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# CREATING A CRISIS

## Immigration, racism and the 2024 general election

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**RUNNYMED**

## SUMMARY

It is widely expected that 2024 will be an election year. This will be the first general election to come after successive years of turbulence and hardship, during which the UK has been buffeted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis that has followed it. Although there was a clear global element to this collision of crises, domestically the UK government has made critical decisions that have shaped and defined the impact, and the protections afforded to people during this period. Shockingly, 3.8 million people in the country now face destitution. The political and economic response to both COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis has also lacked attention to the deeply racialised inequalities that have mediated their devastating impacts on working-class communities of colour. Accompanying this has been an increasing reactionary political turn and a backlash against anti-racism and attempts to address racial and other structural inequalities.

The forthcoming election is therefore an opportunity for us to discuss the real crisis we face in our country: we can either decide on a direction of travel that can steer us towards a more progressive and equitable future, one that deals with the wealth inequalities and labour market and social security failures that underpin the experiences described above; or continue one where we manufacture crises and moral panics and exaggerate concerns about immigration and 'stopping small boats'. The stakes are high, and they must be measured not just in electoral turnouts and majorities but in the very health and functioning of our democratic system.

We argue that:

- Political debate in the UK about immigration has traded on racialised ideas of *who is welcome* and *who belongs*. Whether directly or indirectly, historic and contemporary migration policies are predicated on the exclusion of people of colour. The Windrush scandal highlights that the impacts of these policies are not isolated to new migrants and that they continue to impact settled communities of colour.
- Political and media elites operate interactively and play a crucial part in the construction of immigration as a public concern. They have exploited or passively accepted uncritical interpretations of electoral results and polling to suggest greater public assent for anti-immigration politics and therefore validate such issues as a democratic grievance requiring policy reaction.
- Opinion polls are not static facts that sit outside of political debate: they are powerful constructs of what the people want that can be used to give legitimacy to regressive measures. Political and media elites play a key role that is often ignored in the top-down process of creating, interpreting and mediating these constructs. We therefore need greater scrutiny of and accountability for how they shape political conversations.
- The uncritical use of public opinion and the misuse of data and polling have legitimised so-called populist politics and mainstreamed far-right ideas. This poses a danger to communities of colour and to more progressive and emancipatory forms of democracy and fails to address the real economic crises that impact both communities of colour specifically and the working class more broadly.

## INTRODUCTION

We must recognise that, although the scheme purports to relate solely to employment and to be non-discriminatory, its aim is primarily social and its restrictive effect is intended to and would, in fact, operate on coloured people almost exclusively.

*Rab A. Butler, then home secretary, on the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962*

Hardly a day goes by without a headline, front page or article focusing on immigration, asylum and refugees. Political debate about immigration and asylum regularly conflate the two, and generally, mainstream media coverage is either acquiescent to or passive in the negative discourse, pointing to the allegedly harmful effects of immigration on the nation and its economy, security, culture and 'people', and thereby propagating discourses that serve to fuel xenophobia and racism.

As home secretary Rab Butler's 1962 words show, debates about immigration are often presented as revolving around 'neutral' policies that have no racialised intent. But the reality is that, both historically and contemporarily, immigration debates in the UK have always borne the markers of racism. They construct the unwelcome Other in ways that suggest immigrants as inferior or dangerous and their presence as a threat to either economic security or cultural identity. Butler stated in the discussions about the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 that the 'great merit' of the legislation was that 'it can be presented as making no distinction on grounds of race or colour', but the impact was fully intended to be one of privileging white commonwealth immigrants while controlling 'coloured people'.

Our point here is not to argue whether individuals concerned about immigration are racist: what we are concerned with are racialised systems, processes and politics. We aim to highlight that the wider discourse about immigration, and its implications in terms of policy-making, are constructed, legitimised and promoted in a top-down manner, and have been deeply racialised, structurally and at every stage.

Migration debates and their implications for policy are racialised as they are built on a colonial foundation and have often privileged white migrants and disproportionately targeted those who are racialised and from the Global South. And while the Brexit debate about immigration was often linked to white Eastern and Central European migrants, the Windrush scandal, a focus on Muslim migrants and the privileging of the 'white working class' have exposed the racial undertones and implications for racialised people.

### Wedge issue

A wedge issue is a rhetorical strategy, usually focused on a social 'concern', that is intentionally constructed to polarise the public along party-political lines in order to gain political or electoral advantage. Such issues are given traction through the media, and are usually considered to coarsen political discourse by exploiting so-called entrenched positions.

### Mainstream

The term 'mainstream' is often over-simplified and its meaning often assumed. Public discourse in liberal democracies tends to imbue the mainstream, the 'centre' or, more broadly, 'liberalism' with values of reason and moderation, but the reality can be quite different. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that what is considered mainstream one day can be reviled as extreme the next: think of debates around abortion or same-sex marriage, for example. As such, 'mainstream' is itself a manufactured concept that naturalises contested power relationships and allows a particular dominant and subjective system to position itself as the only acceptable way to govern or regulate society, politics and the economy.

We argue that a critical approach to the mainstream, which challenges its status as a fixed entity and its essentialised 'good' and 'normal' qualities, is crucial for understanding the processes at play in the mainstreaming of far-right thinking.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of immigration is likely to once again be prominent in the upcoming general election. This can already be witnessed in the way that the Conservative government is attempting to use it as a wedge issue, particularly in relation to 'small boats' narratives. But it can also be seen in the Labour Party's response, which, rather than critiquing the policy, articulates the Conservatives' failure to tackle what is increasingly accepted as a 'crisis'. Even political defences of immigration tend to paint it in a way that seeks to artificially separate 'good' immigration from 'bad'. While this is ostensibly linked to financial criteria, it disproportionately condemns migrants from particular countries, often in the Global South and former colonies, and thus is deeply racialised.

1. Brown, K., Mondon, A. and Winter, A. (2021) 'The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: Towards a heuristic framework', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 28(2): 162–179; Mondon, A. and Winter, A. (2020) *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream*, London: Verso.



