Opening up Pandora's box? How centre-right parties can outperform the radical right on immigration

It is often assumed that populist radical-right parties have dominated European politics since the migration crisis and laid claim to the immigration issue. **James F. Downes**, **Matthew Loveless** *and* **Andrew Lam** *argue that this narrative is far too simplistic and that incumbent centre-right parties have responded to the electoral threat of the radical right by highlighting their own anti-immigration positions. This strategy has helped the centre right to outperform the far right and even offset electoral challenges from them. However, it may also be a double-edged sword that benefits the radical right in the longer term.*

The European migration crisis, which began in 2015, has provided significant challenges for mainstream centre-left parties, as well as for the governance of the European Union. As a result, the salience of immigration as a political issue has skyrocketed and remained high on the list of issues the public say is important to them. This has created distinct electoral opportunities for the populist radical right to ramp up the immigration issue and capture disaffected voters.

These circumstances pose obvious challenges for established parties. However, as previous research indicates, centre-right parties recognise this crisis as an opportune moment for far-right parties to make electoral gains and have responded by adopting hard-line positions on immigration. This strategic positioning has been carried out to minimise their loss of support.

To understand this process, we propose two core mechanisms as part of a theoretical framework. First, as part of their 'strategic positioning', centre-right parties recognise the electoral threat posed by the radical right at the right time. In this case, the ongoing migration crisis qualifies as such a moment for far-right parties to try and exploit public sentiment for electoral gain. Second, in response, centre-right parties react by adopting more restrictive positions on the immigration issue. The motivation for these parties is that if they were to maintain their more liberal and 'open' policies on immigration, they would cede political space to the radical right and suffer electorally.

Austria, the Netherlands, Germany and Hungary

We have constructed an original aggregate level elections database on parties' electoral performance in national parliamentary (legislative) elections across Europe and merged it with the Chapel Hill Expert Survey dataset on party positions. The resulting dataset contains 223 parties across 28 EU member states over the period of 2011-18.

By looking at the percentage vote share of each party in each country through statistical models during the country's most recent legislative election, we found that centre-right parties tend to perform better electorally than radical-right parties in the electoral period that spanned the migration crisis. Centre-right parties also performed considerably better than centre-left parties. Furthermore, our evidence, based on a detailed, qualitative analysis of a smaller set of countries, suggests that are three important patterns to the way these parties position themselves on immigration (the table below provides a breakdown of some key cases).

Table: Electoral performance and immigration stances of centre-right/radical-right parties in Austria, Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands

Country/parties	Vote share / change (%)	Immigration position / change (0-10)	Outcome of election
Austria (2017 election)			
- ÖVP (centre-right)	31.5 (+7.5)	N/A (6.6)	ÖVP and FPÖ coalition
- FPÖ (radical-right)	26.0 (+5.5)	N/A (9.9)	
Germany (2017 election)			
- CDU/CSU (centre-right)	32.9 (-8.6)	5.6 (-0.1)	CDU/CSU coalition with SPD
- AfD (radical-right)	12.6 (+7.9	9.3 (-)	
Hungary (2018 election)			
- Fidesz (centre-right)	49.4 (+4.4)	9.9 (+2.1)	Fidesz majority government
- Jobbik (radical-right)	19.1 (+1.2)	9.6 (+0.3)	
Netherlands (2017 election)			
- VVD (centre-right)	21.3 (-5.3)	8.1 (+0.6)	VVD-led coalition
- PVV (radical-right)	13.1 (+3.0)	9.4 (-0.5)	

Note: **Immigration positions are based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and are measured on a 0–10 scale: higher values indicate higher levels of anti-immigration positions held by parties. The figures were not available for Austria in 2017, but results for the previous election in 2013 are shown in brackets. The authors define centre-right parties as representing an ideologically broad church, which belong to one or more of several ideological categories, including 'Conservatives' (UK Conservative Party) 'Christian Democrats' (CDU/CSU in Germany) and 'Market Liberals' (VVD in the Netherlands). A number of centre-right parties have overlapping ideologies, belonging to one or more of these ideological categories.**

First, in the case of Austria's election in 2017, the centre-right party (one of the incumbent parties, the ÖVP) adopted more restrictive positions on immigration, which helped them electorally. They then formed a coalition government with the radical-right FPÖ after the elections. The case of the Netherlands' 2017 election provides a more nuanced picture. Though the incumbent centre-right VVD adopted tougher stances on immigration, they saw their vote share decrease and the radical-right PVV under Geert Wilders made electoral gains. Although the VVD performed electorally worse, they still managed to form a coalition government after the election. Adopting tougher positions on immigration may have mitigated further electoral losses to the PVV. Thus, it is conceivable that by adopting more restrictive positions on immigration, the centre right in both countries have arguably been able to mitigate the electoral threat that the radical right poses in national parliamentary elections.

The second pattern, in the German case, shows that when centre-right parties (the CDU-CSU coalition) do not adopt hard-line stances on immigration, they can lose out electorally to the radical right (AfD). The German 2017 federal election was a key case as it shows the high salience of the immigration issue, the importance of the migration crisis, and arguably how Chancellor Merkel's CDU-CSU coalition was not trusted by voters to handle this electoral issue.

Finally, the third important pattern is one that paints a bleaker picture for the future of European politics, particularly in the context of Central–Eastern Europe. In Hungary, a first reading of this election appears to show that the incumbent centre-right party, Fidesz, performed better electorally and outperformed the radical-right Jobbik. However, the migration crisis in Hungary has led Fidesz under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to ramp up the intensity of the immigration issue, not only to counteract the threat posed by Jobbik, but also to further weaken the mainstream centre-left parties in Hungary.

Why do centre-right party incumbents perform better?

As centre-right parties are likely to become involved in internal party struggles, why have they often adopted hard-line positions on immigration since the migration crisis? Scholars have noted that centre-right parties are often ideologically 'pragmatic', office-seeking parties that generally pursue electoral strategies to maintain and consolidate their political power.

Thus, the answer may be simply that the rationale for incumbent centre-right parties is one of political survival. Such strategic positioning may ensure that the centre right can remain in power as a governing party despite an opportune moment for challenger parties from the far right to seek to increase their own electoral fortunes. For the duration of the refugee crisis, incumbent centre-right parties in many European countries have been electorally resilient by 'playing the immigration card' to outmanoeuvre the radical right on this issue.

However, by shifting further right on immigration, centre-right parties may have opened up a 'Pandora's box' and brought the ideology of the far right into the political mainstream. This strategy could benefit the centre right in the short-term, but conceivably it will aid the radical right more in the long-term.

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Note: An earlier version of this article was published at our sister site, Democratic Audit, and at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right. It is based on a working paper by the authors, titled: 'Strategic Positioning: Right-Wing Party Competition over Immigration during the 2015–2018 European Refugee Crisis'. The paper builds on the authors' recent publication in the journal Electoral Studies. The article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. The authors would like to thank Edward Chan for invaluable research assistance. Featured image credit: Bundesministerium für Europa (CC BY 2.0)

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