

Issue Competition without Electoral Incentives?

A Study of Issue Emphasis in the European Parliament

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Abstract

Niche party leverage over mainstream party policy agendas is a central theme in the issue competition literature. The literature has underlined that the electoral threat associated with niche party issue mobilization guides mainstream party responses to such niche parties. Yet how do political parties react to issue mobilization in an institutional setting not primarily steered by electoral considerations? We argue that the European Parliament constitutes such a case and study issue competition on the radical right's core issue: immigration. To establish the leverage of radical right MEPs, we use an original dataset of parliamentary questions and motions between 2004 and 2016. Using time-series regression analysis, we find that mainstream party groups do not increase their emphasis of immigration issues in response to radical right MEPs' issue emphasis. These findings indicate that the institutional context and the perceived electoral threat are crucial for issue competition dynamics.

Keywords: issue competition, party competition, radical right, European Parliament, European Union

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In recent years, evidence has mounted that mainstream political parties respond to the threat of radical right parties by increasingly emphasizing the radical right's core issue: immigration (Meguid 2005; Bale et al. 2010; van de Wardt 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016). The issue competition literature underlines that niche parties, including the radical right, have an interest in stressing issues which were previously ignored by mainstream parties and which do not match the dominant lines of political conflict (Meguid 2005; De Vries and Hobolt 2012). In turn, gauging the extent of the electoral threat of the niche party in question, mainstream parties devise a response strategy. When the niche party threat is considerable, mainstream parties tend to increasingly emphasize the issue. Yet, when the niche party threat is absent or weak, mainstream parties are usually prone to adopt a dismissive strategy to keep the issue off the agenda (Meguid 2008, 99–103). Hence, a key argument of this literature is that parties do not have a monopoly over their own agenda, but are forced to be responsive to one another when devising their issue emphasis strategies. Crucially, such *electoral drivers of issue competition* are not limited to the electoral arena, but are also found in the parliamentary arena (Green-Pedersen 2010; Otjes 2011; Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink 2011; Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Zicha 2013; van de Wardt 2015).

Yet, how do political parties react to niche party issue mobilization in a parliamentary setting in which institutional factors constrain niche party leverage? The European Parliament (EP) is such a parliament. In contrast to domestic parliaments, the EP's parliamentary arena is disconnected from its electoral arena(s) (Hix and Høyland 2013). In the electoral arena, *national parties* compete with domestic competitors over seats in the EP. In the parliamentary arena, however, *European party groups* compete with each other in the EP over policy (Hix 2002b). Furthermore, the extreme dominance of mainstream party groups within the EP is likely to affect issue competition dynamics (Kreppel and Tsebelis 1999). Unlike in the domestic context, niche party behavior in the EP is therefore less likely to have electoral consequences for the mainstream party groups.

In line with issue competition theory, we argue that the absence of a veritable electoral threat of radical right parties in the EP motivates mainstream party groups to adopt a dismissive strategy by decreasing their emphasis of the immigration issue. Given the growing presence of radical right parties in the EP (Treib 2014) and the increasing competences of the EP in justice and home affairs under the ordinary legislative procedure since the Lisbon Treaty (Lavenex 2015), the immigration issue can be regarded as a ‘crucial case’ for issue competition in the EP.

Since *legislative* agenda-setting is primarily steered by the European Commission (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 116), our focus lies on non-legislative parliamentary instruments that play a role in issue competition (cf. Green-Pedersen 2010; Proksch and Slapin 2011). Based on an original dataset measuring MEPs’ issue emphasis through various types of parliamentary questions and motions spanning the period from August 2004 to February 2016 on a weekly basis, we examine the leverage of radical right MEPs on European party groups (EPGs) dominated by national mainstream parties.

We find that European mainstream party groups decrease their weekly immigration emphasis in reaction to the radical right and hence, do not find evidence for a positive contagion effect of radical right mobilization. This finding is robust to various estimation techniques and measurement methods. The results support the notion that both the electoral and the institutional context are key for dynamics of parliamentary issue competition – a conclusion that is important beyond the case of the EP. When institutional constraints minimize the electoral threat of niche parties, niche parties do not have the leverage they enjoy in electorally sensitive parliamentary contexts. In addition, the findings corroborate the supposition that parliamentary politics in the EP is dominated by the major party groups (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007) leaving little room for direct or indirect influence by the smaller party groups.

Theory

Saliency theory stipulates that a party's policy program is not solely defined by its position on a certain issue, but also by which political issues it chooses to address in the first place (Schattschneider 1960; Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines and Stimson 1986; Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Parties 'own' different issues and try to develop a distinctive profile by emphasizing those issues (Petrocik 1996). The radical right's ownership of the 'immigration issue' (Abou-Chadi 2016), for instance, is so outspoken that many scholars refer to these parties exclusively as 'anti-immigrant parties' (van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2005).

Parties do not operate in a political vacuum, however. They respond to their political surroundings and engage in public debate over a great number of issues (Damore 2004; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Parties therefore do not have absolute control over their own issue agendas. Particularly in a competitive multi-party context, parties devise their issue attention strategies with an eye on their opponents in order to carve out a competitive advantage.

Moreover, not all types of political parties have equal strategic interest in politicizing issues previously ignored on the political agenda (Carmines and Stimson 1986; Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Mainstream parties which regularly hold office are not eager to radically transform the political agenda as they tend to benefit from the status quo. Niche parties, by contrast, emphasize 'non-economic issues' largely ignored by their competitors (Meguid 2005; Wagner 2012b) and tend to benefit electorally from such 'issue entrepreneurial strategies' (De Vries and Hobolt 2012). While quite a number of empirical studies focus on the extent to which mainstream parties respond to niche parties with *positional shifts* (Bale et al. 2010; van Spanje 2010; Meijers 2017), recent studies have focused on mainstream party responses to niche party agenda-setting efforts in terms of *issue emphasis* (van de Wardt 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016; Spoon, Hobolt, and de Vries 2014; Meijers and Rauh 2016).

Meguid (2005; 2008) has specified that mainstream parties may react to niche parties with an accommodative, an adversarial or a dismissive strategy. Both the accommodative strategy, in which the niche party's position is adopted, and the adversarial strategy, in which the niche party's position is contested, convey an increase of issue emphasis. By contrast, a dismissive strategy signals that an issue lacks significance. While we conceptualize a dismissive strategy to indicate a decrease in issue emphasis (see van de Wardt 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016), others regard it to signify either no increase in issue emphasis (Meguid 2005; Meguid 2008; see also Bale et al. 2010) or less issue emphasis in comparison to other parties or issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Wagner 2012a; Dolezal et al. 2014).

