

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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When everyone talks about migration: how mainstream parties shift to the right and still lose

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ABSTRACT

The rise of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) has prompted mainstream parties (MPs) to adopt more sceptical positions toward immigration. Spatial theory suggests that MPs benefit electorally by adopting issues associated with PRRPs. However, empirical evidence indicates adverse effects as this strategy bears the potential to legitimise the radical right's core agenda. This study investigates whether centre-left and centre-right MPs gain or lose from a visible right-wing shift on migration during campaigns in which a significant proportion of people identify immigration as the most pressing issue, making the accommodation strategy seem more promising. Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) on fourteen high-salience elections and 37 MPs, we show that, even in contexts of high issue salience, MPs do not benefit from adopting tougher stances on immigration. While a right-wing shift is not a necessary condition for significant vote losses, not shifting to the right is a sufficient condition for avoiding considerable losses to PRRPs. We describe further conditions that could influence voter migration between MPs and PRRPs.

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Introduction

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) have become a significant part of Western European party systems over the past few decades. This rise, and the growing salience of their core issues has prompted mainstream parties (MPs) to adopt PRRPs' discourses and positions becoming increasingly sceptical about immigration and multiculturalism (Abou-Chadi 2016; Akkerman 2015; Bale et al. 2010; Schwörer 2021; Van Spanje 2010).

According to spatial theory, MPs benefit from copying the anti-immigration policies of radical right niche parties, thereby challenging their issue ownership (Meguid 2005). However, few empirical studies have systematically tested whether a shift to the right

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by MPs reduces defections to PRRPs (Down and Han 2020; Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; Spoon and Klüver 2020), and these studies provide little support for this assumption. Conversely, other studies suggest that parties may attract more radical right voters by adopting their policies (Chou et al. 2021; Hjorth and Larsen 2022; Thesen 2025). However, some argue that this requires an extreme shift to the right, only applies in the early stages of PRRPs (Chou et al. 2021), and may cause other voters to defect to more left-leaning parties (Hjorth and Larsen 2022). Given these divergent results, further research is needed to understand the electoral consequences of accommodating PRRPs' anti-immigration stances.

More importantly, existing empirical research has not explicitly focused on elections where *core issues of PRRP*, such as immigration, dominated public concerns; even though issue salience is considered a crucial factor in determining voting behaviour (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Walgrave and De Swert 2007). When immigration is highly salient among the public, it structures electoral competition and increases voter demand for policy responses, making positional shifts by MPs electorally meaningful and potentially effective (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; Thesen 2025). By contrast, when immigration is not salient, accommodative shifts are unlikely to influence vote choice and may even unnecessarily raise the issue's visibility to the benefit of PRRPs. We therefore treat elections centred on PRRPs' core issues as the most favourable scenario for a successful accommodation strategy, constituting a hard test of the accommodation hypothesis. Still we argue that even under these most favorable conditions MPs are more likely to lose than win when accommodating tougher stances towards immigration.

Furthermore, these contexts are more relevant to investigate also from political and normative perspectives. In scenarios without high salience of PRRPs' core issues, MPs are under no pressure to adjust their immigration agenda. However, in high salience scenarios, PRRPs tend to perform particularly well, and shifting is an option. Particularly in these scenarios, decision-makers benefit from empirical facts.

In summary, we test the assumption that MPs lose votes to PRRPs when they adopt right-wing positions on migration by examining a scenario that provides the best conditions for an accommodation strategy to succeed (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; Thesen 2025). We additionally consider incumbency status as a factor that may condition how rightward shifts are perceived by voters (Brouard and Michel 2025; Fiorina 1981; Plescia, Kritzing, and Spoon 2022) and political scandals as a reputational crisis that could benefit PRRPs independently (Bågenholm 2013; Maier 2011).

From a methodological standpoint, we employ a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which allows us to account for complex and conjunctural causation, that is, situations in which conditions are causally relevant in combination with others rather than in isolation (e.g. a shift to the right can produce different results depending on whether it is adopted by the center-right or the center-left) (Schneider and Wagemann 2010). Second, QCA is sensitive to equifinality, recognizing that there may be multiple causal paths leading to the same outcome (e.g. electoral losses), without assuming that conditions are mutually exclusive (e.g. political scandals or shifting to the right may lead to the same outcome) (Schneider and Wagemann 2010). The QCA approach is particularly appropriate for the sample size of the study (37 political parties). This intermediate-N size allows for a configurational approach, capturing the interactions between different conditions while retaining the specific knowledge of the cases.

This paper makes three important contributions. First, it highlights the theoretical importance of considering the role of public issue salience when studying the effects of accommodation. Second, it creates a scenario with the *most likely conditions* for the potential success of an accommodation strategy. Third, the paper contributes a different methodological approach by using a QCA in an otherwise heavily regression and experiment-based research field. We thereby provide more methodological diversity to the research field of accommodation strategies.

Our analysis of fourteen elections scenarios in eleven Western European countries shows that the absence of a right-wing shift on migration among MPs is a sufficient condition for avoiding significant vote losses to PRRPs in electoral contexts favorable to the latter (i.e. high salience of immigration and terrorism). Furthermore, if we consider the Conservative Party to be a right-wing shifter due to their Euroscepticism in the 2015 UK election, then the presence of a right-wing shift is a necessary condition for centre-right parties to suffer considerable losses.

Mainstream parties and the accommodation strategy

In recent decades, scholarly debates have centred on whether and why MPs change their behaviour in response to external pressures. More recent spatial theoretical models have centred on multiparty systems and the significance of particular issues (Meguid 2005; Spoon, Hobolt, and De Vries 2014). Election campaigns often revolve around specific issues, with parties strategically choosing the issues on which to compete (Meguid 2005). This approach is consistent with issue competition theory, which examines how societal conflicts become focal points of political competition (Meijers 2017; Petrocik 1996; Walgrave and De Swert 2007).

Both the issue competition literature and newer spatial approaches share the critical assumption that MPs respond to emerging issues by adjusting their positions and the emphasis they place on those issues. Factors such as shifts in public opinion or the success of 'niche' parties, which 'own' specific issues, signal MPs to accommodate the issue and adopt corresponding positions (Schwörer 2021).

