

Does Accommodation Work? Mainstream Party Strategies and the Success of Radical Right Parties

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This research note investigates how mainstream party strategies affect the success of radical right parties. While several studies have looked at the effect of mainstream party positions on radical right breakthrough, only few have taken into account the most recent wave of radical right success and looked at how these strategies affect more established radical right parties. Following Meguid's (2005) seminal study, we investigate the effect of accommodative strategies on radical right vote shares. We analyze party level data as well as micro level voter transitions between mainstream and radical right parties. We do not find any evidence that accommodative strategies reduce radical right vote shares. If anything, when mainstream parties shift toward more anti-immigrant positions, more voters defect to the radical right. Our findings have important implications for the study of multi-party competition as they challenge what has become a core assumption of this literature: that accommodative strategies reduce niche party support. In addition, they can help inform a current debate about how established parties should respond to the radical right challenge.

The growing success of radical right parties has spurred considerable debate surrounding the causes and consequences of their recent ascent. A core question within the academic as well as the broader public debate concerns the behavior of established mainstream parties and how it affects the electoral fortunes of the radical right. Among politicians and pundits alike, there seems to exist a strong belief that radical right parties have benefitted from mainstream parties' neglect of popular demand for immigration restriction and cultural protectionism. As a consequence, we regularly see appeals for mainstream parties to move their positions toward the radical right especially on the issue of immigration. Political science has equally debated the role that established parties play for radical right success. The by far most influential take on this question has been formulated by Bonnie Meguid (2005, 2008), who argues that niche parties are less successful when established parties chose accommodative strategies, i.e. emphasize the niche parties' most important issue more and move toward their position. For radical right parties this means that they should be less successful when established parties emphasize a more anti-immigrant position.

Considering how influential Meguid's study is in today's academic debate and beyond, two aspects seem striking to us. First, the data analyzed in Meguid's study ends in 2000 and thus long before the recent and persistent wave of radical right success in Europe. Secondly and relatedly, Meguid's argument and analyses are specific to competition between established mainstream contenders and newly emerging niche challengers. Therefore, her contribution mainly speaks about the effectiveness of positional accommodation as a preemptive strategy in competitive configurations of highly asymmetrical valence images. This defies the logic of competition between mainstream parties and fully consolidated radical right parties that is characteristic of most European party systems in the 2000s.

In addition, there exists some work that casts doubt on the negative effect of accommodative strategies on radical right success. The most important argument against this type of mechanism

emphasizes that when established parties adopt positions of the radical right, they legitimize this type of discourse. Increased salience of immigration and a discourse that has shifted toward the radical right, in turn, should strengthen these parties as voters might – in the words of Jean-Marie Le Pen the long-time leader of the French Front National – “simply prefer the original” (Arzheimer & Carter 2006; Dahlström & Sundell 2012). Similarly to Meguid’s study, however, the empirical evidence brought forward in these studies relies on data that ends long before the recent success of the radical right or is limited to single country studies. Van Spanje (2018) is among the only studies that include more recent elections and shows that accommodation only works under the strong condition of an active *cordon sanitaire*.

In this research note, we provide a series of new tests of the effect of accommodative strategies on radical right success in over 150 elections from 17 Western European countries between 1970 and 2017. Our empirical strategy is twofold. We first analyze data at the party level and test the effect of Meguid’s (2005, 2008) original categories of mainstream party behavior on the success of the radical right. We then move on and apply more flexible continuous measures and a number of alternative model specifications. In none of these analyses do we find that accommodative strategies significantly reduce support for the radical right. In a second step, we make use of a newly compiled collection of post-election surveys from the CSES, the European Voter Project, and a large number of national election surveys to test the effect of mainstream parties’ accommodative strategies on voter transitions between mainstream and radical right parties. Analyzing voter reactions to the strategies of 228 mainstream parties across 70 West European elections, we find that radical right parties are significantly more likely to win voters from mainstream parties that pursue accommodative strategies.

