

Alizade, Jeyhun

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ARTICLE

The electoral politics of immigration and crime

Jeyhun Alizade 

Berlin Social Science Center,
Reichpietschufer, Berlin, Germany

Correspondence

Jeyhun Alizade, Berlin Social Science Center,
Reichpietschufer 50, 10785, Berlin, Germany.
Email: jeyhun.alizade@wzb.eu

Abstract

Concern that immigration worsens crime problems is prevalent across Western publics. How does it shape electoral politics? Prior research asserted a growing left–right divide in immigration attitudes and voting behavior due to educational realignment. In contrast, I argue that leftist voters are more conservative on immigrant crime than leftist parties, which can drive highly educated progressives (so-called “cosmopolitans”) to right-wing parties. I demonstrate this *voter–party mismatch* using survey data from 14 Western European countries linked with expert ratings of party positions. A panel survey from Germany further shows that concern about immigrant crime increases vote intention for the center right among voters of the Greens—the party of leftist cosmopolitans. A conjoint experiment among German voters replicates this defection effect and shows that it persists even if the center right stigmatizes immigrants or adopts conservative sociocultural issue positions. Repercussions of immigration can in fact drive leftist cosmopolitans to the right.

Immigration is one of the key factors shaping European politics in the last decades. A particular concern among voters is that it worsens crime problems. These worries are often triggered by salient incidents. Recent examples include the escalating violence in Swedish cities and suburbs between rivaling gangs led by second-generation immigrants (Milne, 2023); or the stabbing of four individuals, including three children, by an immigrant in Dublin, which triggered violent riots by a far-right mob (Specia, 2023). Responding to concern among the public, political elites—especially those on the right—address the issue of immigrant crime in their electoral appeals to voters. This is not just the case for radical-right parties (Hestermann & Hoven, 2020; Smith, 2010); center-right elites also frequently connect immigration to crime problems (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). For example, French president Nicolas Sarkozy promised to “clean out”

immigrant neighborhoods with high crime rates (Rosenthal, 2007). More recently, a minister of Emmanuel Macron warned about France “turning savage” due to supposedly rising crime among immigrants and their descendants (Onishi & Méheut, 2020). In Germany as well, the conservative Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) has used the topic of immigrant crime to mobilize electoral support, for example during the 2021 federal election campaign (Heinrich, 2021).

Despite the immigration–crime issue’s prominence in public opinion and the electoral sphere, there have been comparatively few studies on its political consequences. Most of the literature on the electoral implications of immigration focuses on how (perceptions of) its cultural and economic consequences shape voting behavior and electoral outcomes (Dancygier & Donnelly, 2013; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020;

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The Cornell Center for Social Sciences verified that the data and replication code submitted to the AJPS Dataverse replicates the numerical results reported in the main text of this article.

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Ivarsflaten, 2008; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). This literature is also primarily interested in explaining how immigration, including (concern about) immigrant crime, affects the electoral fortunes of radical-right parties (Burscher et al., 2015; Chapin, 1997; Dinas & Spanje, 2011; Dustmann et al., 2019; Dinas et al., 2019; Smith, 2010).¹ As such, this line of research is mainly concerned with the “typical” anti-immigrant voter, who tends to be authoritarian, has relatively low educational attainment, and resides in a small town or in a rural area (Cramer, 2016; Donovan, 2019; Lubbers et al., 2002; Ziblatt et al., 2024). In contrast, highly educated progressive voters concentrating in cities—so-called “cosmopolitans”—are often perceived as staunch supporters of immigration and the left (Abou-Chadi & Hix, 2021; Gethin et al., 2022; Kitschelt, 1988; Maxwell, 2019; Rodden, 2019; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020).

I challenge this view in this paper. Examining the electoral politics of immigration and crime in Western Europe, I argue that concern about immigrant crime is more widespread within the electorate than cultural and economic immigration threat and even extends to progressive voters, including highly educated, urban cosmopolitans. Concern about immigrant crime among left-wing voters can be traced to general characteristics of crime, which activates basic physical safety concern, overriding differences in ideology, core values, and socioeconomic status that tend to shape cultural and economic threat perceptions. In addition, characteristics of left-wing voters, specifically their geographic clustering in urban areas, expose and sensitize them to crime. Since left-wing parties, particularly Green and other left-libertarian parties, struggle to respond to their voters’ worries about immigrant crime for ideological and organizational reasons, I further argue that there exists a *voter-party mismatch* on immigration and crime that can drive leftist cosmopolitans to right-wing parties, especially the center right, which does not face comparable constraints in problematizing immigrants as a safety threat.

Using data from round seven of the European Social Survey (ESS; 2016), I first confirm that in Western Europe, partisan differences in immigration threat are largest on the cultural dimension and smallest on crime. Moreover, I show that worries about crime extend to highly educated, urban voters of the left. Linking the ESS data to expert ratings of party positions from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Polk et al., 2017), I also present empirical support for the theorized voter-party mismatch on immigration and crime. Next, I draw on a four-wave panel survey (2016–2017) tapping into voters’ views about

refugees in Germany to demonstrate the electoral consequences of the mismatch. More specifically, I show that among voters of the Greens—the political home of leftist cosmopolitans—concern about immigrant crime increases vote intention for the conservative CDU/CSU by almost five percentage points. Exploring the mechanism, I present evidence consistent with the voter-party mismatch: Worries about immigrant crime are positively correlated with the salience of crime as a vote-determining issue and shift vote choice toward a party that individuals perceive to better represent their views on crime. In a final step, I confirm the progressive defection to the center right using a preregistered candidate-choice conjoint experiment, fielded in 2023 on a sample of 6,000 German respondents (Alizade, 2024). Varying party positions on the deportation of criminal foreigners, I demonstrate that voters of the Green party and the Social Democrats are nine percentage points more likely to elect a CDU/CSU candidate if the latter is more restrictive on immigrant crime than their own party’s candidate. The experiment also shows that safety threat among progressives trumps potential concerns about stigmatizing immigrants or voting for candidates with socially conservative positions, as the defection of leftist voters to the center right is not conditioned by the latter’s framing of immigrant crime as being due to cultural or due to socioeconomic factors or by its position on a salient sociocultural issue, namely adoption rights for same-sex couples.

