

# Saving cities or empowering regions: A Comparative Study on Recent Regional Immigration Policies in Canada and Australia



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**Fact:** In recent years, Canada and Australia have pursued different plans to settle more immigrants in the regions.  
**Research Question:** Why did these two countries have different policy outcomes?

## Introduction

### Regionalization of immigration

Recently, regionalization of immigration reappeared in the agenda of policy makers in Canada and Australia, two countries that rely on immigration for population growth. Although recent policies in the two countries share a common goal which is to achieve a better geographic distribution of newcomers, the process of agenda-setting in those countries did not follow the same pattern. The need for regional immigration policies was not problematized the same way in Canada and Australia. In Canada, population decline, and economic revival of the regions were used to define the problem whereas Australia followed a different pattern where policy makers emphasized the infrastructure problems in metropolitan areas. Using Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), this study compares the policy narratives emerged in both countries.

## Theory

### Narrative policy framework (NPF)

- When:** Developed in the early 2000s, a policy process theory and an empirical approach to study narratives.
- What:** Its main analytical concept is "policy narratives" which are stories and discourses strategically mobilized by the policy makers to influence the policy process<sup>1</sup>.
- Why:** NPF theory postulates that those narratives have impacts on policy outputs and this impact can be systematically studied.
- How:** Although narratives may seem to be unique to a specific context, NPF offers a universally applicable methodology that optimizes the concepts to become generalizable and travel across contexts. NPF can be used in both experimental or quasi-experimental quantitative designs and in non-experimental qualitative inquires.<sup>2</sup>
- Importance:** One of its assumptions is that the policy reality is socially constructed and transmitted in narrative form so human cognitive capacity can make sense of it.

### Application of NPF in this study

**Type of inquiry:** Qualitative comparative case study  
**Level of analysis:** Meso level (how groups construct policy narratives)  
**Units of analysis:** Two countries (Canada and Australia)  
**Policy narrative:** The need for regionalization of immigration  
**Phases of the policy process:** Agenda-setting and implementation

## Methodology and methods

### Comparative case analysis

Criteria for case selection: Canada and Australia  
**Similarities:**

- Population growth depends on immigration
- Federal regimes with a process of federalization (decentralization) of immigration<sup>3</sup>
- Asymmetrical distribution of immigrants across regions
- Recognition of the policy problem and agenda-setting around the same time (late 90s and then in 2017-2018)

**Difference:**

- Different problem definition leading to different policy outcomes

### Data and methods

Policy narratives can be found in:

- Governmental press releases
- Speeches from ministers
- Reports from interest groups
- Journal articles (2018-2020)

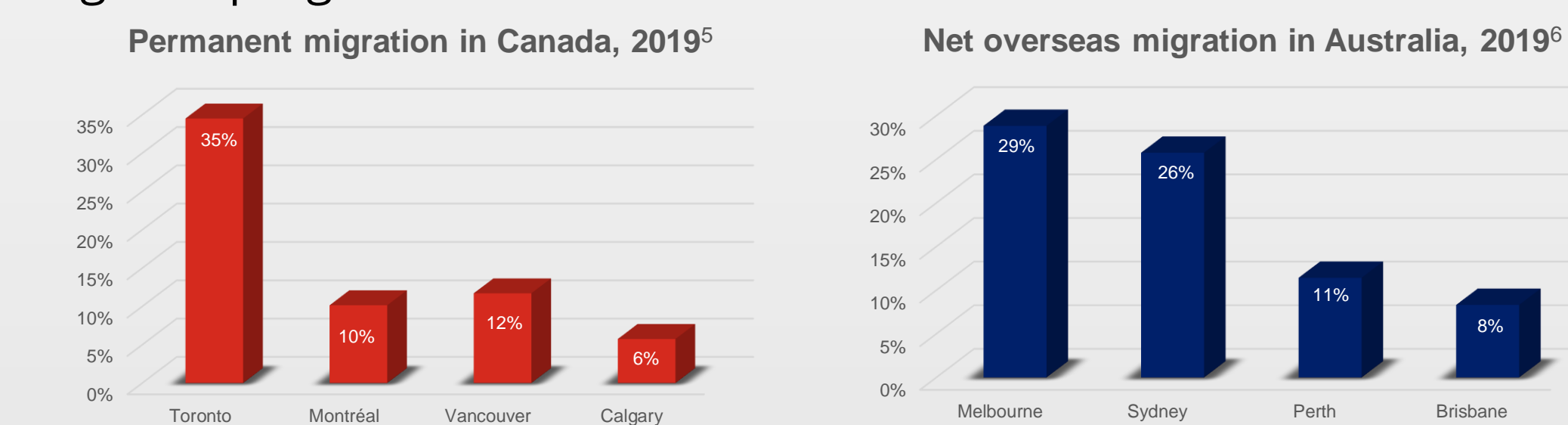
Themes for document analysis<sup>4</sup>:

