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Mainstream parties' failed strategy to counter
anti-immigrant parties**

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Abstract

The emergence of anti-immigrant parties in Western Europe has provoked very different responses from mainstream parties. Some have tried to counter the anti-immigrant parties, while others have tried to recapture lost voters by taking a tougher stance on immigration. Country comparative studies have tried to determine the effectiveness of different strategies, but systematic testing has been impaired by small-n problems. Therefore this paper exploits sub-national variation in 290 Swedish municipalities to investigate the effect of mainstream party strategy on anti-immigrant electoral success. The paper finds that a tougher stance on immigration of mainstream parties is correlated with more anti-immigrant party support, even when controlling for a large number of socio-economic, historical and regional factors. This result indicates that mainstream parties legitimize anti-immigrant parties by taking a tougher position on immigration. However, the results presented in the paper show that it is not enough that one mainstream party takes a tougher position, it is only when the entire political mainstream are tougher on immigration that the anti-immigrant party benefits. What is more, toughness of the parties on the left seem to be more legitimizing than the toughness of the parties on the right.

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Introduction

The last three decades, a new brand of political parties has emerged in Western Europe. Today, anti-immigrant parties are represented in Parliaments in countries such as Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and Sweden. The electoral support for anti-immigrant parties are however unstable over time and there are still several West European countries, such as Spain, Germany and the UK, in which they have weak electoral support. This paper explores one promising explanation for short-term variations in anti-immigrant party support, and tests this explanation on a unique sub-national data-set. More specifically, the paper investigates if mainstream parties' positions in the immigration issue (tough stance on immigration or not) facilitate or impede anti-immigrant party electoral support.¹

Using time-variant cross-country data and pooled election studies, scholars have been able to draw stable conclusions regarding gender, class and other socio-economic characteristics of anti-immigrant voters (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Norris 2005; van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2005). Literature has also explored the effects of institutional settings, such as electoral systems and parliamentary thresholds (Jackman and Volpert 1996; Swank and Betz 2003), the history and ideological origin of

¹ We follow van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie (2005, 537) and use the term anti-immigrant parties for the parties at point (see also Fennema 1997). There are two reasons why we prefer the term anti-immigrant parties. First, as van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie (2005, 538) point out; the immigration issue is of core political concern for all parties in this group of parties. Second, it is not self-evident that parties in this party group should be placed at the right end of the political spectrum. The Swedish case illustrates this. Both the voters of the largest anti-immigrant party in Sweden and their representatives, place themselves in the center of the political spectrum (Holmberg, Näsman and Wänström 2010, 23; Gilljam, Karlsson and Sundell 2010, 19). This makes us reluctant to choose a terminology that already from the outset places these parties at the “extreme” (Carter 2005; Mudde 1996) or “radical” (Mudde 2007; Norris 2005; Rydgren 2007) right end of the spectrum.

anti-immigrant parties (Carter 2002; Ivarsflaten 2006), and factors triggering citizen demand for anti-immigrant policy, such as levels of and changes in immigration and unemployment (Arzheimer 2009; Golder 2003; Knigge 1998; Lubbers, Gijsberts and Scheepers 2002).

However, even in the probably most comprehensive study so far, where answers from 175,000 respondents in 18 countries over a time-period of 23 years were analyzed, the author concluded that “persistent country effects prevail” (Arzheimer 2009, 259). This underlines that we have still not reached a full understanding of the dynamics leading up to electoral anti-immigrant party success, in spite of the high sophistication of the field.

In our view, the most promising line of research in this field explores the effects of issue strategies of mainstream parties (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Bale 2003; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Meguid 2005, 2008). The basic idea is that mainstream parties can impede or facilitate the growth of anti-immigrant parties, depending on how they handle the immigration issue. Two inter-related factors have been identified in this literature: the salience of the immigration issue, and the mainstream parties’ position on the issue.

Research has show that anti-immigrant parties benefit from high saliency of the immigration issue. These results are stable both when tested on individual and system level (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Bale 2003), implicating that a

“dismissive” strategy which keeps the issue saliency low is the most effective (Meguid 2005, 350).

However, empirical evidence is more ambiguous when it comes to the effects of mainstream party stance in the immigration issue. Two rival hypotheses can be crystallized from the literature. The first – the impeding hypothesis – says that we should expect a decline in electoral support for anti-immigrant parties if mainstream parties take a tough position on immigration, as the mainstream parties thereby take ownership of the immigration issue (Meguid 2005, 2008; van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2005). The second – the facilitating hypothesis – holds the opposite expectation. It says that if mainstream parties takes a tough position on immigration, voters interpret this as a signal that tougher policies are relevant, which helps the anti-immigrant party to overcome a barrier of non-respectability and thus helps it to gain more votes (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Bale 2003).

These hypotheses have been tested in cross-country studies, but results are hampered by small n-problems. Even in the more sophisticated studies not more than 22 (van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2005) or 24 (Arzheimer and Carter 2006) elections are included, which makes it hard to draw firm conclusions of the effects of different strategies. Therefore, this paper employs a different research strategy and tests these two rival hypothesis using data on the 290 Swedish local governments in the 2010 elections.

