Immigration, Immigration Perception and the Radical Right-Wing Vote in Europe: What is the empirical link?

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Introduction

The pictures of immigrants trying to reach the Italian, Greek, and Spanish shores from the Middle East are a constant in the news. Escaping war, violence, and poverty, hundreds of illegal immigrants try to reach the European Union daily. In addition to the nearly 500,000 asylum seekers, the pictures of these newcomers arriving clandestinely may create some fears among the inhabitants in the European Union. Who are these newcomers? Do they have criminal tendencies? Are there possibly even terrorists among them? Do they come to invade us, and do they want to push a foreign culture? In keeping with an ethno-centric worldview, radical right-wing parties stir these fears. Parties like the Swiss Peoples' Party, the United Kingdom Independence Party, or the Belgian Vlaams Belang believe that the nation should be reserved for a certain type of people, namely citizens who share the same ethnicity, culture, religion, and history. In practice, this ethno-

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centric worldview translates into a political discourse that advances anti-foreigner and anti-immigrant positions, which are often linked to welfare chauvinism (i.e., a belief that social programmes should work to the exclusive benefit of a nation's 'own' people). Since the late 1970s, these parties have targeted immigrants and foreigners as a symbol of (economic or social) disintegration or as a threat to homogenous norms. For example, as early as 1977, the French National Front used the slogan: "A million unemployed is a million immigrants too many! France and the French First."[3] In the 1990s, the German Republicans campaigned effectively under the slogan "Eliminate Unemployment: Stop Immigration."[4] One decade later, the Swiss Peoples' Party used the slogans "That's Enough! Stop Mass Immigration!" and "Switzerland Needs New Blood! Expand the Gene Pool!"[5] [6]

In terms of success at the ballot box, immigration has proven to be an "ideal" issue for parties like the French National Front or the Swiss Peoples' Party to rally voters. Throughout Europe, the radical right, as a party family, has nearly doubled its vote share from upwards of 5 percent in the early 1990s to upwards of 10 percent in the early 2010s, rendering the radical right the most successful party family in Europe in terms of vote gains over the past two decades (see Table 1). These gains manifested themselves very strongly at the last European Elections, which were held in May 2014. Increasing its vote and seat share by 4 percentage points Europe-wide, these anti-immigrant parties, which also reject European integration, have gained 86 out of the 751 seats in the European Parliament.[7] Even more pronounced in two of the largest European countries, France and the United Kingdom, the respective anti-immigrant or radical right-wing parties, the French National Front and the UK Independence Party, became the leading parties in their countries, winning 25 and 27 percent of the popular vote respectively.

These recent electoral successes indicate that the stigmatization of immigration and immigrants, combined with an emphasis on national sovereignty and populism, can be a successful strategy to

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[3] Translated from the original version « Un million de chômeurs, c'est un million d'immigrés en trop » (see : Bariller, D. and F. Timmermans (eds), (1993). 20 ans au Front. L'Histoire vraie du Front National. Paris, Éditions Nationales: p. 257.

[4] Golder, M. (2003). "Explaining Variation in the Success of Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe." Comparative Political Studies 36(2): p. 438.

[5] This quote implies that instead of accepting immigrants, Swiss women should have more children so that immigrants are not needed.

[6] Art, D. (2011). Inside the Radical Right: The Development of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: p. 127.

[7] For more information about the European Parliament Election Result (see: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html.)

address citizens' socio-cultural fears and anxieties. However, it is less clear whether it is actual immigration numbers or, rather, citizens' perceptions of immigrants that influence the electoral success of parties such as Danish Peoples' Party or the Party of Freedom and Democracy in the Netherlands. On the one hand, it is possible that citizens vote for radical right-wing parties when the percentage of foreigners is high in a given geographical unit because they want to reduce competition from immigrants over economic, social, and cultural resources. According to what is labelled in academic circles as the "ethnic competition theory," ethnic groups compete for housing, social welfare, and cultural hegemony; consequently, ethnic nationals support radical right-wing parties based on their tough stance towards immigration.

Table 1: Development of the vote share for radical right-wing parties (1990 to 2013)

Period	Radical right's average regional vote share
1990 - 1994	5.70 percent
1995 - 1999	6.70 percent
2000 - 2004	7.00 percent
2004 - 2008	9.11 percent
2009 - 2013	10.37 percent

On the other hand, it is also possible that citizens might base their vote choice on perceptions of immigrants rather than on the actual number of immigrants in a geographical region. This second explanation becomes the more plausible if we consider that throughout Europe, citizens are becoming more and more critical about immigrants, regardless of the real number of immigrants in a country. Some survey data supports this notion. For example, data from the European Social Survey indicates that 80% of Europeans hold the opinion that "immigrants committing serious crimes should leave the country." In addition, 43% of the respondents believe that "immigrants that are long-term unemployed should leave the country."

