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A Hollow Victory: Understanding the Anti-Immigration Shift of Denmark's Social Democrats

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Abstract

The Social Democratic victory in the 2019 Danish general election was a surprising and notable event. The election stands out as an important win for Social Democrats as this party family has experienced a significant decline in voter support across Europe in recent decades. At the same time, the election was marked by controversy as Denmark's Social Democrats not only doubled-down on their traditional support for the welfare state but also took a sharp turn to the right on immigration policies. This article analyses the effects of political systems, ideology and polarisation, as well as issue salience and framing on party strategies. These variables help to account for the abrupt policy shift adopted by the Social Democrats in Denmark and why similar anti-immigration platforms were not embraced by Social Democratic parties in other Nordic countries. Further examination of voter survey data suggests that the adoption of stronger anti-immigration policies is likely to be an ineffective strategy for Social Democrats going forward.

Keywords

Electoral politics; Party behaviours; Social democratic politics; Nordic politics; Populist radical right; Anti-immigration

The success of Denmark's Social Democrats in the 2019 general election stands out as an important victory given that the twenty-first century has seen a significant decline in electoral support for Social Democratic parties across Europe (Downes and Chan 2018). Hypotheses for this downward trend include changes in the economies of advanced capitalist states (Graziano and Hartlapp 2019; Buck 2018) to the transformation of an industry-based economy into a service-based one leaving collectivist policies no longer fit for the age of free trade and automation (Downes and Chan 2018; Benedetto Hix and Mastrorocco 2019) as well as several other social, economic, and political shifts (Toubeau 2017; Rennwald and Pontusson 2019; Karnitschnig 2018; Falkenbach and Greer 2018; Downes and Chan 2018). At the same time, the election was marked by controversy as Denmark's Social Democrats not only doubled-down on their traditional support for the welfare state, thereby going back to their party roots, but also made a sharp turn to the right on immigration. This is surprising considering that the party's platform on the welfare state reflects an underlying ideology of egalitarianism while their current agenda on immigration is based on restricting equality and opportunity to citizens only. These two positions highlight tensions between the liberal ideals of the party and a nationalist insider-outsider divide over who should be counted as a member of society. The article makes an important contribution to the literature by analysing the co-option strategy hypothesis to explain why the Social Democrats adopted an anti-immigrant stance and evaluating whether this policy shift is an effective electoral strategy. Ultimately, we argue that this far-right co-option strategy is out of sync with prospective voter preferences and not a viable strategy for Social Democratic parties in Denmark or across Nordic states seeking to achieve electoral success.

The resurgence of the Social Democratic Party in Denmark raises several key questions which we seek to answer in this article. First, what factors help explain Denmark's Social Democrats' policy shift to the right on immigration? Second, to what degree did this strategy contribute to the party's electoral success? Finally, to what extent is this electoral strategy viable for Social Democrats in Denmark and other Nordic countries going forward? This last question is particularly important as Social Democratic parties across Europe are looking for a blueprint for how to win elections once again. Therefore, the Danish case may establish an important precedent for Social Democratic parties in other countries. However, further analysis is needed to unpack this eventuality.

To establish the answers to the questions outlined above we utilise a most similar systems design (Meckstroth 1975) analysing the Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden and Finland to inform our findings surrounding the case of Denmark. This methodological approach allows us to compare countries that share several striking similarities within the social, political, economic and cultural realms, but produce different outcomes with regards to Social Democratic strategies. The goal of this research is to determine whether Denmark is a unique case or whether a new Social Democratic strategy, which embraces a strong welfare state and more restrictions on migrants, is likely to emerge in the region. As our findings illustrate, the Kingdom of Denmark stands out within the Nordic realm as being the only country where the issue of immigration was so politically salient in recent elections. The salience and framing of immigration as an issue and the vote-seeking behaviours of political parties are the predominant factors that help explain why this is the case.

Despite their recent electoral success, however, we argue that this election was less about a new winning strategy for Social Democrats and more so a failure of the populist radical right (PRR) Danish People's Party. Analysis of the 2019 Danish election reveals that, although the Social Democrats won the election, they received a lower vote share than they had in the previous 2015 election. In fact, the Social Democratic victory is primarily attributed to the collapse of the PRR Danish People's Party whose support dropped from 21.1 per cent in 2015 to only 8.7 per cent in 2019 (European Election Database 2019) and not to significant gains

made by the Social Democratic party itself. The 2015 European migrant crisis was an event that allowed PRR parties to flourish, this was the case in Sweden as well. However, once this subsided these PRR parties were not able to retain their voters. These election results indicate a significant loss for the PRR Danish People's Party rather than a strong victory for the Social Democrats.

This article begins by reviewing the academic literature on party strategies focusing most specifically on party systems, polarisation, issue salience and framing. These party strategies are then applied to the Nordic realm with a specific focus on the Kingdom of Denmark (see Table 1). The article concludes by identifying key takeaway points from the Danish elections, evaluating Social Democratic strategies to co-opt populist radical right (PRR) positions, and providing a broader analysis of electoral strategies for Social Democratic parties in Nordic countries going forward. Ultimately, we provide evidence to suggest that a shift to the right on immigration is not a viable strategy for Social Democrats in Denmark or across Nordic countries going forward as an appeal to far-right voters is likely to yield few additional votes and may potentially undermine support for these parties by alienating their traditional left-leaning voter base.

Table 1: Danish Party Coding

Source: Authors' own

Abbreviation	Danish Name	Ideology	Political Position	2019 Election Position
V	Venstre	Conservative Liberal Agrarianism Economic Liberalism	Center-Right	Leading the opposition 43/179 seats
SD	Socialdemokraterne	Social Democracy Pro Europeanism	Center-Left	In government 48/179 seats
DF	Dansk Folkeparti	Danish nationalism National conservatism Social conservatism Right-wing populism Euroscepticism Anti-Islam	Right-wing to Far Right	In opposition 16/179 seats
SF	Socialistisk Folkeparti	Green politics Popular socialism Democratic socialism Eco-socialism Feminism	Center-Left to Left Wing	Supporting government 14/179 seats
K	Det Konservative Folkeparti	Conservatism Green conservatism Liberal conservatism Soft Euroscepticism	Center-Right	In opposition 12/179 seats
RV	Det Radikale Venstre	Social liberalism Pro- Europeanism	Center to Center-Left	Providing parliamentary support 16/179 seats
NA	Ny Alliance	Liberalism Classical liberalism Right-libertarianism	Center-Right to Right-wing	In opposition 4/179 seats

PARTY STRATEGIES

Rather than serving solely as representatives of constituent social classes and groups, there is a rich literature that views parties as autonomous actors who pursue vote-seeking behaviour (see Strom 1990). Downs (1957), for example, argues that rather than being passive actors within a party system political parties adopt strategies that will maximise their vote share. As a result, parties as rational actors are perceived to be responsive to voters and emphasise the issues seen as more important to their constituents. As voter preferences on different issues change over time, the framing and salience that parties attribute to different issues will shift in response (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen 2003; Bélanger and Meguid 2008). Therefore, understanding public opinion and voter preferences on specific issues is critical for political parties as they develop their electoral plans.

Along with voter preferences, it is important to pay attention to the institutional context in which party competition takes place. Given that political parties are rational vote-seeking actors (Uhlener 1986), it is clear that leading up to an election they will likely choose a strategy that will help them win votes within their party system. The structure of party systems and the ideological polarisation within parliaments help to shape party electoral strategies. Since parties are in competition with one another for votes, they are expected to position themselves strategically on issues that they believe that they have an electoral advantage. Parties are likely to concentrate on policies that their rivals have less perceived competence and issue ownership (Meyer and Wagner 2013). Parties are also hypothesised to be more likely to change their policy platforms in response to unsatisfactory electoral results (Meyer and Wagner 2013). Weakening support for Social Democratic parties in recent years may, therefore, prompt shifts in policy positions as these actors seek new winning electoral strategies.

