

Opposition to Government and Back: How Illiberal Parties Shape Immigration Discourse and Party Competition

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Abstract

In recent decades, illiberal far-right parties have seen electoral success, reshaped European politics, challenged established norms, and accelerated shifts in political discourse. Thought to be isolated by a *cordon sanitaire*, these parties are increasingly normalized, gaining footholds in parliament and government—from coalition participation in Austria to majority rule in Hungary. As illiberal far-right parties gain access to power, a pressing question arises: How does their parliamentary and governmental participation influence both their discourse and that of mainstream parties? While we know that far-right parliamentary entry influences mainstream parties’ policy adaptations and strategic positioning, less is known about their systematic effects across countries or how governing responsibilities affect their discourse. Theories of issue competition suggest that parties adjust their stances to maintain voter support, but case studies have suggested diverging results. Leveraging a novel liberal–illiberal scale based on word embeddings and dictionaries, this study examines how far-right parties’ participation in parliaments and governments affects their own immigration discourse and that of mainstream parties by analyzing the interaction between 67 parties in eight European countries (Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland) over the last 15 years. Our findings show that mainstream parties, especially conservative ones, follow the shifts in the immigration discourse of far-right parties. Furthermore, we find that far-right parties minimally moderate their anti-immigration discourse when entering government and then radicalize again when they leave. The illiberal far-right therefore appears to have the net effect of pulling their country’s party system to the right on immigration. These findings clarify the consequences of illiberal party normalization for party competition, coalition strategies, and democratic stability in European politics.

Keywords

Europe; far-right parties; illiberal parties; immigration discourse; parliamentary speeches; party competition

1. Introduction

With the increasing vote share of far-right and illiberal parties, these groups have started to participate in governments across Europe. This development not only highlights gaps in political representation and introduces new conflicts within European party systems (Heinisch, 2003; Kriesi, 2014), but also raises significant questions about the resilience of liberal democracy. These parties' participation can undermine fundamental liberal-democratic values, procedures, and institutions (Mudde, 2016). At the same time, their political success can pressure mainstream parties and alter the spatial dynamics of political competition.

Previous research has examined how the entrance of far-right parties into parliament impacts mainstream parties and their political learning processes (Heinze, 2022). Their entrance can pressure mainstream parties to shift their positions or redefine policy priorities, particularly on issues like immigration (van Spanje, 2010; Zaslove, 2004). Scholars have also increasingly focused on the policy impact of illiberal parties in power (Lutz, 2019). However, there is less clarity on how illiberal far-right parties affect party competition and strategic communication once their role becomes normalized, as they cycle between opposition and government. This gap is particularly relevant given the increasing participation of illiberal parties in government and its implications for liberal democracies (Mudde, 2019). These dynamics raise pressing questions for policymakers about the extent to which including illiberal far-right parties in coalitions can undermine democratic principles.

This study addresses this gap by employing an innovative scaling method that measures illiberalism in party discourse using a combination of word embeddings and dictionaries, allowing us to track changes in rhetoric across multiple countries and time periods. We analyze illiberal far-right parties' influence on other parties' rhetoric in parliamentary speeches and investigate whether far-right parties moderate before and after the participation in government. Specifically, we examine the immigration rhetoric of 67 parties in eight European parliamentary countries—Austria, Czechia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Estonia—between 1996 and 2024, when illiberal far-right parties were present in parliament and, in the majority of cases, also spent some time in a government coalition (except in Estonia and Germany). Our analysis reveals three main patterns. First, shifts in far-right parties' immigration discourse are associated with corresponding shifts in mainstream parties, with limited influence observed among niche parties. Second, conservative mainstream parties appear to be the most responsive, aligning more with illiberal positions as far-right discourse becomes more illiberal. Lastly, far-right parties exhibit minimal moderation upon entering government and radicalize when they leave, only partially supporting the inclusion-moderation theory. Overall, illiberal far-right parties appear to have an illiberalizing effect on their country's party system, suggesting that both inclusion and exclusion fail to contain their influence.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2, we review previous research on spatial and issue competition in parliamentary settings, with a particular focus on the far-right. In Section 3, we specify our hypotheses, synthesizing the existing research. In Section 4, we present our methodology, describing our

approach to measuring illiberal positions on immigration using text-as-data. In Section 5, we present the results of our analysis, and in Section 6, we discuss our findings and their implications.

2. Party Competition and Illiberal Parties

Over the past decades, illiberal parties' success has reshaped the competitive political landscape. The question of why and how parties change their policy positions has long been a central concern in political science. Political parties, driven by both vote-seeking and office-seeking goals, shape their policy stances in response to spatial and issue competition dynamics. These strategic adjustments are not simply reactions to shifts in public opinion, but rather the result of complex interactions between competing parties on issue ownership and issue salience (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Meguid, 2005). One key factor driving these changes has been the rise of illiberal far-right parties in the last decades. For those actors, political competition is about driving issue salience and forcing parties to take positions around "their" topics such as immigration, thereby contributing to the politicization of their topic (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021; Mudde, 2010). This can push mainstream parties to modify their positions on salient issues.

For conceptual clarity, we should note that while illiberalism can theoretically manifest across the political spectrum, including the left (Enyedi, 2024), in contemporary European party systems illiberal and far-right parties largely overlap empirically insofar as both describe parties that oppose liberal democratic principles, particularly regarding immigration. Therefore, while acknowledging their conceptual distinction, we use the terms illiberal and far-right interchangeably when referring to parties that combine far-right ideology with illiberal practices. These parties' growing electoral success has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of party competition.

According to the median voter theorem, parties tend to converge toward the preferences of the median voter to maximize electoral success (Downs, 1957). However, challenger parties such as illiberal far-right ones disrupt established political dynamics. Their rise prompts mainstream parties to shift right to recapture votes (Meguid, 2005). This contagion effect has been observed across multiple cases, influencing party systems beyond the left-right spectrum (Abou-Chadi, 2016; van Spanje, 2010). Mainstream parties now increasingly mention liberal-authoritarian issues in their manifestos and have moved right on cultural issues (Wagner & Meyer, 2017), as well as on their socio-economic policymaking (Röth et al., 2018). These shifts are often strategic, aimed at maintaining electoral competitiveness and coalition viability (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Schafer, 2021). Broadly understood, when confronted with illiberal far-right parties, mainstream parties tend to either accommodate or distance themselves from these positions to retain voter support (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997; Kriesi et al., 2008).

