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The Refugee Crisis in the EU: Right-Wing Party Competition and Strategic Positioning

Abstract: Despite a rise in the number of competitive far right parties leading up to the European refugee crisis, some centre right parties achieved or maintained electoral success. We argue that some centre right parties recognise the electoral opportunity for radical right parties to exploit the refugee crisis for electoral gains and strategically adopt hard-line positions on immigration to maintain and even increase electoral success. We test our theory of *strategic positioning* using data on party competition in national parliamentary elections across 28 EU member states at the start of the refugee crisis. Strategic positioning appears to be a particularly successful choice for centre right parties. The quantitative analysis is supported by case studies of Austria and The Netherlands. Whilst strategic positioning may produce short-term electoral success, it also mainstreams radical immigration positions in contemporary European politics, with negative implications for liberal democracy in Europe.

Keywords: Centre Right Parties; Radical Right Parties; Strategic Positioning; Refugee Crisis; Liberal Democracy

INTRODUCTION

In early 2015, a record number of refugees arrived through the Mediterranean Sea into the European Union (EU) from countries in states of war (e.g.: Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq). Southern European countries, particularly Greece and Italy, received the majority of these refugees (Gianfreda, 2018). In the 2015 calendar year, over one million migrants and refugees arrived into Europe (see Eurostat 2016; UNHCR, 2015). This wave continued into 2016, with a substantial reduction in 2017 and 2018 taking place. This peak number of refugees entering the European Union in 2015 is referred to as the European Refugee Crisis.¹

However, it was clear earlier that this crisis was building. In 2014, there was a surge in the number of refugees and asylum applicants across the EU28, noted and described as a ‘looming’ EU policy crisis in the making (see Trauner, 2016; Eurostat, 2015). Several scholars were pointing the EU’s lack of systematic policy frameworks to handle such a crisis as this was unfolding (see Nacheva, 2015; Triandafyllidou; 2014). At the same time, different EU member states also adopted different policies in handling the refugee crisis situation (see Wagner, 2016). In particular, and partially explained by the severity of different countries’ exposure to the crisis, disagreements over the allocation of refugees amongst member states and EU institutions grew (with particularly regard to the Dublin Regulation).²

For example, Greece receiving the highest number of Asylum seeker applications in 2015 (see Eurostat, 2016); although countries such as Germany under Chancellor Angela Merkel accepted the highest number of refugees (see Trauner, 2016). In contrast, countries such as Hungary, Poland and Austria lagged significantly behind regarding the relocation of refugees and asylum seekers. Furthermore, deep divisions in Central-Eastern European

¹ The 2015 peak number of 1,322,825, compared to 626,950 in 2014 and 1,259,955 in 2016. *Source:* Eurostat 2016. Secondly, we align ourselves with previous work by referring to this period as a ‘refugee’ rather than a ‘migration’ crisis.

² The Dublin Regulation establishes the Member State responsible for the examination of the asylum application.

countries such as the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary have also emerged amongst EU member states regarding their overall opposition towards the relocation of refugees (see Murray and Longo, 2018). Other countries in Southern Europe, such as Spain and Portugal have also lagged behind regarding their overall relocation commitments (see European Commission Report, 2017).

The ‘looming’ surge that became the 2015 European Refugee Crisis heightened the saliency of immigration as a political issue often aimed at the number of Muslim entrants that have entered Europe in this crisis (see Dennison et al, 2018; Gianfreda, 2018; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Geddes and Scholten, 2016; Tedesco, 2016).³ In particular, the refugee crisis created distinct electoral opportunities for the populist radical right to exploit their long-standing positions on the immigration issue (i.e. adopt nationalistic and/or anti-Islam rhetoric) and capture disaffected voters concerned with issues such as national sovereignty and ethnic identity (see Dennison et al, 2018; Pardos-Prado et al, 2014; Pardos-Prado, 2011).⁴

Here, we build on important studies that examine the inter-relatedness of the electoral strategies and fortunes of the centre and radical right (although see: Meguid 2008; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018; Bale, 2008; Odmalm and Bale, 2012; Bale et al, 2010) to examine mainstream centre right party electoral success at the start of the 2015 refugee crisis period on the key issue of immigration. We argue that the period of this ‘looming’ refugee crisis represents the moment at which some centre right parties recognised the electoral opportunity that such a refugee crisis would provide for populist radical right parties. Thus, in order to maintain - and even increase - their electoral success, centre right parties strategically position themselves by adopting more hard-line positions on immigration to compete with far right

³ Eurobarometer data show that in a majority of EU countries, the overall importance of the immigration issue increased substantially in 2014 amongst EU citizens (see Figures 1 and 2 in the Online Appendix). These data point to notable and increased concerns over Europe’s looming Refugee problem even before Autumn 2014.

⁴ This article uses the terms ‘far-right’, ‘radical right’ and ‘populist radical right’ interchangeably.

parties. This pre-emptive shift is aimed at offsetting far right electoral appeals during a period in which these appeals are likely to have heightened electoral success.

We merge national parliamentary election data (ParlGov) with the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data in order to investigate what electoral strategies centre right parties use to maintain and even increase electoral support when it appears the far-right will have the advantage (i.e. the refugee crisis). We find that ‘mainstream’ centre right appear to benefit electorally from strategically adopting increasingly hard-line positions on immigration (i.e. accommodationist strategies) during the refugee crisis. Case studies of Austria and The Netherlands provide further evidence that ‘mainstream’ centre right and populist radical right parties are likely to have made strategic decisions on the key issue of immigration in their party strategies during this time period. Despite a lack of evidence from the quantitative analysis – most likely a degrees of freedom issue - the case studies do suggest that strategic positioning may also move in coordination with incumbency. This is both important and timely as these findings may provide a partial explanation for two recent phenomena. One, the scattered success of far-right parties at both the national and supra-national levels and two, the increasing polarisation of European politics (Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

THEORY

Issue Ownership: Immigration

The conceptual basis of issue ownership is that parties are assigned the issues they are perceived to be best at handling or resolving (Powell and Whitten 1993; Petrocik 1996; Bélanger and Meguid 2008). In line with this (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), far right parties are clear ‘issue owners’ since they primarily compete on this issue with an ‘extreme’ anti-immigration position and have put this issue high on the policy agenda across Europe. Because of their traditional ownership of the issue, the far right have effectively monopolized the electoral use of immigration, limiting its use by mainstream parties on both the left and right (Arzheimer, 2009; Pardos-Prado, 2015; Odmalm and Bale, 2012).