In this context, Meguid's (2005) influential article focuses on identifying which strategies are successful against niche parties that 'own' a particular issue. She identifies three strategies that MPs can adopt. First, they can choose an 'accommodative strategy', in which they align their position with that of the niche party or move closer to it. Second, they can adopt an 'adversarial strategy', where they address the issue but take an opposing stance, challenging the niche party's position. Lastly, MPs can opt for a 'dismissive strategy', in which they avoid engaging with the issue altogether. Meguid's often-quoted thesis posits that MPs benefit from adopting the positions and issues of niche parties (e.g. PRRPs), as they are perceived as more competent due to their legislative and governmental experience.

Numerous studies show that MPs often opt for accommodation adopting negative positions on immigration when faced with the success of radical right parties (Abou-Chadi 2016; Akkerman 2015; Bale et al., 2010; Van Spanje 2010). Importantly, it is not only the success of niche parties that puts pressure on MPs to recalibrate their agendas; the salience of issues in the public is also important. For example, when immigration becomes particularly salient in society, MPs are more likely to address the issue –

some of them actually adopting nativist rhetoric and legislation (Gessler and Hunger 2022; Schwörer 2021, 2024, 2025).

However, the assumption that MPs benefit from accommodating to PRRPs' core issues is increasingly challenged. Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi (2023) examined 350 strategies of MPs in 108 electoral contexts between 1976 and 2017 in 13 Western European countries. They conclude that increasing opposition to multiculturalism and promotion of national culture in election manifestos does not reduce defections to PRRPs, but rather increases them. Similarly, Down and Han (2020) show that the rightward shift of MPs on migration leads to voter defection to the radical right.

Spoon and Klüver's (2020) analysis of election manifesto data and voter transitions found that centre-right parties do not benefit from a tough stance on migration, while left-wing parties may benefit from adopting a more sceptical stance. Similarly, through a survey experiment with Danish voters, Hjorth and Larsen (2022) find evidence that accommodation can attract anti-immigration voters for the Danish Social Democrats. However, Etzerodt and Kongshøj (2022) have challenged these findings, showing that the right-wing shift of the Danish Social Democrats did not attract voters from the radical right Danish People's Party in 2019 and an experimental study by Turnbull-Dugarte, Bailey, and Devine (2025) indicates that the accommodation strategy entails electoral costs for center-left parties. Thesen (2025), however, finds that accommodation is associated with reduced radical right vote growth when immigration news salience and PRRPs' visibility in political news are considered. In contrast to Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi (2023), he argues that media coverage constitutes a confounding factor. When immigration is highly visible in political news, voters are more likely to evaluate parties on this issue.

The empirical evidence of the success of the accommodation strategy is thus mixed at best. Most studies rather suggest that a right-wing shift on migration results in a greater loss of votes to PRRPs particularly for center-right parties. MPs increasing their anti-immigration rhetoric elevate the salience of the issue in media and the public from which PRRPs as 'issue owners' can only benefit (Dahlström and Sundell 2012; Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023). More recent research also shows that MPs adopting radical right's rhetoric contribute to a normalisation of radical agendas, which further drives PRRPs' success (Valentim 2024; Valentim, Dinas, and Ziblatt 2025). The existing scholarship thus indicates that issue ownership and normalisation processes prevent the success of MPs' accommodation strategies – although Thesen's inclusion of media salience seems to challenge the state of research.

The electoral context of high public salience of immigration

Meguid (2005) already highlights that MPs influence both issue positions and issue salience through their strategic responses. In her framework, salience is largely endogenous to party competition: when MPs enter an issue space, they increase its prominence in electoral competition. Our argument shifts the focus to the broader level of public issue salience as a contextual condition. We examine whether the electoral consequences of accommodative rightward shifts are as expected by Meguid when immigration is already highly salient among voters. We acknowledge that public salience may itself be shaped by party strategies among other factors. Our analysis does not seek to explain the origins of immigration salience but treats it as a contextual condition. Even if

mainstream parties have contributed to its rise, they ultimately compete within this high-salience environment at election time. We therefore assess whether accommodation mitigates or amplifies electoral losses to PRRPs under these conditions.

So do the electoral effects of accommodation strategies differ when immigration is highly salient? Existing research has rarely differentiated between campaigns held under conditions of high versus low public concern about immigration. While Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi (2023) acknowledge that accommodative strategies may be more effective when immigration is a salient issue, their salience measure captures issue emphasis among *parties* rather than the public (weighted average scores of parties). Others, such as Spoon and Klüver (2020), focus on individual-level issue salience and show that voters who consider immigration the most important issue are more likely to switch to far-right parties. Down and Han (2020) only include a positional public opinion variable, not a salience indicator. Thesen (2025) shares the argument that greater public immigration salience makes electoral success of accommodation strategies more likely, but measures public salience indirectly by examining the visibility of the issue in the news media.

By contrast, we focus explicitly on electoral contexts in which immigration is widely perceived by the public as a national problem as these scenarios increase the pressure on parties to articulate clear positions. Under such conditions, visible positional shifts become electorally meaningful because voters are attentive to party differences on the issue. This reasoning is consistent with the argument that accommodative strategies should be most effective when immigration is a salient and important issue to voters as formulated by Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi (2023) and Thesen (2025).

We therefore treat high-salience elections as a hard test of the accommodation hypothesis. If accommodation is ever electorally beneficial for MPs, it should be under these conditions. Nevertheless, we still expect accommodation to result in voter defection to PRRPs – even under these conditions. First, rightward shifts by MPs may legitimise more radical policy proposals and contribute to the normalisation of radical right actors (Dahlström and Sundell 2012; Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; Valentim, Dinas, and Zibblatt 2025). Second, issue ownership on immigration is likely to remain with PRRPs, which benefit from greater credibility and internal cohesion on the issue (de Vries and Hobolt 2020). Thus, even under conditions that appear most favourable for accommodation, we expect it to work against MPs.

H1: A rightward shift on immigration among MPs leads to considerable vote loss to PRRPs in contexts where immigration and terrorism are salient issues among the public.

