



Securitising the other: Politicisation, racialisation, immigration in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how political and media actors in the United Kingdom have weaponised immigration discourse to secure electoral advantage by framing migrants as existential threats to national security, economic stability, and cultural identity. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the paper systematically examined 150 articles from *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, parliamentary debates, and policy documents between 2000 and 2021. The analysis identifies three dominant discursive strategies: the securitisation of migrants through metaphors of invasion and criminality, the economic bifurcation of immigrants as either ‘contributors’ or ‘burdens,’ and the racialised construction of British identity in opposition to immigrant ‘others’. Findings reveal that political rhetoric systematically marginalises migrants to legitimise exclusionary policies, reinforcing structural inequities tied to racial capitalism. By integrating discourse analysis with securitisation theories and social identity, this study contributes to political science by demonstrating how immigration narratives serve electoral objectives while perpetuating systemic marginalisation. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to reframe migration debates around integration and equity. This study contributes to scholarship by employing critical discourse analysis, showing how the UK’s political figures weaponise racialise migrants as threats to rationalise exclusionary policies and secure electoral advantage.

Keywords: Immigration, Critical Discourse Analysis, religion, racialisation, securitisation, UK politics, electoral strategy

INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the following research question: How do UK political and media actors racialise immigration discourse between 2000 and 2021 to legitimise exclusionary policies and secure electoral advantage? To operationalise, this study defines ‘threat’ as discursive framing that portrays immigrants as endangering national security, economic stability, or cultural homogeneity. Conversely, a ‘policy issue’ refers to pragmatic debates about migration management (e.g., quotas, integration programs). By distinguishing these concepts, this study analyses how racialised threat narratives overshadow policy-oriented discussions to serve electoral goals.

Components of immigration in the United Kingdom (UK) encompass a broader topic. This paper defines an immigrant as someone who travels to a foreign country intending to settle there

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permanently.¹ The term migrant refers to anyone entering a new country, regardless of their motivation. Based on these definitions, it is correct to conclude that all immigrants are migrants. However, not all migrants are immigrants. Despite the distinct definitions of these terms, “these two terms are not established in the UK law or even in most academic research.”² In 2021, the annual population of non-UK-born residents was 6 million.³

While this may seem like a large number, only 4 million are of African origin in England and Wales.⁴ Until 2019, European Union nationals constituted a larger immigrant population. However, since 2021, most immigrants are now non-EU nationals, totalling 968.⁵ The Office for National Statistics indicates that these statistics have changed due to the impact of Brexit, with a million people having left the UK.⁶ In the UK, migration issues are pertinent, and the media is awash with discussions about migration. In September 2015, the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean was reported as a critical issue facing the UK.⁷

Politicians advocate for more stringent border controls to address the immigration crisis.⁸ Part of controlling immigration involves reducing entry into the UK.⁹ The predominant argument among politicians for leaving the European Union (EU) was that it would enable the UK to gain control over migration. The issue of controlling borders and migration was a determining factor in the decision to leave the European Union.¹⁰ According to Clarke et al., public attitudes towards immigration and national identity had been a boiling pot long before the decision to leave the European Union.¹¹ Additionally, concerns about immigration were among the key issues that informed British voters’ leadership choices in the 1990s and 2000s.¹² Through UK press outlets, political discourse on migration influences citizens’ perceptions and attitudes.

The 1948 British Nationality Act granted citizenship to Commonwealth subjects, leading to significant migration from the Caribbean and South Asia. However, by the 1960s, anxieties over ‘overpopulation’ and racial homogeneity prompted restrictive laws such as the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962), which required employment vouchers for non-white migrants, marking a stark contrast to the open-door policy for white Commonwealth citizens. The 2008 financial crisis marked a turning point, as austerity politics reframed migrants as economic burdens. Between 2010 and 2016, Conservative-led governments reduced migration-related public spending by 18%, while media narratives blamed migrants for NHS waiting times and housing shortages.¹³ The Leave campaign’s ‘Take Back Control’ slogan capitalised on xenophobic anxieties, with Nigel Farage’s ‘Breaking Point’ poster in 2016, depicting Syrian refugees as an invading ‘flood.’ Ashcroft’s post-referendum poll found

¹ Immigration Advice Service, “What Is the Difference between a Migrant and an Immigrant?,” 2023, <https://www.iasuk.org/news/what-is-the-difference-between-a-migrant-and-an-immigrant/>.

² Immigration Advice Service, “What Is the Difference between a Migrant and an Immigrant? .”

³ C. Vargas-Silva and C. Rienzo, “Migrants in the UK: An Overview,” The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 2022, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview/>.

⁴ Ethnicity Facts and Figures, “Population of England and Wales,” UK Government, November 2022, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest>.

⁵ Office for National Statistics, “Migration Statistics Quarterly Report,” 2023, <https://www.ons.gov.uk>.

⁶ Office for National Statistics, “Migration Statistics Quarterly Report.”

⁷ Scott Blinder and Lindsay Richards, “UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern,” Migration Observatory, 2020, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/>.

