingly part of conventional wisdom, in large part due to the efforts of many of our own colleagues in and around immigration research. So I can see how many readers may agree with most of these facts and still not see what follows from them. To put the objection bluntly, to describe these preferences is just an empirical claim. But to build policy around them is a normative choice, and the step between the two is not automatic.

I agree. After all, majorities can be wrong. At the same time, potential migrants—the people with the largest stake in immigration policies—cannot vote on them. Therefore, the case for taking conditional preferences seriously is pragmatic rather than normative. We live in a democracy, for better or worse, and voters get a say on immigration whether or not experts think they have earned it. Regimes built against what voters have wanted for years rarely last long enough for anyone, native or immigrant, to see the benefits. Nothing in this argument requires agreeing with the median voter, and nothing in it forbids trying to move them. It does mean arguing for our conclusions, that immigration is good and that more of it would be better, rather than treating them as premises the public already accepts. Most voters accept them only with conditions attached, and a policy that ignores these conditions persuades no one. In other words, *immigration realism*—the approach I propose here—takes voters’ preferences as they are: a constraint to design within and to argue with. They are neither a moral verdict nor the last word.

This constraint is soft rather than hard: attitudes rarely make a policy impossible, but they can raise its political cost and threaten its durability (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith, 2012; Ruhs, 2022). Policymakers neither do nor should follow every turn of opinion, and policy design often ends up mediating the relationship between public attitudes and migration policy. Building regimes that a stable majority experiences as imposed nevertheless creates a vulnerability that their supporters need to address. The constraint also loosens with trust: governments that are visibly responsive on immigration earn the benefit of the doubt to pursue responsible programmatic policies that would be unpopular on their own (Kustov, 2025c). The essay’s wager is that demonstrably beneficial

policies will admit far more people over time than righteous designs that die at the next election.

Misreading the evidence on the costs and benefits of immigration

Before turning to what might work, I want to examine the second set of misreadings, concerning the evidence on the costs and benefits of immigration, because it is arguably the more important of the two. We often talk as if “immigration” had some true effects we need to uncover, which hides the actual decisions that states make about who can come and what happens after they arrive. But immigration is not just one thing, and we rarely say out loud what we all know privately: some immigration policies, and thus also some of the immigrants they bring, are much more beneficial, economically or culturally, than others for receiving countries. This may be empirically true even if you believe, as a normative matter, that all people have equal moral worth. Most of the economic research already says as much: its favorable verdict on immigration for receiving countries is a qualified one. The misreadings begin when experts leave out the nuances that would change what the public should conclude.

Highbrow misinformation and the laundering pipeline

Following Heath (2025) and Williams (2025), I use the term highbrow misinformation for a familiar problem: experts can mislead without making anything up, through the things they choose to emphasize or leave unsaid. People in institutions where nearly everyone shares the same priors are unlikely to find much wrong with each other’s accounts. But we all have to simplify research to communicate it, so an omission alone is not enough to call something misinformation. I mean cases where we keep simplifying in favor of the same narrative even when correction is available, and where including the missing qualifications would change what a reasonable audience concludes. Universities, NGOs, mainstream media, and international organizations have much in common in this respect, at least on immigration. So do the politicians of nearly all mainstream parties, who come from the same educated circles and now hold more pro-immigration views than

their own voters (Guenther, 2024). As a result, passing a claim from one of these institutions to another compounds the bias.

There is arguably a whole *laundering pipeline* conducive to highbrow misinformation in immigration research, and I—and likely many readers here—have watched each segment of it from the inside. It all starts with a careful econometric study that produces a qualified, context-dependent finding with various methodological caveats in the appendix, but with a somewhat cleaner abstract. Then the university press office simplifies this further, while advocacy organizations strip the remaining nuances and put the cleanest version into their fact sheets. Finally, sympathetic journalists write “what the research says” pieces that present the simplified version as the consensus, and pro-immigration politicians repeat it as settled fact.

What is striking is that nobody has to plan any of this, and at every step someone has an answer: the researcher that the full paper contains the caveat, the press officer that a headline cannot include a methods section, and the advocate that opponents spread even worse falsehoods. But the end result is always the same: the public encounters yet another strong but misleading claim about why “immigration is good” backed by “research.”

There are also our ideological biases at work. At workshops and conferences, I have seen findings that could not be read unambiguously as “immigration is good” quietly downplayed, re-framed, or dropped from papers. Some colleagues have advised me personally to soften robust results that might “feed the far right.” The worry is understandable, but silence does not make uncomfortable facts disappear. It just decides who gets to explain them, and on immigration that is usually a restrictionist, who takes the one true fact the experts ignored and attaches a few false conclusions to it.

The immigration consensus itself is also worth confronting, because it has a fascinating history. A century ago the disagreement ran both across and within disciplines: economists of the eugenics era opposed immigration on explicitly racial grounds in the pages of the *American Economic Review* and the *Journal of Political Economy*, while the early sociologists who rejected eugenics still cast migration as the social “disorganization” of “uprooted” communities (Benton-Cohen, 2018).

