

# Party Communication and Public Opinion on Asylum in Sweden

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the influence of party communication on Swedish voters' opinion on asylum, in a time when Swedish parties increasingly communicate on the migration issue, and heavily shift their positions. Combining data on voters drawn from the 2014–2018 panel of the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) with a large corpus of party press releases collected to measure party communication, this paper analyzes how Swedish voters' positions on asylum have changed between the last and the current election. We find a partisan cueing effect, whereby voters take cues from their preferred party. The study of partisan cueing effects and parties' role in the polarization of public opinion has important implications for the study of mass-elite linkages, as well as for future party strategies towards the migration issue.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

All across Europe, the migration issue<sup>2</sup> has become a crucial part of the political debate. While Sweden was the “odd case out” until very recently, with its mainstream political parties rather hesitant to engage in the migration debate (Odmalm 2011), the two recent election campaigns show that Sweden is not that much of an exception any longer. Not only has migration moved up on the agendas of several parties. Some political parties also shifted their attitudes. Most notably, the governing Social Democratic party (Socialdemokraterna) and

1 Acknowledgements: I am thankful to Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson, Jesper Strömbäck, Nora Theorin, James Adams, as well as the other contributors of this special issue and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.

2 The broad term “migration” is used to designate all issues pertaining to asylum, immigration and integration. Debates in these sub-issues are strongly linked.

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the Green party (Miljöpartiet) went from a relatively liberal position on asylum policy toward advocating more restrictions (Strömbäck & Theorin 2018).

The overall importance of the issue has risen among voters as well (Oscarsson & Bergström 2015). On average, attitudes toward migration remain quite positive in the Swedish population during the last years (Strömbäck & Theorin 2018). However, several studies notice an increasing polarization according to party lines (Bergström et al. 2015; Bové & Oscarsson 2017; Demker 2015).

The question thus arises whether the shifting communication behavior of Swedish parties affects voters' attitudes toward migrants, and refugees more specifically.

Previous studies have shown, on the one hand, that partisan messages prompt voters to update their opinions (Carsey & Layman 2006; Feddersen & Adams 2018; Steenbergen et al. 2007; Zaller 1994). On the other hand, voters have been shown to shift their positions to be contrary to the stated positions of parties they dislike (Bischof & Wagner 2019; Feddersen & Adams 2018; Goren et al. 2009; Nicholson 2012; Zakharova & Warwick 2014).

Drawing on the 2014–2018 panel of the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) and a large corpus of party press releases collected between 2014 and 2018 to measure party communication, this paper analyzes the influence of party policy cues on Swedish voters' attitudes toward refugees. Below, the choice of issue area will be explained, and the recent migration debates in contemporary Swedish politics will be revisited. First, however, testable hypotheses about public responses to party press releases are developed in the next section.

## Partisan Cueing and Backlash Effects: Hypotheses

Parties try to persuade voters. This basic expectation derives from parties' ambition to win elections, hold office and/or implement their policies (Ström 1990). However, scholars of mass-elite linkages have given very different accounts of how successful parties – or, more generally, elites – are at influencing citizens' policy positions. While the research on citizens' *policy priorities* finds encouraging results regarding parties' ability to influence public opinion, results are more mixed regarding the effects of party communication on citizens' *policy positions*.

The study by Neundorf and Adams (2018) looks at voters' policy priorities in Germany and the UK. The authors show that voters' issue priorities are influenced by their party attachment, and can be reinforced if parties emphasize these issues in their communication. In an experimental design, Hayes (2008) finds only weak evidence that candidates' messages on specific issues influence voter priorities. However, when the media coverage reflects a candidate's

campaign agenda, the agenda-setting effect can be considerable. Similarly, political communication scholars are almost unanimous about the agenda-setting effect of political news content on public opinion (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Iyengar & Simon 1993; McCombs 2004; Soroka 2002; Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006).

In contrast, studies on parties' influence on citizens' policy positions find rather inconsistent evidence that citizens respond to parties. While scholars document that political parties adjust their positions on the left-right axis in response to public opinion (see e.g., Adams et al. 2004; Ezrow et al. 2011), studies focusing on parties' statements on the left-right axis only find weak effects of parties' influence on public opinion (for a review of this literature see Adams 2012). Most of these cross-national studies of public reactions to parties' policy statements rely on the codings of parties' overall left-right tone in their election manifestos, provided by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2017). According to these studies, citizens do not seem to update their perceptions of parties' positions, nor their own left-right position in response to parties' stated positions in their election manifestos. These results call into question whether parties can efficiently communicate their message to the public. Furthermore, they stand in contrast to the results of the research on public opinion, which shows the role of partisan messages in creating ideological opinion (Zaller 1992). Zaller (1994: 186) finds that, when political elites are divided, politically attentive citizens align their opinion "[. . .] with that segment of the elite which shares their party or ideology". This has led scholars of political parties to expand their analyses to consider other sources of party communication and to focus on more specific issue areas. Carsey & Layman (2006) study public responses to parties' positions on specific issues measured via voter perceptions in the U.S. They find that citizens only change their issue-related party preference if they are aware of party differences on an issue and consider that issue to be salient. Steenbergen et al. (2007) conduct an analysis on the very salient issue of European integration. In their study of the 2005 French and Dutch referendum campaigns on European integration, the authors find that parties both respond to and influence their supporters' views on this issue<sup>3</sup>. Their measure of party positions relies on the expert judgments provided by the Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al. 2015). Similarly, Feddersen and Adams (2018) find that Swiss citizens' opinions on the migration issue are influenced by parties' positions as expressed in their press releases. The authors show that citizens take cues from their preferred party.

These latter studies thus document consistent policy cueing effects whereby citizens who prefer a certain party tend to take policy cues from this party,

3 Even though this paper focuses on parties' influence on voters' perceptions, it is likely that there is in fact a reciprocal effect between parties and citizens.

updating their own issue positions to bring them in line with their party's preferred position. This research motivates the following hypothesis on partisan cueing effects:

*H1 (Partisan cueing hypothesis) Voters shift their issue position to be in line with their preferred party's position.*

