Party Politics

The immigration issue and anti-immigrant party success in Sweden 1970-2006: A deviant case analysis

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Abstract
Electoral success of anti-immigrant parties varies considerably across Western Europe. This article contributes to research on this important matter by analysing which current theories that accounts for the failure of anti-immigrant parties in one national context, Sweden. It draws on an unusually rich set of data to trace important processes from the 1970s up to 2006. It shows that the failure of anti-immigrant parties is not explained by low citizen demand for anti-immigrant policies. The article does however find clear support for party strategy theories. More specifically, in accordance with important strands of this literature, it is found that a dismissive issue strategy has been effective in reducing support for anti-immigrant parties. There is also support for the expectation that established parties to the right are more inclined to pursue anti-immigrant policies than parties to the left.

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Introduction

The immigration issue is prevalent in most western European democracies. In some countries – Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland – anti-immigrant parties have been able to use the issue as a vehicle for electoral success. In other national contexts, anti-immigrant parties have been less successful in exploiting the issue for electoral gains, this article asks why.

Research on electoral success of anti-immigration parties has developed rapidly during the last decades. Today, the literature offers a range of theories highlighting factors such as the institutional settings (e.g. Norris, 2005; Swank and Betz, 2003), the demand for anti-immigrant policies (e.g. Betz, 1994), the supply of parties that offer anti-immigrant policies (e.g. Ivarsflaten, 2005) and the issue strategies of established parties (e.g. Arzheimer, 2009; Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Meguid, 2005, 2008).

While theory development has been rapid, possibilities for empirical tests are hampered by small n-problems. Attempts to generate comparative data pertaining to particular theories have been quite successful (e.g. Arzheimer, 2009; Ivarsflaten, 2005; Meguid, 2005; van der Brug, Fennema and Tilly, 2005), but given the small number of countries involved scholars should nevertheless work to expand the universe of relevant data observations (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994). This article argues that theoretically informed case studies offer a promising avenue for research in this regard (e.g. George and Bennett, 2004).

Specifically, the article focuses on a deviant case in which anti-immigrant parties have failed electorally for a long time – Sweden. Three factors make the absence of success intriguing: First, by most standards Sweden has been strongly affected by international migration. Until the 1960s, Sweden was ethnically homogenous. Today, with a population of 12 percent foreign born, it is one of the most ethnically heterogeneous countries in Europe (Coleman, 2006; OECD, 2003). Second, while the inflow of immigrants has been lower, neighboring countries, Norway and Denmark have seen the emergence of highly competitive anti-immigrant parties (e.g. Green Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008). Third, as evidenced by the emergence of a politically influential Green party, the institutional setup is conducive to niche parties that compete by introducing new issues (see Meguid, 2008 for a discussion on niche parties).

In the 2010 parliamentary election, an anti-immigrant party, the Sweden Democrats, was able to convert this seemingly favorable context into national representation. We will return to this election in the concluding section, but the article focuses on the long string of failed attempts from anti-immigrant parties.

We have at our disposal a unique set of data which traces political dynamics during the period 1970–2006. There are three main findings: On the negative side we find no supporting evidence for theories stressing citizen demand for anti-immigrant policies. Although Swedish public opinion is regularly classified as tolerant towards ethnic minorities (Hjerm, 2007; Sides and Citrin, 2007), results clearly indicate that anti-immigrant policies have been sufficiently attractive for a viable anti-immigrant party to emerge. On the positive side we find support for theories stressing the importance of parties' issue strategies. In accordance with important strands of this literature, established parties have strived to make immigration a non-salient issue in their competition for votes.

We also find confirming evidence that mainstream right-wing parties are more inclined to pursue anti-immigrant policies than established parties to the left.

In what follows we first present relevant theories along with our research design and the data used. Following a brief analysis of the supply of anti-immigrant parties, we present a detailed empirical analysis pertaining to citizen demand for anti-immigration policies and issue strategies of established parties. We thereafter turn attention to two critical periods in which history could have taken a more favorable direction for anti-immigrant parties. A concluding section sums up the findings and discusses their implications.

The immigration issue and anti-immigrant party success

The party family whose electoral fortunes motivate this research has no agreed-upon terminology. These parties are sometimes referred to as extreme right-wing parties (Carter, 2005; Mudde, 1996), radical right-wing parties (Norris, 2005), radical right-wing populist parties (Rydgren, 2007) or, indeed, populist radical rightwing parties (Mudde, 2007). However, we follow van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie (2005: 537) and use the term anti-immigrant parties (see also Fennema, 1997). Another important concept, the 'immigration issue', is broadly defined as it includes 'regulation of flows of immigration and control of aliens' as well as 'immigrant policy' (Hammar, 1985: 7).

Research on the success of anti-immigrant parties highlights four different explanatory factors (for recent reviews, see Rydgren, 2007; van der Brug and Fennema, 2007). The first explanatory factors are the institutional setting theories, which emphasize electoral systems and parliamentary thresholds (Jackman and Volpert, 1996; Norris, 2005; Swank and Betz, 2003). The basic argument is that anti-immigrant parties are more likely to succeed in proportional electoral systems and in systems with low parliamentary thresholds. Perhaps surprisingly, empirical support for this claim is mixed. While some studies find support for the theory (Jackman and Volpert, 1996; Norris, 2005; Swank and Betz, 2003), others conclude that the electoral systems do not matter in the predicted way (Carter, 2002; Mudde, 2007:233–7; van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2005).

The Swedish case illustrates the limited predicative capacity of institutional setting theories. Its electoral system is strictly proportional, and its 4 percent parliamentary threshold is fairly low by European standards (Särlvik, 2002). Moreover, other new parties, most notably the Green Party, have gained continuous parliamentary representation. Furthermore, since electoral system change is rare, this factor cannot account for long-term change in support for new parties. Overall, in this article, institutional factors will be held constant at a level conducive to anti-immigrant parties.