Party Systems and Polarisation

The electoral strategies that parties adopt are also expected to be shaped by the institutional context in which they operate. This is critical because although parties pursue rational vote-seeking behaviour, the institutional context in which they find themselves matters in terms of a party's willingness to co-opt, and the party systems degree of permissiveness. In the case of Denmark, the 2019 election results created little incentive for the SD to form a coalition with the radical right Danish People's Party.

Party systems are one of the key explanations in the literature for the presence and influence of radical parties and policies on national politics. Assessing how many parties compete with one another is a frequently used criterion for classifying party systems (Mair 1996; Duverger 1954). A more comprehensive approach places the emphasis not only on the number of parties participating in a given election but also on the ideological distance separating these parties (Sartori 1976). Essentially, as the number of parties increases, we can expect a greater range of party positions along the ideological scale. One of the three party systems that Sartori identifies is 'moderate pluralism' which can be seen in Nordic countries. This type exists when three to five parties are competing in elections and the ideological distances between parties remain small despite the increase in competition. When a third party does come into play, the basic Downsian convergence argument (Grofman 2004) no longer holds as the median is likely no longer the point of equilibrium and thus incentives to take up non-centrist positions arise (Grofman 1985).

Traditionally, electoral rules have been the determining factor in the number of parties a country has. Recently, however, the number of parties within European party systems has been increasing despite electoral rules. Much of this can be attributed to party systems'

fragmentation and the general decline of Social and Christian Democratic parties (Falkenbach and Greer 2018).

In addition to the number of parties in a system and their ideological distance, whether a party system is classified as constrained or unconstrained can make party competition either highly predictable with little to no change in the parties over time or unpredictable with new parties able to gain representation in government (Mair 2002). If we look at Scandinavian mainstream parties, we see that in Sweden, for example, they have managed to exclude their PRR party (SD) from government participation by a broad "cordon sanitaire" (Widfeldt 2020; Backlund 2020). In Denmark, on the other hand, the PRR Danish People's Party (DF) was accepted as a normal party (Heinze 2018), and their strict stance on immigration policies was even adopted. In other words, whether a PRR party and its platform are accommodated or side-lined by mainstream parties is influenced by the normative rules and values of the party system. It becomes apparent within the literature that party systems are decisive for niche party inclusion. When a given party system is less constraining the potential for the development of a broader ideological spectrum increases and with it, the greater likelihood of the formation and influence of radical parties and policies as mainstream parties are more likely to adapt their platforms in response to these actors.

In recent years, many mainstream parties began reacting to the success of PRR parties by taking on PRR positions for example adopting a more anti-immigrant position (van Spanje 2010; Han 2015). Researchers are still debating as to whether PRR parties' success and mainstream parties' adoption of anti-immigrant positions are correlated or whether they are simply an adjunct development (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). While some research finds that there are electoral opportunities to be had for mainstream centre-right parties emphasising PRR party positions (i.e. immigration) in economically bad times (Downes and Loveless 2018), the general consensus is to leave those positions be, particularly when the niche party is electorally successful (Meijers and Williams 2020). In addition, the literature has found that, particularly for Social Democratic parties, positioning themselves in a more authoritarian/nationalist way following anti-immigration and anti-European positions may prove increasingly electorally harmful (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020).

In addition to party system type, the degree of polarisation within a parliament is argued to have an important effect on the influence of radical parties and policies in domestic politics. This is significant as the higher the ideological polarisation the more likely that a party will pursue non-centrist policy positions. How a political party is placed on the ideological scale is determined by the various issues that it decides to address. There are two different ways of understanding a party's relationship to the political issues that it supports: policy position and policy salience. This implies that parties can either make decisions according to the stance that they have on an issue (position) (Petrocik 1996) or how important the issue is to them (salience) (Budge and Farlie 1983). This combination of distance and issue salience can determine the amount of electoral support a new party might receive (Tavits 2008). Many niche parties (the PRR), for example, see a need to differentiate themselves from mainstream parties taking on extreme views, thus distinguishing themselves from centrist parties by emphasising issues that mainstream parties fail to address (Wagner 2012). This failure to emphasise issues deemed important by the electorate is among the most prominent reasons why many mainstream parties are losing the political battle. We, therefore, theorise that as political polarisation increases between political parties the more likely it will be that a mainstream party will adopt non-centrist policy positions. We also expect that the less constrained a party system the greater influence that niche parties such as PRR parties will have on politics and policies.

Issue Salience and Framing

Public opinion on key issues is another consideration for political parties as they develop electoral strategies. It is important then to understand what shapes public opinion and how it should be measured. There is a well-established literature on the influence of media on public opinion and immigration politics in Europe (see Eberl, Meltzer, Heidenreich, Herrero et al. 2018). Public attitudes regarding immigration, it is argued, are shaped by how this issue is presented in the national media (van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart and de Vreese 2015). Preference and salience are two key dimensions to consider when analysing media's effects on public opinion on policy issues (Hatton 2017). Preference refers to the framing of topics and whether the coverage of issues is largely positive or negative. Salience refers to the amount of time and attention dedicated to a given issue. These dimensions can move independently from one another over time, and both need to be considered when assessing the overall climate of public opinion and policymaking surrounding immigration policies (Hatton 2017). For example, if immigration has low salience policymakers may deviate from public opinion whether positive or negative (Hatton 2017). However, when an issue becomes highly salient it should gain more prominence on the agenda and how it is framed should influence public opinion and politics.

As an issue, such as immigration, gains more visibility, audiences may attribute greater importance to it (McCombs 2005). Subsequently, this can alter public perceptions and attitudes about immigration (Schemer 2012; Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009; Aalberg, Iyengar and Messing 2012). In addition to the visibility of an issue, framing is important because it emphasises specific aspects of an issue thereby promoting a certain way of thinking about it (Entman 1993). Immigrants, for example, are often framed either as victims or as economic, social, or cultural threats (Benson 2013). 'Refugees' and 'asylum seekers', for example, can be viewed as victims or as burdens to the welfare state and thus economic threats (Baker Gabrielatos, KhosraviNik, Krzyżanowski et al. 2008). Research shows that migrants are most often presented as a threat by the media and that frequent exposure to this negative framing can increase anti-immigration sentiment and even affect vote choice (Eberl et al. 2018). Some research suggests that there is a correlation between salience and negative framing of immigration as an issue and an increase in vote support for parties with anti-immigration platforms (Eberl et al. 2018; Dennison and Geddes 2019). In addition to affecting voters, increased issue salience may affect political party behaviour. A study of the United Kingdom, for example, found that when an issue is highly salient, it may force policy responses from both governing and opposition parties (Ford Dmitrieva, Heller, Chentsova-Dutton et al. 2015). This suggests that, along with influencing public opinion, the framing and salience of an issue may directly affect the behaviour of political parties (Facchini, Margalit and Nakata 2016). Taking the initial example of immigration, this implies that the greater the issue salience and the more negative the framing the more likely anti-immigration positions are pursued.

The salience and framing of immigration vary over time, across media outlets, in public discourse, and between countries. Real-world events are also expected to shape the discourse and visibility of issues in the short run (Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden 2007; Kroon, Kluknavská, Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden 2016; Eberl et al. 2018). Cases of mass immigration, such as the 2015 European migrant crisis, are expected to increase the visibility of immigration. However, the effects of these events on public opinion have less to do with the real number of immigrants in a country and more to do with the tone of how these issues are presented in the media and political discourse (van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart and de Vreese 2015). In sum, the visibility and tone of immigration may influence public opinion, voting behaviour, and politics and policymaking. As such, it is important to consider the context of how immigration is presented within a country. Based on the literature, we

hypothesise that the more salient an issue the more likely that a political party will focus on this concern. How the issue is perceived by the public (i.e. how it is framed) will shape the policy choices made by political parties. Negative framing of immigration, for example, may lead parties to pursue more restrictive migration policies.

