

MEETING THE CHALLENGES FROM THE POPULIST RIGHT

A STUDY OF VOTER ATTITUDES TOWARDS WELFARE AND IMMIGRATION IN DENMARK, GERMANY AND SWEDEN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This study focuses on welfare issues and immigration and explores how social democratic parties (SDPs) in Denmark, Germany and Sweden can regain electoral strength in the face of growing support for populist right-wing parties (PRPs). Over the past few decades, SDPs across Europe have seen a significant decline in voter support, while PRPs have capitalised on concerns related to immigration and cultural issues, particularly among working-class voters. By examining voter preferences in these countries, the study reveals a strategic challenge for the centre-left. The question is how to gain support from both the traditional working class, which is increasingly concerned about immigration, and the new middle class, which is generally more progressive on sociocultural issues.

Here, we make use of surveys conducted in Denmark, Germany and Sweden as part of this project. The findings indicate that welfare and redistribution remain central concerns for both working- and middle-class voters. However, when immigration becomes a highly salient issue, the SDPs face a dilemma. The working class, which has traditionally supported the left on welfare issues, is much more concerned about immigration than the new middle class, and the latter has much more positive attitudes toward immigration and immigrant-friendly policies than the former. When immigration is high on voters' political agenda, it benefits the populist right, mainly because it helps to secure a larger share of working-class voters. This tension among core constituents complicates the SDPs' path to electoral victory.

We argue that a focus on welfare policies, social justice and economic fairness could unite these voter groups – also when addressing the immigration issue. This study highlights the importance of addressing both economic and social integration of immigrants to mitigate the perceived threat of immigration, which PRPs have successfully exploited. While the study acknowledges that immigration and

related sociocultural issues are divisive, it suggests that SDPs could regain their foothold by promoting policies that emphasise immigrants' economic contribution to the welfare state. Moreover, the research shows that pro-welfare attitudes are widespread among voters across social classes and party affiliations. A progressive welfare agenda must be part of the foundation for rebuilding a centre-left electoral majority.

The study concludes by offering strategic recommendations for SDPs to navigate this complex political terrain. By balancing welfare policies with an approach to immigration that focuses on successful integration, SDPs stand a good chance of winning back support from disillusioned voters and countering the influence of PRPs. This research contributes to the ongoing debate on how the centre-left in Europe can adapt to changing voter dynamics and regain political power.

1. INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

Social democratic parties (SDPs) all over Europe have experienced a dramatic decrease in vote shares during the last 20-30 years. At the same time, populist right-wing parties (PRPs) have increased their vote share (Abou-Chadi et al. 2021). The PRPs in particular have gained a large share of working-class voters (Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021). Most PRP voters are not former centre-left voters, but some are, and a large share of PRPs' electoral base comes from the working class. The centre-left – not least SDPs – and the populist right compete for some of the same voters, and these voters may shift the median voter. Therefore, the progressive centre-left's road to power is complicated by the electoral success of the populist right.

This study examines the strategies that the combined centre-left “field” of parties can use to win elections (cf. Häusermann 2024). In doing so, we primarily focus on voter preferences concerning welfare issues and immigration among middle- and working-class voters and voters from different parties. Due to generally higher levels of education in the population, and the post-industrialisation of the economy, the classic working class has shrunk. To compensate for the loss of working-class voters, SDPs are increasingly catering to voters in the new middle class (Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024). Traditionally, the SDPs in most Western European countries have held strong positions on welfare and redistribution that appeal to both working-class and new-middle-class voters. Voter support for economic fairness, redistribution and equality, and state responsibility for welfare is widespread in the working and middle classes in most Western European countries. In fact, redistributive preferences are the main reason why educated voters vote for SDPs (Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021). When elections are about classical themes, such as redistribution and welfare, SDPs are well-positioned to mobilise both working- and middle-class voters.

We are not the first to argue that a progressive social protection and social investment strategy is part of the social democratic ideological legacy, which also must be part of a successful centre-left electoral strategy to unite middle- and working-class voters in the future (Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024). However, the present study not only shows that the new middle class and the working class in Denmark, Germany and Sweden are equally concerned about welfare issues, but we also show that a large share of PRP voters in these countries find welfare issues more important than immigration and have pro-welfare attitudes to the same extent as the average SDP voter. Therefore, they may be potential future SDP and centre-left voters.



When elections are about classical themes, such as redistribution and welfare, SDPs are well-positioned to mobilise both working- and middle-class voters.



The real challenge is the immigration issue. When immigration is high on the voters' political agenda – and sometimes it is – SDPs face an electoral dilemma because working-class voters are more concerned about immigration than middle-class voters and voters with higher levels of education (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Fietkau and Hansen 2018; Heath and Richards 2019).

Historically, the SDPs have adopted a libertarian position on sociocultural issues, such as women's and LGBTQIA+ rights and immigration. But with the rise of PRPs, immigration has become a potentially polarising issue for SDPs because the working and middle classes feel differently about immigration.

If this is inescapably so, the strategic choice that SDPs face becomes an either/or situation. SDPs can either appeal to the multicultural and immigration-friendly new middle class, or they can cater to the working-class worries over immigration. The SDPs side with either the working class or the new middle class on the immigration issue (Häusermann 2024).

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Immigration, we will argue, is not inherently a divisive, sociocultural issue.

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We will make a different argument. Immigration, we will argue, is not inherently a divisive, sociocultural issue. The European PRPs have succeeded in framing immigration as a threat, culturally as well as economically. The political debate about immigration often fuels anxieties about immigrants' alleged lack of capacity or outright reluctance to integrate and assimilate due to differences in religious beliefs, lack of language skills and cultural background. When immigration is phrased in this vein, it polarises voters.

But, as we will argue and show, the attitudes towards immigration are much more positive among voters,

and this includes working-class voters, when immigrants are well-integrated, economically as well as socially. Cultural stereotypes relating to immigrants' origin are much less important for voter attitudes towards immigration than the immigrants' degree of integration. And this is also true for PRP voters. To us, this suggests that immigration does not need to be an issue that polarises working-class and "new"-middle-class voters. We will show this by way of several survey experiments, in which we vary immigrant characteristics to get a more detailed understanding of what it is about immigrants that worries some voters.

We are, of course, fully aware that immigration attitudes cannot be swayed merely by rhetoric and shrewd framing strategies. At the end of the day, trustworthy political communication must be backed by policy. Therefore, we also hope that the findings in this study will inspire not only how SDPs communicate about immigration and integration, but also their policies.

In what follows, we first present the argument and research questions (Section 2). Then, we follow with a description of the research design of the study (Section 3). After the research design, we present the empirical analyses and the results of the study (Section 4). In Section 5, we sum up the results of the analysis and discuss how the SDPs and political parties on the left can regain electoral strength in the face of the challenges from the populist right. Lastly, Section 6 contains our conclusions based on our findings, together with policy recommendations.

2. THE ARGUMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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During the last 20-30 years, SDPs all over Europe have been challenged by PRPs, not least because immigration has become more salient to voters. Studies have shown that PRPs experience electoral success when the saliency of immigration is high among voters, and that saliency tends to be high when immigration rates are high. On the other hand, the vote share for SDPs decreases when the saliency of immigration is high (Dennison and Geddes 2019, Dennison and Kriesi 2022). The saliency of immigration is not equally high all the time, but when it is, PRPs gain votes. The ebbs and flows of immigration saliency may also help explain why Alternative for Germany (AfD) did poorly at the 2021 national election in Germany. The flooding in Nordrhein-Westphalen and Rheinland-Pfalz made the consequences of climate change a top issue, along with the need for economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic (Oltermann 2021). Immigration was not high on the agenda, and AfD lost.

In general, PRPs have a much stronger presence in Denmark, Germany and Sweden today than 20 years ago.

In Denmark, the PRPs have been part of the political landscape since the 1970s, with the entry of the Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*), which was superseded by the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) in 1995. At the Danish 2001 election, the Danish People's Party became the party with the highest share of working-class voters of all parties. In 2015, the Danish People's Party gained a record high 21.1% of the national vote, and in the 2022 election, the three anti-immigration parties that got elected to *Folketinget* received 16.4% of the vote. The Danish People's Party became part of the political mainstream in 2001, when it became part of the parliamentary majority coalition that secured

the minority centre-right government that stayed in power for ten years.

The rise of PRPs in Germany is more recent. True, two PRPs gained representation in the 1949 election, the *German Right Party* and the *Economic Reconstruction Union*, but both parties were short-lived. Since then, no PRP gained representation in the Bundestag until 2017, when the AfD was elected with 12.6% of the vote. In the autumn of 2023, AfD won electoral victories in the two German *Länder* (states), Hesse and Bavaria, and gained 18.4% and 14.6% of the vote, respectively (Conolly 2023).

In the state elections in September 2024, AfD became the largest party in Thuringia with 32.8% of the vote, whereas *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW) received 15.8% of the vote and came in third. In Saxony, the picture was almost the same. AfD received 30.6% of the vote and BSW 11.8%. In both states, the three parties that are presently in government in Germany received less than 15% of the vote combined (Kirby and Parker 2024).

Just like in Germany, the rise of a PRP in Sweden is more recent than in Denmark. In Sweden, The Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) got 5.7% of the vote in the 2010 election; in 2014, the share was 12.9%; by 2018, it was 17.5%; and in the most recent election in 2022, The Sweden Democrats came in second and got 20.5% of the national vote. In 2022, across several polls, "law and order/crime" was a top-three issue among voters, along with education and healthcare (Wikipedia 2023, Holmberg et al 2023: 106). In a 2021 national survey, 41% saw law and order issues as being the most important. This is a drastic increase from 2014 and 2018, where, respectively, 4% and 16% saw law and order as the most

important issue (Martinsson 2022). One reason for the higher saliency of law and order seems to be that immigration and law and order are seen as closely connected in Sweden – especially since 2020 (cf. Ekström et al. 2023). Just like in Denmark and Germany, immigration is a highly salient issue among Swedish voters.

The rise of PRPs and the politicisation of the immigration issue is not unique to Denmark, Germany and Sweden. In countries with a strong presence of PRPs, the populist right "challenges the left over its working class stronghold", and the working class is the largest social class of PRP voters (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Oesch 2008; Abou-Chadi et al. 2021). When the working class supports the left, it is not because of, but despite, its libertarian stances on sociocultural issues (Oesch and Rennwald 2018: 16). As recently argued by Häusermann, "working-class voters today constitute the core constituency of radical right parties in Europe" (2024: 167), and arguably, "more working-class voters have moved to non-left parties for predominantly cultural reasons" (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015: 54; cf. Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

Of course, the working class itself is highly diverse, and not all, or even most, voters in the working class have turned to the PRPs. Therefore, the question is how big a challenge the populist right and its immigration agenda are to the SDPs and centre-left parties in Western Europe when it comes to gaining votes and securing government power.

2.1 Immigration, sociocultural issues and the challenge from the populist right

Most observers of European electoral politics depict PRPs as a direct challenge to parties on the left, particularly SDPs. According to this perspective, the battleground where the populist right has the upper hand is in immigration and sociocultural issues. The argument is that a progressive stance on sociocultural issues and pro-immigration programs does not cater to the worries of the working class,

who are "losers" in a time of modernisation and globalisation and in competition over jobs with increasing numbers of immigrants (cf. Kriesi et al. 2006). If the SDPs do not address this challenge and adopt more stern immigration policies, they will lose big time at the ballot box, the argument goes (cf. Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Whether this is the case is a rather tricky question because the argument rests on several assumptions that cannot be taken for granted.

Firstly, voters consider a host of issues when deciding which party to vote for. Immigration may or may not be a salient issue that carries weight when making this decision. Saliency varies between individuals and over time, depending on real-world circumstances, for example, the number of immigrants, the business trend or party competition dynamics (cf. Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019). This means that no single party can control issue saliency (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020), but it goes without saying that if SDPs potentially are losing votes to the PRPs because of the immigration issue, this challenge is bigger when the immigration issue is salient among voters. This argument is related to the theory of issue ownership (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015). If PRPs "own" the immigration issue, they will gain electorally when immigration is high on voters' agenda.

A corollary to this line of reasoning is that SDPs, if possible, should try to avoid the immigration issue in their electoral strategy and campaign (Arnesen et al. 2023). But no matter how clever a strategy the SDPs come up with, no single party will be fully able to control issue saliency among voters. Bear in mind 2015, when large numbers of refugees crossed the borders of European countries: in that context, no single party or communication strategy would be able to convince voters that immigration was not a salient issue to many voters (cf. Heath and Richards 2019). Therefore, the SDPs cannot avoid talking about and taking a stance on the immigration issue. Immigration will sometimes be highly salient to most voters, and it will be highly salient to some voters most of the time.

In this study, we focus on cross-sectional differences in immigration saliency between different groups of voters. The first set of research questions (RQ1) is:

- a) Is the immigration issue more salient to working-class voters than among voters belonging to other socioeconomic groups?
- b) Is the immigration issue more salient among voters who hold pro- or anti-immigration attitudes?
- c) How salient is the immigration issue among SDP and PRP voters, and among voters who have switched between these two party families?

Secondly, any position on the immigration issue may potentially attract some voters but repel other voters (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020; Abou-Chadi et al. 2024). Vote switching is a two-way street (Häusermann et al. 2021). A strict position on immigration may be attractive to some, or perhaps even most, working-class voters, but, at the same time, dissuade middle-class voters from voting for SDPs. For the combined centre-left, the question is which position yields the largest net gain of voters, but for the SDPs maximising centre-left electoral support may be quite different from maximising support for the SDPs (Kitschelt and Rehm 2024). Leaving aside normative and ideological considerations about which policy stance is more sympathetic, squaring this circle may be the real electoral challenge that SDPs face now and in the future.

Let us first consider the educated middle class – sometimes referred to as “sociocultural professionals” (cf. Oesch and Rennwald 2018). The sociocultural professionals typically work in relatively highly skilled jobs that involve an interpersonal work logic (Oesch 2006). Educated middle-class voters overwhelmingly prefer a progressive-libertarian stance on immigration and sociocultural issues more broadly (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Abou-Chadi et al. 2021). As Hainmueller and Hopkins point out in their review of the literature on immigration attitudes: “education is perhaps the most powerful predictor of pro-immigration attitudes” (2014: 241).

But they also stress that the mechanism behind the education-immigration correlation is far from fully understood.

Working-class voters are more negative towards immigration (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Fietkau and Hansen 2018; Heath and Richards 2019). More generally, voters with low levels of education hold less progressive-libertarian attitudes on socio-cultural issues (Stubager 2010), and arguably, “more working-class voters have moved to non-left parties for predominantly cultural reasons” (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015: 54; cf. Oesch and Rennwald 2018). Of course, this is not true for all, or even most, voters in the working class, but it is true for a substantial number. Working-class voters (production workers, office clerks and service workers) are the socioeconomic group with the largest share of PRP voters (Abou-Chadi et al. 2021, cf. also Oesch 2008).

Studies by Silja Häusermann, Tarik Abou-Chadi and associates have cautioned us not to exaggerate how much a progressive-libertarian position on immigration and sociocultural issues will cost the SDPs in terms of lost voters to PRPs, and – by implication – how many votes can be gained from PRPs by adopting a stern and protectionist stance on these issues (Häusermann et al. 2021; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020; Abou-Chadi et al. 2021; cf. Mudde 2013). Part of the reason for this is that a progressive stance on sociocultural issues may attract more middle-class voters with higher education, which will offset the potential loss of working-class voters to PRPs. But it may also be because working-class voters are less prone to switch from SDPs to PRPs than many expect. One study estimates that 15-20% of those who switched to a PRP from 2000-2018 had voted for an SDP prior to the switch (Abou-Chadi et al. 2021: 17). By comparison, between 35 and 40% switched from a mainstream right-wing party.¹ In our data, collected in the spring of 2024, 26% of PRP voters in Denmark, Germany and Sweden had previously voted for SDPs.

Recent studies that employed experimental manipulation rather than observational data have shown that, if the Danish SDP adopted a more restrictive

immigration policy, it could attract a large share of voters from the Danish People’s Party (Hjorth and Larsen 2020). Importantly, according to these studies, the SDP could attract voters from PRPs without any electoral cost to the total left-wing vote. A recent experimental study from Norway points in the same direction, but in this case, the SDP attracts voters from the right at the expense of losing votes to parties to the left of the SDP (Arnesen et al. 2023; cf. also Häusermann et al. 2021: 5-6 for similar results). In the first study, maximising SDP votes also maximises the combined centre-left vote, whereas, according to the second study, there can be tension between the two ambitions.

To see if there is a dilemma, we must know more about the immigration attitudes in different groups of voters. On that basis, the second set of research questions (RQ2) is:

- a) Are anti-immigration attitudes more widespread among working-class voters than among other socioeconomic groups?
- b) Are anti-immigration attitudes more widespread among PRP voters than among SDP voters? If so, do these differences vary across voters (a) that have switched between these parties, or (b) belong to different socioeconomic groups?
- c) Are pro-immigration attitudes more widespread among left party voters than among SDP voters? If so, do these differences vary across voters (a) that have switched between these parties, or (b) belong to different socioeconomic groups?