Second, supply theories stress history and ideological origin of anti-immigrant parties (Carter, 2002; Ignazie, 1992; Ivarsflaten, 2006; Kitschelt, 1995; cf. van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2005). The argument is that parties originating from fascist or neo-Nazi organizations are less likely to succeed than newcomer parties without historic ballast. The main reason for this is that parties of extreme right-wing origin have to overcome a barrier of non-respectability (Ivarsflaten, 2006). These interesting theories have however limited explanatory value for long-term developments in a given setting.

Because of their static character, they cannot readily be reconciled with growth of specific anti-immigrant parties. In this study we will therefore note the historic legacy of the Swedish anti-immigrant parties, but give priority to more dynamic theories.

A third group of theories highlights citizen demand for anti-immigrant policy. Within this field several sophisticated theories draw attention to the losers of modernization (Betz, 1994), to mass-unemployment (Arzheimer, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2002); xenophobic attitudes (Knigge, 1998); and the level of immigration (Golder, 2003). The argument is that different kind of 'threats' trigger a demand for anti-immigrant policies. For this article, it is less important to ascertain precisely why individuals find anti-immigrant policies attractive. As the rejection of their ideas is the default explanation for the failure of anti-immigrant parties, the ambition here is only to investigate whether there is substantial demand for anti-immigrant policies in Sweden.

In European comparisons, scholars regularly classify Swedish public opinion as tolerant towards ethnic minorities and supportive of generous immigration policies (Hjerm, 2007; Sides and Citrin, 2007). However, it does not follow from relative comparisons that demand is low in *absolute* terms. Indeed, after a review of the literature, Mudde (2007:222) concludes that 'nativism' and other populist radical right attitudes are widespread across Europe. Moreover, to gain parliamentary representation anti-immigrant parties need only limited electoral support.

The fourth group of theories focuses on issue strategies of established parties. Issue strategies are important because they affect saliency and ownership of the immigration issue (Arzheimer, 2009; Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Bale, 2003; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008; Meguid, 2005, 2008). There are two rival hypotheses coming from these theories of prime interest to us. The first holds that established parties can hinder anti-immigrant parties by moving into their policy space and thereby transferring ownership of the immigration issue to themselves (van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2005). The second hypothesis holds that effective established parties play down the saliency of the immigration issue, as anti-immigrant parties will benefit electorally from an extensive public debate on their main issue (Arzheimer, 2009; Arzheimer and Carter, 2006: 439; Bale, 2003: 67). While both hypotheses have received empirical support, they have rarely been tested simultaneously.

Further insights are provided by niche party theory, which considers newcomer parties who politicize new issues. In the framework of this research, immigration and environmental protection are prime examples of issues that help niche parties to compete electorally. Meguid (2005; 2008) suggests three stylized issue strategies for established parties to counter these parties; the dismissive strategy (to avoid the issue at hand, which is expected to decrease niche party support); the accommodative strategy (to move closer to the issue position of the niche party, which is expected to decrease niche party support); and the adversarial strategy (to distance themselves from the issue position of the niche party, which is expected to increase niche party support). As it identifies two alternative ways for established parties to move into the policy space of anti-immigrant parties and other niche parties, the distinction between accommodative and adversary strategy adds important complexity to issue strategy theory.

Shifting attention to party incentives, Bale (2003; 2008) argues that established parties on the political right have most to gain from moving their agenda closer to the

anti-immigrant party agenda. Bale suggests two reasons for this. First, rightwing parties traditionally 'own' issues often emphasized by anti-immigrant parties, such as a hard line against immigration, crime and welfare abuse (Bale, 2008: 320). Second, right-wing parties have a strategic interest to remove 'what was essentially an artificial constraint on the size of any right block in parliament' (Bale, 2003: 69).

Research strategy and data

In comparative research, case studies are often used for illustrative purposes. The ambition here is different. The study will evaluate support for competing theories in one national setting. We use theory to identify key aspects of the processes at play, and compare what actually happened to predictions derived from each theory. It is well known from the methodological literature that case studies cannot provide knockout tests of non-deterministic theories (e.g. Lieberson, 1991). Yet, keeping these limits in mind, our study design is complementary to more traditional comparative designs.

From the literature review we derive three questions for empirical analysis:

1) Is citizen demand for anti-immigrant policies sufficient for an electorally viable anti-immigrant party?
2) Have established parties strived to make ''immigration'' a non-salient issue in their vote-seeking activities? And if immigration has been salient, have parties issue strategies been adversial or accommodative?
3) Are established parties on the political right more tempted to introduce anti-immigrant policies than parties on the left?

To capture citizen demand for anti-immigrant policies we rely on data from the SOM-study, which is a yearly high-quality mail survey with a representative sample of adolescents and adults permanently living in Sweden (Holmberg and Weibull, 2009; www.som.gu.se). We also use survey data from Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) on Members of the Parliament and eligible voters (Holmberg, 1994; www. valforskning.pol.gu.se).[1] To capture issue strategies of the established parties, we mainly look at the issue content of campaign messages. Here we rely on primary data from the POP-study, which is a detailed quantitative content analysis of manifestos and televised debates (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009).

