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Abstract:

The handling of the immigration issue by established parties and the electoral success of anti-immigrant parties are closely linked. Comparative research on anti-immigrant parties argues that articulation of the immigration issue by established parties help make anti-immigrant parties electorally viable. The Swedish case seems to challenge this view. While there is no successful anti-immigrant party, scholars claim that the immigration issue has been a salient issue for established parties at least since the mid 1990s. However, contradicting this claim, this paper argues that Swedish established parties have chosen to not articulate the immigration issue. It first demonstrates empirically that the immigration issue has indeed an electoral potential in Sweden. Using primary data on election manifestos and televised party leader debates from 1970 to 2006, it then shows that established parties have downplayed the immigration issue in their vote-seeking activities.

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Introduction

In countries like Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland, the immigration issue has been a vehicle for electorally successful anti-immigrant parties. However, anti-immigrant parties operating in other West European countries have been less successful in exploiting their issue of concern. Scholarly efforts to understand variations in the electoral success of anti-immigrant parties identify established parties' handling of their policy agenda as a key causal factor. The basic argument is that anti-immigrant parties suffer from an electoral constraint in that they are outside the region of acceptability for most voters, and that this electoral constraint is lifted when established parties acknowledge their policy agenda (van der Brug et al. 2005: 555-7; Arzheimer and Carter 2006: 438-9). Thus, by articulating the immigration issue, established parties make anti-immigrant parties an acceptable choice for potential voters (e.g. Bale 2003: 75; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008: 613).

While this theory on policy agenda acceptance accounts for the development in countries where anti-immigrant parties have been successful, Sweden appears to be the odd case out. The lack of success for Swedish anti-immigrant parties is easily observable (Rydgren 2002). Still, both scholars (Hammar 1999: 179; Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008: 373) and political pundits (e.g. Bengtsson 2009; Gröning 2009) claim that established parties have articulated the immigration issue in their vote-seeking activities, at least since the mid 1990s. If their observation is correct, Sweden is a deviant case for policy agenda acceptance theory, perhaps because public opinion is less susceptible to anti-immigrant rhetoric.

However, this paper will argue that the Swedish experience from 1970 to 2006 fits well with predictions of the theory. It claims that established parties have chosen to not articulate the immigration issue in their vote-seeking activities. We identify two critical moments in which established parties came close to acknowledging the policy agenda of anti-immigrant parties. The first was when the Conservatives were tempted to articulate the immigration issue in the 1994 parliamentary election, but chose not to. The second occurred during the 2002 parliamentary election when the Liberals temporarily made the immigration issue a main issue in their campaign. To validate our argument empirically, we rely on several data sources, among them a primary data collection of election manifestos and televised party leader debates (Esaiasson and Håkansson 2009) and data on the policy responsiveness of elected representatives generated by the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) (Holmberg 1994).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first develop our theoretical argument along with our criteria for parties' articulation of the immigration issue, and then follow a discussion on data and measurements, after which the empirical results are presented. A concluding section summarizes our findings and discusses their implications.

The Immigration Issue and Anti-Immigrant Party Success

We define “the immigration issue” in broad terms to include “regulation of flows of immigration and control of aliens” as well as “immigrant policy” (Hammar 1985: 7).

Regarding the party family of particular interest to us, there is no generally agreed-upon

definition. We follow van der Brug et al. (2005: 537) and use the term anti-immigrant parties (for other terms, see for example Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Mudde 1996; Rydgren 2005).

In comparative research on the electoral fortune of anti-immigrant parties, strategic actions of established political parties are considered crucially important (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). One reason why scholars have turned to party strategy to explain anti-immigrant party success is that models that focus on socio-economic factors fail to account for cross-country variations. Indeed, if socio-economic factors were the main determinant of electoral success, then we should see more successful anti-immigrant parties in Western Europe. Because of this, scholars conclude that traditional socio-economic models omit factors that hamper the electoral fortune of anti-immigrant parties in some national contexts (van der Brug et al. 2005: 555-7; Arzheimer and Carter 2006: 438-9).

Specifically, it has been suggested that anti-immigrant parties underperform in some countries because potential voter groups do not perceive them as “decent” alternatives (van der Brug et al. 2005: 565). In countries where they are evaluated according to the same standards as established parties, anti-immigrant parties are much more successful. Being seen as a normal – “decent” – alternative is therefore a valuable asset for an anti-immigrant party (*ibid.*).

A crucial question, then, is how an anti-immigrant party can be transformed into a decent political alternative. Scholars have explained this with reference to the actions of established parties. Anti-immigrant parties gain decency if their policy proposals are on the political agenda which in turn is strongly influenced by the strategic actions of established parties. If established parties choose to articulate themes from the anti-immigrant party's agenda, it legitimizes the party in the minds of potential voter groups (Arzheimer and Carter 2006: 439; Bale 2003: 67).

Moreover, Bale (2003; 2008) argues that parties on the political right have the most to gain from moving their agenda closer to the anti-immigrant party agenda, and should therefore be the most tempted to do so. In a West European context, mainstream right parties have at least two reasons to take policy positions close to anti-immigrant parties. First, mainstream right parties traditionally "own" issues often emphasized by anti-immigrant parties, such as a hard line against immigration, crime and welfare abuse (Bale 2008: 320). Second, mainstream right parties have a strategic interest in removing "what was essentially an artificial constraint on the size of any right bloc in parliament" (Bale 2003: 69).

