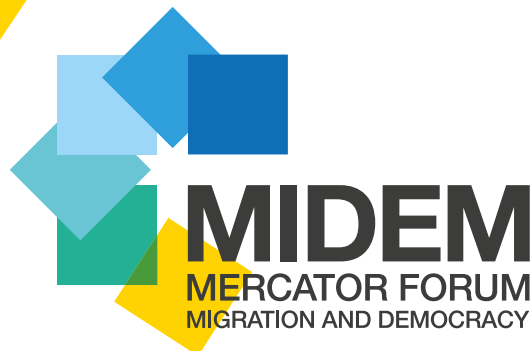


TURNING RIGHT? PARTY POSITION CHANGE ON IMMIGRATION IN THE EUROPEAN 'REFUGEE CRISIS'

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MIDEM-Policy Brief

BY ETHAN VANDERWILDEN¹



KEY FINDINGS

- On average, parties did not significantly change positions on immigration when comparing pre- and post-crisis positions.
- A cross-national analysis shows no relationship between the level of asylum applications to a country and the likelihood of parties in those countries shifting right on immigration, except among center right parties.
- Center right movement on immigration can be understood in the context of incentives that parties face when pressured to clarify their issue position.

INTRODUCTION

What causes parties to shift their positions on immigration? Differences in the national context surrounding migration may be one factor that pushes parties to adjust their stances. This policy brief addresses the issue of how political parties respond to rapid immigration-related demographic change. More specifically, it tests whether parties in countries with more asylum applications are more likely than other parties to adopt restrictive immigration positions.

The paper analyzes party position shifts during the so-called 'Refugee Crisis.' It examines differences in party positions on immigration between 2014 (pre-crisis) and 2019 (post-crisis). For some parties, immigration positions moved in a restrictive direction, while other parties

shifted towards more open positions. Can the level of asylum applications to a country explain these shifts?

In recent years, the impact of migration on societies, institutions, and policies has increasingly been the focus of political science research. Multiple studies have examined how differences in levels of migration affect (or often, do not affect) shifts in public opinion on immigration (van der Brug/Harteveld 2021; Davidov/Semyonov 2017; Karreth et al. 2015; MIDEM 2018). Other researchers have studied the direct connection between levels of migration and the success of populist radical right parties (Lubbers et al. 2002; Swank/Betz 2003), or the indirect ways in which asylum applications may affect far right voting by increasing the salience of immigration (Angeli/Otteni 2022; Dennison/Geddes 2019). Finally, existing work has addressed policy changes over time in response to migration at the European (Guiraudon 2018) or national (Mendes 2023) levels. Taken together, existing work has paid considerable attention to the effects of migration on native attitudes, voting behavior, and policy responses.

However, much less has been done to systematically examine how political parties react to migration patterns. Previous work has offered some explanations of the ways in which parties are reactive to *long term* shifts in the demographics of an electorate (Adams et al. 2004;

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Dancygier 2017; Schumacher et al. 2013), though we are yet to understand the effects of short-term, rapid changes to migration patterns. Work examining party positions throughout the refugee crisis mostly focus on case studies of party reactions (Emilsson 2018; Gessler/Hunger 2022; Hadj Abdou et al. 2022; Mader/Schoen 2019; Wondreys 2021). Altogether, we are yet to have a strong idea of what explains *overall* and *systematic* patterns of how parties react to rapidly changing societies. Thus, this paper assesses party position shifts for 198 European parties throughout the ‘Refugee Crisis.’ Were parties more likely to shift towards restrictive immigration positions in countries with greater levels of asylum claims?