Yet, recent research has demonstrated that, in fact, some centre right parties may adopt stronger anti-immigrant stances (Pardos-Prado 2015) or increase the salience of immigration in mass appeals in order to counteract the threat from far-right parties (Downes and Loveless 2018), particularly in the presence of a successful new far-right party (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). Such co-opting of stronger and more substantial positions on immigration by center right parties is not necessarily a surprising strategy.

The electoral opportunity for far-right parties is not just picking off disaffected moderate right-wing voters but also amassing potential constituents from the ranks of the centre left which has been shown to have alienated traditional working-class voters over the past decades (Berman, 2017). Such voters must pass through centre right parties to reach the radical right, thus creating a clear impetus for mainstream centre right parties to compete with radical right parties and immigration is the most likely issue over which to compete (Bale et al, 2008; Goodwin and Heath, 2017; Pardos-Prado, 2015).

Recent research (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020) has shown the electoral dilemma that parties of the centre left face on socio-cultural issues such as immigration (i.e.

‘accommodationist’ strategies) and how there is no clear way back electorally in the near future for centre left parties in Europe. Bale (2008) has also shown how centre right parties are better placed to compete on the immigration issue, compared to centre left parties in Europe.

At the same time, centre right parties, particularly Conservatives and Christian Democrats, appear to have become much more anti-immigrant across the refugee crisis period (versus centre left parties such as Social Democrats becoming more ‘pro-immigrant’; see Van Spanje, 2010; Bale, 2008; Odmalm and Bale, 2012). In recent cases – such as in the UK, The Netherlands and France – centre right parties have been ‘closer’ to radical right spaces than centre left parties, and have also made the issue salient in their party manifestos (e.g.: The People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy in The Netherlands (VVD); Van Kersbergen and Krouwel, 2008). We can see such an aggregate shift of centre right parties towards the right of the political spectrum on immigration from 2014-2017 (Figure 1).⁵

<<FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

There is an empirical alignment between voting and perceived competencies (van der Brug 2004; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Lachat 2014). Recent research has taken up the conceptual and operational bases of issue ownership (Stubager 2018; Therriault 2015; Walgrave et al. 2016) and the dimensions of debate are twofold. One, whether issue ownership refers to parties’ success at actually addressing the issues or through their simple association with a given issue and two, how stable (i.e. consistent) these perceptions are over time (Walgrave et al. 2016). For example, while the literature on the effect of mainstream party strategies in response to ‘challenger’ parties has found contrasting results (see Abou-Chadi 2016; Bale 2003; Bale et al. 2010; Meguid, 2005; 2008); mainstream centre right parties have

⁵ Radical right parties tend to adopt the most ‘restrictive’ positions on immigration (Lubbers et al, 2002; Meguid, 2005; Mudde, 2007; Mudde, 2017). Based on the 2014 CHES data, the average position on immigration by party family measured on a 0–10 scale in which higher values indicate higher levels of anti-immigrant positions held by political parties, we find: Radical Left: 3.1 ($N=11$); Centre Left: 3.9 ($N=49$); Centrist: 4.4 ($N=18$); Centre Right: 6.0 ($N=57$); and Radical Right: 8.7 ($N=22$). *Note:* Due to missing data on the immigration positions variable in the CHES 2014 dataset, the overall sample size is reduced slightly for both centre right and radical right parties.

also been shown to move to the right on immigration in response to far right party electoral success (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018; Abou-Chadi, 2016; Han, 2015).

More recent studies have found contrasting results regarding whether shifting strategies on immigration such as ‘accommodation’ pays-off electorally (see Spoon and Klüver, 2020; Meijers and Williams, 2019). Meijers and Williams (2019) find that shifting further right ideologically on the political spectrum (i.e. towards more ‘Eurosceptic’ positions) tends to weaken mainstream centre right parties electorally speaking, with the populist radical right benefiting more electorally. Furthermore, Spoon and Klüver (2020) highlight the complexity of party competition, particularly towards ‘accommodative’ positional shifts on the key issue of immigration for ‘mainstream’ parties. They find ambivalent effects for mainstream centre right parties, with ‘accommodative’ positional shifts neither helping nor hurting mainstream centre right parties electorally.

This literature is built on Meguid’s contributions (2005; 2008) which have theorised the (a) accommodative, (b) adversarial, and (c) dismissive strategies mainstream parties could limit radical right electoral success (see also Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Van de Wardt *et al.* 2014). Meguid (2008) also argued that an increase in issue saliency of immigration would actually benefit the radical entrepreneurs – as nominal owners of the issue. Yet, Downes and Loveless (2018) have shown that in the case of right-wing competition over the issue of immigration, just such a strategy – that is, increasing the salience of the issue of immigration in mass appeals - can in fact serve the electoral needs of centre right parties in combating radical right ‘challengers’, in times of economic crisis. At the same time, for centre right parties, such pivots or shifts may create potentially costly internal party contests.

Taking more hard-line immigration stances for centre right parties can lead to electoral rewards by capturing or retaining potential voters from radical right parties (Odmalm and Bale 2015; Pardos-Prado 2015; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). This can however also produce, “...a

tension between market liberal and culturally conservative wings” (Odmalm and Bale 2015, 5). Namely, immigration is directly linked to keeping taxation low and maintaining law and order alongside national security, issues likely to appeal to a core base of the centre right electorate (Pardos-Prado, 2015; Van Spanje, 2010).

However, the market liberal wings are likely to prefer a more moderate and supportive (or at least neutral) stance towards immigration (i.e.: merging with labour fluidity).⁶ By contrast, the culturally conservative wing is likely to advocate a more hard-line stance, seeking to place restrictions on the number of immigrants that can enter the country (as some form of nationalism). Meguid (2005, 2008) has argued that conservative and market-liberal parties may need to consider whether the chances of winning votes by responding to the radical right outweighs potential risks of losing voters at the centre of the voter distribution. For centre right incumbents, such intra-party squabbles may be a particularly risky move. Thus, the use of the immigration issue for centre right parties is neither an automatic nor an easy vote winning strategy.