It is well known that new issues are not automatically made into political issues in parties' electoral competition (Campbell et al. 1960: chapter 2; Gilljam 1988: chapter 1). There are both theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that one important aspect of party competition is that of issue competition. With issue competition scholars normally denote the competition among parties regarding how salient an issue should be (Carmines

and Stimson 1993; see also Budge and Farlie 1983 for a discussion on the similar concept of “selective emphasis”). The basic logic of the concept of issue competition is that a party tries to get issues that it prefers on the political agenda and issues it dislikes off the agenda (Green-Pedersen 2007: 609). Recently, several scholars have claimed that issue voting has gained in importance in Western Europe (Thomassen 2005) and thus that issue competition has become even more important than before (Carmines and Wagner 2006; Green-Pedersen 2007).

Regarding anti-immigrant parties, the immigration issue is the most probable issue bridging the legitimacy gap for them and making them an acceptable alternative for large voter groups (Bale 2003: 75; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008: 613). To understand the success and failures of anti-immigrant parties it is therefore important to analyze if (and to what extent) the immigration issue has been articulated by established parties.

The Swedish Case

From the perspective of the policy agenda theory, Sweden appears to be a deviant case. In sharp contrast to its neighbor countries Denmark and Norway, Sweden has not seen any long-lived and nationally successful anti-immigrant party. A separatist party, The Skåne Party (*Skånepartiet*), accomplished to get mandates in local municipalities in the Skåne region during the 1980s, but it never had any impact nationally. Another, more explicitly xenophobic party, the Sjöbo Party (*Sjöbopartiet*), originating from one specific municipality in Skåne, got some attention in the public debate in 1988 and it managed to get 0.5 percent of the votes in the national election and achieved some local

representation in Skåne. These parties had, however, only very marginal influence on Swedish politics (Rydgren 2002; Widfeldt 2004).

Table 1 reports election results for the two hitherto most successful anti-immigrant parties on the national level; New Democracy (*Ny demokrati*) and the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*). To contextualize the results, it is important to note the 4 percent threshold to the Swedish Parliament. New Democracy was formed just before the 1991 election. It managed to get 6.7 percent of the national vote and was consequently rewarded 25 parliamentary seats (out of 349). However, already in the following election its support dropped to 1.2 percent and it disappeared as a serious political alternative shortly thereafter. The largest anti-immigrant party today is the Sweden Democrats. It is a nationalist oriented party that was formed in 1988. As reported in table 1, they had some success in the 2002 and 2006 elections. Although they are still a marginal party, they have gained a lot of attention in the Swedish debate after the 2006 election. A dominating view today (Winter 2009) is that they have a good chance to get into the Parliament following the election in 2010.

[Table 1 about here]

Contrary to what comparative research would lead us to expect, it has been claimed by both scholars and political pundits that the immigration issue has been salient in Sweden at least since the mid 1990s. As Green-Pedersen and Odman (2008: 372) put it, the immigration issue has: "...gone from being a general welfare state concern, characterized

by cross-party consensus, to being an issue used as a way of distinguishing and profiling parties”, and they identify the turning point as being the 1994 election (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008: 373). The dean of Swedish immigration policy research, Tomas Hammar, makes a similar analysis, although he dates the breaking point some years earlier, somewhere between the late 1980s and the early 1990s (Hammar 1999: 179). On the other hand there are also contradictory claims in the scholarly discussion about the salience of the immigration issue in Sweden and this question stands unresolved today (Dahlström 2004: 76; Rydgren 2002: 39).

Research strategy and data

To evaluate empirical support for our argument that Swedish established parties have deliberately chosen to not articulate the immigration issue, we proceed in three steps. We start by addressing what we consider to be the most probable alternative explanation for the absence of successful anti-immigrant parties, namely that the Swedish electorate is less susceptible to typical anti-immigration rhetoric. For this purpose we first study party elites responsiveness to public opinion on the immigration issue and second whether there is an engaged public opinion on the immigration issue for parties to exploit. Following this, our third and most important analytical step is to study whether established parties have articulated the immigration issue in their vote-seeking activities.

Policy responsiveness of party elites are captured by data from surveys of Members of the Parliament and eligible voters carried out by Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) (Holmberg 1994; www.valforskning.pol.gu.se).¹ Following a parliamentary

election, both MPs (mail surveys) and eligible voters (personal interviews) are asked about their views on an identically worded set of policy proposals including a proposal to “accept fewer refugees into the country”. We take the degree of congruence between representatives and voters on this issue as an indicator of policy responsiveness; repeated and large differences in support of the proposal indicate a low degree of policy responsiveness from party elites.

To capture citizens’ engagement in the immigration issue we rely on data from the SOM-study, a yearly high-quality mail survey with a representative sample of adolescents and adults permanently living in Sweden (Holmberg and Weibull 2009; www.som.gu.se). Specifically, we focus on responses to an open-ended question which probes subjects to identify pressing issues and problems: “What do you think is the most important issue or problem facing the country today? Please report up to three issues or problems”. A relatively large proportion of references to “immigration” indicate that the immigration issue is a concern for citizens.

To capture established parties’ articulation of the immigration issue, we look mainly at the issue content of explicit campaign messages. Here we rely on primary data from the so-called POP-study, which is a systematic quantitative content analysis of campaign messages in manifestos and televised party leader debates (Esaiasson and Håkansson 2009). In a complementary analysis, we look at voters’ perceptions about parties campaign messages using data from SNES voter studies (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2008; www.valforskning.pol.gu.se).