Immigration research has since swung to the opposite pole, framing immigration near-uniformly as an opportunity, to a degree unusual among contested issues. The present orientation, in other words, is a historical artifact rather than a timeless scientific baseline, and the research community has swung to an extreme before.

I should also acknowledge that vigilance has to run in both directions. The skepticism I am urging toward pro-immigration claims applies with equal force to the critics of the consensus, including those whose priors match my own. A prominent recent example is a reanalysis by George Borjas and Nate Breznau of an earlier study in which 71 research teams analyzed identical data. They reported that a team's prior immigration views predicted its estimates, a result presented as evidence of systematic ideological bias in immigration research.⁷ The result proved sensitive to analytical choices: Auspurg and Brüderl reproduced the original estimates but found that the ideological correlation weakened or became statistically indistinguishable from zero under alternative specifications, a critique that Borjas and Breznau dispute (Auspurg and Brüderl, 2026; Rutar, 2026). A claim congenial to immigration skeptics, and in some ways to my own argument about bias, turned out to rest on a fragile specification. Bias surely operates in immigration research too. But we owe the same scrutiny to the findings that flatter our critics as to the findings that flatter us.

What follows are the four clusters of half-truths where I believe the laundering pipeline does the most political damage. These four half-truths are not meant to be comprehensive, and not all of them are held by every immigration expert. Each has serious dissenters, and together they are common arguments rather than a consensus. But they are arguably the modal claims of the mainstream's public output.

⁷The original study is not cited here on purpose. Besides, the exercise there was ill suited to its stated question in a further way: the outcome the teams modeled was public support for social welfare programs, not immigration attitudes or the research consensus on immigration as such. Immigration's relationship to welfare-state support is theoretically ambiguous and contested, which makes it a doubtful proxy for detecting ideological slant in immigration scholarship.

“Immigration is, at bottom, about vulnerable people seeking safety”

The first half-truth frames immigration as, at its core, a humanitarian project. This frame is partly normative, a claim about how generous receiving societies should be toward the world’s most vulnerable, but it is also often explicitly empirical: it presents the vulnerable person seeking safety as the typical migrant and the decision of whether to help them as the typical policy question. This framing is morally attractive to many experts but factually suspect.

Fewer than one in five international migrants are refugees or asylum seekers, while the overwhelming majority move for work, family, or study (IOM, 2024; Paez-Deggeller, 2025). Yet the humanitarian minority dominates scholarly and journalistic attention, an imbalance familiar to anyone who follows either the major outlets or the migration journals. Zeke Hernandez (2024) calls this the victim narrative, the mirror image of the far right’s villain narrative, and the symmetry is apt: both reduce migrants to objects of moral reaction in a factually misleading way.

This imbalance runs deep: family migration is the single largest permanent entry category in the United States, yet even the US literature treats it as a residual category when it studies it at all. Meanwhile, labor migration, which together with family reunification makes up the bulk of the phenomenon outside the US, draws a similarly small share of the attention (OECD, 2024). The largest blind spot of immigration research, in other words, is the modal migrant like the spouse and the coworker voters actually meet, alongside the policies that regulate their movement—about all of which we know much less than we should.

The political cost of this humanitarian frame, or victim narrative, is threefold. First, it speaks to a sliver of the electorate. Explicitly need-based appeals, “we should admit people because they need help,” resonate strongly with perhaps 10 percent of voters; even most left-of-center voters believe immigration policy should serve the national interest (Kustov, 2025c). Building the public case for immigration on its least popular component is a strategic choice, and a poor one. Second, the frame teaches voters that immigration is a cost to be borne rather than a benefit to be captured, which concedes the restrictionists’ central premise in advance. Third, the frame fills in the public’s mental image of what immigration is: we picture the asylum seeker at the border, not the skilled

worker or the spouse turned away, which makes people think more about the negative than the positive aspects of the issue.

The recent crises at the American southern border put the frame to its fullest test. Between 2021 and 2024, encounters at the border reached levels never previously recorded: 2.5 million in fiscal year 2023, and more than 300,000 in December 2023 alone, the highest month ever measured (US Customs and Border Protection, 2024). Much of the pro-immigration mainstream met these numbers with denial. For two years, administration officials insisted the border was secure, the vice president memorably so on national television (NBC News, 2022); sympathetic outlets, weeks after the record December, were still writing about the “so-called border crisis” (North, 2024); and advocates met each attempted restriction, including the administration’s own, with the maximal version of the humanitarian frame, as an attack on “the fundamental human right to seek asylum” (UNHCR, 2023). At the migration conferences I attended in those years, scholars mostly nodded along, at least in public. Inside the frame, the denial was close to obligatory: if seeking asylum is an unconditional right, then record arrivals are simply that right being exercised, and voicing concern about them sounds bigoted.