2.2 Preferences for equality and welfare

In contrast to sociocultural issues, there seems to be consensus among the middle and working classes when it comes to preferences for welfare and egalitarianism. SDPs and the parties on the left usually benefit when electoral competition is about redistribution and the welfare state (Häusermann et al. 2021). In most Western European countries, the

SDPs have ownership over these issues, and studies indicate that SDPs can attract voters from both left- and right-wing parties when they advocate welfare expansion, both when it comes to social protection and to social investment policies (Häusermann et al. 2021; cf. Green-Pedersen 2012; Stubager et al. 2020). It has even been argued that the widespread preference for welfare expansion among voters more generally, not least in the Nordics, has swayed mainstream parties on the right to adopt more pro-welfare positions in their party platforms (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015). In general, SDPs stand a better chance of winning electorally when elections focus on welfare issues and equality, rather than on sociocultural issues that may divide potential voters.

It is well-known that low-income voters with lower levels of education, including working-class voters, have a stronger preference for redistribution and expansive welfare policies than higher income, more educated voters (Svallfors 1997; Attewell 2022; Mengel and Weidenholzer 2023). This is still the case, even if other more fine-grained distinctions, for example, between welfare policies that focus on social protection or investment strategies (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015) or education-based differences in deservingness perceptions (Attewell 2022), add nuances to the picture.

However, a preference for egalitarianism and welfare expansion is also widespread among large segments of middle-class voters, notably public sector employees with some post-secondary education (nurses, teachers, social workers etc.), a group that is sometimes referred to as “sociocultural professional” (Oesch 2008) or “the new middle class” (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015). The new middle class strongly supports the welfare state (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015), and in fact, these preferences are important for their choice to vote for SDPs (Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021). Note that this is the same group which is expected to have more pro-immigration attitudes than traditional working-class voters. Egalitarianism and expansive welfare policies may therefore be the SDPs’ key to attract both working-class and new-middle-class voters. Today, in most Western European countries,

middle-class voters constitute the largest share of the electoral base for pro-welfare parties on the left (Gingrich and Häuserman 2015).

In the present study, we expect to confirm these findings on preferences for equality and welfare. If the saliency of welfare issues and pro-welfare attitudes are widespread among voters across different social groups and party affiliations, focusing on these issues may be a key element in a centre-left strategy to win an electoral majority. Hence, the third set of research questions (RQ3) is:

- a) Is the saliency of welfare issues higher among SDP than PRP voters?
- b) Are egalitarian and pro-welfare attitudes more widespread among working-class and new-middle-class voters than among voters from other social groups?
- c) Are egalitarian and pro-welfare attitudes more widespread among SDP voters than PRP voters? If so, do these differences vary across voters (a) that have switched between these parties, or (b) belong to different socioeconomic groups?
- d) Are egalitarian and pro-welfare attitudes more widespread among left party voters than among SDP voters? If so, do these differences vary across voters (a) that have switched between these parties, or (b) belong to different socioeconomic groups?

2.3 The social democratic strategic dilemma

So far, we have assumed that immigration policy is an inescapably contentious issue, an issue that divides voters and can potentially account for the fact that more and more working-class voters turn to the PRPs. If so, SDPs can choose between appealing to left-wing voters or potential PRP voters, but they cannot do both at the same time. In terms of strategy, this poses a dilemma.

With a broad consensus for welfare expansion and egalitarianism among voters on the far and mainstream left – and arguably also among working-class voters who support PRPs² – it is the battleground of immigration (and a few other sociocultural issues) that makes potential SDP voters choose left parties or PRPs instead (Kitschelt and Häusermann 2021; cf. also Häusermann et al. 2021). Some research has shown that accommodating PRPs on immigration and other sociocultural issues does not lead to voters switching from PRPs to SDPs (Krause et al. 2023); other research has shown that SDPs may gain electorally by moving right on immigration when voters are sceptical towards immigration, but this does not reduce PRP support (Spoon and Klüver 2020); and a third strand of research suggests that a stern anti-immigration policy can indeed win voters over to the centre-left, even if SDP gains may be partially offset by losses to Green and left parties (Arnesen et al. 2023; Hjort and Larsen 2020). There is also research that suggests that SDPs may be winning more votes by adopting a semi-restrictive immigration policy, rather than a very stern or very lenient immigration position (Abou-Chadi et al. 2025). In that sense, the jury is still out. However, with the dramatic increase in PRP electoral support over the last couple of years, the PRPs in countries such as Germany and Sweden have undoubtedly secured a large share of working-class voters, who 10 or 20 years ago would have voted for SDPs.

Adding to this conundrum, it is quite likely that a progressive immigration strategy may maximise votes for SDPs but not the chances of securing the centre-left majority that is required to get into government office. In multiparty systems, maximising votes does not automatically mean that you maximise the chances of securing a parliamentary majority among parties that will bring you into office (cf. the classical argument by Strøm 1990; cf. Hjorth and Larsen 2020).

No matter how steep the trade-off, it seems much more promising to try to identify a position on immigration that appeals to broad segments of voters.

As suggested in some research, there may be a middle position that may be attractive to potential SDP voters (Abou-Chadi et al. 2025). We argue and show that such a position should address the economic and social concerns of voters. If immigrants are well-integrated economically and socially, we argue, a large majority of voters welcome immigrants.

To get a more informed idea about what is shaping immigration attitudes, we move beyond the literature on party choice and voting behaviour and inspect the extant literature on immigration attitudes. The general message in this literature is that attitudes toward immigration are less static and inflexible than the literature on party choice suggests.

2.4 Is immigration necessarily a divisive sociocultural issue?

Following the literature, attitudes to immigration may be informed by both cultural concerns and fear about the economic and distributional consequences of immigration.

The literature on attitudes to immigration mainly revolves around perceived threats among voters. The gist of the argument is that immigration attitudes are somehow shaped by anxiety and worries about the consequences of immigration. In general, there are two lines of theoretical explanations for people's concerns regarding immigration. One focuses on the cultural threat that immigrants may pose; the other focuses on economic threat perceptions. Besides, both threat perceptions may be informed by individual (egotropic) concerns, as well as worries for what immigration will mean for society (sociotropic concerns).

One branch of the literature argues that immigration is predominantly perceived as a threat towards the norms and values of the majority culture in society (Sniderman et al. 2004). The notion is that immigrants will undermine the native culture because the characteristics of immigrants (e.g.,

their cultural background, religious beliefs, way of life or language skills) make it highly unlikely that immigrants assimilate into the majority culture (Newman et al. 2012, Higham 1985, Schräg 2010). Underlying the cultural threat perception is people's inclination to adopt stereotypes and categorise in terms of in- and out-groups. People – some people more than others – tend to be wary, sceptical and sometimes even hostile to out-groups (Sniderman et al. 2004).

Several studies have found support for the cultural threat explanation of attitudes towards immigration (see, e.g., Chandler and Tsai 2001, Ivarsflaten 2006, De Coninck and Matthijs 2020, Newman et al. 2012). However, often the most important aspect measured, as part of the cultural threat perception, is immigrants' inability to speak the language of the majority population (e.g., Newman et al. 2012; De Coninck and Matthijs 2020). As argued by Newman and colleagues, lack of language skills "cause many individuals to feel threatened because of real barriers to interpersonal communication and exchange" (2012: 635).

The language skill aspect of threat perceptions does not necessarily lend itself to a strong cultural explanation based on stereotypical reasoning. As argued by Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014: 242) in their review of the literature, hostility towards immigrants who do not speak the native language may also be based on the belief that these immigrants will be an economic burden to society because a lack of language skills makes immigrants less employable (cf. Arendt and Bolvig 2020). Besides, it may also be based on the belief that immigrants will be socially isolated. More generally, Hainmueller and Hopkins suggest that "differentiating among cultural traits based on their perceived immutability" may be a way forward to get a fuller picture of the antecedents of immigration attitudes, because the evidence seems to indicate that "immigrants' language use influences immigration attitudes but that their skin tone does not" (ibid.). In any case, most immigrants can acquire language skills if the country of residence supports language courses.

On a purely descriptive level, Hainmueller and Hopkins seem to be right. Far more Europeans are concerned about immigrants' language skills than their ethnic background or religion. Heath and Richards demonstrate this with data from the European Social Survey (Heath and Richards 2019). Both language skills and being committed to the way of life in the host country are perceived as far more important criteria for accepting immigrants than either ethnic background or religion. This underlines the fact that there might be differences in the perceived cultural threat, depending on which aspects of culture are considered. But it also suggests that immigration attitudes are much more influenced by immigrants' willingness to integrate and invest in language skills, so that they become more employable than their religious beliefs and the colour of their skin. In the analysis that follows, we have more to say about which immigrant characteristics are most important for attitudes towards immigration.

In the other branch of the literature on attitudes towards immigration, immigration is not perceived as cultural, but rather as an economic threat (cf. Turper et al. 2015; Aalberg et al. 2012; Dustmann and Preston 2007). The perceived economic threat comes in two versions: egotropic and sociotropic. Increased job competition, higher taxes or competition over scarce welfare benefits may be a threat to the individual. If these kinds of concerns dominate, you have an egotropic, economic threat perception. Fear about the sustainability of the welfare state and the well-being of the economy, on the other hand, is a sociotropic, economic threat perception. Several studies have examined which of the economic threats are most important for immigration attitudes, and the consensus is that most people are concerned about sociotropic economic threats, not individual costs (see references in the review by Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; see also Larsen et al. 2009; Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Hainmueller et al. 2011; Dinesen et al. 2016; Hjorth 2016).

Both the cultural and economic threat perceptions have been shown to influence immigration attitudes.

What matters most is less clear. In that sense, the jury is out.

In this study, we test the influence of both cultural and economic threat perceptions on attitudes towards immigration and, in doing so, examine if some of the most significant cultural concerns – such as a lack of language skills and potential challenges to the native “way of life” – are important when controlling for economic concerns. That is, are these apparent cultural influences important when immigrants are not costly to the welfare state, but rather contribute to the well-being of the economy and civil society?

Following Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014), we suspect that sociotropic economic concerns are more important for immigration attitudes than ethnicity and other immutable cultural cues. We are more uncertain about cultural cues that, in principle, are more controllable to the individual immigrants because, for example, poor language skills can be seen as a lack of motivation to contribute to society and an unwillingness to acquire the skills needed to get a job.

Hence, our fourth set of research questions (RQ4) is:

- a) Are immigration attitudes more influenced by economic than cultural concerns?
- b) Do concerns vary across socioeconomic groups?
- c) Is the relationship between threat perceptions and immigration attitudes different between SDP and PRP voters?

The answers to these questions are extremely important for the strategic terrain that SDPs must navigate within and how they can successfully address the challenge from PRPs on immigration issues.

3. DATA AND MEASURES

3. DATA AND MEASURES

This study is based on a survey among representative samples in Denmark, Sweden and Germany. In all three countries, around 2,000 respondents have been surveyed. In Denmark, the exact number of respondents is 2,011, in Sweden 2,008 and in Germany 2,012. The total sample consists of 6,031 respondents. Norstat has distributed the survey. The response rates for the survey are 26% in Denmark, 22% in Sweden and 20% in Germany. The data was collected 12-21 April 2024. The sample is weighted for gender, age and region considerations in each country to secure representativeness of the samples for these variables.

In the following section, we explain how the main variables in this study are operationalised and measured. The English version of the full questionnaire is available in Annex A1. The questionnaires in Danish, German and Swedish are available upon request.

3.1 Saliency of immigration and welfare

We expect the saliency of immigration and welfare issues to vary between different social groups and voters who vote for different parties.

Saliency is measured based on the respondents' assessments of the importance of a series of political issues. Specifically, we ask respondents how important issues are when they decide which party to vote for. Question order has been randomised to avoid ordering effects. See Annex A2 for the full list of issues and the mean saliency of each issue. In all countries, cultural value is the least-salient issue among voters, while healthcare and elderly care are the most salient issues.

The respondents have assessed the importance of each political issue on a Likert-like scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "very important".

The respondents have also had the opportunity to answer "don't know" in each of their assessments. Their answers have been coded with values ranging from one to four, and "don't know" answers are excluded from the analysis.

The saliency of immigration is based upon the assessment of the one verbatim issue, "immigration". The saliency of welfare is measured as the mean score of the respondent's assessments of how important "childcare", "education", and "healthcare and elderly care" are, namely, three substantial aspects of welfare. The average response to the three issues is the saliency score. Both saliency measures range from one to four, with one being least salient and four being highly salient.

3.2 Attitudes toward immigration

We measure attitudes toward immigration with an index that includes five questions about immigration policy and how immigrants should be treated:

- We should allow more immigrants to come to [Denmark/Germany/Sweden] to work.
- [Denmark/Germany/Sweden] should have a strict immigration policy.
- Immigrants with residence permits in [Denmark/Germany/Sweden] should have the same access to healthcare services as [Danes/Germans/Swedes].
- It should be more difficult for immigrants to be allowed to stay in [Denmark/Germany/Sweden].
- Immigrants who commit crimes in [Denmark/Germany/Sweden] should be deported – regardless of the severity of the crime.

The answers to questions a and c have been reversed, since agreeing to these questions expresses a pro-immigration attitude, in contrast to questions b, d and e.

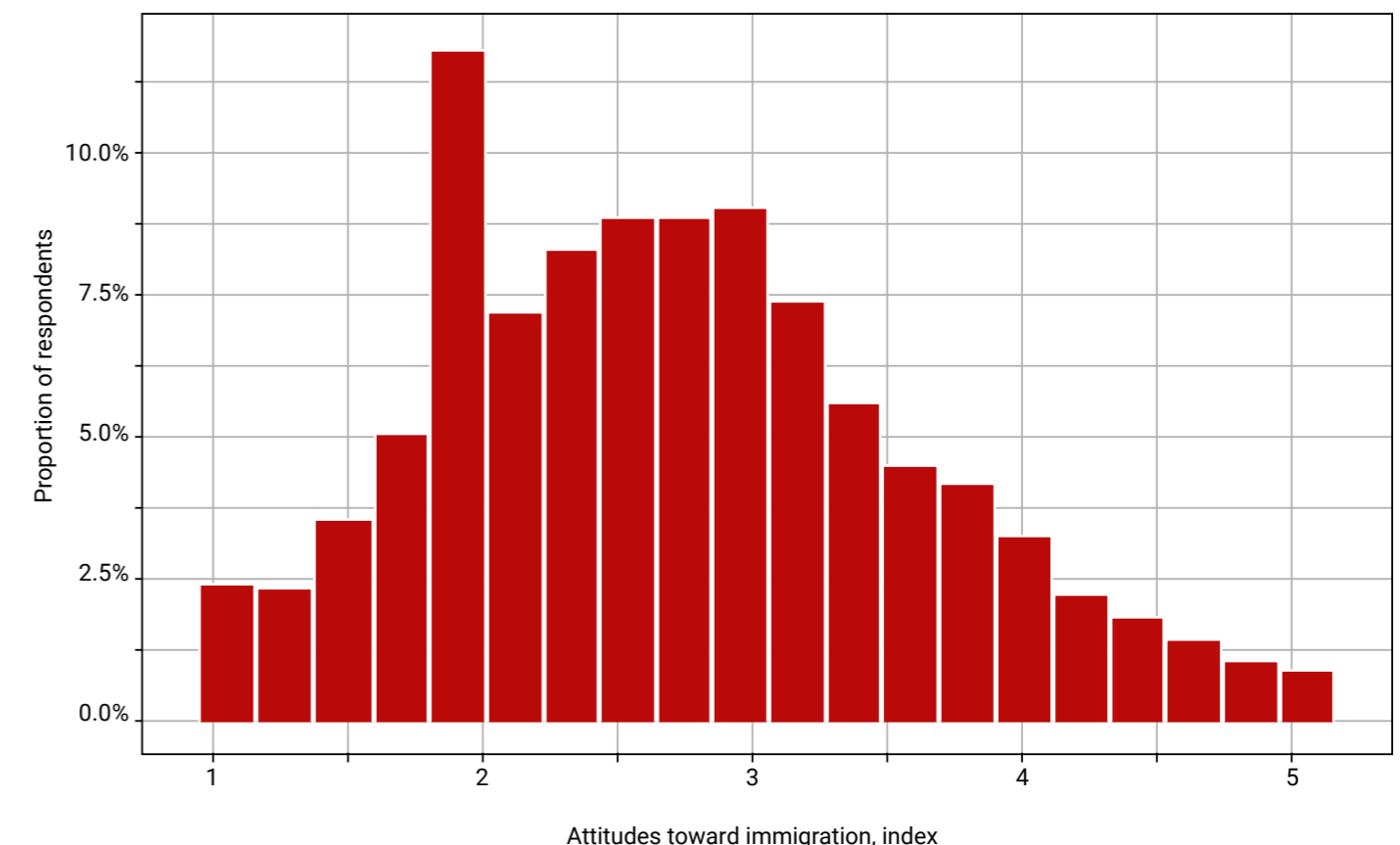
By measuring immigration attitudes with multiple questions, we reduce measurement error and create a more robust measure of immigration attitudes that tap into various aspects of immigration policy. The answers have been coded with values ranging from one to five. A high score on attitudes toward immigration indicates that the respondents have positive immigration attitudes. See Annex A3.1 for a thorough description of the construction of the index.

We have conducted two analyses to make sure that

our index is a reliable measure. We inspect both item-to-item correlations and Cronbach's Alpha to gauge the reliability of the index. The item-item correlations are all between 0.3 and 0.7, and Cronbach's Alpha for the index is 0.82. The index therefore seems to be a reliable measure. See Annex A3.2 for an overview of the correlations.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the respondents' attitudes toward immigration according to our index. The scores follow a normal distribution. As expected, most respondents are placed on the middle values of the index, while there are fewer respondents on the more extreme values of the index. The mean value for attitudes toward immigration is 2.7 (standard deviation (SD) = 0.89).

