

OUT OF THE SHADOWS: CONSPIRACY THINKING ON IMMIGRATION

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About the Authors

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Author's Note

The volatility around the topic of immigration, its outsized role in our political cultures, and the sensitivity inherent in the subject of conspiracy theories, requires this paper to frequently wade into controversial terrain. As such, there are a few of points worth emphasising to frame its reading.

Firstly, it should be made clear that this paper does not make a judgement regarding the question of whether immigration is inherently a positive or negative phenomenon, whether its social and economic consequences can be assessed as a symbiotic 'balance sheet' to infer a net impact, nor whether it is 'valid' to hold concerns about immigration policy. It rather focuses on the realities of contemporary political environments, and the evidenced attitudes of citizens towards immigration. For this reason, many of the examples given within the paper necessarily highlight failures and challenges of immigration and integration policy.

There is no doubt that this does not tell even a fraction of the full story of immigration to the United Kingdom and the United States, a narrative rich with many successes. But exploring this particular phenomenon, at this particular time, compels us to confront the dark side of this hugely polarising and emotive issue. It goes without saying that we, as authors, both professionally and personally emphatically reject prejudice based on racial, cultural, ethnic or religious identity. The paper strongly cautions against the dangers of conspiracy thinking on this issue, in terms of its potential to drive social fissures, marginalise and alienate groups, and incite violence. Despite the emotive, polarising and conflicted subject matter, every effort has been made to be fair and balanced.

Secondly, to make clear that conspiracy theories around race, power and influence are embraced by factions of both the Right and the Left of our political cultures, and that no hierarchy of pernicious intent nor consequence can be inferred. For the purposes of this paper, we have focused primarily on the conspiracy theories that have coalesced around the rise of right-wing populist movements. Further studies will explore, in focused detail, the subject of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and landscape of conspiracy thinking on the Left more generally.

Thirdly, to acknowledge that some will take umbrage with the definitions we set out within this paper regarding conspiracy thinking; specifically, the question as to whether conspiracy theories - a notion we have traditionally considered to be inherently embedded within the 'fringes', can continue to be described in such terms when it reaches a mainstream position. Or whether, if there is some degree of truth underpinning the genesis of the theory, that it can continue to be denounced as a conspiracy theory. It is true that we, as societies, are in new territory on this point. The terminology of 'conspiracy theories' clearly holds a pejorative connotation, and it is understandable that people do not wish to be associated with such a description.

However, this paper asserts that the act of mainstreaming owes as much to the decisions and behaviours of political and media actors than the compulsions of citizens themselves. While the definition of conspiracy thinking does not change, we concede that there are legitimate foundations for such thinking, interacting with anxieties and, on occasion, prejudices, which are together encouraging the proliferation of these ideas. There is a clear spectrum between those who have formed an opinion based on genuine acts of government obfuscation, those for whom such acts have provided credence to their personal fears and hostilities, and those who subscribe to conspiracy theories on immigration of a nature, and to a degree, which compels them towards paranoid, extremist behaviour.

I hope that this paper challenges the traditional parties in both the United Kingdom and the United States to appreciate the scale of the task that faces them to shepherd the debate on

immigration, and citizens' trust in their capacity to effectively manage it, towards a more constructive place. And to reflect on their own role in fostering such fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish. While we may praise and encourage a natural degree of scepticism towards the state, it cannot be healthy for citizens in any advanced democracy to harbour such a common degree of deep-seated mistrust towards their government on this tremendously salient issue.

Sophia Gaston
December 2018

Executive Summary

Immigration has been one of the most divisive and salient issues shaping Western political life over the past decade, with profound demographic changes giving rise to a host of social, economic and cultural insecurities.

The rise in immigration levels and the public's concerns about immigration have coincided with the weakening of trust in governments and institutions. These forces are mutually reinforcing, with politicians seen to have systematically ignored and disregarded citizens' anxieties, challenging the contract that stands at the heart of Western democracies.

The structural evolutions in our political systems towards fragmentation and polarisation, the broader appetite for risk-taking among citizens, their hardening views towards traditional political institutions, and the rise of populist politics, have all fundamentally reshaped our political discourse and our engagement with information.

Such landscapes have also created unique conditions that support the proliferation of conspiracy messages, an opportunity that some politicians – from both the Left and the Right – are harnessing through a targeted focus on the issue of immigration.

Given the levels of anxiety around immigration in almost every Western nation, this strategy has proven especially effective; hence, we can see the rise of conspiracy politics as both a responsive and a proactive force in its relationship with public opinion.

While it is true that the common appeal of conspiracy thinking has been observed for decades, the mainstreaming of conspiracy thinking appears to be accelerating. This process means our received wisdom as to the demographics of those susceptible to conspiracy thinking must also shift.

UK and US Surveys – Key Findings

Through new surveys conducted in the United Kingdom (with Opinium) and the United States (with Ipsos), *Out of the Shadows* demonstrates how widespread conspiracy thinking on immigration has become:

- 58 per cent of Britons and 55 per cent of Americans believe their government is hiding the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society.
 - 51 per cent of Britons think that their government has deliberately tried to make society more ethnically diverse through its immigration policy over the past 20 years, as do 40 per cent of Americans.
 - 42 per cent of Britons, and 41 per cent of Americans, think politicians, media outlets and others in the UK who have spoken out in opposition to immigration have been treated unfairly, compared to 29 per cent of Brits, and 36 per cent of Americans, who think they have been treated fairly.
 - In the UK, Leave voters and UKIP voters are the most likely to agree that the Government is involved in a conspiracy around immigration policy, and that outspoken voices against immigration have been silenced.
 - In the US, Republicans are most likely to agree that the US Government is involved in a conspiracy around immigration policy, but half of Democrats also subscribe to these theories.
-

Dangers of Conspiracy Thinking

Out of the Shadows identifies a number of key risks associated with the proliferation of conspiracy messages in Western societies, including:

- The ‘mainstreaming’ of the appeal of conspiracy messages compounds the burgeoning mistrust citizens hold towards their governments and democratic institutions, and may undermine any efforts to provide authoritative data to refute such narratives.
- Conspiracy theories about immigration are often linked to concerns about demographic change, which can then flow into anxieties about the changing nature of the electorate, facilitating mistrust in the electoral system – often with undemocratic ends.
- Conspiracy theories can activate and encourage a level of polarisation and animosity that can be dangerously exclusionary and divisive, and even lead to acts of violence.

Fertile Ground for Conspiracy Theories

In this paper, the authors set out a number of aspects unique to the contemporary debates and policy environments around immigration, which have rendered the issue such fertile ground for conspiracy theorists.

These include:

- The hostile environment of political rhetoric towards immigration
- Statistical inconsistencies and poor data collection practices
- Misjudgements around the public interest of information transparency
- Human and system error in border enforcement
- Cultural anxieties around demographic decline
- The ongoing challenges inherent to illegal immigration, which is – by its nature – difficult to definitively measure and manage.

The legacy of political choices, and the established anxieties within populations, have fostered an especially challenging landscape for traditional parties to seek to reclaim their position as an authoritative source of evidence and policy design on the issue of immigration.

Conclusions

The survey results undertaken as part of this paper clearly demonstrate that conspiracy theories addressing government obfuscation around the social and economic impacts of migration are now mainstream positions in both Britain and the United States. Moreover, many citizens also identify a ‘conspiracy of silence’ around immigration, extending beyond their governments to encompass the entire nexus of media and political cultures.

In these findings, we can see the extent to which the traditional parties of government on both the centre-right and centre-left have lost control of the narrative around immigration, and also appreciate the scale of the challenge they face in reclaiming an authority of evidence and rhetoric on the issue.

The clear distinctions between different party-political preferences – and in the case of Britain, voting behaviour in the European Referendum – as well as demographics of age, gender and geography, emphasise the prominent role that these conspiracy theories are playing in the political dynamics engulfing both countries.

Nonetheless, these findings confirm that the hostile environment in Britain towards immigration, and particularly the relationship between immigration and poor trust in institutions, is more firmly established than in the United States.

We can conclude that conspiracy thinking around immigration has become a critical tenet of the heightened environment of political and social risk engulfing many Western nations. There is now a palpable urgency for traditional parties to regain control of the policy landscape and the political conversation around immigration – a task that can only be achieved through the consistent, long-term application of open debate, transparency and systematic effectiveness.

Contents

About the Authors	2
Author’s Note.....	3
Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction.....	11
Background and Context	13
Definitions of Conspiracy Thinking and Beliefs	13
Susceptibility to Conspiracy Thinking	13
The Formation of Conspiracy Thinking.....	15
Immigration and the Establishment Backlash.....	15
Conspiracy Thinking in the Digital Age	18
The Dangers of Conspiracy	19
Conspiracy Theories about Immigration - White Genocide	21
Survey Results	24
Immigration as Fertile Ground for Conspiracy Theories.....	32
The Hostile Environment	32
Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics.....	33
Human and System Error	37
Illegal Immigration	39
Mind the Perception Gaps	41
Birth Rates	42
Mired in Conflicted Discourse.....	43
Discussion and Conclusion	45
Notes.....	48

Introduction

The last decade has seen a fundamental shift in how we learn about the world around us and come to hold opinions. The digital revolution has democratised the production of news content, opened up the marketplace for ideas and created new spaces for communities to develop around issues, identities and individuals. We are becoming increasingly dependent on the internet for our news, and 'content' is becoming detached from the institutions that once held a gatekeeping monopoly on information.

In such an environment, the national consensus positions that once formed around facts and evidence are now openly scrutinised, challenged and contested in a way that has never before been possible. New competing versions of history emerge and take hold, overpowering authoritative fact-based accounts. And cottage industries of speculation, cynicism and mistrust flourish.

This paper is the first in a new suite of research from the Centre for Social and Political Risk, exploring the changing role and influence of conspiracy theories in Western societies. In this introductory paper, the Centre's Director, Sophia Gaston, has joined with one of America's leading academic scholars of conspiracy thinking, Dr Joseph E. Uscinski from the University of Miami, to examine how rising public concerns about immigration and mistrust in government have coalesced to widen the market for conspiracy theories.

Supported by new survey data from Britain and the United States, the paper demonstrates how governments are losing control of both the narrative and the facts around immigration, as a new industry of increasingly sophisticated websites, online forums and social media campaigns promote legitimate (but selective) information, alongside misinformation and disinformation about a range of issues - including migrant numbers, crime and the economic impact of migration - to an increasingly receptive public.

Background and Context

Definitions of Conspiracy Thinking and Beliefs

Conspiracy theories are causal explanations of events or circumstances that posit a powerful group acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good.¹ These theories are often problematic, because they generally conflict with the authoritative pronouncements of appropriate epistemological institutions – including governments.² A ‘conspiracy belief’ is the acceptance as probably true of a specific theory that posits a conspiracy. For example, if one believes that their government promotes immigration to take away jobs from native citizens, to institute Sharia law, to remove White people from certain areas, or to promote terrorism, then that person holds a conspiracy belief.³ A conspiracy theory is not necessarily based on false information, and in fact could be true, however the institutions they pertain to don’t acknowledge them as such, so therefore they are classified as conspiracy theories.

Academics have devoted significant resources to examining the genesis and dissemination of specific conspiracy theories, and why people are compelled to believe in them. Moving beyond exploring individual conspiracy beliefs, psychologists and political scientists have begun to conceptualise specific beliefs as the outcome of holding an underlying worldview, in which conspiracies dictate events and circumstances.⁴ This worldview is often referred to as ‘conspiracy thinking’, and it is framed as a unique dimension of public opinion, with segments of the population falling on the high and low ends, and the majority of the public somewhere in the relative middle. Those people who exhibit higher levels of conspiracy thinking are more likely to believe in specific conspiracy theories, all else being equal.⁵ This tendency may be exacerbated by personal experiences of stress or loss, on a number of different levels.⁶

The implication of these findings is that what is most critical in understanding this phenomenon is not that the individual theories drive beliefs, but rather the underlying dispositions encouraging people to accept those beliefs. In turn, it is difficult to encourage people to surrender their conspiracy theories, because their worldview and their experiences are shaping their perspectives.⁷

While conspiracy thinking directs individuals to become more prone to believing conspiracy theories in general, their other internal dispositions will drive them to accept or reject specific conspiracy theories. For example, Catholics are unlikely to believe in ‘Da Vinci Code’-type conspiracy theories suggesting that Jesus fathered children who became the ruling family of France, as this suggestion fundamentally contradicts other critical underpinnings of their values and the way in which they see the world.⁸ Similarly, Republicans and Democrats in the United States are significantly more likely to believe that the opposing party is conspiring against them rather than their own,⁹ reflecting the dynamics supported by the broader environment of party politics to which they subscribe. In short, conspiracy thinking makes the belief in conspiracy theories possible, while other dispositions drive the acceptance or rejection of specific theories.

Susceptibility to Conspiracy Thinking

Research has identified a series of behavioural conditions that carry a strong relationship to conspiracy thinking. For example, people who hold high levels of conspiracy thinking tend to vote and participate politically and economically at lower rates than those who exhibit lower levels of conspiracy thinking.¹⁰ People who hold high levels of conspiracy thinking also tend to live in low-income households and have lower levels of education than those who are less engaged in conspiracy thinking.¹¹ This creates a paradox, because conspiracy thinkers often feel

excluded from the system – often because of their personal financial or social circumstances – but will then subscribe to beliefs or participate in actions that further entrench their exclusion. Other characteristics that can reinforce exclusion and encourage social conflict are also correlated with conspiracy thinking. For example, individuals who exhibit high levels of conspiracy thinking tend to be more accepting of violence against the government, more prone to racist beliefs and, in America, more supportive of liberal gun laws.¹² American domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh, who destroyed the Oklahoma City FBI building in 1996 at a cost of 168 lives, provides a chilling example of the potential pathways provided by conspiracy thinking towards extremist activities. McVeigh believed the US Government was conspiring against Americans, and thought the best means of effecting change was to inflict a catastrophic level of violence.¹³

Given their power to motivate and mobilise individuals and groups of individuals with a susceptibility to belief, conspiracy theories can also be disseminated and promoted strategically as a means of achieving specific goals, including political or financial objectives. By pointing to an enemy (a scapegoat), conspiracy theories offer a way for groups to recoup from losses, close ranks and overcome collective problems. To this end, conspiracy theories can offer a form of disruptive politics, representing attempts by outsiders and those on the ‘wrong side’ of power imbalances to reshape the playing field, bring in other players and rewrite the rules in their favour.¹⁴

We can consider, for example, the climate change denial movements. While their successes in polarising opinion and the political connotations that climate change has taken on in the United States mean global warming scepticism is a widely shared view among citizens, it is also a belief system that is most likely to be held by those who hold predispositions to conspiracy thinking.¹⁵ Following a playbook previously used to challenge other areas of scientific consensus – such as the relationship between cigarette smoking and cancer – climate change deniers have effectively sown seeds of doubt around the firmly established scientific evidence, not through ‘winning the argument’ of facts but through calling into question the validity, honesty and motives of thousands of individual scientists and scientific bodies. In doing so, they have been able to shift the needle on the focus of the climate debate from, ‘What should we do about climate change?’ to, ‘Can we even trust the scientists?’¹⁶

Research has shown that conspiracy beliefs often signal broader political preferences. For example, UK Twitter users who follow accounts promoting conspiracy theories around the disappearance of Madeleine McCann – a child kidnapped from her hotel room during a family holiday in 2007 – are considerably more likely to support political parties and movements on the fringes, including the far-right Britain First and the far-left Momentum.¹⁷ The same correlation can be observed in the United States, where those who identify with ‘third parties’ and political parties outside the mainstream tend to exhibit high levels of conspiracy thinking.¹⁸

Nonetheless, distinctions must be made between less-concerning conspiracy theories, which reflect natural instincts of scepticism and critical challenges to power, and a more pernicious form, which poses a potential danger to both social cohesion and democratic politics. Making such distinctions is especially critical now that conspiracy theories are becoming a central topic of discussion in both the political and media spheres. While the extant literature has eschewed formal typologies, one critical distinction can be made between these through interrogating the target of the conspiracy theories themselves.