While previous literature has often focused on mainstream parties' responses to illiberal far-right parties, less attention has been given to how illiberal parties themselves are affected by mainstream parties. Some evidence suggests that illiberal parties may moderate their positions when seeking coalition participation. However, the moderation thesis remains contested, with mixed results regarding the effects of a *cordon sanitaire* (Akkerman et al., 2016; van Spanje & van der Brug, 2007). Even when illiberal parties enter coalition governments, they tend to maintain extreme policy positions, although their support can decline when they govern alongside the political establishment (Akkerman, 2012; van Spanje, 2011). Despite evidence for the impact of mainstream parties on illiberal far-right parties through, for example, government participation,

the extent and type of effect remains unclear. This gap has important consequences for democratic governance, especially if mainstream parties normalize illiberal parties' rhetoric to maintain power and enter government coalitions.

The rise of illiberal far-right parties and their impact on mainstream parties also presents significant challenges for democratic stability. As mainstream parties shift their positions to counter illiberal challengers, the polarization of political discourse, especially on immigration, can erode democratic norms and consensus politics, intensifying societal divisions. Moreover, mainstream parties' shift in policy positions has resulted in a normalization of illiberal parties' anti-immigration positions (Wagner & Meyer, 2017). Lastly, the accommodation of illiberal parties through coalitions has been shown to negatively affect the quality of democracy by reducing the rights of minorities and eroding the rule of law and separation of powers (Fallend, 2012). Despite those substantial dangers to democratic principles, there is still relatively little systematic, comparative research examining how illiberal parties influence mainstream parties and shift their rhetoric across cases and over time.

This study addresses this gap by bringing together the literature on party competition and coalition formation. Specifically, it explores how illiberal far-right parties' electoral success and government participation influence discourse on immigration policy. It asks how mainstream parties adjust their positions on immigration in response to the rise of illiberal parties and, conversely, how government participation with mainstream parties affects illiberal parties' discourse.

3. Strategic Positioning of Mainstream and Far-Right Parties: Accommodation and Moderation

The electoral success of illiberal far-right parties has altered the competitive landscape. Mainstream parties have responded by adjusting their positions on immigration and multiculturalism. While political competition can take various forms, including position blurring or issue emphasis, parties tend to be strategic: increasing the salience of issues that benefit them. This strategy alters the space of political competition and creates new dimensions of political conflict (Rovny, 2013), aligning with theories of issue ownership and salience theory (Petrocik, 1996). Since the growing success of illiberal far-right parties has made immigration a central issue of political competition, one can observe significant fluctuations in the salience and politicization of the issue (Grande et al., 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2018), which has also affected mainstream parties' stances.

Mainstream parties, though heterogeneous, often respond similarly to shifts in the political landscape by following the agenda set by illiberal far-right parties. They base their responses on the perceived effects on electoral performance and coalition possibilities (Abou-Chadi, 2016), choosing between accommodative or adversarial strategies depending on the electoral threat posed by shifts in spatial competition (Meguid, 2005). In immigration policy, both left and right mainstream parties have increased their anti-immigrant rhetoric and adopted more authoritarian (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020) or pro-welfare positions to attract far-right voters (Krause & Giebler, 2020). This behavior is influenced by parties' incentive to accommodate niche parties that typically focus on a single issue like immigration (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997; Kriesi et al., 2008; Meguid, 2005).

We expect to observe an accommodative strategy particularly with right-wing and conservative mainstream parties. When far-right parties are electorally successful, mainstream right-wing parties are likely to view government coalitions with them as beneficial, offering both political viability and ideological coherence. As these coalitions become possible due to illiberal parties' electoral gains, mainstream right-wing parties tend to move further to the right on cultural issues to accommodate illiberal parties and therefore emphasize anti-immigration positions (Abou-Chadi, 2016; de Lange, 2012; Wagner & Meyer, 2017). This rightward shift polarizes parties' spatial competition and can force mainstream left-wing parties to either oppose the shift or join the far-right coalition, resulting in a bipolar space (de Lange, 2012). By adopting more anti-immigration positions, mainstream parties can extend their time in power.

Overall, mainstream parties react to illiberal parties and shift their positions and issue emphasis based on changes to spatial competition, following challenger parties' positions. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1a: When far-right parties adopt more (or less) illiberal anti-immigrant rhetoric in parliament, mainstream parties will similarly adopt more (or less) illiberal, anti-immigrant rhetoric.

H1b: This effect will be stronger for conservative mainstream parties compared to non-conservative ones.

However, electoral success or loss is not the only factor driving shifts in party rhetoric. Changes in parliamentary power dynamics, particularly parties entering and exiting government, also matter. The shift from opposition to government and vice versa reshapes how parties present themselves. The task of an opposition party is to criticize the government and provide alternative proposals (Helms, 2008), presenting themselves as the main competitor to the majority government position. Far-right parties in opposition tend to adopt extreme positions to distinguish themselves (van Spanje & van der Brug, 2007). However, when their status changes—such as by entering parliament or government—their incentives to maintain combative rhetoric shift accordingly.

For successful illiberal far-right parties in opposition, the possibility of joining government coalitions creates new strategic pressures. Mainstream parties considering coalition bargaining and policymaking implications might be cautious of coalition partners with extreme policy positions. They can therefore demand moderation on specific issues like immigration as a condition for coalition formation. And, at the same time, the inclusion-moderation thesis suggests that illiberal far-right parties will moderate their rhetoric upon entering government to align with the median voter (Berman, 2008; Downs, 1957). Therefore, coalition-influenced moderation has involved announcing policy compromises and shedding populist rhetoric (Heinisch, 2003). This applies both to governance and electoral campaigns, where parties signal their willingness to cooperate.

Illiberal far-right parties employ various strategies when seeking office. For them, policy moderation typically means aligning positions with potential coalition partners, usually mainstream right-wing parties (de Lange, 2012). However, this compromise often focuses on socio-economic issues rather than topics like immigration where far-right parties maintain ownership (Afonso, 2015). Through this logrolling strategy, illiberal parties do not need to make concessions on owned issues, while mainstream parties gain support for their socio-economic agenda (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). In some cases, illiberal parties can even retain

their extreme positions despite government participation (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010). Lastly, illiberal right-wing parties in government might revert to their extreme positions and attempt to go against their coalition partner when policy compromise becomes too costly. This can jeopardize government participation and result in a coalition implosion (Afonso, 2015).

Overall, evidence of moderation is mixed and country-dependent (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016). Far-right parties that moderate their positions during campaigns or in government can later face electoral punishment (Martin & Vanberg, 2011). The Austrian FPÖ illustrates these risks: They had to reverse their opposition to the European Union and unambiguously condemn Nazism before entering a coalition with the ÖVP in 2000. This moderation, combined with the FPÖ's subordinate role in government policy-making, led to a weakened electoral support and internal party member dissatisfaction, ultimately resulting in the breakdown of the coalition (Fallend, 2012). The costs of moderation extend beyond the coalition: After leaving government in 2002, internal tensions split the FPÖ, leading to the creation of the BZÖ (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2013).