While voters are expected to shift their position in the same direction as their preferred party's position, it is unclear how they react to parties they dislike. Studies on negative partisanship in the Anglo-American democracies show that voters have negative feelings toward parties other than their own (e.g., Medeiros & Noël 2014; Abramowitz 2015; Caruana et al. 2015; Abramowitz & Webster 2016). In the U.S. context, this means that Democratic (Republican) voters distrust the Republican (Democratic) party and perceive its voters as very different from themselves (Mason 2015). Furthermore, the findings by Zakharova and Warwick (2014) indicate that voters differentiate parties other than their own according to their ideology. They show that voters in Western democracies evaluate parties on the opposite side of the left-right axis more negatively than parties on the same side of the left-right axis. These negative evaluations of rival parties have been shown to prompt voters to update their positions to be contrary to the ones stated by parties they dislike. Bischof and Wagner (2019) show that voters, who are situated on the left of the left-right axis, move further to the left when radical right parties enter parliament. Experiments by Goren et al. (2009) and Nicholson (2012) in the U.S. context find that Democratic supporters adjust their position to be contrary to policy statements labeled as Republican (and vice versa). According to Nicholson (2012), this effect might influence voters more strongly than the messages of their preferred party. In their study on Swiss citizens' opinion on the migration issue, Feddersen and Adams (2018) not only find partisan cueing effects, but also partisan backlash effects, whereby respondents adjust their issue positions to move away from parties they do not support. They find that backlash effects are especially strong with respect to out-parties whose ideologies clash with that of the preferred party, i.e., that partisans of left-wing parties will be especially hostile to the policies defended by right-wing parties, and vice versa. Citizens thus seem to reject messages that are inconsistent with their predispositions, a finding that resonates well with the research on public opinion formation by Zaller (1992). These findings motivate the following hypothesis on partisan backlash effects:

*H2 (Partisan backlash hypothesis) Voters shift their issue position to be contrary to the positions of parties they dislike.*

Before presenting the data, the following section revisits the recent developments of the migration debate in Sweden.

## The Migration Debate in Sweden

Studying Swedish parties' communication on the migration issue and its influence on public opinion is an interesting case in European comparison. For a very long time, Sweden was the "odd case out" in terms of parties engaging on the migration issue (Odmalm 2011). Dahlström and Esaiasson (2013) notice an absence of anti-migration party success during the period of their analysis (1970 to 2006). Partly because of a lack of consensus and partly because anti-migration parties did not represent a credible electoral threat, the mainstream political parties were rather hesitant to engage in the migration issue, adopting a dismissive strategy toward this issue and radical right competitors (Dahlström & Esaiasson 2013; Odmalm 2011; Widfeldt 2015). Despite high party system fragmentation, the Swedish mainstream was, until very recently, divided into two blocs. On the one hand, the center-left bloc, which has been in government since 2014, is composed by the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna, S; 28.3% of the votes in 2018) and the Green Party (Miljöpartiet, MP; 4.4% of the votes), which is the junior coalition partner of the current government. On the other hand, the center-right "alliance" was composed by the Moderates (Moderaterna, M; 19.8% of the votes), the Liberals (Liberalerna, L; 5.5% of the votes)<sup>4</sup>, the Center (Centerpartiet, C; 8.6% of the votes) and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna, KD; 6.3% of the votes). Outside of these two blocs, we find the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet, V; 8.0% of the votes) on the left, and the anti-migration Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD; 17.5% of the votes) on the right of the political left-right axis. Mainstream parties are divided on the migration issue, both internally and among them (Odmalm 2011; Widfeldt 2015), while the Sweden Democrats hold a clear anti-migration position, which differs from all other parties (Widfeldt 2015). Party polarization increases since the early 2000s, especially in the field of asylum policy (Demker 2015). The two recent election campaigns show that Sweden is not that much of an exception any longer. Not only has migration moved up on the agendas of several parties. Some political parties also dramatically shifted their attitudes. Most notably, the governing Social democratic party and the Green party have moved from a relatively liberal position in asylum policy toward advocating more restrictions (Strömbäck & Theorin 2018). Other scholars also report a growing salience of this issue in the media, as well as an increasingly negative tone toward migration (Strömbäck et al. 2017; Bolin et al. 2016).

The overall importance of the issue has risen among voters as well (Oscarsson & Bergström 2015). On average, attitudes toward migration remain quite positive in the Swedish population during the last years (Demker 2015; Strömbäck & Theorin 2018). However, several studies notice an increasing polarization according to party lines (Bergström et al. 2015; Bové & Oscarsson

4 Formerly known as People's Party (Folkpartiet, FP) until November 25, 2015.

2017; Demker 2015). Demker (2015) reports that Swedish voters' opinions on migration is mostly driven by their party sympathy, their level of education, as well as age and sex.

In sum, in the course of a very restricted time period, Sweden has moved from a rather exceptional case in European comparison to a more "normal" one, where parties increasingly address the migration issue and have (for some) drastically changed their position on this issue. In this context, where parties decided to shift their previous strategies, it thus seems crucial to learn about parties' ability to influence public opinion, and to understand the consequences of this change of strategy toward the migration issue.

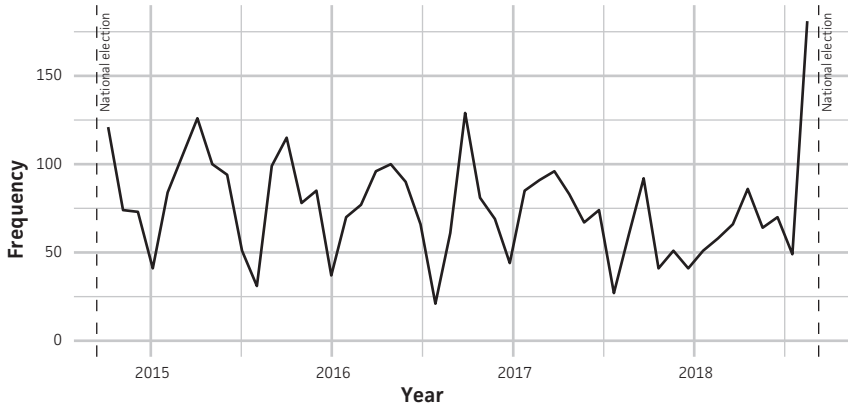
The next section shows how the previously formulated expectations are empirically measured in the Swedish context.

## Data and Methods

This study draws upon two datasets. In order to measure party communication, a novel dataset is created based on political parties' press releases published between 2014 and 2018. The data on public opinion comes from the 2014–2018 panel of the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES). As the next section will empirically show, most Swedish parties shifted the emphasis of the migration issue in their communication and quite dramatically changed their position on this issue in between these two elections.

### MEASURING PARTIES' EMPHASIS AND POSITION

Political parties' emphasis of the migration issue, as well as the position they adopt on this issue, is measured via content analysis of their press releases. The coding of press releases provides a rhetoric-based estimate of parties' emphasis and positions, which presents many advantages over other data sources. Firstly, studying parties' emphases and positions via their press releases allows for a *continuous* measure of party communication. Unlike other widely used sources such as party manifestos, which are published only at the time of elections, measuring parties' communication via their press releases allows for a better understanding of parties' strategies in between elections as well. Secondly, press releases come directly from the party and reflect its official priorities and positions. It does not contain an additional filter added by a third party, as would be the case for data derived from newspaper articles or other media sources. Finally, since press releases convey parties' official messages, parties and candidates have been shown to make their press releases easily available to the general public (Grimmer 2013).