While our core argument concerns the electoral consequences of accommodative rightward shifts, these effects may depend on whether MPs hold office. Incumbency status has received limited attention in research on the electoral consequences of mainstream strategies against the radical right, even though it is frequently associated with changes in party behaviour (Down and Han 2020; Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; Spoon and Klüver 2020). Because parties in power have greater influence over policymaking, blame for perceived social problems often falls on the government (Fiorina 1981). Voters engage in retrospective voting, primarily evaluating the performance of incumbents (Brouard and Michel 2025), and empirical evidence shows that governing parties tend to lose electoral support when public dissatisfaction with their performance is high (Plescia, Kritzing, and Spoon 2022). We therefore expect that a mainstream party

in government during an election campaign in which immigration is salient can be more easily blamed for perceived mismanagement by PRRPs than a mainstream party in opposition. A rightward shift on migration by a governing party may signal that the issue has arisen or persisted while in office, making it more directly accountable to voters.

H2: Shifting to the right on immigration while in government leads to considerable vote losses to PRRPs in contexts where immigration and terrorism are salient issues.

While the primary focus of this study lies on the electoral consequences of accommodative rightward shifts, we also account for additional factors that may independently increase MPs' electoral vulnerability, particularly (but not only) vis-à-vis PRRPs. Including political scandals as an independent condition allows us to distinguish the electoral consequences of accommodation from vote losses driven by reputational crises. Political scandals involving MPs may generate voter defection to PRRPs irrespective of repositioning (de Vries and Hobolt 2020). When a mainstream party becomes embroiled in a scandal – whether related to corruption, abuse of office, or personal misconduct – it risks being portrayed as part of a self-serving political elite. This narrative plays directly into the hands of PRRPs, which rely on anti-elite rhetoric to mobilize support (de Vries and Hobolt 2020; Mudde 2004; Schwörer 2022). Empirical studies show that political scandals can lead to significant electoral punishment although to varying extents (Bågenholm 2013; Maier 2011). PRRPs may benefit disproportionately from mainstream party scandals, regardless of whether MPs have shifted to the right, by presenting themselves as the only clean alternative to a corrupt establishment.

H3: Involvement of MPs in political scandals leads to considerable vote losses to PRRPs.

Data and method

Case selection

Our focus is on MPs in all Western European countries.¹ From these countries, we select those elections that meet our selection criteria of high public salience of PRRPs' core issues and the presence of established PRRPs.

Using Eurobarometer data on the *two most important issues* facing the country, we selected election campaigns in which a substantial percentage of people identified immigration² – the core issue of the radical right (Mudde 2007) – as a key issue.³ We also consider mentions of terrorism insofar as they contribute to high public salience within the broader immigration–Islam nexus. Following the September 11 attacks and subsequent jihadist attacks in European capitals, Islam and Muslims increasingly became framed as the primary outgroup of the radical right and were linked to terrorism in public discourse (Cinnirella 2012; Ernst and Bornstein 2012; Schwörer and Fernández-García 2021; Vellenga 2008).⁴ In this context, terrorism is treated as part of the broader immigration–Islam–multiculturalism issue environment rather than as a separate policy dimension. The Eurobarometer data are available from 2004 to 2024 (as well as one wave in spring 2002), and are collected twice a year, which allows us to identify all election campaigns in a context of high salience of immigration and terrorism over almost two decades. The fieldwork period varies between approximately two and eight months prior to the respective elections. While one could argue that salience levels might have changed

during the final campaign period, in most cases the measured salience clearly exceeds the first and second classification criteria described in the next paragraph. Even a substantial short-term fluctuation would therefore not alter the set membership of these cases as high-salience elections (see Table 1). For Norway and Switzerland, we used national survey data on the most important issues (Aardal and Bergh 2018; Lutz 2016).

We establish four criteria for selecting election campaigns that prominently feature core issues of PRRPs. We deliberately adopt a conservative selection strategy in order to identify elections in which immigration and terrorism genuinely structured public opinion.

As a *first* screening criterion, immigration and terrorism (combined) must be identified as one of the two most important issues by at least 25% of respondents. We treat one

Table 1. Salience of immigration among the public in each country (compared to previous election).

Election	Salience immigration	Salience Terrorism	Salience combined	Election PRRPs	Fieldwork
AUT 2017 15 July	32% (+20%)	11% (+10%)	43% (+30%)	26% (+1.9%)	May 2017
BE 2007 10 June	25% (+7%)	9% (−2%)	34% (+6%)	23.2% (+6.5% ^a)	Sep-Oct 2006***
BE 2019 26 May	29% (+13%)	9% (+8%)	38% (+21%)	28% (+4.1%)	Nov 2018
DE 2025 23 February ^b	35% (+23%)	5% (+2%)	40% (+25%)	20.8% (+10.4%)	Oct 2024
CH 2015 18 October	44% (+24%)	0%* (+0%)	44% (+24%)*	29.4% (+2.8%)	Post-election ^c
DK 2015 18 June	35% (+22%)	15% (+11%)	50% (+33%)	21.1% (+8.7%)	Nov 2014
DK 2005 8 February	25% (−11%)	20% (+10)	45% (−1%)	13.25% (+1.25)	Oct-Nov 2004***
FR 2017 23 April	19% (+11%)	31% (+28%)	50% (+39%)	26%** (+6.3%)	Nov-Dec 2016
IT 2018 4 March	33% (+31%)	13% (+12%)	46% (+43%)	21.7% (+15.6%)	Nov 2017
NL 2006 22 November	16% (+0%)	26% (+15%)	42% (+15%)	5.89% (+0.2%)	Sep-Oct 2006***
NL 2017 15 March	34% (+31%)	18% (+18%)	52% (+49%)	13.1 (+3%)	Nov 2016
NO 2017 11 September	28% (+16%)	0%* (+0%)	28% (+16%)*	15.2% (−1.2%)	Post-election ^d
SE 2018 9 September	25% (+11)	3% (+2%)	28% (+13%)	17.53% (+4.7%)	Mar 2018
UK 2015 17 May	38% (+9%)	16 (+10%)	54% (+19%)	12.6% (+9.5%)	Nov 2014

*No Eurobarometer data available. ** First round presidential elections. ***Data for the previous election was retrieved from EB 57.2. As no other data was available, we relied on the EB 57.2 data, which was collected between April and June 2002. This was despite the fact that the fieldwork was conducted more than six months before the Dutch election in January 2003, almost a year before the Belgian election in May 2003 and five months after the Danish 2001 election (November).

