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Political parties and ‘the immigration issue’: (non)competition around issue ownership in Swedish parliamentary elections 1991-2010.

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## Abstract

Why is ‘the immigration issue’ rarely polemical for the Swedish mainstream when it divides parties across Europe? Several factors suggest fertile ground for conflict, yet parties hesitate to capitalise on anti-immigration cues.

Based on interviews with Swedish MPs, the article discusses two, inter-linked, issues. First, immigration crystallises conflicting ideological streams: market liberalism vs. value conservatism (for the centre-right) and international solidarity vs. welfare state/labour market protectionism (for the centre-left), and stressing the ‘wrong’ stream detracts attention from parties’ core competencies. Second, since competition, when present, revolves around issue ownership, parties will divert attention to areas of higher competence. Whether immigration becomes politicised is not necessarily dependent on electoral grievances or a radical right presence but on parties’ ability to handle and negotiate these conflicting streams and issue priorities. An appreciation of the *party* politics of immigration is thus central to understanding when, and why, immigration becomes an ‘issue’.

## Introduction

While immigration is very much an ‘issue’ for mainstream parties in Europe, it is rarely a dividing factor for Swedish parties or an important electoral issue (Rydgren, 2004). The lack of politicisation raises several questions. Why has Sweden been exempt from the polarised ‘politics of immigration’ that characterises institutionally similar countries such as Austria, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands? And why have questions relating to immigration and asylum not developed into a party-political concern when several factors suggest fertile ground for this to happen? Since the late 1980s, asylum flows have increased, the Swedish model for immigrant reception (Soininen, 1999) has come under pressure and the public mood has been divided. Yet immigration is not a priority for most of the mainstream parties and until the Sweden Democrats secured enough votes (5.7%) in 2010, the lack of conflict meant that Sweden only experienced one period (1991-1994) when a populist radical-right party was in parliament. This presents a comparative puzzle for the study of immigration and electoral politics since Sweden goes against the trend found elsewhere (see e.g. Siaroff, 1999; Wischenbart, 1994; van Kersbergen and Krouwel, 2008; Golder, 2003; Thranhardt, 2009).

Previous studies tend to explain the Swedish ‘exception’ with reference to particular institutional features and/or how parties downplay the issue in order to contain the radical right. On the one hand, Hammar (1999) points to the high level of consensus and cross-party co-operation that prevailed in parliament, whereas Dahlström (2004) highlights the corporatist style of policy-making (see also Lindvall and Sebring, 2005). The ‘frozen party system’ (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) is furthermore said to act as a disincentive for parties to focus on issues that fall outside established cleavages (Sundberg, 1999). On the other, Meguid (2005) suggests that mainstream parties can deliberately ‘dismiss’ niche party positions, thereby signalling that their issues lack merit which, in turn, dissuades the electorate to cast a vote for these challengers (see also Norris, 2005). Dahlström and Esaiasson (2009) find that this ‘dismissive strategy’ explains the lack of electoral priority given to immigration, and why the radical right rarely enjoys electoral success in Sweden.

However, this literature does not fully explain three important aspects of party competition. First, the ‘institutional features’-approach downplays parties’ electoral

strategy rationale and can, as such, not account for temporal variation regarding issue attention and emphasis. Second, the ‘dismissive strategy’-approach overlooks how parties are subject to conflicting ideological ‘pulls’ which will affect their behaviour. Assessing, and understanding, the role of these ideological tensions is particularly important for the study of party competition given the state of flux that party systems are in (see e.g. Budge, 1994; Dalton, 2002; Kriesi *et al*, 2006). Third, neither body of work acknowledges how issue consensus affects party behaviour and strategies. When parties agree on policy outcome, but disagree on the means used, the political struggle tends to shift from ‘positional’ to ‘issue’ competition (Budge *et al*, 2001; Green-Pedersen, 2007). Consequently, the electoral incentives to emphasise certain issues also change.

Therefore, the article argues that parties will engage with immigration if they can successfully handle, and negotiate, two interlinked factors. First, a set of potentially conflicting ideological streams – market liberalism vs. value conservatism (for the centre-right) and international solidarity vs. welfare state/labour market protectionism (for the centre-left) – create framing dilemmas. Emphasising the ‘wrong’ stream brings unwanted interest, and criticism, from the mainstream *and* radical right competitors and detracts attention from parties’ core competencies. These tensions require parties to perform a delicate balancing act where particular ways of framing ‘the immigration issue’ have a better fit with ‘the least problematic’ ideological stream. However, emphasising immigration can be potentially divisive and bring adverse electoral outcomes, which thus prompt parties to remain within their ‘comfort zones’ and focus on questions where they experience higher levels of public trust. The extent to which parties are able to negotiate these ideological tensions, the article argues, offers a more accurate explanation for Sweden’s comparative uniqueness.

Second, although ‘the immigration issue’ is an ideologically loaded and contentious area, parties often agree on policy outcome. As such, immigration shares certain traits with what the literature refers to as ‘valance issues’ (Stokes, 1963). This means that competition, when present, takes on the characteristics of ‘issue ownership’ (Petrocik, 1996; Green-Pedersen, 2007; van der Brug, 2004; Green and Hobolt, 2008). The party that emphasises immigration is thus likely to be the party that displays higher competence scores on the issue, whereas parties that perform less well divert attention elsewhere. However, competition around issue ownership works

in tandem with how parties are able to handle the ideological tensions described above. As such, parties behave strategically and may not necessarily emphasise immigration even though this is where they score relatively higher.