The statistics eventually settled the matter against the deniers on the pro-immigration side. In January 2024, the Congressional Budget Office put net migration for 2023 at 3.3 million, roughly 2 million above its earlier estimates (Congressional Budget Office, 2024). In December 2024, the Census Bureau followed: it revised its methods to count the humanitarian arrivals its surveys had been missing, which roughly doubled its estimate for 2022 to 2023 and put the following year near 2.8 million (US Census Bureau, 2024). The millions that had been waved off as fear-mongering were now the official count. David Leonhardt, who had covered the wave while it was under way and been attacked from the pro-immigration side for repackaging nativist premises (Leonhardt, 2023; Johnson and Shirazi, 2024), described the mechanism plainly the morning after Biden’s June 2024 asylum order: “That loophole is the asylum system,” a system in which, by his account, most claims ultimately fail as unsubstantiated but applicants still remain in the country for years while they wait (Leonhardt, 2024a; Yglesias, 2024).

Advocates answered with the humanitarian frame rather than the numbers: asylum “is not a loophole but rather a life-saving measure,” a “human and legally protected right” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2024). Both descriptions were true, of course: the asylum system was a lifeline for the qualified and a loophole for the unqualified, but only the first half could be said in polite company. Days before the census revision landed, Leonhardt put net migration under the Biden administration at more than 8 million, arriving faster than at the peak of Ellis Island (Leonhardt, 2024b). Those totals reached beyond the asylum queue, taking in parole programs, temporary protections, and overstays, but the direction was no longer in dispute. The public had done this arithmetic long before the agencies: immigration topped Gallup’s Most Important Problem list in February 2024, for the first time since 2019 (Gallup, 2024). Few of the prominent voices that had denied the crisis acknowledged error once the numbers came in.

Scholars and practitioners still debate how much better the Biden administration could have done with the post-pandemic surges it did not fully control. But my sense is that it is now almost conventional wisdom among immigration scholars, including some who denied the crisis while it was happening, that the administration botched its asylum policies. The humanitarian frame was meant to protect the asylum system; by forbidding its defenders to concede what everyone could see, it helped deliver the system to the people who had campaigned against it all along.

The crisis aside, the truthful description is more politically useful: most migrants are ordinary people moving to work, study, and join families, whose presence can be strongly in the receiving country’s interest, and the largest welfare gains on earth sit in enabling more such movement under rules voters can see as legitimate (Clemens, 2011). Experts who communicated that description as confidently as they communicate rescue stories would be both more accurate and more persuasive.

“Immigration is good for everyone”

The second half-truth says that immigration has benefits for various parties with no trade-offs involved. The serious research consensus in economics is nuanced in an appropriate way: we know that immigration produces sizable net gains on average, with distributional effects that leave some

groups worse off in the short or medium run, and with fiscal consequences that depend heavily on the skill composition of flows, the generosity of the welfare state, and the time horizon, among other factors (Dustmann et al., 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). It is also widely established that most of the gains from immigration understandably go to immigrants themselves, who are able to make much more money in a more productive destination with better institutions (Clemens et al., 2019). But by the time these results exit the research pipeline, many of these qualifications are gone. What reaches the public approximates “immigration is good for everyone, full stop,” with the implication that anyone who experiences or fears loss is mistaken or malicious.

Paul Collier once charged that social scientists have “strained every muscle to show that migration is good for everyone,” and Borjas (2016) quoted the line approvingly. As a description of how the research itself is produced, the charge is overstated, though by less than we would like. The vast majority of immigration researchers state their qualifications, but they state them where they are easiest to miss, with the reassuring finding in the abstract or even the title and the troubling finding in an appendix. The inconvenient qualifications are neither shouted from the rooftops nor censored—they are there in the paper for anyone who wants to look. Unfortunately, few of us do.

Researchers also bear responsibility for what others select and amplify from their work, and for the claims they allow others to make in their name. But the public does not parse this division of labor. When experts tell voters who see patterns in their own employment outcomes that nobody loses, they give those voters good reason to distrust them. Like all consequential policies, immigration creates winners and losers. Pretending otherwise is a comforting falsehood. We can make a stronger case for immigration by acknowledging its large overall gains and asking how governments should compensate those who lose out. That gives opponents less room to discredit us by pointing to costs we refused to admit.

Let me give you just one high-profile case from the very top of the expert hierarchy. In November 2019, Esther Duflo sat down with the British journalist Krishnan Guru-Murthy to talk about why people around the world are getting the economy wrong. A few weeks earlier, she had shared

the Nobel Prize in economics with Abhijit Banerjee and Michael Kremer for pioneering an experimental approach to fighting poverty. In the interview, she was asked about immigration and said that the National Academies had reviewed hundreds of studies that “all come to the conclusion that the effect of low-skilled migration on low-skilled wages is zero” (Duflo, 2019). The report actually says that immigration has very little effect on native-born wages overall in the long run. When studies do find wage losses, previous immigrants and native-born workers without a high-school degree are the most likely to experience them (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). We can grant Duflo’s good faith and still recognize that the report does not say what she said it did. Here was a scholar known for careful causal inference summarizing other researchers’ work, but misleading the public by claiming that the studies all found zero wage effects, even though the report she cited explicitly acknowledged evidence of wage losses.

