

Reclaiming National Sovereignty – Converging Trends of Conservatives and the Far-Right in Austria

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Abstract. What had been dubbed Neo-nationalism (Eger & Valdez, 2014) has been exclusively associated with the far right and parties generally labeled Eurosceptical. In recent years, the neo-nationalist arguments, postures, and agenda items have crossed party lines and entered the mainstream discourse in Europe (Mondon, 2013; 2016; Pytlas, 2015; Hainsworth, 2016; Meijers, 2017; van Spanje & Graaf, 2017). Some have referred to this as “parroting the pariah” (van Spanje & Graaf, 2017; 2018). We argue that growing public support for the far right, a declining trend for centrist parties, and a change in the rhetoric of center-right parties under these pressures (not necessarily a policy shift – Akkerman, 2015; Pytlas, 2015) have paved the way, in extreme cases, for the ‘mainstreaming’ of neo-nationalist positions but more frequently, for calling for the reassertion of national control over internationally shared policy areas. The growing cooperation by mainstream parties with the far right both regionally and nationally has resulted in a strategic dilemma in which isolating the ‘other’ and distancing oneself from the ‘extreme’ is no longer a credible path.

Our research paper examines national Austrian election, communication, and manifesto data from 2013 to 2017 to gauge the extent and the content of appeals to national sovereignty. This includes voter surveys, party programs, televised debates, etc. involving the rightwing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Christian-democratic Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), a party that had until recently been a staunchly pro-European. One goal is to ascertain as to whether such calls for national sovereignty are rooted in general ideological preferences (e.g., nativism, nationalism, Euroscepticism, Islamophobia), specific economic and political interests/advantages (e.g., restricting labor mobility, reducing social benefit transfer abroad, closing labor markets), and/or the result of strategic consideration having to do with party completion.

1. Introduction

After decades of debates about the processes of Europeanization and globalization, both radical and center right Western European parties are reclaiming the value of national sovereignty. Until recently, the ever-growing connection between Western states seemed to macerate the differences between nations and their borders, and also started building new, transnational identities. We argue that growing public support for the far right, a declining trend for centrist parties, and a change in the rhetoric of center-right parties under these pressures have paved the way, in extreme cases, for the ‘mainstreaming’ of neo-nationalist positions but more frequently, for calling for the reassertion of national control over internationally shared policy areas.

Using data derived from Austrian party manifestos and party leader speeches, this paper analyzes how these claims for national sovereignty were constructed by the radical right and adopted or transformed by mainstream right parties. The analysis has three levels: First, we identify the policy areas that are most often claimed to be a priority for reasserting national autonomy and sovereignty. This includes both the discursive (claims justifying the need for greater sovereignty) and practical dimension (policy proposals). Second, appealing to sovereignty can be constructed as national autonomy vis-à-vis the EU, or against globalization and international trade or against perceived cultural threats such as immigration and Islam. Third, we ascertain as to whether such calls for national sovereignty are rooted in general ideological preferences, specific economic and political interests, and/or whether they are the result of party strategic consideration. We compare the sovereignty claims of the radical right Austrian Freedom Party with those of the center right Austrian People’s Party between 2013 and 2017. Thus, we can show not only how both radical and center right parties reconstruct claims of national sovereignty but also analyze how these parties influence each other’s claims.

2. Theory: Center-right and far right parties competing for the same voters?

When do parties change their policy positions – and when do they adopt a new ‘styles’ and a new rhetoric? As Hooghe and Marks (2017) put it, parties are “programmatically inflexible” (2017, p. 4) given their focus on a relatively stable support base. Changing the path followed in the past thus involves careful considerations of the consequences of doing so. Yet, electoral opportunity structures, trends and shifts in public opinion, strategic coalition-thinking as well as ideological motives can bring about both a change of policy position and political style. Looking back at the past decade, both party positions and voters attitudes and voting behavior has clearly shifted rightward in a crisis-ridden Europe (Börzel & Risse, 2017; Krzyżanowski, 2017; Luo, 2017). At the same time, conservatives in European party systems have adopted an ambivalent relationship towards Europe (Adam et al., 2017). In opening up towards a party family formerly isolated from the political mainstream by a ‘cordon sanitaire’, center-right parties have rediscovered the salience of identity politics and nationalist agendas: national autonomy at the expense of the ‘European’. This change in mainstream tactics and rhetoric parallels a trend in public opinion and voting behavior which favors the far right and exerts considerable pressure on the ‘old’ party system. Austria has not been left out by these developments (Heinisch & Hauser, 2016).

Schumacher and van Kersbergen (2014), focusing on the Dutch and Danish cases, find that mainstream parties and particularly center-right parties responded “massively” to the restrictive and exclusionary welfare state positions of the far right, in elections marked by a perceived challenge from this side. Van de Wardt (2015) shows for the issues of immigration and European integration that those mainstream parties which have previously been in opposition will adapt to the issues of and made salient by niche party competitors – while governing mainstream parties will shy away from changing their postures and taking over more ‘radical’ policy standpoints. Meijers (2017) finds the same impact of Eurosceptic challengers on mainstream parties’ stance on European

integration, yet only if EU-issues are deemed important and salient by the challenger. By the same token, niche parties and far right parties with extreme positions on multiculturalism “can benefit from their own electoral success by dragging [mainstream parties] towards their own positions” (Han, 2015, p. 571), although it is the mainstream right that is more vulnerable to this dynamic.

Mainstream parties across Europe have employed different strategies of dealing with the rising threat from the far right: especially center-right parties seem to be divided on whether to remain steadfast in their pro-European agenda, or whether to employ a strategy that seeks to regain lost voters and reclaim nationalist and anti-immigration discourses – even though this might mean to let oneself be ‘dragged’ towards the extreme. For Schumacher and van Kersbergen (2014) this latter strategy follows a clear pattern everywhere: “(1) populists take a position that opposes the establishment; (2) from this position, populists enjoy electoral success; (3) mainstream parties accommodate populist parties by adjusting their policy positions away from their traditional stance” (2014, p. 309; see also: Meguid, 2005; 2010). Dahlström and Sundell (2012) argue, however, that this is a “losing gamble” for major parties. According to their argument, if mainstream parties adapt to right-wing discourses, it is the far right that benefits the most in the long-run: while mainstream parties, by employing such a strategy, would not only repel their own voters, they also legitimate right-wing policy proposals and make them acceptable alternatives.

Considering this outlook, is it irrational for parties to adapt to right-wing discourses and policy standpoints? In contrast to Dahlström and Sundell (2012), a number of studies revolving around spatial competition and opportunity structure theories argues the exact opposite.

First, ignoring pressing issues is no viable and successful strategy in the long-run. Perceived congruence of the mainstream on a polarized issue – such as immigration, Europe, and the notion of a loss of national sovereignty in the process of European integration – leads to voter frustration with a lack of policy alternatives, runs the risk of further polarizing the electorate, and favors parties positioning themselves as the ‘alternative’ to an elite consensus (cf. former Austrian Freedom Party leader’s slogan

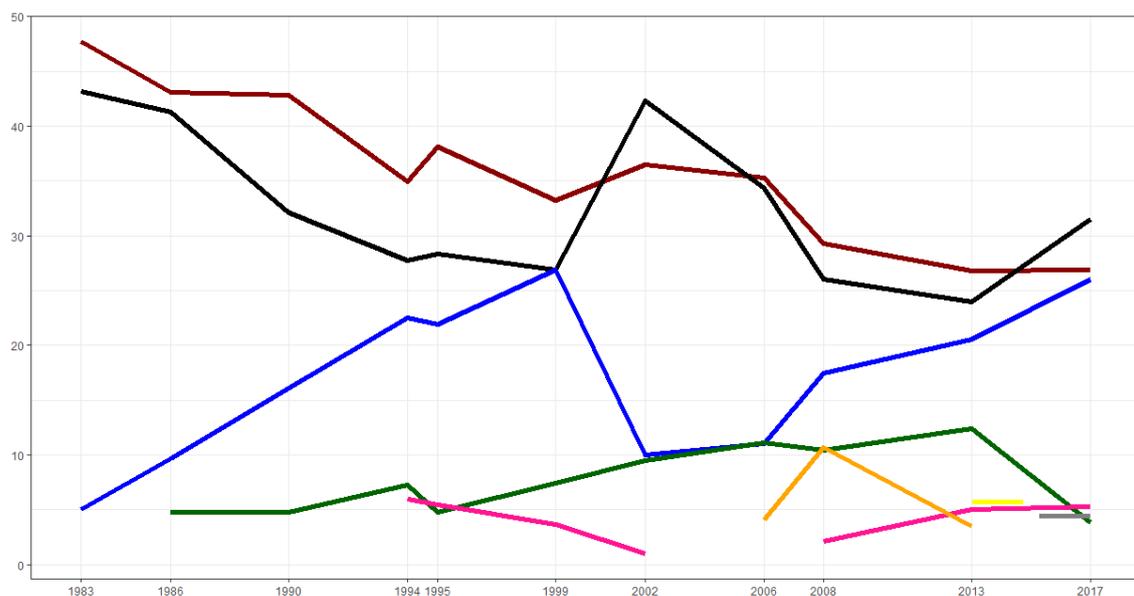
“They are against him, because he is for you”, and the AfD’s name itself: “Alternative for Germany”).

