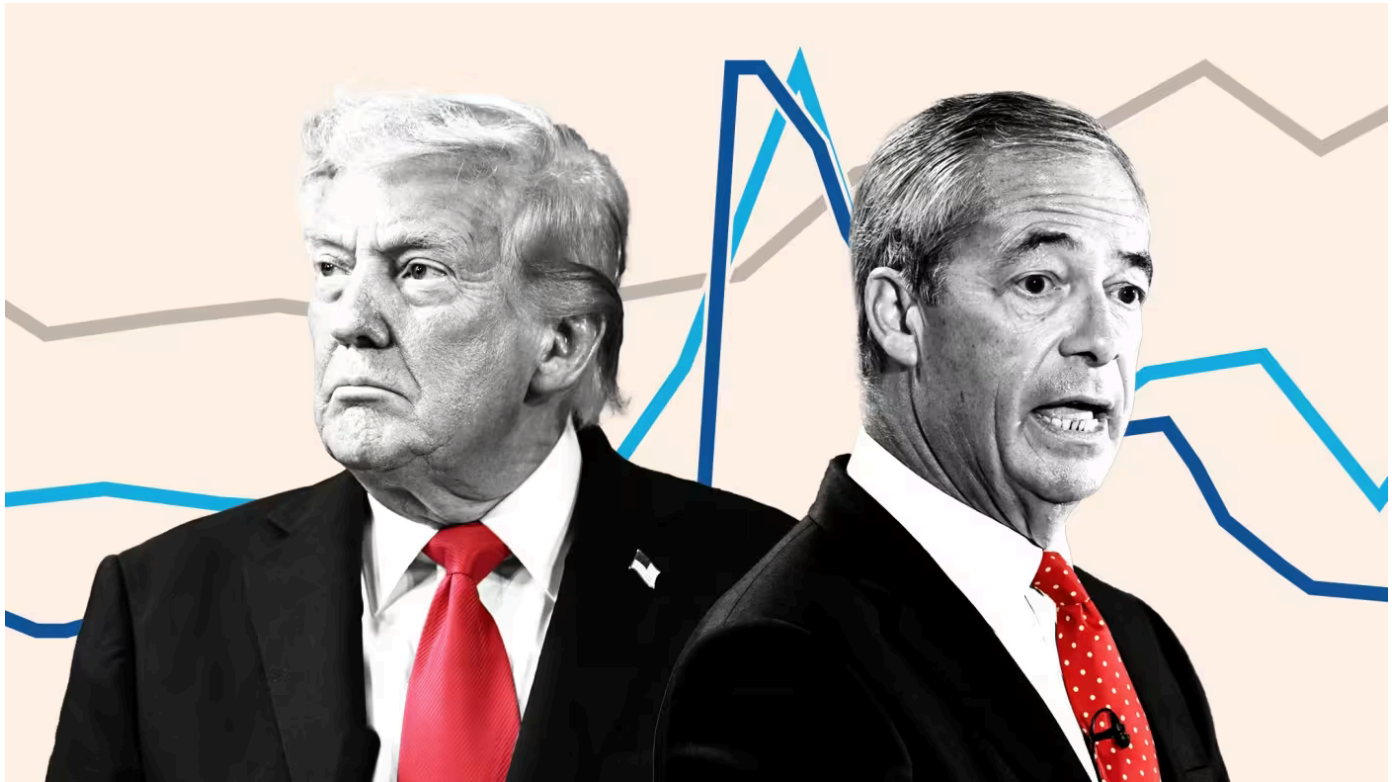


Opinion **Data Points**

Did the political establishment pave the way for Trump and Farage?

New research suggests mainstream politicians created an opening for the populist right

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In the past seven days, Donald Trump has urged pregnant women to avoid painkillers over [unproven autism links](#) and added a [\\$100,000 fee](#) to a visa whose recipients have [propelled US productivity growth](#) in recent decades. Across the Atlantic, meanwhile, his aspiring counterpart Nigel Farage proposed to [retroactively strip](#) settled status from millions who have already been working in the UK for years.

These proposals indicate the strutting confidence of a radical, emboldened populist right in both countries. But new research ponders whether the seeds of these announcements might have been inadvertently planted by the mainstream political establishment.

This is the implication of [recent work by](#) political economist Laurenz Guenther, whose exploration of the gaps between the values and policy preferences of politicians and the public provides a clear and evidence-based framework for understanding the seismic political shifts we've been living through in recent years.

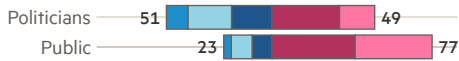
Guenther’s analysis shows that voters and mainstream politicians have long been broadly aligned on economic issues like tax and spend or public ownership. But on sociocultural issues such as immigration and criminal justice there is a yawning gulf. Western publics have long desired greater emphasis on order, control and cultural integration. Their politicians have tilted in the opposite direction, favouring more inclusive and permissive approaches.

Politicians and voters are generally aligned on economic issues, but the public is consistently to the right of mainstream politicians on culture

% of each group with liberal or conservative values on each issue

Very liberal Liberal Moderate Conservative Very conservative

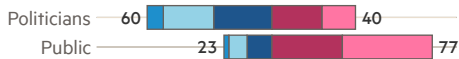
Immigrant integration



Redistribution



Tougher sentencing



Capitalism vs socialism



Sources: [Political Representation Gaps and Populism \(Guenther, 2025\)](#); FT analysis of [European Election Studies](#) and [Comparative Candidates Survey](#). See methods note below for full details of questions and responses.

