

Economic stagnation, inflation, public debt and bleak prospects for the young are the usual explanations for Europe's fraying political centre, and they are well supported. But a diagnosis that leaves out migration is incomplete. The numbers suggest that the scale and pace of immigration over the past decade, and the way mainstream parties handled it, is a major reason voters have drifted toward the far right, and in some cases away from the centre altogether. It is rarely the only reason, and often not the first one voters name. But it works as an accelerant: it sharpens grievances over housing, public services and wages that the centre was already struggling to address.

The scale of the change

Europe's migrant population is now larger than at any point in modern history. On 1 January 2025, Eurostat counted 46.7 million people in the EU born outside the bloc, or 10.4% of the 450.6 million population, up 1.9 million in a single year. Counting people born in another EU country as well, a Rockwool Foundation analysis of Eurostat and UN data puts the total foreign-born population at roughly 64 million, about 14% of residents, up from around 40 million in 2010.

The distribution matters as much as the total. Germany hosts 17.2 million foreign-born residents, France 9.6 million, Spain 9.5 million and Italy 6.9 million. Eurostat finds that these four countries, with 57.8% of the EU's population, hold 69.7% of its foreign nationals. At the other end, foreign-born residents are under 5% of the population in Poland (2.6%), Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia.

The Distribution Imbalance: Where Migrants Live vs. Where They Don't

Despite representing 14% of the total EU population, foreign-born residents are highly concentrated in four western nations, leaving a stark east-west divide.

Source: Eurostat / Rockwool Foundation (2025)

Speed may matter more than stock. Spain's foreign-born population has grown by about 665,000 a year since 2022, according to a Financial Times analysis, taking it from roughly one resident in twenty to nearly one in five within a quarter-century. Germany took in around 1.1 million asylum applicants in 2015 alone, in a country that for a decade had received only 40,000 to 50,000 a year. Britain's net migration hit a record of roughly 900,000 in the year to early 2023, against about 184,000 in 2019.

Germany: the clearest before-and-after

The German case is the closest thing the data offers to a natural experiment. In August 2015, when Angela Merkel declared "we can do this," the Alternative for Germany polled around 3% and was still largely a party about the euro. Between 2015 and 2016 some 1.16 million people lodged first-time asylum applications. By the 2017 federal election the AfD entered the Bundestag with about 13% of the vote. Across 2015 to 2024, Germany registered 2.6

million first-time asylum requests, over a third of all EU applications in that period.

The German “Natural Experiment”: Asylum Surges and the AfD

While first-time asylum applications spiked dramatically in 2015 and have since fallen, the political momentum of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) continued to climb long after the initial flow subsided.

Source: EU Asylum Agency / German Federal Election Polling

CDU's Norbert Röttgen argued that the party's embrace of large-scale immigration alienated traditional conservative voters and opened space for the AfD. The polling averages, with the AfD at about 28% and the CDU/CSU near 20%, support that view. So is public opinion: a January 2025 poll found 68% of Germans wanted fewer asylum seekers admitted.

Two qualifications are important. First, the AfD's rise has other roots, including the eurozone crisis, reunification-era regional disparities in the east, and distrust of the established parties. Second, the flow itself has since fallen. The EU asylum agency reports that applications across the EU, Norway and Switzerland fell 19% in 2025 after an 11% drop in 2024, with Germany's intake (163,000) down 31%. The political damage, in other words, has outlasted the flow that caused it, which is typical: voters respond to perceived loss of control long after the numbers improve.

What voters say, and what they believe

Polling shows immigration is rarely the top concern, but it is nearly always in the top three. YouGov's June 2026 tracker found the economy leading in France (46%, with immigration at 28%), Germany (41%, immigration 25%) and Italy (health first at 42%, immigration 23% alongside crime). In Spain, housing led at 52% with immigration second at 31%. In Britain, immigration topped the list at 38%, just ahead of the economy at 37%. Immigration was the only issue in the top three in all six countries surveyed.

Competing Crises: What Voters Actually Care About

Immigration is rarely the absolute top concern for voters, but it consistently ranks in the top three—acting as a political accelerant for primary economic and housing grievances.