Despite these risks, illiberal far-right parties rarely decline opportunities to join government coalitions (Akkerman et al., 2016). Even parties like the FPÖ have accepted disadvantageous coalition agreements and reentered government after coalition breakdown, despite continuing electoral losses (Fallend, 2012). Other parties, like Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), have similarly moderated positions—in their case, softening Eurosceptic positions (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016). Considering these context-dependent patterns in parliamentary systems, we propose a second pair of hypotheses:

H2a: After joining government, far-right parties will moderate their anti-immigration discourse.

H2b: Far-right parties will become more illiberal upon becoming part of the opposition.

4. Research Design

4.1. Case Selection

This study focuses on eight very different European parliamentary countries: Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. We chose these countries because they have parliamentary systems with coalition governments due to their proportional electoral systems, except for Hungary, which has been dominated by Fidesz since 2010. Importantly for testing our hypotheses, these countries, during the period covered, have seen a far-right party either in parliament or join and/or leave government as presented in Table 1. Moreover, these countries vary in their size, geography, demographics, ideological cleavages, and age of their democracies. The historical relevance of the far-right also varies across these eight cases. In Italy and Austria, far-right parties have been influential in parliamentary politics since the early post-World War II period and also participated in government. In contrast, far-right parties gained parliamentary representation more recently in countries like Finland, Czechia, Hungary, and Poland. Similarly, in Germany and Estonia such parties only emerged in parliament following the refugee “crisis,” with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) entering parliament for the first time in 2017 (Aichholzer et al., 2014; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Braghiroli & Petsinis, 2019; Ruzza, 2018; Widfeldt, 2018; Wondreys, 2021). A detailed overview can be seen in Table 1.

Substantively, the cases vary considerably regarding policies related to immigration. While Finland, for example, continues to have the most inclusive integration policies over the years, Poland and Hungary remain more restrictive than the European average. Immigration policy also differs across countries both in substance and over time (Schultz et al., 2021; Solano & De Coninck, 2023). Similarly, European far-right parties are not homogeneous in their expressions related to immigration (Mudde, 2016). We can see a more exclusionary European-centric discourse after the 2015 refugee “crisis” and/or a shift to an ethno-religious discourse, or parties such as the Movement for Better Hungary (Jobbik) adopting more Islamophobic rhetoric (Moutselos, 2023; Mudde, 2016).

Table 1. Overview of data.

Country	Time Period	Number of Documents	Parties Included	Illiberal in Government	Illiberal Entry in Parliament
Austria	1996–2022	102,862	BZÖ, FPÖ, Grüne, JETZT, LIF, NEOS, ÖVP, SPÖ, <i>Stronach</i>	FPÖ: 2000–2005, 2017–2019 BZÖ: 2005–2007	FPÖ: 1956 BZÖ: 2006 STRONACH: 2013
Czechia	2013–2023	86,078	ANO, ČSSD, KDU-CSL, KSČM, ODS, Piráti, SPD, STAN, TOP09, <i>Úsvit</i>	ANO: 2013–2021	ANO: 2013 Úsvit: 2013 SPD: 2015
Estonia	2011–2022	95,184	EKRE, ISA, KE, RE, SDE, VABA	–	EKRE: 2015
Finland	2012–2024	211,292	K, KD, KESK, KOK, LIIK, PS, RKP, SDP, SIN, VAS, VIHR	PS: 2015–2019, since 2023	PS: 2011 SIN: 2017 (due to a split from PS)
Germany	2010–2023	130,576	AfD, CDU/CSU, FDP, Grünen, LINKE, SPD	–	AfD: 2017
Hungary	2014–2023	52,498	DK, <i>Fidesz-KNDP</i> , <i>Jobbik</i> , LMP, <i>Mi Hazánk</i> , Momentum, MSZP, <i>Párbeszéd</i>	Fidesz: 1998–2002, since 2010	Fidesz: 1990 Jobbik: 2010 Mi Hazánk: 2022
Italy	2013–2022	93,162	AP (NCD-UDC), <i>Fdl</i> , FI, IV-PSI, <i>L-SP</i> , M5S, Misto, NCD, PD	L-SP: 2021 <i>Fdl</i> : since 2022	L-SP: 1992 <i>Fdl</i> : 2018
Poland	2015–2022	97,428	KO, <i>Konfederacja</i> , KP-PSL, <i>Kukiz15</i> , Lewica, PiS, PP, <i>UPR</i>	PiS: 2005–2007, 2015–2023	UPR: 1991 PiS: 2005 <i>Kukiz15</i> : 2015 <i>Konfederacja</i> : 2019
8 Countries		869,080 Documents	67 Parties	12 Cabinets With Far-Right Parties	19 Far-Right Entries Into Parliament

Note: Illiberal right-wing parties are in italics.

Yet, immigration is a salient policy issue in each country included in this study. Given that these cases show variation in many dimensions relevant for explaining party behavior, studying these cases provides a most-different systems design, enhancing the external validity of our findings (Rohlfing, 2012). We therefore use the policy debate around immigration to test our hypotheses about the impact of illiberal parties on their country's party system. We define far-right parties based on the classification by Mudde (2007), which includes anti-immigration as a central issue to their policy program as an indicator. Additionally, we emphasize the illiberal element of such parties which can be placed on a spectrum from illiberal democratic to anti-democratic positions (Pirro, 2023), as well as parties' efforts "aimed at power concentration, partisan state, and closed society" (Enyedi, 2024, p. 5).

4.2. Data

For parliamentary speech data, we rely on various established datasets, including ParlaMint (Kuzman et al., 2023), ParIEE (Sylvester et al., 2022), and ParlSpeech (Rauh & Schwalbach, 2020). For Germany, we further supplement our dataset with the SpeakGer dataset (Lange & Jentsch, 2024). These datasets collect official recordings of parliamentary debates and contain text for a total of 869,080 speeches given by all major parties in Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland (see Table 1). Such speeches are representative of salient policy debates as well as the positions parties hold on issues such as immigration, social policy, or education. The datasets cover over a decade in each country—enough time to observe shifts in the positions of mainstream and far-right parties before they form coalitions, during their time in government together, and after they break up or lose elections. Lastly, it should be noted that the Czech party ANO does not neatly fit into the category of far-right parties, as its classification remains contested in both academic literature and expert surveys. However, its shift toward illiberalism since 2014 makes it nonetheless fitting for our purpose. The party has increasingly implemented illiberal policies and adopted Eurosceptic and conservative positions, creating tensions within its former affiliation with the liberal ALDE group in the European Parliament. This ultimately led to the founding of Patriots for Europe together with other illiberal far-right parties such as Fidesz and FPÖ (Havlík & Hloušek, 2021; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2022; Murphy, 2024).