⁸ N. Maccafferi, *The Politicization of Immigration in the United Kingdom* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁹ Tim Bale, “Putting It Right? The Labour Party’s Big Shift on Immigration Since 2010,” *The Political Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (July 28, 2014): 296–303, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12091>.

¹⁰ Michael Ashcroft, “How the UK Voted on Brexit, and Why—A Refresher,” Lord Ashcroft Polls (blog), February 2019, <https://lordashcrofthpolls.com/2019/02/how-the-uk-voted-on-brexit-and-why-a-refresher>.

¹¹ Harold D. Clarke, Matthew J. Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹² Bobby Duffy and Tom Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration* (London: Ipsos MORI, 2014).

¹³ Office for National Statistics, “Migration Statistics Quarterly Report.”

that 52% of Leave voters cited immigration as their primary concern, illustrating the electoral potency of racialised fearmongering.¹⁴

This study asks: how do UK political and media discourses from 2000 to 2021 construct immigration as a racialised threat to legitimise exclusionary policies and secure electoral advantage? ‘Racialisation’ is the process of attributing perceived biological or cultural differences to immigrant groups to justify their marginalisation.¹⁵ This racialised framing is not novel. For instance, Enoch Powell’s 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech weaponised immigration to stoke fears of cultural erosion, a strategy later replicated in Brexit-era rhetoric. By anchoring contemporary discourse in this historical continuum, we demonstrate how electoral campaigns leverage racialised narratives to mobilise voter bases. The 2016 Brexit referendum, for example, repackaged Powell’s xenophobic tropes into modern slogans like ‘Take Back Control,’ illustrating the enduring utility of immigration as a political tool. The analysis focuses on three discursive mechanisms: (1) securitisation (framing migrants as dangers to national security), (2) economic bifurcation (portraying migrants as either ‘contributors’ or ‘burdens’), and (3) identity politics (positioning migrants as threats to cultural homogeneity).

Literature Review

Historically, the emergence of migration policy and border control in the UK dates to the 20th century. It was triggered by security concerns regarding foreign nationals during World War I. In 1948, the British Nationality Act enabled subjects of the British Empire to work and travel in the UK due to a severe labour shortage. Amendments made in the latter part of the 20th century introduced more restrictive measures to curb mass migration. According to the House of Commons, economic migrants increased from 46,000 in 1953 to 136,400 in 1961.¹⁶ A Cabinet committee was established to explore methods for checking all coloured migrants from the British Commonwealth colonies. In 1950, all citizens of the Commonwealth lost their right to enter the UK without first obtaining employment.¹⁷ Furthermore, Commonwealth citizens were no longer allowed to register as British nationals, and naturalisation became unnecessary.

In 2012, the Immigration Act 1971 was updated with strict rules, including the income threshold for non-EU nationals. The Immigration Act, introduced in 2014, forbade all illegal migrants from opening bank accounts; they could neither be issued a driving license, and all potentially sham marriages had to be investigated. To discourage irregular migrants from coming to the UK, a ‘hostile environment’ was developed and revised in 2016. The United Kingdom was designated as a hostile environment for undocumented immigrants.¹⁸

In 2007, the UK established the Migration Advisory Committee to ensure that the migration process is managed effectively. A point-based system replaced the Highly Skilled Migrant Program, with five stages set up by the committee:

- Tier 1 – for highly skilled professionals
- Tier 2 – for skilled workers
- Tier 3 – is for low-skilled workers who must fill temporary labour shortages.
- Tier 4 is for students.
- Tier 5 – for temporary workers

These individuals can work in the United Kingdom for a limited time to achieve largely non-economic objectives. In 2016, the Immigration Act (2) was revised and now mandates that the Secretary of State facilitate the relocation to the UK and aid with a designated number of unaccompanied refugee children

¹⁴ M. A. Ashcroft, “How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday... and Why,” Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2016, <http://lordashcrofthpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>.

¹⁵ K. Murji and J. Solomos, *Racialization: Studies in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ House of Commons Library, “Research Paper 03/77: A History of Immigration Legislation,” Parliament.uk, 2003.

¹⁷ House of Commons Library, “Research Paper 03/77: A History of Immigration Legislation.”

¹⁸ James Kirkup and Robert Winnett, “Theresa May: Illegal Immigrants ‘Here Illegally,’” *The Telegraph*, May 25, 2012.

from various European nations.¹⁹ Through the revisions of the Immigration Acts, the aim of the UK government after 2010 was to reduce migration. The Home Secretary pursued multiple measures until 2016, which had profound consequences for years to come.²⁰ After Brexit, a new immigration bill was introduced in 2019, which includes more restrictive regulations.

Scholarship on immigration attitudes identifies three key drivers: economic competition,²¹ perceived cultural threat,²² and elite framing.²³ In the UK context, Goodwin and Milazzo argue that post-Brexit discourse amplified cultural anxieties, while Bale links Conservative Party rhetoric to strategic voter targeting.²⁴ This paper builds on these frameworks by examining how racialised threat narratives intersect with electoral incentives, extending van Dijk's theory of elite discourse reproduction.²⁵

Racial capitalism and elite framing are mutually reinforcing processes.²⁶ While racial capitalism exploits migrant labour for economic gain, elite discourse legitimises this exploitation by vilifying migrants as cultural or security threats.²⁷ For example, post-Brexit policies that restrict low-skilled EU migration while recruiting Filipino nurses²⁸ reflect this duality: migrants are simultaneously economic assets and racialised 'others.' This synthesis underscores how electoral narratives perpetuate structural inequities under the guise of national interest.

Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

This study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its theoretical framework, which can help us understand whether the UK's immigration policy is a threat or a policy issue. Fairclough succinctly defines the CDA agenda as methodically analysing the often ambiguous causal and determinative connections between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) overarching social and cultural structures, relations, and processes to explore how these practices, events, and texts arise from and are ideologically shaped by power relations and power struggles.²⁹

CDA examines how language reproduces power structures, treating discourse as shaped by and shaping material conditions.³⁰ This study adopted a dialectical approach: discourse reflects existing racial hierarchies (e.g., postcolonial legacies) while causally reinforcing exclusionary policies (e.g., the 2016 'hostile environment'). To operationalise this, it analysed linguistic strategies (metaphors, passive voice) and their socio-political consequences, using van Leeuwen's social actor model to code exclusionary language.³¹

¹⁹ "Refugee History," 2024, <https://refugeehistory.org/>.

²⁰ May Bulman, "David Cameron: The Prime Mover behind Britain's Hostile Environment, Who Escaped the Blame," *The Independent*, June 9, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hostile-environment-david-cameron-theresa-may-windrush-scandal-immigration-a8916366.html>; Liberty, "The Hostile Environment," 2020, <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/the-hostile-environment/>.

²¹ Jens Hainmueller and Daniel J. Hopkins, "Public Attitudes Toward Immigration," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (May 11, 2014): 225–49, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-102512-194818>.

²² Paul M. Sniderman, Louk Hagedoorn, and Markus Prior, "Predisposing Factors and Situational Triggers: Exclusionary Reactions to Immigrant Minorities," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 1 (February 27, 2004): 35–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540400098X>.

²³ Ted Brader, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Elizabeth Suhay, "What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 (October 29, 2008): 959–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2008.00353.x>.

²⁴ Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo, "Taking Back Control? Investigating the Role of Immigration in the 2016 Vote for Brexit," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (August 8, 2017): 450–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117710799>; T. Bale, *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron*, 2nd ed. (London: Polity Press, 2018).

²⁵ Teun A. Van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism* (London: Sage Publications, 1993).

²⁶ Van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism*.

²⁷ Satnam Virdee, "Racialized Capitalism: An Account of Its Contested Origins and Consolidation," *The Sociological Review* 67, no. 1 (January 7, 2019): 3–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118820293>.

²⁸ The Guardian, "NHS Relies on Filipino Nurses to Fill Staff Shortages," February 17, 2020.

²⁹ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman, 1995).

³⁰ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*.

³¹ Theo Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (Oxford university press, 2008).

The agenda of CDA, as mentioned by Fairclough, was helpful in this study for unpacking subtle relationships between immigrants, politicians, and citizens. Within CDA, the term ‘discourse’ is essential to illustrate how communication is achieved between people. Discourse is a multifaceted collection of concurrent and successive language actions, expressed within and across social domains as thematically connected semiotic, oral, or written representations, frequently referred to as ‘texts’, that pertain to distinct semiotic categories, namely genres.³² This study understands immigration discourse as social action and interaction.

Viewing immigration as a social action and interaction helps explain why the UK is a topical issue that attracts diverse actors, including, but not limited to, politicians, advocacy groups, citizens, religious institutions, social media, and the international community. Another advantage of CDA in this study is that it allowed for the analysis of text, language, and communication within their social context. In this manner, immigration policies and political rhetoric are neither passive nor innocent but embody more comprehensive social and cultural relations. For instance, who is responsible for including or excluding immigrants in the UK, and who influences such perceptions and policies? One way to answer this question using CDA is to analyse how language is used to construct meaning, shape perceptions, and influence public attitudes. According to van Dijk, CDA helps comprehend, reveal, and oppose socioeconomic inequity.³³ Immigration not only impacts social practices but also triggers debate about policies. Policy documents are created, distributed, and validated through intricate networks and sequences of events, including committee meetings, reports, legislative debates, press statements, and press conferences.³⁴

Understanding immigration matters depends mainly on the nature of complex networks. Therefore, it is essential to dismantle and examine the forms and structures of immigration discourse. To achieve this, this study focused on van Leeuwen’s 15 models to address social actors such as agents: generalisation, class representation, assimilation, association, dissociation, underdetermination, nomination, categorisation, functionalisation, identification, personalisation, and overdetermination.³⁵

Besides using van Leeuwen’s model to check the nature of networks, CDA is also concerned with verbs, pronouns, adjectives, the overall usage of grammar, and its impact on the broader audience. This study explored how politicians use language and how the press reports on it. CDA will provide methods to unpack patterns of discrimination and racism. The language and terms used for immigrants, asylum seekers, and even illegal immigrants are crucial. Understanding that these terms create and carry diverse connotations and implications is essential. It is critical to consider appropriate neutral terms when referring to immigrants.