To measure the influence of immigration on the radical right's vote share, I collected data on the number of immigrants, on perceptions of immigrants, and on the radical right-wing vote for 20

European countries.[8] To operationalize perceptions, I use the survey question from the European Social Survey (2012), which asks respondents whether they think immigrants make the country a better or worse place to live in. The variable uses a 10-item scale. 0 indicates that immigrants make the country a worse place to live in, whereas 10 stands for a better place to live in. To measure the actual presence of immigrants, I use the percentage of foreigners per country.[9] To gauge the radical right-wing vote, I employ two proxy variables. First, I use the self-reported vote for a radical right-wing party; I code somebody who indicated that he or she voted for the radical right in the last parliamentary election as 1, and somebody who indicated voting for any other type of party as 0. Second, to measure these parties' overall electoral success, I use the aggregate vote share per country obtained by the radical right in elections (2008 to 2013).[10] (For a list of the radical right-wing parties included in the analysis, please see Table 3 in the appendix). Using these four variables, I engage in three tests. First, I evaluate whether the hard data on immigration and individuals' perceptions about immigration are related. Second, I examine whether individuals who have a more negative opinion about foreigners are more likely to vote for the radical right than individuals who have a more positive opinion about foreigners. Third, I test whether more immigrants in a country are correlated with more support for the radical right in that country.

To answer the first research question, I have graphed the relationship between the percentage of foreigners in a country (x-axis) and the number that measures the average individuals' perceptions about immigration per country (y-axis) (see graph 1). The graph indicates that there is no association between the two indicators, illustrating that individual feelings and opinions about immigration are unrelated to the actual number of foreigners living in a given country. To highlight, in the aggregate, individuals have a positive predisposition towards immigrants in some countries with many immigrants (e.g., Sweden), while citizens in other countries with many immigrants are rather negative towards foreigners (e.g., the UK). This indicates that the radical right's capacity to place its message does not hinge upon the number of foreigners per region. In other words, anti-immigrant parties are no more or less successful in affecting public opinion in

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[8] The 20 countries are Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK

[9] In the text, I use foreigners and immigrants interchangeably. The variable measures the percentage of foreign residents per country. Unfortunately, this is a crude measure, because it does not distinguish individuals based on their origin. However, as of today, there is no data available that measures the percentage of foreigners by country or origin. Hence, the measure used is the best available. The data for this variable come from the Eurostat (http://ec.europa.eu/ eurostat/ help/new-eurostat-website) and national statistical offices.

[10] The data stem from the national election offices.

areas with a high percentage of immigrants as compared with countries with a low percentage of immigrants.

Graph 1: The relationship between the percentage of foreigners in a country and individuals' perception about immigration
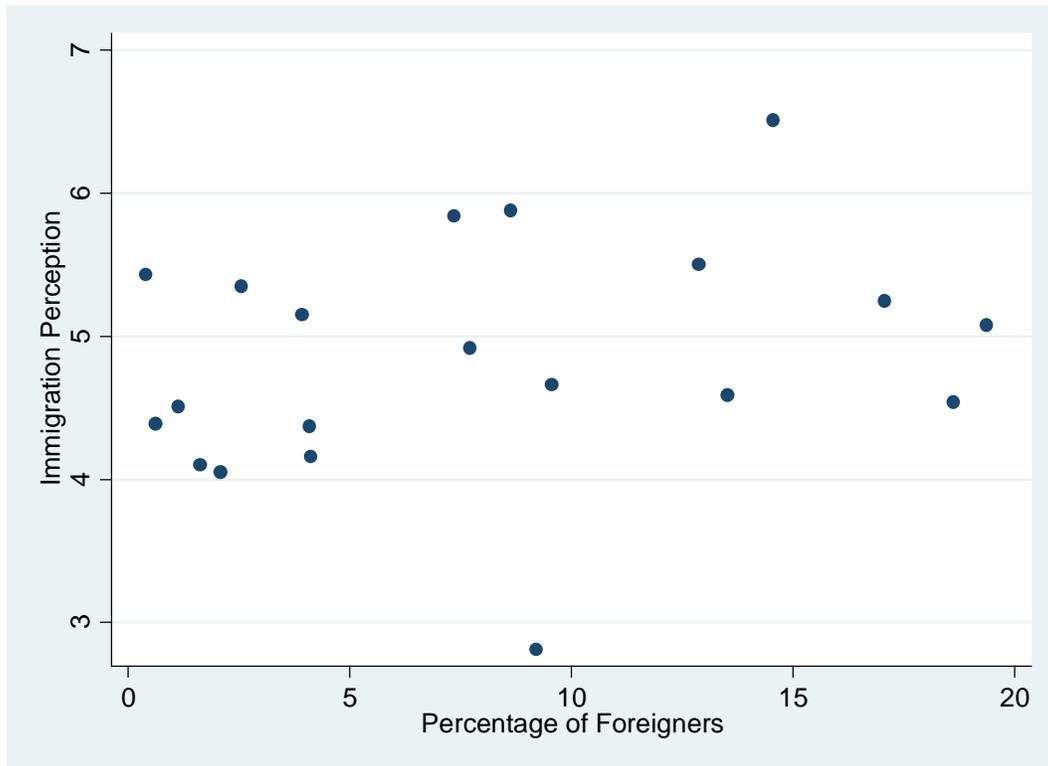