This ‘adversarial policy’ strategy which seeks to ostracize the extreme is therefore no more promising – from a mainstream party’s perspective on vote maximization – than a strategy of taking over right-wing issues, but rather serves to heat up the debate and polarize the electorate (Spies & Franzmann, 2011; Loxbo, 2014; see also: van Spanje & van der Brug, 2007; Treib, 2014 on the issue of European elections; see Bale, 2010 for a disagreeing perspective on the effects of the center-right’s movement on ideological polarization). Passage of the pariah from outside to inside government can de-radicalize and ‘normalize’ the outsider whereas exclusion of large parts of the electorate pushes the right-wing party further to the extreme and results in increased, not decreased ideological polarization (van Spanje & van der Brug, 2007; see also: Wagner, 2012).

Second, substantial empirical evidence exists that shows how taking over issues from competitors and trying to regain lost voters can indeed be successful (Mondon, 2013; 2016; Pytlas, 2015; Meijers, 2017; van Spanje & Graaf, 2017; 2018). What has been dubbed “parroting the pariah” (van Spanje & Graaf, 2017; 2018) describes a strategy by which mainstream parties co-opt and take over the positions of and thereby reach out to the voters of their challengers. Engaging in such a strategy means walking a thin line between broadening one’s own base and mainstreaming and legitimizing the ‘radical’ and the ‘outsider’. Especially in a context of vast ideological differences and after a policy of ostracism that sought to keep the ‘extreme’ out of the mainstream political discourse, a turn towards governing with the pariah and releasing it from the ‘cordon sanitaire’ runs the risk of undermining the mainstream party’s credibility. Just as the Social Democrats (SPÖ) in Austria, center-left parties have therefore been reluctant to break the ‘cordon sanitaire’ whereas center-right parties have reached out to the far right more often (and at the time of writing, a renewal of such a conservative-rightwing coalition looms in Austria). Yet, this strategy can be successful: particularly in cases where a center-right and right-wing coalition has a realistic change. As minimal winning and minimal range theories predict, office-seeking parties should have a strong incentive to govern with a smaller junior partner than to govern with a partner of equal

size (Lange, 2017). The reasoning here is that vote shares turn into leverage and greater leverage translates into more cabinet seats and benefits from the coalition government. Assuming both center-right and right-wing parties – and their leaderships – employ office- and policy-seeking strategies (see also: Müller & Strøm, 1999), a pre-election policy convergence of the two potential coalition partners appears to be rational behavior in this context. Given the circumstance that the vote share of ‘grand coalitions’ (in Austria since the 1980s) has steadily declined and discontent with the frequency of grand coalitions risen, defection of one side (here: the conservative ÖVP) to the far right has been anything but surprising (Fallend & Heinisch, forthcoming, pp. 34–35). Moving towards far-right policies and parroting the right-wing pariah – despite all risks – might therefore appear reasonable.

Figure 1: Parties’ vote shares at national elections in percent, 1883-2017



Note: SPÖ = red; ÖVP = black; FPÖ = blue; Greens = green; Pilz = grey; liberals (LiF and NEOS) = pink; BZÖ = orange; Team Stronach = yellow; percentage of votes received by each party displayed on the y-axis. Own illustration based on data derived from the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.bmi.gv.at/>). Distances on the x-axis are in years. Early elections were called in 1886, 1995, 2002, 2008 and 2017. In 2007, the legislative period was extended from four to five years.

Furthermore, and irrespective of the dangers of such a convergence on nationalist and right-wing issues, ostracism is not guaranteed to be the more successful strategy. The risks of ‘collaborating with the enemy’ on the other hand, can be averted to some extent: adapting to right-wing rhetoric and presenting oneself as a ‘new’ party (or movement) with ‘new’ ideas and policy preferences does not mean that the challenger’s policy positions have been taken over completely (Akkerman, 2015; Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; Pytlas, 2015). In fact, such radical change is rather seldom. As Akkerman (2015) puts it: “Pledges are to be distinguished from rhetorical statements that aim to lay out values and principles or that are so vague that it cannot be estimated whether the promised outcome has been carried out or not” (2015, p. 57). The use of such rhetoric statements does not lie in a credible position-taking and therefore they hardly run the risk of alienating the own supporters – it can be understood, however, from a perspective of ‘valence politics’ and ‘party completion’ (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1966; Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2000; Bélanger & Meguid, 2008).

Specifically, the acceptance of nationalist responses to a range of issues – from identity politics and a sense of belonging to a nation, to security, welfare, and labor market policy – owed to a *rhetorical* convergence in mainstream parties’ and right-wing parties’ campaigns, shifts the voters’ and the campaign focus away from ‘what is the goal?’ towards ‘which party and which candidate is most likely to bring it about?’. Even though differences between conservative and far right parties might exist, the campaign phase lets these differences disappear and produces a competition for ‘competence’ on a given issue that the campaign focuses on and is dominated by. Given a strong focus on and interest in immigration, security and economic policies and, at the same time, a rightward shift of the electorate, this competition revolves around who serves the ‘national interests’ best and who takes the most radically nationalist stance. Other issue areas will be subsumed under a broader, nationalist discourse.

In sum, if center-right parties realistically face a threat from a far-right contender, the question is whether to remain steadfast and keep radical and nationalist ideas off the political agenda or – if that is not feasible (that is, if increasing parts of the electorate are excluded by such a policy towards the extreme party) – directly attack the challenger by making similar demands and engaging in a similar rhetoric. While both strategies are

associated with some trade-offs, “parroting the pariah” can prove to be an effective approach during the campaign phase. Blurring the lines between conservatism and a more radical, right-wing rhetoric which even gets right-leaning voters on board, may seem particularly promising for a conservative catch-all party: “(...) mainstream parties do not have coherent positions, but follow strategies that mix cosmopolitan with nationalist positions. Mixing positions in order to bridge conflicting preferences among their constituencies appears to be a common phenomenon among mainstream parties in this policy field [immigration policy]. This belies the prevailing notion that such strategies are exceptional or typical only for Social Democratic parties” (Akkerman, 2015, p. 63).

Another important point is ‘issue ownership’. The question whether we should observe converging or rather stable postures in a given policy area, in this case, is answered by a look at the challenger’s position and core issue. As Abou-Chadi (2016) argues, ideological proximity and rather broad policy profiles (not only of mainstream parties but also of the challenger) are decisive when it comes to mainstream parties’ strategies and clearly incentivize a tough response; opposition by a niche party that ‘owns’ an issue, however, does not. According to Abou-Chadi, therefore, we should see a harder competition for a common voter pool between mainstream parties and right-wing parties on immigration and nationalist issues, while we should see less competition and less strategic policy convergence with regard to environmentally aware voters between mainstream and green parties. Even though nationalist attitudes – “perceived ethnic threat, social distance to Muslims, Euroscepticism and political distrust” (Lubbers & Coenders, 2016, p. 98) – are very likely to be found among voters of the populist radical right, such issues and attitudes are present among conservative voters as well. Alonso and Fonseca (2012) go as far as to say that the far right is “not the main factor behind the ‘anti-immigrant turn’ of mainstream parties” (2012, p. 869) and that being ‘tough’ on immigration is by no means their prerogative (see also: Mudde, 2007).

