IMMIGRATION SALIENCE AND THE RISE OF THE SWEDISH POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT: TESTING THE FLASH POTENTIAL HYPOTHESIS

by
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Since the 1990's there has been a rise in support for populist radical right (PRR) parties in Western Europe (Rooduijn, 2015). This study illuminates the causes of the rise of PRR politics in Sweden, which was long considered impervious to this widespread wave of radical right populism. Research has identified immigration as one of the issues most connected to support for the populist radical right. And yet, opinions on immigration have remained relatively constant over time. How can these two findings be reconciled? This study builds on the work of Schnaudt and Stecker (2022) and Dennis & Geddes (2020) attributing rise of radical right populism to changes in the *salience* of immigration over time, rather than changes in opinions about immigration. I hypothesized that anti-immigrant opinions will significantly predict voting for the PRR. However, this effect will be mediated by immigration issue salience, such that the effect of immigration opinion on voting is stronger in periods of greater immigration salience. Using a logistic regression, I found a significant direct effect of immigration opinion on PRR voting, and a significant interaction effect between immigration opinion and immigration salience, supporting the hypothesis. This finding helps us understand the widespread rise of PRR support which is indispensable for attempting to understand the contemporary political climate in much of the Western world.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, populist radical right (PRR) parties have risen in Western Europe and throughout the world (Rooduijn, 2015). This trend poses significant challenges to democratic norms, social cohesion, and international cooperation. PRR parties often rely on exclusionary nationalist rhetoric, support discriminatory policies, and criticize or erode institutional safeguards like independent judiciaries and free media, thus weakening checks and balances and threatening democratic stability.

In some cases, such parties have long been present but are now experiencing a resurgence. In other cases, countries are developing popular PRR parties for the first time. The latter is the case in Sweden. Sweden had been treated as an anomaly, invulnerable to the wave of radical right populism affecting its Scandinavian neighbors1. The Sweden Democrats, a PRR party, were formed in 1988 but did not gain sufficient electoral support to enter Parliament until 2010 (Taggart, 1996). In the 2022 election, they rose to be the second most popular party in Sweden, after the long-leading Socialdemokraterna (Social Democrats) (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019; Riksdagsförvaltningen, 2022). In this paper, the factors that predict individuals' support for the Sweden Democrats are examined. The Swedish case is particularly revealing given the recent and rapid rise of the PRR party (the Sverigedemokraterna) which facilitates the examination of the party's trajectory while other sociopolitical factors remain largely stable. The Swedish case is also more clear-cut than some with only one PRR party (as opposed to Denmark's three, for example), simplifying the role of supply-side party mechanisms as

[1] In 1991, a radical right party "New Democracy" entered Swedish Parliament with 6.7% of the vote. However, they failed to get sufficient votes in the 1994 election and quickly dissolved (Taggart, 1996).

increasing the salience of PRR-owned issues would benefit only the Sweden Democrats while in Denmark, the outcome would be less certain. Furthermore, by focusing on the Swedish case, this study's analysis is sensitive to variation in demographic, economic and contextual variables that can be masked in data aggregated across countries as in the aforementioned studies (Boman, 2022). In addition, the impact of variables such as religiosity and country of birth for which data is not consistently available in the pan-European data set can be examined. Overall, this study seeks to shed light on the Swedish case specifically, in addition to understanding what factors may underlie the successes of the PRR throughout the world.

Definitions

Cas Mudde (2007), a leading scholar on populist right-wing parties, defines the populist radical right as possessing three determinative characteristics: nativism[2], authoritarianism[3] (also referred to as "law and order"), and populism. He elucidates populism further as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite'" (p.23). In other words, populism does not have a strong or consistent ideological core but rather may adapt to what will be politically advantageous, flexibly defining who is the corrupt elite depending on context. In the US for example, the political establishment, democrats, and institutions like the Department of Education are all portrayed as the corrupt elite by Trumpian discourse. Mudde's definition is widely accepted and allows us to group parties (and their ideologies) that vary according to

[2] Mudde defines nativism as "an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state." (p.19)
[3] Authoritarianism is the "belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely." (p.23)

culture and context but share a common radical right populist core based on these three key characteristics.

In any given period, certain issues are more influential on the body politic than others, and this dynamic is constantly in flux. In the US, for example, over the last several years, abortion has risen to become a highly salient issue—it is discussed frequently in the political sphere and is an issue that many people describe as feeling passionate about, sometimes making political decisions solely or primarily based on candidate's platforms on abortion. Thus, this is a period of high issue salience for abortion in the US. Issue salience refers to "the relative weight that voters place on each issue, holding constant the positions of parties on those issues" (Ansolabehere & Puy, 2018, p. 104). According to Dennison (2019), "higher issue salience leads to greater information about party positions on that issue and is expected to make attitudes on that issue more accessible, certain and stable, as well as influential on less salient attitudes, which are then formed around the more salient attitudes to ensure ideological cognitive consonance." In other words, when a given issue becomes important, the different parties make clear their positions on it and people's opinions on the given issue become more visible (they suddenly have opinions on something they might previously not have cared about), less ambivalent, and less likely to change. These newly solidified opinions thus shape peoples' political decision making, and people will form their opinions on lesser issues around what has now become a more central belief. Conceptually, immigration salience may be affected by "objective" changes, for example an increase in the number of immigrants attempting to enter the country.

In addition, salience may also be affected by perceived changes due to media coverage, for example. However, Dennison & Geddes (2019) argue that durable changes in issue salience occur in response to events, rather than parties' agenda setting, or the degree and type of media coverage of an issue.

Literature Review and Rationale

Swedish Exceptionalism: An overview of Sweden's history with PRR parties

Sweden has historically stood out from other European (particularly Scandinavian) nations on the basis that it lacked a PRR party in Parliament— Norway, Finland, and Denmark all had Populist Right-Wing parties emerging in the 1970s.[4] Sweden, on the other hand, did not have a PRR party in parliament until 2010. Given the unique history of the Swedish case, it is productive to compare it to the trajectory of PRR parties in the other Scandinavian countries.

Finland

The first PRR electoral breakthrough in Finland occurred in 1970 (Widfeldt, 2023). This party had fluctuating electoral success, before going bankrupt in 1995 (Widfeldt, 2023). Its remnants became a new PRR party "the Finns" (*Perussuomalaiset*) (Widfeldt, 2023). Though it started as a very small party, the Finns began growing in the early 2000s, around the same time that they began to focus on immigration as an issue (Widfeldt, 2023). In 2011, the Finns first entered a ruling coalition government along with the Centre party (*Suomen Keskusta)* and the National Coalition (*Kansallinen Kokoomus*) (a conservative party) (Widfeldt, 2023). The party split in 2017, with a less radical Blue Future party (*Sininen Tulevaisuus*) splintering off (Widfeldt, 2023). In 2023, the increasingly radical Finns party received over 20% of the voting, marking its most successful electoral outcome in history (Widfeldt, 2023).

[4] These early parties are distinct from modern PRR parties in that their platforms primarily mobilized on bureaucracy and tax-burden, rather than emphasizing anti-immigrant ethno-nationalism (Rydgren, 2006).

Denmark

In Denmark, the first populist right party emerged in 1973 when the Progress Party (*Fremskridtsparti)* won almost 16% of the vote (Rydgren, 2010). In the 1980's the Progress Party began emphasizing sociocultural issues to a greater degree, employing anti-immigrant rhetoric that approaches that of modern RRP parties. Rydgren (2010) argues that the first pure PRR party in Denmark was the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti)* which broke away from the Progress Party and entered Parliament for the first time in 1998 (Rydgren, 2010). In 2001, the Danish People's Party became a support party for Liberal-Conservative coalition government in power, and remained a primary coalition party until 2011, motivating Denmark's shift toward stricter immigration policies (Bjerknæs, n.d). Today, there are three different parties classified as Populist Radical Right: The Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*), the New Bourgeois (*Nye Borgerlige)*, and the Danish Democrats (*Danmarksdemokraterne)* (Widfeldt, 2023). The Danish People's Party pioneered welfare chauvinism (protecting benefits for ethnic Danes) and cultural nationalism, while The New Right combines harder anti-immigration stances with economic liberalism which the DPP rejects (Nissen & Siim, 2021). The Danish Democrats, led by former minister Inger Støjberg, occupies a middle ground with its focus on provincial Danish values and immigration restriction, but lacks the ideological coherence of the older parties, functioning more as a personalistic vehicle centered around its controversial founder (Ehrenreich, 2014; Widfeldt, 2023; Susi, 2024). After reaching its zenith in 2015 when it became Denmark's second-largest party with 21.1% of the vote, the Danish People's Party has experienced a dramatic electoral collapse, losing support to both newer radical right competitors and mainstream parties that adopted its immigration policies (Nissen & Siim, 2021). The recent movement away from the DPP and increased support for the New Bourgeois may signal a move

among PRR parties away from welfare chauvinism and toward liberalism that is novel in Scandinavian politics (Nissen & Siim, 2021).

Denmark stands out as its notoriously successful radical right has recently experienced large electoral losses and in 2019, the Social Democrats retook power (Leonhardt, 2025). Once again immigration is playing a large role in this change. While expanding climate change access and abortion protection, the Social Democratic party has adopted increasingly restrictive immigration policies, calling for lower levels of immigration overall, an emphasis on integration and Danish language-learning, and aggressive deportation policies for people who do not have legal status (Leonhardt, 2025). Many attribute the Social Democrat's newfound success largely to this shift on immigration, arguing voters favor restrictive immigration policy and the party's explicit approach to immigration (in the past it has gone back and forth on its platform, and voters were not always sure where the party stood on immigration, Leonhardt, 2025; Ehrenreich, 2024)

Norway

The Norwegian Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet)* was founded in 1973, immediately entering Parliament and becoming a major player in Norwegian politics in the late 80s connected to the increased politicization of immigration (Haugsgjerd, 2023). The Progress Party was first part of a governing coalition in 2013 when in joined with the Conservative Party (*Høyre*) (Haugsgjerd, 2023). The Progress Party remained part of the ruling coalition for over six years until 2020 (Haugsgjerd, 2023). There is some debate over whether the Progress Party should be

considered PRR as it is more moderate[5] than most parties traditionally defined as PRR (Haugsgjerd, 2023). However, the party meets Mudde's three characteristics of the PRR: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Haugsgjerd, 2023).

