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Published online: 09 Feb 2021.

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The Austrian People's Party: an anti-immigrant right party?

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ABSTRACT
This article looks at the immigration profile of the Austrian centre right. It examines whether the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) can be considered an anti-immigrant party by systematically analysing the party's electoral manifestos from 1994 to 2019. From previously more ambiguous positions, the article identifies an amplification of restrictive positions after 2017. In the electoral manifestos of 2017 and 2019, immigration plays a key role, with a strong focus on Muslim immigrants and their descendants as a 'cultural other'. A major driver of the explicit anti-immigration profile was the restructuring of the ÖVP into a leadership party, which effectively side-lined concentrated interest groups. The article concludes that the party can be classified today as anti-immigrant actor, able to attract anti-immigrant votes.

Introduction: the neglected centre right

For decades the issue of immigration has played a prominent role in Austrian politics (Meyer and Rosenberger 2015). In this context, researchers often characterise the Freedom Party (FPÖ) as a European-wide 'role model' mobilising the anti-immigrant vote since the 1990s (Wodak and Rheindorf 2019). Given the prominence of the FPÖ in academic research, the literature has put much less focus on centre parties, and how they may be mobilising the issue of immigration or how they position themselves (Wagner and Meyer 2017; Carvalho and Ruedin 2018).

The 2015 European 'migration crisis' greatly affected Austria, and the subsequent general elections in Austria highlighted this neglect of the centre parties in the purported 'anti-immigrant heartland' of Europe (Gruber and Bale 2014, 6). Whilst migration from other EU member states remained numerically more important for Austria, between 2014 and 2017 asylum applications tripled compared to the previous years (Rosenberger and Gruber 2020, 51). Austria's hard-line measures in response to the crisis, including upper limits on asylum claims, and a rapprochement to the restrictive governments of the Visegrád group – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia – during the crisis has been associated with a Europe-wide shift in the position towards migration

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and asylum (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017), arguably led by the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), not the FPÖ (Gruber 2017). The positions the ÖVP and its current leader Sebastian Kurz took on immigration in the aftermath of the crisis have often been characterised as populist and anti-immigrant. The New York Times, for instance, described the party's 2017 electoral campaign as 'ripped from the anti-immigrant populist playbook' (New York Times, 16 October 2017).

Whilst considering the crisis as a potential juncture, in line with the focus of this special issue we do not take the migration crisis as *the* driver for the Centre-Right's positions for granted (Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2022). Rather we explore whether and to which extent the Austrian centre-right has changed its immigration profile, going beyond an examination of an immediate crisis effect and looking also at changes predating this recent migration crisis. We thus ask whether the ÖVP (a) has changed their migration profile over time and today can be classified as anti-immigrant, and (b) if so, how we can understand this change. To address these questions, we first look at the party's ideological position on migration from the early 1990s onwards: considering issues, themes (including the migrant groups focused on), salience and framing. We then discuss party strategies and underlying drivers of these strategies, which help us to understand the party's present immigration profile.

It is not self-evident that centre-right parties should take an anti-immigrant/immigration position (Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2022). Bale and Krouwel (2013, 20) have argued that conservative centre parties are at risk of alienating their core support groups when they take too restrictive a stance. For (conservative) religious groups charity with displaced persons can be a cherished principle, and the business sector tends to rely on openness to immigration to remain internationally competitive. Only few studies have looked at centre (-right) parties from a comparative perspective (e.g. Wagner and Meyer 2017). While this literature has identified a shift of centre parties to the right, other scholars looking specifically at the issue of immigration (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019) suggest that these parties have not played a prominent role as strategic drivers of immigration issues in the electoral arena. Only few contributions have discussed the ÖVP more specifically (Liebhart 2019; Wodak 2019; Heinisch, Werner, and Habersack 2020). We build on these studies by providing an in-depth study of the Austrian centre-right focusing on its position and emphasis on immigration across time. The party increased its restrictive positioning and salience over time. We show that the centralisation of the party under the leadership of Kurz – which reduced the power of interest groups – has greatly reduced prior ambiguities on immigration.

Background: migration as new political dividing line and socio-economic reality

Two developments build the backdrop upon which contemporary Austrian party politics on immigration must be understood. First, immigration has recently become an issue that defines Austrian politics, after being based on relatively stable political cleavages until the early 1990s. The dominant cleavage was between industrial labour (Social Democratic Party, SPÖ) and farming and enterprise (ÖVP, FPÖ). The second emerged between secularism/agnosticism (SPÖ, FPÖ) and Catholicism (ÖVP). These cleavages translated into an urban-rural cleavage. On all these conflict lines the two

major parties represented opposite ends. The SPÖ represented the workers, as well as secular and urban voters, the electorate of the ÖVP was composed of farmers and employers, religious segments of society, and people who mostly lived in rural areas (Aichholzer et al. 2014). Another cleavage revolved around a conflict between German (FPÖ) and Austrian nationalism (SPÖ, ÖVP) (Plasser, Ulram, and Grausgruber 1992, 17). Until the 1990s, immigration did not play any role in this nationalist cleavage, as it mostly centred on the question of Austria's ethno-national belonging to the German nation or whether the emphasis was on a distinct Austrian national identity. In contrast to the centre parties, the FPÖ showed a commitment to the German ethnic and cultural community in its party programme (FPÖ 2011).

The simple configuration of these conflict lines with each of the major parties representing one end of the major cleavages(Aichholzer et al. 2014), as well as the fact that after World War II the segment of Austrian society that would define themselves as Germans decreased continuously (Brückmüller 1998) ensured the stability of Austria's political system from the establishment of the Second Republic in 1945 onwards, and the power of the political mainstream. Between 1945 and 1986, the SPÖ and the ÖVP combined won between 82.7 and 94.4 per cent of valid votes (Müller, Plasser, and Ulram 2004, 145). Except for the all-party governmentin the immediate post-war period, and a brief coalition between the SPÖ and the FPÖ in the 1980s, all governments until 2000 were either single party or grand coalitions of the SPÖ and the ÖVP (Müller, Plasser, and Ulram 2004).