Figure 1. Press Releases by Major Swedish Parties 2014–2018, *N*

In Sweden, parties publish their press releases either on their own website or via press agencies like *news cision* or *my newsdesk*. Table A1 in the Appendix lists the online availability and sources of parties' press releases in Sweden over the last 10 years. In order to match the party data to the voter data, as well as for reasons of availability, the corpus of press releases used in this study spans from election day 2014 (September 14, 2014) until election day 2018 (September 9, 2018). It contains a total of 3723 press releases published by the 8 major national parties in Sweden<sup>5</sup>. Press releases were gathered through web scraping using R's XML (Lang & the CRAN team 2017) and RCurl (Lang & the CRAN team 2016) packages. Figure 1 shows the monthly distribution of the total number of press releases published by Swedish parties. Without surprise, parties' communication peaks during election campaigns.

All special characters were standardized<sup>6</sup> in order to allow for a keyword search to identify press releases about migration. The dictionary for the keyword search contains words relevant to the migration issue<sup>7</sup>. Table A2 in the Appendix shows how many press releases of each party are in the corpus, and how many of them pertain to the migration issue.

The position toward the migration issue is coded manually by one single coder in all press releases identified as relevant to this issue<sup>8</sup>. A distinction is

5 This corpus can be considered to be exhaustive, since, as already mentioned, parties make their press releases easily available to the general public. Furthermore, when contacted and asked about the availability of the press releases, all parties refer to their websites or press agencies.

6 ä to ae; ö to oe; å to aa, é to ee

7 The complete list of Swedish keywords is the following: asyl\*, aalderstest\*, aatervandr\*, burka, ensamkommand\*, flykt\*, fraemlingsfientli\*, heders\*, hijab\*, IS, islam\*, imam\*, integr\*, invandr\*, migra\*, moskee\*, minaret\*, muslim\*, maangkultur\*, niqab\*, nyanlaend\*, nytillkom\*, rasis\*, SFI, segreg\*, terror\*, \*vaaldtaekt\*. Since the debates in all sub-issues of the wider migration issue are linked, they are all expected to influence voters' attitudes on asylum.

8 At the same time, the coder verified whether the press release was correctly identified as pertaining to the migration issue.

made between negative (restrictive), positive (liberal) and neutral statements. A value of -1 means a negative or restrictive position. Press releases calling for a more severe control over immigration or increased demands on migrants are coded as negative. For example, the Sweden Democrats (SD) published a press release on May 31st 2016, which reads:

**The Young Swedes SDU launch a campaign against multiculturalism**

The Young Swedes are concerned about our society's destructive development and have therefore initiated a campaign against multiculturalism. The main purpose is to wash away the positive connotation this word has in some circles. There is no doubt about the fact that our society has changed fundamentally and that the situation is worst in the multicultural suburbs, where many immigrants live. In these areas, which are becoming more and more, the vital foundations for the Swedish commonwealth have given way to criminal gangs and juvenile thugs [...]<sup>9</sup>.

Positive or liberal statements, such as press releases calling for fewer demands on migrants, more rights for migrants or solidarity with migrants, are coded 1. For example, the Green party (MP) released a press release on March 3 2016, reading:

**Press invitation: Sweden grows – how do we create a welcoming labor market for newcomers?**

The many new newcomers constitute a potential for the Swedish economy to grow. But how do we create a welcoming labor market? What opportunities and challenges do businesses see? [...]<sup>10</sup>.

A value of 0 designates a neutral position, which defends the status quo. Table A3 in the Appendix show each party's mean position and standard deviation on the migration issue. The high values for the standard deviation indicate the great volatility of most parties' positions on this issue during this period.

In order to validate the estimates of party rhetoric obtained on the basis of the press releases, we tested the coding reliability, as well as the external validity of the coding.

Since the coding was conducted by one single coder, an intra-coder reliability test is applied using a randomly selected sample of 192 press releases of the full corpus, which were coded a second time. The coding of the subsample was carried out at a 2-months time interval of the coding of the full corpus. Table A4 in the Appendix reports percentage agreement and Cohen's Kappa for both

9 "Ungsvenskarna SDU lanserar kampanj mot maangkultur. Ungsvenskarna tar den destruktiva samhallsutvecklingen paa allvar och har daerfoer inlett en kampanj mot maangkultur. Syftet aer att foersoeka tvaetta bort den positiva klang begreppet har i vissa kretsar. Att vaart samhaelle har foeraendrads i grunden raader det inga tvivel om och vaerst aer situationen i de invandrartaeta maangkulturella foerorterna. I dessa omraaden, som blir allt fler, har vitala fundament foer det svenska samhaellet gett vika till foerman foer kriminella gaeng och ungdomsligister."

10 "De maanga nyanlaenda utgoer en potential foer den svenska ekonomin att vaexa. Men hur skapar vi en vaelkomnande arbetsmarknad? Vilka moejligheter och utmaningar ser foeretagen?"



the issue of the press release (migration or not) and the position of the press release if it pertains to migration. Both measures indicate a satisfactory level of agreement between codings.

In addition, the external validity was tested by comparing the positions obtained for each party to the codings of the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Volkens et al. 2017). Tables A5 and A6 in the Appendix report the correlations between (1) the party emphases of the migration issue (table A5), as well as (2) the party positions (table A6) based on parties' press releases from 2014 and the CMP codings of the Swedish manifestos published before the 2014 national election<sup>11</sup>. The tables display the correlations with parties' coded emphases and positions on Immigration, as well as Multiculturalism and National Way of Life<sup>12</sup>. These correlations are all above 0.7<sup>13</sup>, which means that the codings of parties' emphases and positions on the migration issue based on their press releases corresponds to the emphases and positions expressed in their manifestos. As a consequence, we are confident that our estimates of party emphasis and position based on the press releases are accurate.

The final dataset contains 3723 press releases, 556 of which pertaining to the migration issue, published by the eight main Swedish parties between September 2014 and September 2018.

## MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

The data on public opinion comes from a subsample of the 2014–2018 panel of the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES)<sup>14</sup>. The subsample contains 1124 citizens with valid demographic information (age and gender), which were interviewed both in the 2014 and the 2018 Swedish post-electoral studies. The dependent variable measures citizens' positions on asylum and is based on a question on citizens' attitudes toward refugees<sup>15</sup> on a 5-point-scale rang-

11 The data based on the 2014 election manifestos is the latest available CMP data.

12 The CMP Immigration categories are per602\_2 (positive) and per601\_2 (negative), the Multiculturalism categories are per607 (positive) and per608 (negative), and the National Way of Life categories are per601 (positive) and per602 (negative). Party emphasis measures based on the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) codings were calculated by adding the negative item(s) and the positive item(s). Party position measures were calculated by subtracting the negative item(s) from the positive item(s) (except for the National Way of Life categories, where the negative category was subtracted from the positive category, and dividing the result by the total of both categories. For the same procedure see Abou-Chadi (2014).

