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January 2026

Managing Migration: The Progressive Way

Recommendations for the U.S. and Germany



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I.

Introduction

During the election campaign from which he emerged as German Chancellor, then opposition leader Friedrich Merz warned that his predecessor, Olaf Scholz, was “losing control of his own country” and urged the government to declare a national emergency if the EU failed to curb illegal migration.¹ Jens Spahn, now parliamentary leader of Germany’s ruling Christian Democrats, declared that the country needed a break from what he called “completely uncontrolled asylum migration.”²

In the United States, Donald Trump launched his first presidential bid in 2015 with the claim that Mexico was sending “criminals and rapists” across the border.³ He has since repeatedly described irregular immigration as an “invasion” that must be stopped.⁴ His deputy chief of staff in the current administration, Stephen Miller, claims that stopping illegal immigration will save taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars.⁵

Politicians across Germany and the United States have increasingly echoed and amplified voters’ concerns that something is fundamentally wrong with their countries’ immigration policies. Loss of control, criminal threats, and soaring public costs – these are some of the dominant themes shaping public discourse around immigration in many receiving countries today. When it comes to apportioning blame, there is a widely held perception that institutions and political elites have failed to act. Voters have consistently ranked rising immigration as a top concern, but often feel their voices have gone unheard.⁶

And the numbers are indeed significant. Worldwide, a record 304 million people lived in a country other than their country of birth in 2024 (up from 275 million in 2020).

Europe, the US and Canada were home to roughly 155 million migrants or 51 percent of all international migrants in 2024.⁷ Forced displacement has also reached exceptionally high levels, with an estimated 123 million people currently uprooted by conflict, disaster, or persecution (up from about 65 million in 2015).⁸

But even these high numbers represent only a fraction of the potential scale of international migration. According to Gallup, one in six adults worldwide – roughly 900 million people – would migrate permanently if they had the chance.⁹

While the share of international migrants in the world’s total population remains relatively small (3.7 percent), it has become clear that rich countries are in no position to take in – nor have they any intention of doing so – even a small portion of the hundreds of millions who dream of a better life abroad. In fact, the opposite is true: most have made it exceedingly difficult for people from poorer countries to enter legally as workers.

As a result, many jobseekers try their luck through the only remaining open channel, the asylum system, hoping to gain access to the labor market or at least basic support during the often years-long asylum process. But when large parts of the public in the receiving countries – including or perhaps even especially those with immigrant backgrounds – begin to see the refugee system as being misused, support for it erodes. And as past experience shows, so does support for liberal migration policies more broadly.¹⁰

However, the situation has never been as dire or out of control as the above statements suggest, either in the United

1 Kiefer, Felix. “Dem Kanzler entgleitet das eigene Land.” Tagesspiegel, August 27, 2024. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/dem-kanzler-entgleitet-das-eigene-land-merz-reicht-scholz-die-hand-und-wirft-ihm-zeitgleich-kontrollverlust-vor-12266762.html>.

2 Deutschlandfunk. “Spahn fordert ‘Pause von dieser völlig ungesteuerten Asyl-Migration’.” Deutschlandfunk, August 20, 2023. <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/spahn-fordert-pause-von-dieser-voellig-ungesteuerten-asyl-migration-106.html>.

3 Ginyea, Don. “The GOP’s Evolution On Immigration.” NPR, January 25, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/25/580222116/the-gops-evolution-on-immigration>.

4 Sullivan, K. and Iyer, K. “Trump says US is ‘like a garbage can for the world’ as he rails against illegal immigration.” CNN, October 24, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/10/24/politics/trump-us-garbage-can-immigration>.

5 C-Span. “Stephen Miller Speaks to Reporters About Immigration Enforcement Policy.” April 28, 2025. <https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/stephen-miller-speaks-to-reporters-about-immigration-enforcement-policy/659207>.

6 Hoelzl, Verena. “Wahlberechtigte skeptisch zu gemeinsamer Migrationspolitik.” Die Zeit, February 15, 2025. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2025-02/umfrage-forsa-migration-parteien-konsens>.

7 Paez-Degeller, Veronica. “Top Statistics on Global Migration and Migrants.” Migration Policy Institute (MPI), August 26, 2025. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/top-statistics-global-migration-migrants?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=9c2fa7e2-f01e-4969-ba4c-6b96fa381b29>.

8 UNHCR Press Release. “Number of people uprooted by war at shocking, decade-high levels.” UNHCR, June 12, 2025. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/press-releases/number-people-uprooted-war-shocking-decade-high-levels-unhcr>.

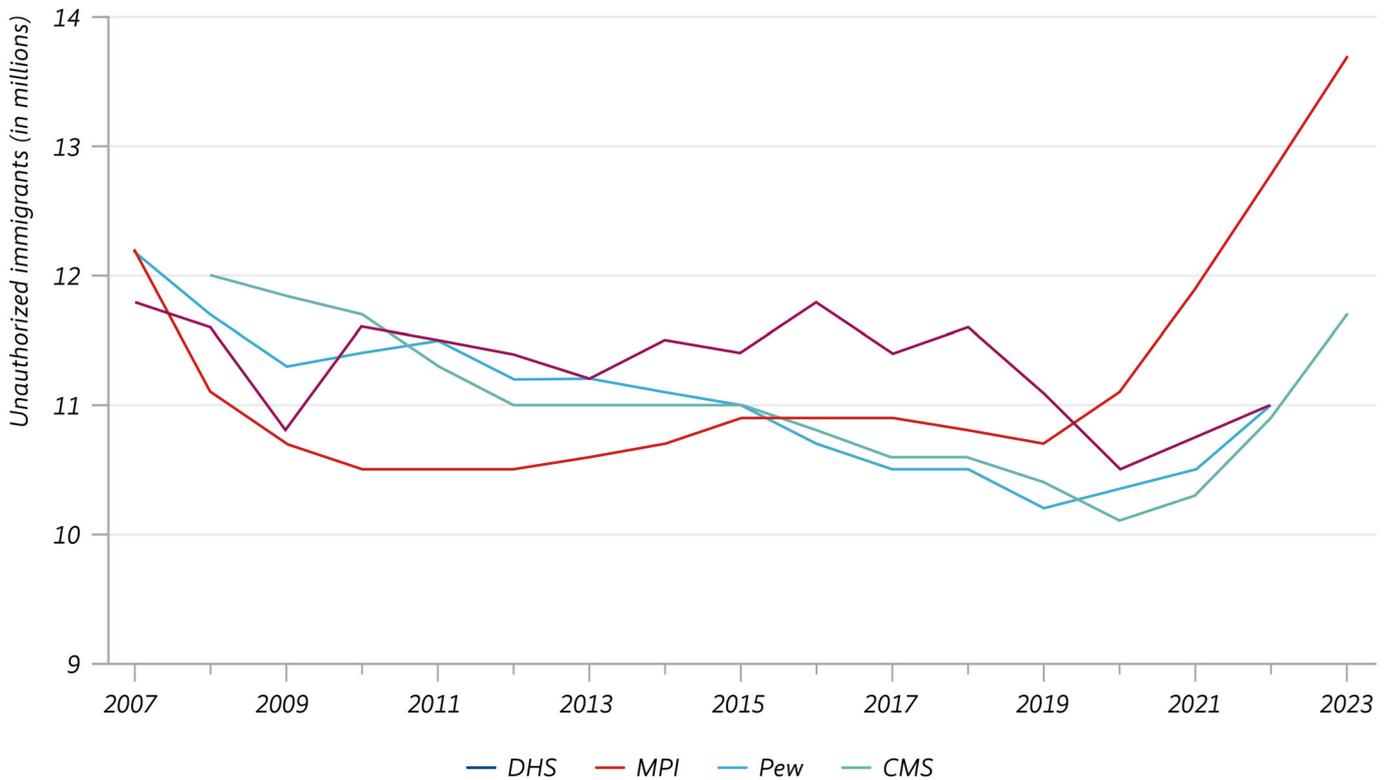
9 Ray, Julie and Pugliese, Anita. “Desire to Migrate Remains at Record High.” Gallup, October 30, 2024. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/652748/desire-migrate-remains-record-high.aspx>.