^aThe radical right ‘New Flemish Alliance’ (NVA) joined a coalition with the centre-right ‘Christian Democratic and Flemish’ (CD&V) party in 2007, so we took half of the result (9.25%) for the NVA.

^bThe trend lines have not yet been updated for autumn 2024 (as of August 2025). Data for Germany 2025 can be found here: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215>.

^cBased on the Selects 2015 Survey. Although the survey was conducted a few weeks after the election, the report documents that migration and asylum issues dominated the election year and campaign period in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis (Lutz 2016, 26).

^dNorwegian National Election Study. Although the survey was conducted after the election, it explicitly asked which issues had influenced respondents’ voting decisions. Data from Aardal and Bergh (2018).

quarter of the electorate as a substantive threshold indicating a considerable potential voter base for PRRPs as issue owners of these topics. This level of salience usually lies above both the long-term average and median values of the individual countries (see Appendix A), suggesting that it exceeds routine issue attention. However, this threshold alone is not sufficient to qualify a case as high salience and is therefore complemented by additional contextual criteria.

Second, immigration/terrorism should not decline in salience compared to the previous election. Even if the 25% threshold is met, a substantial decrease in salience would suggest that other issues are more important to the public.

Third, to account for country-specific baseline differences in issue attention, we compare each selected election to the long-term salience distribution within the respective country using all available Eurobarometer waves. We also use an alternative measure that only includes waves before the respective election. In all cases, salience exceeds the country-specific average at least by 9% and the median by at least 8% (see Appendix). This ensures that the selected elections represent periods of unusually high public attention rather than routine salience. As a consequence of these combined criteria, immigration/terrorism rank first or second among the most frequently mentioned issues in all cases (with Sweden as the only exception, where they rank third), indicating dominance relative to most competing issues such as unemployment, the economy, or health.

Fourth, we restrict the sample to elections in which PRRPs were already represented in parliament prior to the respective election. Our theoretical focus lies on accommodative strategies toward competitors already established in parliament; elections involving first-time parliamentary entry reflect distinct supply-side dynamics and would not allow us to assess net vote migration between MPs and PRRPs.

Based on these criteria, we identify fourteen elections in eleven Western European countries in which immigration and terrorism played a central role in public opinion and in which PRRPs were present in parliament.⁵ On average, 42.43% of respondents identified immigration and terrorism (combined) as one of the two most important issues in the selected campaigns. For Norway and Switzerland, only national data on immigration salience are available. The 2018 Swedish election represents the lowest salience case (28%), yet still clearly exceeds routine issue levels. [Table 1](#) summarises the case selection, including salience scores. In the selected elections, we look at the strategies of all major centre-left and centre-right MPs. In line with existing definitions, we consider social democratic, liberal, and conservative/Christian democratic parties as MPs (Spoon and Klüver 2019).⁶ Parties are coded as PRRP when listed in the 'Populist' as 'far-right' (Rooduijn, Pirro, and Halikiopoulou 2023).⁷

Method

To evaluate the relationship between our outcome, net voter migration between mainstream and PRRPs, and our conditions, we apply a crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis approach, which is particularly suitable for research with medium and small sample sizes. Unlike traditional statistical methods, QCA focuses on the analysis of set relations rather than correlations, enabling the identification of multiple pathways leading to the same outcome (Ragin 1987).

Causal conditions

In crisp-set QCA, both the outcome and the causal conditions are treated as dichotomous variables: a value of 0 indicates the absence or low presence of a condition, while a value of 1 indicates its presence or high strength. We opted for a crisp-set QCA rather than a fuzzy-set approach because, except for the outcome (electoral loss), all causal conditions included in the model are qualitative in nature rather than matters of degree. For example, government vs. opposition status, the presence of a political scandal, or the distinction between centre-right and centre-left parties are inherently dichotomous. Similarly, a ‘rightward shift on immigration’ has been treated as dichotomous condition, since its coding relies on multiple criteria and thresholds that make it unsuitable for a meaningful fuzzy calibration.

A crucial step in any crisp-set QCA is to define thresholds for each condition in order to determine the presence or absence of the conditions and the outcome in each case. These thresholds are established based on theoretical justification, contextual knowledge or empirical patterns (Ragin 1987; Rihoux and Ragin 2009).

Right-wing shift. The crucial ‘condition’ that we theoretically link to the ‘outcome’ in our QCA is whether MPs have shifted to the right on migration/multiculturalism and have given the issue more salience in the campaign.⁸ A somewhat more restrictive position is not, in itself, enough to indicate a right-wing shift, as it also needs to be visible in the campaign.

In a first step, we collected data from the MARPOR dataset (Lehmann, Franzmann, and Al-Gaddooa 2024; for Germany 2025, Lehmann, Franzmann, and Al-Gaddooa 2025) on the salience of pro-multiculturalism (per 607) and anti-multiculturalism (per 608) statements. We created a net index by subtracting the positive score from the negative score. The same process was applied to the pro- and contra-immigration variables (per 601_2 and per 602_2 and the ‘Immi_pos’ variable in Lehmann and Zobel 2018), which, however, are not available for all cases as they were only added to MARPOR in more recent elections. MARPOR data is particularly useful not only to determine positional shifts but also changes in the salience of the issues. The MARPOR multiculturalism and immigration index was our starting point and the first criterion used to determine right-wing shifts (see Appendix for more information).⁹ We consider there to be an indication of a shift if a MP has a more negative net evaluation of at least -0.45 (meaning on average 0.45% more manifesto quasi-sentences rejecting multiculturalism/immigration compared to the previous election manifesto) and the total score is negative. We do not consider a decrease in positive statements about multiculturalism as a shift to the right (e.g. from +3 to +0.5%), as we argue that accommodation requires a negative discourse on multiculturalism/immigration.