From 1986 onwards, however, the party system witnessed a remarkable electoral de-alignment, which led to the rise of the newly established Greens and the previously marginal Freedom Party (FPÖ) (Table 1). In 2013 both centre parties witnessed their lowest electoral support ever, with the ÖVP receiving less than 25 percent of votes (Table 1). The height of this de-alignment, and the firm establishment of the challenger parties was reached during the 2016 presidential election, which was a show-off between the Freedom Party and the Greens. The presidential candidates of the two centre parties reached about 11 percent of votes each, an unprecedented development in the nation's political history.

Table 1. General election results, major parties, 1979–2019.

	ÖVP	SPÖ	FPÖ	Greens	ÖVP/FPÖ coalition numerically possible (92 of 183 mandates)
2019	37.50%	21.2%	16.2%	13.9%	Yes
2017	31.47%	26.9%	26.0%	3.8%	Yes
2013	24.0%	26.8%	20.51%	12.42%	No
2008	25.98%	29.3%	17.5%	10.4%	No
2006	34.33%	35.3%	11.0%	11.1%	No
2002	42.3%	36.51%	10.0%	9.5%	Yes
1999	26.9%	33.15%	26.9%	7.4%	Yes
1995	28.3%	38.1%	22.0%	4.8%	-
1994	27.7%	34.9%	22.5%	7.3%	-
1990	32.2%	42.8%	16.6%	4.8%	-
1986	41.3%	43.1%	9.73%	4.8%	-
1983	43.2%	47.6%	5.0%	-	-
1979	41.9%	51.0%	6.1%	-	-

Note: No coalition potential is given before 1995 because a coalition with the radical right FPÖ was 'unthinkable' for the political centre in Austria.
Source: BMI, https://bmi.gv.at/.

This electoral de-alignment of the Austrian electorate, and the growth of challenger parties is in line with a wider transformation of political systems across the West, and the emergence of a new political cleavage of cosmopolitanism versus communitarianism driven by globalisation processes (Strijbis, Helmer, and de Wilde 2020). Cosmopolitanism advocates open borders to facilitate the flow of capital, services, goods, persons and international cooperation, while communitarianism advocates closed national borders, national sovereignty, and independence. Attitudes to immigration are at the centre of this cleavage, bringing immigration into the parliamentary arena (Hutter and Kriesi 2019). Indeed, both challenger parties in Austria have used immigration to mobilise potential voters, although in opposite ways (Bauböck and Perchinig 2006, 732).

Immigration has become not only a political, but also a relevant socio-economic phenomenon. Austria belongs to the West European countries that experienced large migration flows in the wake of post-war economic growth, and particularly high immigration since the 1990s. According to Eurostat (2019) Austria is the country, which holds the biggest share of foreign residents in the EU28 after Luxembourg and Cyprus. Austria was also affected by the recent 'migration crisis' like few other European countries. In 2015, the country was in absolute numbers the fourth-largest recipient of asylum seekers after Germany, Hungary, and Sweden (Eurostat 2016) with public concerns about immigration rising (Figure 2).

Whilst this recent crisis has provided additional incentives for the ÖVP to mobilise on the issue of migration in a restrictive way, moving too much to the right is also risky for the party. The party traditionally had strong links to the Catholic Church, and associations related to it, which exhibit a position of charity and welcome towards migrant groups (Binder 1994; Rosenberger and Ruedin 2017). The ÖVP has also been a consistent pro-market party (Gruber and Bale 2014, 239): The party has traditionally strong links to business interest organisations, such as the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, or the Associations of Industrials, groups who advocate the recruitment of migrant labour. A firm anti-immigration stance by the party hence is not straightforward. Considering these shifts in the political system, as well as these tensions and ambiguities of the migration issue for the ÖVP, its immigration profile calls for an in-depth empirical analysis.

Strategic party behaviour and political opportunities

Analytically, the article draws on strategic models of party change. Whilst parties tend to be relatively resistant to change, shifts in their profile can be induced exogenously or endogenously, that is it can be triggered by changes in the environment, or it can be an effect of changes in the organisations' internal distribution of power (Panebianco 1988). According to Harmel and Janda (1994) change occurs first and foremost as an effect of 'external shocks', i.e. outside stimuli that affect the party's primary goal(s). Which developments induce change depends whether a party is primarily seeking to maximise votes, trying to maximise control over political office, or trying to influence public policy (cf. Strøm 1990).

The ÖVP – also given the increasing decline of electoral support highlighted above – can be categorised as a vote-seeking party. Because the party was losing vote share, it had strong incentives for party change. With strong electoral competition by challenger parties politicising immigration, we expect that the party's immigration profile

changed in direct response to declining electoral support. In line with this assumption, we consider electoral strategies as the main driver of the immigration profile of the party. External shocks often bring about ripple effects in the form of internal changes, such as leadership change, which in turn can reinforce change (Harmel and Janda 1994). For this reason, we also assume that internal factors have an impact on the immigration profile of the party. As the party has also exhibited a strong office-seeking behaviour in the past (de Lange 2012), we also discuss office-seeking strategies as a potential driver of the ÖVP's migration profile. In the following we spell out expectations considering these three potential drivers (electoral strategy, internal change, and office seeking strategy).

Electoral strategies

Salience

Political parties are incentivized to take up issues considered important by the electorate (Meguid 2008). According to Eurobarometer data (Figure 1) we see an increase in the public salience of immigration in Austria starting in 2007, and an extreme spike around the migration crisis starting in 2014. In 2015, immigration had become the defining issue, surpassing the previously most significant concern of the public: the economy.