We surmise therefore that it is not only dynamics of ‘issue ownership’ versus broad policy profiles that inform conservative parties’ strategies. Shared Policy preferences, ideological proximity and common objectives on the agenda do their part, too.

Immerzeel, Lubbers, and Coffé (2016) examine these distances of other parties to the populist radical right. They find that the group of center-right parties is closest to the populist radical right in terms of a common approach on immigration and nationalism, while the center-left, green parties and leftist parties exhibit the largest distance on this dimension. The argument here is that conservative and right-wing parties share ideological roots, and that conservatives emphasize tradition and seek to defend the ‘national’ and the ‘own culture’ against the ‘foreign’ (also see: Bale, 2008) which lets them adopt a tougher immigration stance and implement tougher immigration laws with greater ease. Convergence of the two may thus not only be strategic (“parroting the pariah”) but also wanted intrinsically and from a policy-seeking perspective. In “Cinderella and her ugly sisters”, Bale (2010) extends the list of policy commonalities between the mainstream right and the far right: As he shows, the center-right has moved towards a tougher stance not only on immigration but also on ‘welfare abuse’ and ‘crime’. Likewise, Schumacher and van Kersbergen (2014) provide evidence to suggest that the rise of the far right has motivated mainstream parties to radically change their welfare policies so that the center-right and far right represent identical policy positions in this respect, too.

Expanding on this ‘ideological closeness’-argument, Han (2017) finds empirical evidence suggesting that center-right parties and right-wing parties are neighboring in terms of their ‘GAL-TAN’ placement (see: online appendix; for more details on ‘GAL-TAN’ see also: Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson, 2002). While green, communist, social democratic and liberal parties seem to cluster on the libertarian-postmaterialist ‘GAL’-side (2-4 on a 10-point scale), conservative, Christian democratic and right-wing parties indeed far closer to the traditionalist-authoritarian ‘TAN’-side (6-8 on a 10-point scale). Moreover, the ‘GAL-TAN’ scores seem to underpin the argument that mainstream parties contain a broader range of ideological positions and policy preferences.

Among parties, policy preferences matter. But so do policy preferences of voters. The electorate is anything but stable and public opinion may shift in a direction that motivates a change in the postures of political parties. Adams, Haupt, and Stoll (2009) raise the question “what moves parties?” and find a clear answer in both economic conditions and movements in public opinion. Crucially, however, the effect of public

opinion is much more pronounced with respect to center and center-right parties (called “mainstream nonleft”) as well as far right parties, while parties to the left remain relatively stable and unaffected in their policy standpoints. In this regard, the authors conclude, center-right and right-wing parties are much more responsive even to short-term shifts in public opinion (measured as citizens’ mean left/right self-placement). Williams and Spoon (2015) swap the left/right-scale for voters’ take on their country’s membership in the EU and the degree of Euroscepticism in public opinion and conclude that here too parties respond to shifts in the electorate – even though they do so in a differentiated way: over time and across countries, it is especially mainstream parties which respond most to Eurosceptic and nationalist ‘trends’.

How do we explain this development? Ezrow, Vries, Steenbergen, and Edwards (2011) state that shifts in the general electorate to the right or left account for mainstream parties’ policy reorientations, whereas niche parties and parties at the extreme ends of the political spectrum are more sensitive to their own, narrow voter base. Catch-all parties at the center of the left/right-continuum on the other hand do not have such a homogenous support base, but must be careful not to repel one group of voters while targeting another (see also: Akkerman, 2015, p. 63). Blurring policy positions and adapting to the rhetoric of the left and right in a given context where either left or right issues are salient therefore seems to be a common strategy (Akkerman, 2015, *ibid.*; see also: Adam et al., 2017). Han (2017) notes, however, that policy shifts on a socio-cultural dimension do not necessarily hurt – i.e. mean a loss in vote shares – if for one, these shifts are in line with shifts within the party’s clientele and, for another, socio-cultural issues are not deemed a very salient issue (as is the case rather for mainstream parties than for the extreme left and right). Importantly, this means that center-right parties should not only have an incentive to blur such issues and mix policy positions (Akkerman, 2015) but also move rightward irrespective of potential vote losses, if their clientele moves rightward too. Furthermore, and as Dunn (2015) points out, exclusive-nationalist attitudes are hardly a characteristic of only the far right, but are rather present within the mainstream and mainstream right clientele as well.

Exogenous factors such as an ongoing globalization and Europeanization of policy issues, the creation of losers from such developments, economic recession (e.g. Adams et al., 2009), and events such as the refugee crisis (e.g. Krzyżanowski, 2017) that play into the hands of right-wing parties and their strength at mobilizing on fears of security risks and cultural threats, lay an additional foundation for a return towards nativist policy claims and identity politics. They do so directly by influencing parties' policy preferences and slogans (even the Austrian Greens have campaigned on national sentiments and attempted to put their own pro-European spin on 'Heimat' and a sense of belonging both in the last presidential and parliamentary elections) and indirectly by moving the median voter further to the right.

From the perspective of the populist radical right, both the shift in issue salience and the parroting strategy of center-right parties should be two strong incentives to (1) emphasize their thematic priorities, position themselves clearly as 'those who claimed it first' and mobilize their core voters, but also (2) get even 'tougher' on immigration and other policy areas as a means to distinguish themselves radically from the mainstream. Yet, whereas we see the first point clearly reflected in right-wing parties' campaigns across Europe, their response to the latter has rather been less radicalism (e.g. Mondon, 2013; 2016). Additionally, as Brubaker (2017) points out, pan-European national populist parties and movements have shifted away strongly from traditional ethnic-nationalist claims and in favor of a more vaguely defined, civilizational and identitarian Christianity – which challenges mainstream parties framing of the far right as an 'outsider' and a 'pariah'.

3. Empirical analysis: The case of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)

To what extent do the Austrian mainstream right and populist right compete for the same voters and nationalist sentiments among the electorate? Do both parties converge on the same (neo-)nationalist agenda (Eger & Valdez, 2014) and campaign on reclaiming the what is viewed as 'Austrian'? In this work we define 'asserting of

national sovereignty and autonomy’ as all those claims (a) favoring the differential treatment of Austrians and non-Austrians contrary to established practices or existing legal obligations such as EU laws, (b) calling for the transfer of authority from supranational to national authorities, and/or (c) demanding measures to defend Austrian culture and identity from external threats. An analysis of candidate speeches (3.1), comparison of election manifestos (3.2) and glance at survey data (3.3) suggests that these trends are indeed noticeable and that not only we see a ‘normalization’ and ‘mainstreaming’ of the radical right (FPÖ), but also an obvious rightward and nationalist shift of the center-right (ÖVP).

3.1 Candidate speeches: rhetorical convergence of the center- and far-right?

Turning to the arguments about reclaiming sovereignty by the Austrian populist far right, we first examined the speeches of its leader Heinz Christian Strache made 2013-2017, the last two national election years, in different venues und settings. The key was to see how the European Union was viewed in these speeches and to understand which issue areas the Freedom Party was most Eurosceptical.

As shown in Table 1, in the column “All Statements”, 503 of the 549 (91.6%) EU-related statements in Strache’s speeches were negative. These included claims about the European Union, its institutions, leaders, policies, and associated issues, underscoring Eurosceptical nature of the Austrian Freedom Parry even if we consider that the extent of negative references varied by speech type and time. However, the fact that the variation between speech type is relatively minor (except for the category “TV Interviews” in which the Stache is not alone in selecting the issue) is minor further confirms the consistency of the negative nature of the FPÖ claims about European integration. Despite its negative tone, Strache simultaneously continued to emphasize that the FPÖ does not advocate Austria’s departure from either European Union or the Euro zone.