Policy Responsiveness

By comparative standards, Swedish citizens are often classified as tolerant towards foreigners (Hjerm 2007). This suggests that Swedish public opinion might be less susceptible to the rhetoric typically associated with anti-immigration parties. However, notwithstanding relatively high levels of tolerance, measures of attitudes towards specific policy proposals show that a large proportion of the general public supports more restrictive immigration policies in Sweden. More specifically, the estimated proportion of citizens that favor a proposal to “allow fewer refugees into the country” has since 1990 varied between 65 and 43 percent. Moreover, when the wordings of the policy proposal are reversed so that a favorable response indicates a support of a generous immigration policy, the proportion of favorable responses decreases to around 20 percent (Demker 2009: 49). Hence, the rather dramatic marginal distributions on the policy proposals in question cannot reasonably be written off as a statistical artifact.

How have party elites responded to this anti-immigration opinion? To answer this question, Figure 1 displays the percentage difference between MPs’ and citizens’ support for the proposal to “accept fewer refugees into the country” in the aftermath of parliamentary elections between 1994 and 2006. High percentages indicate large policy disagreement. As points of reference we use the average level of disagreement over a large set of policy proposals (excluding “accept fewer refugees”) and a policy proposal that reflects the dominating ideological left-right conflict “to reduce the scope of the public sector”.²

[Figure 1 about here]

Results show a persistent and substantially large level of disagreement between MPs and citizens on the proposal to accept fewer refugees into the country. As expected, MPs hold a negative view on the proposal, whereas citizens are much more supportive. The level of disagreement is three to four times higher than the average level of disagreement over the entire set of policy proposals included in the surveys as well as the typical left-right issue to “reduce the scope of the public sector”. Taking all policy proposals in the surveys into account, disagreement over “immigration” is clearly larger than for any other policy proposal in 1994, 1998, and 2002, and the second largest in 2006 (beaten only by a proposal to allow Turkey into the EU).

In 2006, the level of policy disagreement decreases somewhat (the difference is down from 50 to 40 percentage points). However, for our purpose it is important to note that this is because citizens express more liberal views on immigration than before (support for the proposal to allow fewer refugees into the country decreases from 57 to 48 percent). In other words, it is citizen opinion that moves closer to MP opinion, rather than MPs adjusting to citizen opinion.

Overall, in support of our argument that established parties have deliberately chosen to not exploit the immigration issue, the results presented here suggest that party elites have remained unresponsive to anti-immigrant policy views among citizens.

Electoral Potential

Another alternative related to the Swedish public opinion is that citizens consider “immigration” a peripheral issue. As a measure of citizens’ engagement, Figure 2 shows the proportion of citizens in the SOM-surveys that have answered “immigration” when asked an open-ended survey question about the “the most important problem facing the country today”. To provide some points of reference, we include corresponding information about “the environmental issue” and about the issue which is mentioned by most respondents each year (what we denote the “main issue”). We also include information about the rank order of “immigration” on a list of 17 issues and problems.³

[Figure 2 about here]

Results indicate that “immigration” is a concern for citizens. Each year a substantial proportion of respondents (ranging from 7 to 25 percent) identifies “immigration” as one of the most important problems facing the country. In terms of rank order, “immigration” consistently scores among the top third of important problems facing the country. It is not a *prime* concern for citizens – not in any year is “immigration” identified as the main problem facing the country – but from the mid 1990s it has been relatively more engaging than “the environment”. Overall the results suggest that there is a potential engagement in the immigration issue to explore for political parties; Swedish public opinion is hardly exceptional in comparison to countries in which anti-immigrant parties

have used the immigration issue as a springboard for electoral success (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Bale 2003).

While citizen engagement in the immigration issue appears to be relatively stable over time, the early 1990s stands out as a deviant period. For two consecutive years, in 1992 and 1993, “immigration” was considered to be among the top three most important problems facing the country. These were years when Sweden received an unusually large influx of refugees from the war-torn former Yugoslavia (Dahlström 2004: 50-5) and also experienced violent actions against refugee centers and individual immigrants (Lodén and Larsson 1994), while at the same time being hit by an exceptional economic recession with drastic cutbacks in welfare state systems (Andersen 2001; Lindvall 2004). Beginning in the election year of 1994, citizen engagement returned to a lower level (although higher than before the crisis years).

The Immigration Issue in Election Campaigns

In this section we study established parties’ articulation of the immigration issue in their vote-seeking activities during election campaigns from 1970 to 2006. Figure 3 reports the proportion of the election manifestos from the established parties that have been dedicated to the immigration issue. Again, the environment issue and the main issue (that is the issue that gains the most attention) for each election are included as points of reference.

[Figure 3 about here]

As is evident in Figure 3, a very small proportion of the election manifestos are dedicated to the immigration issue. In the election manifestos from 1970 to 2006, between 0 and 4 percent of the content are related to the immigration issue. This can be compared with the environment issue, another new issue, which varies from 2 to 10 percent. With the exception of the environment issue in the 1988 election, none of the two issues come close to being the main issue in any election campaign. At the most, the immigration issue is allotted a third of the space compared to the main issue.