10 The Economist. “The global asylum system is falling apart.” The Economist, July 10, 2025. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2025/07/10/the-global-asylum-system-is-falling-apart>.

Estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States

Fig. 1

2007–2023



Source: Economic Policy Institute.

States or in Germany. Germany's net immigration (including asylum seekers) decreased by about 35 percent to 430,000 in 2024 (the most significant spikes of more than one million in 2015 and 2022 came as the result of civil war in Syria and Russia's invasion of Ukraine).¹¹

President Trump's claims of 20 million irregular immigrants in the US has never been backed by statistics, which estimate that the population of irregular immigrants stood at between 11.7 and 13.7 million in 2023.¹² This was the highest number ever recorded, but far below the President's claim.

Immigrants (both regular and irregular) in the US do not commit more crimes than native-born citizens, nor do crime rates rise in the US communities where they settle.¹³ And as

long as the labor market eagerly relies on immigrants to fill labor shortages in industries such as agriculture, construction, and hospitality, most economists agree that immigration is a net positive for the US economy.¹⁴

Nevertheless, immigration at the levels seen in recent years may be politically difficult to sustain in receiving countries, largely because majorities are dissatisfied with how governments manage it. Current polls in both the United States and Germany indicate that people do not necessarily see immigration in itself as harmful to their country.¹⁵ However, their frustration with the current immigration system is salient enough for Americans to have elected a president who made attacks on immigrants central to his campaign. And in Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) –

11 Destatis Press Department. "Nettozuwanderung 2024 auf 430 000 Personen gesunken." German Federal Statistical Office, June 24, 2025. https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2025/06/PD25_224_12411.html.

12 Costa, Daniel, Bivens, Josh, and Morrissey, Monique. "Unauthorized immigrants and the economy." Economic Policy Institute, April 15, 2025. <https://www.epi.org/publication/unauthorized-immigrants/>.

13 Ruiz Soto, Ariel G. "Explainer: Immigrants and Crime in the United States." Migration Policy Institute (MPI), October 2024. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-explainer-immigration-crime-2024_final.pdf.

14 Gelatt, Julia. "Explainer: Immigrants and the U.S. Economy." Migration Policy Institute (MPI), October 2024. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/content/explainer-immigrants-and-us-economy>.

15 Saad, Lydia. "Surge in U.S. Concern About Immigration Has Abated." Gallup, July 11, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692522/surge-concern-immigration-abated.aspx>; Einsporn, Hannes. "Eine Migrationspolitik jenseits der Spaltung." Robert-Bosch-Stiftung, August 11, 2025. <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/de/stories/eine-migrationspolitik-jenseits-der-spaltung>.

labeled “extremist” by domestic intelligence in part because of its anti-immigrant rhetoric – has been gaining ground, with support for the party rising from 10 percent to 25 percent over the past five years.¹⁶

Growing public frustration with how governments have handled immigration raises the question: how could it be managed differently? The Trump administration has shown that there is virtually no limit to its harsh measures against immigrants, ranging from family separations at the border to sweeping ICE raids across US communities, but this crackdown has gone far beyond the public’s actual demand for order and control.¹⁷

Polls consistently show that many voters doubt whether progressive parties can manage immigration effectively.¹⁸ Confronting this skepticism is essential. For example, both the United States and Germany rely on immigrant workers to offset the labor market pressures of aging populations. Above all, as recent developments in the US demonstrate, the issue of immigration can open the door to right-wing populism with the potential to threaten democracy.

This paper offers three ideas for how progressives can address immigration firmly and fairly, without cruelty and without relying on deterrence or intimidation.

¹⁶ Henrich, Philipp. “Ergebnisse der Sonntagsfrage im Zeitverlauf seit der Bundestagswahl 2017 bis 2025.” German Federal Statistical Office, September 4, 2025. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1227103/umfrage/ergebnisse-der-sonntagsfrage-lange-zeitreihe/>.

¹⁷ Saad, Lydia. „Surge in U.S. Concern About Immigration Has Abated.” Gallup, July 11, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692522/surge-concern-immigration-abated.aspx>.

¹⁸ See, for example, Infratest Dimap. “ARD-DeutschlandTREND September 2025.” September 2025. <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/ard-deutschlandtrend/2025/september/>; Ballard, Jamie. “Americans trust the Democratic Party more on health care and Republicans more on immigration.” YouGov US, May 28, 2025. <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/52266-americans-trust-the-democratic-party-more-on-health-care-and-republicans-more-on-immigration>.

II.

The Specific Immigration Challenge

Election cycles across the globe between 2023 and 2025 showed that immigration remains a salient issue across regions and contexts. Across all these elections and contexts, one thing was clear: migration narratives continue to be dominated by right-wing and far-right politicians, for whom closing borders and expanding deportations remain the primary policy responses. Centrist and progressive policymakers, in turn, often struggle to set out a vision for migration policy that resonates with the public.

Right-wing Issue-Ownership and Salience

Immigration has long been a weak issue for parties on the left, including for Democrats in America and Social Democrats in Germany. The approach to the issue on the left has usually been simply to ignore immigration and immigration policy; to avoid talking about it as far as possible, and to play defense on the issue, when forced. This has become the default approach for a number of reasons. For one, the issue does not tend to be a core issue for constituencies on the left, while it is a core issue for Republicans and right-wing parties, and one that brings their base to the polls.¹⁹ Thus there is naturally less interest on the left in talking about the issue, as it is not one that tends to mobilize their core constituency, while the exact opposite is true for the right.

Relatedly, talking extensively about the issue can boost its salience, which benefits mainly the issue-owners, namely the far-right, in most cases and contexts. When immigration is a low-priority issue, people may vote for candidates that hold immigration beliefs they do not agree with; however, once the issue gains prominence, it can become a key voting point, which usually benefits the populist right.²⁰

The tendency to sidestep immigration has left the issue largely in the hands of the right, but voters' attitudes can

still change. Critically, when voters are confident that the government is managing immigration in their interest, they can be more open to supporting more liberal immigration policies.²¹ Past Democratic policies on the issue show that striking a balance between immigration enforcement and liberalization – in other words, demonstrating a commitment to border enforcement while opening legal pathways for immigrants to come to the United States – has proved politically popular, and has given voters confidence that the system is well managed.²² Emphasizing that the majority of migration is regular and legal, and that most immigrants will arrive at a port of entry with a valid visa or work permit,²³ is also an important part of building trust in a well managed migration system.

Finally, in both the US and Germany, excessive focus on border policies, situations at the border, and irregular immigration often “poisons” the debate about the need for more immigration to meet labor market demands. The conflation of the border with the issue of immigration as a whole means that there is less room for nuanced debate on other immigration issues, in particular legal economic immigration. Once again, this plays into the hands of right-wing parties.