One electoral strategy for centre right parties might be to *appear* to make immigration more central to their electoral platforms. That is, centre right parties may choose to emphasise—rather than change position on the issue of immigration during periods of national economic struggle. They may also strategically change positions on immigration in the context of the emergence of successful new far-right parties (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). Those that do adopt such strategic moves also tend to be electorally more successful. Downes and Loveless (2018) show this to be the case as the increasing the *saliency* of immigration was a successful strategy during an economic crisis. While far-right rhetoric may attempt to link economic

⁶ Further, one could, for example, pro-market right-wing parties or wings within parties may be favourable towards labour migration but not necessarily towards refugee migration. This distinction is potentially valuable to centre right parties in ‘normal times’. The European refugee crisis however is represented by an overwhelming proportion of refugees from war torn states suggesting that this distinction may lose its explanatory potency.

downturns to immigration issues, this linkage is indirect. Thus, centre right parties can use salience – rather than positions to show that the immigration issue is an important one, whilst not needing to make positional changes (i.e. to become more *extreme*). During times of economic crisis, centre right parties can offer palatable *moderate* positions about immigration to voters who may be concerned about, but not openly hostile to, immigration.

Strategic Positioning: The Essentiality of the Refugee Crisis Context

The refugee crisis, on the other hand, is a direct crisis specifically about immigration. Immigration issue become a highly politicised issue, dominating public opinion and party competition going into the 2015 crisis (Gianfreda, 2018; Dennison et al, 2018). Unlike the related but tertiary economic crisis above, the refugee crisis calls for centre right parties to compete directly with far-right parties' immigration positions. This may require centre right parties to adopt more hard-line stances (i.e. anti-immigrant) on immigration in order to better compete with far-right parties electorally by maintaining their constituencies (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018).

To understand the electoral success of mainstream centre right parties during this period, we propose *strategic positioning* as an entrepreneurial exploitation of the issue of immigration and electoral dynamics (Van der Wardt *et al.* 2014). The combination of heightened context should benefit mainstream right parties regardless of how radical those positions are (Pardos-Prado 2015). Therefore, strategic positioning states that in order to minimise electoral losses, centre right parties identify opportune moments for far-right parties to make electoral gains and respond strategically by adopting hard-line positions on immigration in order to minimise voter losses. There are two core mechanisms in the theoretical framework of strategic positioning, that apply directly to the European refugee crisis context and the electoral fortunes of centre right parties.

- (a) Centre right parties must recognise the electoral threat posed by the radical right at the right time and adjust their *positions* accordingly on the immigration issue (i.e. they are ‘strategic’).
- (b) Centre right parties adopt more ‘restrictive’ *positions* on the immigration issue.

In addition, we argue that this implies that centre right parties which do not adopt more hard-line positions on immigration are less likely to achieve electoral success in this crisis period.

HYPOTHESES

Strategic positioning builds on recent research (see Spoon and Klüver, 2020; Meijers and Williams 2019; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018; Pardos-Prado, 2015; Meguid, 2005) and results in two hypotheses. Simply, centre right parties’ use of strategic positioning in the context of the Refugee Crisis is not only to improve their electoral fortunes but also to out-perform far right parties electorally.

H1: Centre Right parties that adopt more hard-line stances (i.e. ‘accommodationist’ strategies) on immigration will perform better electorally in the context of the refugee crisis.

H2: Centre Right parties that adopt more hard-line stances (i.e. ‘accommodationist’ strategies) on immigration will perform better electorally than Populist Radical Right parties in the context of the refugee crisis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The central research question is how ‘mainstream’ centre right parties can maintain or even improve their electoral success during the refugee crisis period. In order to answer this question, we proposed strategic positioning. To test this theory, we collected recent national parliamentary election data and cross-checked this with data from the ParlGov dataset (see Döring and Manow, 2018). Our elections database contains data on parties’ recent electoral performances in national parliamentary elections across Europe. These party performance data were then merged with the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) dataset on party positions.

The CHES dataset is a widely used dataset of experts’ assessments of parties’ issue positions on a number of key European electoral issues. The CHES has a high degree of reliability and consistency in terms of the empirical measures (see Bakker et al, 2015) and allows us to examine party positions on immigration at the onset of the refugee crisis electoral period. The CHES 2014 data captures party positions at the onset of the refugee crisis.⁷ In order to check the reliability of party families in our dataset, we matched and cross-checked our classifications with b-lefth ParlGov and the 2014 CHES database.⁸

Defining Centre Right Parties in Europe

In line with scholars such as Bale (2008) and Pardos-Prado (2015), we define centre right parties as representing an umbrella term. Thus, centre right parties belong to diverse ideological categories, such as ‘Conservatives’ (UK Conservative Party), ‘Christian Democrats’ (CDU/CSU in Germany) and ‘Market Liberals’ (VVD in The Netherlands) party groupings. A number of centre right parties also have ‘overlapping’ ideologies, belonging to

⁷ Unfortunately, the CHES 2017 Expert Flash Survey cannot be used as there is a greatly reduced number of countries (N=14) and party families under investigation.

⁸ For party families, we have coded each party on a 1-5 scale (1= radical left, 2= centre left, 3= centrist, 4= centre right and 5= radical right). Mudde’s recent classifications (2014) of far-right parties also provided an additional reliability check. See Table 1 in Appendix A of the Online Appendix for a more comprehensive breakdown of political parties.

one or more of these ideological categories.⁹ For consistency purposes, we only include centre right parties that belong to these ideological categories.¹⁰ The final sample size includes 223 political parties across 28 countries in Western and Central-Eastern Europe. Given the literature on potential variation on the nature of right-wing parties across regions (Tavits and Letki 2014), we include a dummy for post-Communist countries. Including both the West and East contexts also allow us to control for important variations on key issues such as immigration that are likely to structure competition between right-wing parties in the refugee crisis period.

Dependent Variable: The main dependent variable in this paper is the percentage vote share in the most recent national parliamentary election since the start of the refugee crisis, across 28 EU member states (See Appendix A). We also ran an additional dependent variable measuring the change in vote shares and seat shares across the refugee crisis period.