Conspiracy theories that address historical events – for example, the belief that the CIA assassinated President John F. Kennedy, or the notion that the British state was somehow involved in the death of Diana, Princess of Wales – accuse powerful, well-protected actors. These stand in direct contrast to conspiracy theories that focus on marginalising groups that are

inherently vulnerable or are being targeted primarily based on their identity. Thus, while the system-level scapegoating of leaders can contribute to democratic decline through the promotion of mistrust, the targeting of citizens and groups of citizens, especially when supported by the reach and resources of political and/or financial leaders, must be regarded as considerably more dangerous on a human level than the scapegoating of leaders by individuals.

The Formation of Conspiracy Thinking

During individuals' formative years, society's institutions – including the family, schools, the media, religious institutions and government – teach citizens to participate in and engage with the political and legal frameworks they will encounter for the remainder of their lives. How positively people view these institutions later in life – their perceived levels of fairness, honesty and equity – often rests on how they are portrayed during this period.¹⁹ This process solidifies individuals' membership into racial, ethnic, religious, regional, economic and partisan groupings, and provides the underpinnings of the opinions and allegiances that individuals will hold as adults, voters and citizens.²⁰ Group identities can reinforce social cohesion, but they can also encourage scrutiny, resentment and competition with other identities, which – at their most pernicious – can encourage xenophobia, racism, sexism, jingoism and polarisation.²¹

Some people's underlying worldviews do change in fundamental ways over the course of lifetimes or in response to dramatic events, but stability is more the norm than the exception.²² These underlying worldviews determine the more specific opinions that people will hold; for example, partisanship has often been called an 'immovable mover' because it causes other opinions to fluctuate, but does not fluctuate much itself. An example of this at its most extreme can be found in the fact that Republicans in the United States immediately viewed the American economy as performing more positively after Donald Trump was elected, despite there being no appreciable change in economic indicators.²³

It is important to recognise that individuals' ideologies, group identities and worldviews determine what information they access, and how they then interpret that information. In perhaps the most influential study of information reception, political scientist John Zaller argued, "Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it."²⁴ Thus, only those individuals who hold a set of underlying worldviews and perspectives conducive to a particular conspiracy theory are likely to ultimately adopt it with any emphasis. When presented with new information that clearly challenges or contradicts their worldview, people often tend to ignore it, discount it or rationalise it away; this process sometimes takes the form of 'motivated reasoning'.²⁵ Thus, processes such as motivated reasoning can lead people to either accept or reject a conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories differ from paranoia in that they focus less on self-victimisation and more on group competition and group victimisation. Social identity theory is therefore relevant to the examination of conspiracy theories: when group identities become salient for individuals, those identities can offer self-esteem, but also a desire to view other groups negatively, and to potentially treat other groups in a deleterious manner.²⁶ For those susceptible to conspiracy thinking, the consequence may be the perception of one's group as a victim, pitted against competing groups and institutions that are seeking to undermine their 'truth'.

Immigration and the Establishment Backlash

Immigration has been one of the most divisive and salient issues shaping Western political life over the past decade, with profound demographic changes giving rise to a host of social, economic and cultural insecurities. Reflecting the uneasy public consensus position that has

become well established, few politicians in Europe and the United States, whether on the Left or the Right, now stand on an immigration platform that does not advocate, first and foremost, for some degree of immigration control. In a polarising political landscape rapidly eschewing the dominant received wisdom of globalisation and pluralism, which had come to define our recent decades, even those who identify themselves as liberals – such as Bernie Sanders in the United States – now advocate for the limiting of immigration in order to protect constituencies at the lower end of the labour market from competition from foreign workers.²⁷

The rise in immigration levels and the public's concerns about immigration have coincided with the weakening of trust in governments and institutions.²⁸ These forces are mutually reinforcing, with politicians seen to have systematically ignored and disregarded citizens' anxieties, challenging the contract that stands at the heart of our democracies.²⁹ While it is true that the common appeal of conspiracy thinking has been observed for decades – in 1984, communications scholar David Zarefsky noted that, while often dismissed “as fantasy in the minds of deluded advocates, the arguments are taken seriously [and] are advanced by moderates as well as extremists”³⁰ – in recent years, as political polarisation and partisanship has grown, and as important cleavages around identity, culture and values have emerged, the mainstreaming of conspiracy thinking appears to be accelerating.

This process means our received wisdom as to the demographics of those susceptible to conspiracy thinking must also shift. There has been a broad traditional research consensus around conspiracy thinking as reflecting the marginalisation of a group from genuine social and political power, encouraging them to regard institutions as fundamentally compromised and sinister.³¹ However, in an age of accelerating anti-establishment sentiment, the constituencies prone to regarding themselves as ‘marginalised’ or disaffected are widening. More than half of the British public say they do not feel that any of the UK political parties represent the views of ‘people like them’,³² while six in 10 Americans feel the same.³³

Given the state of the long-term trends around public opinion regarding immigration and trust in government in British and American society, it can now be said with some confidence that politicians have failed to effectively communicate the collective positive dividend of immigration, while also failing to adequately confront the challenges it can bring to societies. These miscarriages of politics and policy-making have wrought profound consequences for the economic and social experiences of many migrants, and for community cohesion and integration across societies.³⁴ However, the vacuum of political language and debate around these issues has also led many citizens to believe that migration policies are defended and upheld by perverse political and business interests, in a systematic betrayal of the needs and wishes of the general public. A March 2016 survey from YouGov, just ahead of the seismic Referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, found that 41 per cent of Britons believed that the Government was concealing the true number of immigrants in the country.³⁵ A more recent survey, also from YouGov in association with the University of Cambridge, has found that 47 per cent of Brexit voters continue to hold this view.³⁶

Political elites can themselves be involved in exploiting their position as an exalted public information source, encouraging the formation and reinforcement of hostile attitudes and even conspiracy beliefs, to solidify their own grip on power.³⁷ Such uses of conspiracy theories are particularly dangerous because they seek to apply authoritative force to conspiracy theories by targeting vulnerable groups or exposing them to risk through explicit or implicit inference of ill intent. The rise in populist politics – commonly understood as an approach to strategic communications, campaigning and governance that pits the candidate or party on the side of ‘the people’ against a corrupt elite³⁸ – has especially complicated the definition of ‘conspiracy theories’ in the political domain. As anti-establishment individuals, messages and language

grow in prominence, the distinctions between our understanding of political rhetoric and conspiracy theories becomes more difficult to separate.³⁹

As our survey results demonstrate below, there is a particular resonance of conspiracy theories among voters for populist parties and movements. This naturally reflects the positioning frames employed by populist parties, which situate themselves outside the traditional parties, who in turn are depicted as fundamentally compromised and ineffective.⁴⁰ Academic studies have demonstrated that the correlation between populist support and conspiracy thinking centres on the propensity to regard elites as ‘corrupt’ in a fundamental sense.⁴¹ In Britain, the UKIP Daily website – a grassroots news website promoting UKIP news and policies – has articulated the ‘conspiracy’ of immigration in Britain as a form of class warfare, by which a privileged cosmopolitan elite systematically disenfranchises the working classes through “a Ponzi scheme in which the profits are privatised”, while public services are overwhelmed and “the traditional working class bears the brunt”.⁴²

In the 2016 American elections, both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders campaigned as anti-establishment candidates, outside the system of established networks, funders and policies that are generally expected of the Presidential office. They harnessed their weakness as unexpected candidates by emphasising their scepticism and even contempt for the state, and, at times, evidenced their grievances and mobilised disenfranchised groups by promoting conspiracy narratives.⁴³ Donald Trump’s conspiracy theories impugned foreigners, immigrants, refugees, racial minorities and political elites; when taken together, these accusations suggested that American political elites had sold out the interests of regular Americans to foreign interests.⁴⁴ Sanders, on the other hand, focused on a singular theory: that the entirety of the American political and economic systems was controlled by a small group, which he called the “one percent”.⁴⁵ In both cases, the candidates turned to scapegoating as a political tactic, while emphasising an endemic level of systemic corruption in government, and promoting restrictions on immigration owing to its potential for societal ‘harm’.⁴⁶

Outside political campaigns, populist leaders often engage in promoting conspiracy theories as tools for maintaining their monopoly on social narratives favourable to their authority. In Hungary, for example, President Viktor Orbán has undertaken a state-sponsored campaign against philanthropist and campaigner George Soros,⁴⁷ simultaneously stoking the dissemination of conspiracies about the nature and intention of the migrants Soros is accused of supporting, and deploying a wide range of historical anti-Semitic tropes against Soros himself.⁴⁷ Orbán has furthermore embedded the notion of Soros and his activities as fundamentally criminal by introducing legislation – known as the ‘Stop Soros law’ – to make it illegal for organisations to support ‘unlawful’ migrants.⁴⁸ Conspiracy theories against George Soros, including the astonishing accusation that he was secretly a Nazi himself – even though he is from a Jewish family that survived under hostile conditions in Nazi-occupied Hungary – have also gained international appeal among alt-right figures in the United States and Europe.⁵⁰

The structural shifts in our political systems towards fragmentation and polarisation, the broader appetite for risk-taking among citizens, their hardening views towards traditional political institutions, and the rise of populist politics, have all fundamentally reshaped our political discourse and our engagement with information. Such landscapes have also created unique conditions that support the proliferation of conspiracy messages, an opportunity that some politicians – from both the Left and the Right – are harnessing through a targeted focus on the issue of immigration. Given the levels of anxiety around immigration in almost every Western nation, this strategy has proven especially effective; hence, we can see the rise of conspiracy politics as both a responsive and a proactive force in its relationships with public opinion.

Conspiracy Thinking in the Digital Age

Over recent years, the internet has become a powerful mechanism for organising and coalescing individuals united by interests, ideas and objectives. As concerns regarding immigration have grown from the public at large, new website and social media groups have emerged to provide space for discussion and debate, and for sharing information and 'evidence' that supports citizens' anxieties. The extent to which both deliberate and accidental misinformation is promoted within these groups and through these websites means that many can now be classified as supporting conspiracy thinking on immigration. The specialised focus of these information chambers reinforces the impact they have on shaping beliefs and their capacity to encourage polarisation, which research demonstrates is critical in bolstering conspiracy thinking.⁵¹

The demarcation between misinformation and conspiracy theories has become especially blurred in the digital age. The changing nature of news production, prioritising speed (supply-side) and engagement (demand), and the rise of media 'influencers' on social media, means that even major media organisations are susceptible to unwittingly distributing incorrect information. The incidence of such transgressions is reinforced by their evident appeal to public readership. Research has revealed that stories that are negative in tone and focusing on divisive, polarising issues are more likely to attract high levels of sharing, reach and engagement.⁵² Indeed, it appears to be a fundamental aspect of the human condition to favour hostile or fearful content;⁵³ moreover, even if citizens express a desire for more positive content, in practice they will often favour the consumption of negative content.⁵⁴

Over the past decade, the social sciences have begun to specifically address the relationship between conspiracy theories and misinformation in the digital age.⁵⁵ Much of the research focuses on the underlying psychology driving belief in conspiracy theories, but scholars from a variety of other disciplines have explored the social and political factors that drive such beliefs.⁵⁶ More recently, and in response to the 2016 US Presidential Election and the Brexit Referendum, researchers have invested heavily into better understanding how conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation travel through social relationships and across social media.⁵⁷ Scientists have also been concerned with how conspiracy thinking and conspiracy beliefs affect how people view government, media and other institutions, and how these shape citizens' subsequent interactions with, and behaviour towards, them.⁵⁸

As in discussions regarding the well-established field of research around media and public opinion, there is an inherent push-pull between the 'mirror' effect of online information as representing citizens' views and the critical role that exposure to such information plays in reinforcing these views. Conspiracy theories concerning immigration tap into an existing, heightened level of public concern regarding not only the level of migration into nations but also the role of politicians in facilitating these arrivals. The information environment regarding immigration is therefore a responsive ecosystem; however, it also fulfils a reinforcing function. And in recognising this function, it is pertinent to note that the social media algorithms that deliver much of the information citizens receive around immigration in the digital age have typically been designed to emphasise extreme content⁵⁹ and to create a sense of equivalence between reputable and amateur sources.⁶⁰

Research has demonstrated a clear relationship between media consumption and conspiracy belief.⁶¹ Conspiracy theories, whether accessed via traditional or social media, are most likely to convince audiences if they come from perceived 'trusted' sources and are congruent with audience members' worldviews.⁶² Moreover, evidence presented to debunk such theories is not consistently as effective as the conspiracy theories themselves, highlighting the challenge in 'reclaiming the narrative' on issues once it has been lost.⁶³ Indeed, attempts by social

scientists to reverse conspiracy beliefs sometimes result in what is called a ‘backfire effect’, meaning that people often double down on the conspiracy beliefs when confronted with disconfirming information.⁶⁴

This reflects the very nature of conspiracy theories: if a powerful agent is seen to be operating in a secretive manner, then it would make sense that that agent is attempting to cover their tracks and leave a trail of red herrings, or to persuade others to act on their behalf. Those who attempt to debunk conspiracy theories are often referred to as ‘sheepie’⁶⁵ – blindly following establishment cues – or even accused of being co-conspirators.

The Dangers of Conspiracy Thinking

There are clear social and political consequences to the proliferation of conspiracy messages in expanding not only the reach of the content itself but also the establishment of such beliefs among new constituencies.

Firstly, this ‘mainstreaming’ of the appeal of conspiracy messages compounds the burgeoning mistrust citizens hold towards their governments and democratic institutions, and may undermine any efforts to provide authoritative data to refute such narratives. The publication of such figures can be met with incredulity and suspicion, reinforcing the notion that governments are seeking to reclaim the power lost to citizens through the ‘democratisation’ of information. Nonetheless, deliberative democracy is predicated on the notion of an informed electorate, and the dissemination of false, misleading and manipulative information can undermine the very foundations of democratic governance. When people fall prey to believing false information, their ideologies may not allow them to retreat from believing that information in the face of disconfirming evidence, leading them to continually act on false information.⁶⁷

Secondly, conspiracy theories about immigration are often linked to concerns about demographic change, which can then flow into anxieties about the changing nature of the electorate, facilitating mistrust in the electoral system – often with undemocratic ends. Around a quarter of Americans believe that ‘millions’ of illegal votes were cast in the 2016 Presidential election,⁶⁷ prompting questions regarding the legitimacy of the very highest office of our democratic institutions. This particular belief built on a growing conspiracy mind-set within American politics and society during President Barack Obama’s term, with as many as 36 per cent of the American people at one point subscribing to the ‘birther’ conspiracy theory,⁶⁸ which sought to draw links between the President’s allegedly disputed racial and cultural background and his empowerment of minorities at the ‘expense’ of the dominant White population. Today, Facebook groups with names such as ‘Illegal Immigration Must Be Stopped and Reversed’ and ‘No Welfare for Illegals’ enthusiastically promote the idea that the Democrats are proactively supporting a relaxed migration policy to help bolster support for their party.

The notion that immigration policy has reflected a conspiracy from social democratic parties to strengthen their voter base has been supported by articles published by traditional news organisations. Writing in *The Telegraph* in 2013, Graeme Archer recalled a conversation with a cab driver keen to venture his conspiracy theories about immigration, in which he concluded that his diagnosis was correct but his conclusions were wrong. “Mass immigration happened for the obvious, boring reasons: business likes cheap labour, and Labour likes new votes. There’s no organised, malign conspiracy controlling society; no shadowy puppet-masters.” Nonetheless, the journalist concedes that “there is a conspiracy of sorts ... it’s the conspiracy of silence which we wished into being, all by ourselves”.⁶⁹ In the United States, conservative pundits such as Ann Coulter routinely promote narratives suggesting that immigration is simply a ploy for Democrats to gain voters.⁷⁰ One of her most recent books, *Adios, America: The Left’s Plan to Turn Our Country into a Third World Hellhole*, was a *New York Times* bestseller.⁷¹

The breadth of support these theories at the nexus of demographics and democracy have been able to inspire, not only among citizens but also within the media, clearly demonstrates the profound challenge these conspiracy theories pose to governance. They can be considered an existential threat to the capacity to maintain robust and unified democracies, which rest on citizens' shared belief in the inherent fairness and transparency of the institutions that serve as the foundations of social and political life.