13 The only exception is the correlation between the measure of parties' emphases of the migration issue based on their press releases and the measure of parties' emphases of Immigration in their manifesto. This is not very surprising, since immigration only represents a subcategory or the migration issue as defined in this paper.

14 At the time of the publication of this Special Issue, only a subsample of the panel was available, limiting the choice of indicators and control variables. For more detail see <https://valforskning.pol.gu.se>.

15 The exact question reads: Here are a number of suggestions that apply to Sweden's relationship with other countries. What is your opinion of each of them? .... receive fewer refugees in Sweden ("Här är ett antal förslag som gäller Sveriges förhållande till andra länder. Vilken är Din åsikt för vart och ett av dem? . . . B. ta emot färre flyktingar i Sverige").

ing from “very good suggestion” to “very bad suggestion”<sup>16</sup>. 543 respondents have valid answers to this question both in 2014 and 2018, 36.1% of which kept the same position between 2014 and 2018. 51.6% of respondents shifted toward a more restrictive attitude toward refugees between the two national elections, while 12.3% defend a more positive position in 2018 than what they did in 2014.

Respondents’ party preference is measured via their party choice in the 2014 national election. Adding respondents’ answers regarding their interest in politics in 2014 as a control variable, this leaves 488 citizens who responded to all relevant questions.

### **ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF PARTIES’ COMMUNICATION ON PUBLIC OPINION**

Datasets are matched using the respondents’ party preference in 2014. Each respondent’s preferred party’s mean position is calculated based on the party’s press releases published between the 2014 and the 2018 national elections. Additionally, two variables measure rival parties’ mean positions. Each respondent is assigned a variable, which indicates the mean position of parties in the same bloc (center-left or center-right) as the respondent’s preferred party, as well as another one calculating the mean position of parties in the opposite bloc. For voters of the Left party, the variable indicating the mean position of parties on the same bloc measures center-left parties’ mean position, while the variable specifying the mean position of parties on the opposite bloc measures the mean position of parties in the center-right “alliance”. For voters of the right-leaning Sweden Democrats, these variables are reversed. As will be shown in a robustness check presented below, excluding these voters from the analysis does not alter the results.

The resulting data structure and the nature of the dependent variable call for a linear mixed effects model, where respondents are nested in their preferred parties. The full model evaluates the effects of a respondent’s lagged position (in 2014), his or her preferred party’s position between 2014 and 2018, the mean position of parties in the same party bloc than his or her preferred party, the mean position of parties in the opposite party bloc than his or her preferred party, as well as his or her interest for politics, age, and gender on his or her current position toward refugees (in 2018).

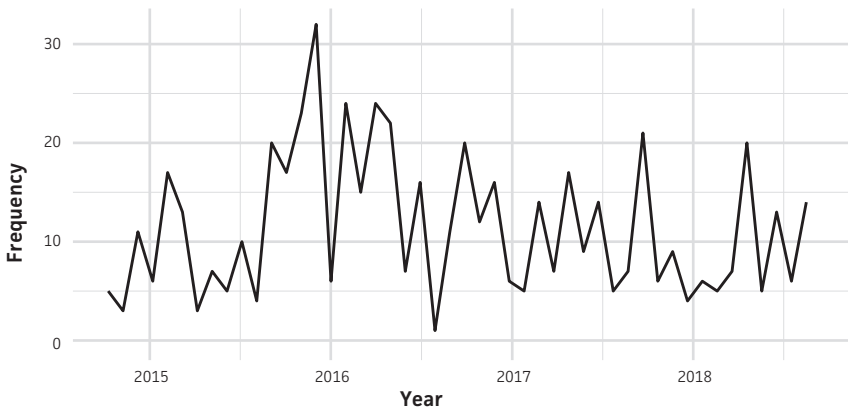
The next section shows the results of these calculations after offering some dynamic descriptions of the evolution of Swedish parties’ emphases of the migration issue and positions on the migration issue between 2014 and 2018.

16 (“mycket bra förslag” – “mycket dåligt förslag”)

## Results

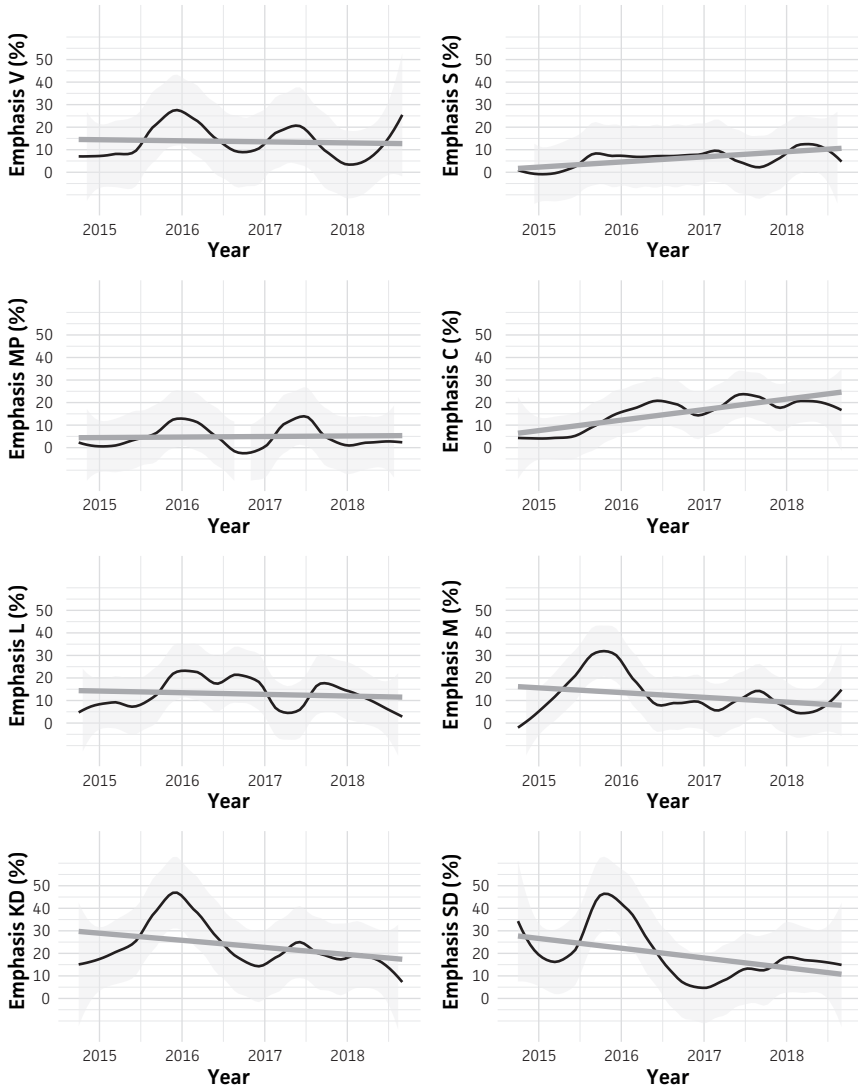
The result section is divided into two main parts. First, the results regarding parties' communication on the migration issue are presented. The findings are in line with previous studies, showing an increase in the overall attention parties devote to the migration issue, as well as a position change for several parties over the studied period of time. The second section looks at the effects of party messages on voters' position shifts toward refugees.