Table 2 displays the percentage of individuals who voted for the radical right based on their assessment of immigrants. I find that somebody's propensity to vote for an anti-immigrant party decreases the more positively the person feels about immigrants and foreigners. For example, the odds to support the radical right increase from less than 4% for somebody who strongly thinks that immigrants positively influence the country, to over 9% for somebody who thinks that immigrants do not benefit the host country at all.[11]

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[11] In the ESS dataset, 2,111 or 7.3% of the respondents indicated that they voted for radical right or anti-immigrant parties. These self-reported voting figures are lower than the approximately 10% of the vote, which the radical right actually gained in elections between 2008 and 2013. While this underreporting is less pronounced than in previous research, it still indicates that individuals are hesitant to admit that they have voted for the radical right.

Table 2: The relationship between immigration perceptions and individuals' likelihood to vote for the radical right

Immigration Perceptions	Likelihood to vote for the radical right
0 (Immigration is a bad thing for the country)	9.3%
1	9.6%
2	8.9%
3	9.0%
4	7.0%
5	6.9%
6	7.1%
7	5.8%
8	5.0%
9	4.3%
10 (immigration is a good thing for the country)	3.3%

Graph 2 displays the relationship between the percentage of foreigners per country (x-axis) and the radical right-wing vote (y-axis). It highlights that there is no relationship between the two measures. Both countries with a very small percentage of immigrants (e.g. Hungary) and states with a high percentage of foreign residents (e.g. Switzerland) can have high support for the radical right. This implies that the number of immigrants per geographical unit does not have a reinforcing influence on individuals' propensity to vote for anti-immigrant parties. For these parties' electoral success, it is only important what voters think about immigration. The actual number of immigrants appears irrelevant.

Graph 2: The relationship between the percentage of foreigners per country and the radical right-wing vote
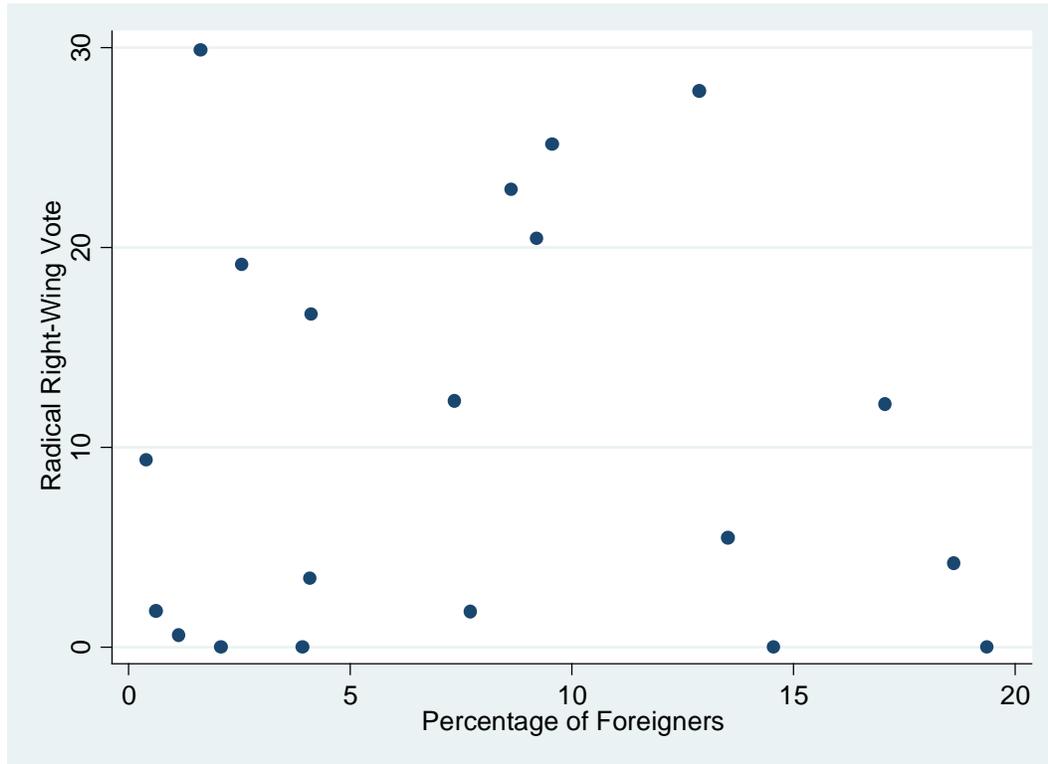
The repercussions of this research are twofold. First, this study suggests that if people feel threatened by immigrants, they have a higher likelihood to vote for the radical right than if they judge immigrants to be beneficial for their country. However, this research also highlights that this feeling is unrelated to the actual number of immigrants in a given country. Second, this study indirectly indicates that the way immigrants are perceived in a country might depend on dozens of factors other than immigration. For example, perceptions on immigrants might depend on how successfully the radical right places its message, on how the media discusses immigration, or on the existence of civic society organisations or sports clubs where natives can interact with foreigners.