The sub-national setting is ideal as it keeps important institutional and cultural factors constant, while it exhibits rich variation both in the strategies mainstream parties employ and in electoral anti-immigrant party support. We have at our disposal unique data capturing the immigration policy positions among politicians at the local level in Sweden, which allow us to evaluate the effects of tougher immigration issue positions among the mainstream parties.

Our main results support the facilitating hypothesis. We therefore conclude that tough policy positions of mainstream parties in the immigration issue help anti-immigrant party success. However, contrary to previous research we demonstrate that it is not enough if one mainstream party takes a tougher stance on immigration. In order to affect the electoral success of the anti-immigrant party the whole immigration discourse must become tougher, which we interpret as a legitimizing effect. We also report the perhaps counterintuitive result that tougher positions of the parties on the political left are more important for anti-immigrant party success than tougher positions of the parties on the political right.

Tough Policy Positions and Anti-Immigrant Party Support

Theories of prime interest for this paper are those focusing on the effects of strategies of mainstream parties. Both classical theories of party competition (Downs 1957) and more recent theories of party strategies (Meguid 2005, 2008) highlights the strategic importance of competing parties' policy positions. As mentioned in the introduction two rival hypotheses have evolved from this discussion. In the more classical view a

competing party can take voters from an anti-immigrant party by occupying a party position close the anti-immigrant party, e.g. take a tougher stance on immigration. From this perspective the most probable outcome from this competition is a vote loss for the anti-immigrant party (van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2005, 548).

There is however also the opposite hypothesis. The rationale behind this is that although voters might have anti-immigration attitudes, they do not act on these preferences on Election Day because anti-immigrant parties are not seen as legitimate alternatives.

Therefore, anti-immigrant parties need to overcome a barrier of non-respectability before they can attract a larger proportion of the voters. This was for example probably the case in Sweden for a long time. The general public in Sweden has much tougher attitudes on immigration than their representatives in mainstream parties. Between 1994 and 2006 the disagreement between MPs and voters in Sweden were several times larger than on any other issue. This policy disagreement did for a long time not result in any substantial support for an anti-immigrant party in Sweden, which may indicate that in spite of a large demand for anti-immigration policy something hindered Swedish voters to vote for an anti-immigrant party (Dahlström and Esaiasson, forthcoming). According to this theory, tough policy positions by mainstream parties helps anti-immigrant parties to overcome the barrier of non-respectability because voters will interpret it as a signal that tough immigration policies are relevant. Thus, from this perspective the most probable outcome of a tough immigration policy position by mainstream parties is an anti-immigrant party vote gain (Arzheimer 2009, 264; Arzheimer and Carter 2006, 424). We call the first the impeding hypothesis and the second the facilitating hypothesis.

Theory has however been ambiguous on two key aspects of the hypotheses. We therefore take two steps in order to specify the theory and test the two hypotheses empirically.

First, the causal mechanism suggested by the facilitating hypothesis imply that a legitimizing process starts when mainstream parties takes a tough stance on immigration, a process that eventually break down the taboo around this policy position. As anti-immigrant parties are closely associated with a tough stance on immigration, making this position more legitimate this will increase their support (ibid.). But, how much does it take to break the taboo? Is it enough if one of the mainstream parties takes a tough immigration policy position? Or does the whole immigration policy discourse have to move in a tougher direction? This paper acknowledges both possibilities and tests them empirically.

Second, it is not clear if all parties can play an impeding or facilitating role. Some studies are only geared towards the positions of right parties (Bale 2003; Carter and Arzheimer 2006), while others also consider policy positions of left parties (Arzheimer 2009). As shown by Meguid (2005) party competition between mainstream parties and niche parties, such as anti-immigrant parties, are sensitive not only to the policy position by the party closest to the anti-immigrant party, but also to the position of the other parties. We therefore include policy positions of all parties in this study. We use this information to study if the effects of left and right parties differ, and to evaluate the effect of all parties individually.

As mentioned in the introduction, several other explanatory factors have been suggested and tested empirically (for recent reviews, see Rydgren 2007; van der Brug and Fennema 2007). While relevant in cross-country studies, some of the theories are not well-suited to explain the short-term variations of prime interest in this paper. Important examples of theories highlighting fairly stable variables are theories concerning the effects of electoral systems and parliamentary thresholds and other institutional arrangements (Jackman and Volpert 1996; Norris 2005; Swank and Betz 2003). Other interesting examples are theories that stress history and ideological origin of anti-immigrant parties (Ignazie 1992; Kitschelt 1995; Carter 2002; Ivarsflaten 2006). In this paper we will however not be able to evaluate any of these theories as we by way of design hold institutional and party-historical factors constant.