The choice to engage with a niche party's issue is guided by electoral considerations (Green-Pedersen 2007; Meguid 2008). Mainstream parties' propensity to increase the emphasis of the niche party's issue depends, first, on the specific electoral threat the niche party poses (Meguid 2008, 99–103) and, secondly, on the extent to which the mainstream party considers the niche party issue to be a potential 'vote winner' (Spoon, Hobolt, and de Vries 2014). In this vein, studies on domestic issue competition over immigration policy have consistently found a positive 'contagion effect' of radical right immigration issue emphasis on mainstream party emphasis (Harmel and Svasand 1997; van de Wardt 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016).

Crucially, this 'electoral logic' of issue emphasis is not limited to the electoral arena, but also applies to the parliamentary arena. Indeed, in most parliaments "[l]egislative behavior is (...) shaped by the electoral contest" (Lindberg, Rasmussen, and Warntjen 2008, 1110). Mainstream and governing parties have been shown to respond to issue mobilization efforts of niche and opposition parties with increased emphasis of the issue in question (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Vliegthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink 2011; van de Wardt 2015). With respect to the immigration issue, van de Wardt (2015) has found that radical right niche parties affect the

extent to which mainstream opposition parties address immigration issues in the Danish parliament.

Such issue engagement is usually costly in programmatic terms as mainstream parties are forced to adopt a position on the issue, which is either a departure from their previous stance or in direct opposition to the niche party's position (Meguid 2008; Bale et al. 2010). By contrast, a dismissive strategy does not come at a great price. Therefore, only when the niche party poses a serious electoral threat to the relevant mainstream parties, it is expected that mainstream parties do not pursue a dismissive strategy (Meguid 2008, 100).

Importantly, the extent to which niche parties pose a threat for mainstream parties is mediated by the electoral institutions in place (Rohrschneider 1993; Meguid 2008, 97–99). Mainstream party sensitivity to the niche party threat is mediated by the presence of electoral thresholds and disproportionality of the vote-seat index. Accordingly, the argument we put forward in this article is in line with Meguid's reasoning that "[s]trategic choices are sensitive to the setting in which they are made." (2008, 97) The next section elaborates on why we expect mainstream party groups in the EP to adopt a dismissive strategy in response to radical right immigration issue emphasis.

Issue Competition in the EP

While studies of issue competition in the domestic context consistently found positive contagion effects of radical right mobilization on immigration policy, we expect issue competition dynamics to unfold differently in the EP for two reasons: politics in the EP is disconnected from its electoral arena(s) (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 26) and the EU's institutional structure has produced a relative dominance of the 'mainstream' party families.

First, unlike the national parliamentary arena, the composition of the European parliamentary arena does not mirror the electoral arena. In most domestic legislatures, the 'parliamentary game' is a continuation of the 'electoral game' and vice-versa (Green-Pedersen 2010; Vliegenthart,

Walgrave, and Meppelink 2011; van de Wardt 2015). Yet, elections to the EP are held at national level among domestic political parties – primarily on the basis of domestic issues and European integration issues (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009). Daily parliamentary affairs, however, are structured by European party groups (Rasmussen 2008, 1179), in which ideologically proximate national parties cooperate (McElroy and Benoit 2010).

As such, MEPs have two different principals (Hix 2002b). The national party selects candidates for EP elections. Party groups, on the other hand, provide indispensable political resources for MEPs between elections such as the participation in parliamentary committees, which draft legislative reports and which receive speaking time in the plenary debates (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 26). In fact, survey research among MEPs has found that European party groups principally regulate MEPs in day-to-day politics (Rasmussen 2008).

This produces the peculiar phenomenon of parliamentary politics without direct electoral repercussions which likely affects patterns of parliamentary behavior. As Slapin and Proksch (2010, 336) note, “[t]he electoral disconnection between European political groups and citizens raise[s] questions about the extent to which the parliamentary behavior of MEPs matters for re-election”. As a result of the absence of such ‘external motivations’, “political behavior in the European Parliament is primarily driven by considerations internal to the institution and the EU policy process” (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 28). A good example of this is that national competitors can be part of the same European party group, as is the case with the Dutch center-right VVD and social-liberal D66 parties – both of which are members of the liberal party group ALDE.

With respect to issue competition, the lack of electoral repercussions of EP politics suggests that EP issue competition is less likely to be driven by electoral incentives. Hence, EP mainstream party groups have less to gain from increasingly emphasizing issues in response to niche parties, since the latter lack the electoral sway to present an imminent threat. Rather, mainstream party groups

have an interest in keeping the issue agenda stable by defusing the niche party issue. While the electoral opportunity structure in the domestic context renders such a dismissive strategy rather risky (Meguid 2008, 99–103; Bale et al. 2010), party groups in the EP have greater maneuvering space to do so.

Also the institutional peculiarities of EU policy-making make a dismissive strategy of mainstream party groups in response to niche party emphasis in the EP more plausible. Legislative agenda-setting in the European multi-level system is strongly dominated by political actors affiliated with Christian-democratic, social democratic and liberal parties linked to the EPP, S&D and ALDE respectively (cf. Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 114). Even though there is no evidence for purposive collusion across institutions and across party groups, there is a strong ‘bias’ in the agenda-setting process toward ‘centrist’ policies close to the political median.

In contrast to most domestic parliaments, the EP does not enjoy the right to initiate legislation. Instead, the Commission proposes legislation, most of which must be passed by both the Council and the EP since the introduction of the ‘ordinary legislative procedure’ in the Lisbon Treaty. Although the Commission is not steered by partisanship (Wonka 2008), it cannot be discounted that nearly all Commissioners are career politicians stemming from the same Christian democratic and social democratic parties, and some from liberal parties (cf. Hix 2005, 70). Moreover, the Council is characterized by a rather centrist political profile given that most governing parties representing their member-states are affiliated with the EPP, S&D or ALDE.

In the EP, the EPP and the S&D have consistently constituted a majority and tend to dominate parliamentary affairs. In particular, the EP’s internal agenda-setting processes are strongly dominated by the EPP and S&D and, to a lesser extent, ALDE. Legislative agenda-setting offices, such as committee chairs and *rappoteurships* in the EP are allocated roughly in proportion to party group size (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 115). Moreover, because EP decision-making increasingly occurs through fast-track ‘early agreements’ conducted in secluded meetings with

representatives from the EP, the Council and the Commission (Yordanova 2016, 179), those actors affiliated with the larger mainstream party groups have more influence in such early agreement decision-making (cf. Farrell and Héritier 2004).¹

The EPP, S&D and ALDE have an interest in upholding the status quo both with respect to the extraordinary discretion in agenda-setting enjoy and the specific issues which feature on the agenda. They have the incentive and the means to nip radical right issue mobilization attempts in the bud with a dismissive strategy on the immigration issue. Given the weak electoral linkage, moreover, the EPP, S&D and ALDE have the ability to do so as MEPs' parliamentary behavior seems of little consequence to the voter.