4.3. Scaling Liberal–Illiberal Positions on Immigration

Following Schafer et al. (2025), we use text analysis of these parliamentary speeches to measure the debates over immigration on a liberal–illiberal scale. To this end, we start by creating a dictionary that defines the debate around immigration policy, which includes "immigration," "border," "asylum," "migrant," and "migration." These terms are likely to appear primarily in debates about immigration—and not other contexts—and as a group encompass key aspects of the debate, from border security to the treatment of migrants once they are in the country.

We pair these immigration terms with liberal and illiberal dictionaries. Dictionaries for liberalism and illiberalism were initially derived from terms validated by Maerz and Schneider (2020) and Schafer (2024). Illiberal terms are indicative of discourse referring to intolerant, anti-pluralist, anti-minority language, for example, "invasion," "threat," "abuse," or "illegal." Such words—when co-occurring with immigration terms—generally have the intended effect of framing refugees and immigrants as a threat, as undeserving, or as Other, while prioritizing the dominant in-group (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Material; van Dijk, 1993).

The language of parties in parliament is modeled using a word-embeddings approach. Word embeddings offer an unsupervised method for modeling language grounded in Wittgenstein's (1973) use theory of meaning. This method leverages the distributional hypothesis of language, which proposes that we can know the meaning of a word by “the company it keeps” (Firth, 1957, p. 11).

Word embeddings encode the similarity between words based on the frequency of their co-occurrence in usage. They have been shown to successfully capture ideology in parliamentary corpora (Rheault & Cochrane, 2020). And, crucially, word embeddings are sensitive to changes in word usage over time (Rodman, 2020). For example, while the word “immigration” will likely always refer to the same topic, it might be embedded in the language of a dramatically different ideological valence, depending on the speaker and the time.

We used the text2vec GloVe algorithm (Selivanov et al., 2022) to train the word-embedding models. The training data are the collections of parliamentary speeches. We train separate models for each party in each country based on speeches given by members of that party in parliament. Further, to measure change over time, we break up the data by year and train a separate model for each year that each party was in parliament. We therefore train a total of 638 models, representing party-years, which is our unit of analysis.

The corpora normally used to train word embeddings are extremely large, containing billions of words. Our corpora are relatively smaller. We, therefore, use a bootstrapping method shown by Rodman (2020) to stabilize model outputs and make analysis less vulnerable to bias produced by single documents. We then looked at the semantic similarity—measured by the cosine similarity in the vectorized word-embedding space—between the sets of words in our dictionaries. The cosine similarity between the liberal and illiberal dictionaries and each immigration term represents the degree to which immigration is defined by a liberal or illiberal discourse. We took the difference between the average cosine similarity of the liberal and illiberal dictionaries with the immigration-related terms to produce a single score for each policy area. The final liberalism–illiberalism scale has been validated through checks with an established measure of party positions on policy issues, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Jolly et al., 2022), and shows a statistically significant correlation between the two measures, which can be found in Figure A1 in the Supplementary Material.

The distribution of the country-year scores for parties' positions on immigration accords with our intuition based on party families. Figure 1 groups the country-year scores for all parties in this study so the distribution by party family can be easily compared. The y-axis reflects the liberal–illiberal scale. Positive scores are more liberal, and negative scores are more illiberal. The Far-Left category includes parties coded as radical left by CHES. Center-Left includes social democrats and greens. Center-Right includes conservative parties and Christian Democrats. Far-Right is drawn from parties coded by CHES as radical right. The Other category includes agrarian and regionalist parties. The scores used for this analysis consist of 615 country-year observations for 67 unique parties from 8 countries between 1996 and 2024.

On average, radical left and liberal parties are the most liberal on immigration. Unsurprisingly, the radical right is the most illiberal. Still, we can see considerable variation within party families. This suggests considerable within- and between-country variation as well as considerable within-party variation over time. Using this data, we can test whether far-right parties do indeed have a radicalizing effect on immigration discourse at the party-system level. We can also test whether they moderate that position over time as they enter government and radicalize when they leave.

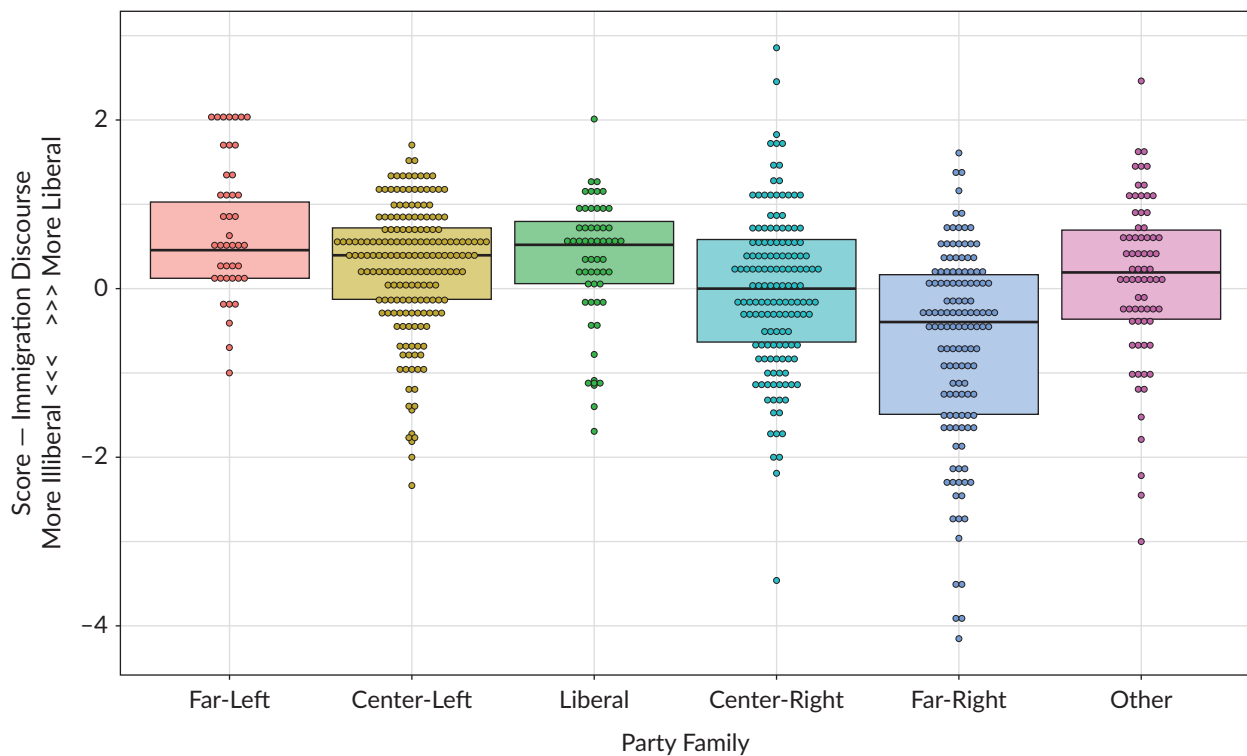


Figure 1. Distribution of country-year scores on the illiberal-liberal scale by party family.

