

Finding a Balance Between Expertise and Democratic Responsiveness in the Face of Immigration Anxieties

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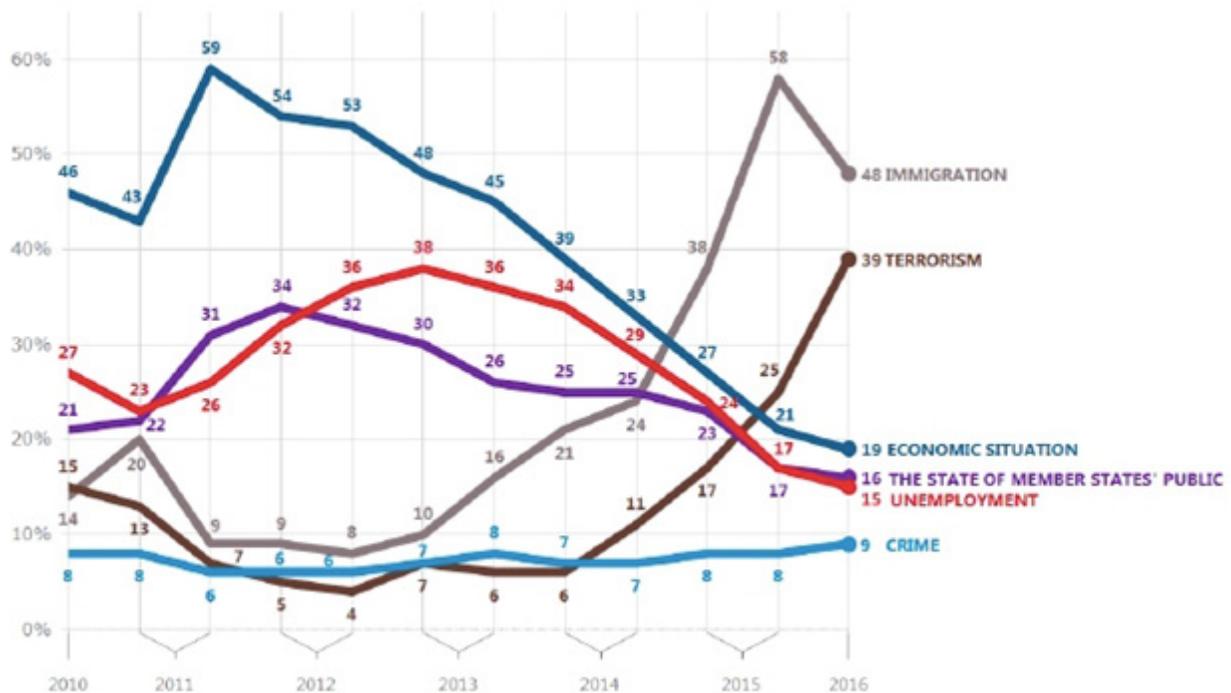
Across industrialized democracies, immigration has become a top, if not *the* top, public concern, and public attitudes toward immigration have been trending more negative, prompting a re-evaluation of migration policies and a continued retreat from welcoming new arrivals (Glavey 2016). On the whole, these reactions are driven not simply by economic threat, but rather by a more diffuse set of anxieties: the sense that migrants are putting unsustainable pressure on an increasingly fragile public social safety net; fears about the possible infiltration of terrorism and criminality as a consequence of migration; and a sense that migration is irrevocably changing society, making it unrecognizable to those born there. Governments have been seen as deaf to these concerns, continuing to promote unpopular migration policies, making them vulnerable to electoral discontent and, more troubling, to charges of democratic illegitimacy (Moravcsik 2004). Across the

OECD, increasing concerns about immigration have been reflected at the ballot box. Conservative immigration restrictionist parties have become a significant presence across Western Europe and North America, winning majorities in countries like Austria, Hungary, Italy and Poland, among others, (Migration Policy Institute 2016; Aisch et al. 2016) and capturing both the presidency and Congress in the United States in the 2016 elections.

The Temptation of Policy Insulation

In the face of this immigration backlash, policy makers favoring a continued commitment to the reception of migration flows may be tempted to “venue shop” for more favorable policy-making arenas (Guiraudon 2000), particularly those which have worked in the past to insulate

Figure: Most Important Issue Facing the European Union



Source: Eurobarometer 2016



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immigration policy from restrictionist pressures (Freeman 1995). Even as post-war Europe retreated from more open immigration policies, through the 1990s venue-shopping strategies were successful in maintaining a relatively generous refugee regime, and in the United States, a bureaucratic decision-making process for refugee admissions did the same. In addition, a post-war bipartisan commitment to immigration in the US resulted in sustained high rates of immigration admissions overall. However, a reliance on bureaucratic administration and the courts to carve out a space protecting the rights of migrants has always been vulnerable to political backlash. This backlash, building over time, has resulted not only in policy reversals across the OECD, but in a loss of public consensus around the desirability or even tolerance for more ethnically diverse societies, at least over the medium term (Papademetriou 2016).

Addressing Anxieties

What may have been missing from migration policy making, leading to this erosion of consensus, is a sense of “accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and openness to interest consultation” (Schmidt 2013), that might have allowed publics to feel that their concerns were being reflected in the resulting policies. In response, policymakers across national contexts have taken measures to better take into account public opinion around migration. One, of course, has simply been to reduce immigration overall. This has been the strategy of some conservative governments. But other strategies have included taking a better account of the public’s views and incorporating these into policy making. The efforts of the German Foreign Ministry are one example, making an explicit commitment to better capture public opinion on immigration (German Foreign

Ministry 2014). Another strategy has been to decentralize immigration policy-making (Sumption 2014), shifting away from the national level. In the case of Canada, for instance, allowing provinces to have greater control over immigrant admissions and settlement helped diffuse tensions around linguistic and cultural differences with immigrant arrivals (Reeve 2014). In the United States, the de-facto devolution of at least some immigration policy-making to the states level has allowed for some room for more welcoming policies (and more restrictive ones as well) (Jones-Correa 2011), even as national immigration policy has moved, accelerating under the Trump administration, in a more restrictionist direction.

The Role of Expertise

The role of experts might seem more likely to reinforce the insulation of migration policy making rather than helping address the concerns of the broader public, “merely specializing,” as Moravcsik writes, “in those aspects of modern democratic governance that typically involve less direct political participation” (Moravcsik 2004: 362).¹ And with their emphasis on objective assessment, experts might seem out of step with the populist anti-immigrant discourse of the moment. However, it is precisely in this moment that expertise can provide a counter-narrative that can play a critical role serving as a break on populist over-reaction. Social science research has provided much-needed evidence, for instance, in the public debates on immigrant reliance on social welfare programs, their rates of criminality, and their rates of economic and social incorporation, among other issues. However, for experts to act as a kind of ballast in public policy debates around immigration requires *engaged* rather than *insulated* expertise.

¹ Though Moravcsik writes this not of experts per se, but of the supranational bureaucracy of the European Union, and not critically – that is, he believes much of the criticism of the EU is simply a dislike of necessary specialized political functions carried out by bureaucracies.



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Expert policy-making walled off from the democratic engagement of the public risks reinforcing the kind of backlash we have seen developing over the last several decades across both Europe and North America.

At a time of high anxiety around migration and refugee flows into industrialized democracies, and increasingly vociferous calls to curtail these arrivals, it might seem tempting to argue for the rationalization of migration policy by calling for the further insulation of expert policymakers. While this tactic might work in the short run, over the longer run it runs the risk of undercutting public support for migration policy and the legitimacy of the democratic system more broadly. More, not less, engagement is the better strategy over the longer run.

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