Of more direct interest for this paper are theories emphasizing factors triggering citizen demand for anti-immigrant policy, such as levels of immigration and unemployment. Several studies have theorized the relationship between unemployment and immigration on the one hand, and anti-immigrant party support on the other hand. These theories have however had mixed empirical support. Some studies have indeed found that the number of immigrants or asylum seekers in the country positively affects the electoral support for anti-immigrant parties (Arzheimer 2009, 269; Golder 2003, 451; Lubbers, Gijsberts and Scheepers 2002), while others have failed to establish such a relationship (Norris 2005, 172; van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2005, 555). Unemployment is in some studies associated with electoral success for anti-immigrant parties (Jackman and Volpert 1996;

Golder 2003), while other studies show a counterintuitive negative relationship (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Knigge 1998). In one recent study the interaction between unemployment, immigration and unemployment benefits was tested empirically, revealing a complicated interaction pattern (Arzheimer 2009, 273).

As the unit of analysis in this paper is local governments, and not individuals, the paper is not design to directly test these or other individual level factors which are associated with anti-immigrant party support, such as gender or education. We will however control for aggregate levels of immigration, unemployment, gender and education in all empirical models, but without ambition to directly evaluate these individual level theories.

In sum, we will focus on party positions of mainstream parties and its effect on anti-immigrant party support, while holding most institutional and historical explanations constant and controlling for the aggregate levels socio-economic explanations. We will test both the effect of the extreme position among the mainstream parties (suggesting that it is enough if one mainstream party has a tough position) and the effect of the mean position of all mainstream parties (suggesting that the political discourse must be tougher). We will also analyze if it matters if it is mainstream left parties or mainstream right parties that has a tough position on immigration. Finally, we will evaluate the effect of the position of individual mainstream parties.

The Case: Swedish Local Governments

Since our methodological approach in some aspects differs from the convention of cross-country comparisons, some clarifications are called for. One obvious advantage of using data on the sub-national level is that the data is less analyzed than data on the national level (see however Dülmer and Markusklein 2005; Kestilä and Söderlund 2007; and Lubbers and Scheepers 2001, 2002 for examples of studies on anti-immigrant parties on the sub-national level). Anti-immigrant parties in European national parliaments have been extensively studied in both a plethora of case studies and in many cross-country comparisons. Rigid theory-testing is hence impaired by the fact that most theories were developed from the same data. Furthermore, the sub-national approach also provides rich variation in party strategy, while keeping institutional factors, such as the electoral system, and historical factors, such as the background of the anti-immigrant party, constant.

However, for a study of local governments to address questions posed by the existing cross-country literature, the local governments need to have similar competencies as the national governments, albeit at a smaller scale. In Sweden, this is clearly the case. The municipal councils (the local parliaments) are elected every fourth year in tandem with the national parliamentary elections, and turnout is usually only a few percentage points lower than in the Riksdag elections (which means over 77 percent in all elections since 1973). Parties represented in the municipal councils are mostly the same as in the Riksdag, even if not all Riksdag parties are represented in all municipal councils. Many municipal councils also include a local party.

The municipal councils have vast competencies in international comparison, and are even able to set the level of taxation. This is necessary, as they are responsible for the provision of key portions of the welfare state such as primary and secondary education, child care and care of the elderly. Moreover, Swedish local governments are in many municipalities the biggest employer (Bäck, 2003).

Of special importance to this study is that the municipal councils decide on the number of refugees that will be received in the municipality. Exploiting a natural experiment situation that arises from a feature of the mandate allocation system in Sweden, Folke (2010) find that representation of New Democracy in municipal councils had a significant negative impact on the number of received refugees in municipalities in the 1990's. (New Democracy was a short-lived party with a tough stance on immigration, represented in the Swedish Riksdag from 1991-1994.) This shows that local politics matter for the issue of interest. General conclusions drawn from the study of local governments in Sweden should thus travel reasonably well to the national context.

Still, one needs to be careful when drawing conclusions from the comparison of sub-national political units. In an illuminating critique of a study by Kestilä and Söderlund (2007), Arzheimer and Carter (2009) highlight several shortcomings of the study in particular and of sub-national studies in general. For instance, it is not possible in an ecological analysis to estimate the effects of individual characteristics such as unemployment or immigrant background on vote choice. All such variables are in our

study only used as controls. However, factors pertaining to party strategy are common to all individuals in a political unit and can thus be studied on the ecological level.

Arzheimer and Carter (2009) also raise the issue of possible spatial correlations between sub-national units in the same region. As we discuss in the data and methodology section, we therefore include regional fixed effects, which soak up explanatory factors at the regional level.

Furthermore, one of Arzheimer and Carter's (2009) main objections to the Kestilä and Söderlund (2007) study is that they fail to take into account the ideology of the mainstream parties at the local level. Our study addresses exactly this issue, as we measure the position of the other parties on the immigration issue in each municipality.