This paper provides novel theoretical and empirical insights on how immigration impacts electoral politics in advanced democracies. Scholarship suggests that an educational cleavage has emerged in countries that transitioned from industrial to knowledge societies, with the left becoming the home of highly educated cosmopolitans (Gethin et al., 2022; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2023; Rodden, 2019; Stubager, 2010; Van der Waal et al., 2007). The rise of Green and other left-libertarian parties, whose support base most clearly falls under this category (Abou-Chadi & Hix, 2021; Dolezal, 2010), plays a key role in this trend. Since educational attainment is an important predictor of pro-immigration attitudes (Cavaille & Marshall, 2019; Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020), the educational cleavage is also a divide over immigration. The results in this paper complicate the picture by showing that when different dimensions of immigration’s consequences are considered, there is substantial variation in the divide between left-wing and right-wing voters, and that particularly among leftist cosmopolitans, concern about immigration varies considerably across dimensions, being low on culture and the economy and high on crime. This constellation of attitudes has electoral consequences: I show that the immigration-crime linkage has the potential to shift voters from the left to the right. As such, my findings more broadly point to the limits of

¹ Another strand of the literature focuses on the effect of immigrant crime on anti-immigrant hate crimes (Frey, 2020; Riaz, Bischof, and Wagner, 2024). In addition, Fitzgerald et al. (2012) study the attitudinal link between concern about crime and concern about immigration.

the educational cleavage in the electoral politics of advanced democracies.

This research also speaks to the literature on mainstream party accommodation of the radical right (Meguid, 2005), which tends to conclude that centrist parties should not move to the right on the immigration issue because voters skeptical of immigration prefer to vote for the “original” anti-immigrant party—the radical right—and/or because moderate voters defect to parties further on the left (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020; Chou et al., 2021; Dahlström & Sundell, 2012; Krause et al., 2023).² In contrast, the findings in this paper imply that adopting more restrictive positions on immigration can be electorally beneficial for centrist parties. I come to this conclusion by differentiating between different dimensions of immigration threat, which most of the prior research has not done, and showing that public opinion is more uniformly negative on immigrant crime. As a result, when security threat dominates the discourse on immigration, centrist parties should be less concerned about defection to the left but risk bleeding voters to parties further on the right if they do not adopt more restrictive positions on the immigration–crime issue. However, in practice, centrist parties might struggle to move to the right only on one dimension of immigration without creating the perception that they have become more anti-immigration overall, which might deter voters who have an aversion to crime but value multiculturalism.

The findings of this paper also carry important implications for our understanding of center-right politics (Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019; Gidron, 2022; Odmalm & Bale, 2015). Scholarship highlights the severe electoral trade-offs center-right parties face, as they compete with both the left and the radical right for votes and risk alienating their conservative base by moving to the left (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Chou et al., 2021; Meguid, 2005). The results of this paper imply that the issue of immigrant crime may turn out to be particularly useful for center-right parties from an electoral perspective since the electoral trade-offs associated with it are more muted. The muted trade-offs result from a combination of widespread concern about immigrant crime in the electorate, which extends to all partisan camps, and left-wing parties’ strategic bind when it comes to this issue. Therefore, the immigration–crime issue nexus may allow the center right to make inroads among progressive voters without alienating its conservative base.

Finally, I also contribute to the literature on Green parties’ electoral fortunes across Europe. In this line of work, scholars have primarily focused on the environment as the core issue of Green parties as niche parties

(Abou-Chadi, 2016; Grant & Tilley, 2019; Hilbig & Riaz, 2024; Kitschelt, 1988). By focusing on an issue other than the environment, I show that there exist potential limits to the further electoral rise of Green parties, which, as they attempt to expand their voter base, may need to engage with issues that may be uncomfortable for them from an ideological standpoint and have the potential to create internal rifts.

THEORY

Immigration threat and partisanship

An important theoretical concept for understanding immigration attitudes is immigration threat: the perceived threat posed by immigrants to natives (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Homola, 2021; Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012; Sides & Citrin, 2007; Sniderman et al., 2004). In the literature, different types of immigration threat are considered, most prominently economic, cultural, and safety threat. *Economic* threat (Dancygier & Donnelly, 2013; Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2010; Pardos-Prado & Xena, 2019) is conceptualized either based on realistic conflict theory (Hardin, 1997), assuming that material interest and competition over scarce resources cause outgroup hostility in the form of anti-immigrant attitudes. Alternatively, economic immigration threat can stem from sociotropic views about immigrants’ deleterious effect on the national economy or the welfare state.

Cultural threat of immigration is usually conceptualized based on social identity theory. In this framework, an individual’s sense of self originates from self-categorization and comparison to others (Tajfel, 1982). This, in turn, can produce prejudice and hostility against outgroups, who individuals want to feel superior to. In the context of immigration, one common manifestation of cultural threat is fear that immigrants will undermine a national identity or culture, resulting in calls for the assimilation of immigrants into this culture. High levels of ethnocentrism predict cultural immigration threat (Kinder & Kam, 2010; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020).

A third type of threat that is comparatively less prominent in the literature is the perceived *safety* threat that immigrants pose to natives (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007; Ward, 2019). Safety threat encompasses both terrorism (Giani, 2021; Hansen & Dinesen, 2023; Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012) and street crime (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). While I focus on the latter, many of the insights from the research on (Islamist) terrorism carry over to crime (and vice versa). An important difference between crime and terrorism, however, is that the former is more common temporally and spatially and thus has the potential

² But also see Hjorth and Larsen (2022) and Klüver and Spoon (2020), who come to the opposite conclusion.

to more consistently shape individuals' views of immigrants.

