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8 Concluding remarks

Pontus Odmalm

The aim of this edited volume has been to establish empirically whether mainstream parties offered a choice on the immigration ‘issue’. Or were voters left with only one alternative – namely the PRR one - should they wish for a reduction in the number of migrants and a more assimilation-type approach to integration. The manifesto analysis suggests that, overall, at least one mainstream party in each country and in each election under study has been facing in a R/A direction. Meanwhile, the PRR’s position is typically more intense than that of the mainstream (a notable exception, however, being the UMP in E2). And even when the R/A choice is offered, mainstream parties are in close proximity to each other and their adopted positions are usually moderately restrictive. As the aggregate data also show, PRR parties have steadily moved towards the more extreme end of our four-point scale. This has increased the distance between the mainstream and the PRR contender yet further. The latter’s positions have also been more consistent and more stable. Some mainstream parties, on the other hand, display surprisingly volatile patterns and switch back and forth between positions from one election to the next. Conversely, in the Finnish and Swedish cases, one observes a party system polarisation. The option available is thus between degrees of L/M positioning by the mainstream, and the increasingly R/A stance of the PRR. The evidence further suggests that this lack of choice has played a role in the electoral achievements of both PS and the SD. Yet in the other cases, the message is not as straightforward. Previous research points to a variety of ways in which mainstream parties can counter the success of niche contenders (see e.g. de Lange, 2012; Bale, 2010; Bale et al., 2010; Norris, 2005). A key strategy – highlighted by Meguid (2005) – is that of the mainstream parties accommodating the PRR by taking over their anti-immigration position. This, the argument runs, can persuade voters to return to the mainstream. But when we took these shifts into account and subsequently looked at changes in the number of votes cast for the mainstream, then the evidence supporting this assumption has been ambiguous. It can perhaps be concluded that mainstream stances are important but also that they are only one part of the equation. In Chapter 1 we therefore suggested some additional possibilities for helping us to understand the relationships between the mainstream parties and the PRR. Our contributors found some support for the notion that issue ownership competition

has become more important when parties contend the immigration issue. However, these struggles not only concern dynamics between mainstream parties and the PRR. They also affect relationships among the mainstream. It can therefore be as important to emphasise – and campaign on – the opposition’s incompetence as to communicate the incompetence of the incumbent. Conversely, Kuisma and Nygård (Chapter 4 in this volume), as well as Widfeldt (Chapter 7 in this volume), find that the Finnish and Swedish mainstream parties have largely not engaged with the issue at all. In the case of Sweden, this outcome is partly explained by a converging mainstream, which therefore made any attempts to politicise the issue redundant. However, in Finland, and especially following the financial crisis, socio-economic questions managed to push other areas off the (mainstream) agenda. These factors effectively left the Finnish and Swedish PRR parties free to capitalise on an increasingly split electorate. Therefore, perhaps it is of less importance whether mainstream parties offered an R/A choice or not. Rather, what the authors of chapters 4 and 7 highlight is how the lack of attention that mainstream parties paid to the immigration issue – in combination with some rather fundamental changes within PS and the SD – took the mainstream by surprise, thereby facilitating the PRR’s success. Whereas PS managed to mainstream its image by sidelining the more outspoken and, arguably, more radical wing of the party, the SD instead opted to professionalise and reorganise itself in order to present the party as a credible alternative to the mainstream.

Equally, one would expect the British party system to be more obviously characterised by attempts to compete over issue ownership. Given that the political mainstream (except for the Liberal Democrats in E1 and E3) have all been positioned in the R/A sphere this should therefore have prompted Labour and the Conservatives, in particular, to make more of their successful track records, or at least highlight their competent management of immigration and integration matters. Yet Partos (Chapter 2 in this volume) concludes that their strategies have largely been ad hoc and directionless, and as a result this has damaged their credibility in claiming any form of ownership of the issue. Finally, the Danish and Dutch cases illustrate emerging difficulties when trying to determine boundaries between the mainstream and the PRR. The constant bartering that takes place before and after Danish elections has provided the DF with several opportunities to mainstream its appeal and to exert influence over the direction immigration and integration policies should take. This situation obviously challenges our initial assumptions about how we should define a mainstream party. The developments

witnessed in Danish politics would arguably place the party system on a par with that found in Italy (Masseti, 2014). Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, parts of the mainstream have moved so close to the PRR that the R/A stance has become the new centre ground.