Historically, Sweden has been dominated by a five-party system consisting of a conservative party representing the economic elite (today "Moderates"), an agrarian "Center Party" representing the farmers, the Social Democratic party representing the working class, a center-right "Liberal Party," and a communist party (today "the Left") (Aylott, 2016). This five-party model was stable in Sweden from 1917 to 1986. With the exception of a brief break in 1936, the Social Democrats held government continuously from 1932 to 1976 (Aylott, 2016). A great deal of literature has been dedicated to understanding the stability of this party system and the dominance of the Social Democratic party. Three factors are generally highlighted: 1) Sweden's late-but-rapid industrialization created a strong working class-identity and centralized powerful industrial trade unions. 2) Their early support for suffrage made them more receptive to progressive right-wing parties, which in turn made them less radical. 3) The comprehensive welfare state that the Social Democrats implemented appealed to both the working and middle classes. During this stable five-party period, Sweden had a moderate pluralist model with two informal blocks (the left block with the Social Democrats and Communist party, and a right block with the agrarians, liberals, and conservatives; Aylott, 2016). The nature of these block politics also contributed to the stability of Social Democratic leadership in Sweden.

[5] The Progress Party lacks the extreme-right militant past of many PRR parties, for example the Sweden Democrats or the National Front in France. In addition, it is less authoritarian than other Scandinavian PRR parties. Unlike the Sweden Democrats, it was founded under popular neoliberalist movement rather than nativist militancy. The progress party entered government for the first time in the 2013 parliamentary election and is one of the best integrated PRR parties. The Progress Party's history as a ruling coalition party has caused it to have to moderate. Furthermore, it was never frozen out of political cooperation unlike the National Front in France, (and to some extent the Sweden Democrats) for example. This has encouraged cooperation and compromise between the Norwegian Progress Party and mainstream political parties (Bjerkem, 2016)

Then, in 1969, politics in Sweden began to change. The shift is generally understood through the median voter theorem—strikes made union voting shift leftward and the Social Democrats followed, leading them to lose votes among other parts of their base (Aylott, 2016). This enabled the first center right coalition in over forty years to gain power in 1976 (Aylott, 2016). After this loss, the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterna)* moved back to the right, approaching the Moderates (*Moderaterna*) and blurring party differentiation (Aylott, 2016). Further changes came in the late 80s and 90s with the collapse of the five-party system as three new parties entered the Swedish Parliament: The Greens (*Miljöpartiet)*, The Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*), and New Democracy (*Ny Demokrati)*, a right-wing populist party (Aylott, 2016). However New Democracy had little success, it was considered too radical to join one of the existing blocs and did not receive sufficient votes to be in Parliament the following election in 1994. After this election, party coalitions were relatively unstable, shifting with each election, but by 2004 a modified two-party system had been recreated with a left and right bloc, which were formalized for the first time (Aylott, 2016). In 2010, the Sweden Democrats (the modern populist radical right party) first entered Parliament, but Sweden was still considered to have stable class-voting system with the five original parties receiving over 80% of the vote share in the 2000s (Aylott, 2016).

So why did the Swedish case differ from its Scandinavian neighbors for so long? In 2002, Jens Rydgren, one of Sweden's foremost experts on Swedish politics, published a paper examining why Sweden was a "deviant case" for not having any electorally successful radical right-wing party. Rydgren put forth four main explanations: 1) Social class remained more salient in Sweden and working-class voters identified strongly with the Social Democratic party making it unlikely that they would leave in favor of an PRR party. 2) Socioeconomic issues still

dominated Swedish politics; thus, sociocultural issues associated with PRR voting (namely, immigration) had low salience for voters. 3) The five major parties were seen as distinct and voters perceived clear policy alternatives between the parties. 4) The existing radical right alternatives were perceived as too extreme (the Sweden Democrats have Nazi roots, in addition to being considered extreme for their policies). Sixteen years later, Rydgren and Meiden (2018) revisited these four explanations to attempt to account for the rise of the *Sverigedemokraterna.* They found all four factors originally contributing to Sweden's resistance to an PRR party no longer held true: 1) There was a decline in the importance of class politics in Sweden. 2) There was a rise in the salience of sociocultural issues, in particular immigration. Rydgren & Meiden (2018) connect this shift with the increased politicization of immigration, which spiked in response to sharp increases in Syrian refugees beginning in 2015. Rydgren & Meiden (2018) also argue that increases in immigration salience mapped on to increases in asylum seeking. 3) The Social Democrats and the Conservatives both moved centrally creating ambiguity for voters around the meaningful differences between the parties. 4. The Sweden Democrats were able to distance themselves from their explicitly fascist past by instituting a "zero tolerance" for racism and extremism and encouraging "deviants" to leave the party (Bulent, 2020).

Who are the Swedish Democrats

The Sweden Democrats were formed in 1988 emerging from an organization named *Bevara Sverige Svenskt (*Keep Sweden Swedish). In its early years, the SD was led by Nazis, and members burned books while wearing Nazi uniforms (Bulent, 2020). At least one member also wrote for a Nazi newspaper (Bulent, 2020). Under the leadership of Jimmie Åkesson, the party chairman, the Sweden Democrats transformed their image by expelling members for making

explicitly racist statements, helping to clean up the party's image and make it more palatable to the mainstream (Bulent, 2020). Åkesson took over leadership of the Sweden Democrats in 2005, before the party was in parliament (Bulent, 2020. Åkesson famously described Islam as "the greatest foreign threat to Sweden since World War II" (Bulent, 2020).

The Swedish Democrats are well-characterized by Mudde's three attributes of the PRR. Law and order and a nativist support for tough immigration policy are both central to their platform discussed below. Like many modern PRR parties, the Sweden Democrats have a platform of welfare chauvinism. Rather than advocating a broad contraction of the welfare state in the name of a small state and low taxes as PRR parties tended to do through the late 90s, they advocate for restricting social benefits to Swedish nationals (Chueri, 2022). The homepage of the Sverigedmokraterna reads:

> Decades of socially liberal politics have led to a divided Sweden where gangs have grown, exclusion has taken root, and the cost of living has increased. It is therefore clear that those who have created these problems are not capable of solving them. The Sweden Democrats are the party that warned of this social development and said it was coming.
>
> The Swedish Democrat's vision is to create a unified Sweden where people can feel safe and secure and have good standards of living. Where long queues for medical offices are only a memory and where those who have worked their entire lives can receive a good pension.
>
> The following four questions are particularly important for us:
>
> Serious immigration policies: Protection against organized crime, human trafficking and terrorism.
>
> Cheaper Fuel: The whole country should be able to live.
>
> True security: Harsher punishments for those who threaten our society and protect law-abiding citizen.
>
> True Welfare: Welfare should work in the entire country regardless of how much is in someone's wallet.

(Sverigedemokraterna, "Det här vill vi," translation mine)

Theorizing About the Rise of the PRR

Theories about the rise of the Populist Radical Right can be grouped into a few different categories. Structural accounts look at changes on societal levels as drivers of PRR support. These are divided between demand side and supply side accounts, both of which can be used to conceptualize the role of immigration in the rise of PRR support. Demand-side accounts can be further divided between interest-based approaches (most often the modernization/globalization losers hypothesis) and cultural-threat approaches (which argue that people perceive a symbolic threat to their culture, rather that concrete economic threats as in interest-based approaches). Finally, demographic accounts emphasize changes in the numbers or types of immigrants (refugee vs. asylum seeker vs. "economic migrants" etc.), where they are coming from and where they are going, in addition to emigratory shifts both inter- and intra-nationally. It is important to note that demographic changes are not likely to have a direct effect on PRR support and rather could operate through any of the above structural accounts, however the link between demographic changes and PRR support is often described independently from the mechanism underlying it. Furthermore, the Flash Potential Hypothesis allows for demographic changes to influence PRR support and allows for integration of supply-side accounts through issue ownership theory and demand side accounts through economic interest-based conceptualizations and/or symbolic threat theorizations, in addition for allowing demographic changes to impact immigration salience.

Immigration and PRR Support: Structural Accounts

Immigrant Demography

Perhaps the most intuitive theory linking immigration and PRR is the idea that increased immigration accounts, in part, for the rise of PRR. Evidence on this link is highly mixed. Some

research has found that support for PRR parties is stronger in areas with higher percentages of foreign-born residents (e.g. Coffé et al. 2007; Green et al., 2010; Lubbers et al. 2002; Wagner et al., 2006). Similarly, research has found that increases in immigrant populations, in particular those associated with ethnic change, predict PRR voting (e.g. Arora, 2019; Coffé et al., 2007; Halla et al., 2017; Kaufmann 2014, 2017; Patana, 2018, Piekut and Valentine, 2016; Rink et al, 2009). The theoretical explanation for such accounts is that when minority groups are large, they are seen (regardless of whether this perception is accurate) as competitors for resources and political influence (Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes, 2017).

However, studies supporting the intergroup contact hypothesis find contradictory effects––an inverse relationship between the percentage of immigrants in a community and PRR support explained by the idea that frequent interaction between communities is likely to include positive intergroup contact and improve perceptions of immigrants (e.g. Charitopoulou & García-Manglano, 2018; van der Waal et al., 2013).

In a recent meta-analysis, Amengay and Stockemer (2019) found the relationship between immigration demography and PRR voting highly inconsistent (both in terms of direction and significance), largely varying based on the proxy used to operationalize immigration (percentage of immigrant population vs. national immigration rate vs. yearly change in immigration change, etc.) Interestingly, in a separate meta-analysis, Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes (2017) found that the most stable relationship was between perceptions of large immigrant populations (regardless of their actual sizes) and anti-immigrant prejudice.