Looking at the entire time period, an initially small increase can be seen in the election of 1988, when 2 percent of the manifestos were devoted to the immigration issue. This level is stable through the 1991 election, but drops to 1 percent in 1994 and stays at that level in the 1998 election. The immigration issue has its highest scores in the elections of 2002 and 2006, when 4 percent of the content in the manifestos were devoted to this issue. Generally, the data from the manifestos supports the view that the established parties have not articulated the immigration issue.

The election manifestos do however only capture the messages that the parties had drafted before the campaign. To get an indication of whether the immigration issue was articulated during the campaign itself, figure 4 reports on the proportion of time dedicated to the issue in the televised party leader debate broadcasted just before the Election Day. If “immigration” emerged as an issue during the campaign, either the parties or the journalists are likely to bring it up in this final debate.

[Figure 4 about here]

Again, the general picture is one of little attention being paid to the immigration issue. The proportion of time dedicated to the immigration issue is generally between 0 and 8 percent, and if the 2002 election is excluded it is between 0 and 4 percent. Up to the 1991 election the immigration issue was almost never brought up at all in the party leader debate, and if it was included, then it was only to a very small extent (1 percent). In all elections before 1998, the environment issue was dedicated more time than the immigration issue and in the 1998 election the same time was devoted to the two issues.

There are, however, two important exceptions from the general pattern. The first occurs in the 1994 debate. Although it is still on a fairly low level, the attention paid to the immigration issue increases from 1 to 4 percent. This reflects how leaders of the established parties responded to the explicit anti-immigrant statements made by the new leader of New Democracy, Vivian Franzén. We will discuss this period in more detail below since it has been identified as a critical period by scholars (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008; Hammar 1999).⁴

The largest diversion from the general pattern is the party leader debate in the 2002 election. This is the only time when more attention has been paid to the immigration issue than to the environment issue, and what is more, in the 2002 election the immigration issue took up about half the time as the main issue. Since the 2002 election stands out

regarding the attention paid to the immigrant issue, we will discuss this election and the period between 2002 and 2006 in more detail in the next section. Here it is enough to note that the reason for the high scores in the 2002 election is a specific policy proposal from the Liberals that was made late in the election campaign and that the immigration issue was pushed only by the Liberals.

There are two important limitations to our main indicators of parties' articulation of the immigrant issue. First, although we maintain that manifestos and party leader debates are important channels for party communication, there are other forums where parties can communicate with their voters (Naurin 2009). Second, they only capture explicit campaign messages from the parties. Obviously parties sometimes use other means, such as implicit strategies, to communicate sensitive matters to voters (Gilens 1999; Federico 2004). Therefore, figure 5 reports on voters' perceptions of the parties' primary campaign issues.

[Figure 5 about here]

As before, the environment issue and the main issue are included as points of reference. The time period covered in figure 5 is from 1982 to 2006, and it draws on an open-ended question from the SNES voter studies. Respondents are asked about what issues each party has emphasized the most during the election campaign (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2008: 52). From 1982 to 1988 no one (0 percent) saw the immigration issue as an important issue for any of the established parties. This changed in the 1991 election,

when the proportion rose to 10 percent for the Liberal party, but then it dropped back to 3 percent in 1994 and to 0 percent in 1998. The relatively high value in 1991 is explained by the Liberals' critique against the anti-immigration policies suggested by New Democracy, which motivated some voters to perceive the immigration issue as a primary issue for the Liberals. During all years up until the 2002 election, the immigration issue was far behind the environment issue and it never came close to being the main issue.

The 2002 election is again an exception; 56 percent of the respondents perceived the immigration issue as an important issue for at least one of the established parties. This is the only time when "immigration" scores higher than any other issue including the environment. However, the high value for the immigration issue in the 2002 election can be attributed solely to voters' perceptions about the Liberals. This also illustrates how sensitive the perception indicator is, as it captures all important issues for *any* of the established political parties.

Importantly, our indicators of party leader debate and the voters' perceptions show a sharp drop in terms of the attention paid to the immigration issue already in the following election of 2006. We will discuss the 2002 election further in the next section.

Overall, the results presented here support our argument that the established parties have chosen not to systematically articulate the immigration issue in their vote-seeking activities.

Two Critical Periods, 1991-1994 and 2002-2006

We will finally turn to the two critical periods during which the immigration issue has had its highest scores of articulation from the established parties; 1991 to 1994 and 2002 to 2006.

Regarding the former period, it has been argued that the immigration issue was articulated in the early 1990s, since established parties adapted to the electoral success of New Democracy in the 1991 parliamentary election (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008: 373-4; Hammar 1999: 179). We agree that the early 1990s was a critical period for the immigration issue in political discourse – Figure 2 above illustrates how citizen engagement rose rapidly in 1992 and 1993 – but we argue that established parties acted to keep the issue away from the public agenda.

Before analysing the actions of the established parties in the 1991-1994 period, it is important to recognise that New Democracy primarily ran their 1991 campaign on a broad anti-establishment agenda. True, the anti-immigration rhetoric was a part of their campaign, but it was not their main message in 1991 (Rydgren 2002: 33-34). This is supported by the data reported in Table 2. The immigration issue did not play the leading role for New Democracy in their vote-seeking activities in 1991. On all three indicators immigration was far behind the main issue which was high taxes along with bureaucratic inefficiency. Only in their bid for re-election in 1994 did the immigration issue emerge as the main issue for New Democracy.

