

Democratic elections and anti-immigration attitudes

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Abstract

Democratic elections are ritualized and institutionalized processes that allow for the peaceful resolution of political disagreements and conflicts. However, electoral processes also serve as focal points in which right-wing political parties can adopt a negative (or xenophobic) discourse against immigrants and other minority groups in order to obtain political benefits (i.e. more electoral support). Left-wing parties are often better off abandoning the immigration issue and focusing on other policy areas during the campaign. As a result, anti-immigration narratives become more prominent during periods of election salience. In this article, we take advantage of the timing of the cross-national post-election surveys included in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) to explore the effects of election salience on individuals' anti-immigration attitudes. We find that immigration attitudes become more polarized just after an election has taken place. On the one hand, right-wing respondents exhibit more negative attitudes toward immigrants when the election is salient, but those negative views decrease as we move away from the election. On the other hand, left-wing respondents express lower levels of xenophobia immediately after the election, but their immigration views become more negative as time since the election increases. Surprisingly, these effects are only detectable in contexts where the immigration issue is less salient.

Keywords

Elections, ideology, immigration attitudes, issue ownership, xenophobia

Introduction

In recent decades, immigration has become a matter of widespread public concern, fueled by surges in refugees and migrants that are often politicized by political parties and sensationalized in the media. Notably, in recent US elections, there was a surge of anti-immigration rhetoric, coinciding with extensive media coverage of migrant caravans at the US–Mexico border. Similarly, the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe overlapped

with the rise of right-wing parties espousing a strong anti-immigration agenda. In all these cases, both media and politicians consistently portray immigration negatively, framing it as a problem and a threat that requires the implementation of more restrictive immigration policies.

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The Venezuelan migrant crisis in Latin America serves as a compelling illustration of such migration narratives, particularly in the context of electoral processes. It is estimated that 3 million Venezuelans migrated to Colombia in the period 2015–2023 to escape terrible economic difficulties and increased authoritarianism back home. The initial response of the Colombian state was welcoming, and generous policies were implemented that facilitated the socio-economic integration of Venezuelan migrants. For instance, in 2021, Colombia implemented a mass regularization program to grant legal status and work authorization to millions of Venezuelans who had crossed the border irregularly (Guerrero Ble, 2023).

However, the Colombian state faces its own (although less severe) economic difficulties and a dire public security crisis (Vega-Mendez and Visconti, 2021). In this context, during the campaign preceding the 2023 regional elections in the South American country, several (mostly right-wing) mayoral and gubernatorial candidates adopted a clearly xenophobic rhetoric scapegoating Venezuelan migrants for the increase in violent crime and other policy challenges (Jiménez and Suárez, 2023; Restrepo, 2023). Moreover, in most local contests, this anti-immigrant rhetoric was not counteracted by candidates adopting a more benevolent perspective on immigration. Even the politicians who did not jump on the xenophobic bandwagon preferred to avoid the issue (Rangel and Arenas-Ortiz, 2023). As a result, the rhetoric about immigration during the campaign had a negative tone and presented Venezuelan migrants as a security threat. Some reports suggest that this narrative contributed to xenophobic attacks and hate speech on social media during that period (Jiménez and Suárez, 2023).

This example is paradigmatic of the way the immigration narrative tends to play out during electoral periods. Right-wing parties often benefit from the politicization of the immigration issue and the scapegoating of immigrants for domestic policy challenges. Liberal or left-wing parties often prefer to avoid a sensitive issue they do not ‘own’ (Petrocik, 1996) and focus on policy areas where they have an edge. What are the consequences of this one-sided, anti-immigrant rhetoric? Are immigration attitudes more negative during periods of election salience?

This article contends that there are ebbs and flows in anti-immigration attitudes that closely follow political dynamics throughout the electoral cycle. Immigration attitudes tend to be more negative when national elections are salient because political parties and the media intensify their coverage of immigration, often

portraying it in a negative light. Consequently, people are more exposed to and influenced by extreme anti-immigrant views during periods of election salience. One of the questions this article will explore is whether these anti-immigrant attitudes are generalized across different ideological groups or concentrated among right-wing voters. This study contributes to the field of political violence in democracies by assessing whether the xenophobic rhetoric espoused by (far)-right parties during the election season can lead to anti-immigrant sentiments among the mass public.¹ Of course, a surge in anti-immigration attitudes when elections are salient does not automatically lead to violence but previous research has demonstrated that xenophobia is a significant attitudinal precursor of hate crimes against immigrants and minorities. Anti-immigrant feelings can have a mobilizing effect, leading some individuals to engage in acts of violent xenophobia (Gordon, 2020). Moreover, although perpetrators of hate crimes represent a small share of the population, they can become emboldened when they enjoy wider community support (Dancygier, 2023). If an aggressive anti-immigration narrative becomes dominant in the political arena and the media during election campaigns, native populations might become more attached to their own ethno-national identities (Eifert et al., 2010) and acceptance of hate crimes against immigrant populations might increase.² Recent incidents in the United Kingdom show very clearly how anti-immigrant sentiments can quickly escalate into widespread violence. Anti-immigration protests and riots erupted following a mass stabbing incident. False claims about the perpetrator’s immigrant status fueled these events, leading to attacks on mosques and immigrant-owned businesses (Hanif, 2024). In another example, a gunman who killed 23 people in Texas in 2019 cited anti-immigration beliefs in a manifesto, claiming the attack was in response to the ‘Hispanic invasion of Texas’, echoing Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric (Aratani, 2019). These findings align with recent work on the joint production of election violence, which highlights how electoral contexts empower elites to circulate narratives of threat and injustice that legitimize violence and mobilize ordinary citizens (Klaus and Turnbull, 2025).³

Beyond hate crimes, anti-immigration attitudes can contribute to political violence by increasing support for extremely harsh anti-immigration policies. According to a recent report that analyzes immigration attitudes in the United States, there is a notable link between anti-immigration attitudes and support for violence at the southern border, particularly among politically conservative individuals (PRII Spotlight Analysis, 2024).