“If migration is good there, it is good everywhere”

The third half-truth is to assume that what researchers find in one country also holds elsewhere, regardless of which immigrants arrive or the policies under which they do so. Crime offers perhaps the clearest case I know of, because the reassuring evidence from the United States is easy—and convenient—to overextend. Immigrants in the United States have lower incarceration rates than the native-born, and researchers can trace this pattern going back 150 years (Abramitzky et al., 2024). The evidence also includes immigrants without legal status: in the unique Texas data recording immigration status during 2012-2018, even those immigrants without legal status had substantially lower arrest rates than US-born citizens, and the finding held when researchers examined convictions (Light et al., 2020). These robust findings are worth communicating widely.

The highbrow misinformation begins when that American result becomes a universal law of immigration. The US finding that immigrants without status have lower arrest rates is not particularly surprising when you think about it: an immigrant without status who is caught speeding may end up in removal proceedings, so the incentives to avoid even minor offenses, or at least to avoid getting caught, can be unusually strong. Even noncitizens with legal status may face depor-

tation for serious crimes. Distance and long unauthorized journeys also help select who reaches the United States, where immigrants encounter flexible labor markets and limited social transfers. But the conditions, rules, and the related incentives may be quite different in other countries. In Europe, for instance, some states receive large humanitarian inflows with less selection for labor-market prospects, and some restrict asylum seekers' employment while facing legal and practical obstacles to removing rejected applicants.

In February 2025, five days before the federal election, Germany's ifo Institute published a study of police crime statistics (Adema and Alipour, 2025). The police statistics it used showed that foreigners were suspects at roughly three times the rate of German citizens. In 2023, there were 57 foreign suspects per 1,000 foreign residents and 19 per 1,000 German citizens, excluding immigration violations. This difference had persisted for over a decade. In their longitudinal analysis, the authors examined whether changes in a district's foreign population share predicted changes in its crime rate during 2018-2023. After adjustment, they found no statistically detectable relationship. That result can coexist with the difference in suspect rates, because the two comparisons answer different questions. The press release acknowledged the difference, but its headline was "More Foreigners Do Not Increase Germany's Crime Rate." Three days later, a Green Party state caucus, while also acknowledging foreigners' overrepresentation in the statistics, announced that the study "clearly shows that the connection often asserted between migration and crime does not exist" (Kustov, 2026b).

Of course, the German over-representation numbers can be misleading too. Besides age and sex, what matters is where people live, how the police work and what gets reported, and even who counts as a foreigner. The numerator in Germany also includes suspects who do not reside in the country, while the denominator does not. And we are talking about suspects here, not convictions. But explaining all that is quite different from denying the raw numbers that voters can see for themselves. I have met many immigration scholars at international conferences who, for whatever reason, did not know that foreign nationals were substantially overrepresented in several European countries' crime statistics. If information this basic does not make it through the pipeline, we

should not be surprised when voters begin to distrust us on other questions too.

“Immigration is good... unless it is temporary, which is exploitation”

The fourth half-truth concerns temporary and circular labor migration. It is somewhat unusual since here the advocates tend to *understate* the potential benefits of immigration and overstate the costs, though to immigrants themselves rather than the receiving states. Temporary migration, particularly to the Gulf states, routinely attracts condemnation as inherently abusive, a violation of human dignity bordering on indentured servitude.

Of course, the abuses are real and extensively documented. Workers may incur recruitment debts, employers may confiscate passports, while temporary work visas may tie workers to employers they cannot safely leave. But condemning temporary migration as such requires ignoring both the evidence on its effects and the choices of migrants themselves.

The rare causal evidence we have, from a natural experiment that quasi-randomly allocated jobs at a large construction firm in the United Arab Emirates among several thousand Indian applicants, shows that guest work roughly doubled workers' wages and sharply raised their employment (Clemens, 2018). Workers queue for years and pay heavily for these jobs because the home alternative is worse, and they know their circumstances better than immigration experts. There was also little evidence that they had systematically misunderstood the pay or conditions before going. The more general finding is that moving from a poor country to a rich one can multiply the earnings of observably identical workers severalfold (Clemens et al., 2019). Most aid programs cannot offer anything like that. Describing only the restrictions on temporary work leaves out much of what makes it worth doing for the workers themselves.

When pro-immigration advocates insist on granting rights to migrant workers that are costly to receiving countries, they may also be advocating for fewer migrant workers to begin with. In *The Price of Rights*, Ruhs (2013) documents a trade-off between admissions and some rights, with the clearest evidence in high-income countries. This does not mean that rights are unimportant or that advocates should become complacent, but it does mean that we need to consider the available

policy compromises given the existing constraints. For example, a government might admit more workers if it could phase in certain benefits, while still enforcing basic labor protections from the start. For the people who would otherwise never get in, this may be the only available way to migrate. And governments can change recruitment fees and restrictions on leaving an employer without ending temporary migration itself. South Korea did something along these lines when it put government agencies in charge of recruitment under its Employment Permit System. Average recruitment costs fell from about \$3,500 per worker in 2001 to \$950 in 2012, while the country continued to admit workers (Yi, 2013).