THE CASE OF DENMARK: SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

Since the end of the Second World War, the Social Democrats have with few exceptions been in government and have thus influenced Danish social development in almost all areas until 1973 when the Social Democrats lost a third of their seats to five new or previously unrepresented parties (Opstrup Wendel 2019). By 1982, the country was led by Denmark's conservative party Venstre and in 1993, a Social Democratic coalition took over again. Between 2001 and 2015, the Social Democrats suffered great losses to the PRR Danish People's Party (DF) (Heinze 2018). However, the party recovered during the 2015 election and became the country's strongest party once again. The question that arises is how did the Danish Social Democrats manage to recover their stronghold?

PARTY STRATEGIES IN NORDIC COUNTRIES

Party Systems and Polarisation in Nordic Countries

Analysing differences in party systems among Scandinavian countries is an important starting point to understand why Denmark's Social Democrats adopted a far more conservative stance on immigration in the 2019 election. Denmark is characterised as having a party system of moderate pluralism similar to other Nordic countries. This implies that pluralism, the amount of diverse and competing centres of power, is limited and the ideological distance between parties is small. What makes this country different in comparison to its Nordic counterparts is that it has a less constrained party system meaning that it is fairly open to new parties entering into the system or government (Mair 2002), unlike for example Sweden, which has a more restrictive party system (Miller and Lishaug 1990).

When taking a closer look at the Danish party system's various parties, the country's acceptance of new parties becomes clear (see Appendix Figure A1). The two most consistently powerful parties, Venstre and the Social Democrats, were founded in the late 1800s having the typical centre-right and centre-left ideological orientation. By the early 1900s, more centrist parties (Social Liberals and the Conservatives) entered into the party system keeping the ideological spectrum rather compact. By the mid-90s, however, the compressed spectrum was breached with the PRR Danish People's Party's entrance who found a niche in opposing immigration and Denmark's membership in the European Union (EU).

Although the party systems in Nordic countries are structured similarly, there are important differences in the allowance or disallowance of PRR parties to participate in government. Like Denmark, Norway and Finland can also be considered as having more of an unconstrained party system. New parties such as the PRR FrP (Progress Party) in Norway and the PRR Finns Party (PS) in Finland, were accepted by mainstream parties (De Lange, 2012), whereas the PRR Social Democrats in Sweden were shut out of negotiations from the beginning (Widfeldt 2020; Backlund 2020).

Typically, PRR parties are known to focus on anti-immigration policies. However, this was not the case in all Nordic countries; in fact, immigration was only politically salient and contentious

in Denmark and Sweden. Although the mainstream parties in Norway accepted the FrP, the political debate was not initially centred around immigration. In fact, the Social Democrats were the first to introduce stricter immigration policies in 1975 so that by the 1990s, all mainstream Norwegian parties moved to the right on immigration. The Finns Party (PS) was not taken seriously until 2009 as they only had a very marginal impact on politics and immigration was a depoliticised issue (Heinze 2018). The party was able to mobilise voters from all mainstream parties but still remained more moderate on the topic of immigration than their Danish and Swedish counterparts (Heinze 2018).

Contrary to Denmark, Norway, and Finland, mainstream parties in Sweden shut the PRR Sweden Democrats (SD) out of politics from the beginning rejecting their positions and rhetoric. They refused coalitions with the SD and were backed by the media. This worked because all of the mainstream parties united and followed suit. While immigration was a major issue in some countries, socioeconomic concerns always stood at the forefront of Swedish elections. In 2018, the SD celebrated their best election results yet achieving 17.7 per cent; this was due however to the increased income inequality perpetuated by conservative policies during 2006-2014 (Dal Bó, Finan, Folke, Persson, et al. 2018) and not immigration.

Immigration, in fact, is not the common denominator amongst PRR parties in Nordic countries. The PRR in Denmark and Norway found their niche in immigration until other parties filled that policy space, resulting in decreased support for the PRR parties due to their lack of credibility in other policies. The Swedish and Finnish PRR, on the other hand, found greater support when they focused on income inequality and other socioeconomic issues rather than on immigration as a key issue.

During the 2019 general elections in Denmark, party positions on immigration changed drastically in comparison to the previous two elections (2011 and 2015). Leading up to the 2011 general election, before the migrant crisis hit Europe, the positions with regards to immigration were such as could be expected. The PRR People's Party expressed the most restrictive policies for immigrants stating: 'No one can benefit from Denmark receiving more foreigners than society can absorb; clear demands are a key element' (Bräuninger, Debus, Benoit and Bernauer 2018). The Social Democrats and the Social Liberal parties, on the other hand, were much more liberal in their vision of immigrants stating that 'there is room for anyone that wants to come' and that the country must 'attract foreigners' (Bräuninger, Debus, Benoit and Bernauer 2018). Venstre took the middle ground supporting a more flexible Immigration Act on the one hand while also stating that those migrants who abuse their residence in the country are no longer welcome (Munkøe 2011).

By 2015, the ideological spectrum with regards to immigration shifted a bit further to the right. However, the PRR was still the strongest anti-immigration party stating that Denmark must secure its borders (studieportalen, n.d.). Venstre began lamenting that there were too many immigrants not working, which cost society much money. The Social Democrats stated in their party programme that 'If you come to Denmark, you must work' whilst simultaneously advocating for the preservation of the 'good, Danish welfare society' (The Danish Social Democratic Party 2015) thereby moving slightly to the right on immigration. The Social Liberal party generally stayed its course advocating for migrants to be able to acquire work faster.

During the 2019 general election campaign, the Social Liberal Party and Venstre no longer mentioned immigration or integration in their party programmes. Although the Danish People's Party kept their anti-immigrant rhetoric, they failed to follow up statements like 'Denmark is not an immigrant country and we will therefore not accept a multi-ethnic transformation of the country' (Danish People's Party 2019) with plausible action points. Surprisingly, the Social Democratic Party, previously inching more towards the centre on this

issue, established a firm anti-immigration policy stance. Statements such as 'Denmark must have control again' and proposals like 'We will introduce a ceiling on how many new non-western foreigners can come to Denmark in one year' or 'We will change our asylum system and create a reception centre outside Europe' (Socialdemokratiet 2019) filled their manifesto. The Social Democrats also took a strong pro-welfare position arguing that taxes must go to welfare and that free and equal access to welfare solutions such as doctor visits, schooling and elderly care must be maintained (Socialdemokratiet 2019).