Our research note thus contributes to a growing literature that investigates the role of supply side factors for the success of niche parties. It empirically challenges what has become one of the main assumptions in this strand of literature – that accommodation reduces support for niche

parties and especially the radical right. The implications of our study, however, go beyond academia and challenge the widely held view in today's political debate that the adoption of more authoritarian-nationalist and anti-immigrant positions by mainstream parties can curb the success of the radical right. In contrast, we find that these strategies might actually help to further strengthen the radical right.

Theory

Research on the determinants of radical right success largely contends that demand side factors such as socio-economic positions and public preferences are not enough to explain cross-sectional and inter-temporal variation in radical right vote shares (Norris 2005; Rydgren 2007; Kitschelt 2007; Golder 2016). Supply side factors play a crucial role and ever since Kitschelt's (1995) seminal work on the question, positions of mainstream parties feature prominently when researchers try to explain the varying success of radical right parties. In their strong rejection of immigration and appraisal of nationalism, radical right parties have provided a relatively unique position on the increasingly politicized second dimension of political competition. Following the spatial conception of party competition, established parties should potentially be able to crowd out new competitors by shifting toward their positions (Downs 1957: 131). For radical right parties, this means that mainstream parties should be able to reduce their success by shifting toward a more anti-immigrant position.

This question has indeed concerned a considerable amount of research on the radical right (Kitschelt & McGann 1995; van der Brug et al. 2005; Arzheimer & Carter 2006; Abedi 2002; Lubbers et al. 2002; Arzheimer 2009; Spies & Franzmann 2011). The by far most influential approach for studying and explaining the relationship between mainstream party strategies and radical right success has been formulated by Bonnie Meguid (2005, 2008). Meguid investigates

radical right success as part of the larger phenomenon of competition between mainstream and niche parties. Niche parties are parties that campaign largely on a single non-economic issue, such as green parties on the environment and radical right parties on immigration. Facing a niche party challenger, mainstream parties have three strategic responses at their disposal: dismissive, accommodative and adversarial strategies. Mainstream parties apply a dismissive strategy when they simply ignore the niche party's core issue. Accommodative and adversarial strategies both entail an increase in issue emphasis. However, when applying an adversarial strategy mainstream parties take a position opposite of the niche party, while accommodative strategies include a move toward the niche party position. For mainstream party reactions vis-à-vis radical right parties, accommodative strategies thus mean that mainstream parties take a more anti-immigrant position while adversarial strategies lead to more pro-immigrant positions. Although Meguid presents mixed results regarding the impact of accommodative strategies on electoral support for the radical right (2008: 58, 65), it has been very influential in shaping how academics think about competition between mainstream and niche parties and the radical right in particular. The findings are also in line with an understanding that is regularly visible in the public debate that the success of radical right parties is largely a result of mainstream parties' failure to provide a supply for the popular demand in the radical right's core issue positions. Once mainstream parties fill or reclaim the presumed representational gap on which radical right parties thrive, so the argument goes, public support for radical right parties will decrease. Despite its important contribution to the study of niche party success and party competition more generally, we see two main reasons for why it seems desirable to re-evaluate the effect of mainstream party strategies on the success of the radical right. First, there is notable scholarly disagreement about the efficacy of radical right accommodation and the conditions under which it may yield the desired electoral effects. Meguid (2008: 51) argues that the benefits of accommodative strategies are limited to a small window of opportunity, namely when

mainstream parties preemptively exploit their valence advantage vis-à-vis newly emerging radical right parties. Following the radical right's consolidation and strive for issue ownership, in contrast, accommodative strategies should rather strengthen than weaken radical right parties. Arguments and findings of several other studies support this notion. The core idea in this line of argumentation is that when mainstream parties adopt the positions and rhetoric of the radical right, they normalize and legitimize these positions (Arzheimer & Carter 2006; Dahlström & Sundell 2012; Bale 2003; Wodak 2015). This, in turn, should strengthen the radical right.

