

Framing Migration and Policy Consumers: A Comparative Study of U.S. and British Think Tanks.

Ellias Aghili Dehnavi¹, Kanan Ahmadzada²

¹Third year Ph.D. Candidate, Political Science and Public administration, faculty of political science and journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland,

Email ID : ellagh@amu.edu.pl , ORCID 0009-0001-9238-056X

²Fourth year Ph.D. Candidate, Political Science and Public administration, faculty of political science and journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland, ORCID, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8669-4685>

***Corresponding author,**

Ellias Aghili Dehnavi

ABSTRACT

This study provides a comparative analysis of how the phenomenon of migration is framed in the discourse of leading American and British think tanks. In this regard, a method based on qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis of reports published by American and British think tanks in the period 2015-2025 has been used. Think tanks such as Brookings, CIS, Chatham House, and IPPR are among the most important think tanks whose reports this study focuses on. By comparing discourses, policy briefs, and recommendations, this research highlights convergences and divergences shaped by institutional contexts and national priorities. The findings show that the approach of these institutions, despite the common theme, is strongly influenced by the historical context, political priorities, and identity concerns specific to each country. On the American side, the dominant discourse defines immigration mainly in terms of national security calculations and economic gain. This view views immigrants as human capital or risk factors in the strategic equations of a global superpower whose main concern is competitiveness and control of transnational threats. In contrast, British discourse, deeply influenced by the Brexit experience, frames immigration more as an issue of national sovereignty and social cohesion. Here, the central question is about control as a symbol of political autonomy and the impact of immigration on collective identity and the capacity of public services. This research shows how the language used in these texts plays a role in the construction of political reality. Ultimately, the study concludes that these discursive differences have produced quite distinct policy trajectories on both sides. The American strategy is focused on the optimal management of migration in the service of national goals, while the British strategy is engaged in redefining itself through border control and social engineering. This opposition has made migration an arena for the display of fundamental differences in national projects...

Keywords: Immigration, think tanks, framing, immigration policymaking, content analysis, United States of America, United Kingdom.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Migration, as one of the most challenging and multidimensional global issues of the 21st century, is not only a demographic phenomenon, but also an arena for the confrontation of ideas, values, and political interests (Bloemraad, 2021). In this regard, think tanks, as influential actors in the public arena, play a significant role in shaping the understanding of this phenomenon (Ivannikov & Shmonova, 2023). By producing knowledge, providing expert analysis, and disseminating policy recommendations, they actively participate in the process of framing the migration issue; a process in which they emphasize certain aspects of the issue and neglect others, ultimately institutionalizing a particular understanding of the issue in the minds of policymakers and the public (Pettrachin & Hadj Abdou, 2024).

This framing is deeply influenced by the political, historical, and institutional issues of each country. The

United States and the United Kingdom, as two major players on the global stage, both grappling with complex immigration issues, are good case studies for exploring these differences (Colson, 2021). The United States, with its history as a “nation of immigrants” and heated debates over its southern border, and the United Kingdom, with its experience of leaving the European Union (Brexit), where immigration was at the center, have created distinct discursive contexts (Garnett & Lorenzoni, 2021).

Understanding how American and British think tanks frame migration is key to identifying hidden priorities and future policy directions in these two countries. It also reveals the different paths these influential institutions take to define the migration issue, allowing domestic policymakers to tailor their strategies to these discourses (Wiarda 2015). At the root of this inquiry lies, first, the assertion that explaining state leadership decisions concerning external security matters must not be isolated from the domestic environment. Because decision-makers’ insights, intuitions, and strategic plans are filtered

through prevailing belief systems in society, as well as socially embedded long-term intentions, prescriptive ideals, emotions, and identities. Therefore, public opinion is considered influential, as is the way that interest groups, lobbyists and research organisations shape it through information and policy recommendations (Mintz and DeRouen 2010; Redd and Mintz 2013). Among them, think tanks occupy a special place as actors with epistemic authority in the marketplace of ideas, due to their expertise in understanding political issues and presenting long-term visions. Think tanks produce certain ideas and solutions on various public and security problems through electronic and print-based publication, thereby contributing to public opinion; consequently, they impact the formation of perspectives and value judgements on political issues (Abelson 2014). Although the indirect, subtle and cumulative nature of this impact makes its measurement difficult, it is certainly real that both explanatory and prescriptive ideas they produce and promote frame the political agenda (Merke and Pauselli 2015). In this regard, the study of the discourse and language used in their publications is considered to be of particular importance. Language, notably, involves representations that allow for the disclosure of intentions in security policies and the assessment of their rationale and plausibility (Hansen 2016).

