

## Francesco Pasetti

*Research Fellow, CIDOB*  
*@PasettiF*

Immigration is one of the hot button issues of the upcoming European elections. In fact, according to Krastev and Leonard (2024) migration is one of five “existential crises” that currently trouble European voters, along with the crises of the economy, climate, health and security. The authors say these fears, more than the left-right ideological divide, will determine the outcome of June’s vote.

What is striking about the immigration issue compared to the other crises is how it looms so large in the political debate, to the extent that in several national contexts the European elections have come to be considered a referendum on immigration. In France, Jordan Bardella, right-hand man to Marine Le Pen and head of the National Rally ticket, was unequivocal at the launch of his party’s election campaign: “It is quite clear [these elections] are a referendum against being inundated with migrants” (Bassets, 2024).

### The power of anti-immigration discourse

Reflecting on the importance of the migration issue in the political debate also leads one to consider what lies behind a political discourse that is fundamentally hostile towards immigration. The question is even more intriguing if we consider the electoral weight the migration issue carries, which is significant, but still relative and less important than the other crises, according to Krastev and Leonard’s research. It is more baffling still if we bear in mind the contribution immigrants make to European society and the member states, for example in terms of demography (helping to offset an ageing population), economics (satisfying demand in specific sectors of the market) and welfare (via net fiscal contributions) (Kancs and Lecca, 2017 and OECD, 2022).

If we accept that the migration debate is fundamental to understanding the European political context, we need to ask two questions. Why is immigration so decisive in the political debate? And why do people speak so much and so negatively about immigration?

What is striking about the immigration issue compared to the other crises is how it looms so large in the political debate, to the extent that in several national contexts the European elections have come to be considered a referendum on immigration.

There are several reasons. Exploring them prompts profound reflection that transcends the current electoral climate and raises questions about the future of the European Union (EU).

The first reason relates to the rise of right-wing and radical right-wing populism, which has made the fight against immigration its main propaganda and electoral hobbyhorse. In a nutshell, there is so much talk about immigration (and so much of it is negative) because it has increased the political and institutional clout of those who chose this discourse. This trend is playing out in the European political arena via the growth of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) parties and their groups in the European Parliament. These parties and parliamentary groups share the same anti-immigration discourse, which rests on the fear of a vanishing national identity and is forged in the logic of us against them. According to the latest polls (Cunningham et al. 2024, Garsha, 2023), ECR and ID together could win 23% of the vote and become the second biggest political force in the chamber. ID's gains would come from the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, which continues to grow in the wake of its victory in the national elections, and S.O.S. Romania, which could win two seats. This would make it the third biggest parliamentary group. If, moreover, Fidesz in Hungary finally decides to join the ECR (whose president is Italy's Giorgia Meloni), its group in the European Parliament could secure a further 18 seats. Parties on the radical right are currently leading the polls in countries like Austria, Italy, France and Poland, and impressive results are expected in Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

The second reason, which is closely related to the first, concerns the attention that someone who speaks (so much and so negatively) about immigration captures. And it is connected to the twisted relationship between politics and the media. Ruth Wodak, one of academia's most respected voices regarding the political discourse on immigration, provides a clear explanation in her book *The Politics of Fear*. In an era of "media democracy" – where words trump facts and the political process of democracy is increasingly subject to individual, media-savvy performance – anti-immigration rhetoric triumphs in media outlets thanks to a perverse process. Confronted with a political representative's racist or xenophobic remark, the media cannot win. If, on the one hand, they choose not to report it, it might be perceived as censorship; if they do choose to report it, meanwhile, they inevitably end up helping to further its dissemination. This allows radical right populist parties to set the agenda and distract the media and the public from other important issues (Wodak, 2015).

The third reason is rooted in a feature of Western democracies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which connects the rise of parties on the radical right with the politics of identity. Gennaioli and Tabellini (2023) explain this very well in a recent article focusing on the United States. They show how a switch in the electorate's social identity, from class to culture, accounts for: one, growing conflict over identity issues among voters and parties and, two, a simultaneous attenuation of political conflict over matters of equality (despite rising inequality). In short, voters at the ballot box attach increasing importance to identity and cultural issues compared to those relating to economics and class. This change in voter demand

has been reflected in party political supply in terms of programmes and propaganda. It is in the shift from the politics of redistribution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the politics of recognition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – in the words of Nancy Fraser (1997) – that anti-immigration rhetoric is bolstered as a central and *necessary* component of the political contest. The near synchronous rise of Donald Trump in the United States, Brexit in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen in France and Matteo Salvini in Italy is a clear illustration of the extent of the process, and its structural nature.

The final reason concerns the absence of political scope for an alternative discourse on immigration and is linked both to the dynamics of the traditional left-right axis and to relations between the old mainstream parties and the new populist parties on the radical right. Gennaioli and Tabellini, again, explain the first aspect in their study. Another consequence of the shift in voters' social identity, from class to culture, is a realignment of lower-class voters from the left to the right. On the one hand, this new identity-based and nativist electoral demand is an incentive for right-wing parties to push anti-immigration rhetoric to lure the lower classes; on the other, inevitably, it is a disincentive for left-wing parties to promote an alternative discourse and risk losing ascendancy over that same electorate. In short, if a clash of civilisations replaces the class struggle, left-wing parties will find it hard to come forward with alternative discourses and policies on the migration issue.