## Immigration discourse and the far right

Anti-immigration discourse has always been a key element in the arsenal of the far right. As biological racism became increasingly taboo in public discourse in the aftermath of the Second World War and immigration from the colonies and former colonies was needed to rebuild much of Europe, far-right intellectuals adapted their ideological matrix to fit their new environment and needs: the exclusion of the Other was no longer premised on a superiority/inferiority relationship, but rather on irreducible cultural differences that should be protected by controlling immigration.<sup>2</sup> It was also clear that controlling immigration was not just about the numbers of people coming into a country but also about the racialised profiles of those communities.<sup>3</sup> The negative construction of the Other has often served to split working-class interests, with racialised immigrants painted as responsible for a lack of jobs, low wages or poor work conditions rather than this being understood as a result of an economic system based on labour exploitation.<sup>4</sup> While mainstream political actors had at first accepted, if not welcomed, immigration because the need for cheap labour to rebuild Europe was the priority, the breakdown of the post-war settlement and the growing unrest created by the neoliberal turn and austerity policies has revived the mainstream's tendency to blame hardships on those who are deemed not to belong.

This report contends that current immigration debates rely on racialised Othering, often in euphemistic and indirect ways,<sup>5</sup> and that the representation of immigration as an urgent issue of concern is not natural and inevitable, driven by 'popular' and thus 'democratic' grievances, but is actually cultivated and nourished by political and media elites.<sup>6</sup> We argue that far from simply responding to the people's demands, these political and media elites are playing a key role in constructing such demands and making them central to our current political discourse, thus taking attention away from other issues. Moreover, the positioning of opposition to immigration as a popular demand serves to legitimise far-right politics, the further mainstreaming of racist ideologies and the Othering of people of colour. In particular, recent discussions around immigration have served the far-right agenda by splitting the working class into a racialised Other and a constructed 'white working

class' whose interests are made to match those of the reactionary economic elite, in spite of the fact that those interests are in no way aligned and the latter's support for the former is far from obvious.<sup>7</sup>

We argue that rather than the simplistic bottom-up process which is often used to justify the coverage and attention given to immigration, with the blame put on 'popular' reactionary and racist views, the focus is in fact fuelled by predominantly top-down effects, where public concerns about immigration are mediated by those with power and privileged access to shaping public discourse.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to reiterate that while discussions often rage about whether it is racist to support anti-immigration policies, our conclusion is that anti-immigration policies in the UK have generally been used as a proxy for articulating racist intent and outcome. The logics of exclusion that anti-immigration policies advocate are unequal in both their direct application and the collateral damage they inflict on communities of colour, whether they are settled or new. The pernicious impact of these policies recently found its maximum expression in the events and harms exposed by the Windrush scandal, but evidence of their detrimental effects can equally be seen in areas such as housing, safeguarding from crime and access to health, among others.<sup>9,10</sup> This paper sets out how political and media elites operate interactively to manufacture 'crisis issues', inflate the credibility of poorly evidenced conclusions, and damage our democratic conversation by mainstreaming far-right ideas that are racialised, regressive and dangerous.

## 1. Manufacturing exaggerated support and democratic assent for racist far-right ideas

One area of concern is that in recent years, in an attempt to move away from its purely elitist and anti-democratic (including fascist) roots, or at the very least conceal them, the reconstructed far right has been allowed to tap into the notion of being 'populist'.

In the early 1990s, Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, in an attempt to distinguish his party, the Front

2. Mondon and Winter, *Reactionary Democracy*.

3. Smith, E. and Marmo, M. (2014) 'The myth of sovereignty: British immigration control in policy and practice in the nineteen-seventies', *Historical Research* 87(236): 344–369.

4. Roediger, D. R. (2007) *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, London: Verso.

5. Masocha, S. (2015) 'Asylum seekers in media and parliamentary discourses', in *Asylum Seekers, Social Work and Racism*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

6. Mondon, A. (2022) 'Populism, public opinion, and the mainstreaming of the far right: The "immigration issue" and the construction of a reactionary "people"', *Politics*, online first, 23 June.

7. Mondon, A. and Winter, A. (2018) 'Whiteness, populism and the racialisation of the working-class in the United Kingdom and the United States', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 26(5): 510–528.

8. Wodak, R. (2021) *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, 2nd edition, Los Angeles: Sage.

9. York, S. (2018) 'The "hostile environment": How the Home Office immigration policies and practices create and perpetuate illegality', *Journal of Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Law*, 32(4).

10. Grant, S. and Peel, C. (2015) *'No Passport Equals No Home': An Independent Evaluation of the 'Right to Rent' Scheme*, London: Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI); Qureshi, A., Morris, M. and Mort, L. (2020) *Access Denied: The Human Impact of the Hostile Environment*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

National, used the term 'populist' as distinct from more stigmatising terms such as 'far/extreme right', 'racist' or even 'fascist'. Since then, many have warned of not only the inaccuracy but also the danger in uncritically linking the far right to populism, whether in the media or in academia. While most serious research on populism stresses that the term should only be peripheral in defining far-right parties and politics, its widespread (mis)use in public discourse has been incredibly useful to the far right.<sup>11</sup> It has not

## Populism

Populism is used as shorthand to refer to an imaginary of 'the people' and ascribes a 'popular' legitimacy or 'common sense' value to particular ideas.<sup>12</sup>

As noted by Giorgos Katsambekis, we appear to have reached a 'consensus among scholars regarding the core characteristics of populism, namely the centrality of "the people" and an antagonistic view of society that pits the former against an elite'.<sup>13</sup> Experts on the matter also generally agree on the populist nature of a party coming second to its politics and ideology. Unfortunately, various warnings about the dangers of positioning populism as a primary definer of particular parties or movements have gone unheeded in both academia and the media. This hype about populism has led in particular to the legitimization of far-right politics.<sup>14</sup>

## Far right/reconstructed far right

We use the term 'far right' to describe movements and parties that espouse a racist ideology but do so in an indirect, coded or even covert manner, by focusing notably on culture or occupying the space between illiberal (overt, direct and obvious) and liberal (systemic and institutional – often indirect) racisms, between the extreme and the mainstream. This can be seen in what we call the 'reconstructed far right'. Such movements and parties may challenge mainstream parties and be more explicit in their ideologies and agendas, but these differences are exaggerated by the mainstream to establish its liberal self-image and hegemony.<sup>15</sup>

only euphemised the danger it poses and the nature of its politics, but it has also afforded the far right a semblance of democratic assent, even though they clearly represent the interests of the few, support innately elitist politics and, most importantly, can claim only limited support in most cases.