In the second step, we cross-checked the validity of our MARPOR measure by screening newspaper coverage of electoral campaigns, academic reports on elections, as well as expert evaluations by V-Party (Lindberg, Düpont, and Higashijima 2022; Pemstein, Marquardt, and Tzelgov 2020) and CHES data (Jolly, Bakker, and Hooghe 2022; Polk et al. 2017).¹⁰ This also makes sure that we measure only shifts that are perceived as such by the public. A summary of all the information collected from the datasets, including cases classified as accommodators and a detailed discussion of our calibration decision

for challenging cases, can be found in the Appendix. We code parties that shifted considerably to the right as 1 and those that did not shift (or shifted only slightly) as 0.

Incumbency status and political scandal. We coded incumbent parties with 1 and opposition parties with 0 for the period before the respective election.¹¹ To assess whether MPs were involved in political scandals, we screened the *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbooks*¹² for each election and for the German 2025 general election we consulted media coverage. Considerable scandals occurred in the French Republican Party (LR) in 2017¹³, in the Danish Liberal Party (Venstre) in 2015¹⁴, in the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) in 2017¹⁵, and in the German FDP before the 2025 elections.¹⁶ No scandals were mentioned during the other election.

Center-right and Center-left. Finally, the QCA includes all MPs, along with a causal condition that distinguishes between center-right parties (1) and non-center-right parties (0).¹⁷ This allows us to explore whether accommodation strategies on immigration/multiculturalism yield similar outcomes across the mainstream as a whole, or whether their effectiveness differs depending on the ideological proximity of MPs to the radical right as some research has indicated (e.g. Spoon and Klüver 2020).

Outcome variable: net voter migration. As outcome variable, we look at the net voter migration between the respective MPs and PRRPs since the last election, considering both vote gains and losses. We use data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (www.cses.org; for example, see CSES 2024). CSES provides information on vote choice for the ‘current’ and previous election for several years and several European (and non-European) countries based on national election studies. Cases for which CSES data was not available we relied on national election surveys (see Appendix). Tables 2 and 3 show the net voter migration between mainstream and PRRPs. We provide detailed information in the Appendix.

Vote-switching estimates should be interpreted cautiously due to potential recall bias and sampling limitations (Dassonneville and Hooghe 2017). Although recall errors do not appear to fundamentally undermine validity (Abou-Chadi and Stoetzer 2020; Van Elsas et al. 2014), the sample size may not fully capture the diversity of the electorate, particularly for MPs with low vote shares. We weighted the data by party choice where possible and cross-checked survey-based party shares against actual results. For the 2018 Italian election, substantial deviations in the CSES data led us to rely instead on a national election study (see Appendix).

In the absence of established QCA calibrations for substantial inter-party vote losses, we define a five-percentage-point defection from a party’s previous absolute vote as substantively meaningful. Losing more than one in twenty former voters to a specific competitor represents a politically consequential shift in multiparty systems and may affect coalition bargaining and party competition. This threshold also lies clearly above what could plausibly be attributed to sampling error in national election studies (Mercer 2016), reducing the risk that minor fluctuations are treated as substantive vote transfers.

The empirical distribution of our cases further supports this calibration (Table 2). We observe a clear separation between parties losing around four percent of their previous electorate and those losing more than six percent, with no cases located in between.

Table 2. MPs vote losses ordered by share of losses to PRRPs.

Party	Year	Ideology	Country	Right-wing shift	Net losses to PRRPs
Forza ^a	2018	Right	IT	Yes	19.54%
SPÖ	2017	Left	AUT	Yes	15.87%
LR ^b	2017	Right	FR	Yes	14.29%
Venstre	2015	Right	DK	Yes	12.47%
FDP	2025	Right	DE	Yes	11.29%
Con	2015	Right	UK	No	9.35%
VVD	2017	Right	NL	Yes	8.8%
PS	2017	Left	FR	No	8.66%
PS/SPA	2019	Left	BE	Yes	8.41%
Labour	2015	Left	UK	No	7.82%
CDU/CSU	2025	Right	DE	Yes	6.35%
M	2018	Right	SE	Yes	6.34%
SPD	2025	Left	DE	No	4.38%
VLD	2007	Right	BE ^c	No	4.33%
CVP	2015	Right	CH	No	4.24%
SAP	2018	Left	SE	Yes	3.55%
FDP	2015	Right	CH	Yes	3.48%
PD	2018 ^d	Left	IT	No	3.2%
H	2017	Right	NO	No	3.13%
VLD	2019	Right	BE	No	2.83%
S	2015	Left	DK	Yes	2.76%
CD&V	2019	Right	BE	No	2.7%
LibDems	2015	Right	UK	No	2.65%
CDA	2017	Right	NL	Yes	2.56%
Venstre	2005	Right	DK	No	2.47%
AP	2017	Left	NO	Yes	2.43%
PvDA	2017	Left	NL	No	2.17%
D66	2017	Right	NL	No	2.16%
PS/SPA	2007	Left	BE	No	1.7%
S	2005	Left	DK	No	1.25%
CDA	2006	Right	NL	No	0.63%
PvDA	2006	Left	NL	No	0.62%
SP	2015	Left	CH	No	0.49%
VVD	2006	Right	NL	No	−0.66%
DKF	2005	Right	DK	No	−1.12%
CD&V (+NVA)	2007	Right	BE	No	−1.33%
ÖVP	2017	Right	AUT	Yes	−3.02%

^a2013: People of Freedom. We used data from the Italian National Election Study 2018 (see Appendix).

^bPredecessor party: UMP.

^cFor the Belgian general elections, we illustrate the results from the MPs in Flanders, as our focus is on the Flemish party system (there are no relevant radical right parties in Wallonia).

^dAccording to the Italian national election study 2018 (see Appendix).

The five-percent threshold therefore reflects a natural break in the data rather than an arbitrary cut-off.

Even at the lower bound of the ‘substantial loss’ category, such defections were publicly interpreted as significant. In the German federal election, the CDU’s 6.35% loss to the AfD was widely discussed as electorally consequential (Kubitza and Kohler 2025; Rößner 2025). Similarly, following the 2018 Swedish election, media coverage considered the Moderates’ 6.34% losses to the Sweden Democrats significant (Aftonbladet 2018; SVT 2018). We therefore code parties with net losses exceeding five percent as experiencing substantial vote loss (1), and those below as not experiencing substantial loss (0).