ASYLUM APPLICATIONS AND SHIFTING PARTY POSITIONS ON IMMIGRATION

To assess the relationship between asylum applications and changes in party positions, I examine data from Eurostat (Eurostat 2021a) on asylum applications² to European countries and ratings of party positions on immigration from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2020). To assess *changes* in immigration positions, I take the difference between party positions before (2014) and after (2019) the ‘crisis.’ By taking the difference between pre- and post-crisis positions, we can better understand which parties grew more restrictive or more open in their positions. Additionally, we can assess whether greater levels of asylum applications to a country cause parties in those

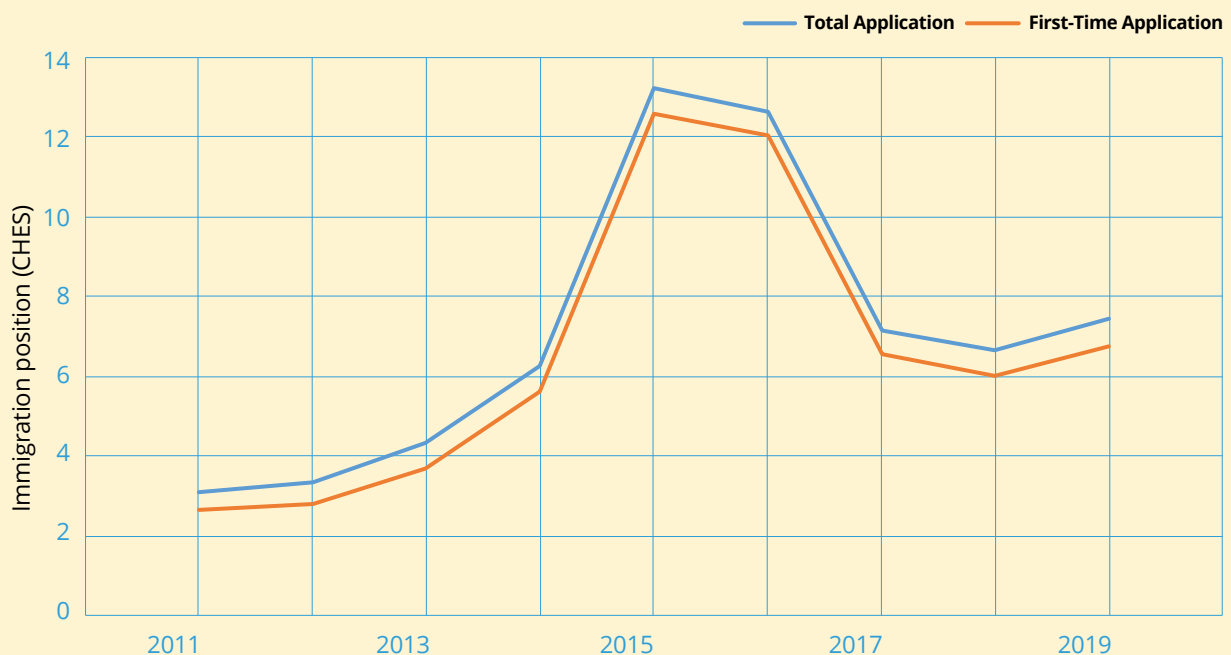
countries to adopt more restrictive immigration positions. In 2015 and 2016, asylum applications were up around 400 percent to EU countries compared to years prior. Figure 1 plots total and first-time asylum applications to EU countries between 2011 and 2019.

Asylum applications not only reflect pressure on European systems and institutions but are also connected to significant changes in the demographic makeup of many countries. For example, the proportion of Swedish residents born outside of Europe rose by nearly two percentage points between 2015 and 2017. In that time, the overall proportion of European residents born outside of Europe rose by 0.6 percentage points (Eurostat 2021b).

However, this overall picture does not reflect the country-level differences relevant to the research question. Considerable variation exists *between countries* in the levels of asylum applications received. Figure 2 plots the total number of asylum applications to a country throughout the ‘Refugee Crisis’ as a proportion of the country’s population.

Did immigration positions shift throughout the crisis? Similar to findings suggesting that the refugee crisis did not actually increase overall anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe (Dennison/ Geddes 2019), there did not appear to be any systematic shift towards more restrictive immigration positions among political parties.

Fig. 1: Asylum applications to EU countries, 2011-2019



Date Source: Eurostat

² Throughout the paper, data on asylum applications in 2015 and 2016 is normalized by the population of a country. The analysis yields similar results when specifying migration patterns in other ways.