The article is structured in the following way. First, it provides an overview of how immigration has played out in Swedish politics and why it predominantly was a non-issue for parties between the 1991-2010 elections. The studied period is particularly confusing since the socio-economic conditions suggest that immigration would be an 'issue' and the Sweden Democrats turned into a serious political contender. It is worth stressing that the electoral success of the Sweden Democrats has effectively put an end to the long period of immigration being a 'non-issue' but it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the party's journey from political pariah to gaining a parliamentary presence. However, by exploring how the political mainstream engages with, and competes on, immigration, the article points to the necessity of going beyond the radical right when examining immigration as a source of political contestation.

Second, the article outlines how immigration brings the inherent ideological tensions to the fore, which in turn affects parties' electoral strategies. Finally, by invoking qualitative (interviews with MPs<sup>1</sup>) and quantitative data (election surveys<sup>2</sup>), the article shows how Swedish parties attempt to bypass these ideological tensions by either framing immigration as a matter of competence or by diverting attention to other areas where competence levels are higher.

### 'Immigration' as a source of political contention

How did immigration manage to be a non-issue in Swedish politics when it is one of the key sources of conflict elsewhere in Europe? (see e.g. Boswell, 2003 and Koopmans *et al*, 2005). The literature on the topic is extensive but can be summarised into two general approaches. On the one hand, a body of work that addresses how political institutions affect party behaviour and, on the other, one that focuses on party strategies.

The former highlights how the institutional surroundings have a constraining effect on party behaviour and much emphasis is placed on how Swedish immigration policies were handled through corporatist negotiations between the state and key social partners (see e.g. Hammar, 1999; Dahlström, 2004; Freeman, 1995; Geddes, 2003). Accordingly, they did not differ from how other types of public policy were proposed, debated and decided on (Lindvall and Sebring, 2005; Arter, 2006) which thus defused the issue as a source of conflict between parties. However, by the early 1990s, the corporatist features had diminished in scope (Lindvall and Rothstein, 2006) which coincided with immigration becoming a more salient issue for the electorate. The heightened importance was due to a combination of increased asylum applications, anti-immigrant, especially anti-asylum, sentiments among the population and a populist radical-right party - *New Democracy* - entering the political scene. These factors usually propel immigration into the political spotlight, but Sundberg (2007) points to how the deeply cemented class cleavage impeded on new dividing lines becoming established in Swedish politics (see also Strömbäck and Johansson, 2007). In contrast to the Dutch ‘multi-/monocultural’ divide (Pellikaan *et al.*, 2007), immigration has rarely been understood as a cultural ‘cost’, or threat to Swedish values, and the absence of a clear cleavage line has also meant that party-political interest tended to be low (Brandorf *et al.*, 1996, Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009).

The second strand in the literature points to how parties are sensitive to shifts in public opinion and how they may take calculated risks in the pursuit of votes (Budge, 1994) but only when the identified shift makes the status quo clearly disadvantageous (Adams *et al.* 2004). As Figure 1. shows, public attitudes towards refugees have predominantly been in favour of restrictive policies and Swedish parties would therefore be expected to respond to these electoral preferences by moving closer to a ‘restrictive’ median position.

(Figure. 1 about here)

However, only New Democracy reacted to these public cues and broke away from the established consensus, whereas the mainstream parties collectively denounced the party’s anti-immigrant stance during the political debates in both 1991 and 1994 (Dahlström, 2004). Even in subsequent elections, parties have been hesitant to

capitalise on the public's negative sentiments, even though the Liberals and the Conservative party (the Moderates), tried to raise their immigration profiles on various occasions during the late-1990s (Boréus, 2006; Schall, 2004). As such, Swedish parties did not identify the sufficient incentive "to make a societal problem a political issue" (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008:628) which, for example, transformed immigration into a central issue in both Danish and Dutch elections (Scholten, 2010).

A related aspect is the extent to which parties engage confrontationally with an issue since this affects its' degree of politicisation (Meguid, 2008; Dahlström and Esaiasson, 2009). As noted above, several features of the Swedish 'politics of immigration' suggest no shortage of opportunities for parties to have capitalised on the issue during the 1990s. For the centre-right, it can be particularly lucrative to engage with immigration questions since they share certain traits with the radical right (e.g. an emphasis on law and order and value conservatism) and often compete for parts of the same electorate (Bale, 2008). Indeed, this is an increasingly common strategy for such parties elsewhere, e.g. in France (Hollifield, 1994), Germany (Boswell and Hough, 2008) and Austria (Bale, 2003). However, Dahlström and Esaiasson (2009) suggest that the Swedish centre-right generally downplays, or outright dismisses, a restrictive agenda since it could legitimise the radical right's stance. Furthermore, the centre-right has previously experienced problems with undercurrent, intra-bloc splits, which for a long time jeopardised governing potential (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008). Focusing too heavily on a potential divider, such as immigration, would thus undermine the centre-right's possibilities of (re)winning government power. Similarly, the centre-left has emphasised Sweden's asylum commitments rather than focussing on the more divisive concerns of how immigration can affect wage levels and potentially split the workers' movement (Givens and Luedtke, 2004).

The corporatist policymaking style, a high level of consensus and dismissive strategies to contain the radical right, provide a partial answer as to why immigration is a relatively less contentious issue in Swedish politics. Although persuasive, it raises questions as to why some parties consistently avoid engaging with the issue, whereas others do not. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the illusive nature of immigration (Lahav, 1997) gives rise to a set of ideological tensions and

how these strains affect party priorities and strategies. This focus is particularly important given the changes that have taken place in the ideological landscape.