It is hard to disentangle the role political parties played in raising the public salience of the issue, and how much of this salience can be considered independent from the mobilisation of political parties on immigration. It is reasonable to assume, though, that dependency works both ways, and that public salience influences the behaviour of parties (Morales, Pilet, and Ruedin 2015). If public salience drives change in the party's immigration profile in some form, we will observe a rising emphasis on immigration in the 2008 elections, and another significant increase especially in the 2017 elections (being closest to the crisis). In the 2019 general elections, by contrast, we would expect a reduction in emphasis on the issue, because the public salience of the issue has decreased after the crisis, and public opinion turned more favourable (Figure 2).

Issue ownership

Party actors pursue change only if benefits can outweigh costs (Harmel and Janda 1994). In the case of a vote-seeking party like the ÖVP, this implies that the party needs to
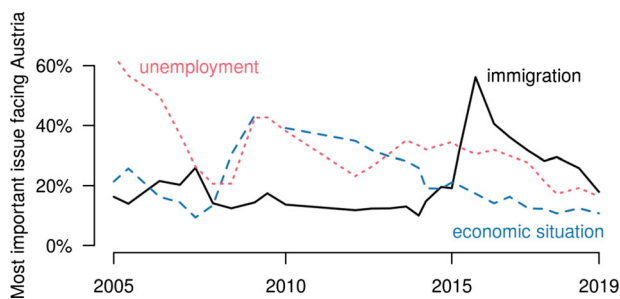

Figure 1. Salience of the immigration issue for public in Austria, 2005–2019. *Source*: Eurobarometer.
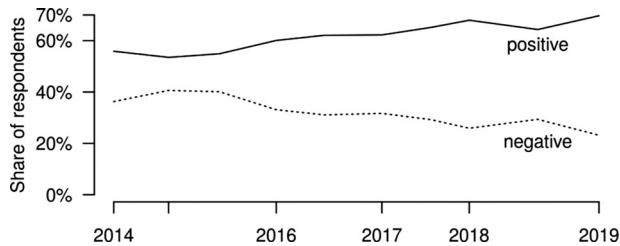
Figure 2. Immigration attitudes in Austria, 2014–2019. *Source*: Eurobarometer, attitudes towards migrants from outside Europe.

assume that by changing its profile, it can attract more new supporters (voters) than alienating old ones. To be able to attract new voters, parties may put greater emphasis on issues they can show 'leadership' or 'ownership' on (Meguid and Belanger 2008). The anti-immigrant FPÖ has been widely identified as issue owner in terms of immigration rhetoric (Wodak and Rheindorf 2019). In terms of policy competence, however, especially from 2000 onwards the ÖVP also can plausibly convey some ownership: Since 2000, the Minister of Interior had been from the ÖVP, whereas previously this portfolio was always headed by the SPÖ. This increases the potential of the party emphasising immigration (cf. Kraler and König 2014, 23).

A relevant development was the adoption of a national immigrant integration strategy in 2010, and the subsequent establishment of a state-secretary for immigrant integration under the leadership of the ÖVP. This brought Sebastian Kurz into government. As Gruber and Rosenberger (2018) show, the integration domain was vital for the party to regain issue ownership in an area dominated by the FPÖ and the Greens. Kurz was successfully branded as the government's face of integration from the 2010 onwards (Gruber and Rosenberger 2018). If ownership drives the party's immigration profile, the party will put more emphasis on immigration in the campaigns from 2002 onwards. From the 2013 election onwards we can also expect that the ÖVP emphasises immigrant integration, if ownership capacity is shaping its immigration profile.

Changing internal power structure

External stimuli or shocks, such as sharp electoral decline, can also trigger changes in the internal power structure of a party, which in turn can induce or amplify changes. In particular, the more power is centralised in parties the more changes are likely to occur (Schumacher and Giger 2018). Following the dramatic decline of the party in the 2013 general elections, and in the 2016 presidential elections, the party saw a change in leadership, with far-reaching consequences. The party rebranded itself as 'List Kurz – the New People's Party', with the party leader put centre stage. This change into a leader party, bears similarity of the rebranding of the FPÖ under the leadership of Jörg Haider in the late 1980s.

In the process of taking over, Kurz demanded the centralisation of the party's decision-making power. Thanks to his popularity and widespread dissatisfaction with the previous leader, Kurz was able to accumulate power in an unprecedented way (Puller 2018): A previously strong and decentralised power base was replaced by

centralised decision-making, diminishing the former power of interest groups, including pro-immigrant interests. On the basis of the newly centralised decision-making structure, Kurz also changed the composition of the party's parliamentary faction, with 56 percent of newly elected MPs representing the party directly rather than interest groups like it was common previously, implying increased loyalty to the party leader (Puller 2018). At the same time, the party loosened its historic ties to the Catholic church (Müller 1996), putting less emphasis on Christian social values, and publicly self-identifying as 'neo-conservative' (Der Standard 6 January 2019).

Because the restructured leader party is electorally successful, it is relatively resistant to critique within the party: During the 2017 general election, the rebranded ÖVP increased its vote share 7.5 per cent compared to the previous general elections (Table 1), and could further increase its share in the 2019 snap elections. According to polls, the most important reason for voters to choose the ÖVP in 2017 and 2019 was the main candidate: Kurz (SORA 2017, 2019). If the centralisation of power and the reduced influence of interest groups shape the profile of the party in the immigration domain, we expect to find a more restrictive immigration position from the 2017 electoral campaign onwards.

Office seeking strategy

An important goal for the ÖVP is to secure government office (de Lange 2012). In proportional systems, such as the Austrian, office seeking parties must avoid policy commitments that alienate potential coalition partners (Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019). Given its electoral strength, the FPÖ has been a viable, potential coalition partner for the Austrian centre parties since decades now. Compared to other European countries there has been a relatively early turn-away of a cordon sanitaire towards the populist radical right in Austria (Meyer and Rosenberger 2015). This has manifested itself in 1999, when the ÖVP entered a coalition with the FPÖ, setting a precedent for other EU countries and future Austrian governments.