In order to test the effect of accommodative strategies on the success of the radical right under the conditions of present-day party system configurations, one should thus extend the focus of inquiry to contexts with established and consolidated radical right competitors. Yet, most comparative studies, like Meguid (2005, 2008), use data that ends in the early 2000s, and do thus not include the most recent and persistent wave of radical right success in Western Europe during the past 15 years. Van Spanje's (2018) study is among the very few studies on this question that includes more data points from the 2000s. However, the study also includes many observations from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, a period during which immigration was essentially a non-issue in Western European party systems (Dancygier and Margalit, forthcoming) and which predates the emergence and consolidation of the third wave of radical right parties (e.g. Mudde 2013). For these reasons, we regard it as essential to re-evaluate the relationship between mainstream party strategies and radical right success in Western Europe between the 1970s and today.

Analyses

We present a series of empirical tests to scrutinize how positional accommodation of radical right core issues by mainstream parties affects the electoral performance of radical right parties.

Starting with the approach presented in Meguid (2005, 2008), we test whether combinations of the strategies pursued by the major parties of the center-right and center-left condition the electoral fortunes of the radical right. Our analyses cover over 150 elections from 17 West European countries between 1970 and 2017. Using a multitude of both discrete and continuous conceptualizations of mainstream party strategies, we try to recover a negative effect of accommodative strategies on radical right success – and fail. To gain further insight, we then turn to micro-level data. Using a newly compiled data set covering 70 elections across 13 West European polities between 1987 and 2017, we study voter migration between mainstream and radical right parties in consecutive elections. Again, we find no evidence that accommodating radical right issue positions sways voters in mainstream parties’ favor – to the contrary, radical right parties are more likely to switch to the radical right when mainstream parties adopt anti-immigration positions. Extensive robustness checks corroborate the credibility of our findings. In particular, all findings hold when we subset our analyses to electoral contexts following the initial breakthrough of the radical right in a given country. This shows that positional accommodation is fruitless in the best case, and detrimental in the worst case, when used against consolidated radical right parties.

Macro-Level Evidence

Meguid (2008) employs OLS with panel-corrected standard errors to investigate the impact of mainstream parties’ strategies on niche parties’ electoral performances with the following formula:

$$\begin{aligned}
 RRP\ Vote_t = & \beta_0 \\
 & + \beta_1 RRP\ Vote_{t-1} \\
 & + \beta_2 Mainstream\ party\ strategy_t \\
 & + \beta_3 GDP\ per\ capita_t \\
 & + \beta_4 Unemployment\ rate_t
 \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
& + \beta_5 \text{Share of foreign citizens}_t \\
& + \beta_6 \text{Unemployment Rate}_t * \text{Share of foreign citizens}_t \\
& + \nu + \varepsilon_t,
\end{aligned}$$

where ν denotes country fixed effects and ε describes the error term. We extend her study by analyzing radical right vote shares between 1970 and 2017 in all West European countries, taking into account all elections in which a radical right party competed.¹

Table 1: Mainstream party strategies in response to niche party success (Meguid 2005, 2008)

Mainstream left/ Mainstream right	Adversarial	Dismissive	Accommodative
Adversarial	AD-AD	DI-AD	AC-AD
Dismissive		DI-DI	AC-DI
Accommodative			AC-AC

In the regression equation, β_2 describes the strategic responses of the two major mainstream parties in a given party system. Each party may unilaterally pursue one of three strategies: adversarial, dismissive, or accommodative. Combining the strategies of mainstream right and mainstream left parties yields a set of six different strategic responses (Table 1). To operationalize these strategies, we use data provided by the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al.

¹Following Meguid, we treat Belgium's Flemish and Walloon regions as separate polities. The selection of radical right parties matches that of other studies related studies (e.g. Meguid 2008; van Spanje 2010; Han 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). The selection of mainstream parties follows Meguid (2008): We choose those mainstream left and mainstream right parties with the highest mean vote share since 1970. See Tables A1 and A2 (Appendix) for details. Lastly, we consider all elections in which a radical right party gained at least .1% of the national vote.