The public rarely hears much about these possibilities. Instead, temporary migration usually appears as something abusive that a decent society should reject. Banning such programs takes legal options away from the people advocates claim to protect, diverting them to more dangerous and less monitored irregular routes. If experts judged temporary migration by what it does for migrants' welfare—not to mention national interest—well-designed programs would be among the main policies they advocated.

Why it is all about credibility

Each expert half-truth from above, examined alone, may look like an ordinary simplification—the inevitable cost of public communication in a representative democracy where voters are not fully engaged. But what they all share is a direction. Every omission and overgeneralization here leans the same way, toward the unconditional pro-immigration narrative that the right thing to do is to accept more people from poor countries on a permanent basis. Much of this is enforced socially: the researcher who emphasizes an uncomfortable qualification risks being read by colleagues and the broader pro-immigration public as defecting. The end result is a public narrative, with no conspiracy behind it, that only ever leans toward reassurance.

The public, which experiences immigration policy directly, through labor markets and neighborhoods, or less directly, through the evening news and social media, eventually notices the gap

between the narrative and the observable world. Surveys in many receiving democracies have found more people disapproving than approving of their government's handling of immigration (German Marshall Fund, 2014). Distrust earned on one claim transfers to all the others. That is how noble half-truths, each individually defensible, erode the experts' standing: when experts are caught misleading the public, the public stops listening.

Another thing the half-truths share is what they crowd out. The strongest claim in the experts' possession is the sheer size of the gains from freer movement, for migrants above all but far beyond them: the unrealized surplus famously described as trillion-dollar bills left on the sidewalk (Clemens, 2011), alongside the benefits of skilled immigration to receiving countries specifically (Kerr, 2018). In my experience, many immigration researchers outside economics are unaware of these magnitudes, and some who know them hesitate to say them out loud, precisely because they sound too favorable or even materialistic. The result is the worst of both worlds: confident overstatement of the relatively small conditional claims and diffident silence on the large true one. Those forgone gains are the reason this essay exists. An expert community that will not state its best-supported finding has no standing to overstate its weaker ones, and no way to explain to voters what is actually lost when the system fails.

But why should strategic silences matter when the far right traffics in outright fabrication? Unlike demagogues who ask their followers for their allegiance, experts ask the public to trust data and methods that should, at least in principle, reveal inconvenient results. A nearly true claim coming from the experts arrives with citations and credentials, so it can travel much farther before anyone notices the missing qualification. Communication research suggests that messages acknowledging and answering opposing considerations can be more credible and persuasive than one-sided advocacy, and audiences can recognize advocacy presented as analysis (O'Keefe, 1999; Mercier, 2020). This gives experts a reason to report inconvenient findings even when doing so complicates their preferred argument.

A related problem is the misalignment between policy rhetoric and delivery. Credibility fails when communication outruns what policy delivers and voters can see the gap. Three features

of the immigration case make the mechanism unusually destructive. First, the public arguably has independent access to the phenomenon: unlike the ozone layer or internet protocols, immigration is more relatable and observable without expert mediation. Second, the issue's intensity asymmetry makes that detection politically actionable, because the voters most likely to punish perceived expert dishonesty are the ones who care most (Kustov, 2023). Third, expertise on immigration is institutionally bundled with advocacy to a degree unusual even by social science standards: the same exact organizations often produce research and advocacy campaigns, and scholars can move freely among them.

The same credibility dynamic runs through party competition. Challenger parties grow by exploiting cracks in mainstream coalitions, taking adversarial positions on issues whose costs voters can see, and immigration has been the canonical case for decades (Dickson and Hobolt, 2025). Owning the issue is an advantage a mainstream rival cannot simply announce away: voters treat a long-held reputation as more credible than a recent change of position (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). The accommodation record reads accordingly: on average, mainstream parties that adopt tougher immigration positions do not win radical-right voters back, and by some estimates strengthen the radical right instead, even though parties keep reaching for the move once the radical right is already winning (Krause et al., 2023). But this does not necessarily mean that the lesson is that moving right is always a mistake. Rather, it is that mainstream parties lose either way, because any gains from accommodation among restrictive voters tend to be offset by defections from the party's own base (Chou et al., 2021), a rise in the issue's salience, and a restrictive turn that looks less credible than the original owner's (Hilbig, 2026).

Of course, immigration experts as knowledge producers are just one input among many. The immigration status quo has many concentrated beneficiaries such as employers of precarious labor or enforcement contractors, and policy is made under their pressure too. The claim here is correspondingly narrow: whatever share of the political outcome expert communication controls, it is the share we control, and we have been spending it badly.

What realism asks of immigration scholars and other experts

The realist research program follows from taking the diagnosis outlined above seriously. I state it as four norms, each of which some scholars already practice, but none of which the mainstream expert institutions reward systematically, and then turn to the institutional changes that would make them stick.