Figure 1. Distribution of respondents within the index of attitudes toward immigration.



3.3 Attitudes toward welfare and equality

In measuring attitudes toward welfare, we use six questions, and for equality we use two questions. As argued in Section 3.2, this is done to get robust measures of the respondents' opinions.

Attitudes toward welfare are based on the respondents' assessment of the responsibilities of the government regarding securing certain welfare services for a country's inhabitants. Question order has been randomised to avoid ordering effects. See Annex A4.1 for a more thorough description of the construction of the index.

The questions on welfare are:

People have different views on what the responsibilities of governments should be. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

The government should...

- Ensure adequate healthcare for all.*
- Ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old.*
- Ensure a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed.*
- Ensure sufficient childcare for working parents.*
- Ensure adequate education and training for all.*
- Provide paid leave from work for people who temporarily have to care for sick family members.*

Our two questions on equality are often used as a measure of egalitarianism, which is one of the core principles of the welfare state (see, e.g., van Oorschot et al. 2012). Others use the questions as a measure of preferences for redistribution (see Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021). In this analysis, we see the measure as an expression of attitudes toward equality; see Annex A4.3.

The questions for equality are:

- Large differences in people's incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and efforts.*
- For a society to be fair, differences in people's standard of living should be small.*

The answer to question a has been reversed, since agreeing to this question expresses a negative attitude toward equality, in contrast to question b.

The respondents have assessed the responsibility of each welfare service, as well as the two equality questions, on a Likert-like scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The answers have been coded with values ranging from one to five. A high score on attitudes toward welfare indicates that the respondents are positive toward an extensive welfare state.

Again, we conducted two analyses to make sure that our index was a reliable measure: item-to-item correlations and Cronbach's Alpha. The item-item correlations for the welfare index are all between 0.3 and 0.6, and Cronbach's Alpha for the index is 0.78. The index therefore seems to be a reliable measure. See Annex A4.2 for an overview of the correlations. The correlation between the two equality attitude indicators is 0.42, and Cronbach's Alpha for the index is 0.59. For Cronbach's Alpha with only two items, you often see somewhat lower alpha values. This means that we should expect a bit more noise in our measurement of equality. That said, a two-item index is still a more reliable measure than using just one question to measure equality.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the respondents' scores on the welfare index. Most respondents score at the high end of index. Not surprisingly, most voters in Northern European countries like Denmark, Sweden and Germany favour an encompassing welfare state that is responsible for universal healthcare, childcare, education and so forth. The mean value for attitudes toward welfare is 4.2 (standard deviation (SD) = 0.57).

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the respondents' attitudes toward equality, according to the index.

The mean value for attitudes toward equality is 3.0 (standard deviation (SD) = 0.88).

Figure 2. Distribution of respondents within the index of attitudes toward welfare.

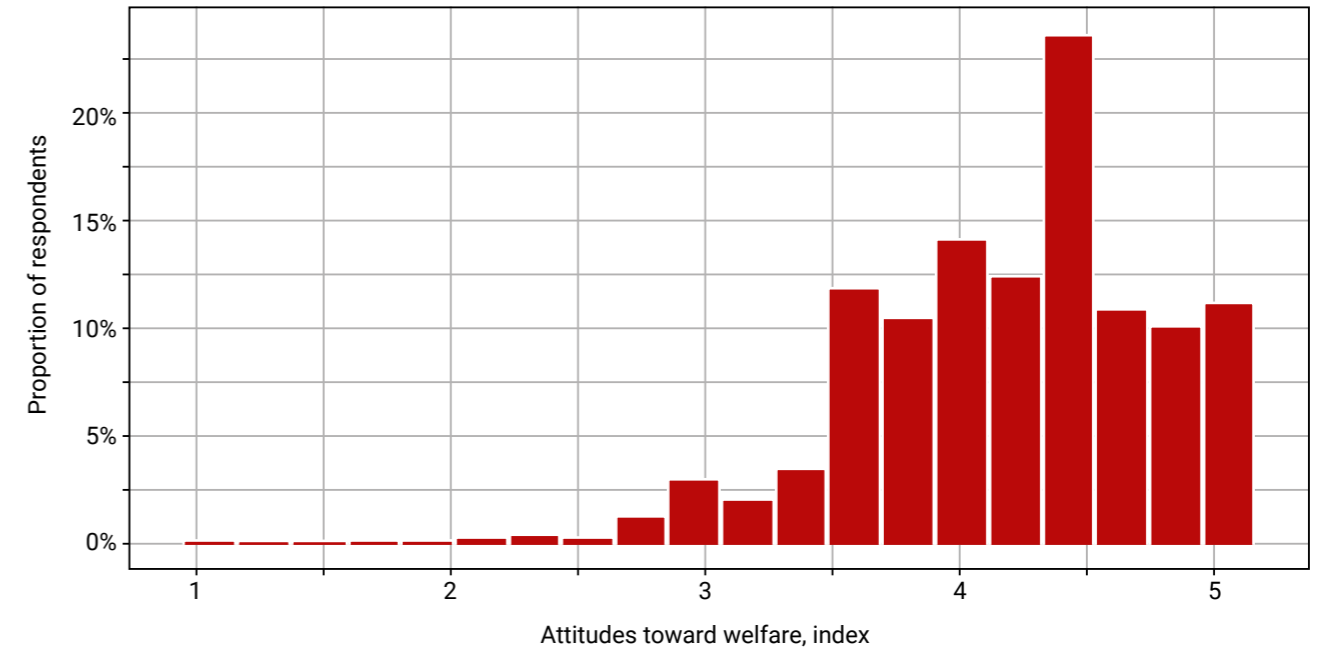


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents within the index of attitudes toward equality

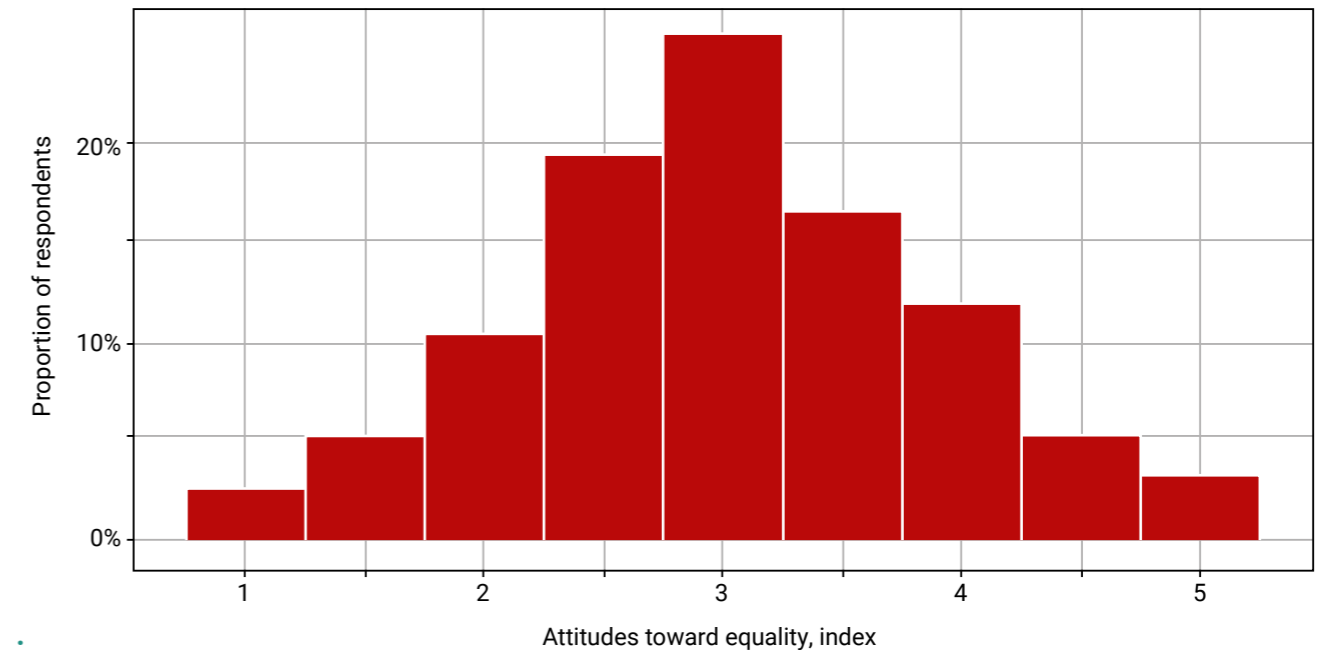


Table 1. Definition of the social classes used in the analysis.

CLASS (BROAD DEFINITION)	CLASS (NARROW DEFINITION)	WORK LOGIC	SHARE OF SAMPLE (%)
Employers, professional self-employed – high skill level		Independent	2
Small-business owners – low/general skill level		Independent	3.6
<hr/>			
Middle class – high skill level			54.6
	Technical (semi-) professionals	Technical	12.4
	(Associate) managers	Organisational	22.5
	Sociocultural (semi-) professionals (also called “new” middle class)	Interpersonal	19.7
<hr/>			
Working class – low/general skill level			39.8
	Production workers	Technical	9.3
	Office clerks	Organisational	12.6
	Service workers	Interpersonal	17.9

Note: The shares are weighted after gender, age and region considerations. n = 4,827. 1,239 respondents are excluded from the table, since we were not able to place them into ISCO coding. This was either due to the respondents not giving sufficient answers for us to code (811), them refusing to answer (302 respondents) or respondents who have not previously had a paid job (126).

3.4 Social classes

Several of our research questions suggest that political orientations may vary across social classes. More specifically, we expect class differences in the saliency and attitudes towards immigration and welfare. In the analyses, we both use Daniel Oesch’s fine-grained class categorisation scheme and a broader distinction between the working class and new middle class that merges some of the Oesch categories into aggregated measures of class. The coding of respondents’ class belonging involves several steps.

Firstly, we ask respondents to report their job title/description and workplace for their primary occupation. If they do not have a job (e.g., pensioners or unemployed), we ask them about their most recent occupation. Then we ask whether respondents are employees, employers or self-employed. Respondents’ occupation is then coded into the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) at the most detailed level possible (see International Labour Organization 2012 for a detailed description).

Next, based on the ISCO coding, we use Daniel Oesch’s guide to place the respondents in one of eight social class categories (Oesch 2008).³ Oesch’s class categorisation is based on two dimensions: (1) a four-point skill-level dimension (unskilled/low; general/vocational; associate professional/semi-professional; professional); and (2) a work logic dimension that also includes four categories, see Table 1. Employees’ work can be primarily managerial, technical or interpersonal, whereas employers and self-employed are guided by an “independent” work logic.

In the analyses, we often distinguish between the working class, the “new” middle class and other social classes, so we adopt a broad distinction between classes. Employees who have unskilled jobs, or jobs that require general qualifications or vocational training, are coded as working class. In this broad definition of class, we ignore whether jobs are based on a technical, managerial or interpersonal work logic. The new middle class consists

of sociocultural (semi-)professionals. Note that the self-employed, small-business owners and employers who are guided by an “independent” work logic are not coded as either middle or working class. Table 1 summarises the class definitions we use in this study:

In the literature, the class position of office clerks is often ambiguous; clerks may be seen as belonging to the lower strata of the middle class or they may be seen as part of the working class (e.g., Oesch 2008; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). In this study, we code clerks as working class, because their skill level and income resemble the other groups in the working class. However, in most analyses, we report both models based on the broad concept of working class and Oesch’s fine-grained class categories. Therefore, we can judge the extent to which clerks resemble service and production workers.

3.5 Party choice and party switchers

Many of our research questions focus on potential differences between voters who support different parties. We expect that attitudes towards and saliency of immigration, welfare and equality vary between voters of SDP, PRPs and left parties.

All respondents have been asked which of all eligible parties they would vote for if there was a national election tomorrow. Next, the parties have been categorised into “party families”, according to the definitions developed by the Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al 2022). We use respondents’ party family vote, rather than their specific party vote, to make voter preferences comparable across the countries. See Annex A.5 for an overview of the parties included in each party family.

Some respondents prefer parties that are not on the ballot. These parties have also been included and coded because the preferred party choice gives information about respondents’ political orientations, even if their preferred party does not run for election.

When we examine the attitudes and behaviour of party switchers, we code if a respondent's party choice at previous elections is different from the party that is currently preferred. When we examine party switchers, we also rely on the party family coding; see Annex A5.

3.6 Perceptions of threat

In the fourth set of research questions, we examine if cultural or economic threat perceptions are more important for attitudes towards immigration. Note that immigration attitudes in the experiments are measured by a single item, asking about whether more immigrants like the one described in the vignette should be allowed to the country. So, in the experiments, we simply measure the attitudes towards allowing more immigrants.

To answer if cultural or economic threat perceptions are more important, we use a vignette experiment with a description of an immigrant, Sofia. In our description of the immigrant, we vary characteristics relevant to cultural and economic threat. Each respondent is randomly selected for a vignette that describes exactly the characteristics of the immigrant.

By using an experimental design, we can draw causal inference about the effect of each characteristic on immigration attitudes.

The first characteristic we vary is the origin of the immigrant. The immigrant will be either from the USA or the Middle East. The immigrant from the USA represents an immigrant with a small cultural distance from the native population, while the Middle Eastern immigrant represents an immigrant who comes from a region that is more culturally different from Denmark, Sweden and Germany than the USA. In the literature (see for example Dinesen et al 2016), place of origin is often used to tap into stereotypical cultural threat perception.

The second characteristic we vary is the employment status of the immigrant. The question about

an immigrant's employment status is often used to measure if the immigrant can be seen as an economic burden/threat to the host society or to the economic opportunities of the native citizen, namely, the respondent. We vary whether the immigrant is unemployed, employed in a low-skilled job (cleaner) or employed in a high-skilled job (nurse). By including these three conditions, we will both be able to answer if immigrants who are employed in a low-skilled, low-paid job (cleaner) are preferred to an immigrant without a job (unemployed) and if highly skilled immigrants (nurse) are preferred to less-skilled immigrants (cleaner).

To examine if the economic threat perception is informed by individual, egotropic concerns or a sociotropic fear for the well-being of society, we examine if threat perceptions vary across social class. If low-skilled respondents are more reluctant to allow immigrants who have low-skilled jobs, and high-skilled respondents are more reluctant to allow immigrants who have high-skilled jobs, it suggests that the economic threat perception is informed by self-interest rather than concerns for society.

If, on the other hand, as we suspect, all respondents are most worried about unemployed immigrants, this will indicate that voter attitudes are informed by a sociotropic threat perception, because unemployed immigrants involve higher welfare state expenditures rather than tax revenue from employed immigrants. We expect the economic threat effect to be smallest when immigrants are highly skilled (nurse) because a higher income also results in higher tax payments, and we expect this to be the case across social class. Besides, there is a shortage of trained nurses in all three countries that we survey. These expectations are in line with the existing literature on the subject (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014).

In the description of the immigrant, we also vary the language skills of the immigrant. We vary whether the immigrant speaks the local language or not (Danish, Swedish or German). The language skills of the immigrants are very important for immigrant attitudes, according to the literature (see, e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). As discussed above, the lack of language skills can be seen as both a cultural and an

economic threat (ibid.: 242). On one hand, it can be seen as an unwillingness/lack of capacity to integrate and a barrier to social interaction and interpersonal communication; on the other hand, it can also be seen as an indication of unwillingness to invest in the competences that are needed to get a job and contribute to the economy. In the analyses below, we discuss which interpretation is most reasonable.⁴

The last characteristic of immigrants we vary is whether the respondent is volunteering in civil society. This characteristic only varies for Middle Eastern immigrants who are unemployed. By only including this characteristic among unemployed immigrants, we test whether the activity in civil society makes respondents more positive towards unemployed immigrants because volunteering signals another form of contribution to society and is an indication of social integration.

See Annex A6 for an overview of all possible combinations of vignettes. We have tested whether the respondents who have been presented with each of the descriptions, on average, are alike with regards to gender, age, party choice, country and whether they live in large/small cities, so-called balance tests. There was no indication that the groups were different based on these observable characteristics. Therefore, the experimental logic seems sound.

3.7 Controls

We include controls in the statistical testing of our research questions. We include the respondent's country, gender, age and whether they have at least one parent born in a country outside of the EU. The first three controls are standard in the literature, and we have included the last one because we suspect that respondents who are descendants of immigrants may have different immigration attitudes than other respondents, irrespective of their political orientations and party choice. If the controls do not add anything to the explanation of the dependent variable, we exclude the variable from the given regression and mention it in the note to the table.

4. RESULTS

4. RESULTS

In the following section, we present the results of our analyses. In the first section, we focus on the saliency of the immigration issue and examine if saliency varies across social class, party preferences and immigration attitudes. The second section examines pro- and anti-immigration attitudes among different groups of voters. The third section analyses the saliency of welfare issues and voter preferences for equality and welfare. In the fourth section, we examine which immigrant characteristics and threat perceptions are most important for voter attitudes towards more immigration, and if the effects of immigrant characteristics vary between different groups of voters.

After we have presented the results of the analyses, we summarise the results and discuss the implications for social democratic electoral strategies concerning the immigration issue.

4.1 Saliency of the immigration issue

The immigration issue is not equally important to all voters. If a political issue is not salient to a certain group of voters, their vote is not likely to change, even if a political party changes its position on that issue. Leaving aside tradition and emotional attachments, in general, voters vote for a party with which they agree on issues that are important to them. This section examines the saliency of immigration. More specifically, for which groups of voters is the immigration issue so important that parties' position on this issue influence which party they vote for?