Our models include all covariates used by Meguid (2008). See Tables A3 and A4 (Appendix) for summary statistics. Unlike the original study, we do not use panel-corrected standard errors. As we are dealing with unbalanced quasi-panel data, we cluster standard errors by country instead.

2018). The items *National Way of Life: Negative* (per602) and *Multiculturalism: Positive* (per607) identify pro-immigration issue positions, whereas *National Way of Life: Positive* (per601) and *Multiculturalism: Negative* (per608) capture anti-immigration stances. We combine these items in the form of logit-transformed scales (Lowe et al. 2011). To transform the resulting issue positions into party strategies, we first compute the distance between parties' positions and the center of gravity on these issues in their competitive environment, i.e., the average position in their party system weighted by parties' vote shares.² Whether a party employs an adversarial, dismissive, or accommodative strategy thus depends on its non-centrism on the radical right's core issue domain. We define the cut points for accommodative and adversarial strategies as being positioned at least half a standard deviation away from the ideological center of gravity, treating centrist positions in between as dismissive.³

Figure 1 shows the main results of the replication study. The plot depicts the predicted values of radical right vote shares across different mainstream party strategies.⁴ Unlike Meguid (2005, 2008), we find no conclusive evidence for the effectiveness of accommodative strategies in curtailing the electoral support for the radical right. In fact, the predicted radical right vote shares are rather evenly distributed, and statistically indistinguishable from one another, across the six categories.

² To avoid endogeneity problems, we exclude radical right parties during these calculations.

³ While Meguid states that mainstream party strategies are a combination of their position on the conflict dimension and the attention they pay to it, we restrict our measure to mainstream parties' positions toward immigration. Otherwise, we would be unable to identify whether adversarial/accommodative strategies indeed go back to positional adjustments rather than mere salience fluctuations. However, the regression models give similar results if we use mainstream parties' salience scores and positions to construct the categorical response variable.

⁴ For regression tables of our analyses and extensive robustness checks, please consult Table A5-A7 and A9 (Appendix).

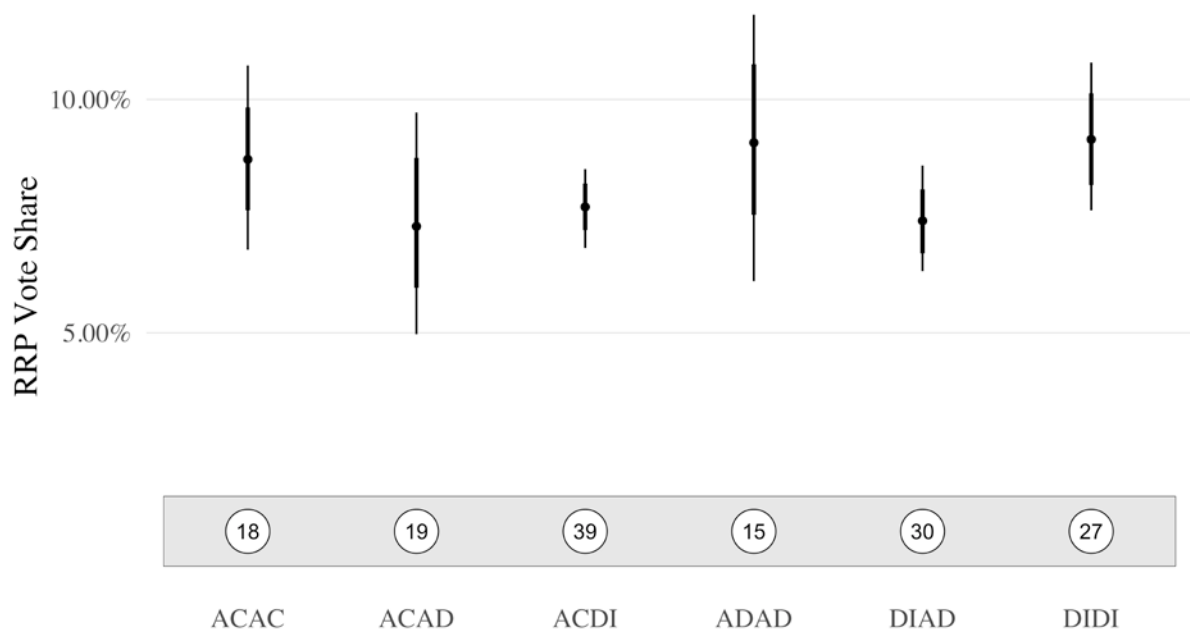


Figure 1: Predicted values of RRP vote share across varying mainstream party strategies

