

In an Age of Right-Wing Populism, Why Are Denmark's Liberals Winning?

Around the world, progressive parties have come to see tight immigration restrictions as unnecessary, even cruel. What if they're actually the only way for progressivism to flourish?



By David Leonhardt

David Leonhardt, a senior writer at The Times, has spent years studying the history of immigration in the United States and traveled to Denmark to report this article.

Feb. 24, 2025

Mette Frederiksen, the prime minister of Denmark, had returned from Ukraine hours earlier and was munching on a baby carrot when I walked into her office on a recent Wednesday afternoon. She laughed as she finished the carrot, evidently not expecting a visitor quite yet.

“I need vegetables,” she explained.

The trip was a whirlwind — a flight into Poland, then a train into Kyiv, all of it kept secret until Frederiksen was across the border. It was her fifth trip to Ukraine since the war began, and she made it to honor the 1,000th day of resistance to Russia's invasion, a day that happened to coincide with Frederiksen's 47th birthday. While there, she visited wounded soldiers in a hospital, and she appeared at a news conference alongside President Volodymyr Zelensky to announce Denmark's latest aid package for Ukraine. Relative to the size of its economy, Denmark has donated more to the war effort than any other country.

Generous support for Ukraine is only one way in which Denmark has become an outlier. Since President Trump won re-election in November, Frederiksen has become a global symbol of opposition to him, thanks to her rebuffing his call for Denmark to turn over control of Greenland. But the main significance of Frederiksen and her party, the Social Democrats, has little to do with aid to Ukraine or a territorial argument in the North Atlantic. Over the past six years, they have been winning elections and notching policy victories that would be the envy of liberals worldwide, and doing so at a moment when the rest of the West is lurching to the right.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has changed laws and marginalized critics to help him remain in office. In Austria, Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and elsewhere, the far right has grown. In Germany's election on Sunday, the governing center-left party finished third, behind the center right and far right. In both Canada and

Australia, polls suggest that center-left governments will lose elections this year. And in the United States, Joe Biden left office with dismal approval ratings, and Trump won the popular vote for the first time last year. In each of these cases, a major explanation is that working-class voters have drifted from their historical home on the political left and embraced some mix of populism, nationalism and conservatism. Over the past several years, there is arguably not a single high-income country where a center-left party has managed to enact progressive policies and win re-election — with the exception of Denmark.

Since the Social Democrats took power in 2019, they have compiled a record that resembles the wish list of a liberal American think tank. They changed pension rules to enable blue-collar workers to retire earlier than professionals. On housing, the party fought speculation by the private-equity industry by enacting the so-called Blackstone law, a reference to the giant New York-based firm that had bought beloved Copenhagen apartment buildings; the law restricts landlords from raising rents for five years after buying a property. To fight climate change, Frederiksen's government created the world's first carbon tax on livestock and passed a law that requires 15 percent of farmland to become natural habitat. On reproductive rights, Denmark last year expanded access to abortion through the first 18 weeks of pregnancy, up from 12 weeks, and allowed girls starting at age 15 to get an abortion without parental consent.

All the while, the country continues to provide its famous welfare state, which includes free education through college (including a monthly stipend of about \$900 for living expenses), free medical care and substantial unemployment insurance, while nonetheless being home to globally competitive companies like Novo Nordisk, the maker of the anti-obesity drug Ozempic. In 2022, Frederiksen won a second term, defying the anti-incumbent mood that has ousted incumbent parties elsewhere since the Covid pandemic. As part of her success, she has marginalized the far right in her country.



Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen of Denmark on election night in 2022 when her Social Democratic Party finished stronger than expected. Nikolai Linares/Agence France-Presse, via Getty Images

But there is one issue on which Frederiksen and her party take a very different approach from most of the global left: immigration. Nearly a decade ago, after a surge in migration caused by wars in Libya and Syria, she and her allies changed the Social Democrats' position to be much more restrictive. They called for lower levels of immigration, more aggressive efforts to integrate immigrants and the rapid deportation of people who enter illegally. While in power, the party has enacted these policies. Denmark continues to admit immigrants, and its population grows more diverse every year. But the changes are happening more slowly than elsewhere. Today 12.6 percent of the population is foreign-born, up from 10.5 percent when Frederiksen took office. In Germany, just to Denmark's south, the share is almost 20 percent. In Sweden, it is even higher.

These policies made Denmark an object of scorn among many progressives elsewhere. Critics described the Social Democrats as monstrous, racist and reactionary, arguing that they had effectively become a right-wing party on this issue. To Frederiksen and her aides, however, a tough immigration policy is not a violation of progressivism; to the contrary, they see the two as intertwined. As I sat in her bright, modern office, which looks out on centuries-old Copenhagen buildings, she described the issue as the main reason that her party returned to power and has remained in office even as the left has flailed elsewhere.