## How do ideological changes affect party competition on immigration?

Studies on party competition suggest that ideological polarisation has steadily weakened since the 1950s (see e.g. Budge, 2001; Dalton, 2002; Clark, 2009; Green-Pedersen, 2007). This trend has had important implications for how parties interact and compete over votes. The decline of traditional dividing lines, such as labour/capital or religious/secular, may open up for new cleavages to be established. While Inglehart (1971;1997) suggested that the ‘Old’ – *material* - Left-Right cleavage was supplemented, or even superseded, by a ‘New’ – *postmaterial* - Left-Right, others have contested this ‘two-dimensional’-thesis. The significant development, they argue, relates more to how the meaning of ‘Left-Right’ has changed and less to the emergence of ‘new’ cleavages (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Kriesi *et al*, 2006; see also Enyedi and Deegan-Kruse, 2010).

A contrasting argument points to how party dynamics have changed in the light of declining ideological conflict. When parties have fewer issues to disagree on – e.g. ensuring a strong economy; protecting the environment or tolerating different lifestyle choices – it will prompt them to compete over ‘issue ownership’ and selectively emphasise certain issues over others (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Carmines and Stimson, 1993). That is, parties try to persuade the electorate that they are more competent than their opponents at delivering the desired outcome. Over time, parties develop different levels of competence on a question or set of questions (Green and Holbalt, 2008) which they will pay more attention to while downplaying others. If parties aim to maximise votes, they will behave strategically and focus on the issues that they are comparatively stronger, and more trusted, on.

The Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) and Expert Survey Group (ESG) (Budge *et al*, 2001; Benoit and Laver, 2007) both show a relatively even spread of the Swedish parties along the material, Left-Right axis. As such, party positions correspond to their views held on state-market relations with parties further to the



'Right' favouring less state intervention in the market than those on the 'Left'. Studying positions on post-material issues only, the distribution shows a clustering around a 'New' Left position. This indicates two things. When competition occurs around material questions, it should be spatially oriented, whereas when parties compete on post-material issues, it will be ownership orientated. Parties may, however, compete over ownership on spatial questions as well (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008) and consequently offer the electorate a choice, both in terms of ideological outcomes and which party that is 'better' at handling the issue/s. Since a manifesto analysis does not cover non-salient issues, it may distort party positions on questions that are not covered in electoral publications. The extent to which Swedish parties are in 'agreement' over the direction of post-material questions may therefore be exaggerated.

Nevertheless, the greater number of quasi-sentences that deal with material issues suggest that an economic, Left-Right cleavage still dominates Swedish politics. By emphasising particular policy problems, and the solutions they offer, parties strive to set the agenda and draw attention to 'their' issues (Schattschneider, 1960; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). However, parties do also have to be sensitive to electoral cues, e.g. changes in issue saliency, in order to attract enough votes, which will enable them to implement their policies. Table 1. shows the development of voters' top three electoral priorities during the period 1991-2006.

(Table 1. about here)

Apart from the 'Environment', no other 'New' politics issue has resonated strongly enough with the Swedish public. Since economic issues dominate voters' agenda, as well as the party manifestos, party competition is expected to echo these sentiments and policy propositions will thus correspond to parties' location on the material, Left-Right axis. Parties will then behave selectively and emphasise the issue/s where they experience the highest level of public trust.

However, when immigration is factored in, it poses a number of problems for the interpretation of party positions and modes of competition since it cuts across several – sometimes disparate - policy fields (Benoit and Laver, 2007). Immigration

does not only have economic implications but also affects other policy, and non-policy, areas such as nationhood, citizenship, language, traditions, etc. Therefore, 'the immigration issue' may be difficult to assimilate into certain cleavage structures, such as state-market relations, especially when the question at stake is which loci that should decide on entry. Equally, if immigration is related to a post-material cleavage, such as internationalism vs. nationalism (Kriesi *et al*, 2006), it poses additional framing problems. Should mainstream parties opt to position themselves on the 'nationalism' side, they must avoid moving too close to the radical right, thereby subjecting themselves to a positioning 'backlash' from competitors. Conversely, if parties move in an 'internationalist' direction, this also requires careful navigating. Should immigration be discussed with reference to solidarity and a 'no borders'-rhetoric, centre-left parties will have to explain how the welfare state, and the collectively bargained wage-levels, are to be upheld. Centre-right parties, on the other hand, will have to address how increasing immigration flows affect national unity and social order. The alternative is to draw attention to areas of policy strength and emphasise issues that parties are comfortable with and trusted on.

How parties are able to handle, and negotiate, these tensions is conceptualised as follows:

- A. Immigration subjects parties to certain ideological 'pulls'
  - market liberalism vs. value-conservatism (for the centre-right) and international solidarity vs. welfare state/labour market protectionism (for the centre-left).
- B. that can have adverse electoral implications
  - intra-party fragmentation, unwanted criticism from mainstream and radical right competitors, detract attention from issue priorities, etc.
- C. which parties will attempt to remedy by selectively emphasising particular issues
  - areas of policy competence and/or issues that do not bring the above tensions to the fore.