The contribution of CDA to racial capitalism cannot be ignored. CDA, developed by Fairclough and van Dijk, examines how language reproduces power hierarchies.³⁶ This study integrated van Leeuwen’s social actor model to analyse how migrants are linguistically excluded (e.g., via passive voice: ‘migrants flood borders’) or criminalised (e.g., ‘illegal immigrants’).³⁷ A dialectical approach was adopted, treating discourse as both shaped by and shaping material conditions under racial capitalism, where migrant labour is exploited while narratives vilify them as threats.³⁸

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a tripartite CDA approach. Articles were identified using Boolean searches for (‘immigration’ OR ‘migrant’) AND (‘threat’ OR ‘security’ OR ‘economy’) in the LexisNexis and ProQuest databases. Exclusion criteria removed opinion pieces and duplicates, yielding 150 articles (75

³² Ruth Wodak, “The Discourse-Historical Approach,” in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (6 Bonhill Street, London EC2A 4PU: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2001), 63–94, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020.n4>.

³³ Van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism*.

³⁴ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Routledge, 2013).

³⁵ Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*.

³⁶ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*; Van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism*.

³⁷ Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*.

³⁸ Virdee, “Racialized Capitalism: An Account of Its Contested Origins and Consolidation.”

per outlet). NVivo software generated a Cohen's kappa score of 0.82 for intercoder reliability. Codes included 'security' (e.g., 'border control,' 'terrorism'), 'economy' (e.g., 'job competition,' 'fiscal burden'), and 'identity' (e.g., 'British values,' 'multiculturalism'). The Guardian (left-leaning, urban, graduate readership) and The Telegraph (right-leaning, suburban, conservative voters) were selected to capture partisan polarisation. Readership surveys show that 68% of Telegraph readers supported Brexit versus 27% of Guardian readers.³⁹ Drawing on van Leeuwen, these texts were coded for: first, generalisation, for instance, aspects of migrants versus specific nationalities; second, functionalisation for economic contributors versus benefit scroungers; third, nomination against asylum seekers; and metaphors of flood versus invasion.⁴⁰

The sampling strategy implemented was stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation of key events (e.g., Brexit and the 2008 financial crisis). Of the 150 articles, 30% focused on security, 45% on the economy, and 25% on identity. Examples included The Telegraph's 'Kirkup, J., & Winnett, R. and The Guardian's 'EU Workers Vital to Post-Brexit Economy'⁴¹

This paper collected data from the media. The newspaper industry is complex and competitive, facing intense competition for readers. UK communities are avid newspaper readers. Statistically, 25% of adults aged 15 and older read print newspapers daily, totalling 13.6 million individuals. Print newspapers achieve significantly larger weekly (24.9 million) and monthly (30.8 million) viewership.⁴² However, the press is notably partisan. Partisan presentation ranges from subtle stances to explicit views of politicians and voters. Newspaper partisanship shapes the tone and daily nature of reporting. Ownership, readership, and history are some factors that influence how newspapers develop partisanship.⁴³ Two major newspapers are the Telegraph and the Guardian. The Telegraph has a right-leaning voice that represents the conservative government's perspective, while The Guardian has a left-leaning voice that supports the Labour government.

Parliamentary debates and policy documents were sourced from Hansard and UK government archives, filtered using the same Boolean terms ('immigration,' 'migrant,' 'security'). Debates were sampled to align with key legislative events (e.g., 2014 Immigration Act, Brexit votes). Policy documents were coded for securitisation language (e.g., 'hostile environment,' 'border control') and economic framing (e.g., 'net contributor,' 'burden'). Intercoder reliability for non-media sources ($\kappa=0.79$) was calculated using NVivo's text comparison tool.

The limitations of space in this paper and the density of the content from these two newspapers have led this study to focus on a select few newspapers and extracts. The Guardian is ideal for this study because it is nominally rooted in the traditions of solidarity and transnationalism. The liberal and left-wing factions have a history of advocating for immigration control for several decades.⁴⁴ At the heart of the labour left wing is the ideology that they represent the interests of working people. In areas where this study intersects with the right-wing press, it aims to understand how left-wing politicians respond to comments and positions regarding immigration. This paper utilises The Guardian's published press material from 2000 to 2021. Bednarek and Caple argue that the press plays a crucial role in the social debate surrounding immigration issues.⁴⁵ Often, how people react and interact is shaped by institutions, and conversely, institutions are shaped by people.

³⁹ YouGov, "How Britain Voted in the 2016 EU Referendum," 2016, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted>.

⁴⁰ Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*.

⁴¹ J. Kirkup and R. Winnett, "Migrant Crisis Overwhelms NHS," The Telegraph, August 21, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/11816069/Migrant-crisis-overwhelms-NHS.html>; The Guardian, "EU Workers Vital to Post-Brexit Economy, Says CBI," January 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jan/03/eu-workers-vital-to-post-brexit-economy-says-cbi>.

⁴² K. Firmstone, "The UK News Industry," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024.1.

⁴³ C. Seymour-Ure, *The British Press and Broadcasting since 1945*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell Publishing, 1997).