If coalition incentives primarily drive the immigration profile, we expect the party to be especially outspoken and restrictive in phases in which a potential of a coalition with the radical right can be anticipated. To facilitate coalitions, we might see ideological 'trespassing' or convergence with the radical right. To operationalise periods of coalition incentives with the radical right we use the numerical possibility of coalitions (according to combined mandates) after general elections (assuming the approximate electoral strength of its competitors will be roughly anticipated by the party, Table 1). If coalition incentives were driving the party's immigration profile we would need to find a change in campaigning on immigration issues starting already in 1999. Following the same logic, we would find less emphasis on migration in 2006-2013, i.e. in electoral years without a coalition potential with the FPÖ.

In sum, our analysis is guided by the assumptions that the coalition potential with the radical right, public salience, and ownership of the issue as well as the structure of the party (centralised versus decentralised power structure) are factors that drive the 'immigration profile' of the party. Depending on which factor is more influential we expect to see different patterns. If public salience drives the party's migration profile, we expect the issue to be highlighted in the 2008 election manifesto, and especially the 2017 election given the prior rising public salience of the immigration issue. If it is coalition incentives

with the far right, we expect more emphasis and a restrictive position on immigration related issues in the party's campaigning as early as 1999 (with less focus on immigration from 2006 to 2013). If it is ownership capacity, we expect changes in party campaigning in 2002, and from the 2013 election particularly an emphasis on immigrant integration issues. If the centralisation of power drives the party profile, we would see an anti-immigrant stance from the 2017 election onwards. Plausibly it might be also a combination of those factors that drive the behaviour of the party, but still we expect that these factors will have different weight, which will manifest itself in the data in the degree of issue emphasis and positioning during different time periods. Given that previous scholarship has emphasised that the biggest hurdle for Centre Right parties to display an anti-immigrant profile are strong relations to pro-immigrant interest groups (Bale and Krouwel 2013), we expect the weakening of these groups as the most influential driver of change. We, thus, expect to find the most substantive shift in the migration profile by the party from the 2017 election onwards.

Material & methods

To explore the immigration profile of the party (measuring the ideological position, themes, salience and framing of immigration), we use electoral manifestos from 1994 to 2019, which we collected from the party's webpage and the CMP/MARPOR archive, and then manually coded. Election manifestos are not only among the richest sources of information about parties' policies (Dolezal et al. 2018), but reflecting the outcome of internal party processes they also indicate party strategies, which makes them particularly useful to identify potential positional shifts and explain the reasons for such shifts. We drew on the coding system introduced by Ruedin and Morales (2019) to code manifestos.

We identified three aspects of every sentence on immigration and integration: its topic or issue, which immigrant groups it is about – respectively how immigrants are referred to –, and the argument (position, whether the status quo should be changed, and the justifications or frames used). For the position of the party, we drew on the 'checklist' approach: Coders use the entire manifesto to identify the position on 19 pre-defined issues related to immigration and integration, which are then averaged. This approach has been extensively validated in different contexts, including Austria (Ruedin and Morales 2019). As is common in the literature, relevant policy issues are divided into immigration and integration (Helbling 2014). Immigration policies concern responses to international mobility, before departure, at the territorial borders and after the arrival of new immigrants; integration in turn concerns policy responses to immigrants already in the country. These two issue categories were divided into security and crime, the economy and welfare, politics and institutions, and society and culture. The positional variable contrasts restrictive positions (i.e. conservative, pro-national, and mono-cultural positions where the rights and access of immigrants is restricted) with expansive positions (i.e. open to migrants, progressive, cosmopolitan, and multi-cultural positions where rights and access is expanded to immigrants).

In addition to organised actors such as other parties, we recognised different object actors to whom electoral manifestos may refer: foreigners and immigrants in a generic sense, asylum seekers and refugees, irregular immigrants, ethnic minority groups, and

religious groups – of which we differentiate references to Islam separately as the party often directly addresses Muslim immigrants. Three broad argumentative frames (instrumental, identity, moral principles) were divided into more specific codes, capturing the justifications given for demands.[1] The salience of the issue of immigration was captured by calculating the number of words in sentences about immigration and integration as a share of all the words in the electoral manifesto. Analytically, we rely on developments over time for different aspects of the manifestos to assess the plausibility of the different reasons for changes in politicisation outlined in the preceding section.

Findings

Increased salience of immigration and more negative positions

We find increasing salience of the immigration issue in the electoral campaigns from 1999 to 2013, and then again from 2017 onwards, with peaks in the 2008 and 2019 elections (Figure 3). In the wake of the 2015 'immigration crisis', the emphasis on migration is especially pronounced. While the salience in the manifesto in 2017 was already above the average of the past two decades, the salience of immigration in the 2019 ÖVP manifesto has increased even further: immigration has become a central topic in the electoral campaign of the party (Table 2).