In the UK, this could be witnessed in the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). UKIP is a party that has espoused Islamophobic, homophobic and misogynistic ideas. Nigel Farage, UKIP leader from 2006 to 2016, often referenced the 'silent majority' and claimed to be the 'voice of the people',<sup>16</sup> something which was in turn legitimised by some academics who unduly linked the far-right party or its politics to the 'white working class' and the 'left behind' and their 'legitimate grievances', particularly around immigration. It is these narratives which paved the way for the construction of a reactionary people in the lead-up to the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU).

During the 2014 EU election which set in motion the Brexit vote, UKIP made headlines along with other far-right parties across the EU by winning the contest.

### UKIP Is Forcing David Cameron into a Referendum on Whether Britain Will Leave Europe

(headline, Business Insider, September 2014)

UKIP may indeed have 'won' in the UK, but they did so with only around 10 per cent of the registered vote. But there is far more discursive and political capital to be gained by stating that UKIP received 26.6 per cent of the vote, or that more than one in four voters supported the party, than by using the very same results to say that UKIP won with less than 10 per cent of registered votes, with almost four times as many not turning up to vote in second-order elections centred on UKIP's pet issues.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of these inaccurate readings cannot be understated, as they have dramatic consequences: after all, it is these hyped-up one-in-ten voters who became strong enough to 'force' Cameron's coalition government to promise a referendum which would pit a deeply distrusted status quo against fantasy narratives of returned grandeur, 'sunlit uplands' and 'oven-ready deals'. The small minority of so-called 'fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists'<sup>18</sup> were allowed to take the reins of public discourse, with the help of prominent Conservative MPs who pushed the idea

11. Brown, K. and Mondon, A. (2020) 'Populism, the media and the mainstreaming of the far right: The Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study', *Politics* 41(3): 279–295.
12. Wodak, Politics of Fear; Zappettini, F. (2021) 'The tabloidization of the Brexit campaign: Power to the (British) people?', *Journal of Language and Politics* 20(2): 277–303.
13. Katsambekis, G. (2022) 'Constructing "the people" of populism: A critique of the ideational approach from a discursive perspective', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 27(1): 53–74.
14. De Cleen, B., Glynnos, J. and Mondon, A. (2018) 'Critical research on populism: Nine rules of engagement', *Organization* 25(5): 649–661; Glynnos, J. and Mondon, A. (2019) 'The political logic of populist hype: The case of right-wing populism's "meteoric rise" and its relation to the status quo', in Cossarini, P. and Vallespin, F. (eds) *Populism and Passions: Democratic Legitimacy after Austerity*, Abingdon: Routledge; Goyvaerts, J., Brown, K., Mondon, A., De Cleen, B. and Glynnos, J. (2024, forthcoming) 'On the politics of "populism": The case of populist hype', in Katsambekis, G. and Stavrakakis, Y. (eds) *Elgar Research Handbook on Populism*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing; Hunger, S. and Paxton, F. (2022) 'What's in a buzzword? A systematic review of the state of populism research in political science', *Political Science Research and Methods* 10(3): 617–633.
15. Mondon and Winter, *Reactionary Democracy*.
16. Hall, M. (2014) 'UKIP: We'll speak up for silent majority', *Express*, 1 March, [www.express.co.uk/news/uk/462471/Ukip-We-ll-speak-up-for-silent-majority-in-Euro-elections](http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/462471/Ukip-We-ll-speak-up-for-silent-majority-in-Euro-elections).
17. Mondon, A. (2015) 'Populism, the people and the illusion of democracy: the Front National and UKIP in a comparative context', *French Politics* 13(2): 141–156.
18. Taylor, R. (2006) 'Cameron refuses to apologise to Ukip', *Guardian*, 4 April, [www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/apr/04/conservatives.uk](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/apr/04/conservatives.uk).

that UKIP was winning away their core voters because the Conservative Party was not sufficiently strong enough in its anti-immigrant position.

Political and media actors either actively supported or passively accepted an interpretation that UKIP was gaining electoral momentum at a scale that was not tied to the reality of the data, and responded in a way that embedded its political agenda rather than challenging it. There was thus an interactive process of mainstreaming UKIP's ideas about the urgent need to leave the EU that was not necessarily tied to the party's actual electoral strength.

A similar process took place in 2016, as the victory of the Brexit vote was celebrated or lamented as the *majority* of the population voting to 'take back control'. In particular, narratives on both sides suggested that the vote represented a popular demand to take back control of our borders, as immigration was high on the agenda throughout the campaign.

Yet as a simple starting point to challenging this narrative, consider the following potential headlines:

**The vote for Brexit wins with 52 per cent against 48 per cent for remain**

**The vote for Brexit wins with 37 per cent of registered voters, 35 per cent voting for remain and 27 per cent abstaining**

These two headlines are based on exactly the same electoral results and with the same political impact in terms of who wins the referendum. The point is not to challenge the ultimate result: even though the referendum, like all electoral systems, was based on arbitrary rules, they are the current rules of the game. The point is to bring critical nuance to narratives about the level of democratic support claimed, as this is far from obvious and at the very least questionable.

The 52/48 split justified the centring of Brexit narratives on the basis that this was the wish of the majority of 'the people' – something which is commonly (and arbitrarily) seen as core to democratic decision-making. The Remain side begrudgingly accepted this narrative, reflecting mostly on how those who voted Leave were manipulated into it and how they might have been convinced differently with an alternative strategy. Yet this representation of the outcome only ever accounted for a partial understanding of 'the people': if abstention is included in our understanding of the referendum, the split would have been 37 per cent (Leave)/35 per cent (Remain)/27 per cent (abstention), as in the headline above. We could of course also go beyond abstention and include those not registered to vote, those not able to vote based on their immigration status, or those a few months too young to participate in decisions that will impact them for decades to come.

The winner remains Brexit in all cases, but the narrative would have been markedly different, preventing UKIP and Leave voters from claiming as strong a democratic mandate as they did. Reporting data in ways that distort the nuanced reality does a disservice to the health of our democratic conversation and can be used to manufacture binary positions that are unhelpful to understanding complex issues.