Although we were able to establish a link between mainstream positions and the PRR's electoral trajectory, it was beyond the scope of this book to test the strength of this relationship further. What we have been able to ascertain, and which is indeed the purpose of this book, is that – contrary to popular opinion and to claims made by numerous PRR parties – there are in fact mainstream parties that put forward R/A platforms – many more than we had in fact expected when we first began to code the manifestos. But the question of why mainstream parties are not fully able to communicate these positions is thus an important one for future research to address. And furthermore it must be asked how much this matters to voters. As van Klingeren et al. (Chapter 6 in this volume) also suggest, the answer could lie in the multidimensional nature of many party systems as well as in the immigration issue itself. Indeed, the latter aspect has been flagged up elsewhere (see e.g. van der Brug and van Spanje, 2009) and could help us to explain why the PRR continues to grow despite the presence of an R/A mainstream. It could well be that the emphasis that mainstream parties typically place on the material aspect of immigration, i.e. on jobs, on the cost of hosting refugees, and on access to the welfare state, does not correspond to the real concerns voters have about immigration. In other words, the electorate may be more concerned about how immigration affects national identity; social cohesion; gender equality and the country's way of life, all of which are likely to be challenges to frame in the manifesto format as well as in public debates. However, we identified an additional source of mismatch. The manifesto analysis revealed that parties are more likely to adopt restrictive positions on family reunification than on asylum and labour migration. This points to several avenues for future research to pursue. First, does it matter which category – or categories – mainstream parties seek to reduce? Or is the overall – reductionist – message more important? Most of the PRR parties examined in this book opted for the latter approach, whereas the mainstream parties tended to stress one or two types. Given the propensity of media and public discourse to conflate types of migrants into one nebulous category, it therefore seems plausible that any differentiation that the mainstream makes will be irrelevant when the electorate assesses and evaluates all the available options.

Second, is the predominant focus on family reunification a sign of ‘agenda friction’ between mainstream priorities and those of the electorate? If one accepts the ‘winners and losers’ of the globalisation argument (Kriesi et al., 2006), then pursuing a restrictive stance on labour migration would make more electoral sense. However, such a stance has been infrequent (i.e. 17 per cent). Yet given increasing asylum pressures and subsequent challenges to a state’s ability to process these claims, one can observe a shift in public opinion towards wanting a further tightening of borders. But any restrictive positions on asylum have been equally scarce (17 per cent). Although our analysis ends in 2015, and some of the elections studied took place prior to the asylum crisis’, one can reasonably expect party priorities to move in the same direction as those of the electorate in forthcoming elections. This is particularly relevant given the challenges that conservative and social democratic-type parties currently face in maintaining voters’ support and trust. As such, there is a need to complement links made between mainstream and PRR parties, and the immigration issue, with a focus on the demand side, namely on voters.

And, finally, is the mainstream more likely to frame the issue along the socio-economic axis, or along the so-called GAL/TAN dimension? (Hooghe et al., 2002)? Our coding concentrated explicitly on the direction parties face in (that is, liberal or restrictive; multicultural or assimilationist). We were consequently not able to pick up on any justifications made for these positions. Furthermore, we were unable to identify whether, say, a restrictive stance on labour migration was justified because migrant labour risks undercutting wage levels, or whether this position was explained with reference to any chauvinistic reasons. Paying closer attention to the frames that parties use and how they differ between mainstream and PRR parties allows us to assess the extent to which competition has changed with regard to the immigration issue. If recent debates are anything to go by, especially following Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election, conventional modes of party competition have probably altered, if not fundamentally changed. In other words, it could be less important that parties put forward solutions which are properly anchored in some form of ideological framework. What could matter more, conversely, are the intuitions and feelings party representatives communicate about the question at stake (Andrejvic, 2016). This partly explains why some mainstream parties have struggled to come up with consistent narratives about how they plan to address immigration and integration matters. Since ‘facts’ are considered to play a minuscule role in the post-truth era, it presents obvious obstacles to the political mainstream. These are obstacles which the

PRR is not particularly concerned with. In that sense, whether mainstream parties offer an R/A choice could be less important. That they put forward solutions that ‘feel’ right could conversely matter more.