Conservatives are much more likely to agree that the US government should use violence to stop unauthorized immigration and even engage in extreme violence such as shooting migrants crossing the border. The study highlights that alarmist, anti-immigrant rhetoric, particularly from political leaders, contributes to this trend. By framing immigrants as ‘criminals’, ‘killers’, or an ‘invasion’, such language fosters dehumanization, which can open the door to supporting or justifying violence (see also Utych, 2018). While studying xenophobic violence and violent anti-immigration policies is beyond the scope of this study, these questions are suggestive of the wider set of puzzles our article places on the table.

To investigate how elections and ideology relate to anti-immigrant attitudes, we analyze data from Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). This survey explores preferences and political attitudes following elections. We create a variable measuring the number of days elapsed since the election and use it as an independent variable to assess the influence of election salience on anti-immigrant attitudes.

Interestingly, we find that the number of days from the election does not significantly influence immigration attitudes when considering the population as a whole. However, the temporal distance from elections does exert a distinct effect on immigration attitudes across different ideological groups. On the one hand, right-wing respondents exhibit more negative attitudes toward immigrants immediately after the election, but those negative views decrease while we move away from the election. On the other hand, left-wing respondents express lower levels of xenophobia after the election, but their immigration views become more negative as time since the election increases. This indicates that although these ideological groups hold sharply polarized views on immigration around election time, their opinions grow more similar as time elapses. Surprisingly, we find that the link between election salience and immigration attitudes is more pronounced in low-immigration settings and where the immigration issue is less salient. This is because citizens with limited exposure to immigration tend to have more malleable, less crystallized attitudes. In contrast, in high-immigration settings where the issue has been consistently salient, citizens hold stronger predispositions and more entrenched views that remain stable and are less influenced by elite rhetoric during election periods.

Theory and hypotheses

Immigration has become an increasingly prominent political issue in the last three decades in West European countries and other developed nations. Due to a

combination of extraordinary events (e.g. the ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015) and the routine negative media coverage of immigration, there has been a sharp increase in the salience of immigration among Western populations (Dennison and Geddes, 2019). The issue of immigration is often framed by the media and politicians in a negative way (as a problem that needs to be addressed and brought under control) rather than in a balanced way that takes into account both the challenges and opportunities associated with immigration.

The main argument we want to advance in this article is that the immigration issue is not equally prominent in different moments of the political and electoral cycle.⁴ We contend that immigration attitudes are more negative when elections are salient due to the politicization of the issue during electoral campaigns. In fact, electoral processes also serve as focal points in which some political parties can adopt a negative (or xenophobic) discourse against immigrants and other minority groups in order to obtain political benefits (i.e. more electoral support).

In the periods surrounding elections, people tend to pay more attention to political messages and are exposed to the proposals of different parties through the media, electoral debates, and campaign advertisements. As a result, very negative views on immigration that exist on the fringes of the political arena might become more prominent and shape citizens’ views on immigration (at least temporarily). When exposed to a more ‘toxic’ debate on immigration that frames immigrants as an economic, cultural and security problem, citizens might develop more anti-immigration views.⁵

Our theoretical rationale is as follows. The extreme anti-immigration views of conservative parties (especially those on the far right) tend to reach a broader swath of the citizenry during electoral periods as they benefit from easier access to the media at a time when voters are likely to pay more attention. One key element of the rhetoric and ideology of the far-right (populist) parties is to scapegoat immigrants ‘as the source of crime and violence, for taking jobs from the locals and for overburdening the welfare state’ (Zaslove, 2004: 74). One of the goals of election campaigns for niche parties on the far right is to put pressure on more moderate government forces to stem the flow of immigrants into the country.

Center-right parties tend to follow suit rhetorically (or at least to dissimulate their programmatic differences with far-right parties) in order not to lose electoral ground to those more extreme parties. Several studies using manifesto data and other sources of evidence have demonstrated that the electoral success of radical right

parties provides an incentive for moderate right parties to shift their positions on immigration in a more restrictive (illiberal) direction (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Han, 2015). Over the last three decades, the immigration policy proposals of mainstream right parties have gradually become more similar to those of far-right anti-immigration parties. Even in the absence of viable far-right parties, mainstream right parties have appropriated the immigration issue and adopted more restrictive policy proposals to stave off the rise of anti-immigration forces (Alonso and da Fonseca, 2011). Therefore, voters are not likely to hear a clear debate during electoral periods between liberal pro-immigration right-wing parties and more restrictive far-right parties. At least on the right of the political spectrum, voters tend to be exposed to an outbidding of anti-immigration proposals.

The anti-immigration rhetoric of right-wing parties is often amplified by media coverage that frames immigration as a 'crisis'. It is well known that negative media frames in response to real world events such as elections or terrorist attacks can lead to an increase in xenophobic attitudes (Haynes et al., 2016). Media coverage of immigration intensifies during election periods, as it becomes a highly politicized issue used by parties (especially on the right) to galvanize voter support (Benson, 2013; Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden, 2007). When elections are salient, citizens are more exposed to – and pay greater attention to – candidates' statements or policies on immigration, reinforcing the issue's prominence in public discourse.

Headlines and news stories often emphasize issues such as crime, identity threats, or economic competition, which stokes public emotions and sustains the topic's visibility (Benson, 2013). In sum, media coverage tends to mirror the salience of immigration (and the tone of the immigration rhetoric) in political discourses during the election period (Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden, 2007).