Data and Methodology

The dependent variable is the percentage of valid votes received by the Sweden Democrats in the municipal elections of 2010, which is logged to account for skewness. The main independent variable is the toughness of the mainstream parties on the immigration issue. Arzheimer and Carter (2006) and Arzheimer (2009) use manifesto data to determine how tough mainstream parties are on immigration. While this approach is fruitful in cross-country comparisons, it is less so in within-country studies. Local election manifestos, especially in smaller municipalities, can not be expected to reflect the positions of the parties as well as national election manifestos. Instead, we utilize a pioneering web survey of all 13 000 local politicians in Sweden, administered in the fall of 2008, the midst of the last election period (Gilljam, Karlsson and Sundell 2010). The

response rate of the survey was 70 percent, and was over 50 percent in 98 percent of the 290 municipalities.

Respondents in the study were asked two questions about immigration, which we compiled to an index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$) of toughness towards immigration.² We then calculate the position of the toughest mainstream party in each municipality, which we use as a measure of the limit of mainstream anti-immigration attitudes, similar to Arzheimer (2009). This is more inclusive than Arzheimer and Carter (2006) who instead use the position of the largest conservative party to capture the same dynamic. In general, it might be assumed that the largest party on each side of the political spectrum is the main agenda setter, but the following example illustrates that other parties may serve to legitimize anti-immigration policies.

Immigration is rarely a salient theme in Swedish election campaigns, but 2002 is an exception. Late in that campaign, the Liberal party proposed that immigrants should be required to take a language test when applying for citizenship, which drew sharp criticism from several of the other parties (Dahlström and Esaiasson, forthcoming). The Liberals were accused of being xenophobic, but still increased their vote share from 4.7 to 13.4 percent in the election. In this case, a policy proposal of a small party in the middle of the

² The questions were phrased as suggestions, one concerning the politicians' municipality and the other Sweden as a whole: "When it comes to the municipality where you live: What is your opinion on each of the following suggestions? Receive more refugees in the municipality", and "Below are a number of proposals that have been put forward in the political debate. What is your opinion on each of them? Receive fewer refugees in Sweden". Five response options were available: "Very good suggestion", "Moderately good suggestion", "Neither good nor bad suggestion", "Moderately bad suggestion" and "Very bad suggestion".

political spectrum put immigration on the agenda. It is therefore necessary to include attitudes towards immigration from parties other than the largest conservative party.

However, we also calculate the mean toughness of the mainstream parties in the municipality. This measure is used to test the hypothesis that it is the immigration stance of the entire political mainstream that matters for anti-immigrant party success, rather than the position of the most extreme party.

The response rate of the survey used to calculate the mean toughness of the party is high, but there are still some gaps. Average toughness in each party in the municipality is hence weighted to account for missing responses in the calculation of the municipal measure. In the few municipalities where the representatives of one party on the municipal council are completely missing in the data, toughness for that party is replaced with the average toughness of the party in question nationwide.³

Our theory predicts that the level of support for the anti-immigrant party depends on the mainstream parties' toughness in the immigration issue. However, model specification must account for both problems of reverse causality and omitted variable bias. We take several steps to reduce these problems. First, we include the level of support for the Sweden Democrats in 2006 as a control variable. This effectively means that the dependent variable is the change in support for the Sweden Democrats between 2006 and 2010. By doing so, we reduce the risk of reverse causality in the model. In order for

³ The correlation between the weighted and the unweighted measure (that is, the average toughness of all mainstream party representatives that answered the survey in the municipality) is .90.

reverse causality to be the cause of a correlation between the toughness of the mainstream parties in 2008 and the change in SD support, mainstream politicians must be assumed to anticipate the election results two years in advance, which we find implausible.

Omitted variable bias is instead the most serious caveat facing the model. It is likely that there are factors that affect both mainstream party toughness and electoral support for SD in the municipality. We include three sets of control variables to minimize the risk that possible results are spurious.

First, we include known determinants of anti-immigrant votes. Following Arzheimer (2009), we control for the mean age, squared mean age (to account for an inverse-u relationship), proportion men, proportion highly educated, proportion unemployed, and proportion foreign-born. To draw conclusions about how individuals are affected by for instance age or education from the basis of the estimated coefficients of these variables would obviously be an example of ecological fallacy. They are thus included in the analysis only as control variables, and their respective coefficients are not of interest for this paper.

Second, a possible confounding factor could be popular demand for anti-immigrant policies, driven by some kind of (unknown) cultural or historical factor not captured by our first control variables. To account for this we add two further controls to the model. In order to pick up long-term historical factors, we include the share of votes received by the Nationalist party in the Riksdag elections 1936 in the municipality. The reason for

choosing the election 1936 is that it is the only time a nationalist or nazi party was big enough to merit inclusion in the official election statistics. Data for the variable is obtained from Berglund and Dellerbrandt (1986).

In order to pick up more short-term cultural factors, the share of votes received by *New Democracy* (a short-lived party with a tough stance on immigration, represented in the Swedish Riksdag between 1991 and 1994) in the Riksdag elections 1994 in the municipality is included in the model. The reason why we include the votes for New Democracy in the 1994 rather than in 1991 is that the party started off as an anti-establishment party in 1991 and turned into a full-blown anti-immigrant party first before the 1994 election (Dahlström and Esaiasson, forthcoming). New Democracy only received 1.2 percent of the popular vote in 1994, but a vote for New Democracy in 1994 is hence a better indication of anti-immigrant leanings than a vote for the same party in the preceding election.