Lastly, the parties on the radical right have a “pull effect” on the mainstream parties (particularly those that sit between the centre and centre-right), drawing them to similar positions on migration issues. Kyung Joon (2015) details this dynamic, analysing the evolution of the main political programmes in 16 European countries over three decades spanning the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Yet one only need look at recent statements by European People's Party exponents. “Our national identity is open but not for sale,” they said in early March, auguring a restrictive shift on migration with a view to staunching the leakage of votes to parties on the radical right (Sahuquillo, 2024). Whether it is from the left or from the centre-right, the path to an alternative discourse on immigration is a blind alley.

Voters at the ballot box attach increasing importance to identity and cultural issues compared to those relating to economics and class.

## The consequences of the election result

After the upcoming elections, populist voices on the radical right will be heard louder than at any time since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 (Cunningham et al., 2024). The polls would appear to leave no room for doubt. The rise of the right, reflected in the upsurge of ID and ECR, will come at the expense of the rest of parties, which to a greater or lesser degree will all see their parliamentary representation diminish. The shift to the right of the parliament's ideological centre of gravity augurs the entrenchment and institutionalisation of the anti-immigration discourse.

The repercussions of this election result, however, will be felt not only in terms of discourse, but also in concrete policies. On immigration, it will be crucial to see how the parliamentary makeup impacts the area of civil liberties, justice and internal affairs, where the limited centre-left majorities of today could be supplanted tomorrow by a populist right-

So far, the progression of European migration governance has been a slow but unremitting shift towards the “fortress Europe” project.

wing majority comprising the EPP, ECR and ID. This change could have major repercussions for European migration governance, particularly as far as the safety of migrants and the protection of their fundamental rights such as the right to asylum are concerned.

So far, the progression of European migration governance has been a slow but unremitting shift towards the “fortress Europe” project. Over the course of this journey, European borders have become more inaccessible, migration routes more dangerous, and the security of European citizens has been pursued – ever more blatantly – at the expense of the rights and lives of migrants. The radical right has had a clear impact on this process, framing the political and policy agenda on migration matters in terms of an exclusionary clash between us (Europeans) and them (migrants). To a large extent, however, it has been an indirect impact, exerted from a growing power in the national parliaments.

As of June 9<sup>th</sup>, should the election forecasts prove correct, this impact could also be direct, that is to say, exerted directly from the parliament and the other European institutions. This will probably mean an even more restrictive shift in migration and asylum policies, for example with the outsourcing of international protection procedures to third countries (as in the recent agreement between Italy and Albania) and the complete abandonment of alternative solutions, such as new channels of authorised entry to the EU. In short, it will be another step nearer “fortress Europe” and a step further away from the Europe of rights.

## References

Bassets, Marc. “Le Pen plantea las elecciones europeas como un referéndum sobre la inmigración”. *El País*, March 3, 2024. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-03-03/le-pen-plantea-las-elecciones-europeas-como-un-referendum-sobre-la-inmigracion.html>

Cunningham, Kevin et al. (2024). “A Sharp Right Turn: A Forecast For The 2024 European Parliament Elections”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 523. <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/A-sharp-right-turn-A-forecast-for-the-2024-European-Parliament-elections-v4.pdf>

Fraser, Nancy (1997). *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Post-Socialist” Condition*, New York: Routledge.

Garsha, Mingo (2023). “EU Parliamentary Projection: Le Pen’s Right-Wing ID Rises to Third Place”, *Europe Elects*. <https://europeelects.eu/2023/12/30/december-2023/>

Gennaioli, Nicola and Tabellini, Guido (2023). “Identity Politics”, Working Paper n. 693, WORKING PAPER SERIES IGIER – *Università Bocconi*. <https://repec.unibocconi.it/igier/igi/wp/2023/693.pdf>

Kancs, d’Artis and Lecca, Patrizio (2017). “Long-term Social, Economic and Fiscal Effects of Immigration into the EU: The Role of the Integration Policy”, *JRC Working Papers in Economics and Finance*, 2017/4. [https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/sites/futurium/files/jrc107441\\_wp\\_kancs\\_and\\_lecca\\_2017\\_4.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/sites/futurium/files/jrc107441_wp_kancs_and_lecca_2017_4.pdf)

Krastev, Ivan and Leonard, Mark (2024). "A crisis of one's own: The politics of trauma in Europe's election year", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 521. [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/A-crisis-of-ones-own\\_The-politics-of-trauma-in-Europes-election-year-v2.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/A-crisis-of-ones-own_The-politics-of-trauma-in-Europes-election-year-v2.pdf)

Kyung Joon, Han (2015). "The Impact of Radical Right-Wing Parties on the Positions of Mainstream Parties Regarding Multiculturalism", *West European Politics*, 38:3, 557-576. doi: [10.1080/01402382.2014.981448](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.981448)

OECD (2022), "The Contribution of Migration to Regional Development, OECD Regional Development Studies", *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/57046df4-en>

Sahuquillo, María R. "El Partido Popular Europeo endurece su discurso para frenar la fuga de votos a la extrema derecha". *El País*, March 6, 2024. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-03-06/el-partido-popular-europeo-endurece-su-discurso-para-frenar-la-fuga-de-votos-a-la-extrema-derecha.html>

Wodak, Ruth. (2015). *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270073>