Independent Variables: The central independent variable is the position that centre right parties adopt on immigration. Immigration positions are measured on a 0–10 scale and allow us to examine the positions that parties adopt on this key electoral issue at the start of the refugee crisis context in Europe. Higher values on this variable indicate greater anti-immigrant positions held. The salience of immigration (emphasis) variable was not asked in the 2014 CHES dataset and we are unable to include this variable in our paper and examine the combined effect of positional and salience models on immigration as previous studies have done (see Pardos-Prado, 2015). We also control for key variables such as the left-right economic position (0-10, in which 0=extreme left, 5 =centre, 10 =extreme right) and the salience of the left-right economic dimension in overall party strategies.

⁹ For example, the Dutch VVD Party can be considered as having both ‘conservative’ and ‘market liberal’ ideologies in its core party platform.

¹⁰ We did not include ‘centrist’ parties such as Macron’s La République En Marche (LREM) as being a ‘centre right party’. LREM is ‘centrist’ and clearly differentiated from the mainstream ‘centre right’ party grouping. Similarly, we also see parties such as the UK Liberal Democrats as a predominantly ‘social liberal’ party grouping distinct from a ‘market liberal’ grouping. Therefore, they are not included in the ‘centre right’ party grouping.

Previous research has demonstrated the importance of Euroscepticism for radical right parties (see Lubbers et al, 2002; Mudde, 2007; Arzheimer, 2009; Werts et al, 2012). At the same time, the EU integration issue has also seen much widespread variation for centre right parties (see Bale, 2008; Odmalm and Bale, 2015; Pardos-Prado, 2015; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015). The CHES 2014 dataset contains a wide range of variables that capture parties' stances on the EU. First, we include a variable that examines parties' positions on EU integration. We then reverse coded this variable so that higher values imply greater opposition towards EU integration ('hard' Euroscepticism). Second, we include the issue salience of parties' EU integration position: from 'European integration is of no importance' to 'European integration is of great importance' (0-10). We also included a dummy variable for party incumbency during this electoral period.

To increase the robustness of our analysis, we include country-level variables, we include the Change in Unemployment (2013-2015) and Change in GDP Growth (2013-2015) (World Bank).¹¹ Finally, we include institutional variables in line with the existing literature. We adopt the Gallagher Index of the change in disproportionality levels to account for the varying effects of electoral systems (see Norris, 2005; Carter, 2005; Arzheimer and Carter, 2006). The online Appendix includes the classification of parties, the election years, alongside measurement and operationalisation of all variables.

ANALYSIS

In Table 1, we test H1–H2. Given the nature of the dependent variable, we use OLS multivariate regression models. Model 1 provides a test of H1 in examining the performance of centre right parties. Model 1 demonstrates that centre right parties that adopted hard-line stances on immigration benefited electorally (Anti-Immigration position: 2.28; $p < 0.001$).

¹¹ We also included the change in the number of asylum seekers (2013-2015). While these latter data are drawn from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), there is a high number of missing data for some EU countries reducing our overall sample size.

These findings support H1. Model 1 also shows that centre right parties benefited from a positive incumbency effect during this electoral period.

<<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

Model 2 provides a test of H2 in investigating the positions that both centre right and populist radical right parties adopted on immigration in one single model. Model 2 tests a statistical interaction on the immigration issue between both party families. (i.e. ‘accommodationist’ strategies).¹² Model 2 shows that centre right parties benefit more than the populist radical right on the immigration issue (Anti-Immigration position of 3.43; $p < 0.05$). Model 2 therefore provides evidence for H2. For Model 2, we also assessed party performance with the overall change in seat shares. This produced no substantive change in the results.

Robustness Checks

We performed several robustness checks. The first check included dropping one country control variable at a time which produced no substantive change to the main empirical findings in Models 1 and 2. Models 3 and 4 in Table 1 produce identical models for centre left and populist radical right parties. The Models showed that both centre left and radical right parties did not benefit electorally from adopting hard-line positions on immigration. Thirdly, we also ran a ‘Far Right challengers’ party model and this further showed how the radical right did not benefit from adopting hard-line stances on immigration during the refugee crisis period.

It is important to further note that the main empirical findings (M1-M2) demonstrate overall patterns and trends at the start of the refugee crisis, yet they do not establish systematic changes in immigration positions across time (i.e. longitudinally). Thus, further empirical evidence is required through the use of qualitative case studies to provide further evidence for H2. In order to fully explore and understand ‘mainstream’ centre right party electoral success

¹² In order to examine right-wing party competition, we coded this variable as a dummy variable (1= ‘Centre Right’ and 0= ‘Populist Radical Right’).

on immigration during this ‘crisis’ period (particularly H2), we deploy a mixed methods research design which features qualitative case studies in the next section that build on the findings of the main statistical models.

The value of the case studies is that they enable us to provide a more comprehensive story across time (i.e. beyond the start of the 2015 refugee crisis), of how certain centre right parties can benefit from adopting more hard-line stances on immigration and better compete with radical right parties in this crucial electoral period.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Above, we have examined electoral data to identify empirical patterns that consistent with our theory in the context of the European Refugee Crisis. However, a limitation consistent across many studies of right-wing party competition is the lack of dynamic data. While currently increasing, the number of far-right parties is still small.¹³ To address this, we next use qualitative case studies to ‘drill down’ on our theory and its core mechanisms in the wider context (2015–2018) of the Refugee Crisis, particularly in regard to testing H2 in further detail.

The dataset used above yields insightful patterns in recent national parliamentary elections that cover the 2015 refugee crisis period. Two cases stand out where (a) immigration is featured as a core electoral issue and (b) by variations in electoral success for centre right and radical right-wing parties across the refugee crisis period. A closer inspection of the dataset also reveals that the ‘type’ of centre right party appears to matter, with a number of ‘incumbent’ centre right parties performed well electorally when adopting ‘restrictionist’ strategies on immigration (i.e. VVD in the Netherlands, the ÖVP in Austria, the UK Conservative Party, alongside the N-VA in Belgium).

¹³ There are thirty-five new parties in the EU since 2011. Of those, four are radical right parties: FvD in the Netherlands; SPD in the Czech Republic; Kukiz’15 in Poland and We Are Family in Slovakia.