However, it is possible that there are additional omitted variables that could give rise to a spurious correlation between mainstream party toughness and SD support. For instance, it is well known that the Sweden Democrats tend to perform better in the southern regions. As a third and final test, we therefore include dummy variables for the 21 administrative regions in Sweden, to capture unobserved regional differences. In this final model, correlations between mainstream toughness and SD support are due to within-region effects. Summary statistics are presented in table 1.

*** Table 1 about here***

Results

The two main independent variables, maximum and mean mainstream party anti-immigration toughness, are tested in three models each, with different sets of control variables. In table 2 models 1 and 2 only control for the support for SD in 2006. Socio-economic controls are introduced in models 3 and 4, while regional dummy variables are introduced in models 5 and 6. Models 1, 3 and 5 thus test the effect of a tougher average policy position on immigration among mainstream parties (mean toughness), and models 2, 4 and 6 test the effect of the toughest position from a mainstream party (maximum toughness).

Table 2 about here

The coefficient for maximum toughness is positive, but not statistically significant in any of the specifications. This is not very surprising as the result is in line with the findings of Arzheimer (2009) and Arzheimer and Carter (2006). A tough stance on immigration by one mainstream party does not seem to legitimize the anti-immigrant party.

However, the coefficient for mean toughness is positive and highly significant in all three specifications. In the most demanding specification, where both socio-economic controls and regional dummy variables are included in the model (model 5), is the coefficient

1.00. The toughness scale is a 9-point scale that has been coded to range from 0 to 1. The coefficient thus describes the maximum possible effect of the variable.

What does the effect signify in substantive terms? A one standard deviation increase in mainstream party toughness is expected to have an effect of 0.07 on the dependent variable, about 0.1 standard deviations. Since the dependent variable is log-transformed, this is equivalent to an increase in support of 7 percent (not percentage points). In the median municipality, where support for the Sweden Democrats is 4.01 percent, a one standard deviation increase in the mainstream parties' anti-immigration toughness is thus predicted to increase support for the Sweden Democrats with 0.28 percentage points.

While this effect hardly seems to be a game-changer, it is important to bear in mind that we model the change in electoral support, not the level. And since past electoral support has a substantial positive effect on current support, it is possible that a tough mainstream position on immigration leads to successive and cumulative gains for the anti-immigrant party.

Looking closer at the control variables, the education level of the municipal population has the strongest and most consistent effect. If the education level were to increase by one percent, support for SD would decrease by 0.38 percent, according to model 5. The share of foreign-born among the municipal population has a positive effect in models 3 and 4, but is rendered insignificant when regional dummy variables are included.⁴ A curvilinear effect of age is observed in model 3 and 4, but is substantially mitigated to the point of

⁴ The results are substantially identical if the variable is exchanged for the share with foreign background, or with foreign citizenship.

insignificance in models 5 and 6. In the latter models, the effect of age is significant and negative when the mean age in the municipality is 42 or higher, which is true for two-thirds of the sample. Only one party variable has a significant effect: the Sweden democrats gained less in the municipalities where the Liberal Party was more successful in 2006.

How can the effect of mainstream toughness be interpreted? Is it merely a reflection of Arzheimer and Carter's (2006) suggestion, that it is the position of the largest conservative party that matters? To answer this question, the variable for mean toughness is split into toughness of the parties belonging to the red-green coalition, and the parties in the centre-right coalition. In table 3, three regression models using the split independent variable are presented, using the same sets of control variables as in table 2. In model 1, the only control is SD support in 2006, while model 2 also includes socio-economic controls, and model 3 includes regional dummy variables.

*** Table 3 about here ***

Both the toughness of the left and the toughness of the right have positive coefficients in all models, but perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the coefficient for the toughness of the left is larger. It is also significant in models 2 and 3, while the toughness of the right coefficient is not.

However, to fully test Arzheimer and Carters (2006) hypothesis that it is the position of the largest conservative party that matters, the toughness variable is divided into individual parties, which are then inserted into the regression model one at a time together with the other control variables. It is impossible to test all of the individual parties in a single model, since the smaller parties are unrepresented in many municipalities. Figure 1 shows the unstandardized b-coefficients of the toughness variables for each party together with 90 percent confidence intervals.