Lack of a Progressive Narrative

Because the approach on the left has largely been to avoid talking about the issue, Democrats and parties on the left in Germany lack a clear message or narrative on immigration, while right-wing parties have a clear, negative message grounded in fear and emotion.²⁴ This narrative disparity was reflected in ad dollars spent during the US presidential campaign in 2024: from January to October 2024, Republicans spent \$573 million on television ads focused on immigration across twelve battleground states, while Democrats spent only \$107 million.²⁵ Republican spending on the issue far

19 PRRI. “Challenges to Democracy: The 2024 Election in Focus.” PRRI, October 11, 2024. <https://www.prii.org/research/challenges-to-democracy-the-2024-election-in-focus-findings-from-the-2024-american-values-survey/>.

20 Ibid.

21 Kustov, Alexander. In Our Interest: How Democracies Can Make Immigration Popular. New York: Columbia University Press, 2025.

22 Mortimer, Colin. “Democrats Lost the Immigration High Ground. For What?” The Hill, March 15, 2025. <https://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/5195102-democrats-immigration-fail/>.

23 Kingsbury, Kathleen. “To Understand Global Migration, You Have to See It First.” The New York Times, April 17, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/04/17/opinion/global-migration-facebook-data.html>.

24 Rosas, Greisa Martínez. “Why Democrats Fail the Immigration Test Every Time.” The New York Times, February 12, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/12/opinion/immigration-republicans-democrats-crisis.html>.

25 “Right-Wing Playbook: Immigration Ads and Narratives.” Catalyze/Citizens, November 2024. https://catalyzecitizens.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/cc_2024-right-wing-spending-and-narratives-report.pdf.

exceeded the \$171 million they had poured into immigration-focused television ads during the 2022 midterms.²⁶

When there is messaging from the left on the issue, progressives have tended to anchor their approach in personal narratives and moral arguments, which tend to lose when competing with messages highlighting concerns about crime, security, or social cohesion.²⁷ Messaging on the issue should instead come from a place of material self-interest and economic common sense, especially given the most pressing common challenge confronting countries with regard to immigration.

Increasing Need for Immigration, Decreasing Public Support

One of the most pressing challenges, not only in the United States and Germany, is decreasing public support for immigration at a time when increased immigration is needed: as the workforce ages and birthrates decline, immigration has become the primary source of growth in many countries. Since the pandemic, immigration has been the main²⁸ driver²⁹ of growth in the United States, especially in major metropolitan areas. In fact, for the first time since 1850 (when the US Census began recording data), immigration accounted for the entire growth of the US population in 2022 and 2023.³⁰ Similarly, in Germany and several other European countries, immigration accounted for all population growth between 2000 and 2020, and mitigated population loss in many other countries.³¹

At the same time, public opinion polls over the past few years have shown that immigration attitudes have become more restrictionist. A Gallup poll in July 2024 showed that, for the first time since 2005, a majority of Americans (55 percent) wanted less immigration.³² Polling during the 2024 presidential campaign also showed an increasing preference

for tougher immigration enforcement, including majority support for mass deportations (between 51 and 62 percent).³³ Immigration was also the issue on which Trump held the largest lead over Harris, at nearly 15 percentage points in one poll.³⁴ Recent surveys in Germany indicate that a large majority (82 percent) of the population believes that the government should adopt a more restrictive immigration policy, with 50 percent viewing migration as giving rise to more costs than benefits.³⁵

Exacerbating this challenge is that immigration systems in the United States and Germany are both outdated and ill-equipped to meet current migration flows. In the United States, the last significant reform of the immigration system was in 1986, meaning the immigration system that exists now is no longer fit for purpose, especially given that patterns at the southwest border have shifted significantly in the intervening decades. Overloading and underresourcing compound the “brokenness” of both immigration systems. In the United States, the primary example thereof is the amount of time it takes for asylum claims to be processed; an average of 4.3 years as of early 2024.³⁶ In Germany, although the time to process asylum claims is shorter (just over a year as of 2025³⁷), asylum seekers are in many cases not allowed to work for up to nine months while their claims are being processed, leading to right-wing narratives of asylum seekers “abusing the system” and taking advantage of public benefits.

Immigration as an Avatar for Other Domestic Issues

Another key issue is that immigration, and anti-immigrant sentiment, are often linked to concerns about the economy,³⁸ housing prices,³⁹ and crime.⁴⁰ In other words, immigration often becomes an avatar for other difficult-to-solve domestic issues.

26 Ibid.

27 Rosas, “Why Democrats Fail the Immigration Test.”

28 Frey, William H. “Recent Immigration Brought a Population Rebound to America’s Major Metro Areas, New Census Data Show.” Brookings, April 10, 2025. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/recent-immigration-brought-a-population-rebound-to-americas-major-metro-areas-new-census-data-show/>.

29 Kamp, Jon, Overberg, Paul and Rust, Max. “Immigrants Dominate U.S. Population Growth.” The Wall Street Journal, December 19, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/us-news/census-data-immigration-state-population-changes-9f8f4508>.

30 “For First Time in Recorded History, Immigration Accounts for Entire Growth of the U.S. Population Year over Year.” Migration Policy Institute, March 12, 2025. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/statistics-us-immigration-2025>.

31 Kramer, Stephanie. “In Some Countries, Immigration Accounted for All Population Growth between 2000 and 2020.” Pew Research Center, July 8, 2024. <https://www.pew-research.org/short-reads/2024/07/08/in-some-countries-immigration-accounted-for-all-population-growth-between-2000-and-2020/>.

32 Jones, Jeffrey M. “Sharply More Americans Want to Curb Immigration to U.S.” Gallup, July 12, 2024. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/647123/sharply-americans-curb-immigration.aspx>.

33 Narea, Nicole. “What Immigration Policies Do Americans Actually Want?” Vox, August 27, 2024. <https://www.vox.com/policy/368889/immigration-border-polls-election-2024-trump-harris>.

34 Zitner, Aaron. “Trump Takes Narrow Lead Over Harris in Closing Weeks of Race.” The Wall Street Journal, October 23, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/politics/elections/trump-leads-harris-wsj-poll-779f8516>.

35 Hildebrandt, Tina. “Schaffen wir das noch?” Die Zeit, September 11, 2024. <https://www.zeit.de/2024/39/migration-umfrage-asylpolitik-rechtsradikalismus>.

36 “Explainer: Asylum Backlogs.” National Immigration Forum, January 23, 2024. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/explainer-asylum-backlogs>.

37 Statista Research Department. “Durchschnittliche Verfahrensdauer bei Asylanträgen in Deutschland von 2019 bis 2025.” September 9, 2025. Statista. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1561090/umfrage/verfahrensdauer-bei-asylantraegen-in-deutschland/>.

38 Laaker, Dillon. “Economic Shocks and the Development of Immigration Attitudes.” Cambridge Core, May 17, 2023. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/economic-shocks-and-the-development-of-immigration-attitudes/7B2C59BC0FA28EF1A38A1499C4D35445>.

39 Wile, Rob. “What Economists Say about JD Vance’s Claim That Immigrants Drive up Housing Costs.” NBC News, October 3, 2024.

40 Hesson, Ted. “Sheriffs Push Trump’s ‘Migrant Crime’ Message with Scant Evidence.” Reuters, October 31, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/sheriffs-push-trumps-migrant-crime-message-with-scant-evidence-2024-10-31/>.

Public concerns often revolve around a couple of recurring claims. First, immigrants are accused of competing in the low-skill labor market, allegedly “stealing” jobs or depressing wages for native workers. Second, they are seen as a burden on public finances, drawing welfare benefits and overstressing public services, a concern voiced particularly in Germany. Third, immigration is blamed for increasing pressure on already scarce resources, such as affordable housing, which fuels broader social tensions. Finally, immigrants are often linked to rising crime or public safety risks, reinforcing perceptions of threat and insecurity.