The immigration issue is most salient to working-class voters. When comparing the salience of immigration between the different social classes, we find that the issue is more important among voters from the working class than among voters from

other social classes; see Online Annex B1. Overall, the saliency of immigration is highest in Germany and lowest in Denmark.

The new middle class, namely, sociocultural (semi-) professionals, find immigration least salient among all the social classes. The new middle class is therefore the social class for which the difference in saliency is largest compared to the working class; see Online Annex B1. Within the working class, there are no differences in saliency between production workers, service workers and office clerks. Nor does the saliency among the working class differ from the self-employed social classes. The higher saliency of immigration among working-class voters is therefore mainly due to the low saliency among the new middle class.

Focusing on saliency and attitudes toward immigration, Figure 4 shows that immigration is most salient among those who hold the most negative attitudes toward immigration. The correlation between saliency of immigration and attitudes toward immigration is not linear but curvilinear, since there are no differences in saliency between voters with moderate and positive immigration attitudes; see models 2 and 3, respectively, in Online Annex B2.

These results give us the first cue to understanding party competition over immigration issues. They indicate that that party positions on immigration are most important among voters who hold the most negative attitudes toward immigration. For voters with more positive immigration attitudes, the immigration issue is significantly less important when they decide which party to vote for.

Not surprisingly, voters who find immigration important and hold negative attitudes toward immigration also vote for certain parties. Figure 5 shows that immigration is most salient for voters of PRPs and least salient among voters of left parties.

The saliency of immigration is significantly higher among PRP voters than all other party groups of voters. This indicates that a party's position on immigration is important for PRP voters.

When comparing the saliency of immigration between the different party families, saliency among SDP voters is quite low, whereas immigration saliency among conservative and Christian democratic voters is quite high, although not quite as high as among PRP voters. This suggests that positions on immigration are more important for conservatives and Christian democratic parties when competing against PRPs for votes than they are for (present) SDP voters.



They indicate that that party positions on immigration are most important among voters who hold the most negative attitudes toward immigration.



Figure 5 also shows that the saliency of immigration is roughly at the same level among SDP voters and liberal and left party voters, even if the marginal differences in saliency between SDP voters, on one hand, and liberal and left party voters, on the other hand, are statistically significant, when controls are included; see models 5 and 6 in Online Annex B3.

Overall, the saliency of immigration is highest among German voters and lowest among Danes, see Online Annex B3, model 2. Besides the differences in the overall saliency, there are also country differences between the voters of different party families.

The saliency of immigration is highest among voters of PRPs in all three countries, but the difference in saliency varies between the countries. In Sweden,

the difference in saliency of immigration between voters of SDPs and PRPs is larger compared to both German and Danish PRP voters, see Online Annex B3.A-C, because the saliency of immigration is higher among Swedish PRP voters than Danish and German PRP voters.

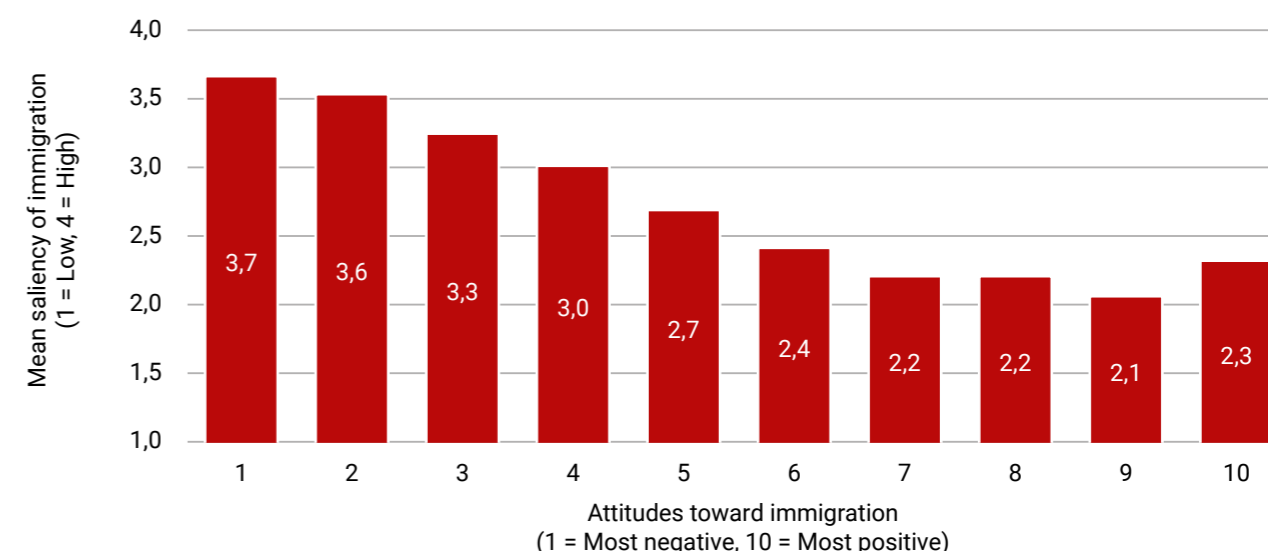
This suggests that, even more so than in Denmark and Germany, immigration issues may be an important reason why voters have turned to PRPs in Sweden. However, we can get a better understanding of these dynamics if we focus on voters who have shifted from voting for SDPs.

There are no differences in the saliency of immigration among voters of PRPs, depending on whether they have previously voted for SDPs. Figure 6 shows that the saliency of immigration is similar among voters of PRPs independent of whether they have previously voted for SDPs. This similarity indicates that the immigration issue could be an important reason why these voters have switched from SDPs to PRPs.

On the other hand, the saliency of immigration differs among voters of SDPs, depending on whether they have previously voted for PRPs. Figure 6 shows that the saliency of immigration is higher among SDP voters, who have voted for PRPs before, but not as high as among voters who support PRPs today. These differences might indicate that the immigration issue was a reason for these SDP voters to vote for PRPs at previous elections, but that other issues might have become more important to this group of voters. However, it may also suggest that the SDPs have adopted a sterner position on immigration and that this change in policy has attracted some voters who previously voted for PRPs. At least in Denmark, this seems to be part of the explanation (Hjorth and Larsen 2020).

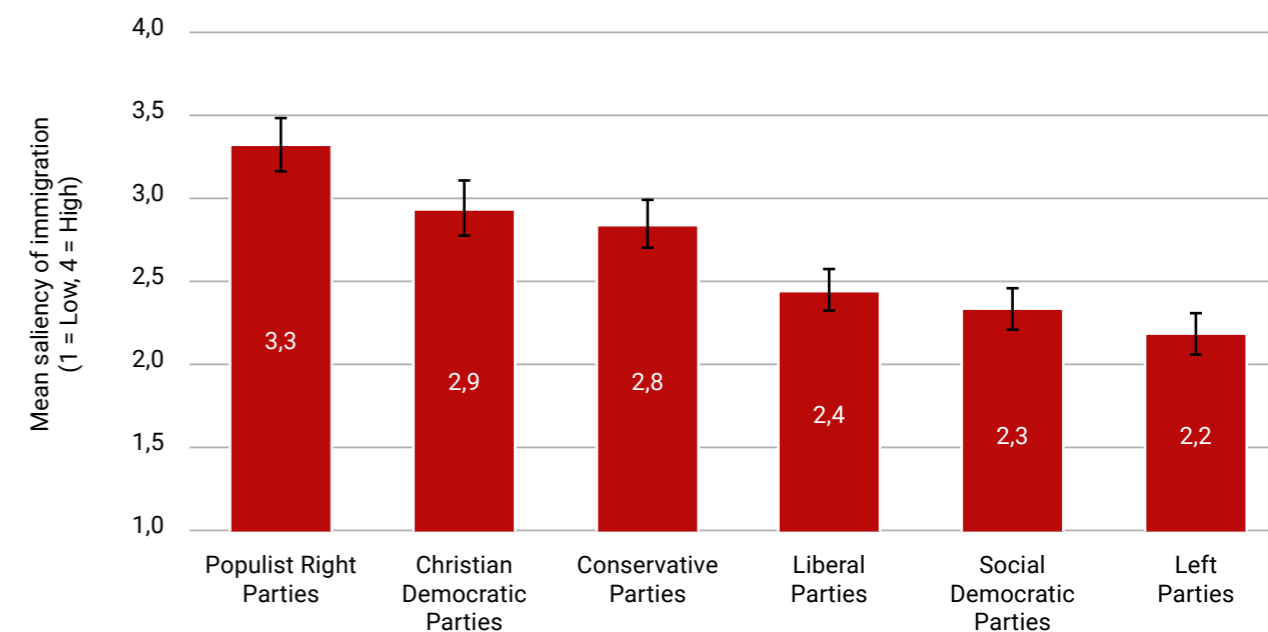
When looking at SDP and left party voters, immigration saliency does not vary between party switchers and other voters, see Online Annex B3, model 6. This suggests that party switching between SDPs and left parties is unrelated to differences in how important voters consider immigration to be.

Figure 4. The dependence of the saliency of immigration issue on attitudes toward immigration.



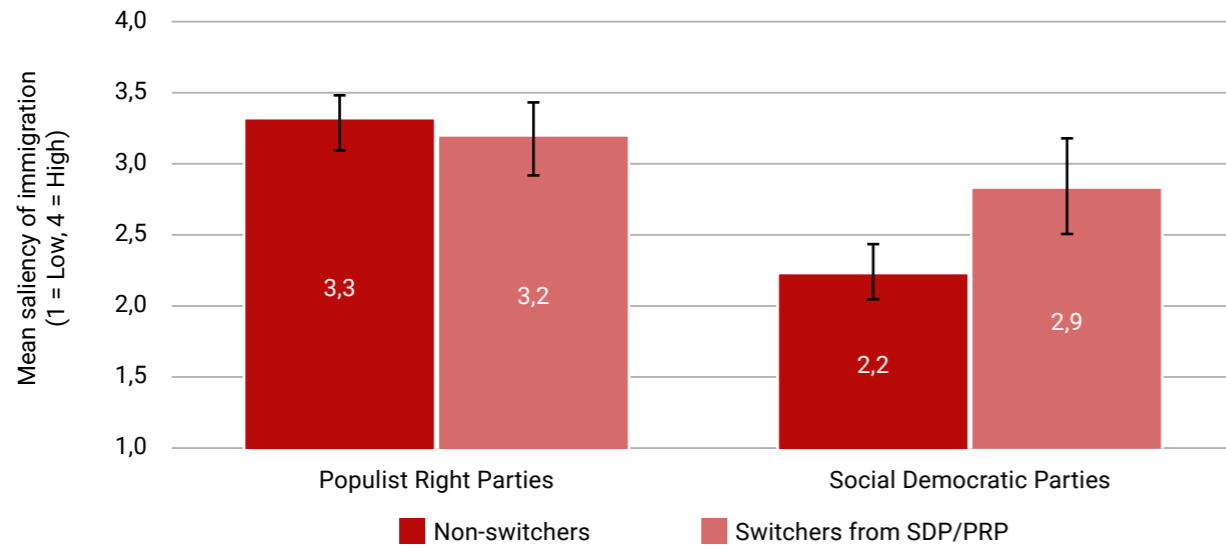
Note: For visualisation purposes, the respondents have been divided into deciles depending on their attitude toward immigration. The estimates are descriptive means without controls. See Online Annex B2 for the statistical tests. n = 5,912.

Figure 5. The dependence of the saliency of the immigration issue on vote choice.



Note: The estimates are controlled for country, gender and age. Voters of special issue parties and ethnic and regional parties are not included due to too few observations (n = 9 and n = 2). See Online Annex B3 model 2 for the statistical testing. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 4,429.

Figure 6. The dependence of the saliency of the immigration issue among voters of PRPs and SDPs on whether the voters have switched between SDPs and PRPs.



Note: The estimates are controlled for country, gender and age. See Online Annex B3, model 3, for the statistical testing. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 1,870.

4.2 Attitudes toward immigration

Voter attitudes toward immigration also depend on social class. As expected, voters from the working class hold more negative attitudes toward immigration than voters from other social classes; see Online Annex B4.

There are some differences in attitudes toward immigration between the subgroups of the working class. Production workers, who are the traditional working class, hold more negative attitudes toward immigration than both service workers and office clerks; see Online Annex B4. Even though production workers hold more negative attitudes than other workers, the service workers and office clerks hold more negative attitudes than the other subgroups. As was the case with the saliency of immigration, the sociocultural (semi-)professionals also differ most from the working class when it comes to attitudes toward immigration. The sociocultural (semi-)professionals hold the most positive attitudes toward immigrants of all the subgroups.

Attitudes toward immigration also vary with party preference. Voters of PRPs hold the most negative attitudes toward immigration, and left party voters hold the most positive attitudes; see Online Annex B5. If the SDPs move too far to the right on the immigration issue, they therefore risk losing the more pro-immigration voters to the left parties, and if they move too far left, they risk losing voters to the PRPs. However, since the saliency of immigration is lower among SDP voters and left-leaning voters more generally, the potential loss of voters to the PRPs is probably larger if the SDPs adopt a more lenient immigration policy than the number of voters SDPs will lose to the parties on the left if they adopt a stricter immigration policy.

The picture is highly similar across voters from different social classes. For all social classes, those voting for PRPs hold the most negative attitudes toward immigration, and the voters of left parties have the most positive attitudes; see Online Annex B5. However, the differences in attitudes toward immigration between voters of PRPs and SDPs

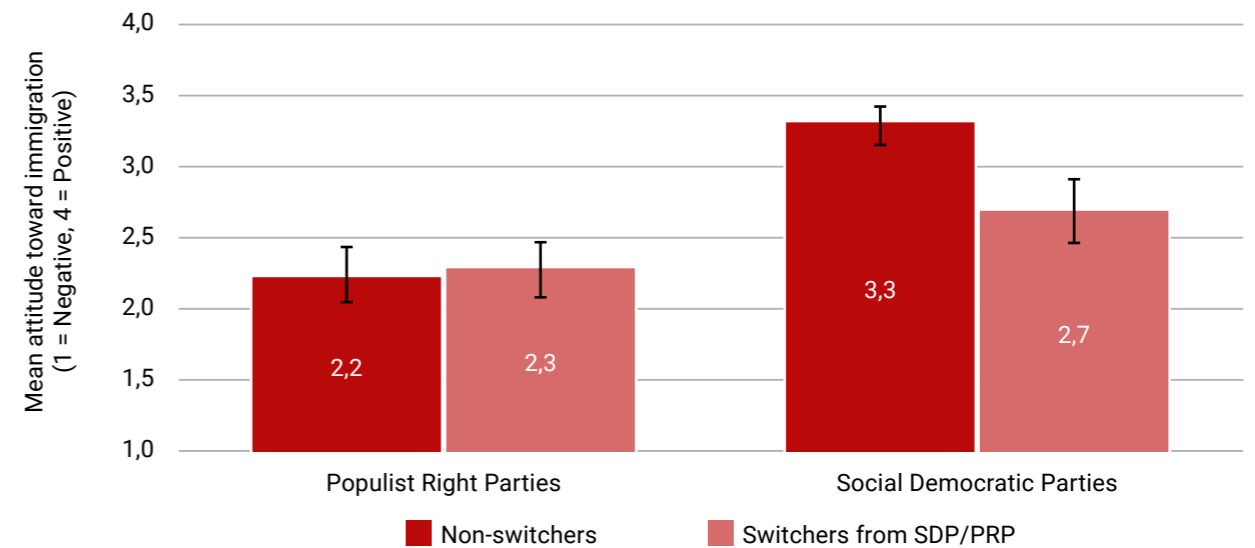
are larger among voters that belong to the middle class, including sociocultural (semi-)professionals, than among working-class voters. This may suggest that the differences in immigration attitudes are smaller in the working class, irrespective of party preferences.

The attitudes toward immigration among PRP voters are roughly the same for PRP voters who have previously voted for the SDP and other PRP voters who have not previously voted for SDPs (see Figure 7). The fact that PRP voters who have previously voted for SDPs share attitudes with the other PRP voters indicate that immigration may have been a reason for this group of voters to switch to PRPs. This seems to be a quite reasonable interpretation of the findings, especially because we already know

that immigration is highly salient to this group of party switchers (see Figure 6).

By contrast, among SDP voters there is a difference in attitudes toward immigration, depending on whether they have previously voted for PRPs. Figure 7 shows that SDP voters who voted for PRPs before hold more negative attitudes toward immigration than other SDP voters, which may indicate that the SDPs have won voters back from the PRPs due to issues other than immigration or that they have won back voters exactly because they have adopted a stricter position on immigration. The fact that immigration is rather salient to SDP voters who previously voted for PRPs, see Figure 6 for comparison, suggests that previous PRP voters still pay attention to the immigration issue when they decide which party to vote for.

Figure 7. Attitudes toward immigration among PRP and SDP voters for switchers/non-switchers.



Note: The estimates are controlled for country and age. See Online Annex B5, model 5, for the statistical testing. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 1,898.