Leftist politics depend on collective solutions in which voters feel part of a shared community or nation, she explained. Otherwise, they will not accept the high taxes that pay for a strong welfare state. "Being a traditional Social Democratic thinker means you

cannot allow everyone who wants to join your society to come,” Frederiksen says. Otherwise, “it’s impossible to have a sustainable society, especially if you are a welfare society, as we are.” High levels of immigration can undermine this cohesion, she says, while imposing burdens on the working class that more affluent voters largely escape, such as strained benefit programs, crowded schools and increased competition for housing and blue-collar jobs. Working-class families know this from experience. Affluent leftists pretend otherwise and then lecture less privileged voters about their supposed intolerance.

“There is a price to pay when too many people enter your society,” Frederiksen told me. “Those who pay the highest price of this, it’s the working class or lower class in the society. It is not — let me be totally direct — it’s not the rich people. It is not those of us with good salaries, good jobs.” She kept coming back to the idea that the Social Democrats did not change their position for tactical reasons; they did so on principle. They believe that high immigration helps cause economic inequality and that progressives should care above all about improving life for the most vulnerable members of their own society. The party’s position on migration “is not an outlier,” she told me. “It is something we do because we actually believe in it.”

As center-left parties elsewhere — including in the United States — try to find their way back to power, they will have to reckon with this dilemma. Immigration is likely to remain a defining political issue in coming years because poverty, political instability, climate change, trafficking networks and social media will continue to push residents of poor countries toward richer ones. Yes, those richer countries, where birthrates have plummeted, will need to admit immigrants to keep their economies functioning smoothly. But the approach that the United States and Western Europe have taken in recent decades has failed.

Immigration has often been chaotic, extralegal and more rapid than voters want. The citizens of Europe, the United States and other countries were never directly asked whether they wanted to admit millions more people, and they probably would have said no if the question had appeared on a ballot. Instead, they revolted after the fact. Trump won in 2016 and 2024 partly by running on a platform of mass deportation. In Europe, the parties of the far right were long the only opponents of immigration, and they have been rewarded with large gains.

For progressives in the United States, Denmark may not be an especially comfortable exemplar. The cruel aspects of Trump’s immigration policy have understandably outraged many people. But in Germany and Sweden, politicians who once criticized Frederiksen’s approach have since begun to emulate it, and for center-left parties around the world, Denmark offers a glimpse at what a different version of the left can look like — more working-class, more community-focused and more restrictive on immigration.

Frederiksen and her Social Democrats have confronted their peers elsewhere with a question: In the modern age, is a restrictionist border policy a prerequisite for successful modern progressivism?

The world is living through a period of mass migration that has no precedent. Until the 1980s, immigrants made up less than 5 percent of the population in many Western European countries. The share has since reached the teens. It has also increased sharply in Australia and Canada. During the Biden administration, the United States experienced its most rapid immigration on record, with a pace of entry that surpassed even that of the peak years of Ellis Island. More than eight million people entered the country, about 60 percent without legal permission. In all, about 16 percent of U.S. residents today were born abroad, exceeding the previous high of 14.8 percent in 1890.

The causes of this surge are more complex than people sometimes realize. Misery, be it from poverty, war or other sources, plays a central role in many individual decisions to leave one country for another. But there is a conundrum at the heart of our age of mass migration: It has coincided with a decline in human misery. Global poverty has plummeted in the 21st century. War and other forms of violence are less common than they were for most of history. Climate change may one day become a dominant cause of migration, but it has not yet. These trends indicate that the recent migration cannot be explained simply by a deterioration of life in the countries that people are leaving. Other factors play a role.

One of them, counterintuitively, is the decline of poverty. Moving to a new country requires resources that the poorest of the poor lack. Many more people now have the money and skills, such as literacy, to undertake the journey than in earlier times. Modern highways and airlines are a factor, too. So is social media. TikTok videos, from migrants and smugglers, offer tips on how to make the journey through Central America or across the Mediterranean. Once people make it to a new country, they can use WhatsApp to encourage their relatives and friends to try. Smartphone technology gives migration a salience that letters and landline phone calls never did.

The final major cause has been government policy in the receiving countries. In the late 20th century and especially the early 21st century, many Western countries loosened their entry rules. The United States overhauled its system in 1965, with a law that was a civil rights victory because it repealed rules that gave arrivals from Western Europe priority over other regions. But the law also had a legacy that its authors had vociferously promised it would not: It vastly expanded immigration, mostly through a loophole that allowed family reunification. In later decades, loosening of immigration rules continued, sporadically.