Note: Predicted values with 95% (thin error bars) and 83.3% confidence intervals (thick error bars). Numbers in circles denote the frequency of each strategy.

We subject these findings to numerous robustness checks, testing alternative measures of parties' immigration position on the one hand, including a broader multi-item variant presented in Meguid (2008) and a narrower single-item variant used in Abou-Chadi (2016), and on the other hand various widths of the cut point interval for distinguishing adversarial, dismissive, and accommodative strategies.⁵ Although some of these alternative specifications alter the mapping of our observations across the six categories substantially, we find little evidence that the pursuit of accommodative strategies electorally advantages the radical right.

Constructing a categorical variable for analyzing the impact of mainstream party strategies on radical right vote share necessarily relies on the difficult and somewhat arbitrary decision where

⁵ See Figures A1 and A2 (Appendix).

to set the cut points for classification. The approach is also not sensitive to positional shifts within categories and may furthermore mask positional changes due to its reliance on parties' relative positioning to the average party system position, which may also change over time. For these reasons, we conduct an additional test with explicit focus on the short-term electoral changes in response to dynamic mainstream party repositioning. Toward that end, we run first difference models with country-clustered standard errors. We use continuous measures of mainstream right and left policy shifts on the immigration domain and interact them in order to assess the effect of their interplay. This allows us to assess whether mainstream parties' adoption of more restrictive immigration positions, relative to their previously held positions, decreases the electoral support for the radical right.

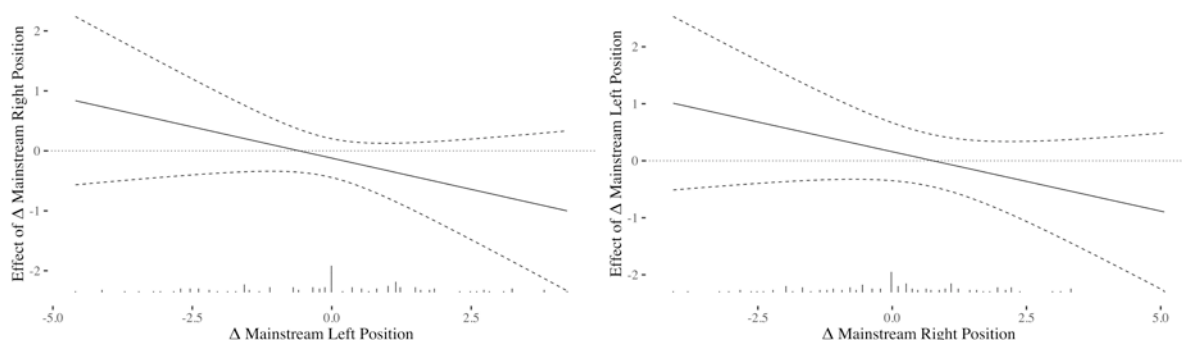


Figure 2: Marginal effects plot with 95% confidence bands - Effect of mainstream right (left) position shift on RRP vote share conditional on mainstream left (right) position shift

Figure 2 shows the corresponding marginal effects plots. Overall, the plots corroborate the null finding from the preceding analysis. Changes in mainstream party strategies do not result in significant changes in radical right vote shares. This holds true for parties of both the mainstream right and the mainstream left, irrespective of the strategic response pursued by their respective competitor.⁶ The marginal effects are similar to those presented if we relax the

⁶ For further intuition, we present predicted values of changes in radical right vote shares as a joint function of mainstream right and mainstream left strategies in Table A8 (Appendix).