Figure 2. Press Releases About the Migration Issue by Major Swedish parties 2014–2018, *N*



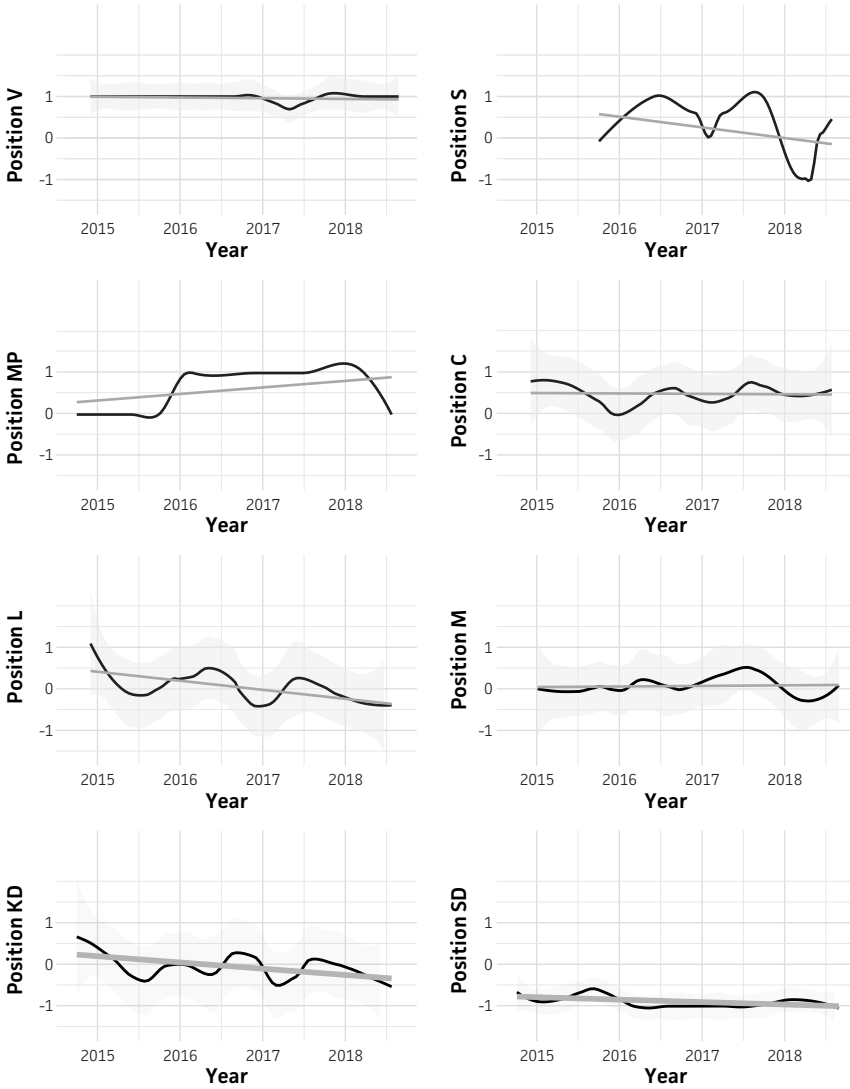
Swedish parties' attention to the migration issue since 2014 has been punctuated by different events. Figure 2 shows the evolution of the number of press releases Swedish parties publish monthly about the migration issue. The event, which mostly sticks out, is the aftermath of the 2014 national election campaign, during which migration was salient (mostly for right-of-center parties). The second most important event was the center-left government's historic decision to heavily reduce the number of refugees admitted into the country during the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. During an emotional press conference on November 24, 2015, the Social democratic and Green parties announced their radical policy shift.

Figure 3. Swedish Parties' Emphasis of the Migration Issue 2014–2018, % (share of total press releases per month)



In order to understand how much importance parties attribute to the migration issue, we need to know how much parties emphasize the migration issue *in relation* to their overall communication. Turning to the results in figure 3, which displays a party's emphasis of the migration issue as the share of the total amount of press releases a party publishes monthly, we first notice that far from all parties have increased their emphasis of the migration issue between 2014 and 2018 (The solid grey lines show the general average trends). This result is not completely in line with the studies cited above, which find that the migration issue has moved up on the agendas of several parties. However, most of these studies look at the evolution of parties' emphasis of the migration issue starting before the time period analyzed here, which could explain differing results. Indeed, most parties' emphases of the migration issue peak in late 2015, and diminishes toward the end of the period, which means that parties might indeed talk about more about migration between 2014 and 2018 than before 2014, but might experience a "downwards" trend during this period (i.e. after late 2015). Although punctuated by several political events, the governing Social Democrats (S) increasingly talk about migration. However, this issue still represents a rather small proportion of their communication via press releases. On the center-right, the Center party (C) increasingly emphasizes the migration issue. The Moderates (M) and the Christian Democrats (KD) register notable increases at the beginning of the studied period. The Christian Democrats even match up to the emphasis of the anti-migration Sweden Democrats (SD) during this period, before decreasing their emphasis of the issue toward the end. Interestingly, the Sweden Democrats do not contribute to this trend. On the contrary, their relative emphasis of the migration issue has slightly decreased since 2016.