An additional body of research has examined more nuanced hypotheses, such as the halo effect which predicts that PRR support is likely to be higher in ethnically homogenous areas that are geographically close to areas with high immigrant populations. However, the results of these

studies are also mixed. For example, in Sweden, Bowyer (2008) Rydgren and Ruth (2013) found support for the halo effect whereas Rydgren and Tyberg (2019) failed to find support for the halo effect (the results were in the expected direction but far from significant). Focusing on temporal variation rather than geographic, Ramos et. al (2021) find that recent increases in immigration were positively related to PRR voting while long-term sustained immigration was not. According to their conception, over time non-immigrant populations grow accustomed to demographic changes and immigration no longer triggers increased PRR support.

Finally, recent research has begun to explore the impact of a new demographic variable: emigration. Dancygier et al. (2022) found that intranational and international emigration are related to increased PRR support across Europe as both the composition and opinion of the remaining citizens are altered. Those who emigrate are disproportionately young and motivated, while the population that remains is less educated. The departure of young, working age populations negatively impacts the local economy, leading to school and business closures and straining the viability of public services. This allows PRR parties to capitalize on the disenchantment among those who remain. Furthermore, Danygier et al. found that PRR vote shares increase in places of emigration and the Social Democrats (Sweden's moderate left-wing party and historic coalition leader) are the primary losers from emigration. The role of emigration in shaping support for the PRR is not necessarily predicated on perceptions of immigration but rather it captures another facet of demography that impacts PRR support.

Supply and Demand-Side Explanations

I. Demand-side Accounts

Other explanations for the connection between immigration and PRR support are not necessarily predicated on real changes in the demography of immigrant populations, but rather,

rely on perception of immigration as a threat. These can be grouped into demand-side and supply-side accounts (Rothmund, Bromme & Azevedo, 2020; Schnaudt & Stecker, 2020). Demand-side explanations generally fall into two approaches: first, political/economic interest-based approaches and second, cultural threat approaches.

A. *Interest-Based Approaches*

Political/economic interest-based approaches assume that people are motivated by perceived competition for limited economic resources, for example, competition over jobs or social benefits (Zhirkov 2014 as cited in Schnaudt & Stecker, 2020). This is the basis of the broader Modernization/Globalization Losers Hypothesis which suggests that support for the PRR is caused by people feeling "left behind" in modern globalized Western democracies (Rothmund, Bromme & Azevedo, 2020).[6] Importantly, these explanations do not necessarily require people to actually *be* the losers of modernization (i.e. face greater unemployment, lower wages, etc.), only that people perceive this to be true, perhaps due to the uplift of other groups. Nevertheless, a recent meta-analysis on causal explanations for populism reveals a robust link between economic insecurity and populism finding that "economic shocks and economic insecurity explain approximately one third of recent populist surges" (Scheiring et al, 2024).

B. *Cultural Threat Approaches*

Identity-based demand-side approaches emphasize the cultural rather than economic ramifications that are perceived to be associated with immigration. (e.g. Ivarsflaten, 2005, Babst et al., 2024, Manunta et al., 2024). Often called the Cultural Backlash Thesis, such accounts harness nativist ideas and attribute radical right support not to perceived material losses like interest-based hypotheses but to perceived cultural and identity threats. For example, in many

[6] For example, many accounts of Donald Trump's popularity among white blue-collar workers attribute this phenomenon to the modernization/globalization losers hypothesis (e.g. Lombardo, 2018).

countries, recent narratives compatible with this mechanism highlight hijab-wearers as a cultural threat and express concern about immigrants not learning the national language,.

II. Supply-Side Accounts

Supply-side mechanisms broadly refer to the party spectrum structure and issue competition wherein the positions occupied by extant political parties on immigration, the degree to which they are emphasized, and how distinct they are relative to each other impact the degree to which a radical right party can "own" the immigration issue (Spoon & Klüver, 2019; Meguid, 2008). These mechanisms portray voters as reacting to political parties rather than forming their own opinions and supporting the party that matches their beliefs most closely.

Flash Potential Hypothesis

The present study builds on the work of Dennison (2020) who found that the rise of the populist radical right in Western Europe is primarily driven by increases in immigration salience, rather than meaningful changes in immigration opinion. Dennison, 2019 connects issue salience to issue ownership theory which conceptualizes the rise of the PRR as follows: immigration rose in salience in the late 90s and early 2000s. Because mainstream parties did not 'own' the immigration issue, it created the opportunity for PRR parties to mobilize electoral support (Sipma & Berning, 2021). Consequently, PRR parties are now the issue owners of immigration and according to issue ownership theory, should benefit electorally in periods of higher immigration salience. Schnaudt & Stecker (2022) build on the work of Dennison (2020), finding that periods of high immigration salience "activate" already existing anti-immigration beliefs leading to PRR support; it is not variations in immigration opinion but rather changes in the salience (relative importance) of immigration that underlie recent increases in PRR support in Europe. The below graph from Dennison & Geddes (2019) visualizes immigration opinion

across multiple European countries over time, exemplifying the relative stability of immigration opinion over time (see also Kustov et. al 2021 for more evidence of the stability of immigration opinions over time). Importantly, as Dennison & Geddes point out, in countries where immigration is not stable it is actually becoming less negative, underlining the insufficiency of immigration opinion as an explanation for rising PRR support.

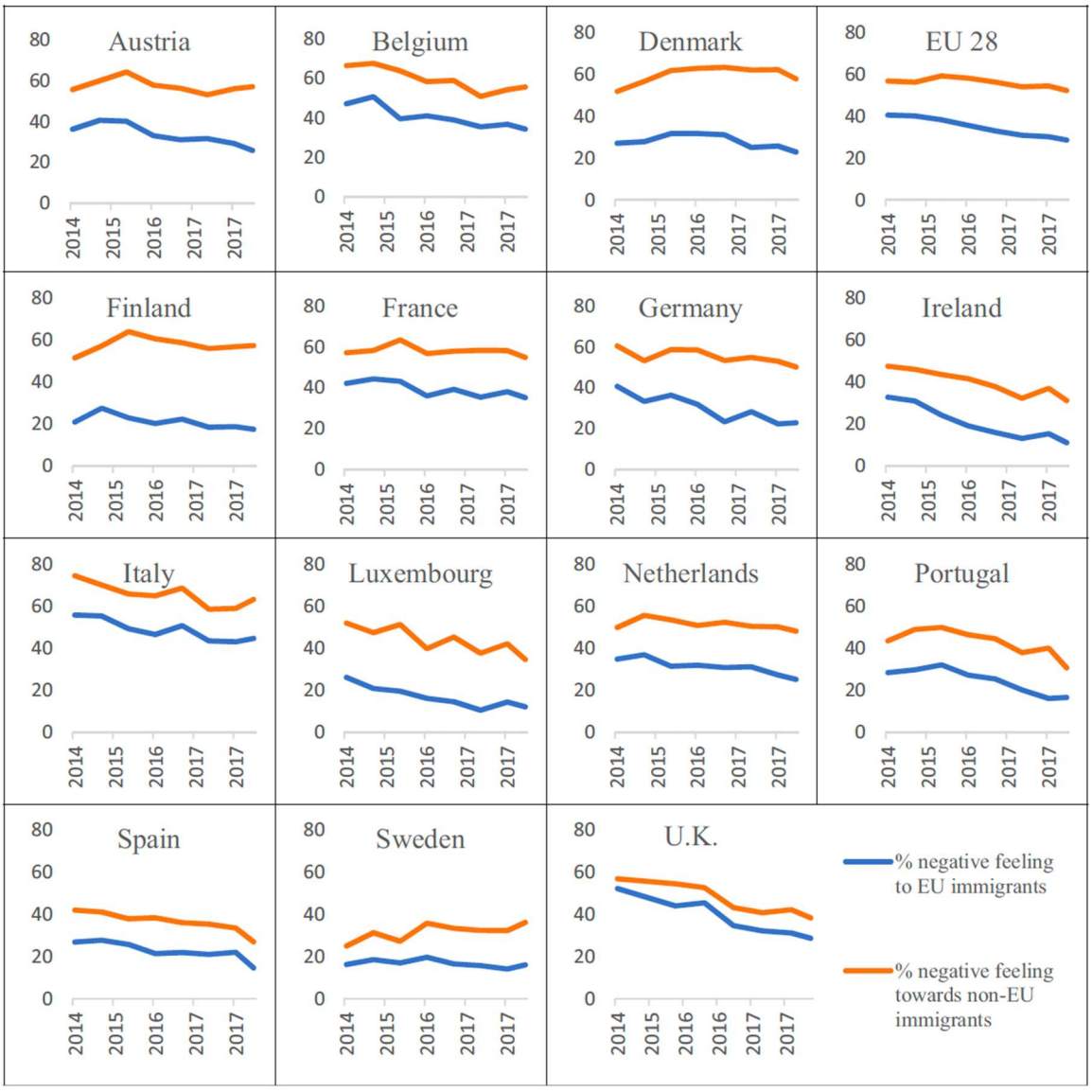

Figure 1: Changes in negative feelings toward immigrants across Europe between 2014-2018 (Source: Dennison & Geddes, 2019)

The Flash Potential Hypothesis is unique in that it offers a structural account of increasing PRR support without limiting itself to a demand or supply-side only account as increases in immigration salience are likely driven by a combination of demographic variables (on the most basic level—increases in immigration), supply-side variables (party platforms and media discussion of immigration and other issues), and demand-side variables (changes in economic standing, perceptions of increased socio-cultural threats posed by immigrants etc.). As such, the Flash Potential Hypothesis allows for the integration of past research previously portrayed as discrepant into a more cohesive understanding of the role of immigration in the rise of the PRR.

Immigration and PRR Support: Individual Psychological Motivational Mechanisms

The mechanisms described above attempt to explain the connection between immigration and PRR support on a structural level. Additional research has attempted to delve into the psychological processes underlying the social mechanisms, though current literature lacks an integrating conceptualization of the psychological mechanisms at play. The present study does not attempt to account for the psychological mechanisms linking immigration to PRR. A brief overview of popular accounts, however, allows us to explore how they may integrate with the Flash Potential Hypothesis. Research into individual variables affecting populist support can be roughly grouped into two categories: 1) Who votes for the PRR, and what attributes make an individual more likely to do so? and, 2) Why are people voting for the PRR, what psychological mechanisms underpin their support?