linearity assumption of the interaction effect and apply a kernel estimator as proposed by Hainmueller et al. (2019).⁷ These results also persist under alternative model specifications such as fixed or random effects. They are also robust to the omission of the lagged dependent variable or the interaction term as well as to the inclusion of elections without radical right challengers. The effects remain substantially similar if we only consider elections with successful radical right parties.⁸ Lastly, the findings also hold when using the aforementioned alternative variants of parties' immigration positions.⁹

Micro-Level Evidence

None of our extensive tests at the election-level lends support to the notion that positional accommodation curtails radical right success. Yet, the bird's-eye view on aggregate election results might mask important electoral dynamics at the micro-level. For instance, election-level findings cannot isolate voter reactions to the strategic positioning of a given party. Furthermore, voter transfers between mainstream and radical right parties may in fact intensify in response to mainstream party accommodation of the radical right but cancel out in aggregation.

Hence, for further scrutiny of the electoral consequences of radical right accommodation, we study vote switching between mainstream and radical right parties in consecutive elections. For this, we make use of a newly compiled data set that marries voting data from rounds 2-4 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (2015a, 2015b, 2017), the European Voter Project (Thomassen 2005), and nearly 30 national election studies with the aforementioned data on

⁷ See Figure A3 in the Appendix.

⁸ Here, we considered those cases in which a radical right challenger managed to gain seats in the national legislature in at least two consecutive elections.

⁹ For details, see Tables A7 and A9 (Appendix).

mainstream party strategies from the Manifesto Project.¹⁰ Focusing on dyadic competition between radical right parties and all significant mainstream parties in their respective party systems, we analyze 228 instances of voter migration between mainstream and radical right parties across 70 elections from 13 West European polities.¹¹

We generate a stacked data matrix, which pairs individual respondents with each of the mainstream parties competing in the corresponding electoral context (for a similar approach, see Hartevelt et al. 2017). Using recall questions on respondents' voting behavior in the current and previous general elections, we record for each voter-party dyad if voters switch from the respective mainstream party to the radical right, from the radical right to the respective mainstream party, or neither. Using this switching indicator as the outcome variable, we then specify hierarchical regressions for each losses, gains, and net transfers. Random intercepts at the party-election level capture nominal percentages of the radical right's gross losses to, gross gains from, and net transfers with a given mainstream party. We explain this variation in aggregate dyadic losses, gains, and net transfers as a function of mainstream parties' positional shifts on the immigration issue, controlling for their past positions as well as the salience they attribute to the issue (past levels and changes). Additionally, we control for radical right and mainstream party vote shares in the previous election, mainstream parties' government status in the previous legislative cycle (in opposition/ in government/ in government with the radical right), and the systemic salience of the immigration issue. Random intercepts at the election level account for the dependence among mainstream parties competing in the same election. We employ a weighting scheme that simultaneously adjusts for discrepancies in individual

¹⁰ The mapping of voting data to CMP party data in CSES rounds 2 and 3 was greatly facilitated by the MARPOR Party-Voter Data Set (Lehmann and Schultze 2012).

¹¹ We include all parties of the social democratic, christian democratic, conservative and liberal party families which hold at least 5% of seats in their national legislature. An overview of the parties and electoral contexts under investigation can be found in Table A10 in the Appendix, which also reports the source surveys for each electoral context.

sampling or poststratification weights within election clusters and assigns equal weights across election clusters.