- Population decline and aging
- Immigrants' preference for urban areas
- Economic development
- Problems in big cities (infrastructure and congestion)

## Analysis & Key Findings

### Evolution of the policy debate

**90s:** Federalization of immigration in both countries  
**Late 90s:** Regionalization of immigration becomes an important policy problem – first agenda setting attempts  
**Early 2000s:** Statistical evidence about population aging integrated into the debate to justify problem definition – first problem definition attempts  
**Early 2000s:** Statistical evidence about immigrants' preference for urban areas integrated into problem definition  
**2017-2018:** An urgent need for regionalization of immigration is problematized  
**2018-2019:** Accelerated decentralization of immigration with targeted regional programs



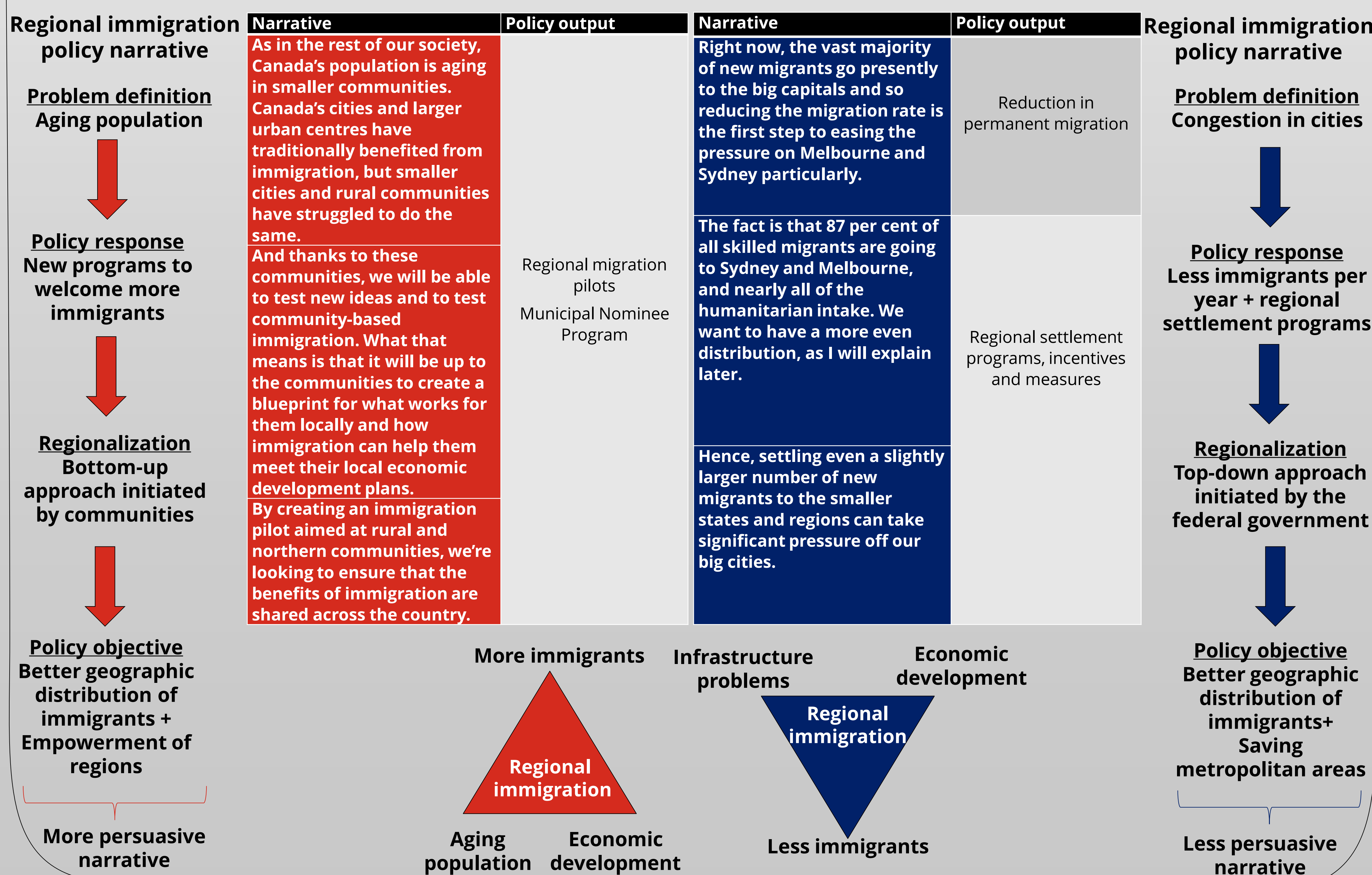
### Major differences

The two countries differ in four areas:

1. Problem definition
2. Policy response
3. Regionalization method
4. Policy objectives

### Narrative Policy Framework Analysis

	Canada	Australia
<b>Narrative Form</b>		
<b>Setting</b>	Federated system of immigration Demographic asymmetries Declining regions	Federated system of immigration Demographic asymmetries Declining regions Congested cities
<b>Characters</b>	Heros: Federal government and local actors Villains: Population decline Regions have not benefited from immigration as much as urban areas	Heros: Federal government Villains: Population density in cities and congestion Immigration flow to urban areas contributed to problems in big cities
<b>Plot</b>	Increasing permanent migration with more regional immigration programs to achieve economic prosperity in regional Canada	Decreasing permanent migration with more regional immigration programs to achieve economic prosperity in regional Australia
<b>Moral of the Story</b>		
<b>Narrative Content</b>		
<b>Beliefs</b>	Population decline Aging population Declining birth rate	Infrastructure problems in big cities Aging population Declining birth rate
<b>Strategies</b>	Inadvertent cause (population decline)	Inadvertent cause (immigrants' settlement in big cities)



## Limitations

1. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic as an exogenous shock has been excluded from this study due to its coverage.