Of course, other parties with different ideological orientations also compete in elections. Centrist, liberal, or left-wing parties tend to have a more benevolent view on immigration and its sociotropic effects. However, we argue that these more moderate (or even pro-immigration) views are less likely to influence voters during the electoral process for at least three reasons.

First, research in political psychology has demonstrated that people tend to pay more attention to negative messages than to positive messages (Lau, 1982). Assuming two messages of equal intensity (one presenting immigrants as a threat to the country and another one presenting them in a more positive light), citizens

are more likely to pay attention to (and be swayed by) the negative message. The rhetoric of conservative parties that frames immigrants as a threat might produce feelings of anxiety and generate a negative reaction among citizens, even if other parties adopt a more balanced perspective on immigration.

Second, during electoral campaigns, many left-wing parties opt to 'defuse' and change the conversation rather than engage on an issue that can be electorally costly (Bale et al., 2010). The immigration issue has been traditionally owned by right-wing parties (Dennison and Goodwin, 2015; Egan, 2003). Political parties are said to 'own' particular issues or policy problems when they have 'a reputation for policy and program interests, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties (and its candidates) is more sincere and committed to doing something about them' (Petrocik, 1996: 826). The issue ownership theory of voting contends that parties can gain an electoral advantage when, during campaigns, they emphasize issues that they 'own' and which other parties are perceived as less able to handle (Petrocik, 1996).

Because parties on the right are more vocal about the problem of immigration and propose more visible and restrictive policies for combatting it, they tend to be recognized as more effective in this policy area. In line with this notion of issue ownership, studies conducted in Germany and in the Netherlands demonstrate that media priming of immigration issues (with a negative valence) strengthens support for right-wing parties (Damstra et al., 2019; Pardos-Prado et al., 2013).

The accumulated evidence of ownership of the immigration issue by right-wing parties suggests that often, the best strategy for leftist parties is to abandon the issue and focus on issues of policy strength (Odmalm, 2011). The left may downplay the immigration issue to avoid highlighting one of the perceived strengths of right-wing parties. Leftist politicians may also hesitate to emphasize immigration because framing it as a key campaign issue can alienate centrist or moderate voters who might perceive left-leaning policies as overly permissive.

In one of the most sophisticated analyses of political parties' rhetorical choices during electoral campaigns, Riker (1996: 6) argues and demonstrates that 'when one side dominates in the volume of rhetorical appeals on a particular theme, the other side abandons appeals on that theme.' Riker hypothesizes that this is because the latter party has deemed it detrimental to focus on an issue that it is perceived as less able to address. If, as we argue, conservative parties 'own' the issue of immigration, left-of-center parties

are better off not making immigration a central issue in their campaigns. In the words of Pardos-Prado et al. (2013: 849), 'Keeping the immigration issue off the public agenda is a good strategy for the mainstream left and a bad one for the mainstream right.'

Left-wing parties might also downplay the immigration issue because left-wing voters (and politicians) are divided on the immigration issue. The left often has support from labor groups and manual workers (who tend to prefer restrictive immigration policies) and from ethnic minorities/immigration communities (who tend to embrace more liberal immigration policies). Faced with this dilemma, the best electoral strategy for the left might be to de-emphasize the immigration issue. This is corroborated by a recent study (Han, 2020), which shows that left-wing parties often blur their positions on immigration to avoid alienating divided core supporters and to downplay an issue where they lack a competitive advantage.

In sum, citizens tend to be exposed to more negative messages about immigration during the campaign period. There tends to be no countervailing effort from centrist and leftist parties to present immigration in a positive light, as these parties are often better off 'abandoning' the issue during the electoral process. The negative anti-immigration messages to which they are exposed can lead to feelings of xenophobia among citizens of different ideological stripes in the immediate aftermath of an election. This discussion yields the first hypothesis of the article.

Hypothesis 1: Following an election, anti-immigration attitudes are expected to peak immediately after election day and decline as the election becomes less salient (i.e. as time since the election increases).

The argument so far suggests that the one-sided anti-immigration rhetoric to which voters are exposed during electoral campaigns should lead citizens of all ideological stripes to develop xenophobic attitudes (at least temporarily) when elections are salient. Here, we consider an alternative (but equally plausible) hypothesis. If we assume that citizens pay more attention to messages that come from parties that are aligned with their ideological preferences, it is possible that only right-wing voters shift their attitudes in a more anti-immigrant direction. Although liberal or left-wing parties tend to abandon the immigration issue during the campaign, left-of-center voters might not be swayed by anti-immigration messages coming from the right or might not be paying attention to those messages.

In other words, the alternative hypothesis is that when right-wing parties endorse anti-immigration and xenophobic positions in periods of election salience, their supporters (and only them) adopt more xenophobic views. Right-wing party supporters mirror these anti-immigrant sentiments to align with their party's stance and show support for their leaders. Lenz (2012) provides compelling evidence that citizens embrace the policy views of their favored party or candidate. Rather than selecting candidates based on policy considerations, many voters seem to choose them for other reasons, eventually adopting the policy positions of their chosen candidates or parties (Lenz, 2012: 18). For instance, research indicates that during the 2016 US election, white supporters of Trump adjusted their perspectives on race and immigration to align with Trump's stances (Enns and Jardina, 2021).

This tendency of voters who locate themselves on the right of the political spectrum to embrace the policy positions of right-wing parties can be explained by various factors, including cue-taking and partisan identification. Given the time and effort required to comprehend public policy debates, citizens may find it convenient to rely on their political party's or leader's position as an informational shortcut to develop their own opinions (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Mondak, 1993). By following their party's cues, they can reach the same opinions they would have arrived at if fully informed but without the effort. Citizens might not adopt their party's policy positions solely through heuristic reasoning; they might also feel a strong psychological identification with their party (Green et al., 2004). Social identities play a crucial role in shaping political attitudes and behavior. Partisan loyalties can be powerful enough to prompt motivated reasoning and lead individuals to adjust their policy views to match those loyalties (Achen and Bartels, 2016).