In this way, this paper conducts comparative discourse analysis and provides a map of the intellectual forces shaping migration policy internationally. It is therefore essential and important to study the role of think tanks in the US and the UK and compare them. The aim is to answer the question of how think tanks in these two countries, as bridges between academia and government, frame the issue of migration in these different contexts. Beyond their role as policy advisors, think tanks can also be understood as actors operating within a broader ecosystem of persuasion in which policy ideas are produced, framed, and communicated to multiple audiences. From a consumer research perspective, these audiences—including policymakers, media professionals, and the general public—function as *policy consumers* who interpret, evaluate, and internalize policy narratives in ways analogous to how consumers process market information. The framing strategies employed by think tanks thus resemble branding and positioning practices, where complex social phenomena such as migration are translated into cognitively accessible narratives emphasizing risk, benefit, identity, or control. By shaping how migration is perceived, evaluated, and emotionally processed, think tanks influence not only policy outcomes but also public attitudes and preference formation. This study therefore contributes to consumer research by examining how institutional framing affects perception, meaning-making, and decision-relevant interpretations in the policy domain.

The hypothesis of this research is that the approach of American think tanks revolves mainly around concepts such as national security and economic interest, frames that reflect the priorities of a superpower with security concerns and global economic competition. In contrast, the dominant discourse of British think tanks seems to focus more on issues related to social cohesion, national

identity and the specific challenges of governance in the post-Brexit era. These differences are rooted in the two countries' distinct political histories, institutional structures and public priorities.

This policy paper seeks to explore these differences and similarities, drawing on qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis of reports published by leading think tanks on both sides of the Atlantic between 2015 and 2025. The ultimate goal of this study is to provide insight into how these intellectual frameworks influence the public policy agenda.

2. Research Method

This study, adopting a comparative-qualitative approach (Wagenaar et al., 2022), explores how the phenomenon of migration is framed in the discourse of American and British think tanks. The research methodology is designed to cover both the conceptual depth and the specific political context of each country. Data collection and analysis are conducted at two levels. At the first level, qualitative content analysis focuses on a targeted collection of reports, policy briefs, and media outputs from leading think tanks between 2015 and 2025. Samples are selected non-randomly based on criteria such as policy influence, ideological orientation, and thematic diversity. The analysis relies not on word counts but on identifying dominant frames such as national security, economics, governance, social cohesion, argumentative patterns, and key vocabulary to extract patterns of meaning-making in each national context.

At the second level, discourse analysis (Johnstone & Andrus, 2024) is used to uncover hidden layers and the connections between discourses and power structures. This section addresses the question of how texts produced by think tanks represent the reality of migration not as an objective reality, but as an ideological construct that advances particular interests. For example, it examines how the use of the term economic migrant versus asylum seeker, or threat versus opportunity, orients the perceptions of policymakers and the public.

To complement and validate the textual findings, this study will use expert interviews with senior researchers and directors of a number of these think tanks. These semi-structured interviews will help to understand the internal processes of knowledge production, prioritization of topics, and the degree of influence from funders. Finally, the data from all these methods will be integrated in a comparative analysis to systematically and evidence-based explain the key overlaps and differences in the discourses of the two countries.

3. Case study

In this section, we will analyze selected reports from a sample of American and British think tanks over the period 2015-2025.