The first norm is *symmetric reporting of both positive and negative findings*, effectively encouraging a working firewall between analysis and advocacy. Such symmetry means publishing and publicizing findings at the same volume whether or not they flatter the favored narrative, and adopting the practices that make the symmetry verifiable, including preregistration, registered reports, adversarial collaboration, and routine reproduction. The credibility argument for open science is especially strong in more politicized fields like ours, because the audience's (quite reasonable) prior is elite capture.

The second norm is *qualification of findings in terms of their context by default*. Every empirical claim about immigration should travel with its scope conditions: which migrants, which legal design, which institutions, and which time horizon, among other possible things. The single-dial habit of speaking about "immigration" as one thing with one effect is the root of half the laundering documented above. To fix this, research introductions and conclusions, as well as abstracts and press releases, should almost always state where their findings likely *do not apply*. Researchers should routinely discuss external validity and push back when others generalize their findings beyond the contexts they studied. The standard is not a caveat on every sentence, which nobody would read. It is the right level of abstraction: claims about groups and policies rather than about "immigration," with the scope conditions carried in the main body rather than buried in the appendix. The ifo episode is instructive here precisely because the study itself was sound. What went wrong came afterward: the press release oversold the result, a state party caucus oversold it further, and the study's qualifications did not prevent that broader claim from circulating.

The third norm is *retiring the deficit model of voters as a default*. This model reads voters' restrictionist preferences as symptoms to be cured or mitigated. The realist alternative treats them as

preferences that are legitimate in a democracy, and designs research accordingly. This means measuring intensity and salience rather than direction alone, studying the conditional middle on its own terms rather than as failed cosmopolitans, and seriously engaging with the strongest restrictionist arguments in print.

The fourth norm is *making popularity a legitimate object of study*, including the questions of when and why people support immigration, and not just why they oppose it. Immigration researchers study attitudes exhaustively and policy design extensively, but the question of which policy designs sustain public support, and why, remains strikingly understudied relative to its political importance. We know some fragments: visible selectivity and order sustain support, while humanitarian intakes without legible control erode it. A systematic research program on popularity-by-design would give experts something to offer mainstream parties besides messaging advice they no longer believe. That program should also distinguish symbolic accommodation from visible delivery. The party competition literature is right that voters do not hand credibility to mainstream parties simply because they adopt a tougher line rhetorically. The open question is still which particular policy actions, repeated over what horizon, can make voters—if at all—conclude that a party can competently manage immigration.

In practice, this program means redirecting some effort in migration opinion research and campaign polling from persuasion to compromise identification. Unfortunately, the standard survey repertoire, built around generic support for “more” or “less” immigration, is too blunt for the question that matters politically: under what conditions citizens will accept specific policy arrangements. When items specify the trade-offs instead (the type of pathway, the admission criteria, the enforcement instruments, the rights attached), they do not prime new attitudes so much as reveal differentiated preferences that generic items normally conceal. Mapping those acceptable policy packages, and testing their political viability in real policy debates, is how immigration experts can help design demonstrably beneficial compromises that sustain their own majorities.

Doing expertise better also needs institutional teeth, ideally beyond immigration research, because the institutions that set researchers’ incentives do not consistently reward these norms. The

first set of reforms concerns how journals publish, and the easier step is to make registered reports, including for observational studies, and adversarial collaborations routine (Clark et al., 2022; Chambers and Tzavella, 2022). If an editor thinks that a question is worth asking and that the proposed methods can answer it, why should a result that disappoints them make the study less worthy of publication? With a registered report, the journal makes that decision before anyone knows the answer, although the authors still have to follow the approved protocol and interpret their results in line with the evidence. Similarly, if two colleagues disagree about a policy's benefits, they could agree beforehand on what would count as a fair test. Migration journals could invite more of these studies, committing to the same publication standards whether the findings support one colleague's expectations, the other's, or neither.

The harder step is a serious move toward post-publication review for politicized findings. Under the current norm of pre-publication review, reviewers who share the prevailing ideological or methodological view can block sound findings that challenge it, even in good faith. Most immigration researchers can probably name findings they hesitated to submit or publicize. Publishing first and refereeing in the open shifts the question from whether a result is welcome to whether it survives scrutiny.⁸

The second set of reforms concerns how the public finds and reads immigration research. When regular readers or journalists search online to ask their questions about immigration or even ask their AI agents, which they already do, they should be able to easily check the answers against the underlying studies. If those studies sit behind paywalls while simplified accounts circulate freely, experts make that checking harder. Researchers can help by putting their papers in open repositories and maintaining accessible reviews that explain what the findings show and where they apply.

