

Rethinking immigration as an issue in the European Union and its consequences for government accountability



The financial crisis and the migration crisis served to heighten the salience of immigration in the EU's member states. Drawing on a new study, [Andrea Fumarola](#) explains how both crises have reshaped not only the policy agendas of governments, but also the dynamics of party competition.

The last twenty years were marked by historical events like the 2004, 2007 and 2013 EU enlargements, the 2008 economic crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis. The combination of these events has increased not only the migration flow to and within the European Union, but also the perceived (economic and cultural) costs of integration, while media attention has greatly contributed to the politicisation of the immigration issue. A number of studies show how even moderate [mainstream parties](#) have gradually changed their attitudes towards immigration in response to the increased [politicisation](#) of the issue and the electoral success of radical right parties.

In a [new study](#), I analyse the electoral consequences of retrospective evaluations of immigration using the traditional reward-and-punishment framework. I also test the conditional effect of several individual and contextual characteristics, namely partisanship, government clarity, issue salience and perceived party competence.

From a positional to a quasi-valence issue?

We are currently experiencing what scholars define as the “[era of valence politics](#)” where voters increasingly structure their electoral preferences on the basis of policy outcomes. While immigration has been traditionally considered an ideologically loaded, positional issue, i.e. a value that is not shared by the entire electorate, its growing unpopularity across the broad ideological spectrum gives it nowadays some of the characteristics of a valence issue.



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In his seminal work on party competition, [Donald Stokes](#) warned against any a priori classification of position or valence issues, stating that they should be instead settled empirically. [Recent research](#) explicitly tackles this problem, considering political issues as placed along one single dimension in which 'positional' and 'valence' represent the extremes of the same continuum. In exceptional circumstances – such as the recent migration crises – a traditionally positional issue might assume the characteristics of a (quasi-)valence issue. These shocks might persuade a considerable majority of people to consider a particular policy outcome desirable, pushing parties to converge gradually to those positions. However, it doesn't mean that a transformation of immigration from a positional to a valence issue would be permanent but, rather, it might represent a temporary shift triggered by these exceptional circumstances.

In recent decades, three factors have contributed to gradually reshaping the traditional valence issue agenda in Europe: the increased attention of voters on government performance, the partial decline of the traditional left-right cleavage and, connected to this, the convergence of mainstream parties on specific issues. Building on the growing literature on immigration, issue voting and electoral accountability, and using survey data from the European Election Study, I therefore investigated whether voters in the EU's member states hold governments accountable for the perceived level of immigration. Consistent with research on retrospective voting, my study confirms that voters are likely to sanction incumbent parties if they evaluate immigration policy performance on immigration unsatisfactory or ineffective.

The conditional effect of individual and institutional characteristics

I also found that this accountability mechanism is conditional to specific individual and institutional characteristics. First, I tested the conditional effect of voters' partisanship on the main relation. I found that voters that are not linked to any political party rely more on their own perceptions about immigration to structure their electoral preferences. This result supports the idea immigration has assumed an increasingly salient and [cross-cutting connotation](#) which makes it no longer exclusively identified with right-wing party platforms but also with mainstream opposition and governing parties across the EU's member states.

The use of the EES data allowed me also to analyse immigration performance voting across several different institutional contexts. My results not only confirm that cohesive and stable executives make voters able to identify who is responsible for policy decisions concerning immigration. They also suggest that voters still identify their national governments as the main institution responsible for immigration even in a context characterised by complex multilevel governance.

Although the 2015 refugee crisis had negative consequences on citizens' attitudes towards the EU's institutions, my analysis suggests that Euroscepticism did not significantly impact citizens' ability to assign responsibility to different levels of government, especially when the immigration issue becomes more salient. A potential explanation is that policy harmonisation is more difficult for highly politicised issues. This is confirmed by the [consolidated approach](#) of the member states towards the implementation of an intergovernmental rather than a supranational model of EU governance.

Finally, I also found that voters hold governments accountable for immigration when it becomes a salient issue. This is an important result, because the saliency of an issue is not stable across time and countries. The 'immigration shocks' experienced by Europe in the last twenty years contributed to a reshaping of the public agenda. They strongly impacted on citizens' feelings about their personal and economic situation, making them more likely to use personal evaluations as shortcuts to judge a government's performance at the polls. This element, in turn, has had important consequences on party competition in several European countries. The migration crises not only provided a window of opportunity for (right-wing) opposition parties that made containment of immigration their own, but they also persuaded government parties to [adapt their policy agenda](#) in response to the increased saliency of the immigration issue.

While my analysis did not reveal any significant, conditional effect of party competence on immigration performance voting, it opens up perspectives on the role of issue ownership on voting behaviour. I found, in line with recent research on [Canada](#) and [Austria](#), that the perceived party competence exerts a potential direct and simultaneous effect on incumbent vote intention, working in parallel to citizens' evaluation of government performance on immigration. These two dimensions might therefore reinforce or counterbalance each other depending on the nature of these evaluations and which party owns the immigration issue.

In conclusion, my study has important implications for the study of government accountability in Europe. The shocks experienced by several European countries with the recent economic and refugee crises have reshaped not only the policy agendas of governments but also the dynamics of party competition. Citizens' requests for more restrictive immigration policies induced by these emergencies created not only a new window of opportunity for far-right parties, but also forced both right- and left-wing mainstream parties to converge or, at least, to narrow their position on the issue.

While the economy is still a crucial predictor of voters' behaviour, my results suggest that other issues can also be decisive in understanding why and how governments are punished at elections. Across the EU's member states, voters are sensitive to the way in which immigration is managed, and they consider it important enough to determine their evaluation of the incumbent government. However, individual and institutional factors might condition this mechanism.

For a longer discussion of this topic, see the author's recent article in [European Politics and Society](#)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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