Residents of Lampedusa, an Italian island south of Sicily, protest the opening of a new tent camp for migrants in 2023. Giorgia Meloni, a far-right politician, became prime minister in 2022 partly by campaigning against high immigration. Her government recently restarted a program to send asylum seekers to Albania, rather than allowing them to live in Italy while officials consider their cases. Valeria Ferraro/Anadolu, via Getty Images

The changes in Europe have been more recent. In 1985, five countries — France, West Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands — signed the Schengen agreement, to allow free movement among them. The pact has since grown to include 27 European Union nations, allowing people from the continent's poorer southern and eastern regions to move to richer areas. The E.U. also allowed more immigration from places outside Europe, partly to supplement its aging work force.

Another factor has been the transformation of the asylum system. Designed after World War II to accommodate wartime refugees, the United Nations expanded it in 1967 to apply universally. The system presumes that anybody who can reach another country should be able to make a case for staying. Sometimes, migrants win asylum. Often, they do not, because they are not political refugees, yet the legal process can take years, by which point they have put down roots. Deportation can be costly and inhumane, and countries have been reluctant to carry it out. A result is another loophole that has contributed to far higher levels of immigration than national laws officially permit.

In earlier eras, some of the biggest concerns about high levels of immigration came from the political left. Progressives worried that it would hurt the most vulnerable members of the society where they were arriving. As A. Philip Randolph, the American labor and civil rights leader, argued a century ago, "The excessive immigration is against the interests of the masses of all races and nationalities in the country." By the late 1960s, however, the

political left was starting to change. Students and intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic were becoming more influential, energized by the movements against nuclear arms, pollution and racial and gender discrimination.

The French economist Thomas Piketty has coined the term “Brahmin left” to describe this new version of progressivism. (Brahmins are the highest caste in India, and Protestant elites in Boston came to be known as Brahmins.) In Piketty’s telling, the term captures the shift of the political left away from its working-class roots toward a more affluent, academic version of progressivism that focuses on social issues and cultural identity rather than economic class. This shift helps explain why the Democratic Party and center-left parties in Europe once won voters without college degrees by wide margins and now lose this same group.

Immigration is a natural issue for the Brahmin left. The old left worried that a labor pool swollen by immigration would undermine unions and lower wages. The new progressives focused instead on the large benefits for the new arrivals. Immigration was a way to help the world’s poor, many of whom were not white. The advocates for the 1965 law in the United States considered it an extension of the civil rights movement. In Europe, the issue was a way to make amends for colonialism. In both places, it was also a response to the failure to protect Jews during the Holocaust.

The Brahmin left paired its arguments for racial justice with economic and cultural arguments. Immigrants start new businesses and provide labor that makes other businesses possible. In doing so, they expand a country’s gross domestic product. They invigorate the countries where they arrive, diversifying food, music, sports, art and other forms of culture.

Illustration by Callum Rowland

By the 1990s and early 2000s, rising immigration became a signature feature of post-Cold War globalization, celebrated by nearly every politician and intellectual who seemed to matter, including Tony Blair, George W. Bush, Bill Gates, Milton Friedman and liberal academics who agreed with Friedman on little else. In 2015, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany famously exhorted her country's citizens to welcome waves of refugees from the Middle East. "*Wir schaffen das*," Merkel said: "We can do this." Think tanks and journalists trumpeted the advantages of immigration. Academic economists shed their usual skepticism about free-lunch arguments and claimed that immigration benefited everyone.

But most voters in the receiving countries were never as enthusiastic. As liberals recognize in other circumstances, a policy that lifts G.D.P. doesn't necessarily benefit everyone. Rapid immigration can strain schools, social services, welfare programs and the housing market, especially in the working-class communities where immigrants usually settle (as happened in Chicago, Denver, El Paso, New York and elsewhere over the past four years). Many studies find a modestly negative effect on wages for people who already live in a country, falling mostly on low-income workers. A 2017 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, intended as a comprehensive analysis of the economic effects of immigration, contains a table listing rigorous academic studies that estimate immigration's effects on native wages; 18 of the 22 results are negative. The Brahmin left sometimes waves away these effects as too small to matter. The workers who experience them feel differently. Corporate executives feel differently, too, which explains why they often push for higher immigration to restrain wage growth.

Of course, racism also helps explain opposition to immigration. But recent history makes clear that discrimination based on skin color is not the only cause of skepticism and may not even be the leading one. Concern often comes from people of the same race as arriving immigrants. The issue became politically sensitive in Britain two decades ago, when the immigrants were largely white Eastern Europeans. In Lebanon, the government has recently deported many Syrian refugees. Immigration was an issue in Taiwan's 2024 election, with one party accusing another of allowing too many Chinese students to enter. In South Africa's election last year, illegal immigration from Zimbabwe became a major topic. In the United States, Trump made big gains among Latino and Asian voters in places where migrants had arrived, such as Queens, the Bronx and South Texas.