While partisanship as a variable has generally been rather neglected in the literature on immigration attitudes (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014), scholarship finds that right-wing voters exhibit higher levels of immigration threat (Homola & Tavits, 2018; Homola, 2021) and hold more ethnocentric and anti-immigrant views (McLaren, 2001; Street, 2014; Weldon, 2006) than left-wing party supporters. The differences between the left and the right have become larger over time (Semyonov et al., 2006) as educational attainment has evolved into an important determinant of left-wing voting in contemporary knowledge societies (Gethin et al., 2022; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2023; Stubager, 2010; Van der Waal et al., 2007). The emergence and rise of Green and radical-right parties, who disproportionately attract voters with high and low education, respectively, played a key role in this development (Abou-Chadi & Hix, 2021; Dolezal, 2010). High educational attainment, particularly university education, is an important predictor of positive immigration attitudes (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020) and there is evidence that this relationship is causal (Cavaille & Marshall, 2019), as education "broadens men's outlooks" (Lipset, 1959, p. 79), facilitates cultural openness, and weakens adherence to traditional values (Hyman & Wright, 1979). In addition, those with higher educational attainment are less likely to compete with most immigrants over scarce resources such as jobs or housing, reducing economic immigration threat perception (Mayda, 2006; Scheve & Slaughter, 2001).

Notwithstanding these patterns, I argue that differentiating between dimensions of immigration threat uncovers important variation in the magnitude of the left-right divide; and this variation can have important electoral implications. Specifically, partisan differences should be largest on cultural immigration concern and smallest on worries about immigrant crime. This prediction is consistent with existing work on safety threat perception. For example, Lahav and Courtemanche (2012) demonstrate for the American context that cultural threat frames polarize conservatives and liberals with respect to support for restrictive immigration policies, but that the ideological gap closes if security threat is framed, as liberals "catch up" to conservatives. Similarly, in a survey experiment with US respondents, Homola (2021) shows that among Democrats, priming immigration increases concern about immigrant violence on the community level but has no effect on cultural or economic threat perception. Research on the effects of terrorist attacks in advanced democracies comes to similar results, showing that these events raised negative immigration attitudes and support for law-and-order positions

primarily among highly educated left-wing individuals who score low on authoritarianism (Brouard et al., 2018; Davis & Silver, 2004; Ferrín et al., 2020; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011; Van de Vyver et al., 2016), exactly those sections of the electorate that previously held positive views on immigrants. In this sense, safety threat may mobilize previously unconcerned sections of the public rather than galvanize those already predisposed to negative immigration attitudes (Sniderman et al., 2004).

What explains high levels of concern about immigration and crime among left-wing voters? A potential explanation relates to general characteristics of crime, which activates basic physical safety concern (Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012) and may thus produce more uniform threat perceptions, overriding ideological differences that stem from higher order needs (Maslow, 1954) or postmaterial values (Inglehart, 1997)—key sources of cultural immigration views. Relatedly, (violent) crime also triggers emotions such as fear of death, anxiety, or uncertainty, which predict politically conservative views (Jost et al., 2003; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009). Finally, crime is also a valence issue (Stokes, 1963; Wenzelburger, 2020) and therefore less subject to positional differences, as there is a broad consensus in the electorate that it should be minimized.

These mechanisms are further amplified by the fact that left-wing voters, particularly those with high educational attainment, cluster in cities (Rodden, 2019; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020), where crime rates tend to be relatively high (Ceccato, 2016; Glaeser & Sacerdote, 1999) and therefore a salient issue (Arnold & Carnes, 2012). Urban dwellers are thus sensitized to crime, as they may be exposed to it directly or indirectly through their networks and the local media (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). In this sense, the dimension of crime may deviate from the well-documented urban-rural divide in immigration attitudes where residents of cities express more positive views on this issue (Maxwell, 2019).

The voter-party mismatch on immigration and crime

In the second step of my argument, I posit that high concern about immigration and crime among left-wing voters is not met with policy positions that respond to these worries among left-wing parties, creating a *voter-party mismatch*. Research on party competition over immigration in Europe finds that left-wing parties tend to speak more positively about this issue than right-wing parties (Alonso & Fonseca, 2012; Dancygier & Margalit, 2020). More importantly, left-wing parties also struggle to put forward law-and-order positions and policies. This has ideological and party-organizational reasons: Parties on the left are

committed to social movements that aim to limit the state's repressive capacity and promote social justice (Aden, 1998, p. 213). In addition, party activists, who are generally more ideologically committed than the party elites (May, 1973), pressure the latter to adhere to these principles, regardless of potential electoral costs. These dilemmas on the left are intensified if crime is group-centric—that is, linked to ethnic or racial minorities (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; Mendelberg, 1997; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002) since in this case, progressive party elites that adopt tough-on-crime policies risk being accused of discrimination and racism.

A recent example that illustrates this is the intraparty conflict among the Social Democrats in Berlin over immigrant-led organized crime. During the 2021 convention of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) Berlin, parts of the basis formally proposed to ban the use of the term “clan-criminality”—used to describe organized crime operations by large family networks of mostly Arab background—from official use, arguing that it stigmatizes immigrants and reproduces racist stereotypes (Rada, 2020). In this case, the then-mayor Giffey (SPD) was able to block the proposal from being voted on, but the episode reveals the deep divisions within the left over the handling of group-centric crime.

Within the left bloc, the emphasis on civil liberties and anti-racism relative to law-and-order should be stronger among the smaller Green and other left-libertarian parties and weaker among the center left. This prediction is based on research showing that niche parties are primarily policy-seeking and have a more powerful and ideologically committed activist base relative to mainstream parties (Kitschelt, 1994), who are more vote-seeking and therefore more responsive to voter preferences (Adams et al., 2006). In addition, niche parties rely on narrower issue appeals than mainstream parties and frequently do not engage with topics that are outside their core issue areas (Bischof, 2017; Bischof & Wagner, 2020; Meguid, 2005).