The EP and Immigration Policy

The scope condition for successful radical right issue entrepreneurship is that the EP is a relevant player in EU immigration policy. Exercising control over entry to and residence of migrants within the national territory touches upon the essence of national sovereignty (Lavenex 2015). Nevertheless, the dissolution of national borders in the Schengen Area required close coordination among EU member-states on key questions such as immigration and asylum and border control. Over the years the EU has acquired significant competences over justice and home affairs (JHA) – often considered to be ‘core state powers’ (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2016).

Prior to the Maastricht Treaty, a number of significant coordination efforts in directing European immigration and asylum policies produced intergovernmental agencies and treaties outside of the Community framework (Lavenex 2015, 369–70). In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty incorporated

¹ Also with respect to non-legislative aspects of parliamentary activity in the EP the three mainstream party groups have privileged agenda-setting opportunities. Many parliamentary instruments used for agenda-setting, such as the tabling of motions, requesting hearings with the Commission, and requesting parliamentary debates are the exclusive prerogative of party groups or ad-hoc coalitions of at least 40 MEPs.

many such intergovernmental treaties coordinating JHA policy into EU treaty law in the EU's intergovernmental 'third pillar'. The Treaty of Amsterdam of 1997 integrated the Schengen Convention into the treaties and formally placed migration policy in the first pillar – making migration questions to a certain extent subject to the supranational Community method and empowering the EP through its role in the co-decision procedure from 2004 onwards.² With the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the EP was granted full co-decision powers as the ordinary legislative procedure was extended to all policy areas pertaining to JHA issues (Lavenex 2015, 369–73).

Hence, the powers of the EP in migration policy has increased over the years (cf. Hampshire 2015). As this arguably increases the prominence of the immigration issue on the EP's agenda, the extension of the EP's powers can affect issue competition on the migration issue as it increases mainstream party groups' incentive to adopt a dismissive strategy in reaction to radical right immigration emphasis.³

In line with the arguments related to mainstream dominance in EU institutions presented above, Lahav and Messina (2005) moreover argue there is an elite consensus on the immigration issue among MEPs – and not subject to left-right contestation between the party groups. Given that political conflict in the EP primarily revolves around the left-right dimension and the EU integration dimension, mainstream party groups should have no incentive to emphasize immigration issues if external pressures are lacking (Hix 2001; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 149; Otjes and van der Veer 2016; Roger, Otjes, and van der Veer 2017).

² Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom secured various opt-outs for the communitarization of justice and home affairs issues.

³ Nevertheless, most key competences on migration policy remain strongly in the hands of the member states' governments. As Lavenex (2015, 375) points out, the uneven structure of justice and home affairs policy at EU level is testament to cautiousness of national governments with respect to supranationalization of core state tasks and has resulted in an unfinished, unsettled institutional framework (cf. Luedtke 2009).

Hypothesis

Combining insights from the issue competition literature and the literature on the electoral and institutional structures in the EP, we can formulate our central hypothesis. Both from an electoral perspective and an institutional perspective European party groups likely adopt a dismissive strategy in response to radical party group mobilization on immigration policy. The issue competition literature has employed varying notions of the dismissive strategy, however. Meguid (2005; 2008) and Bale et al. (2010) conceptualize the dismissive strategy as *non-action*, which presumably is analogous to a null hypothesis. Others consider the dismissive strategy to denote a party's lesser degree of issue emphasis vis-à-vis its competitors – hypothesizing differences across parties (Wagner 2012a; Dolezal et al. 2014). This article regards a dismissive strategy to signify a *decrease* in a party's issue emphasis in comparison to previous points in time (see also van de Wardt 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016) – permitting a directional hypothesis test. Consequently, considering the EP's lack of electoral opportunity structure and mainstream party groups' interest in upholding their institutional dominance in the EU, our central hypothesis states that:

Dismissive Strategy Hypothesis: The more radical right MEPs emphasize the immigration issue at $t-1$, the less mainstream party groups emphasize the immigration issue at time t .

Data & Methods: Analyzing Issue Competition in the EP

We study issue competition in the EP through MEPs' issue mobilization attempts with non-legislative parliamentary instruments. By contrast, studies of EP agenda-setting have often focused on the role of *rapporteurs* in shaping the formal agenda (Finke 2012; Finke 2016; Thierse 2017).⁴ Once the Commission has proposed a draft bill under the ordinary legislative procedure,

⁴ Scholarship on agenda-setting in the EP context has focused on different emanations of agenda-setting. Hix has regarded the extension of the EP powers in the Amsterdam Treaty as the result of the EP's 'constitutional agenda-

the Conference of Presidents appoints the relevant standing committee, which in turn assigns the bill a rapporteur. The rapporteur evaluates the bill and adopts a position on it and proposes amendments if deemed necessary. Before the draft bill (with or without amendments) is put to a plenary vote in the EP, the committee votes on and amends the report. While the rapporteur has some leeway in framing the bill's policy issue (Thierse 2017), the rapporteur ultimately is responsible for adopting a *position* on the bill proposed by the Commission (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 113). Hence, while rapporteurs are undoubtedly crucial players in the EU's policy process, they have very limited scope to introduce new issues on the agenda.⁵ In other words, rapporteurships and committee memberships are not viable venues for MEPs' strategic issue emphasis.

In addition, the EP's plenary agenda is determined by the Conference of Presidents (CoP), consisting of the EP President and the chairs of all party groups which usually operates on the basis of consensus (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2011). Besides organizing the day-to-day order of affairs, they also draft the agenda for the part-sessions in which they can choose to address certain issues. Yet, the plenary agenda is also not relevant to study issue competition as the party groups cannot choose singlehandedly which issues will appear on the agenda – the

setting' powers (Hix 2002a). Tsebelis (1994) regarded the EP's ability to incentivize the Council to accept amendment proposals as an indication of its agenda-setting powers. Again others study voting patterns in the EP on an agenda that is exogenously set by the Commission and Council (Blumenau and Lauderdale 2018; see Otjes and van der Veer 2016 for similar findings).

