

# A Rising Tide? The Salience of Immigration and the Rise of Anti-Immigration Political Parties in Western Europe

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## Abstract

In this article, we consider the causes of the increase in voting for anti-immigration parties in western Europe in the past decade. We first note that one of the most commonly assumed reasons for this increase is an associated increase in anti-immigration sentiment, which we show is likely to be false. We also outline the major theoretical explanations, which we argue are likely to be incomplete. We then introduce our proposed explanation: these parties have benefitted from a sharp increase in the salience of immigration amongst some voters. We show that there are strong correlations over time between the salience of immigration and the polling of such parties in most western European countries. We argue that aspects of immigration in the last decade have activated pre-existing opposition to immigration amongst a *shrinking* segment of the populations of western European states.

**Keywords:** immigration, radical right, populism, issue salience

## Introduction

AS OFTEN happens in this contemporary era when the academic quest for and anxiety about ‘impact’ and ‘societal relevance’ accompany any programme of research, the authors of this article were both happy and intrigued to receive an invitation to present their work on European attitudes to migration at a meeting of senior EU officials. Discretion necessarily prevents us recounting all the details, but the way in which the meeting was subsequently described to us was quite striking. There is, we were informed in the briefing note prepared for the meeting, a rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment sweeping across the EU. This, apparently, has resulted from negative media coverage of immigration and migrants. What is more, this rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment, driven by a hostile media coverage, was driving voters into the hands of anti-immigration populists and the radical right.

The briefing note contained two quite big, assumed causal mechanisms that we suggest—and previous research shows—are questionable and reflective of a misunderstanding

of the structure, characteristics and effects of attitudes to migration in Europe. As we show in this article, there is little evidence that there is a rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment sweeping across Europe. Rather, while there are important forms of variation, such as those between countries, attitudes to migration are remarkably stable and have actually become gradually more positive to immigration from outside and within the EU over the last decade. Moreover, strikingly and perhaps counterintuitively, positivity actually increased during and since the ‘migration crisis’ of 2015. What matters more to voting, as we show, is the high salience of the immigration issue around 2015 and the effects of this salience on political behaviour. Moving to the second proposition, while we would not dispute the relevance of negative media coverage of migration, particularly of migrants and asylum-seekers crossing to Europe via Mediterranean routes (a small minority of those arriving in Europe, it must be said), it would be dubious, as we argue, to ascribe such strong causal effects to negative media coverage. Attitudes to migration, like attitudes to other political issues, are

primarily formed relatively early in life and linked to key formative experiences such as education. Once established, they are difficult to shift and are not formed and reformed on a daily basis by various types of media coverage. Finally, having questioned the opening two elements of the briefing note, we are left with the main focus of this article, which is the increased support for anti-immigration political parties. We show that the rise of anti-immigration parties is far more likely to be primarily an effect of increased issue salience amongst those with pre-existing dispositions against immigration based on their underlying value orientations. In short, *some* aspects of immigration that are most deemed to threaten conservative values like security, tradition or conformity have activated already existing anti-immigration sentiment amongst a shrinking number of Europeans.

Why does this matter? We contend, for one thing, that mistaken diagnoses of the structure and drivers of attitudes to migration can lead to mistaken remedies. In a May 2018 speech, the EU's Migration Commissioner, Dimitris Avramopoulos, stated 'we must not forget an important additional challenge that we are facing inside Europe. We need to change the perception of the public opinion on migration. Our biggest concern is the rise of racism and xenophobia, fuelled by populist movements across Europe'.<sup>1</sup> Avramopoulos reflects a number of common assumptions by policy makers about popular attitudes to immigration: that they are negative and increasingly so; that this negativity fuels populist movements; that they are linked to racism and xenophobia; and that they are malleable and should be altered accordingly. Similarly, political analysts have explained the success of anti-immigration parties by arguing that 'attitudes to immigration have turned more negative ... in the US as well as in Europe'.<sup>2</sup>

Changing peoples' political attitudes is likely to be very difficult. Allaying their worst fears may be less so. The Avramopoulos speech links racism and xenophobia to negative attitudes to migration, implying that opposition to migration *is of itself* necessarily racist or xenophobic. This is a potentially dangerous assumption. Clearly there are racists and xenophobes in Europe, but to

imply that opposition to or concern about immigration is necessarily linked to racism and xenophobia is overly simplistic and misleading. It is possible to be *concerned* about immigration as it is without being a racist or xenophobe or even necessarily opposed to immigration outright or at all. This itself is reflective of the need to better understand the drivers and structure of attitudes to migration. Many people in Europe and globally have 'conservative' value orientations that leads them to prioritise to various degrees security, tradition and conformity over other more audibly celebrated values like universalism. These individuals are more likely to interpret images associated with the 'migration crisis' as challenging—not because they are indicative of immigration, but because they are associated with disorder, chaos and a lack of government control.