Electoral consequences of the voter–party mismatch

In contrast to the left, parties on the right do not face similar constraints and are clearly associated with law-and-order positions (Neundorf & Adams, 2018; Smith, 2010; Wenzelburger, 2020). Moreover, as illustrated above, political elites on the right frequently link crime with immigration in their electoral appeals. The voter–party mismatch on immigration and crime among left-wing parties coupled with right-wing parties' law-and-order profile therefore creates the potential for electoral shifts that hurt the left and benefit the right. In this context, perceptions of safety

threat may have a unique potential to cause left-wing party defection, especially from parties with a high share of highly educated cosmopolitan voters who exhibit low cultural and economic concern about immigration. Given general ideological differences, these types of voters are unlikely to turn to radical-right parties, which the literature on immigration and voting behavior usually focuses on (Arzheimer, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2002). Instead, the center right as a type of party that is more acceptable to progressive voters but still has a distinct law-and-order profile (Neundorf & Adams, 2018) might turn out as a beneficiary of the voter–party mismatch on immigration and crime. In the literature on immigration politics, the center right has primarily been considered as a competitor of the radical right (Abou-Chadi et al., 2022; Chou et al., 2021; Pardos-Prado, 2015).³ By directing attention to potential movements from left-wing parties to the center right as a consequence of immigration concern, I thus go beyond existing work.

Under what conditions does concern about immigration and crime lead to voter shifts from the left to the right? Building on research on so-called “left-authoritarians”—another group of cross-pressured voters—issue salience may be a key factor (Lefkofridi et al., 2014). When the general political environment is such that immigrant crime constitutes an important issue in public discourse and the media or specific events—high-profile or smaller and more localized incidents—raise concern about immigrant crime, voters are more likely to prioritize it in their voting decision, which can lead to defection to parties with a law-and-order emphasis.⁴ The specific case I consider in the empirical section—the refugee crisis in Germany (2015–2017)—meets those conditions.

Whether progressives defect to the center right might also depend on the latter's *framing* of the immigration–crime issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The discourse about immigrant crime and violence is often tied to cultural fears about immigration. Prominent terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists have led to stereotyping of immigrants originating from Muslim-majority countries as a security threat (Panagopoulos, 2006). Young men from Muslim countries in particular tend to be perceived both as a safety and as a cultural threat (Ward, 2019). This has become apparent in the wake of the sexual assaults on women during the 2015/2016 NYE in Cologne, which led to debates about the danger of “Muslim patriarchy” for women's safety and gender equality in Europe (Boulila & Carri, 2017). If center-right elites, who compete with both the left and the radical right for votes (Meguid, 2005; Abou-Chadi, 2016), frame

³ For notable exceptions, see Bale (2008) and Bale (2003).

⁴ See Bélanger and Meguid (2008) for a more general theory of how perceived issue salience conditions the effect of issue ownership on voting behavior.

immigrant crime in a culturalized way with the goal of mobilizing right-wing voters receptive of such frames (Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012), they might deter progressive cosmopolitans supportive of multiculturalism. In contrast, a framing that highlights socioeconomic factors in causing crime problems among immigrants is likely more effective among progressives adhering to egalitarian values (Unnever et al., 2008).

Finally, the effectiveness of the center right's law-and-order positions on immigrant crime among leftist cosmopolitans could also depend on its positioning on salient sociocultural issues such as gender equality, LGBT+ rights, and environmental protection. Voters of Green and other left-libertarian parties tend to be particularly supportive of progressive stances on these issues (Dolezal, 2010) and the center right, while usually pursuing a socially conservative program (Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019), has occasionally adopted a more moderate agenda, such as the German CDU has done under Angela Merkel's tenure (Chase & Goldenberg, 2021). Thus, by combining law-and-order positions that respond to progressive voters' worries about immigrant crime with liberal stances on salient sociocultural issues, the center right may maximize its support among progressive cosmopolitans.

EMPIRICS

Cross-national descriptive analysis

In the first step of the empirical analysis, I illustrate the voter-party mismatch across Western Europe using the ESS and the CHES of party positions. Round seven of the ESS (2014) includes an item on respondents' views about immigration's effects on crime rates. To compare concerns about immigration and crime with cultural and economic worries, I examine items on these dimensions:

- *Crime* concern: "Are [country]'s crime problems made worse or better by people coming to live here from other countries?" (0 = better to 10 = worse)
- *Cultural* concern: "Would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?" (0 = enriched to 10 = undermined)
- *Economic* concern: "Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries?" (0 = good to 10 = bad)

I focus on comparing immigration threat perceptions across partisan camps by categorizing respondents based on their (self-reported) most recent national election vote. Parties were classified using the CHES (Bakker et al., 2015) "family" variable, with some

adjustments.⁵ The analysis includes 14 Western European countries.⁶ The final sample consists of 15,249 respondents.

Panel (a) of Figure 1 shows voter concern about immigration by threat dimension and party family. The smallest differences between party families are on crime, and the largest are on culture. For example, Green voters—leftist cosmopolitans who are less concerned about cultural and economic consequences of immigration—are closer to the rest of the electorate on crime. Compared to Green voters, center-right supporters are 79% more concerned about culture and 37% more about the economy, but only 11% more on crime. Similarly, when looking at ideological blocs (panel b), left- and right-wing voters are closest on crime. This supports the idea that economic and cultural threats polarize voters, while safety concerns are more uniformly distributed across party lines.

