Laurenz Guenther on the Representation Gap in Politics

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In this week's conversation, Yascha Mounk and Laurenz Guenther discuss why there's a massive representation gap between political elites and voters on cultural issues, how this explains the rise of populist parties like the AfD in Germany, and whether new parties can successfully occupy the economically left but socially conservative political space.

This transcript has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.

Yascha Mounk: You managed to write one of these papers that goes viral quite quickly because it really shows something interesting. Often in the social sciences, the best kind of papers show what we all already kind of knew, but actually demonstrate it in a thorough and methodological way. What you show is that there is a significant gap in representation, particularly of representation on cultural issues, between political elites and ordinary people. To me, the most striking graph in this paper came from Germany, and it looked at attitudes about immigration among members of the Bundestag, among elected politicians, and ordinary voters—I believe in 2013. Tell us a little bit about that specific data and what it shows us.

Laurenz Guenther: What we have is answers to surveys of representative samples of citizens and also of parliamentarians. These two groups answer the exact same question, which enables comparability. The example that you mentioned is about immigration—to what extent immigration should be facilitated or restricted. What one can see in this graph is that Germans, of course, have heterogeneous preferences, but most Germans want to restrict immigration to Germany. What I show is the average response of the members of all the parties that were relevant at this point in time in Germany, and all of these parties—measured by the average position of the member—wanted to facilitate immigration. There was a huge mismatch, even in the direction, in the sense that most people wanted to go to the right on immigration, but all the parties wanted to go to the left.

Mounk: One of the striking things about this is that this is before the rise of the Alternative for Germany, which I think was founded right about then, but was not yet represented in the Bundestag. The most right-leaning political party in the Bundestag was the Christian Democratic Union, which was led at the time by Angela Merkel. The view of the average parliamentarian—not just in the Bundestag, but in the Christian Democratic Party—was way to the left of where the average view in the population was. Is that right?

Guenther: Yes, this is right. All of these people who are right-leaning on immigration—from their perspective, it must have looked like everyone, even the supposed right-wing politicians, were much more left-wing. They had absolutely no representation on this topic. This is one of the ideas of this paper: this provided fertile ground for the AfD, which then subsequently also rose.

Mounk: Over half of the population didn't really have their views represented in the Bundestag. What happens? The AfD was founded as a political party by these slightly stodgy economics professors who were really worried about the euro and opposed the single currency. But the longer the party existed, the more it focused on issues like immigration. By the time it managed to get elected to the Bundestag in 2017, its main focus really was on restricting immigration. What this paper strikingly shows is that there was all of this fertile ground in which it could fish for voters, because so many voters weren't represented by the pre-existing political parties.

How general is this? That is a really striking data point about Germany. To what extent do you have similar data about other countries? To what extent can we generalize from the existence of this kind of cultural representation gap in the German case to the existence of similar cultural representation gaps in other countries in Europe or beyond?

Guenther: The aim of this paper is to do that more systematically—to look at other countries and other issues. This can be generalized across European countries, and across cultural issues. Looking at 27 European countries, I find the same patterns on cultural issues for all of them. By cultural issues, I mean immigration, but also issues like gender

relations, punishment for criminals, assimilation, and multiculturalism. On all of these, voters are much more right-wing than the parliamentarians of their countries. On economic issues it is much more mixed and the gaps are smaller. Notably, there is a great article in the *Financial Times* where this analysis was also extended to the United States, and there you find a similar pattern.

Mounk: Tell us a little bit more about each side of this. On the cultural representation gap, what other metrics do you look at where the views of ordinary citizens tend to be quite far apart from the views of parliamentarians?

Guenther: Immigration is certainly one of the issues where you have one of the largest differences. Another issue where the difference is similarly large is punishment for criminals—should sentences for criminals become harsher? Here again, majorities in basically all European countries say that this should be done, but parliamentarians disagree. This is a directional disagreement: majorities of parliamentarians disagree with that position, while around 70% of the population say that it should be done. There are also big differences on gender relations and European unification. European unification, however, is not so directional. Parliamentarians seem to be very strongly in favor, and voters are also somewhat in favor, but apparently want a much slower unification.