Table 2 shows how adopting different positions on immigration for centre right parties is likely to influence centre right parties' electoral success and ability to better compete with the radical right in this macro-political context. Political parties that scored 1–5 on the immigration positions variable adopted much more 'liberal' and positive attitudes towards immigrants, whereas parties that scored 6–10 adopted more 'restrictive' and anti-immigrant positions. Figure 2 further shows the extent to which adopting 'tougher' positions on immigration can influence the electoral fortunes of centre right parties in this electoral context. Drawing from our 'universe of cases' across 28 EU Member states, we examine two key country cases in Western Europe, due to their similar political contexts.¹⁴

<<FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE>>

Patterns of Party Competition: Refugee Crisis Context

We further note that crisis periods also tend to exhibit more severe anti-incumbency effects from greater numbers of dissatisfied voters and a high tide of 'challenger parties.' The broader context of anti-incumbency effects is also likely to have continued in the refugee crisis period and further benefited the radical right (see Kriesi and Pappas, 2015). Although radical right parties are likely to benefit electorally from anti-incumbency effects during a period in which immigration as an electoral issue is highly politicised, we posit that incumbent centre right parties' *strategic positioning* may be a more effective electoral strategy. Crucially, by adopting this strategy, centre right incumbents may be able to provide a clear differentiation on immigration from incumbent centre left parties and, in contrast to the radical right challenger, may also be perceived by voters as more ideologically palatable.¹⁵

¹⁴ The United Kingdom case (UK Conservative Party) was not selected as immigration was the issue of Brexit dominated the 2017 national parliamentary election.

¹⁵ Centre right party 'challengers' parties are also likely to realise the electoral benefits of 'strategic positioning' on immigration. We note that a number of centre right 'challenger' parties that were successful during the recent economic crisis period (i.e. 2008-13) such as the VVD in the Netherlands, the N-VA in Belgium (Coalition Government, 2014–2018) and the ÖVP in Austria are now serving as incumbents during the refugee crisis period and have prospered electorally.

Building on the main findings above, two representative qualitative case studies are chosen which allow us to examine further and expand on how ‘accommodative’ strategies on immigration (i.e. anti-immigrant positions) influenced the electoral success of specific ‘types’ of mainstream centre right parties, in the context of the 2015–18 European Refugee Crisis. It is important as well to highlight the electoral threat posed by ‘insurgent’ populist radical right parties (H2). These two cases provide a snapshot and a more nuanced examination of ‘strategic positioning’ alongside the ‘close’ competition on immigration, between (a) mainstream centre right parties and (b) radical right ‘challengers’ in Europe.

Both country cases studies provide contrasting variations of ‘strategic positioning’ in the context of the refugee crisis. The Austrian case provides a story of (a) ‘dual’ electoral success, for both the ‘incumbent’ centre right party (ÖVP) and the ‘challenger’ populist radical right party (FPÖ). In contrast, the (b) Dutch case study provides a more complex and nuanced illustration of a story of ‘incumbent’ centre right political survival (VVD), in the context of the electoral threat posed by the radical right (PVV). These cases are also selected due to the right-wing nature of the political landscapes in both countries (i.e. ‘close’ party competition between both mainstream centre right and populist radical right parties) alongside the Western European geographical location. Both country cases arguably have comparable political systems, and this provides an important basis for comparison. Other case studies such as Hungary in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) were not chosen.

This is primarily because the main governing party Fidesz is now no longer considered a ‘mainstream’ centre right party and instead should be considered a ‘fully-fledged’ PRR ‘incumbent’ party, due to its recent ideological transformation towards an anti-democratic party. The historical context (i.e. post-communism) and recent ‘democratic backsliding’ also makes the Hungarian case a difficult one to include, compared to other Western European cases.

Party positions data is drawn on from the CHES 2014 and CHES 2017 datasets for the three countries.¹⁶ We are also able to expand and build on our empirical findings in the OLS regression models, in examining the wider dynamics of the 2015–2018 refugee crisis in the case studies below.

Austria: ‘Dual’ Electoral Success for MCR and PRR

From 2013–2017, Austrian politics featured a ‘Grand Coalition’ arrangement between the centre left Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the centre right Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) through the Faymann Government Coalition (Faymann II, 2013–2016) alongside the Kern Government (2016–2017). Historically speaking, Austrian politics can be considered unique as it has often had Grand Coalition arrangements in a multi-party parliamentary system (Fallend and Heinisch, 2016).

The case of Austria at the 2017 legislative election further demonstrates the pattern of contestation by centre right parties on the issue of immigration, with the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) under party leader Sebastian Kurz. Though previous in a Grand Coalition agreement with the centre left SPÖ, the ÖVP has in recent years adopted ‘tougher’ rhetoric (6.1/10) on the immigration issue, particularly in relation to Muslim immigrants (see Jenny, 2019). This has arguably enabled them to create ‘distance’ spatially from other ‘mainstream’ parties in Austria and brought them ideologically closer to the FPÖ.

At the 2017 election, the ÖVP frequently adopted ‘tough’ and ‘restrictive’ positions on immigration (see Bodlos and Plescia, 2018), particularly in regard to Muslim groups and marked a shift from the former leader of the party Reinhold Mitterlehner. This tougher rhetoric on immigration is likely to have contributed partially to their electoral success at the ballot box, in increasing their vote share (+7.5%) points and seat share (+15) respectively (H2). Additional

¹⁶ Again, the ‘flash’ CHES 2017 includes only 14 EU countries. The positions on immigration for parties in Austria are not included in Table 2 as the data is missing.

factors such as declining vote shares for the Greens (-8.8%) and ‘stagnating’ vote shares for the ‘incumbent’ centre left SPÖ (+0.1%) arguably helped both the ÖVP and the FPÖ electorally.

The radical right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) also performed considerably well electorally (+5.5%) at this election, alongside an increase of eleven seats. The FPÖ was also able to successfully mobilise ‘fear’ over the immigration issue (9.9/10) in the refugee crisis period. Their electoral strategy arguably profited from the party’s opposition to the Schengen Area (a zone of free movement within the EU) and strong rhetoric on Muslim immigrants entering the country.

