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10

THE PARTY POLITICS OF MIGRATION AND MOBILITY

Pontus Odmalm

Introduction

The populist radical right (hereafter, PRR) and certain ideological tensions the immigration ‘issue’ gives rise to (Odmalm, 2014) currently challenge mainstream capabilities to deal with a number of migration related ‘crises’. These dilemmas most obviously concern on-going (and arguably large-scale) influxes of asylum seekers, clandestine and family reunification-type migrants, and the links made between immigration, radicalisation and terrorism (Lazaridis, 2016). Just as important, but perhaps less obvious, is whether mainstream parties can – and should – capitalise on an increasingly polarised electorate? And what can they feasibly do to stem the outflow of voters to the PRR? These developments raise several important questions for scholars, which are surveyed in this chapter. First, why are immigration and integration such thorny issues for political parties to engage with? Second, are these challenges country – or region – specific in any way? In particular, is there a specific European take on these questions compared to research conducted elsewhere, particularly in North America? Third, are these specificities reflected in research bridging the divide between ‘parties and elections’ scholarship and ‘migration studies’? And, finally, is studying the party politics of migration (still) important, and in which direction are such studies heading?

The party politics of migration?

‘Party politics’ constitutes a long-standing staple of the discipline but the ‘party politics of migration’ is a more recent addition to the political science literature. Explaining parties’ engagement with immigration matters has often been secondary compared to the attention paid by migration scholars to states, policy-makers and public opinion.

There has thus been a distinct gap in the field, and one needed to look quite hard for studies that linked parties with the immigration issue. This gap not only concerns how immigration and integration play out *within* the parties – that is, whether these issues are essentially different from other types of questions parties compete on – but it also concerns the impact of migration politics on broader party system dynamics. In some respects, this omission can be understood as a result of the predominant approaches used in the field of 'migration studies', and to the questions migration scholars usually ask. The focus has typically been on understanding (and explaining) *state* responses to increased mobility and processes of integration. Yet the actors that ultimately make and shape policy, namely, the political parties, have been either absent or portrayed as playing minor roles. As Bale (2008: 316) puts it, 'the political science communities working on asylum and immigration, on the one hand, and parties, on the other, have traditionally sat at separate tables'. Yet sometime around the mid-2000s, several important developments effectively brought these two communities closer together. The PRR stopped being a mere irritant and now constitutes a serious threat to centre-right *as well as* to centre-left parties (see for instance Bale *et al*., 2010, Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008; Meguid, 2005; Norris, 2005; van Spanje, 2010). This metamorphosis of the PRR, which involved a blend of welfare and labour market chauvinism with conservative values and nationalism, has allowed the PRR to eat into the voting groups of conservative and social democratic-type parties (Gruber and Bale, 2014; Rooduijn, 2015; Rydgren, 2013; van der Brug and van Spanje, 2009). The PRR party family also challenges established orders of 'doing politics' by emphasising how a 'corrupt elite' has largely by-passed the general will of 'the people' (Mudde, 2004; 2007). These challenges mainstream parties are currently subjected to raise several important questions. Scholars have thus begun to note an increased inter-dependence between mainstream and niche contenders. The 'threat' posed by the PRR concerns several strategic decisions mainstream parties need to make in order to not lose out electorally (see e.g. Art, 2007; Bale, 2003; De Lange, 2012; Williams, 2006). How are they supposed to position themselves in the face of an increasingly successful – *anti-immigration* – challenger? What electoral risks are associated with accommodative, adversarial or dismissive strategies that mainstream parties may consider undertaking

(Meguid, 2005)? Furthermore, the state of flux identified by Mair (1989) now also affects the party politics of migration. The time when one could associate liberal and multicultural stances with the centre-left and restrictive and assimilationist ones with the centre-right now seems over. For example, Helbling (2014) finds remarkably similar views on multiculturalism between conservative and social democratic-type parties in Europe. That is, both party families tend to communicate favourable – yet moderate – attitudes regarding cultural difference.