Fig. 2: Relative asylum applications by country, 2015-2017

Asylum Applications (as % of pop) 0.5 1.0 1.5 2.0



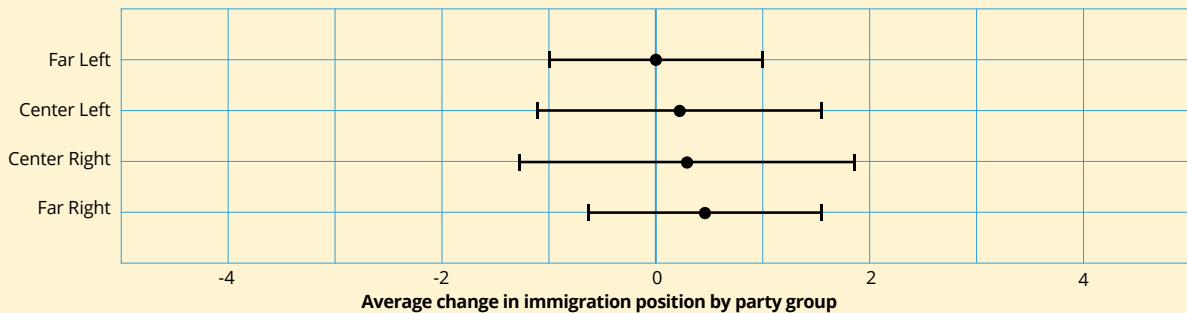
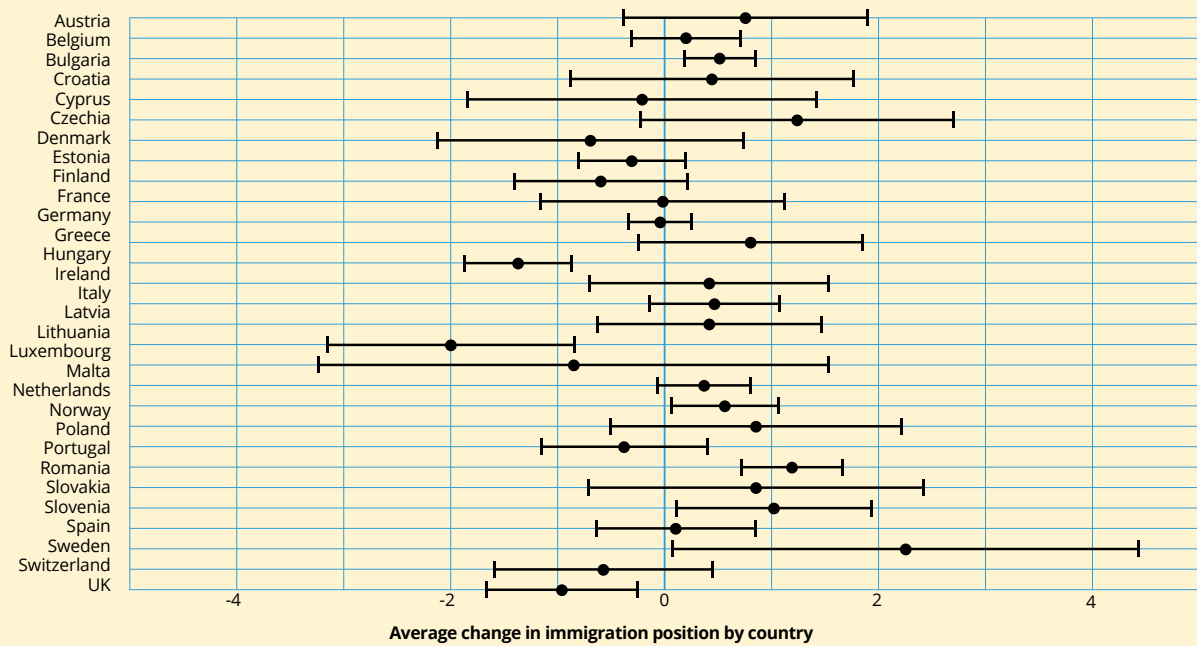
Date Source: Eurostat

Among the parties analyzed in this report (n = 198), the average positional shift from before and after the crisis was +0.23 (on a 10 point scale) to the right. This number is very close zero, meaning that there is no notable rightward shift on immigration.