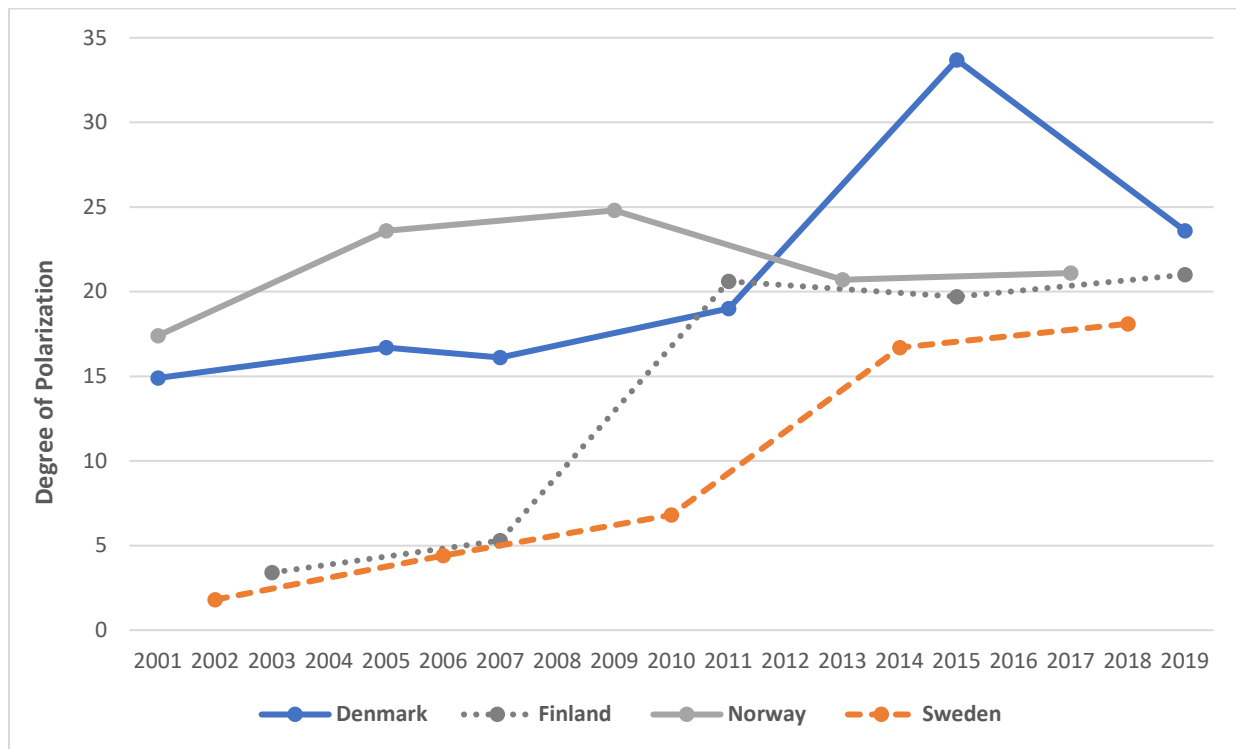
The results of these three elections can be seen in Table 2 below. In 2011, the common issues important to voters were economic and employment policies reaching 73 per cent and 62 per cent respectively. In comparison, immigration policy was the sixth most important issue during this election and received only 24 per cent. The issues important to the voters and the election results correlated nicely as Venstre, the party known for its classical liberal policies, came out on top. The results of the 2015 general election clearly showed the Social Democratic party as electorally victorious. However, the strong backing for the People's Party prevented the formation of a left-led government. Increased support for the People's Party was predominantly due to their tighter regulations on immigration (Niclas and Bojesen 2015), although all parties moved slightly to the right on this point. The 2019 election showed no clear winners, rather a very distinct loser. The failure of the People's Party to not only take a renewed stance on immigration but also their failure to speak to the issues of welfare, health, and the environment resulted in a loss of over ten per cent compared to 2015.

Table 2. General Election Results Denmark 2011, 2015 and 2019

	2011	2015	2019
	% of votes won Seats	% of votes won Seats	% of votes won Seats
Venstre	26.7% 47	19.5% 34	23.4% 43
Social Democrats	24.9% 44	26.3% 47	25.9% 48
Danish Peoples Party	12.3% 22	21.1% 37	8.7% 16
Social Liberal Party	9.5% 17	4.6% 8	8.6% 16

Source: Deloy (2019)

Although data is limited, there is some evidence to suggest that political polarisation is higher in the Danish party system than in other Nordic states (Arndt 2016). Using a measure of party system polarisation¹, Figure 1 shows that on average there appears to be a greater ideological distance between political parties in the Danish political system. This was particularly evident during the 2015 Danish general election which took place at the height of the European migrant crisis and in the subsequent 2019 election. As such, Danish parties may face higher incentives to adopt non-centrist positions as a means to achieve policy differentiation and issue ownership among voters (Spoon 2009; Grofman 2004, 1985). Under these circumstances, Denmark's Social Democrats may have had incentives to move further to the right on immigration during the 2019 general election in an attempt to differentiate themselves from other political parties and to expand their voting base. Given the lower levels of ideological polarisation in other Nordic countries, political parties' incentives to adopt non-centrist policy positions may be less pronounced.

Figure 1. Party System Polarization

Source: Casal Bértoa (2021)

Issue Salience and Framing in Nordic Countries

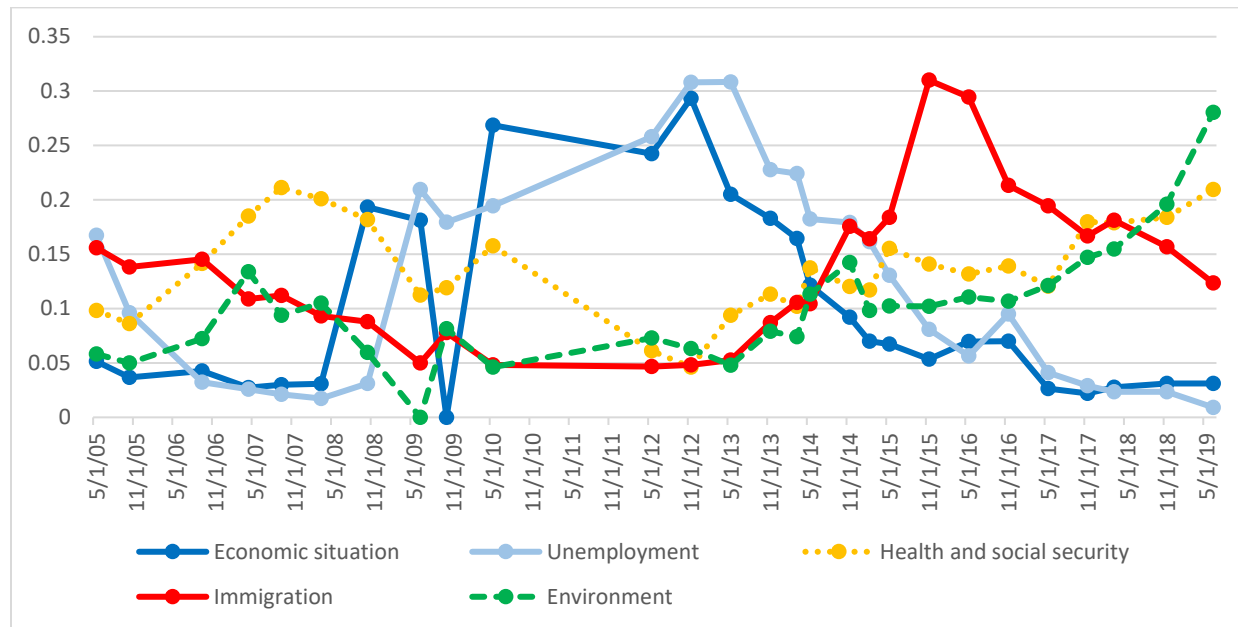
Despite the many similarities between Nordic countries, media coverage of immigration varies considerably between Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Analysis from 1970-2016 reveals that while Swedish newspapers typically frame immigration in a positive light, Danish papers more often present strong negative views about immigration, with the Norwegian press occupying a middle ground position (Hovden and Mjelde 2019).² For example, immigrants are most commonly depicted as victims in the Swedish press, while in Denmark they have been more frequently presented as threats (Hovden and Mjelde 2019). Given these differences in media framing across countries, we should expect variations in national attitudes towards immigration. Eurobarometer survey data confirms that the Swedish public has a more favourable view of immigration than the Danish public. At the height of the 2015 European migrant crisis, for example, 70 per cent of Swedish respondents reported positive feelings about the immigration of people from outside of the EU compared to only 27 per cent who had negative feelings (Eurobarometer 2019). For the same time period in Denmark, only 30 per cent reported positive feelings about the immigration of people from outside of the EU, while 62 per cent had negative feelings (Eurobarometer 2019).

Although differences in media framing and public opinion exist across Nordic countries, evidence indicates that immigration has become more salient in national debates and politics across the region in recent years (Hovden and Mjelde 2019). While newspaper coverage of immigration was relatively low in the 1970s and 1980s, it rose sharply in the late 1990s and once again in 2015 (Hovden and Mjelde 2019). These changes corresponded with international events, such as the 2015 European migrant crisis, which led to increases in refugees and migrants into Nordic countries. While media coverage of immigration has

increased, variations in framing highlight key differences in how each country’s media treats the issue. For example, the Danish media focuses far more frequently on welfare and integration problems than its Nordic counterparts, indicating a more polarised national debate (Hovden and Mjelde 2019). Overall, there is evidence to suggest a link between media, public opinion, and politics within the Nordic realm especially in recent years (Strömbäck, Ørsten and Aalberg 2008; Hjarvard 2013). Immigration, however, is more frequently presented in a negative light in Denmark compared with Sweden and Norway. This context is important to understanding public opinion and party platforms in Denmark.