[Table 2 about here]

However, rather than adapting to an anti-immigration rhetoric which might have played well with the policy moods among substantial groups of voters, established parties unanimously denounced New Democracy in 1994. In a rare manifestation of unity in the televised debate shortly before Election Day, representatives of all established parties made it clear that immigration was a non-issue for them: “Shameful”, “despicable”, “immoral” were some adjectives used to characterize New Democracy policy proposals (Dahlström 2004: 76-78). Apart from this demonstration, the immigration issue was not articulated at all by established parties in the 1994 party leader debate.

According to policy agenda acceptance theory, actions of mainstream right parties are particularly important as they stand the most to gain from articulating the immigration issue (Bale 2003: 69). Considering this, it is surprising that the Conservative Prime Minister at the time, Carl Bildt, joined the other party leaders in dissociating himself and his party from the anti-immigration rhetoric of New Democracy. This is even more surprising when we take a closer look at the data on policy responsiveness, as it indicates that the Conservatives did indeed differ from other established parties in 1994. Table 3 gives detailed information about the level of policy agreement on the proposal to allow fewer refugees into the country between MPs and their party voters for all parties in the Swedish Parliament in 1994 and 1998.

[Table 3 about here]

In 1994, Conservative MPs were in close agreement with their voters on favouring more restrictive immigration policies. This is the only occasion during the entire study period from 1994 to 2006 that a party has been in agreement with their voters on this particular proposal.⁵ In 1998, Conservative MPs had again adjusted their views to other party elites and thereby distancing themselves from their voters. To take a contrasting example, Social democratic MPs, who ran the risk of losing substantially to radical anti-immigrant parties, responded quite differently to the situation. While a majority of Social democratic voters consistently favoured the proposal to accept fewer refugees into the country, the vast majority of MPs took the opposite view in both 1994 and 1998. These results suggest that the Conservative party leadership did not have the full backing of their parliamentary party group when they chose to not articulate the immigration issue in the 1994 election. Providing support for the view that the early 1990s was a critical period for Swedish debate, the Conservative party was probably tempted to start articulating the immigration issue.

Turning to the second critical period, 2002 to 2006, the political context differs quite radically from the crisis ridden period between 1991 and 1994. The Swedish economy was in much better shape; the level of unemployment was relatively low (SCB 2005) and public support for a more restrictive immigration policy was less widespread than in the early 1990s (Demker 2009, 49). In spite of this, the election of 2002 is the one election that differs the most from the general pattern reported in the previous section, in

particular with regard to the party leader debate and voters' perceptions about campaign messages.

The main reason why the 2002 election is exceptional is that a specific policy proposal to introduce a language test as a requirement for naturalization was brought to the campaign by the Liberals (Boréus 2006: 134). This policy proposal came in rather late in the campaign, but grew in importance, fueled by the harsh critique from the Social Democrats, the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*), and the Greens (*Miljöpartiet*), together with massive media attention (Boréus 2006: 133-4; Holmberg and Oscarsson 2004: 123-4). The Conservatives had actually made a similar but less advertised proposition in the parliament before the election campaign, and they also expressed some interest in the issue during the final weeks of the campaign. As is evident from Table 4, the Conservatives did not communicate its message to the voters since only 2 percent of the respondents saw the immigrant issue as an important issue for the Conservatives in the 2002 election, compared to 56 percent for the Liberals. Overall, it is thus clear that the Liberals articulated the immigration issue in the 2002 campaign and voters obviously got the message. With regard to voters' perceptions, the party scoring second after the Liberals' 56 percent was the Social democrats with 5 percent.

[Table 4 about here]

Turning to the election manifestos, the Liberals put the most emphasis on the immigration issue out of the established parties, but the levels were still quite low.

Compared to the main issue reported in figure 3, it made up about a third. However, as indicated by the detailed results presented in Table 4, it is also clear that the Liberals did not push the immigration issue in the party leader debate. This might indicate that the Liberals tried to turn down its articulation of the immigration issue during the end of the campaign. Instead, the highest figure in the party leader debate came from the opponents of the language test. Regarding the immigration issue, the most active party in the party leader debate was the Greens followed by the Left party, who both took the opportunity to denounce the Liberals' policy proposals in terms that were similar to the unique, unanimous action in the 1994 debate.

For the purpose of this paper it is even more important to note that the attention paid to the immigration issue dropped sharply already in the following 2006 election. In the televised party leader debate no party mentioned the immigration issue (0 percent), and according to voters' perceptions only the Liberals articulated the immigration issue during the election campaign and it did so much less clearly than in 2002. As reported in table 4, 18 percent of the respondents perceived the immigration issue to be important for the Liberals, while the figures for the other established parties are extremely low (between 0 and 1 percent). In the party leader debate of 2006 almost no time was dedicated to the immigrant issue. It would thus appear that the established parties returned to their previous decision to not articulate "immigration" in their vote-seeking activities.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the established political parties in Sweden have deliberately chosen to not articulate the immigration issue in their vote-seeking activities. We make this claim in contrast to previous scholars who have argued that the immigration issue became an “issue used as a way of distinguishing and profiling parties” in Sweden in the mid 1990s (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008: 372; see also Hammar 1999: 179, for similar statements).

Empirically, the paper first demonstrates that the immigration issue has indeed an electoral potential in Sweden. The gap between policy preferences of voters and Swedish MPs in the immigration issue is large and persistent (Holmberg 1996; 2002; 2004; 2010). What is more, the immigration issue has generally scored among the top third of the most important problems facing the country between 1987 and 2008 (Holmberg and Weibull 2009: 12-3). Using original data from quantitative analyses of the issue content of election manifestos and televised party leader debates, the paper then empirically contradicts the claim that the immigration issue has been articulated by the established parties during election campaigns. Generally, the immigration issue has not been articulated by the established parties between 1970 and 2006.