Figure 4. Swedish Parties Position on Migration Issue 2014–2018 (mean of press releases per month)



Turning to the Swedish parties' positions on the migration issue (Figure 4), it can be noticed that the two pole parties, the Sweden Democrats and the Left party, hold quite constant and opposite positions from 2014 to 2018. Mainstream parties' positions, on the other hand, fluctuate during the entire period under study. Most impressively, the governing Social Democrats (S) take an important turn toward a more restrictive position, the first time at the end of 2015, when they announce their asylum policy shift, and a second time in 2018, for a second policy shift. While all center-right parties defend liberal migration policies at the beginning of the period under study, a trend toward more restrictive positions can be detected on this side of the left-right divide as well. The Liberal party (L) and the Christian Democrats (KD) defend increasingly negative positions. For the Christian Democrats, this trend was probably set in motion after the leadership change from Göran Hägglund to Ebba Busch Thor on April 25, 2015, with the subsequent decision to leave the "Decemberöverenskommelse", an agreement of all center-right parties not to collaborate with the Sweden Democrats. For all parties on the center-right, the tone becomes increasingly negative until the government's policy shift on November 24, 2015. After this date, the Center party (C) slowly goes back toward a more positive attitude. The Moderates' (M) position fluctuates around a rather neutral position. The observed trends partly confirm the results from previous studies, which report that several Swedish parties shifted their position on the migration issue during recent years (e.g., Strömbäck & Theorin 2018). These shifts might not leave voters unaffected.

### **PARTISAN CUEING AND POLARIZATION EFFECTS**

Table 1 shows the results of the mixed effects models assessing voters' position shifts toward refugees. As could be expected, a voters' lagged position influences his or her current position positively and significantly (Model 1). This effect does not disappear when adding the preferred party's stated position (M2). The coefficient shows that there is a significant positive effect of parties' positions stated in their press releases on their partisans' position shifts toward refugees. This effect stays positive and significant when adding rival parties' stated positions to the model (M3).

Table 1. Explaining Swedish Voters' Positions Towards Refugees 2014–2018 (mixed effects model)

|  | Model 1           | Model 2           | Model 3           |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Position (t-1)</b>                                | 0.58***<br>(0.04) | 0.56***<br>(0.04) | 0.56***<br>(0.04) |
| <b>Preferred party's position</b>                    |                   | 0.50***<br>(0.14) | 0.46**<br>(0.17)  |
| <b>Mean position of parties in the same bloc</b>     |                   |                   | 0.36<br>(0.41)    |
| <b>Mean position of parties in the opposite bloc</b> |                   |                   | -1.09<br>(1.24)   |
| <b>Gender</b>  | 0.23**<br>(0.08)  | 0.22**<br>(0.08)  | 0.22**<br>(0.08)  |
| <b>Age</b>   | 0.00<br>(0.00)    | 0.00<br>(0.00)    | 0.00<br>(0.00)    |
| <b>Level of interest for politics</b>                | 0.03<br>(0.06)    | 0.04<br>(0.06)    | 0.03<br>(0.06)    |
| <b>Intercept</b>                                     | 0.55<br>(0.29)    | 0.49<br>(0.28)    | 0.64<br>(0.39)    |
| <b>AIC</b>   | 1345.98           | 1341.57           | 1341.44           |
| <b>Log Likelihood</b>                                | -665.99           | -662.79           | -660.72           |
| <b>N individuals</b>                                 | 488               | 488               | 488               |
| <b>N parties</b>                                     | 8                 | 8                 | 8                 |
| <b>Variance individuals</b>                          | 1.00              | 1.00              | 1.00              |
| <b>Variance parties</b>                              | 0.07              | 0.02              | 0.02              |

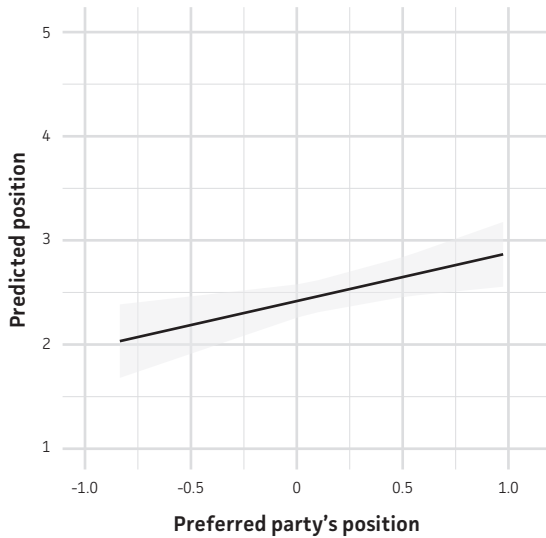
\*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05

Figure 5 displays the predicted effect of the preferred party's stated position on Swedish voters' positions toward refugees in 2018<sup>17</sup>. Although this effect is significant, it has a rather limited magnitude. If a party moves its average position on migration from -0.27 (one standard deviation below the mean) to 0.58 (one standard deviation above the mean), a partisan's predicted position toward refugees increases by only a half a point on the response scale (from 2.2 to 2.7). Nevertheless, it seems as though voters take cues from their preferred party when forming their opinions on the migration issue, thus confirming the first hypothesis.

17 Predicted probabilities are calculated based on the full model holding all variables at their means, and gender at its mode (male).



Figure 5. Effect of Preferred Party's Position on Swedish Voters' Position Towards Refugees 2014–2018 (95% CI)



Regarding the expectations on the influence of rival parties' mean position on voters' positions on the migration issue, the results in table 1 point in the right direction, even though they are not significant at the 0.05-level. Voters seem prompted to update their positions to be contrary to those positions stated by rival parties of the opposite party bloc, while shifting in the same direction as parties, who belong to the same party bloc as their preferred party. These results, which are found looking at this subsample of 488 Swedish citizens, however, cannot be extrapolated to the entire Swedish population due to insufficient significance levels. The second hypothesis on the partisan backlash effect thus cannot be accepted.

### ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

In order to assess the robustness of these results, two robustness checks are conducted. Firstly, model 3 is calculated excluding voters of the anti-immigration party Sweden Democrats (SD), since this party as well as its voters might follow a different pattern of behavior in this particular question than other parties and partisans. The results, which are displayed in table A7 in the Appendix, do not alter the conclusions stated above.

Secondly, a model is estimated using an alternative specification of the three variables measuring parties' stated positions. Indeed, there are many different valid ways of matching data measuring communication content with survey data (De Vreese et al. 2017). The second robustness check presents the results calculated with an alternative specification of the three variables measuring parties' stated positions including a recency measure. In other words, this is a

test of whether the strength of the cueing effects depends on *when* the parties issued their press releases. The expectation is that more recent information is better remembered and more accessible when a respondent forms his or her attitude on asylum. For these alternative weighted party positions, all press releases published during the 2018 election campaign (three months prior to the election date on September 9, 2019) are weighted double. Practically, this means that press releases published between June 9, 2018 and September 8, 2018, are counted twice when calculating parties' mean positions on the migration issue. Table A8 in the Appendix show the results of Model 3 with weighted measures of party communication. The results do not alter the validity of the conclusions stated above.