In terms of issue salience and Danish public opinion, immigration has not always been the principal concern of citizens. Figure 2 presents Eurobarometer data for Danish citizens on the issues that they believe are the most important facing the country. As we can see, immigration’s relative importance has varied over time in response to changing social and economic conditions. For example, in the wake of the Great Recession, immigration decreased in importance among the public as concerns over the economic situation and unemployment became paramount (see Figure 2). As the crisis subsided, the economic situation and unemployment became less prominent issues and concerns about health and social security and immigration grew. During the 2015 European migrant crisis, the Danish public viewed immigration as, by far, the largest problem facing the country with 31 per cent of citizens believing it was the most important issue. Given the weight that the Danish public placed on health, social security and immigration, beginning in 2015, it is less surprising that the Social Democrats emphasised these issues in their 2019 party platform.

Figure 2. Issue Salience in Denmark (2005-2019)



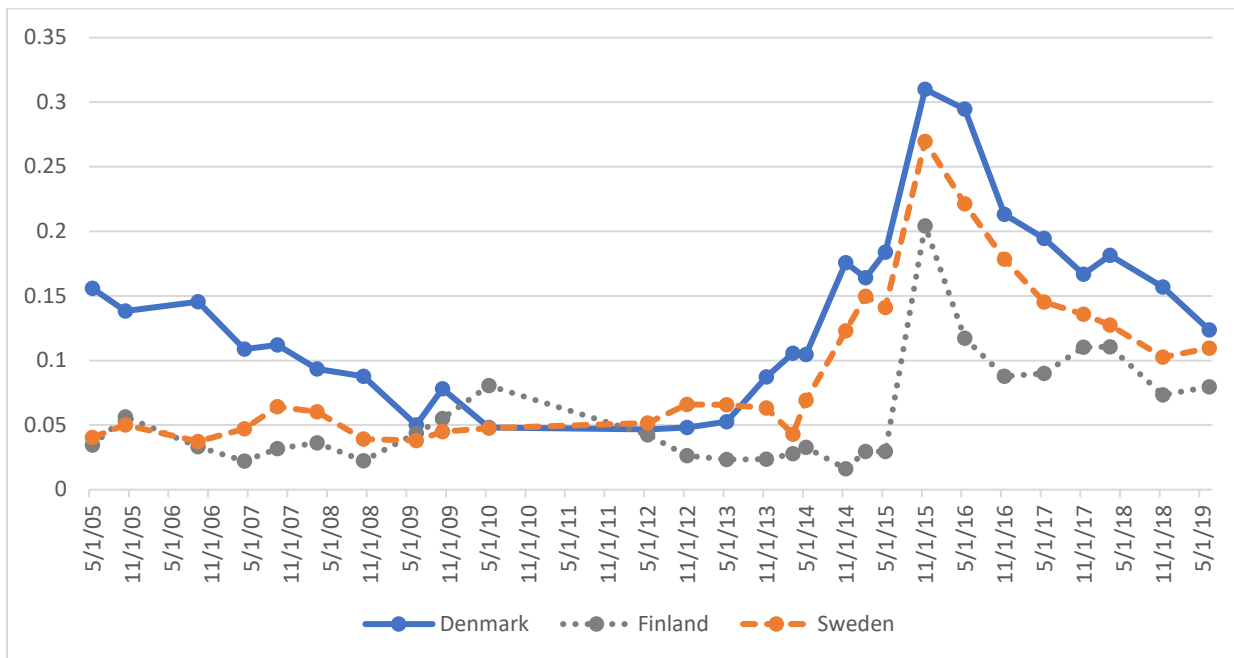
Source: Eurobarometer (2019)

Not only did immigration become a highly salient issue in Denmark but it was also a major concern in Finland, and Sweden during the European migrant crisis. As shown in Figure 3, public opinion regarding immigration followed a similar trend in each country with a notable increase in 2015 and subsequently decreased as the crisis abated. The level of concern, however, varied across countries. Whereas 31 per cent of the Danish public listed immigration

as the main issue facing the country at the height of the migrant crisis, it was 26.9 per cent in Sweden and only 20.4 per cent in Finland.³ Although the migrant crisis had a similar effect in raising the prominence of immigration, Denmark still stands out in the relative importance that its public placed on this issue.

Interestingly, the 2019 Eurobarometer shows that in Denmark immigration has fallen in significance with the public identifying the environment and health and social security as the two most important issues facing the country. This suggests that the salience of immigration may have been reactive to the external events presented by the migrant crisis. It also shows that while immigration was still a significant topic in the 2019 election it may become a less important issue for voters going forward as reflected in declining public concern on this topic (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Immigration Issue Salience in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden (2005-2019)

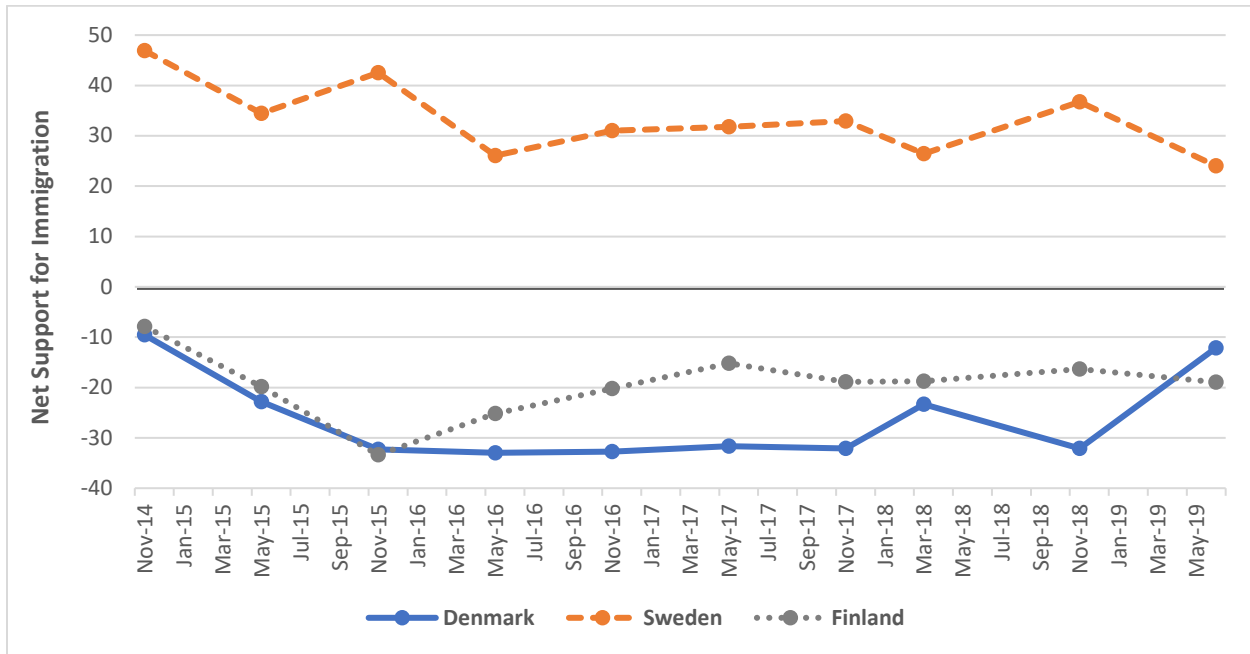


Source: Eurobarometer (2019)

When looking at comparative levels of support for immigrants from non-EU member states in Nordic countries, we can see that public opinion in Denmark is consistently more negative than in Sweden and lower on average than in Finland (see Figure 4).⁴ In fact, throughout the European migrant crisis, Swedish support for immigrants from non-EU member states remained positive. By comparison, Danish public opinion declined at the start of the crisis and has remained low. This highlights important differences in public opinion regarding immigration between Denmark and Sweden and corresponds with more negative framing of the issue in the Danish media and political discourse. This is significant because even though immigration increased in salience in both Denmark and Sweden (see Figure 3) the framing of this issue was markedly different with the Swedish public holding more positive views of immigration and the Danish public holding far more negative views (see Figure 4). While the Finnish public held negative views of immigration, on average these views were slightly more positive than those of the Danish public. Importantly, the issue was considerably less salient in Finland than in Denmark (see Figure 4). Overall, we can see that compared to other Nordic states immigration was more salient and negatively framed in Denmark. This helps to explain

the surprising anti-immigration platform that the Danish Social Democrats adopted in the 2019 election. It also helps to account for why this phenomenon happened in Denmark and not in other Nordic states, such as Sweden and Finland, where issue salience was lower, and the issue was framed in a more positive light.