The most important exception from this pattern is found late in the studied period, namely in the 2002 election. During the campaign the Liberals made a policy proposal to introduce a language test as a requirement for naturalization, which was enough to bring the immigration issue into the campaign. This exception demonstrates that it is indeed

possible to make politics out of the immigration issue and, at least speculatively, that something might be on the way to happen with the immigration issue in Sweden. Speaking against this speculation is, however, that the saliency of the immigration issue dropped sharply already in the following 2006 election.

Our findings fit well with policy agenda acceptance theory on anti-immigrant party success. In a comparative West European context it has been shown that the actions of established political parties are crucially important for the success of anti-immigrant parties. If the established parties' prime issues are from the anti-immigrant party agenda, then this will legitimize the anti-immigrant party and thus make more voters inclined to actually vote for it (Arzheimer and Carter 2006: 439). Based on this comparative research and on the findings in this paper, it is probable that the established parties' decision not to articulate the immigration issue has contributed to the general failures of anti-immigrant parties in Sweden.

Our findings are not only important for political science theory, but have also important political implication. Currently, Swedish political pundits often advise established parties to bring the immigration issue into the political debate as a way of hindering the growing anti-immigrant party, the Sweden Democrats. According to this paper, such advice rests on false premises about the experience during the study period.

If the established parties wish to hamper the growth of the Sweden Democrats, an advice more in line with the results in this paper is to avoid to articulate the immigration

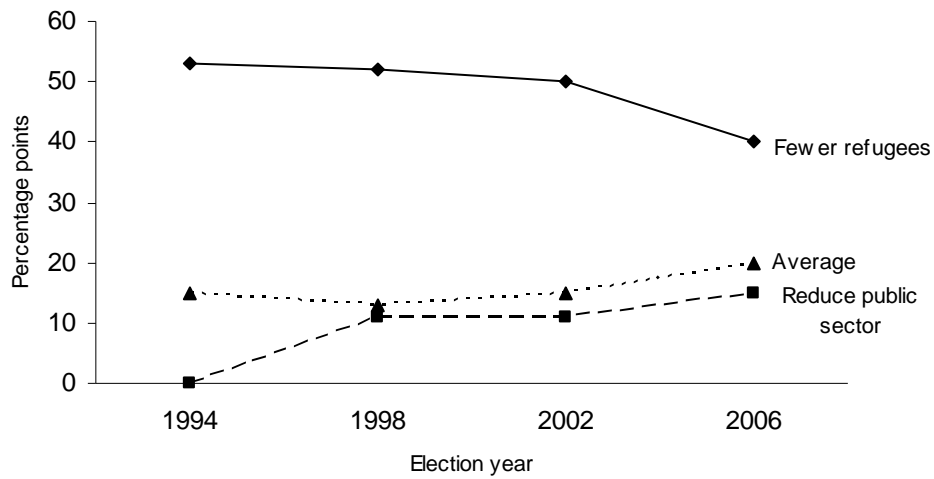
issue. Elisabeth Ivarsflaten (2005) has argued that anti-immigrant parties are vulnerable to the salience of the economic dimension, since they are supported by a combination of voters with radically different preferences for state intervention in the economy (blue-collar workers and owners of small businesses). Combining these two observations, we would instead offer the following advice to established parties — “When they say immigration, you say the economy!”

But, what would be the consequences of such a strategy be? It is probable that the large policy disagreements between voters and MPs that we observe to some extent can be explained by the fact that the immigration issue has not been discussed among the political parties in Sweden. Generally, the gap between policy positions tends to be smaller in salient issues. Persistent policy disagreement between citizens and representatives is, of course, not good for legitimacy of the representative democratic system. From this perspective, the established parties’ handling of the immigration issue is a problem for the democratic system in Sweden. However, while reflecting over the low degree of responsiveness of the representative system it is also important to note insights from the issue competition literature (Carmines and Wagner 2006; Green-Pedersen 2007). If they are right, and issue competition is of significant and growing importance, the immigration issue is only one of many potential issues suppressed by the established parties. Indeed, policy disagreement between voters and their representatives in some issues may be an unavoidable element of modern party competition.

Tables and Figures

Figure 1

Level of policy disagreement between MPs and adult citizens 1994-2006



Percent supporting "Fewer refugees"

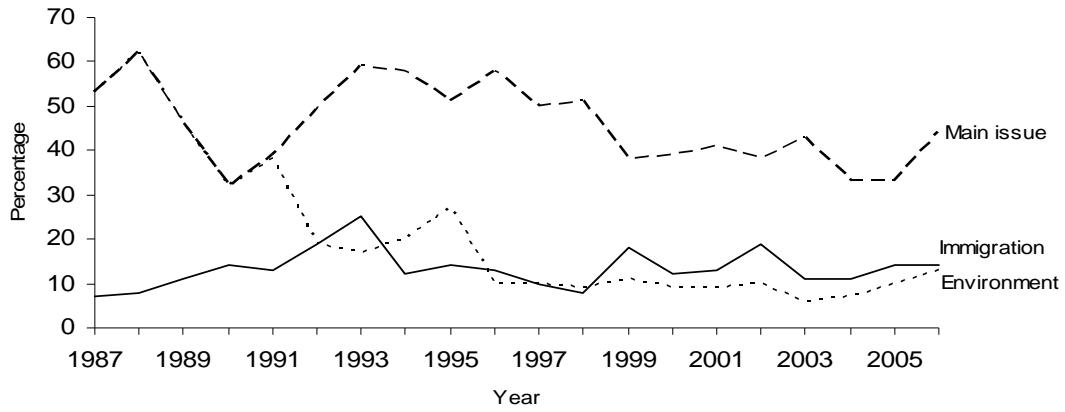
MPs/Citizens	1994	1998	2002	2006
	17/70	9/61	7/57	8/48