Ignorance about the role played by abstention, for example, also contributed to the extensive hyping up of who was behind the Leave vote, pinning the blame or heaping praises on the 'white working class'. If abstention is taken into account in the reporting of electoral results, the apparent strength of far right parties and politics is diminished. This is particularly the case in working-class areas, where the poorest tend to abstain in greater numbers, thus preventing so-called 'right-wing populists' from being able to claim that they speak for the 'left behind'. Leave elites referenced this 'left-behind' majority in ways that racialised them as white, folding their narrow anti-immigration goals into the narrative of the outcome. Meanwhile, Remain elites blamed the working class of the so-called 'red wall' (working-class, traditionally Labour-voting areas, mostly in northern England), deflecting attention away from their own failures. This took place even though, critically, most of the Leave vote came from affluent areas. In this way, through the uncritical and partial interpretation of data, we saw a construction of the reactionary 'people' who were demanding more anti-immigrant policies.<sup>19</sup>

The careless use of 'populism' in public discourse cemented this twisting of democratic legitimacy, perversely portraying deeply elitist politics and actors as 'the voice of the people'. This allowed them to be far louder and seem a far greater political force than their real level of support justified.

## 2. Public opinion and concerns over immigration as top-down constructions

As already discussed, the construction of immigration and its indirect but heavily racialised dimension as major public concerns has been a mainstay in the public discourse of many Western countries for decades now. In fact, it is so common that it is now generally accepted as an almost 'natural' concern of the population, and certain sections of the population in particular. This assumption that the people care about it in a negative way is clearly demonstrated by the focus of the 2016 referendum campaign.

19. Mondon and Winter, 'Whiteness, populism'; Zappettini, 'Tabloidization of the Brexit campaign'.

Extensive surveying of the media coverage of the referendum showed that while the economy was the most covered issue, 'Coverage of immigration more than tripled over the course of the campaign, rising faster than any other political issue', and became 'the most prominent referendum issue, based on the number of times it led newspaper print front pages'.<sup>20</sup> The impact of UKIP, which echoed the discourse of the right-wing tabloid newspapers, could be felt, as 'coverage of the effects of immigration was overwhelmingly negative. Migrants were blamed for many of Britain's economic and social problems – most notably for putting unsustainable pressure on public services'<sup>21</sup> – and specific nationalities were singled out. In an infamous image, Nigel Farage stood pointing at a Leave poster showing a photograph taken in Slovenia in 2015 of a queue of asylum seekers – the vast majority from diverse minority ethnic backgrounds, which racialised the issue, with the slogan 'Breaking point: The EU has failed us all'.

However, the use of racialised imagery and immigration as a concern was not limited to the Leave campaign. The Remain camp also attempted to make use of it as a scaremongering tactic, stressing that leaving the EU would make it harder to control borders.<sup>22</sup> This is key, as there is a tendency to blame the discussion of such issues on outsiders – in this case, the far right – who force the otherwise 'good mainstream' to reluctantly engage on this terrain. Instead, we argue, the mainstream must be considered a key agent, if not *the* key agent, in the process of mainstreaming of far-right politics.<sup>23</sup>

This raises important questions regarding the chicken-or-egg nature of political discourse:

*Was immigration first a major concern of the population in the UK, leading to a rise in coverage of the issue by both the media and politicians as they responded to democratic demands?*

or

*Did the media and politicians play a role in shaping the agenda and placing immigration at the core of the national concerns, diverting attention from other issues?*

There is considerable scholarship which attests to the 'agenda-setting' role of the media, whereby what journalists choose to focus on impacts our perception of the relative importance of different subjects. The saliency of issues is not derived from a simple journalistic harvest of pre-existing issues: the process is interactive and often actively curated by those news items that are most reported upon.<sup>24</sup>

The use of 'data' is critical to this relationship. The push of immigration as a concern across the political spectrum and the media often finds its roots and power 'under the pretence of "data", with accompanying graphs suggesting that the argument is objective, unbiased and/or scientific'.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, our interest is not in whether the polls are accurate but in the role they play in shaping the agenda: how their use within public discourse frames and primes certain issues while obscuring others.

'Data politics' needs to be interpreted as 'a field of power and knowledge'.<sup>26</sup> Data is not innocent of political motive and interest and it is always derived in a social and political context. Yet the centrality of power is often ignored when it comes to articulating 'public opinion', both in the collection process and in the dissemination and reporting of the results. Gauging public opinion is portrayed as a simple, factual, scientific and accurate way to understand and weigh democratic urges, demands and grievances, making even elections at times appear rather secondary.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years we have witnessed the use of dubious data and opinion polls to advance points about 'national populism', or the 'white working class'. The aim behind this (mis)use of polls is not accuracy – as demonstrated by the rebuttals those responsible generally receive from colleagues – but impact on the public discourse and agenda through access to many mainstream platforms. No matter how clearly and thoroughly a claim is debunked,<sup>28</sup> the fact that it appeared in the first place in legitimate publications, and from the mouth of apparently legitimate sources, means that the damage is done, particularly to those who are already sympathetic or predisposed to the position. This manipulation of data could not be clearer than in the construction of immigration as a major issue of electoral concern.

20. Moore, M. and Ramsay, G. (2017) *UK Media Coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum Campaign*, London: Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, King's College London, p. 8.

21. Moor and Ramsay, *UK Media Coverage*, p. 9.

22. Brown, K. (2022) 'Talking "with" and "about" the far right: Putting the mainstream into mainstreaming', doctoral thesis, University of Bath.

23. Brown, Mondon and Winter, 'Far right'.

24. McCombs, M. (2004) *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*, London: Wiley; Block, E. (2013) 'A culturalist approach to the concept of the mediatization of politics: The age of "media hegemony"', *Communication Theory* 23: 259–278; Couldry, N. (2003) *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, London: Routledge.