⁵ So-called own initiative reports are an exception as committees are free to select the subject. Nevertheless, own initiative reports formally also require the consent of the Conference of Presidents.

agenda is a compromise between multiple actors. Moreover, it is not possible to ascertain which actor in the CoP drives which agenda choice given that the CoP meets behind closed doors.⁶

In order to assess the dynamics of issue competition in the EP, we therefore examine MEPs' attempts to raise attention to the immigration issue with non-legislative parliamentary instruments (Proksch and Slapin 2011). We primarily focus on written and written priority parliamentary questions. Parliamentary questions are particularly useful for issue mobilization purposes as it is the parliamentary tool least affected by the disproportionate institutional constraints in the EP.⁷ Parliamentary questions do not only offer a powerful instrument to political groups in opposition for executive oversight (Proksch and Slapin 2011), but they are also important for issue competition for both mainstream and non-mainstream actors (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Vliegthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink 2011).⁸

⁶ A semi-automated content analysis on the keyword 'migration' moreover shows that throughout EP 6 (2004 – 2009) and EP 7 (2009 – 2014) migration appeared on the agenda only 22 times out of ca. 400 plenary days. This suggests that, if anything, the CoP adopts a dismissive strategy on the immigration issue.

⁷ Other non-legislative parliamentary instruments, such as speeches and the tabling of motions, face greater institutional constraints. Given that most speeches are to be held on an issue previously determined by the CoP makes it a less effective tool for issue competition.

⁸ MEPs can pose four types of parliamentary questions: ordinary parliamentary questions, priority written questions, questions for question time prior to a legislative debate and questions with an oral answer and debate. Our principal analysis is restricted to ordinary parliamentary questions and priority written questions, since other types of parliamentary questions face greater institutional constraints as the opportunity to successfully table them hinges on acceptance of these questions by the EP President and the Conference of Presidents.

Data

Our empirical focus lies on the emphasis of the immigration issue by MEPs through parliamentary questions during the period between August 2004 and February 2016, spanning two full EP terms (the sixth term from 2004 to 2009 and the seventh term from 2009 to 2014) and the first one and a half years of the eighth term. The primary analysis relies on an original dataset of virtually all parliamentary records combined with data on the party group and national party affiliation of the MEP in question.

This dataset is constructed by automated scraping and normalization of disaggregated data from the online parliamentary archives. After structuring the parliamentary records, we linked it to stable identifiers for legislators, parties and European party groups. The full dataset of written and priority written parliamentary questions amounts to 122,041 questions, 11,347 of which were related to the immigration issue. Radical right MEPs asked 2,792 immigration-related questions and MEPs from the mainstream party groups asked a total of 4,393 questions.

Questions asked by MEPs whose national party is affiliated with the EPP, S&D or ALDE are coded as 'mainstream party group questions' since their constituent national parties often take part in national office (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007, 116). Table A1 in the appendix shows that the absolute number as well as proportion of national parties in government within the EPP, S&D and ALDE is much higher.

Whereas mainstream parties are aligned in party groups, not all radical right parties have been able to form stable party groups (McDonnell and Werner 2017). Although a number of radical right party groups exist or have existed, many radical right MEPs are aligned with an informal technical group of non-attached (NA) members. This NA group, however, also contains far left oriented MEPs. Therefore, 'radical right questions' are coded on the basis of whether the MEP's *national party* belongs to the radical right party family. Radical right parties are defined in

accordance with Mudde (2007).⁹ To examine whether mainstream party groups respond differently to radical right emphasis than other party groups, we have additionally collected data for the party groups without radical right members; the radical left party group GUE/NGL and the Green party group. Figure 1 shows the number of MEPs per party group and the share of radical right MEPs. On average, 8 per cent of MEPs are radical right MEPs and 7 per cent of the national parties in the EP belong to the radical right.

(Figure 1 here)

Whether a parliamentary question concerns immigration policy is established by means of a semi-automated content analysis on the basis of a dictionary of keywords pertaining to the immigration issue on EU level. This list of keywords is designed to appropriately cover both radical right and mainstream party discourse on immigration on EU level.¹⁰ The descriptive analysis of keyword usage in Table A3b shows that most party groups use similar keywords referring to immigration. Yet, the radical right uses keywords related to 'Islam' more and keywords related to 'refugees' less than other party groups.

Estimation Method

In order to examine whether radical right immigration emphasis affects mainstream party groups' emphasis of the issue, we examine issue competition dynamics within various time structures. Usually, issue competition dynamics are measured with extended time brackets of multiple years (De Vries and Hobolt 2012), election-years (Meguid 2008; Spoon, Hobolt, and de Vries 2014;

⁹ The appendix provides for a full list of national parties considered to be radical right.

¹⁰ Keywords for mainstream party EU migration discourse were informed by the Lavenex' (2015) chapter on justice and home affairs. Keywords for radical right immigration discourse were created with reference to existing political communication studies on immigration (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 2007).¹⁰ The full list of keywords is presented in the appendix (Table A3a).

Abou-Chadi 2016), or calendar years (Green-Pedersen 2007; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; van de Wardt 2015). Yet, Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink (2011) have argued that such an approach does not do justice to fast-changing complexities of issue competition in the parliamentary arena. Rather, in an attempt to shape the agenda, parties are shown to also engage in short-term issue competition (cf. Meijers and Rauh 2016).

Following the study by Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink (2011) of the Belgian parliament, we therefore primarily focus on the weekly issue competition dynamics in the EP in a time-series cross-sectional design. Given that mainstream actors' response to niche parties can also occur in more extended time brackets, we also model the monthly and quarterly effects of radical emphasis on mainstream parties' agendas as a robustness test. This is important, as the time period in which parties and party groups are expected to react to one another is undertheorized.

Hence, the main unit of analysis is the change in the number of parliamentary questions on immigration posed per mainstream party group per week – with the mainstream party group as cross-section identifier. In other words, the dependent variable is the first difference of mainstream party group emphasis representing the change in emphasis of immigration compared to the week before. The main independent variable is also first-differenced and measures the weekly change of radical right immigration emphasis lagged by one time period.¹¹ With this first-differenced measurement we capture the dynamic effects of radical right issue emphasis from

¹¹ While we think a lag of one week reflects the dynamics of parliamentary behavior best, we do not exclude the possibility that further lags could affect mainstream EPG's immigration emphasis. Therefore, Table A5 in the appendix shows the estimates for further and multiple lags.

week to week on mainstream parties' emphasis of immigration policy.¹² Table A4a in the appendix shows the summary statistics of the main variables for the weekly party group models.¹³

In order to examine whether radical right emphasis of the immigration issue spurs a response of mainstream party groups, we calculate pooled OLS regression models with a Prais-Winsten transformation with a panel-specific AR(1) error structure in order to account for serial correlation. Other studies have relied on a lagged dependent variable to account for autocorrelation, but recent research have shown that this could lead to bias related to trends in the error term (Plümper, Troeger, and Manow 2005). We include party group fixed effects by inserting party group dummies in the model as this is essential for making causal claims about radical right issue emphasis on the mainstream party group issue agenda (Abou-Chadi 2016). The party group dummies also control for the direct and conditional effect of party group membership and examine whether some party groups are more responsive to the radical right than others.