In the Supporting Information (SI; pp. 2–3), I further differentiate voter concern by educational attainment and urbanity of residence. I find that the relationship between each of these two variables and immigration threat is less pronounced for the crime dimension relative to cultural and economic concern—especially among leftist voters. In sum, supporters of progressive parties, even if they are highly educated or live in a large city—two important determinants of low cultural and economic immigration threat—exhibit relatively high concern about the impact of immigration on crime rates.

To explore how party positioning corresponds to voter concern about immigration, I use the 2014 CHES, which provides expert assessments of party positions. Unlike content analysis of election manifestos or media reports, expert surveys use predefined scales, reducing the risk of conflating ideological stances with the political agenda of a specific country or year (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). Expert judgments are considered valid measures of party positions (Steenbergen & Marks, 2007).

To approximate party positions on immigration and crime, I use the CHES variable measuring a party's stance on the *civil liberties versus law-and-order* scale (1–10, with higher values indicating stronger emphasis on law-and-order). While this approach does not specifically measure party positions on immigrant crime, it remains valid because crime and immigration are closely linked in Western European discourse.⁷ Additionally, research shows that safety

⁵ I collapsed the "conservative" and the "christian democrats" categories into a broader "center-right" category. For consistency, I also relabeled the "socialist" category into "center-left."

⁶ They are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

⁷ To my knowledge, there does not exist a data set that contains such information for all relevant party families.

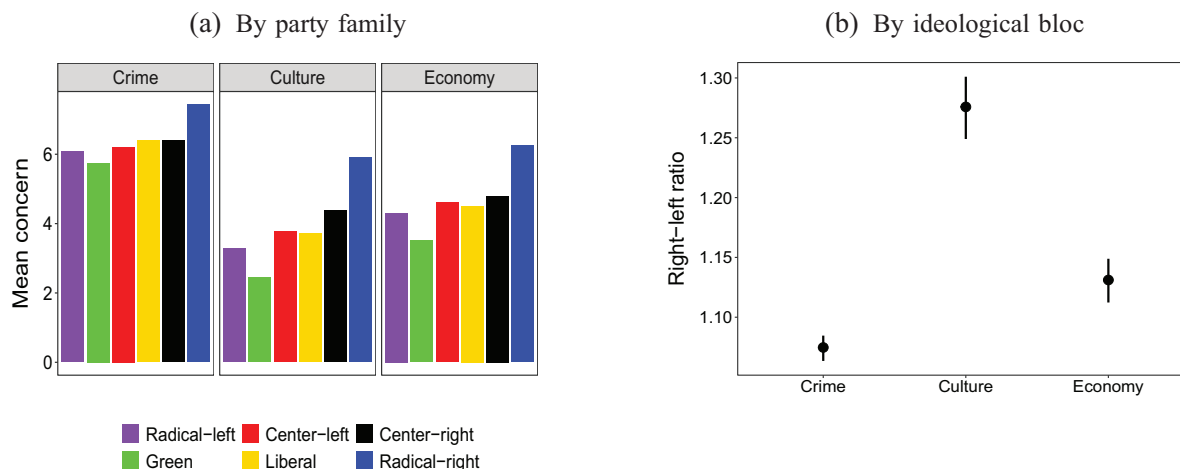


FIGURE 1 Voter concern about immigration (2014). *Note:* Data based on round seven (2014) of the European Social Survey. See text for the item wordings. In the right-hand panel, which shows the ratio of average voter concern between ideological blocs, radical-left, Green, and center-left parties are classified as left and liberal, center-right, and radical-right parties are classified as right; 95% confidence intervals are based on bootstrapping with 1,000 samples.

threat increases support for law-and-order policies more generally (Brouard et al., 2018; Giani, 2021), making this scale a useful proxy for understanding how concern about immigrant crime influences voting behavior.

As with voters, I compare parties' positions on crime to other dimensions of immigration. Specifically, I tap into party positions on immigration and culture by examining the *multiculturalism versus assimilation* scale (range: 1–10, with higher values indicating a stronger emphasis on assimilation). Unfortunately, there is no variable in the CHES that would allow me to examine party positions on the immigration–economy nexus. The sample consists of 83 political parties in the 12 Western European countries that are also part of the ESS sample.⁸

As Figure 2 demonstrates, on the party level, there is clear differentiation between party families (panel a) as well as ideological blocs (panel b) both for culture and crime. Right-wing parties are more assimilationist than left-wing parties and they exhibit a stronger emphasis on law-and-order. Therefore, it appears that voters are well-represented by their parties with respect to their views on the cultural consequences of immigration but that high concern about immigration's effect on crime rates among left-wing voters is not met with pronounced law-and-order positions by left-wing parties.

In the final step of the descriptive analysis, I more formally demonstrate the voter–party mismatch on immigration and crime. Figure 3 displays standardized regression coefficients from ordinary least squares (OLS) models in which the independent variable is a

given ESS-respondent's level of concern about immigration and crime or immigration and culture and the dependent variable is the position of the party the respondent voted for on the associated policy dimension (measured by the CHES). Focusing on the estimates from the bivariate models without country fixed effects (FE), which are equivalent to the correlation between the independent and the dependent variable, a clear difference between crime and culture becomes apparent: The association between voter concern and party positions is more than twice as large on the cultural dimension ($r = .32$) than on crime ($r = .14$).⁹ This gap remains substantial when the analysis is performed within countries (see the estimates from models with country FE).¹⁰ These results thus underline the relative incongruence between the demand and the supply side on the immigration–crime nexus.¹¹

To summarize, a descriptive analysis of survey data and expert ratings of party positions suggests that on immigration and crime, there exists a voter–party mismatch, with left-wing voters having high safety concern but left-wing parties, especially Greens and the radical left, being unresponsive to these worries. A natural question that follows from these patterns is

⁹ I find a comparable gap in the correlation between voter concern and party positions when using the law-and-order ($r = .09$) and multiculturalism ($r = .15$) scales from the Comparative Manifestos Project (Lehmann, Franzmann, Burst, Regel, Riethmüller, Volkens, Weßels, and Zehnter, 2023). This gap does partly close when adding country FE ($r = .13$ for crime and $r = .16$ for multiculturalism). For each party, I used the manifesto that was published in 2014 or the year closest to 2014.