## Summary and Outlook

This paper sets out to explore how party communication affects Swedish citizens' views on asylum. In the context of the recent upheaval in the Swedish migration debate, it is more important than ever to assess whether and how these changes influence the attitudes of Swedish citizens. Previous studies have shown an increase in Swedish parties' attention toward the migration issue, as well as changing and increasingly polarizing positions on this issue. However, the effect on Swedish citizens' attitudes remains unclear.

Based on the existing literature on mass-elite linkages, two expectations are formulated. On the one hand, political science scholars have shown that parties can persuade their own supporters on specific salient issues (Carsey & Layman 2006; Feddersen & Adams 2018; Steenbergen et al. 2007). In other words, voters update their policy positions on specific issues to align with their preferred party, thus leading us to expect a partisan cueing effect. On the other hand, citizens have been shown to move away from the stated positions of parties they dislike (Bischof & Wagner 2018; Feddersen & Adams 2018; Goren et al. 2009; Nicholson 2012; Zakharova & Warwick 2014), thus creating a partisan backlash effect.

The study combines data on public opinion from the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) 2014–2018 panel with data on parties' stated emphases and positions based on an exhaustive collection of their press releases between 2014 and 2018 in order to assess cueing effects. The rhetoric-based measures of party communication assessed via their press releases allow for continuous and unmediated measures of party emphasis and party position. Validity and reliability tests are conducted to ensure the quality of the hand coding.

Looking at Swedish parties' communication on the migration issue between the 2014 and the 2018 elections, it can be noted that almost all parties' emphases of the migration issue increase at the beginning of the analyzed period, when the center-left government announced its historic decision to heavily

reduce the number of refugees admitted into the country during the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. During an emotional press conference on November 24 2015, the Social democratic and Green parties announced their radical policy shift. However, after this first increase in overall emphasis, parties take different trajectories regarding the importance they allocate to the migration issue. In line with previous research, the dynamic descriptions of party positions show a polarization between the two blocs, lead especially by the positional developments by the Social Democratic, the Liberal and the Christian Democratic parties.

Regarding the effects of party messages on the Swedish public opinion, the results show that there is a partisan cueing effect. Even though this effect is not very strong in absolute terms, citizens nevertheless seem to take cues from their preferred party when updating their opinion on asylum. These results confirm that cueing effects exist and can be detected when looking at salient issues and using the appropriate data sources to measure party communication. The partisan backlash effect, whereby citizens move away from the stated position of parties they dislike (namely parties of the opposite bloc) is present as well, although non-significant.

The results presented in this study confirm the importance of exploring mass-elite linkages during these “turbulent” times in Sweden. For parties, the results can be rather reassuring, since it seems that their partisans take cues from their stated positions, even though these positions might have fluctuated heavily in between elections. However, the results also show that it might be difficult for parties to convince voters, who prefer a party belonging to the other bloc.

Still, parties might also be prompted to revise their positions on the migration issue based on public opinion. Indeed, public opinion influences parties’ communication, and parties have been shown to update their positions in response to public opinion (e.g., Adams et al. 2004; Ezrow et al. 2011). Additional studies are needed to evaluate this reversed effect, as well as the presence of reciprocal effects, and to further study the relationship between party communication and public opinion.

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## Appendix

Table A1. Availability and Sources of Swedish Parties' Press Releases

| Party         | PR from    | until      | URL   | last visited |
|---------------|------------|------------|---|--------------|
| <b>V</b>      | 2012-03-29 | 2018-09-27 | <a href="https://www.vansterpartiet.se/kategori/pressmeddelanden/">https://www.vansterpartiet.se/kategori/pressmeddelanden/</a>                                       | 2018-11-07   |
| <b>S</b>      | 2016-12-05 | 2018-10-04 | <a href="https://via.tt.se/pressrum/socialdemokraternas-ps-kansli?publisherId=142377">https://via.tt.se/pressrum/socialdemokraternas-ps-kansli?publisherId=142377</a> | 2018-11-07   |
|               | 2006-03-23 | 2016-11-25 | <a href="http://news.cision.com/se/socialdemokraterna">http://news.cision.com/se/socialdemokraterna</a>   | 2018-11-08   |
| <b>MP</b>     | 2008-09-05 | 2018-10-30 | <a href="http://news.cision.com/se/miljopartiet-de-grona">http://news.cision.com/se/miljopartiet-de-grona</a>   | 2018-11-07   |
| <b>C</b>      | 2016-11-01 | 2018-10-31 | <a href="https://www.centerpartiet.se/press/pressmeddelande">https://www.centerpartiet.se/press/pressmeddelande</a>   | 2018-12-11   |
|               | 2003-05-15 | 2016-11-01 | <a href="http://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/centerpartiet/pressreleases">http://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/centerpartiet/pressreleases</a>                                       | 2018-11-08   |
| <b>L (FP)</b> | 2012-10-09 | 2018-11-02 | <a href="http://news.cision.com/se/liberalerna">http://news.cision.com/se/liberalerna</a>   | 2018-11-07   |
| <b>M</b>      | 2013-04-10 | 2018-10-24 | <a href="http://news.cision.com/se/moderaterna">http://news.cision.com/se/moderaterna</a>   | 2018-11-07   |
|               | 2013-01-10 | 2013-04-04 | <a href="http://www.moderat.se/pressmeddelande">http://www.moderat.se/pressmeddelande</a>   | 2018-11-08   |
| <b>KD</b>     | 2016-11-25 | 2018-11-02 | <a href="https://kristdemokraterna.se/kategori/nyheter/">https://kristdemokraterna.se/kategori/nyheter/</a>   | 2018-11-08   |
|               | 2010-11-12 | 2016-11-18 | <a href="https://www.kristdemokraterna.se/Media/Nyhetsarkiv">https://www.kristdemokraterna.se/Media/Nyhetsarkiv</a>   | 2018-11-08   |
| <b>SD</b>     | 2006-01-14 | 2018-10-25 | <a href="http://www.mynewsdesk.com/sesverigedemokraterna/pressreleases">http://www.mynewsdesk.com/sesverigedemokraterna/pressreleases</a>                             | 2018-11-08   |

Table A2. Swedish Parties' Press Releases 2014–2018, N (%)

| Party        | PR about migration | PR about other issues | Total         |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| <b>MP</b>    | 14<br>(8)          | 172<br>(92)           | 186<br>(100)  |
| <b>V</b>     | 39<br>(13)         | 250<br>(87)           | 289<br>(100)  |
| <b>S</b>     | 20<br>(6)          | 296<br>(94)           | 316<br>(100)  |
| <b>C</b>     | 133<br>(15)        | 744<br>(85)           | 877<br>(100)  |
| <b>L</b>     | 108<br>(14)        | 663<br>(86)           | 775<br>(100)  |
| <b>KD</b>    | 124<br>(22)        | 428<br>(78)           | 552<br>(100)  |
| <b>M</b>     | 39<br>(12)         | 290<br>(88)           | 329<br>(100)  |
| <b>SD</b>    | 79<br>(20)         | 324<br>(80)           | 403<br>(100)  |
| <b>Total</b> | 556<br>(15)        | 3167<br>(85)          | 3723<br>(100) |

Data: Own data (press releases).