The supply of anti-immigrant parties in Sweden

While, for a long time, Sweden did not see any long-lived and nationally successful anti-immigrant party, niche parties pushing for anti-immigrant policies have been present at the local level for some decades. In the mid-1980s, the Skåne Party (*Skånepartiet*), won mandates in some municipalities in the Skåne region. Following a nationally recognized local referendum on the acceptance of refugees into their municipality, an openly xenophobic party, the Sjöbo Party (*Sjöbopartiet*), gained additional municipal representation in the Skåne region. In accordance with supply-side theories, both of these

Table 1. National election results in percentage of votes for New Democracy and the Sweden Democrats, 1988–2006

	1988	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010
New Democracy	–	6.7	1.2	0.2	–	–	–
Sweden Democrats*	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.4	1.4	2.9	5.7

The Sweden Democrats was founded in 1988 and New Democracy was founded in 1991.
* The 1988, 1991 and 1994 election results are rough estimates, based on self reported results from the Sweden Democrats.
Source: Statistics Sweden and The Election Authority.

regionally successful parties were newly formed (Integrationsverket, 2006; Rydgren, 2002; Widfeldt, 2004).

Table 1 reports election results for the two hitherto most successful anti-immigrant parties on the national level; New Democracy (*Ny demokrati*) and the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*). New Democracy was formed shortly before the 1991 election. It managed to get 6.7 percent of the national vote and was rewarded 25 parliamentary seats (out of 349). However, in the following 1994 election its support dropped to 1.2 percent and it disappeared shortly thereafter.

At present, the largest anti-immigrant party is the Sweden Democrats. It was formed in 1988, from a nationalistic and xenophobic organization Keep Sweden Swedish (*Bevara Sverige Svenskt*) (Rydgren, 2004). Although well below the 4 percent threshold, they tripled their national electoral support in the 2002 elections and doubled it again in the 2006 elections. At the local level they have increased their support rapidly; after the 2006 elections they were represented in 140 of 290 municipalities (up from 29 municipalities in 2002 and 5 in 1998). During the build-up to the 2010 election, the Sweden Democrats gained a lot of attention in the public debate and political pundits expected them to gain parliamentary representation. In accordance with this prediction, they secured support from 5.7 percent of voters, clearly above the electoral threshold. They also made further gains in the local elections (they gained representation in 245 of 290 municipalities).

The quick success of New Democracy compared to the Sweden Democrats is consistent with supply theories on the legacy of anti-immigrant parties (e.g. Ivarsflaten, 2006). However, as will be shown below, New Democracy initially had a more diverse policy agenda than the Sweden Democrats, who almost exclusively push for anti-immigrant policies. Moreover, supply theories cannot by themselves account for the sudden demise of New Democracy and the increasing support for the Sweden Democrats. Acknowledging that supply theories may be part of the story, we focus attention to theories with a potential to explain dynamic developments of anti-immigrant parties' attractiveness.

Citizen demand for anti-immigration policies

Can the long period of failure of anti-immigrant parties be attributed to low citizen demand for their policies? As point estimates of citizens' attitudes are unreliable, we will look at different indicators and use different points of reference.
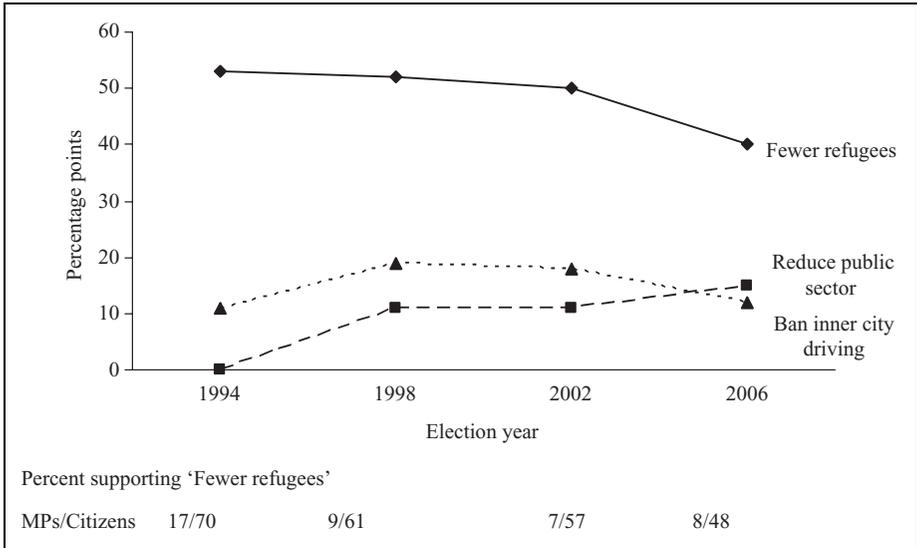
Figure 1. Level of policy disagreement between MPs and adult citizens 1994–2006. Difference in percentage points between MPs and adult citizens regarding policy proposals (very and rather good). **Source:** Holmberg (1996, 2002, 2004, 2010).

We depart from citizen support for a policy proposal to 'accept fewer refugees into Sweden' as registered in the SOM-surveys. At their core, anti-immigrant parties want to limit immigration. Changing immigration policy in a restrictive direction is an important part of this ambition. We consider responses to the directly-worded survey question as a useful indicator of demand for anti-immigration policies.

During the period 1990–2006, the proportion of respondents supporting a more restrictive immigration policy has never fallen below 43 percent, with a high of 65 percent (Demker, 2009: 49). Moreover, support for restrictive policies cannot be written off as a methodological response set-effect. When the wording of the policy proposal is reversed, so that a favorable response indicates support of a generous immigration policy, only about 20 percent of respondents express support of the more liberal policy proposal (Demker, 2009: 49).