This article examines the growth of anti-immigration parties in western Europe to which Avramopoulos and others refer. We look at accounts that have been offered for increased support for these parties in recent years. We show that there is not a rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment in Europe. With this established, we turn to issue salience—its meaning, causes and effects—and show that the increased salience of immigration as an issue is likely to be the predominant, albeit proximal, explanation for the increased electoral support of the major anti-immigration parties in western Europe.

## The growth of anti-immigration parties

One of the most commented upon political trends of the twenty-first century has been the increased electoral support for a number of political parties in western Europe that, while variously labelled as 'radical', 'far' or 'populist' right, share opposition to immigration. In Figure 1, we show the polling results between 2005 and 2018 of the Freedom party of Austria (AT); Flemish Interest (BE); the Danish People's party (DK); the Finns party (FI); the National Front (FR); Alternative for Germany (DE); the Northern League (IT); Alternative Democratic Reform party (LU); the party for Freedom (NL); the Popular party (NO); the National Renovator party

(PT); Sweden Democrats (SE); Vox (ES) the Swiss People's party (CH) and the UK Independence party (UK).

Before we analyse these trends, we should note that a number of labels, definitions and groupings of such parties have been offered by academics. Indeed, they have variously been called the 'populist radical right', 'right-wing populist' or 'national populists'. We acknowledge that grouping together the parties that we do in this paper as we do is contestable. However, put simply, they are each the primary party in their country that

gives high prominence to anti-immigration policies and their supporters tend to be in accordance with those attitudes. To varying extents, they also combine euroscepticism with their anti-immigration message.

As shown, support for these parties has by no means followed a simple, common trend. However, there are commonalities. In all fifteen countries except Norway and Belgium, these parties experienced an overall growth in support during the thirteen years. In Portugal and Spain, despite the party experiencing growth, its overall support remains tiny.