25. Mondon, 'Populism, public opinion'.

26. Ruppert, E., Isin, E. and Bigo, D. (2017) 'Data politics', *Big Data and Society* 4(2): 1–7.

27. Krippendorff, K. (2005) 'The social construction of public opinion', in Wienand, E., Westerbarkey, J. and Scholl, A. (eds) *Kommunikation über Kommunikation*, Berlin: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

28. Mondon and Winter, 'Whiteness, populism'.

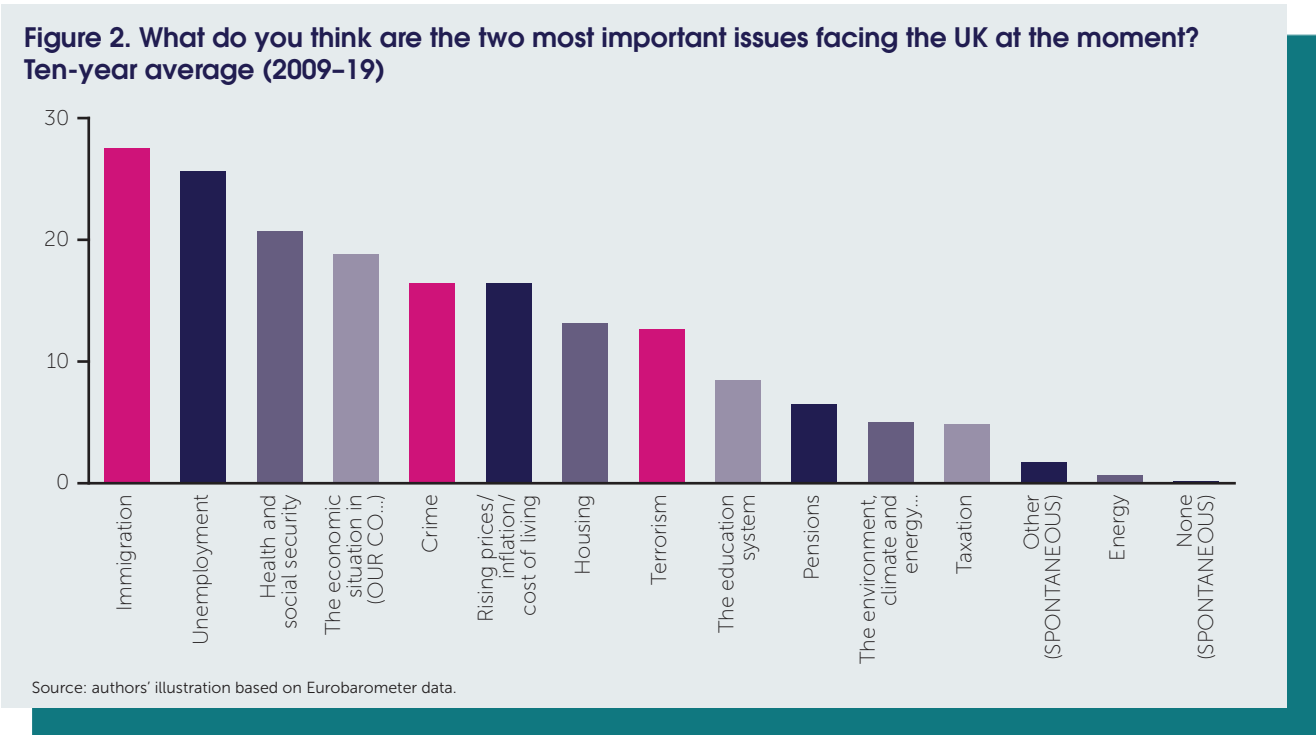
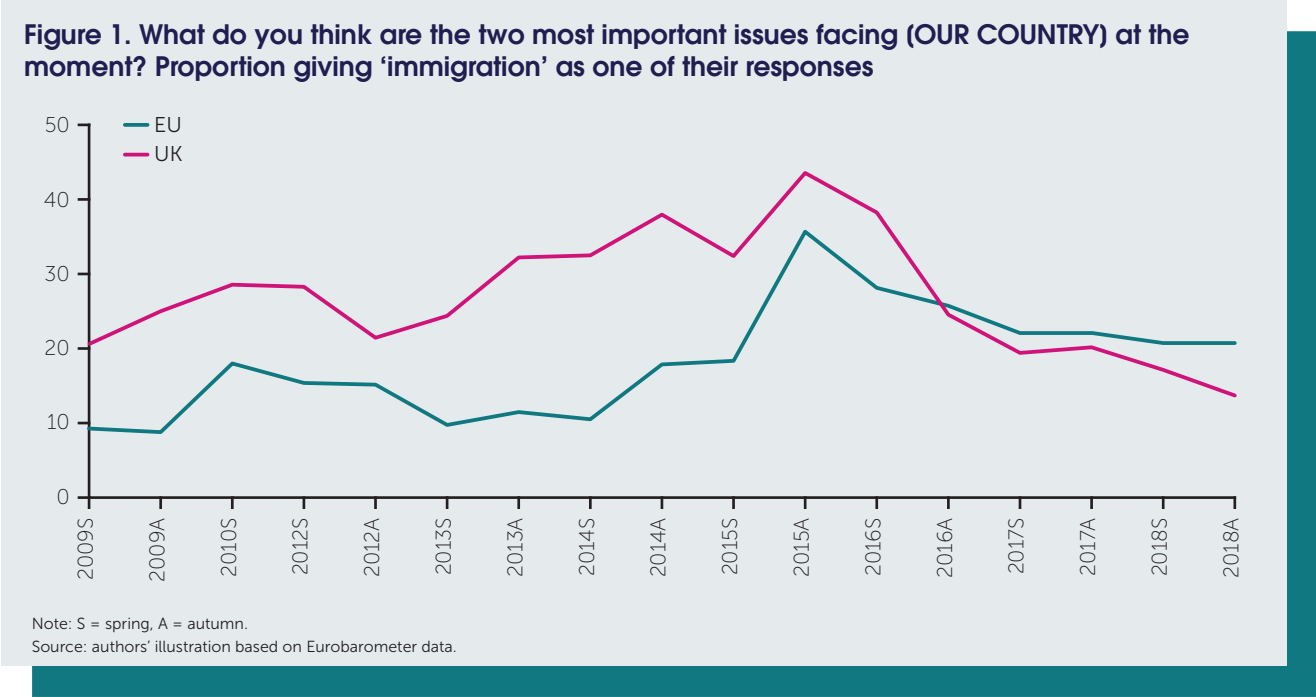


3. Making immigration an ‘issue’

Using data taken from Eurobarometer, it is possible to reveal how the ‘issue’ question which is common to many opinion polls in the election campaigning period is often used in media articles to hype up the immigration concern.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents who named ‘immigration’ in response to the question

‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing [OUR COUNTRY] at the moment?’ for both the UK and the EU. Figure 2 takes a longer view, comparing immigration with other issues offered to respondents in the UK across the most recent ten-year period (2009–19). It would appear rational to conclude that immigration is an issue of most concern to ‘the people’, based on the responses of a representative sample in the UK. Other issues, such as crime and terrorism, often linked to immigration, particularly through far-right discourse, are also prominent in the results, with crime coming fifth and terrorism eighth.