To account for the possibility that mainstream party groups react to one another, we additionally include the lagged first differenced attention to immigration issues by the other mainstream parties. In addition, we control for the direct and conditional effect of EP terms for two reasons. First, with the entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009, almost all JHA issues related to immigration issues became subject to the ordinary legislative procedure – significantly empowering the EP (Hampshire 2015). This can affect the incentives for mainstream party group issue emphasis. Second, given that the radical right increased its seat share considerably in the 2014 EP elections (Treib 2014), the dynamics of issue competition in the EP can be affected by

¹² The weekly time structure of the data ensures that the models account for long- and medium-term contextual changes.

¹³ Summary statistics for other operationalizations can also be found in the appendix (Table A4b-d).

the EP's composition. This amounts to the following basic model in which the sixth EP term dummy and the ALDE party group dummy serve as baseline variables:

$$\begin{aligned}
& \Delta \text{ Mainstream EPG Emphasis}_{i,t} \\
&= \beta_0 + \beta_1(\Delta \text{ Radical Right Emphasis}_{i,t-1}) \\
&+ \beta_2(\Delta \text{ Other Mainstream EPG Emphasis}_{i,t-1}) + \beta_3(\text{EP Term 7 Dummy}_{i,t}) \\
&+ \beta_4(\text{EP Term 8 Dummy}_{i,t}) + \beta_5(\text{EPP Dummy}_{i,t}) + \beta_6(\text{S\&D Dummy}_{i,t}) + \nu_{i,t} \\
&+ \varepsilon_{i,t}
\end{aligned}$$

Although we primarily focus on written parliamentary questions, it is nevertheless possible that mainstream party groups engage in issue competition using other non-legislative parliamentary instruments – as they do not face the same institutional constraints radical right MEPs. To account for this in the empirical design, we include an alternative dependent variable as a robustness test including all relevant non-legislative parliamentary instruments by adding oral parliamentary questions, pre-announcement of questions at question time and motions for resolutions.

Following other studies of parliamentary issue competition (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Vliegthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink 2011; van de Wardt 2015), we expect mainstream party groups to engage in issue emphasis strategies as cohesive actors. Yet, given that party switching between different European party groups occurs (McElroy and Benoit 2010), it is possible that MEPs are not guided by their party groups or national parties but engage in issue emphasis strategies at their own discretion. Therefore, we also calculate a model on the level of the individual MEPs as a robustness test. We constructed our MEP level dataset by generating observations on a week-by-week basis for all non-radical right MEPs that have asked a parliamentary question in the analyzed week mentioning immigration. The dependent variable is a dichotomous variable measuring whether an MEP emphasized the immigration issue or not. The independent variable measures the total number of immigration-related parliamentary questions asked by the radical right in the previous week. To account for individual MEP characteristics, we

calculate a fixed effects logistic panel regression model with additional EP term and party group fixed effects.

(Figure 2 here)

Results

Figure 2 shows the proportion of written and written priority parliamentary questions by party group related to the immigration issue, relative to the total number of questions asked for the sixth, seventh and eighth EP (until February 2016). Figure 2 shows that the radical right is indeed the ‘owner’ of the immigration issue in the EP. Mainstream party groups as well as the Green party group and the radical left party group, GUE/NGL, emphasize the issue less in comparison to other issues. While the relative salience of the immigration issue in the EP was stable prior to 2014, all party groups have increased their share of immigration emphasis in the eighth EP. Given the unprecedented increase in the number of refugees in EU member-states due to violent conflict in nearby regions (Trauner 2016), this increase is not surprising. It is important to note, however, that the radical right’s immigration emphasis remained approximately twice as strong as the other party groups throughout the period. Moreover, our central hypothesis formulated the expectation that mainstream parties adopt a dismissive strategy on the immigration issue in response to the radical right. As such, we expect that this increase in immigration emphasis post-2014 is not caused by the radical right’s issue emphasis.

(Table 1 here)

The time-series cross-sectional analysis presented in Table 1 tests the central hypothesis that radical right MEPs motivates mainstream party groups to emphasize the immigration issue less. Table 1 demonstrates that radical right emphasis change has a statistically significant *negative* effect on the weekly change in emphasis of immigration issues by mainstream parliamentary groups. This effect is small in substantive terms, however. The finding that the increase of

immigration issue emphasis by radical right MEPs motivates mainstream party groups to lower their attention to the immigration issue allows us to accept our central hypothesis – notwithstanding the substantively small effect size. Contrary to what is usually found in the domestic context, this therefore confirms the expectation that increased radical right immigration emphasis in the EP does not lead to a positive change in mainstream party emphasis of the immigration issue.

Based on a model measuring the interaction between the party group dummy and change of radical right immigration emphasis, the marginal effects plot in Figure 3 graphically presents the predicted value of the dependent variable for different values of radical right emphasis change per party group – as is common practice when estimating conditional effects (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006).¹⁴ In order to compare mainstream party groups with non-mainstream parties, the estimates for the Green party group and the radical left party group GUE/NGL are also shown. Figure 3 shows that there is a significant negative effect of radical right emphasis on the issue emphasis of mainstream party groups ALDE, EPP and S&D, but not on the immigration emphasis of the green and radical left party group. Moreover, the slope of the marginal effects plot for the EPP and S&D is slightly steeper than for ALDE, suggesting a more pronounced negative effect.

(Figure 3 here)

Robustness of the Results

Crucially, our findings are robust to various model specifications, different time structures and alternative measurement methods.

Table A6 in the appendix shows that this finding also holds when multiple lags are introduced. Moreover, vector auto regression analysis accompanied by cumulative impulse response function

¹⁴ The model with the interactions on the basis of which Figure 3 and 4 are calculated can be found in the appendix (Table A5).

graphs (CIRFs) display a similar result (see Tables A7a, A7b and Figure A2). In addition, in order to make sure the significant negative effect of radical right emphasis is particular to the immigration issue and not the function of an agenda cycle, we conducted placebo tests with another issue, the environment. The results in Table A8b in the appendix indicate that the radical right emphasis of the environmental issue has no statistically significant impact on mainstream environment emphasis, which further augments the confidence in our results.

