

Populists in Power:

Attitudes towards immigrants after the Austrian Freedom Party entered government.

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## Introduction

As three Western European democracies—Austria, the Netherlands, and Italy—have survived the inclusion of a populist right party in government and these parties experienced severe electoral losses immediately thereafter, government responsibility seems to be the best cure available for ridding Western European voters of their taste for radical right-wing populism. However, many scholars, politicians, and commentators worried about such inclusions not primarily because they feared improved electoral performance by populist right parties. Instead, elites were worried about the signal that such inclusion would send to voters concerning the acceptability of anti-immigrant sentiment. After all, populist right parties across several Western European countries had risen from insignificance to substantial political influence since the mid 1980s mainly because of the attention that their provocative exclusionist statements on asylum and immigration policy had granted them and the way in which these statements resonated with parts of the public (Carter 2005; Ivarsflaten 2005; Norris 2005). Contrasting the recent Austrian experience with that of Denmark and Flanders, this chapter examines the extent to which including a populist right party as a legitimate government partner fuels anti-immigrant sentiment.

This chapter argues and shows that, in the Austrian case, including the populist right Freedom Party in government did not fuel anti-immigrant sentiment, but that it most likely somewhat dampened the expression of such sentiments in the short term. I argue and show some supportive evidence to suggest that this unexpected dampening effect has two causes. Firstly, I argue that populist right parties in government are structurally constrained in their communication with voters in a way that populist right parties in

opposition are not, and that these constraints limit the extent to which populists in government can incite anti-immigrant sentiment. Secondly, I argue that the particular way in which the government inclusion of the Freedom Party was handled in Austria sent a strong signal to the Austrian public that suggested, on the one hand, that the mainstream right party, ÖVP, did not agree with the radical anti-immigrant proposals of the FPÖ, and on the other, that parts of the FPÖ's legacy and personnel was still unacceptable. Comparing the Austrian case to Denmark and Flanders where populist right parties were not included in government, this chapter concludes that including populist right parties in government is not more likely to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment than the two main alternatives. However, the extent to which more tolerance will be the result depends on the particular way in which such inclusion is handled.

#### Theories of how parties interact with public opinion.

Since the 1950s political science has fostered two powerful, yet contradictory, schools for understanding how political parties interact with public opinion—spatial theory and opinion leadership models. The main claims of these two schools and how they apply to our question of interest will be discussed in this section. In the following sections, arguments will be put forward to fill gaps in existing opinion leadership models that result from their narrow application to the two-party context of the U.S.

Spatial theory of party competition holds that for most intents and purposes the public's policy preferences are influenced by events and prior convictions and are therefore unaffected by the argumentation of political parties. Political parties, in this account, compete for votes by strategically altering their policy positions and/or the

choice situations for voters to their advantage. They do so, for example, by adopting winning policy positions on issues and/or promoting the importance of their winning issue over others. They do not, by contrast, significantly alter the distribution of voter preferences, so opinion towards immigrants do not depend on parties' opinion leadership (Downs 1957; Riker 1982; Laver and Hunt 1992; Kitschelt 1994; 1995; Meguid 2005).

Opinion leadership models, by contrast, hold that the public does not form solid opinions on a range of issues. Bombarded by information and with only limited interest in politics, most people trust elites to do the work of how to respond to complex and changing social, political and economic phenomena for them. The extreme version of this idea is captured in V.O. Key's much cited phrase, "the voice of the people is but an echo" (1966). When elites disagree, voters, according to the dominant contemporary account in this school of thought, follow the cues of the party or elite to which they have a prior affinity (Zaller 1992). Political parties thus perform an important function in shaping the public's response to political events. They do not only compete by jostling to be on the right side of public opinion, they also do so by trying to bring as much of the public as possible to their side.

For the purposes of this analysis, the spatial theory perspective functions mostly as a null hypothesis. Spatial theory would lead us to expect that the public's response to the immigration crisis of the 1980s and 1990s in Western Europe<sup>1</sup> was mainly influenced by the experience of receiving a large number of refugees or immigrants, on the one hand, and their prior convictions about the desirability of and obligation to accepting such

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<sup>1</sup> It has been called a crisis because Western European countries received a large number of asylum applications and/or illegal immigrants in spite of often strict bans on immigration. In addition, governments in Western Europe were not well prepared for the increased demands on the immigration and asylum fronts (UNHCR 1995).

individuals, on the other. These prior convictions could for instance concern beliefs about the obligation to help people in need and about the costs and benefits of accepting immigrants. However, parties' positions on immigration policy should not have any direct impact on voters' attitudes towards immigrants, according to the most commonly used assumptions of spatial theory.