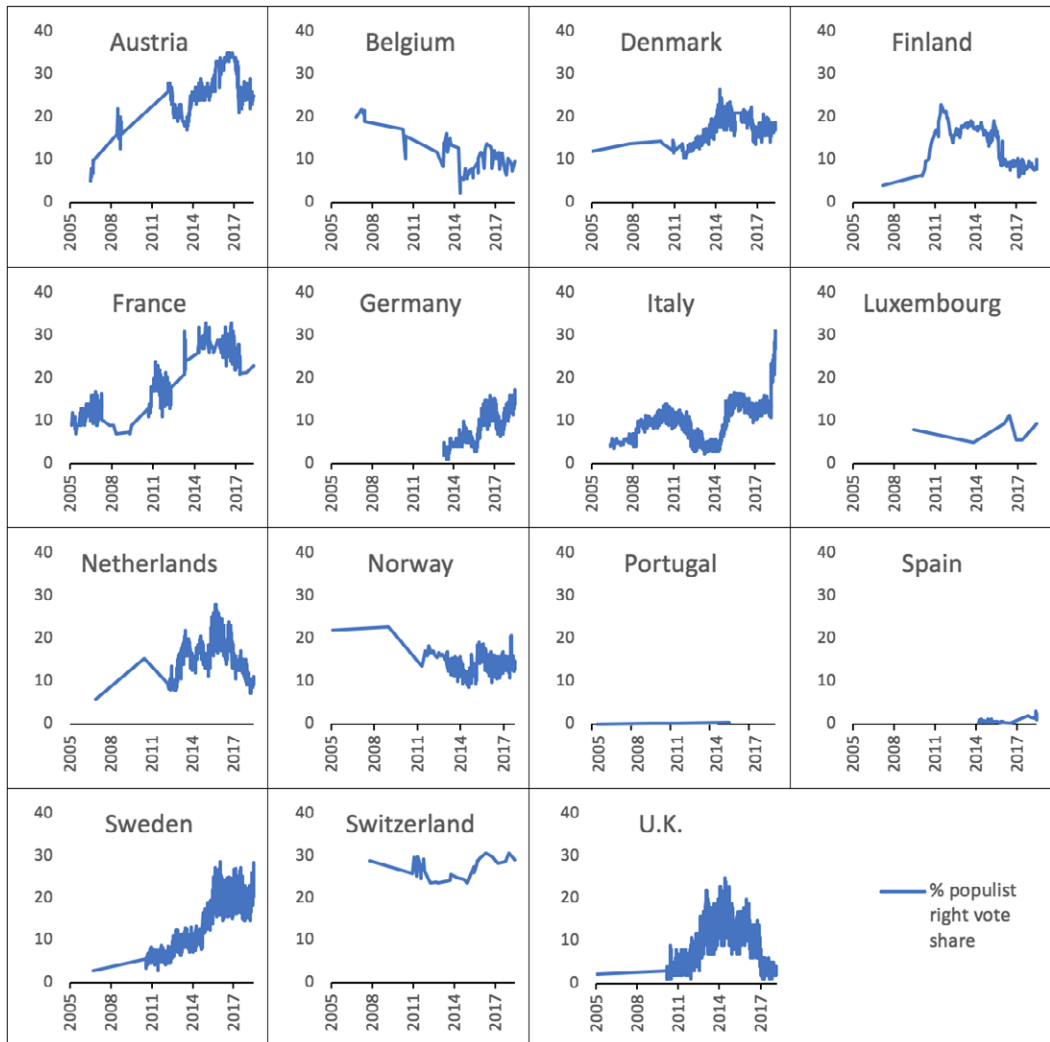


Figure 1: Polling for anti-immigration parties in fifteen western European countries, January 2005 to June 2018

In the UK, UKIP experienced impressive growth before steep decline after 2016. Elsewhere, the most common trend has been a period of steady growth from 2005 to 2013, followed by rapid growth between 2014 and 2016 and then a partial decline thereafter. In Germany, Italy and Sweden, this partial decline has very recently been followed by another uptick, with that being particularly pronounced in Italy.

Overall, the largest states of western Europe—Germany, France, the UK and Italy—have all at some point experienced a significant increase in support for anti-immigration parties. This phenomenon has had grave ramifications in terms of the policy responses of existing parties, election outcomes, transformed party systems and government coalitions across western Europe.

## Theoretical explanations

What are the major academic explanations for the growth of anti-immigration parties over the last thirty years and specifically the role played by opposition to immigration in these accounts? Explanations are generally based on one of two theories—grievances about the perceived economic effects of immigration or opposition to broader cultural and normative transformations, of which immigration constitutes one. There are of course a number of further, alternative explanations for individual-level electoral support for such parties—such as those based on stable psychological and personality traits and socio-demographic attributes—that are by now empirically well-supported. However, given their reasonably stable socio-demographic nature, they are unlikely to be able to explain the dramatic short-term uptick in support for these parties between 2005 and 2017, and especially around 2015.

First, the ‘economic insecurity’ thesis argues that people vote for anti-immigration parties because of real, imagined or misplaced economic grievances against out-groups, including immigrants. Arzheimer<sup>3</sup> classifies four groups of economic grievance sub-theories in descending order of the emphasis that they put on the supposed rationality of the choice, and each with

fairly self-explanatory names: realistic group conflict and ethnic competition; status politics; social identity; and scapegoating theory.

Second, according to the ‘cultural backlash’ theory, anti-immigration parties represent a ‘silent counter-revolution’<sup>4</sup> against the New Left thinkers of the 1970s, who sought to liberate the individual from oppression, not only in terms of class conflict but also from other unequal power relations, be they based on race, nationality, sexuality or gender. To these New Left thinkers, traditional institutions, such as the nation state, represent an insult to the universal nature of mankind and should be dismantled. Opponents of this view coalesced around a standpoint to the contrary that affirmed that individual identities are actually entrenched in community traditions, which are unavoidably unique and thus, not universal. Accordingly, struggles to eliminate traditions, override them via universalist policies, or undermine the cultural homogeneity from which they arise, were considered by what would become the ‘populist right’ an offence to the social nature of humans. Unlike the ‘economic insecurity’ theory, the ‘cultural backlash’ theory assumes that supporters of the radical right are driven not by sectional self-interest, but by a divergent value set.