(Figure 4 here)

It is conceivable that time and EP-term dependent factors influence our results. Therefore, we have additionally examined the conditional effect of EP term on the effect of radical right immigration emphasis on mainstream party emphasis as shown in Figure 4. We find that the negative effect of radical right immigration emphasis on mainstream party group emphasis change is more pronounced in the seventh EP term than in the sixth EP term.¹⁵ The negative effect in the eighth EP term – compared to the seventh EP term – was, however, even more pronounced. As the greater effect size also indicates, these findings suggest that as the salience of the immigration issue increases over time, as Figure 1 has shown, the size of the negative effect of radical right emphasis increases.¹⁶ The finding that mainstream parties respond stronger to radical right MEPs' immigration emphasis in times when in the immigration issue becomes more salient provides additional evidence for the hypothesis that mainstream party groups attempt to

¹⁵ The difference between the sixth and the seventh EP is borderline significant at an alpha of 0.05.

¹⁶ Additionally, we have calculated the marginal effects of radical right emphasis change for a linear (Figure A3a) and a quadratic (Figure A3b) continuous time variable. Substantively, these estimates show the same result. Yet, they indicate that there is no significant negative effect of radical right emphasis change on mainstream party groups prior to the seventh EP term.

de-emphasize the immigration issue in response to the radical right when they have the ability to do so.

As it is theoretically possible that mainstream party groups choose to respond to the radical right using other parliamentary instruments, we also calculated weekly models which allowed for the possibility that both radical right and mainstream MEPs use additional parliamentary instruments to address the immigration issue, including oral parliamentary questions, pre-announcements of questions at question time and motions (Model 1 in Table 2). Nevertheless, this analysis yields substantively similar results. The fact that the inclusion of motions and other types of parliamentary questions does not affect the result lends further credence to the robustness of our results and suggests that – as expected – these other non-legislative parliamentary instruments are not relevant for parliamentary issue competition in the EP.

Additionally, we have conducted a robustness test for the possibility that radical right MEPs induce more immigration emphasis within larger time brackets. In Table 2, we report analyses based on monthly and quarterly data in Models 2 and 3 respectively. In the monthly and quarterly analyses, we no longer find a significant negative effect of radical right immigration emphasis. Yet, the statistically insignificant estimates suggest there is no positive effect of radical right emphasis on mainstream immigration emphasis.¹⁷ Given that a dismissive strategy has not only been conceptualized as a *decrease* in emphasis, but also as a lack of response in emphasis (see Meguid 2005), the results of the monthly and quarterly analyses suggest a dismissive response à la Meguid. However, since the absence of statistically significant effects offers weak evidence for the actual absence of a relationship (Gill 1999; Rainey 2014), additional evidence specifying the absence of *meaningful* effects strengthens arguments for the absence of an effect (Rainey 2014).

¹⁷ The marginal effects plots per party group for the aggregated monthly and quarterly analyses in the appendix corroborate this.

The coefficient plots in the appendix (Figures A5a and A5b) indicate that the insignificant effect is also a substantively negligible effect.¹⁸ The absence of a substantively meaningful positive effect increases our confidence that mainstream party groups do not increase their emphasis in reaction to radical right in the monthly and quarterly time periods.

(Table 2 here)

The previous models on party group level data are based on the implicit assumption that European party groups largely function as cohesive actors. The occurrence of party switching between different European party groups suggests however, that MEPs are possibly not steered by their respective party groups (McElroy and Benoit 2010). As a robustness check, we therefore examine whether the result also holds with MEP-level data with a fixed-effects logistic panel regression model (Table A10 in the appendix). The statistically significant, negative coefficient displays a similar effect for the MEP-level data. This bolsters our confidence in the party group level results and serves as additional evidence that party groups are cohesive agenda-setters in the EP (Rasmussen 2008). To be sure, such party group cohesion does not prove that unity is a function of party groups' ability to enforce MEP loyalty rather than a product of converging MEP preferences (see Krehbiel 1993; Willumsen and Öhberg 2017). For the purpose of our theoretical argument, however, the strong convergence of the party group level and the MEP-level results is sufficient evidence that our party group level analysis is not the product of 'artificial' aggregation.

All in all, our central hypothesis, which formulated the expectation that radical right issue emphasis change on the immigration issue negatively affects the propensity of mainstream party groups to address the issue, can be accepted.

¹⁸ The definition and measurement of meaningful effects is discussed in the appendix.

Conclusion

The issue competition literature argues that the leverage of niche parties, such as the radical right, over mainstream policy agendas hinges on the potential electoral threat the niche party poses to the mainstream party (Meguid 2008; Green-Pedersen 2007). Relying on an original dataset of immigration-related parliamentary questions posed by MEPs between 2004 and 2016, we examined the case of immigration issue emphasis in the EP – an institutional setting in which niche party actors lack electoral leverage over mainstream actors and face particular institutional disadvantages vis-à-vis their mainstream competitors. We show that the lack of a strong electoral connection in the EP and the disproportionate institutional power in the EP creates a condition in which mainstream party groups do not respond to increased radical right immigration emphasis with increased immigration emphasis. Rather, dynamic week-by-week analyses demonstrated that our hypothesis that mainstream party groups tone down the emphasis of the immigration issue in response to radical right emphasis can be accepted. This corroborates other findings of short-term party issue competition (Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink 2011; Hopmann et al. 2012; Meijers and Rauh 2016). The monthly and quarterly analyses moreover found no meaningful positive effect of radical right mobilization in the EP indicating that mainstream party groups do not increase their emphasis of the immigration issue in response to the radical right.

This pattern deviates considerably with the patterns found in the national electoral arena. National-level studies have shown that mainstream parties increase the emphasis of the immigration issue in response to the mobilization of the immigration issue by radical right parties (Harmel and Svasand 1997; van de Wardt 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016). Our findings therefore suggest that institutional opportunity structures shaping the niche party actors' threat potential are crucial for our understanding of issue emphasis of mainstream parties in response to radical right challengers. This conclusion is in line with the idea that electoral rules and parliamentary rules have a strong influence on the dynamic interaction between niche party actors and mainstream

party actors (Rohrschneider 1993; Karp and Banducci 2002; Meguid 2008, 97–99). Future research should further explore how electoral institutions and parliamentary procedural rules affect issue competition dynamics – also in the domestic context.

The contrasting findings in the weekly analysis and the monthly and quarterly analyses moreover highlight conceptual ambiguity with respect to dismissive and de-emphasizing strategies. So far, the literature has not been clear about the different manifestations of dismissive strategies. To some, a dismissive strategy refers to non-action (Carmines and Stimson 1986; Meguid 2008; Bale et al. 2010), others regard a dismissive strategy to denote a low degree of issue emphasis relative to other competitors (Wagner 2012a; Dolezal et al. 2014), to other issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Volkens et al. 2013) or to previous points in time (van de Wardt 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016). Scholars of issue competition are therefore well advised to clarify conceptually what they measure and, accordingly, reflect on that in theoretical terms.