However, yet again, uncritical analyses of this data can suggest a level of consensus that is not an accurate representation of the nature and degree of the 'concern'. Such averages show us only part of the picture and do not tell us much about whether the issue is indeed constant or not. Here, the EU was added to highlight some interesting trends.

Research has demonstrated that 'individuals hold more negative attitudes toward immigration during electoral periods' and that 'this change is most significant in elections where anti-immigration sentiment is part of the political discourse, and among individuals across the political spectrum'.<sup>29</sup> It is therefore no surprise that immigration as a major concern appeared to recede dramatically after 2016 both in the UK and the EU. But while the vote for Brexit had won and coverage of the 'refugee crisis' abated, the principle reasons for that concern, i.e. freedom of movement, remained firmly in place in the UK and refugees continued to arrive, demonstrating the disconnect between the reality of immigration and the perception, reiterating the agenda-setting and mediated effects of the media.

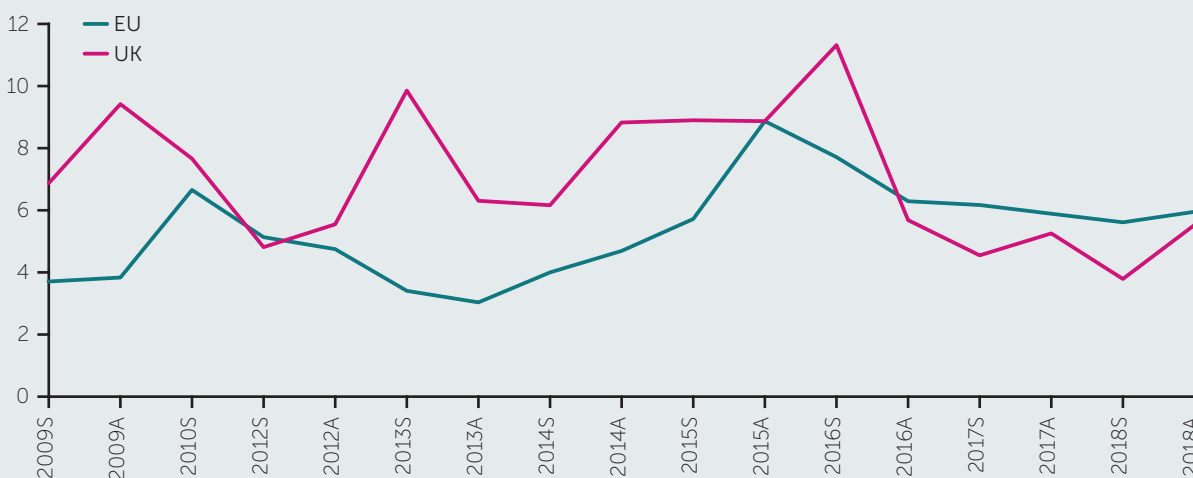
It is not just Eurobarometer which paints a picture in which immigration is presented as a central concern. A similar question asked by Ipsos Mori (2021) returns very similar results over the same period.<sup>30</sup> Yet this picture is nuanced by an added question in Eurobarometer, where the same respondents are asked about the two most important issues they are *personally facing*. While the difference in wording would seem minimal at first glance, and it would seem logical to expect similar answers, in reality the answers differ markedly.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of respondents who put immigration as one of their top two concerns when asked to think about themselves personally rather than their country. When UK respondents think about their country, concern about immigration only dips below 20 per cent after 2017 and is at its highest point (43.69 per cent) in the autumn survey of 2015. However, when thinking of their own personal situation, it only ever reaches 10 per cent of support, in the Summer survey of 2016, at the height of the referendum campaign. A similar trend can be witnessed for the EU, where immigration is never one of the top two issues of concern for more than 10 per cent of the respondents.

When we look at ten-year average responses to this question (Figure 4), a similar pattern appears. While immigration is the top issue when respondents are primed to think about their country, and while other related issues in the media such as crime and terrorism are also prominent, all three fall off the radar when the same respondents are asked about their own lives (with crime, immigration and terrorism respectively 10th, 14th and 17th). The issues which appear as top concerns for people in their immediate personal lives are based on their own economic and social situation rather than on their more 'cultural' concerns about the threats of immigration. This is in direct contradiction with much of the literature on the 'white working class' and the 'left behind', which tends to downplay economic arguments and amplify fears about loss of identity and culture.

To add a further degree of precision, Figure 5 shows the evolution of all the key issues over the period,

**Figure 3. Personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment?**



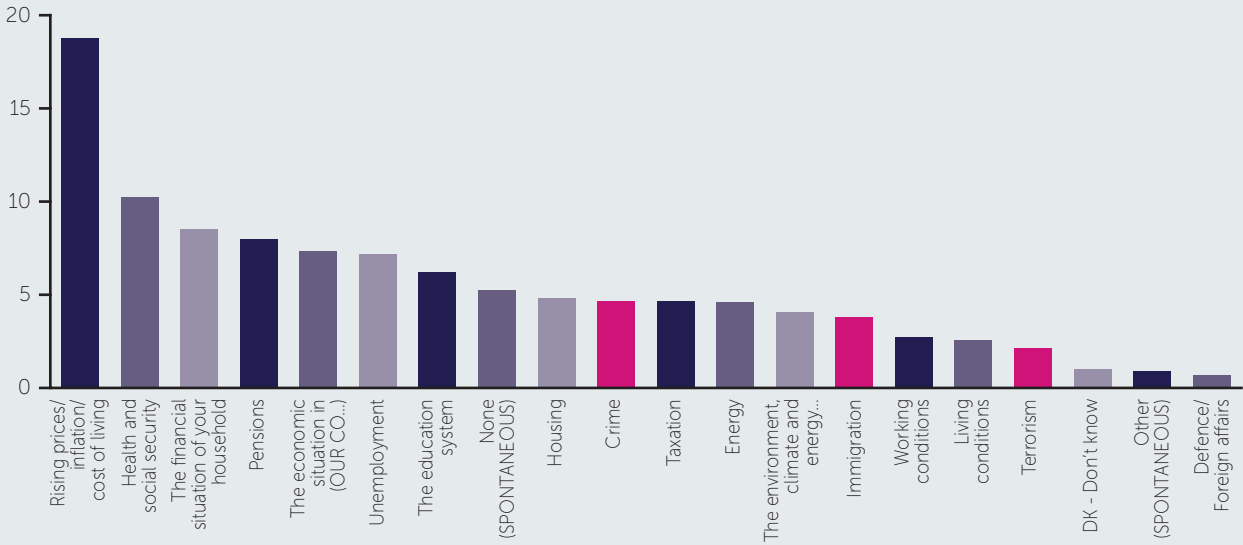
Note: S = spring, A = autumn

Source: authors' illustration based on Eurobarometer data.