However, this overall pattern does not capture differences between parties. Figure 3 presents average changes in immigration positions in each country and within general ideological groupings. The figure shows that there are some differences between countries in the average shift on immigration positions, but there do not appear to be many differences between average shifts between different party 'types'.

Thus far, it does not appear that parties, on average, shifted in more restrictive directions on immigration throughout the crisis. However, the average finding of zero (or 'no-movement') can be explained by some parties becoming more restrictive and others becoming more open (therefore balancing out the overall picture).

Fig. 3: Average party shifts for immigration positions throughout the crisis



Note: Lines represent average positional change on a 10 pt. scale, +/- 1 sd.

Date Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2014, 2019

This project is not only interested in average party movement, but also, what might explain why some parties moved positions while others did not. Do greater levels of asylum applications to a country lead parties to adopt more restrictive positions on immigration?

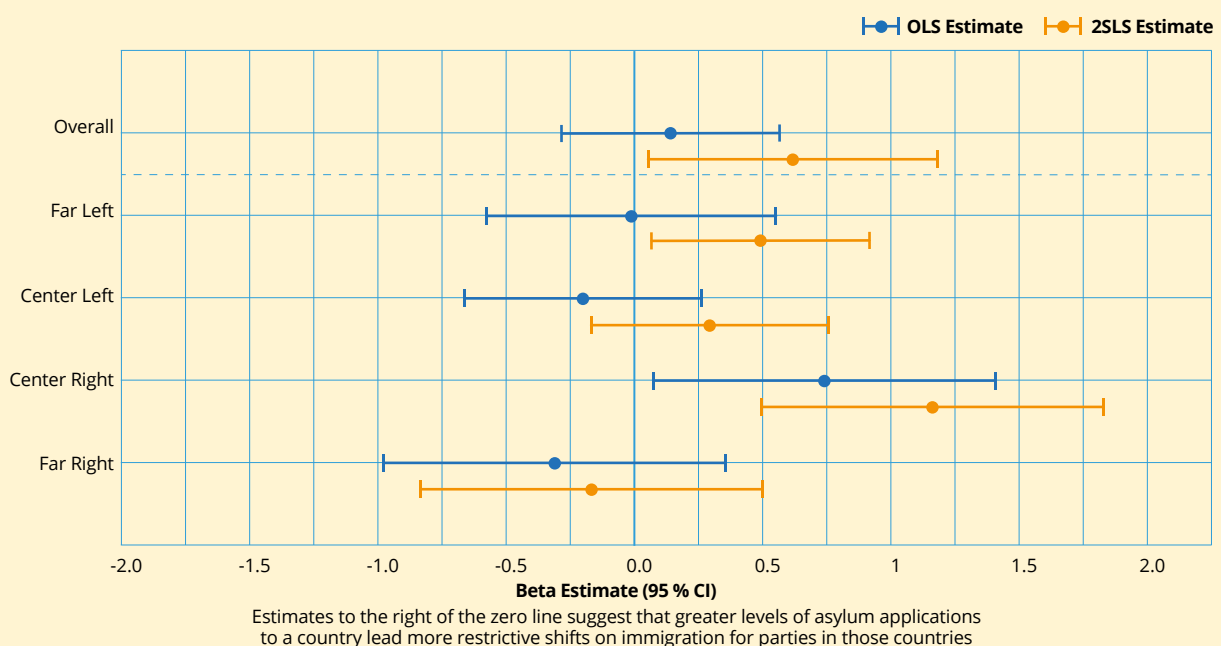
To evaluate this possibility, I test whether asylum applications to a country can predict whether parties in those countries are likely to shift positions on immigration.