## Party strategies: emphasising competence rather than choice?

The ideological distance between parties will influence positioning and strategy choices. Since Swedish parties are evenly spread along the – *material* – Left-Right axis (Budge *et al*, 2001; Benoit and Laver, 2007), the expectation is that competition on economic issues will be structured according to how parties offer voters a set of policy choices (Downs, 1957). While parties may still highlight their ability to deliver these choices, it is the different societal outcomes that parties will stress. Competition on ‘New’ politics issues will, however, take a different appearance. Since parties tend to occupy the same policy space, particular issues will be selectively emphasised by those who enjoy high competence ratings. Conversely, they will be downplayed, or ignored altogether, by others.

The Swedish parties are thus expected to emphasise policy differences, given their material, Left-Right location, but their party manifestos rarely use confrontational language. Identifying policy differences on economic issues is further complicated once intra-bloc comparisons are made. The Liberal Party’s tax policy is, for example, very similar to that of the Moderates<sup>3</sup>. While some MPs suggested that *inter-bloc* differences are still stark<sup>4</sup>, a majority of the interviewed MPs suggested that the key dividing line was not between leftist and rightist parties but between the Left Party and ‘the rest’<sup>5</sup>. The differences among ‘the rest’ have, however, diminished over time<sup>6</sup>, especially since 2002. However, for certain policy solutions that are closely associated with a particular party, e.g. taxes<sup>7</sup>, or a particular bloc, e.g. unemployment benefits<sup>8</sup>, the interviewees pointed out that clear differences still prevail. Parties would then attempt to exaggerate these differences in order to clarify their party position to the electorate<sup>9</sup>. The interview data does therefore run contrary to what the CMP and ESG analyses predict competition to be like. Even though the manifesto analyses suggest spatial positioning, MPs’ responses point to how competence and selective emphasise have not only become more important but that they have increasingly come to characterise the Swedish political landscape<sup>10</sup>.

In order to check for how the decline in ideological conflict affects modes of party competition, the article initially considers two survey questions - ‘[Issue]: Good policy (Traditional and new parties)’ and ‘Emphasised issue: [Party]’ (Holmberg *et al*,

1991-2006). Combining the two reveals the extent to which parties respond to perceived competencies by selectively emphasising those issues. Table 2. shows parties' issue competence (ownership) and the extent to which this coincides with the main issue that parties raised during elections (selective emphasis).

[Table 2. about here]

First, on average, forty per cent of the parties behave strategically and emphasise questions that they also 'own'. This is especially the case for the two 'big' parties, the Moderates (3/5 elections) and the Social Democrats (3/5 elections) where both parties own different types of 'Old' politics questions ('The economy' (1991), 'Taxes' (1998) and 'Employment' (2006) for the Moderates; 'Employment' (1991-1998) and 'Taxes' (2002)<sup>11</sup>, for the Social Democrats). The Greens is the most consistent party and push 'their' issue, the 'Environment', during all elections<sup>12</sup>.

However, given the parties' Left-Right placement, competition also revolves around the Social Democrats and the Moderates providing a different set of choices for how to 'best' deal with these economic issues. For the Moderates, with a very clear rightist profile (bar 2006), it involves deregulating the economy and lowering taxes. Even though the Social Democrats overall hold centrist positions, their 'Employment' policy positions have been distinctly leftist (bar 1994 and 2006).

The smaller centre-right parties display a more mixed approach (the Liberals (2/5), Centre Party (1/5) and Christian Democrats (0/5)). The Liberals emphasised 'The economy' (1991) and 'Employment' (1994), shift to 'Education' (1998), on to 'Immigration' (2002), and then back to 'Education' in 2006. The selective emphasis on non-economic issues was a conscious move by the Liberals in order to distinguish themselves from the Moderates and to avoid unnecessary electoral overlap<sup>13</sup> but it was also a strategic move to deal with the party's poor performance in 1998 when the Liberals only just gained representation. This move was accentuated following the formation of the Alliance when the 'big' questions were handed to the Moderates while the Liberals concentrate on 'smaller' - but owned - issues such as immigration and education.

The Centre Party, on the other hand, primarily emphasised non-economic policy areas - 'The Environment' (three elections) and 'Regional policy' (one election) - until 2006 when they switched approach and emphasised 'Employment'. The change in issue emphasis partly related to how the Centre Party underwent significant changes in the late 1990s, culminating in 2001 when it adopted a new party programme. The programme broke away from the old focus on agriculture and regional policy in favour of economic issues. The programme also suggested becoming an ideas - rather than issue - driven party<sup>14</sup>. However, the shift toward emphasising 'Employment' also relates to how the Centre Party's competence score improves in relation to the other parties as well as to previous elections. Albeit not owning the issue, the Christian Democrats nevertheless emphasised 'Family policy/child care' during all elections. In contrast to the other Alliance MPs, the Christian Democratic representatives stressed ideological conviction, rather than responding to improved competence ratings, as the main driving force behind their issue emphasis<sup>15</sup>. However, a consequence of the Christian Democrats' strong commitment to family related policies indirectly meant that they have tried to monopolise those issues and steer voters away from the Social Democrats<sup>16</sup>.

For the Social Democrats, two things stand out. First, a clearer appreciation of how political life has developed towards selective emphasis and issue competition<sup>17</sup>, and second, a higher sensitivity towards responding to changes in issue saliency. When 'Education's' saliency level surpasses 'Employment's', between the 1998 and 2002 elections, the party responded by moving emphasis *and* ownership competition towards the former (Holmberg *et al*, 1991-2006). However, when the Moderates took over ownership of 'Employment' in 2006, this fundamentally challenged the Social Democrats' virtual monopoly of the issue.