Research shows that historically, anti-immigrant sentiment increases as domestic economic anxiety increases,⁴¹ anxiety that is usually expressed in the form of worries about cost-of-living issues such as the state of the economy (including inflation and the affordability of the welfare state) and housing prices.

A Unique US Challenge: Executive Action

The forty-year pause in lawmaking on the issue in the US, and Congress’ abdication of its role on immigration⁴² as the subject matter has grown increasingly toxic, have led to a particular problem in the United States, one of executive action. Congress is the only branch of government that can make meaningful, long-lasting changes to the system. There have been attempts at comprehensive immigration reform in Congress, but all have failed at various stages. As a result, most immigration policy is made through executive action and by the courts,⁴³ making it highly changeable and inconsistent. Under the second Trump administration, most immigration policy is set by executive order, often resulting in measures more radical than what Congress would approve.

A Unique German Challenge: Managing Migration through European Cooperation

German policymakers face a constant dilemma: responding to public pressure to demonstrate strength and control over irregular migration while needing to coordinate closely with neighboring countries on border management. The new government has pledged to implement stricter border controls and prevent asylum seekers from entering the country. However, the legality of such measures remains contentious, under both Schengen and asylum law. This is why so much depends on the success of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and on how the new legal frameworks, border procedures, and solidarity mechanisms are put into

practice. Much also rests on the European Commission’s ability to ensure compliance with existing regulations (such as Dublin), which some border states under heavy pressure from high arrival numbers have implemented only partially.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Laaker, “Economic Shocks and the Development of Immigration Attitudes.”

⁴² Bolter, Jessica, Israel, Emma and Pierce, Sarah. “Four Years of Profound Change.” Migration Policy Institute, February 2022. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-trump-at-4-report-final.pdf>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sommer, Hannah und Kasperek, Bernd. “Reform des Gemeinsamen Europäischen Asylsystems.” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, July 2, 2024. <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/hintergrund-aktuell/522800/reform-des-gemeinsamen-europaeischen-asylsystems/>.

III.

Recommendations for Progressives

Despite widespread public concern and the dominance of right-wing narratives, progressives can regain ground by showing they can manage migration effectively.

1. Restoring Public Confidence in Progressive Immigration Policy

Exercising Control over National Borders

Concerns about the impact of immigration on stability, security, and the economy may be exaggerated, but they have consistently dominated public debate, especially in the run-up to elections, when right-wing politicians work to keep them in the spotlight. Underpinning this debate is a clear expectation from voters in both the United States and Germany that their governments exercise control over their national borders. This includes not only registering foreign nationals upon entry, but also asserting authority over who is allowed to enter in the first place. And as recent polls from Germany show, many now believe that this authority should include refusing asylum seekers entry at the border.⁴⁵

Over the past few years, US public opinion has leaned toward more restrictive immigration policies.⁴⁶ But with illegal border crossings now sharply down and President Trump having effectively closed off asylum in America, recent polls show a shift, reversing a four-year trend of rising concern about migration across all major party groups. Fewer Americans agree with the Trump's administration's anti-immigration course; the share of people wanting less immigration has dropped to 33 percent (from 55 percent in 2024), while a record-high 79 percent say immigration is good for the country.⁴⁷

In Germany, the newly elected conservative-led coalition government, in office since May 2025, has promised a "*Migrationswende*", a complete shift away from the migration policies of the previous Social Democrat-led government. While it is too early to assess tangible results, and many measures draw from a familiar playbook of short-term, often symbolic fixes (more deportations, stricter bor-

der controls, refusal of asylum seekers at the border), the sharp drop in asylum applications in the first half of 2025⁴⁸ may give the government some breathing room. It could reduce the pressure to continuously introduce harsher measures aimed at regaining public trust, which many voters feel has been lost.

This is by no means a call for the kind of harsh and often illegal measures the Trump administration has taken against new arrivals or even long-settled immigrants rooted in their communities, nor a claim that tighter German border controls or turning away asylum seekers offer more than temporary deterrence. Rather, the lesson is that when governments credibly demonstrate control over who can and cannot enter, public concern about immigration tends to ease, and the issue is viewed as less of a threat to the country and its people.

Of course, migration flows will always be shaped by global events that no government can fully control. Borders cannot be "fixed" once and for all, nor can the impression of complete control be sustained at all times. Given that right-wing parties dominate the border issue, it makes sense for progressives to shift the debate towards other aspects of immigration policy and reduce the constant focus on border management. But for such a shift to succeed, governments must first rebuild public trust in their ability to enforce control and develop policies that differentiate urgent protection needs from other types of migration.

Fair, Not Just Tough: Reforming Asylum to Restore Trust

For years, right-wing actors have accused governments in wealthy destination countries of losing control over who enters and how long they stay, often pointing to the asylum system as the weak link. In the United States, the Trump administration has effectively shut down asylum for anyone arriving at the border. In Germany, the courts are weighing whether the government can legally turn away asylum seekers arriving from a safe third state, after an initial

45 James, Katharina. "Mehrheit unterstützt laut Umfrage Zurückweisung an Grenzen." Die Zeit, January 30, 2025. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2025-01/deutschland-trend-mehrheit-unterstuetzung-zurueckweisung-migranten-grenzen>.

46 Gallup. "In Depth: Immigration." Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>.

47 Saad, Lydia. "Surge in U.S. Concern About Immigration Has Abated." Gallup, July 11, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692522/surge-concern-immigration-abated.aspx>.

48 Tagesschau. "Deutlich weniger Asylanträge in Deutschland." Tagesschau, July 5, 2025. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/asylzahlen-halbjahr-100.html>.

ruling declared the practice unlawful. Recent polls show strong public support for a stricter border regime, including refusing entry to asylum seekers.⁴⁹

Such claims gain traction when asylum systems admit not only those fleeing persecution but also those seeking better opportunities, reinforcing perceptions of misuse and unfairness. If asylum becomes a pathway to work or a better life and seems to reward the most determined rather than the most vulnerable, public trust erodes, along with support for the asylum system and for more open migration policies more broadly.⁵⁰

That is why making the system more functional is crucial. It can help to restore public recognition that offering refuge to people fleeing war and persecution is essential. Polls in Germany show that most people believe restoring control must come before expanding humanitarian admissions. This suggests less an absence of compassion than a belief that compassion depends on order; this can be “unlocked” by asserting competent control.⁵¹

Aid and Access Where It Is Most Needed

The border focus of both policy and public debate centers largely on those who make it to Germany, Europe, or the US. In reality, only a small fraction of displaced people ever travel that far. Most stay close to home. UNHCR reports that 67 percent of refugees find shelter in a neighboring (often poor) country, and 73 percent remain in low- or middle-income countries.⁵²

Such proximity shapes outcomes in two important ways. Refugees who remain nearby are more likely to return home one day. And host societies are often more welcoming when the conflict feels closer. Europeans, for example, have been far more open to Ukrainians than to Syrians, citing cultural ties, geographical closeness, and a more immediate understanding that Ukrainians had no choice but to flee Russian aggression.⁵³

It is widely – and rightly – argued that more support should go to countries near conflict zones, which host the vast majority of refugees. At the same time, governments need

to reduce the incentives that push people to undertake costly and dangerous journeys to Europe or the United States by bringing access to protection closer to asylum seekers’ countries of origin. Paired with narrow asylum eligibility for unauthorized arrivals, the Biden administration’s Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala – which screened applicants for refugee resettlement or other legal pathways – could serve as a model. Also, partnerships with transit countries such as Turkey and Mexico have shown they can slow refugee flows. But if financial incentives for these countries come at the expense of humanitarian aid to conflict zones and frontline hosts (the UN’s assistance budget has sharply declined in 2025⁵⁴), such arrangements risk being unsustainable and short-lived.