The hypotheses emerging from opinion leadership models are more complex, and being more complex the burden of evidence lays on their shoulders. From this perspective, if the major parties take a firm stance against the populist right—for example forming a *cordon sanitaire* as was done in Belgium in the late 1980s and onwards—they will clearly signal that the populist right is illegitimate and that its views on immigration are unacceptable. Following these strong elite cues, voters with a prior affinity towards the major parties will, according to this perspective, express less anti-immigrant sentiment. In fact, the opinion leadership model predicts that mainstream parties will be able to convince a substantial number of their key voters that a moderate or liberal policy response to the immigration crisis is appropriate.

By contrast, if the mainstream right makes a high-profile effort to propose more restrictive immigration policies, as was done in Denmark in the 2001 election campaign, the expected outcome according to the opinion leadership model is that voters with a prior affinity to the mainstream right will express more anti-immigrant sentiment and call for restrictive immigration policies. The change in public perception will come about because the mainstream right will send cues to the effect that more restrictive immigration policies are in their voters' interest and that the claim for such policies is legitimate within liberal democracies.

### Government inclusion as a new dimension.

Including new parties into a governing coalition, as was done in Austria in 1999, is not usually a behavioral dimension that is considered by these opinion leadership models of how parties interact with public opinion. Simply extending the theory as stated above, it could be argued that a mainstream right party that includes a populist right party into government sends a signal to voters that all policy differences between the two parties are small or irrelevant. Thus, the effects of government inclusion could be analogous to the policy cooptation model described above, where the mainstream right adopts more restrictive immigration policies.

However, while government inclusion of populist right parties doubtlessly signals that such parties are largely acceptable to the mainstream right, it is not clear *a priori* that, if assuming opinion leadership, the effects on people's attitudes towards immigrants should be the same as when the mainstream right itself campaigns for much more restrictive immigration policies. The two responses can be thought of as different because a mainstream right party that includes a populist right party into a coalition after an election can position itself on the moderate side in the immigration and multiculturalism debates, while a mainstream right party that itself wants to become the proponent of restrictive immigration policies cannot do so.

In the case of policy cooptation, the mainstream right party will seek to emphasize, explain and justify its change of position as much as possible and, if opinion leadership is strong, the mainstream right party is likely to persuade voters that it is in their interest to restrict immigration. The case for restrictions on immigration and the

costs of multiculturalism was indeed adamantly argued by the Danish mainstream right, *Venstre*, in the campaign leading up to the 2001 general elections. If major mainstream parties exercise opinion leadership on sentiment towards immigrants, we should as a consequence see more anti-immigrant sentiment among *Venstre*-partisans after the 2001 election.

By contrast, even if we expect a high degree of opinion leadership by the major mainstream parties, the inclusion of the populist right into government may not lead to much of a shift in public opinion towards immigrants. Mainstream parties may state before the election that a coalition with the populists is undesirable because of the party's incitement of racism, and they may campaign on a ticket of moderate or status quo immigration policies. If, after the election, it turns out that the populist right party gained a very substantial amount of votes, the mainstream right may reluctantly enter into a coalition with the populist right party arguing that they are responding to the voice of the people although they dislike the populist right parties' policies.

Moreover, they may seek symbolic and substantive concessions from the populist right party. As will be discussed further below, this account resembles what the mainstream right in Austria, ÖVP, did when it entered into a governing coalition with the Freedom Party after the 1999 general elections. If government inclusion is an important and overlooked dimension in existing opinion leadership models, we should therefore expect less anti-immigrant sentiment expressed by Austrian ÖVP-partisans, following the government inclusion of the Freedom Party in 1999, than by Danish *Venstre*-partisans following the 2001 election campaign.

### Opinion leadership of the populist right parties themselves as a new variable

The traditional theory of opinion leadership was formulated for the U.S. context where it makes sense to assume that opinion leadership will be exercised only by the two main parties (Zaller 1992). In the context of European multiparty systems, it is however possible that parties other than the major mainstream left and right parties exercise considerable opinion leadership. In the three contexts considered here, the populist right parties are large parties that have existed for a long time (especially in Austria and Denmark where they were established in the 1950s and 1970s respectively). It is therefore possible that these parties exercise a considerable amount of opinion leadership especially in the area of immigration and asylum, where they have sought the role as populist ‘truth-tellers’ (Rydgren 2005).