Who Votes for the PRR: Demographic Variables

On an individual level, peoples' backgrounds influence the likelihood of their voting for the PRR. Men consistently support PRR parties at greater rates than women (Spierings and Zaslove, 2017; Harteveld & Ivarflaten, 2018). Schäfer & Steiner (2025) argue that gender, education, and generation structure a cleavage where young, educated women are turning to Green parties, while young, uneducated men turn toward the PRR. Income has a less consistent effect on PRR voting, depending on the specific platform and primary constituencies of a party (Han, 2016). However, research has often found that the PRR enjoys greater support from the working class than from other socioeconomic classes, which is the case in Sweden (Jylhä et. al, 2019). Yet Jylhä et. al (2019) make clear that the majority of Sweden Democrat voters cannot be considered "economically marginalized," and instead are of high socioeconomic status, illustrating the complex relationship between PRR support and economic background. According to Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville (2021) there is no positive correlation between religiosity and voting for the PRR in any Wester European country. In many countries, including Sweden, there is a negative relationship between religiosity and PRR voting; religious people are less likely to vote for the populist radical right. Given these mixed results, it is not clear what effect religiosity has on PRR voting. Research on the relationship between unemployment rates and PRR support is mixed at best, a recent meta-analysis found no compelling evidence for the any significant relationship between unemployment rates and PRR support (Sipma & Lubbers, 2020). However, many theories expect PRR support to increase in periods of high unemployment (Sipma & Berning, 2021).

Who Votes for the PRR: Personality Variables

Erisen et al. (2021) find that conspiratorial beliefs (of all types) are a primary source of populist attitudes, while other psychological variables such as moral disengagement, need for cognition and belief in simple solutions had mixed effects on populist attitudes depending on contextual factors (see also Papaioannou et al., 2023 finding that belief in conspiracy theories predicts autocratic attitudes). Similarly, (Pellegrini, 2022) find that stronger beliefs that the world is dangerous and ideological aversion to change were strongly linked with hostile attitudes toward immigration and populist beliefs. They posit that perceptions of scarce resources and a view of competitive and unregulated resource management lead to desire to restore historical power hierarchies consistent with PRR platforms.

Baro (2022) found that PRR voters are less likely to support self-transcendent values[7], and more likely to support conservation values.[8] From this, the authors conclude that the Manichean and exclusionary character of populist ideologues appeals to people with specific personal values; PRR voters are less likely than others to prioritize inclusiveness and tolerance and more likely to prioritize in-group protection and uncertainty avoidance, and to demonstrate greater sensitivity to threat perceptions. Similarly, Rothmund, Bromme & Azevedo (2020) found that sensitivity to injustice toward oneself enhanced the likelihood of preferring PRR candidates via anti-immigration attitudes. Sensitivity toward injustice towards others, on the other hand, decreased the likelihood of preferring PRR candidates to other parties. Gründl & Aichholzer (2020), found that uncertainty avoidance is associated with PRR support. More specifically,

[7] Self-transcendent values are those that emphasize concern for the welfare of others, as opposed to self-enhancement values which legitimize the pursuit of self-interest (Baro, 2022).
[8] Conservation values emphasize preserving the status quo and voiding threats as opposed to openness value which prioritize the pursuit of new ideas and experiences (Baro, 2022).

Gründl & Aicholzer found that authoritarianism and nativism (both of which are core to PRR ideology) correlate with the need to reduce uncertainty.

Why Do People Vote for the PRR: Cognitive and Affective Models:

Abadi et al., 2023 found that perceived threats, whether symbolic or actual, trigger feelings of anxiety leading to anti-establishment attitudes. Altomonte et al. (2019) found that worsening levels of relative deprivation (the average distance between the individual's income and that of the wealthiest people in the community) lead to individual feelings of resentment and injustice as people perceive a loss of social status. Importantly, Altomonte et al., found that this resentment occurs through a mechanism of social identification wherein increases in the relative deprivation of individuals' communities also leads to resentment and perceived loss of social status. This effect is stronger in more cohesive communities who protest more strongly against the outgroup when faced with increased relative deprivation. Manunta et al., (2022) identify status- based identity threats, specifically feelings of social exclusion as a partial mediator of the link between relative deprivation and populist beliefs. Together, these accounts shed light on the individual psychological mechanisms that underlie interest-based approaches to the connection between immigration and PRR support as they help us understand how perceived economic suffering can relate to anti-immigrant sentiment and in turn PRR support. Furthermore, these accounts help explain why research linking objective economic measures to PRR support have been so mixed, instead, shedding light on the importance of perceived relative deprivation both on an individual level and of one's in-group.

Additional research has focused on the role of negative affect in shaping populist attitudes and subsequent actions. Researchers have examined disgust and sadness (e.g.

Widmann, 2021), contempt (e.g, Vahter & Jakobson, 2021), and anger and fear. Erisen and Vasiolopoulou (2022) found that anger, rather than fear, is the emotional mechanism underlying the link between anti-immigration attitudes and PRR support. This is important because when anger emerges as the primary emotion it is associated with confrontational voting, while anxiety leads to preferences for reconciliatory behavior (Verbalyte et al., 2024). In addition, political trust moderates this relationship such that anger is more strongly related to PRR support in individuals with lower levels of political trust. Finally, the authors found that anger affects how individuals seek out and process information about immigration. This cognitive bias means that they subsequently overestimate the threat posed by immigration. When paired with previously discussed research on threat appraisal, this research on affect gives us further insight into why anti-immigrant beliefs may translate into PRR support at greater rates in periods of high immigration salience; people motivated by anger toward perceived wrongs are driven to support anti-establishment parties and disfavor parties that emphasize reconciliation and cross-party collaboration.

Rhodes-Purdy et al., (2021) aim to integrate economic and cultural accounts for the rise of populism through the emotional responses of citizens. They argue that both economic and cultural threats trigger anger, and cultural discontent in turn leads to populist attitudes. The authors argue that this gives specific insight into populism in Scandinavia where economic inequality is relatively low. This Affective Political Economic theory bridges demand-side accounts for the rise of populism, suggesting that economic and socio-cultural accounts for the rise of populism are not only not exclusionary, but may be attributed to the same underlying psychological mechanism. Though beyond the scope of this study, this theory seems reconcilable with the Flash Potential Hypothesis: it may be that the Affective Political Economy theory

explains increases in immigration salience which in turn activate previously held anti-immigrant beliefs. In other words, real or perceived economic changes or threats to social-cultural hegemony all trigger anger, in turn activating anti-immigrant beliefs. Changes in immigration salience could be the cause of perceived social-economic threats where increased immigration rates, media coverage of immigration etc. cause increases in immigration salience which in turn leads people to feel threatened. Alternatively, changes in salience could be the outcome of threats where people are suffering economically or feel their cultural hegemony is threatened which in turn increases the salience of immigration. The potential integration of Affective Political Economic Theory with the Flash Potential Hypothesis should be the subject future research, likely using structural equations modeling and may provide a more nuanced and comprehensive model for the mechanisms leading to PRR support

In this study, I examine the interaction effect between immigration attitudes (how positively or negatively people feel that immigrants impact their country in addition to how many/what types of immigrants should be allowed into their country) and immigration salience. I examine the following hypotheses:

H1a: There is an inverse relationship between immigration opinion and voting for the PRR party where people who believe immigrants are good for Sweden are less likely to vote for the *Sverigedemokraterna.*

H1b: There is a positive relationship between immigration restrictiveness and voting for the PRR party where people who favor restrictive immigration policy are more likely to vote for the *Sverigedemokraterna.*

H2: There is a positive relationship between immigration salience and PRR voting where, in periods of higher immigration salience, more people vote for the *Sverigedemokraterna.*

H3a: There is a significant interaction effect between immigration opinion and immigration salience on PRR voting where immigration opinion is associated with PRR voting to a greater extent in periods of high immigration salience.

H3b: There is a significant interaction effect between immigration restrictiveness and immigration salience on PRR voting where immigration restrictiveness is associated with PRR voting to a greater extent in periods of high immigration salience.

Methods

Data

This study uses individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS) to assess Swedish attitudes toward immigration and support for the *Sverigedemokraterna*. The ESS provides cross-sectional longitudinal data on attitudes toward a variety of issues, in addition to voting behavior. The ESS includes standard survey questions asked biannually since 2001. ESS sampling is representative of all residents within a country above age 15 (regardless of nationality, citizenship, or language). I examined ESS rounds 4-11 from 2008 (the last ESS survey before the *Sverigedemokraterna* entered Swedish Parliament) to 2023 (the most recent data available). Immigration salience is assessed using Eurobarometer data. The Eurobarometer survey with the data collection period closest to that of the relevant ESS round was used to determine immigration salience. In cases where ESS data collection was evenly spaced between Eurobarometer surveys, the average of the two surveys was used for the given ESS round.

Operationalization

Swedish immigration attitudes are operationalized based on a six-item measure informed by ESS survey questions as was done in Schnaudt & Stecker (2022), Dennison & Geddes (2019) and Dennison (2020).

> The first three items ask respondents how many immigrants (a) of the same ethnic group, (b) of a different ethnic group, and (c) from poorer countries outside Europe they would allow to come and live in their country. Respondents could answer on a four-point scale ranging from “allow many” to “allow none.” The remaining three items ask respondents about their views concerning the consequences of immigration for the (a) economy, (b) culture, and (c) overall condition of their country. Respondents could indicate their evaluations on an 11-point scale (0–10), where higher values indicate more positive evaluations.

These six items were reduced using Primary Components Analysis into two factors: immigration restrictiveness (based on the first three questions) and immigration opinion (based on the final three questions).

As was done by Schnaudt & Stecker (2022) and Dennis (2020), immigration salience is operationalized through the Eurobarometer "Most Important Problem" (MIP) question which asks respondents the two most important issues facing their country today. The percentage of respondents who reported the following issues: immigration, economy, unemployment, crime and terrorism as being one of the top two issues facing Sweden today was used to represent the issue salience for each issue. Prior research supports the use of MIP questions as a measure of issue salience (Bartle & Laycock, 2012). Unemployment and economy were found to be highly correlated ($r = 0.87$), thus unemployment was removed from the analysis on the basis that economy is both a broader measure and likely to include unemployment.