More recently, a ‘political demography’ explanation has emerged that shares similarities with the ‘cultural backlash’ theory, but focuses squarely on immigration rather than broader cultural changes. Kaufmann argues that ‘in most times and places, ethno-demographic change breeds an anti-immigration response among the majority’ because ‘change tends to pry apart the alignment of ethnicity and territory cherished by ethnic nationalists’.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of national-level specific predictors of anti-immigration party success, Arzheimer identifies four regularly hypothesised, relevant effects: anti-immigration media cues based on the theory of agenda-setting; crime; unemployment; and immigration rates. Although the first three—media, crime and unemployment—are repeatedly theorised and tested, the evidence for their effects remains ‘limited’, inconsistent and ‘far from conclusive’, respectively. Only evidence for the latter effect of immigration rates is ‘less equivocal’, as found by a long list of studies.<sup>6</sup>

However, a *direct* causal effect of immigration on voting for anti-immigration political parties is theoretically implausible, because such an exogenous event cannot lead to a behavioural change without any intermediary change in cognition, as well-argued by the psychological literature on decision making.<sup>7</sup> Hawkins et al. argue that research on the causes of populism ‘says little about the mentality of anti-immigration voters or the cognitive processes that lead people’ to vote for anti-immigration parties.<sup>8</sup> Such a cognition transformation could be in terms of an increased negativity in attitudes to immigration as described in the speech by Avramopoulos (referred to above) and others.

### Explaining the rise of anti-immigration parties: attitudinal transformation?

We now examine the trajectory of attitudes to immigration in western Europe during the same time period as the above increase in support for anti-immigration parties. The notion that European electorates are turning against immigration is not evidenced by survey research. Indeed, European Social Survey (ESS) data shows that in fourteen European countries, between 2002 and 2016, attitudes to accepting immigrants ‘from poorer countries outside of Europe’ had become more positive in ten, did not change in two, and had become more negative in a further two. Moreover, between 2014 and 2016, during the biggest spike in support for anti-immigration parties, attitudes became more favourable in nine countries, did not change in four and only became more negative in two. Similar increases in positivity towards the effects of immigration on the economy, culture, quality of life, jobs, government accounts and crime can be tracked in most European countries between 2002 and 2016, as well as to acceptance of EU immigrants.

Further evidence is provided by the Eurobarometer, which, between 2014 and 2018, has asked respondents in all twenty-eight member states about their positivity towards both EU and non-EU immigrants. In the vast majority of countries, there is decreased negativity to both groups, as shown in Figure 2.

Overall, then, the notion that Europeans are becoming more negative to immigration and that this is the cause of the increase in support for anti-immigration parties is not supported by major social science surveys.

### On issue salience

That there has been a rise in support for anti-immigration parties, but there is not a general increase in anti-immigration sentiment represents something of a puzzle. To solve this puzzle, we turn to issue salience and the salience of immigration particularly. We consider whether variation in issue salience may be the necessary cognitive ‘missing link’ in existing explanations for the recent rise in electoral support for anti-immigration parties. Rather than contradict the major existing theoretical explanations, we argue that immigration’s salience has the potential to have a large and highly *proximal* causal effect on voting for anti-immigration parties and to be an important theoretical complimentary component to both the ‘economic insecurity’ and ‘cultural backlash’ theories, as well as the political demography literature.

Political scientists have used multiple terms to refer to the concept that this article calls ‘issue salience’, including ‘policy attitude importance’, ‘issue importance’, ‘policy issue salience’ and, in earlier works, the concept was alluded to with terms like ‘importance’, ‘centrality’, ‘ego involvement’ and, indeed, ‘salience’.<sup>9</sup> Krosnick defined salience as ‘the degree to which a person is passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude’.<sup>10</sup> He and others later expanded on this to argue that ‘There is nothing subtle about attitude importance, particularly at its highest levels: People know very well when they are deeply concerned about an attitude’.<sup>11</sup> Issue salience is most often measured in surveys by asking individuals what they consider to be the most important issue(s) (MII) or most important problem(s) (MIP) affecting themselves or their country. Higher concern is expected to have multiple effects on behaviour with the primary causal mechanism being that assigning significance to a topic should trigger and occupy an individual’s feelings which are likely to be determined by or indeed