3.1. U. S. Think Tanks

1) Brookings Institution

Brookings Institution reports this period have analyzed immigration primarily through the prism of the national economy and the effectiveness of governance (Podesta, 2019). One prominent study examines the Biden

administration's immigration policies, focusing on their impact on economic growth and labor shortages (Jacobs, 2023). The report argues that temporary parole programs for nationals of countries like Cuba and Venezuela, while not perfect, have helped ease border pressure by allowing immigrants to enter legally, allowing them to quickly find work, and contributing to a strong economic recovery after the pandemic.

The language used in the report is highly pragmatic and policy-oriented. The analysis is based on lessons learned and emphasizes implementation and tangible results. For example, the report explicitly emphasizes the interdependence of legal pathways and border law enforcement, and portrays migration as a complex management challenge that requires a mix of policy instruments. Another Brookings report, citing census data, identifies immigration as the main driver of post-pandemic population growth in the United States, highlighting its critical role in preventing population decline in 16 states. This approach frames immigration primarily as an issue of human capital and long-term national planning.

2) Center for Immigration Studies (CIS)

The think tank, which is often categorized as a conservative institution, frames immigration primarily in terms of its impact on American workers, public safety, and cultural cohesion (Nowrasteh, 2015). A 2023 report focusing on the Biden administration's immigration policies argues that they have not only fueled a crisis at the border, but have also led to increased strain on the welfare system and lower wages for low-skilled workers (Antoniades, 2022).

The language used in the report is alarmist and based on presenting statistics with specific interpretations. For example, the report, citing its own internal data, emphasizes the staggering costs of education, health, and social services for low-income immigrant households, presenting these costs as a financial burden on American taxpayers. The central argument is the primacy of the national interest in its restrictive sense, that is, immigration policy should protect the economic and security interests of current citizens above all else. This view portrays immigration not as an opportunity but as a challenge to domestic sovereignty and well-being.

3. 2. British Think Tanks

1) Chatham House, UK

Academic analyses of the discourse of migration in the UK, including a study of the media framing of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in comparison with the Syrian and Afghan crises, provide valuable insights. These studies show that the discourse of migration in the UK is strongly influenced by notions of identity and cultural-racial tensions (Farese, 2016).

Analysis shows that media coverage of Ukrainian refugees in outlets such as the BBC and the Sun has often emphasised characteristics such as Europeanness, civility and homogeneity. This framing is in stark contrast to the framing of Middle Eastern and Afghan refugees, which has sometimes been accompanied by negative labels (Ajana, Connell, and Liddle 2024). This shows how

cultural and racial norms can significantly influence the level of public empathy and policy response. Furthermore, a quantitative analysis of British parliamentary discourse also suggests that in recent years, security frames such as border control and illegal immigration have dominated social integration frames. This finding suggests that arguments in the British space often revolve around national sovereignty and social cohesion, with a strong subtext of identity.

2) Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)

The centre-left, reformist think tank's reports analyse immigration in terms of fairness, social justice and sound management. An IPPR analysis study due in 2022 will examine how to design a fair and efficient immigration system after Brexit. The report argues that the current system is both damaging to migrants and damaging public trust because it is too complex and opaque.

The language of the report is critical-constructive and focused on system redesign. Rather than focusing solely on control, it emphasises the need to create diverse and accessible legal pathways to meet the real needs of the UK labour market. The report also insists on the need to support social cohesion and tackle the exploitation of migrants in the workplace. The main argument is that a broken immigration system benefits no one, and that a fair system benefits both the economy and society. This view sees migration as a manageable natural phenomenon that requires rational, evidence-based policymaking.

4. Comparing the language and arguments of American and British think tanks

The language in the American think tank (Brookings) is objective and technical, emphasizing evidence, census data, and cost-benefit analysis. In contrast, the language in the British example is more emotionally and culturally charged, using concepts such as belonging, shared norms, and border security to persuade. On the other hand, the argument in the Brookings report is based on national interests defined in terms of economic indicators. In the British discourse, arguments are more focused on preserving collective identity and socio-cultural sovereignty. Furthermore, the proposed solution in the American think tank approach is generally to reform the system to make it more efficient. In the approach of British think tanks, even when the issue of integration is raised, the main emphasis is on the necessity of immigrants adapting to the values and norms of the host society as the main condition for acceptance. This comparison shows how different historical-political contexts lead to the formation of distinct discourses around the same phenomenon as immigration.