Such an analysis explores *general trends*, and individual parties and countries may deviate from these patterns. Still, assessing large-scale trends can be informative to get a comparative sense of how political parties operate. First, I present results for the overall dataset of parties, and below this, I present results for the same analysis when exclusively analyzing groups of ideologically similar parties. The Methods box describes the statistics in more detail, and Figure 4 presents the results of these tests.

METHODS

- Coefficients in blue are from an OLS model regressing the shift in immigration positions for a party (dependent variable) on relative asylum applications throughout the crisis (independent variable). Controls include incumbency, vote share, and radical right vote share in a country pre-crisis. Errors are clustered at the country level: $\Delta_{pc} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_c + \beta_2 X_p + \epsilon_{pc}$
- Coefficients in orange are from a 2SLS model, using a shift-share instrument (Boustan 2010; Calderon et al. 2020; Card 2001) as a plausible pre-crisis exogenous variable that predicts asylum applications. The purpose of this model is to avoid the possibility of reverse causality, where shifts in party positions are causing asylum application patterns.
- Each estimate represents the effect of greater asylum applications (+1% of the population) on party position changes on immigration for a subset of parties in the sample.
- Results are consistent when defining ideological groups slightly differently, respecifying subset models as interactions, examining positions on multiculturalism and positions towards ethnic minorities, using % change in non-EU born population as the independent variable, and using robust standard errors.

Fig. 4: Effect of relative asylum application on shifts in immigration positions



Date Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2014, 2019

Figure 4 suggests a few key takeaways:

- Among all parties, there does not appear to be a clear relationship between asylum applications to a country and restrictive shift on immigration. While one model suggests a significant result (row 1, orange), the other (row 1, blue) does not.
- For center right parties (row 4), there appears to be a clear relationship between levels of asylum applications and restrictive shifts on immigration positions.
- For other party groups (leftist parties, and far right parties), no systematic pattern emerges connecting these variables.
- The fact that center-right parties were more likely to shift to the right on immigration in countries with greater levels of asylum applications does not mean

that this is the case for all center right parties. As an example, consider the German CDU/CSU, described in further detail in the German info-box, which did not significantly shift its position. The findings presented thus far show cross-national trends, rather than hard rules for each party.

Summing up, there does not appear to be a general relationship suggesting that parties operating in countries with greater levels of asylum applications throughout the ‘crisis’ were more likely to shift immigration positions to the right. However, this relationship does exist for center right parties. The data show that higher levels of asylum applications led center right parties to adopt more restrictive immigration positions throughout the crisis.