Analysis

The description of the distribution of the raw data (outcome) in Table 2 shows that in elections where migration and terrorism are central issues, MPs always lose out to the radical right – with the exception of four parties winning votes. Among them only one party shifted to the right (ÖVP in 2017). The descriptive data suggests that accommodating is not a successful electoral strategy for MPs. Setting the threshold at five percent, nine out of fifteen MPs that have shifted to the right have lost substantial votes to PRRP. Conversely, only three out of 22 parties that have not shifted to the right have lost substantially. Among centre-right parties, three that moved to the right did not lose significantly, while seven did. Among centre-left parties, three right-wing shifters did not lose votes, while two did. If we consider the parties that lost significantly, the findings are even clearer: Nine of the twelve losing parties shifted to the right, while only three did not. Of those that did not lose significantly, 19 did not shift and only seven did. The findings appear to be more robust for the centre-right. Except for the Conservatives in 2015, all parties that lost significantly to PRRP shifted to the right ($n = 7$). Among the four centre-left parties that lost, two shifted and two did not.

Analysis of the presence of the outcome (significant electoral losses)

The first step in a crisp-set QCA is to identify the necessary conditions for the outcome. A condition is considered necessary if, whenever the outcome is present, the condition is also present. However, its presence alone does not guarantee the outcome, as additional conditions may be required (Schneider and Wagemann 2010). The analysis indicates that there are no necessary conditions for the presence of the outcome when all cases are considered together. The shift to the right does not qualify as a necessary condition (consistency 0.75; coverage 0.6), since there are three cases leading to the outcome without this condition being present: Cons 2015, PS 2017, and Labour 2015.

The next step in the QCA is to construct the truth table in order to identify the configurations of conditions that are sufficient for the outcome (vote losses to the radical right). A configuration of causal conditions is considered 'sufficient' if, whenever it is present, the outcome is also present. In other words, such configurations consistently lead to the outcome, although alternative configurations may do so as well (Schneider and Wagemann 2010). The truth table for the presence of the outcome (Table 3) contains 16 logically possible configurations, of which 5 lack empirical instances. Only the configurations with empirical evidence are displayed.

For the complex solution,¹⁸ the path to the outcome consists of (Shift*Center-Right*~Government) OR (Shift*Government*Scandal). In other words, for centre-right parties, a rightward shift while in opposition leads to significant losses (observed in five parties, with CDA2017 as a contradictory case). The alternative path indicates that parties that shift to the right while in government and are involved in a political scandal lose significant votes to PRRPs (regardless of their ideology). This only applies to two parties. The coverage of the complex solution is 0.58 with a consistency of 0.875.

The parsimonious solution¹⁹ indicates that (Scandal) OR (Shift*Center-Right*~Government) leads to electoral loss. The first path accounts for four of the 12 cases with significant losses and no contradictory cases. The second path covers five parties but has

Table 3. Truth table (presence of the outcome: significant electoral losses to PRRPs).

Shift to the right	Center-right	Government	Scandal	Significant losses to PRRPs	Consistency	Cases
1	1	0	1	1	1	LR2017; Venstre2015
1	0	1	1	1	1	SPÖ2017
1	1	1	1	1	1	FDP2025
1	1	0	0	1	0.75	Forza2018; CDU/CSU2025; M2018; CDA2017*
1	0	0	0	0	0.5	PS/SPA2019; AP2017
0	0	0	0	0	0.33	Labour2015; PvDA2006; S2005
1	1	1	0	0	0.33	VVD2017; FDP(CH)2015; ÖVP2017
0	0	1	0	0	0.16	PS2017; SDP2025; PS/SPA2007; SP2015; PD2018; PD2018; PvDA2017
0	1	1	0	0	0.09	CON2015; Venstre2005; CVP2015; VVD2006; LibDem2015; H2017; CDA2006; VLD2019; VLD2007, CD&V2019; DKF2005
0	1	0	0	0	0	CD&V + NVA2007; D66-2017
1	0	1	0	0	0	SAP2018; S2015

*Contradictory cases.

CDA2017 as a contradictory case, as already noted in the complex solution. Overall, the parsimonious solution explains seven of the 12 positive cases (solution coverage = 0.58; solution consistency = 0.875). This means that five cases of electoral loss remain unexplained, suggesting that additional conditions are at play in explaining MPs' losses to the radical right (VVD2017; Con2015; Labour2015; PS2017; PS/SPA2019). We discuss these cases later.

In sum, these configurations indicate that a rightward shift of MPs might matter, but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition on its own. The number of unexplained cases points to additional factors not captured by our QCA model.

If we carry out the analysis only for center-right parties, we obtain the same parsimonious solution: (Scandal) OR (Shift*~Government) → Significant electoral losses. The coverage value improves when analyzing center-right parties (0.75), while the consistency value remains at similar levels (0.86). However, the same unexplained cases (Con2015, VVD2017) and contradictory case (CDA2017) remain.

Analysis of the absence of the outcome (no significant electoral losses)

While several positive cases remain unexplained by the crisp-set QCA, the analysis of the absence of the outcome (~losses to PRRPs) produces clearer results. The absence of scandal emerges as a necessary condition for avoiding significant vote losses to PRRPs (consistency = 1; coverage = 0.76). In other words, for a mainstream party to avoid significant electoral losses to PRRP, it is necessary that it is not involved in a political scandal; although this condition may not be sufficient (it may require additional conditions to produce the outcome). The absence of a shift to the right on immigration/multiculturalism and the government status also show medium-high consistency values in the necessity relationship (0.75), but not high enough to be considered necessary conditions.

The truth table for the absence of the outcome (Table 4) contains 16 logically possible configurations, of which 5 lack empirical instances. Only the configurations with empirical evidence are displayed.

Table 4. Truth table (absence of the outcome: ~significant electoral losses to PRRPs).