4.4. Assessing the Effect of Far-Right Anti-Immigration Discourse: A Fixed Effects Approach

We use three sets of regressions to test the hypotheses outlined in Section 3. To examine H1a and H1b regarding the impact of increased anti-immigration discourse by far-right parties on that of mainstream parties, we run a series of models using a sample of non-far-right parties in Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. In these models, the dependent variable is the average (il)liberality of a party's immigration rhetoric in a given year, based on our word-embedding approach.

To test H1a, we include a model with an interaction term between mainstream-niche party status and the average shift in anti-immigration rhetoric of far-right parties in a party's country's parliament compared to the previous year. We calculate the average shift of far-right immigration rhetoric by averaging the change in the levels of (il)liberalism of all far-right parties in a country's parliament from $t - 1$ to t . We identify the far-right parties using the CHES party family indicator (Jolly et al., 2022) as well as expert opinion in case of shifts that have not been captured or assigned yet. We present the parties coded as illiberal far-right with italics in Table 1. The independent variable indicates whether a party is mainstream or niche according to the party's vote share in the last national election. We understand mainstream parties as those parties that represent large constituencies and are consequently constrained by median voters (Ezrow et al., 2011). Accordingly, we code a party as mainstream if it has gained more than 15% of votes in the last election; otherwise, we code it as a niche party. In this model, we also add country-fixed effects to account for time-invariant country-specific factors that may shape the party system (such as institutional arrangements or socio-cultural values). Additionally, we include year-fixed effects to account for time-variant effects, which could include exogenous shocks on the political system such as increasing levels of immigration or the 2015 Syrian refugee "crisis" on party-system level attitudes on immigration. This is particularly relevant as it has increased the politicization of immigration

and potentially has formed a new political cleavage (Grande et al., 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). With the specification described, we estimate the following model where i is the country, t is the year of observation, and $\text{FarRightShift}_{it}$ refers to the average shift of far-right parties in a country-year combination:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{(II)liberality}_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{liberality}_{i(t-1)} + \beta_2 \text{FarRightShift}_{i(t-1)} \times \text{Mainstream}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{FarRightShift}_{i(t-1)} + \beta_4 \text{Mainstream}_{it} \\ & + \sum_{c=1}^C \alpha_c \text{Country}_c + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

To test H1b, we include a model where we further distinguish between mainstream conservative, mainstream non-conservative, niche conservative, and niche non-conservative parties. This distinction aims to test if the magnitude of the effect of the far-right shift is indeed different for mainstream conservative parties compared to mainstream non-conservative parties. We again utilize the CHES party family indicator to code this variable. We code a party as mainstream conservative if it belongs to the Christian Democratic or Conservative party family and received more than 15% of the votes in the last elections. We code the party as non-conservative mainstream if it received more than 15% of the votes in the last elections but does not belong to the Conservative or Christian Democratic Party family. Other than distinguishing between conservative/non-conservative niche and mainstream parties, the model includes the same specifications as the model that tests H1a. Specifically, we estimate the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{(II)liberality}_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{liberality}_{i(t-1)} + \beta_2 \text{FarRightShift}_{i(t-1)\text{ConservMain}_{it}} + \beta_3 \text{FarRightShift}_{i(t-1)\text{NonConservMain}_{it}} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{FarRightShift}_{i(t-1)\text{ConservNiche}_{it}} + \beta_5 \text{FarRightShift}_{i(t-1)\text{NonConservNiche}_{it}} + \sum_{c=1}^C \alpha_c \text{Country}_c \\ & + \beta_6 \text{Pre2015}_{it} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Finally, to test H2a and H2b, we specify a single model that includes observations of parties that just entered or just exited the government. The dependent variable of this model is change in the illiberality of immigration discourse of a party from the previous year ($t - 1$ to t). The main independent variables in this model describe the interaction between whether the party is far-right or not, as well as the change in the party's government status. We classify change in government participation status as a two-categorical variable. If the party is in government in the year observed but has been in opposition for the previous two years ($t - 1$ and $t - 2$), we code its status as "entered government." If the party is currently in opposition but has been in government for the previous two years, we code its status as "entered opposition." Consequently, we exclude observations where a party has not been either in opposition or government consecutively for more than two years. By utilizing this approach, we model the effects of changes in government participation status dynamically. This model also includes country-fixed effects. Because the dependent variable is differenced (measuring change from one year to the next) it already accounts for linear time trends and therefore we do not include year-fixed effects. Instead, we add a before-and-after-2015 dummy variable. This dummy controls for the shock of the shift in attitudes after 2015 as a reaction to an increased level of migration from Syria and the Middle East. This model corresponds to the following equation where Δ denotes change from the previous year:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta \text{(II)liberality}_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{FarRight}_{it} \times \text{GovChange}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{GovChange}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{FarRight}_{it} \\ & + \sum_{c=1}^C \alpha_c \text{Country}_c + \beta_4 \text{Pre2015}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

5. Results: Conservative Mainstream Parties Follow the Far-Right

All of the hypotheses outlined in Section 3 involve interaction terms. For this reason, we present the marginal effect estimates of each of the three hypotheses visually, instead of presenting the regression coefficients, which are not directly interpretable (Brambor et al., 2006). The respective regression models can be found in Table A3 in the Supplementary Material.

Figure 2 illustrates the variation in far-right discourse and its relationship with mainstream and niche parties, addressing H1a. The horizontal axis represents the position that far-right parties take on, where negative values indicate a more illiberal immigration discourse. The vertical axis represents the immigration discourse of non-far-right parties, with lower or negative values indicating more illiberal discourse. The red line shows trends for mainstream parties, while the blue line represents niche parties, displayed along with their confidence intervals.