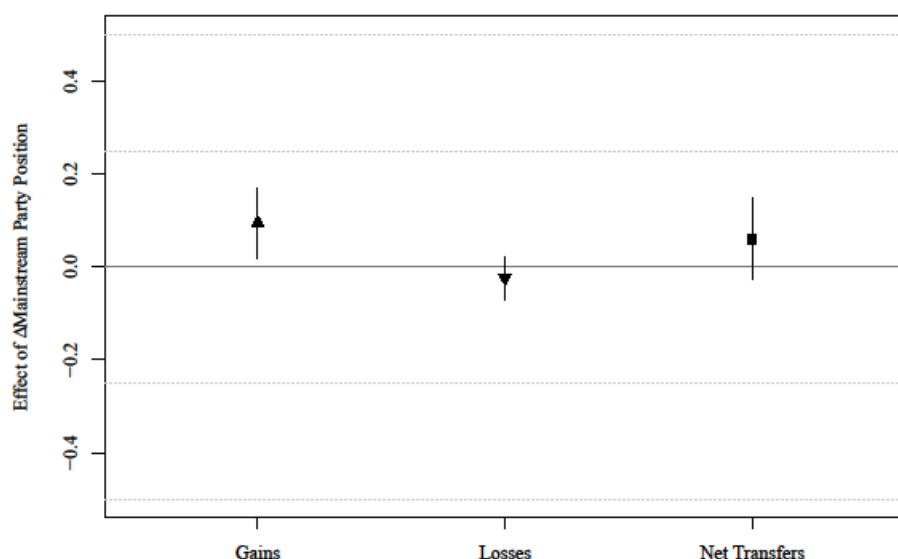


Figure 3: Marginal effects of mainstream party shifts on radical right gains, losses, and net transfers (with 95% confidence intervals)

Figure 3 shows the results of our inquiry. It reports the average marginal effect of a given mainstream party’s unit shift toward a more restrictive position on immigration on the percentage points of voters that radical right parties win from and lose to it, as well as the net balance of this trade. The estimates show that accommodative policy shifts by mainstream parties do more good than harm to the radical right: While rightward shifts increase both gains *and* losses of radical right parties, their gains clearly outweigh their losses. Even though the overall net effect is statistically indistinguishable from zero, the findings show that rightward shifts on immigration result in significantly greater gains for radical right parties and suggest that mainstream parties that move toward the radical right’s core issue positions tend to lose more voters to the radical right than they win from it. These findings remain robust when the analysis is ran on a subsample of electoral contexts in which radical right parties with sustained

parliamentary presence competed. They also hold under the alternative measures of parties' immigration position discussed above.¹²

Conclusion

In this research note, we re-investigate one of the core questions within the research on radical right success: Do accommodative strategies help to weaken radical right parties electorally? Our analyses do not provide any evidence that adopting more anti-immigrant positions curtails the radical right's electoral success. Combining macro and micro level evidence, we can demonstrate that this does not mean that voters are not responsive to party positions at all. On the contrary, accommodative strategies by mainstream parties increase voter transitions between mainstream and radical right parties. While some of these transitions cancel each other out in aggregation, the radical right, if anything, is the net beneficiary of this exchange.

Our findings have important implications for the literature on party competition and radical right parties in particular. Following Meguid's (2005, 2008) seminal work, the idea that accommodation helps to reduce niche party success, has become a working assumption in many other studies. This is especially the case in research on mainstream party reactions to niche party success. However, the findings of our research note open up a puzzle here. While it is well-documented that mainstream parties react to radical right success by shifting toward their policy position (van Spanje 2010; Han 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018), these strategies do not seem to pay-off electorally in weakening the radical right. Future work focusing on intra-party dynamics and competition between mainstream parties should explore this discrepancy further.

¹² The corresponding evidence is reported in Figures A4-A8 in the Appendix. Table A12 shows the regression estimates for Figure 3 in tabular form. Summary statistics for all variables of the micro-level study are reported in Table A11.

In addition, our research note can inform the current broader debate about the success of radical right parties in Europe. Commentators and politicians alike, often seem to be convinced that a) the success of the radical right is a consequence of too centrist positions of mainstream parties and that b) more anti-immigrant positions especially from mainstream right parties should help to weaken the radical right again. Our study provides support for neither of these claims. On the contrary, we find that, if anything, accommodative strategies of mainstream parties strengthen the radical right. In addition, when mainstream parties pick up radical right issues, they run the risk of legitimizing and normalizing radical right discourse and strengthening them in the long run.

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