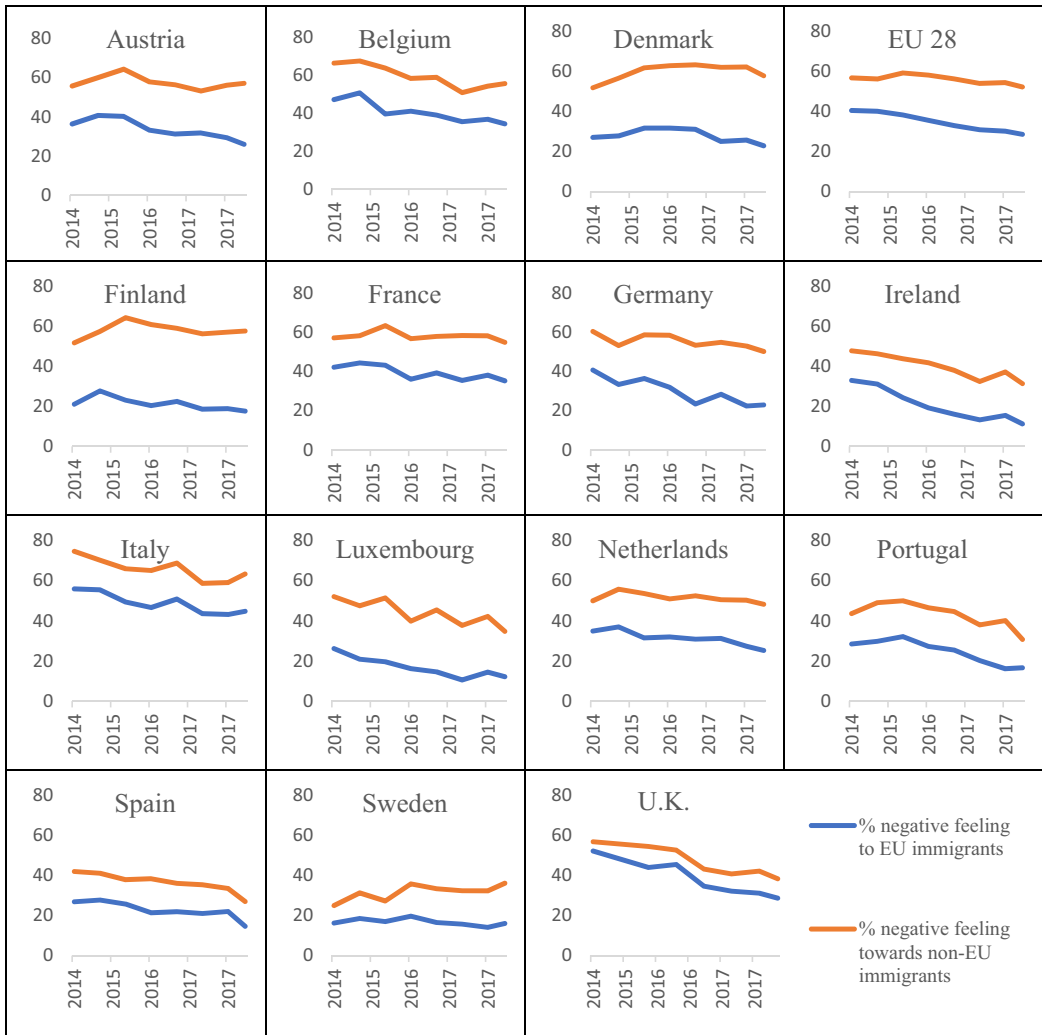


Figure 2: Negative attitudes to EU and non-EU immigrants in the EU-28 and selected western EU member states, 2014–2018

Notes: Source: Eurobarometer. 'Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you? Immigration of people from other EU Member States/ Immigration of people from outside the EU' % responding fairly negative or very negative

determine their values and political attitudinal pre-dispositions.

Behaviours that have been shown to be caused by salience include additional and selective exposure to information about an issue and greater consideration of information about that issue. More specifically, higher issue salience leads to greater information about party positions on that issue and is expected to make attitudes on that issue more accessible, certain and stable, as well as

influential on less salient attitudes, which are then formed around the more salient attitudes to ensure ideological cognitive consonance. Though Bartle and Laycock criticise MII measures of salience by drawing on the psychology literature to argue that individuals cannot be relied upon to offer self-reported salience, they argue that this bias cancels out at the aggregate-level, concluding that 'Aggregate MII appears to broadly reflect what actually matters to the typical voter'.<sup>12</sup>

Fournier et al. argued that issue salience ‘has received little attention [and] is rarely integrated into models of political decision’.<sup>13</sup> However, early electoral studies scholars, such as Anthony Downs and Donald Stokes, assumed that voters would not only vote for parties with policies that were most congruent to their own, but also that they would weigh congruence according to salience. To this end, Krosnick has shown that in US congressional elections, salience indeed acts as a weight on policy attitude congruence when voters make their vote choice, contrary to earlier findings which he argued were methodologically flawed. Other studies in the twenty-first century have found evidence of such an effect.