Thirdly, conspiracy theories can activate and encourage a level of polarisation and animosity that can be dangerously exclusionary and divisive. Conspiracy theories are fostered in environments that promote a framework of 'in' and 'out' groups, with the 'out' group positioned as a threat and collective enemy.⁷² The dichotomy between these groups can promote a sense of tribal fear, which can in turn can lead to a disregard for the well-being of those perceived to be in the 'out' group.⁷³ The risk of an individual becoming radicalised towards extremism and violence is greatest when they perceive themselves to be marginalised and/or threatened,⁷⁴ and research makes clear that there is a strong relationship between a psychosocial propensity for conspiracy thinking and support for, or engagement in, violent extremism.⁷⁵

At its most severe, the widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories by the Nazi regime, as a form of state-sponsored propaganda against the Jewish people, provides a vivid example of the dangerous relationship between violence and conspiracy thinking.⁷⁶ Many individual extremists and terrorists have also immersed themselves in conspiracy theories ahead of committing atrocities.⁷⁷ In a more recent example, the murderer of British politician Jo Cox MP, an unemployed gardener called Thomas Mair, who had a history of mental health problems, believed that a left-wing conspiracy perpetuated by the mainstream media was to blame for the world's problems. Having spent countless hours scouring the internet for 'evidence', he specifically targeted Jo Cox MP because of her open support for the European Union and cultural diversity, and for her work on international refugee crises, perceiving her to be a 'traitor' to the White race.⁷⁸ The shocking and tragic murder of a public representative and humanitarian worker demonstrates the most extreme risks posed by conspiracy theories that focus on an issue as intrinsically human as immigration.

Conspiracy Theories about Immigration - White Genocide

One of the most rapidly proliferating conspiracy theories regarding immigration is known as the 'White Genocide' theory. This concept originally promoted anti-Semitism in Europe and the notion of a Jewish conspiracy to eliminate the White race, but has now evolved to become linked to a broader cultural movement resisting the 'Islamification' of Western nations. This application of the theory has gained increasing traction as Islamic populations in Europe and the United States have grown – reaching around five per cent of Europe's total population in 2016⁷⁹ and 1.1 per cent in the United States⁸⁰ – and with Middle Eastern and Muslim-majority countries over-represented in recent large-scale waves of migration to Europe during the 2015-16 migration crisis.⁸¹ Moreover, as public consciousness of, and anxieties regarding, Islamic fundamentalism have increased in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and other ongoing major terrorist incidents have occurred in European capitals, giving credence to conspiracy theories and radical views.⁸²

Books focusing on national or collective European 'decline' – such as Thilo Sarrazin's monumentally successful *Deutschland schafft sich ab* ('Germany abolishes itself') – have proven immensely popular, generally presenting White Europeans as the 'in' group and Islam as a dangerous external force seeking to embed internal control over nations in terms of law, culture and values.⁸³ Both the fuel and consequence of the widespread success of such books is the mainstreaming of public opinion around the idea of a 'clash of civilisations', which posits that Islam as a religion and a culture is fundamentally incompatible with Western liberal values and traditions – a belief now shared by 42 per cent of Europeans.⁸⁴ Research has shown that those who believe in this framing of an existential cultural clash between Islam and the West favour homogeneity and hold high levels of patriotism and national pride, and are most likely to believe in conspiracy theories in general.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, the large plurality of citizen belief in the 'incompatibility' of the cultures provides fertile ground for persuasion across other constituencies.

The difficult distinction between conspiracy theories – insofar as we understand them to be pernicious acts of delusion – and heightened anxieties, is exemplified in the language of campaigner and former journalist Katie Hopkins. Describing the mission behind her work as raising awareness of persecution of White and Christian minority populations, she states:

I will not stand by and watch people – of any walk of life – who love their country be oppressed by mandatory multiculturalism, or the official narrative we are force fed. The powerful have a script and we are expected to follow it blindly, compliantly. We will not. We will resist the narrative. We find our truths. We get furious. And we fight back.⁸⁶

In these words, we can see a clear emphasis on the notion of a state-sponsored effort to enforce cultural diversity on an unwilling population. However, her language is also sufficiently vague so as to remain within the commonly understood boundaries of 'acceptability'; though it should be noted that, on many occasions, Hopkins' public discourse has strayed outside such boundaries⁸⁷. Anne-Marie Waters, the founder and leader of the anti-Islamic party For Britain, has been sufficiently more explicit in her engagement with the terminology of White Genocide, describing the concept as "part of a broad-ranging, virulent, and vicious hatred" of "white Western people", and believing that European leaders have sought "to extinguish Western culture".⁸⁸ What is evident is that there is a spectrum of language on these issues that can straddle both the edges of the mainstream and the polemic fringes.

In August 2018, President Trump propagated the internationalisation of the issue of White Genocide through a tweet⁸⁹, following a segment on the Fox News cable television station in which host Tucker Carlson claimed that the South African Government was illegally seizing land from White citizens. The President's intervention came after several conservative groups

promoting the White Genocide theory had made extended visits to the United States, meeting with Republican senators and even with the Ku Klux Klan.⁹⁰ The President's tweet proved invigorating to White Supremacist movements and proponents of the White Genocide theory in the United States, Australia and beyond, with new petitions, campaigns and online communities emerging to champion the issue. On the 'Fight White Genocide' blog, noting the media's interest in the White Genocide theory following the President's tweet, the author wrote of the reinforcing effect of such coverage to their cause:

What we are seeing now is the media doubling down on trying to debunk white genocide. What's brilliant about their feeble attempt, once they start trying to debunk White Genocide, they have already lost because they're openly broadcasting our message to their audience. And once you hear White Genocide, you can't un-hear it.⁹¹

It is also true that the original construction of the theory as a force of anti-Semitism has also become more visible in the socio-political environment during the Trump Presidency, with alt-right activists positioning Jewish communities as 'enablers' of diversity. In the 2017 'Unite the Right' protests in Charlottesville, Virginia, White nationalists chanted, "Jews will not replace us", while Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke blamed Jews for presiding over the orthodoxy of establishment liberalism that had victimised White Americans⁹². The perpetrator of the anti-Semitic mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018, was found to have subscribed to conspiracy forums that held Jews - and especially, George Soros - responsible for the perceived threat posed by the progress of a 'caravan' of thousands of Honduran migrants towards the United States-Mexico border⁹³.

The White Genocide conspiracy theory is especially nefarious because it often coalesces around theories of genuine racial prejudice, including eugenics and even phrenology. It also evokes a long history in Western societies of translating fear of racial decline into discriminatory policies around women's reproductive health - including sterilisation and forced abortions.⁹⁴ Today, hundreds of Facebook groups such as 'Stop White Genocide' - run from Poland - create and disseminate images that depict people of African and Middle Eastern backgrounds as descendant from other species altogether, describing them as 'primitive' and biologically lacking in intelligence compared to White Europeans. Websites such as the 'Conspiracy Files' have even manufactured false information about political compacts designed to further entrench unfavourable immigration policies against the will of citizens - for example, claiming that EU leaders had signed a declaration with African nations to facilitate the growth of Europe's African-born population to 300 million by 2068. "This, of course," the website concludes, "would lead the white native population as minorities within their own homeland."⁹⁵

The hysteria fostered around the perceived threat of White Genocide can naturally lead to calls for armed protection and even retribution. On the Facebook page 'Europa Rising', which boasts 60,000 followers, a story about liberal politicians telling citizens that diversity is "what's good for you" compels a response of a White girl holding a gun, ready to shoot, with the caption, "This is what's good for you"⁹⁶. Norwegian far-right terrorist Andre Brevnik, who in 2011 murdered 77 civilians, mainly at a youth summer camp, was motivated by the White Genocide theory, with a manifesto found at his home entitled *2083: A European Declaration of Independence* making frequent references to the notion of an ongoing European plot.⁹⁷

Another rapidly proliferating conspiracy theory which has spun off from the broader White Genocide narrative centres on Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi, a 20th Century European politician of Austrian-Japanese descent who played a central role in European integration and was the first recipient of the Charlemagne Prize in 1950. Now referred to as the 'Coudenhove-Kalergi Conspiracy' on the many websites and forums that promote its dissemination, the theory purports that his plans to bring the continent together masked his

intention to encourage a process of enforced racial intermixing. The genesis of this idea stems from a passage in a book he wrote in 1925,⁹⁸ in which he reflected on the future of the Jewish faith in Europe and declared, “The man of the future will be of mixed race. Today’s races and classes will gradually disappear owing to the vanishing of space, time, and prejudice. The Eurasian-Negroid race of the future, similar in its appearance to the Ancient Egyptians, will replace the diversity of peoples with a diversity of individuals.” Today, websites such as ‘Western Spring’ (‘fighting for a white revival’) conclude that “the implementation of the Kalergi plan seems to be at an advanced stage”, drawing deep relationships between contemporary European policy and the legacy of a book written almost 100 years ago.

Conspiracy theories are most powerful and persuasive when they comport with the existing views held by individuals susceptible to such thinking. Political elites in many Western nations, particularly the United States and Britain, have not succeeded in convincing their electorates that the benefits of immigration and cultural diversity more generally, are widely shared and individually experienced, and that the challenges that immigration can inspire are able to be effectively mitigated. The marketplace of public information around immigration in these countries has necessarily become disproportionately hostile towards migrants and imbalanced in its perspectives, providing ready access to both evidence and arguments that support negative narratives. For those who hold conspiracy mind-sets, this information has proven especially galvanising to their beliefs and to the formation of anti-immigration conspiracy groups and movements.

Nonetheless, the following survey results demonstrate the extent to which the widespread mistrust in governments and unique circumstances surrounding their record on immigration have enabled conspiracy thinking on this issue to permeate beyond the fringes and well into the mainstream of public life, finding resonance with those who would otherwise see themselves as resistive to conspiracy theories.

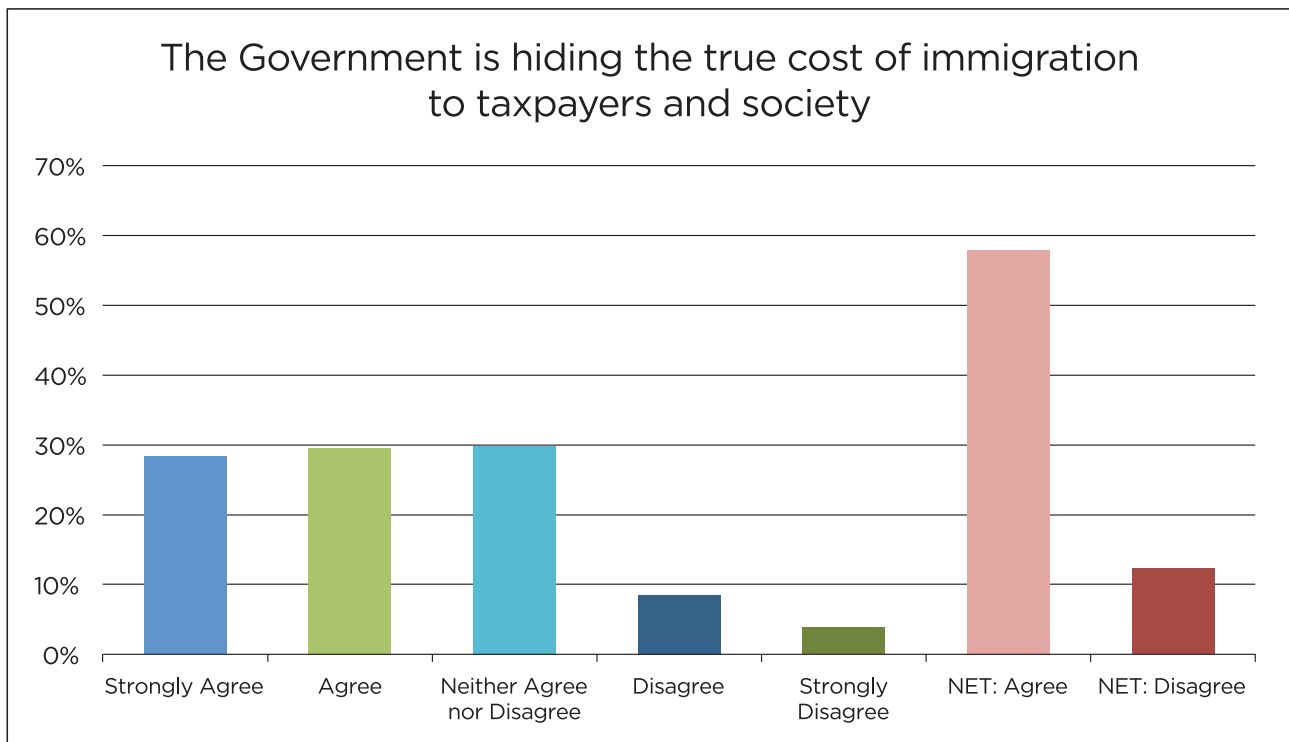
Survey Results

To explore the extent to which conspiracy thinking around immigration has moved towards the mainstream in recent years, we partnered with two polling organisations, Opinium⁹⁹ in Britain and Ipsos¹⁰⁰ in the United States, to conduct nationally representative surveys testing three of the most enduring messages on this divisive issue:

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
'The Government is hiding the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society.'
2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
'In the last 20 years, the Government has deliberately tried to make British society more ethnically diverse through its immigration policy.'
3. Politicians, media outlets and others who have spoken out in opposition to immigration have been... [Likert scale: Treated completely fairly to Treated completely unfairly]

United Kingdom: Key Findings

- **58 per cent of UK citizens believe the government is hiding the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society.**

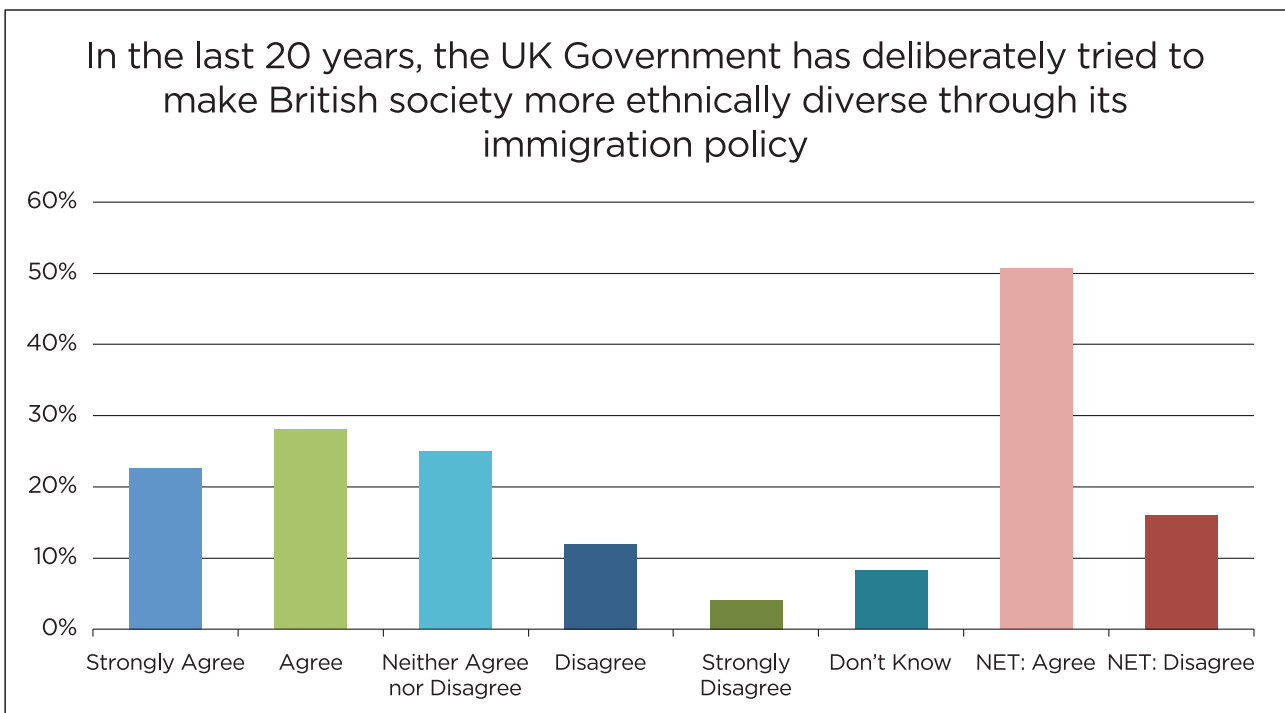


Reflecting the many years of polarising debate and building public concern around immigration, the findings from the United Kingdom survey reveal that conspiracy thinking on this vexed issue is now a mainstream position amongst Britons. Looking more closely at the figures, the percentages who strongly agree (28 per cent) and agree (30 per cent) with this statement are roughly similar. Only 12 per cent of Brits disagree or strongly disagree, with a large group of citizens (30 per cent) neutral on the issue - meaning a significant proportion of the population is potentially open to persuasion from either side. What is clear from these results is that the dual narratives that the Government has been operating

dishonestly and that there is a potentially ‘damaging’ level of cost from immigration that they have been compelled to hide has successfully permeated across the majority of the British population.