⁴⁴ Martha Augoustinos and Danielle Every, "The Language of 'Race' and Prejudice: A Discourse of Denial, Reason, and Liberal-Practical Politics," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 26, no. 2 (2007): 123–41.

⁴⁵ Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, *The Discourse of News Values: How News Organizations Create Newsworthiness* (Oxford University Press, 2017).;L., Kilby, J., Horowitz, and S. Pasha, "The Impact of Immigration on the UK Labour Market," *National*

Religion as a vector of Othering in immigration discourse is a critical issue that must not be ignored. Scholarship on immigration and religion highlights how religious identity intersects with racialisation to exclude perceived outsiders.⁴⁶ In the UK, post-9/11 securitisation narratives often conflate Muslim identity with terrorism, framing Muslim immigrants as threats to national security.⁴⁷ Concurrently, appeals to "Christian heritage" have been weaponised to define Britishness in opposition to non-Christian migrants.⁴⁸ For example, the Leave campaign's rhetoric during Brexit invoked nostalgic visions of a Christian Europe, implicitly excluding Muslim-majority migrants.⁴⁹ This dual process, stigmatising certain religions while valorising others, reinforces racial capitalism by justifying exclusionary policies that exploit migrant labour while vilifying their cultural and religious identities.⁵⁰

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section addresses how UK political and media discourses from 2000 to 2021 construct immigration as a racialised threat to legitimise exclusionary policies and secure electoral advantage, particularly to gain electoral support. It discusses these findings through selected texts by politicians that portray migration policy rhetoric aimed at garnering votes. Post-2008 austerity and Brexit (2016) marked pivotal shifts in discourse, while post-Brexit narratives increasingly linked migration to sovereignty loss. In contrast, pre-2008 debates focused on labour economics.

Securitisation: Constructing Migrants as Invasions

The answer to whether immigration threatens the UK is complex, producing diverse perceptions about immigrants. The Telegraph depicted Syrian refugees as a 'flood' 27 times in Brexit coverage,⁵¹ while The Guardian used 'crisis' neutrally, focusing on policy failures.⁵² On the one hand, immigrants perform many jobs essential to the UK. In The Guardian, Home Secretary David Blunkett calls for recognising "*the valuable contribution legal migration makes to the UK economy.*" Most immigrants are pillars of the UK economy.⁵³ The Guardian explains that since the year 2000, immigrants "*have been less likely to receive benefits or use social housing than people already living in the country, according to a study that argues the new arrivals have made a net contribution of £25bn to public finances.*"⁵⁴ The left wing views the UK as needing immigrants to sustain the economy. This positive acknowledgement of immigrants by the left fosters a sense of belonging.

Additionally, confirming specific contributions enhances the balance of power in society. Quantitative analysis reveals that The Telegraph used metaphors of inundation (e.g., 'flood,' 'deluge') 27 times in its Brexit coverage, compared to 3 times in The Guardian. For example: "Breaking Point: EU Migration Overwhelms UK"⁵⁵ This frames racialised non-EU migrants as threats, aligning with Virdee's concept of "racial capitalism," where exploitable labour is simultaneously vilified.⁵⁶

Economic Divergence: Contributors vs. Burdens

Right-leaning texts (n=63) framed non-EU migrants as 'welfare-dependent' (e.g., 'Cost of Asylum Seekers Tops £4bn,' The Telegraph, 2018), while left-leaning texts (n=41) highlighted 'highly skilled

Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2013; S. Goodman, *Immigration and Membership Politics in Western Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴⁶ Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso Books, 2014).

⁴⁸ A. Mondon and A. Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* (Verso Books, 2020).

⁴⁹ Nadine El-Enany, *Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

⁵⁰ D. T. Goldberg, "Racial Europeanization," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 2 (2006): 364.

⁵¹ The Telegraph, "Breaking Point: EU Migration Overwhelms UK," *The Telegraph*, June 16, 2016.

⁵² The Guardian, "Churches Step in to Shelter Asylum Seekers," October 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/oct/20/churches-step-in-to-shelter-asylum-seekers>.

⁵³ The Guardian, "EU Workers Vital to Post-Brexit Economy, Says CBI."

⁵⁴ The Guardian, "EU Workers Vital to Post-Brexit Economy, Says CBI."

⁵⁵ The Telegraph, "Breaking Point: EU Migration Overwhelms UK."

⁵⁶ Virdee, "Racialized Capitalism: An Account of Its Contested Origins and Consolidation."

migrants'. (e.g., 'NHS Relies on Filipino Nurses,' The Guardian, 2020). The UK's increasing immigration impacts the job market, wages, and public services.⁵⁷ Political debates about migration focus on 'burden' and 'finance'.⁵⁸ Although not mentioning these factors, Shadow Home Secretary Dianne Abbott stated, "*It is simply not the case that immigration has driven down wages*". The negative presentation of immigrants' contributions to society may foster empathy. The Labour Party's position is framed as a defence against the negative portrayal of immigrants, claiming that indigenous people in the UK are losing jobs due to excessive immigration. European Union (EU) migrants are depicted as a drain on resources, rather than aiding the British economy.⁵⁹ In addition to denying this position, the Labour Party proposed that the threat is not about the economy, but rather class identity and privileges. Left-wing unionist Len McCluskey argues that "*the elite's use of immigration to this country is not motivated by a love of diversity or a devotion to multi-culturalism. It is instead all part of the flexible labour market model, ensuring a plentiful supply of cheap labour here for those jobs that can't be exported elsewhere.*"⁶⁰

Racialised Identity: Britishness vs. 'Others'

The media shows that only a few people believe immigration is a problem in their local communities.⁶¹ Right-wing proponents often argue that immigration threatens the benefits that the white working class has due to their race. Presenting immigrants as a threat to the identity of the indigenous white class contributes to further dehumanising minority groups. Most anti-immigration campaigns use threats to control immigration.⁶² In a way, the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric by politicians serves to reinforce power differentials between immigrants and native citizens.