*** Figure 1 about here***

The results can be said to give some credence to Arzheimer and Carter (2006) as the only negative coefficient is found for the Conservatives. This effect is however not significant, even at the 90 percent level, and should thus be interpreted very carefully. Effects for the Social Democrats, the Green Party and the Liberal party are significant (Social Democrats and Liberal at the 95 percent level) and positive. The Liberals is the mainstream party that since the 2002 election probably is closes associated with a tough stance on immigration (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2004), but also the mainstream party with the clearest ownership of the immigration issue (Odmalm forthcoming), which might be the reason why it has a stronger legitimizing effect than other parties. It is also interesting that a tougher stance from the Social Democrats significantly affect the Sweden Democrats electoral success. We can only speculate why this effect occurs, but it is possible that Social Democratic voters with anti-immigrant attitude interpret a tougher stance on immigration from the Social Democrats as a signal that immigration is an

important issue, but are at the same time not satisfied with the Social Democratic position (although it is tougher) and therefore moves to the Sweden Democrats. As observed by van der Brug and van Spanje (2009) there is a large group of voters, who has left-wing attitudes on socio-economic issues but right-wing attitudes on cultural issues, which are not represented in Western European politics. It is plausible that this kind of voters has voted for the Social Democrats in Sweden and at the same time are the ones most easily affected by shifts in issue strategies. It does not seem unreasonable as the Social Democrats to a fairly large extent lost voters directly to the Sweden Democrats in the 2006 election (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2008).

To test the robustness of the results, we tested the effect of mainstream anti-immigration toughness in a number of alternative model specifications. Without control for electoral support for the Sweden Democrats in 2006, the results point in the same direction, but the coefficients for toughness increase in size and significance. Furthermore, Arzheimer and Carter (2009) warn that spatial correlations may drive the results in studies on the sub-national level. In addition to the regional fixed effects, we therefore also included a variable indicating the mean (logged) support for the Sweden Democrats in 2006 in all neighboring municipalities. The effect of this variable was very weak and failed to achieve statistical significance. We also included other variables related to the “political opportunity structure”, such as the effective number of parties and mean ideology of the mainstream parties (as measured in the survey of local politicians). None of the variables had any significant effects, and did not affect the coefficient of the main independent variable.

A possible objection to our model is that success for anti-immigrant parties is the result of short-term changes in the independent variables, and not the result of absolute levels on the independent variables. We therefore estimated models in which we included independent variables measuring change in unemployment, education level, population and the number of inhabitants with foreign background between 2006 and 2009.⁵ The coefficient for mean toughness decreased slightly in this model, but remains clearly significant.

To rule out that results are biased by outliers in the data, we also reran models with jackknife and bootstrap procedures, which did not affect the results.

Summing up the results, empirical evidence seems to support the notion that a tough stance on immigration from mainstream parties legitimizes the otherwise taboo policies of the anti-immigrant parties, rather than crowd them out. Our results hence support the facilitating hypothesis. However, it is not enough that one party takes a tough stance – the variable indicating the position of the toughest party is insignificant. We only find support when operationalizing mainstream party toughness as the weighted mean of the mainstream parties' position. Specifically, toughness of the parties on the left seem to be more legitimizing than the toughness of the parties on the right.

⁵ Changes were calculated as the difference between the level 2009 and 2006, as data for 2010 are yet unable.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have argued that short-term variations in electoral support for anti-immigrant parties are affected by the mainstream parties' policy positions on immigration. Research has suggested that a tough position can both impede and facilitate anti-immigrant parties. We have tested these two competing hypotheses, using a unique sub-national dataset on the 290 Swedish local governments in the 2010 elections. The results show that if mainstream parties take a tough position on immigration it facilitates anti-immigrant party success. Even when controlling for a large number of socio-economic, historical and regional alternative explanations, electoral support for the Sweden Democrats (the largest anti-immigrant party in Sweden) are stronger in municipalities where representatives of mainstream parties has tougher positions on immigration. Thus, our main conclusion is that tougher policy positions of mainstream parties on the immigration issue facilitate electoral anti-immigrant party success.

Looking closer at the facilitating hypothesis, the analysis in this paper contributes with three additional and important observations. First, contrary to what has been argued in previous research (Arzheimer and Carter 2006) it is not enough if *one* mainstream party takes a tough stance on immigration. In order to have a statistically significant effect on the electoral success of the Sweden Democrats, the political immigration discourse must become tougher. This indicates that voters need to see that several of the mainstream parties have tough positions on immigration, in order to interpret it as a positive signal for the Sweden Democrats policy position. This is probably only natural, as the barrier of non-respectability for anti-immigrant parties are hard to overcome.

Second, and again opposing the most common position in the literature (Bale 2003, 2008; Arzheimer and Carter 2006), the paper suggests that it is not necessarily the political right that holds the key to the making or breaking of the success of anti-immigrant parties, but the political left. Using the same very demanding controls as in the main analysis, we report a statistically significant and positive correlation between the toughness of the left (including the Left party, the Social Democrats and the Greens) and the success of the Sweden Democrats. This is especially interesting as we fail to establish the same relationship between the political right (including the Liberals, the Center Party, The Conservatives and the Christian Democrats) and the success of Sweden Democrats.

Third, looking at the effects of single parties, our findings again go against important stances in the literature. Previous research has almost exclusively (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2005; but for an exception see Arzheimer 2009) focused on the relationship between the largest (or most extreme) mainstream right party and the anti-immigrant party. We report statistically significant and positive relations between the positions of the Greens, the Social Democrats, and the Liberals on the one hand, and the electoral success of the Sweden Democrats on the other hand (none of the other parties show statistically significant coefficients). Even more interesting, the strongest and most significant relationship is between the policy position of the Social Democrats and electoral success of the Sweden Democrats. Again, this underlines that it can not be taken for granted that the political right is at the center of the story. The Social Democrats indeed seem to have a large potential to facilitate the Sweden Democrats.