Examining the demographic trends, we can see that men are more likely to believe this theory, at 61 per cent to 55 per cent of women, as are those aged over 55, of whom 62 per cent agree, compared to 50 per cent of 18-34-year-olds. As ever, geography plays a strong role: the percentage who agree with the statement rises to an astonishing 71 per cent in the North East, followed by 65 per cent in the North West. Interestingly, more residents in diverse and cosmopolitan London (57 per cent) believe this to be true than their neighbours in the South East (52 per cent). In Scotland, 57 per cent of citizens agree, and 50 per cent of the Northern Irish population. Looking at a city level, vast differences can be observed: residents in Newcastle (69 per cent) and Manchester (68 per cent) are 20 percentage points more likely than residents in Brighton and Southampton (both 49 per cent) to believe the statement.

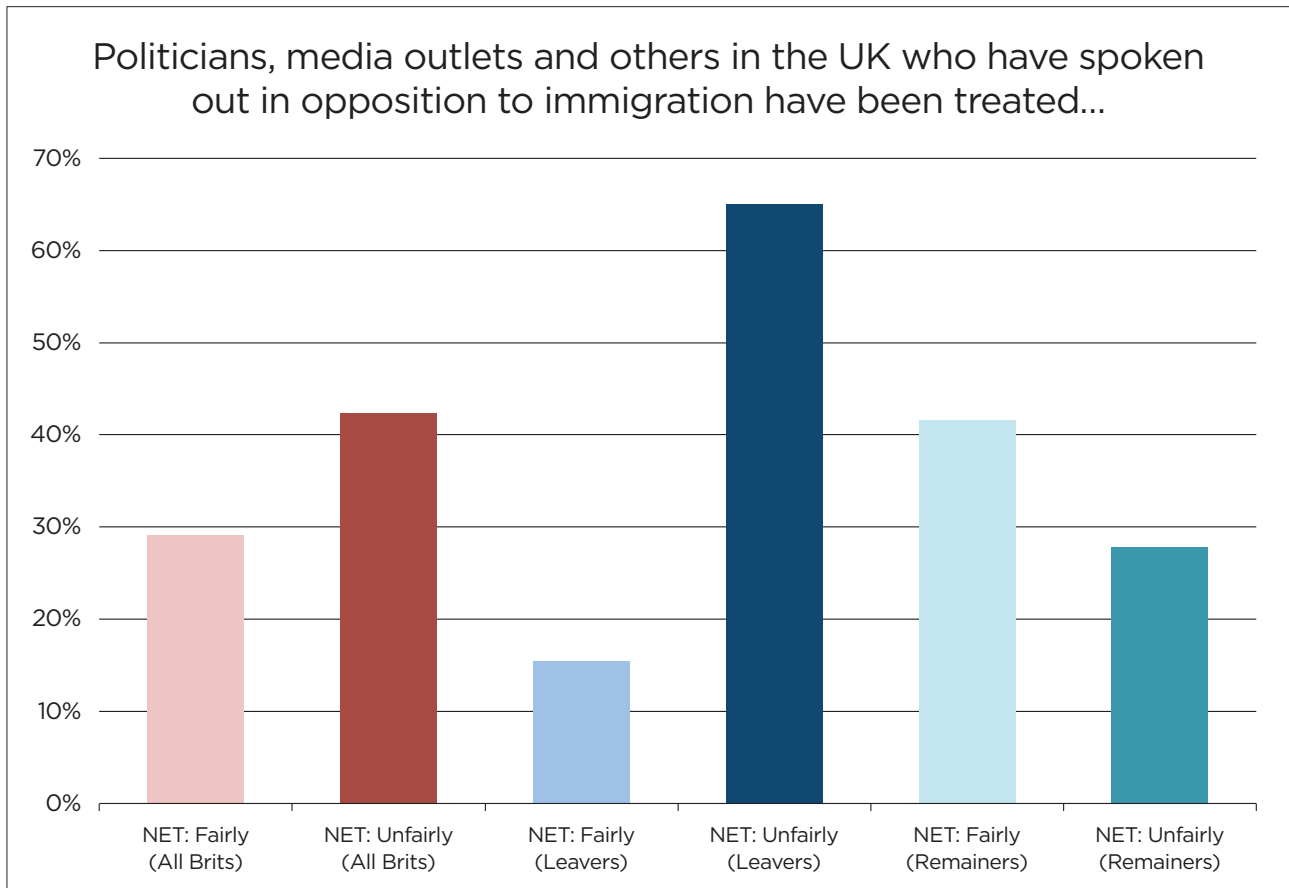
- **51 per cent of Britons think that the UK Government has deliberately tried to make British society more ethnically diverse through its immigration policy over the past 20 years.**



This question reveals that the ‘Neather-gate’ theory of a deliberate policy to ‘enforce’ multiculturalism on Britain has also become a majority position held by the electorate, and the agreement with the period offered (20 years) also indicates that voters believe there to have been some cross-party level of complicity in this endeavour. Perhaps most significantly, the survey finds that only 16 per cent of the population categorically disagree with this statement.

Similar to the previous question, there are significant gender differences to be observed. Men are much more likely to strongly agree with this question (28 per cent to 17 per cent), and women are twice as likely to be unsure about the question (12 per cent to five per cent). And again, those aged over 55 years are most likely to believe the statement, at 56 per cent, compared to 44 per cent of 18-to-34-year-olds – many of whom, it must be noted, would not have been born, let alone politically engaged, for the full period outlined in the question.

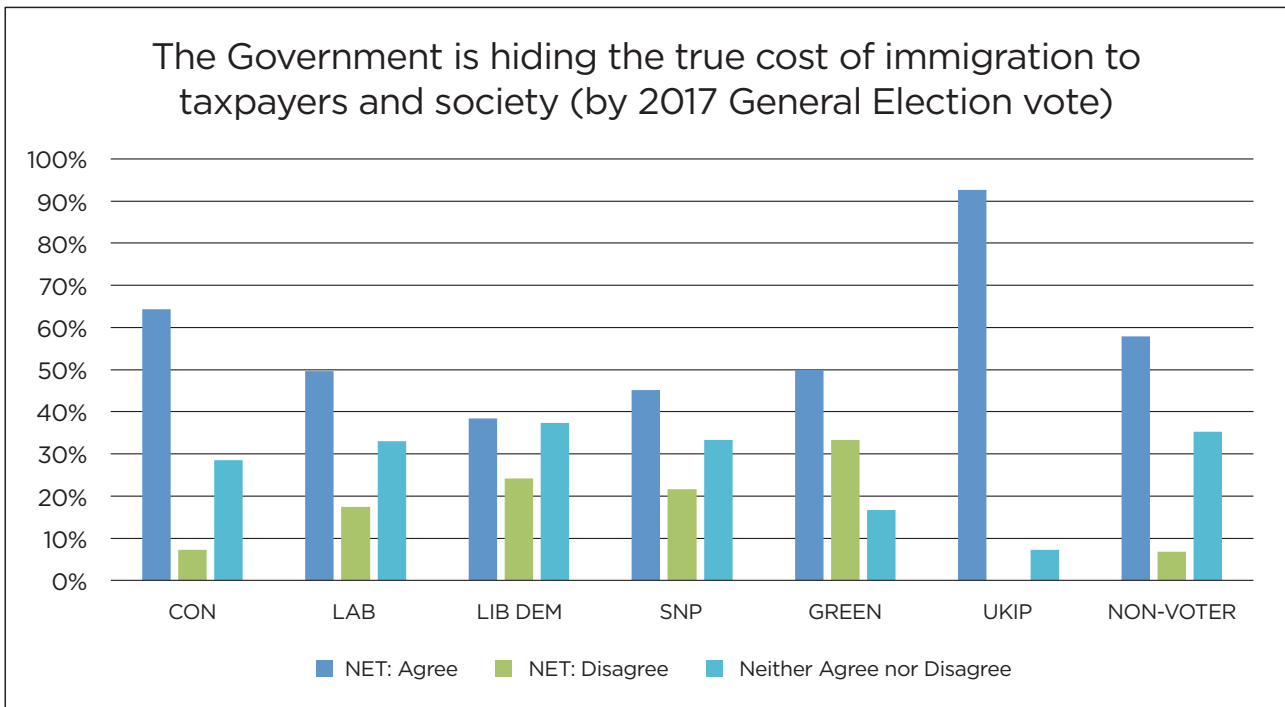
Regionally, residents the North East are most likely to believe the statement, although percentages are relatively consistent across most major English regions. At a city level, it finds the highest proportion of support in Norwich (60 per cent), Manchester (59 per cent), and Newcastle, Liverpool and – perhaps surprisingly – Bristol (all on 56 per cent), and the least support (39 per cent) in Cardiff. In London, the area that has undergone to largest demographic transformation over this period, 48 per cent of residents agree.



- **42 per cent of Britons think politicians, media outlets and others in the UK who have spoken out in opposition to immigration have been treated unfairly, compared to 29 per cent who think they have been treated fairly.**

This question cuts to the heart of contemporary debates around platforming, representation and free speech in the political and public spheres, and while it reveals a considerably higher level of conflicted opinion compared to previous questions, it also reinforces that the upper hand of opinion is currently held by those who see an institutional level of collusion around the issue of immigration.

At 48 per cent to 37 per cent, men are more likely than women to feel that dissenting views on immigration have been treated unfairly, and twice as likely (22 to 12 per cent) to believe they have been treated *completely* unfairly. Older Britons are again much more likely to subscribe to this idea than their younger counterparts, at 54 per cent of over-55s, compared to just 28 per cent of 18-34-year-olds. Residents in the North East and the South East are most likely to believe that those speaking out against immigration have been unfairly treated, at 50 per cent and 49 per cent respectively, compared to just 34 per cent of Londoners.



- **Leave voters and UKIP voters are the most likely to agree that the Government is involved in a conspiracy around immigration policy, and that outspoken voices against immigration have been silenced.**

An astonishing 93 per cent of 2017 UKIP voters believe that the Government is hiding the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society. At 64 per cent, Conservative voters are the next most likely to agree with this statement, although 50 per cent of Labour and Greens voters also share this view. At 38 per cent, Liberal Democrats are the least likely to subscribe to the theory.

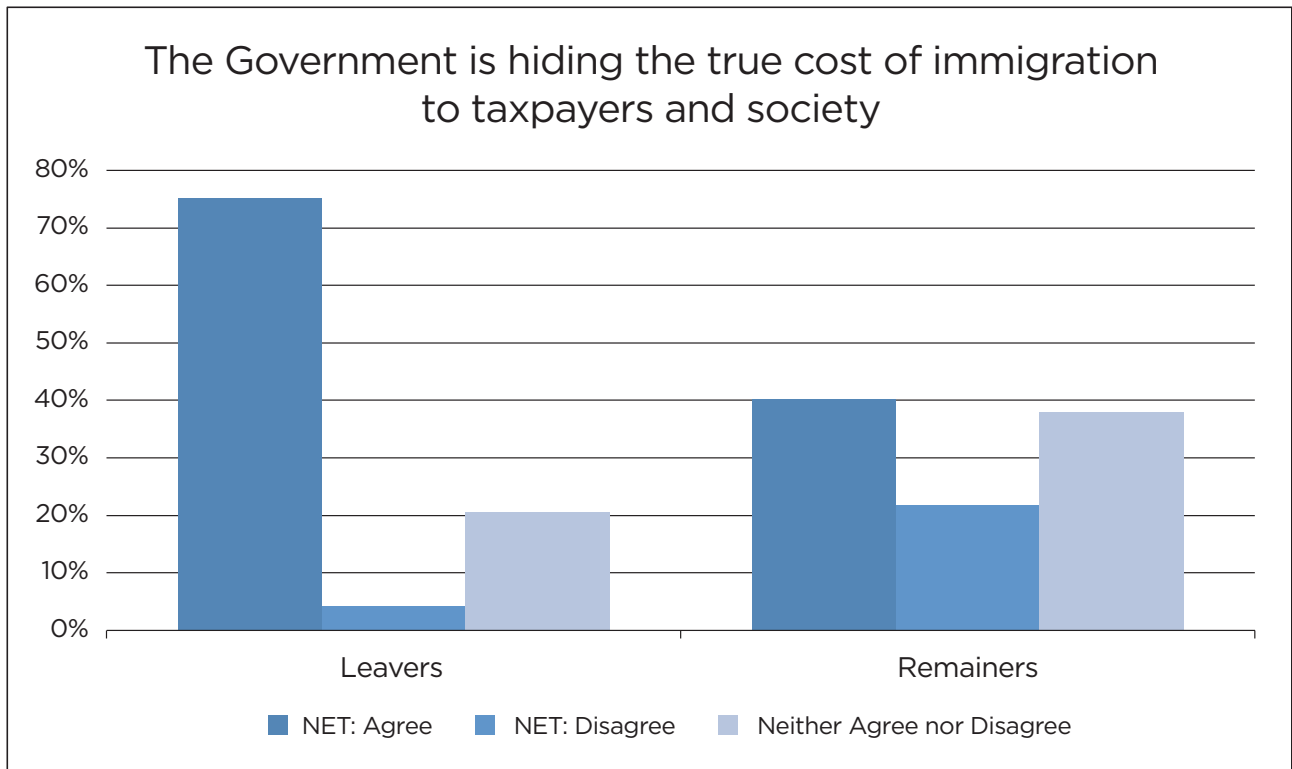
On the question as to whether the UK Government has deliberately tried to make British society more diverse, similar distinctions can be observed. The statement is supported by 63 per cent of Conservatives, 42 per cent of Labour voters, 29 per cent of Liberal Democrats, and 85 per cent of UKIP voters.

Conservatives are considerably more likely than Labour voters to believe that politicians and journalists who have spoken out against immigration have been unfairly treated, at 57 per cent to 37 per cent. By a long margin, Green voters are the most likely to believe that these provocateurs and dissenters have been treated fairly, at 67 per cent, and UKIP voters are the most likely to believe they have been treated unfairly, at 73 per cent.

There are also sharp divisions to be observed between Leave and Remain voters. While 40 per cent of Remain voters believe that the Government is hiding the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society, the percentage of Leave voters subscribing to this theory jumps to 75 per cent. Moreover, 42 per cent of Leave voters ‘strongly agree’ with the statement, compared to just 13 per cent of Remain voters.

Similarly, on the question regarding whether the UK Government has deliberately tried to make British society more diverse, 70 per cent of Leave voters agree, compared to 34 per cent of Remain voters. Again, almost 40 per cent of Leave voters ‘strongly agree’ with this statement, compared to just nine per cent of Remain voters.