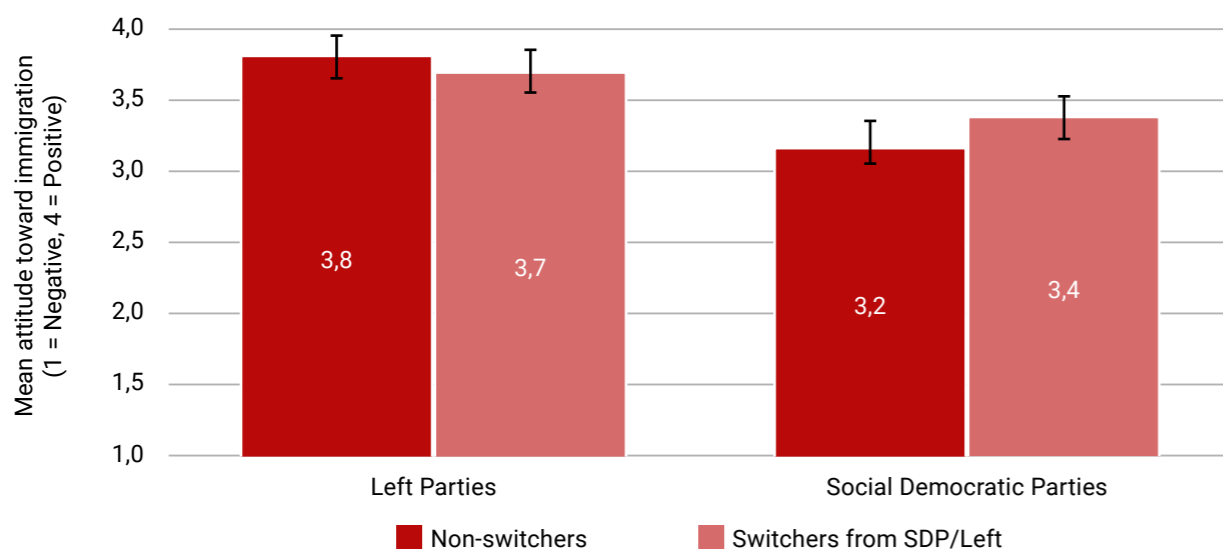
The attitudes toward immigration among voters of SDPs also vary depending on whether they have voted for a left party at previous elections. Figure 8 shows that SDP voters who have voted for left parties in the past hold slightly more positive attitudes

toward immigration than other SDP voters. Among voters of left parties, the picture is the opposite: voters who have previously voted for SDPs hold more negative attitudes toward immigration than voters of left parties who have not previously voted for SDPs.

However, the attitudes of party switchers are closer to the party they have moved to than to the voters of the party they have left. Taken together, this suggests that the parties' position on immigration policy

may have been one of the reasons for these voters to switch party. Still, this is probably not the only reason, since the saliency of immigration is comparatively low among both SDP and left party voters.

Figure 8. Attitudes toward immigration among voters of left parties and SDPs for switchers/non-switchers.



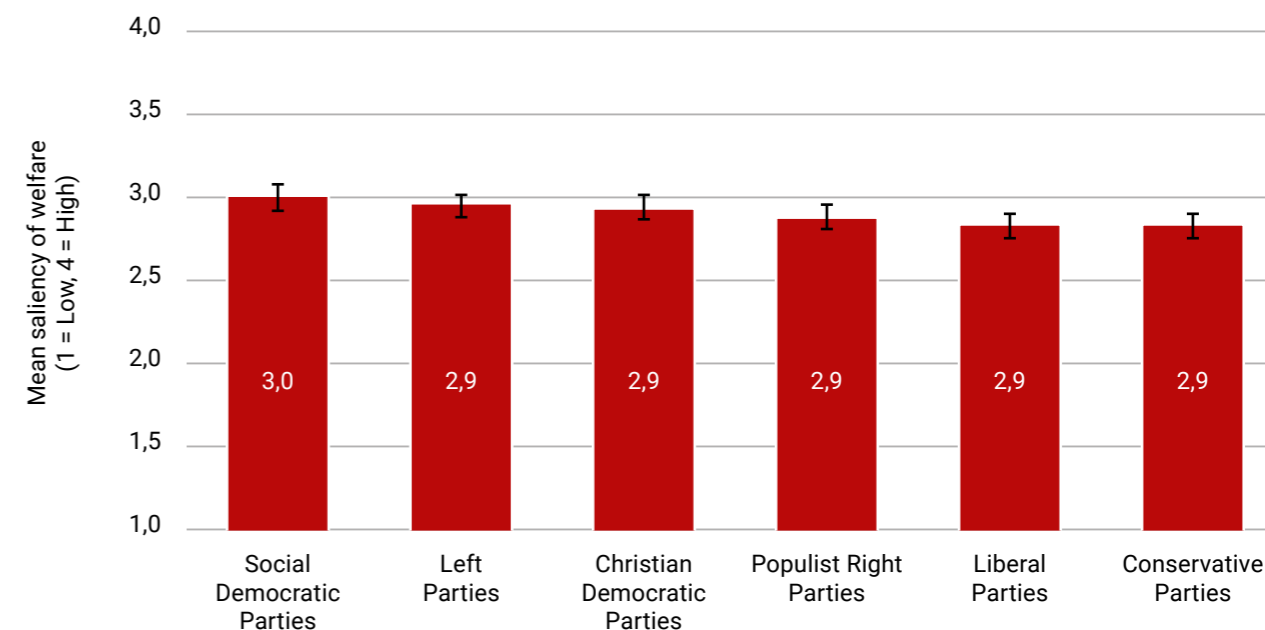
Note: The estimates are controlled for country and age. See Online Annex B6, model 2, for the statistical testing. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 2,004.

4.3 Saliency of and attitudes towards egalitarianism and welfare

The saliency of welfare issues is higher than the saliency of immigration among SDP voters. Figure 9 shows that the saliency of welfare is higher among SDP voters than voters of any other party. This difference is significant when compared to all other party groups, except for the voters of the Christian

democratic and left parties (p = 0.09 and p = 0.10). However, in general, the saliency of welfare issues is quite high among voters of all parties: Welfare is more salient than immigration for SDP, left party and liberal voters and as salient as immigration among conservative and Christian democratic voters (cf. Figures 5 and 9). Only among PRP voters is immigration more salient than welfare.

Figure 9. The dependence of the saliency of the welfare issue on vote choice.



Note: The estimates are controlled for country, gender and age. See Online Annex B7, model 2, for the statistical testing. Voters of special issue parties and ethnic and regional parties are not included due to too few observations (n = 9 and n = 2). The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 4,470.

The saliency of welfare issues varies between countries, with the highest saliency in Sweden and the lowest saliency in Denmark; see Online Annex B7. Welfare issues therefore seem most important for vote choice in Sweden and least important in Denmark. More importantly, with few exceptions, the differences in the saliency of welfare issues across parties are roughly the same across countries; see Online Annex B7.

One exception is the absence of a difference in saliency between SDPs and PRPs in Germany. In Germany, somewhat surprisingly, it seems that PRP and SDP voters are equally concerned about welfare issues; see Online Annex B7.A, model 6. When looking closer at the data, the reason is that welfare issues are more salient among voters of the BSW party, which is classified as a PRP in this analysis; see models 7 and 8 in Online Annex B7.A. Subtracting BSW voters from AfD voters in Germany, we find that welfare issues are less salient among AfD voters than SDP voters (p < 0.10).

In Denmark and Sweden, there is no difference in welfare saliency between voters of SDPs and left parties, whereas in Germany welfare saliency is, in fact, higher among SDP voters; see Online Annex B7.

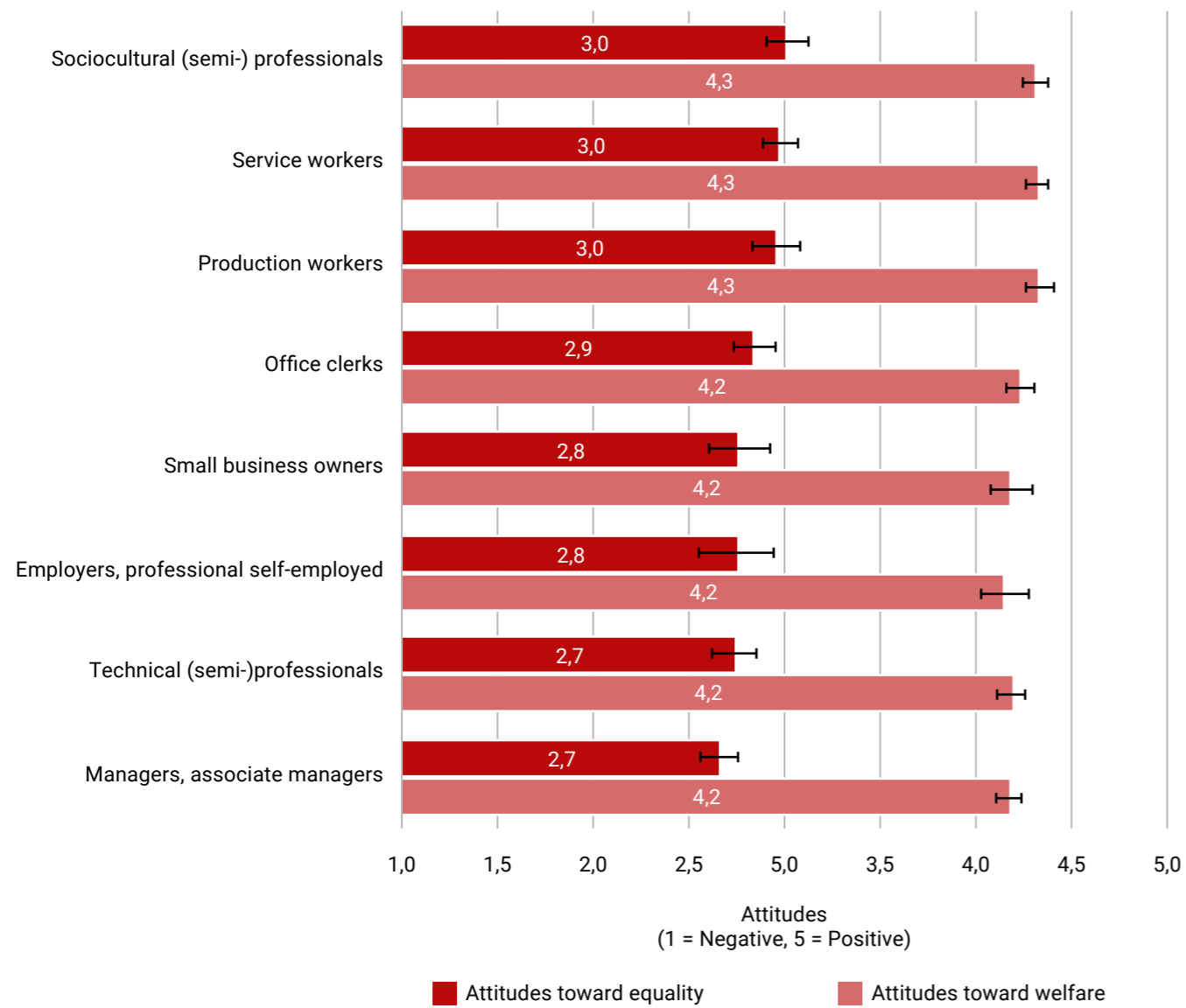
The saliency of welfare issues also varies across social classes. Production and service workers, and even more so sociocultural (semi-)professionals, are the groups that consider welfare issues most important; see Online Annex B8. Within the working class, office clerks find welfare issues somewhat less important than production and service workers. Still, in general, welfare issues are more salient in the new middle class, namely, sociocultural (semi-)professionals, and most of the working class than among other social groups.

The pattern is largely the same when we look at attitudes toward welfare and equality. Except for office clerks within the working class, working-class and new-middle-class voters hold more positive attitudes toward welfare and equality than

other voters (see Figure 10). Managers, technical professionals, employers and small-business owners hold somewhat more negative attitudes toward welfare and equality. Importantly, in this context, and different from what we found for

immigration attitudes, there seems to be no differences in attitudes toward welfare and equality among most voters in the working class and voters in the new middle class. Attitudes in these domains are almost identical.

Figure 10. The dependence of attitudes toward equality and welfare on social class.

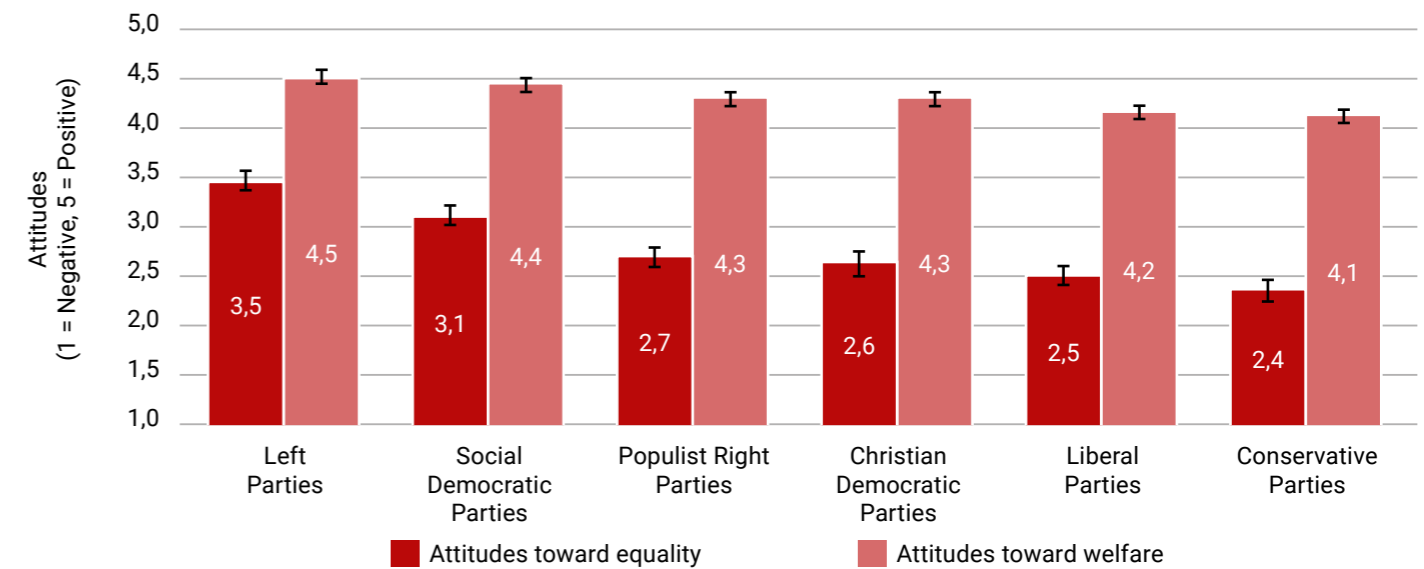


Note: The estimates are controlled for country, gender and age. See Online Annex B9, models 3 and 6, for the statistical testing. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 4,827.

Focusing on party differences, the most positive attitudes toward equality are found among voters of left parties, followed by SDP voters, and the least positive attitude is among conservative voters (see Figure 11). PRP voters hold more negative attitudes toward equality than voters of SDPs, but voters of both liberal and conservative parties hold significantly more negative attitudes toward equality than

voters of PRPs. Not surprisingly, we find largely the same patterns when looking at attitudes toward welfare (see Figure 11). In fact, PRP voters and Christian democratic voters have almost identical attitudes towards equality and welfare. In general, attitudes towards equality and attitudes toward welfare correlate moderately among German, Swedish and Danish voters with a Pearson's r value of 0.28.

Figure 11. The dependence of attitudes toward equality and welfare on vote choice.



Note: The estimates are controlled for country, gender and age. See Online Annex B10, models 2 and 6, for the statistical testing. Voters of special issue parties and ethnic and regional parties are not included due to too few observations (n = 9 and = 2). The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 4,466.

When we focus on voters of different parties, there are some country differences in attitudes toward equality. In Germany, the differences in attitudes between voters of the SDP and PRPs are smaller than in Denmark, and particularly in Sweden; see Online Annex B10.A-C. In Sweden, we find the largest difference in attitudes toward equality between SDP and PRP voters. When we compare SDP and left party voters, Germany again stands out as the country in which the difference in attitudes toward equality is smallest. Interestingly, when we look at attitudes toward welfare rather than equality,

party differences are not different in Sweden, Germany and Denmark. Thus, when it comes to welfare attitudes, voters cluster in the same way across parties in all three countries; see Online Annex B10.A-C.

If we look at different segments of party voters, the pattern remains the same. Across social classes, left party voters have the most positive attitudes toward equality and welfare, and across social classes, PRP voters hold more negative attitudes toward equality and welfare than SDP voters; see Online Annex B10.

However, zooming in on party switchers, we can add some interesting nuances to this picture. The attitudes toward equality vary among voters of PRPs, depending on whether they have previously voted for SDPs. Figure 12 shows that PRP voters who have voted for SDPs at earlier elections hold significantly more positive attitudes toward equality than PRP voters who have never voted for SDPs. In fact, PRP voters who have voted for SDPs in the past have about as positive attitudes toward equality as present SDP voters, including those SDP voters who have previously voted for PRPs. Besides, attitudes toward equality among SDP voters are almost identical, whether they have previously voted for PRPs or not.