This article has focused on issue competition through non-legislative parliamentary instruments in the EP. Our results are robust to the inclusion of various parliamentary instruments. Parliamentary activities by parliamentary committees and *rapporteurs* are not included in the analysis as we argue that these venues do not give MEPs the opportunity to strategically emphasize certain policy issues. Our empirical focus on a single political arena is moreover in line with virtually all studies of issue competition focusing either on the electoral setting (Budge and Farlie 1983; Meguid 2005; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Abou-Chadi 2016) or on the parliamentary setting (Green-Pedersen 2010; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Proksch and Slapin 2011; Vliegthart, Walgrave, and Meppelink 2011). Integrating different political arenas with distinct institutional dynamics in a single explanatory model of party competition nevertheless remains a task for the discipline – both in the national and in the EU context.

In all likelihood the issue of immigration will stay and become even more important with the rising number of immigrants coming to the European Union (Trauner 2016). At the same time,

the progression toward an 'ever-closer Union' has come under attack, not only by Eurosceptic parties on the fringes of the political spectrum, but also from mainstream parties (Meijers 2017). In the United Kingdom, the immigration issue was a key factor in the Brexit referendum to leave the European Union in June 2016 (Hobolt 2016). Moreover, in many respects the formal competences on migration policy still reside with the member-states and the introduction of the Early Warning Mechanism since the Lisbon Treaty has increasingly empowered national parliaments to steer EU legislation (Cooper 2012). The 'nationalization' of immigration policy could lead to a further decoupling of the EP's electoral and parliamentary arena, giving mainstream European party groups even more leeway to de-emphasize immigration policy in the EP. Our results suggest that this might be the case. The increase in immigration salience in the EP since the eighth EP term, on the one hand, and the stronger de-emphasizing response of mainstream party groups to the radical right in the eighth EP term, on the other hand, imply that mainstream party groups can afford to be unresponsive to political competitors when shielded from electoral competition.

Yet, the surge in the number of refugees has forced the EU to act cohesively as a unitary actor – as the contentious EU-Turkey agreement of March 2016 demonstrates. Supranational solutions to the migration issue can increase the importance of immigration policy in the EP – as the increasing salience of the immigration issue in the EP since mid-2014 suggests. Therefore, the political reality of the increase of migrants from war-stricken regions seems to do what the radical right has been unable to do: to change the political agenda mainstream party groups have tried to carefully control.

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Table 1: Pooled time series regression model of mainstream EPG's weekly change in immigration emphasis

	(1) Δ Mainstream EPG Weekly Emphasis
Δ Radical Right Emphasis (t-1)	-0.0833*** (0.0196)
Δ Other Mainstream EPG Emphasis (t-1)	-0.0262 (0.0178)
EPP	0.0193 (0.112)
S&D	0.0250 (0.0873)
EP 7	0.0844 (0.303)
EP 8	0.353 (0.488)
Time	-0.000334 (0.00102)
Constant	0.0296 (0.165)
<i>N</i>	1803

Note: Prais-Winsten regression coefficients with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

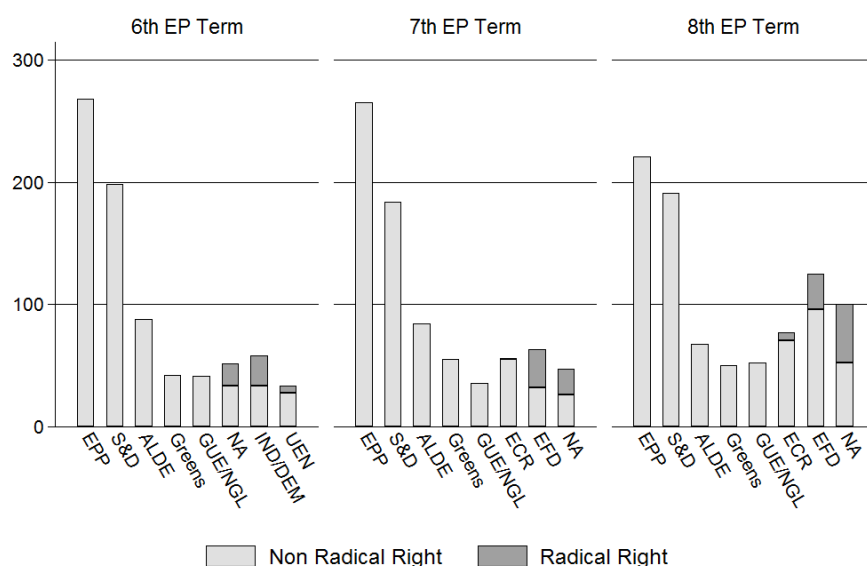
Table 2: Alternative specifications of the pooled time series regression model of mainstream EPG's change in immigration emphasis

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Δ Mainstream EPG Weekly Emphasis (all instruments)	Δ Mainstream EPG Monthly Emphasis	Δ Mainstream EPG Quarterly Emphasis
Δ Radical Right Emphasis (t-1)	-0.0789** (0.0286)	0.0189 (0.0528)	-0.0843 (0.0817)
Δ Other Mainstream EPG Emphasis (t-1)	-0.0356 (0.0235)	0.0164 (0.0485)	-0.0419 (0.0766)
EPP	0.0182 (0.128)	0.0821 (0.162)	0.126 (0.173)
S&D	0.0229 (0.100)	0.114 (0.134)	0.134 (0.139)
EP 7	0.160 (0.510)	0.196 (0.502)	0.922 (0.556)
EP 8	0.524 (0.820)	1.141 (0.814)	2.369** (0.907)
Time	-0.000635 (0.00171)	-0.00291 (0.00737)	-0.0392 (0.0247)
Constant	0.0706 (0.286)	0.0215 (0.284)	0.347 (0.346)
<i>N</i>	1803	414	138

Note: Prais-Winsten regression coefficients with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