If the populist right themselves exercise opinion leadership, then it is possible that the effectiveness of this leadership varies when the populist right is included in government, as in Austria, and when it is excluded, as in Denmark and Flanders. When excluded from government responsibility populist right parties can use all their resources to campaign on persuading the public at large and their key electorate more specifically about the negative consequences of immigration and the problems associated with the integration of new minorities. When included in government, many of their resources will by practical necessity be diverted to other policy areas. Moreover, they will be in a position where they cannot just criticize immigration policy, but will have to defend the status quo. It is therefore possible that populist right parties in a governing position will be a less persistent, single-minded and effective advocate of anti-immigrant views and sentiments than populist right parties out of government.

### Summary of hypotheses.

In spite of the one dimensional focus of opinion leadership models, the discussion above revealed that mainstream parties' responses to the asylum crisis can in fact be thought of as two dimensional. As table 1 illustrates, the first dimension consist of policy positions and changes in them. In the three cases studied here, moderate policies predominated on this dimension.<sup>2</sup> The exception is the Danish mainstream right, which changed its policies and started proposing restrictive immigration policies before and during the 2001 election campaign. Because of the debate above about whether or not inclusion of the populist right in the government coalition changed the immigration policy signal sent by the Austrian ÖVP as much as that of the Danish *Venstre*, the Austrian 1999 case appears in between the moderate and restrictive categories. By contrast, their coalition policy was evidently inclusionary at that point. The two other cases considered (and all mainstream right parties in the three cases earlier on, in the 1990s) pursued exclusionary coalition policies towards the populist right.

The empirically testable proposition that derives from the above discussion can be summarized as follows:

P0 (following spatial theory assumptions): Neither immigration policy changes by major parties nor government inclusion of populist right parties influences the level or composition of anti-immigrant sentiment.

P1 (following traditional opinion leadership accounts): If a mainstream party adopts more restrictive immigration policies, the partisans of this party will express more anti-immigrant sentiment.

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<sup>2</sup> See Lubbers (2001) for expert survey data confirming this statement about these major mainstream parties' immigration policy positions.

P2 (new opinion leadership hypothesis): A mainstream right party that reluctantly includes an anti-immigrant party in government will not lead its partisans towards expressing more anti-immigrant sentiment.

P3 (new opinion leadership hypothesis): A well-established populist right party in government will be less effective at inciting anti-immigrant sentiment among its partisans than a well-established populist right party in opposition.

### Empirical evaluation of the hypotheses.

Ideally, we would have an all European multi-wave panel study conducted at regular intervals between the early 1980s and today to evaluate the hypotheses above. This study should have asked respondents about their absolute and relative asylum and immigration policy preferences, indirectly tapped their prejudice against minorities, and also asked about their vote and party affinities. Such survey data would have allowed us to make fine tuned and precise tests of the hypotheses above. Unfortunately no such data exists, and we therefore have to answer what I consider to be a crucial question in Western European politics—about the extent of parties’ opinion leadership on immigration attitudes—by creatively using and interpreting the data that was gathered in this period.

Unfortunately, good time series data on immigration attitudes in Austria is lacking.<sup>3</sup> The best studies that chart attitudes towards immigrants over time in the relevant period was found to be Eurobarometer surveys (1997, 2000, 2003).

Unfortunately, these surveys do not ask about party affinity or party membership and the questions that are asked in all three years tap policy preferences more than prejudice or anti-immigrant preferences. The Eurobarometer data can therefore only be used to get a sense of the movement of attitudes towards immigration policies over the relevant time period.

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<sup>3</sup> Pooling national surveys was not possible, because the questions asked about immigration and attitudes towards new minorities were not comparable over time and/or across countries.

To analyze how anti-immigrant sentiment relates to partisanship, it was therefore necessary to rely on a cross-sectional study. The first wave of the European Social Survey includes all three countries, measures of party affinity and membership, and measures of anti-immigrant sentiment and can therefore be used to compare the role of party affinity in the formation of these attitudes across countries. Since the propositions discussed above primarily concern how partisanship influence anti-immigrant sentiment, and not the overall movement of immigration policy attitudes over time, the most crucial evidence will be found in the European Social Survey data.

#### Attitudes towards immigration and asylum policy over time.

As pointed out above, our propositions mostly concern the relationship between partisanship and anti-immigrant sentiment on the individual level. However, if party cues strongly affect public opinion towards immigration, we would expect to see aggregate traces of such effects. Only being able to examine aggregate public opinion towards immigrants and immigration policy at three points in time, however, we will not be able to distinguish the effects of opinion leadership from other possible exogenous influences. The evidence about over time changes in aggregate public opinion in Austria discussed in this section is therefore only suggestive.