Finally, after the conclusions presented in this paper, one intriguing question for future research is why the mainstream parties take tough positions on the immigration issue when it is obviously bad for them. Empirical studies have shown that the anti-immigration policies of anti-immigrant parties are “contagious”, meaning that it has an effect on policies of mainstream parties (van Spanje 2010). It can of course mirror real-world problems, but we would suggest that it can also be the result of a strategically motivated vicious circle. When the mainstream parties observe stronger support for an anti-immigrant party, a natural reaction from a Downsian perspective is to move in the direction of a tougher immigration policy position, as this is a both underrepresented and popular position (Dahlström and Esaiasson forthcoming). This is probably what happened in Denmark in the late 1990s (Downs 2002; Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008) and might also be what is happening in Sweden after the 2010 election. Unfortunately, we do not have the data to test this hypothesis properly, but we will end by showing a figure that gives a crude indication that there might be something to it.

Figure 2 about here

Figure 2 shows a fairly strong positive bivariate relationship between the electoral success of the Sweden Democrats in the 2006 election and the attitudes of the mainstream parties in 2008 (Pearson’s $R = 0.28$, $p=0.000$). A possible interpretation is that the mainstream parties observed the electoral gains for the Sweden Democrats 2006 and therefore adopted tougher positions on the immigration issue, which in turn facilitated the

success for the Sweden democrats in 2010. If this is actually the case is however for future research to answer.

Tables and Figures

Table 1
Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	Sd	Min	Max
Ln(SD vote share 2010)	1.34	0.68	-0.87	2.96
Ln(SD vote share 2006)	0.61	0.89	-3.05	3.10
Mean toughness	0.33	0.07	0.15	0.68
Max toughness				
Proportion men 2009	50.26	0.75	48.1	52.4
Median income 2009 (1000 SEK)	222.29	20.03	185.72	308.29
Ln(Proportion highly educated 2009)	3.05	0.31	2.55	4.05
Ln(Population 2009)	9.83	0.94	7.82	13.63
Ln(Area 2009)	6.49	1.25	2.16	9.87
Ln(Foreign-born/1000 cap 2009)	2.45	0.48	1.44	3.96
Open unemployment 2008	2.79	0.72	1.02	4.81
New Democracy vote share 1994	1.15	0.50	0.08	2.89
Nationalist vote share 1936	0.80	1.36	0.00	11.75
Mean age in the population 2009	42.83	2.47	37.00	48.50
<i>Vote shares for mainstream parties</i>				
Left	0.06	0.05	0.00	0.58
Green	0.03	0.02	0.00	0.11
Centre	0.14	0.09	0.01	0.47
Liberals	0.07	0.04	0.00	0.23
Christian democrats	0.06	0.05	0.00	0.44
Conservatives	0.20	0.10	0.00	0.67
Local parties	0.05	0.07	0.00	0.43

Comment: N=287.

Table 2
The effects of mean and max toughness on anti-immigrant party success

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Ln(SD vote share 2006)	0.65*** (0.02)	0.66*** (0.02)	0.60*** (0.03)	0.62*** (0.03)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.45*** (0.04)
Mean toughness	0.89*** (0.29)		1.18*** (0.32)		1.00*** (0.30)	
Max toughness		0.16 (0.14)		0.07 (0.13)		0.01 (0.12)
Proportion men 2009			0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Median income 2009 (1000 SEK)			0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Ln(Proportion highly educated 2009)			-0.38** (0.15)	-0.38** (0.16)	-0.38** (0.16)	-0.38** (0.16)
Ln(Population 2009)			0.06 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.07 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Ln(Area 2009)			0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.05* (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Ln(Foreign-born/1000 cap 2009)			0.12* (0.06)	0.15** (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	0.08 (0.07)
Open unemployment 2008			-0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
New Democracy vote share 1994			0.05 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
Nationalist vote share 1936			-0.02 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Mean age in the population 2009			0.77*** (0.24)	0.82*** (0.24)	0.32 (0.23)	0.33 (0.24)
Mean age in the population 2009 squared			-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
<i>Vote shares 2006 (reference: Social democrats)</i>						
Left			0.46 (0.48)	0.62 (0.49)	0.06 (0.46)	0.21 (0.47)
Green			1.41 (1.32)	0.77 (1.35)	0.63 (1.31)	0.20 (1.33)
Centre			0.50 (0.33)	0.55* (0.34)	0.07 (0.34)	0.16 (0.34)
Liberals			-0.92 (0.62)	-0.66 (0.63)	-1.35** (0.62)	-1.11* (0.63)
Christian democrats			0.23 (0.46)	0.42 (0.47)	-0.71 (0.49)	-0.62 (0.50)
Conservatives			0.45 (0.36)	0.74** (0.36)	-0.39 (0.38)	-0.12 (0.38)
Local parties			1.18*** (0.34)	0.89*** (0.34)	0.26 (0.34)	0.04 (0.34)
Constant	0.65*** (0.09)	0.85*** (0.08)	-16.57*** (5.84)	-16.68*** (5.98)	-7.05 (5.73)	-6.56 (5.86)
Regional dummy variables	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
N	289	289	287	287	287	287
R ² _{adj}	0.771	0.765	0.812	0.802	0.852	0.845

Comment: OLS regression, unstandardized b-coefficients, standard errors in parentheses.