Shift to the right	Center-right	Government	Scandal	~Significant losses to PRRPs	Consistency	Cases
0	1	0	0	1	1	CD&V + NVA2007; D66-2017
1	0	1	0	1	1	SAP2018; S2015
0	1	1	0	1	0.91	CON2015*; Venstre2005; CVP2015; VVD2006; LibDem2015; H2017; CDA2006; VLD2019; VLD2007, CD&V2019; DKF2005
0	0	1	0	1	0.83	PS2017*; SDP2025; PS/SPA2007; SP2015; PD2018; PD2018; PvDA2017
0	0	0	0	1	0.67	Labour2015*; PvDA2006; S2005
1	1	1	0	1	0.67	VVD2017*; FDP(ch)2015; ÖVP2017
1	0	0	0	0	0.5	PS/SPA2019; AP2017
1	1	0	0	0	0.25	Forza2018; CDU/CSU2025; M2018; CDA2017
1	1	0	1	0	0	LR2017; Venstre2015
1	0	1	1	0	0	SPÖ2017
1	1	1	1	0	0	FDP2025

*Contradictory cases.

The complex solution results in the paths ($\sim$ Shift* $\sim$ Scandal*) OR (Government* $\sim$ Scandal) explaining the absence of significant electoral losses. In other words, MPs that do not shift to the right on immigration/multiculturalism and are not involved in a scandal, or MPs in government that are not involved in a scandal, do not lose significantly to PRRPs. This solution covers 92% of the negative cases (absence of the outcome) and has a consistency value of 0.85.

The parsimonious solution yields the paths ($\sim$ Shift) OR (Government* $\sim$ Scandal) $\rightarrow$ $\sim$ Significant electoral losses. That is, either the absence of a rightward shift on immigration/multiculturalism or the absence of scandals while in office leads to the absence of significant electoral losses to the radical right (consistency value = 0.85; coverage value = 0.92). Four contradictory cases are included in this configuration: Labour2015, Cons2015, PS2017, and VVD2017 (they will be discussed later).

The findings from the analysis of the absence of the outcome indicate that the absence of a rightward shift ($\sim$ Shift) emerges as a sufficient condition for avoiding significant electoral losses to PRRPs in the parsimonious solution. In contexts highly favorable to the radical right (high salience of immigration/terrorism), MPs therefore mitigate or slow vote losses by refraining from shifting to the right on immigration. Additionally, parties in government that did not experience any political scandals avoided significant losses to the radical right.

In general, the QCA can better explain the cases in which MPs manage to reduce losses to PRRPs in electoral contexts favorable to the radical right. This is achieved without adopting a strategy of accommodation or avoiding political scandals in government.

Explaining contradictions and uncovered cases

Several cases are not covered by the QCA solution for the presence of the outcome, and one case (CDA 2017) appears contradictory. Detailed case analyses are provided in the Appendix; here we briefly summarise the key explanations for the most important cases.

CDA 2017. CDA 2017 constitutes the only contradictory case in the analysis for the presence of the outcome. Although it shifted right in opposition, it did not experience substantial losses to the PVV. This can be explained by its already weak electoral base following the disastrous 2012 election (8.5%), which left limited room for further defections, as well as by its strategically advantageous positioning on health care, the dominant issue in the 2017 campaign.

Conservatives 2015, labour 2015, and PS 2017. These cases are not covered by the QCA solutions for the presence of the outcome and experienced significant vote losses to PRRP without having clearly shifted to the right on immigration.

The British Conservatives in 2015 did not shift right on immigration in our coding but lost significantly to UKIP. Closer inspection shows that they accommodated UKIP on EU scepticism, UKIP's other core issue. The highly salient Brexit debate and the referendum pledge created a distinct electoral context. This means that accommodation occurred – just on another issue. Additionally, the party lost credibility on the migration issue by making bold promises on immigration without delivering results while in office.

The Labour 2015 case is best explained by severe internal divisions and strategic inconsistency on immigration, which undermined credibility and public unity. This suggests that internal disunity may constitute an additional source of vulnerability.

The French PS in 2017 collapsed without having clearly shifted right on immigration. Its losses are better explained by prolonged internal conflict – similar to the Labour case – leadership unpopularity, and fragmentation across the left. This was combined with competition from the Front National, which attempted to present itself as more 'moderate' than in the past.

Discussion and conclusion

The theoretical debate surrounding MPs' responses to the rise of PRRPs has focused on whether adopting more restrictive positions on immigration can help MPs retain voters. Spatial approaches, such as those proposed by Meguid (2005), suggest that MPs can effectively 'steal' PRRPs' issue ownership by accommodating and reduce voter defection. Recent empirical evidence rather challenges this assumption but is inconclusive (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; Thesen 2025).

We build on existing debates by examining electoral campaigns in Western Europe where migration was highly salient among the public, creating conditions under which accommodation strategies should be more likely to work (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; Thesen 2025). Using a crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis, we analysed whether MPs' accommodation strategies increase or limit vote-losses to PRRP in high-salience scenarios.

The findings show that avoiding a rightward shift is a *sufficient* condition for MPs to avoid significant losses to PRRPs. This challenges the assumption that restrictive positions are the safer strategy when migration dominates public debate (Thesen 2025). The csQCA did, however, not show a rightward shift on migration as a *necessary* condition for significant losses. Among the centre-right parties this is due to the contradictory case of the British Conservatives. In 2015 they lost heavily to UKIP without stressing anti-immigration rhetoric, but they had in fact accommodated on another UKIP core issue: EU scepticism

and the demand for a Brexit referendum. If the Conservatives' Brexit stance were treated as a rightward shift, the results would demonstrate that accommodation is a necessary condition for significant losses. Overall, our study suggests that MPs do better when refraining from accommodating PRRPs, especially when in opposition.

Our findings align with those of Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi (2023), who suggest that accommodative rightward shifts do not reduce vote losses to PRRPs, even in contexts of high issue salience. They also suggest that, contrary to expectations, shifting to the right in *opposition* seems to explain significant vote losses among centre-right parties.²⁰ The ineffectiveness of the accommodation strategy even under the most favorable conditions of high public salience diverge from Thesen (2025), who found that, once immigration salience were accounted for, accommodation could undermine the success of the radical right. While we have no definitive explanation for this discrepancy, one possible reason for it might lie in the different ways in which salience is conceptualised. While Thesen (2025) operationalises salience indirectly through immigration coverage in political news, our study relies on survey-based measures that capture public salience more directly by looking at the people's most mentioned problems.