Mounk: There is an interesting contrast here. On some issues, political elites feel really strongly about something, but they are actually going in the same direction as ordinary voters. But when talking about things like immigration in particular, and to some extent assimilation and how strong criminal sentences should be, they are not just far apart—they are going in opposite directions. The average view of a parliamentarian is that immigration is a good thing for the country. The average view of a voter is that immigration is a bad thing for the country. That feels like a more significant gap. Even if on a 1 to 10 scale the gap is three points on each of them—and I don't know exactly what the gap is on your scale, I'm making these numbers up—if that three means that overall preferences go in different directions, that seems to matter more than if three means one set of people is very enthusiastic and the other is somewhat enthusiastic.

Guenther: In the public discourse, people sometimes don't use that term, but this idea often comes up that there may be differences between parliamentarians and voters. It is always framed in the sense that parliamentarians are somewhat ahead and voters want everything to go a little bit more slowly—which, of course, adds a normative dimension, and that is a whole different issue. But it also does not really address these findings. Because, as you say, this is not just a matter of everyone in principle wanting the same thing, with some wanting it a bit more quickly and others a bit more slowly. It is really that parliamentarians and the average voter disagree on the goal—on where we should be heading as a society. That is indeed a very different thing.

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Mounk: Tell me a little bit about those economic metrics, because I think that especially on the left, a lot of people want to think the real disjuncture between voters and the people is on economic issues. People want redistribution, they want a robust welfare state, and then there are the evil political elites—probably from a much more affluent milieu, who have to find donations for political parties, especially in the United States, but also in Europe—who are moving in fancy circles and don't want any redistribution. That is really where the gap lies. Your data seems to suggest that the story is much more complicated. There are obviously some gaps on various issues of economic policy as well, but they seem to be much smaller on average than on cultural issues. Tell us about the extent to which the views of ordinary people and of political elites match up on economic issues.

Guenther: On economics it depends a bit. On redistribution, there is an item that asks people about redistribution, and qualitatively this is indeed what people on the left would think: ordinary people are a bit more in favor of redistribution than parliamentarians. Notably, wealthier ordinary people—those above median income—have similar preferences to the average parliamentarian of their country, and the gap is driven by the poorer half of the population, who really want much more redistribution. That makes a lot of sense.

But this gap—and I would have to look up the exact numbers—is much smaller than on cultural issues, by a factor of roughly five. The gap on immigration is really about five times as large as the gap on redistribution. On other economic issues it depends a bit more. Generally speaking, it looks like people want a bit more redistribution than parliamentarians, and they want less state intervention.

One thing that is missing here is trade. In the dataset that I use, there are no questions on trade, so there may be a representation gap there—we don't really know.

Mounk: We would expect political elites to be probably more pro-free trade and ordinary people probably less so.

There is another way of thinking about this, which is a two-dimensional graph where you look on one dimension at where people are on social and cultural issues and on the other dimension where they are on economic issues. What tends to be well represented, particularly in two-party systems but to some extent even in systems of proportional representation, is the things that go on the axis from the bottom left to the top right. On the one hand, there are right-leaning political parties that want less redistribution and are reasonably restrictive on migration. On the other hand, there are left-leaning political parties that are quite open to immigration, or even want more immigration, and are also pro-redistribution.

On one side, there are libertarians who are very socially liberal but want less economic redistribution. Those tend to be overrepresented in elite political discourse, but they are actually a relatively small part of the population. There is a much larger part of the population that occupies what is often called the populist quadrant—people who actually want a reasonably high level of redistribution, who do not oppose the welfare state and are not libertarians on economic policy, but who are quite conservative on social issues.

How does your research intersect with that line of thinking? Do you think it is basically right that it is that last quadrant—the people who are socially quite conservative but economically and fiscally reasonably progressive—that are most underrepresented?