¹⁰ In the SI (p. 4), I show that the gap between the crime and the cultural dimension exists in most of the countries included in the sample.

¹¹ As expected, this result is driven by left-wing parties, for which the correlation coefficient on the crime dimension is close to zero ($r = .007$).

⁸ Norway and Switzerland were not included in the 2014 CHES edition.

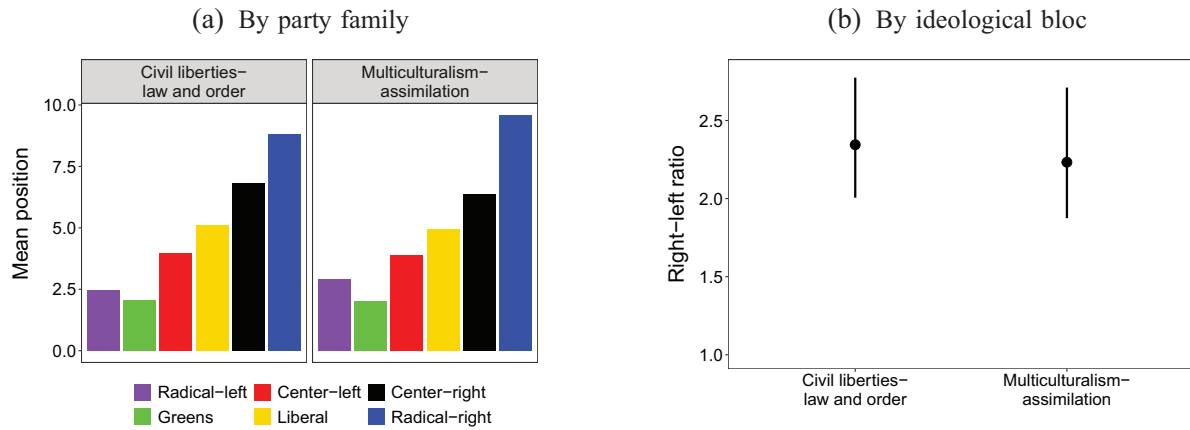


FIGURE 2 Party positions on law-and-order and assimilation (2014). *Note:* Data based on the 2014 edition of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). See text for the description of the variables. In the right-hand panel, which shows the ratio of average party positions between ideological blocs, radical-left, Green, and center-left parties are classified as left and liberal, center-right, and radical-right parties are classified as right; 95% confidence intervals are based on bootstrapping with 1,000 samples.

whether concern about immigration and crime may lead to voter shifts from left-wing parties toward parties on the right, who have a stronger law-and-order profile and could therefore benefit from the voter-party mismatch. To explore this question, I turn to the case of Germany, Europe's most populous electoral democracy.

Panel survey

To study how concern about immigrant crime influences electoral behavior among left-leaning voters, I first draw on a four-wave panel survey of German

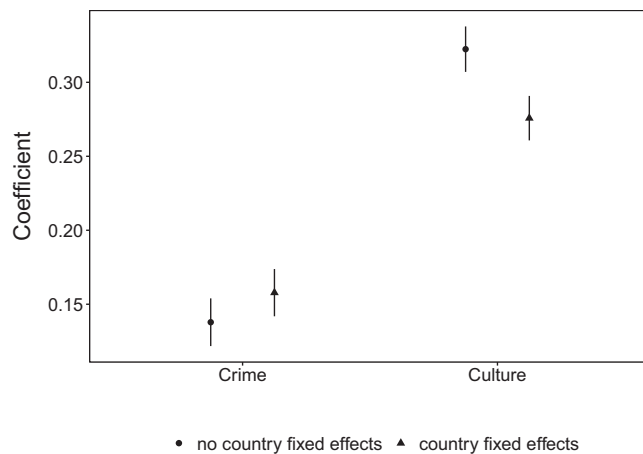


FIGURE 3 Association between voter concern and party position (2014). *Note:* Standardized regression coefficients from ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with 95% confidence intervals. The independent variable, voter concern, is based on the seventh round of the European Social Survey (ESS). The dependent variable, party position, is based on expert ratings in the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). See main text for a description of the variables.

respondents fielded between September 2016 and December 2017 (Dancygier et al., 2024). While generally considered one of the safest countries in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023), debates about public safety regularly capture the attention of political elites, the media, and many citizens in Germany. These discussions often center around the country's large immigrant-origin population, which makes up almost one quarter of the country (Associated Press, 2023). Worries about a worsening of crime problems due to immigration were especially salient during the so-called refugee crisis (2015–2017), when more than 1.2 million asylum-seekers arrived in the country. High-profile events such as the sexual assaults during the 2015–2016 NYE in Cologne sparked particular outrage and anti-immigrant hostility (Frey, 2020), but more localized crimes committed by refugees led to nativist retaliation as well (Riaz et al., 2024). Thus, the panel survey analyzed below was fielded during a period in which immigrant crime had high salience, which should increase the likelihood that concern about this issue affects vote choice.

The goal of the panel survey was to elicit and track German citizens' views about refugees across a number of different dimensions. The data were collected through the online access panel of the survey firm *Bilendi* and the sample is representative of the German adult population on age, gender, and federal state. The approximate N in each wave is 3,000.¹²

The main dependent variable in the analysis is vote intention for a given right-wing party, measured as a binary indicator. In the German context, these are the center-right CDU/CSU—generally perceived as the issue-owner of law-and-order (Neundorff & Adams, 2018)—the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), and

¹² The total number of unique individuals in the panel is 5,815.

the radical-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).¹³ The independent variable is concerned about local refugee crime. The exact item wording is as follows:

- “If additional refugees came into my town this would increase crime.” (1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = agree strongly)

Asking about the effect of refugees on crime in the respondent’s town (in contrast to Germany overall) nicely captures the theorized safety threat perception, as it taps into concern about one’s *immediate* physical safety.¹⁴ As I demonstrate in the SI (p. 9), the majority of respondents and a majority of left-wing voters changed their level of concern about local refugee crime at some point during the panel. The panel analysis below thus captures meaningful within-respondent variation in physical safety threat.¹⁵ In the SI (p. 9), I also show that security threat perceptions are less stable than cultural and economic threat perceptions among progressive voters of the Greens and the Social Democrats.