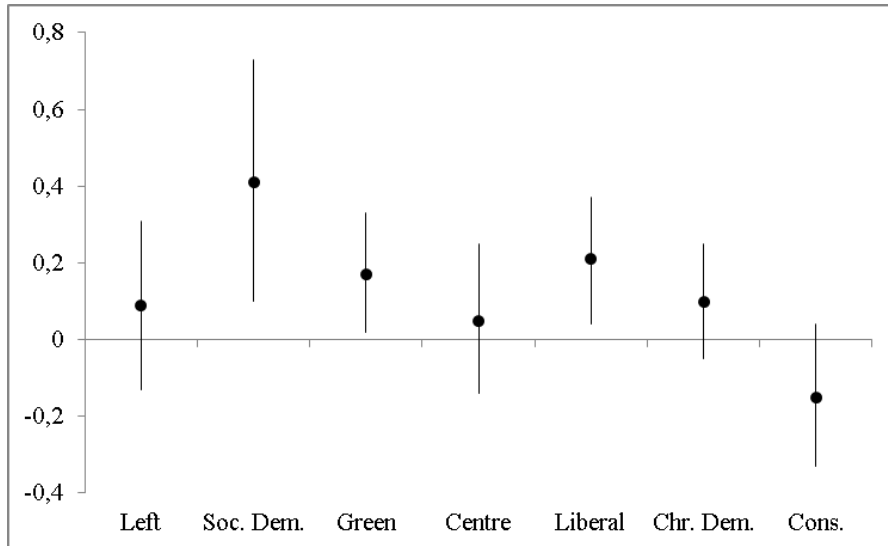
Table 3
Effect of toughness among the left and right mainstream parties.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Left toughness	0.55***	0.54**	0.45**
	(0.21)	(0.22)	(0.21)
Right toughness	0.35*	0.31	0.21
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.20)
Control variables	No	Yes	Yes
Regional dummy variables	No	No	Yes

Comment: OLS regression, unstandardized b-coefficients, standard errors in parentheses.

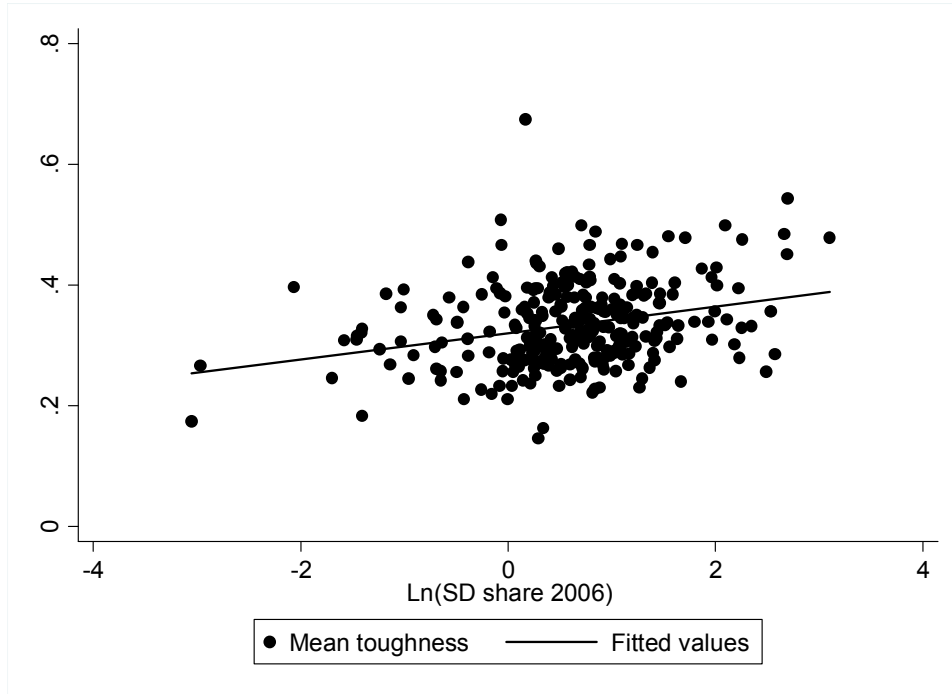
Figure 1.

Effect of toughness of individual parties. OLS-regression, unstandardized b-coefficients, 90 percent confidence intervals.



Comment: N: Left 222, Soc. Dem. 286, Green 183, Centre 269, Liberal 251, Chr. Dem. 239, Cons. 275

Figure 2.
Relationship between electoral success for the Sweden Democrats in 2006 and mean toughness of the mainstream parties in 2008.



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