Results from Member of Parliament surveys are a further point of reference. As reported in the lower panel of Figure 1, the highest proportion of MP support of a more restrictive immigration policy is 17 percent (in 1994), and MP support is usually below 10 percent. Apparently, when compared on the same metric, citizens find anti-immigrant policies much more attractive than do their representatives.[2]

Is the immigration issue of a special character? Research on policy responsiveness concludes that elected representatives are typically quite sensitive to the policy wishes of voters (see Lax and Phillips, 2009 and the literature cited therein). At least on salient policy matters, it is rare that elected representatives fail to adjust their policy views to accommodate citizen opinions. Accordingly, unresponsive representatives indicate that citizen demand for anti-immigrant policies has not been fully met.
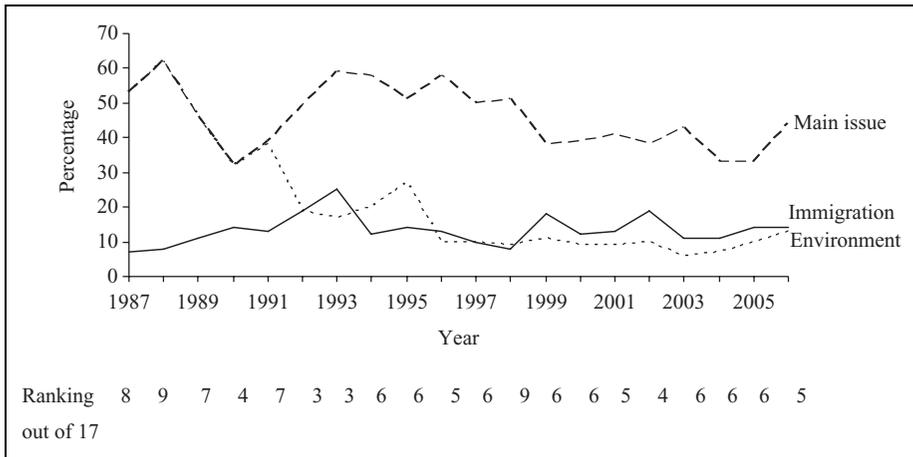
Figure 2. Most important problem facing the country, 1987–2006. Percentage of the respondents naming immigration and the environment as the most important issues for Sweden today. The environment and the main issue are included as points of reference. From 1987–1990 the environment was the main issue.
Source: Holmberg and Weibull (2009): 12–13.

To measure attitudinal responsiveness, Figure 1 displays the percentage difference between MPs' and citizens' support of the proposal to 'accept fewer refugees into the country' in the parliamentary elections between 1994–2006. High percentages indicate large policy disagreement at one particular point, and the development over time reflects responsiveness. As points of reference, we include corresponding information about policy proposals reflecting environmental protection ('ban inner-city driving'), and the dominating left-right dimension ('to reduce the scope of the public sector').

Results indicate that the immigration issue is indeed special. The level of disagreement between MPs and voters is consistently three to four times higher on immigration policy than on environmental protection and left-right policy. Furthermore, looking at the complete set of policy proposals for which SNES have collected information, disagreement over 'immigration' is much larger than for *any* other policy proposal in 1994, 1998, and 2002, and the second largest in 2006 (details not shown).[3]

Finally in this section, we consider that many citizens favor anti-immigrant policies but ascribe it low priority compared to more pressing issues and problems. If citizens consider the immigration issue of low importance, demand for anti-immigrant policies may be insufficient for anti-immigrant party success.[4]

As a measure of issue importance, we used an open-ended question about 'the most important problem facing the country today' from the SOM-surveys 1987–2006. We know from previous research, for example on the thermostatic character of public opinion on border control and asylum in Britain (Jennings, 2009), that most individuals who identify immigration as an important problem favor restrictive immigrant policies. With regard to the SOM-surveys specifically, between 60 percent and 80 percent of respondents who saw 'immigration' as an important problem facing the country supported the proposition to accept fewer refugees into the country. Figure 2 shows the proportion of respondents who

identified 'immigration' as a significant problem each year. As points of reference, we include corresponding information about 'the environmental issue' and about the issue which is mentioned by most respondents ('main issue'). We also include information about the yearly rank order of 'immigration' on a list of 17 issues and problems.[5]

Results indicate that 'immigration' is a concern for citizens. Each year between 7 and 25 percent of respondents identify 'immigration' as one of the most important problems facing the country. In terms of rank order, 'immigration' consistently scores among the top third of important problems facing the country. It is not a *prime* concern for citizens – not in any year is 'immigration' identified as the main problem facing the country – but from the mid-1990s it has been relatively more important than 'the environment'.

While importance is relatively high during most years, the early 1990s stands out as an exceptional period. For two consecutive years, in 1992 and 1993, 'immigration' was among the top three most important problems. These were years when Sweden received an unusually large influx of refugees from the war-torn former Yugoslavia (Dahlström, 2004: 50-5), and also experienced violent actions against refugee centers and individual immigrants (Lodenius and Larsson, 1994). The country was simultaneously hit by an economic recession which motivated drastic cut backs in welfare state systems (Andersen, 2001; Lindvall, 2004). In the election year of 1994 importance began to return to a lower level (although higher than before the crisis years). We will study this critical period further in a coming section.

Our overall conclusion is that Swedish public opinion on immigration may differ in degree but not in kind from other western European countries. It seems unreasonable to maintain that low demand for their policies can account for the long string of failures of anti-immigrant parties in Sweden.

Issue strategies of established parties

In this section we study established parties' priority of the immigration issue in their competition for votes during election campaigns. In the terminology of Meguid (2005; 2008), low saliency indicates that parties have chosen a dismissive issue strategy. High saliency might indicate accommodation to anti-immigrant parties as well as adversity. To differ between the latter strategies, we look at actual policy positions.

Figure 3 reports the proportion of issue messages devoted to immigration in election manifestos between 1970–2006. Again, the environment issue and the main issue (the issue that gains the most attention) are included as points of reference. Table 3 below gives detailed information about individual parties.