For estimation, I rely on two-way fixed effects (FE) models, with FE for respondent and wave. The results presented below are thus *within-individual* estimates of the effect of concern about local refugee crime on support for right-wing parties. I estimate models without and with a large set of time-variant control variables that measure respondents’ views about refugees on other dimensions such as culture or the economy, both on the local as well as the national level. In addition, I account for variables capturing exposure to refugees, general views about crime and the police, neighborhood trust, ideological self-placement, an index of views on gender equality, and an index measuring attitudes toward the welfare state.¹⁶ Since my theoretical interest is in left-wing voters, I conduct the analysis within the subgroups of voters of the center-left SPD, the Greens, and the radical-left Die Linke. A respondent is categorized as a voter of a given left-wing party if, in any of the four waves, she indicated to have voted for that party in the previous federal

election with her second (party) vote.¹⁷ I also consider vote intention for the “own party” (i.e., the left-wing party the respondent indicated to have voted for) as a dependent variable.

Figure 4 displays the effect of concern about local refugee crime on vote intention among left-wing party voters. Given the inclusion of FE for respondent and wave, the figure essentially shows the change in vote intention as a respondent changes their concern about local refugee crime. The most interesting results are among Green party supporters: Within this voter group, which tends to be dominated by highly educated urban cosmopolitans (Haffert, 2022), worries about refugee crime increase vote intention for the center-right CDU/CSU and decrease vote intention for the Greens (statistically significant in the model with controls). These findings are consistent with the cross-national analysis of voter concern and party positions above, where the Greens were the party family with the most striking voter–party mismatch on immigration and crime. At the same time, the results are quite remarkable given the large differences between the Greens and the CDU/CSU on many sociocultural issues (Burst et al., 2021, p. 5). The effect on vote intention for the center right, which has a magnitude of 4.8 percentage points. in the model with controls, is not just statistically significant; it is also substantially meaningful, as the overall probability of indicating vote intention for the CDU/CSU among Green party voters only amounts to 7%.

There are no consistent effects among voters of Die Linke and the SPD. The SPD in particular tends to put forward more moderate positions on law-and-order and immigration as a more centrist party. In addition, the SPD was part of the grand coalition government with the CDU/CSU at the time of the panel survey, which created pressures for Social Democrats to move further to the right on immigration (Atzpodien, 2020).¹⁸

In the SI (p. 11), I present supplementary analyses that suggest the voter–party mismatch as the likely mechanism driving the above findings. In particular, I find that concern about local refugee crime is positively associated with the probability of mentioning crime as one of three vote-deciding issues. Moreover, Green party voters who indicate that crime is a vote-deciding issue for them also rate the CDU/CSU as more representative of their views on crime than the Greens. In contrast to Green party voters, Die Linke and SPD voters do not rate their own party as a worse

¹³ Vote intention measures the likely party vote if the next federal election was held on Sunday.

¹⁴ A potential concern about the wording of this item is that respondents might interpret it in different ways. For example, it might be that they believe that the influx of refugees increases crime by triggering hate crimes against refugees. In the cross-sectional survey that I fielded in 2023 (see below), I included this question as well as another question that more explicitly asks respondents whether they believe that refugees *as perpetrators* will increase crime in their town. I find that the two items correlate very strongly ($r = .87$), suggesting that the above question indeed captures concern about refugee crime.

¹⁵ In the SI (p. 8), I plot the average level of concern about local refugee crime by partisanship and wave.

¹⁶ A full list of variables used in this analysis can be found in the SI (pp. 5–8). Controlling for ideological self-placement, attitudes toward gender equality, and views on the welfare state, coupled with the relatively short time period covered by the panel (16 months) makes it unlikely that any potential effects would be driven by changes in general levels of conservatism.

¹⁷ In the first three waves, this question refers to the 2013 election; in the fourth wave, it refers to the 2017 election. The main findings are robust to classifying respondents based on their 2013 vote choice only (see SI, p. 9) and to excluding wave 4 from the analysis altogether (see SI, p. 10).

¹⁸ In the SI (p. 10), I show the effects of concern about local refugee crime on vote intention for left-wing parties. There are no voter movements between parties of the left-wing bloc.