Changes over time in attitudes towards immigration and asylum policy in Austria are depicted in figure 1. The figure shows the percentage of Austrian voting age respondents who expressed that they wished to see more restrictions on asylum (Asylum), that legal immigrants should not have the right to family reunification (Family), that legal immigrants who had committed serious criminal offences should be

expelled (Crime), or that legal immigrants who were long-term unemployed should be expelled (Employment). While one of these measures (Asylum) asks about preferences relative to the present, the other three asks about absolute preferences. The pattern seen across all measures is largely the same. Opposition to immigration was more widespread in 1997 than right after the inclusion of FPÖ in government in 2000. Between 2000 and 2003, however, opposition to immigration increased.

As pointed out above, aggregate evidence gives us a general sense of the movement of attitudes in this area, but we cannot say if this movement was caused by the actions of political elites or by other events or both. The data is not detailed enough for time-series modeling and we do not have the indicators of party affinity necessary for evaluating the opinion leadership hypothesis. However, figure 1 is informative in that it shows that public opinion in Austria was not at an all-time high after the inclusion of the Freedom Party in government. To the contrary, right after the government inclusion of the populist right in 2000, opposition towards immigration was lower than in 1997 and 2003.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 2 compares changes in immigration attitudes between 1997 and 2000 in Flanders, Austria and Denmark.<sup>5</sup> It shows firstly that the movement towards less opposition observed in the Austrian case in figure 1 was not unique. Secondly, it shows that the decline in Austria was more pronounced than in the two other cases. In Denmark and Austria, the decline was of a similar magnitude. In Austria, the difference between the averages is in excess of seven percentage points (in 1997 on average 56 percent

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<sup>4</sup> It is hard to interpret the change between 2000 and 2003. Possibly the increase in anti-immigrant sentiment is due to the events following September 11, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> The measures shown is the difference between the average percentage point score on the four measures presented in figure 1 in 2000 and in 1997.

expressed opposition to immigration whereas in 2000 on average 48 percent did so). In Denmark the difference is around five percentage points (in 1997 on average 59 percent expressed opposition to immigration whereas in 2000 on average 54 percent did so). Unlike in Denmark and Austria, the decline was very small and not statistically significant in the Flemish case.

In the absence of panel data or more extensive time series we will not be able to establish for certain what explains the patterns seen above, but we will be better able to evaluate our hypotheses when we in the next section turn to using cross-sectional data on party affinity and party membership. Here we simply conclude that after the Freedom Party was included in government we did not observe an increase in the level of opposition to immigration, but to the contrary, we observed a decrease of between five and ten percentage points depending on the question asked. Compared to Austria, this decline in opposition to immigration was equally or somewhat less pronounced in Denmark and clearly less pronounced in Flanders.

#### Partisanship and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Turning to examine the cross-sectional data collected in 2002/3 both after *Venstre*'s immigration policy change in Denmark and after the inclusion of FPÖ in government in Austria, we will be better, able to address the propositions above, albeit still only in a suggestive way. If, contrary to P0 and P1 but in line with P2, opinion leadership by *Venstre* in Denmark spurred an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment among *Venstre*-partisans and no similar leadership was exercised by the ÖVP, we would expect that more of those who felt close to *Venstre* expressed anti-immigrant sentiment than those

who felt close to the ÖVP in Austria. This would happen because *Venstre* had spent more time and effort campaigning to convince their voters that immigrants posed a problem, while the ÖVP had not done so. To the contrary, the ÖVP had sought to distinguish itself from the immigration stances of the Freedom Party by insisting that Haider not be a part of the government and that the Freedom party sign a declaration of abidance to democratic norms. If P2 is true, then we would expect the leadership exercised over CVP sympathizers to be more similar to that exercised over ÖVP sympathizers.

Figure 3 shows that in all three countries more of those who had affinities with parties of the right expressed anti-immigrant sentiment than the average in the respective publics in 2002/3.<sup>6</sup> However, in addition to this uniform trend, figure 3 also shows, in line with P2, that the pull towards anti-immigrant sentiment for *Venstre* partisans in Denmark is significantly stronger than the pull on mainstream right partisans in Flanders and Austria. Among *Venstre* partisans, the number of people who expressed anti-immigrant sentiment exceeded the national average by nine percent. The comparable figures for Austrian and Flemish mainstream right partisans were four and five percent respectively.

[Figure 3 about here].