Right-wing citizens might be particularly susceptible to adopting the xenophobic views of conservative parties due to existing patterns of information exposure and processing. Studies have shown that citizens tend to select media sources that align with their ideological preferences (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). This selective exposure leads individuals to actively seek out information that reinforces their preconceived views, contributing to the formation of echo chambers where only ideologically congenial content is consumed (Knobloch-Westerwick and Jingbo, 2009).⁶ Individuals also tend to avoid information that challenges their perspectives, which protects them from cognitive dissonance. Additionally, when processing information, individuals

often display biases, assigning greater significance to messages that align with their pre-existing opinions. This bias in information processing means that individuals favor arguments that resonate with their ideological views and dismiss those that contradict their perspectives (e.g. Taber and Lodge, 2006). Therefore, if media coverage emphasizes xenophobic messages by right-wing parties, right-wing voters may be exposed to and influenced by these ideas.

By contrast, liberal or left-wing voters are much less likely to consume the xenophobic messages coming primarily from conservative parties. Even if they are not able to completely escape the anti-immigrant rhetoric that predominates when elections are salient, left-wing citizens might be more likely to discount xenophobic narratives that are inconsistent with their ideological priors. Although liberal and left-wing parties prefer to strategically abandon the immigration issue to the right during the campaign, voters who identify as left-wing might not be swayed by those anti-immigrant sentiments. As a result, the gap in immigration attitudes between left- and right-wing voters should be wider when elections are salient, as conservative citizens develop more xenophobic views that match their parties' messages (while left-wing citizens are not moved by the anti-immigrant narrative). This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Following an election, anti-immigration attitudes are expected to peak immediately after election day and decline as the election becomes less salient (i.e. as time since the election increases), with this effect being more pronounced among right-wing voters.

Our theoretical expectations are predicated upon the increased salience of the immigration issue in the political arena in the last two decades (Dennison and Geddes, 2019; Hatton, 2021). In fact, voters should be more exposed to negative elite messages on immigration in contexts where immigration is salient – either because parties (especially right-wing parties) have chosen to politicize the issue or because of refugee crises or sudden terrorist attacks (Frey, 2022; Hangartner et al., 2019; Huddy et al., 2005; Nussio et al., 2019). These events create a fertile ground for political actors to exploit security or economic concerns. Political parties frequently capitalize on such moments by framing immigration negatively for electoral purposes. Following this logic, we should expect people living in high migration contexts (and in political contexts where the immigration

issue is very prominent) to react more strongly to anti-immigration messages during the election period.

While it seems reasonable to expect that anti-immigration narratives will have stronger effects on immigration attitudes in contexts of high migration, the 'migration context hypothesis' developed by Nussio et al. (2019) offers a plausible theoretical counterpoint. This hypothesis posits that individuals in low-immigration societies are more likely to adopt negative immigration views when exposed to discourses linking migration to terrorism. Individuals who live in contexts with limited experience of immigration might be more reactive to anti-immigration messages because they lack stable predispositions. For instance, following the 2015 terrorist attacks in France, immigration attitudes became more negative in European countries with low levels of immigration, where individuals were more susceptible to xenophobic narratives (Nussio et al., 2019).

We will try to adjudicate between these two theoretical possibilities by evaluating empirically whether any effects we uncover in our analyses are moderated by the migration context (low immigration vs. high immigration) and the salience of the immigration issue in the election (low salience vs. high salience).

We organize the empirical section of this article into two different parts. First, using Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data, we examine two key assumptions: that right-wing parties are more likely to focus on immigration issues and that they adopt a more negative tone on immigration. Second, we analyze Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) survey to evaluate whether attitudes toward migration shift when elections are salient. In particular, we explore whether negative immigration frames lead to increased anti-immigration attitudes during moments of election salience among the general population or only within specific segments of it.

Evidence of party positions on immigration

Our theory posits that election salience shapes anti-immigration sentiments in public opinion. A key premise of this theory is the nature of party positions concerning migration issues. We contend that right-wing and far-right parties engage in a markedly negative discourse on immigration, often advocating for stricter controls on immigration. In contrast, left-wing parties tend to either avoid the issue or promote more open and liberal immigration policies.

To confirm the validity of this assumption and before analyzing citizens' anti-immigrant sentiments, we examine

Table 1. Regression of immigration salience and policy on left-right orientation (CHES Europe and Latin America).

	<i>Immigration salience</i>		<i>Immigration policy</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Left-right orientation	0.252*** (0.040)	0.301*** (0.029)	0.708*** (0.034)	0.737*** (0.034)
Constant	3.849*** (0.233)	4.049*** (0.417)	1.550*** (0.203)	1.527*** (0.490)
Country fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	402	402	402	402
R ²	0.092	0.615	0.513	0.625
Adjusted R ²	0.090	0.567	0.512	0.579

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

the stances of political parties on immigration. We use the most recent wave of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data, which records how country experts evaluate political parties' positions on a series of policy issues in Europe (2019) and Latin America (2020). This dataset encompasses a comprehensive evaluation of 402 parties across 44 countries and covers the parties' policy positions on a variety of issues, including immigration (Jolly et al., 2022; Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023). This dataset captures the perceptions of country experts about these parties' stances, reflecting the parties' projected image through various communication channels, including public statements and media coverage.