The Greens' dominance over 'The Environment', and the lack of a clear ideological commitment<sup>18</sup>, meant that they have hesitated to make the same changes that the Centre Party did. At the same time, Green MPs acknowledged that the ideological landscape has changed and how the means used to achieve the same goals are increasingly becoming more important<sup>19</sup>. The Left Party (2/5 elections) also stands out by gravitating away from competence competition on economic issues. Much like how the Liberals' have tried to avoid direct competition with the Moderates, the Left Party has shied away from explicitly competing with the Social Democrats. Instead, the party has selectively emphasised 'New' politics issues such as 'Equality' (2002)

and 'Left-Right Ideology' (2006). The survey data also shows that the Left Party's competence scores on 'Equality' significantly increased between 1994 (2.8%) and 2002 (23.5%).

All parties, bar the Left Party and the Christian Democrats, have moved away from spatial competition. Instead, they selectively emphasise issues where their competence scores are higher. The issues that parties focused on do also, by and large, correspond to voter priorities and the scope available for showing that their option is 'better' than the opponent's. The Left Party's priority since 1998 – *ideology* - meant that they have emphasised issues that are either difficult to adopt opposing positions on ('Equality') or which are downplayed altogether by the other parties ('Left-Right ideology'). The Christian Democrats, on the other hand, have pursued the same question regardless of competence levels and issue saliency.

### Conflicting ideological 'pulls', selective emphasis and (non)competition on immigration

Parties thus tend to emphasise issues where they display a strategic advantage over their competitors. In addition, these issues are also less likely to disrupt the party-ideological equilibrium. The article's final section will therefore examine the extent to which a selective emphasis strategy - due to conflicting ideological 'pulls' - is an important explanatory factor for why parties downplay 'the immigration issue' and why it has attracted comparatively less attention in Sweden.

Despite frequent self-descriptions of being a 'conservative'<sup>20</sup> party, few questions relating to value-conservatism have made it onto the Moderate's electoral agenda. This behaviour is unsurprising for three reasons. First, their main policy strengths have consistently been on economic issues. Second, moving outside of this comfort zone is associated with party identity problems<sup>21</sup>. Finally, the Moderate's aim to be *the* leading party<sup>22</sup> in Swedish politics has meant that the party plays down 'problematic' issues such as immigration in favour of 'unproblematic' questions like the economy. When immigration *does* feature in their electoral publications, focus is on reforming the labour migration regulations and portrayed so it is compatible with

the party's approach to economic policies (e.g. "We want to increase the possibilities to immigrate for work purposes", 1991 Manifesto). On the other hand, an emphasis on asylum seekers and refugees would make the ideological tensions rise to the surface<sup>23</sup> since the economic gains are not as obvious as with the labour migrants. The Centre Party experienced a similar hesitation but with the additional differences of lacking a clear party profile and position<sup>24</sup> on the issue. The Christian Democrats have tended to avoid engaging with the issue unless it concerned asylum and refugee policy. A focus on 'asylum' allows for a better fit with Christian Democratic concerns of catering for vulnerable groups in society. Nevertheless, immigration has not featured heavily on the party agenda since it diverts attention from these issues. Introducing an 'unknown' question would also run the risk of a competitor challenging the Christian Democrats' core competencies<sup>25</sup>.

For the centre-left, competing on immigration has involved balancing concerns for international solidarity with notions of welfare state/labour market protectionism. Asylum policy has not been as divisive as labour migration was, especially for the Social Democrats, since it did not involve bartering with the trade unions<sup>26</sup>. References to labour migration have therefore been kept to a minimum in both Social Democratic and Left Party (bar 2006) manifestos but both parties have taken a clear stand in favour of a generous, and humane, refugee policy. The restrictive asylum policies that the Social Democrats pursued in the 1990s were thus justified with reference to the difficulties involved in trying to *economically* integrate large numbers of newcomers (Abiri, 2000; Spång, 2008). By framing policies in this way, it allowed the Social Democrats to appease protectionist *and* pro-asylum wings within the party. While the Left Party's experiences have been similar, their hesitation towards liberalising the labour migration laws related more to how they could impact on workers' rights and potentially create a new *ethnic* underclass<sup>27</sup>.

The Greens have in contrast not been subject to the same type of ideological strains. Since the party does not view political conflict in the same way as the other parties do<sup>28</sup> it meant that the Greens' ideological placement has been less static. They were therefore able to reach an agreement with the 'Alliance', which subsequently allowed a new labour migration law to be passed in 2008<sup>29</sup>. However, this comparative flexibility has not meant that 'the immigration issue' featured high on the party agenda since the Greens' competencies have consistently been elsewhere.

Although the centre-right has generally avoided to engage with immigration questions, either by shifting emphasis toward non-divisive policy areas, such as labour market reform (Moderates) or by downplaying the issue altogether (Christian Democrats and Centre Party), the Liberal Party chose to selectively emphasize the issue. Three reasons explain this behaviour. First, a long-standing electoral association between ‘the immigration issue’ and ‘the Liberal Party’. In the early 1990s, the party strongly opposed the mainstream’s restrictive, and the radical right’s anti-immigration, policies. This ‘intense’ (Rabinowitz and MacDonald, 1989) positioning was thus an important motivator for the electorate to link immigration with the party.