These examples can still involve xenophobia — a fear of outsiders, even one disconnected from skin color. But the key point is that rapid, large-scale immigration is almost always unpopular, regardless of who the arrivals are. Hectoring voters to feel differently does not tend to work.

A healthy political debate over immigration would have grappled with its complexities. It would have acknowledged that immigration increases G.D.P. in unequal ways, with the affluent enjoying more of the advantages, while poor and working-class people, including recent immigrants, bear more of the costs. Angus Deaton, a Princeton economist, Nobel laureate and immigrant from Britain, points out that some large sectors where many immigrants work provide services that wealthy people disproportionately use. Restaurant dining, landscaping and construction are all examples. Immigrants have created a larger labor pool, which holds down both wages (hurting workers) and prices (helping upper-income people who dine out frequently and live in large homes with nice yards). As Deaton says, the expanded pool of landscape workers has been good for the well-heeled residents of Princeton, N.J.

But the debate over immigration rarely acknowledged these nuances. Instead, opponents like Trump told dark lies about migrants, while advocates for immigration tried to disallow discussion of its downsides. The advocates' position, in essence, was: More is good, and less is racist. Voters disagreed, and they rebelled.

Protesters gathered in front of The Custom House in central Dublin after a march against Ireland's migration policies in February 2024. The share of Ireland's population born in another country has risen to about 20 percent, from 6.5 percent in 1990. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

The Social Democratic leader in Denmark who has probably spent the most time thinking about this issue is Mattias Tesfaye, the 43-year-old education minister, who himself is a product of an immigrant family. Tesfaye grew up in Aarhus, the country's second-largest city, in the 1980s and 1990s. His father immigrated from Ethiopia, and his mother was a native Dane who worked as a health care worker. As a teenager, Tesfaye was drawn to far-left politics, and he adopted its pro-immigration outlook. He had experienced racism himself, and he initially viewed support for more immigration as tantamount to antiracism.

His journey to a different perspective began at age 16, after he attended a protest outside Aarhus's city hall, he told me when we spoke in his office. The protest was trying to stop a policy that bused children from immigrant-heavy neighborhoods to schools where they would interact with more Danish students. The protesters believed that immigrant children should be allowed to go to school in their own communities, rather than being transferred in the name of assimilation. These politics may sound confusing to Americans, who are used to progressives' being in favor of busing for school integration and conservatives being opposed to it. But the issue cut the other way in Denmark, with

the political right arguing for assimilation and the left supporting culturally distinct communities. It is a reminder that immigration does not fit neatly onto a left-right spectrum.

Even as Tesfaye protested in the city square, he had nagging questions about the cause. At his school, two of his friends were Somali immigrants who seemed glad to have switched to a school where they spent more time with native Danes. It made them more comfortable in their new country and opened new opportunities. Tesfaye's father, by contrast, had never mastered the language or felt at home in Denmark. "I'm stupid in Danish," his father would say. He eventually moved back to Ethiopia.

In the years after the protest, Mattias graduated from a technical high school and became a unionized bricklayer. He quit a far-left political party and instead joined the more moderate Social Democrats, the party with the strongest connections to organized labor. In 2015, when he was 34, he ran for a seat in Parliament and won. His victory was notable because the Social Democrats lost power in the same election, with their weakest issue having been immigration. Support for the far-right Danish People's Party surged, to 21 percent. In response, Tesfaye decided to write a book tracing the history of immigration in Denmark.

The tone of his book is dispassionate, befitting his soft-spoken, considered persona, but its message is clear: By favoring more and more immigration, the modern left betrayed its traditional working-class constituency. The book has become something of a bible for Tesfaye's and Frederiksen's generation of Social Democratic leaders.

Mattias Tesfaye, a member of the Social Democratic Party and the Danish education minister. He has written that "the fear of being accused of racism has often prevented the

party from taking an objective stance on immigration policy.” Johanna Geron/Reuters

Tesfaye starts the story in the 1960s, when Danish business executives began calling for the admission of more foreign workers to alleviate labor shortages. The Social Democratic Party and its labor allies pushed back. “There is only one reason we have foreign workers in Denmark, namely that it pays off financially for businesses,” one Social Democratic member of Parliament said in 1970. A newspaper poll around the same time showed that only 36 percent of Danes favored expanded admission of foreign workers. Most white-collar professionals supported the idea, while a large majority of workers opposed it.