However, the ways in which the contemporary mainstream engages with the immigration issue are often confusing, subject to sudden shifts, and do not always follow any obvious logic. In part, this is due to immigration and integration cutting across several, sometimes disparate, policy fields, ranging from hands-on questions of redistribution to law and order, security and national identity. If one accepts the multi-dimensionality of these questions, then immigration and integration arguably present mainstream parties with several framing dilemmas. One relates to the economic impacts likely to occur as the population increases through immigration, while another concerns cultural – possibly more nebulous – effects that the migrant 'Other' is perceived to have. Mainstream parties consequently find themselves balancing multiple positions. And emphasising either the 'threat' or the 'benefit' of further migration comes with its own set of challenges.

The focus on migration as a 'threat' often characterises centre-left positions on labour migration, the rationale being that labour markets need to be controlled and salary negotiations subjected to collective bargaining. Migrant labour, especially of the unskilled variety, is typically considered to suppress wages and hinder the advancement of workers' rights rather than constituting new recruits to the cause (see Ireland, 2004; Messina, 2007). Many centre-right parties, conversely, typically push the opposite stance, referencing the benefits that increasing the *supply* of labour can bring to employers and to the owners of capital (Breunig and Luedtke, 2008). These conclusions characterise the work done by, for example, Hinnfors *et al.* (2012) who suggest social democracy to be a key factor for understanding this, perhaps counter-intuitive, outcome. European centre-left parties, particularly those in corporatist contexts, often struggle to square an internationalist outlook with fears of splitting the working-class into

indigenous and ethnic factions (see further Freeman and Kessler, 2008; Sainsbury, 2006). While contemporary social democracy has reluctantly come to accept the mobile character of labour, thereby seeking to manage rather than to control borders, the chauvinistic position is now taken over by the PRR.

However if one looks beyond the category of labour migration, then mainstream positions are reshuffled. The asylum and refugee categories are indicative in this respect. The centre-left often adopts remarkably lenient stances compared to those taken up by the centre-right, mostly with reference to their human rights and international solidarity agenda (Widfeldt, 2014). Although centre-right parties tend to view labour migration as largely unproblematic, particularly when it is of the skilled variety, their attitudes towards asylum and family reunification are more ambivalent. This reticence connects to the delays in entering the labour market these groups often experience, making their economic benefit less obvious. But these attitudes also tap into security concerns, fearing societal fragmentation and 'parallel societies' developing due to 'uncontrolled' migration and a too lenient approach to cultural differences. These worries are then amplified the more pronounced the traditional, authoritarian and nationalist elements are in the party in question.

The tensions sketched out above characterise a majority of the *West* European party families (see e.g. Odmalm and Bale, 2015). But if one's comparative perspective broadens, then a more nuanced – possibly more complicated – picture emerges. The work on Central and East European parties highlights some interesting differences. Pytlas (2013), for instance, discusses how radical right discourses have become increasingly legitimised by the political mainstream. In contrast to party strategies pursued elsewhere in Europe (Meguid, 2005), mainstream and niche contenders in Hungary and Slovakia appear to find common ground in those historical narratives that concern nation- and state-building in the post-1989 era (see further Minkenberg, 2015; Pytlas, 2016). While PRR parties in Central and Eastern Europe share some of the nationalist and chauvinist sentiments of their sister parties in Western Europe, they usually place greater emphasis on the threat of disunity stemming from their domestic national minorities than do those in Western Europe. In Southern Europe, and in Spain particularly, PRR-type parties play a comparatively smaller role (Alonso and

Kaltwasser, 2015) despite the dilemma of trying to restrict clandestine entry versus the need for low-skilled labour. This absence is further puzzling as the Spanish conservatives and social democrats have both been favouring the same liberal and multicultural positions since the early 1990s (Morales *et al*., 2015b). Yet Southern European countries' status as countries of immigration is relatively new, which helps to explain why immigration is less politicised and thus less of a topic for academic inquiry. The work produced by Morales *et al.* (2015b: 477) is among the few to have an explicit focus on party politics in Southern Europe. Their key finding – 'the Spanish mainstream parties have also started to incorporate immigration into their patterns of electoral competition' – suggests such questions to perhaps have become established features of party competition, which, in turn, makes Spanish party politics of migration similar to that found elsewhere in Western Europe (see also see Karamanidou, 2015; Massetti, 2015).