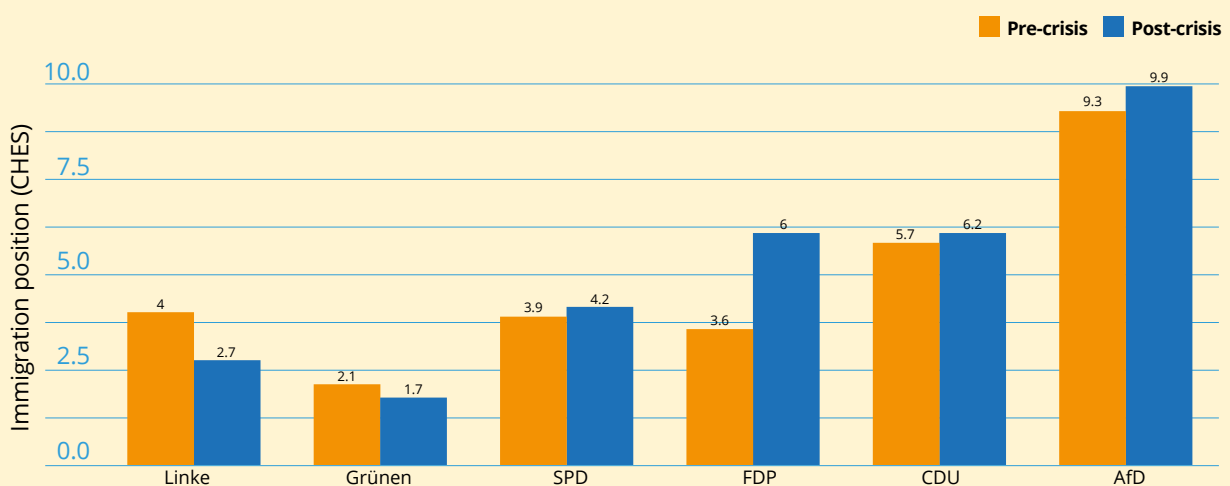
The German Case

Does the German case fit the overall patterns in the data? Importantly, the above analysis is concerned with general trends, and individual parties can deviate from patterns found in cross-national analyses.

We could consider Germany as a special case. The CDU/CSU-led government’s decision to keep borders open in September 2015 increased perceptions of the center right’s embrace of open immigration policies. However, this decision can be thought of as directly connected to Chancellor Angela Merkel’s political experience (Mushaben 2017), and data on party position movement suggest that Merkel’s ‘Wir Schaffen Das!’ policy was not reflective of the party’s policy movement throughout the crisis (Hornig 2023; Mader/Schoen 2019).

When examining the expert survey data used in this analysis, we can see some movement among various parties, though most trends are not particularly striking. These ratings also reflect party positioning between 2014 and 2019, before the current SPD government took office. Figure 5 shows the pre- and post-crisis ratings of immigration positions of major German parties.

Fig. 5: Ratings of Immigration positions for German Parties, pre- and post-crisis



Date Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2014, 2019

Indeed, there does not appear to be much movement among parties in these data. One notable exception is the German FDP, which would also be grouped into the ‘center-right’ category of the analysis. The lack of movement from the CDU/CSU could be a product of their responsibility as a governing party throughout the crisis. Additional analyses on the full dataset suggest that opposition parties were more likely than governing parties to shift issue positions as a function of asylum applications, which is consistent with prior arguments about parties most likely to be responsive to changes in their environments (Hornig 2023; Klüver/Spoon 2014).

WHY CENTER RIGHT PARTIES TURN RIGHT, BUT OTHERS DO NOT

Generally, center right parties adopted more restrictive positions on immigration in places with more asylum claims throughout the ‘crisis.’ Why would this relationship hold for center right parties, but not others?

In places with greater levels of asylum applications, political parties conceivably face more pressure from voters, media, and political opponents to clarify their issue positions (Mader/Schoen 2019). Put differently, the issue of immigration is *unavoidable* in these countries. In the face of this pressure, political parties are incentivized to update their positions. Incentives may relate to the past ideological commitments of a party, the electoral strategy of the party, and existing extremity of their positions. These incentives will push parties in different directions. Table 1 offers theoretical expectations of how, in general, these incentives might operate for an abstract party.

Let us consider each incentive. First, when greater changes to national demographics and migration patterns push parties to clearly articulate issue positions, parties may ‘double-down’ on their previous positions. That is, if a party has previously committed to more open borders and leftist immigration policy, when pressured to update their position, they may strengthen their commitments. If a party were to change course and reverse their position, they risk losing credibility, alienating core voters, and diluting their ‘brand’ (Lupu 2014; Schimmelfennig 2001; Seawright 2012). Accordingly, we might expect that in countries with greater levels of asylum applications, parties on the far and center left are incentivized to move further to the left, while parties on the center and far right are incentivized to move further to the right.

Second, as parties seek electoral success, they may pursue distinct strategies that incentivize shifting positions. Most clearly, parties are incentivized to adopt the positions of their electorate and attract new voters. As van der Brug and Hartevelde (2021) show, public opinion was more likely to polarize in places with greater levels of asylum applications throughout the crisis. This may be especially true for voters on the right, who have been shown as reactive to exposure to greater levels of ethnic

diversification (Karreth et al. 2015). This would suggest, once again, that parties on the far right have incentives to shift to the right, while parties on the far left have incentives to shift to the left. However, centrist parties may be a bit more mixed, as they compete for a larger set of voters and are generally more ‘governing’-oriented than responsive (Hornig 2023; Klüver/Spoon 2014).