Figure 4. Support for immigrants from non-EU member states (2014-2019)



Source: Eurobarometer (2019)

By directing their attention to the issues of migration and welfare the Social Democrats accomplished two important things. First, they stayed true to their traditional values of supporting a strong welfare state. Second, they took up the issue of migration, which only the PRR party DF supported. Realising that immigration and welfare were the key concerns of the Danish citizens, the Social Democrats reorganised their priorities. They presented their electorate with proposals that they hoped spoke to the concerns of the population.

Upon winning the 2019 elections in Denmark, the Social Democratic party caused a media sensation across Europe becoming known as the Social Democratic Party that took a harder stance on immigration and was thus awarded increased electoral support. There are two primary reasons why this simplistic coverage escapes the core of what actually occurred. To begin with, while the Social Democrats ultimately won the elections in Denmark during a time when Social Democratic support across Europe was at its lowest, they did not win because of their tough stance on immigration. In fact, public opinion polls show a shift in voters’ priorities from migration in 2015 to healthcare and the environment in 2019 (see Figure 2). Although the Social Democrats moved significantly to the right on immigration, more importantly for the outcome of this election, they managed to find their way back to supporting and promoting Social Democratic core values such as healthcare, pensions and education. In addition, they strengthened their position on environmental policies. The second reason for the Social Democratic success is that the PRR People’s Party lost their footing. The party was successful in 2015 because of its anti-migration platform. When public opinion shifted away from the topic of immigration in 2019, the People’s Party had nothing else to run on. They decreased their anti-immigration rhetoric, thereby leaving a position open to their right, which the Social

Democrats quickly occupied. They could not competently speak to any of the other issues that increased in salience for the Danish voters.

So, the Social Democrats won the election, but not with sweeping gains. In fact they lost 0.4 per cent of the votes compared to the 2015 election. The losses among other parties, particularly the People's Party, made the success of the Social Democrats more apparent and prominent. Therefore, the story is less about Social Democrats gaining support, and more about the loss of support for the People's Party.

DISCUSSION

Evaluating Social Democratic Strategies to Co-Opt PRR Positions

The 2019 Danish election stands out not only because it received a tremendous amount of media attention, but also because it raised questions about whether a new electoral strategy emphasising strong welfare support coupled with anti-immigration policies had emerged for other Social Democrats across Europe. Based on the previous sections, we have demonstrated that in many regards the election in Denmark was an outlier, implying that their approach is no trend. As we evaluate the case going forward, it will become increasingly clear that it is not the best strategy.

Beyond explaining why Social Democrats in Denmark adopted a strong anti-immigration position, it is important to evaluate this electoral strategy. Along with responding to changing public opinion on issues such as welfare and immigration, the strategic decisions of Denmark's Social Democrats to increase their vote share were informed by shifting political dynamics. Given the PRR Danish People's Party's electoral success in the 2015 national elections, the Social Democrats may have been trying to increase their base of support by appealing to far-right voters in taking a stronger anti-immigration stance. This coupled with pro-welfare policies aimed at their traditional left-leaning supporters could, in theory, expand the voting base of the party. In fact, if successful this strategy could serve as a template for other Social Democratic parties in Europe at a time when many of them are struggling to achieve electoral success. However, evidence of voter preference suggests that this approach may not be electorally viable as a strategy for Social Democratic success because far-right voters are highly unlikely to defect and vote for Social Democratic party alternatives.

To test this explanation, we looked at the 2019 European Election Study (EES) survey data, which asked respondents which party they voted for in their most recent national election and the likelihood that they would ever vote for the Social Democrats.⁵ This conveniently allows for a measure of the likelihood of voter party defection in favour of Social Democrats across parties. For example, Social Democratic voters in Denmark represented 17.7 per cent of the total respondent size, and that 92.1 per cent of these voters reported that they would vote Social Democratic in a future election (see Appendix Table A1). By multiplying these two columns, the total potential support that Social Democrats can expect to receive from voters who supported them in the last election represents 16.3 per cent of the overall respondents. By emphasising the issues that matter most to these voters, Social Democrats can expect to receive their largest pool of support.

In contrast, when looking at respondents who voted for the Danish People's Party in the previous election, only 34.5 per cent of them stated that they would vote for the Social Democrats in a future election. Given that this population represented only 16.8 per cent of respondents the total potential support that Social Democrats might expect to receive from this pool of voters is 5.8 per cent of all respondents. This may help to account for the Social

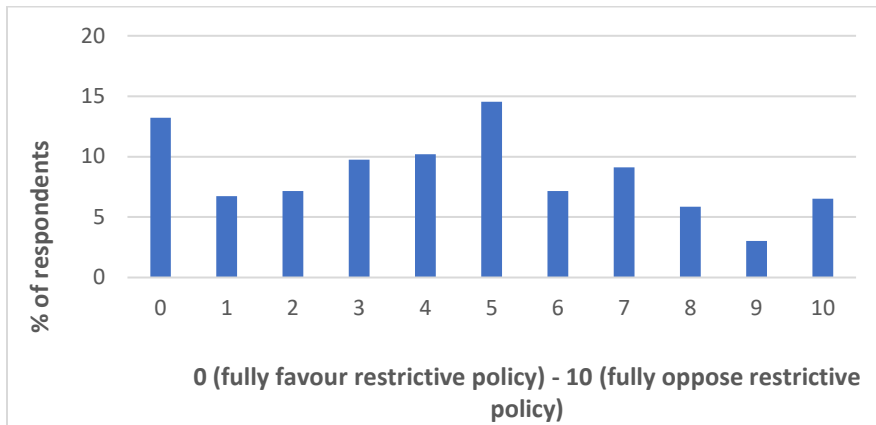
Democrat's decision in the 2019 election to pursue anti-immigration policies with the hopes of gaining support from potential DPP voters. However, while DPP voters represent a possible source of votes for Social Democrats, combined support from other left-leaning party voters (Socialist People's Party, Radical Party and Red-Green Unity List) is 9.3 per cent (see Appendix Table A1). This suggests that while Social Democratic efforts to appeal to far-right DPP voters, for instance by embracing anti-immigration policies, might yield some additional votes, the party might risk isolating a larger potential pool of left-leaning voters.

The EES data analysis for Sweden and Finland shows that far-right voters are an even more unlikely base of support for Social Democrats in these countries. In Sweden, for example, only 9.8 per cent of PRR Sweden Democrat voters said that they would vote for the Social Democrats in a future election representing only 1.7 per cent of total respondents (see Appendix Table A2). By contrast, 55.8 per cent of Green Ecological Voters said that they would defect to the Social Democrats in a future election representing 2.9 per cent of respondents. In Finland, 89 per cent of Left-Wing Alliance voters said they would vote for the Social Democrats in a new election, representing 6.7 per cent of the overall respondents (see Appendix Table A3)⁶. By comparison, only 21.5 per cent of respondents who voted for the PRR True Finns party said that they would vote for the Social Democrats in a future election representing 4.5 per cent of all respondents.