Table 1: Percentage of statements by direction across Strache’s speech types (by freq./%)

Direction of Statement	Ash.W Speech	TV Interview	Int’n Speech	Parl. Speech	TV Debates	All State-ments
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Negative	50/92.5%	43/74.1%	59/95.1%	300/93.1%	51/96.2%	503/91.6%
Positive	4/7.4%	6/10.3%	3/4.8%	3/0.9%	2/7.7%	18/3.2%
Neutral	0	9/15.5%	0	19/5.9%	0	28/5.1%

Speech types: a) Ash Wednesday speeches given to party activists, b) TV interviews, c) speeches given internationally, d) statements made in a televised debate, e) parliamentary debates

In his speeches, Strache demanded the European Union undergo different kinds of changes ranging from more limited reforms all the way to a complete deconstruction and devolution of the current system in favor of a federated economic community of sovereign nation states. His notion of a reconstituted EU as a federation of nation states can be gleaned from the following accepts.

Strache on EU and sovereignty:

“No! We need a change in this European Union. Turn back toward the interest in peace in Europe like the founding fathers of the EU used to live it. It is this path [Europe] has left. And that is an ungodly path. Toward centralism, toward some federal state construct ... [where one] abolishes the sovereignty of states within the European Union.” – ZIB 2, ORF 24-10-2016;

“We need a federal Europe focused on basic tasks, an economic union and a defense union and everything else should be handled by member states.” – Ash Wednesday Speech, 1-3-2017

Table shows the distribution of negative statements across these five categories in Strache’s speeches. The largest number of negative statements was devoted to the question of refugees and asylum. In fact, this issue was not only the most salient in parliamentary debate but has dominated Austrian politics since the refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016 when nearly a million refugees moved through Austria and more than 100,000 sought asylum.

Table 2: Distribution of five categories in Strache’s speeches by negative statements

Content	Relative frequency	Absolute frequency
EU and integration in general	31.6%	159
EU institutions	20.6%	104
Specific Issues (Islam, migration, Enlargement, Turkey)	18.4%	93
EU policies	21.2%	107
the Euro	7.9%	40
Total	100%	503

Strache refers to the EU as being threatened by, or responsible for the uncontrolled “invasion of culturally alien groups” who threaten the fabric of Christian European society and are often not fleeing wars but rather labor migrants. More specific criticism takes aim at the failure of European institutions and political arrangements in managing the crisis. Based on this assessment the FPÖ call for the complete return of authority back to the member states:

Strache on the EU’s external borders:

“To this day the European Union engages in violations of the law as it is unable and unwilling to police its borders (...). Our borders are porous like Swiss cheese because of this flawed policy by the European Union (...).” – Parliament/142nd Session, 13-9-2016

Strache on Asylum policies:

“As we said before, there are already problems with the transfer of asylum seekers back to EU-countries in accordance with the Schengen and Dublin Agreements (...). This can’t be! I mean is this EU even taking itself seriously anymore, yes or no? Why do we have these laws if they are constantly subverted?” – Parliament/130th Session, 19-05-2016

In fact, an analysis of the FPÖ leader’s negative statement in parliament versus other speeches in relation to Europe provides further insight about distribution of issue categories. Invariably immigration and the Euro crisis are the primary issues in parliamentary speeches whereas ‘another Europe’ (reconfiguration of Europe) and greater national sovereignty are more prominent themes in other speeches.

Table 3: Distribution of issue sub-categories in Strache’s speeches

Rank	Content	Parl. Speeches	Other	Total
1	Immigration	82	20	102
2	Euro	46	15	61
3	Another Europe	24	36	60
4	Enemies (EU, EU bureaucrats, Brussels)	34	13	47
4	Reforms	29	18	47
5	Islam	28	14	42
6	Sovereignty	11	30	41
7	TTIP/CETA	11	18	29
8	Regulation	9	9	18

9	Neo-lib EU	9	8	17
10	Enlargement	1	11	12
11	Russia	8	3	11
12	Turkey	5	5	10
13	Greece	3	2	5
14	Agriculture	0	1	1
Total		300	203	503

Prior to the refugee crisis during the height of the financial crisis, the Euro and associated issues such as the European Stability Mechanism were frequent targets for the Freedom Party. Strache was especially critical of the various bailout mechanisms and blamed the Southern economies as well as the policies of the European Central Bank and other European institutions for the problems that had ensued.

Strache on the ECB:

“What are we expecting from a European Central Bank in which there are all former Federal Reserve bankers? They are engaged in a whole different representation of interests, namely political and banking [interests], perhaps American interests and dollar interests.” Parliament/49th Session, 19-11-2014

Other prominent positions held by the FPÖ leader concern the reorganization of the EU in favor a community of sovereign nation states, criticism of Islam, the rejection of the free trade agreement between the EU and the US and Canada (TTIP/CETA), support for stronger ties with Russia, the condemnation of Turkey as well as highlighting the negative repercussions of EU enlargement.

3.2 Election manifestos: a center-right right-wing policy convergence?

If we then turn to the FPÖ 2017 election manifesto¹ and examine its demands, we find that of 25 issues areas on which the Freedom Party offered proposals 14 contained demands or points that can be broadly considered as asserting claims of national sovereignty. If we disaggregate these claims further and divide them into three basic categories then we notice that 19 deal explicitly or implicitly with the EU (i.e. a claim such demands a preferential treatment of Austrian citizens versus non-Austrians

¹ <https://www.fpoe.at/en/themen/wahlprogramm-2017/unsere-bevoelkerung/>

including other EU citizens such as free university attendance, free access to museums), 18 points in the program take issues with curbing or countermanding other forms of globalization and internationalizations, and 5 issue positions deal with different kinds of supposed cultural (typically Islamic) threats.

Interestingly, the claims with respect to asserting Austrian autonomy do not just concern expected issue categories such as the EU, economic integration, international trade agreements, immigration and refugees but also seemingly innocuous areas such as animal protection, rural development, education, and especially the welfare state. Table 4 presents a comprehensive overview of the actual policy claims per issue area put forth by the 2017 FPÖ election manifesto. The claims were grouped according to whether they pertained to the EU, internationalization in general, or other foreign cultural issues. Not surprisingly, the list of claims against the European Union is the longest and they fall into three groups: a) demands the EU undergo significant change in favor of devolving powers back to the member states, b) demands for deviations from Austrian commitments and EU practices, and c) demands based on criticism of perceived malfeasance or incompetence by the EU. A nearly equally long list of claims seeks to protect Austrian arrangements, culture, and established practices from global or international developments. Here, the dominant issue is immigration and its consequences. The last set of claims is directed more or less clearly against the spread of Islam in Austria.

Table 4: FPÖ Claims in the 2017 National Election Manifesto

EU-related Claims by the FPÖ	
1.	Transfer more competencies back to member states—stop the central regulation mania
2.	Stop the EU from always breaking its laws and enable mass migration and the Euro crisis
3.	Stop all policies contrary to Austrian neutrality.
4.	More subsidiarity, more democracy, and more autonomy from Brussels
5.	Secure external borders, otherwise national controls
6.	Get out of ESM-EFSF-bailout guarantees to protect domestic consumers
7.	Not o Turkey in the EU and no payments to Turkey
8.	No to the Dublin rules that make Austria shoulder much of the burden
9.	Protect cash in circulation (implying the EU and international interest want abolish ist).
10.	Free admission for Austrian families to public museums.

11. Strict national border controls to combat immigration and crime
12. No to CETA, TTIP und TiSA
13. No to inhumane animal transport across Europe
14. No to restrictions for Austrian applicants to universities.
15. University fees for non-Austrians
16. Benefit payments to non-Austrian families must be proportional to the cost of living in the countries where the beneficiaries live.
17. Stop that Austrian taxpayer money goes to EURATOM-in support of nuclear energy.
18. Prevent that international agreements like TiSA privatize and sell out Austrian water resources.
19. Stop the extortion of money from Austrian companies through fake emissions certificates.
General Claims about International Threats
1. Stop the international NGO industry profiting from immigration at the expense of Austrian taxpayers
2. Immediate cancellation of Austrian citizenship when a second citizenship is adopted.
3. Refugee care should be exclusively transferred from NGOs to the state.
4. Vital information and personal data should not become the object of speculation and business for international corporations.
5. Evaluate the European Human Rights Convention and replace through an Austrian one.
6. Stop immigration and deport rejected applicants immediately.
7. Strengthen local identity through more financial support for culture and customs.
8. Mandate the Austrian broadcaster to have more programming with an Austrian content
9. Deport foreign prison inmates to their home countries to alleviate burden for Austrian tax payers.
10. Stop that Austrian students suffer increasingly because class mates don't speak proper German.
11. Stop that foreigners study almost for free financed by Austrian tax payers
12. Ensure that minimal financial support for immigrants is lower than the lowest Austrian pension pay.
13. Stop that more and more social housing is made available to foreigners rather Austrians.
14. More social housing must be built and preference must be given to Austrians.
15. Stop international trade agreements that lead to genetically manipulated food being brought to Austria.
16. No sell out of Austrian water.
17. Use the budget of the labor market service for the job training of Austrians.
18. Foreign convicts must be serving their time in their home countries.
Claims against Foreign Cultural Issues
1. Not to the immigration from patriarchal cultures where women are oppressed.
2. Not to the formation of Islamist structures under the guise tolerance
3. Cancel citizenship of those returning from Jihad
4. Ban the inhumane slaughter of animals in accordance to religious custom.