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The result is the opening up of a wide “representation gap” — a space on the political map with large numbers of voters but few mainstream politicians or parties — into which the populist right is now rapidly expanding as cultural issues rise in salience.

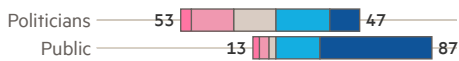
Extending Guenther’s European analysis to include more recent data and a wider set of countries, I find the thesis aligns well with several recent developments. First, the same pattern is visible in the US, where the average voter’s preferences on immigration are close to those of Republican politicians, but [far more conservative](#) than those of Democratic party elites.

Mainstream politicians across much of the west have become misaligned from the public on immigration and integration. Denmark is an exception

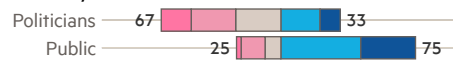
‘Immigrants should be required to adapt to the customs of this country’ (%)

Strong disagree Disagree Neither Agree Strong agree

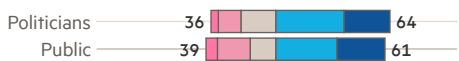
UK



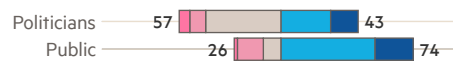
Germany



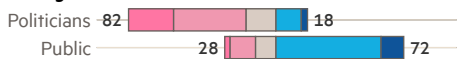
Denmark



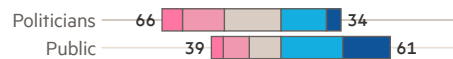
Netherlands



Portugal



Sweden



Sources: [Political Representation Gaps and Populism \(Guenther, 2025\)](#); FT analysis of [European Election Studies](#) and [Comparative Candidates Survey](#).

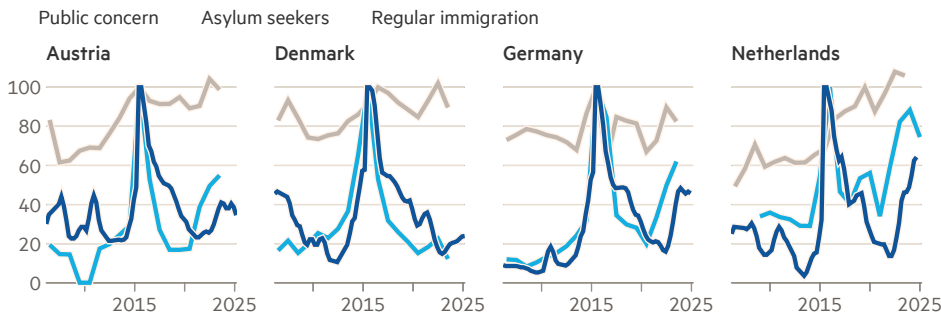
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Second, Denmark is a notable exception to the rule of public-politician misalignment, with its mainstream parliamentarians broadly in line with the public on the importance of integrating immigrants into culture and society. When the Social Democrats [took a tough position](#) on asylum and assimilation in 2019, voters believed and trusted them, rhetoric was matched with [action](#) and [the radical right threat was neutralised](#).

It's important to be clear about what can and cannot be concluded from these findings. The data gives no indication that voters are rejecting immigration wholesale. [My analysis of decades of data](#) on public perceptions and immigration levels shows that concern consistently tracks irregular migration and failed integration, not people coming to work and study. But Guenther's research corroborates the [consistent finding](#) that the public does not want large flows of arrivals without visas, or a growing share of the population unable to speak the language ([both of which have happened](#)).

Public concern about immigration tracks asylum-seeker volumes rather than regular immigration flows

Relative levels of regular immigration, asylum-seeker arrivals and public concern about immigration (2015 = 100)



Sources: FT analysis of data from Eurostat and Eurobarometer; YouGov
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A similar pattern is clear with crime, where rates of arrest and prosecution [have fallen](#) in several countries and lower-level [disorder is on the rise](#). Sustained failure to curb these trends under governments of both the centre left and centre right has signalled to the public that the political class either doesn't see this as a problem or is incapable of addressing it.

What should today's mainstream liberals and conservatives do with this information? For the US it may be too late. Trump won, and is now [playing fast and loose with the constitution](#) and turning America into an illiberal democracy.

How can others avoid a similar fate? A [fresh study](#) from Guenther this month found that in Germany, perceiving the centre-right Christian Democrats as holding a more conservative position on immigration led to a marked fall in Alternative for Germany support. But [separate research](#) in Britain found that Sir Keir Starmer's heated speech this year on integration failings led to a drop in support for Labour and no change for Farage's Reform UK.

Clearly solutions are highly context dependent. Most important, closing the door to the populist right requires action rather than rhetoric. The former shows voters you're addressing their concerns; the latter without the former tells them you agree there's a problem but they'll have to find someone more radical to solve it. One thing is clear: simply carrying on and hoping public dissatisfaction eases is a recipe for further unpleasant election-night surprises.

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