Our analysis focuses on two key questions related to migration in the survey: Do right-wing parties emphasize immigration issues and adopt stronger anti-immigrant stances compared to their left-wing counterparts? To answer these questions, we first examine migration salience, which measures the relative importance of immigration policy in a party's public discourse, with a scale ranging from 0 (no importance) to 10 (great importance). Second, we assess the parties' positions on immigration, where 0 indicates a strong preference for a liberal immigration policy, and 10 indicates a strong preference for a restrictive immigration policy.

Table 1 shows the results of regressing immigration salience and policy on the left-right orientation of political parties, which is measured on a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). We present regressions both with and without country fixed effects to account for various country-level factors that might influence a party's stance on immigration. The analysis reveals that the effect of left-right orientation on immigration salience is statistically significant and

Table 2. Immigration and left-right positions in party manifesto data.

	<i>Immigration saliency</i>		<i>Positive immigration tone</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Left-right position (CMP)	0.022*** (0.002)	0.019*** (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.000)	-0.006*** (0.000)
Constant	2.331*** (0.057)	1.296*** (0.182)	0.132*** (0.010)	0.573*** (0.031)
Country fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	3,776	3,776	3,154	3,154
R ²	0.021	0.254	0.088	0.292
Adjusted R ²	0.021	0.251	0.088	0.289

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

positive, indicating that right-wing parties are more likely to emphasize immigration policy.

Another strategy for evaluating whether conservative and far-right parties prioritize immigration issues and espouse anti-immigrant rhetoric is to analyze party manifestos. These electoral programs provide a direct insight into the party's self-reported stance, unfiltered by media or experts' evaluations. Our analysis utilizes the 'Parties' Immigration and Integration Positions Dataset' by Lehmann and Zobel (2018), which measures party positions and the importance they place on immigration across 14 countries and 43 elections from 1998 to 2013.

The analysis focuses on three variables. Immigration saliency refers to the extent to which a party's electoral program addresses immigration, measured by the proportion of quasi-sentences dedicated to the topic. A positive immigration tone evaluates the sentiment of these statements, coding them as supportive, neutral, or skeptical towards immigration. To assess party ideologies, we use the left-right scale (rile) from the Party Manifesto dataset. This variable records the original ideological positions of parties as they are first included in the dataset; therefore, it is not susceptible to shifts in party discourse over time (Volgens et al., 2013).

Table 2 reports the results of regressing immigration saliency and positive immigration tone on the left-right ideological positions of political parties. We observe a statistically significant and positive correlation between conservative parties and the frequency with which immigration issues are mentioned in party platforms. Furthermore, the analysis reveals a significant and negative correlation between conservative parties and the likelihood of adopting a positive tone on immigration,

suggesting a propensity for conservative parties to address immigration in less favorable terms.

In sum, this analysis of party positions on immigration corroborates two key assumptions of our theoretical framework. First, political parties on the right of the political spectrum are much more likely to focus on immigration issues during the campaign. This suggests left-wing parties prefer to avoid an issue they do not 'own' in the lead-up to national elections. Second, right-wing parties consistently adopt a more negative tone towards immigration. Therefore, during electoral periods, voters are predominantly exposed to negative messages about immigration.

Design

To evaluate whether people's attitudes toward immigration become more negative when elections are salient, we use Module 5 from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) survey. The core objective of this survey is to measure people's attitudes and preferences toward representative democracy at the time of a national election, so every survey participant was interviewed after the election. These studies were conducted between 2016 and 2021 in 45 different countries.⁷ Importantly, all the surveys are nationally representative.

We take advantage of the timing of the cross-national post-election surveys included in the CSES to explore the effects that election salience has on individuals' xenophobic attitudes. The timing of survey interviews with respect to election day is used as an exogenous measure of election salience.⁸ We expect that views on immigration will be more negative when elections are more salient.

We create a variable called score, which is the difference between the day a given respondent participated in the CSES survey and the election date. Therefore, it measures how many days have passed since the election. This is our key independent variable, which will capture how exposure to an election affects attitudes towards immigrants. This variable goes from 1 to 90 days after the election.⁹ Therefore, we take advantage of the timing of the implementation of CSES, where some subjects participate just after the election but others several months after the conclusion of the electoral process.¹⁰

As outcomes, we compute the average for agreement with the following statements: Immigrants are not good for the economy, immigrants harm culture, and immigrants increase crime (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree). Therefore, higher values represent more negative attitudes toward migrants. The three items proved to

Table 3. Effect of the score (days from the election) on negative attitudes toward immigrants.

<i>Negative attitudes toward immigrants</i>	
Score (days from the election)	0.0002 (0.0003)
Covariates	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes
Observations	62,750

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

form an internal coherent scale (Cronbach's α : 0.68), so we use a scale of anti-immigration attitudes in all the analyses of the article.¹¹ We called this new variable anti-immigration attitudes.

As controls, we use age (in years), education (0: early childhood education to 9: Doctoral studies or equivalent), gender (0: male, 1: female), and ideology (0–4: Left, 5: Center, 6–10: Right).

We rely on a two-way fixed effects model, which allows us to estimate the impact of our score variables (days from the election) on attitudes toward immigrants. To test Hypothesis 1, we use year and survey fixed effects and key control variables, and this analysis is implemented using the linear regression described in equation 1.

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 S_{it} + \beta_2 X_{it} + \sigma_c + \omega_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (\text{Eq. 1})$$

In this equation, Y represents the outcome of interest (i.e. attitudes toward immigrants) for subject i at survey t . S corresponds to how many days after the election the survey was implemented for subject i . σ_c represents country fixed effects and ω_t are year fixed effects. β_1 is the coefficient of interest. We also include a set of covariates X_{it} . In order to evaluate how results are conditional on ideology, we use the same equation, but we also include an interaction between score and ideology.