Further evidence from the 2019 EES reveals the policy preferences of Danish respondents who were likely Social Democratic voters (6 or higher on a 10-point scale). Figure 5 shows that although there is a small cohort from this group (13.1 per cent) that favours an extremely restrictive immigration policy, most respondents favoured more moderate immigration policies. This suggests that the strong anti-immigration position that the party adopted in the 2019 election may be out of sync with potential voters. By comparison, there is a clearer consensus among prospective voters on redistributive and environmental policies that Social Democrats could pursue which might yield higher support. Likely Social Democratic voters tended to favour redistribution (see Figure 6) and policies which favoured environmental protection over economic growth (Figure 7). By contrast, extremely restrictive immigration policies are not largely supported by a wide cross-section of likely Social Democratic voters. As noted earlier, the importance of immigration as an issue among the Danish public has decreased whereas welfare and environmental concerns have grown in salience (Figure 2). This further confirms why Danish Social Democrats would be better served to focus on redistributive and environmental policies rather than anti-immigration ones.

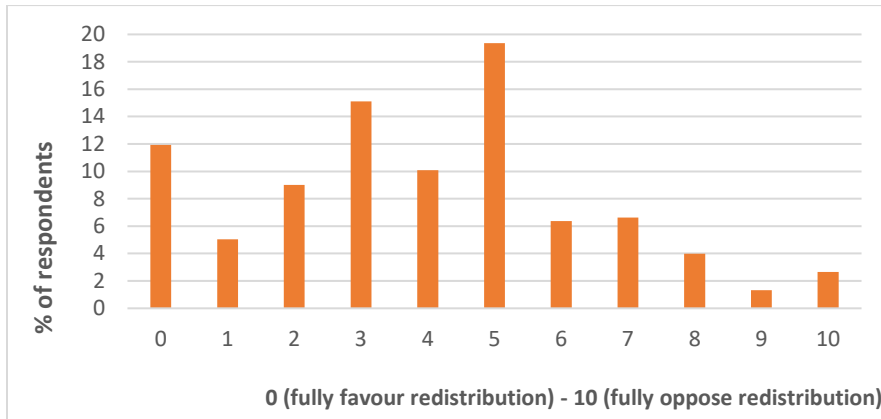
Along with examining the distribution of potential Social Democratic voter positions on key issues, we analysed the correlation between these positions and the likelihood of voting for the Social Democrats. To analyse the effects of voter position on support for the Social Democratic party, logistic regressions using individual respondent data from the 2019 European Voter Survey were applied. The main dependent variable of interest for each model was likely Social Democratic voters measured as respondents who scored a 6 or higher on a 10-point scale question that asked whether the respondent would vote for the Social Democrats. The independent variables measured voter positions on redistribution, immigration, and the environment on a 10-point scale. Table 3 presents the logistic regression results and the transformed odds ratios which demonstrate how respondents' positions on redistribution, immigration, and environmental policies correlate with the likelihood of voting Social Democrat.⁷

Figure 5. Potential Social Democratic Voter Position on Immigration (Denmark)



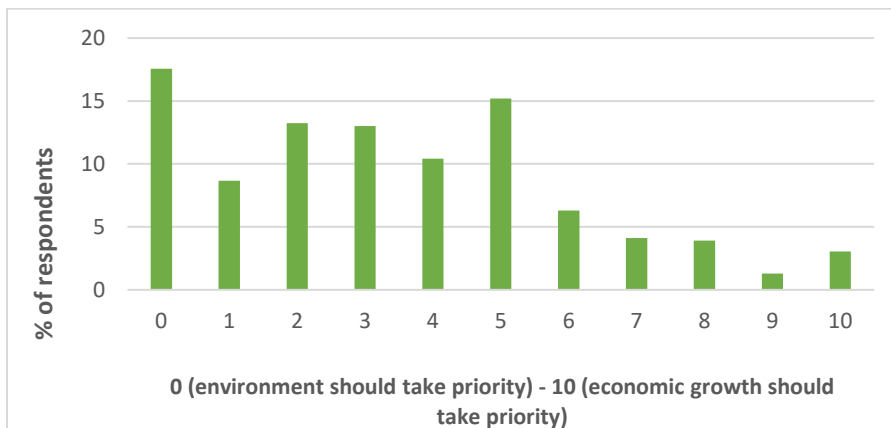
Source: European Voter Study (2019)

Figure 6. Potential Social Democratic Voter Position on Redistribution (Denmark)



Source: European Voter Study (2019)

Figure 7. Potential Social Democratic Voter Position on the Environment (Denmark)



Source: European Voter Study (2019)

Table 3. Social Democratic Support and Voter Policy Position

Variable	Social Democratic Vote Log odds	Social Democratic Vote Odds Ratio
Voter Position on Redistribution		
0 (fully favour redistribution) Reference category		
1	– 0.530703 (0.367002)	0.5881913 (0.2158674)
2	0.0159198 (0.3351978)	1.016047 (0.3405768)
3	0.2864289 (0.3011613)	1.331663 (0.4010454)
4	– 0.3516748 (0.313155)	0.7035089 (0.2203074)
5	– 0.2376408 (0.2729344)	0.7884859 (0.2152049)
6	– 0.768844* (0.3348605)	0.4635486* (0.1552241)
7	– 0.7936419* (0.3249328)	0.4521949* (0.146933)
8	– 0.8088808* (0.3634017)	0.4453562* (0.1618432)
9	– 1.277548* (0.5368028)	0.2787198* (0.1496176)
10 (fully oppose redistribution)	– 1.088971* (0.4543706)	0.3365625* (0.1529241)
Don't know	– 0.5650695 (0.3131329)	0.5683207 (0.1779599)
Voter Position on Immigration		
0 (fully favour restrictive policy) Reference category		

Variable	Social Democratic Vote	Social Democratic Vote
	Log odds	Odds Ratio
1	0.4187431 (0.2972249)	1.52005 (0.4517966)
2	0.5547304 (0.2912907)	1.741471 (0.5072744)
3	0.8783434** (0.2795568)	2.406909** (0.6728677)
4	1.294163*** (0.3032924)	3.647941*** (1.106393)
5	0.8024837*** (0.2445193)	2.231075*** (0.5455411)
6	1.130742 *** (0.3273906)	3.097955*** (1.014241)
7	0.9507186*** (0.2877028)	2.587568*** (0.7444506)
8	0.5488877 (0.3258718)	1.731326 (0.5641904)
9	0.7632623 (0.4335559)	2.145263 (0.9300915)
10 (<i>fully oppose restrictive policy</i>)	0.1928194 (0.2888888)	1.212664 (0.350325)
Don't know	1.138038*** (0.3499253)	3.120639*** (1.091991)
Voter Position on the Environment		
0 (<i>environment should take priority</i>) Reference category		
1	0.7387436* (0.307337)	2.093304* (0.6433496)
2	0.5481954*	1.730128*

Variable	Social Democratic Vote	Social Democratic Vote
	Log odds	Odds Ratio
	(0.2648563)	(0.4582353)
3	0.3918161 (0.2569953)	1.479666 (0.3802671)
4	0.510647 (0.277606)	1.666369 (0.462594)
5	0.0690211 (0.2380415)	1.071459 (0.2550516)
6	0.0537798 (0.3090513)	1.055252 (0.3261271)
7	0.2611621 (0.3625116)	1.298438 (0.4706989)
8	0.387856 (0.3720184)	1.473818 (0.5482873)
9	0.4486828 (0.5995086)	1.566248 (0.938979)
10 (<i>economic growth should take priority</i>)	0.6996995 (0.4385925)	2.013148 (0.8829514)
Don't Know	- 0.2790016 (0.4260063)	0.7565387 (0.3222903)
Constant	- 0.6551995* (0.2576145)	0.5193385* (0.1337891)
N	986	986
t statistics in parentheses, * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001		

Based on this model we can see that respondents who fell on the extreme end of the spectrum and fully opposed redistribution were less likely to vote for the Social Democrats compared with those who fully favoured redistribution. Respondents who opposed redistribution (6 or higher on the scale) were statistically less likely to vote for Social Democrats than those who favour redistribution. For example, the odds that those whose response was a 9 would vote for the Social Democrats was 72.1 per cent lower than those who fully supported redistribution

(0 on the scale). Similarly, the odds that those who answered 10 (fully opposed redistribution) would vote for the Social Democrats was 66.3 per cent lower than those who fully supported redistribution (see Table 3).