Every hand a finding passes through on its way to the public strips another qualification, which is why so much of the laundering documented above happens after the research leaves the re-

⁸Of course, flawed results could reach readers before reviewers correct them, but working papers and preprints already circulate long before referees finish, and the laundering pipeline runs on those versions. Open review would attach scrutiny to the versions people actually read. Clear labels indicating review status and permanent links to corrections would help readers distinguish circulating claims from vetted findings.

searcher. One possible remedy is for scholars to explain their own published evidence in public, in newsletters and blogs, rather than outsourcing translation to journalists and intermediaries who carry different incentives and, often, thinner expertise. Universities that want credible experts can reward this public engagement in hiring and promotion, including outside public policy schools, instead of treating it as time stolen from publishing in peer-reviewed journals.

Here, the useful distinction is between public engagement and activism: engagement brings research to publics and lets the conclusions fall where the evidence falls, while activist scholarship is oriented toward a predetermined political conclusion, and audiences can smell the difference (Prasad, 2021; Cohen, 2025; Kustov, 2026a). The engaged scholar takes sides on the problem, not on the politics, and declines to become a campaign asset for either coalition. The seeming pro-immigration activism inside academia now, by contrast, converts findings into ammunition and authors into combatants, so that even careful work gets discounted as advocacy.

This also distorts the research agenda itself. When categories and questions are inherited from policy and advocacy, the things policymakers and advocates do not want to know remain unstudied (Bakewell, 2008). The immigration version is visible in what immigration research is thin on: the fiscal effects of low-skilled migration into strong welfare states, the local consequences of rapid demographic change, the conditions under which temporary programs protect workers, the integration impacts of immigrant origin on top of individual qualifications, the design features that make enforcement legitimate rather than cruel. These are the questions conditional voters—and not just restrictionists—are asking but academics are hesitant to touch.

When experts neglect politically inconvenient questions, they leave others to answer them, carefully or otherwise. Some of the most careful accounting of immigration's costs now comes from outside the academic journals, such as the Manhattan Institute's estimates of immigrants' lifetime fiscal impact (Di Martino, 2024). From my experience, professors tend to judge such work by its origin rather than its method, dismissing the think tanks on the conservative side while citing the think tanks on their own side. A realist would read both with the same skepticism. Experts who decline to study these questions, or study them but mute the answers, should not be

surprised that voters take them to populist entrepreneurs who at least pretend to answer.

None of these norms are hypothetical, and immigration experts do not need to invent the institutions that practice them from scratch. The same National Academies report that gets flattened into soundbites is itself a possible model: it separates average from distributional effects, short from long horizons, and federal from state and local budgets, handing readers the benefits and the costs in a single document. The research styles closest to these norms already exist inside immigration research: formal demography and register-based work publish their definitions, distinguish stocks from flows, report outcomes by admission channel, and revise estimates in public even when the new counts are politically inconvenient, as the Census Bureau did in 2024.

Some official institutions go further still. Denmark’s annual fiscal accounts by origin group report costs as well as benefits, and because the finance ministry publishes them, they enter budget and integration debates as official figures rather than as advocacy (Finansministeriet, 2023). The United Kingdom’s Migration Advisory Committee, created under a Labour government in 2007, has been kept by governments of both parties, which have formally accepted the great majority of its recommendations (Ruhs, 2019). Their credibility rests on publishing the evidence even when it is inconvenient to the government of the day.

What realism asks of advocates and policymakers

The parallel realist program for policymakers and the advocates trying to influence them builds on what we know about which immigration policies voters will accept. It ranges from separating popular policies from more contested ones to improving the capacity and order of the system. Scholars and researchers should evaluate and refine this agenda rather than cheerlead for the policies they favor.

The first, and perhaps most important, commitment is to *unbundle* the issue, separating its popular parts from the rest. Moderate and conservative observers can often misread voters just as readily as those on the left. For instance, the strategic advice known as “populism” tells parties to

run on their popular positions and avoid drawing attention to unpopular ones, especially on salient issues (Yglesias, 2022). Applied to immigration as a whole, this can become advice to retreat from pro-immigration positions altogether. If voters care about immigration and mostly want less of it, the reasoning goes, a disciplined center-left party should change the subject to a more favorable issue, such as reducing economic inequality.

But such a retreat would be premature. “Immigration” is a bundle of distinct policies with very different levels of support. The same people need not favor skilled workers, international students, family reunification, humanitarian admissions, or temporary work, and their views on enforcement may differ again. This is one reason why comprehensive immigration reform is so hard: a policy that voters actually want can fail because of its association with another policy they do not want. Parties should be willing to pursue policies voters already want while designing the rest so that their benefits become visible.

The second, related commitment is to consolidate the existing popular core of immigration policies first. Majorities across party lines already support skilled immigration in nearly every receiving democracy, including among many currently skeptical voters. These voters also want newcomers to integrate and governments to keep immigration orderly. In the United States, more than three-quarters of voters support high-skilled immigration, with majorities in both parties, yet disagreements over the least popular parts of the system still hold up its expansion. Governments should build on this support by explaining whom they admit and why. Freer immigration can remain popular only if voters have reason to believe that their government is in control of it.