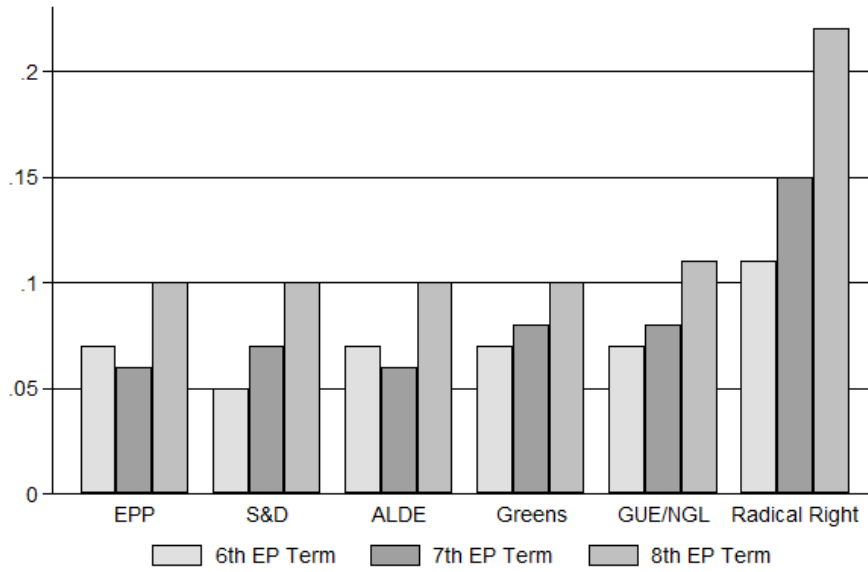
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 1: Number of MEPs per party group and the share of radical right MEPs in each party group.



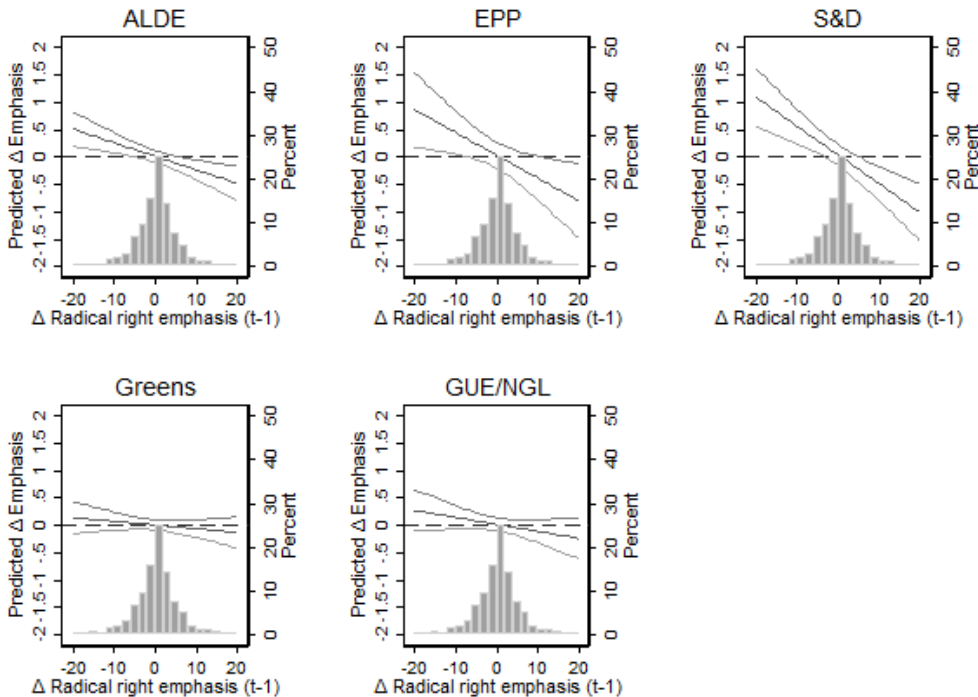
Note: The number of MEPs per party group is the total number of MEPs per party group as measured at the start of each legislative term

Figure 2: Relative share of immigration-related parliamentary questions by party group per EP term



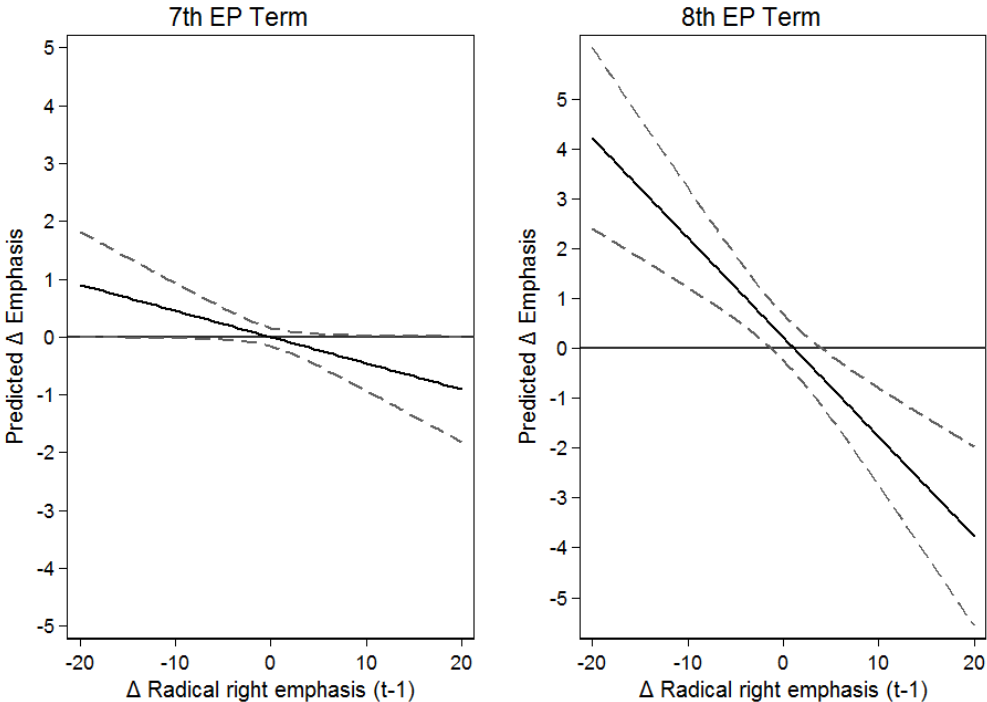
Note: The graph displays the share of immigration-related written and priority written parliamentary questions by party group relative to the total amount of parliamentary questions for the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth EP. N = 96084 (total number of written and priority written parliamentary questions by the selected party groups and MEP-types)

Figure 3: Marginal effects plot of radical right issue attention change on mainstream party issue attention change per party group



Note: The plot shows the marginal effect of a change in radical right immigration issue emphasis at *t-1* on the predicted change of mainstream party group emphasis of the immigration issue per party group. The rug plot presents the distribution of the variable Δ Radical Right Emphasis (*t-1*).

Figure 4: Plot of the marginal effect of radical right issue attention change on mainstream party issue attention change for the difference between EP 6 and EP 7 (left) and the difference between EP 7 and EP 8 (right)



Note: The plot shows the marginal effect of a change in radical right immigration issue emphasis at $t-1$ on the predicted change of mainstream party group emphasis of the immigration issue for EP term 7 and 8.