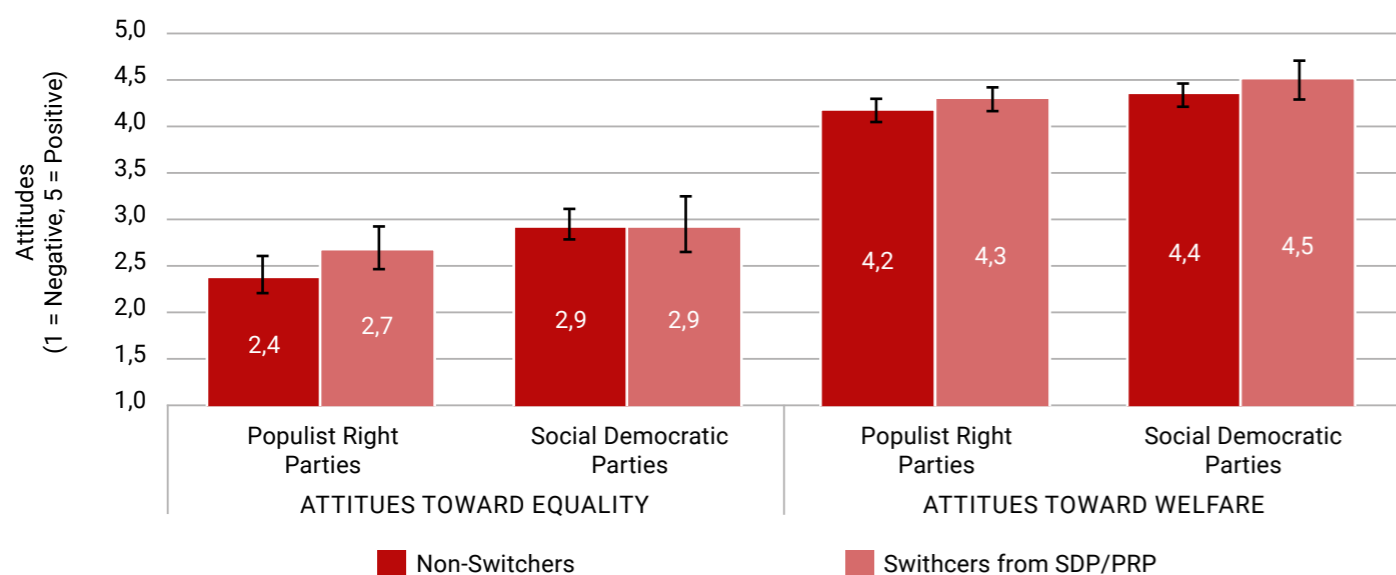
Taken together, this suggests that there is a group of PRP voters who have previously voted for SDPs and who share SDP voters' attitudes on equality but nonetheless have switched to PRPs. Recall, that this group also found immigration as salient as other PRP voters, and that the switchers also had similarly negative attitudes toward immigration as other PRP voters (cf. Figures 6 and 7). This strongly suggests that the immigration issue may be one of the reasons why these

voters no longer vote for SDPs, even if their attitudes on equality resemble those of present SDP voters.

The group of SDP voters who have previously voted for PRPs is somewhat different – they share other SDP voters' positive attitudes toward equality. As we have seen above, this group finds the immigration issue more important than other SDP voters, and it also holds more negative immigration attitudes than other SDP voters, but it is still significantly less negative towards immigration than present PRP voters, and it also does not find the immigration issue as important as present PRP voters (cf. Figures 6 and 7). As Figure 13 shows, the group of SDP voters who have previously voted for PRPs not only shares other SDP voters' attitudes toward equality, but it also has equally positive attitudes towards welfare as other SDP voters. This strongly suggests that SDPs' position on equality and welfare may be one of the reasons why these voters have switched to SDPs – even if they do not quite agree with other SDP voters on immigration.

In section 5 we say more about voter competition between PRPs and SDPs.

Figure 12. Attitudes toward equality and welfare among voters of SDPs and PRPs for switchers/non-switchers.

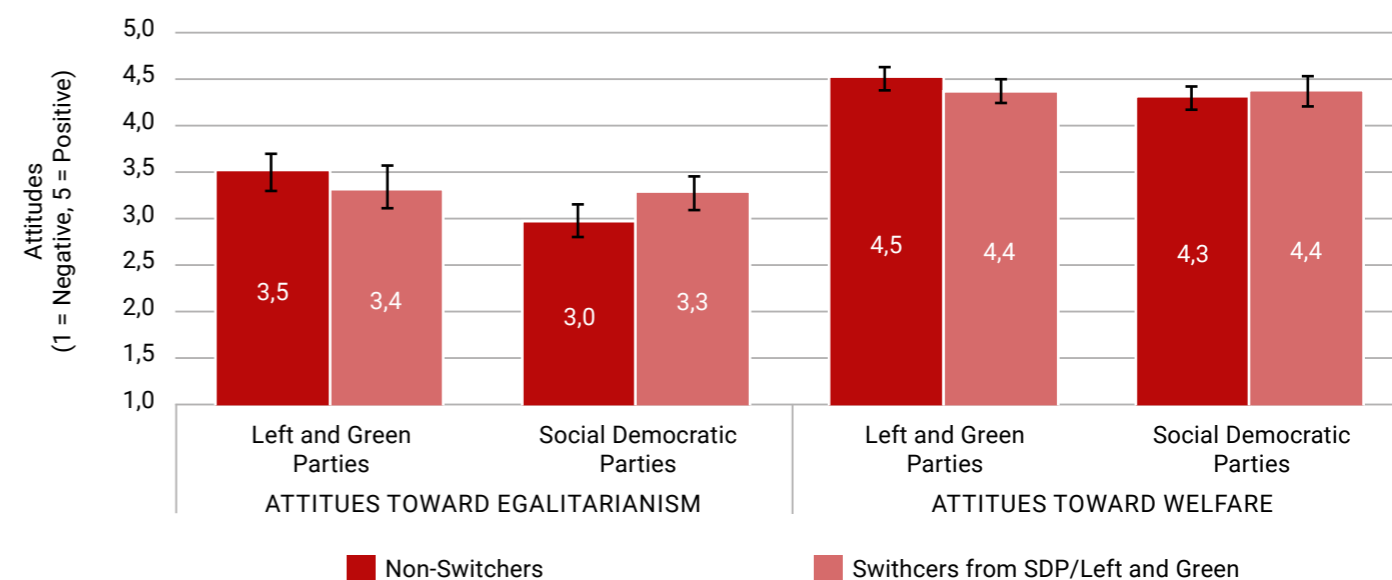


Note: The estimates are controlled for country, gender and age. See Online Annex B11, models 2 and 4, for the statistical testing. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 1,898.

Attitudes toward equality also vary to some degree when we look at voters who have switched between the SDPs and left parties, particularly in Sweden. All voters for left parties, including switchers, as well as SDP voters who have previously voted for a left party, have more positive attitudes towards equality than SDP voters who have not voted for a left party in the past (see Figure 13). However, when looking at country differences, this only seems to be the case in Sweden. In Denmark and Germany, there are no differences in attitudes among SDP voters – switchers or not; see Online Annex B11.A-C.

When it comes to attitudes toward welfare issues, there are no significant differences between left party and SDP voters, no matter whether they have been switching between these parties or not. These similarities in attitudes toward equality and welfare may indicate that the parties' position on these issues may be a reason for switching between SDPs and left parties, and that voters see left parties as more pro-welfare than SDPs. However, other issues, for example, the climate, may also be important for vote choice in the centre-left.

Figure 13. Attitudes toward equality and welfare among voters of left parties and SDPs for switchers/non-switchers.



Note: The estimates are controlled for country, gender and age. See Online Annex B12, models 3 and 6, for the statistical testing. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 2,004.

Among the current Swedish SDP voters, there are differences in attitudes toward equality depending on whether they have previously voted for left parties. In both Germany and Denmark, there are no differences in attitudes among voters of SDPs depending on whether they have voted for

left parties before; see Online Annex B12.A-C. The Swedish SDP voters who have previously voted for left parties hold relatively more positive attitudes toward equality than Swedish SDP voters who have not previously voted for left parties.

4.4 The concerns and perceived threats from immigration among voters

The results so far show that immigration is an issue that may divide working-class and new-middle-class voters. On one hand, working-class voters find immigration more important than voters from the new middle class, and the former hold more negative immigration attitudes than the latter. Equality and attitudes towards welfare, on the other hand, are issues that may unite most of the working class and the new middle class. Both groups favour more equality and extensive welfare provisions, and these issues are important to them. We are not the first to show this (e.g., Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021).

The thorny issue is immigration because the working class and the new middle class feel differently about it. Which voter segment should SDPs appeal to? The big question, which is at the heart of this project, is whether this zero-sum logic is necessarily true if the SDPs adopt a new immigration position that focuses on how immigration may benefit the economy and the welfare state. In this section, we examine if voters – including working class and PRP voters – are more positive towards immigration if immigrants are seen as contributing to the economy and civil society rather than as a cost to society. We also examine if immigrants’ country of origin is important. More specifically, by way of vignette experiments, in which we vary the characteristics of immigrants (see Section 3.6), we examine what decides voters’ acceptance or rejection of more immigration.

Before we present the effects of immigrant characteristics in detail below, Figure 14 shows popular support for more immigration across the different immigrant characteristics that we highlight in the 14 vignettes in the survey. Figure 14 gives the broad picture of which immigrants voters prefer in Denmark, Germany and Sweden. Two things stand out.

Firstly, unemployed immigrants are the least popular immigrants. Less than 30% of voters are willing to accept more immigrants if they are unemployed,

and it does not matter much whether immigrants come from culturally close countries, like the USA, or more culturally distant places, like the Middle East. One exception is when respondents are told that unemployed immigrants from the Middle East are volunteering in a local sports club. Then immigrants are significantly more welcome (13-15 percentage point increase), and this is true whether the immigrant speaks the local language or not. Among the unemployed immigrants, the least popular are those who do not speak the local language (11-16% will allow more immigrants), whereas those who speak the local language are somewhat more popular (28-29%).

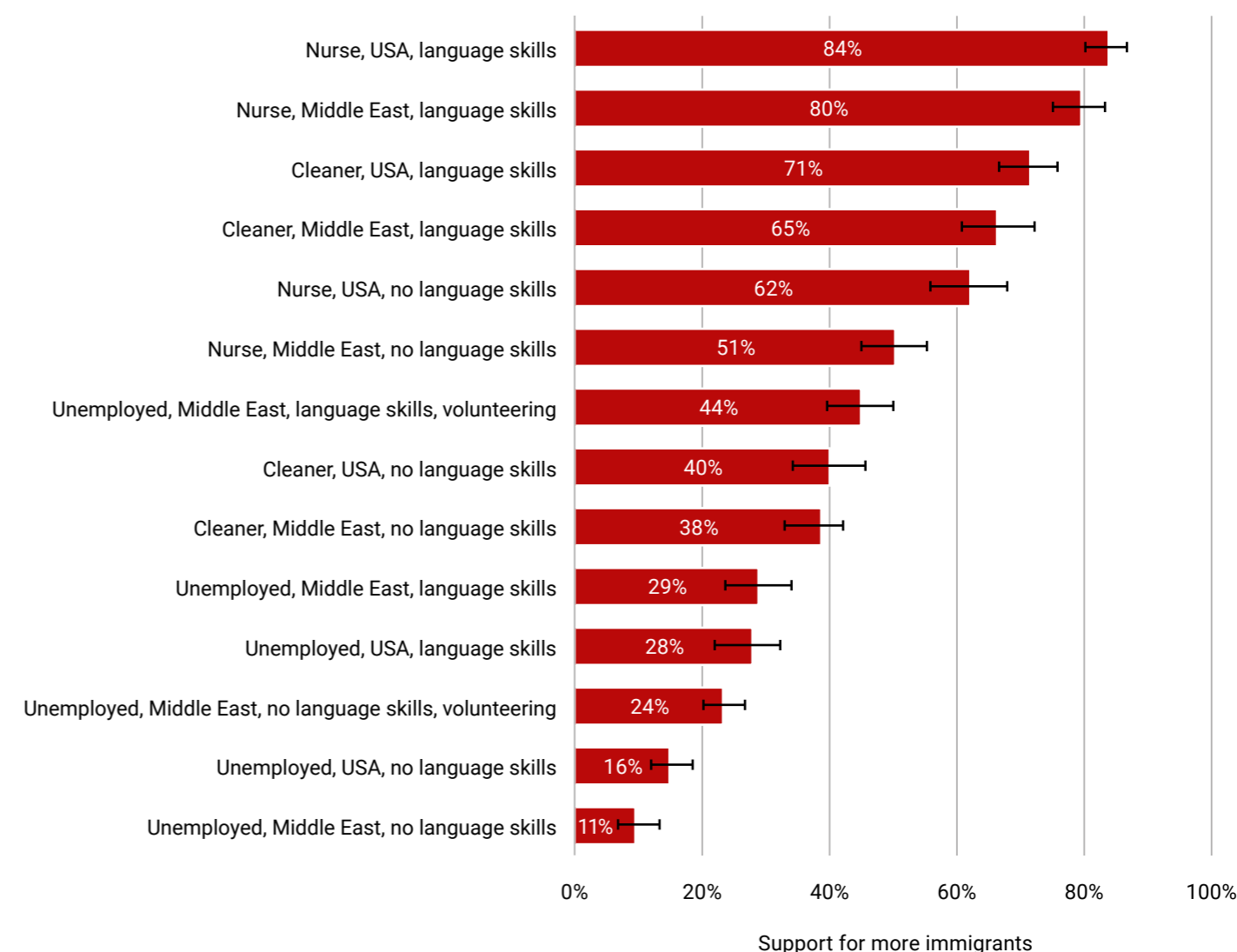


Four out of five voters (80-84%) welcome highly skilled nurses that speak the local language.



Secondly, employed immigrants – in particular those who speak the local language – are the most popular immigrants. Four out of five voters (80-84%) welcome highly skilled nurses that speak the local language. However, a large majority also welcome less-skilled immigrants if they have a job. Two out of three voters (65-71%) welcome low-skilled cleaners who speak the local language. This suggests that being in a job is more important than what kind of job immigrants have. Besides, even if employed immigrants from the USA are a bit more popular than employed immigrants from the Middle East (difference in support, 2-11 percentage points), country of origin is much less important than the immigrants’ language skills (22-31 percentage points) or skill level (difference in popularity between cleaners and nurses, 13-22 percentage points).

Figure 14. Overview of the dependence of support for more immigration on immigrant characteristics.



Note: The figure shows the shares of respondents who have either answered “Somewhat agree” or “Strongly agree” to the statement: [Country] should allow more immigrants [with the mentioned characteristics] like Sofia to come to the country. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 5,196.

The effect of individual immigrant characteristics on voter attitudes can be tested more rigorously in a multivariate regression framework, in which we simultaneously control for the effect of other characteristics. The regression framework also allows us to test if the effects vary across countries and different groups of voters. The picture

we saw in Figure 14 stands, but these additional analyses add important nuances and give more precise estimates.

Figure 15 shows the effect of all the immigrant characteristics we have investigated. The employment status of the immigrant has the largest effect on

voter attitudes toward immigration. Support for more immigrants is 48 percentage points higher when the immigrant is working full-time as a nurse instead of being unemployed. The support increases by 32 percentage points when the immigrant is working full-time as a cleaner instead of being unemployed. Note that the difference between the immigrant employed as a cleaner and the unemployed immigrant is much larger than the difference between the cleaner and the nurse (16 percentage points). The fact that the employment status of the immigrant is the most important determinant of attitudes towards more immigration suggests that worries about the economic costs of immigrants are the main concern when voters are sceptical towards immigration.

After employment, the immigrants' ability to speak the local language is the second most important factor that shapes voter attitudes. Figure 15 shows that when immigrants speak the local language (Swedish, German, Danish) the support for more immigration increases by 23 percentage points. The effect of language skills on immigration attitudes is therefore also very substantial. As discussed in Section 2.4, other studies have also found that language skills are important for attitudes towards immigration, and that this could be due to both economic and cultural concerns. On one hand, it may suggest that being able to speak the local language increases the employability of the immigrants, namely, an economic concern. On the other hand, it may also suggest that language skills increase the possibility for social and cultural interactions and, by implication, the social and cultural integration of the immigrant.

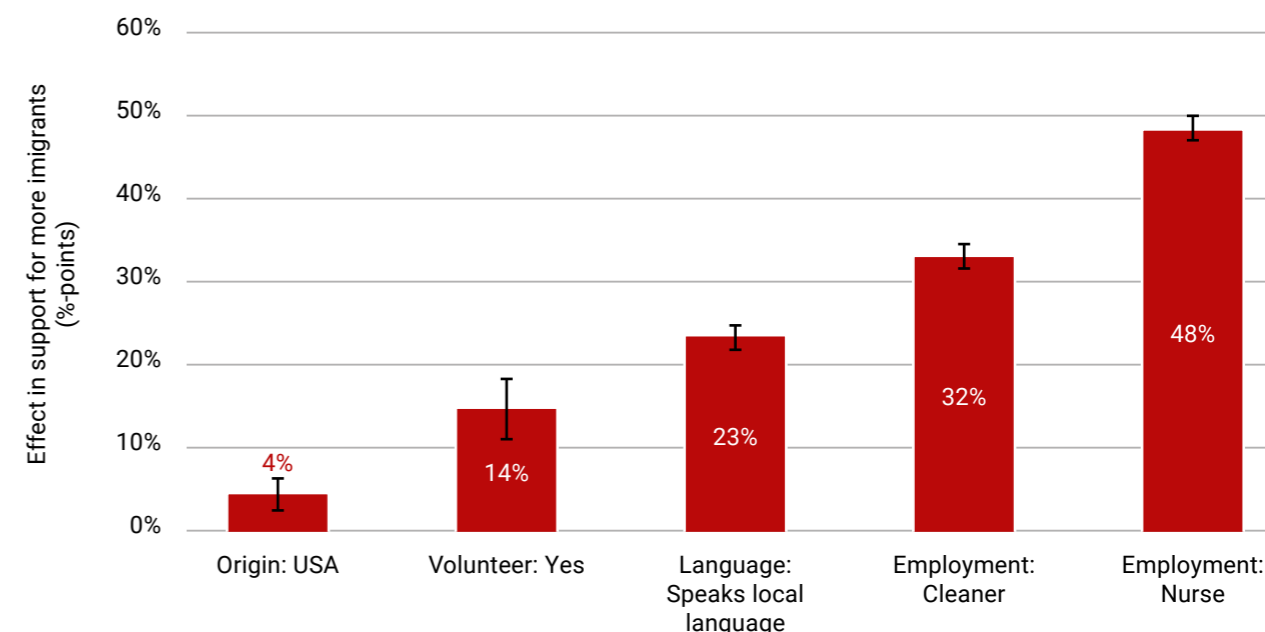
The fact that we find similar language effects for those who are employed (nurses and cleaners) and those who are unemployed suggests that economic integration is not the only concern. Social costs and cultural integration are also important to voters; see Online Annex B13. If anything, the language effect is larger for those who are employed, but the difference is not significant; see Online Annex B13, model 2. Added to this is that language effects do not differ significantly

with either the origin of the immigrant (if anything, it is larger for the Middle Eastern immigrant) or whether the immigrant is volunteering in a local sports club. Thus, it is not only narrowly defined economic concerns that shape attitudes toward immigration. Tokens of social and cultural integration also matter.