A dependent variable was created from the European Social Survey question which asks respondents which party they voted for in the last national election. From this, a binary dependent variable was created for whether the respondent voted for the PRR party or any other party (respondents who did not vote or did not respond to the question were recorded as missing).

All models additionally included the following potentially relevant variables: gender, net income, age, years of education, unemployment history, religiosity, belief in a just world, satisfaction with government, state of education and health services.

Gender was reported as a binary (0- male, 1-female). Net income was measured in deciles. Unemployment history was a binary where participants were asked if they had ever been "unemployed and seeking work for a period of three or more months," to which they could

answer Yes (1), No (0), or refuse to answer. Religiosity was measured by a factor derived by a principle components analysis (PCA) on the following variables: 1) "How religious are you?" (0- Not at all – 10- Very religious), 2) "How often do you pray apart from religious services?" (1- Everyday – 6 less than only on special holy days), and 3) "How often do you attend religious services apart from special occasions?" on the same scale. Belief in a just world is also a factor derived through PCA composed of: 1) "Most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair" (0- most people try to take advantage of you – 10- most people try to be fair), 2) "Most of the time people are helpful or mostly looking out for themselves" (0-people mostly look out for themselves – 10- people mostly try to be helpful), 3) "Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful" (0- you can't be too careful – 10 most people can be trusted). The satisfaction with government factor is composed of 1) "How satisfied [are you] with the national government?" (0- extremely dissatisfied – 10- extremely satisfied), 2) "How satisfied [are you] with the way democracy works in country?" (0-extremley dissatisfied – 10- extremely satisfied), 3) "How satisfied [are you] with the present state of economy in country?" (0- extremely dissatisfied – 10- extremely satisfied). The state education and health services factor includes: How would you describe 1) "the state of health services in country nowadays?" (0-extremely bad – 10-extremely good), and 2) "the state of education in country nowadays?" (0-extremely bad – 10-extremely good).

Statistical Analysis

I used binary logistic regression to examine the overall role of immigration salience, immigration opinion, and immigration permissiveness, and the interaction effects between these on PRR voting attachment.

Results

Profile of a PRR Voter

In the sample, of those who voted for the Sweden Democrats, 62.9% were men, 37.1% were women. Overall, in the sample 8.2% of men and 4.9% of women voted RRP. There was no significant relationship between age and RRP voting. People who were born in Sweden or another Western country voted for the PRR at a higher rate (7.6%) than those who were born in a non-Western country (6.4%). There was little difference in PRR voting between those born in Sweden (7.6%), those born in Northern Europe but outside of Sweden (7.2%) and those born in a Western country outside of Northern Europe (7.2%). Where participants' parents were born had a similar relationship with PRR voting in which 7.6% of those who had two parents from Western countries voted for the PRR, compared to 6.1% of those who had at least one parent born outside the West. However, in the regression analysis, neither participant's region of birth nor that of their parents had a significant effect on PRR voting.

The relationship between income level and PRR voting was significant ($p < .001$), but very small ($b = -.006$, $\beta = .007$), where people in higher income brackets were slightly less likely to vote for *Sverigedemokraterna*. The relationship between years of full-time education and voting for the RRP was also very small though significant ($b = -.006$, $p < .001$). However, the role of education was not stable in the model, only becoming significant once issue salience was added (Table 3). This suggests an interaction effect between education, issue salience, and PRR voting that will be explored more below.

The percentage voted for the PRR by round of the European Social survey is described below (Table 1).

Table 1 PRR Voting over Time

ESS Round (Data collection period)		PRR Percentage in Sample (N)	Election Vote Share
5	(09/2010 - 02/2011)	3.4% (42)	5.7%
6	(09/2012 – 05/2013)	4.4% (64)	**
7	(07/2014 - 01/2015)	4.9% (71)	12.9%
8	(08/2016 - 02/2017)	6.1% (94)	**
9	(08/2018 - 05/2019)	9.2% (141)	17.5%
10	(12/2021 - 01/2022)	12.1% (229)	**
11	(03/2023 -12/2023)	7% (86)	20.5%

** (Non-election year, respondents referring to previous election)

As expected, Sweden Democrat voters had lower belief in a just world (i.e. they agreed more with the statement that 1) "most people try to take advantage of you" than "most people try to be fair" and 2) related more to the statement that "most of the time people are looking out for themselves" than that "most of the time people are helpful," and finally 3) that "you can't be too careful" over "most people can be trusted"). Those who voted for the Sweden Democrats were also less satisfied with the current state of the Swedish government, democracy, economy, and education and health services than those who did not vote for the Sweden Democrats. Sweden Democrat voters favored immigration restrictiveness, overall preferring to "allow few immigrants of different race/ethnic group from the majority," "allow few immigrants of same race/ethnic group as the majority," and "allow few immigrants from poorer countries outside of Europe." Finally, those who voted for the Sweden Democrats held more negative views of the impact of immigrants on society agreeing that "immigrants make country worse place to live,"

that Sweden's "cultural life is undermined by immigrants," and that "immigration is bad for [Sweden's] economy." Below, Table 2, depicts a comparison of the descriptive statistics on the above variables for Sweden Democrat vs Non-Sweden Democrat voters.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for PRR vs non-PRR Voters

	Sweden Democrat Voters		**Non-Swed. Democrat Voters**	
Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Belief in a Just World	-.456	1.195	.101	.951
Satisfaction w/ Gov., Democracy, Economy	-.843	1.091	.076	.959
Satisfaction with Education, Health	-.385	1.102	-.012	.971
Immigration Restrictiveness	.502	1.080	-.037	.978
Immigration Good for Society, Culture, etc.	-1.057	1.197	.106	.930

Below Table 3 depicts issue salience by ESS round. Salience (abbreviated "sal.") is measured by the percentage of respondents who selected the given issue as one of the "two most important issues facing their country today" in the Eurobarometer survey. Table 4 depicts the correlation matrix between issue saliences.

Table 3: Issue Salience over Time

			Issue Salience				
ESS Round	**ESS Collection Dates**	**Euro-barometer**	**Immigration**	**Economy.**	**Crime**	**Unemployment**	**Terrorism**
4	Not specified	71 (Oct-Nov 2008)	8%	43%	16%	38%	1%
5	Sep 2010-Feb 2011	74 (Nov-Dec 2010)	14%	22%	15%	56%	7%
6	Sep 2012- May 2013	76 (Nov 2011) 77 (May 2012)	9.5%	23.5%	11.5%	55.5%	1.5%
7	Jul 2014- Jan 2015	81 (May-Jun 2014) 82 (Nov 2014)	19%	14%	5.5%	44.5%	1%
8	Aug 2016- Feb 2017	86 (Nov 2016) 87 (May 2017)	36.5%	8.5%	13.5%	18%	4.5%
9	Aug 2018- May 2019	90 (Nov 2018) 91 (June 2019)	21%	9.5%	22.5%	5.5%	3%
10	Dec 202- Jan 2022	95 (Jun-Jul 2021) 96 (Jan-Feb 2022)	20.59%	7.5%	18%	11.5%	1.5%
11	Mar 2023-Dec 2023	99 (May-Jun 2023)	9%	13%	42%	2%	2%

Table 4: Correlation Matrix between Issus Salience Variables

		Immig.	Econ.	Unemp.	Crime	Terror.
Immigration Salience	**Pearson's *r***	1	-.667**	-.352**	-.294**	.220**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
Economic salience	**Pearson's *r***		1	.862**	-.244**	.240**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			<.001	<.001	<.001
Unemploy. salience	**Pearson's *r***			1	-.677**	.212**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				<.001	<.001
Crime Salience	**Pearson's *r***				1	.003
	Sig. (2-tailed)					.776
Terrorism Salience	**Pearson's *r***					1
	Sig. (2-tailed)					

** Correlation significant at .01 level (2-tailed)

Due to the very strong correlation between unemployment and economic salience, unemployment salience was omitted from the analysis as economy is a broader issue that encompasses unemployment.

The decision to vote for the PRR is likely to be multidetermined as noted in the introduction, influenced by individuals' backgrounds in addition to their beliefs and external sociocultural factors, as such all of the above variables are included in the models discussed below.

Modeling PRR Voting

Table 5 presents the results of the logistic regression examining the effect of immigration restrictiveness (the belief that few immigrants should be allowed into Sweden) and impact (the belief that immigrants are on the whole good for society) on PRR voting. Consistent with

hypotheses H1a and H1b, there is a significant positive relationship between immigration restrictiveness and PRR voting, and a significant inverse relationship between immigration impact and PRR voting. Furthermore, women and people with more years of education are less likely to vote for the Populist Radical Right. On the other hand, the more religious a person is, (religiosity is measured by how frequently people report praying, going to church more often and how religious they describe themselves as being) the more likely to vote for the PRR. Satisfaction with current institutions was also inversely related with PRR voting.

The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(11) = 1061.966$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors, as a set, reliably distinguished between PRR party voters and non-voters. The model explained 27.3% of the variance in voting behavior (Nagelkerke R^2). While overall classification accuracy was high (93.7%), this was largely driven by correct classification of non-PRR voters (specificity = 99.4%). The model's ability to correctly identify PRR party voters was considerably lower (sensitivity = 13.2%), suggesting limited predictive utility for the minority class despite the significant overall model fit.

Table 5: Model 1: Direct Effect of Individual Variables on the Odds of Voting for the Populist Radical Right Party

Variable	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Background				
Female	-.458	22.208	<.001	.632
Household's total net income	-.057	9.675	.002	.945
Age	-.001	.242	.623	.999
Years of full-time education	-.007	.266	.606	.993
Ever unemployed and seeking work 3+ months	-.182	3.264	.071	.834
Religiosity	.175	9.625	.002	1.191
Personal Beliefs				
Belief in a Just World	.080	2.814	.093	1.083
Satisfaction with government, democracy, economy	-.514	119.306	<.001	.598
Satisfaction with education and health services	-.178	15/357	< .001	.837
Immigration Restrictiveness	.397	80.645	<.001	1.488
Immigration Impact (benefit to society, culture etc)	-.812	278.161	<.001	.444
Constant	-1.801	27.988	<.001	.165

When issue salience is added in (see Table 6 below), the model remains stable. However, inconsistent with Hypothesis H2, there is a significant inverse relationship between immigration salience and PRR voting; on its own, higher immigration salience is actually associated with lower odds of voting for the PRR. This is at odds with previous findings. Schnaudt and Stecker

(2022) found no significant direct effect of issue salience on PRR voting, and Dennison (2020) and Dennison and Geddes (2019) both found a significant positive effect of immigration salience on PRR voting where within one country, periods of higher immigration salience are directly associated with greater PRR voting.