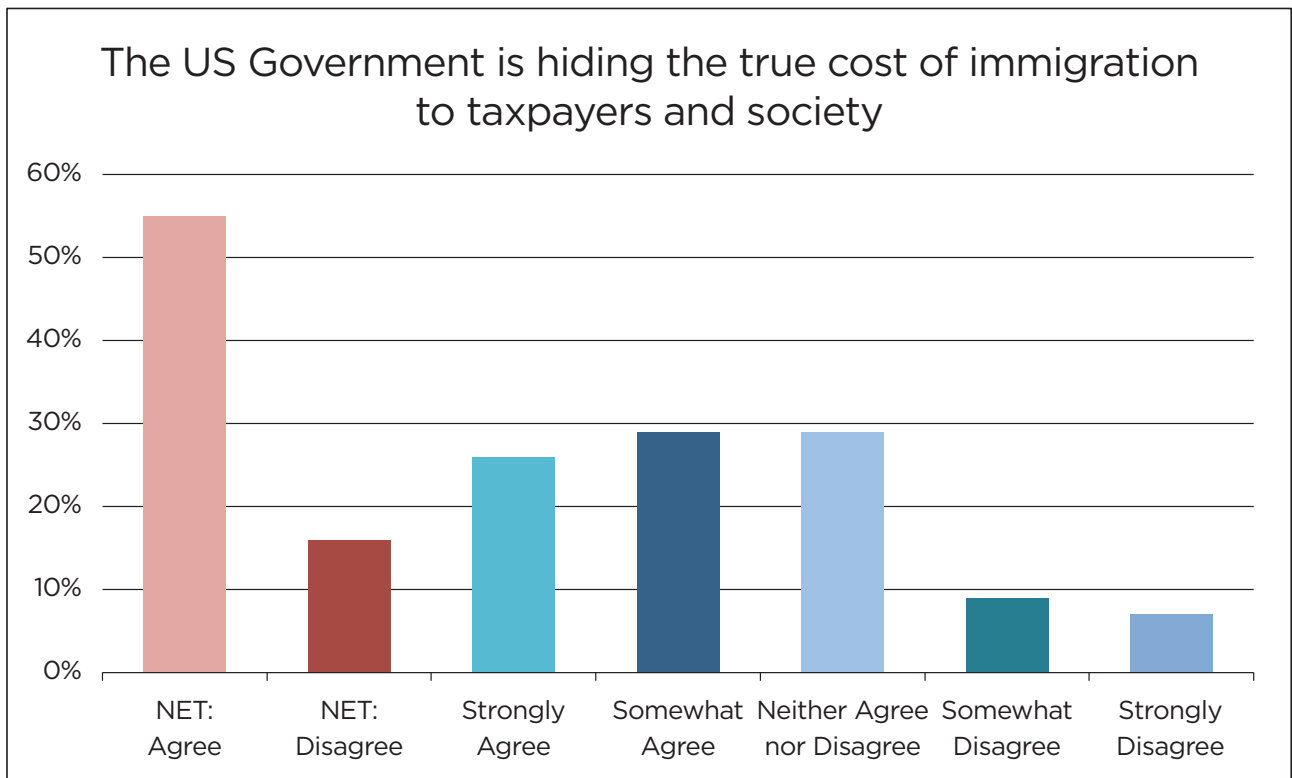
Finally, as to whether those who have spoken out against immigration have been treated fairly or unfairly, 65 per cent of Leave voters feel they have been treated unfairly, and 15 per cent



believe they have been treated fairly. By contrast, 28 per cent of Remain voters feel they have been treated unfairly, and 42 per cent believe they have been treated fairly.

United States: Key Findings

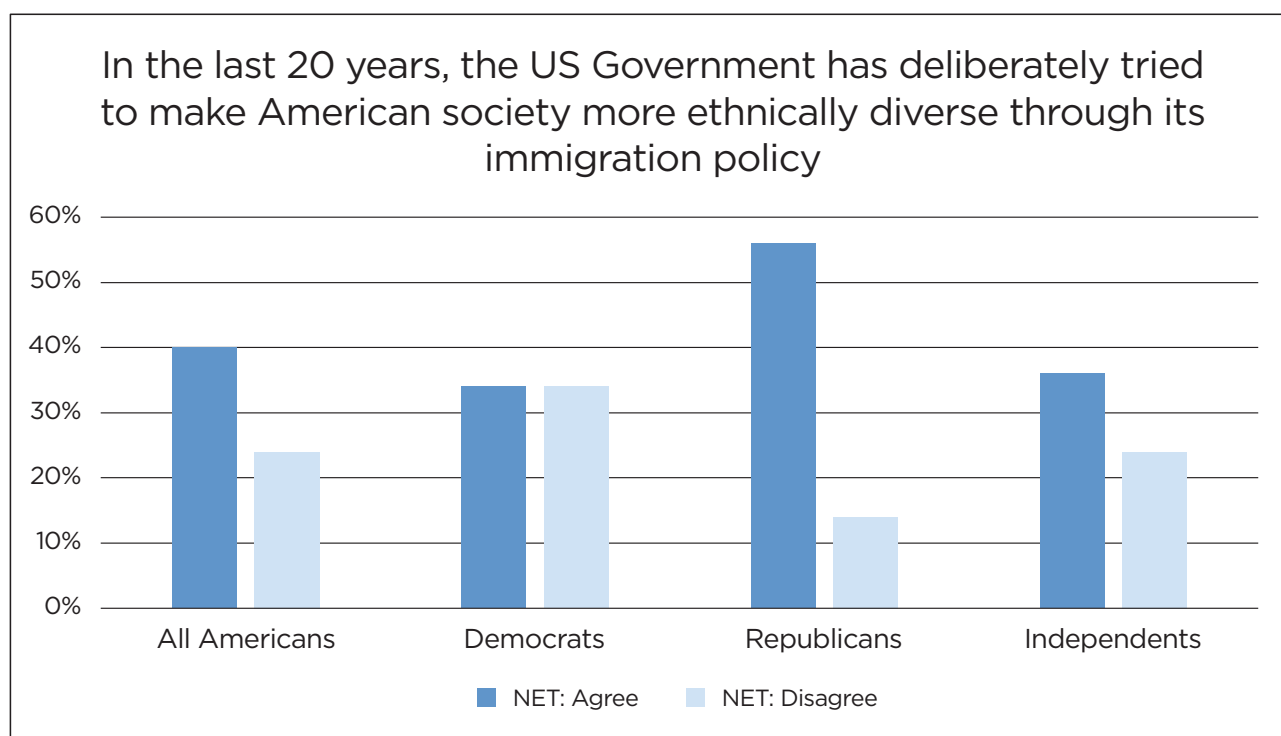
- **55 per cent of US citizens believe the Government is hiding the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society.**



Findings from the survey of the United States show that Americans are just as likely as their British counterparts to agree that their Government is hiding the true cost of immigration. The percentages who strongly agree (26 per cent) and somewhat agree (29 per cent) are statistically similar. Only seven per cent of Americans strongly disagreed, with nine per cent somewhat disagreeing. Like the British sample, 29 per cent express neutrality on the issue – again meaning that a third of the population carries a level of ambivalence and is potentially open to persuasion by either side.

Turning to demographics, we can see that men are more likely to believe this theory, at 59 per cent, compared to 52 per cent of women, as are those aged 35-54, of whom 60 per cent agree, compared to 50 per cent of 18-34-year-olds and 55 per cent of those aged 55+. Belief in this conspiracy theory appears similar across regions of the United States, and across levels of household income. Interestingly however, the unemployed (46 per cent) and part time workers (51 per cent) are *less* likely to believe in this immigration conspiracy theory than those who are employed full time (59 per cent); this would seem to contradict the idea that those most economically challenged are most fearful of competition from immigrants.

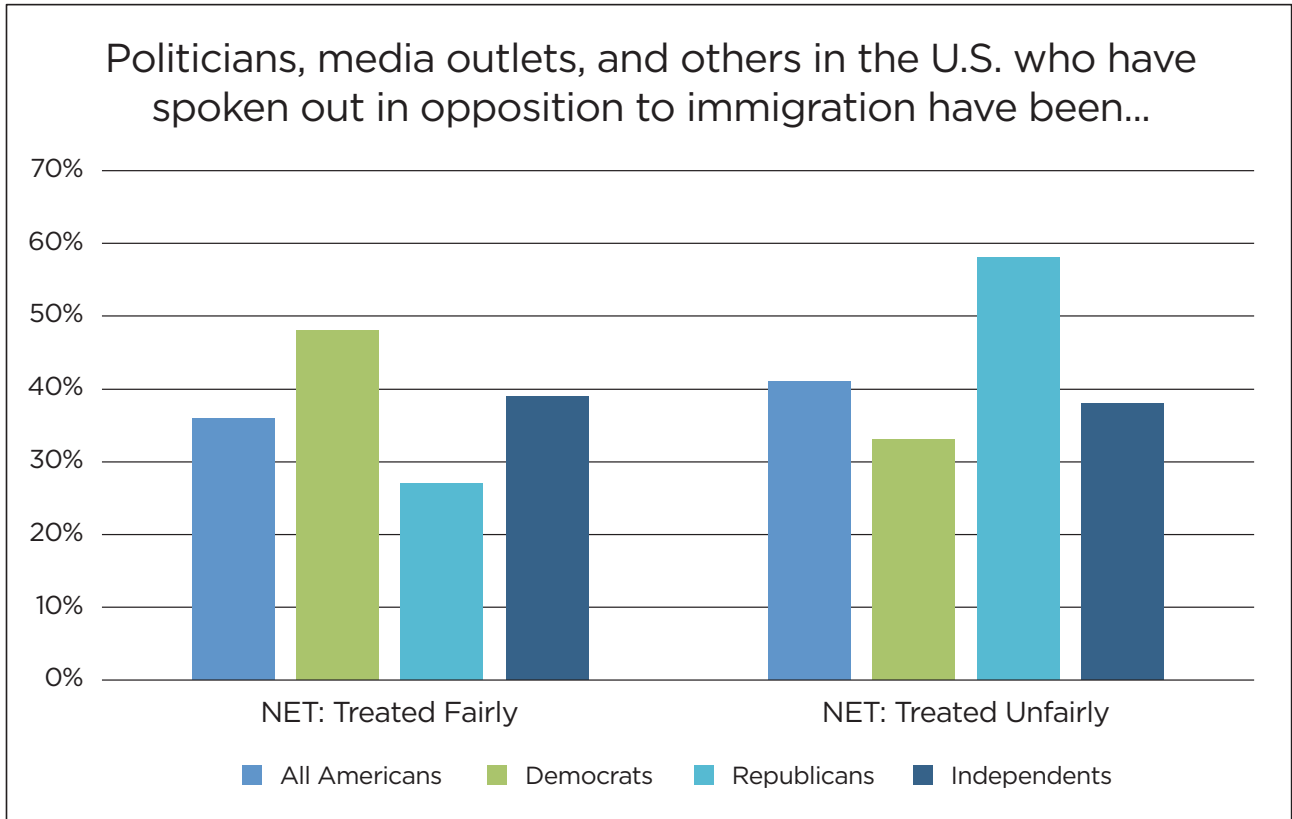
- **40 per cent of Americans agree that in the last 20 years, the US Government has deliberately tried to make American society more ethnically diverse through its immigration policy.**



While forty per cent of Americans strongly or somewhat agree that the US Government has deliberately tried to make the US more ethnically diverse, only 24 per cent strongly or somewhat disagree with this statement. These numbers demonstrate an underlying suspicion of the Government's motives in formulating policy, and also a concern about the sustainability of dominant White ethnic identity. Perhaps not surprisingly, non-Whites are less likely to agree with this theory (28 per cent) than Whites (44 per cent). Women are also less likely to agree with this view than men, 33 per cent to 48 per cent, and younger Americans (36 per cent) are less likely than their elders (42 per cent) to agree. Interestingly, those with a college degree are 10 percentage points *more likely* to agree than those without a college degree (45 to 35

per cent), with the discrepancy the result of a higher proportion of non-degree-educated people either claiming ambivalence ('neither agree nor disagree') or selecting 'don't know'.

- **41 per cent of Americans agree that politicians, media outlets, and others in the U.S. who have spoken out in opposition to immigration have been treated unfairly, compared to 36% who think they have been treated fairly.**

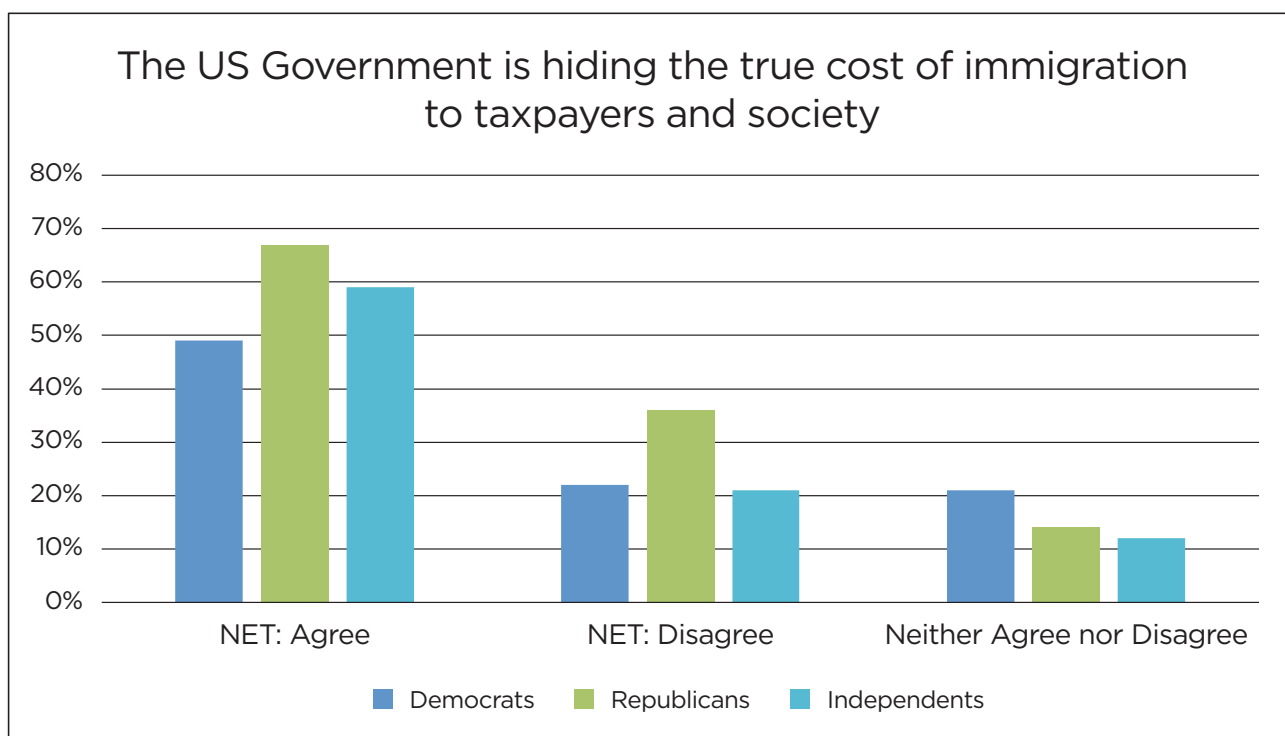


American men and women agree equally that those speaking out against immigration have been treated unfairly, at 41 percent each. More Americans in the Midwest (45 per cent) and the South (43 per cent) agree than Americans from the North East (37 per cent) and West (39 per cent). Americans with no college degree are more likely to agree with this statement, at 44 per cent, compared to those with a college degree at 38 per cent. Retirees and full-time workers (43 and 44 per cent) are more likely to agree with this statement than part-time and unemployed workers (34 and 36 per cent). Also, Whites were 7 percent more likely to agree than non-Whites, at 43 to 36 per cent.