2. Designing Adaptive Migration Systems that Serve the National Interest

Developing a Broad Vision for Pursuing the National Interest

As the experience from the Biden administration shows, “undoing” the Trump administration’s policies can create migration that exceeds the public’s demand for these frameworks. To credibly oppose the administration’s cruel and inhumane approach, policymakers need to acknowledge that some immigration restrictions have become part of the public consensus, and that demonstrating greater control over who enters the country may be necessary to gain public confidence in their competence on the issue. Taking this lesson to heart can help to ensure the Trump administration’s failures on immigration remain the definitive cautionary tale for lawmakers in the future.

The public response to the Trump and Biden administrations’ policies point to another common truth despite the dramatic divergence between the two approaches: publics express most support for immigration when they believe that their governments select and retain migrants that advance the national interest, especially with regard to the economy.⁵⁵ The same applies in Germany: while advocates often highlight the cultural benefits of diversity, the public is far more persuaded by evidence of economic gains.⁵⁶

49 James, Katharina. “Mehrheit unterstützt laut Umfrage Zurückweisung an Grenzen.” Die Zeit, January 30, 2025. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2025-01/deutschland-rend-mehrheit-unterstuetzung-zurueckweisung-migranten-grenzen>.

50 The Economist. “The global asylum system is falling apart.” The Economist, July 10, 2025. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2025/07/10/the-global-asylum-system-is-falling-apart>.

51 Mason-Sucher, Ben et al. “Europe Talks Migration: a cross-country study on changing public attitudes.” More in Common, August 2025. <https://www.moreincommon.com/europe-talks-migration/>

52 UNHCR. “Refugee Data Finder.” UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>.

53 The Economist. “The global asylum system is falling apart.” The Economist, July 10, 2025. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2025/07/10/the-global-asylum-system-is-falling-apart>; Hellmann, Jens and Kuepper, Beate. “Mitte-Studie: Ambivalente Willkommenskulturen in Deutschland.” Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V., March 14, 2024. <https://www.fes.de/angekommen/artikelseite-angekommen/ambivalente-willkommenskulturen-in-deutschland>.

54 UN Press Office. “UN’s humanitarian work is ‘underfunded, overstretched, and under attack.’” United Nations News, September 15, 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165855>.

55 Kustov, Alexander. “The Formula for Making Immigration Popular with American Voters.” Reason, October 1, 2025. <https://reason.com/2025/10/01/the-formula-for-making-immigration-popular-with-american-voters/>.

56 Ibid.

This reality should prompt progressives to assess how they can address these concerns in their policy frameworks, especially during a period in which commentators advocate narrow – and in many cases xenophobic – interpretations of “the national interest.”⁵⁷ Polling shows that Americans do not have stringent standards when it comes to selecting migrants based on their ability to integrate and work in the economy.⁵⁸ This means that the relevant frameworks simply need to meet these standards to secure public trust. The blowback against the Trump administration also creates openings to make the case that attracting and retaining non-citizens who have strengthened the country’s economy serves this interest, not subjecting them to inhumane treatment.⁵⁹

Building Flexibility into the Immigration System Can Serve the National Interest

To make advances in the broader debate about immigration, progressives must step firmly into the debate about selecting non-citizens in the national interest. While this debate may seem to bolster efforts to restrict migration through the narrow lens of skill levels, promoting the national interest requires governments to change the selection of migrants to successfully meet changing political and economic goals over time.⁶⁰ In short, making flexibility, not rigidity, the guiding principle for the US and German immigration systems would allow progressives to make an affirmative case for a dynamic and diverse immigration system.

German and American progressives can promote two policies that introduce this form of flexibility into their immigration system. First, they should continue to support the ability of the executive branch to rapidly create short-term programs to address near-term challenges such as acute labor shortages. Examples of these potential programs may include:

1. permitting employers to sponsor individuals to work in economic sectors that appear in updated versions of the Department of Labor list of industries with labor shortages;
2. permitting employers to sponsor individuals to assist with long-term disaster recovery efforts when states and localities lack the necessary workforce; and

3. permitting rural colleges and universities, non-profits, and religious organizations to sponsor individuals to work in sectors with labor shortages, which can extend to work outside of these institutions to address local labor demand.

Proponents of these measures must argue for the preservation and expansion of these authorities in immigration law to ensure that these programs can survive litigation. Rather than simply declaring that these authorities should allow for the creation of “humane pathways,” however, progressives must argue that the immigration system cannot establish programs that support the country’s economic goals without a flexible core to immediately deploy programs that supplement employment-based systems.⁶¹

While legal pathways can address near-term economic and humanitarian challenges, flexible self-sponsorship channels allow countries to adapt to longer-term economic and political priorities. Broadly, these avenues allow non-citizens to seek approval for entry into a country without a sponsor, such as an employer or family member, to submit the application. Governments would subsequently review the petition and invite individuals who meet the program’s criteria to apply for permanent or temporary residency.⁶²

Examples from countries such as Australia and Canada show that self-sponsorship channels can offer a number of benefits. They allow governments to select non-citizens for admission based on evolving needs, including the ability to adjust or even overhaul the selection process based on the program’s performance. They also allow governments to adopt criteria that promote the selection of individuals with job offers or family connections without excluding qualified candidates who lack such ties. Finally, they allow governments to clearly communicate to the public why and how it selects migrants.⁶³

A progressive version of a self-sponsorship channel should ensure that governments can select individuals with a range of skill levels and backgrounds to meet these goals, not simply use it to restrict migration to the wealthiest, highest skilled population. This channel could include:

- a dedicated program for selecting candidates across low-to-high skill levels, bestowing on the Executive Branch the ability to change the selection criteria based on assessments of labor shortages;

57 Frum, David. „How Much Immigration Is Too Much?“ The Atlantic, April 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/04/david-frum-how-much-immigration-is-too-much/583252/>.

58 Bipartisan Policy Center. „Survey Results: The New Middle on Immigration.“ Bipartisan Policy Center, July 17, 2018. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/survey-results-the-new-middle-on-immigration/>.

59 Oliphant, J. Baxter, Kiley, Jocelyn, Van Green, Ted, Gracia, Shanay and Copeland, Joseph. “Americans Have Mixed to Negative Views of Trump Administration Immigration Actions.” Pew Research Center, June 17, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/06/17/americans-have-mixed-to-negative-views-of-trump-administration-immigration-actions/>.

60 Kustov, Alexander. “How to Win on Immigration: Targeted Policies That Benefit the Economy Can Counter Rising Populism.” Foreign Affairs, August 12, 2025. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-win-immigration>.

61 Denamiel, Thibault, Reinsch, William Alan, Schenker, Jason and Al-Saleh, Dhari. “Immigration Policy Solutions to Shortages in Critical Sectors of the U.S. Economy.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 25, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/immigration-policy-solutions-shortages-critical-sectors-us-economy>.

62 Collins, Laura and Ramón, Cristobal. “Creating Avenues for Legal Migration Through Self-Petitioning.” The George W. Bush Institute, December 2023. <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/creating-avenues-for-legal-migration-through-self-petitioning>.

63 Ramón, Cristobal and Downs, Angelina. “Immigration Systems in Transition: Lessons for U.S. Immigration Reform From Australia and Canada.” The Bipartisan Policy Center, September 2020. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/immigration-in-transition/>.