As is evident in Figure 3 and Table 3, typically only a small proportion of issue messages are on immigration policies (between 0 and 4 percent). In comparison, attention to the environment issue varies from 2 to 10 percent. Importantly, in the 1988 election when the Greens first gained parliamentary representation, their favored issue was high on the agenda for established parties (in an accommodative manner, established parties expressed strong support for environmental protection). Generally, the manifesto data supports the view that established parties have used a dismissive issue strategy towards anti-immigrant parties.
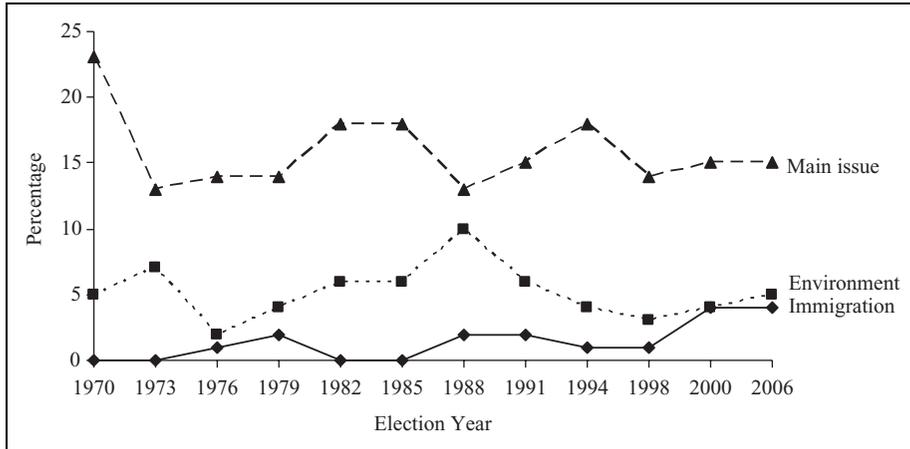
Figure 3. Policy issues in Election Manifestos, 1970–2006. Percentage of election manifestos dedicated to the immigration issues. The environment and the main issue are included as points of reference.
Source: Esaiasson and Håkansson (2009).

Election manifestos capture messages that are drafted in advance of the campaign. To capture campaign developments of issue strategies, Figure 4 (and Table 3 below) report the proportion of issue messages dedicated to immigration in the televised party leader debates which are broadcast at the end of the campaign, two days prior to Election Day (e.g. Esaiasson, 1992).

Again, the general picture is that established parties have paid little attention to the immigration issue and have thus chosen a dismissive issue strategy. For most years, as the campaign enters its most frantic stage, the proportion of immigration issue messages varies between 0 and 1 percent. Beginning in the 1985 election, environmental issues are typically more present in parties' campaign messages. However, there are two exceptions from the general rule of silence vis-à-vis immigration in the televised debates – the 2002 election, and, but less clearly so, the 1994 election.

While content analyses of manifestos and televised debates are important, there are two limitations to these indicators. First, parties can communicate with voters through other forums as well (Naurin, 2009). Second, our analysis covers explicitly expressed issue messages. Obviously parties sometimes use more implicit ways to communicate their positions (Federico, 2004; Gilens, 1999). To gain a more complete picture, we turn to voters' perceptions of parties' campaign issues as captured by an open-ended question in the SNES voter studies. More specifically, respondents are asked about what issues each party has emphasized the most during the campaign (Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2008: 52). Figure 5 displays the highest proportion of respondents who perceived that immigration was a prime issue for any established party (see also Table 4). As before, the environment issue and the main issue are included as points of reference.

Overall, results in Figure 5 mimic the two prior indicators. From 1982–1988 literally no respondents saw immigration as an important issue for any of the established parties.
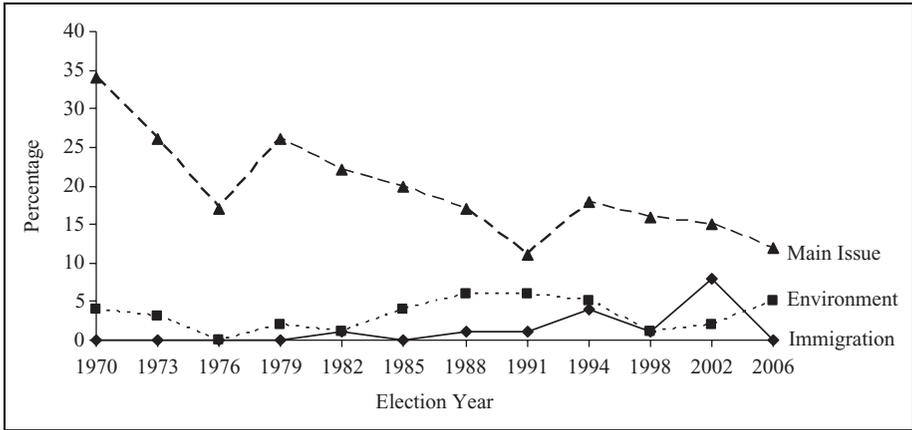
Figure 4. Policy issues in televised party leader debates, 1970–2006. Percentage of time of the televised party leader debate dedicated to the immigration issue. The environment and the main issue are included as points of reference.
Source: Esaiasson and Håkansson (2009).
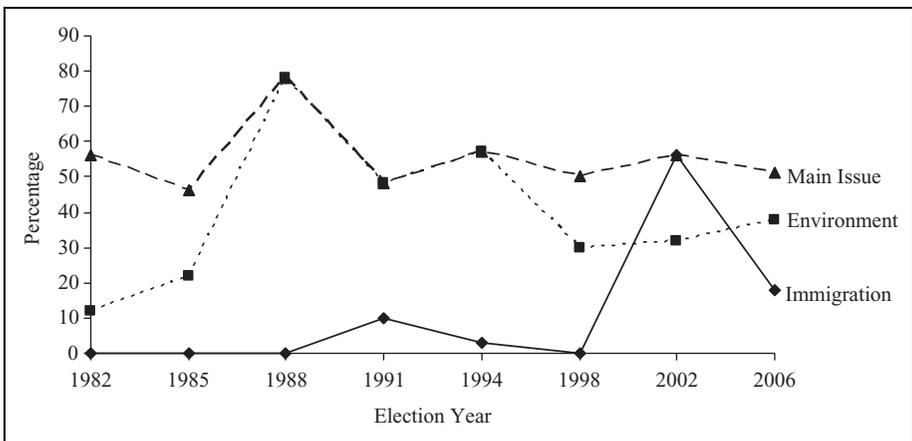
Figure 5. Voters' perception of the prime issue for any political party during the campaign, 1982–2006. Percentage of voters perceiving immigration issues as a major issue for any political party in the election campaign. The environment and the main issue are included as points of reference. From 1988 –1994 the environment was the main issue, and for 2002 immigration was the main issue.
Source: Gilljam and Holmberg (1990, 1993, 1995); Holmberg (1984, 2000); Holmberg and Gilljam (1987); Holmberg and Oscarsson (2004); Oscarsson and Holmberg (2008).