In Table 5 we list the percentage of policy claims per policy area that directly or indirectly assert Austrian autonomy vis-à-vis international commitments, no-longer tolerated national practices, or perceived external threats. The percentages were calculated based on the frequency of corresponding bullet points in the manifesto. It is no surprise that immigration takes the lead with 24% (cf. Table 5). However, unexpectedly the environment and animal welfare come in second (remarkably, this was hardly an issue in the 2013 FPÖ program). In part, this topic has to be seen in the context of widespread Austrian mobilization against international trade agreements and

the general perception that the globalization of the food and agriculture market represents numerous threats in the form of toxins, pesticides, genetic modification, and the likes. Health scares, stories about poor animal welfare, industrialized farming, and unsavory food imports from less developed countries or the US are a staple in Austrian activist politics and associated with the European Union or globalization in general. It is thus not surprising that the FPÖ would embrace this issue, which allows it to oppose European integration in a key policy area without appearing rightwing given that the Greens have supported similar calls in the past.

Table 5: FPÖ Claims by Policy Area in the 2017 Election Manifesto

FPÖ claims and policy area by frequency	
Immigration	24%
Environment (incl. water/ opposition to nuclear power)	14.6%
Social Policy/ Welfare State	12.1%
Public Safety (incl. policing/ law enforcement)	12.1%
Sovereignty (reclaiming authority)	12.1%
Euro-Zone/ Economy	9.7%
Education	9.7%

Another issue dating back to the campaigns of Jörg Haider and his leadership of the FPÖ in the 1990s is the claim that Austrian water resources would be taken over and sold off by international corporations and thus required special protection. This too, is a fixture in the FPÖ program of 2017 and account for the prominence of the environment issue in Table 5. In other policy areas, the FPÖ calls for the differential treatment of people based on their citizenship. Since no exceptions for fellow EU citizens are listed, we are to assume that Austrians are to be preferred over them as well. In the area of earned social benefits the welfare regime would be changed that payouts would depend on the country of origin (cost of living) and kick in only after a five year waiting period.

Thus far, Austria has maintained to policy of treating all contributors to the welfare system equally and on the basis of benefits earned. Public safety, sovereignty, and also education include a significant number of claims asserting Austrian sovereignty and autonomy whether this means preferential treatment of Austrians in university admissions, protecting Austrians from foreign criminals, or protecting Austrian savers and tax payers from burdensome EU rules and policies.

In Table 6, comparing the 2017 election manifestos of the Austrian Conservatives ÖVP with that of the FPÖ, we notice significant parallels also in the language chosen. This is especially true in the areas of immigration, sovereignty, culture, and social policies.

Table 6: ÖVP and FPÖ Claims by Policy Area in the 2017 Election Manifesto

Policy Field	ÖVP	FPÖ
IMMIGRATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Severely curtail immigration, selectivity, more national autonomy. differential treatment, safety first 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stop Immigration, counteract illegal activities, replace European HR convention with “Austrian HR convention”.
SOVEREIGNTY/ EURO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect cash in circulation, force ECB to raise interest rates, expand national say in currency matters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect cash in circulation need for higher interest rates, pull out of mutual bailout mechanism.
CULTURE/ TRADITION/ VALUES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> protect and revive Austrian culture, favor diversity but opposes ‘false’ tolerance vis-a-vis religion, celebrate own national values zero-tolerance against political Islam prevent parallel societies from emerging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen identity through promoting local customs and traditions
DIRECT DEMOCRACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen voluntarism, more direct democracy, more citizen initiatives and referenda, expand preferential voting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct democracy following the Swiss model, enable blocking referenda against legislations
PUBLIC SAFETY/ ORDER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> more effective policing, more competences and means, stricter punishment, make military more attractive), more effective European border security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase police corps, stricter border controls against illegal immigrants and “crime tourism”, increase defense expenditures
YOUTH/ SCHOOLING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extra year of kindergarten for students with insufficient German language skills special German class for kids with inadequate German 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restrictive admission of foreigners to school classes to protect Austrian students, good German skills are required for Austrian school attendance.
LABOR/ SOCIAL POLICIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For foreigners, access to work related social benefits after 5 years of work in Austria. remittances of family benefits for foreign workers (incl. from the EU) to be proportional to cost of living in receiving country. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sector-wide closures of labor market to foreigners, access to labor related benefits only after 5 years.
ENVIRONMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus more strongly on energy independence and renewables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No sell-out of Austrian water resources, reliance on Austrian energy sources

ECONOMY		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more competences to be transferred to the EU, CETA, TTIP never to be enacted contrary to national sovereignty.
EUROPEAN UNION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New subsidiarity agreement with Europe • directly election of European Commission President • oppose Turkish accession. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater sovereignty, secure external borders, stop uncontrolled immigration, exit ESM-EFSF-vehicles, • oppose Turkish accession and any payments going to Turkey

In Table 6, the areas where the convergence in sovereignty-related claims is particularly striking are rendered in bold print. There widespread agreement on the specific protection of Austrian culture and practices, the curbing of immigration, the major push for greater subsidiarity, the differential treatment of welfare beneficiaries based on citizenship. Unusual for the Conservatives is also the rather populist language hitherto used only by the Freedom Party such as “the false tolerance vis-a-vis religion”, “celebrate own national values” “0-tolerance against political Islam” – incidentally a term not defined and implying that Muslim are not to have a political agenda or equating them with terrorist sympathizers. Also the term “parallel society” vaguely implying an emerging Islamist underground had previously been used by the FPÖ but finds itself now in the ÖVP program. This stand is a rather remarkable contrast to the 2013 program which had still called for a “culture of welcome” when dealing with immigration.

Table 7 represents an effort to visualize the change of the ÖVP over time and show the relative convergence between the two parties. In our approach we compared the respective election manifestos of 2013 and 2017 of the two parties and assigned a 4-part score (0-3) if the policy demands overlapped completely (3), significantly and substantively (2), only in minor ways (1), or not at all (0). Our findings suggest that in 15 of 22 policy areas, a convergence between ÖVP and FPÖ took place between 2013 and 2017. This was particularly the case in the areas of immigration, culture and identity, public order and safety, direct democracy, and sovereignty. In 2013 there was practically no overlap between the ÖVP and FPÖ program on 10 of 22 issue areas. By 2017 this number had declined to 3. Whereas there was no policy domain with substantial similarities on the 2013 -- a score of 2 -- there were 9 in 2017 manifestos. This clearly suggests a significant shift by the ÖVP to the right but at the same time, the FPÖ has moderated its style and no longer calls for a “millionaire’s tax”, the ban of “usury fees for existential utilities” and a stop to “the export of Austrian family

benefits” – although couched in different language this last point has become a prominent demand in the 2017 ÖVP manifesto. By the same token, the tone in the ÖVP program has become less soft as already mentioned above. Also in this respect some convergence has taken place.