Figure 2 suggests that shifts in far-right parties' immigration discourse is associated with that of mainstream parties. Specifically, a one-unit shift by far-right parties toward a more illiberal stance correlates with a 0.25 increase in the illiberality of mainstream parties' discourse and this association is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. In contrast, the correlation of shifts in far-right parties' discourse with niche parties is 0.09, nearly three times less than that between mainstream parties and far-right parties. Furthermore, the association between shifts in discourses of far-right and niche parties, while positive, is not

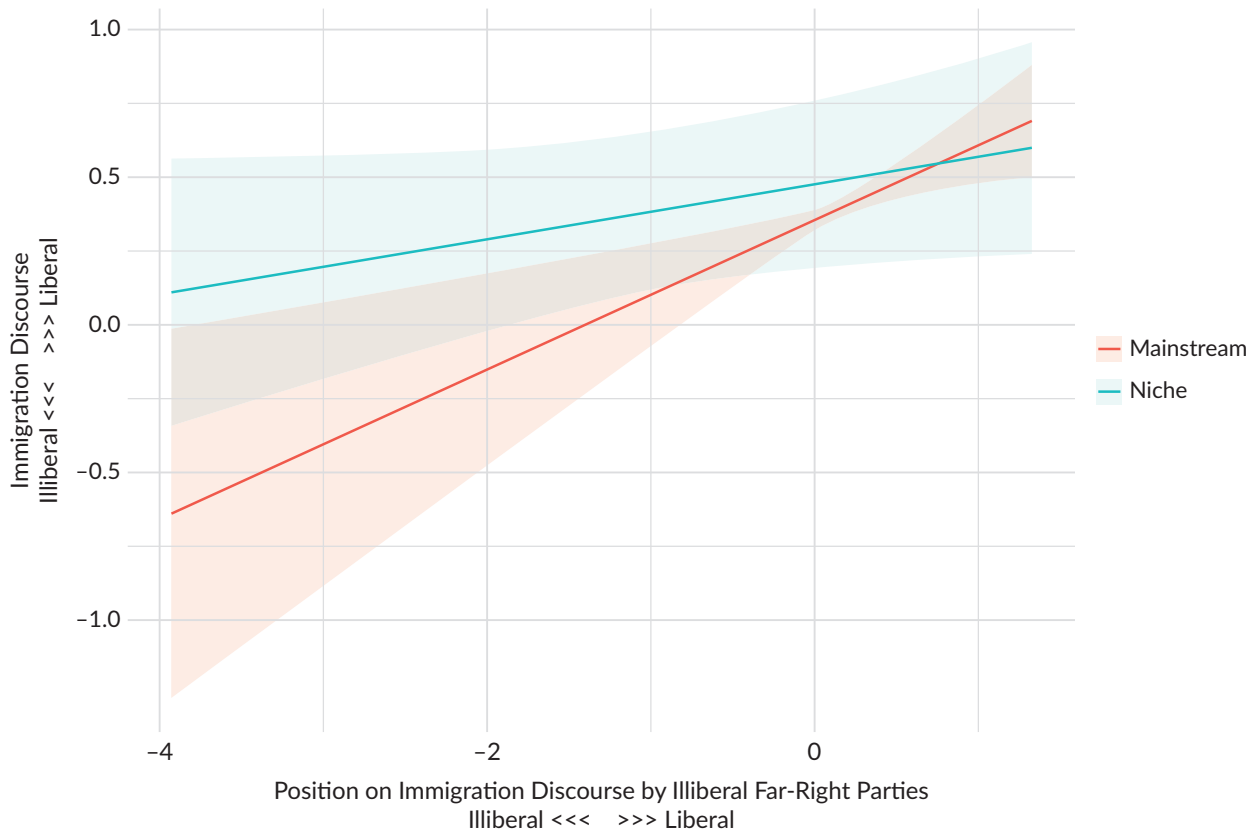


Figure 2. Marginal effects of average shift in immigration discourse by illiberal far-right parties on mainstream and niche parties' immigration discourse.

statistically distinguishable from zero. However, the two associations are also not statistically distinguishable from each other despite the substantive differences in their magnitude.

Overall, the evidence from the first regression model and Figure 2 suggests tentative support for H1a but is inconclusive. Further, as we demonstrate in Figure A2 (see Supplementary Material), these findings remain consistent if we focus on the immigration discourse of far-right parties using pooled OLS models as well as first-differenced models that take as the independent and dependent variables the change in parties' discourse from $t - 1$ to t . We follow up this initial evidence in support of H1a with the next regression that breaks up mainstream parties by whether they are conservative.

In Figure 3, we test the argument of H1b. Using marginal effects, we show the association between the far-right and mainstream parties but further distinguish between conservative and non-conservative (denoted as "Other" in the Figure). Figure 3 suggests that shifts in the immigration discourse of far-right parties toward (il)liberalism push mainstream conservative parties to become, on average, more (il)liberal. Specifically, a one-unit increase (or decrease) in the illiberality of far-right parties' immigration discourse is associated with a 0.39 unit change in the position of mainstream conservative parties, and this association is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. In contrast, shifts in far-right parties' discourse on immigration do not show a significant relationship to the immigration discourse of other mainstream or conservative niche parties. Shifts among other niche, mainstream, or conservative niche parties do not appear to be a reaction to the anti-immigration rhetoric of the far-right. Using hypothesis testing