The CIS report's argument is centered on protecting national resources and cultural identity from external factors. In contrast, the IPPR argument emphasizes improving governance systems to achieve more equitable outcomes for all stakeholders, including citizens, the economy, and migrants themselves. Both think tanks' reports use data, but for different purposes. CIS uses data to highlight costs and threats. IPPR uses data to highlight the flaws in the existing system and propose alternative solutions. The CIS's proposed solution is generally a quantitative reduction in migration and stricter border

controls. The IPPR solution is a qualitative reform of the system through simplification, the creation of legal pathways, and guarantees of rights to prevent exploitation.

This comparison shows that even within each country, there is a wide range of discourses, ranging from strictly conservative to reformist positions, making the immigration debate an arena for contrasting different views on the nature of society and the state.

5. Comparing Immigration Discourses in American and British Think Tanks

5. 1. Dominant Frames in American Think Tanks

The discourse on immigration in American think tanks is largely dominated by two key frames: national security and economics. These two frames present the complexity of the immigration issue in a format that is directly related to the strategic priorities of Washington and the financial markets of Wall Street.

The “national security” framework examines migration not as a social phenomenon but as a strategic security issue. In this perspective, borders are defined as the first line of defense against transnational threats such as terrorism and human trafficking, geopolitical competition, and so on. For example, conservative or moderate think tanks emphasize the need for effective border governance and analyze migration flows as a factor that can disrupt internal stability. This discourse creates an inextricable link between migration policy and a country’s ability to control its territorial space, such that any discussion of migration is automatically tied to an assessment of security vulnerabilities.

In contrast, the “economic” frame examines immigration from the perspective of efficiency and profitability. Liberal, pro-market think tanks frame immigrants as human capital or a driver of economic growth. The main focus of this view is on the impact of immigrants on GDP, innovation, and filling labor gaps. Even in critical approaches, arguments revolve around the net costs of immigration to state welfare systems or its impact on the wages of native workers. In this framework, the intrinsic value of the immigrant is measured by his or her potential contribution to the economic cycle, and his or her identity is reduced to a set of economic skills and capabilities.

What is striking is the interaction and sometimes tension between these two key frames. A think tank may emphasize the “economic benefits” of educated and skilled migration in a report, but in the same report analyze the flow of unskilled migrants in terms of national security and threats to social cohesion. This dichotomy reflects a larger paradigm in American policymaking in which immigration is simultaneously defined as both an opportunity and a vulnerability. Ultimately, these framings separate the discourse of immigration from its human and cultural dimensions and turn it into a category for cold strategic and economic calculations.

5. 2. Dominant frames in British think tanks

In British think tanks, the discourse on immigration is shaped around two distinct axes: national sovereignty and social solidarity. These frameworks reflect specific

historical and political concerns in Britain, particularly in the post-Brexit era.

The ‘national sovereignty’ frame often focuses on the issue of control. In contrast to the security-oriented American perspective, the British discourse places the main emphasis on the right to determine immigration laws, independent of supranational institutions such as the European Union. This frame makes immigration a test of political autonomy and the ability of the state to implement the will of the people. For example, center-right think tanks link immigration less with terrorist threats and more with concepts such as the rule of law and democratic accountability. In Britain, immigration has become a symbol of national autonomy and the ability to reclaim control from external institutions.

The ‘social cohesion’ framework looks at the consequences of immigration on the fabric of British society. This concern goes beyond purely economic considerations and focuses on the impact of immigration on national cohesion, shared identity and the capacity of public services. Centre-left and centrist think tanks warn that the rapid and unplanned influx of migrants could lead to the erosion of social capital and create tensions. The main debate revolves around the absorptive capacity of society; how to manage increasing diversity while maintaining a shared sense of Britishness. This framework examines immigration not as a security or economic equation, but as a challenge to social engineering and political culture.

The interplay between these two frames has profoundly influenced the immigration debate in Britain. On the one hand, national sovereignty demands greater control, and on the other, social solidarity warns that strict policies may lead to the isolation of migrants and the weakening of long-term cohesion. This confrontation has transformed the immigration discourse in Britain into a debate about national identity and the future of a society that is redefining itself.