It is also important to point out that the increased vote share won by the FPÖ may suggest that the ÖVP’s strategy (i.e. ‘accommodationist’) had a downside, as adopting tough positions on immigration may have arguably also played into the hands of the FPÖ (see Praprotnik, 2017). Evidently, ‘strategic positioning’ on immigration may have provided a double-edged sword for the centre right ÖVP. The final outcome of the 2017 Austrian legislative election saw a repeat of the historic 1999 coalition government (see Fallend and Heinisch, 2016), with the centre right ÖVP and radical right FPÖ joining forces once again to form a coalition government.

The Netherlands: ‘Incumbent’ MCR Political Survival:

The case of the Netherlands at the 2017 General Election highlights a more nuanced dynamic in examining H2. A first reading of this election would be misleading, as the centre right incumbent VVD led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte (Rutte II/Rutte–Asscher Cabinet) performed electorally worse, with a (-5.5%) reduction in their overall vote share. VVD’s seat share also decreased (-8), yet the party still won the greatest number of seats in the Dutch Parliament. The radical right Party for Freedom (PVV) led by their leader Geert Wilders saw

a gradual increase in their vote share (+3%) and at the same time increased their seats by five in the Dutch Parliament.

The VVD's election campaign also focused heavily on an anti-immigration platform. Recent studies have highlighted how the VVD Party contained policies that largely resembled the PVV Party (i.e. 'accommodation') in the Dutch 2017 General Election. Furthermore, the centre right governing party VVD's policies included proposing the outlawing of burqas in public, stricter residency rules, alongside delegitimising the PVV "as a serious government player by refusing to consider it as a coalition partner" (see Akkerman, 2018: 2).

Though the centre right VVD has a history of adopting 'restrictive' stances on immigration, the party has been less 'tough' on the issue and the broader issue of Islam compared to the radical right PVV (see Van Kessel, 2010; Van Heerden et al., 2013). We argue that the Dutch case of the centre right VVD should not be seen as a negative case, where the centre right VVD lost out electorally. Rather, a different and more complex narrative exists. Compared to the majority of other centre right and centre left parties, VVD adopted much more 'restrictive' positions on immigration in 2014 (7.5/10).

This rhetoric on immigration increased in 2017 (8.1/10) and this 'tough' rhetoric on immigration continued throughout their election campaign at the 2017 election. Though the party did suffer a general anti-incumbency vote at the 2017 election, it is conceivable that the 'restrictive' positions on immigration may have provided a 'strategic' electoral plan for political survival, in mitigating further losses to the PVV (H2) and at the same time allowing Prime Minister Mark Rutte (Rutte III) and his VVD government to form a workable governing multi-party coalition after the election (albeit with a substantially reduced majority) with the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Democrats 66 (D66) and Christian Union (CU) after the General Election of 2017.

DISCUSSION

The ‘double edged sword’ consequences of accommodative strategies towards the radical right has been widely acknowledged in the literature (see Meguid, 2005; Pardos-Prado, 2015). This paper builds on the literature pertaining to the effects of party competition strategies on centre right (and radical right) electoral success (see Meguid, 2005; Carter, 2005; Pardos-Prado, 2015; van Spanje and de Graaf 2018). The paper argues that ‘accommodation’ appears to work as an electoral strategy for specific ‘mainstream’ centre right parties during the refugee crisis period in Europe. However, in contrast to the existing literature, this paper contributes by outlining the electoral success of mainstream centre right parties during the recent European refugee crisis on the immigration issue. At the same time, the results also point to certain centre right parties being able to outperform radical right parties, when adopting ‘tougher’ positions on immigration.

The case studies support the main findings and underscore two key patterns in Western European politics. First, the case of Austria (2017) show that centre right parties (the incumbent ÖVP) adopted more ‘restrictive’ positions on immigration (particularly Muslim immigrants) and helped them electorally. At the same time, the centre right ÖVP and radical right FPÖ formed a coalition government after the 2017 legislative election. This provided a repeat of the historic 1999 ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government.

Secondly, the case in The Netherlands (2017) election provides a more nuanced picture. Though the incumbent centre right VVD adopted tougher stances on immigration, VVD saw their vote share decrease and the radical right PVV under Geert Wilders increasing their vote share. Although the centre right VVD performed electorally worse, they still managed to form a coalition government after the election (effectively locking out Wilders and his PVV Party).

The Dutch case provides evidence that adopting tougher position on immigration may have mitigated further electoral losses to PVV for the VVD Party and at the same time led to

their survival as the ‘main’ governing party in the Dutch political system. Thus, it is not unreasonable to argue that by adopting more ‘restrictive’ positions on immigration, the centre right in both countries (VVD in the Netherlands and ÖVP in Austria) have arguably been able to mitigate the electoral threat that the populist radical right (PVV in the Netherlands and FPÖ in Austria) poses in national parliamentary elections.

An important observation not examined in the two case studies is the case of Central-Eastern Europe that paints a bleak picture for the future of liberal democracy in Europe (see Butsikova and Kitschelt, 2009). Over the last decade (2010–2020), the Fidesz ruling party under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has ideologically transformed from a ‘former’ mainstream Conservative centre right party towards a fully-fledged populist radical right party. Furthermore, recent national parliamentary elections in Hungary (2018) also demonstrates this ‘mainstreaming’ effect, with the increasing anti-immigrant positions of the now anti-democratic party Fidesz and the dominant right-wing political landscape (the extreme right-wing electoral competitor Jobbik) (see Pytlas and Kossack, 2013; see Rovny, 2016; Rovny and Polk, 2016).

This last finding has important implications for the future of liberal democracy in European politics. The implications are profound and suggest that if ‘mainstream’ centre right parties shift too far (i.e. a so-called ‘mainstreaming’ effect) on the key socio-cultural issue dimension (i.e. on immigration and nationalism), they then run the risk of ideologically transforming into fully-fledged populist radical right parties.

Centre right parties appear to have benefited from the immigration issue in diverse contexts. First, this was demonstrated through the role of issue salience in the recent economic crisis, where centre right party ‘challengers’ tended to prosper electorally and, in some cases, perform better than radical right parties when they emphasised the issue (Downes and Loveless, 2018). Second, these findings have been extended to the European Refugee crisis period. We

show that the immigration issue can be used successfully by specific centre right incumbents in cases such as the ÖVP in Austria (to consolidate their hold on power) and VVD in the Netherlands (to maintain their survival as the main governing party).