Another, more common use of issue salience in the vote choice literature is within issue voting theory, which assumes that individuals vote for whichever party they consider to be most effective, competent or sometimes simply associated with the issue that they consider to be most important or salient. Accordingly, parties endeavour not to change public attitudes—which tend to be stable—but to increase the salience of the issues that they ‘own’. Budge summarises the evidence on issue ownership theory from a raft of studies as ‘the prominence of “your” issues on the agenda does indeed increase votes’.<sup>14</sup> He goes on to test which party families (nine in total) are associated with which issues, finding consistent cross-national associations, though he does not include the populist radical right or the recently salient issues of immigration or Europe. An addendum to the issue voting theory downplays the ability of parties to manipulate the salience of issues and instead theorises parties as ‘wave-riding’.

The causes of variance in issue salience remain relatively underexplored. Krosnick argued that salience varies between individuals according to three factors: self-interest, social identification and values, whereas it varies across time according to prominent events or problems that focus national attention. The exception to this lack of attention given to the antecedents of salience is the agenda-setting literature, which asserts that salience is a function of whichever issues the media and other prominent actors seek to focus on. However, not only is the evidence to support this theory limited, but experimental

studies on the framing tend to show that any effects are non-durable. Moreover, panel data studies have shown that media preferences—and perhaps attention too—tend to follow consumer preferences, rather than vice versa. Perhaps the most consistent finding regarding the causes of cross-time variation is that issue salience responds to actual events and their gravity. This suggests that the extent to which the media can genuinely and durably affect the agenda beyond simply presenting the most ‘objectively’ eventful issues, a concept itself that remains underdeveloped, may be limited.

## **The salience of immigration and the rise of anti-immigration parties**

We now test our idea that the salience of immigration is the most important, though probably not exclusive, issue salience predictor of national-level polling for anti-immigration parties. We do this by using simple correlations of the two variables in eleven western European countries. It is for data availability and theoretical reasons that these eleven countries are selected. These comprise the electoral support of the following parties: the Freedom party of Austria (AT); Flemish Interest (BE); the Danish People’s party (DK); the Finns party (FI); the National Front (FR); Alternative for Germany (DE); the Northern League (IT); Alternative Democratic Reform party (LU); the Party for Freedom (NL); Sweden Democrats (SE); and the UK Independence party (UK). All of these are the primary anti-immigration party in an EU member state. We only consider EU member states for reasons of data availability; the Eurobarometer data on which the analyses are based is only carried out in the EU. Otherwise, we would have included the Norwegian Popular party and Swiss People’s party.

We do not include parties from central or eastern European EU member states, which have distinct party systems, value sets amongst the electorates, migration patterns and, partially as a result, likely causal dynamics of support for anti-immigration parties that justify a separate analysis. Finally, we do not include parties from the Republic of Ireland, Malta, Portugal, Spain

or Greece in the analyses. The first four do not have anti-immigration parties of any notable strength and, as such, there is no variance in support to be explained. The reasons for the omission of Greece are less singular: there are at least three different parties with strong anti-immigration platforms: Golden Dawn, Independent Greeks and the Popular Orthodox Rally, making analysis less simple and the most successful of these, Golden Dawn, is akin to a neo-Nazi party far more so than the contemporary versions of the ten parties under consideration. It is worth noting that during this period, in three countries other anti-immigration parties were able to win seats in the national legislature at general elections. These were: the People's party (*Parti populaire*) in Belgium in 2010 (1.3 per cent of overall vote) and 2014 (1.5 per cent of overall vote); the Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*) in 2013 (2.0 per cent of overall vote); National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*) in Italy in 2006 (12.3 per cent of overall vote); and the Forum for Democracy (*Forum voor Democratie*) in the Netherlands in 2017 (1.8 per cent of the overall vote). With the exception of Italy, however, in all ten countries there was indisputably only one electorally relevant anti-immigration party during the period in question. In 2007 the National Alliance merged into the centre-right People of Freedom party, making tracking their fortunes over time difficult.