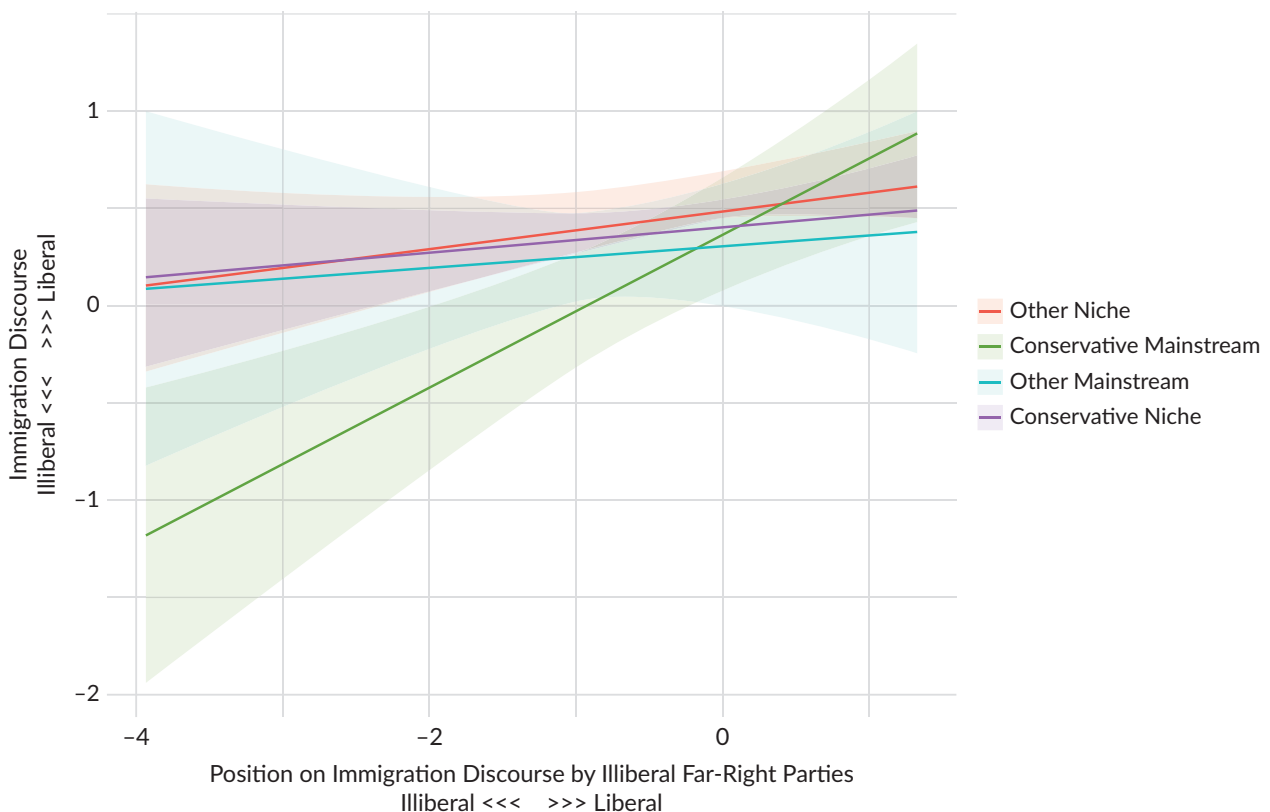


Figure 3. Marginal effects of average shift in immigration discourse by illiberal far-right parties on mainstream and niche parties' immigration discourse, with distinction between conservative and non-conservative parties.

(Arel-Bundock et al., in press), we can also see that the estimated effect of far-right parties' rhetoric on conservative mainstream parties is significantly higher than the far-right's estimated effect on other party categories at the 90% confidence level.

The far-right might have a small, party-system-wide effect on illiberal discourse around immigration. Figure 3 shows that the far-right's immigration discourse appears to have a small, positive, and nearly identical relationship with other mainstream, conservative niche, and other niche parties. However, this relationship does not meet the standard measures of statistical significance. The evidence therefore supports both H1a and H1b, but with some qualifications. The far-right appears to have a slight radicalizing effect on all political parties, which aligns with Kriesi et al.'s (2008) observations of far-right parties' role in spatial competition across party families. However, the radicalizing influence of the far-right is strong and statistically significant most consistently when it comes to pushing conservative parties in an illiberal direction (see further tests of this relationship in Figure A4 in the Supplementary Material). These findings extend previous research findings that accommodation of illiberal parties can not only be observed in conservative parties' manifestos (Wagner & Meyer, 2017) but also in their discursive practice.

Turning to the second set of hypotheses H2a and H2b, we test the effect of entering and exiting government. Figure 4 displays the average predicted shift in the liberal-illiberal position of far-right and non-far-right parties. The estimates for illiberal far-right parties are shown on the right, while those for non-far-right parties are shown on the left. Red dots indicate the estimates immediately after parties enter government, and blue dots represent the estimates immediately after they exit.

Figure 4 provides evidence in support of H2a and H2b. It shows that, for far-right parties, the relationship between entering and exiting government and illiberal discourse on immigration follows the expected

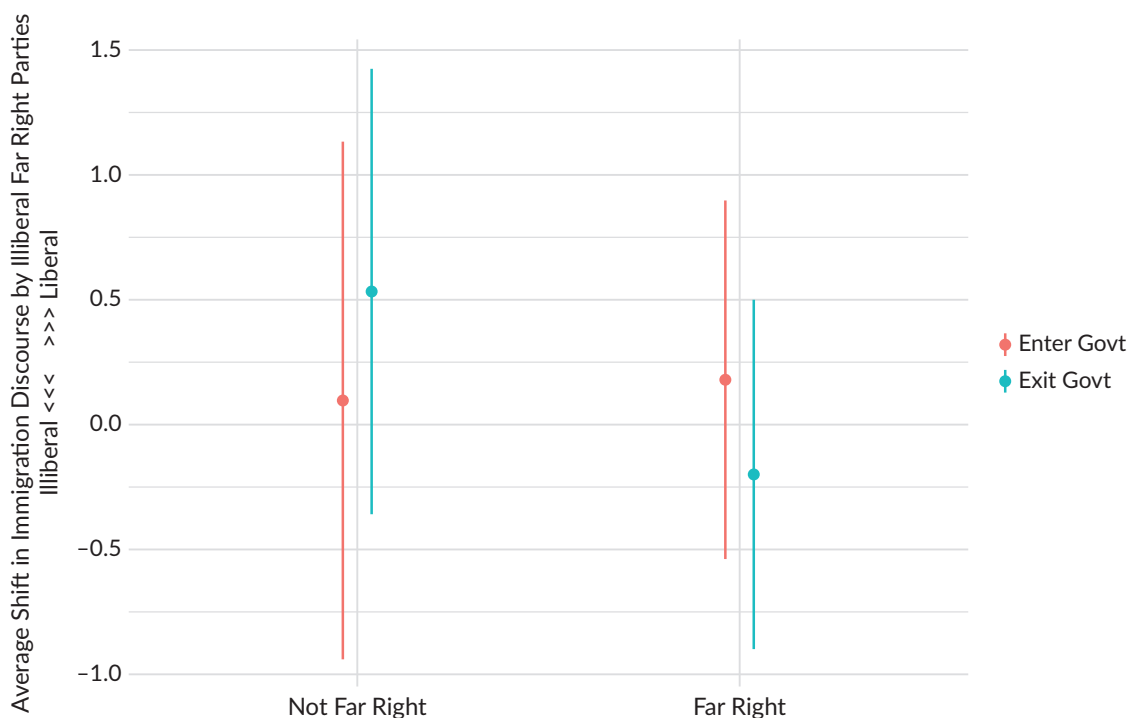


Figure 4. Marginal effects of entering and exiting government on immigration discourse.

direction. However, the relationship reverses for non-far-right parties. When far-right parties enter government, their position on immigration becomes more liberal, while exiting has the opposite effect, resulting in more illiberal positions. Conversely, non-far-right parties show a tendency toward a less liberal immigration discourse upon entering government, whereas they shift toward a more liberal discourse when joining the opposition. When both entering and exiting government, they appear to maintain a liberal immigration discourse, contrary to far-right parties. The difference in the effect of exiting government between far-right and non-far-right parties is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

In other words, far-right parties entering government are, on average, more likely to moderate. And, when they leave, they are more likely to radicalize. However, there is considerable variation of these effects of entering and exiting government. Far-right parties are not homogeneous, which can be an artifact of coalition size, being a junior coalition partner, or party strategy. They have incentives for both liberal or illiberal communication strategies and might be punished for either approach as well. The moderating effect of entering government is clearest when comparing the far-right with parties that are not far-right. For parties not on the far-right, there is no clear effect of entering or exiting government—and there might even be a small illiberal effect of entering government. For the far-right, there is a clear divergence: The point estimates show a positive liberal effect of entering government, and an illiberal effect of exiting government. While previous literature has emphasized the country differences of immigration discourse (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016), we find a moderation effect of entering government on parliamentary speeches even after controlling for country-specific variation.