Source: YouGov Tracker (June 2026)

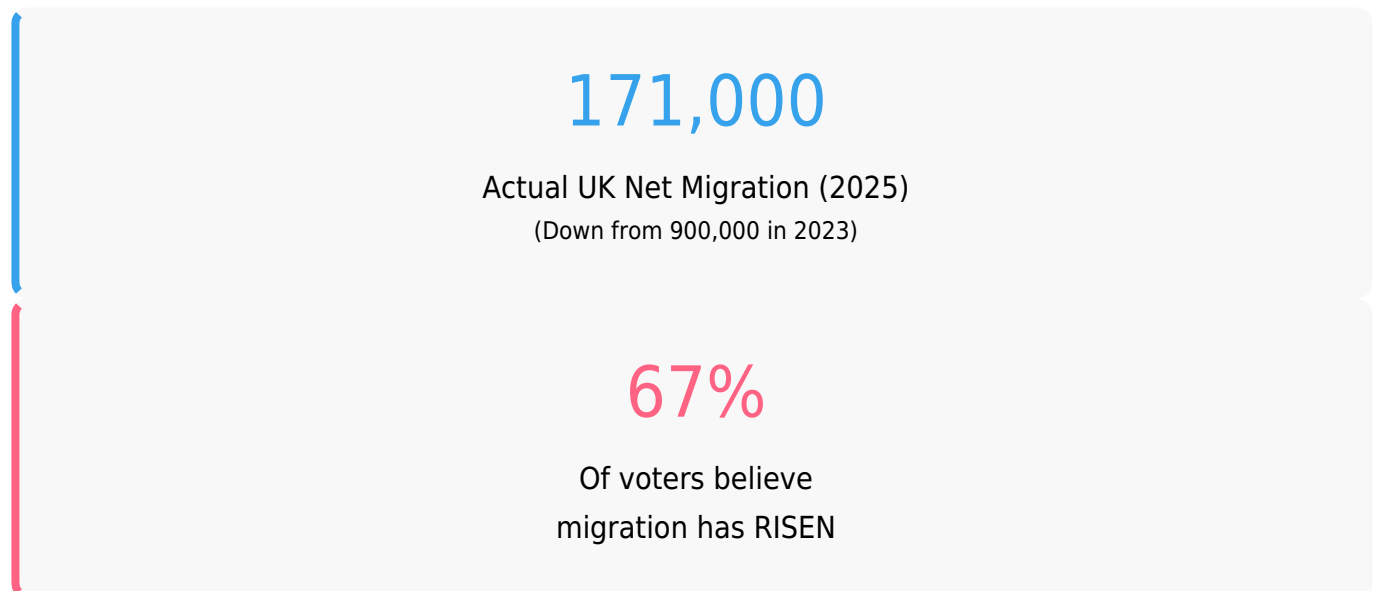
That pattern fits the our thesis and complicates it. Cost of living and growth come first for most voters, and the far right's own strategists know it: reporting on France's National Rally notes that its stated priority "emergency" is cost of living, ahead of security and immigration. Yet immigration is the issue on which the far right holds the clearest advantage. In a recent French poll, the National Rally was the most trusted party on immigration at 46%, against 30% for the Republicans and 25% for all the major left parties combined. Roughly 70% of French respondents said there are too many immigrants, including two-thirds of centrist voters.

Perception also runs ahead of reality in ways that sustain the issue. In Britain, net migration fell by more than two-thirds from its peak, to 171,000 in 2025 according to the Office for National Statistics, yet 67% of voters in a More in Common poll believed it had risen. Visible

symptoms, such as small-boat arrivals (41,472 in 2025, the second-highest on record) and asylum hotels, shape impressions more than net migration figures do.

Perception vs. Reality: The UK Migration Disconnect

Even as net migration in the UK plummeted by more than two-thirds from its 2023 peak, highly visible symptoms like small-boat arrivals have led a massive majority of the public to believe migration is still rising.



Source: Office for National Statistics / More in Common

In France, foreign nationals are 8.8% of the population, below the EU average of 9.6%, yet legal entries rose from 247,000 in 2017 to 376,000 in 2025, with only 13% for work. Voters need not be misinformed to be uneasy: the composition of migration, not only its volume, matters.

What the research tells us

Economists have tested the link between immigration and far-right voting in several countries, and the weight of evidence is that it exists but depends on conditions.

- Austria. Halla, Wagner and Zweimüller found that the arrival of immigrants in a community had a significant effect on its vote for the Freedom Party, explaining roughly a tenth of regional variation in vote changes. The effect came from low- and medium-skilled immigration; high-skilled immigrants had no effect or a negative one. They also found evidence of reduced “compositional amenities”, with Austrian children commuting farther to school and fewer daycare resources in high-inflow communities.
- Cross-country attitudes. A 2024 Korean study of multi-country survey data found that a preference for immigration barriers retained strong explanatory power for far-right voting even after controlling for education, income, employment and industry exposure. In other words, the vote is not just economic distress by another name.
- Britain. Research on eastern European migration to London found that the far-right response depended on local housing costs and on which far-right party was on the ballot. The effect was not uniform.
- Finland. A study of municipalities found the opposite: inflows of economic migrants reduced far-right support, with the lost votes going to pro-immigration parties.

The literature's own summary is that most studies find a positive effect, but results vary with the type of migrant, the local economy and the party offering. That variation is informative. It suggests the vote is driven less by migrants' mere presence than by whether newcomers are perceived as competing for scarce housing, jobs and services, and by whether voters believe the system controls the flow.