- **Republicans are most likely to agree that the US Government is involved in a conspiracy around immigration policy, but half of Democrats also subscribe to these theories.**

There are clear differences across the partisan divide in the support for immigration-related conspiracy theories, but neither party can be absolved of believing in conspiratorial accounts of immigration. Around half of Democrats (49 per cent) strongly or somewhat agree that the government is hiding the true costs of immigration, compared to 67 per cent of Republicans. Nonetheless, only 21 per cent of Democrats and 14 per cent of Republicans somewhat or strongly disagree with this conspiracy theory.

56 per cent of Republicans agree that the Government has deliberately tried to make the country more ethnically diverse, compared to 34 per cent of Democrats, and 36 per cent of



self-identified independents. 58 percent of Republicans agree that politicians, media outlets, and others in the U.S. who have spoken out in opposition to immigration have been treated unfairly, compared to 33 per cent of Democrats, and 38 per cent of independents.

- **40 per cent of citizens in Florida believe the Government is hiding the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society.**

To buttress the national-level United States polling results, in August 2018 we commissioned a comprehensive poll of 2,085 Americans in the state of Florida¹⁰¹. Florida is a microcosm of the larger United States, being a ‘swing state’; however, 20 per cent of its population is also foreign-born. It was important to conduct this survey in a state as diverse as Florida, and also to over-sample racial and ethnic minorities to identify the salience of conspiracy narratives in areas that should not necessarily be especially receptive to them. Nonetheless, even in this unique environment, we found that Floridians are only 15 percentage points less likely to agree that the US Government is hiding the true costs of immigration, with 40 per cent of citizens believing this statement, compared to 55 per cent nationwide.

Only 24 per cent of respondents disagree or strongly disagree with the immigration conspiracy theory. Thirty-six per cent chose ‘neither agree nor disagree’, indicating some passivity, but not disagreeing with the statement, while 40 per cent of the sample choose to agree or strongly agree with the statement. In short, even in a state so visibly and intrinsically shaped by immigration, narratives of mistrust and suspicion hold widespread appeal.

Immigration as Fertile Ground for Conspiracy Theories

There has been a persistent limitation regarding much of the scholarship and punditry pertaining to conspiracy theories in an age of populism, in finding a middle ground between rejecting conspiracy theories as unworthy of rational analysis and perpetuating the sentiments that underlie the theories themselves.¹⁰² To consider the practical means by which they can be challenged, it is prudent to first acknowledge that there are a number of circumstances particularly unique to the construction of conspiracy theories around immigration, which in turn are inherently favourable to their dissemination.

In this section, we set out some of the ways in which immigration provides such fertile ground for conspiracy theorists, including disputes over statistics, government admissions of errors, cultural anxieties around demographic decline, and the ongoing challenges inherent to illegal immigration. Together, these compound the scale of the task of ‘setting the facts straight’ around the issue of immigration, and must be considered in any political efforts to ‘reclaim the narrative’ from those peddling genuine misinformation.

The Hostile Environment

Over recent decades in both the United States and the United Kingdom, the proportion of citizens expressing perspectives of racial prejudice has either remained steady, or broadly in a state of decline¹⁰³. Over the same period, attitudes towards immigration have distinctly toughened, often driven by concerns regarding the sustainability of public services, welfare states, and the potential impact on the capacity for the native-born population to ‘get ahead’ in life¹⁰⁴. Many of these attitudes have been encouraged by perceived failures in policy-making – some of which we set out below. It is also true that while racial prejudice has fallen or steadied, fears around the ‘cultural incompatibility’ of certain groups of migrants with Western liberal norms have risen. We can distinguish between these policy-level concerns and cultural concerns as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ in nature, although this does not suggest that the ‘soft’ concerns are any less meaningful; in fact, it is these perceptions of a cultural discordance that has been more instrumental in the construction of *radical* views on immigration¹⁰⁵ than, for example, the notion that medical waiting rooms are over-crowded.

Both these messages of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ impacts have become increasingly prominent in British and American media environments during the past twenty years¹⁰⁶, with numerous examples of particular ‘spikes’ in public and media salience – for example, during the 2016 EU referendum¹⁰⁷. As mentioned earlier in the paper, it is difficult to cleanly differentiate between political and media interest and engagement with the issue of immigration, and the concerns of populations, given both institutions are charged with the task of representing citizens’ interests. Nonetheless, it is well-established that the choice of language, issues and framing employed by political and media actors has, over the years, played a role in the construction of citizens’ level of concern regarding the topic of immigration¹⁰⁸.

Much of the negative political discourse regarding immigration has typically fallen into ‘dog whistle’ territory, with particularly conservative politicians often ‘signalling’ their discomfort with the issue through coded language¹⁰⁹. In recent years, the rise of populism as a campaigning style and approach to governance has seen previously guarded language escalate into more explicit examples of prejudice, discrimination, or fear-mongering¹¹⁰. While, as we make clear below, there are many policy and political decisions regarding immigration that have made it difficult to dismiss the growing tendency towards conspiracy thinking as entirely without basis nor principle, in considering the genesis of this environment, it cannot be ignored that politicians and the media have played a role in heightening fears and anxieties, and embedding a feeling of practical and existential threat.

In an increasingly polarised political climate, both conservatives and liberals often – wittingly or unwittingly – instil a sense of competition in their rhetoric around immigration, ‘protecting’ different groups from the perceived threat of the other. The escalation of discourse on immigration from a policy issue to an existential threat has undoubtedly imbued conversations with an emotive quality, which is challenging to address through rational discourse. Moreover, the entrenchment of conspiracy thinking around immigration provides a direct disincentive to those seeking to challenge public opinion, lest they expose themselves to being seen as an intrinsic co-conspirator. For these reasons, an examination of the rise of conspiracy thinking on immigration should accept that the political and media environment is increasingly supportive towards the formation of negative attitudes and to the escalation of emotions regarding this issue.

Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that governments have, over the years, engaged in various forms of obfuscation and manipulation of immigration statistics. Some of these, such as the scandal revealed around the British Home Office’s misrepresentation of student visa over-stayers, reflect efforts to over-emphasise the scale or nature of migration for political gain.¹¹¹ Even incidents such as these, which should – in theory – challenge the notion that governments are obscuring a *higher* level of immigration, in fact only legitimise arguments of concealment and bolster the sense of mistrust in the Government as a whole. Whether the intention is to amplify or diminish the realities behind the data, such policy failures reinforce the notion of statistical fluidity.

Myriad examples of the contested collection and application of data abound. For example, the British Government has been accused of selectivity and partisanship in its use of evidence to justify the introduction of the Immigration Act in 2014, which strengthened state powers around deportations and restricted migrants’ access to the country’s welfare system. An academic examination of the analysis underpinning the Migration Advisory Committee report that informed the legislation concluded, “Whether this research was deliberately conducted in an unethical fashion or simply carried out badly isn’t a question that can be definitively answered, but the way it was conducted suggests ‘significance hunting’ and the disconnection between the findings and the strength of the final conclusion suggest external bias.”¹¹²

Serious questions have also been raised regarding the quality and reliability of the figures the British Government uses to chart the incoming and outgoing flow of migrants. In late 2015, British academic and economist Jonathan Portes – often a *bête-noir* for the Right of politics – published a blog in which he highlighted a large-scale discrepancy between two different departments in the UK Government’s official immigration figures.¹¹³ While population statistics showed one number, the number of National Insurance numbers issued (a critical social security accreditation, without which neither employment nor benefits can be accessed) that year was considerably higher. While Portes distinguished himself from holding an anti-immigration position, he declared, “While not sharing this paranoia, [I] don’t trust government numbers on this topic.”

Portes wrote to the Government to query the numbers gap and was told that the information was being withheld in light of the negotiations being undertaken with the European Union at that time. In response, he wrote, “What would the data show? My current expectation is that it would reveal there are actually considerably more such recent migrants than the official immigration or labour market statistics actually suggest.” Portes’ concern and motivation behind his piece was that the Government was at risk of stoking burgeoning conspiracy theories around migration by discrediting itself even to impartial academics. Indeed, the publication of the piece was received with considerable interest by media hostile to immigration, which described a systemic “cover-up” and poured fuel onto the fire of the Government’s delicate position in the negotiations.¹¹⁴

This anecdote suggests an important point about how conspiracy theories can themselves lead otherwise honest political actors – in this example, the British Government – to act defensively, dishonestly or even conspiratorially.¹¹⁵ When leaders expect to be subjected to an unnecessary amount of scrutiny, they can become protective, and may even begin to take on a destructive pattern of self-reinforcing behaviour that resembles the accusations made against them. For example, the infamous ‘Climategate’ incident in 2009 in the United States occurred not because climate scientists wanted to obscure data or mislead the public, but because they were forced to act pre-emptively against an onslaught of genuine conspiracy allegations made against them. The unfortunate side effect was that their actions made it appear as though they actually conspired on the issue, in just the way they were being accused.¹¹⁶

Media reporting propagating conspiracy theories has further contributed to exacerbating the sense of confusion around the ‘true’ nature of immigration statistics. A striking example can be found in a 2007 article from the *Independent*, which has been seized upon by anti-immigration and anti-EU conspiracy theorists as evidence of a UK Government cover-up regarding the true size of Britain’s population. In the piece, journalist Steven Baker interviewed an anonymous supermarket worker, who, extrapolating from the volume of food sold within British supermarkets, asserted that the national population must have reached at least 80 million. Baker wrote, “My sources ... are good, but scared of admitting the truth for fear of incurring the wrath of Whitehall.” The Office for National Statistics dismissed the hypothesis as without basis in fact; however, the article continues to be widely disseminated online in forums and on social media, some ten years on.¹¹⁷

Nonetheless, the most galvanising force underpinning the strengthening and dissemination of conspiracy narratives has been the legitimate acts of government obfuscation, generally intended to avoid stoking public anxieties about any consequences of immigration policy that have been detrimental to citizens or communities. These have diluted the robust evidence base around these issues of public interest and ceded the position of trusted information provider to forces outside the state – including websites, online communities and divisive political parties, with agendas that are often not focused on national well-being and cohesion.

No issue has become a greater lightning rod for accusations of government concealment around immigration than migrant crime. And no incident has become a more powerful marker of this emotive issue than the 2015 New Year’s Eve attacks in Cologne, Germany. According to police reports leaked to the media, on that one evening around 1,200 women were sexually assaulted and harassed by more than 2,000 men in Cologne’s city centre, as well as in public celebrations in Hamburg, Dortmund and other cities.¹¹⁸ The vast majority of the perpetrators were identified as from a migrant background, largely from Morocco and Algeria, including many who had arrived as asylum-seekers or had entered the country illegally. By July the following year, only four perpetrators had been convicted.¹¹⁹

The attacks came during the most volatile moments of the 2015–16 migration crisis and contributed to a significant hardening in public opinion.¹²⁰ However, much of the public anger both within and outside Germany was in fact directed towards the Federal Government and the media, which were accused of deliberately avoiding addressing the issue or delaying reporting, contrary to public interest.¹²¹ Public television channel ZDF later apologised for the “clear misjudgement” in its hesitancy, admitting that it had failed to report on the incidents despite holding sufficient information.¹²² The incident has, more than any other, strengthened the narrative of a ‘Lügenpresse’ (lying press), which has become a siren call for the populist and far-right parties against German institutions.

An inconsistent stream of official statistics from the German states has also painted a dire, if confusing, picture of the representation of migrant arrivals in criminal offences. A report from

North Rhine-Westphalia showed a 10 per cent increase in crime between 2014 and 2017, and attributed 92 per cent of the jump in offences to refugees¹²³. A separate government-funded report from Lower Saxony found similar spikes in violent crime between 2015 and 2016, of which 90 per cent was attributed to refugee arrivals.¹²⁴ The fact that the migrants and refugees who arrived during the crisis in 2015-16 were predominantly young males – the demographic most likely to engage in crime across the population as a whole – undoubtedly has contributed to their over-representation. Nonetheless, these isolated reports have caused alarm in a country struggling to maintain its optimism in the face of an increasingly polarised political environment, and been used as an evidence base of widespread conspiracy by far-right campaigners across the globe.

Former Capitol Hill staffer-turned-firebrand Austin Frank wrote on his polemic right-wing 'Today in Politics' blog:

Globalists will have you believe there are literally no downsides whatsoever to their policies. This is because globalists will blatantly and shamelessly lie to spread propaganda about their policies ... Does it not just feel instinctively true that importing over 1.5 million foreigners from the Third World would increase the crime rate in a given country?¹²⁵

On the website of 'The Trumpet', a news magazine published by a Christian sect, the Philadelphia Church of God, which believes it holds 'predictive powers', Brad Macdonald and Richard Palmer wrote:

Many of the Germans becoming disillusioned with mainstream politics and turning to these groups [populist parties] are not hardcore neo-Nazis ... They are regular, sound-thinking, rational people ... But Angela Merkel's government refuses to give serious attention to these concerns and refuses to tell the truth about the impact the migrants are having and will have on the nation.¹²⁶

Ahead of its 2018 elections, Sweden also found itself under global media scrutiny for the rising incidence of crime in established neighbourhoods of migrant communities, which many external observers sought to link to the nation's decision to accept the highest number of arrivals per capita in Europe in during the 2015-16 crisis.¹²⁷ Characterised by its liberalism and tolerance – and certainly accelerated by the popular outside view of its supreme 'Whiteness' – the notion of the country overrun by lawlessness, crime and declining standards of living has been interpreted by far-right activists as an existential threat to Western civilisation. In this environment, rumours of government suppression of information have flourished, including accusations that sexual assaults by "immigrant gangs" on young women at music festivals have been systematically concealed in a conspiracy with the national media. The *Daily Mail* has reported that the Stockholm police chief Peter Agren, who has previously led operations around such festivals, has since "admitted", "Sometimes we dare not tell how it is because we think it plays into the hands of the Sweden Democrats."¹²⁸

The Swedish Government's response to this reputational challenge was to launch an international media and PR campaign, including sending ministers as envoys to downplay inflammatory reporting – and a tweet from the US President – regarding the existence of 'no-go' zones.¹²⁹ Undoubtedly, international media organisations with their own geopolitical interests – especially Russia Today and Sputnik News – have sought to amplify the reach of such messages, emphasising a relationship between the concealment of migration statistics and endemic government corruption.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, the political decision to diminish the severity of the alarming spikes in violence in the manner of a tourism campaign was met with a sense of frustration by some groups of citizens, and undoubtedly supported the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats' historic performance at the elections.¹³¹

Efforts to 'fact check' and restore a degree of evidence to public debate around immigration have not always helped to ameliorate public opinion. An article from *Der Spiegel*,¹³² which

sought to refute conspiracy narratives around migrant crime, found that while pernicious German conspiracy website 'Rapefugee' had reported almost 450 sexual offences from refugees, only around a third of these were confirmed to be refugees, and of those actually investigated by police, 26 were refugees. The article does acknowledge that ambiguities remain around the identity of many of the other alleged perpetrators, and states that "each of the crimes committed is, of course, one too many". However, in an environment where many citizens feel frustrated at the lack of consultation in the decision taken to enable such a large volume of refugees and migrants to enter the country, this article symbolises the fundamental challenge facing the German establishment.