Results

Table 3 summarizes the results when implementing Equation 1. The effect of increasing the score (or the days from the election) by one unit (day) does not have a substantive nor significant impact on negative views toward immigrants. As a reminder, the outcome goes from 1 to 5, so the effect of each day that passes since the election is minimal, with a change in the outcome of 0.0002 points.

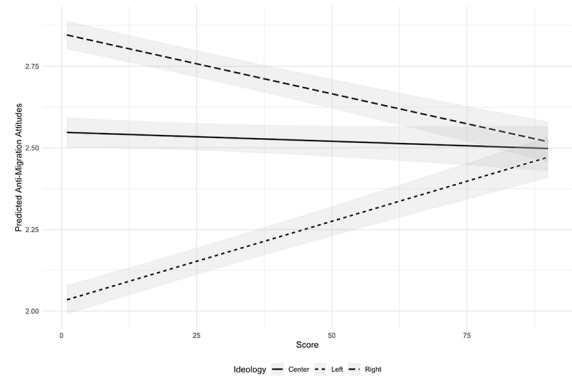
Table 4. Effect of the score (days from the election) on negative attitudes toward immigrants by ideology.

	<i>Negative attitudes toward immigrants</i>
Left	−0.518*** (0.016)
Right	0.302*** (0.016)
Left*score	0.005*** (0.000)
Right*score	−0.003*** (0.000)
Baseline ideology	Center
Covariates	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes
Observations	62,750

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

However, when analyzing the impact of the score by ideological groups, we observe different results. Table 4 provides the impact of days from the election based on the ideology of the respondent. We report the results for left- and right-wing respondents (when compared with a centrist respondent) at the time of the election (i.e. when score is equal to zero). Then, we provide the interaction terms, which are interpreted as the change in the effect of ideology for each day that passed since the election. We only report the relevant coefficients in the table: the impact of ideology and how it gets moderated by time from the election.

On the one hand, left-wing respondents have lower negative attitudes (i.e. less xenophobic attitudes) immediately after the election (when compared to centrist respondents). However, those increase by 0.005 points per day as we move away from the electoral competition (95% CI: 0.004, 0.006). This suggests that left-wing voters become less supportive of immigration as time passes after the election. On the other hand, right-wing respondents have more negative attitudes toward immigrants just after the election (when compared to centrist respondents), but those decrease by 0.003 points per day (95% CI: −0.004, −0.002). That is, right-wing voters become less xenophobic as time passes after the election. Therefore, while these right-wing and left-wing voters hold polarized views on immigration at election time, their opinions depolarize as time elapses. Regarding the effect sizes, left-wing respondents' anti-migrant attitudes change by 0.5 points in 90 days. Given that the outcome is structured in a five-point scale, half a point is not a negligible effect.

**Figure 1.** Predicted values for anti-migration attitudes across different ideological groups.

In Figure 1, we provide the predicted values obtained from Table 4. They show how left and right respondents have clearly different stances toward migrants just after the election, but they move toward similar attitudes three months later. Meanwhile, centrist respondents present quite stable sentiments toward migrants.

Table 5 checks for heterogeneous treatment effects by ideology. First, we split the sample into two groups based on the level of immigration experienced in the country in which respondents live. We compute the immigration shocks for each country by calculating how much immigration has changed in percentage points in the last three years.¹²

We then split the sample into two groups using quantiles: high immigration and low immigration. In the case of high immigration, we can see the same differences between left- and right-wing respondents reported before. However, the interaction terms are small and one of them non-significant, showing that immigration attitudes are much more stable in contexts of high immigration. By contrast, in the low immigration group, the interaction terms are larger and significant. Left-wing respondents have lower negative attitudes immediately after the election, but their immigration views become more negative as time since the election increases. On the other hand, right-wing respondents have more negative attitudes toward immigrants just after the election, but their views become less xenophobic as we move away from the election.

Then, we split the sample into two groups by the saliency of immigration. We compute saliency by using the most important topics identified in each election by the country collaborators of the CSES surveys. If immigration or immigration-related issues were mentioned as one of the top-three topics, cases are classified as high saliency; otherwise, they are classified as low saliency. Results align with the previous analyses since attitudes are very stable in countries where the immigration issue

Table 5. Effect of the score (days from the election) on negative attitudes toward immigrants.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>High migration</i>	<i>Low migration</i>	<i>High saliency</i>	<i>Low saliency</i>
Left	-0.403*** (0.024)	-0.666*** (0.023)	-0.462*** (0.030)	-0.529*** (0.020)
Right	0.207*** (0.023)	0.397*** (0.022)	0.221*** (0.029)	0.322*** (0.019)
Left*score	0.002*** (0.001)	0.010*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)
Right*score	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	0.003* (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.001)
Baseline ideology	Center	Center	Center	Center
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	30,123	32,627	16,243	46,507

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

is very salient, and there are larger changes in places where immigration is less salient.

Discussion and conclusion

The empirical evidence does not support Hypothesis 1. The findings indicate that, at the aggregate level, immigration attitudes do not become more negative during periods of heightened electoral salience. Although the immigration narrative during electoral periods tends to be dominated by right-wing parties that espouse more restrictive immigration policies, leftist citizens report lower levels of anti-immigrant prejudice when the election is more salient (i.e. when the survey was answered in the days immediately following an election) than in the subsequent weeks or months. The immigration attitudes of centrist voters appear to be unmoved by the political dynamics during elections.

By contrast, the results support Hypothesis 2. Right-wing voters hold more negative immigration views in the days that immediately follow a national election. This suggests that the anti-immigration rhetoric used by conservative parties (and echoed in the media) during electoral campaigns exacerbates anti-immigration attitudes among right-wing citizens. Those anti-immigration attitudes gradually decrease as the heat of the campaign dissipates.¹³

However, there was also a result we did not anticipate in the empirical evidence presented earlier. Given that left-wing parties tend to ‘concede’ the immigration issue to conservative forces for strategic electoral reasons, we did not expect leftist citizens to move in a more liberal (i.e. pro-immigration) direction in periods

of heightened electoral salience. The results suggest otherwise. Contrary to our first hypothesis, our results suggest that left-wing voters adopt more liberal (i.e. pro-immigration) attitudes when elections are salient. We can only speculate about what might explain this unexpected finding.