Where migration meets grievances

The drivers of discontent: low growth, inflation, debt, poor prospects for the young, and a state that no longer “takes care of the drains.” Migration does not replace these; it interacts with them.

Spain is the starkest illustration. Immigration has been central to its economic performance: it accounts for a quarter of net new jobs in the EU since 2020, with around 70% of Spanish jobs created since 2019 going to foreign-born workers, and economists credit it with nearly half of 2023-24 growth. Yet the same inflow has collided with a housing market that has built far too little, with an estimated shortfall of around 700,000 homes over a decade. Housing is now Spaniards' top concern, immigration is second, and Vox, which the FT reports is now third in the polls and which *El Post* says exceeds 17% in some surveys, has linked the two. A younger voter who cannot find an affordable flat is available to a party that blames arrivals, even if construction rules are the larger culprit.

The Spanish Paradox: Economic Engine vs. Housing Shortfall

Spain illustrates the “drains” problem: macroeconomic success driven by immigration colliding head-on with a localized lack of infrastructure and affordable housing.



70%

Of all Spanish jobs created since 2019
went to foreign-born workers

An infographic with a light gray background and a vertical orange bar on the left. The number '700,000' is displayed in large orange font. Below it, the text 'Estimated shortfall of housing units over the last decade' is written in a smaller black font.

700,000

Estimated shortfall of housing units
over the last decade

Source: Financial Times / General Economic Data

This is Acemoglu's "drains" problem seen through a migration lens. Public services, schools, clinics and housing are infrastructure with fixed capacity. When population grows faster than capacity, ordinary people experience it as queues and rents, whatever the macro numbers say. The Austrian evidence on daycare and school commutes is a small-scale version of the same mechanism.

The fiscal data adds nuance rather than a rebuttal. The OECD, reviewing 25 member countries over 2006 to 2018, found that on average immigrants contributed more in taxes and contributions than governments spent on their social protection, health and education, and that the net fiscal impact is generally small as a share of GDP. The outcome hinges on how well migrants are integrated into work. But the national average is not what individual voters experience. The costs are local and immediate, such as housing, school places and benefits for new arrivals, while the gains are national and diffuse. A policy can be net positive for the budget and still politically corrosive in the neighbourhoods that absorb it.

Why the centre, specifically, took the

damage

My piece argues that centrist parties lost touch with working-class and young voters. Migration is one of the clearest tests of that disconnect, because it created a gap between where public opinion stood and what mainstream parties offered. In Germany, a majority wanted fewer arrivals while the major parties spent years arguing over how to manage the existing policy rather than whether to change it. In France, most centrist voters themselves say immigration is too high. When a majority position has no major-party champion, a challenger can claim it.

Denmark shows the mirror image and the strongest evidence that the issue is movable. After the Danish People's Party reached 21% in 2015, the Social Democrats under Mette Frederiksen adopted much stricter immigration policies. By 2019 the DPP had fallen to 8.7%, its worst result since 1998, and the Social Democrats led the vote and have governed since. Analysts attribute the far right's decline partly to losing ownership of the issue once others adopted its core policies. The price was real: the party alienated some cosmopolitan urban voters, and critics argue it normalised ideas that were once on the fringe. But it demonstrates that the far right's rise is not inevitable once migration is addressed credibly.

Limits of the argument

Three cautions apply before calling migration "the" cause.

It is rarely the first concern. In every country polled, the economy, health or housing ranks at or above immigration, except in Britain. My central hypothesis, that voters feel economically left behind, stands on its own.

Flows have turned. Asylum applications are down, Syrian claims are down 72%, and British

net migration has roughly halved. Whether the political effect fades with the numbers, or persists as a legacy of the surge, will be one of the quiet tests of the coming elections.

Migration can also help the centre's other problems. Europe's ageing populations and low birth rates mean that labour shortages and pension costs will worsen without inflows, as Spain's government argues. A restrictive turn has its own economic price.

Conclusion

The evidence supports a more precise claim than "immigration explains the rise of the far right," and a stronger one than "immigration is incidental." Migration at the scale and speed Europe has seen since 2015 has raised the salience of local pressures that governments, short of money and trust, could not relieve. It has given the far right an issue on which it is often the most trusted party and on which many centrist voters agree with it. It also exposed a gap between what many voters wanted and what mainstream parties offered, exactly the elite disconnect my piece aims to describe.

For centrists, the implication is double-edged. The data suggest that credible control of flows, paired with visible investment in housing, schools and integration, can take the issue away from the far right, as Denmark did. But it also suggests that arguing about migration in isolation misses the point. The voters who move to the far right are reacting to a bundle of grievances, of which migration is one of the most politically potent, and the parties that address that bundle together are the ones most likely to rebuild the centre.