These results, which support the refined opinion leadership proposition P2, would be severely undermined if they were caused only by switches of party affinities, meaning that in Denmark a significant number of those who had anti-immigrant views had started feeling close to *Venstre* while a significant number of those who did not hold such views

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<sup>6</sup> The means were 48 % for Flanders, 37 % for Denmark and 34 % for Austria. The question used taps anti-immigrant sentiment by asking how many people from different races, religions, and cultures should live in the respondent's ideal neighborhood. The percentage quoted refers to those who answered "almost none."

had stopped feeling such affinity. However, both the mainstream right and the populist right increased their number of votes in the 2001 election, so it is unlikely that the high number of *Venstre* partisans who expressed anti-immigrant sentiment were caused by a massive shift in affinities from the populist to the mainstream right or by a massive desertion of *Venstre* by its traditional electorate.

Moreover, as shown in figure 4, the correspondence between the opinion leadership thesis and the levels of anti-immigrant sentiment among *members* of mainstream right parties in Denmark, Austria, and Flanders is strong. The figure shows that the proportion of *Venstre* members who expressed anti-immigrant sentiment exceeded the national average by 27 percentage points. The comparable numbers for Austria and Flanders are 6 and 3 percentage points respectively.

Party memberships are less easily changeable than party affinities, and it is therefore less likely that switching will have caused the results in figure 4. Some voters may have given up their membership in the Danish *Venstre* in disagreement with the party's change in asylum policy, but it is unlikely that such protests happened only in Denmark and not in Austria where the mainstream right entered into government with the FPÖ. While not proving proposition three, therefore, the results in figures 3 and 4 support it.

[Figure 4 about here].

#### Government inclusion.

In this final section we investigate the extent to which populist right parties themselves also exercise opinion leadership. We do so by seeking to determine whether or not the

data is consistent with proposition 3, which suggested that government participation by populist right parties hampers their ability to incite anti-immigrant sentiment.

By assuming government responsibility, the populist right in Austria all of a sudden found itself in a position where it had to defend the government's practices in the area of immigration. Moreover, and these are the issues that predictably tore the FPÖ apart, the party had to focus on other policy areas than immigration. Thereby it lost some of its capacity earlier spent on persuading the public that radical restrictions on immigration were in their best interest.

By contrast, the populist right parties in both Flanders and Denmark were excluded from government responsibility and were, because of their positions as government outsiders, uniquely placed to continue their campaign to sway public opinion towards opposing immigration. These structurally different positions of the populist right parties in Denmark and Flanders, on the one hand, and in Austria, on the other, inspired proposition three which suggested that the FPÖ would be less able to lead its partisans towards expressing anti-immigrant sentiment than would the Danish People's Party or Vlaams Blok.

The data in figure five supports this proposition. It shows that, in 2002/3, the FPÖ exercised a significantly weaker pull towards anti-immigrant sentiment on those who felt close to this party than did the DF and the VB. Among those who felt a close affinity to the DF and the VB, the number of people who expressed prejudice exceeded the national averages by 27 and 25 percent respectively. By contrast, the comparative figure for those who felt an affinity for FPÖ in 2002/3, after the government inclusion and fiasco, was only 18 percent.

[Insert figure 5 about here].

### Conclusion

This paper finds evidence, yet not conclusive evidence, to suggest that whether or not populist right parties are included in government, and how this inclusion is handled, matters for opinion towards immigrants. However, a simplistic notion of opinion leadership does not explain the patterns of change across time and countries found in the public opinion data. Firstly, it does not seem to be the case that only mainstream parties influence the public's views in this area. The data are consistent with the hypothesis that populist right parties exercise opinion leadership in the area of immigration, and that they are particularly effective at doing so as government outsiders. Secondly, the data presented here suggests, contrary to the implicit assumptions of the opinion leadership literature, that drawing a distinction between government inclusion and policy cooptation is crucial for understanding how parties and public opinion towards immigrants interact.

Western Europe's arguably boldest mainstream party effort at collectively opposing the populist right, in Flanders, was more effective in preventing partisans from opposing immigrants than the Danish strategy of approaching the populist right on policy terms. It was however not more effective than the Austrian version of approaching the populist right by including the FPÖ in government. Whereas the Danish case cautions against disregarding opinion leadership, the Flemish case, where we saw opposition towards immigration at the highest level among the three cases studied in all three years (1997, 2000, and 2003) cautions against overestimating it. In particular, the evidence

presented here suggests that populist right parties themselves exercise a fair amount of opinion leadership in the area of immigration policy.

Finally, the Austrian case suggests very strongly that the cues that are sent to the public with regards to tolerance towards immigrants are significantly different when the populist right is reluctantly included in government than when the mainstream right seeks to campaign on a more restrictive immigration policy agenda itself. The argument for how this could happen from within an opinion leadership perspective has both a structural and an agency component. In terms of structure, in contrast to *Venstre* the ÖVP did not have to significantly change its immigration policy position before the election campaign. Moreover, the Freedom Party was hampered in its effort to emphasize the negative aspects of immigration from its position as a governing party.