But by the 1980s, Denmark's Social Democrats were gradually becoming more supportive of immigration. In 1983, Parliament passed the Aliens Act, which experts described as Europe's most liberal immigration law. Asylum rules were loosened. Refugees received access to the country's generous welfare benefits. A family-reunification policy allowed relatives to come, too. That policy led to far more entries than forecast, as was also the case in the United States after the 1960s reform. Between 1960 and 2015, the share of the Danish population that was born in another country rose to almost 9 percent, from just 2 percent.

A central theme of Tesfaye's book is that the Danish political establishment spent decades refusing to listen to its own voters. By the early 1980s, the unpopularity of rapidly rising immigration was evident to the politicians who were willing to see it. These politicians tended to be the Social Democratic mayors of the working-class suburbs where many immigrants were settling because housing was more affordable than in central Copenhagen. “We can't take everyone who wants to come here,” Vibeke Storm Rasmussen, a former schoolteacher who was a politician in Albertslund, a suburb filled with small single-family homes, said at the time. “That's why we need to have a discussion about where to draw the line.”

At some elementary schools, more than half of kindergarten students did not speak Danish. Gender dynamics became a flash point: Danes see themselves as pioneers for equality, while many new arrivals came from traditional Muslim societies where women often did not work outside the home and girls could not always decide when and whom to marry. Crime and welfare were also flashpoints: Crime rates were substantially higher among immigrants than among native Danes, and employment rates were much lower, government data showed. (The same has not been true in the United States, where upward mobility among immigrants is higher than average and crime rates are lower.) One source of frustration was the fact that unemployed immigrants sometimes received resettlement payments that made their welfare benefits larger than those of unemployed Danes.

These debates could be fraught. As always, some opposition to immigration stemmed from an irrational fear of outsiders — of people who had a different skin color, worshiped a different religion and spoke a different language than the close-knit Danes. Well-functioning societies push back against this bigotry and make room for newcomers. But the mistake that many mainstream political leaders have made, in Denmark and elsewhere, has been to treat all dissatisfaction with rising immigration as racism. As Tesfaye wrote, “The fear of being accused of racism has often prevented the party from taking an objective stance on immigration policy.”

By the early 2000s, Denmark was experiencing a populist backlash against immigration and, more broadly, globalization. The country voted against adopting the euro in 2000, making it one of the few parts of the European Union that still uses a national currency, the krone. In the 2001 election, the Social Democrats had their worst showing since 1924.

These acts of voter rebellion were a preview of trends coming to the rest of the West. The acceleration of globalization after the Cold War had brought rapid changes and forced many working-class voters to compete more directly with lower-wage workers from around the world. Factories closed. Currencies changed. Brussels issued new regulations. Communities were transformed. Many voters responded by asserting that they were not citizens of the world, as cosmopolitan professionals sometimes like to call themselves; they were citizens of a nation with interests distinct from those of the rest of Europe and the world.

Britain voted to leave the European Union in 2016. Far-right parties expanded across much of Europe. Center-left parties, after embracing globalization and Brahmin leftism, hemorrhaged support among blue-collar voters almost everywhere; in France, the presidential candidate of the main center-left party, which governed the country for most of the 1980s and 1990s, received less than 2 percent of the vote in the last election. In the United States, Trump effectively consolidated the center-right and far right into the Republican Party and twice won the presidency on an anti-elite message. From the moment his political career began in Trump Tower 10 years ago, immigration has been his most salient issue.

In Denmark, 2015 also ended up being a turning point, but with a different outcome for the left. While Trump and Brexiteers were gaining support, Denmark's Social Democrats were reinventing their party. After they lost power that year, they chose Frederiksen as their new leader. She was young and blunt, with a working-class background.

She and her allies, including Tesfaye, took over the party at a delicate moment for immigration. A few months earlier, an Islamic State sympathizer who grew up mostly in Denmark murdered two people in Copenhagen, one at an event celebrating free speech and another at a synagogue. At the same time, the civil wars in Libya and Syria were

sending a flood of refugees into Europe. At one point, about 300 migrants escaped from a Danish school where they were being detained and began walking on a highway. The police temporarily closed the road, and the story dominated the news.

The Social Democratic Party had spent the previous few decades waffling on immigration, sometimes supporting restrictions but mostly favoring expansion. Many voters could not tell what Social Democrats believed and what they were saying to get elected. It has been a common problem for left-leaning politicians around the world. Think of Biden reversing his own liberal border policy in the final year of his presidency or Kamala Harris claiming that she, not Trump, was the true defender of border security. Both Biden and Harris failed to acknowledge that they were switching the Democratic Party's position or that their initial policy was still straining lower-income communities. Their lack of candor struck many voters as unconvincing.