In a sense, the results are aligned with the broader literature on campaigns and elections. It is well-known that elections tend to increase political polarization (Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017; Hernández et al., 2021) and activate political identities and predispositions (Michelitch and Utych, 2018; Singh and Thornton, 2019). Since election campaigns are periods of maximum political conflict and information spread (Freedman et al., 2004), voters tend to harden their pre-existing attitudes rather than be persuaded by political messages that challenge their predispositions.

A key assumption in the literature that suggests that campaigns simply reinforce political predispositions is that voters are exposed to different messages coming from political parties that have clearly defined ideological policy proposals and that these messages have similar intensity. When these assumptions hold, campaigns serve mainly to strengthen existing preferences rather than to alter political attitudes (Finkel, 1993). What is puzzling in the results presented in this article is that the same ideological sorting and polarization appear to materialize in a policy area that is ‘owned’ by right-wing parties. Even if left-of-center parties avoid the immigration issue and/or adopt more moderate policy positions on immigration, left-wing voters move in a more liberal (pro-immigration) direction as elections become more salient.

One possible explanation is that voters use the policy pronouncements of opposing parties as heuristics (Colombo and Steenbergen, 2020). Left-wing voters exposed to anti-immigration rhetoric from conservative parties may take those messages as cues to reaffirm their own, more liberal views. In the absence of strong pro-immigration messaging from leftist parties, the stark contrast with right-wing narratives may activate pre-existing predispositions among left-leaning voters. However, in the weeks following the election, more centrist voters within the left-wing coalition may revert to seeing liberal immigration policies as overly permissive.

Another possible reason for this unexpected finding is that voters often self-select into ideologically aligned media outlets (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Prior, 2013), reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs and contributing to attitude polarization. Social media echo chambers further amplify this effect (Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). This matters because it shapes how citizens process anti-immigration messages, particularly during elections. While left-of-center parties may avoid confronting xenophobic rhetoric, liberal media and social networks often condemn such messages. As a result, left-wing voters are rarely exposed to conservative narratives in their raw form. Instead, they encounter these messages through critical lenses that reinforce liberal viewpoints, potentially prompting a more pro-immigration shift rather than the backlash one might expect.

Another important finding is that ideological sorting on immigration attitudes during elections is more pronounced in contexts where immigration is less salient. Our analyses show a clear, though short-lived, polarization in low-migration settings and in elections where immigration is not among the top campaign issues. While this may seem counterintuitive, it aligns with research showing that political attitudes vary in strength and crystallization (Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Sears and Funk, 1999; Tesler, 2014). In high-immigration contexts, citizens are often exposed to sustained information and political messaging over time, leading to more stable, well-formed attitudes. Immigration shocks can also trigger anxiety, prompting individuals to seek more information and reinforce their predispositions (Gadarian and Albertson, 2014). Moreover, in these contexts, parties – especially on the right – tend to politicize immigration early and often, contributing to the development of entrenched views. When these attitudes are reinforced by partisan loyalties, they become particularly resistant to change (Harteveld et al., 2017; Sears, 2001).

A recent study by Kustov et al. (2021) actually demonstrates using nine panel surveys conducted in high

immigration contexts (the United States and Western European countries) that immigration attitudes are remarkably stable, even amid major shocks like the 2008 global recession, the European refugee crisis, and Brexit. The authors attribute this persistence to deeply ingrained predispositions developed early in life rather than to transient environmental or informational factors. In a similar vein, Hopkins et al. (2019) show with a series of survey experiments that providing correct information about the size of immigrant populations does not consistently affect immigration attitudes. The authors suggest that immigration attitudes are anchored in stable psychological predispositions and socialization processes, making them resistant to information that contradicts pre-existing beliefs.

By contrast, individuals who live in contexts with limited experience of immigration may not have strong immigration attitudes or stable predispositions. Our results suggest that mass immigration attitudes in low-immigration contexts are more reactive to campaign rhetoric. Since immigration has only recently become a salient political issue in many countries in the Global South (e.g. Chile, Colombia, and Peru), and natives may lack crystallized opinions on immigration, it is possible that elections could engender greater xenophobic violence in those contexts. Future research should explore whether this is indeed the case.

In sum, while elite messages and partisan cues might be able to shape policy attitudes in an unfamiliar policy area (Santoro et al., 2021), our results suggest that voters' immigration attitudes are less malleable in contexts in which the issue is highly salient. In high immigration contexts, pre-existing immigration attitudes might be reinforced or primed (Tesler, 2014), but we are less likely to see attitude change (even a temporary one). In a similar vein, Paul and Fitzgerald (2021) show that concerns about immigration do not increase during election years in Germany, a country where the immigration issue is very salient.

Our article provides a supply-side story of immigrant attitudes coming from political parties. One potential limitation is that we pay less attention to the demand-side of anti-immigrant attitudes, which can be related to the political and geographic context in which people live within their countries. In particular, there is the question: Do elite cues during election campaigns shape immigration attitudes differently depending on citizens' exposure to immigration in the areas where they live within their countries? In line with our findings regarding the cross-national immigration context, it is plausible that people who live outside urban centers and have less direct contact with immigrants might

react more negatively to campaign messages that present immigration as a threat or as a problem. Evaluating whether and how exposure to immigrants shapes attitudes is fraught with methodological challenges because individuals self-select into the areas where they live within their countries. However, it remains an important question that could be explored in future research with a careful research design.