Additionally, we might consider the threats of opposition parties as a relevant component of electoral strategy. Consistent with findings that the crisis fueled some success for far right parties (Dennison/Geddes 2019), center right parties may be particularly motivated to co-opt some of the positions of the far right in an attempt to mitigate their success (De Vries/Hobolt 2020; Meguid 2008). In general, center right parties likely face more pressure to shift to the right as part of its electoral strategy in places where they fear growing success of the far right (even if this strategy has not worked particularly well, as Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner 2022 show). Altogether, in countries with greater levels of asylum applications, center right parties may strategically move right, while the incentive is less clear-cut for center left parties.

Finally, parties may be constrained in their movement on some issues because they already hold extreme positions and have very little room to change their stance. Of course, there will be variation between parties (for example, far left parties in Eastern Europe may be less likely to have held pro-immigrant positions than their Western European counterparts), and the idea captures a more general pattern. These ceiling effects, especially on the far right, can be connected to the relationship between a party and ‘crisis.’ Put simply, if a party promotes an image of a ‘nation in crisis’ in times of relative stability, we should expect little issue-positional movement at the onset of real change. Populist radical right parties often ‘perform crisis,’ especially around the issues of immigration and multiculturalism (Moffitt 2015; Mudde 2019). Accordingly, actual levels of asylum applications will be unlikely to induce a change for parties that have perpetually taken extreme anti-immigrant positions. Put simply, parties near the edges of the positional spectrum are constrained in their ability to move.

Summing up, these incentives will operate differently for different parties. Table 1 gives a broad overview of how each party ‘prototype’ might act when pressured

Tab. 1: Theoretical expectations

Party Type	Ideological re-commitment	Electoral strategy	Ceiling effects	Result
Far left	Left	Left	Constrained	No shift
Center left	Left	Mixed	Unconstrained	No shift
Center right	Right	Right	Unconstrained	Rightward shift
Far right	Right	Right	Constrained	No shift

to restate or clarify their position on immigration. Generally, center right parties are the only group who have *aligning incentives* that push them to the right, while other parties are either constrained, or face mixed or conflicting incentives. Of course, this is a very general picture of how political parties may act. Nonetheless, it offers one explanation of the patterns found in the cross-national statistical analysis.

CONCLUSION

How do political parties react to high levels of migration? In increasingly diversifying societies, answering this question is an important task for understanding the evolution of issue positions and party systems. While the analysis here suggests that there is no overall backlash trend to asylum applications, there is a backlash among center right parties.

This paper has moved beyond some of the more well-studied individual outcomes that could be affected by migration patterns, like vote choice and public opinion, to explain why parties reacted differently throughout the crisis. In doing so, it provides a cross-national overview of these reactions, giving us a general idea of party reactions to differential levels of migration. However, it should be noted that not all party behavior (as the German case partially suggests) perfectly fits into the abstracted explanation provided in this paper.

Future work could move in several directions based on the findings here. First, additional studies could be conducted to more rigorously test the explanation of party movement in this report. Both qualitative and experimental work could empirically assess the validity of the incentives that parties face when pressured to stake a clear issue position. Second, additional work should be done with other data on party positioning. This study uses expert surveys, which provide a reliable pre- and post-crisis measure of immigration that is consistent across countries. However, party positions can be measured in many ways, and future work could disentangle elements of immigration positions as well as locate party positions via other sources like social media or manifestos. Third, future studies may consider similar analyses in different contexts. For example, we might expect the reaction of political parties to be vastly different for Ukrainian refugees or for high-skilled migrants, as compared to migrants in the 'Refugee Crisis.' Fourth, we might also consider the effects of rapid changes to patterns of migration on other aspects of a party system. Here, rather than studying party position change, the entry and exit of parties could be a relevant outcome to explore. Did greater levels of asylum applications to a country throughout the 'crisis' open space for new parties? These questions remain unexplored here, though they outline possibilities for a future research agenda that builds on the findings from this report.

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PROFILE

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