29. Dekeyser, E. and Freedman, M (2021) 'Elections, party rhetoric, and public attitudes toward immigration in Europe', MIT Open Access Articles, 21 June, <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/148445>.

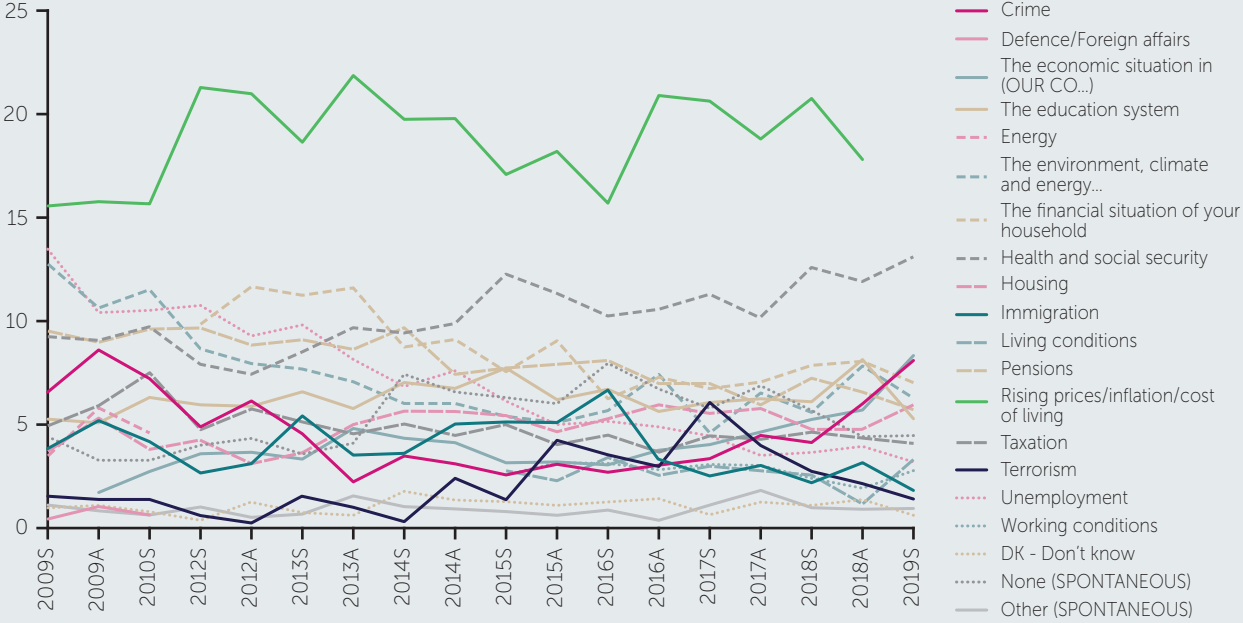
30. Ipsos (2021) 'Ipsos issues index: September 2021', [www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-09/ipsos-issues-index-september-2021-charts.pdf](http://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-09/ipsos-issues-index-september-2021-charts.pdf).

**Figure 4. Personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment?**  
**Ten-year average (2009–19), UK respondents**



Source: authors' illustration based on Eurobarometer data.

**Figure 5. Personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment?**  
**All issues between 2009–19, UK respondents**



Source: authors' illustration based on Eurobarometer data.

demonstrating that concern about immigration is consistently low compared with other concerns when people think of their own day-to-day situation. Opinion polls like these point to the impact of external mediation processes such as the rhetoric and analyses offered by political and media elites. It is clear that when respondents are not required to think beyond themselves and therefore to rely on external sources for an understanding of the wider

world (in this case 'their country'), they are more attentive to their day-to-day realities and less likely to be concerned with those issues that political parties claim to be the most urgent – like controlling immigration. A more granular level of analysis clearly demonstrates the issue with taking the data at face value or, worse, using it to legitimise particular politics or agendas on the basis that they are popular grievances or democratic demands.

## 4. Reifying public opinion

This analysis confirms the mediation power of particular actors with privileged access to the ability to shape public discourse. Their ability to set the agenda in turn can lead to issues being reified (uncritically treated as 'real') in a way that benefits far-right politics even though the framing of these issues is a distortion of reality. This manufacturing of crises is then used to legitimise the far right with numbers that inaccurately suggest that the issues in question in fact arise from popular demands or grievances.

It is critical to question the very concept of public opinion, as it is often used to conceal the agency of those who are actively shaping it. Our study demonstrates the importance of discourse and mediation, not just in the way people make their decisions about issues broader than themselves and

their immediate surroundings, but also in how issues are primed to occupy a particular place in opinion polls, serving to justify and reinforce certain kinds of discourse and political choices on behalf of 'the people'.