While the public attributed less importance to immigration after the crisis years (Figure 1), the ÖVP nevertheless decided to focus a substantial part of its campaign on the topic. Despite this, however, according to SORA (2019), ÖVP voters cared more about climate change, the economy, and health care during the same time. This suggests that immigration has become a central issue of the party under the leadership of Kurz, beyond short-term strategical use. This trend is also confirmed by the latest provincial election in Vienna in October 2020. Notwithstanding the Covid-19 pandemic that decreased the salience of migration further, the ÖVP Vienna relied heavily on the migration issue in its electoral communication. According to an analysis of data from August to October 2020 (IMWF 2020), the ÖVP thematized migration to a larger extent (references to migration: 34 percent) than the two radical right parties, the FPÖ and the HC Strache party[2] combined (references to migration by PRR: 31 percent).
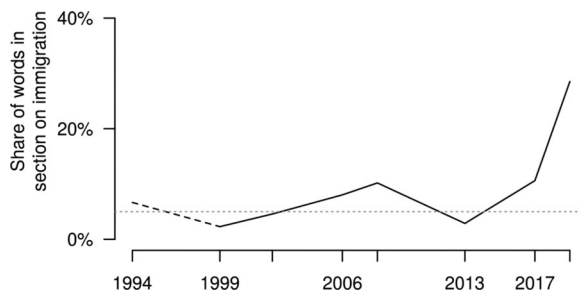
Figure 3. Salience of immigration in ÖVP electoral manifestos, 1994–2019. *Source*: own calculations from electoral manifestos; share of words on immigration and integration compared to the entire manifesto. *Notes*: the ÖVP produced no manifesto for the 1995 snap elections; the dashed horizontal line indicates 5%, around the average across electoral manifestos in Western Europe covered by Ruedin and Morales (2019).

Table 2. Contrasting expectations and evidence about factors driving the ÖVP's immigration profile.

Stimulus	Strategy	Driver	Expected evidence for impact of driver	Finding
Exogenous: Vote loss	Vote seeking	Salience of immigration	2008/2017 elections more emphasis on immigration	Yes, but increasing party salience despite decreasing public salience in 2019
Exogenous: Vote loss	Vote seeking	Ownership capacity in the domain of immigration	From 2002 onwards, emphasis on migration issues.	Yes, but decline in salience in 2013.
			From 2013 onwards, increased focus on integration	Yes
Endogenous: Organisational change based on loss of votes	Vote seeking/ Remaking of party image	Centralisation of power	From 2017 onwards, radicalised anti-immigration profile.	Yes
Exogeneous: Vote loss	Office seeking	Coalition incentive	1999/2002/2017/2019 Ideological trespassing with FPÖ /radicalised anti-immigration immigration profile.	No, moderate restrictive stance until 2017

Looking at the position the ÖVP takes in their electoral manifestos over time, we can observe a trend towards more restrictive positions (Figure 4). Interestingly, when examining the position sentence by sentence, we do not observe the same trend towards more restrictive positions: The manifestos in 2017 and 2019 continue to balance positive and negative sentences in a similar way than the preceding years. What has changed is that the party has taken a clearer anti-immigrant position on more policy domains. Once a clear anti-immigrant position is established in the manifesto, the party subsequently tones down some of these to a limited extent – we understand this as efforts by the party leadership to speak to different groups and interests while exhibiting an overall anti-immigrant position, possibly to mobilise new voters. The rhetoric in the manifestos
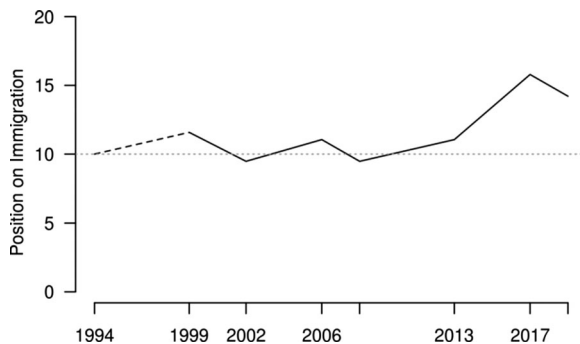
Figure 4. Position on immigration by the ÖVP, 1994–2019. *Source*: own calculations from party manifestos, "checklist" position as described in Ruedin and Morales 2019. *Notes*: no manifesto was produced for the 1995 snap elections, larger numbers indicate anti-immigrant positions that favour assimilation, the horizontal dashed line at position 10 describes a 'neutral' position. Expert coders read the manifestos and assigned an overall position on the basis of 19 statements on immigration. The mean of these answers is rescaled linearly.

until 2013, by contrast, was comparatively moderate, resembling those of other centre parties across Western Europe (Ruedin and Morales 2019). Slight ups and downs in terms of positioning indicate that until 2017 the party was seemingly caught in internal ambiguities about its positioning in the field of immigration. In manifestos before 2013, the party underlined its position as a centre party by clearly rejecting radical positions, both left and right (ÖVP 2013). We also observed a commitment to integration measures – still presented as a two-way process in 2013 – later replaced with more symbolic and more openly assimilationist rhetoric over cultural difference. In other words, while we see some changes before, we see a more substantive shift in the immigration profile turning explicitly anti-migrant, only after the 2013 election.

As regards emphasis of migration issues and an unambiguous, restrictive positioning, our data suggest that public salience has been reflected in the party's immigration profile, whilst coalition incentives and also ownership did not translate neatly into a notably changed migration profile. Given the more substantive shift in 2017, the endogenous driver of party organisational change, seems to be the most influential one, contributing to a rise in salience of the issue and a more radical anti-immigration stance. Let us remember, though, that this endogenous driver is related to the exogenous stimuli: It emerged based on the ambition of the party to raise its electoral support in the wake of electoral decline.

Increasing focus on integration

Over time, the share of the electoral manifesto covering immigrant integration – politicising immigrants and their descendants already in the country – as opposed to border crossing of immigrants not (yet) in the country increased substantially (Figure 5). Since 2013, more than three quarters of the sentences on immigration and integration refer to immigrants already in the country, which mirrors the increasing relevance of integration for the party since the establishment of the integration state secretary led by Kurz.