Given the theory and evidence here, is increased ‘toughness’ on immigration, then, always successful for centre-right parties, regardless of the refugee crisis? The answer is most likely no. Downes and Loveless (2018) have shown adjusting positions on the immigration issue do not appear to work as well as an increase in saliency of the issue in mass appeals. Thus, while recent research has made progress, such strategies require further research. Future party competition research should seek to build on these findings in understanding the electoral fortunes of the centre right across Europe in different macro-political and economic contexts and also examining at the individual level, the ‘types’ of voters that vote for both sets of political parties on the right.

After the initial onset of the refugee crisis, it became clear that far right parties, while more numerous, were not achieving greater or at a minimum consistent electoral success. It is important for future research should consider the role of measures to mitigate or alleviate specific countries’ immigration struggles (however poorly or well devised and implemented) taken at the national or supra-national levels.

As our theory rests on the strategic ‘choices’ of parties, future research into the vote choices of right-wing constituents (i.e. the individual level) would offer another facet of right-wing electoral competition. For example, one might investigate how centre right and radical right parties compete on the issue of immigration towards different ethnic ‘out-groups’ in periods both inside and outside of macro-political and macro-economic crisis. At the same time, a closer investigation on the issue of the EU and party competition between both party families on this crucial issue in the refugee crisis period would also be a fruitful area for future research.

CONCLUSION

During periods of direct challenge to the issue of immigration – such as the European Refugee crisis, this paper found that centre right parties which directly contest the immigration issue by adopting ‘hardline’ (‘accommodationist’) strategies can perform better electorally. Building on existing findings in the literature (see Spoon and Klüver, 2020; Meijers and Williams 2019; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018; Pardos-Prado, 2015; Meguid, 2008; Meguid, 2005), we presented evidence that that electorally successful centre right parties perceive the refugee crisis context as a ‘strategic’ moment for radical right parties to exploit the issue of immigration for electoral success and adopt ‘tougher’ ‘accommodative’ positions on the issue as a result.

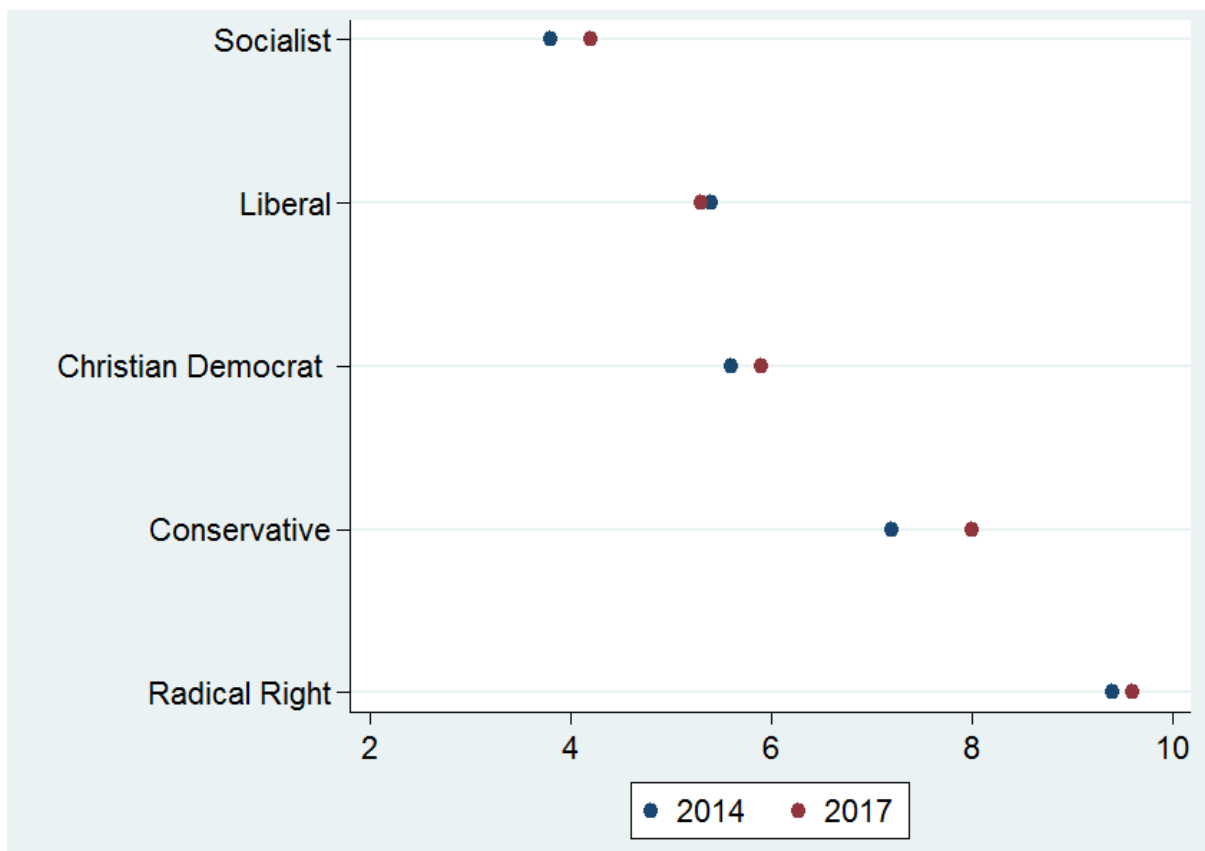
Further, the findings in this paper may provide a partial explanation for two recent phenomena in European politics. Far right parties have been on the rise in several countries but in others have found less success and have even declined. One reason for this may be the ability of centre right parties to compete effectively by staking claim on what have historically been considered far right issues, such as immigration. Second, whilst on the surface it appears that strategic positioning has helped centre right parties to perform well electorally, this is normatively worrying. By shifting further right on immigration, a number of centre right parties have been able to hold onto power and stay in government.