Appendix

Table 3: List of radical right-wing parties

Country	Party	Party accronym
Belgium	Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang)	VB
	National Front (Le Front National)	FN
Bulgaria	Order, Lawfulness, Justice	RZS
Czech Republic	Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09	TOP 09
Denmark	Danish People's Party	DF
	Russian Party in Estonia (Vene Erakond Eestis)	VEE
	Our Home is Estonia! (Meie Kodu on Eestimaa!)	MKE
	Right-Wingers/Republican and Conservatives People's Party	VKR/P
	Russian Party in Estonia	VEE
	Estonian Independence Party	EIP
France	Front National (National Front)	FN
	Mouvement National Républicain (National Republican Movement)	MNR
	Mouvement pour la France (Movement for France)	MPF
Estonia:	Isamaaliit Pro Patria Union/Fatherland Union	Isamaaliit
	Our Home is Estonia! (Meie Kodu on Eestimaa!)	MKE
Germany	National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands)	NPD
	Deutsche Volksunion (German Volk Union)	DVU
	Die Republikaner (the Republicans)	Rep
Greece	Popular Orthodox Rally(Laïkós Orthódoxos Synagermós)	LA.O.S
	Golden Dawn (Chrysi Avgi)	ANOIX
Hungary	Jobbik, The Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom)	Jobbik
	Patriotic Elections Coalition (Hazafias Választási Koalíció)	HVK
	Hungarian Truth	MIÉP-Jobbik
Ireland	-	
Italy	LOMBARDA - Northern (Lombardy) League (Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania)	LEGA
	North League (Lega Nord)	LN
Netherlands	Party for Freedom - Group Wilders (Groep Wilders / Partij voor de Vrijheid)	PVV
Norway	Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet)	FRP
Poland	Union of Political Realism (Unia Polityki Realnej)	UPR
	Fatherland Catholic Electoral Committee - Homeland	KKW-O
	Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Samoobrona Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej)	SRP
	National-Christian Bloc for Poland (Narodowo Chrzescijanski Blok dla Polski	NChBdP
	National Alliance of the Polish Republic´s Retired	KPEiRRP
	National Party of Retirees and Pensioners	KPEiR
	Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (Ruch Odbudowy Polski)	ROP
	Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc)	PiS
Portugal	-	

Slovenia	Slovene National Party (Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka)	SNS
	Slovenia is ours (Slovenija Je Naša)	SJN
	National Democrats and Slovenian Party (Narodni Demokrati in Slovenska Gospodarska Stranka)	ND-SGS
Spain	-	
Sweden	Sweden Democrats	SD
Switzerland	Swiss People's Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei / Union démocratique du centre)	SVP/UDC
	Freedom Party of Switzerland (Freiheits-Partei der Schweiz / Parti suisse de la liberté)	FPS/PSL
	Tessinian League (Lega dei Ticinesi)	Lega
United-Kingdom	British National Party	BNP
	UK Independence Party	UKIP