Guenther: If you think about these four quadrants, this is the group that is least represented. In this two-dimensional space, the parties in most countries fall along a diagonal. The more you condition on political knowledge or participation in politics, the more you get a strong correlation to that line.

Mounk: People who are very engaged in politics, if they are economically liberal, are also likely to be socially liberal. But people who are not very interested in politics are going to have views that are more all over the place, which doesn't necessarily mean they are less coherent. They are just not bundled in the way that our political system conditions us to bundle our views.

Guenther: For the general population, views are more dispersed—it looks more like a circle, like a two-dimensional normal distribution. What my paper shows is that this line of the politically active has actually shifted downward. If you think about that, you can see that the people who are socially conservative and economically left-wing are particularly far away from the closest party in many countries. There is no major party that bundles their views, which I would predict would be an opportunity for new parties.

The populists that are very successful in many countries usually supply this policy position for the upper-right quadrant—that is, for people who are socially conservative and also economically right-wing, even though they are often quite flexible on economics. If you plot them over time in this space, you can see how they move around somewhat to attract more voters from the left.

Mounk: The one thing that defines right-wing populism today in most contexts—perhaps excluding Argentina or certain other countries—is not economics. It is those social and cultural issues. The AfD is interesting in that sense because it was founded on an economically populist issue, but over time it really became defined by those social and cultural issues much more than economic ones.

The economic views of populist parties are a little bit all over the place in different countries. A party like the AfD, in part because of its roots, is probably mostly right-leaning on economic issues, though it certainly isn't a radical libertarian party and doesn't want to abolish the welfare state. But a party like the Rassemblement National in France is much more left-leaning on economic issues. They have promised in many ways to preserve the welfare state and opposed Emmanuel Macron's pension reform, wanting to preserve those entitlements for people. Even Donald Trump plays a strange role in this. On the one hand, a lot of the economic policies he has passed have been quite right-leaning economically—huge tax benefits for the rich, much less for ordinary people. But when you look at how he distinguished himself from his Republican competitors in the 2016 primaries, it was in part by saying things like, perhaps the state does have a responsibility to make sure that everybody has access to healthcare, which was something that the other fifteen Republican candidates did not say.

Why is it so hard for populist parties, particularly in systems of proportional representation, to really appeal to that quadrant? There is something surprising about the fact that you don't see more political movements move squarely into the space that is economically relatively left-wing and socially right-wing. We have seen an attempt at something like that in the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany—a party that for all kinds of reasons I personally don't particularly like. They nearly got into the Bundestag in the last elections but fell just short by a few thousand votes and now seem to be falling apart. It seems to be hard for political parties to move into that space, even though that clearly is where a significant portion of the electorate is. Tell us a little bit about who Sahra Wagenknecht is and what this party is.

Guenther: Let me answer this in two steps, looking at two parties that may have moved into that space: the AfD and the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht.

The AfD was founded as an economically right-leaning party, largely driven by economics professors opposed to the European Union, and then became very anti-immigration during the refugee crisis. At that point it was probably already positioned, just because of its members, as an economically right-wing party, and it is difficult to move from there. This plays a big role: it is difficult to completely change your position over time, which I think is also one of the reasons why established parties don't do that. To really capture this quadrant, a party would have to move so much that it risks a split. It would have to make much bigger moves than, for instance, Merkel did during the refugee crisis, which was already a big stress test for the party.

One thing worth mentioning briefly is that in Germany, the quadrant of economically right-wing and socially right-wing people is quite a bit larger than the quadrant of socially right-wing and economically left-wing people. The latter—the quadrant we are interested in—is still a big quadrant, larger than the libertarian quadrant. But if you want to be the socially conservative party and you are simply thinking about maximizing votes, it makes sense to first go after the people who are right-wing across the board, then perhaps move to the center, and then take the second quadrant. The AfD does seem to be trying to do something like that.

Now, turning to Sahra Wagenknecht. She was for a very long time one of the most prominent members of Die Linke—the left-wing party that is basically a descendant of the former Communist Party of East Germany. It is a minor party, polling around five to ten percent, that is very economically left-wing but also very socially progressive and liberal. Wagenknecht distanced herself from this party, largely driven by her views on cultural issues, in particular immigration, on which she was more conservative than much of the rest of her party. This ultimately led to a split in which she left the party together with a few other members of parliament and founded her own party, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht—Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht.