The agency component relates to how the ÖVP included the FPÖ in government. The ÖVP leadership clearly demarcated itself from the unacceptable parts of the FPÖ's personnel and legacy. In practical terms, this meant that Haider was not part of the government and that a declaration of abidance to democratic norms was signed. The popular demonstrations as well as the international response also sent clear signals to the Austrian people and may have contributed to the overall decline in observed opposition towards immigration in Austria right after the dramatic events of 1999.

The trends in this paper thus caution us against adopting a simple spatial model to understand party competition over immigration policy in Western Europe. The data is not good enough and a sufficiently sophisticated set of empirical tests were therefore not possible, but through careful examination of the best evidence available, I found strong enough support for the claims that parties lead public opinion that this possibility needs to

be studied further rather than assumed not to exist. It looks likely that parties do not simply respond to voters when they change their immigration policies, but that they also affect the very public opinion environment within which they operate. This paper suggests that they do so in somewhat more complex ways than predicted by the opinion leadership literature, but that this added complexity easily can be modeled theoretically and with better data can also be rigorously analyzed empirically.

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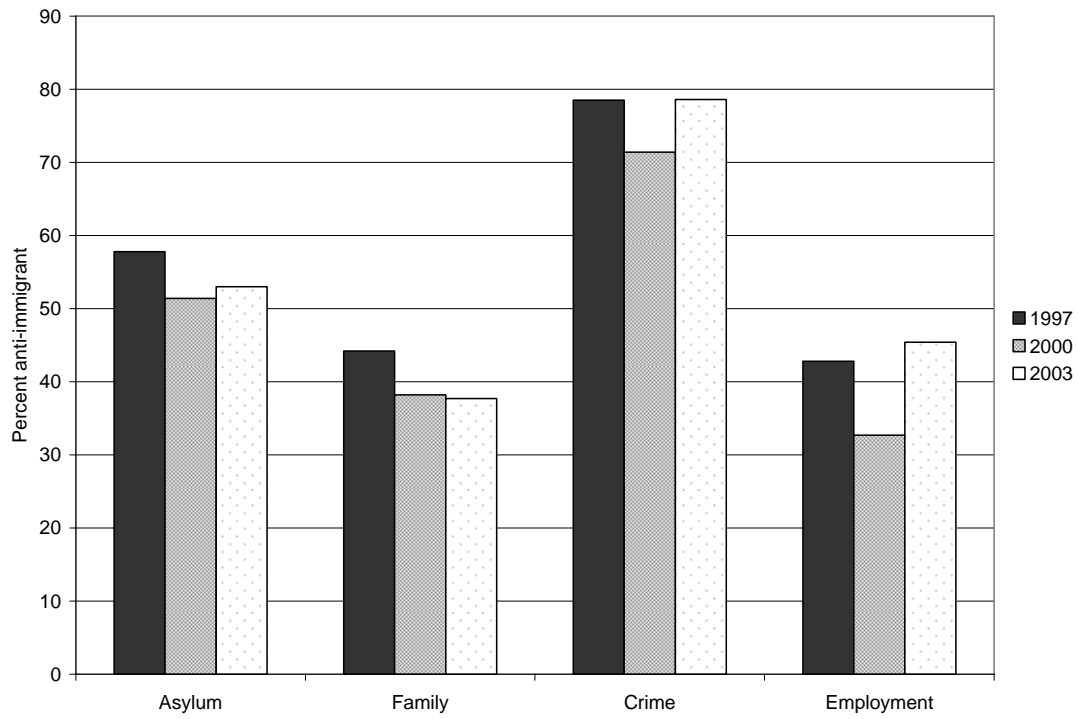
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**Table 1. Mainstream parties' immigration policies and their changes in Austria, Denmark, and Flanders.**

		ASYLUM POLICIES	
		Moderate	Restrictive
COALITION POLICIES	Exclusion	Denmark 1990s Austria 1990s Flanders 1990s	Denmark 2001
	Inclusion	Austria 1999	