For the eleven selected cases, we take measures of issue salience from the pan-EU Eurobarometer survey (Standard Eurobarometer, 89.1). Since 2005, this survey has asked around 1000 respondents in each respective EU member state 'what do you think are the two most important issues affecting your country?' as a close-ended 14-choice (with occasional variation) variable. Surveys are face-to-face and twice (and occasionally three-times) yearly, with the surveying done over the course of a month. We take the percentage responding 'immigration'. The measure of national-level support for the anti-immigration right is taken from the monthly average polling for that party in publicly available polls for general election vote intention in that country (first round of the presidential election in France). The months chosen are those that align with the

Eurobarometer's polling. We also include *actual* election results that happen to take place in the month in question.

In Table 1, we present correlations between the national level support for the radical right and the salience of immigration on a country-by-country basis, as well as the *p*-values of the correlations and the number of observations per country.

The correlation is in the expected direction in all but one of the cases, Finland, and is statistically significant at the 95 per cent level in seven of these. It should be noted that both Germany and Luxembourg have fewer observations, affecting the *p*-values. These correlations are displayed in Figure 3. We also add the correlations of support for the anti-immigration right and the salience of immigration in Portugal (the anti-immigration right party being the National Renovator party) and Spain (*Vox*), as well as the latter metric only in Ireland (in which there is no anti-immigration political party that has been polled), for the sake of comparison.

## Conclusion

We did accept the invitation to present our research into public attitudes to Europe because, in our view, misunderstanding of the causes and effects of attitudes to migration could have corrosive effects that go

**Table 1: Correlations between polling for anti-immigration parties and the salience of the issue of immigration**

Country	Obs	Immigration issue salience	
		Correlation	P-value
Austria	15	0.681	0.005
Belgium	14	0.461	0.097
Denmark	19	0.818	0.000
Finland	19	-0.570	0.014
France	20	0.340	0.143
Germany	11	0.258	0.444
Italy	23	0.587	0.003
Luxembourg	7	0.476	0.280
Netherlands	15	0.518	0.048
Sweden	17	0.864	0.000
UK	18	0.655	0.003

beyond the politics of migration and spread to wider trust and confidence in political institutions and political leaders. At the meeting, we got the chance to use evidence similar to that presented above to show that the vote share of anti-immigration parties rises and falls not with attitudes to immigration but, to a large extent, with the salience of immigration. We could also show that variance *between* countries in the salience of immigration largely predicts the support for anti-immigration parties there, with Portugal, Spain and, to a lesser, extent Ireland all

displaying exceptionally low levels of immigration salience in recent years—although at the time of writing, Spain’s mid to late 2018 spike in immigration salience seems to be quickly being followed by a spike in polling for the anti-immigration party *Vox*.

This is scientifically interesting. Rather than individuals voting purely in spatial terms, the recent growth of anti-immigration parties shows that attitudes are likely to be combined with salience in the voter’s decision calculus. In short, behaviour is dictated by priorities as much as by preferences, at least in certain