Table A3. Swedish Parties' Positions on the Migration Issue 2014–2018

| Party        | Mean position | Standard deviation |
|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| <b>MP</b>    | 0.57          | 0.51               |
| <b>V</b>     | 0.97          | 0.16               |
| <b>S</b>     | 0.00          | 0.79               |
| <b>C</b>     | 0.49          | 0.81               |
| <b>L</b>     | 0.03          | 0.79               |
| <b>KD</b>    | 0.01          | 0.96               |
| <b>M</b>     | 0.10          | 0.45               |
| <b>SD</b>    | -0.84         | 0.44               |
| <b>Total</b> | 0.10          | 0.88               |

Note: Scale runs from -1 (negative) to 1 (positive).

Data: Own data (press releases).



Table A4. Coding Reliability of Press Release Codings

| Variable                           | % Agreement | Cohen's Kappa |
|------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| <b>Migration issue</b>             | 95.3        | 0.79***       |
| <b>Position on migration issue</b> | 85.7        | 0.66**        |

Note: Reliability test based on a randomly selected sample of 192 press releases of the full corpus.

Data: Own data (press releases).

Table A5. Swedish Parties' Emphases of the Migration Issue: Comparing the Press Release Codings to the Comparative Manifesto Codings (2014)

| Party              | Press releases | CMP:<br>MC & NWL | CMP:<br>IM | CMP:<br>MC, NWL & IM |
|--------------------|----------------|------------------|------------|----------------------|
| <b>MP</b>          | 8.26           | 6.04             | 2.62       | 8.25                 |
| <b>V</b>           | 6.31           | 2.50             | 2.50       | 5.00                 |
| <b>S</b>           | 0.00           | 0.92             | 0.74       | 1.66                 |
| <b>C</b>           | 1.49           | 3.68             | 2.37       | 6.05                 |
| <b>L</b>           | 9.81           | 6.65             | 3.90       | 10.55                |
| <b>KD</b>          | 12.45          | 4.37             | 2.83       | 7.20                 |
| <b>M</b>           | 0.00           | 5.62             | 2.81       | 8.44                 |
| <b>SD</b>          | 16.66          | 14.56            | 3.48       | 18.04                |
| <b>Correlation</b> |                | 0.73             | 0.66       | 0.76                 |

Note: Party emphasis measures based on the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) codings were calculated by adding the negative item(s) and the positive item(s). MC = Multiculturalism (per607 and per608); NWL = National Way of Life (per601 and per602); I = Immigration (per602\_2 and per601\_2).

Data: Own data and Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2017).

*Table A6. Swedish Parties' Positions on the Migration Issue: Comparing the Press Release Codings to the Comparative Manifesto Codings*

| Party              | Press releases | CMP:<br>MC & NWL | CMP:<br>IM  | CMP:<br>MC, NWL & IM |
|--------------------|----------------|------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| <b>MP</b>          | 0.76           | 0.80             | 1.00        | 0.86                 |
| <b>V</b>           | 1.00           | 1.00             | 1.00        | 1.00                 |
| <b>S</b>           | -              | 0.60             | 1.00        | 0.78                 |
| <b>C</b>           | 1.00           | 1.00             | 1.00        | 1.00                 |
| <b>L</b>           | 0.57           | 0.72             | 1.00        | 0.83                 |
| <b>KD</b>          | 0.41           | 0.53             | 1.00        | 0.71                 |
| <b>M</b>           | -              | 0.91             | 1.00        | 0.94                 |
| <b>SD</b>          | -0.81          | -0.91            | -1.00       | -0.93                |
| <b>Correlation</b> |                | <i>0.99</i>      | <i>0.94</i> | <i>0.98</i>          |

Note: Party position measures based on the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) codings were calculated by subtracting the negative item(s) from the positive item(s) (except for the National Way of Life category, where the positive item is subtracted from the negative item) and dividing the result by the total of both categories (for the same procedure see Abou-Chadi 2014). MC = Multiculturalism (per607 and per608); NWL = National Way of Life (per601 and per602); I = Immigration (per602\_2 and per601\_2).

Data: Own data and Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2017).

*Table A7. Explaining Swedish Voters' Positions Towards Refugees Excluding SD-Voters 2014- 2018 (mixed effects model)*

| Robustness check I                            | Model 3           |
|---|-------------------|
| Position (t-1)                                | 0.57***<br>(0.04) |
| Preferred party's position                    | 0.71**<br>(0.22)  |
| Mean position of parties in the same bloc     | 0.70<br>(0.39)    |
| Mean position of parties in the opposite bloc | -0.86<br>(1.12)   |
| Gender  | 0.23**<br>(0.09)  |
| Age   | 0.00<br>(0.00)    |
| Level of interest for politics                | 0.01<br>(0.07)    |
| Intercept                                     | 0.42<br>(0.42)    |
| AIC   | 1266.87           |
| BIC   | 1307.99           |
| Log Likelihood                                | -623.44           |
| N individuals                                 | 451               |
| N parties                                     | 7                 |
| Variance individuals                          | 1.00              |
| Variance parties                              | 0.01              |

Note: The dependent variable is an individual's position towards refugees. Respondents indicating that they voted for the Swedish Democrats were excluded from the analysis.

*Table A8. Explaining Swedish Voters' Positions Towards Refugees Using Weighted Party Positions 2014–2018 (mixed effects model)*

| Robustness check 1                            | Model 3           |
|---|-------------------|
| Position (t-1)                                | 0.56***<br>(0.04) |
| Preferred party's position                    | 0.47**<br>(0.16)  |
| Mean position of parties in the same bloc     | 0.36<br>(0.45)    |
| Mean position of parties in the opposite bloc | -1.01<br>(1.14)   |
| Gender  | 0.22**<br>(0.08)  |
| Age   | 0.00<br>(0.00)    |
| Level of interest for politics                | 0.02<br>(0.06)    |
| Intercept                                     | -0.31<br>(0.56)   |
| AIC   | 1341.14           |
| BIC   | 1383.04           |
| Log Likelihood                                | -660.57           |
| N individuals                                 | 488               |
| N parties                                     | 8                 |
| Variance individuals                          | 1.00              |
| Variance parties                              | 0.02              |

Note: The dependent variable is an individual's position towards refugees. Party positions are weighted by recency.