An evidence-based challenge to the misinformation around this most emotive of topics only focuses citizens' minds on the fact that "one too many" crimes has happened, 26 times. Individual cases, such as the rape and murder of 14-year-old Susannah Feldman at the hands of a migrant whose asylum claim had been rejected, have brought a powerful human face to the issue.¹³³ The polarising debate that has coalesced around the issue of migrant crime has forced difficult conversations around the intersectionality at play in contemporary interpretations of liberalism, with some feminists forced to confront perilous choices between defending cultural pluralism and denouncing women's victimisation in sexual criminality.¹³⁴ These conflicts have led to accusations that hard-won values of gender equality are being compromised through the deliberate obfuscation of police information and a lack of political solidarity with female victims.¹³⁵

Similar outrage has surrounded the ongoing revelations of scores of large-scale, historical and contemporary grooming scandals in England, which have followed a pattern in which mainly White working-class girls have been trafficked and sexually abused by gangs of predominantly Asian men, of largely Pakistani heritage. As with the Cologne incidents, the investigation, reporting and coverage of the scandals were mediated, and even suppressed, by considerations around the 'divisive' impact that such information could have on community cohesion.¹³⁶ While distancing themselves from the highly charged public rhetoric around the scandals, survivors of the abuse have made clear that cultural elements were indeed in play; in the Rotherham case, girls had been told they were beneath contempt owing to their White non-religious backgrounds.¹³⁷ Even in recent years, some politicians who have drawn a link between the scandals and the cultures and communities involved have been politically ostracised and even threatened with violence.¹³⁸

Ultimately, the considerations taken around the potential for information regarding the cases to be inflammatory has only served to heighten the public focus on the ethnicity of the perpetrators, as distinct from other cases of child sexual exploitation. Perhaps seeking to redress the balance in its initial lack of coverage of the scandals, the subsequent extensive media reporting around these cases has also fuelled the false conception that Asian communities are over-represented in sexual crimes.¹³⁹ Moreover, the hesitancy among politicians from the major parties to discuss the grooming incidents - the scale of which necessarily prompts a high degree of public interest - has created space for divisive voices on the fringes to 'own' the issue, with former football hooligan-turned-populist-firebrand Tommy Robinson placing it at the centre of his campaigning.¹⁴⁰ As Nazir Afzal, a leading prosecutor who has worked on both the 'Asian grooming' cases and myriad other high-profile cases involving White paedophiles and abusers, has emphasised, the critical issue at stake is the way in which young women have consistently not been protected and the silence that has formed around these most pernicious forms of abuse.¹⁴¹

It should be noted that crime statistics in all nations - particularly those pertaining to sexual crimes - are especially prone to gaps and errors of data, as they are so reliant on victims reporting

incidents, to which they continue to face many structural, emotional and institutional barriers.¹⁴² Researchers have highlighted how Sweden's disproportionately transparent crime measurement practices mean it appears to be especially dangerous for women – a fact that has been repeatedly highlighted by populist and tough-on-immigration leaders, such as Donald Trump and Nigel Farage.¹⁴³ On the issue of rape, for example, the widening of the country's legal definition of sexual assault, and the commendable level of support and the absence of shaming experienced by crime victims have raised levels of reporting compared to other countries.¹⁴⁴

To conclude, public institutions have performed poorly at monitoring and disseminating authoritative information about immigration in some countries – partly as a result of misguided institutional decision-making, a hyper-awareness of political considerations, and the inordinate level of scrutiny focused on the issue of immigration. The resulting vacuum has given space for non-state actors – including the media – to seek to lead an evidence-based discussion; however, the data gaps that have persisted have created an incomplete picture of the true context around many highly charged associated issues, including crime. The caution and hesitancy that has encouraged governments to de-prioritise transparency has proven detrimental to the quality of evidence and rationality of debate around the topic of immigration.

Human and System Error

Much of citizens' exasperation with immigration policy stems from the fact they find it difficult to understand why politicians have been so sluggish to respond to public concerns. There was a direct correlation between rising levels of immigration in the UK and public concerns about immigration,¹⁴⁵ and while Britain's membership of the European Union was frequently blamed for the lack of Government responsiveness, in reality, non-EU migration had also been growing.¹⁴⁶

The perceived inaction on this issue, which masked internal decisions around the delicate trade-offs between economic and social considerations, led many citizens to conclude that the only possible explanation was that the Government itself was involved in some level of conspiracy.

This theory took on a new level of salience in 2009, when a former Labour speechwriter, Andrew Neather, wrote an article in the *Evening Standard* entitled, 'Don't listen to the whingers – London needs immigrants'.¹⁴⁷ In the article, Neather wrote:

What's missing [from political debate] is not only a sense of the benefits of immigration but also of where it came from. It didn't just happen: the deliberate policy of ministers from late 2000 until at least February last year, when the Government introduced a points-based system, was to open up the UK to mass migration.

Neather also revealed that he had authored a landmark speech for then-Immigration Minister Barbara Roche – which by this point had become the subject of much condemnation from those concerned about rising immigration levels – that had called for “a loosening of controls”. Neather went on to describe the “driving political purpose” behind the speech, which was intended “to rub the Right's nose in diversity”.

The piece was immediately met with a fierce backlash from conservative commentators, and continues to be invoked as ‘evidence’ of a deliberate effort to enforce large-scale demographic change on an unwilling population.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the political decisions¹⁴⁹ taken around this time have also drawn the ire of more-liberal observers and politicians, many of whom now concede that the ‘naivety’ around the scale of immigration that would come to Britain during the 2000s, especially following the decision to refrain from imposing transitional controls after the accession of Eastern European countries to the European Union,¹⁴⁹ has wrought profound political consequences.

In 2011, Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls singled out the issue of immigration as a critical error of the previous Labour administration, declaring, “When [commentators] say we made mistakes in government, they’re right ... We should have adopted tougher controls on migration from eastern Europe.”¹⁵⁰ Two years later, in 2013, former Home Secretary Jack Straw described the decision to resist transitional controls as a “well-intentioned policy we messed up”.¹⁵¹ Writing in *The Guardian* in 2015, journalists Nicholas Watt and Patrick Wintour acknowledged, “Virtually all politicians now agree that the failure to impose transitional controls was a mistake.”¹⁵² These admissions clearly afford a greater sense of credence to the notion of fallibility than conspiracy in government policy; however, in their palpable regret, politicians have also validated the central premise of many conspiracy theories, which is that immigration can be seen to be ‘harmful’ to society at large.

In Sweden, the unprecedented scale of border crossings during 2015 and 2016 compelled the social democratic government to abandon its uniquely generous and humane migration policy, and a series of legislative and regulatory measures was frantically introduced in October 2015 to tighten borders and restrict access to the country’s welfare system.¹⁵³ In 2016, the Finance Minister Magdalena Andersson was forced to admit that mistakes had been made in the country’s asylum policy, which had not been able to meet the tremendous challenges it had faced. “The integration [of immigrants] does not go as it should,” she said. “We had a problem with it before the autumn of 2015 (when Sweden accepted a wave of migrants). For me it is obvious that we cannot accept more asylum seekers than we can integrate. It will not be good either for people who come here or for the whole society.”¹⁵⁴

Similarly, in Germany – which had led the way in welcoming refugees during the height of the 2015–16 crisis – the Chancellor was compelled to impose ‘temporary restrictions’ around the country’s borders with Austria.¹⁵⁵ Having assured the German people that the scale of the task of successfully accommodating and integrating such a large volume of people in such a short space of time was well within the state’s capacity, these restrictions signalled that the country’s limits of generosity had been reached, and galvanised those harbouring concerns about the nature of, and the motivations behind, German immigration and asylum policy.¹⁵⁶

The Chancellor’s initial optimism around the country’s ability and willingness to welcome such a large volume of migrants was especially stark when considered against the entrenched legacy of the 1970s ‘guest worker’ programme of labour recruitment, which had been intended to be a stopgap measure but had ultimately resulted in the unexpected, long-term absorption of hundreds of thousands of workers and their families. The incompetence of migration policy design during this era is now regarded as a series of “mistakes, failures, and unforeseen consequences”, with the misplaced expectation that migration was only of a temporary nature, meaning that the government failed to sufficiently invest in social and economic integration measures – with lasting consequences.¹⁵⁷ While citizens may be alarmed at the decision to revisit high-volume migration in such a short period of time,¹⁵⁸ the current administration has sought to learn the lessons of the past, at least in terms of integration policy, pouring billions of public funds into programmes it hopes will unlock arrivals’ economic potential and smooth their social transition.¹⁵⁹

Reactive policies and retrospective *mea culpas* from public representatives have given the impression of governments ‘on the back foot’, which perpetuates the image of migration as an overwhelming force that intrinsically challenges the sanctity of state sovereignty. The changeability of the political winds around migration reflects that the issue is intrinsically complex and challenging for all governments to manage, and also that it has become highly politicised and therefore considerably more likely to be subject to policy-making constructed around political imperatives than many other areas of government oversight. Writing about immigration policy in the United States, academic Douglas Massey notes that “immigration

policies implemented in 1965 and thereafter were not founded on any rational, evidence-based understanding of international migration. Instead, they were enacted for domestic political purposes and reveal more about America's hopes and aspirations – and its fears and apprehensions – than anything having to do with immigrants or immigration per se".¹⁶⁰

There have, of course, also been countless individual failings on a system level. Scores of incidents of border control mismanagement have been welcome fodder for the media, sparking public fury and forcing governments to mobilise swiftly in response. The most emotive of these involve migrants with criminal backgrounds who were mistakenly allowed to enter or remain in a country. Cases such as the separate murders of schoolgirls Alice Gross and Jeshma Raithatha by Latvian migrants to Britain, both of whom held previous convictions of violent crime, were felt to have exposed critical failures in the Government's border control processes, and placed pressure on the Prime Minister to reconsider freedom of movement from the European Union.¹⁶¹ In 2013, John Vine, the Independent Chief Inspector for Borders and Immigration in the UK, revealed that the nation's border control agency was harbouring thousands of cases in backlogs, with standards inconsistently upheld – both to the detriment and suffering of migrants, and, in other cases, at the expense of organisational efficiency and national security.¹⁶²

Other blunders that have eroded trust in the capacity and effectiveness of national immigration systems have involved the processes of deportation, with residents and even citizens entitled to permanent leave to remain persecuted by border control agencies and even forcibly removed. These harrowing individual stories – most emotively and infamously captured in the 'Windrush' deportations in the UK¹⁶³ – have reinforced a broader sense of incompetence and inconsistency in the application of government migration policies. In the case of the Windrush debacle, whereby mainly elderly Britons who had arrived in the country as citizens from the now-former territories of Empire were mistakenly pursued by the Home Office as a result of their lack of documentation, the public outrage led to the resignation of the Home Secretary and an apology from the Prime Minister. The Windrush episode highlighted the nuance in citizens' perspectives on immigration and deportation, with judgements of fairness and humanity balanced against views on migrants' social and economic contribution.¹⁶⁴ Overall, citizens largely blamed Government incompetence for the episode, with dissatisfaction with the Government's performance increasing in the wake of the revelations.¹⁶⁵

So too has the Brexit vote steered attention towards a miserable catalogue of immigration bumbles, including one incident in which 100 long-standing EU residents in the UK found themselves levelled with mistaken deportation notices.¹⁶⁶ Legal charities have also identified numerous cases of EU citizens being deported for relatively minor crimes, such as driving offences, with forced removals overall increasing 20% in the year following the Referendum.¹⁶⁷ The UK's Home Office again found itself on the back foot when it was revealed that it may have falsely accused thousands of foreign students of faking their English language proficiency and deported them as a result, without right to appeal.¹⁶⁸ In Germany, a corruption scandal was identified in the nation's migration processing centre, in which at least a thousand migrants were alleged to have been granted asylum in exchange for cash bribes.¹⁶⁹

While it is probably not possible to expect all human or system error to be removed from the process of managing migration, in the age of social media, such transgressions are increasingly difficult to hide, and every such incident naturally erodes trust and respect in national governments.

Illegal Immigration

Another particular challenge for governments in maintaining their status as the primary information source on immigration is the issue of 'illegal' immigration, which, by its nature, is

difficult to measure definitively. While the exact terminology differs between nations, we can generally define illegal immigration as the entry or continued residence of a person, or persons, who does, or do, not have the legal right to enter or remain resident that country, and/or in a manner that violates their immigration policy. The distinction between ‘illegal’ and ‘legal’ immigration is a fundamental component of border control management in any nation state, and is a critical means of differentiation in the minds of citizens, who overwhelmingly favour ‘legal’ migration flows over ‘illegal’ arrivals.¹⁷⁰

The terminology of ‘illegality’ – and, indeed, in the United States, the highly pejorative description of ‘alien’ is readily employed – emphasises a level of criminality at stake in migration patterns. The British Home Office describes the purpose of its Immigration Enforcement team as “to reduce the size of the illegal population and the harm it causes”,¹⁷¹ implying a clear relationship between illegal immigration and societal damage. In the United States, Homeland Security presents illegal immigration as simply one issue within its broader remit of border security, setting out its mission as, “Protecting our borders from the illegal movement of weapons, drugs, contraband, and people”, seen as “essential to homeland security, economic prosperity, and national sovereignty”.¹⁷²

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the UK admits that it is “impossible to quantify accurately the number of people who are in the country illegally”,¹⁷³ but points to two widely shared studies for a picture of the scale of the country’s illegal population. The first, published by the Home Office in 2005 based on 2001 data, estimated that the total unauthorised migrant population living in the UK was around 430,000. The second, published by the London School of Economics in 2009 based on 2007 data, estimated the figure to stand at 533,000. While the ONS cautions that “the methodology behind this work requires huge assumptions, thus making the estimates largely uncertain”, these two studies have been used on an ongoing basis to extrapolate an ongoing growth in the population in line with broader migration trends. In 2010, Migration Watch, a pressure group chaired by Lord Green of Deddington which campaigns for “sustainable” and “manageable” levels of migration, made its own estimates, which came in at 1.1 million unauthorised migrants.¹⁷⁴ The ONS has not acknowledged this report as part of its evidence base.

In the United States, the illegal immigrant population was estimated in 2014 to stand at between 11 and 12 million people,¹⁷⁵ which represents around 3.5 per cent to 3.8 per cent of the total American population – incidentally, a figure higher than the total population of Sweden. In recent years, the illegal migration flows towards the United States have shifted from primarily Mexicans in search of economic opportunities towards a much greater share of humanitarian arrivals, following a surge in civil wars and violence in Central American countries.¹⁷⁶ The issue has become a central focus of President Trump’s policy platform, with a ‘tougher’ approach – including a decision to separate children from their families at the US–Mexico border becoming the subject of heated public debate.¹⁷⁷

In Germany, the 2015–16 migration crisis focused minds not only on asylum policy, but also on the issue of illegal immigration, which has historically been poorly enforced.¹⁷⁸ Estimates of the size of the unauthorised population prior to the crisis vary dramatically, but it is thought it could have been as high as one million people, with as many as up to a quarter of a million of Berlin’s residents thought to be lacking any formal identity papers.¹⁷⁹ In 2016, the German federal police recorded 167,500 illegal entries into the country, separate to the large numbers arriving to seek to claim asylum – many of whose claims were not approved, although they were not deported.¹⁸⁰ There were, for example, around 13,000 failed deportations in the first half of 2018, with half of those assigned to leave the country going missing ahead of their departure.¹⁸¹

In France, illegal immigration was last formally estimated by the government in 2006, when Nicolas Sarkozy’s government judged the unauthorised migrant population to stand at between

200,000 and 400,000 people, with up to 100,000 more arriving on an annual basis.¹⁸² Since then, the issue has become considerably more visible, with large camps of illegal migrants setting up in Calais and Paris and becoming an unavoidable challenge to law and order officials, and to local and national politicians.¹⁸³ In April 2018, President Macron approved a controversial new Bill to strengthen state powers against illegal immigration, including new prison sentences and an extension to the detention period.¹⁸⁴

Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign took advantage of this factual ambiguity around immigration, and provides numerous examples of anti-immigration sentiments undergirded by conspiracy thinking. For example, isolationist and nativist policies were justified on the campaign trail with accusations that Mexico was sending murderers and rapists to the United States, that refugees were carrying ISIS cell phones, and that there are large networks of terrorists in the United States being hidden by unscrupulous politicians and a compliant media.¹⁸⁵ Many of these conspiracies have continued to fester and catalyse during the ensuing months of his presidency.¹⁸⁶

The ambiguity around the 'true' scale of illegal immigration in many countries has naturally made the issue ripe for hypotheses and estimations from media, citizens and political campaigners who position themselves outside the establishment. Ultimately, it is the principal subject around which governments have had to admit their incapacity to effectively monitor and enforce public policy, enabling the proliferation of wild estimations and speculation as to the government's motivations in 'turning a blind eye'. For this reason, illegal immigration will continue to underpin the endurance of conspiracy theories around the subject of immigration in general.