Second, the Liberals have had a consistent message on asylum and immigration. Boréus (2006) attributes the party’s favourable reputation to how it regularly stresses the benefits of ‘immigration’ coupled with ‘effective integration policies’. The Liberals thus managed to enjoy higher competence scores on the issue even though the party lacked an ‘incumbent advantage’ (Clark, 2009) for most the 1990s,

Third, the Liberals did not identify a negative link between immigration and the ‘people’s home’, a connection that troubled the left-wing bloc (Bucken-Knapp, 2009). In addition, the value-conservative streams, that proved problematic for their centre-right partners, have been particularly weak within the party<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, the party was not subject to the same type of ideological ‘pulls’ that were present within the other parties. These factors helped the Liberals to build up a more favourable reputation on the issue<sup>31</sup>. They also allowed for further party profiling even though the Liberal’s labour migration and integration policies are almost identical to those proposed by the Moderates. As such, the Liberal Party were able to propose language tests in 2002 without being branded as xenophobic, something which the Moderates suffered in 1998.

As pointed out previously, a ‘division of labour’ developed within the centre-right bloc and the Liberal Party has taken the lead on ‘the immigration issue’. This meant that competition over ownership has primarily been with the Social Democrats, which avoided unnecessary intra-bloc competition. The Liberals have, bar 1998, owned immigration on all occasions but sometimes with a marginal lead, e.g. in 1991 and 1994 the advantage over the Social Democrats was less than 1%. The 1998 election stands out since ‘the immigration issue’ virtually dropped off the electoral



radar. Abiri (2000) points to how the implosion of New Democracy meant that immigration's salience level decreased. In addition, a 'quid pro quo' agreement on changing the prevailing asylum legislation meant tighter criteria for entry (satisfying the Social Democrats) while simultaneously extending the time limit for temporary protection (satisfying the Liberal Party). These changes, which were proposed by the left-wing government, allowed the Social Democrats to capture ownership from the Liberals. However, a change in ownership - or close competence scores - has not always meant that the Social Democrats devoted more attention to the issue. They have rather responded to higher saliency, and less divisive, issues such as Employment; the Economy and Welfare Services. This has consequently allowed the Liberal Party to virtually monopolise immigration questions, effectively profile the party and, as such, provide a respectable alternative to the Sweden Democrats (Bale, 2003). As an electoral strategy, this approach has benefited the Liberals, particularly in 2002, but at the expense of the Moderates losing votes, rather than the intended Social Democrats.

## Conclusion

Competing on 'the immigration issue' comes with a number of challenges for the political mainstream. The appropriate strategy requires parties to get the balance right between emphasising policy strengths and engaging with immigration so it does not bring the conflicting ideological 'pulls' to the fore.

One strategy is to push electoral competition toward ownership over high salience issues, and where parties try to position themselves as the responsible choice with clear governing capabilities. This approach seems to apply in particular to parties with an office-seeking objective, as evidenced by the Moderates and Social Democrats, but less so to parties that are primarily vote-seeking since a high degree of public trust also needs to be present. For the centre-right, this strategy comes with two additional benefits, their value-conservative factions are bypassed and they avoid an engagement with the radical right's anti-immigration agenda. However, choosing not

to deal with ‘the immigration issue’ is likely to contradict their agenda-setting criteria<sup>32</sup>.

While the centre-right has struggled to co-ordinate market liberal and authoritarian ideas, the centre-left has had a different set of ‘pulls’ to deal with. On the one hand, to pursue a restrictive agenda by the welfare state/labour market protectionist camp, originating from within the party as well as from the trade unions. On the other, to push a liberal immigration agenda urged on by the parties’ internationalist wing. Again, high salience issues, such as the economy or employment, usually take precedence in a strategic move to avoid intra-party conflict and further distraction from core party competencies.

These ideological tensions often mean that mainstream parties are hesitant to engage with immigration if such an engagement should fall outside any prevailing consensus, e.g. on asylum, or if it draws too much attention away from their electoral priorities and competencies. This behaviour suggests that trying to keep the radical right out of the political spotlight is a lesser priority compared to the strategic deliberations for attracting ‘more’ votes.

However, the Greens constitute a puzzle for the article’s guiding hypothesis since they do not seem to be subject to the same type of ideological tensions as the other parties are. In other words, parties that operate primarily within a single conflict dimension appear less affected, or ‘pulled’, by ideology compared to parties that function within multi-dimensional dimensions. This also suggests more flexibility in terms of being able to use immigration as a profiling tool given that an electoral advantage has been identified. In that sense, the Greens display some, perhaps surprising, similarities with the Liberal Party.

The article’s analytical framework has further implications for studying the interplay between ‘immigration’ and ‘party politics’. A common approach in the literature suggests that the political mainstream reacts to external stimuli, e.g. the successful mobilisation of radical right challengers. However, as discussed here, this overlooks ‘the *party* politics of immigration’ and how inter-, and intra-, party dynamics give rise to conflicting ideological ‘pulls’, which in turn, create positioning dilemmas. As such, the article’s guiding hypothesis allows for future replication using a wider set of cases.

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## Biographical note

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## Interviews

Social Democrats 1, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Social Democrats 2, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2009.

Left Party 1, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2009

Left Party 2, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2009

Left Party 3, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2009

Green Party 1, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2009

Green Party 2, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Moderates 1, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Moderates 2, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Moderates 3, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Liberal Party 1, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Liberal Party 2, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Centre Party 1, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Christian Democrats 1, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2009.