Comment: Difference in percentage points between MPs and adult citizens regarding policy proposals (very and rather good).

Source: Holmberg (1996; 2002; 2004; 2010).

Figure 2

Most important problem facing country, 1987-2006



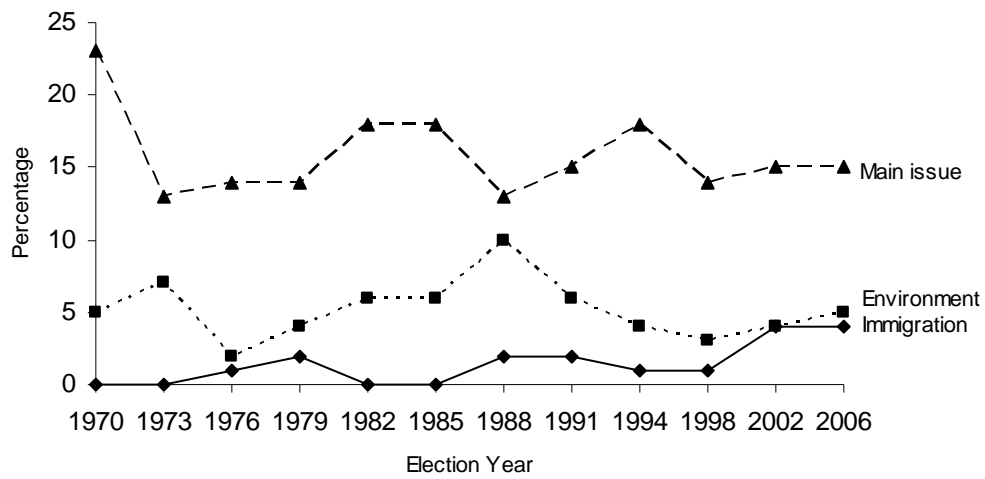
Ranking 8 9 7 4 7 3 3 6 6 5 6 9 6 6 5 4 6 6 6 5
 out of 17

Comment: Percentage of the respondents naming immigration and the environment as the most important issues for Sweden today. The environment and the main issue are included as points of reference. From 1987 to 1990 the environment was the main issue.

Source: Holmberg and Weibull (2009), 12-13.

Figure 3

Policy issues in Election Manifestos, 1970-2006.

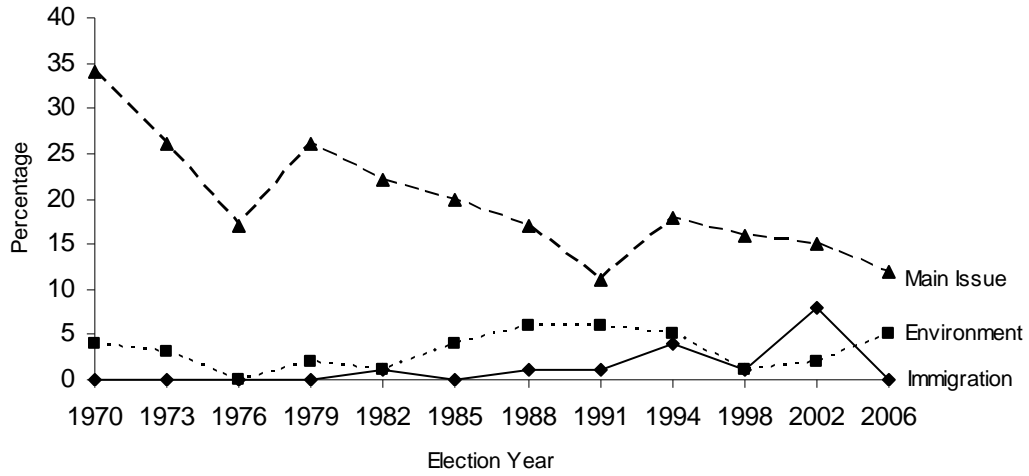


Comment: Percentage of election manifestos dedicated to environment and immigration issues. The main issue is included as a point of reference.

Source: Esaiasson and Håkansson (2009).