5. 3. Commonalities and differences in framing

Undoubtedly, comparing the discourse on immigration in American and British think tanks, in addition to showing differences in priorities, also reveals differences in the historical and political contexts of the two countries. Despite sharing some key concepts, the way in which these concepts are emphasized and the context in which they find meaning creates fundamental differences.

Both intellectual traditions place the concept of sovereignty at the centre of their analysis, although this is done with quite different readings. In the US, sovereignty is mainly interpreted through the lens of national security and the protection of territorial integrity against external threats. In contrast, in the UK, sovereignty is defined more as a domestic political project and a symbol of legislative independence, especially in the post-Brexit era. Both are concerned with border control, but the motivation behind this control is security on the one hand and the exercise of independent political will on the other. Similarly, concerns about the economy are present on both sides, but in the American discourse, the economy is seen as an engine of growth and global competitiveness, while in the British discourse, the economy is often discussed within

the broader context of concerns about the capacity of public services and the pressure on national infrastructure such as the health system.

A fundamental gap lies in the way immigration is viewed as a national project. The dominant discourse in American think tanks sees immigration within the framework of the idea of America as a nation of immigrants and in constant tension with security considerations. Even in restrictive arguments, immigration is more often seen as a foreign policy problem or a risk management challenge. In Britain, by contrast, immigration is deeply intertwined with questions of national identity and social cohesion.

Another key difference is the role of scale. American think tanks inherently operate on a global scale, given America's position as a superpower. Immigration is part of the geopolitical equation, competing with China and attracting global talent. But the post-Brexit British discourse has combined global extroversion with intense introspection about the domestic structure of society. Its focus is on restoring national identity and redefining Britain's place in the world, but with a domestic and sociological starting point. Thus, while both take the issue of migration seriously, the American discourse sees it as a governance issue at the macro level (security and the global economy), the British discourse sees it as an existential issue for the fate of society and the nation at the micro level.

6. Suggestions

1) Suggestions for policymakers

Policymakers should proactively assess the discursive ecology of think tanks, rather than passively responding to their reports. A first step is to require financial transparency and explicit disclosure of funding sources. A think tank might publish reports on energy while its sponsors are oil companies. This potential conflict of interest requires the creation of a public database that transparently records the financial connections of think tanks. Policymakers should consider the ideological subtext and institutional orientation of any report before using it, rather than focusing solely on the findings. Second, policymakers need to embrace analytical pluralism. Reliance on a single source of thought, whether conservative or liberal, can lead to perspective blindness. It is recommended that for any policy measure, the opinions of at least three think tanks with different orientations be collected and analyzed in a comparative manner. This not only reveals analytical gaps, but also allows the policymaker to make a more mature decision based on the strengths and weaknesses of each argument. Indeed, effective policymaking requires breaking through the bubbles of discourse.

2) Suggestions for the media

The media has a vital role to play in breaking the frames set by think tanks. The first step for journalists is to move from direct reporting to critical commentary. This approach transforms the audience from passive consumers of information to active analysts. Second, the media must seek to break the frames. When a think tank frames immigration solely as a national security issue, the media can break this one-dimensional frame by interviewing

sociologists, economists, and immigrants themselves, revealing the human, cultural, and historical dimensions of the phenomenon. Also, tracking the evolution of a particular think tank's discourse over time can reveal contradictions or shifts in its positions in response to political developments. This not only deepens reporting but also increases the public accountability of these influential institutions. Ultimately, by playing this role, the media becomes a monitor and corrector of dominant discourses, rather than a mere reflector.