Christian Democrats 2, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> The qualitative data stems from 31 semi-structured interviews with Swedish MPs conducted during August-September, 2009. The interviews serve three purposes. First, to map how the conflicting ideological 'pulls' affect party politics and the extent to which MPs identify a decline in party polarisation. Since public opinion considers Swedish parties to have become more alike (Holmberg *et al*, 1991-2006), the interviews aim to establish whether the elected representatives acknowledge this sentiment. Second, to evaluate how changing levels of ideological conflict impacts on the modes of party competition. If parties are becoming more alike, then issue ownership, rather than spatial positioning, will be more important for party strategy. Third, to assess the extent to which issue ownership competition explains why some parties are more likely to engage with 'the immigration question' than others are. The selection of candidates aimed for a) gender-balance and b) an age spread in order to achieve maximum variation (Patton, 2002). On average, four candidates per party were interviewed which meant a slight over-representation of Left Party (5); Green (5); Social Democratic (5) and Liberal (6) MPs and an under-representation of Christian Democratic (3) and Moderate (3) MPs. The interviews centred around a set of pre-arranged themes (ideology; policy position and party

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competition on immigration) and aimed to map MPs' 'experiences and the meanings they attach[ed] to those experiences' (Devine, 2002:199).

<sup>2</sup> The statistical data for this article comes from the election survey material collected by The Swedish National Election Studies Program (<http://www.valforskning.pol.gu.se/>, principal investigators: Holmberg *et al*) and is the standard statistical source for election research.

<sup>3</sup> Compare: "Only through a political choice that lowers taxation and emphasises economic growth can we secure employment and welfare" (Election manifesto 1991, Liberal Party); "Lower taxes stimulate the business sector to invest in our country, lower taxes means higher net income and lower increases of costs" (Election manifesto 1991, Moderates); "Taxes must be lowered, primarily where taxes prevent new jobs. As soon conditions allow, income tax should be lowered" (Election manifesto 1998, Liberal Party); "We want to immediately lower taxes where these prevent entrepreneurs, de-regulate and facilitate for new businesses" (Election manifesto 1998, Moderates). .

<sup>4</sup> "There are still is major differences between us and [the Alliance] relating to the labour market, especially how we view job securities and unemployment." (Social Democrats 1) "There's one big difference between the Red-Green coalition and the Alliance; they want to raise taxes, we want to lower them." (Moderates 1); "The differences between the Alliance and the left parties are still significant and have become a lot clearer" (Liberal Party 1); "The Alliance wants to spend more effort on the individual, his or her freedom, but by the cuts they are introducing, they are making it worse for the unemployed. That's really the key difference between the parties" (Left Party 1).

<sup>5</sup> "They are quite big. What I mean by that is that the key differences are primarily between us and the other parties. In some ways, the differences between us and the Social Democrats are greater than between the Social Democrats and the Alliance". (Left Party 2); "We are overall closer to our three coalition partners and furthest away from the Left Party". (Centre Party 1); "[The differences] will become even clearer//...//because the Left Party has such a distinct ideological profile." (Moderates 2); "We are furthest away from the Left Party, no question." (Liberal Party1).

<sup>6</sup> "There are some principal differences of course, but if you e.g., look at the budget proposals, then you won't find any massive differences (Moderates 2); "There are a lot of things going on and we constantly pick up influences and new ideas which means that a) conflict becomes less pronounced and b) that we tend to agree a lot more than we used to (Christian Democrats 1).

<sup>7</sup> "When push comes to shove, the Moderates is the only party that is serious about lowering taxes." (Moderates 1)".

<sup>8</sup> "[The Alliance] says that it should pay to work meaning that those who do have a job should get it better, whereas those who are unemployed should get it worse. That's a very clear aspect where we differ". (Left Party 1).

<sup>9</sup> "Ideologically, and in the policy proposals put forward, I think the differences are there and what I feel, when I have debates with someone from the opposition, is that I become more to the 'right' and a Social Democrat becomes more to the 'left' as a way of clarifying one's position and making the alternatives clear." (Centre Party 1).

<sup>10</sup> "We are strongly associated with [the labour market and unemployment] and health care//...// here we differ in terms of what the best solution is – the carrot or the stick?" (Social Democrats 1); "What has happened is that each Alliance party gets a couple of key policy areas - we got education, integration and the EU - and the Moderates got their classic questions – taxes, law and order and the economy" (Liberal Party 2); "What we try to do is to emphasise particular questions that we are seen to be particularly good at so as to avoid direct confrontation, that's why we will push employment questions rather than environmental issues in the next election" (Social Democrats 2).

<sup>11</sup> Worthy of note is that the Social Democrats did not emphasise taxes in 2002 even though they owned the issue.

<sup>12</sup> "That's why we stick to what we know, it wouldn't be seen as credible if we, all of a sudden, campaigned on issues that are closely connected to, say, the Moderates. But then again, I don't think that that is something we would do either. The environmental issue is the most important issue for us, that's what we focus on" (Green Party 1).

<sup>13</sup> "We had very good candidates pushing those questions, they were very well established on education policies whereas the Moderate's equivalent was not//...//it's very difficult to break new ground and introduce new issues. Even though we have very similar policies as they do [on taxes], their views are so engrained in people's mindset that it becomes very difficult to change party emphasis//...//there is division in that way, we got the 'softer' questions," (Liberal Party 2).

<sup>14</sup> "We have been quite a vague party, are we a party that's on the left, the right or in the middle? It wasn't easy to place us//...// Since 2001, we have gone deep into ideology and tried to become a party driven by ideas and that follows an ideological compass. That wasn't something we did explicitly

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before. This move allows us to be a much broader party which encompasses, and deals with, many more questions. Questions that we previously would have found difficult to deal with.” (Centre Party 1)

<sup>15</sup> “Our policies always stem from our ideological conviction, what’s right and what’s the right thing to do?” (Christian Democrats 2); “[Public opinion] is very important but not more important than ideology, because if it was, then we wouldn’t be as vocal as we are with our views on same-sex marriages” (Christian Democrats 1).