Of the sentences that concerned immigrant integration, many touched on welfare. Particularly in the 2017 and 2019 manifestos the ÖVP focused on the so called
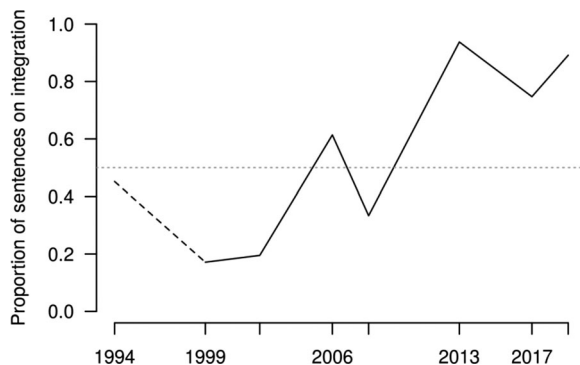

Figure 5. Share of sentences on immigrant integration, ÖVP 1994–2009. *Notes*: no manifesto was produced for the 1995 snap elections. Sentences on immigrant integration as opposed to immigration in the sense of border crossing; the dashed horizontal line is at 50% of the sentences in the manifesto.

'minimum income scheme' (*Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung*) and presented it as being exploited by recognised refugees and subsidiary protected persons. Migrants were described as taking advantage of the system in a fraudulent way (e.g. ÖVP 2017, 66). The party suggested more controls, and a reduction of welfare payments to recognised refugees (e.g. ÖVP 2017, 64), despite a legal opinion of 2016 highlighting a conflict with European Union Law if such policies were implemented. In the 2017 campaign, the ÖVP also linked welfare to EU migrants. The 2017 electoral manifesto underlines that it wanted EU citizens to be eligible for welfare benefits only after five years of residence. In this case, too, the party was aware that this proposal if realised would violate EU law, given a negative legal opinion under the previous government. We therefore argue that these proposals should be viewed as symbolic policy rather than substantive policy proposals. This attack on free movement, however, entirely disappeared in the 2019 electoral manifesto.

Another major integration subtopic concerned education, and this was mostly related to the demand by the party for the apprehension of the German language. The idea that knowledge of the German language is a condition for successful integration was widely promoted by the ÖVP. Although this idea featured in the political debate since the beginning of the 1990s, it became dominant throughout the 2000s. In addition to German classes, classes teaching democratic principles, the state of law, and Austrian culture were also advocated by the party (e.g. ÖVP 2017, 48). The underlying message was that migrants not only lack German skills but are also not adjusted to liberal democracy. The party's vision of integration in the recent manifestos in a nutshell can be described as: speak German, and accept our 'values,' and work [instead of relying on welfare] (e.g. ÖVP 2017, 58).

Although the party oversaw the interior ministry for most of the 2000s and took policy leadership on the issue, immigration was much less salient than integration.

During the migration crisis in autumn 2015, the ÖVP demanded a strict stance on asylum seekers. Although the junior partner in the coalition, the party was firmly in command of the government's position on the immigration and asylum agenda, pushing ahead with restrictive policy proposals including the establishment of temporary asylum, and the erection of a border fence at the Austro-Slovenian border. This put severe pressure on the governing partner SPÖ which had a more conflicted position on immigration (Gruber 2018, 48).

The ÖVP, notably by then the minister for foreign relations Sebastian Kurz, was behind the establishment of an upper ceiling for asylum applications in 2015. Austria was the first EU country to introduce such restrictions. The government also tightened rules of family reunification, especially for persons with subsidiary protection, but also for recognised refugees, who now had to apply within three months to obtain full family reunification rights. This increased restrictiveness was later reflected in the 2017 and the 2019 electoral manifesto, where the party claimed responsibility for closing off the Balkan route and halting migration flows to the country. Despite this, however, the electoral manifestos made few direct references to refugees and asylum seekers (Figure 6). A closer analysis reveals that this can be explained by the party mixing categories and using terminology interchangeably. We note that this 'loose' use of legal terminology coincides with a weakened commitment to refugee protection by the party after 2002 in electoral campaigns.
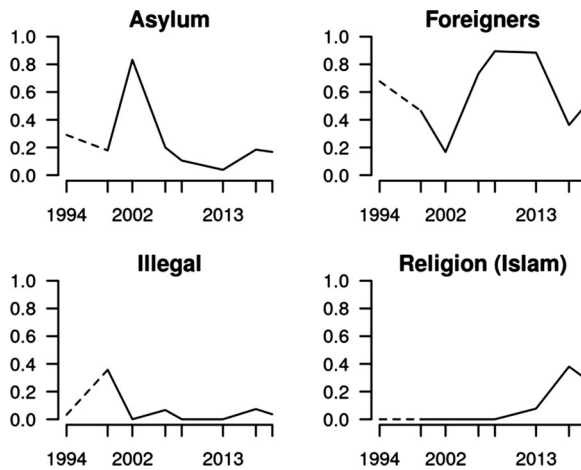
Figure 6. Immigrant groups referred to in the ÖVP manifestos, 1994–2019. *Notes*: no manifesto was produced for the 1995 snap elections. Share of sentences by kind of immigrant (group), respectively the way immigrants were referred to; the category 'foreigners' includes all references to undifferentiated 'immigrants' as they are common and often dominant in party manifestos across Western Europe.

When looking at the way immigrants were identified in the electoral manifestos (Figure 6), we can see clear differences over time. Overall, the share of sentences on asylum seekers is declining, while references to Muslims increased over time (see also Berkhout and Ruedin 2017). References to undifferentiated 'foreigners' and 'immigrants' saw an increase after 2002, but a recent decline. The 2002 manifesto constitutes a clear outlier, where most of the manifesto focused on asylum seekers. By contrast, the manifestos of 2017 and 2019 make hardly any reference to asylum. References to 'illegal' immigrants were highest in 1999 (replaced by references to asylum seekers in the subsequent election). Since 2013, we observe a clear increase of references to religion – Islam. In fact, before 2013, the ÖVP did not refer to Islam at all, while over a third of the sentences on immigration and integration in 2017 did so. This brings the ÖVP into line with radical right parties across Europe that politicise against Muslims in particular.

In Figure 7, we can see that a different focus of immigrant groups – respectively how immigrants are referred to in the manifesto – coincides with differences concerning migration-related topics discussed (see also Rosenberger and Ruedin 2017): In the figure, all sentences about Muslim immigrants and their descendants in the ÖVP manifestos 1994–2019 are combined. We can see a clear focus on cultural issues when it comes to Islam, with no sentence relating economic issues to Islam for instance.