Table 7: Comparison of ÖVP and FPÖ Election Programs 2013 and 2017

Policy Area	Comparative Score EP 2013 (ÖVP-FPÖ)	Comparative Score EP 2017 (ÖVP-FPÖ)	Change
1. Safety/order/immigration	1	2	+1
2. Neutrality/defense	1	1	0
3. Family	1	2	+1
4. Youth/schooling	1	2	+1
5. Universities	0	0	0
6. Women	0	1	+1
7. Pensions	1	1	0
8. Labor	1	1	0
9. Housing	1	1	0
10. Nursing care/healthcare	0	1	+1
11. Regions	0	1	+1
12. Agriculture/food	0	1	+1
13. Animal welfare	0	0	0
14. Environment	0	1	+1
15. Taxes	1	2	+1
16. Economy	1	2	+1
17. Traffic	0	1	+1
18. Justice system	0	0	0
19. Publ. bureaucracy	1	2	+1
20. Identity/culture/Tradition	0	2	+2
21. Sovereignty	1	2	+1
22. Direct Democracy	1	2	+1
Total	12	28	+16

Source: Election Programs ÖVP and FPÖ 2013 and 2017:

Scoring: Programs were rated based on whether there was no overlap (0), minor similarities (1), major overlap/similarities (2), complete overlap (3).

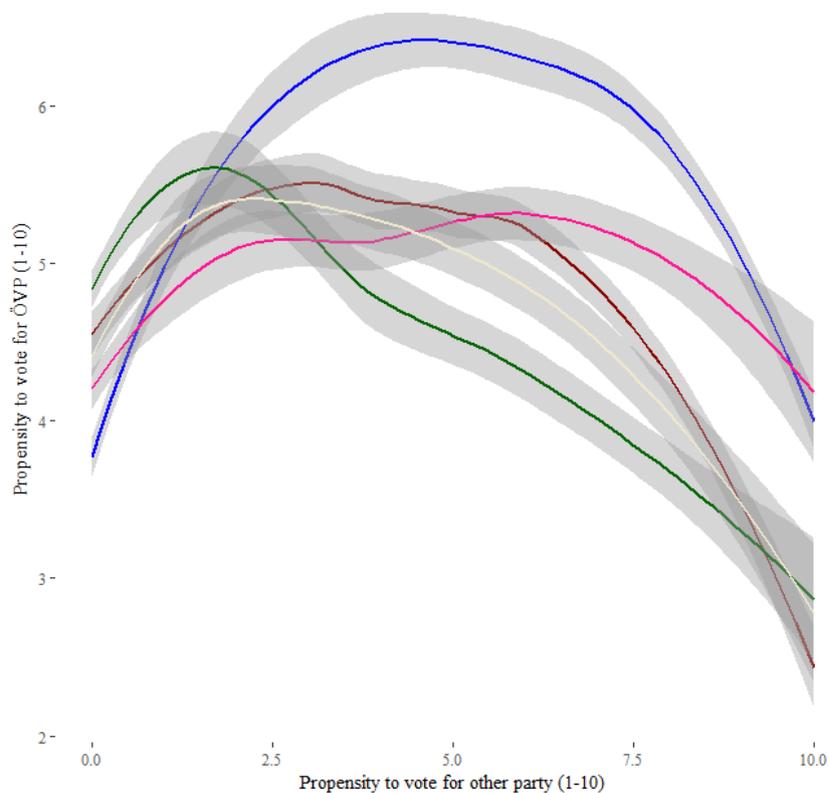
3.3 Survey data: a common voter pool?

Turning to Austrian voters and survey data, we rely on recently collected panel data from the “Austrian National Election Study” (AUTNES). The first two waves cover voters’ responses on a number of issues in a time period from June (wave 1) and July to August (wave 2), thus ahead of the most recent national elections (15 October). For wave 1, the N of respondents is 4,042 and in the case of wave 2, the number of panelists

is 3,157. Throughout all figures with which we took an initial glance at the data, 90 percent confidence intervals are used.

Beginning with a general look at voters' party preferences, we juxtapose respondents' statement on "Would you ever consider voting for ÖVP?" (0: very unlikely; 10: very likely) to the same question on all other parties that ran for office nationally: the outcome tells a clear, even though not surprising story (see figure 2). A low propensity to vote for FPÖ correlates with a low propensity to vote ÖVP. On higher scores, the ÖVP appears to be an equally good choice – compared to all other parties – for respondents who also consider voting for the FPÖ.

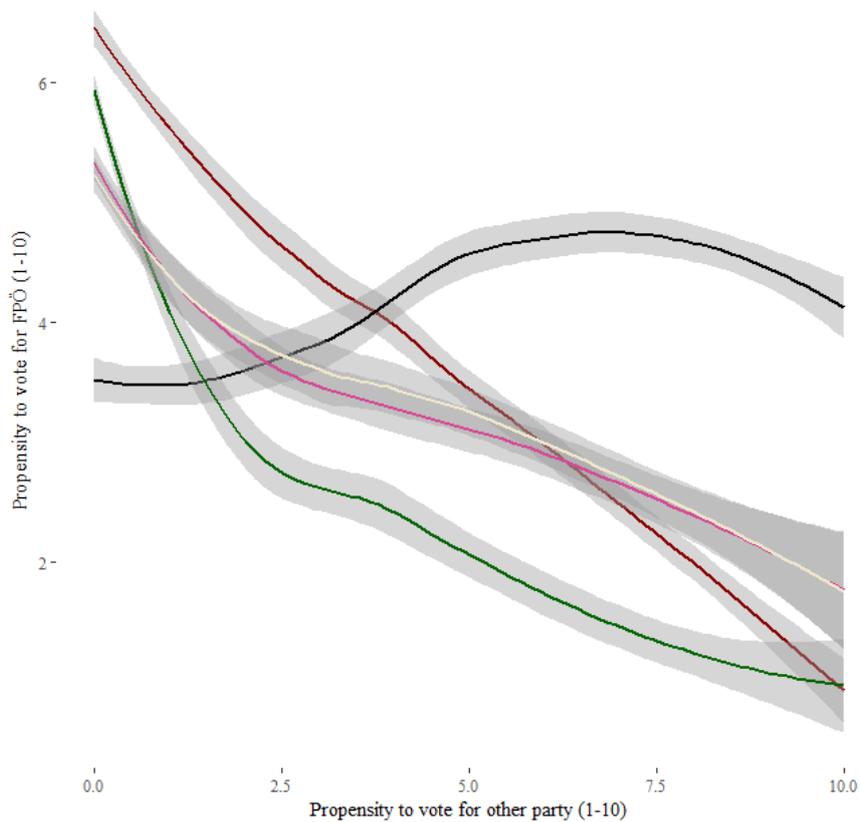
Figure 2: "Would you ever vote for ÖVP?", based on other party preferences, N=2772



A similar story is told by figure 3 in which the propensity of voting for FPÖ is juxtaposed to all other parties. Here, ÖVP voters appear to consider voting for FPÖ as well (>5), compared to all other parties and notably the Greens that do not seem to be an alternative vote choice for conservatives. The picture is reversed for a FPÖ-voting-propensity bigger than '5', where respondents Conversely, low scores for ÖVP (and high scores for other parties such as Greens and SPÖ) also correlate with low FPÖ-

scores. This preliminary glance at voting preferences implies a rather pronounced divide between the right and left side of the political/ ideological spectrum – and points towards the (ideological) closeness between conservative and right-wing voters.

Figure 3: "Would you ever vote for FPÖ?", based on other party preferences, N=2772