The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(14) = 1074.992$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors, as a set, reliably distinguished between PRR party voters and non-voters. The model explained 29.1% of the variance in voting behavior (Nagelkerke R^2). The model successfully classifies 99.1% of non-PRR voters but only 15.5% of PRR voters.

Interestingly, immigration salience alone was related to PRR voting in the expected direction where higher issue salience is associated with greater odds of voting for the PRR (Table 7). The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 14.135$, $p < .001$. The model explained .4% of the variance in voting behavior (Nagelkerke R^2). The model successfully classifies 100% of non-PRR voters and 0% of PRR voters.

This indicates that controlling for individual characteristic and personal beliefs, immigration salience is negatively related with the odds of PRR voting while without controlling for such variables immigration salience is positively related with PRR voting. Future research is needed to more fully interpret this effect.

Table 6: Model 3: Direct Effects of Immigration Impact, Immigration Restrictiveness and Issue Salience on the Odds of Voting for the Populist Radical Right Party

Variable	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Background				
Female	-.463	22.044	<.001	.630
Household's total net income	-.043	5.237	.022	.958
Age	-.004	1.987	.159	.996
Years of full-time education	-.026	.3.630	.057	.974
Ever unemployed and seeking work 3+ months	-.222	4.697	.030	.801
Religiosity	.145	6.581	.010	1.155
Personal Beliefs				
Belief in a Just World	.081	2.834	.092	1.084
Satisfaction with government, democracy, economy	-.529	115.010	<.001	.589
Satisfaction with education and health services	-.128	7.450	.006	.880
Immigration Restrictiveness	.388	71.313	<.001	1.473
Immigration Impact (benefit to society, culture etc)	-.775	249.590	<.001	.461
Sociocultural Factors				
Immigration salience	-.020	5.229	.022	.980
Economic salience	-.054	16.383	<.001	.948
Terrorism salience	.061	3.071	.080	1.062
Constant	-.331	.508	.476	.718

Table 7: Direct Effect of Immigration Salience on the Odds of Voting for the Populist Radical Right Party

Variable	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Background				
Immigration salience	.017	14.575	<.001	1.017

Finally, in Table 8, below, the interaction effects between immigration salience and immigration restrictiveness and immigration salience and immigration impact are added, testing the Flash Potential Hypothesis. In line with hypothesis (H3), both interaction effects were significant where in periods of higher immigration salience, people with pro-immigrant beliefs were even less likely to vote for the PRR and people who favored immigration restrictiveness were even more likely to vote for the PRR. Notably, the direct effects of immigration opinion and restrictiveness disappear in the compound model, stressing the importance of the interaction effect.

The model successfully explained 30.2% of the variance in RRP voting (Nagelkerke R2 = .302), and correctly predicted 98.9% of non-RRP voting, and 17.7% of RRP voting. The model was significant ($\chi 2(16) = 1110.69$, $p < .001$, $N = 8362$). This model supports the Flash Potential Hypothesis that in periods of high immigration salience extant anti-immigrant beliefs are activated leading to greater support of PRR parties.

Table 8 Model 3: Direct Effect of Immigration Impact, Immigration Restrictiveness, Issue Salience & Interaction Effect on the Odds of Voting for the Populist Radical Right Party

Variable	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Background				
Female	-.475	22.786	<.001	.622
Household's total net income	-.046	6.035	.014	.955
Age	-.004	1.935	.164	.996
Years of full-time education	-.027	.3.872	.049	.973
Ever unemployed and seeking work 3+ months	-.224	4.717	.030	.799
Religiosity	.144	6.424	.011	1.155
Personal Beliefs				
Belief in a Just World	.063	1.645	.200	1.065
Satisfaction with government, democracy, economy	-.485	94.548	<.001	.616
Satisfaction with education and health services	-.120	6.410	.011	.887
Immigration Restrictiveness	.008	.005	.945	1.008
Immigration Impact (benefit to society, culture etc)	-.118	.961	.327	.889
Sociocultural Factors				
Immigration salience	-.051	23.250	<.001	.950
Economic salience	-.053	2.424	.119	.949
Terrorism salience	.053	16.136	<.001	1.055
Interaction Effects				
Immigration Salience x Immigration Restrictiveness	.021	12.641	<.001	1.021
Immigration Salience x Immigration Impact	-.036	24.551	<.001	.965
Constant	.252	.277	.599	1.287

Discussion

The rise of Radical Right Populism across the west has garnered significant attention in recent years. The Swedish case has attracted particular notice due to the legacy of Swedish exceptionalism wherein Sweden seemed invulnerable to the PRR wave sweeping Scandinavia for nearly 40 years. Immigration is deeply implicated in trying to understand the shift toward PRR parties; substantial research has identified it as one of, if not the most, powerful predictor of PRR support. Furthermore, the nativist platform inherent to PRR parties lends itself to immigration as a focal issue. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that despite relative agreement on the importance of immigration in understanding the rise of the PRR, the mechanism through which this occurs is still largely elusive.

Particularly puzzling is the fact that opinions on immigration have remained relatively constant over time. Thus, the rise of the PRR cannot be interpreted as resulting from increasingly anti-immigrant beliefs. To shed additional light on the connection between immigration and the Populist Radical Right, I test the Flash Potential Hypothesis introduced by Dennison and Geddes (2018). One can interpret the rise of the Populist Radical Right as resulting from increases in immigration salience which activate already held anti-immigrant beliefs leading to an increase in PRR voting.

Using individual-level data from eight rounds of the European Social Survey (2008-2023) combined with aggregated data on immigration salience from Biannual Eurobarometer surveys, I show that the effects of opinions on immigration impact and immigration restrictiveness were greater in periods of higher immigration salience. Accordingly, while opinions on immigration have not changed significantly, high immigration salience has activated previously held anti-immigrant beliefs leading to increases in support for the PRR consistent

with the Flash Potential Hypothesis. This provides insight into the mechanism underlying the sweeping rise of the PRR.

Another interesting takeaway is that even predicting PRR voting with respondents' left-right self-placement (Annex B) explained only 30.2% of the variance in in PRR voting. This supports Cas Mudde's emphasis on classifying parties such as the Sweden Democrats as "radical right" rather than "far right," as Sweden Democrats did not self-place themselves on the far-right of the left right political-spectrum and their left-right placement was not particularly predictive of whether they voted for the Sweden Democrats. Rather, the radical-ness of PRR parties seems to be on a second dimension, such as the GAL-TAN dimension (discussed in Annex B).

Limitations and Future Directions

Though all three models were statistically significant, even model three only explained approximately 30% of the variance in PRR voting, correctly predicting around 18% of PRR votes. Clearly something is missing from these models. The models presented here include all variables considered by Schnaudt & Stecker (2022) (and some additional ones), suggesting that other salience-based models would have similar predictive utility (though their model fit is not reported).

The low variance explained is likely due in part to the very small percentage of the sample that voted for the PRR (approximately 7%). Future research should examine closely the representative of ESS samples, and perhaps look to other data sources, as thus far all salience-based research that I am aware of has used ESS data.

Future research should continue to include immigration salience, and the interaction between immigration saliences and immigration opinion in predicting PRR voting, however, for such predictive modeling to be truly useful additional research needs to focus on integrating what

are often considered dichotomous mechanisms for understanding the rise of the PRR as none of them seem sufficient independently. In particular, future research should focus on further integrating individual and structural level analyses, including examining the relationship between individuals' issue salience evaluations and the likelihood of their voting for the PRR in addition to the relationship between aggregate salience evaluations and national polling or election results. Similarly, an integrative model for the manner in which other variables impact PRR voting alongside immigration is needed: the role of structural variables such as GDP change, unemployment, crime rates, demographic changes and the saliences of each of these issues on PRR voting remains unclear and must be better understood in order to gain a more complete understanding of the rise of the PRR. Furthermore, future research should test the effectiveness of Affective Political Economy theory alongside the Flash potential hypothesis in predicting the rise of the PRR as this allows us to integrate economic and cultural-threat hypotheses.

Appendices

Appendix A: Closeness to the PRR

In addition to examining PRR voting, closeness to the PRR was also examined. Though the two are of course related (it is unlikely to vote for the PRR party if you are not politically close to them), the two measures are not redundant. Predicting closeness allows us to examine a different set of questions: is there an overall shift closer to the PRR? If so, is this shift explained by the same variables that significantly predict PRR voting?

The European Social Survey (used by Schnaudt and Stecker (2022) and in this study) asks participants what party they are closest to, how close they feel to the party they are closest to, and where they place themselves on a the left right scale. To create a continuous measure of closeness to the Sweden Democrats, I use average voter placements on the left-right scale and GAL-TAN scale (described in detail in Annex B) from Bäckersten, 2022 and calculate the Euclidian distance from the Sweden Democrats. Model 3 was then used to predict closeness to the Sweden Democrats.