Frederiksen made a clear break with her party's past in 2015. She said that she was wrong to support ever higher immigration previously and that her party should not have ignored the mayors of the Copenhagen suburbs. "They were absolutely right," she said. "My party should have listened." The party set up a working group that spent nearly three years interviewing experts, studying data and developing a new policy. The result was a document called "Retfaerdig og Realistisk," which translates roughly to "Just and Realistic," that the party published in 2018, while a center-right coalition ruled the country.

The new policy had three pillars: tougher rules about who could enter the country, a more rigorous effort to integrate immigrants into Danish society and an expansion of foreign aid to help people in other countries. The Social Democrats also endorsed the immigration restrictions that the center-right government was implementing at the time. Still, Frederiksen and her allies cast their approach as part of a progressive agenda to reduce inequality, one that would foster the sense of community that made citizens comfortable paying high taxes to help their less fortunate neighbors. "On immigration, they moved to the right," says Lars Olsen, a veteran political journalist, "but on many other policies, they moved to the left." Even many critics of the party's shift see it as genuine. "For them, it's not just a strategy," Rosa Lund, a member of Parliament in the leftist Red-Green Alliance, told me. "They mean it."

Like the progressives before the rise of the Brahmin left, the post-2015 Social Democrats argue that high immigration worsens inequality — an argument that has a lot of history on its side. In the United States over the past 150 years, immigration and inequality have tended to move in the same direction, as Deaton, the Princeton economist, has noted. Both rose during the Gilded Age of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Both fell in the middle decades of the 20th century. Both have risen since the 1970s, as they have in Europe. These historical correlations don't prove causation, and many other factors play

important roles, including regulation and tax rates. But the high immigration of recent decades has contributed to inequality. It has expanded the labor pool and weakened the sense of national identity that helps justify high tax rates.

Academic research has documented that societies with more immigration tend to have lower levels of social trust and less generous government benefits. Many social scientists believe this relationship is one reason that the United States, which accepted large numbers of immigrants long before Europe did, has a weaker safety net. A 2006 headline in the British publication *The Economist* tartly summarized the conclusion from this research as, “Diversity or the welfare state: Choose one.”



People attend an anti-immigration protest in London last October. Unhappiness with immigration helped drive support for the successful Brexit referendum in 2016. In last year's general-election campaign, the Labour Party leader, Keir Starmer, won in part by criticizing the Conservative government for not being tough enough on migration. Chris J Ratcliffe/Reuters

Almost immediately after changing their approach to immigration, the Social Democrats began to benefit politically. In the 2019 election, the party reclaimed power, making Frederiksen, then 41, the youngest prime minister in Denmark's history. Once in power, the Social Democrats continued to tighten immigration policy.

Over the past decade, Denmark has strengthened border checkpoints with Germany and Sweden to prevent people without European Union citizenship from entering. (Citizens of one E.U. country can still freely enter another.) It has changed asylum rules so that a temporary crisis in another country is no longer grounds for a permanent stay in Denmark. Authorities, using a national I.D. system, have been aggressive about detaining

and expelling people who fail to qualify for asylum. Denmark has also made the process to receive citizenship more difficult, including requirements that applicants speak Danish at a high school level and pass a test with questions about history and culture.

The most controversial policy has become the subject of a lawsuit at the European Court of Justice. The policy was known as the “ghetto” law when a center-right government enacted it in 2018 and is now known as the “parallel societies” law. Today it evaluates neighborhoods based on five categories: employment, crime, educational progress, welfare rates — and the percentage of residents with non-Western backgrounds. If a neighborhood fares poorly on two of the first four metrics and has at least 50 percent non-Western residents, the authorities take steps to spur integration, such as encouraging others to move into the community. If those efforts fail, the government can tear down housing units to gentrify the neighborhood. The European Court released a preliminary finding on Feb. 13 suggesting that it might strike down the non-Western provision as discriminatory.

Frederiksen told me that many immigrants, of all backgrounds, were thriving. But, she added, “Too many are not willing to be integrated in our society.” While government data show that immigrant families from India, Sri Lanka and Vietnam fare quite well in school and the job market, those from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories fare worse. Some of the statistics are jarring, with sharply higher crime rates and sharply lower employment rates. Frederiksen is particularly concerned about the number of immigrant women whose husbands and communities discourage them from working outside the home. Tesfaye argues that ignoring these integration problems would be irresponsible.

Still, the fact that the law treats people differently depending on their country of origin alarms even some people who support Denmark's other policies. Mahad Yussuf, an East African immigrant and a city councilor in Aarhus, told me that he understood the reduction in immigration levels was here to stay. It has become so popular that many immigrants support it, he said. Nonetheless, Yussuf quit the Social Democratic Party in 2020 and joined a smaller, socially liberal party because he could not stomach the harshness of integration policies. “What bothered me the most was the rhetoric about minorities, especially the rhetoric about people with Muslim backgrounds,” he said. “The tone is making all Muslims suspect.”