The scholarship on North America, on the other hand, exhibits a long(er) tradition of analysing the mainstream's relationship with, especially, labour migration but also with ethnic relations. Regarding the former, Hampshire's findings (2013, see also Freeman, 1995; Munck, 2009) suggest that US parties often have to balance employer demands for low-skilled labour with voters' demands for tighter border controls. This dilemma has been a continuous challenge for Democrats and Republicans alike. Much like socio-democratic parties in Western Europe, the Democratic Party has found it challenging to combine a (somewhat) pro-immigration stance with maintaining good relations with trade unions (Tichenor, 2002).

Integration has traditionally been less contentious in the US however. In part, its low level of salience is due to the 'melting pot' understanding of national identity that prevailed (Cheng, 2014). However, as flows diversified and populations of migrant origin became more visible – in terms of their ethnicity as well as religious affiliation – the American mainstream faces novel challenges for how to frame on-going immigration debates (see e.g. Hajnal and Rivera, 2014). Although some of the pressures stemming from increased numbers – on the environment, on resources and on services – are equally present in European contexts, a key feature for US based studies is how mainstream parties attempt to negotiate the *racial* element of migration. An implicit –

possibly continuous – element of racism is thus identified by Wroe (2008) as crucial for understanding relationships parties have had with immigration and ethnic relations. And this quandary has become particularly acute following 9/11 and the increased securitisation of the immigration issue (D'Appollonia, 2012).

Is there a particular European or North American take on these questions?

The European literature typically divides between those adopting structuralist perspectives and those emphasising parties' agency. In the former, country specific 'philosophies of integration' are said to be remarkably robust and difficult to change. Parties are consequently not credited with much ability to influence policy or policy outcomes. This approach characterises the work done by, for example, Kitschelt and McGann (1997). Political parties are here viewed as passive agents that primarily react to public opinion and/or the electoral feats of PRR-type parties. Also, they are understood to be at the mercy of the institutional environment they happen to compete in (see further Lazaridis *et al*., 2016; Norris, 2005). Research done on the British party politics of migration is illustrative of this structuralist perspective. The first-past-the-post system is said to push parties closer together, which consequently is said to explain why mainstream parties embarked on a restrictive journey in order to not lose out electorally (Carvalho *et al*., 2015; Evans and Mellon, 2015). Party responses are thus understood as the result of forces beyond their immediate control.

Yet at the same time, parties often drive reform and may also – proactively – pick up on particular types of migrant claims-making should some form of potential electoral gain be identified (Bale, 2013). These more agency-based approaches are present in the special issue edited by Bucken-Knapp *et al*. (2014: 558) with the editors noting that '[m]any party-migration scholars fail to recognize mainstream parties' own *pro-active reasons* [emphasis added] for moving in a more open or stricter direction' (see also Howard, 2010). Green (2005; 2012) also acknowledges a degree of agency in parties' actions. The German greens and social democrats, for example, identified migrants and their descendants as a substantial and largely untapped segment of the population that could well be persuaded to vote for them once legislation allowed them

to acquire full political membership. Thus, the two parties were instrumental in reforming German citizenship policy in the late 1990s. In contrast to Kitschelt and McGann, then, Green stresses party attempts to exploit an institutional set-up rather than being trapped by it.

Structuralist approaches are dominant in the North American literature too. In the Canadian case, for example, Winter (2015) flags the sustained continuity of multicultural thinking and policy-making. This path-dependency resulted in a solid cross-party consensus regarding policy direction, which, in turn, steered much academic attention *away* from focussing on any party politics of migration. In the US focussed literature, conversely, the relatively smaller role parties traditionally play often means that administrations, governments and presidents receive most of the analytical attention (see e.g. Stonecash, 2013).

Yet one can also observe similarities between European and North American scholarship. Contrasting framings of migration as an 'economic/demographic necessity' or as a 'threat to national security/welfare state/social cohesion' have developed into common denominators to characterise those intra- and inter-party tensions that emerge as mainstream parties engage with the immigration issue. Both European and North American literatures seek to explain why e.g. conservative-type parties increasingly emphasise the 'threat' aspect of immigration (Gruber and Bale, 2014; Meguid, 2005). One would perhaps expect said parties to consider the needs of businesses first. Yet such free market-style arguments also face increasing difficulty to gain traction, particularly in the post-9/11 era (Golash-Boza, 2016). What said parties appear more concerned with is how to increase the state's capacity to control, monitor and vet migrants and asylum seekers. Questions of immigration and integration have thus morphed into issues typically portrayed (and understood) as security risks. Interestingly, then, this process of securitisation has simultaneously shifted academic attention away from political parties and back to the *state level* politics of migration (see e.g. Balzacq *et al*., 2016; Bourbeau, 2011).