Although the number of scandal cases in our sample is limited, the results indicate that such reputational crises represent a distinct mechanism of electoral vulnerability. In particular, MPs in *government* that are not involved in a scandal usually do not experience significant vote losses. This does of course not imply that opposition parties are immune to scandal-related losses (both opposition parties involved in scandals lost significantly to PRRP).

The fact that several cases remain unexplained – especially with regard to the solutions for the presence of the outcome – indicates that our general explanations do not capture all potential reasons for MPs' vote losses to PRRPs. This is evident in the case of the British Conservatives, who, upon closer scrutiny, hardly represent a contradiction, and in the cases of Labour and the Socialist Party in France, both of which avoided accommodation but still lost significantly. The two latter cases can be explained by internal party crises and divisions that damaged their public image. Such intra-party conflicts may therefore be worth considering in future studies, alongside formal scandals. CDA 2017, a contradictory case in the QCA, can be explained by its exceptionally weak performance in the previous election, when it had already fallen back to its shrinking core electorate and thus had little room left for further losses to the PVV besides strategic positioning on healthcare.

Our study has several limitations. First, we examine only net migration between parties and do not consider mobilisation among previous abstainers. Research shows that PRRPs are particularly successful in activating former abstainers (Schulte-Cloos and Leininger 2022). Whether MPs' strategies affect these mobilisation patterns is an important avenue for future research. Second, our study does not explore the potential long-term consequences of right-wing shifts and patterns might differ the longer a party adopted these positions. What speaks against a reverse effect, however, are more recent findings about normalisation processes that are reinforced by MPs' adopting radical right parties' rhetoric (Valentim, Dinas, and Ziblatt 2025). Third, we cannot entirely rule out the issue of endogeneity. Although we have selected EB data on public salience closely to the election, public opinion and party discourse likely reinforce each other. However, we treat salience as a contextual factor: even if MPs contributed to the public salience of immigration, they would still operate under this condition with a more

restrictive agenda. Another limitation concerns external validity: as is common in QCA research, the theoretically guided case selection – focused on ‘salient’ elections with more established PRRPs – limits the generalisability of the findings to comparable empirical contexts (Thomann and Maggetti 2020). Lastly, although we provide explanations for uncovered and contradictory cases, there may be further case-specific explanations that we have not considered in our QCA. QCA discourages the introduction of conditions tailored to individual cases, as this would increase the number of configurations lacking empirical evidence (Thomann and Maggetti 2020).

To recapitulate, although several condition may contribute to substantial vote losses to PRRPs when immigration dominates public opinion – such as accommodation in government, scandals, internal party disputes, and positioning on other salient issues – we find that shifting to the right is not a good idea for MPs. The fact that almost all MPs lost votes to PRRPs in these campaigns further suggests that MPs generally suffer when immigration dominates the agenda.

Notes

1. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.
2. The Eurobarometer salience item captures perceived problem salience rather than neutral issue attention (see Appendix for clarification).
3. We used data from the EB trend lines (<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/about/other>); ('Main issues at (OUR COUNTRY) level'). For Germany 2025 we used data from the report found here: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215>. For the Spring 2002 wave we used the raw data from the EB 57.2 wave (https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA3640?doi=10.4232/1.10950).
4. For the two critical cases (France 2017; Netherlands 2006), we verify in the Appendix that ‘terrorism’ indeed refers to Islamist terrorism.
5. The only exception is UK 2015. UKIP failed to gain parliamentary representation in previous elections, but this was largely due to the first-past-the-post electoral system. Since 2004, UKIP has consistently received over 15% of the vote in European elections, becoming the largest party in 2014 with over 26%. In 2015, UKIP was a well-known and successful radical right party that failed to enter parliament mostly due to the electoral system.
6. We include all MPs that received at least 10% of the vote in the election in question or the previous one.
7. Although the Dutch ‘List Pim Fortuyn’ is not mentioned as far-right in the list we included is due to large agreement among scholars due to ParlGov’s classification (de Lange and Art 2011; de Jonge and Voerman 2025; Döring and Manow 2024; Koopmans and Muis 2009).
8. While terrorism is included in the public salience measure, we focus on shifts on immigration/multiculturalism. We consider terrorism as part of the broader immigration-Islam-multiculturalism issue rather than as a separate policy dimension.
9. As of September 2025, MARPOR does not provide data on any elections after 2020 that meet our criteria, except for Germany 2025. This is why we had to exclude certain elections, despite them meeting our salience criteria: Belgium in 2024, Switzerland in 2023, and the Netherlands in 2023.
10. Any counter-evidence from media reporting and analysis must be compelling enough to refute the MARPOR assessment. The stronger the MARPOR evidence, the stronger the counter-evidence must be to overrule it. Except for the case of the Danish Social Democrats in 2005 (due to manifestos being an unreliable source), a clear MARPOR assessment has never been corrected by other sources (see Appendix).
11. There are no in-between cases of MPs supporting a minority government.

12. The EJPR Political Yearbooks follow a standardised structure across countries and years, including sections on parliament, political parties, national issues, and – during election years – dedicated election reports. Major political scandals are systematically documented in these reports. The Yearbooks have been used in previous research to identify scandals (Bågenholm 2013).
13. Known under ‘Penelopegate’. Revelations that Fillon’s wife and children were paid for fictitious parliamentary jobs.
14. Party leader Lars Løkke Rasmussen faced a personal scandal using party and public funds for personal expenditure.
15. The so-called ‘Silberstein affair’.
16. An entire strategy of the FDP was leaked to bring down the federal government (of which the FDP was a part). (Frezel 2024; Spiegel 2024)
17. Center-right: Conservative, Christian Democratic and Liberal parties. Non-center-right parties: Social Democratic parties.
18. This solution relies only on empirically observed configurations, thus providing the most conservative and descriptive result.
19. This solution includes the logical remainders that contribute to simplifying the solution, offering, as its name suggests, the most parsimonious solution.
20. Another issue related to the effect of incumbency that is not addressed in the paper is the potential impact of PRRPs’ participation in government. In our paper, only the SVP in Switzerland (along with all the other relevant parties due to the specific Swiss political system) and the FrP in Norway were in government, but these cases did not produce different findings.

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