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EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION AND MIGRATION

ACHIEVING COMMON
PROGRESSIVE NARRATIVES



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EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION AND MIGRATION : ACHIEVING COMMON PROGRESSIVE NARRATIVES

This document is a summary of the recommendations emerging from the European Public Opinions and Migration project which aims to provide strategic and practical advice for progressive politicians in the run-up to the European Parliament elections in May 2019. The project brings together experts across seven EU member states — Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom (focusing on Scotland) — to evaluate their countries' recent experience and develop political recommendations. These member states provide examples of a wide range of experience in terms of immigration histories and political contexts. Surprisingly, despite such variety, a great deal of commonality emerges with regard to the recommendations proposed. Nonetheless, national contexts will undoubtedly influence tone and tenor in practice.

Our recommendations have three core themes concerning both regular as well as irregular migration, and a fourth section with practical advice:

-  **1. Establishing a moderate narrative** explaining that progressives are the only ones who offer a balanced approach to migration.
-  **2. Mainstreaming migration** into other policy areas as much as possible rather than addressing it as an exclusive topic.
-  **3. Exploiting the mistakes and failures** of populists and far-right parties.
-  **4. Practical advice**



ESTABLISHING A MODERATE NARRATIVE

Progressives should present themselves as the only ones who offer a balanced approach to migration based on human rights and solidarity but which also strives to ensure that migration is controlled and which addresses the core concerns and fears that voters link to migration. This narrative should also proclaim a truly inclusive vision of society in which disadvantaged groups are not played off against each other but rather unite against common structural challenges. Progressives should provide a moderate alternative to both right-wing and far-left approaches to migration. This strategy maintains our traditional claim of being a broad coalition of diverse voter segments and conflicting interests. It is also the only viable short-term way to prevent internal ideological divisions on cultural issues and diversity from tearing our parties apart. In the long term, however, the main goal should be the redirection of public opinion towards a forward- not backward-oriented perception of diversity in a globalised world. A progressive strategy should contain the following aspects:

- The starting point for progressive migration narratives (and policies) should be that migration is a part of the human condition. It has always been a part of human history, and people will continue to move across countries and continents in the future. Migration cannot be stopped, but it can be managed. Migration is neither good nor bad, it is rather a phenomenon that simply exists.
- Progressives should focus on getting voters to understand that immigration is a necessary part of our future if we want to remain prosperous and thriving. Rather than trying to persuade voters to like it, we should explain how immigration can benefit our countries economically and demographically.

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- We need a long-term progressive vision: a progressive strategy must be based on a long-term vision of Europe as a welcoming continent, which is open to legal, orderly and safe migration.
- Progressives are at a disadvantage when immigration rises in salience and should thus avoid playing up the issue. Nevertheless, progressives should demonstrate a clear commitment to domestic/EU migration management and addressing root causes through proactive foreign policy and development cooperation. Creating legal migration channels could be the strongest political message.
- We need to europeanise progressive objectives: in order to achieve our goals, we must push for EU-level solutions and explain why they are necessary. The Common European Asylum System is a case in point: reforming it is the only way to avoid a repeat of the so-called 2015-2016 refugee crisis.





MAINSTREAMING MIGRATION

Immigration functions as a touchstone issue in European politics, channelling voter concerns and discontent on issues ranging from economic insecurity to cultural change. Progressives should try to shift the focus of political debate towards these underlying concerns as this is where they can be better positioned to take on the right. By mainstreaming migration issues into broader socio-economic challenges, we can avoid 'us vs. them' framing and demonstrate how structural deficiencies – not migrants – are the problem. We must ensure that we have strong narratives and convincing proposals for voters on how we will tackle growing inequality and rising job insecurity, and on how we will provide safety and security. We must promote an attractive vision for our future that includes immigration.

- Progressives should ensure that party positions have a strong narrative on solutions to social and economic concerns that aligns with our values. We should strive to ensure that immigration is not to the detriment of existing residents. Progressives should focus on safeguarding labour standards, wage levels, public services and social security.
- The left should offer a policy that can reduce uncertainties, acknowledge that immigration can raise challenges, but be clear that these are just part of the wider challenges facing our societies. Progressives must stress that the solutions needed to counter growing insecurity and inequality must be much broader than ending or restricting immigration, and emphasise that without immigration some of these problems will worsen.

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- Progressives should address security concerns relating to immigration (regardless of whether these concerns are only perceived or actually existing). But progressives should also explain that restrictive measures marginalise migrants and their descendants, thus increasing the risk of crime and radicalisation. Instead, solutions lie in improving integration and equality.
- Progressives should explain that part of the challenge for our societies is to ensure that the benefits outweigh the costs and that these are shared by all.
- Progressives should be careful to resolve any instances of direct resource competition between immigrant and non-immigrant populations with regards to jobs, housing and other resources.





EXPLOITING MISTAKES AND FAILURES

Even though progressives should mainly aim for a narrative that is centred around their own ideas, there is a window of opportunity to show that populist policies fail to provide sustainable migration solutions.

- The promises of Brexit with its slogan “take back control” could be used as a case to highlight the failure of populist ‘quick fixes’ based on misinformation. It is up to progressives and the political centre to prevent further chaos.
- Likewise, the false success of the June 2018 European Council summit, which promised disembarkation platforms and a strong focus on border control could be used to showcase that only progressive solutions for a Common European Asylum System provide sustainable answers.
- Local-level examples of counterproductive migration policies could be highlighted at the national level in order to demonstrate how hard-line policies do not work.





PRACTICAL ADVICE

The following points are a collection of practical tips for progressive campaigning and advocacy work. It is not an exhaustive list but rather a starting point for further elaboration.

- Use simple, clear and natural language.
- Communication with voters should seek to discuss immigration in local, concrete terms wherever possible. For example, while using the term “unskilled workers” can cause implicit disapproval, describing migrants as “cleaning staff in hospitals”, “construction workers”, etc. can foster a more positive sentiment.
- Pay attention to vocabulary. Always distinguish between refugees and migrants; publishing a progressive vocabulary list could help.
- Personal leadership on immigration is important — do not underestimate the role of personality/charisma.
- Target group: focus more on young voters and non-voters, since formerly progressive voters who have recently voted for the right are much more difficult to reach.
- Draw historic parallels between current political developments and 20th century history, and how the EU was created and expanded in response to those historical events.
- There are few votes to be gained for left-wing parties by shifting to anti-immigration positions. Do not talk tough on immigration issues to attract right-leaning voters; they will not be persuaded while left-leaning voters will be alienated.