This party initially did very well in the polls and was seen as considerably more successful than the original left-wing party. In the election, however, they nearly failed to clear the 5% threshold required for parliamentary representation, while Die Linke did make it into parliament. In some sense, it was a respectable performance—it is very rare for new parties in Germany to clear that threshold, and it was the party's first election. Now they seem to be falling apart.

My sense is that on cultural issues they were not right-wing enough to capture the quadrant of socially conservative, economically left-wing voters. I think in the beginning people expected Wagenknecht to be more conservative on social issues, and that position appeared to be significantly watered down over time, which I think was a problem for the party.

Mounk: That is interesting. She is also a very charismatic but polarizing figure, and there is always a tension between a political party really just being a personal vehicle for its leader. The party's name, BSW, literally consists of her initials—Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, or Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht. She has now distanced herself a little from the party, and that probably means it is not going to survive. But it was an interesting attempt at trying to capture that quadrant of the electorate.

Let me present to you a reading of your paper which I know you deliberately don't put in the paper, but which I think is how a lot of people have read it. Tell me to what extent, speaking as a private citizen rather than a scholar of social science, you agree with that interpretation.

Here is the first part. Here is the real explanation of populism. We have been having this debate for ten or fifteen years about why populism is rising around the world, and people point to this explanation and that one. The one thing nobody has really been talking about is whether the problem is simply that the established political parties aren't listening to what voters want. You might agree with the views of the established parties, or you might agree with the views of voters. On many things, I'm probably closer to the views of members of a political elite, because having a PhD in political science, I'm virtually by definition a member of the political elite. But when we collectively become so distanced from what ordinary people think, they are going to get upset. What happened here is that over time, this cultural representation gap increased. People no longer listened to voters. Election after election, people said they wanted more controls on immigration. Elite political parties did not deliver on those preferences. Finally, voters rebelled by voting for the one party willing to give them what they want.

The second part is a more provocative statement. Perhaps one of the things that established political parties need to do in order to deal with the rise of populism is to actually listen to what people want and adopt some of those policy positions. Not every single established party needs to do this. In the German context, it probably makes sense for the Green Party to continue to be very pro-immigration, because its electorate is very pro-immigration—and that is the virtue of a system of proportional representation. But if the Christian Democrats or even the Social Democrats want to

compete with the AfD for the many voters who have shifted towards it over the last few years—a party that now polls roughly equal with the Christian Democrats in first place, having grown from less than 5% of the vote in 2013, around the time of your paper, to around 23 to 25% in polls today—the straightforward thing to do is to get closer to what a lot of ordinary people want. Is that a plausible interpretation of your paper?

Guenther: I think that is a plausible interpretation. The first part stays relatively true to the paper. The previous literature has done a lot of very valuable work, and what I do is not a substitute for that—I'm not saying everyone else was wrong. I have the impression that the previous literature just didn't really look at this specific part of the puzzle. It looked more at how the financial crisis contributed to making people vote for populist parties, what the loss of manufacturing jobs did, and so on. But there was less focus on the choices of mainstream parties and in particular how they would respond. That ties into the second question, which I also think is a fair interpretation.

This paper is also interesting because it looks at a variable that can be easily influenced. We have all of these variables in mind when it comes to populism—lack of trust, slow economic growth, certain cultural characteristics, and so on. But these things are more or less given and very difficult to change. If you take the estimates seriously, winning back voters by increasing economic growth would require growth rates that are just completely unrealistic. What this paper—and several related papers—does is look at the positioning of parties, which is a variable that can be adjusted relatively easily. In that sense, I do agree that if mainstream parties want to win back voters and weaken populist parties, they have to move their political positions.