This changed temporarily in the 1991 election, when the proportion naming the immigration issue as important for a specific party rose to 10 percent, but it then dropped back to 3 percent in 1994 and to 0 percent in 1998. Clearly, looking over the entire period, only small proportions of respondents perceive that immigration is a central issue for established parties.

However, it should be noted that the voter perception indicator picks up a major exception from the general rule of low priority to the immigration issue – in the 2002 election 56 percent of respondents perceived the immigration issue as important for a particular established party. Obviously, something unusual happened in this campaign that calls for further examination.

Drawing on these results, it can be safely concluded that all established parties have used a dismissive issue strategy vis-à-vis immigration for nine of the twelve elections included in our analysis. Precisely, in three of four elections during a period in which ethnic heterogeneity increased substantially in Sweden, established parties did not use the immigration issue at all for electoral gains. For the remaining elections in 1991, 1994 and 2002 some of the indicators show that at least some parties gave higher priority to the immigration issue, which makes classification of issue strategies less straightforward.

In 1991 the party New Democracy entered the electoral arena by running on an anti-establishment platform, including anti-immigration policies. This triggered critical responses from (mainly) the Liberals. In Figure 5 (and with details in Table 3) we can see that voters for the first time perceived that 'immigration' was at all a prioritized issue by an established party. In the 1994 televised party leader debate, saliency for the immigration issue increased a little, which is seen in Figure 4 (the proportion of time in the party leader debate increases from 1 to 4 percent).[6]

During the 2002 election campaign, the immigration issue reached its highest level of saliency on most indicators. The reason for this is that the Liberal Party introduced a controversial immigration policy proposal late in the campaign, which triggered reactions from the other parties.

To categorize established parties' issue strategies in 1991, 1994 and 2002, we will look further into the context of these elections.

Two critical periods: 1991–1994 and 2002–2006

Regarding the period 1991–1994, experts disagree over which issue strategy was taken by established parties. Some maintain that the immigration issue became salient as established parties adapted to the electoral success of New Democracy in 1991 (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm, 2008: 373–4; Hammar, 1999: 179). Others however, argue that the issue remained non-salient for established parties throughout these critical years (Dahlström, 2004: 76; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008; Rydgren, 2002: 39).

Drawing on our extensive empirical evidence we agree that the early 1990s was a critical period, but we maintain that established parties acted to dismiss the issue from the public agenda rather than subsume it into their own platforms. First, it should be noted that New Democracy ran their successful 1991 campaign on a broad anti-establishment agenda; anti-immigration rhetoric was part of their campaign, but it was not a main theme. In fact, results presented in Table 2 show that environmental issues were more salient in their 1991 campaign than immigration. Only in their bid for re-election in 1994 did immigration emerge as their main issue (Rydgren, 2002: 33–34 makes the same observation). Because immigration was a much more central

Table 2. New Democracy and the immigration issue

	Manifestos %		Televised debates %		Perceived importance of issue messages %	
	1991	1994	1991	1994	1991	1994
Immigration	4	10	8	44	9	29
Environment	5	5	2	1	1	1
Main Issue	16	10	17	44	21	29

Entries show proportion of issue messages devoted to respective issue in the 1991 and 1994 election campaigns.
Source: Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009 (manifestos and televised debates); Gilljam and Holmberg, 1993, 1995 (perceived importance of parties' issue messages).

theme in 1994 than in 1991, New Democracy became more sensitive for a dismissive strategy from the established parties.[7]

As shown in the previous section (Figures 3-5), the immigration issue was not salient at the aggregated level in 1991. Using more detailed information, Table 3 makes it clear that none of the established parties abandoned the traditional dismissive strategy.

Turning to the 1994 election, rather than adapting to an anti-immigrant rhetoric, which might have played well with the policy moods among substantial groups of voters, established parties unanimously denounced New Democracy. In a rare manifestation of unity in the televised debate shortly before election day, leaders of all established parties made it clear that immigration was a non-issue: 'Shameful', 'despicable', 'immoral' were some adjectives used to characterize New Democracy explicitly xenophobic policy proposals (Dahlström, 2004: 76–78). We consider this uniform reaction to be a special case of dismissive issue strategy; voters attracted by New Democracy were told that their opinions were out of bounds. Underlining that immigration was non-salient, very few voters perceived that established parties emphasized the issue during the campaign (Table 3).