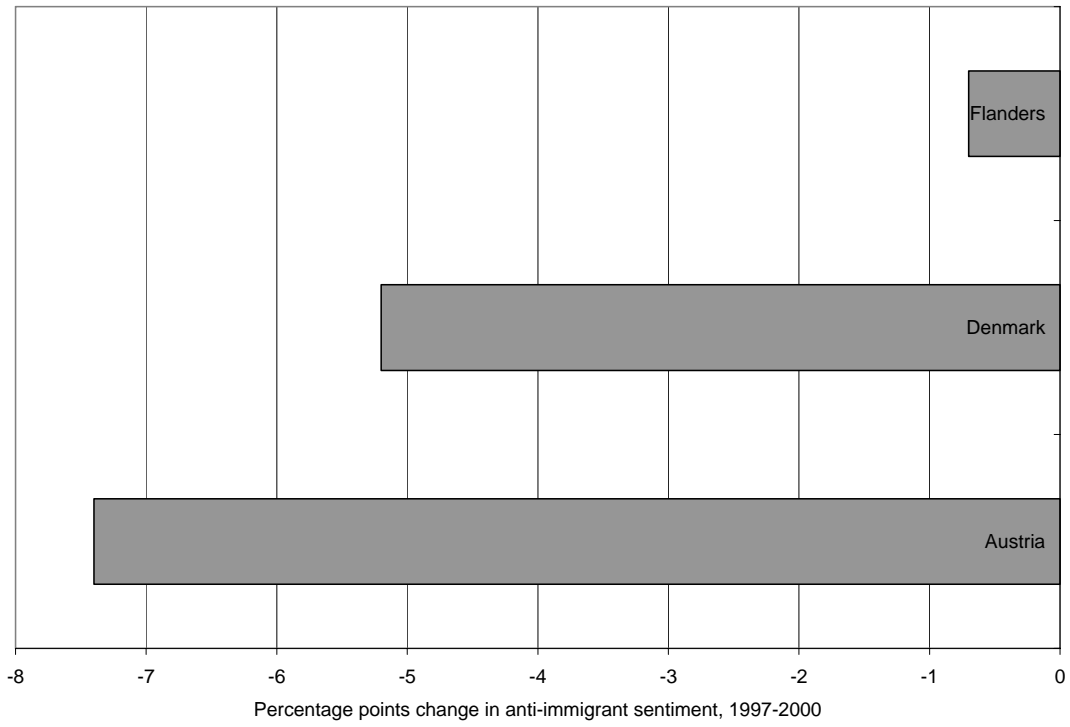
Source: Lubbers (2001); own research.

Figure 1. Opposition to immigration in Austria in 1997, 2000, and 2003.



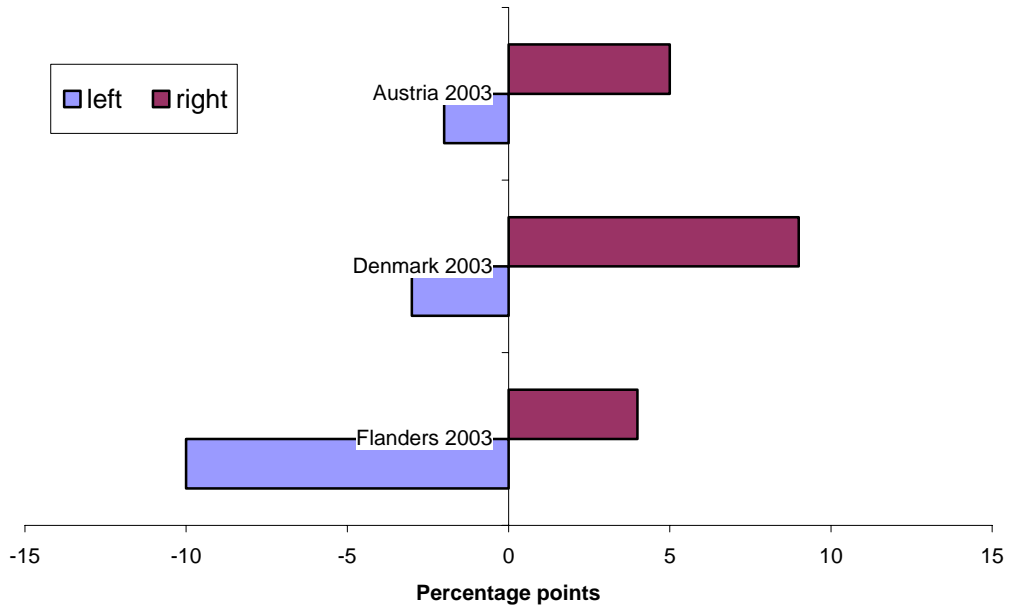
Source: Eurobarometer 47.1, Eurobarometer 53, and Eurobarometer 59.2.

Figure 2. Comparing changes in attitudes towards immigrants in Austria, Denmark, and Flanders between 1997 and 2000.