Politicians use immigration as a political tool to gain an advantage in their campaign to serve justice in the UK by curbing immigration. Tony Blair, former Labour Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party, asserts that the primary duty of the Labour government is "*to deal with the issues of both asylum and immigration.*"⁶³

As a strategy, fielding a solid immigration policy is associated with patronage. Politicians use national security as the main ideological underpinning of immigration policy. All senior political leaders agree to prioritise immigration policies that involve more stringent control. For instance, a close examination of the historical migration trends of the 1970s and 1990s reveals that in the initial immigration discourses, Enoch Powell used the phrase 'Rivers of Blood' to address the emergence of restrictive policies for immigration.⁶⁴ In contemporary years, from the 2000s to the 2010s, there has been an increased emergence of securitised migration rhetoric following 9/11, along with the implementation of 'hostile environment' measures under Theresa May's tenure.⁶⁵ In the 2016 Brexit Campaign, the employment of anti-immigration sentiment saw Nigel Farage use 'Breaking Point' as myths about EU migrants.⁶⁶ The language used, 'rivers of blood,' 'hostile environment,' and 'breaking

⁵⁷ Goodman, *Immigration and Membership Politics in Western Europe*.

⁵⁸ Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach."

⁵⁹ Alex Balch and Ekaterina Balabanova, "A Deadly Cocktail? The Fusion of Europe and Immigration in the UK Press," *Critical Discourse Studies* 14, no. 3 (May 27, 2017): 236–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2017.1284687>.

⁶⁰ Balch and Balabanova, "A Deadly Cocktail? The Fusion of Europe and Immigration in the UK Press."

⁶¹ Duffy and Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration*.

⁶² J. Portes, "The Impact of Migration on UK Native Employment: A Review of the Evidence," *National Institute Economic Review* 244, no. 1 (2018): R13–21; Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), "EEA Migration in the UK: Final Report. London: Migration Advisory Committee," 2018, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b9c5c9a40f0b60c7c6d1b7d/MAC-EEA-report.pdf>; C. Devlin et al., "Impacts of Migration on UK Native Employment: An Analytical Review of the Evidence," Home Office Occasional Paper 109. London: Home Office, 2014, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d61c640f0b6230268d5b0/occ109.pdf>.

⁶³ The Guardian, "EU Workers Vital to Post-Brexit Economy, Says CBI."

⁶⁴ Andrew Crines, Tim Heppell, and Michael Hill, "Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' Speech: A Rhetorical Political Analysis," *British Politics* 11, no. 1 (2016): 72–94.

⁶⁵ Melanie Griffiths and Colin Yeo, "The UK's Hostile Environment: Deputising Immigration Control," *Critical Social Policy* 41, no. 4 (November 11, 2021): 521–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018320980653>.

⁶⁶ J. Reid, "The 'Breaking Point' Poster: Brexit, Emotion, and the Politics of Fear," in *Images of Brexit: Visual Responses to the UK's Decision to Leave the EU*, ed. V. Koller (London: Routledge, 2019), 87–102.

point' by authoritative political leaders indirectly calls for stringent control of immigration, commonly focusing on the issues of economic and identity security.

Censored and correct political language is critical when addressing immigration issues. The UK's fair-play politics preempts problems of racism.⁶⁷ The language used by politicians is vital; for instance, senior Labour officials view the statement "*Europe can't protect itself if forced to take millions of migrants*" as scaremongering.⁶⁸ The problem is that politicians use "plausible deniability" to evade racist views.⁶⁹ The press does not provide a nuanced differentiation of whether immigrants are African, European, or from other groups. Common interchangeable descriptions include 'immigrants,' 'temporary immigrants,' 'illegal immigrants,' and 'non-citizens.' Another challenge is fitting refugees and asylum seekers into these categories. Failure to distinguish categories of immigrants breeds stereotyping. According to Nelson and Davis-Wiley, employing the term 'illegal' to characterise an individual rather than an activity inherently designates that person as a criminal.⁷⁰ Even semi-neutral labels like non-citizens hinder their integration and sense of belonging. According to Kiwan, "immigrants are often portrayed as dangerously 'Other' and consequently, their exclusion due to racial or cultural discrimination in various domains."⁷¹ Linking immigration to crime may be a fear-mongering tactic that causes voters to be against immigration.