The third commitment is to expand through demonstrably beneficial policies once that popular core is secure. Employers who need workers could bring them in through temporary programs that protect these workers. Foreign students should know before they arrive what their options after graduation will be. Citizens who want to help refugees should have more opportunities to sponsor them and cover their initial living costs (Kustov, 2025c). All such expansions would also require difficult choices about migrants’ rights. When advocates insist on granting rights that are costly to receiving countries, they may effectively advocate for fewer migrants to begin with. Phasing in

some benefits while protecting basic rights can allow more people to come. It is more honest, and ultimately more generous, to make these choices explicitly.

The fourth and final commitment is to invest in administrative capacity and law enforcement together. Getting decisions right and delivering them on time should be desirable whatever one thinks about immigration. Years of waiting prevent migrants from planning their lives, while backlogs make it harder for the public to believe that anyone is in charge. Simpler applications, clearer criteria, and wider access to premium processing for admissions could help. But greater capacity means faster protection for those who qualify and faster lawful removals for those who do not, which may be the hardest part for pro-immigration advocates to accept. If someone has no legal right to remain after a fair hearing and appeal, and no protection against removal, the government must be able to make them leave promptly and humanely, under consistent rules.

Germany illustrates the difficulty of resolving cases even after an order to leave. At the end of 2025, about 232,000 people in Germany had a legal obligation to leave, although most held a *Duldung*, an official certificate temporarily suspending their deportation. Over the whole year, Germany deported fewer than 23,000 people, while more planned removals fell through than succeeded (Deutscher Bundestag, 2026). Leaving people for years without either departure or secure status is no kindness to them and gives voters reason to distrust the system. Immigration experts should help governments resolve these cases lawfully and humanely and give the public an accurate account of the results. The American reaction to enforcement in 2025 also suggests that voters can turn against cruelty and chaos as well as a lack of control. Advocates who avoid saying what they would enforce leave the issue to people who enjoy answering that question.

Governing parties have instruments challengers do not: budgets, agencies, processing rules, removals, work authorization, and legal pathways. A mainstream party does little to rebuild credibility by sounding like its restrictionist challengers for a news cycle. It needs to use its powers to reduce unresolved claims, deliver faster decisions, establish clearer lawful pathways, and carry out humane, predictable removals of those without a legal claim to remain. Regaining trust takes time, and making relatively open immigration popular and sustainable will always be an uphill battle

given the strength and persistence of opposition. But the gains from freer movement make that effort worthwhile.

Conclusion: why realism is the pro-immigration position

My overall argument in this essay is that the public—which immigration experts keep trying to correct—is mostly reasonable, while the evidence on immigration’s costs and benefits that they keep simplifying is far more nuanced than what reaches that reasonable public. We, the experts, have made the case for immigration harder to defend by asking voters in democracies to accept claims that leave out the inconvenient qualifications they care about. Improving our own communication is part of the answer, but mainstream expert organizations—including journals and universities—also need to change how they evaluate and reward research on immigration and other contentious topics.

None of what I have proposed requires any revolution. We need to report findings at the same volume whether or not they flatter our favored narrative, state where they apply and where they do not, treat voters’ preferences as democratically legitimate even when we disagree, and study what can make immigration popular and not only what currently makes it unpopular. Many researchers already practice some of these habits, and the others could adopt them tomorrow. The institutional proposals, from registered reports and open review at journals to open access and rewards for public engagement at universities, need the changes described above. But they are still feasible, since institutions that practice them already exist.

I do not expect every reader to accept every claim here, but I will take even a partial agreement or desire to adopt some of the proposed norms as a win. Parts of the diagnosis also rest on my reading of a contested record, and I have flagged where reasonable people may disagree. What I am confident of is the direction in which we are heading if we fail to change. Restrictionist politics is ascendant, and the salience of immigration issues is rising across many contexts. The coming political cycles could set immigration regimes for a generation, in the United States, Europe, and

beyond. We, immigration experts, can meet that moment as a more credible but occasionally more uncomfortable version of ourselves, or we can keep blaming our declining influence on misinformation spread by populists and other opponents of immigration.

This essay's title borrows from Achen and Bartels (2016), who taught political scientists to see voters as they are, with all their parochial commitments and irrationalities, rather than as the folk theory of democracy requires them to be. For better or worse, the evidence shows that voters are themselves realists about immigration: they support what they see as beneficial to their societies and distrust those who are not completely honest with them. The scholars who study those voters and the other experts who work with them should finally return the compliment. Being more realistic about immigration and what voters believe about its costs is not the same as retreating from the pro-immigration position. Realism is arguably the only version of that position with a future.

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Declaration of generative AI use

I used OpenAI Codex (GPT-6 Astra) and Anthropic Claude Code (Table 5.1) for editorial assistance, source and attribution checks, and critical feedback on potentially selective framing and overgeneralization in my own discussion. I evaluated their suggestions against the evidence, accepting some qualifications and retaining stronger claims where I judged them warranted. I verified

the manuscript's originality and accuracy, including its references, and take full responsibility for the article.

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Notes on contributor

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