- an entitlement for the Legislative or the Executive Branch to create permanent or temporary “modules” that select individuals to meet specific economic needs;
- a right for the Legislative or the Executive Branch to create permanent or temporary “modules” that allow non-citizens on temporary visas, such as foreign students, to seek permanent residence to meet specific economic needs; and
- an entitlement for the Legislative or the Executive Branch to create programs that grant undocumented applicants legal status to meet specific economic needs.

German lawmakers have started to introduce some of these programs in their migration system. The German “Opportunity Card” (“*Chancenkarte*”) lets qualified non-EU nationals stay in Germany for up to a year to seek skilled employment. Applicants qualify either through a recognized academic or professional degree or by earning at least six points on a system that rates education, experience, and language skills. During their job search, holders may work part-time – up to 20 hours a week – or accept short trial placements lasting up to two weeks.⁶⁴ The program offers German policymakers an opportunity to examine how they might introduce more flexibility into the immigration system through small, meaningful steps that align with national priorities and remain within the system’s institutional and historic parameters.

Rethinking “Filtering” in Migration Management to Address Future Challenges

Developing a progressive framework that bolsters the national interest must address efforts to restrict asylum access at the border. German and US lawmakers have doubled down on the most aggressive forms of “filtering” out viable cases among border arrivals, tightening asylum standards in the belief that these changes will deter future border crises.⁶⁵ The record low number of arrivals to the US–Mexico border has also earned President Trump strong marks on the border issue despite public blowback against the rest of his immigration agenda.⁶⁶ This suggests that the American public supports harder line filtering measures.

Progressives can address the filtering debate and largely remain true to their commitments to international law by promoting a multi-step process for selecting and processing different categories of border arrivals through smartphone apps and in-region processing centers.⁶⁷ This sys-

tem, which would be overseen by US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in the United States and by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in Germany, could include:

- prioritizing the adjudication of individuals who submit their applications through a smartphone app or in-region processing centers located across in key migration hubs, depending on the conditions at the border;
- issuing preliminary advisories about an individual’s application within two weeks which outline the next steps in the review process, with asylum seekers receiving non-binding guidance on the initial results of their case;
- referring individuals with approvals to designated ports of entry to conduct final reviews and security screenings based on their existing capacity to process specific categories;
 - this information can be used to coordinate the reception of these individuals with states and localities based on federal and state resources.
- Although asylum seekers can appeal these non-binding denials, they need to begin this process when they receive this notification.
 - Individuals can complete the process and meet with attorneys upon arrival to complete the appeal process.
 - Individuals who do not complete this process would have 60 to 90 days to appeal this decision with counsel, depending on their circumstances.
 - Authorities can determine whether they can appeal to the immigration court system, depending on their circumstances.

Finally, the system needs a more robust process for irregular immigration to incentivize managed migration. In the United States, for instance, it could establish a 90 to 120 day adjudication process for asylum seekers to work with appointed counsel, based on their circumstances. Non-asylum seekers can voluntarily return to the nearest in-region processing center to apply for entry. Although progressives do not have to adopt these ideas, they must address legitimate concerns about extended adjudications serving as a pull factor to push back against complete restrictions on asylum access at the border.

⁶⁴ Chancenkarte Deutschland. “Finding qualified employment in Germany with the Opportunity Card.” October 16, 2023. <https://chancenkarte.com/en/news/finding-qualified-employment-in-germany/>.

⁶⁵ NewsNation. “Rep. Suozzi: It’s time to solve America’s immigration issues.” NewsNation, June 19, 2025. <https://www.newsnationnow.com/cuomo-show/suozzi-america-immigration-issues/>.

⁶⁶ Blanton, Dana. “Trump’s ratings are strong on border security, weak on the economy.” Fox News, September 11, 2025. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-trumps-ratings-strong-border-security-weak-economy>.

⁶⁷ The American Immigration Council. “CBP One: An Overview.” The American Immigration Council, March 24, 2025. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/cbp-one-overview/>.

Using State Immigration Policy to Show Credible Governance on Migration

One of the principal challenges facing progressives – and the center-left more broadly – in addressing migration is finding ways to rebuild public trust on immigration. While these proposals contribute to building frameworks that advance this goal, the center-left cannot implement these measures without controlling the national government. This makes it difficult to gain ground in national debates on this issue.

State immigration policies in Germany and the United States offer one potential avenue for addressing this goal. Both governments have federal immigration laws that limit the ability of their federated states to select and maintain non-citizens. In contrast to countries without federated political structures, US states and German *Länder* can shape the integration of immigrants, direct their economic contributions, and affect their access to public benefits. As a result, progressive lawmakers have a policy venue with which to demonstrate to the public how their parties' migration policies can strengthen the common good.

In the United States, progressives can propose legislation that maximizes the contributions of skilled migrants. Licensing reforms that allow non-citizens to enter industries with labor shortages is one natural opening for state legislators.⁶⁸ States such as Colorado, New Mexico, and Illinois allow individuals to apply for professional licenses using their national tax identification number or Social Security number.⁶⁹ Because non-citizens use these tax identification numbers to file their taxes,⁷⁰ these steps expand the pool of skilled individuals who can enter these professions beyond the population of workers with Social Security numbers.

The same holds true for Germany: the federal states and their agencies are responsible for a wide range of practical matters, including residence permits, professional recognition, and licensing. States such as Baden-Wuerttemberg⁷¹ and Lower Saxony⁷² have actively created structures to help migrants navigate credential recognition and training requirements, while others pilot programs to match skilled

newcomers with regional labor needs.⁷³ By coordinating these efforts and sharing best practices, progressives in state governments can help to address labor shortages and show that immigration policy can yield tangible economic benefits.

3. Messaging Matters: Why Progressives Can't Abandon the Field to the Right

Messaging is central to how the public perceives migration. Those perceptions, in turn, heavily shape government policy. Republicans in the United States and right-wing parties such as the AfD in Germany have long understood this, and excel at driving home their narrative of an "uncontrolled immigrant invasion."⁷⁴

Their advantage is clear. The message is simple, taps into intuitive fears, and, in times of overlapping crises, offers immigration as a convenient scapegoat for broader frustrations over economic hardship, social strain, or public safety. The challenge for progressive parties, then, is how to counter this with a more positive and proactive narrative. How can they shift the debate away from resignation – the sense that institutions have once again failed to deliver – and the belief that the only option left is to block new immigrants or expel those already present? Here are three recommendations.

Countering Nativist Narratives with Facts and Persistence

While polls in both America and Germany suggest that people are not against immigration in itself, they do worry about its effects. In Germany, 78 percent expect added costs for the welfare state and 74 percent fear housing shortages.⁷⁵ Similar concerns are echoed in the US.

Populist parties have tapped into these fears. US Vice President J.D. Vance claims that immigrants drive up housing prices⁷⁶, while Germany's AfD brands immigration a "drain on state finances" and a threat to housing

68 National Conference of State Legislatures. "Barriers to Work: Improving Access to Licensed Occupations for Immigrants With Work Authorization." National Conference of State Legislatures, August 7, 2023. <https://www.ncsl.org/labor-and-employment/barriers-to-work-improving-access-to-licensed-occupations-for-immigrants-with-work-authorization>.

69 World Education Services. "How States Are Opening Their Own Pathways to Occupational Licensure." WES Global, September 3, 2024. <https://www.wes.org/resource-library/blog/global-mobility/how-states-are-opening-their-own-pathways-to-occupational-licensure/>.