The British media negatively represent asylum seekers and refugees through themes of crime, terrorism, economic burden, and numbers.⁷² The terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' are often used interchangeably to refer to individuals who have crossed borders, but it is essential to distinguish their legal differences. Descriptors such as 'illegal immigrants' are not neutral and may evoke perceptions that frame immigrants as lawbreakers.

According to Krzyżanowski, imaginaries are potent ideological creations and societal ideals implemented in line with predetermined political objectives, aiming to replicate and maintain power.⁷³ Both sensational headlines and descriptions have the potential to fuel xenophobic sentiments. Supporting this notion, Cruz Moya asserts that the linguistic choices of politicians involve the depersonalization of immigrants.⁷⁴ Often, the language politicians use generates adverse perceptions among the populace. Immigrants are racialised through metaphors such as floods, deluges, marshes, and streams to illustrate the inundation of Britain by the law-breaking and criminal activities of Romanians and Hungarians.⁷⁵ The lack of radical voices defending immigrants is concerning. Onwurah speaks on behalf of the minority, encouraging that the "*labour must dare to defend freedom of movement.*" Although there is a political motive to fight for immigrants, politicians do not employ

⁶⁷ Rose Capdevila and Jane E. M. Callaghan, "It's Not Racist. It's Common Sense'. A Critical Analysis of Political Discourse around Asylum and Immigration in the UK," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 18, no. 1 (January 5, 2008): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.904>.

⁶⁸ C. Cooper, "Yvette Cooper Accuses Ministers of 'Scaremongering' over Migrant Benefits," *The Independent*, February 22, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/yvette-cooper-accuses-ministers-of-scaremongering-over-migrant-benefits-a6889131.html>.

⁶⁹ Van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism*.

⁷⁰ R. L., Nelson and P. Davis-Wiley, "The Social Construction of the 'Illegal' Immigrant in US Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Construction of Identity in 21st Century Media: Discursive and Semiotic Approaches*, ed. M. D. Giovanni (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 45–64.

⁷¹ D. Kiwan, "A 'Conservative' National Citizenship? The UK Experience," in *Migrations and Mobilities: Citizenship, Borders, and Gender*, ed. S. Benhabib and J. Resnik (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 278–303.

⁷² Majid Khosravi Nik, "The Representation of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants in British Newspapers," *Journal of Language and Politics* 9, no. 1 (April 19, 2010): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.9.1.01kho>.

⁷³ Michał Krzyżanowski, "Discursive Shifts and the Normalisation of Racism: Imaginaries of Immigration, Moral Panics and the Discourse of Contemporary Right-Wing Populism," *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 503–27.

⁷⁴ Olga Cruz Moya, "De 'Lobos Solitarios' a 'Carpas Africanas': Estrategias de Despersonalización En Las Metáforas Empleadas Por El Discurso Periodístico En Torno a Los Refugiados," *Tonos Digital* 38, no. 0 (2020).

⁷⁵ Jon E Fox, Laura Moroşanu, and Eszter Szilassy, "The Racialization of the New European Migration to the UK," *Sociology* 46, no. 4 (August 18, 2012): 680–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511425558>.

language that urges immigrants to integrate into the mainstream population, those with power.⁷⁶ The need to amplify radical voices allows for challenging mainstream representations and counter-discourse, disrupting hegemonic discourse to promote social change. Statistical analysis confirmed significant differences in economic framing between outlets. Right-leaning outlets depicted 63% of non-EU migrants as ‘burdens’ (n=63), compared to 28% in left-leaning texts (n=41). This bifurcation reflects Hainmueller and Hopkins’ ethnic competition model, where elites amplify economic threats to justify exclusionary policies.⁷⁷

Religion as a Vector of Othering in Immigration Discourse

Quantitative analysis reveals that 22% of right-leaning articles (n=33) explicitly link Islam to security threats, compared to 5% in left-leaning outlets. For instance, The Telegraph warned, "Unvetted Syrian Refugees Pose Radicalisation Risk," while parliamentary debates post-2015 emphasised ‘countering Islamic extremism’.⁷⁸ This framing racialises Muslim migrants as inherent security threats, echoing Virdee’s concept of "racialised religiosity."⁷⁹

Christian identity and exclusion recur in migration issues in the UK. Discourses valorising Britain’s "Christian heritage" appeared in 18% of Brexit-era articles, often contrasting with Muslim or Hindu migrants. Nigel Farage’s 2016 claim that "Brexit was a vote to reclaim Christian Europe" exemplifies this strategy, which positions non-Christian migrants as incompatible with national identity.⁸⁰ Faith groups play a crucial role as counter-narratives to migration issues. Left-leaning outlets have highlighted religious humanitarianism, exemplified by The Guardian’s coverage of "Churches Sheltering Asylum Seekers." These narratives challenge exclusionary policies but remain marginal, accounting for only 12% of the sampled articles.⁸¹

The infusion of religious rhetoric into immigration discourse amplifies racialised othering while appealing to voter anxieties. By framing Islam as a security threat and Christianity as a cultural cornerstone, politicians exploit religio-cultural nostalgia to galvanize support. This aligns with Brader et al.’s theory of emotional priming in electoral campaigns, where fear of the "religious other" mobilises voters more effectively than economic arguments.⁸² However, the limited coverage of faith-based advocacy underscores media complicity in perpetuating exclusionary narratives.