2. This study explains the impact of problem definition on the policy outcome. Therefore, it treats problem definition in the process of agenda-setting as an explanatory factor, not as a dependent variable. The factors that explain why these different problem definitions occurred is beyond the scope of this study.
3. The resources used in this study cover records for public consumption only. Since Canada and Australia have different public spheres, there is an asymmetry in the availability of resources. Australian minister has delivered more speeches on the subject that are publicly available whereas Canadian minister was less involved in the debate, providing less material to document the policy narrative.

## Contributions & Conclusion

- 1. Similar systems, similar goals, different policy responses:**
  - This study shows why two similar immigration countries ended up having different policy outcomes to address the same policy problem. The evidence drawn from documents analyzed through the NPF lens demonstrates that the problem definition is an explanatory factor.
  - The analysis suggests that Canada's problem definition led to an increase in number of immigrants and introduction of new programs whereas Australia's problem definition led to a decrease in number of immigrants and incentives to settle immigrants outside the capital cities.
- 2. Role of narratives in problem definition:**
  - This study shows that this explanatory factor, problem definition, can be analyzed in narrative form.
  - Canadian policy makers mobilized a narrative of population aging and economic decline in the regions whereas Australian policy makers mobilized a narrative of congestion in the cities and infrastructure problems.
- 3. First attempt to mobilize NPF to explain a recent policy phenomenon in immigration:**
  - Although Canada and Australia have been compared in numerous comparative studies, this study offers new insights into immigration policies from a narrative perspective.

## Notes and bibliography

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3. Paquet, M. (2017). Wicked problem definition and gradual institutional change: federalism and immigration in Canada and Australia. *Policy and Society*, 36(3), 446-463.
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