This leads us to two final reflections. First, is the distinction typically made between the mainstream and the PRR still relevant? The dividing line so far has run between the L/M positioning of the former, and the R/A stances taken by the latter. But as most of our cases show, this broad-brush approach is increasingly difficult to uphold. In some instances, disparate party families have all ended up in the same R/A sphere. This very much blurs the analytical edges between the mainstream and the niche contender. In other words, are we witnessing a critical juncture regarding the party politics of immigration? Is the new ‘normal’ one that is characterised by mainstream attempts to reduce migrant numbers as much as possible, and one which places increasing demands on migrants and refugees in order to qualify as legitimate members of society? But if this is the case, then how are we supposed to apply and use conventional understandings of PRR-type parties? As van Klingeren et al. (Chapter 6 in this volume) suggest, it might be more appropriate to view the PVV, for example, as a more radical version of a mainstream party rather than as a member of a distinct party family. Such a conclusion dovetails with findings from the manifesto analysis. In other words, the PRR’s position is always, and almost by definition, more extreme as well as more intense than that of the mainstream. But it could also open up new opportunities for the latter regarding how they compete with the PRR. As the literature on issue ownership highlights (see e.g. Green, 2007), should parties agree on policy direction, then it becomes more important to emphasise competence and a successful track record. Yet such strategies are also likely to include claims about incompetence and opponents’ inability to achieve any of the R/A goals promised during elections. This potentially puts PRR parties in an even stronger position since the mainstream finds it increasingly difficult to meet its restrictive targets (see e.g. Ford et al., 2015).

Second, is it perhaps time to expand the scope of indicators used when defining and classifying membership of the PRR party family? Granted, previous research has highlighted the fact that the immigration issue is usually a core feature of the PRR identity, and they are often considered to have little to say about any broader societal questions. Positions on the issue typically differ from those of the mainstream, but how ‘populist’, ‘radical’ or ‘right’ are PRR

stances on taxation, labour markets or gender equality, for example? Eger and Valdez (2015) find variations on these positions throughout Western Europe. Of particular importance, they argue, is the gradual shift away from neo-liberal solutions towards a position that emphasises state intervention. The latter stance on economic questions is then coupled with traditional and authoritarian positions on sociocultural questions. If the contemporary PRR is characterised by fairly traditional centre-left stances on the economy and equally traditional centre-right positions on the state-individual relationship, then there is a need to reflect on the appropriateness of the PRR label and what it means today. The particular combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ politics is thus likely put novel pressures on the centre-left as well as on the centre-right. For the former, in particular, they may also result in some form of identity crisis. Social democratic-type parties throughout Europe have struggled to come up with convincing narratives for the post-crisis era. This struggle appears especially challenging should the centre-left party in question also have come to accept the occasional benefits of the market economy. The move that some conservative-type parties have taken towards the centre ground can cause similar problems. Scholars may therefore want to question some of the assertions made in the political science literature, namely that an electoral choice matters in the political ‘game’ (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Budge, 1994). That parties offer clear and different alternatives is often considered key for scholarly understandings of parties and elections. It not only addresses the importance of the proximity between parties’ positions and those of the electorate, but also allows us to assess the extent of mainstream convergence. But as the results of this book show, it is not obvious whether – and how much – a mainstream choice matters. In some cases – e.g. in Denmark (E2), France (E2) and the Netherlands (E3) – the R/A option is present and support for the PRR consequently decreased. Yet at the same time support has increased in Britain (E1–E3), Denmark (E1 and E3), France (E3), and the Netherlands (E2) despite the presence of a mainstream alternative. It would therefore be difficult to conclude that an accommodative strategy ‘works’ as per Meguid’s suggestion. Rather, what appears to be a more likely outcome is that the PRR’s vote share will increase when mainstream parties adopt an adversarial position. That said, voters attracted to the niche contender because of its position towards and its solutions to the issue of immigration may not necessarily care whether or not the mainstream offers an R/A alternative. Equally, they may not care whether the PRR also proposes, say, greater expenditure on welfare services or a reversal of gender equality legislation as long as its key ambition is to reduce the number of newcomers.

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