However, while the choice of issue strategy is clear, details of the 1994 election are important for our understanding of the actions of individual established parties. Bale (2003) argues that mainstream rightwing parties stand to gain the most from accommodating the immigration issue. Considering this, it is unexpected that the Conservative party played along with a dismissive strategy. Indeed, a closer look at the data on policy responsiveness reveals that the strategy decision of the party leadership caused internal turmoil. Table 4 gives information about policy disagreement between MPs and their party voters on the immigration policy proposal in 1994–2006.

Following the 1994 election, most Conservative MPs were actually in close agreement with their voters in favoring more restrictive immigration policies.[8] In 1998, Conservative MPs had adjusted their views to other party elites, thereby distancing themselves from voters. To take a contrasting example, Social Democratic MPs, who ran the risk of losing substantially to radical anti-immigrant parties, responded differently to the situation. While a majority of Social Democratic voters consistently favored the proposal to accept fewer refugees into the country, the vast majority of MPs took the opposite view in both 1994 and 1998.

These results suggest that the Conservative party leadership did not have the full backing of their parliamentary party group when dismissing the anti-immigration policies of New Democracy in 1994. Underlining that history could have taken a different direction in the early and mid-1990s, important fractions of the Conservative party were probably tempted to adapt a more anti-immigrant policy stance, which shows how strong the dismissive consensus were at that time. Not even when MPs policy positions were in agreement with their voters, did the party push the immigration issue.

Table 3 reports the immigration issue saliency according to our three indicators (manifestos, televised debates and perceived importance of issue messages). Both the Conservatives and the Social-Democrats score low on all three of the indicators, showing that irrespective of their policy positions, all established parties acted in a dismissive way throughout the 1994 campaign.

During the 2002–2006 period, the economy was in much better shape (SCB, 2005), and public support for a more restrictive immigration policy was less widespread than in the early 1990s (Demker, 2009, 49). In spite of this, the 2002 election differed most from the general pattern of low attention to the immigration issue. The main reason for this is a policy proposal from the Liberals to introduce a language test as a requirement for naturalization (Boréus, 2006: 134). This policy proposal came late in the campaign, but grew quickly in importance, fuelled by harsh criticism from the Social Democrats, the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*), and the Greens (Boréus, 2006: 133-4; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004: 123-4). The Conservatives had actually introduced a similar but less advertized proposition before the election campaign, and they also expressed some interest in the issue during the final weeks of the campaign. However, as is evident from Table 4, the Conservatives did not communicate its message to the electorate. Overall, it is clear that the Liberals strived to make the immigration issue salient in the 2002 campaign and that voters got the message.

As indicated by the detailed results presented in Table 3, it is also clear that the Liberals did not push the immigration issue in the televised debate. Instead, the most active parties in the debate were the Greens and the Left party who once more denounced the Liberals' policy proposals. The reactions from the Greens and the Left party were however probably more a consequence of the Liberals policy proposal than a planned strategy change. Although they were the most active parties during the televised debates they did not push the immigration issue in their manifestos to any large extent, and the immigration issue was not perceived as important for them by the voters (see Table 3).

Using Meguids' (2005, 2008) terminology, the Liberals choose an accommodative strategy, while the Greens and the Left Party choose an adversarial strategy. According to Meguids' theory (2005: 350) when the adversarial strategy is dominant this should result in a vote gain for the niche party and this is precisely what happened as the Sweden Democrats doubled their electoral support, albeit from a very low level (see Table 1). Referring to supply theory, it can well be that success of the Sweden Democrats was hampered by its extreme-right origin. Also compatible with Meguids' theory, the Liberal party was rewarded by voters as they gained 8.7 percentage points, which is one of the largest gains ever in Swedish parliamentary elections.

For our purpose it is crucial to note that the saliency of the immigration issue dropped in the 2006 election (see Table 3). Results thus indicate that the established parties

Table 3. Established parties and the immigration issue 1991–2006

	Manifestos %					Televised debates %					Perceived importance of issue messages %				
	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006
Left Party	1	2	2	3	3	—	5	1	8	0	0	—	2	3	—
Social-Democrats	3	—	2	3	3	0	—	2	4	0	0	0	0	5	—
Greens	0	0	6	4	6	0	3	4	15	0	0	0	0	0	—
Center Party	2	0	—	5	3	0	0	0	4	—	0	0	0	—	0
Liberals	—	3	3	6	6	—	2	0	5	0	10	3	0	56	18
Conservatives	2	—	2	2	5	0	12	0	9	0	0	0	0	2	0
Christian Democrats	3	2	0	—	3	4	6	0	9	0	0	2	0	—	0

Source: Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009 (Manifestos and Televised debates); Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004; Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2008 (perceived importance of parties' issue messages).

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Table 4. Agreement between members of parliament and their respective voters on a policy proposal to accept fewer refugees into the country

	1994 %			1998 %			2002 %			2006 %		
	MPs	Voters	Level of agreement	MPs	Voters	Level of agreement	MPs	Voters	Level of agreement	MPs	Voters	Level of agreement
Left Party	0	51	−51	0	54	−54	0	32	−32	0	23	−23
Greens	0	40	−40	0	41	−41	0	24	−24	0	17	−17
Social-Democrats	9	75	−66	4	63	−59	7	60	−53	2	50	−48
Center party	6	74	−68	17	58	−41	0	85	−65	4	40	−36
Liberals	0	43	−43	0	30	−30	0	51	−51	4	39	−35
Conservatives	**74**	**78**	**−4**	**28**	**71**	**−43**	28	71	−43	22	60	−38
Christian-Democrats	0	56	−56	6	58	52	11	53	−42	10	46	−36

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

returned to their dismissive strategy. Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup (2008: 626) have shown that the center-right parties in Sweden disagreed internally over the immigration issue. It is plausible that the Liberals abandoned the issue to allow for the forming of a government seeking a center-right alliance.