<sup>16</sup> “The problem is that voters who are close to us on value issues usually vote for the Social Democrats” (Christian Democrats 2).

<sup>17</sup> “This move is very significant because it means that [the Moderates] are taking over a number of positions that were previously held by us. Yesterday, e.g., they proposed new measures for re-training which are typical Social Democratic solutions” (Social Democrats 1). See also Social Democrats 2 quoted in footnote 10.

<sup>18</sup> “We don’t really fit in on any conventional ideological scales, as it were, we are not a party that’s on the ‘Left’ or the ‘Right’//...// we’ve worked in various party constellations depending on the settings that exist, if they work, they work”. (Green Party 1).

<sup>19</sup> “[The voters] don’t care if it is a ‘Leftist’ or a ‘Rightist’ solution, what they care about is whether the policies work//...// If voters trust us and think that we are a more competent alternative, then they will vote for us. They make the calculation, ‘Are the Greens a better alternative on this issue than any of the other parties?’ (Green Party 1).

<sup>20</sup> “We hold certain conservative views, e.g. we are in favour of the king, we have traditionally pushed law and order questions, the military, etc” (Moderates 3); “We have always said that we need to be cautious when it comes to societal expenditure and that we need to save *except* when it comes to defence and the police force” (Moderate 1).

<sup>21</sup> “//...//we have not been very consistent when it comes to non-economic questions//...//[t]hose questions have provided us with, perhaps not an identity crisis, but definitely some challenges. The party is somewhat torn between, on the one hand, very libertarian views and, on the other, very morally conservative views.” (Moderates 1)

<sup>22</sup> “The debate we want to have is about who is the most capable of running the country, who can keep the public finances in check, who can get more people working?//...//the debate should be about those big questions” (Moderates 2).

<sup>23</sup> “[W]e don’t really want to have a debate at all because it’s difficult to debate the case //...//so we try to emphasise that it’s good for Sweden if people come here for work and that we should get refugees working as quickly as possible, I mean all parties want the discussion to take place on their home court.” (Moderates 2).

<sup>24</sup> “My impression is that we used to be rather sceptical towards immigration, we were a bit hesitant towards internationalism and we tended to embrace Sweden and Swedish values. We were a party that was afraid of the unknown and didn’t want any massive changes to the way things were//...// immigration has perhaps not been our strongest side or where we have had the clearest profile.” (Centre Party 1).

<sup>25</sup> “//...// [immigration] is not a question that lies to the core of who we are, as e.g. family policy or health care do. Those questions are essential for our party identity so it’s sometimes not very strategic to make a big deal out of immigration” (Christian Democrats 1); “...//many voters associate us with family policy, the elderly and health care//...//[i]f you don’t campaign on [those issues], you create space for other parties to do so.”(Christian Democrats 2).

<sup>26</sup> “We have, paradoxically, been able to tolerate asylum and refugee migration. The reason is that refugees were not considered to push down salaries in the same way as the labour migrants would because refugees are kept outside the labour market for so long//...// the right and the left flank have been able to agree here, “Ok, we will let these asylum seekers in but they are not allowed to be cheap labour or to suppress wages”. That particular agreement meant some confusion but it has also allowed us to avoid major conflicts.” (Social Democrats 1)

<sup>27</sup> “We are very critical towards the restrictive development that Swedish immigration and asylum policies have taken, they have become inhumane//...//the important thing for us is that this is not done in an exploitative way, so labour migrants should get the same pay, the same working conditions and the same rights as anyone else on the labour market.” (Left Party 3); “Refugee reception is a very fundamental act of solidarity and it is important that you actually help out here//...//labour migration can undercut wages and they won’t have the same rights, and that’s wrong, if they come here they must have the same rights” (Left Party 2).

<sup>28</sup> “//...//sometimes we are the new social liberal party, sometimes we are the strong Green party and sometimes we are the party for solidarity, we are quite keen on raising levels of foreign aid for

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example. That's where we are and in that sense we don't fit on conventional Left-Right scales or blocs." (Green Party 2).

<sup>29</sup> "We have a very 'open borders'-approach to immigration which means that we could co-operate with the Alliance when it came to labour migration. We had a very different view here than the Social Democrats and the Left Party did, they very much listened to the trade unions' opinion. They said it would drive down wages and that there would be too much competition. The labour migration rules had become unnecessarily complicated so we were prepared to support a change and therefore the employers' opinions were more important than the unions." (Green Party 2).

<sup>30</sup> "We are definitely more towards the 'liberal' side of the spectrum; I mean there are two authoritarian parties in Sweden - the Moderates and the Social Democrats" (Liberal Party 1); "We are clearly to the 'New' Left here, we feel very strongly about letting people live how they want to live and that the state should stay out of people's lives as much as possible" (Liberal Party 2).

<sup>31</sup> "...//because of the way we approached it, immigration became a 'Liberal's' question', so when we started to talk about also making demands, then we were seen as credible on the issue. People saw our approach as genuine; we weren't seen as a racist or xenophobic party because we already had the reputation of being a pro-immigration party. The Moderates, under Bo Lundgren, had pushed for very similar policies but that didn't generate the same response" (Liberal Party 1).

<sup>32</sup> "...//we should disagree with our political opponents; it should be something that the population sees as a problem and it should be something that we have a concrete solution to" (Moderates 1).