The clear focus is on the purported lack of (cultural) integration of Muslim immigrants and their descendants, or the purported lack of willingness to integrate. The ÖVP hence depicted Muslims as 'cultural others'.

From an international perspective, intense debates about the 'Muslim other' emerged late in Austria. The politicisation of the Muslim issue was primarily a strategic tool of political party competition. After the FPÖ split in 2005, it used Islam as a topic to sharpen its profile against the new political competitor, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) (Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou 2013). The ÖVP included a reference to
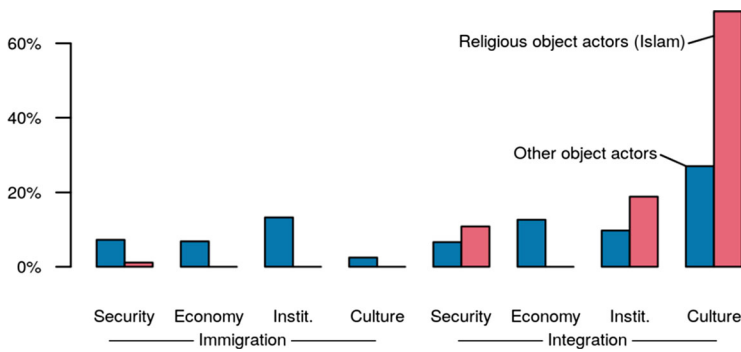
Figure 7. Issues connected with Islam in the ÖVP manifestos, 1994–2019 combined. *Notes*: all electoral manifestos 1994 to 2019; issues refer to security, the economy, social and political issues, and national culture; references to Muslims on the right bar.

Islam for the first time in its 2002 electoral manifesto, by referring to a European value system (ÖVP 2002, 79), mirroring the debates contesting multiculturalism across Europe.

In the 2017 and 2019 manifestos, a major keyword used by the ÖVP was 'parallel societies', which were exclusively and explicitly associated with Muslim migrants. In 2019, Islam continued to be a key issue, but to a lesser extent than in the 2017 election. The strong focus on Islam is also mirrored in the composition of groups that were made responsible for problems identified by the party. Muslims were the most important specific actor blamed for identified problems. Policy change so far, however, is mostly limited to the restriction of Muslim veiling: In May 2019 the government and the ÖVP minister of education established a prohibition of the Muslim headscarf in primary schools (Parliament 2019), and during the 2019 campaign the party also demanded a prohibition of headscarves for teachers. Put differently as suggested by single measures targeting highly visible symbols, the focus on Muslims as the 'cultural other' seems to function predominantly as a symbolic issue.

Frames: increasing justification with security and traditions

Looking at the justification given in the electoral manifestos for policy positions and demands, we observe that cultural and security frames were more important than economic frames in recent elections: The ÖVP justifies its policies because they would improve security and protect the national culture, not because the economy would benefit from them. National identity frames peaked in 2019, which suggests a rising national(-ist) outlook of the party. In Figure 8, we can see an increase in references to cultural traditions as well as political traditions: the way 'things are done' in Austria, both indicating an exclusionary or assimilatory approach to immigration and integration. Economic frames in turn are present especially when it comes to questions of welfare, and its alleged abuse by immigrants – here the costs are highlighted. A study of Austrian national newspapers from January 2015 to January 2016 revealed that frames presenting refugees as economic burdens, and as a threat to the host country's prosperity and welfare, were the third most frequent frame used in the public debate
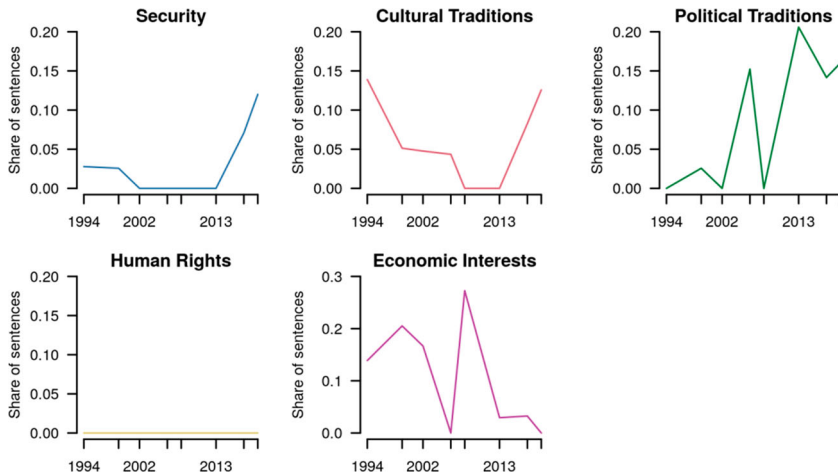
Figure 8. Selected frames used in the ÖVP manifestos, 1994–2019. *Notes*: Share as of all sentences with a frame.

on the migration crisis (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017). This seems to suggest that the frames by the party partly mirror broader public concerns and issues, but they also take up arguments central to the FPÖ rhetoric where the argument of abuse is commonplace. By contrast, human right framings never played an important role in the ÖVP manifestos for immigration and immigrants.

Summarising the previous sections, we can see that the ÖVP over time put growing emphasis on immigrant integration, a trend especially pronounced from 2013 onwards. The party increasingly focused on Muslims, with a peak in 2017, as well as an emphasis on welfare abuse, especially in the 2017 and 2019 elections. Moreover, in terms of framing, cultural and security frames as opposed to economic framings dominated in 2017 and 2019. These findings indicate that the party took over core issues and frames of the populist radical right: We can clearly observe ideological trespassing.