Mind the Perception Gaps

One of the strongest tropes of efforts focused on countering conspiracy thinking has been to highlight the 'perception gaps' between the public's estimation of migrant populations and the 'reality'. In an evidence-based mindset, this approach clearly demonstrates how widely spread misperceptions are among citizens in almost every Western nation, and the insufficiencies in public knowledge on this issue. A Eurobarometer survey in 2017, for example, found that Britons estimate the foreign-born population at 21 per cent, when it is in fact closer to nine per cent.¹⁸⁷ Such 'mistakes' are reported on with both frustration and bewilderment by many media commentators, held up as evidence of the widespread misinformation and poor education around demographic trends.¹⁸⁸

However, it is also true that many citizens base their perceptions on their lived experiences, or on the views they form based on the political and social information they consume - none of which will necessarily offer the differentiation between different generations of migrants which is critical to the distinction of being classified as 'foreign-born'. Nobel Laureate Robert Shiller has spoken previously of the need for fellow economists to pay greater heed to the 'irrationality' of the human condition and, in particular, to the salience of conspiracy theories and 'narratives' based not on fact, but on perception.¹⁸⁹ An individual may reflect on the people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and/or those who are speaking different languages, whom they see in the course of their daily life and through the media, and draw a conclusion based on these observations.

The language of migration in the media and political spheres has undoubtedly shaped citizens' perspectives on different groups within society, and the term 'migrant' has often been used as a pejorative framing device, which can inflame and distort anxieties.¹⁹⁰ Nonetheless, the process of responding to such surveys necessarily compels citizens to differentiate between groups in their society, and in doing so they are faced with an inference that their 'misperceptions' are informed by a level of racial prejudice or conscious 'othering'. When one considers that the 2011 Census revealed that 80.5 per cent of the British population is now White British¹⁹¹ - itself

an evidence-based fact published by the government body responsible for undertaking the population audit – the perception that citizens may hold that around one-fifth of the population is of an immigrant background cannot be dismissed as entirely unreasonable.

The extent to which these perceptions are systematically mocked, challenged and refuted with ‘hard facts’ by politicians and the media can only serve to strengthen the feeling that public discourse around immigration is governed by a particular orthodoxy that does not align with their own ‘truth’. As such, while research into perceptions is critical to understanding how both social and information environments are shaping citizens’ worldviews, the media and political response to such data can inadvertently strengthen the confusion and polarisation citizens experience around the issue of immigration.

Birth Rates

The environment for conspiracy thinking around immigration has become more fertile as citizens have become more attuned to their countries’ evolving demographics and birth rates – in particular, the widely reported statistics around the decline or stagnation of population sizes in many Western countries.¹⁹² This existential crisis of demography in nation states has moreover taken on cultural dimensions, as citizens are made conscious of differences in family sizes between cultural groups; in particular, the notion that non-Western migrants tend to have larger families than native European or White American populations.¹⁹³ This phenomenon, often viewed as a symbiotic relationship, has found special concern among those anxious about the ‘influence’ of migration on the endurance of liberal, Christian societies and – for some – the distinct identity of ‘Whiteness’ as a specific racial group.

In 2012, the US Census Bureau announced that, for the first time, a greater number of babies had been born that year to minority mothers than to White mothers. This partly reflected the fact that minorities were having more children, but also the fact that they tend to be younger and therefore more likely to be of child-bearing age.¹⁹⁴ While minority birth rates do outstrip the White population, the Institute for Family Studies in the United States has found that birth rates in the nation are falling as a whole fastest among minority populations – particularly among Hispanics.¹⁹⁵ This mirrors the situation in the United Kingdom: while women born outside the UK are considerably more likely to have larger families than native Britons, the fertility rate of both foreign-born and UK citizens is falling to historically low levels.¹⁹⁶

These trends challenge the notion of ‘inevitability’ in the narrative around shifting national demographics. Nonetheless, analysis of US Census population projections published in 2018 suggests that America will become a ‘minority-majority’ country by 2045, regardless of falling birth rates, as the White birth rate will fall to unsustainable levels.¹⁹⁷ A similar study from Pew Research focusing on the Muslim populations in Europe found that, even if all Muslim migration were to be stopped – a drastic, prejudiced and nonsensical policy approach – the gulf between the birth rates of the Muslim and white communities means that Europe’s existing Muslim population would be expected to increase by 7.4 per cent by 2050.¹⁹⁸ Aside from cultural factors, fertility rates appear to be intrinsically linked to both integration and poverty; communities where foreign-born women become more economically active and independent tend to have fewer children.¹⁹⁹

Many of the populist parties in Europe have explicitly promoted the notion that native women should be procreating as a ‘national duty’, drawing direct links with the issue of immigration. In the 2017 German election campaign, the far-right AfD Party sought to counter the narrative of migration as a solution to declining fertility, with a series of advertisements featuring a pregnant woman’s stomach and the slogan, “New Germans? We’ll make them ourselves”.²⁰⁰ This focus on native reproduction has been echoed by Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, who warned of

being “wiped away, our population replaced and our culture annihilated”, and has fed into the policies of the Polish and Hungarian governments, which have introduced new family-focused tax incentives, state funding and parental support.²⁰¹ The politicisation of the issue of demographic decline, especially when it is framed in cultural terms and positions migration as an existential threat, has undoubtedly bolstered conspiracy theorists and their ‘clash of civilisations’ narratives, while also increasing the alarm felt among the broader population.

Mired in Conflicted Discourse

Unlike many other aspects of government policy, the issue of immigration is especially fractious in public debate because it appears uniquely immune to consensus positions of evidence and argument. For example, in the 2016 Referendum campaign, Vote Leave – the official campaign of the ‘Leave’ vote – published a briefing which presented a series of ‘facts’ around immigration. These included statements such as, “We cannot stop criminals entering Britain from Europe while job creators from non-European countries are blocked.” These ambiguous claims held a degree of truth, but they were also met with counter-arguments from the Remain side – including the Government – which pointed out the UK’s capacity to wield criminal checks,²⁰² and the fact that immigration from non-EU countries still represented a significant proportion of total inflows.²⁰³ In this single document we see the challenge for governments seeking to assert a monopoly of proof, when ‘facts’ are presented as matter of interpretation and conjecture.

The language employed by governments and politicians around immigration is also critical to both the formation of public opinion and the conception of evidence around migration statistics.²⁰⁴ For example, during President Obama’s term in office, illegal migrants who arrived with their families as children were described as ‘Dreamers’, given dignity and agency that helped support policy pathways towards legitimising their immigration status. Following the election of Donald Trump, this softening of rhetoric ceased to be promoted by the highest levels of government, and gave way to a more polarised debate focusing more on border control than on social and economic contribution. Right across the West, diverse populations of migrants are often collectivised in terms that focus solely on their economic contribution, or alternatively on their social costs.²⁰⁵ The volatility and inconsistency ascribed to political rhetoric on immigration, and the tendency to lionise or condemn migrants as a homogenous group, means that citizens’ varied and complex views on the subject can be accelerated, activated and concentrated with astounding rapidity into ‘movements’.²⁰⁶

Conspiracy theory websites and online communities have become increasingly adept at drawing on mainstream media and government sources as reinforcing evidence to support their views. In many cases, information is collated selectively to emphasise the inherent biases in play in the framing choices of politicians and journalists, and to suggest that they are informed by hidden motivations to forcibly conceal information that could give power and credence to dissenting opinions. Alt-right conspiracy website ‘Zero Hedge’²⁰⁷ – a former financial blog, which now describes its mission as ‘to provide analysis uninhibited by political constraint’ – provides a forensic catalogue of ‘evidence’ about migrant crime in Germany, alongside statements from politicians and media articles, presented as contradictions confirming a deep-state-level of conspiracy to obscure the truth. “Unfortunately,” it argues, “these claims and assurances now seem like nothing more than liberal pipe-dreams to push through a pro-immigration policy in Germany.”²⁰⁸

The ‘Generation Identity’ website in the UK employed similar tactics in vehemently refuting accusations levelled against it by an article in the *Independent*, declaring that the weight of evidence regarding immigration meant it could not be accused of “peddling conspiracy theories”. The website claims:

Since the 1990s, major cities in the U.K. have undergone a demographic transformation leading to an ethnic British minority in our capital city, with similar situations in the other large urban areas. A recent government report into education in the UK found that 30% of primary school children are from a migrant background. Outside of a few isolated suburban and rural areas, the Great Replacement has been a fact for a number of years now. Anyone seriously denying this in 21st century Britain must be wilfully blind.²⁰⁹

In drawing together disparate information from legitimate news organisations, websites and blogs such as these thrive on fuelling a sense of contest, confusion and dysfunction around immigration policy, and in doing so they underscore the immense challenge facing governments and other political institutions in ‘gatekeeping’ representative and accurate data.

Discussion and Conclusion

Immigration has become one of the most singularly defining issues shaping Western political cultures over recent years, and unless governments can regain their citizens' trust in their capacity to be responsive to public opinion, to effectively enforce policies and to uphold standards, they will continue to find themselves increasingly disadvantaged in the broader social debate around this topic. While condemning the rationality and the nature of many of the conspiracy theories that are proliferating around immigration, and, of course, their dangerous potential consequences, it must be acknowledged that governments have played an active role in giving rise to a landscape so fertile to their construction.

Through human and system error, the deliberate concealment of information and the proactive shaping of polarising narratives, governments have helped give fuel to citizens' burgeoning unease and suspicion, and bolstered the fortunes of those seeking to capitalise on such failures for their own political, financial or ideological ends. It must be possible in liberal democracies to confront the fact that there is some element of truth underpinning the notion that governments have not always been truthful, or effective, in their management of immigration policy, and in doing so, to also draw a distinction between this reckoning and the racialised misinformation being promoted by conspiracy theorists, which threatens to incite violence and embed divisions in our societies that will be tremendously challenging for governments to overcome.

The survey results undertaken as part of this paper clearly demonstrate that conspiracy theories addressing government obfuscation around the social and economic impacts of migration are now mainstream positions in both Britain and the United States. Moreover, many citizens also identify a 'conspiracy of silence' around immigration, extending beyond their governments to encompass the entire nexus of media and political cultures. In these findings, we can see the extent to which the traditional parties of government on both the centre-right and centre-left have lost control of the narrative around immigration, and also appreciate the scale of the challenge they face in reclaiming an authority of evidence and rhetoric on the issue.

The clear distinctions between different party-political preferences – and in the case of Britain, voting behaviour in the European Referendum – as well as demographics of age, gender and geography, emphasise the prominent role that these conspiracy theories are playing in the political dynamics engulfing both countries. Despite the 'mainstreaming' evident in these results, they also suggest that the propensity to believe in immigration-related conspiracy theories is highly correlated with a tendency to vote for anti-establishment campaigns, candidates and parties. In this respect, we can consider these findings as consequential to understanding the rise of the salience and influence of such movements.

These findings confirm that the hostile environment in Britain towards immigration, and particularly the relationship between immigration and poor trust in institutions, is more firmly established than in the United States. This is especially evident for the question regarding the intention of political parties to deliberately alter demographics with the objective of electoral gain, in which the considerably higher belief in this conspiracy theory (51 per cent of Britons to 40 per cent of Americans) clearly emphasises the specific link in citizens' minds between the Labour governments of 1997–2010 and the rapid growth of immigration levels during this period. By contrast, despite being the first Black President in American history, Democratic President Barack Obama deliberately avoided emphasising race as an identity marker during his election campaigns and for a significant part of his leadership.²¹⁰

It is also true that attitudes towards the policies under each country's contemporary leadership will play a role in shaping citizens' responses on these issues. What is most curious, however, is

that while Britons are marginally (58 to 55 per cent) more likely to believe that their government is concealing the true cost of immigration – reflecting the broader loss of authority of the ruling Conservative Party on border control – even a majority of Americans living under President Trump’s explicitly anti-immigration administration also subscribe to this conspiracy theory.

Given that President Trump has been forthright in his confrontation of the issue of immigration, and especially illegal immigration, it is especially curious that so many supporters of his own party subscribe to the notion that the ‘Government’ is acting against their interests. A possible conclusion is that these respondents are motivated by their mistrust towards former, successive governments; views on these conspiracies have been shaped over a relatively long period, and remain resilient despite shorter-term shifts in the political and policy environment. Another explanation is that, having campaigned on an anti-establishment platform, many of the President’s voters do not regard him as part of the ‘Government’ per se, which they rather consider to be more of a ‘deep state’ that exists with some continuity outside of the Presidency. Further research will help to advance our understanding of these phenomena.

Finally, examining the results pertaining to Florida, a highly diverse ‘melting pot’ state, we can see that immigration continues to align with conspiracy beliefs. Even in a state shaped by large flows of immigrants from Cuba, Canada, Russia and South America, there exists a widespread belief that immigration inflicts unsustainable and unpalatable costs, which are therefore concealed by government institutions. While the evidence behind ‘contact theory’ on intercultural relations is well established,²¹¹ these findings do not bode especially well for those seeking to liberalise preferences around immigration policy in the United States, suggesting that the extent to which the information environment at a national level has been dominated by hostile narratives has impacted local perspectives, in spite of environmental circumstances.

These results comport with surveys conducted in other Western countries.²¹² For example, survey fieldwork conducted in France in December 2017 shows anti-immigrant attitudes jaded by conspiracy thinking; 48 per cent of French respondents agreed with the ‘replacement theory’, in which the global elite are replacing White people with immigrants from more diverse backgrounds.²¹³ The 2018 YouGov-University of Cambridge study mentioned earlier in the report, which examined the salience of a range of conspiracy beliefs across nine different countries, found that there is a relatively widespread belief in the notion of a plan for the ‘Islamic colonisation’ of Western nations amongst voters for populist parties and movements.²¹⁴

We can conclude that conspiracy thinking around immigration has become a critical tenet of the heightened environment of political and social risk engulfing many Western nations. There is now a palpable urgency for traditional parties to regain control of the policy landscape and the political conversation around immigration – a task that can only be achieved through the consistent, long-term application of open debate, transparency and systematic effectiveness. When we consider that much of the mistrust around immigration policy – among both those favourable to and those concerned about immigration in general – has built over a period of many years, even decades, it is not unreasonable to assume that this process of regaining confidence could take a generation.

It also needs to be acknowledged that the rising levels of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity in Western nations over the past 20 years in particular will make it difficult for countries that were previously relatively ethnically homogenous to return to the same social and political settlement they once possessed. These transformations are significant – forces of tremendous opportunity, in terms of enriching cultural life and economic prosperity, but also bearing meaningful challenges in terms of social integration and citizens’ conception of the long-term sustainability of their welfare states. It is not impossible for democracies to function effectively

with diverse populations, nor to unite such electorates around a common purpose. It is, however, extremely difficult to govern when social competition, resentment and fear preoccupies citizens, and when they lose faith in the independence and transparency of their institutions.

Public attitudes towards immigration have formed a central part of the political consciousness in both the United States and the United Kingdom over recent years. These findings indicate the dangers that such opinions can pose to the integrity of our democracies, when politicians are no longer seen to be public servants and agents of change, but rather to be reinforcing a system deemed to be fundamentally unsatisfactory. Politicians from traditional parties must accept that their policies and political choices, however well intentioned, have been instrumental in the erosion of trust and in the 'mainstreaming' of conspiracy theories on immigration. For those who desire to bring the conversation about immigration to a more constructive, less toxic place, and indeed for those who would like to see both countries continuing to experience the benefits migration can bring, there must be awareness that shifts in public opinion will only be realised through first diminishing the resonance that genuine misinformation, paranoia and prejudice have come to hold.

While the dissemination and promotion of conspiracy theories is often naturally led by those outside the political establishment, focusing on the role of social media organisations, or individual movements themselves, will not provide any silver bullets. Rather, governments must consider how they can take a leading role in ensuring that their systems and policies around immigration are, and are seen to be, considerably more responsive, effective and fair.

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