However, following the Brexit referendum; the US presidential election (both in 2016), and the continuous rise of niche challengers, we are likely to see a stronger focus on parties again, particularly studies that examine the blurred edges between

mainstream and PRR parties. An important part of this relationship concerns the transformation the latter has gone through. In the 1980s and 90s, the PRR party family was largely tainted by its neo-Nazi past, making any appeal to broader segments of the electorate difficult to pull off. In that sense, their level of success was typically confined to the size of the 'niche vote', and, until the last 15 to 20 years, rarely went above single figures. The niche position was furthermore characterised by biological racism and ethnic understandings of national identity. These starting points constituted a clear dividing line between the political mainstream and the PRR. Therefore, a significant chunk of the party politics literature tended to focus on explaining and categorising the latter (see e.g. Mudde, 2007; Pelinka, 2013), while any dealings mainstream parties have had with immigration and integration often were neglected. However, two important developments have come to refocus attention on the political mainstream. First, the emphasis PRR parties previously placed on being radical and anti-system is gradually being replaced by more populist approaches. The novelty, Taggart (1995) notes, lies in fusing voters' increased level of distrust in political elites with an equally strong level of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Contemporary incarnations of the PRR also tend to pursue an 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth' style of arguing. The intuitions and feelings of party representatives are here taken as 'fact' and confirmed as such through 'saturation coverage, platform and outlet multiplication, and information glut' (Andrejvic, 2016: 168). This particular communication strategy can be difficult for (mainstream) parties to engage with since they are often used to a more facts-based approach to politics (McGratten, 2015). Second, several PRR parties are actively trying to remove those obvious signs of racism which previously characterised their anti-immigration position (Rydgren, 2013). This makeover consequently allows them to adopt positions that underscore the cultural and economic *cost* associated with 'uncontrolled' immigration. Such arguments are then combined with chauvinistic understandings regarding access to the welfare state, to the national labour market and to the benefits of being a citizen. These changes are important for understanding why mainstream parties often struggle to come up with consistent – and convincing – narratives for how to manage immigration and ethnic relations. Part of the challenge is that certain chauvinistic elements are still present within the political mainstream.

Determining who should have legitimate access to the welfare state and to the labour market has troubled segments of the centre-left, whereas migrants' access to citizenship taps into those nationalist and traditionalist streaks typically present in centre-right parties.

Overall, then, a key difference is the (somewhat) greater role parties are given in the European literature compared to that of North America (see further Hampshire and Bale, 2015, Schmidtke, 2015). The latter, conversely, tends to stress policy outputs and/or state level politics of migration. Granted, this is usually where most of the immigration action takes place. However, such an emphasis may well be at the expense of more input-orientated studies.

Conclusion

Is studying the party politics of immigration (still) important? And in which direction are such studies heading? As a burgeoning – but emerging – sub-field, it may be premature to answer the first question in the affirmative. Particularly so since the 'party politics of migration' has traditionally played a minor role in studies conducted across Europe and in North America. However, what can perhaps be concluded is that we are currently witnessing a shift in scholarly attention. On the one hand, mainstream parties are receiving more and more coverage, especially regarding how immigration and integration affect their intra- and inter-party dynamics. That is, the picture that materialises is one which is more nuanced and one which is not confined to simple dichotomies between leftist (liberal) – rightist (restrictive) positions. Although the special issue by Bale (2008) suggests a need to 'turn the telescope around', and focus (more) on the centre-right, recent developments across Europe, but also in North America, point to an equally strong need to consider the interactions between centre-left *and* centre-right parties. In other words, scholars might benefit from adopting a wider systemic focus and ask to what extent mainstream parties engage with the immigration issue in relation to their 'normal' competitors. Such an approach opens up new possibilities to challenge conventional narratives. It could well be that some of those restrictive and assimilationist turns we currently witness are the result of parties' trying to claim back ownership over immigration and integration from their *mainstream*

competitor/s rather than being a sign of playing catch-up with the PRR. These new approaches may also help to bridge the divide between structural and agency-based explanations that so far have characterised the literature.

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