70 The American Immigration Council. "The Facts about the Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN)." The American Immigration Council, June 25, 2025. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/facts-about-individual-tax-identification-number-itin/>.

71 Netzwerk Integration durch Qualifizierung. "Anerkennungsberatung Baden-Württemberg." Retrieved October 9, 2025. <https://www.netzwerk-iq-bw.de/de/anerkennungsberatung/>.

72 Netzwerk Integration durch Qualifizierung. "Das Förderprogramm IQ in Niedersachsen." Retrieved October 9, 2025. <https://www.migrationsportal.de/ueber-uns/ueber-uns.html>.

73 See, for example, AWO AQtivus Labour Market Service. <https://welcome.hamburg.com/labour-market-service-18142>.

74 Presidential Action. "Protecting the American People against Invasion." The White House, January 20, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/protecting-the-american-people-against-invasion/>; Press Office AfD Bundestagsfraktion. "Rene Springer: Unkontrollierte Massenzuwanderung zerstört unseren Sozialstaat." AfD-Fraktion im Bundestag, January 28, 2024. <https://afdbundestag.de/rene-springer-unkontrollierte-massenzuwanderung-zerstoert-unseren-sozialstaat/>.

75 Wieland, Dr. Ulrike. "Migrationsskepsis steigt, Offenheit für zugewanderte Menschen bleibt dennoch stabil." Bertelsmann Stiftung, March 5, 2024. <https://www.bertelsmannstiftung.de/de/themen/aktuelle-meldungen/2024/maerz/migrationsskepsis-steigt-offenheit-fuer-zugewanderte-menschen-bleibt-dennoch-stabil>.

76 Wile, Rob. "What economists say about JD Vance's claim that immigrants drive up housing costs." NBC News, October 3, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/real-estate/jd-vance-said-immigration-driving-housing-crisis-numbers-say-rcna173595>.

and welfare systems.⁷⁷ Earlier claims about immigrants depressing wages have faded, as record employment and low unemployment across OECD countries undercut that argument.⁷⁸ So with long-term migration to wealthy states up 28 percent in a decade⁷⁹, welfare and housing have become the new flashpoints.

These claims resonate because they rest on a simple truth: more people need more housing. But immigration is not the main driver of price surges. Rigid housing markets, restrictive planning rules, and shifts in local demand – such as US millennials buying homes post-pandemic – have played a much larger role. Migrants also tend to live more densely, easing per capita pressure. Ironically, the right’s favored solution – boosting birth rates – would put even greater strain on housing markets than immigration.⁸⁰

With regard to welfare, most economists agree that migrants contribute more in taxes and social contributions than they receive. Fiscal impact varies by education level, but in both Germany and the US, migrants are essential to cope with aging populations, fill labor shortages, and sustain key sectors, from agriculture and construction to elder care and delivery services.⁸¹ The economic costs of doing without migrant labor are already visible in the US, where Trump era deportations have hit migrant-reliant industries hard.

While crime statistics in the United States show that immigrants commit fewer crimes than the US-born population⁸², the picture in Germany looks different. Non-German suspects are overrepresented in police crime statistics, accounting for over 40 percent of recorded violent offenses, despite making up only about 15 percent of the population. This perception has been further amplified by a series of fatal attacks involving (irregular) immigrants – for example in Solingen, Aschaffenburg, and Magdeburg – which have fueled a growing sense of insecurity among the public. In 2024, 40 percent of Germans said they felt unsafe in public spaces such as parks or public transport; among supporters of the right-wing AfD, the share was as high as 78 percent.⁸³

Criminologists emphasize that higher crime rates among some migrant groups are linked to factors such as poverty,

low educational attainment, exposure to violence, and trauma, conditions that often coincide among refugees. They also point out that migrants are more likely to be reported to the police than native-born Germans.⁸⁴ This does not mean that progressives should downplay public concerns about safety. But it does underline the importance of presenting the full picture and focusing political debate on integration and prevention, rather than treating crime statistics alone as a sufficient explanation.

Nuanced counterarguments are less intuitive than nativist soundbites and often overlook the specific experiences of different communities and income groups. But that makes it all the more important to drive them home. Governments must confront genuine concerns about housing and public finances, while never ceasing to expose how the far right overstates immigration’s role in these challenges. Progressives need to repeat these truths tirelessly if they want to shift the debate.

Moving Past the “For or Against” Trap

Debates on immigration often fall into moral appeals, casting the issue as a question of right versus wrong. But this framing convinces only some, alienates others, and leaves little room for constructive problem-solving. A more effective approach is to focus on the practical realities of immigration because that is how most of the public views it.⁸⁵ That means emphasizing tangible economic contributions – such as immigrant labor keeping US agriculture and construction running and sustaining Germany’s elderly care sector – while also acknowledging and addressing the challenges that high-immigration communities and border regions encounter.

One way to get this message through to the public is through broad coalitions. In the early 2010s, US religious leaders, law enforcement, national security officials, and business representatives formed the “Bibles, Badges, and Business for Immigration Reform” network to push Congress towards meaningful reform.⁸⁶ Demonstrating that there is common ground for certain immigration policies

77 AfD Bundesverband. “Zeit für Deutschland. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 20. Deutschen Bundestag.” January 11–12, 2025. https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AfD_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025_web.pdf.

78 OECD Press Office. “Migration to OECD countries hits new record.” OECD, November 14, 2024. <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2024/11/migration-to-oecd-countries-hits-new-record.html>.

79 Ibid.

80 The Economist. “Your guide to the new anti-immigration argument.” The Economist, March 13, 2025. <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2025/03/13/your-guide-to-the-new-anti-immigration-argument>.

81 Ibid.

82 Ruiz Soto, Ariel G. “Explainer: Immigrants and Crime in the United States.” Migration Policy Institute (MPI), October 2024. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-explainer-immigration-crime-2024_final.pdf.

83 Infratest dimap. “ARD-DeutschlandTREND Juli 2024.” Infratest dimap. July 2024. <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/ard-deutschlandtrend/2024/juli/>.

84 Arp, S. et al. “Zehn Jahre, zehn Herausforderungen – und ein Lichtblick.” Der Spiegel, August 9, 2025. <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/10-jahre-wir-schaffen-das-zehn-jahre-zehn-probleme-und-ein-lichtblick-a-2a5d330c-6777-4696-a0b3-0e016523205e>.

85 Mason-Sucher, Ben et al. “Europe Talks Migration: a cross-country study on changing public attitudes.” More in Common, August 2025. <https://www.moreincommon.com/europe-talks-migration/>.

86 National Immigration Forum Staff. “Bibles, Badges and Business for Immigration Reform.” National Immigration Forum, March 25, 2024. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/bibles-badges-and-business-principles/>.

across multiple sectors of society – not just among certain political parties – can undercut the outsized influence of a much smaller but louder hardline opposition.

Progressives have long cast themselves as the morally courageous, compassionate counterweight to right-wing restrictionism. Yet many voters, including those with immigrant backgrounds, felt their concerns about rising immigration were being dismissed rather than heard,⁸⁷ leaving a vacuum that right-wing parties eagerly filled with increasingly radical anti-immigrant rhetoric. By pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in public debate, the right has succeeded in defining the terms and cementing its role as the undisputed “issue owner.”

It would be a mistake for progressives to try to echo their anti-immigrant rhetoric. Doing so only mainstreams their positions, lends them credibility, and further boosts their popularity.⁸⁸ To break out of this reactive stance, progressives must instead highlight areas in which they have genuine credibility – such as affordability, wages, and universal health care – and connect these strengths directly to the immigration debate.