This interpretation is further supported by the positive effect of immigrants being volunteers in the local community, which indicates that the immigrant is socially integrated. Volunteering increases support for more immigration by 14 percentage points (see Figure 15). Note that we have not tested the effect of volunteering across all additional immigrant characteristics. We have only tested the effect of volunteering for unemployed immigrants from the Middle East, who either speak or do not speak the local language. Even in these cases, which may also trigger fear of economic costs, volunteering increases support for immigration by 14 percentage points. It therefore seems fair to conclude that, although economic costs are voters' main concern, cultural integration and social contributions are also important.

The characteristic with the smallest effect on support for more immigration is origin. Figure 15 shows that the support for more immigration merely increases by 4 percentage points when the immigrant is from the USA rather than the Middle East. Even though the effect is significant, it is very small compared to the effects of the other characteristics. Immigrant origin may be seen as an indicator of cultural and religious distance and perhaps the inclination to be influenced by ethnic stereotypes (cf. Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). However, in the present study, we find only very small effects of this type of concern.

Figure 15. Effect of immigrant characteristics on attitudes toward more immigration (change in positive attitudes, percentage points).



Note: The effect sizes are estimated with regression models, as outlined in Online Annex B13, models 5 and 7. The effects are relative to a reference category. For origin, the reference is origin from the Middle East. The reference for volunteering is an immigrant for which we give no information about volunteering (no mention). The reference for language skills is a person who does not speak the local language. The reference for both employment types (nurse, cleaner) is an unemployed immigrant. Note that the effect of volunteering is estimated for an unemployed immigrant of Middle Eastern origin. The error bars indicate the 95% interval for the estimates. n = 5,196.

There are some important differences in the effect sizes between Denmark, Germany and Sweden. Across all three countries, employment is the characteristic with the largest effect on support for more immigration; see Online Annex B13.A-C. However, the differences between the immigrant being employed as a cleaner and nurse are smaller in Denmark (8 percentage points) than in both Germany (25 percentage points) and Sweden (15 percentage points); see Online Annex B13.A-C. The effect of being a nurse rather than unemployed is similar in all three countries, but being a cleaner instead of unemployed has a larger positive effect in Denmark than in Germany and Sweden. This indicates that the skill level of immigrants matters most in Germany and least in Denmark.

When we inspect the data closer, the small effect of immigrants' origin, which we discussed above, is only found in Denmark and Sweden, whereas

origin has no effect in Germany; see Online Annex B13.A-C. The effect of origin is about twice as large in Denmark (11 percentage points) as in Sweden (5 percentage points). This indicates that the effect of cultural distance is more widespread among Danes and to some extent Swedes but not among Germans.

Interestingly, there are no country differences when it comes to the effects of volunteering and language skills; see Online Annex B13.A-C. Signs of social and cultural integration are equally important for immigration attitudes in Denmark, Sweden and Germany.

We have also examined if the effects of immigrant characteristics vary across social classes. Note that, due to sample size, small differences are likely to be insignificant in this test because the standard errors of the estimates increase when we include the fine-grained class variable in our analyses.

For most immigrant characteristics, the effects on attitudes toward more immigration are the same (i.e., not statistically different) across social classes. The most interesting difference across social classes we find for the employment characteristic, and even in this case, differences are small.

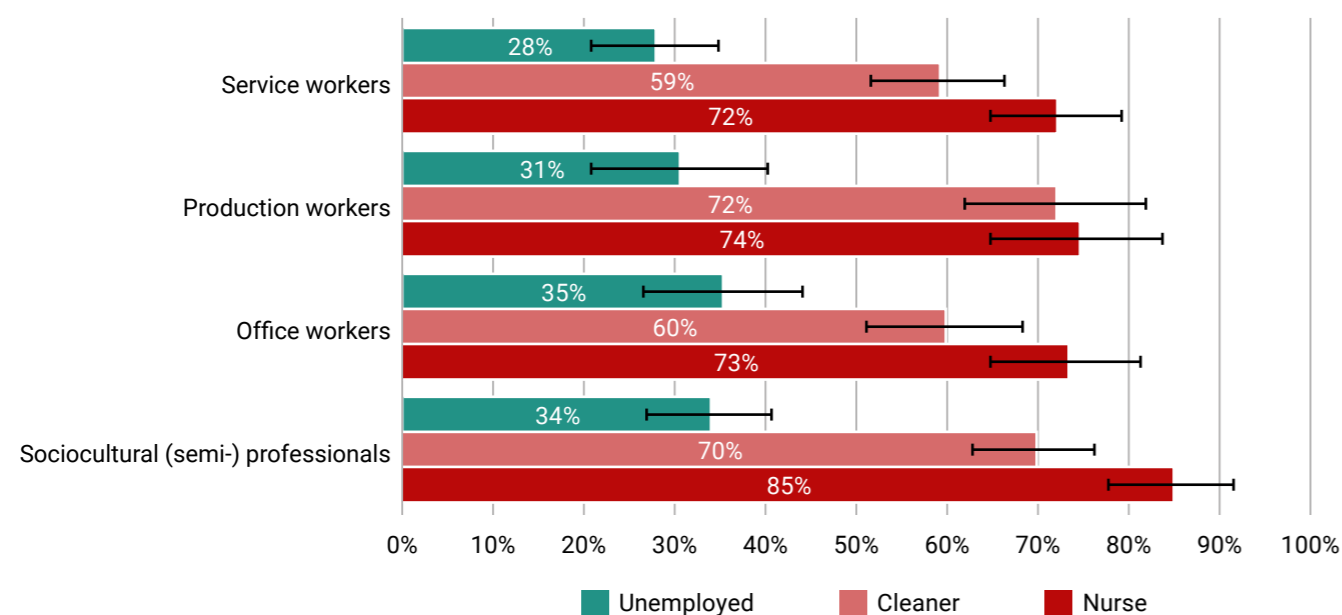
For all social classes, the employment status of the immigrant is the characteristic that matters most for attitudes toward more immigration; see Online Annex B14. Immigrants' ability to provide for themselves economically is the most important determinant of immigration-positive attitudes across social classes. True, immigrant nurses are preferred over cleaners, but the effect of being a cleaner rather than an unemployed immigrant is much larger than the effect of being a nurse rather than a cleaner for all social classes.

When we zoom in on the working class and the new middle class, we can add a few nuances to this picture (see Figure 16). Among sociocultural (semi-)

professionals and in most of the working class (service workers and office clerks), the acceptance of more immigrants is more widespread when the immigrant is a nurse rather than a cleaner. However, production workers are indifferent whether the immigrant is working as a cleaner or a nurse. In both cases, more than 70% of production workers welcome more immigrants. For production workers, what seems to be important is whether you can provide for yourself or not. Note also that the effect of being a nurse compared to an unemployed immigrant seems to be larger among sociocultural (semi-)professionals than among working-class voters, in particular office clerks.

The take-home point echoes what we have already shown. The support for more immigrants is widespread among voters if immigrants have a job, and even more so when immigrants have a skilled job like a nurse. And this is true when we focus on traditional and new core SDP constituents.

Figure 16. Effect of immigrant characteristics on attitudes toward more immigration across social groups (percentage with positive attitudes).



Note: The support is estimated from the regression model in Online Annex B14, model 3. The figure shows the overall support for more immigration with varying employment. The levels of support for employment status are estimated for an immigrant from the Middle East who speaks the local language with no cues about volunteering in a local sports club. n = 2,900.

The support for more immigration across social classes is important, but in terms of electoral competition and the prospects for SDPs and parties on the left to win over the median voter, immigration attitudes among voters who support different parties – notably the PRPs – are even more important.

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The support for more immigrants is widespread among voters if immigrants have a job, and even more so when immigrants have a skilled job.

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Across political parties, the effects of language skills and volunteering on attitudes toward more immigration are roughly the same (i.e., not statistically different). However, the effect of the origin and employment status of the immigrant vary between voters of different party families. These effects are shown in Figure 17.

Several findings are worth noting.

Firstly, across different party voters, the employment status of the immigrant is still the most important determinant of attitudes towards more immigration. Thus, this is also the case for PRP voters.

Secondly, across all immigrant characteristics, PRP voters are more reluctant to accept more immigrants than voters of all other parties. This is hardly surprising. Still, and perhaps somewhat more surprising, two out of three PRP voters (65%) are willing to allow more Middle Eastern immigrants if they work as nurses and speak the local language; if the Middle Eastern immigrant works as a cleaner instead, the support for immigration plummets, but four out of ten PRP voters still accept more immigrants who

work in a low-skilled job like cleaning. If we are talking about unemployed immigrants from the Middle East, only 13% of PRP voters will allow more immigration, even if these unemployed immigrants speak the local language.

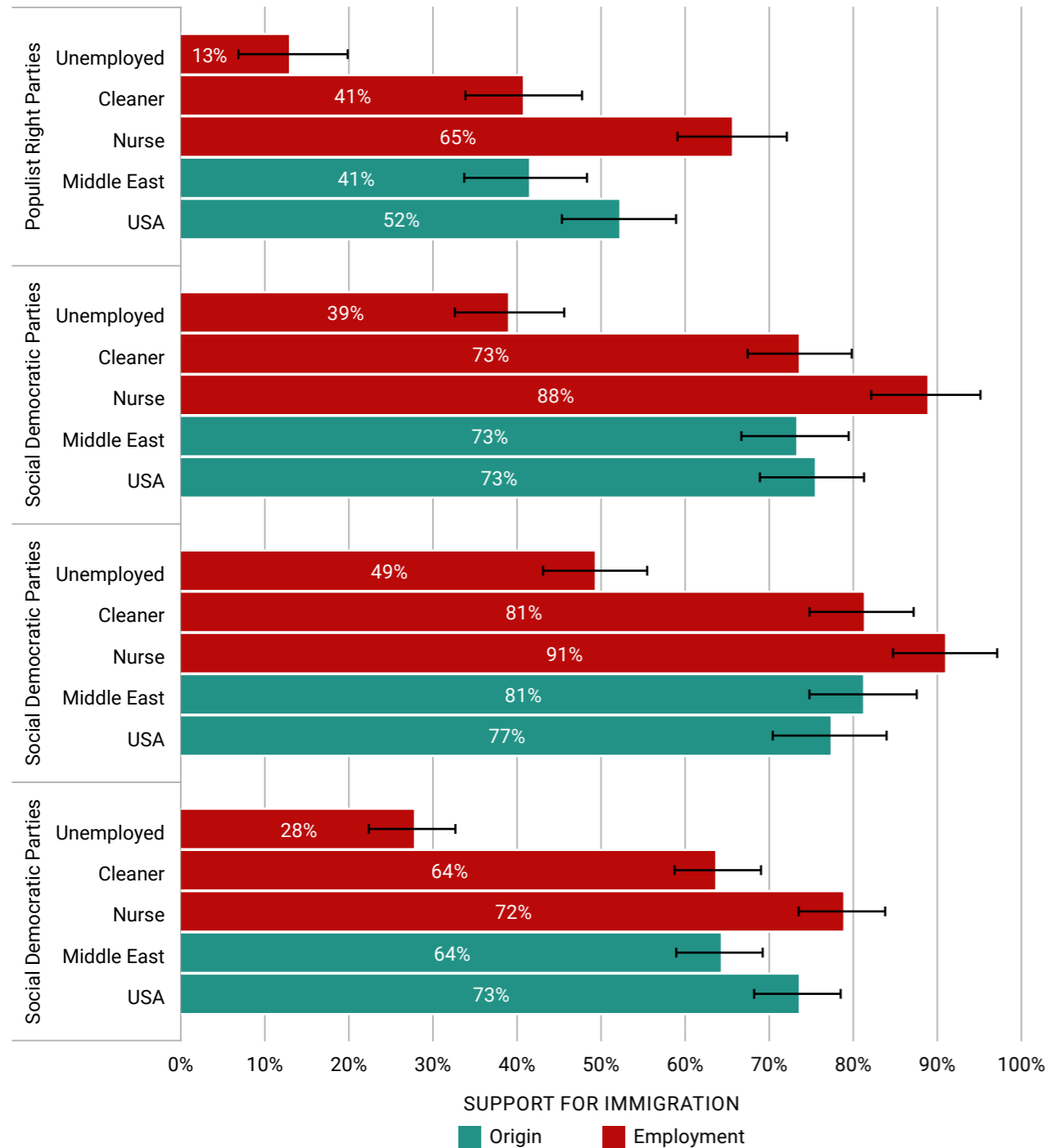
Thirdly, the skill effect is larger for PRP voters than for voters of other parties. That is, the immigrant being a nurse rather than a cleaner is more important for attitudes towards immigration among PRP voters than among voters of the SDPs and left parties. Additional analyses show that the skill effect is larger among voters who find immigration highly salient (see Online Annex B16), and as we know, immigration saliency is higher among PRP voters.

Fourthly, and finally, the origin of the immigrants is not important for centre-left voters, that is, left party and SDP voters. Among right-wing voters, notably PRP voters, American immigrants are more welcome than immigrants from the Middle East. This suggests that cultural bias has some influence on right-wing voters' attitudes toward immigration. Additional analyses show that the effect of origin is larger among voters who find immigration highly salient (see Online Annex B16), and as we know, immigration saliency is higher among PRP voters.

When it comes to the saliency of immigration, those who found immigration important for determining who they would vote for react similarly to the immigrant's language skills and whether the immigrant is volunteering as those who found immigration less salient; see Online Annex B16. As already mentioned, the effect of origin and employment status is larger among those for whom immigration is highly salient; see Online Annex B16.

When looking upon the effects of the characteristics together with the saliency of welfare, the effect of language skills, employment and volunteering does not vary with the saliency of welfare; see Online Annex B16. The effect of origin is smaller among those who find welfare important for their vote choice. Those who find welfare issues important find the origin of the immigrant less important than those who care less about welfare.

Figure 17. Effect of immigrant characteristics on attitudes toward more immigration for voters of PRPs, SDPs, left parties and other right parties (percentage with positive attitudes).



Note: The support is estimated from the regression model in Online Annex B15, model 5. The levels of support for the different values of employment are estimated for an immigrant from the Middle East who speaks the local language with no cues about volunteering in the local sports club. The levels of support for the different origins of the immigrant are estimated for an immigrant employed as a cleaner who speaks the local language with no cues about volunteering in the local sports club. n = 3,842.

5. A CENTRE-LEFT WINNING STRATEGY?

5. A CENTRE-LEFT WINNING STRATEGY?

The present project is based on the firm assumption that no single political party will be able to win an electoral majority in Western European multi-party systems in the foreseeable future. This means that government power must be based on a coalition of parties that command a majority in parliament. Historically, majority coalitions have mostly been rooted in either the centre-left or centre-right of the political spectrum, although we have sometimes also seen broad coalitions.

In this context, the strong presence of PRPs throughout Europe is a big challenge for government formation, both for the centre-right and for the centre-left. For the centre-right, it has become increasingly difficult to secure a parliamentary majority without including the PRP vote. For the centre-left, forging a majority coalition that includes a PRP seems highly improbable. The ideological distance between left parties and PRPs is simply too wide, especially when it comes to sociocultural issues. Therefore, if centre-left governments shall prevail in the future, centre-left parties must win some PRP voters. For two reasons, this seems not out of reach. Firstly, working-class voters are overrepresented in the group of PRP voters, and these voters find equality and welfare issues highly salient. Secondly, many PRP voters have as positive attitudes to welfare as the average SDP voters. Whether centre-left parties have lost 15, 20 or 25% of their vote share over the last couple of decades is not the issue (Häusermann et al. 2021; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020; Abou-Chadi et al. 2021). The critical question is how the centre-left can secure the median voters to win government office.

The question of how bright the prospects are for winning PRP voters can be approached in several ways.