Conclusion

This article has argued that established parties in Sweden have typically chosen a dismissive issue strategy to hinder the electoral success of anti-immigrant parties. Empirically, this article first demonstrated that there is substantial citizen demand for anti-immigrant policies: During the past decades citizens have expressed relatively strong support for a more restrictive immigration policy; the gap between policy preferences of voters and MPs on the immigration issue has been large and persistent; and according to citizens' views, the immigration issue has consistently been one of the most important problems facing the country. Using primary data from quantitative analyses of election manifestos and televised party leader debates, it has been shown that the immigration issue has generally received little attention in election campaigns between 1970–2006.

There is however one important deviation from the general pattern. In a surprising move during the 2002 election campaign, the Liberals proposed the introduction of a language test as a requirement for naturalization, which boosted the saliency of the immigration issue. This exception demonstrates that it is possible to make the immigration issue political in Sweden and, at least speculatively, that the established parties' consensus around the dismissive strategy might be changing. Consistent with predictions from issue strategy theories (Meguid, 2005; see also Arzheimer, 2009; Arzheimer and Carter, 2006), it should also be noted that the electoral support for the largest anti-immigrant party, the Sweden Democrats, has increased since the 2002 election.

Overall, the Swedish experience supports claims that the probability for anti-immigrant party success increases with the saliency of the immigration issue. This insight underlines a potential dilemma for established parties who want to keep down electoral support for anti-immigrant parties but at the same time aspire to make the immigration issue salient. This article thereby contributes to the discussion on why parties sometimes refrain from politicizing an issue with electoral potential. As demonstrated by the unanimous denouncement of New Democracy in the 1994 election, unity among established parties has hindered parties with a desire to make the immigration issue salient. The strength of this consensus was demonstrated during the mid-1990s. Even when many Conservative MPs agreed with their voters on the need for more restrictive immigrant regulation, the party leadership refrained from making it salient during the election campaign.

With regard to the incentives of individual parties, we find that that the established right-wing parties have been tempted to use an accommodative strategy, while the Left Party and the Green Party, whose voters are relatively immigration friendly, have been most tempted to use an adversarial strategy (Bale, 2003; 2008). Going in either of these directions would politicize the immigration issue and break the dismissive strategy

consensus. This dynamic was demonstrated in the 2002 election, when the Liberals changed to an accommodative strategy and the Left and the Green parties responded in an adversarial way. This dramatic development during the 2002 campaign shows how quickly immigration can emerge as a salient campaign issue. Consensus among established parties to dismiss a potentially vote-gaining issue from campaign competition is thus inherently fragile.

The critical 2010 election, in which the Swedish Democrats eventually won entrance to the national parliament, further indicates the complexities involved. At this stage we lack systematic information about issue strategies of established parties, but according to our tentative observations they largely stuck to a dismissive strategy (established parties were, however, frequently forced by journalists to comment on the implications of growing support for the Sweden Democrats in opinion polls). Consequently, while our analysis demonstrates that the dismissive issue strategy proved to be successful over a long period of time, the most recent Swedish experience directs us towards boundary conditions for issue strategy theory.

With regard to complementary theories in the field, there is no evidence that public opinion turned more negative towards immigration prior to the election (see Demker, 2009). Since constitutional factors remained constant, it would appear that the Sweden Democrats managed to overcome at least some of the restrictions that follow from their extreme rightwing origin (Carter, 2002; Ignazie, 1992; Ivarsflaten, 2006; Kitschelt, 1995; cf. van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2005). This means by implication that a promising avenue for further research would be to introduce explicitly dynamic components to party supply theories. Judging from the recent Swedish experience, we need to identify the conditions under which anti-immigrant parties can gain partial respectability and thus become more likely to counter dismissive issue strategies from established parties.

Notes

1. The response rate of the Riksdag surveys, which have been conducted regularly since 1985, are over 90 percent among the 349 MPs. Principal investigators are Sören Holmberg (1985–2006), Peter Esaiasson (1985–1994) and Martin Brothén (1994–2006). Study details are found in Brothén and Holmberg (2003) and Brothén, Holmberg and Eriksson (2007).
2. Results for each party are presented in Table 4.
3. In 2006 the largest level of disagreement was over a proposal to allow Turkey into the EU, which also reflects the immigrant issue. The number of identically worded policy proposals that are included in the SNES-studies varies somewhat over the years: 20 (1994); 12 (1998); 17 (2002); 19 (2006). Eight proposals have been included in all four studies.
4. A complicating factor is that issue saliency is endogeneous to parties' agenda building strategies (e.g. Zaller, 1992). Because an issue could be made salient if promoted by established parties, low saliency does not imply that the immigrant issue lack electoral potential. Issue strategies of established parties are discussed in the following section.
5. Additionally, the following issues and problems are identified in the SOM-surveys: Health care; employment; the environment; the educational system; the economy; pensions and elderly care; law and order; social insurances; taxes; family politics; transport; moral issues; energy

issues; public sector/privatization; agriculture; and the European Union. For each respondent, up to three issues and problems were registered.

6. If New Democracy is included in our coding of the televised debate, the proportion dedicated to the immigration issue increases to 10 percent, which is the third among all issues.

7. It might seem contradictory to code New Democracy as an 'anti-immigrant' party as early as 1991, when anti-immigration policies at that point were only a part of their campaign. It is however true that even though New Democracy did not push their immigration agenda as hard in 1991 as they did in 1994, their policy position on immigration issues were much stricter than the established parties (see Rydgren, 2002, 2004).

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

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