6. Discussion: The Far-Right's Overall Anti-Immigration Effect and the Failure of Accommodation

On average, far-right parties consistently express more anti-immigrant positions than the rest of the parties in the political system. While our analysis shows they may moderate somewhat when entering government, this moderation is limited and temporary. Our findings therefore suggest a more complex interpretation of moderation, contradicting work by van Spanje and van der Brug (2007)—far-right parties in government adapt their rhetoric without fully abandoning core anti-immigrant positions, and their expressed moderation often reverses upon returning to opposition. Most importantly, even as far-right parties temporarily moderate in government, they simultaneously pull mainstream conservative parties toward more illiberal positions. Therefore, their net effect on the political system is to make discourse on immigration more hostile overall. We thus build on Akkerman and Rooduijn's (2015) finding that neither inclusion nor exclusion strategies effectively moderate radical right party positions, by showing that inclusion of far-right parties in government does not lead to lasting moderation of their positions and likely has a deleterious influence on the broader discourse around immigration.

This has important implications for how to approach far-right parties within parliament and beyond. Parties that support accommodation strategies—such as granting government access—often justify this approach by arguing it will moderate far-right positions and reduce their electoral appeal. However, our findings suggest these strategies rest on flawed assumptions. The moderation we observe is temporary and likely superficial, while the far-right's influence on immigration discourse is pervasive. Paradoxically, research shows that when far-right parties enter government, they may not even produce more restrictive policies than center-right governments would on their own (Akkerman, 2012; Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). Rather, the far-right's most substantial impact appears to come through their influence on mainstream conservative parties, who adopt

more restrictive positions regardless of whether the far-right is in government or opposition. This suggests that accommodation strategies fail to contain the far-right's influence while potentially legitimizing them through participation in government.

These results also highlight the dynamic interplay between issue ownership, salience, and strategic positioning. The observed shifts by mainstream conservative parties reinforce the notion of accommodation as a central strategy in electoral competition (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Wagner & Meyer, 2017). The German case is illustrative. The entry of the far-right AfD into parliament not only significantly expanded the political space for party competition but also resulted in mainstream parties moving to the right. This case also exemplifies our findings on party family differences: While center-left parties like the SPD barely changed their positions or even moved further to the left on immigration, conservative mainstream parties such as the German CDU shifted rightward in various state parliaments (Atzpodien, 2022). Notably, this rightward shift occurred even as German federal parties, like the CDU, officially excluded the possibility of cooperation with the AfD—a stance they reaffirmed in 2018. However, this formal barrier has shown signs of erosion in state-level parliaments and in 2025 also on the national level (Thurau, 2025). Instances such as the election of an FDP politician with AfD support in Thuringia in 2020 and increasing cooperation on parliamentary motions illustrate the weakening resolve of mainstream center parties (Decker et al., 2023). The German case thus illustrates a broader pattern supported by our findings: Whether through formal cooperation or despite official exclusion, far-right parties succeed in pulling mainstream conservative parties toward more illiberal positions on immigration, suggesting that accommodation strategies not only fail to moderate the far-right, but may accelerate the rightward shift of immigration discourse and policy.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a novel approach to measuring immigration discourse in parliamentary settings using an illiberalism–liberalism scale based on word embeddings and dictionaries. It addresses pressing questions regarding how far-right participation in parliaments and governments affects both their own rhetoric and that of mainstream parties by focusing on spatial competition. Responding to existing literature, we specifically focus on two issues: one, the potential influence of far-right parties' anti-immigration discourses on conservative mainstream parties, and, two, the moderating effect that entering or exiting government has on far-right parties' rhetoric. By combining various existing datasets on parliamentary speeches, we can analyze the party systems of eight countries between 1996 and 2024. These countries have seen a far-right party join parliament or transition in/out of government in the time covered by this analysis and there is considerable variation in the historical relevance of the far-right. These findings therefore travel well across diverse party systems.

We find that far-right parties' illiberal discourse on immigration leads to an increase in the illiberalism of conservative parties on immigration, supporting both H1a and H1b. However, while our initial accommodation hypothesis regarding all mainstream parties—that they will adopt more illiberal immigration discourse after a similar shift by far-right parties—is statistically significant, this significance disappears after accounting for conservative mainstream parties in H1b. Conservative mainstream parties—not all mainstream parties—respond by accommodating the position of far-right parties on immigration. This emphasizes the dynamic aspect of party competition, in which parties react to discursive shifts of ideologically proximate parties.

Our results provide contradictory evidence regarding the inclusion-moderation theory. On the one hand, far-right parties do indeed moderate their illiberal immigration discourse when entering government. Further research could address whether moderation is driven by conditions imposed by the coalition partner, such as with the FPÖ in 2000 (Fallend, 2012). Or possibly, moderation could result from being in power and therefore being responsible for policy decisions—rather than playing the opposition’s role as a government critic (Helms, 2008). On the other hand, three factors counteract the tempering effect of entering government. One, there is high variation within illiberal far-right parties. Two, they illiberalize again when returning to the opposition, and three, they appear to have an overall illiberalizing effect on the party system. Therefore, on net, far-right parties appear to have an illiberal effect despite the potential for moderation.

Lastly, it is important to note that we have focused on parliamentary speeches in this study. Parties strategically communicate in different arenas of political competition and their discourse might not reflect their actions or communication in other mediums such as party manifestos. For instance, our results partially contradict previous research that analyzed press releases and found an increase in salience but no changes in positions after the 2015 refugee crisis (Gessler & Hunger, 2022). While parliamentary speeches are indicative of parties’ positions on salient policy debates, it would be worthwhile to extend this study to other contexts such as party conventions or social media. This would be particularly interesting in the context of tailored communication strategies.

Our findings highlight the evolving dynamics of party competition and far-right influence. While institutional constraints and coalition responsibilities may produce temporary moderation of far-right parties in government, this effect is ultimately overshadowed by their broader, illiberal impact on party systems. Our analysis of parliamentary discourse shows that mainstream conservative parties follow the far-right’s more restrictive positions on immigration regardless of whether the latter is in or out of government. These findings demonstrate not just the failure of accommodation as both an electoral strategy and containment mechanism but also suggest that conventional approaches to managing far-right parties may miss these parties’ most significant impact. Through their influence on parliamentary debate and policy positions, far-right parties shape the supply of elite discourse in ways that normalize illiberal, exclusionary positions—an effect that neither exclusion nor inclusion strategies effectively address.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Zsolt Enyedi (Central European University), Petra Guasti (Charles University), and Bálint Mikola (CEU Democracy Institute).

Data Availability

Data associated with this study can be found in the following datasets: ParlaMint (Kuzman et al., 2023), ParLEE (Sylvester et al., 2022), ParlSpeech (Rauh & Schwalbach, 2020), and SpeakGer (Lange & Jentsch, 2024).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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