Importantly—and this is often a point of confusion—they need to deliver on policy outputs, not just rhetoric. There are some papers that show it backfires if parties merely shift their rhetoric. There was a famous speech by Starmer—"island of strangers" and so on—and the analysis of that suggests it probably backfired.

Mounk: The idea here being that if politicians say they have heard the voters and are going to do something about immigration, and then there is no action to follow up on it, voters conclude that the politicians are simply being hypocritical and cannot be trusted.

Guenther: The facts on the ground must change. In some sense, this is a chance—and maybe the last chance—for the mainstream parties, because populists are often not that good at delivering real results or delivering on their promises, at least in their first attempt. During the first Trump administration, for instance, there was no major deportation effort. The second time, Trump is delivering on that: immigration has fallen dramatically and deportations are proceeding at scale. He learned from the first term and delivered on those promises in the second.

Something similar may be happening in Europe. Often, in their first time in power, right-wing populists don't really deliver. We have seen this with right-wing populists in Austria, with Meloni, and others. Mainstream parties therefore have a chance to deliver now, or even if populists come to power, to use that period to develop a new strategy and new policy positions. If mainstream parties then win the election after the populists leave power, they have another chance. But I do think it is an increasingly difficult situation for mainstream parties across Europe. They have one or two election cycles to deliver. If they don't, populist parties could, in the medium term, simply outperform them and come to dominate European policymaking.

Mounk: What do you say to people who claim that when mainstream parties try to emulate populists, it actually only reinforces the populists? This is a strand of research that I have seen repeatedly, and more than anything else it seems to be conventional wisdom among a lot of political scientists—that there are these studies, sometimes somewhat dubious studies I think, that demonstrate that when mainstream political parties start to use the verbal register of populists or emulate some of their policy positions, voters are simply going to vote for the original. This is an argument you hear a lot. How convincing do you find it, and why does it sound like you don't agree with it?

Guenther: This depends a lot on whether you deliver results or whether you do something else—which is why I made the rhetoric versus results distinction. There are a lot of studies on this and they show mixed results. Some find that people vote for the original populist party if a mainstream party moves toward the populists. An example is the analysis of the Starmer "island of strangers" speech that I alluded to before. Other papers show the opposite: that if a party moves to the right on immigration, voters shift toward that party and away from the populists. There is a study in Denmark that shows this, and we also have a study done in Germany just before the most recent election that finds that if the CDU moves to the right and fills the representation gap, the AfD loses voters and the CDU gains voters.

I do think it depends, and it depends most strongly on whether actual policy positions change. If the policy positions really change and the output is delivered, people do not simply vote for the original.

One thing that is often forgotten in this context is that right-wing populism in Germany is only in some sense a third wave. There were early right-wing populists just after the foundation of the German republic who were strong in the

1950s. Then there were the Republikaner—the Republicans—in Germany in the 1980s, who were in some sense similar to the AfD. In both cases, the CDU—the centre-right party—accommodated them, moved toward their positions, and in the 1950s under Adenauer even gave them ministerial posts. Later, in the context of the asylum wave from Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, immigration had become a major issue and people wanted less of it, and the constitution was actually changed to limit asylum immigration significantly.

Mounk: Your point is that it worked at the time—the Republikaner really were a kind of insurgent populist force in the 1980s and 1990s. They had some significant successes, ended up being represented in a number of state parliaments, but never quite made it into the Bundestag. What you are saying, I take it, is that the Christian Democrats moved to the right in order to limit the oxygen for that political party. Rather than people saying that this somehow reinforced their impression that the Republikaner were onto something and they should vote for them, they said that some of their concerns were being taken care of by the political party they traditionally voted for and moved back toward voting for the Christian Democrats.

On this telling, it was Angela Merkel's very deliberate strategy of capturing the political center—and no longer covering the right of politics—that allowed this insurgent movement to establish itself as a permanent political force. There are two ways of thinking about this. Strauss, a very influential Bavarian prime minister, always used to say that between the Christian Democrats and the right, nothing should be able to fit—meaning that he always wanted to make sure that the Christian Democrats, as a democratic political party, would cover the flank on the right far enough to prevent any party to their right from establishing itself. Merkel's approach was very different: she would make the Christian Democrats into the party of the political center. But of course, that raises the question of who deeply conservative people—those who don't think of themselves as being in the political center—should be voting for.