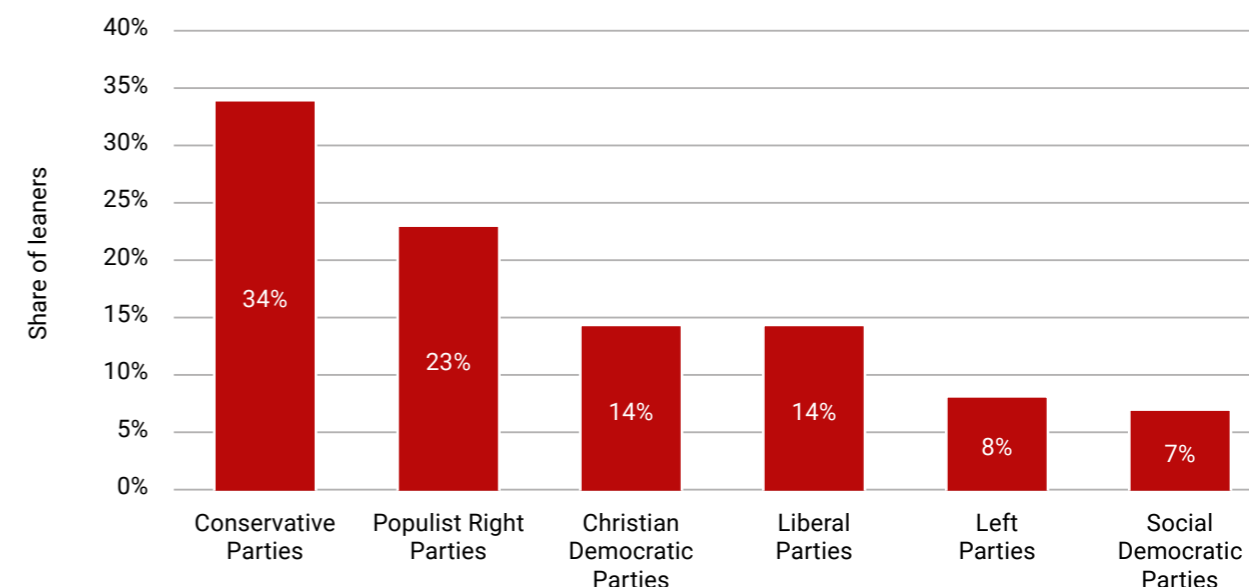
We first look at the second party choice of PRP voters, that is, the party they would vote for if they should cast their vote for another party than the one they currently vote for. This gives an indication of the share of PRP voters who “lean” towards SDPs and centre-left parties. Bear in mind that this is a snapshot of how PRP voters lean given their perceptions of other political parties’ present programs and policies.

Figure 18 shows that PRP voters overwhelmingly lean toward conservative parties and other PRPs if they were to vote for another party. However, 15% lean towards a centre-left party (SDP or left party). With a somewhat different measure (voting propensity rather than second party choice), this is roughly the same share that previous studies have found (Häusermann et al. 2021).

The second approach to this question is to take a closer look at the policy preferences of PRP voters. In the analyses above, we have focused on the average PRP voter, and there is no doubt that immigration is far more salient to the average PRP voter than the average voter of any other party. It is also unquestionable that the average PRP voter prefers strict immigration policies. But not all PRP voters feel the same. Just like for all other parties, PRP voters are different and they hold different attitudes.

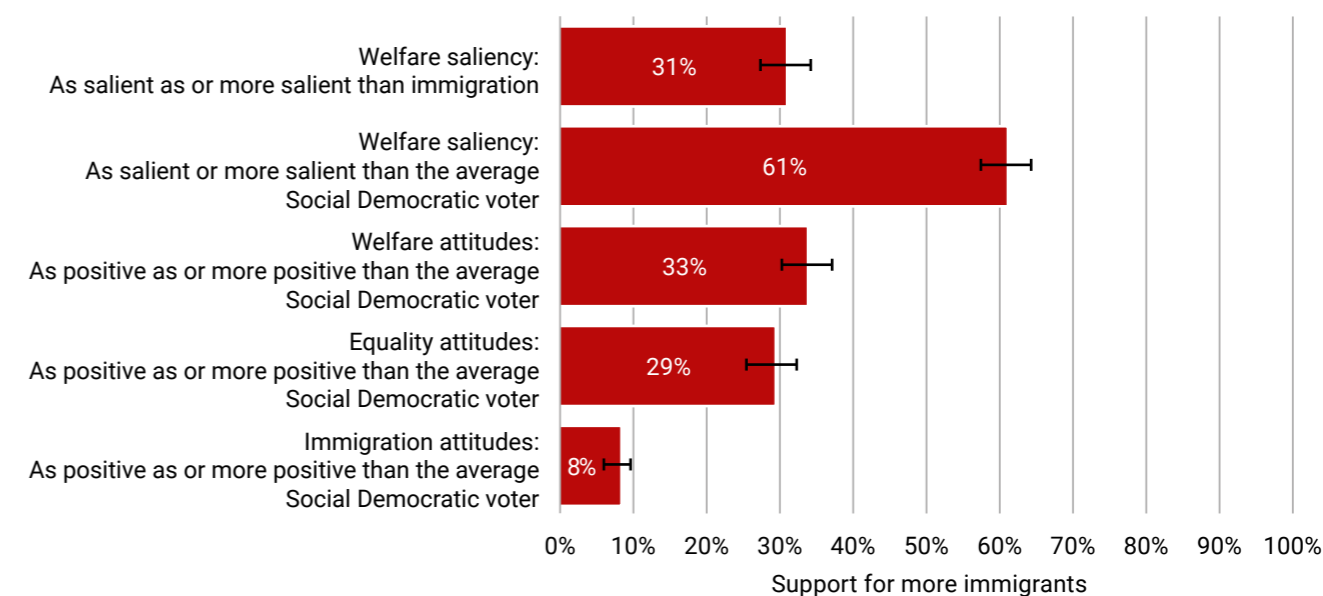
Figure 19 shows that 31% of all PRP voters find welfare issues more salient than immigration, and 61% find welfare as salient or more salient than the average SDP voter. Add to this that around 30% (29% and 33%, respectively) have at least as positive attitudes toward equality and welfare as the average SDP voter.

Figure 18. Share of PRP voters who lean toward different party families.



Note: Leaners are defined as second party choice. Party families have been coded using the same scheme as that for current vote choice. Voters may have chosen a second party that belongs to the same party family as their first choice. The column “Don’t know” includes “Don’t know/Prefer not to say”, “I would not vote” and “I would cast a blank vote”. The calculation of the shares and leaners for each party does not include “Don’t know”; see Online Annex C1.

Figure 19. Share of PRP voters with different attitudes and saliency on welfare and immigration.



Note: The shares are calculated from estimates of the mean saliency and attitudes among SDP voters. The shares are calculated for voters of PRPs. See Online Annex C2. n = 896.

This strongly suggests that among PRP voters there is an electoral potential for SDPs that focus more on expansive and progressive welfare policies than they do today. Besides, focusing on welfare is also likely to appeal to both left party voters and large segments of centre-right voters, as we showed above.



The integration of immigrants is key.



Even when it comes to immigration attitudes, there is a small group of PRP voters (around 8%) who hold immigration attitudes that are as positive as, or more positive than, the average SDP voter. This, of course, suggests that the large majority of PRP voters do hold more negative attitudes toward immigration than most SDP voters – or voters of any other party for that matter. Still, bear in mind that 31% of PRP voters find welfare more important than immigration, which suggests that SDPs may attract a considerable share of PRP voters if they focus on the welfare agenda.

Immigration is a thorny issue for SDPs, and as we have argued above, it is hard to keep the immigration issue at bay in all situations. The saliency of immigration to voters depends heavily on real-world circumstances, for example, the number of immigrants, crime, the business trend or party competition dynamics (cf. Section 2, and Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019). Therefore, SDPs must have an immigration policy and a communication strategy that addresses voter concerns.

Our survey experiments on what shapes attitudes toward more immigration indicate what worries voters the most: immigrants' employment status and language skills.

In general, voters – including PRP voters – are much more positive towards immigration if immigrants have a job and speak the local language (Danish, Swedish, German). More than two out of three voters welcome more Middle Eastern immigrants that speak the local language, even if the immigrant has a low-skilled job (cleaner). The share that welcomes more immigrants is even higher when the immigrant has a high-skilled job (nurse). In fact, a cleaner who speaks the local language is generally more welcome than a nurse who does not have these language skills.

As Figure 19 shows, the picture is largely the same among PRP voters, although they are more hesitant towards immigration than the average voter. Still, two out of three PRP voters accept more immigrants from the Middle East if the immigrants speak the local language and have a high-skilled job, like a nurse. The support for more immigration is lower when immigrants have low-skilled jobs. Around 40% of PRP voters accept more immigrants from the Middle East if the immigrant has a job as a cleaner and speaks the local language. If immigrants are unemployed – and even more so if they also do not speak the local language – almost all PRP voters reject more immigration.

PRP voters are the only voters who care about immigrant origin. Immigrants from the USA are more welcome than immigrants from the Middle East. However, this does not change the fact that many PRP voters welcome immigrants who have a job and speak the local language. Besides, other indications of successful immigrant integration, such as volunteering in a local sports club, also have a positive effect on attitudes toward more immigration, not only among the average voter but also among PRP voters.

Taken together, these analyses strongly suggest what needs to be done to dampen voter worries

when it comes to immigration: immigrants must be integrated, economically and socially. Like previous studies on immigration attitudes, we find that most voters are critical towards more immigration if immigrants are seen as an economic burden to society, and if they are perceived as socially unintegrated (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). This is also true among PRP voters.

For SDPs and other progressive parties on the left, voters' immigration worries cannot be ignored. The integration of immigrants is key. This is not only a question of political communication and how immigrants are portrayed, but also a major policy challenge. Immigrants who have a job and speak the local language are not a problem to most voters, not even to large segments of PRP voters.

In many ways, the results are promising for SDPs in Denmark, Germany and Sweden. The way to regain electoral strength and win back enough voters to secure a centre-left majority resonates well with time-honoured social democratic policies: SDPs must invest in welfare and social equality to address the concerns of the middle and working classes. But the SDPs must also secure jobs for immigrants, make sure that they learn the language and integrate immigrants into civil society. This is a big challenge, but voter anxiety over immigration – not least among PRP voters – is unlikely to wane any time soon, unless SDPs succeed in this endeavour.

6. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

6. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

The main question we have asked in this study is how the combined centre-left in Denmark, Germany and Sweden can secure an electoral majority in the face of the challenge from PRPs, which have gained more and more votes in recent elections, mainly by focusing on anxiety over immigration. The issue here is not so much exactly how many votes SDPs and other centre-left parties have lost to PRPs over the last decades, but rather how the centre-left can attract enough voters to secure a majority that can bring a governing coalition headed by the SDPs to power.

Like earlier studies, we have documented that the saliency of the immigration issue is high among all segments of the working class. We also found that the immigration attitudes among working-class voters were more negative than among most other voters. By contrast, immigration is least important for middle-class voters – in particular sociocultural (semi-)professionals – and these voters also hold the most immigration-friendly attitudes. This, of course, poses a dilemma for the centre-left, which traditionally has had a stronghold among voters in the working class and the “new” middle class. If SDPs and other centre-left parties adopt strict immigration policies, they may attract some working-class voters who currently vote for PRPs. But, at the same time, they may antagonise other voters among their core constituents, particularly the sociocultural (semi-)professionals.

Our analysis of party switchers indicates that this dilemma is very real: SDP voters who have previously voted for PRPs have more negative immigration attitudes than other SDP voters, whereas SDP voters who have previously voted for a left party have more positive immigration attitudes. However, this also shows that these voters have probably switched to the SDP for issues other than immigration.

The immigration issue is salient in the three countries we have studied, but it is not the most salient issue in any of the three countries; see Annex A2. In the spring of 2024, when we collected the data, the issue was most important among German voters, followed by Swedish voters, and least important in Denmark.



If the SDPs and the centre-left shall win and sustain an electoral majority, they must include welfare as a top priority



Welfare issues and social investment policies are much more uniting. Issues relating to welfare and social equality are top priorities, both in the working class and in most segments of the middle class. And both groups share the same pro-welfare attitudes. In fact, a strong focus on welfare may attract voters from all social groups and most political parties. It is only among PRP voters that immigration is more important than investing in welfare issues, such as healthcare, education and training, and childcare. However, even among present PRP voters, 31% find welfare issues more important than immigration.

Our analysis of party switchers also suggests that welfare may be a reason why former PRP voters have switched to the SDP. Former PRP voters have just as positive attitudes towards welfare and equality as other SDP voters.

Welfare issues are most salient in Sweden, followed by Germany, and least salient in Denmark. In all three countries, welfare issues – notably healthcare and education – are more important to voters than immigration; see Annex A2.



The SDPs and other centre-left parties must address the social and economic integration of immigrants, which worries many voters



If the SDPs and the centre-left shall win and sustain an electoral majority, they must include welfare as a top priority. Fortunately, the centre-left already has a strong issue ownership of welfare, which implies that they are well-positioned to capitalise on voters' worries about welfare.

This leaves us with the immigration issue. There is no doubt that the centre-left will do better at elections when elections focus on welfare and social investments, rather than immigration. But, as our analysis has shown, immigration is an important issue to many voters, not least PRP voters. Besides, no matter how creative its campaign strategy, no single party can control the agenda. Depending on real-world circumstances immigration anxieties may be important to many voters. Therefore, these anxieties must be addressed.

Our survey experiments showed that most voters – including voters from the working class and the new middle class – worried about the economic costs and the social integration of immigrants. We find very few signs of cultural xenophobia. Only PRP voters welcome immigrants from the USA more than immigrants from the Middle East when we control for other immigrant characteristics, and even among PRP voters, this effect is rather small. Besides, the origin effect is mostly found in Denmark. Very large voter majorities welcome immigrants who speak the local language and have a job. Immigrants who are well-integrated into civil society are also more welcome than those who are not. By contrast, more than 70% of voters are unwilling to accept more immigrants if they are unemployed, and if the unemployed immigrants also do not speak the local language, around 85 % of voters reject more immigration.

The pattern is largely the same among PRP voters, but the levels of support for more immigration are lower: two out of three PRP voters accept more immigrants from the Middle East if immigrants have a high-skilled job (nurse) and speak the language of the country in which they live. If the Middle Eastern immigrant is employed in a low-skilled job (cleaner), 40% of PRP voters support more immigration.

We find few signs of outright rejection of immigration among voters in Denmark, Germany and Sweden. The acceptance of more immigrants is remarkably high in all countries. But voters worry when immigrants do not have a job, and when they are not socially integrated.

Both in terms of policy and political communication, there is only one solution to voters' immigration anxieties. The SDPs and other centre-left parties must address the social and economic integration of immigrants, which worries many voters. If centre-left parties succeed in this endeavour, they are well-prepared to counter the rhetoric of PRPs and win back voters in sufficient numbers to secure a progressive majority.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Pooled data for Austria (AT), Switzerland (CH), Germany (DE), Denmark (DK), Finland (FI), the United Kingdom (GB), the Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO) and Sweden (SE) 2000-2018.
- 2 Note that several studies show that not only welfare support but also welfare chauvinism and welfare populism are more widespread among PRP voters and voters with conservative sociocultural attitudes, for example, high levels of prejudice (see, e.g., de Koster et al. 2012; Mewes and Mau 2012; Hjorth 2016).
- 3 Guides available at: <https://people.unil.ch/danieloesch/scripts/>
- 4 If an immigrant is employed as a nurse but does not speak the language, the lack of language skills may mainly be perceived as a cultural threat. If, on the other hand, the immigrant is unemployed, the lack of language skills may also be seen as an economic threat, since it will be harder for the immigrants to get a job when they do not speak the language; see Arendt and Bolvig, 2020.

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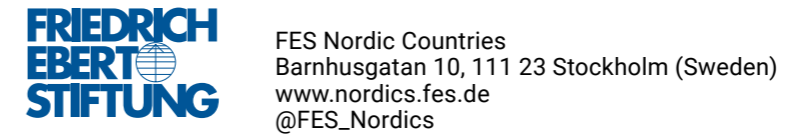
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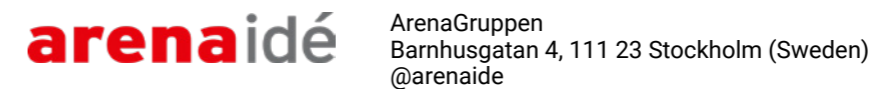
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ANNEXES

Over the past few decades, Social Democratic Parties across Europe have seen a significant decline in voter support. At the same time Populist Right-Wing Parties have capitalized on concerns related to immigration and cultural issues, particularly among working-class voters. The study is based on a large survey and explores how Social Democratic Parties and the center-left in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden can regain electoral strength in the face of growing support for populist right-wing parties.

The study focuses on voter preferences on welfare, equality, and immigration. It shows that welfare and equality issues are important to both working-class and middle-class voters when they decide who to vote for. Welfare and equality are uniting themes. Immigration, on the other hand, is potentially a dividing issue. The question is how to gain support both from the working class, which is increasingly concerned about immigration, and from the new middle class, which is much less concerned about immigration. Populist Right-Wing Parties have successfully fostered and exploited these immigration anxieties among voters.

The present study finds that immigration attitudes are strongly influenced by how well-integrated immigrants are. Most working-class voters accept more immigrants if they are socially and economically integrated. In general, voters welcome immigrants who have a job and speaks the language in the country they live in. Voters are not concerned about immigrants cultural origin.

The study concludes by offering strategic recommendations for Social Democratic Parties to navigate this complex political terrain. For the centre-left the best way to address the challenge from Populist Right-Wing Parties is to develop a strategy that balances progressive welfare policies with an approach to immigration that focuses on successful integration. Our study contributes to the ongoing debate on how the center-left in Europe can adapt to changing voter dynamics and regain political power.

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