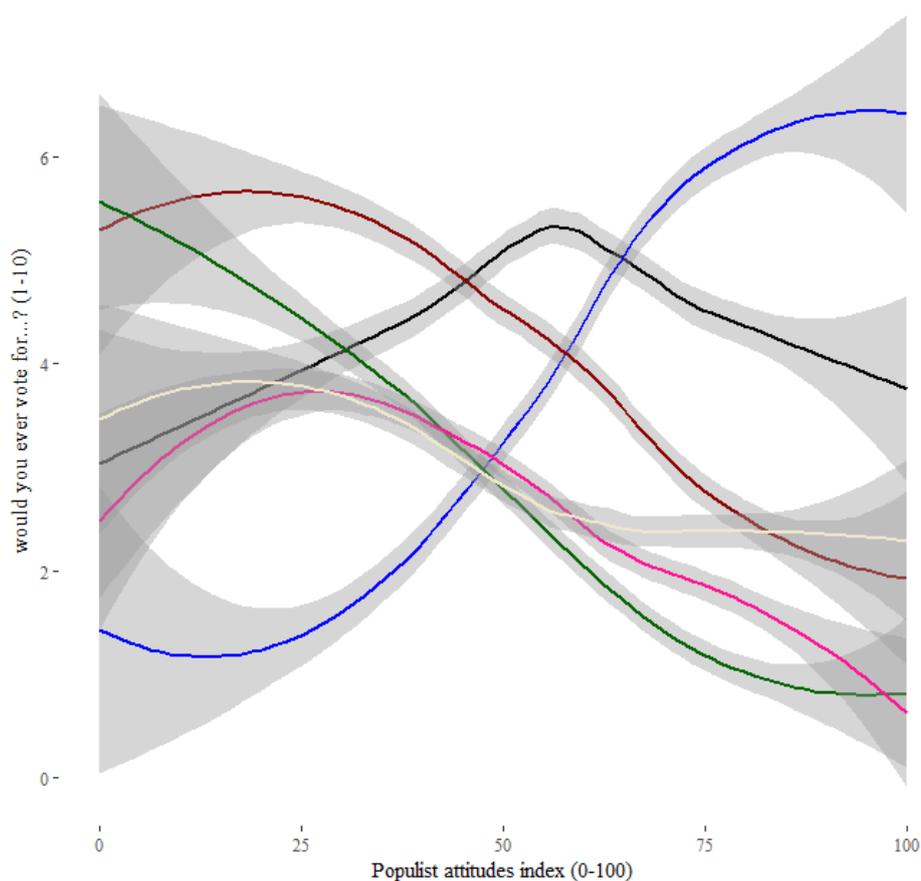


Next, we checked whether these preferences over parties ‘translate’ into (correlate with) similar preferences over issues and nationalist sentiments. In figure 4, we combined several survey items² as a measure of populist attitudes, similarly constructed and used in other studies (e.g. Spierings and Zaslove (2017, p. 841) use a similar index to explain gender difference in voting for populist radical right parties based on populist attitudes). Are such attitudes correlated with voting preferences (namely, whether someone would ever consider voting for a given party)? As figure 4 reveals: yes, they

² More specifically, the measure comprises the following items: “If there is talk of making compromises in politics, what is usually meant is selling one’s principles” (1), “most politicians only care about the interests of the rich and the powerful” (2), “most politicians are trustworthy” (~3), “the political parties are the main problem in Austria” (4), “it is good for Austria to have a strong leader as head of government who decides on things single-handedly” (5), “the people, and not the politicians should take our most important political decisions” (6), “I would rather prefer to have an independent citizen as delegate than any party member” (7), “companies, and not governments determine politics” (8).

are. As expected, voters with populist attitudes clearly tend to vote FPÖ, whereas non-populist voters are least likely to vote FPÖ. However, the center-right ÖVP compared to all other parties stunningly comes closest to the FPÖ's curve and seem to be situated between the downward curves of all other parties and the strongly upward curve of FPÖ. At least based on these responses and its voters, the ÖVP seems to be 'mid-way populist'. Distrust and anti-establishment sentiments may in turn nurture nationalist and nativist preferences.

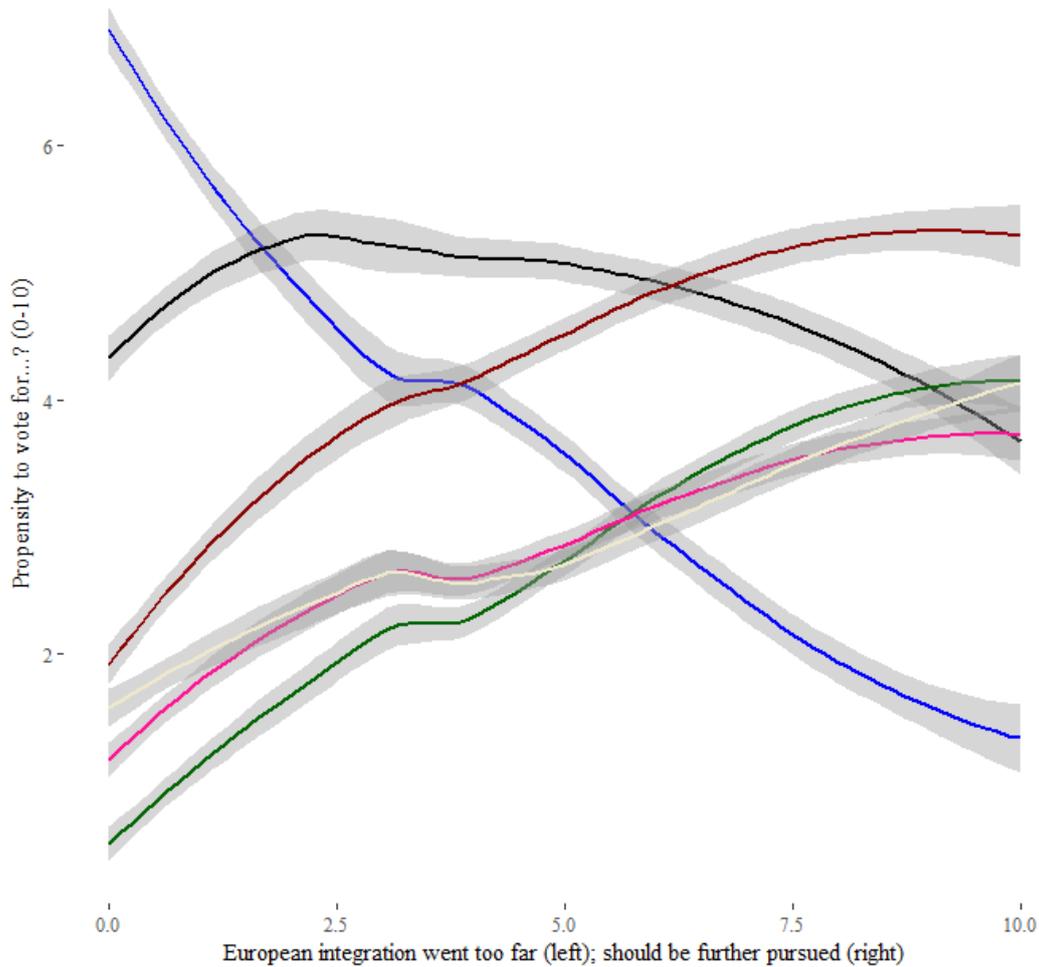
Figure 4: Populist attitudes and voting preferences, N=2772



Lastly, figure 5, 6 and 7 address the issue of a turn towards (neo-)nationalism in public opinion and voting behavior more directly. For figure 5, we drew on panelists' responses regarding the issue of European Integration: did this process already go too far, and should priorities shift back towards national interests, or has it not yet gone far enough, and should deeper integration be pursued? Again, as expected, voters of the FPÖ seem to be clearly more Eurosceptic than any other party. Yet, ÖVP seems to come closest and – as the only among all other parties – seems to benefit more from

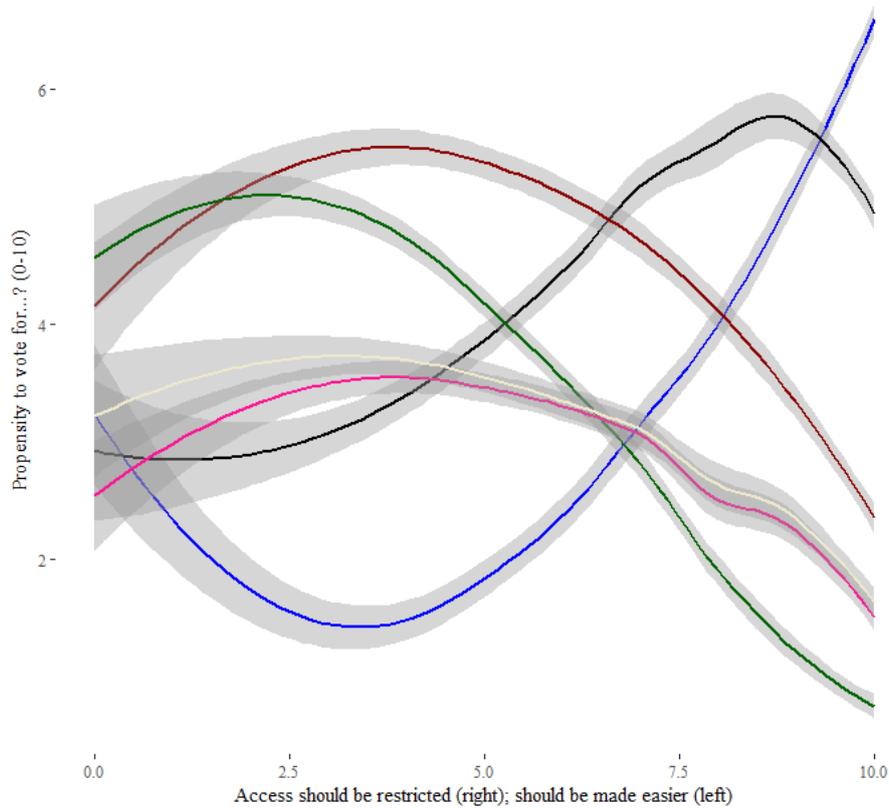
skepticism towards European integration among their voters, and lose among pro-Europeans.