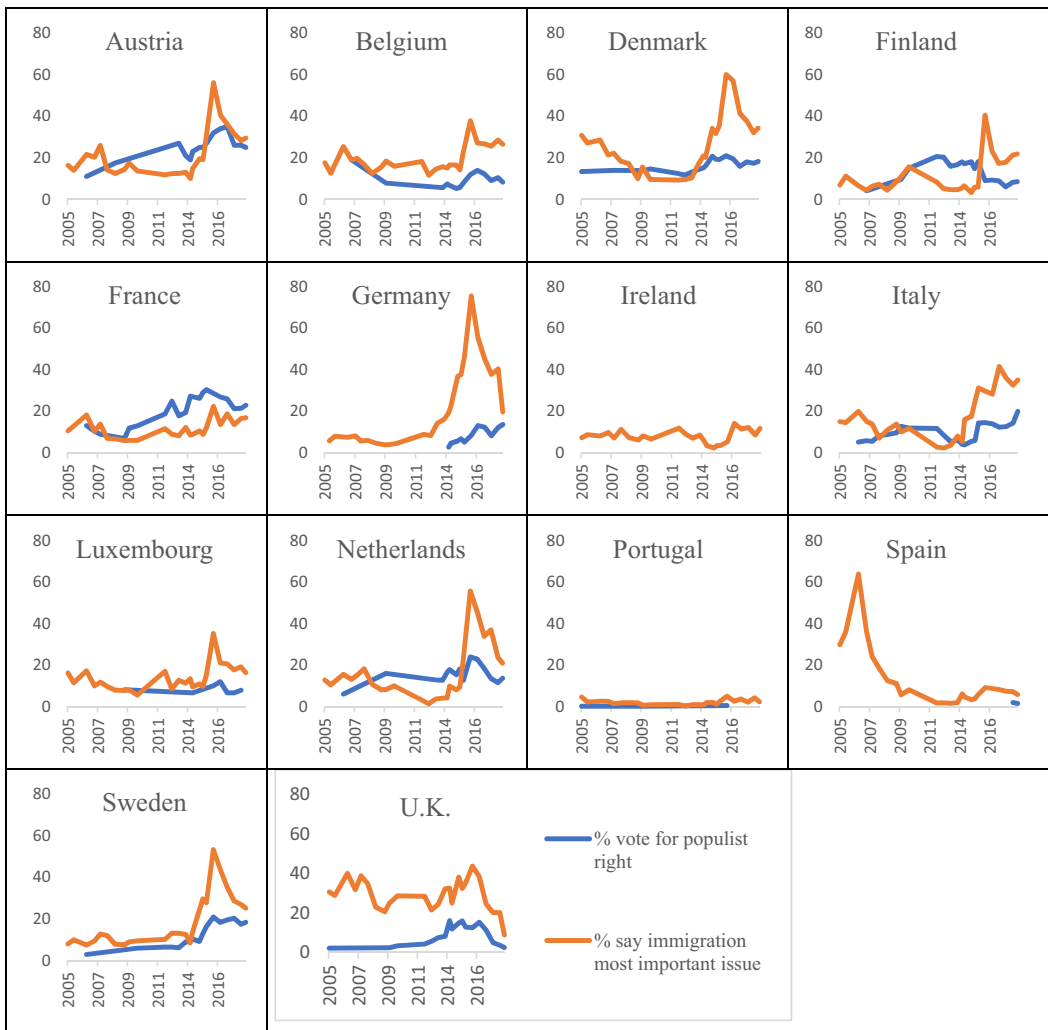


Figure 3: Correlations between percentage listing immigration as one of two most important issue affecting one’s country and percentage voting for anti-immigration parties, 2005–2018 [Figure 3 was replaced on 7 December 2018 as part of the legend was missing]

cases. This also represents additional evidence for the issue-based theory of voting, which has hitherto surprisingly overlooked anti-immigration political parties.

This finding has important policy implications. All of the anti-immigration parties discussed here have made use of populist rhetoric that explicitly aims to undermine institutionalism and constitutionalism as the organising principles of democratic society, to be replaced by a *vox populi* or crude majoritarianism with weakened respect for individual liberties and human rights. If policy makers such as Avramopoulos get the diagnosis wrong, then they are likely to get the remedy wrong. Similarly, if we think that there is a rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment linked to racism and xenophobia, that this is driving support for anti-immigration political parties, then a remedy could be to co-opt their positions. This has happened in the past and is happening now.

Instead, we would suggest that it is more likely that the effect of the 'crisis' was to activate latent concern about immigration amongst those already predisposed to be concerned about the issue. Policy makers should think more seriously about the drivers and structure of attitudes to migration. It is very difficult to shift these, but this does not mean that views are fixed and non-changing. What it does mean is that communication on migration needs to be couched in ways that appeal or make sense to those with a conservative value orientation (who comprise relatively large sections of European electorates). Given the relative cross-time stability of political attitudes compared to the high volatility of issue salience, allaying the fears of those most alarmed by threats to societal security, conformity or tradition is likely to be both far more achievable and effective *anyway*, if policy makers wish to stem ongoing electoral polarisation.

## Notes

- 1 Speech of Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos at the first European Migration Forum, 27 January 2015; [https://www.europa-nu.nl/id/vjxpprckdr1/nieuws/speech\\_of\\_commissioner\\_dimitris?ctx=vjn4cltrxe&start\\_tab0=20](https://www.europa-nu.nl/id/vjxpprckdr1/nieuws/speech_of_commissioner_dimitris?ctx=vjn4cltrxe&start_tab0=20) (accessed 11 November 2018).
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- 14 I. Budge, 'Issue emphases, saliency theory and issue ownership: a historical and conceptual analysis', *West European Politics*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2015, p. 770.