All in all, the preponderance of the evidence presented in this article allows us to be more sanguine about the role of democratic elections in shaping anti-immigrant sentiments. In contexts of high immigration saliency, citizens of all ideological stripes appear to be set in their ways, and their immigration attitudes do not shift one way or the other during the electoral period. However, in contexts of lower immigration saliency, we see an ideological polarization that is akin to the polarization we observe in other political attitudes in periods of heightened election saliency (Hernández et al., 2021; Singh and Thornton, 2019). Right-wing voters therefore develop more restrictive views on immigration as they follow the programmatic position of conservative parties during the campaign, although those effects appear to be short-lived.

However, we urge caution in the interpretation of these results. The fact that elections do not lead to a sustained increase in the level of xenophobia in high-migration contexts does not imply that migrants are not at greater risk of verbal and physical violence in the lead-up to (and immediately after) an election. For instance, a survey experiment conducted during the 2016 US presidential election shows that exposure to Donald Trump's racially inflammatory rhetoric, particularly about Mexican immigrants, emboldened individuals with existing prejudices (Newman et al., 2021). Prejudiced individuals were more likely to engage in harmful or discriminatory behaviors following exposure to inflammatory rhetoric, particularly when it was condoned by other elites. Another study demonstrates that the Brexit vote led to a 29% increase in hate crimes in the United Kingdom during the month following the referendum (Williams et al., 2023). Both studies suggest that inflammatory anti-immigration rhetoric during campaigns can lead to a sharp increase in hate crimes by shifting social norms, reducing suppression forces, and increasing justification for prejudice. In sum, while our results clearly show that anti-immigration messages during elections do not lead to a rapid increase in anti-immigration attitudes in the electorate, they can serve as focal points that embolden those who are already prejudiced.

This article has also important implications for preventing xenophobic violence in democracies when elections are salient. Our study suggests that implementing interventions to mitigate anti-immigrant sentiment and hate crimes during the electoral period is necessary. Governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations can play a key role by supporting initiatives that counter hate speech in public debates about immigration. These efforts can include urging political parties, media, and citizens to actively combat xenophobic discourse. Social media platforms, which often amplify such rhetoric, can also help by blocking or suspending harmful content and users. Interventions should be intensified during electoral periods and specifically directed at political actors and media that spread negative views about immigrants, as well as at social groups with malleable attitudes who are more susceptible to xenophobic beliefs.

Replication Data

The dataset and R scripts for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, are available at <https://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/>. All analyses were conducted using R.


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Notes

1. We contribute to a broader literature that investigates how real-world events shape immigration attitudes. For instance, previous research has shown that anti-immigrant attitudes are exacerbated after terrorist attacks, as they heighten perceptions of fear and threat (Frey, 2022; Huddy et al., 2005; Nussio et al., 2019). Similar dynamics have been observed in conflict settings; for instance, Bakke et al. (2025) show that in wartime Ukraine, direct

- experiences of violence significantly diminish citizens' support for safeguarding minority rights. Negative economic shocks have also been associated with an increase in anti-immigration attitudes (Laaker, 2024).
2. Most of the literature on electoral violence focuses on violence 'levied by political actors to purposefully influence the process and outcome of elections' (Birch et al., 2020). In this article, we are interested in understanding a more indirect form of electoral violence, that might emerge as ordinary citizens react in a xenophobic fashion to the charged anti-immigrant narratives that become more salient during the election season.
 3. For an interesting counterpoint, see the contribution by Krakowski and Morales (2025) in this special issue, which shows how political violence around election times decreases support for political elites associated with it in mature democracies.
 4. In Online Appendix D, we present evidence of the increased salience of the immigration topic in the weeks that immediately precede an election using Google trends data for several elections that took place in 2024.
 5. Related work in this special issue shows that outside of electoral contexts, exposure to politically salient information – especially about state misconduct – can shift public attitudes on punitive policies (Córdova and Tiscornia, 2025).
 6. Although other studies argue that echo-chambers might be less prevalent than we think (Guess, 2021).
 7. Albania, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Czechia, Denmark, El Salvador, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Tunisia, Türkiye, United States, and Uruguay.
 8. We believe the sampling procedures used in the CSES help mitigate biases associated with comparing subjects across time. Sampling procedures differ across countries, but they predominantly employ multistage stratified cluster sampling or stratified systematic random sampling. These methods involve first dividing the population into distinct subgroups and then drawing a systematic random sample from each group. This approach helps us mitigate concerns that the characteristics of respondents are different based on participating early or late in the survey.
 9. Of the total observations, 80% have a score between 1 and 90. After 90 days from the election, the score variable becomes scattered. As a result, we exclude those cases from the main analysis.
 10. A similar empirical strategy was used in recent studies analyzing the link between election salience and political polarization (Hernández et al., 2021; Singh and Thornton, 2019).
 11. While the Cronbach's α is slightly below the 0.7 threshold that indicates acceptable internal consistency, 0.68 is acceptable in this case because our anti-immigration index is made up of only three items (Cortina, 1993). Our results are remarkably consistent if we use the individual items rather than the scale to estimate the main results of the article (see Online Appendix A).
 12. We calculated these shock measures based on information obtained from the UN International Migrant Stock dataset. The concept of a 'shock' is designed to capture the relative change in migration within a country, using the same country as a reference point across time. This approach aims to standardize the measure (Severino and Visconti, 2025). As a robustness check, we complement this measure by examining how salient migration issues are to individuals in the affected countries.
 13. An interesting question for further research is how factors that drive significant differences in elite cues, media framing, and public opinion – such as terrorism events, economic changes, and the presence of radical right-wing parties – can produce heterogeneous treatment effects.

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