To get there, however, the conversation must move beyond the binary of being “for” or “against” immigration. Progressives need to reject both anti-immigration racism and the notion that any call for limits is inherently racist. People may believe immigration benefits the country while still feeling it should be better managed.⁸⁹

From Defending Institutions to Shaping Policy

Finally, progressives too often find themselves merely defending institutions and legal norms rather than setting the terms of the debate. This challenge, of course, extends far beyond the issue of immigration. In the United States, that defensive posture has been understandable. In its grab for executive power, the Trump administration has repeatedly trampled long-standing legal and procedural norms. It has denied immigrants due process before deporting them to third countries, defied court orders prohibiting deportations, and even threatened federal judges with impeachment for rulings against it. However, one could argue that Democrats have spent much of their political capital defending the current immigration system – and its evident shortcomings regarding border policy – rather than proactively pushing for issues on their own agenda, such as expanded legal pathways for skilled workers.

In Germany, the dynamic is different because far-right parties are not in government. But the pattern is similar: progressives often defend the existing asylum regime on strictly legal grounds, which is correct in principle, but weak in the face of critics pointing to the obvious abuses of the system. The argument becomes even less persuasive when it rests on the EU’s malfunctioning Dublin rules. Many European countries have openly refused to take back asylum seekers who filed for asylum on their territory or to participate in relocation mechanisms, leaving large countries such as Germany disproportionately affected. Meanwhile, the AfD has used these failures to cast the asylum system as both broken and illegitimate, further undermining public trust.

Defending democratic norms and the rule of law is essential, especially against the backdrop of the kind of lawlessness being demonstrated in the United States. But it is not enough. The risk is that progressive politics will be reduced to protecting an unpopular status quo.⁹⁰ To move forward, progressives must set the agenda and advance forward-looking solutions that show that immigration can be managed fairly and effectively. Above all, they must not let the far right dictate the terms of the debate.

87 Lerer, Lisa et al. “Can Democrats Find Their Way on Immigration?” *The New York Times*, July 6, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/06/us/politics/democrats-immigration-trump.html>.

88 Schwoerer, Jakob (ed.). *New Danish Paradigms on Asylum and Integration*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V. January 2025. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/21766.pdf>.

89 Mason-Sucher, Ben et al. “Europe Talks Migration: a cross-country study on changing public attitudes.” *More in Common*, August 2025. <https://www.moreincommon.com/europe-talks-migration/>.

90 Wike, Richard, et al. “Global Elections in 2024: What We Learned in a Year of Political Disruption.” *Pew Research Center*, December 11, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/12/11/global-elections-in-2024-what-we-learned-in-a-year-of-political-disruption/>; Ipsos Public Affairs Staff. “Deutsche beurteilen die Lage der Nation so pessimistisch wie nie zuvor.” *Ipsos*, January 20, 2025. <https://www.ipsos.com/de-de/deutsche-beurteilen-die-lage-der-nation-so-pessimistisch-wie-nie-zuvor>; Gallup. “In Depth: Satisfaction With the United States.” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1669/general-mood-country.aspx>.

IV.

Conclusion

Germany and the United States face many of the same challenges in crafting effective migration policy. Both must address diverse migration pressures – from humanitarian protection needs to labor market demand – while reforming strained asylum systems and rebuilding public trust in how borders and integration are managed. These pressures have increasingly allowed right-wing actors to dominate the political narrative on migration, often portraying control and compassion as mutually exclusive. For progressive policymakers, the challenge is to move beyond reactive crisis management towards shaping their own migration agenda that balances credibility, fairness, and effective management.

The proposals outlined in this paper show how progressives can craft a migration policy that is neither purely defensive nor solely humanitarian, but that demonstrates practical competence and fairness. The approach is built on three interlocking objectives: restoring public confidence in progressive immigration policy; designing adaptive migration systems that serve the national interest; and reclaiming the political narrative through consistent, evidence-based messaging.

1. Restoring Public Confidence in Progressive Immigration Policy

Rebuilding trust is the foundation of any credible progressive policy. Both Germany and the United States have seen public support erode when governments appear unable to manage border arrivals or process asylum claims effectively. For progressives, **exercising control over national borders** must therefore be viewed as a condition for sustaining support for legal migration. This means **reforming the asylum system** by investing in fair and efficient asylum processing, ensuring transparent screening, and communicating clearly about who qualifies for protection and why. Reducing backlogs, expanding humanitarian parole and safe mobility pathways, and using digital triage systems can make procedures faster and more predictable.

At the same time, governments must **direct aid and access where it is most needed**, supporting municipalities that absorb new arrivals and aligning humanitarian assistance abroad with regional protection efforts. By combining order, fairness, and tangible local support, progressives can demonstrate that effective management can unlock support for humanitarian commitments.

2. Designing Adaptive Migration Systems that Serve the National Interest

Establishing a stable, long-term framework for migration governance requires a **broad vision for pursuing the national interest**. Articulating how migration contributes to national prosperity can help reframe it as an asset rather than a burden. To align migration policy with the national interest, both countries must **build greater flexibility into their immigration systems**. Progressives should promote pilot programs that allow employer sponsorship to support long-term disaster recovery or fill persistent labor shortages. They can also draw from self-sponsorship models, such as those used in Australia and Canada, which enable qualified individuals to apply for residence based on transparent, evolving criteria. Progressives should also **rethink “filtering” in migration management**. A multi-step process using smartphone apps and in-region processing centers can help to screen applicants efficiently while maintaining humane standards. Prioritizing those who apply through these channels, especially in key migration corridors, can improve the management of migration flows while upholding international obligations. Finally, **state and regional immigration policies offer opportunities to demonstrate credible governance**. In both countries, sub-national authorities manage crucial aspects of integration, permits, and residence. US states can expand access to professional permits for non-citizens using tax identification numbers, while German *Länder* can test new models for recognizing qualifications and managing residence permits. These localized reforms can show tangible results and build public confidence from the ground up.

3. Messaging Matters: Why Progressives Can’t Abandon the Field to the Right

Policy alone is insufficient without a credible public narrative. Progressives must **counter nativist narratives with facts and persistence**, highlighting how migration supports economic growth, fills labor shortages, and sustains social systems. They must also **move beyond the “for or against” trap** that dominates migration debates. Framing migration as a question of management, not ideology, allows progressives to connect with skeptical voters and neutralize extremist rhetoric. Lastly, progressives need to **move from defending institutions to shaping policy**. Protecting asylum rights and international norms is crucial, but public confidence will return only when governments show that

these principles can work in practice: by streamlining asylum procedures, improving coordination between federal and local actors, and expanding lawful migration pathways that reduce pressure on border systems.

Migration will remain a difficult issue with no one-size-fits-all solution. Yet as the US experience shows, when progressives withdraw from the debate, the far right fills the vacuum, shaping public opinion, winning elections, and undermining liberal democratic institutions.

Progressives in Germany and the United States have the tools they need to reclaim this ground. By pairing credible governance with clear communication and principled pragmatism, they can rebuild trust, show competence, and advance a vision of migration policy that upholds humanitarian principles while serving the national interest.

About the authors

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Managing Migration: The Progressive Way

- Germany and the United States face similar pressures over migration. This paper outlines how progressives can advance approaches that balance fairness, credibility, and effective management.
- Immigration has become a defining election issue in many destination countries. The US case shows how right-wing mobilization can fuel anti-immigrant fervor with the potential to threaten democracy.
- Progressives must restore public confidence, design adaptive systems that serve the national interest, and reclaim the narrative with consistent, evidence-based messaging.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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