As concerns the focus on the religious other, Hafez and Heinisch (2018) note that it can be viewed a strategic move by the ÖVP to distinguish itself from the coalition partner, the centre-left SPÖ, in times of increasing pressure by the anti-immigrant right. Focusing on Islam, Hafez and Heinisch (2018) find, allowed the party to position itself against its coalition partner, in a domain that was not a core interest of the SPÖ, and at the same time allowed it to appeal to voters on the right. Our findings, support such a vote-seeking perspective and complement it, by emphasising that issues of integration gained relevance for campaigning because of ownership capacity the party had based on taking over the immigrant integration portfolio in the 2010s.

Moreover, the fact that we see an ideological trespassing adapting core FPÖ themes in 2017 suggests that there was also a coalition incentive at play, driving the party's behaviour. The party indeed decided to form a government with the FPÖ. The fact that we do not see this coalition incentive effect manifest itself explicitly prior to 2017, however, highlights that the internal reorganisation of power was the essential driver, enabling an explicit anti-immigration profile and a convergence with radical right positions that ultimately also facilitated a coalition with the populist radical right.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the immigration profile of the Austrian centre right. We demonstrated that, the party has increased the emphasis on immigration, particularly on the sub-issue of immigrant integration. Based on the high salience (Figure 3) and a restrictive, anti-immigrant positioning, as well as an assimilationist and exclusionary framing (Figure 4), along with an absence of human rights framings (Figure 8), we can classify the party's profile today as anti-immigrant. To understand this development, we have traced different drivers, rooted in exogenous and endogenous causes that motivated the party to change, including electoral vote maximising strategies as well as office seeking strategies, and organisational change.

The heightened emphasis on immigration by the party partly mirrors, as we have shown, the public salience of the issue, which saw significant peaks already in the mid-2000s as well as in the wake of the recent 'migration crisis'. The party responded to the increasing concern about immigration in the public to attract voters. The salience by the party of immigration consequently heightened in the 2008 electoral campaign, as well as in 2017. Interestingly, though, the emphasis on immigration peaked in 2019, a trend that continued in sub-national elections in 2020. This latest peak is in contradiction with the decreasing public salience of the issue – before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our finding thus indicates that immigration has become a major theme of the party's profile under the leadership of Kurz, to some extent irrespective of declining voter's concerns. Indeed, once the topic is picked up, it can become an integral part of the party outliving short term electoral strategies. By raising the salience of immigration, the 'migration crisis' provided an incentive for the party to pick up the issue more strongly, but it was not the sole driver of the anti-immigrant profile of the party. As we have shown in this article, internal power shifts mattered considerably.

Ownership of the immigration issue also mattered in terms of the development of the migration profile of the party. In line with taking over the immigrant integration agenda, this topic dominated the electoral manifestos from 2010 onwards: Especially Islam, Muslim immigrants and their children are a major objective of the party's campaigning. The emphasis on the issue of asylum in turn has been decreasing, which mirrors a decreasing commitment of the party in terms of refugee protection.

We found less evidence for a link of office seeking behaviour and the party's immigration profile. Coalition incentives with the populist radical right, only became tangible once the internal power structure changed and became centralised. Overall, an unambiguous and restrictive anti-immigrant position as has been indicated by our findings is most likely the effect of the restructuring of the ÖVP into a leader party, as this restructuring diminished the power of pro-immigrant interest groups. This centralisation of power into the hands of the new party leader followed the loss of votes by the party in the previous elections, it hence can be ultimately understood as the result of a vote seeking attempt.

The party has been successful in this attempt: In the last 2019 elections, twenty percent of 2017 voters of the radical right gave their vote to the ÖVP (SORA 2019). Surely this development has to be understood also in terms of political scandals (the 'Ibiza affair'[3]) that have substantially weakened the FPÖ, but it also cannot be explained without considering the profile the ÖVP exhibits today on immigration. Immigration will likely

remain an important issue in the Austrian parliamentary arena, and it has reached the political 'centre'.

The majority of the existing political party scholarship (Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner 2022) has shown that an accommodative strategy, adopting radical right discourses and positions, does not prevent voters from choosing the radical right over centre-right parties. Our results, by contrast, indicate that the centre-right can potentially be a successful anti-immigrant player, it can convey ownership of immigration and attract the radical right vote (cf. Plescia, Kritzinger, and Oberluggauer 2020). It would be overstated, though, to suspect all centre parties to turn into (successful) anti-immigrant actors, because we identified specific drivers in the Austrian case: The far-reaching power shift in the wake of the centralisation of the party played a decisive role for the ÖVP's change of immigration profile. Leadership change, as also the successful anti-immigrant UK Conservative Party (Bale 2022) suggests, seems to be a central component to the understanding of the development of the centre-right in relation to the issue of immigration.

Future research should pay more attention to endogenous drivers of change when discussing immigration party politics. For the Austrian case, future studies should explore the role of pro-migrant interest groups within the centre-right. How do they perceive their influence today? Or, might there some renewed potential that they can flex their muscles? Especially in the wake of the 2020 pandemic, the recruitment of labour migrants in sectors such as agriculture, has received a new relevance, which in tandem with the overall downturn of the economy, might strengthen the voice of pro-immigrant business groups within the centre right. The open question seems not to be whether the centre-right can be a successful anti-immigrant party, but whether it will replace the anti-immigrant radical right in the long term.

Notes

1. Sub codes of frames were: general or public interest, economic interest, social-political interest, individual interest, domestic security, international security, strategic arguments; national identity, cultural traditions and norms, political-institutional traditions, European identity; human rights, other moral principles.
2. The HC Strache party formed in 2020 after former party leader Strache was expelled from the FPÖ.
3. A video filmed during a private stay in Ibiza, that emerged in May 2019, and in which the head and the deputy head of the party discuss seemingly corrupt practices, and which led to the resignation of both politicians from the FPÖ (see e.g. The Guardian May 20, 2019).

Disclosure statement

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