Table 9: Predicting Closeness using Model 3: Direct Effect of Immigration Impact, Immigration Restrictiveness, Issue Salience & Interaction Effect on Closeness to the PRR

Variable	B	Coeff. Std. Error	Sig.
Background			
Female	.111	.025	<.001
Household's total net income	-.049	.005	<.001
Age	.002	.001	.042
Years of full-time education	-.005	.003	.114
Ever unemployed and seeking work 3+ months	-.181	.028	<.001
Religiosity	.118	.013	.<.001
Personal Beliefs			
Belief in a Just World	.000	.014	.981
Satisfaction with government, democracy, economy	-.106	.014	<.001
Satisfaction with education and health services	-.002	.013	.859
Immigration Restrictiveness	-.020	.032	.526
Immigration Impact (benefit to society, culture etc)	-.036	.033	.276
Sociocultural Factors			
Immigration salience	.003	.002	.237
Economic salience	.012	.003	<.001
Terrorism salience	-.044	.008	<.001
Interaction Effects			
Immigration Salience x Immigration Restrictiveness	-.009	.002	<.001
Immigration Salience x Immigration Impact	.016	.002	<.001
Constant	1.904	.122	<.001

Overall, the model remained relatively stable when used to predict closeness to the PRR as compared to PRR voting. Using a linear regression, the model explained 11.6% of the

variance in Euclidian distance from the Sweden Democrats (r^2 = .116). The model was significant p <.001, F(16) = 67.473.

Interestingly, though the interaction effects between attitudes toward immigration and immigration salience were significant in both models, the signs were opposite where, when predicting PRR voting the relationship between immigration restrictiveness and PRR voting became stronger (more positive) in periods of high immigration salience and the relationship between pro-immigration attitudes and PRR voting became stronger (more negative) in periods of high immigration salience; on the other hand, when predicting distance from the PRR the relationship between immigration restrictiveness and distance to the PRR became weaker (less positive) in periods of high immigration salience and the relationship between optimistic perceptions of immigration and PRR voting became weaker (less negative) in periods of high immigration salience. This indicates that salience has a different mediatory role in affecting closeness to the PRR compared to PRR voting. Unraveling this dynamic is beyond the scope of this paper. However, this finding emphasizes that closeness to the PRR and voting for the PRR are not interchangeable emphasizing the need to research the two distinctly. Specifically, the role of immigration salience in shaping closeness to the PRR should be explored further. In addition, it will be informative to compare in detail the best models for these two measures of PRR support (closeness and voting) in addition to comparing changes overtime in the two dependent measures— are people as a whole, even those not actually voting for the PRR, shifting toward the PRR? In addition, this raises the question of what factors determine whether someone who is relatively close to the PRR chooses to vote for the populist radical right or not, as some people may be close to the PRR on a political compass scale but still not choose to vote for them.

The model remained stable when predicting closeness by the city block measure.

Table 10: Linear Regression for Model 3 Predicting City Block Measure of Closeness to the Sweden Democrats

Variable	B	Coeff. Std. Error	Sig.
Background			
Female	.136	.029	<.001
Household's total net income	-.061	.006	<.001
Age	.002	.001	.043
Years of full-time education	-.009	.004	.023
Ever unemployed and seeking work 3+ months	-.215	.033	<.001
Religiosity	.140	.015	.<.001
Personal Beliefs			
Belief in a Just World	.002	.016	.880
Satisfaction with government, democracy, economy	-.132	.016	<.001
Satisfaction with education and health services	-.000	.015	.975
Immigration Restrictiveness	-.029	.037	.430
Immigration Impact (benefit to society, culture etc)	-.020	.038	.596
Sociocultural Factors			
Immigration salience	.003	.003	.327
Economic salience	.012	.004	.002
Terrorism salience	-.053	.009	<.001
Interaction Effects			
Immigration Salience x Immigration Restrictiveness	-.010	.002	<.001
Immigration Salience x Immigration Impact	.017	.002	<.001
Constant	2.162	.140	<.001

The model was significant $p < .001$, $F(16) = 62.717$, $r = .343$, $r^2 = .118$.

Appendix B: The Radical Right not the Far Right

Cas Mudde emphasizes the characterization of parties such as the Sweden Democrats as "radical right" rather than "far right." The analysis in this study supports that distinction as Sweden Democrat voters do not, in fact, place themselves on the far-right of the left right political scale (Figure 2). In fact, Bäckersten (2021) find that on average, voters for the Moderate, Liberal and Christian Democrat parties all place themselves further to the right than Sweden Democrat voters (Figure 3).

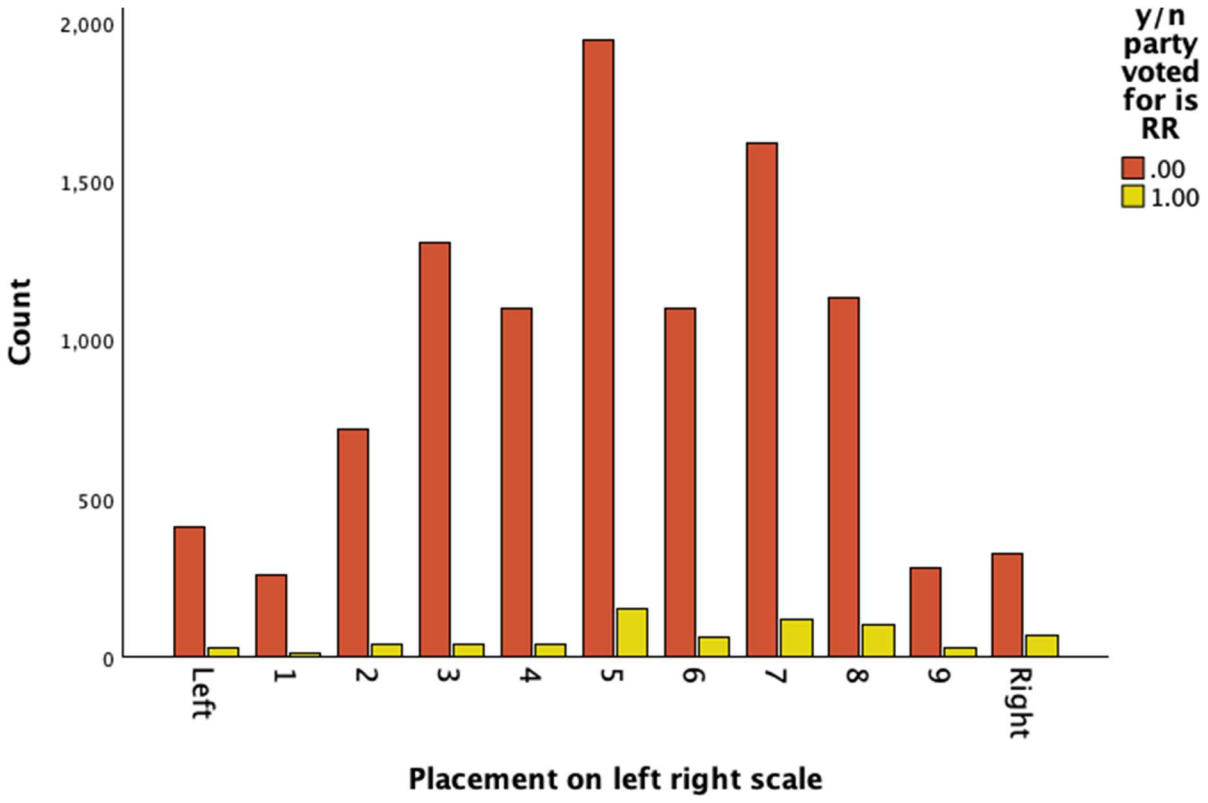

Figure 2: A comparison of voter self-placement on a left-right scale between non-Sweden Democrat voters (0) and Sweden Democrat voters (1). Source: European Social Survey

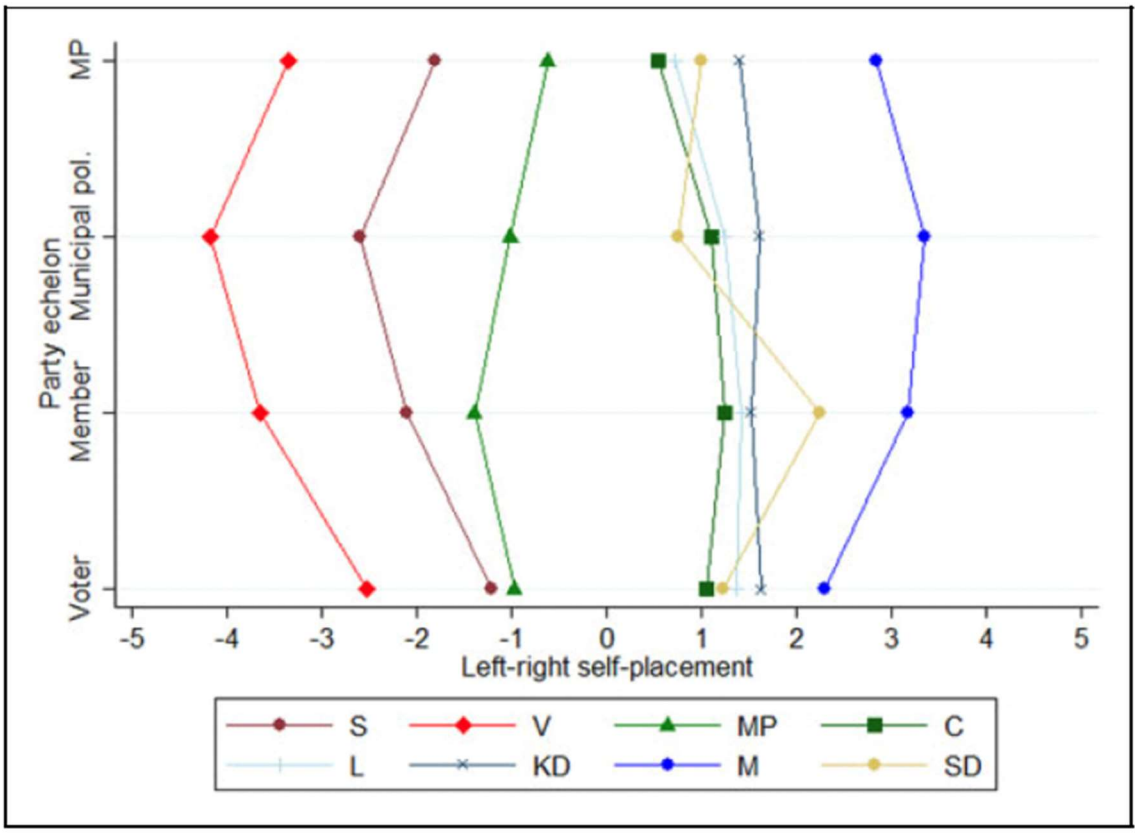

Figure 3: Average placement on left right scale across parties. The lowest point for each party represents average voter placement. From there moving up the points represent average part member placement, average municipal politician placement and average member of parliament placement Source: Bäckersten, 2021

Instead, according to Bäckersten (2021), it is on the GAL-TAN dimensions that the Sweden democrats are radical. The GAL side of this spectrum stands for Green-Alternative-Libertarian and represents parties that favor expanded personal freedoms and emphasize cultural and environmental issues. The TAN end stands for Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist. These parties emphasize value, tradition, and law and order. On this GAL-TAN dimension, the self-placement of Sweden-Democrat voters is indeed radical.