Based on the results we can also see how respondent positions on immigration correlates with the likelihood of voting Social Democratic. Here we can see that respondents who answered 3 or higher on the scale (i.e. those who held moderate to liberal positions) were far more likely to vote for Social Democrats than those who favoured fully restrictive immigration policies (0 on the scale). For example, respondents who answered 6 on the scale were nearly 3.1 times more likely to vote for the Social Democrats than those who answered 0 (fully favoured restriction). Interestingly, respondents who answered that they did not know how they felt about this issue were 3.1 times more likely to vote for Social Democrats. This suggests a higher degree of uncertainty among the electorate around this issue compared to redistributive and environmental issues. These findings reinforce our claim that potential Social Democratic voters do not tend to favour extremely restrictive immigration policies suggesting that the party's strategy to embrace anti-immigration policies in the 2019 election was out of sync with voter preferences.

Finally, the findings highlight how respondent positions on the environment correlate with the likelihood of voting Social Democratic. Here we can see that respondents who answered 1 or 2 were more likely to vote for Social Democrats than those who responded that the environment should take absolute priority over the economy (0 on the scale). For example, respondents who answered 1 on the scale were over 2 times more likely to vote for Social Democrats than those who answered 0 (the reference category). This suggests that while Social Democratic voters are less likely to support the position that the environment should take absolute priority over the economy, they still heavily favour environmental protection over economic growth.

Ultimately, the logistic regression model provides further insight into the policy preferences of likely Social Democratic voters. On the issue of redistribution, this pool of voters is likely to favour some degree of redistribution rather than fully oppose such measures (see Table 1). These voters are less likely to favour fully restrictive immigration policies. Finally, these voters tend to favour a high degree of environmental protection. This analysis provides a deeper insight into the preferences of likely Social Democratic voters on key issues which can be used to evaluate how well the party's platform matches supporter preferences.

Overall, this survey data offers some evidence to suggest that far-right party voters are an unlikely base of support for Social Democratic parties in Denmark or other Nordic states. Attempts to appeal to these voters, for example by taking a stronger anti-immigration stance, may prove ineffective while at the same time reducing potential support from voters of other left-leaning parties. This finding is important as it should inform Social Democratic parties on how to evaluate potential strategies for renewed electoral success.

CONCLUSION

Mainstream parties adopting PRR positions in an attempt to achieve electoral success have been widely acknowledged in the literature (Downes and Loveless 2018; Downes, Loveless and Lam 2021; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). This article argues that the strategy taken by the Danish Social Democrats to win the 2019 election – doubling-down on their traditional support for the welfare state whilst also taking a sharp turn to the right on immigration policies – is not a viable strategy for Social Democratic parties

moving forward. This article makes an original contribution to the literature finding that while the adoption of PRR strategies for centre-right parties might be fruitful (Downes and Loveless 2018; Downes, Loveless and Lam 2021), Social Democrats, adopting a similar strategy, are only successful in very few outlier cases. At the same time, the results point out that Social Democrats are better advised to strengthen their traditional support for the welfare state if they want to win elections.

The Danish case offers an important test of PRR co-option strategy hypotheses which have been identified in the literature. Our analysis helps to explain the paradox of the 2019 Danish election, namely why a Social Democratic party made such a radical turn to embrace strong anti-immigration policies. This case received a lot of media attention because it seemed that it might serve as a template for other Social Democratic party success. However, as we argue, this strategy is unlikely to yield positive results for Social Democratic parties in Nordic countries going forward. In fact, we find that the 2019 victory of Denmark's Social Democrats had less to do with the adoption of a new immigration policy platform, and more to do with the collapse of PRR Danish People's Party support amongst voters. This finding is emphasised by the fact that despite gaining control of the government in 2019, the Social Democrats performed worse in this election than in the previous one.

According to the presented data, it becomes apparent that future Social Democrat supporters are not necessarily past supporters of the far-right as PRR parties will frequently blur their positions to appeal to various different categories of voters (Falkenbach and Greer 2018; Afonso 2014). This can be seen nicely in the 2017 German parliamentary election where the Social Democratic SPD lost over five per cent of its voters to other mainstream parties and non-voters, rather than to the PRR, while the PRR AfD won more votes from the Christian Democratic party and non-voters (Mudde 2019). Voters who abandon the Social Democrats do not primarily move to PRR parties, rather they tend to refrain from voting. In addition, the issue of immigration in Denmark, at least during the 2019 election, was less salient, so even if the Social Democrats continue to take a hard line on immigration, its importance with voters is decreasing compared with other issues, notably welfare and the environment. Thus, the idea of focusing a significant amount of attention on immigration is questionable given decreased public concerns, making the Danish Social Democratic strategy in 2019 less viable going forward. Moving to the right on immigration is not a solution for all Social Democratic parties. In fact, this strategy seems poorly suited to other Nordic countries where immigration is less salient and the likelihood of far-right voter defection to Social Democrats appears even less likely. Denmark is a particular case where the PRR People's Party and the centre-right Venstre decided to ease their anti-immigration rhetoric during the 2019 campaign thereby leaving this policy space open for the Social Democrats to cover. In other countries, Austria for example, the PRR party FPÖ always took a hard-line approach against immigration and the centre-right ÖVP followed suit in the 2017 elections leaving no room for the Social Democratic SPÖ.

Overall, while the success of Social Democrats in Denmark and their shift to the right on immigration stands out as a fascinating and controversial case, it remains an outlier among Nordic countries. To fully understand viable strategies for Social Democratic electoral success, future research will need to analyse broader trends across European democracies. This includes assessing how key issues such as welfare, immigration, and the environment are viewed by the public within different national contexts. It is also vital that Social Democratic parties note where their potential base of support lies and what policy preferences these prospective voters have. Variations in party system, party ideology and issue salience and framing are important factors to consider when looking across countries. While many Social Democratic parties are looking for a simple one-size-fits-all solution to once again achieve electoral success, a more careful examination of individual countries is needed.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Party system polarisation is conceptualised as the greater the overall ideological difference between parties the higher the polarisation within the party system. This is measured using the Party Systems and Governments Observatory's index of polarisation. For more details on how this index is calculated see Casal Bértoa (2021).

² While data for Finland is not available in this study, a 2017 report by the Finnish Ministry of the Interior indicates that there has been considerable news media coverage of immigration with both positive and negative sides represented in reporting (2017). However, analysis of Finnish news in 2019 reveals that crime was the topic most associated with immigration in the media indicating a more unfavourable framing of migrants (Finnish Ministry of the Interior 2019).

³ Although Eurobarometer data is not available for Norway, according to 2017 survey data collected by Statista on the most important national issues facing Norway immigration was the most important issue according to 29 per cent of respondents with healthcare being the second most important issue according to 28 per cent of respondents (Statista 2019).

⁴ Although Eurobarometer data is not available for Norway, according to survey data collected by the Norwegian government in 2018, over 70 per cent of respondents agreed that immigrants made a positive contribution to the working life and culture of Norwegian society compared to less than 20 per cent who disagreed (Statistics Norway 2019). Similar data on Norwegian's attitudes on immigration and integration for 2018 found that 40 per cent of respondents agreed that immigration is good for Norway compared to 27 per cent who thought it was bad (Norwegian Integration Barometer 2018). Overall, this suggests a higher degree of support for immigrants among the public in Norway than in Denmark.

⁵ Likelihood of voting for the Social Democratic Party is measured on a scale from 0 (not at all probable) to 10 (very probable) in the EES survey. For the purposes of this article, voters who scored a 6 or higher were considered likely to vote Social Democratic.

⁶ As Norway is not part of the EU, the data for this country could not be found, however one would suspect that it would be similar to that of its Nordic counterparts.

⁷ To address concerns with multicollinearity in the model, a collinearity diagnostics table is included in the appendix (see Table A4). The variance inflation factor values for each of the independent variables are sufficiently low to suggest that multicollinearity is not a problem.

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