The rawness of these debates helps explain why the initial reaction from progressives elsewhere was contempt. Activists and academics in Sweden, Germany and elsewhere described the Danish Social Democrats as sellouts to the far right. Coverage in the international media tended to be withering. When I started reporting this article, some of the Danes I reached were wary of talking because they assumed I was yet another foreign journalist coming to their country to portray them as nativist rubes.

That wariness led me to reflect on the pro-immigration slant in so much of elite culture. Years ago, like many Americans and Brits, I enjoyed the television series “Borgen,” a Danish political drama that debuted in 2010. But until I spoke with Danes about the show during my visit, I had forgotten about the central role that immigration played. The protagonist is Birgitte Nyborg, the leader of a minor political party, who in the first episode quits a center-left coalition on principle because it adopts stricter asylum rules. A series of unlikely events then propels Nyborg to become prime minister, and she must occasionally deal with working-class politicians and immigration skeptics who come off as backward. “Borgen” is both an entertaining show and a piece of Brahmin-left fan fiction. When I mentioned the show to Frederiksen and made this point, she dryly replied, “Maybe that’s the reason why I have never really been into it.”

In real life, Denmark’s new immigration policy has become virtually a national consensus, with overwhelming support. Frederiksen won a new term in 2022 as part of a coalition government. Olsen, the political journalist, showed me a book with detailed Danish electoral maps that contained a remarkable pattern: Since 2019, Social Democrats have again won some lower-income areas far from Copenhagen. It is akin to the Democratic Party winning blue-collar counties in Pennsylvania or Texas.

The Social Democrats have been able to do so because immigration no longer dominates the political debate. As Frederiksen told me, “If we lose the next elections — and maybe we will, I don’t know, of course — then it will not be because of immigration.” The fading of the issue has been particularly damaging to the far right. The Danish People’s Party has fared so poorly in recent elections that a rival far-right party formed, and it has struggled, too. It finished fifth in last year’s elections for European Parliament seats, with only 7 percent of the vote. In the same election, the far right finished second in Germany and the Netherlands and first in France and Italy. “Everybody is suffering from these right-wing parties,” says Marlene Wind, a political scientist at the University of Copenhagen. “In Denmark, we don’t have that.”

Tellingly, the response in Sweden and Germany has also shifted. The initial criticism of Frederiksen’s approach has subsided. Today many Swedes look enviously at their neighbor. The foreign-born population in Sweden has soared, and the country is struggling to integrate recent arrivals into society. Sweden now has the highest rate of gun homicides in the European Union, with immigrants committing a disproportionate share of gun violence. After an outburst of gang violence in 2023, Ulf Kristersson, the center-right prime minister, gave a televised address in which he blamed “irresponsible immigration policy” and “political naïveté.” Sweden’s center-left party has likewise turned more restrictionist.

In Germany — which has experienced at least four recent fatal attacks by migrants who had failed to receive asylum but nonetheless remained in the country — immigration was a central issue in the election campaign this winter. Friedrich Merz, the center-right

leader whose alliance finished first, made restrictive measures core to his message, while the far right had its best showing since World War II. Shortly before the election, Vice President JD Vance inserted himself into the campaign by giving a speech in Munich that criticized European politicians for trying to marginalize anti-immigration parties. It was chilling to hear Vance align himself with Germany's version, known as Alternative for Germany, or AfD, which deliberately echoes Nazi slogans. But he also offered an accurate diagnosis of the far right's appeal. It has risen in Europe, Vance suggested, because mainstream parties "relentlessly ignored" voters and told them that their views were "invalid or unworthy of even being considered."

In many ways, the subject is less fraught in the United States than in Europe. Upward mobility among immigrants in the United States is the norm, and terrorism is rare. These differences offer reason for optimism that the American politics of immigration will eventually calm down. But even in the United States, the numbers matter. When immigration grows so high that it creates turmoil in working-class communities, as happened over the past four years, the issue can shape politics despite the country's impressive record of assimilation.

Protesters in central Copenhagen in 2016. The Social Democrats, long Denmark's largest party, lost power in 2015 partly because of dissatisfaction with rising migration. The party adopted a more restrictionist policy in 2018 and reclaimed power in 2019. Ole Jensen/Corbis, via Getty images

American progressives venerate the middle decades of the 20th century, for good reason. From the wreckage of the Depression, the United States built a prosperous, inclusive economy between the 1930s and the 1970s. Incomes for the poor and middle class rose faster, in percentage terms, than they did for the wealthy. Although racial injustice

remained acute, it receded. The Black-white pay gap began shrinking in the 1940s and shrank even more during the civil rights movement. In Europe, this same period was also good for workers. The French refer to it as *Les Trente Glorieuses*, or the 30 glorious years.