7. Conclusion

The results of this comparative study clearly show that the discourse on immigration in American and British think tanks, despite the common theme, has taken two completely distinct paths, influenced by the specific historical-political contexts of each country. On the American side, immigration is mainly framed as a variable in the equations of national security and economic competitiveness of a global superpower. In this view, immigrants are either human capital or a threat that must be managed within the framework of macro-strategic interests. In contrast, British discourse, deeply influenced by the Brexit experience, sees migration as more of a question of national sovereignty and collective identity, a phenomenon whose main priority is border control as a symbol of independence and an impact on internal social cohesion. Ultimately, these discursive differences do not simply reflect intellectual preferences, but dictate quite different practical policy paths. The American strategy seeks to optimize immigration to enhance national power on the global stage, while the central concern of the British strategy is to redefine itself through the exercise of strict border controls and the management of the socio-cultural impacts of immigration. This confrontation has transformed immigration from a shared management challenge into an arena for displaying the fundamental differences in the national projects and existential priorities of the two countries

REFERENCES

1. Abelson, D. E. (2014). Old world, new world: The evolution and influence of foreign affairs think tanks. *International Affairs*, 90(1), 125–142.
2. Ajana, B., Connell, H., & Liddle, T. (2024). "It could have been us": Media frames and the coverage of Ukrainian, Afghan, and Syrian refugee crises. *SN Social Sciences*, 4(7), Article 135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-024-00943-4>
3. Antoniades, N. (2022). The CIS strategy as a driver of nation branding. *International Journal of Export Marketing*, 5(3–4), 345–353.
4. Bloemraad, I. (2021). The politics of migration law: Interests, ideas, and institutions. In *Research handbook on the law and politics of migration* (pp. 8–20). Edward Elgar Publishing.
5. Cockbain, E., & Sidebottom, A. (2025). War, displacement, and human trafficking and exploitation: Findings from an evidence-gathering roundtable in response to the war in Ukraine. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 11(3), 258–286.
6. Colson, A. (2021). State of the art: Radicalisation of Western female migrants to ISIS-held territory: Case

- study from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. *SciencePo*, S, 5–19.
7. Farese, G. (2016). The culture of investment-led international development: The Chatham House circle (1939–45) and lessons for today. *International Affairs*, 92(6), 1481–1498.
8. Garnett, M., & Lorenzoni, V. (2021). British think tanks in the time of Brexit. In *Handbook on think tanks in public policy* (pp. 354–368). Edward Elgar Publishing.
9. Hansen, L. (2016). Discourse analysis, post-structuralism, and foreign policy. In S. Smith, A. Hadfield, & T. Dunne (Eds.), *Foreign policy: Theories, actors, cases* (3rd ed., pp. 95–110). Oxford University Press.
10. Ivannikov, N. S., & Shmonova, U. A. (2023). The role of think tanks in shaping European policies. *Russia in the Global World*, 26(2), 33–47.
11. Jacobs, E. (2023). Two years of Biden’s immigration policies (Policy report). Center for Immigration Studies.
12. Johnstone, B., & Andrus, J. (2024). *Discourse analysis*. John Wiley & Sons.
13. Merke, F., & Pauselli, G. (2015). In the shadow of the state: Think tanks and foreign policy in Latin America. *International Journal*, 70(4), 613–628. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702015594595>
14. Mintz, A., & DeRouen, K. R. (2010). *Understanding foreign policy decision making*. Cambridge University Press.
15. Nowrasteh, A. (2015). Center for Immigration Studies report exaggerates immigrant welfare use. Cato Institute.
16. Pettrachin, A., & Hadj Abdou, L. (2024). Beyond evidence-based policymaking? Exploring knowledge formation and source effects in US migration policymaking. *Policy Sciences*, 57(1), 3–28.
17. Podesta, J. (2019). The climate crisis, migration, and refugees (Policy brief). Brookings Institution.
18. Redd, S. B., & Mintz, A. (2013). Policy perspectives on national security and foreign policy decision making. *Policy Studies Journal*, 41(Suppl. 1), S11–S37.
19. Wagenaar, H., Kieslich, K., Hangel, N., Zimmermann, B., & Prainsack, B. (2022). Collaborative comparisons: A pragmatist approach towards designing large-scale, comparative qualitative research. *SSM – Qualitative Research in Health*, 2, Article 100172.
20. Wiarda, H. J. (2015). Think tanks and foreign policy in a globalized world: New ideas, new “tanks,” new directions. *International Journal*, 70(4), 517–525