Figure 4

Policy issues in the televised party leader debate before the election, 1970-2006

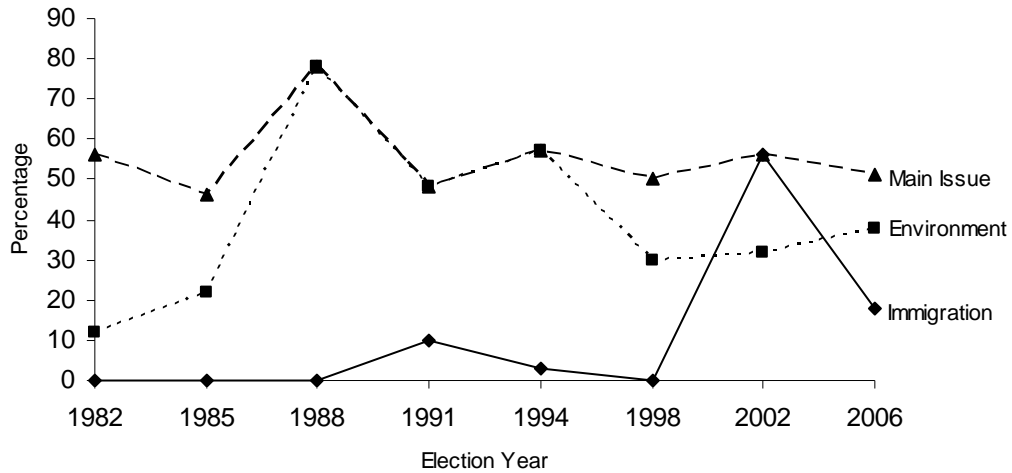


Comment: Percentage of time of the televised party leader debate dedicated to environment and immigration issues. The main issue is included as a point of reference.

Source: Esaiasson and Håkansson (2009).

Figure 5

Voters' perception of parties' primary issues for any political party in the election campaign, 1982-2006.



Comment: Percentage of voters perceiving environment and immigration issues as major issues for any political party in the election campaign. The main issue is included as a point of reference. From 1988 to 1994 the environment was the main issue, and for 2002 the immigration issue was the main issue.

Source: Gilljam and Holmberg (1990; 1993; 1995); Holmberg (1984; 2000); Holmberg and Gilljam (1987); Holmberg and Oscarsson (2004); Oscarsson and Holmberg (2008).

Table 1**Election results in percentage of votes for New democracy and the Sweden Democrats, 1988-2006**

	1988	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006
New Democracy						
National elections	--	6.7	1.2	0.2	--	--
Local elections	--	3.4	1.1	Missing	--	--
The Sweden Democrats						
National elections	0.0*	0.1*	0.2*	0.4	1.4	2.9
Local elections	Missing	Missing	Missing	Missing	0.9	2.9

Comment: The Sweden Democrats was founded in 1988 and New Democracy was founded in 1991.

* The 1988, 1991 and 1994 election results are rough estimates, based on self reported results from the Sweden Democrats.

Source: Statistics Sweden and The Election Authority.

Table 2

New Democracy and the Immigration Issue (percent)

	Manifestoes		Party leader debates		Perceived importance	
	1991	1994	1991	1994	1991	1994
Immigration	4	10	8	44	9	29
Environment	5	5	2	1	1	1
Main Issue	16	10	17	44	21	29

Comment: The table shows the New Democracy articulation of the immigrant issue in the 1991 and 1994 election campaigns.

Source: Esaiasson and Håkansson (2009) (Manifestoes and Party Leader debates); Gilljam and Holmberg 1993, 1995 (perceived importance of campaign messages).

Table 3**Agreement between members of Parliament and their respective voters on a policy proposal to accept fewer refugees into the country (percent).**

	1994			1998		
	MPs	Voters	Difference	MPs	Voters	Difference
Left Party	0	51	-51	0	54	-54
Greens	0	40	-40	0	41	-41
Social-Democrats	9	75	-66	4	63	-59
Center party	6	74	-68	17	58	-41
Liberals	0	43	-43	0	30	-30
Conservatives	74	78	-4	28	71	-43
Christian-Democrats	0	56	-56	6	58	52

Source: Holmberg (1996; 2002).

Table 4**Established Parties and the Immigration Issue 2002 and 2006 (percent)**

	Manifestoes		Party Leader debates		Perceived importance	
	2002	2006	2002	2006	2002	2006
Left Party	3	3	8	0	3	1
Social-Democrats	3	3	4	0	5	1
Greens	4	6	15	0	0	1
Center Party	5	3	4	1	1	0
Liberals	6	6	5	0	56	18
Conservatives	2	5	8	0	2	0
Christian Democrats	1	3	8	0	1	0

Source: Esaiasson and Håkansson 2009 (Manifestoes and Televised debates); Holmberg and Oscarsson 2004; Oscarsson and Holmberg 2008 (perceived importance of campaign messages).

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Notes

¹ The response rate of the Riksdag surveys, which have been conducted regularly since 1985, are over 90 percent among the 349 MPs. Principal investigators are Sören Holmberg (1985-2006), Peter Esaiasson (1985-1994) and Martin Brothén (1994-2006). Study details are found in Brothén (2003, 2007).

² The number of policy proposals that are included in the SNES-studies varies somewhat over the years: 20 (1994); 12 (1998); 17 (2002); 19 (2006). Eight proposals have been included in all four studies.

³ Additionally, the following issues and problems are identified in the SOM-surveys: Health care; Employment; the Environment; the Educational system; the Economy; Pensions and Elderly Care; Law and order; Social insurances; Taxes; Family politics; Transports; Moral issues; Energy issues; Public sector/privatization; Agriculture; and The European Union.

⁴ If New Democracy is also included in our coding of the party debate the proportion dedicated to the immigration issue would increase to 10 percent, ranking third of all issues in that debate.

⁵ Unfortunately for the purpose of this study, but indirectly in support of our argument that immigration has been a non-salient issue, the 1994 Riksdag survey was the first to ask participants about this policy proposal.