One way I have sometimes put this about German politics—and I am obviously a German citizen—is the following. I have been politically socialized on the left and continue to think of myself as being on the left, even though I have significant criticisms of the shape that the left is taking in many countries today. If I look at Angela Merkel and find that I share a lot of her basic value coordinates—even if I think she made a lot of bad decisions—we have a problem, because there are a lot of people in Germany who are considerably more conservative than I am. If the leader of the most conservative democratic political party in Germany holds views that someone on the left feels broadly comfortable with, that may be fine as long as that person is in charge. But it leaves a huge segment of the German electorate without political representation. What happens? They go and vote for the AfD.

There is another line of argument, which is that left-wing political parties in particular have not made sufficiently large redistributive demands. There was a period in which the left and the right had very similar positions on economic policy. If you look at Germany today—the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats—or at Britain—Labour and the Conservatives—they are not that far apart on a lot of economic policy issues. People therefore no longer invest significance in economic policy, and that is why cultural issues become so salient. Why are we debating immigration? Because if there are no deep ideological differences in economic policy, that is the only thing left to debate. On this argument, what is really explaining the rise of right-wing political parties is the convergence on economic policy, and one way to fight that—particularly for left-wing political parties—is to move to the left on economics, making that a more charged political issue and shifting the public debate away from issues like immigration. This is an argument that has been made by a number of political scientists and that I often hear in the debate. I imagine that you are skeptical about that line of argument as well.

Guenther: I am indeed skeptical about that line of argument. It leads to an interesting deeper question, which I will address first. I do believe that in principle the theoretical argument is correct. All else being equal, if left-wing parties moved further to the left, we would probably talk more about economic topics and, because people's attention is limited, they would probably think a bit less about cultural issues. However, I would guess—and I don't think we have particularly strong studies on the relative importance of this effect—that it is a relatively minor thing. That is my main criticism. I'm sure the effect probably exists; all kinds of effects exist. But how big is it?

I don't think people will stop caring about immigration because talk shows discuss economics more, or because the policy options on offer are somewhat more distinct from each other. This belief is driven by two things. The first is simply talking to Germans. I am German, most of my friends are German, and I do a lot of interviews and survey work where people tell their stories. Immigration and issues related to it is such a huge issue, and touches on such fundamental fears about identity and belonging, that I think it will always be salient for these people as long as immigration is high or looks like it could increase further.

The second thing is that if you look at the immigration that people say they care about—specifically immigration from the Middle East and Africa—the actual numbers of arrivals from these groups are extremely highly correlated with how much people care about the issue. During the refugee crisis, for instance, people were asked how important immigration was to them, and that line tracks extremely closely with the actual number of asylum applications in

Germany. This suggests that concern about immigration is tied to things that really happen on the ground.

Notably—and this is an argument that is often made, but I think it is close to a straw man—how much people care about immigration is not really predicted by overall immigration numbers, that is, by how many people come to Germany in total. Most people don't really care about, say, a French student coming to Germany to study. It is about very specific groups, and the correlation with real-world arrivals of those groups is clearly there.

Mounk: You said a little while ago that perhaps the last chance for established political parties to win the race against the populists is not just to shift their rhetoric, but to actually show results. The problem is that especially in systems of proportional representation, this becomes more and more difficult the higher the share of parliamentary seats populists hold. In Germany now, it is barely imaginable that there will be a right-wing governing majority in the Bundestag that excludes left-wing political parties while also maintaining the *Cordon Sanitaire*—the *Brandmauer*—the separation between the traditional democratic parties and the new right-wing populists.

The last German government was a left-leaning coalition in which the Social Democrats and the Greens governed alongside the right-of-center Liberal Party, the FDP. Now there is a conservative chancellor in power who is in various ways more conservative than Angela Merkel, but his coalition partner is the Social Democrats, the left-of-center political party. Even though Merz was talking a great deal about the need to curb immigration during the election campaign, it is actually very difficult for him to deliver on those policies because his coalition partners in the Social Democrats are opposed to many of them.