There is one part of this story progressives often forget, however. Immigration was low during these decades. In the United States, a 1924 law sharply curtailed entry from everywhere except a few European countries. The rationale for that law was bigoted, but its effect ended up being broad. It caused a large decline in all immigration because the only countries permitted to send many people to the United States were those, like Britain, that relatively few residents wanted to leave. By 1970, the share of the foreign-born population had fallen below 5 percent, from 13 percent in 1920.

That the era of low immigration was also the era of progressive triumph is no coincidence. The tightness of the labor market in big cities helped Black workers who were part of the Great Migration get jobs they were previously denied. Immigrant families who were already in the country likewise had an easier time climbing the economic ladder. Perhaps most important, immigration receded as a political issue, which shifted the political debate toward economic issues more favorable to the left — as has happened in Denmark over the past decade. The United States felt more like a cohesive nation to many voters, with higher levels of social trust and national pride, and politicians were able to enact higher taxes on the rich and new benefits like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Over the past half-century, the story has flipped. Immigration has surged, and the United States has entered an individualist, conservative epoch. Tax rates have fallen. Working-class incomes have stagnated. Economic inequality has soared. Around the world, there is not one clear counterexample — of a country that has accepted large numbers of newcomers while marginalizing the far right and reducing inequality. Even the partial recent exceptions underscore the pattern. Consider Japan, which started admitting more people in the 2010s without destabilizing its politics, yet from an extremely low base. Even today, less than 3 percent of Japan's population is foreign born.

It's understandable why dreams of mass migration are so hard for some progressives to abandon. The promise of the United States as a beacon for (as Emma Lazarus famously put it) the world's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" remains a stirring one. It may be the most noble American creed of all. We are a nation of immigrants, and we derive enormous benefits from that status. But even during peak periods of immigration, the United States has admitted only a tiny fraction of the people who would prefer to live here than in their home countries. Global polling by Gallup estimates that nearly one billion of the globe's eight billion people would like to migrate, and the United States is their most desired destination. The question has always been what small percentage of would-be Americans this country will choose to accept.

There can be an answer that is both consistent with progressive values and politically sustainable. It was not so different from the answer that many Democrats, including Barack Obama, offered not long ago. It combined a hardheaded approach to border security and deportation with a celebration of immigrants and an effort to expand pathways to citizenship. It welcomed true political refugees. It acknowledged that the country would need immigrants as our own workers aged. It rejected both anti-immigrant racism and the false idea that immigration restrictions were inherently racist. All these policies aligned progressives with public opinion. Only a minority of voters supports the extreme views of Trump. But when forced to choose between radically more immigration and radically less, they will choose less. And if radically more immigration has already happened, some voters will turn into right-wing populists who vote against social programs.

Supporters of mass migration often claim that it is inevitable, stemming from some combination of demography, globalization and climate change. Yet like most arguments for historical inevitability, this one is more wishful than accurate. Countries can exert substantial control over their borders. Japan has long done so. Denmark has recently done so. Biden tightened policy in his last year in office, and border traffic plummeted. Trump has pushed it even lower. If anything, modern technology, such as employment-verification systems, can make enforcement easier than in the past. When immigration advocates say that controlling borders is impossible, they are adopting an anti-government nihilism inconsistent with larger goals of progressivism.

Trump's cruel approach to immigration will create an opportunity for Democrats, much as it did during his first term. If they can fashion a moderate approach, and not only in the final months of an election campaign, they will improve their chances of winning back many of the voters they have lost. But doing so will require real change, not merely different marketing. Much of the Brahmin's left post-election analysis remains tied to the magical idea that working-class voters are simply wrong about mass migration and can be won over with clever narratives rather than substantive policy changes.

These working-class voters implicitly recognize an important truth: A restrained approach to immigration is ultimately progressive because it makes possible the kind of society that progressives want. It fosters a sense of community and neighborliness, while prioritizing the values and interests of vulnerable Americans. Recognizing this connection can help the political left emerge from the wilderness where it now finds itself.

Read by Robert Petkoff Narration produced by Krish Seenivasan Engineered by Quinton Kamara

David Leonhardt runs The Morning, The Times's flagship daily newsletter. Since joining The Times in 1999, he has been an economics columnist, opinion columnist, head of the Washington bureau and founding editor of the Upshot section. More about David Leonhardt

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 30 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: The Migration Paradox