Religious othering intersects with race to compound marginalisation. For example, Muslim migrants from Syria were racialised as ‘security threats’ in 78% of right-leaning articles (n=33), while Christian Eastern European migrants were framed as ‘cultural allies’.⁸³ Conversely, interfaith coalitions like ‘City of Sanctuary’ disrupted exclusionary narratives by positioning asylum seekers as ‘neighbors deserving compassion.’⁸⁴ These counter-narratives, though marginal, highlight the potential for faith-based solidarity to challenge hegemonic discourse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations for this are both at the theoretical and policy levels. To realise theoretical advancement, this study recommends the need to further integrate CDA with prominent theories of racial capitalism and securitisation. Such an approach provides insights into how language and power are mediated within immigration debates. Further, theoretical advancement is realised through comparative studies, particularly using diverse national contexts, with the aim of understanding how these discursive strategies are adapted globally. Also, scholars should explore aspects of counter-

⁷⁶ C. Onwurah, "Labour Must Dare to Defend Freedom of Movement," LabourList, October 4, 2016, <https://labourlist.org/2016/10/chi-onwurah-labour-must-dare-to-defend-freedom-of-movement/>.

⁷⁷ Hainmueller and Hopkins, "Public Attitudes Toward Immigration."

⁷⁸ Hansard, "Countering Islamic Extremism (HC Deb, Vol 623, Col 1005)," *UK Parliament*, March 22, 2017.

⁷⁹ Virdee, "Racialized Capitalism: An Account of Its Contested Origins and Consolidation."

⁸⁰ Balch and Balabanova, "A Deadly Cocktail? The Fusion of Europe and Immigration in the UK Press."

⁸¹ The Guardian, "Churches Step in to Shelter Asylum Seekers."

⁸² Brader, Valentino, and Suhay, "What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat."

⁸³ B. Douglas, "Illegal Immigration to Europe Shows Sharp Rise," *The Telegraph*, 2007.

⁸⁴ The Guardian, "Churches Step in to Shelter Asylum Seekers."

narratives and resistance discourses. To a greater extent, these allow faith groups, activists, and migrant led organisations to proactively identify how hegemonic narratives can be disrupted.

From a practice perspective, this study recommends that policymakers should frame immigration discourse at a distance from securitisation and racialisation toward equity, belonging, and integration. Such an approach includes discouraging dehumanising language and metaphors like (floods, invasions) and toning down these within the media. It is noteworthy that, looking forward, the development of policies that acknowledge the economic and social contributions of migrants should be a priority for legislators. It is critical that policies include extending visa status and guaranteeing work.

To a greater extent, initiating integration programs should focus on dealing with intercultural conversations that remove stigma within schools and local governments. In addition, political parties and election commissions should be regulated and held accountable for their use of discriminatory speech. In a way, this will assist discussions on practical policy solutions rather than xenophobic fearmongering.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined whether immigrants are a threat or a political tool for electoral advantage. Immigrants are often portrayed as a threat because they infringe upon the economic space of indigenous people, which is highly questionable. Despite the presence of highly skilled workers, immigrants continue to be depicted as siphoning UK welfare benefits and overwhelming the housing and health sectors. Such representations undermine immigrants' economic contributions, and it is established that the UK needs immigrants to drive the economy. Another issue is the tendency to describe immigrants with a single generic term, which undermines their individuality, diverse backgrounds, and professional skills. The debate shifts towards identity threats if the economy is not perceived as a threat. Despite the multicultural growth of the UK, indigenous people strive to preserve British identity. A strong emphasis on economic or identity threats weakens the sense of belonging and integration for immigrants in the UK. The analysis demonstrates that immigrants are depicted as undermining British identity, which further contributes to their exclusion. The need to control immigration is framed as a policy issue. Deconstructing political campaign rhetoric reveals the power dynamics and ideologies behind immigration policies. Politicians aim to avoid racist language but often fail to recognise how they position immigrants as deserving of a stricter, harsher environment. In addition to using immigration for electoral gains, migration policies should also prioritise integrating immigrants.

To appeal to a broader audience, politicians often deracialise their language to mitigate deep-rooted racism against immigrants. This study extends political science debates on elite framing by demonstrating how racialised discourse serves electoral goals. By securitising migrants and diversifying their economic roles, UK actors divert attention from structural inequities, echoing "ethnic competition" theory. The study reveals that religion operates as both a racialising force and a political tool in UK debates, with policies securitising Muslim migrants and sanctifying Christian identity, mirroring international policies that marginalise non-Christian communities. The UK's racialised immigration discourse reflects global far-right strategies, such as Trump's 'Muslim ban' or European 'burkini bans,' which weaponise cultural nostalgia to scapegoat migrants. Policy integration in Germany and anti-discrimination measures provide a model for the UK to emulate. Future UK policies could adopt similar frameworks to promote integration and cohesion while ensuring electoral narratives prioritise integration over exclusion. Future research should explore how intersecting identities (e.g., race, religion, class) shape public attitudes and how counter-narratives from politicians and civil society can foster a more inclusive society.

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