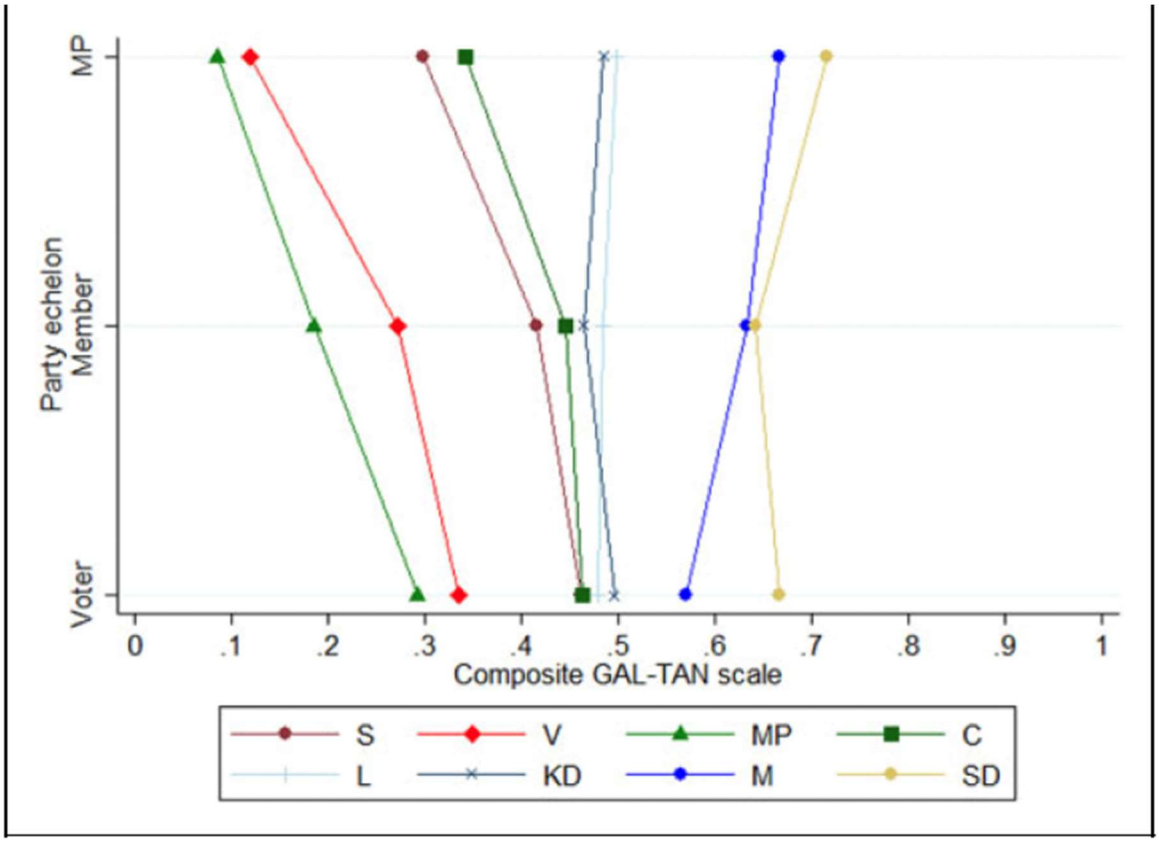

Figure 4: Average placement on GAL-TAN scale across parties. The lowest point for each party represents average voter placement. From there moving up the points represent average part member placement, average municipal politician placement and average member of parliament placement Source: Bäckersten, 2021

Comparing the distribution of voters on the GAL-TAN scale between Sweden Democrat and non-Sweden Democrat voters in the sample, Sweden Democrat voters are indeed further toward the TAN dimension than non-Sweden Democrat voters who were bimodally distributed at the center of the scale (Figure 5).

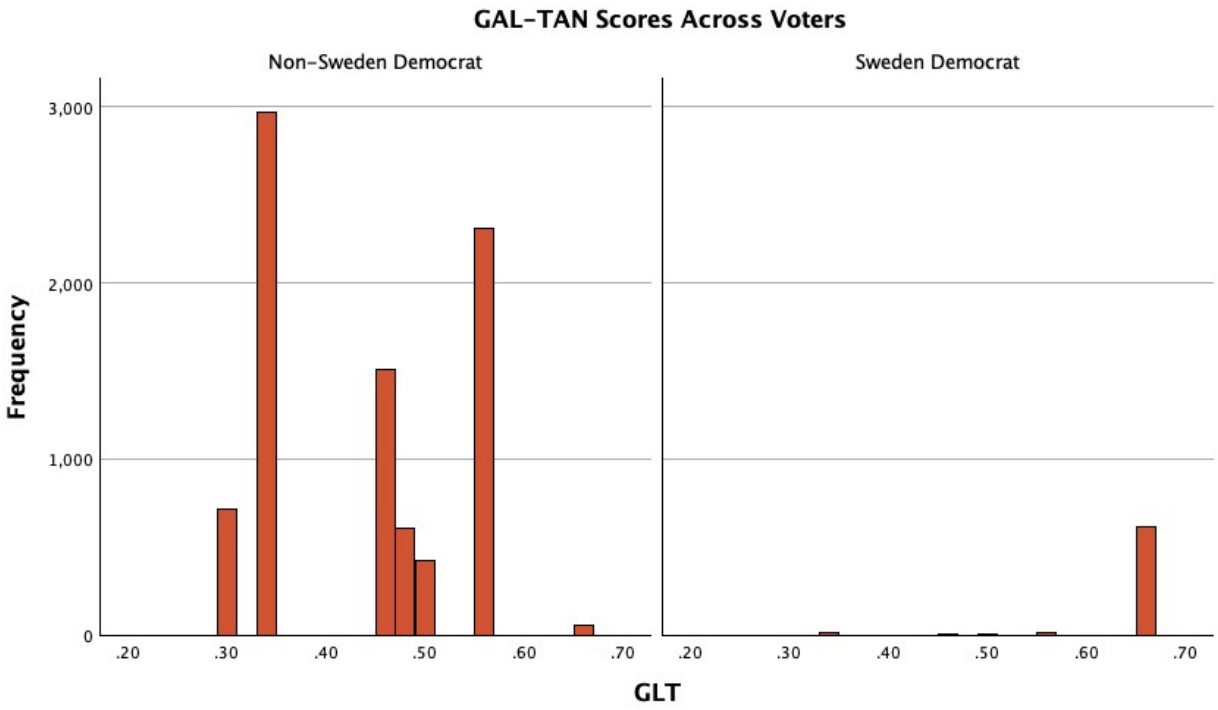

Figure 5: Comparison of distribution of GAL-TAN scores between Sweden Democrat and non-Sweden Democrat voters

Organizing the parties on both the left-right and GAL-TAN dimensions creates the below distribution making it possible to calculate the distance from a voter to the Swedish Democrat party (Figure 6).

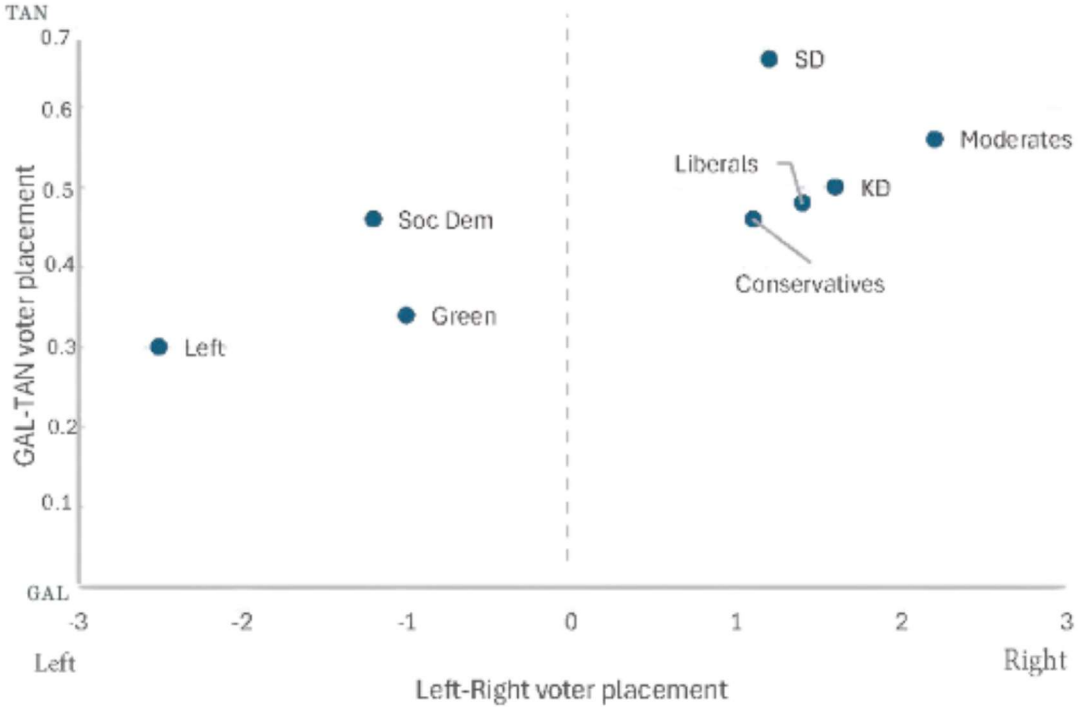

Figure 6: Arrangement of Swedish Political Parties

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