Do you think realistically that traditional political parties are going to be able to rein in immigration to a sufficient extent to make voters feel that their preferences are being represented? Or do you think we are now in a structural situation in which the inability of mainstream political parties to deal with that issue is simply going to lead to their continued decline in vote share and to parties like the AfD continuing to grow?

Guenther: This depends a lot on the country. In Germany, also for historical reasons, the resistance to accommodation is particularly high, even though as we discussed, it did happen in past episodes. I would guess—and this has to be taken with a grain of salt—that the current coalition has the last real opportunity to deliver the legislation needed to genuinely reduce asylum immigration and pursue deportation efforts.

After that, I would guess the AfD will be stronger in the next election than in this one, and it will then be very difficult to find a coalition that addresses immigration effectively while leaving the AfD aside. If efforts don't increase significantly—and I would guess they won't—the next government will probably also fail to deliver, the AfD will be even stronger, and it will probably eventually become part of the governing coalition. That is my guess. We can check in perhaps nine or ten years.

For other countries, the picture is a bit different. Populists are participating in or supporting governments in several countries. In Sweden, for instance, with the support of the Sweden Democrats, immigration policy has changed quite significantly—net asylum immigration is now reportedly negative. It is possible. Germany tends to look mostly at itself, but in other countries, such as Denmark, these things have happened.

Mounk: Let me ask you about how this theory applies in some other contexts. We haven't talked much about the United States. America actually, on a lot of the generic questions about immigration that are asked cross-nationally, continues to have more pro-immigrant attitudes than most European countries, which is interesting. The failure of the Biden administration to deal with the southern border with Mexico is clearly one of the big reasons why Donald Trump won reelection in 2024. It was even one of the reasons why new voting groups like Latinos shifted to the Republican Party. At the same time, as you said earlier, the current administration is in some sense very successful in its policies—it has reduced the number of immigrants coming to the United States very significantly. But it has done that using cruel and indiscriminate tactics that turn out to be very unpopular. The immigration enforcement agency is very unpopular, and Donald Trump's approval ratings on immigration are quite low.

Is that an American specificity, where American attitudes about immigration are simply somewhat more permissive than European ones? Or do you think that if, say, Marine Le Pen—or if she is not allowed to run, Jordan Bardella—became the next president of France and effectively cracked down on immigration, deporting large numbers of undocumented people, they might face a backlash as well? Not just from people with more progressive attitudes who become activated by those policies, but perhaps from some of the swing voters who helped them get into power in the first place—as, according to polls, seems to be happening in the United States.

Guenther: You can always overdo it. The vast majority of Europeans want lower immigration levels, but you can also have levels that are too low. The amount of cruelty—for lack of a better word—that voters are willing to tolerate is certainly limited. I do think that voters will support severe actions to reduce immigration, but there is some limit. The

threshold in Europe might be a bit higher than in the United States, so Europeans might be willing to accept more severe measures than Americans, but even there some limit exists. It is possible that populists, when they come to power, overdo it to some extent—one could argue that Trump somewhat overdid it.

Relatedly—and this is a slightly different point—it also depends on how efficiently these policies are carried out. Some degree of severity may be necessary to achieve a goal, but there is also cruelty that is arguably indiscriminate and serves no purpose in achieving the desired outcome. I would guess that because populists are considerably less experienced, they will tend to be less efficient. There will be problems when they come to power and pursue immigration policies. This is something that mainstream parties can exploit by shifting their positions but then arguing that they are the professional alternative—that they will pursue these goals in a more targeted and discriminate way, and that they won't overdo it. I think that is one way that mainstream parties can make their case.

In the rest of this conversation, Yascha and Laurenz discuss whether journalists and politicians have as much impact on public thought as they think they do, to what extent self-censorship has increased in recent years, and the impact AI will have on the media. This part of the conversation is reserved for paying subscribers…