

# Rhetoric of Crisis The Way Political Parties Talk about Refugees Shapes the Climate of the Debate

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The current debate about the situation of refugees in Germany is an excellent example of how interpretative schemes influence the way issues are perceived. In her initial statements, Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasized that the right of asylum is grounded in human rights and tried to describe the refugee movement as a challenge that can be managed, embodied in the slogan “We can do it.” Criticism was quick to arrive—from the right-wing fringe and from the sister party of Merkel’s Christian Democrats (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU), who called for more restrictive immigration and asylum policies and stricter border protection. These arguments represent two different ways of framing the problem: a universalist one, emphasizing human rights and international treaties, and a nationalist one, primarily highlighting national sovereignty and domestic security.

Social scientists refer to such problem definitions and interpretative schemes as frames. Debates are not only shaped by different positions but also by the way a problem is framed in the first place. A frame defines into which interpretative space or set of problems an issue is assigned, thereby opening up different possible solutions. Which frame is chosen can have a decisive effect on how the discussion evolves and on the policies that follow. A look at the current debate in Germany shows that choosing the term “refugee crisis” (*Flüchtlingskrise*) already constitutes a frame. The term not only contains a description, it also offers an interpretation of the situation. In order to examine how parties help shape the discourse on immigration and integration we have therefore analyzed the frames in which they talk about these issues. In a comparative project, we analyzed the election manifestos of parties in 14 countries and used quantitative textual analysis to identify the frames that parties refer to.

## The intensity of debates differ between country types

To analyze the election manifestos, we used crowd-coding. We uploaded election manifestos from an existing data set (Manifesto Project) to a crowd-coding platform. Through this platform we reached coders in numerous countries and asked them to evaluate for each statement we showed to them whether it addressed issues of immigration and integration. There is strong variation in how intensively parties discuss these issues in their manifestos, both across countries and across individual parties and party families. In the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—traditional settler countries—issues of immigration only play a minor role in party competition, whereas in Denmark, for example, they figure quite prominently in party discourse. Party families strongly emphasizing immigration issues are, unsurprisingly, right-wing populist and radical right parties; whereas regional and agrarian parties are least emphasizing these issues in the manifestos.

After the crowd had identified which statements touched upon the issues of immigration and integration, we were able to assign them to the various frames by connecting them to existing codes from the Manifesto Project. The Manifesto Project has analyzed the content of election manifestos for more than 30 years in order to identify party positions. For our analysis, we distinguished three frame dimensions: an economic, an administrative, and a cultural frame dimen-

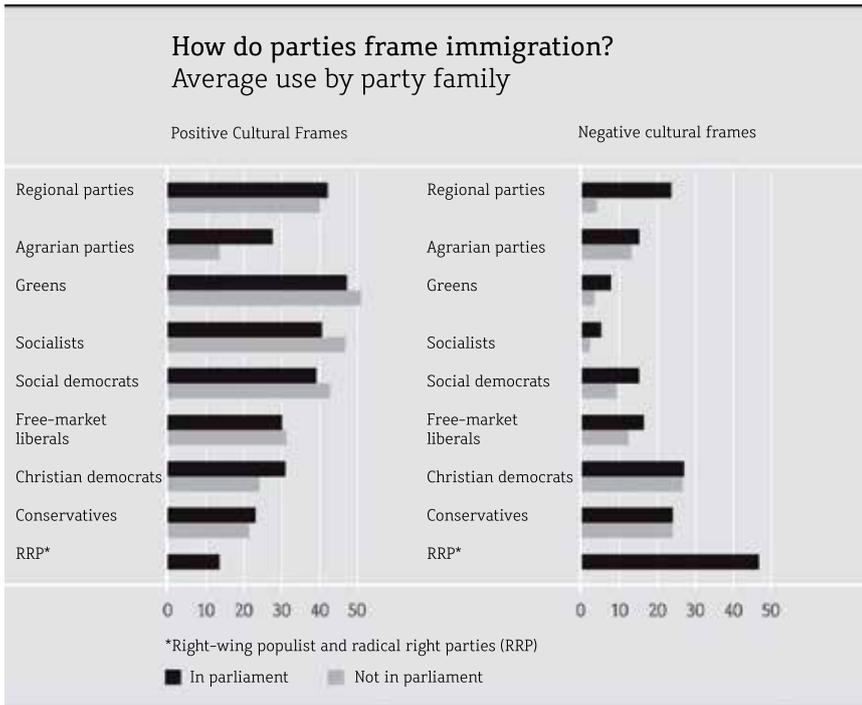
**Summary:** The political discourse on immigration and integration is influenced not only by the various positions that are taken within the discourse, but also by the frames used when discussing the issues involved. An analysis of electoral programs in 14 countries showed that cultural frames are more important than economic or administrative frames. The cultural frames which are used differ across both party-families and countries. Of special importance is whether or not a populist right or a radical right party is present in the parliament.

sion. The economic dimension encompasses statements on the dualism between a free market economy and protectionism as well as on the welfare state. The administrative dimension is concerned with problems of jurisdiction with respect to immigration and integration. This includes issues that also keep surfacing in the current debate, such as: Should the distribution of refugees be decided at the national or at the European level?