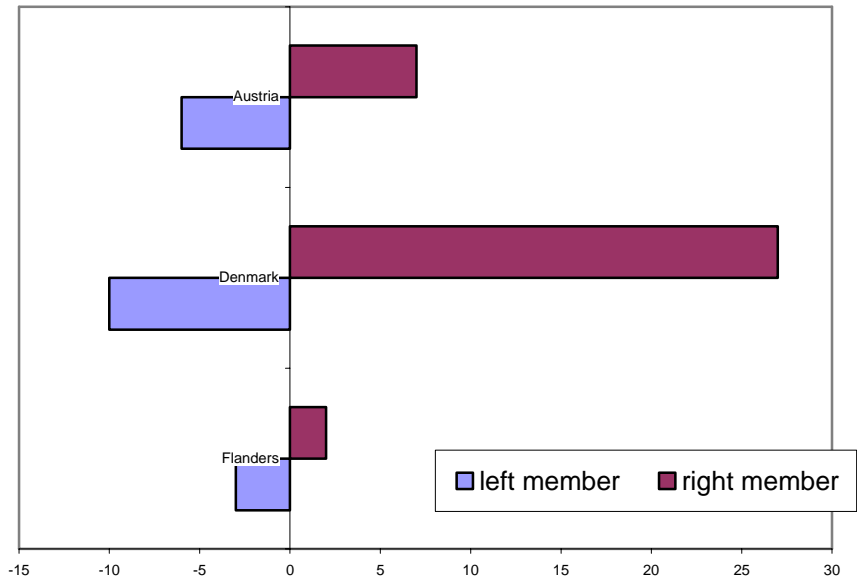
Source: Eurobarometer 47.1, Eurobarometer 53, and Eurobarometer 59.2.

Figure 3. Anti-immigrant sentiment by party affinity. Difference from national averages, 2002/3.



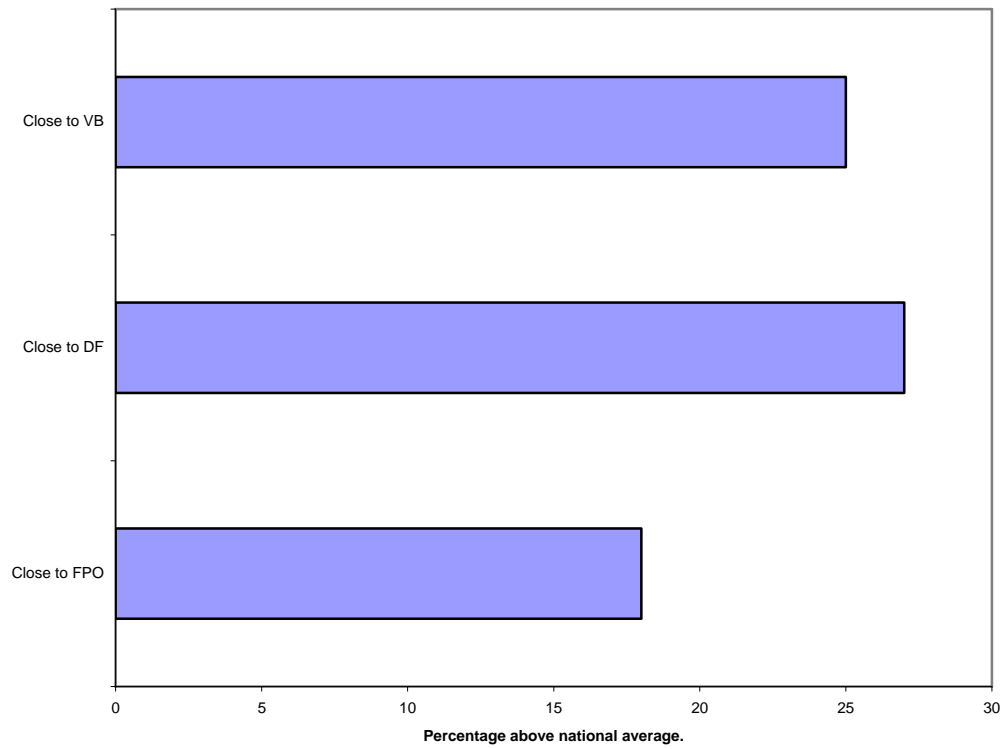
Source: European Social Survey 2003.

Figure 4. Anti-immigrant sentiment by party membership in Austria, Denmark, and Flanders, 2003.



Source: European Social Survey 2003.

Figure 5. Anti-immigrant sentiment by party membership in Austria, Denmark, and Flanders, 2003.



Source: European Social Survey 2003.