Figure 5: Stance on European integration and party preferences, N=2772



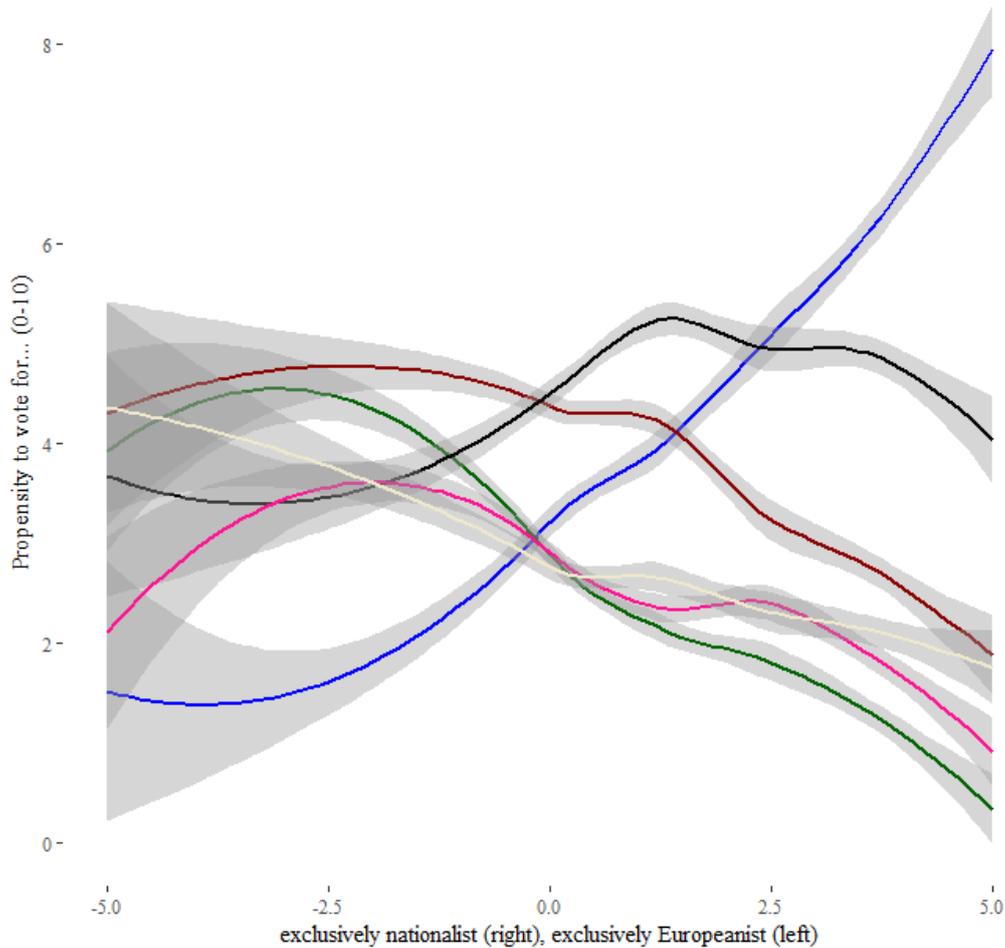
Do attitudes on immigration and social benefits play a role for preferences over voting right or far right versus other parties (figure 6)? For figure 6, we selected an item on whether access to social benefits should be restricted more and made more exclusive to Austrians or, to the contrary, made easier in general. Again, voters of the ÖVP and FPÖ seem to be closest in their policy preferences (here: stricter welfare policies).

Figure 6: Restriction of access to social benefits to Austrians and party preferences, N=2772



Moving even further towards the matter of nationalist attitudes and identity as a driver of vote choices, we juxtapose a measure of exclusive sense of belonging to Austria (+5) versus an exclusive European identity, to party preferences in figure 7. The measure is calculated based on two items that tap respondents' strength of identification with both sides. Exclusive nationalism, as shown below, clearly correlates with FPÖ support while exclusive identification with 'Europe' is associated with low FPÖ support. However, here again, the ÖVP for one seems to benefit from nationalist sentiments and comes closest to the FPÖ curve in figure 7 as well.

Figure 7: Nationalism/ Europeanism and party preferences, N=2772



On the whole, the insights and findings gained from our manifesto and speech analysis are borne out by an initial look at the Austrian survey data as well. Not only do conservative parties and right-wing parties (ÖVP and FPÖ) share common ideas about policies on a range of issues. We also observe that both are in parts competing for and backed by the same voters. Nationalist attitudes, a wish for stricter labor market and welfare policies as well as a strong/ exclusive sense of belonging to ‘Austria’ separate the center- and far right from their competitors.

4. Conclusion

After decades of ostracizing the far right, mainstream parties and particularly mainstream right parties have shifted their focus in favor of a more nationalist agenda, reached out towards radical right-wing parties as a coalition partner in regional and national governments, and have adapted their policy priorities and language. At the same time as the mainstream parties have broken with their ‘cordon sanitaire’ against the far right, the latter has broken with its radicalism in favor of a movement towards the center. Both strategy shifts have paved the way for the ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘normalization’ of the ‘outsider’ (Pytlas, 2015; Mondon, 2016; Hainsworth, 2016; Meijers, 2017). This paper aimed at analyzing the motivations of the center-right’s strategic shift (and the (non-)response by the far right) as well as identify the policy areas affected by this neo-nationalist turn (Eger & Valdez, 2014).

Strategic considerations of mainstream parties in competition with left and right challengers, shifts in public opinion in response to globalization and economic developments and changes in parties’ support base, as well as ideological standpoints and policy preferences let parties focus contextually on (‘salient’) issues and adopt tough immigration and welfare state stances. Additionally, literature on right and far right parties suggests that nationalism is by no means a prerogative and should thus be addressed by mainstream parties as well (Mudde, 2007; Alonso & Fonseca, 2012; Dunn, 2015). According to Alonso and Fonseca (2012), the far right is “not the main factor behind the ‘anti-immigrant turn’ of mainstream parties” (2012, p. 869).

In the case of the Austrian parliamentary elections in 2017, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) adopted a rather soft tone and seemed to spare particularly the new ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz. He, in turn, had previously adopted far right and nationalist policy positions in his own campaign. While the FPÖ had moved towards somewhat blurry policy positions and an “equivocal Euroscepticism” that combines “general support” with a reformist and nationalist range of demand (Heinisch, McDonnell, & Werner, 2017), the ‘new’ ÖVP had radicalized its rhetoric such as on immigration (closing the “Balkan route”) and welfare state policies. After the election, ÖVP and FPÖ leaders quickly signaled readiness regarding the formation of a coalition.

The empirical analysis of manifesto data from ÖVP and FPÖ regarding the national elections in 2013 and 2017 as well as FPÖ leader Strache's speeches during the campaign phase, underscores the central claims made above: both parties seem to have found a common, nationalist rhetoric – but beyond that they also showed a striking proximity to one another in terms of policy claims on a wide range of areas. Extending the view beyond campaigns and party strategies, an initial glance at survey data (AUTNES) ahead of the elections on 15 October 2017, likewise suggests a similarity of policy preferences between both sides: a significant number voters of both ÖVP and FPÖ appear to have similar populist attitudes, exclusivist-national sentiments and a sense of belonging to Austria as well as similar stances on immigration policy and Europe—and it is especially the topic of immigration which dominated the 2017 national election cam

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