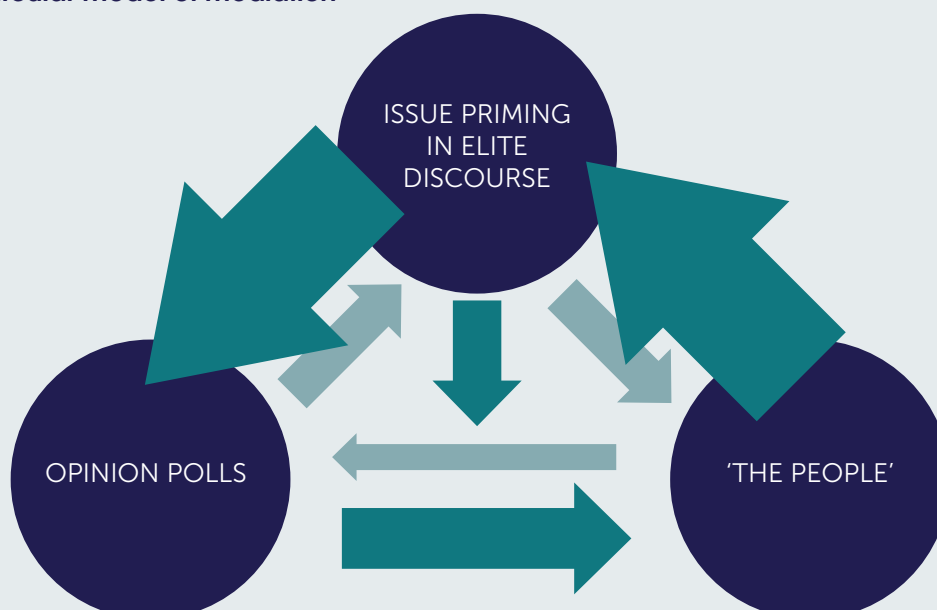
Figures 6 and 7 are an attempt to illustrate this process: rather than the linear process depicted in Figure 6, which implies that 'the people' think something that is then translated by opinion surveys and addressed by democratic elites (the media and politicians, and academics to an extent), this process is rendered more complex by mediating powers and agenda-setting as shown in Figure 7. In this figure, the thinner arrows pointing from 'the people' to elite discourse and opinion polls highlight the uneven relationship in shaping the agenda: public opinion is shaped to different extents by the content of public discourse, but also by polling companies which themselves

**Figure 6. Linear model of mediation**



Source: reproduced from Mondon, 'Populism, public opinion'.

**Figure 7. Circular model of mediation**



Source: reproduced from Mondon, 'Populism, public opinion'.



play a part in shaping this discourse. Thus, a limited and spun construction of 'the people' becomes 'the people as a whole'. It is therefore essential to see 'the people' as constructed rather than as some oracle to be listened to uncritically, as is too often the case in the use of opinion polls in public discourse and broader mainstream discourses about populism.

Respondents to polls do not hold beliefs in a vacuum, particularly when thinking about issues concerning 'imagined communities' - those with a far wider scope than individuals' own perceptions. While it would be naïve to argue that the media or other elites were solely responsible for what people believe, it would be just as naïve to think that they have no effect or do not have a privileged access to the ability to shape public discourse. The same is true of opinion polls, which are far too often treated as 'apolitical' and 'objective' measures rather than as biased in their construction and political in their use. This bias and political nature of opinion polling does not automatically mean they are a negative influence on the democratic discussion, but ignoring the constructive and mediating influence hides unequal power relationships and is thus a threat to a process that requires transparency.

This widespread (mis)use of opinion polls can have a severe impact on the rise of the far right. It means that rather than reflecting the views of the people 'the people', they risk legitimising so-called 'populist' politics which are not only dangerous to communities of colour and more emancipatory forms of democracy but also divert attention away from other crises in the system, including that of democracy itself.

## 5. Conclusion

Nigel Farage spent the autumn of 2023 splitting his time between navigating ever closer to the Conservative Party and 'funwashing' his image through his participation in *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*. Celebrating leaders like Farage through reality TV shows or coverage of their hobbies rather than their politics serves only to normalise them.

Rather than lamenting the rise of the far right, public actors and institutions – notably those that are part of the political and media establishment – have a real role to play when it comes to setting the agenda and driving the discussion towards more positive and progressive horizons and outcomes. This is more difficult than hyping up the far right or merely asserting a centrist consensus. But a failure to do it is not only a failure to uphold democratic standards; it is a direct threat to democracy itself, as what is being normalised is its antithesis – one which does great harm to people who require representation, as well as to the values and rights that are so often asserted as fundamental to democracy.

As the general election approaches and political campaigns ramp up, it is already clear that immigration, and reactionary stances on wider issues, will play a key part in the electoral battle. As stated earlier, whether individuals who express concern about immigration are racist is not our focus: our concern is with the design, delivery and execution of immigration policy at the systemic level. The markers of racism are self-evident even if they are denied, whether in Home Office documents revealing the intent to present policy as neutral while celebrating its ability to restrict and operate almost exclusively on people of colour, or in more recent references to 'invasions' of migrants crossing the Channel.

Both the Conservatives and Labour have made clear that anti-immigration policies will be a key pillar of their strategy and that much of their campaign attention will be on competition to appear the strongest and most effective in enforcing border controls and limiting the number of migrants. In doing this, they validate the issue as one worthy of attention and one whose solution is to be found in harsher anti-immigration policies and stances. We can thus expect the issue to be high on the agenda of the parties, but also of pollsters, pundits and the media more generally. However, it is disingenuous to manufacture a 'popular agenda' and trade on ever harsher policies and claim that there is no racialised intent or impact.

It is essential for those who seek a more progressive way out of the many crises we face to understand how issues are mediated and legitimated by an uncritical representation of data. Our analysis of the EU referendum result and Eurobarometer data has demonstrated the power of agenda-setting and the need for people to rely on processes of mediation to make sense of the world. While we can feel a certain degree of confidence that we understand the immediate world around us and our own personal needs, making judgements or decisions about a wider imagined community demands from us that we rely on trusted accounts of what that community is, needs and believes in. This is where elite actors like politicians and the media, with privileged access to the ability to shape public discourse, play a key part in the democratic process.

The run-up to the 2024 general election looks like it is stuck in a groove where we exaggerate, endorse and give urgency to debates about ever tougher immigration policies that too often rely on racialised Othering. The parameters of these conversations often depend on representations of polls and electoral strength that are not tied to critical questioning of the numbers. We need to ensure that political elites take responsibility for and are held accountable for the ways that public opinion and assent is collected, curated and narrated – and to make it clear that these are not politically neutral activities. The media plays a critical role in this agenda-setting process. Journalists (and

academics too) cannot claim to simply be reporting on facts: there are clear editorial choices made, and these choices are political ones which bring certain issues to the fore and relegate others to the private realm.

When people are asked what matters to them personally, they point to the everyday realities of their lives, including their economic and social situation at a more local level. Instead of mainstreaming far-right politics of division and racialised hostility directed at minoritised groups, we call for an electoral politics that deals with the desperate economic situation and the need for public services and community infrastructures that can rebuild our communities.

Our democracy is in peril; people will lose confidence in the political system if we continue to allow it to be

hijacked by political theatre over manufactured crises, with all of the serious consequences this entails, and ignore the very real political and economic issues that shape our lives and communities.

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