But it was the cultural dimension that emerged as the most important one in our analysis. Within the cultural dimension we distinguished five frames. The multiculturalism frame contains statements that support cultural diversity and oppose the idea of a dominant culture, thus running contrary to the statements in the nationalism frame. The frame on universal rights contains statements emphasizing human rights and personal freedoms, as well as human equality, in the context of immigration. Statements in the domestic security frame are primarily relating criminal matters to immigration and integration. Finally, state-



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ments within the internationalism frame refer to the causes of mass migration and are placing the treatment of immigrants in an international context.

Our analysis of election manifestos released between 1998 and 2013 shows that immigration and integration are discussed primarily in cultural terms—not only in the German debate but also in other countries. However, the parties use the individual frames within the cultural dimension in widely different degrees of intensity. Of all the party families we studied, those on the left-wing of the political spectrum—that is, socialists, social democrats, and greens (we only found one communist party, which we considered along with the socialists)—tend to frame issues of immigration and integration in universalist terms such as equal rights, inclusion, and justice, whereas party families on the right-wing tend to put a greater emphasis on domestic security and the importance of national culture.

This is not surprising insofar as these party families, on average, follow their basic programmatic guidelines when it comes to issues of immigration. More interesting findings emerge, however, when comparing countries with notable right-wing populist and radical right parties to countries in which these parties have so far been unsuccessful. Here we see that mainstream parties competing with radical right parties not only change their positions with respect to immigration and integration; they also increasingly adopt nationalist frames and frames of domestic security.

Curiously, this also applies to parties on the left, which, pressured by the competition for votes, begin to make a little less use of universalist frames and a little more use of nationalist ones than left-wing parties not exposed to this kind of competition. This is also evident in the figure, which shows that party families on the left, when competing with right-wing populist and radical right parties, make less use of positive cultural frames and more use of negative cultural frames than parties in the same family that are not facing this kind of competition.

## The role of right-wing parties

What matters in this context is not only whether a radical right party is represented in parliament but also whether that party is powerful and may serve as a potential partner in a coalition or help the governing parties gain a majority in parliament. The vast extent to which frames vary between countries with radical right parties of varying strength can be illustrated by comparing Denmark and Sweden. For that comparison, we supplement our quantitative analysis with a qualitative analysis of the frames used in the election manifestos of the Danish and Swedish parties. Doing so allows for a detailed analysis of the interplay between individual frames—whether they reinforce each other, for example, or cancel each other out. Denmark has long had a right-wing populist party with an established presence in parliament, the Danish People's Party, which supports the current minority government in parliament and hence has a de-facto say in lawmaking. Sweden, by contrast, is considered a very open, immigrant-friendly country. In 2010, however, the right-wing populist Swedish Democrats won seats in the Swedish parliament for the first time—albeit without becoming part of the government or collaborating with the established parties in any other way.

The discourse in the Danish election manifestos is clearly marked by a skeptical view on immigration. As we have shown earlier, the manifestos very often contain negative frames. Our detailed analysis reveals that these negative frames are frequently used to weaken statements made within positive frames. For example, nearly all statements about incoming immigrants are accompanied by qualifications. When discussing the intake of refugees, for instance, the manifestos are quick to add that this is not about “mass integration” but rather about a few “quota refugees.” The emphasis in the statement that foreign workers should not be exploited is accompanied by the discussion that this would otherwise have negative effects for Danish workers (through wage dumping, for example). The only reason to allow for immigration accepted by many parties is when Danish citizens bring in their foreign spouses. In other words, immigration is repeatedly framed in nationalist terms, for instance when high numbers of immigrants are presented as a threat to Danish society.

## Frames: multicultural Vs. nationalist

In the Swedish debate, by contrast, the parties emphasize much more the fundamental right of refugees to receive protection and the human aspect of asylum policy. Likewise, the discussion about learning the language of the host country is held very differently in the two countries. The Swedish election manifestos do stress the need for expanding the range of Swedish language courses to help refugees become acclimatized, but they also call for offering more instruction in their native language (multiculturalism frame). In the Danish debate on language acquisition, by contrast, the focus is not on helping refugees manage their daily lives but rather on making Danish language acquisition a prerequisite for integration (nationalist frame). Interestingly, the Swedish debate features only very few statements that oppose a multicultural society. All statements to that end were found in the 2010 election manifesto of the Swedish Democrats. Obviously, at that time the other parties had not been infected by this view.

Frames not only determine what is defined as a problem, they also contain—albeit only implicitly in many cases—moral judgments. These judgments might



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pre-structure the debate with respect to possible solutions. This becomes very evident in the current use of the term “refugee crisis.” Even though the pure fact that this frame is shared by many parties, might still allow for opposing positions, it does not allow for well-considered, steady actions. Instead the semantics of crisis demands immediate decisions and swiftly presented solutions. As a consequence, alternative courses of action that may take longer to implement or will have medium or long-term effects tend to disappear from the agenda.

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