However, ideologically, a number of centre right parties, such as ÖVP in Austria have begun to resemble the radical right parties they sought to defeat (see Arzheimer, 2019). Such mainstreaming of radical positions can be additionally seen by centre-right parties having already started to cooperate with radical right challengers in government (see de Lange 2012; Fallend and Heinisch, 2016). The ideological transformation of Fidesz in Hungary, from a ‘former’ centre right party towards a fully-fledged populist radical right party provided further evidence of this trend. Thus, strategic positioning may also mainstream radical right ideology,

thereby opening up a 'Pandora's Box' in national and supranational European politics. In just this way, it may be contributing to the increasing polarisation of European politics (Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

FIGURES & TABLES:

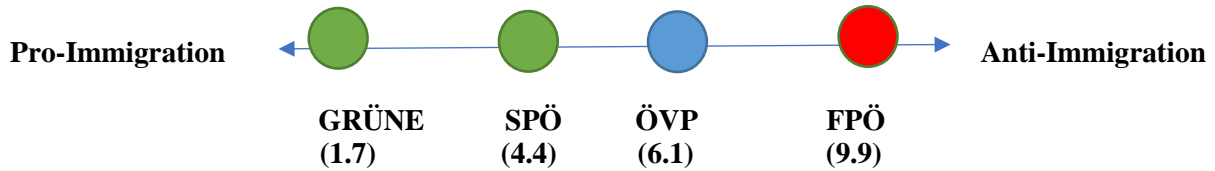
Figure 1: Party Positions on Immigration (CHES 2014 & 2017 Data)



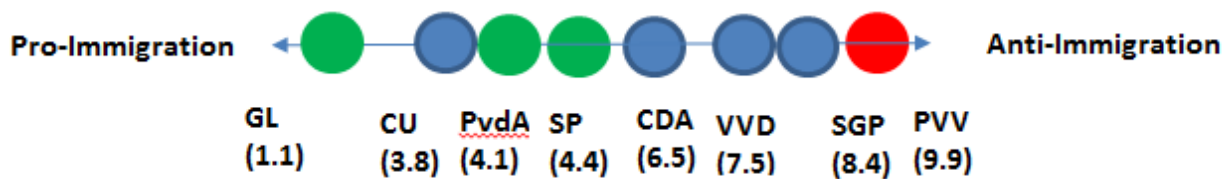
Source: CHES (2014 & 2017) & Authors' own Database

Figure 2: Graphical illustration of ‘Strategic Positioning’ on Immigration

Austria: ‘Dual’ Electoral Success for Mainstream Centre Right ‘Incumbents’ (ÖVP) and PRR ‘Challengers’ (FPÖ)



The Netherlands: Mainstream Centre Right Political Survival in Government (VVD)



Notes: Positions on Immigration (1–10) is denoted in parentheses. 1–5= ‘Pro-Immigration’ (6–10) = ‘Anti-Immigration.’

Data Source: CHES 2014.

Red: Radical Right
Blue: Centre Right
Green: Centre Left

Additional Notes: PILZ (Austria), DENK (The Netherlands) and FvD (The Netherlands) contain missing data on immigration positions (CHES 2014) and are therefore not included in Figure 2.

Table 1: Centre Right Party Performance: European Refugee Crisis

Independent Variables	Centre Right (Model 1)	Right-Wing Interaction (Model 2)	Populist Radical Right (Model 3)	Centre Left (Model 4)
Centre Right Dummy (Ref Category: PRR)	-	-29.16** (-2.62)	-	-
Centre Right Dummy *Position: Anti-Immigration	-	(3.43)* (2.39)	-	-
Position: Anti- Immigration	2.28*** (3.05)	-3.45** (-2.64)	-8.21** (-2.66)	2.66 (1.81)
Incumbents	3.60** (2.67)	-0.48 (-0.45)	-5.29* (-2.03)	-3.65 (-1.51)
Left-Right Economic Position	-1.89 (-1.29)	-0.28 (-0.38)	0.36 (0.16)	1.19 (0.62)
Left-Right Economic Saliency	5.35*** (3.67)	0.11 (0.13)	2.13 (0.89)	3.85* (2.14)
Position: Euroscepticism	1.31 (1.51)	1.03 (1.71)	7.55 (1.25)	-2.28 (-1.43)
Saliency: EU Integration	1.71 (1.52)	0.15 (0.22)	1.63 (1.30)	-0.23 (-0.13)
Disproportionality Index	-0.32 (-0.57)	0.51 (1.05)	-0.80 (1.69)	-0.42 (-0.57)
Western Europe	2.54 (0.71)	1.47 (0.71)	-30.93 (-1.65)	-1.45 (-0.27)
Change in Unemployment Levels (2015-2013)	-0.98 (-1.02)	0.36 (0.49)	6.08 (1.65)	0.66 (0.45)
Change in GDP Growth (2015–2013)	0.14 (0.84)	-0.15 (-1.02)	-1.24 (-1.95)	-0.23 (-0.91)
Constant	-49.54 (-4.67)	29.31 (2.67)	-31.20 (-2.00)	18.65 (0.54)
N	45	53	19	38
R2	0.65	0.21	0.69	0.39

Dependent Variable: Model I-IV % Vote Share (Most Recent National Parliamentary Election).

t statistics in parentheses * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2: Key Case Studies Breakdown

Country & Election Years	Electoral Indicators	Centre Right Party	Radical Right Party	Electoral Outcomes ('Winners')	Case Study: Refugee Crisis Context
Austria (2017-2013)	Party Name % Vote Share % Change (Vote) Seat Share (Change) Immigration Positions (2014) Immigration Positions (2017)	ÖVP 31.5% +7.5% +15 6.1 N/A	FPÖ 26% +5.5% +11 9.9 N/A	FPÖ & ÖVP Joint Coalition Government	Mainstream Centre Right (MCR) & Populist Radical Right (PRR) 'Dual' Electoral Success
The Netherlands (2017-2012)	Party Name % Vote Share % Change (Vote) Seat Share (Change) Immigration Positions (2014) Immigration Positions (2017)	VVD 21.3% -5.3% -8 7.5 8.1	PVV 13.1% +3% +5 9.9 9.4	VVD Coalition Government with CDA, D66 & CU	Mainstream Centre Right (MCR) 'Incumbent' Survival

Notes: Immigration positions are measured on a 0–10 scale are in bold (CHES 2014 & 2017 Data are presented). Higher values indicate higher levels of anti-immigrant positions held by political parties.

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