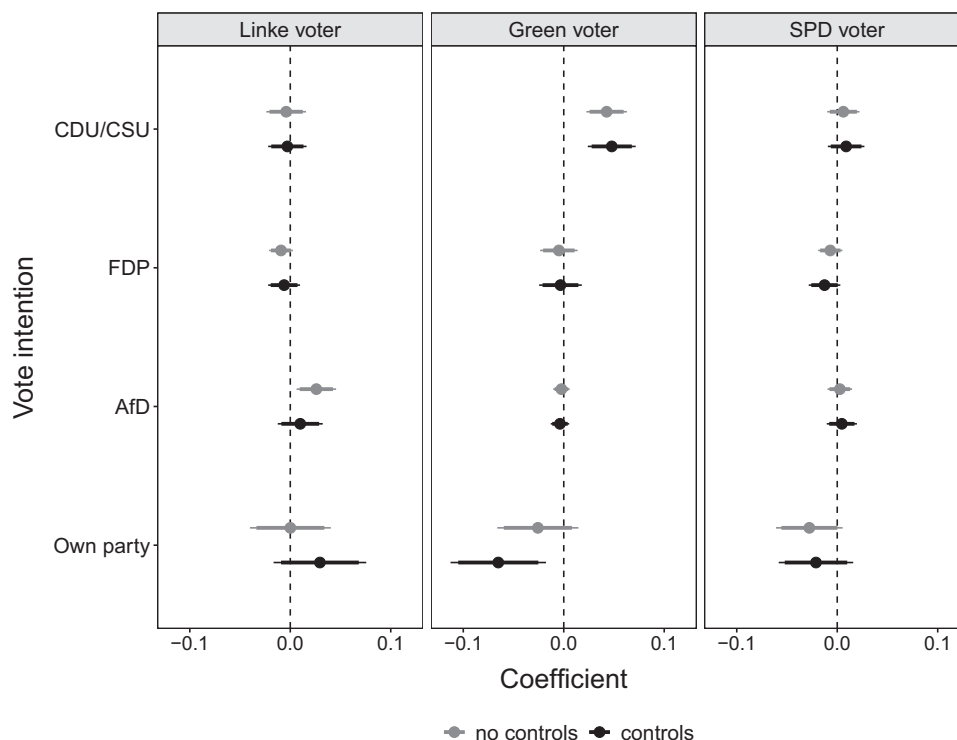


FIGURE 4 The effect of concern about local refugee crime on vote intention among left-wing party voters. *Note:* Coefficients from two-way fixed effects models with 90% and 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered on the respondent. Abbreviations: CDU/CSU, Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union; FDP, Free Democratic Party; AfD, Alternative for Germany; SPD, Social Democratic Party.

fit on crime compared to other parties. In sum, consistent with the voter–party mismatch, concern about local refugee crime is positively correlated with the importance of crime as a vote-deciding issue among left-wing party voters and shifts vote intention toward a party that they perceive to better represent their views on crime.

As a further robustness check, the SI (pp. 19–21) contains an analysis of the German Socio-Economic Panel, which has asked respondents since 1994 about their worries about crime (in general) in Germany (SOEP, 2019). Crime worries have decreased among all partisan camps since 1994 but have spiked again around 2015/2016, coinciding with the so-called refugee crisis (see SI p. 19). Consistent with my argument, I find that this spike is observed among supporters of all major German parties, including the Greens, for whom concern about crime fluctuates significantly over time (see SI, p. 20), suggesting that they are susceptible to salient events and news cycles. Finally, using two-way FE models, I also replicate the voter shift from the Greens to the CDU/CSU as a function of worries about crime (see SI p. 21). This effect persists when using a more restrictive definition of “Green party supporter” by including only those that indicated in the first three waves (i.e., years) in which they participated in the panel that they support the Greens. Thus, the defection effects extend to longer

term Green party supporters, who might have already brought in their years-long support for the Greens when they entered the panel.

Conjoint experiment

The panel analysis shows that concern about immigrant crime can shift progressive voters to the right. The longitudinal nature of the survey data, which allows me to hold observable and unobservable time-invariant confounders constant, combined with the inclusion of an extensive set of time-variant controls raises confidence in the causal nature of this result. Still, there might be lingering concerns about unobserved time-variant confounding or reverse causality if Green party voters first change their vote intention and subsequently adjust their views on immigrant crime.

To address these concerns, I conducted a preregistered candidate-choice conjoint experiment (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Bansak et al., 2023) among a large sample ($N = 6,000$) of German respondents. In addition to pinning down causality, the experiment also allows me to address open substantive questions. First, exploratory analyses of the panel suggest the voter–party mismatch as the likely mechanism driving the defection of progressive voters to the right. Accordingly, by adopting more restrictive positions on

TABLE 1 Candidate attributes and levels with randomization restrictions.

Attribute	Levels	Note
Deportation of criminal foreigners	(1) For any crime (2) For severe crimes (3) No deportations	Not assigned to CDU/CSU and AfD
Primary cause of immigrant crime	(1) Poverty and social inequality (2) Cultural background of immigrants	Not assigned to AfD Not assigned to Greens
Adoption rights for same-sex couples	(1) Approves (2) Rejects	Not assigned to AfD Not assigned to Greens

Note: Attributes were always displayed in the same order as shown above.

Abbreviations: CDU/CSU, Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union; AfD, Alternative for Germany.

immigrant crime, leftist parties might be able to avoid such voter losses. The experiment tests whether this is indeed the case.

Second, as I theorized above, defection by leftist cosmopolitans to the center right might be conditional on the center right's framing of immigrant crime—either as culturally determined or due to socioeconomic problems—and its broader positioning on the sociocultural issue dimension. The multidimensional nature of conjoint experiments allows me to explore these hypotheses. The conditionality of progressive defection to the center right is an important question because the general ideological profile of the mainstream right can vary significantly over space and time. In the German case, the CDU was more moderate under Angela Merkel's leadership period (2000–2018), which also covers the panel survey used above, than under their current chairman Friedrich Merz, who adopted many radical-right talking points on immigration and other sociocultural issues (Kampfner, 2024). Such right-wing shifts by the center right might deter progressives who uphold multiculturalism and socially liberal values.

The candidate-choice conjoint experiment was fielded in October/November 2023. Subjects completed six choice tasks, of which I include the first five in the analysis.¹⁹ In each task, a subject was presented with four hypothetical candidates for the federal election. This mimics voters' decision for their first (candidate) vote in the German mixed-member electoral system. Focusing on candidates allows me to more credibly vary issue positions within a party. Candidates were affiliated with one of four political parties: the Greens, the SPD, the CDU/CSU, and the AfD. In addition to the party, the profiles consisted of three candidate attributes that were varied using restricted randomization to ensure realistic profiles. Table 1 displays the candidate attributes, their respective levels, and the randomization restrictions

employed. After being presented with the four candidate profiles, respondents were asked to indicate which candidate they would vote for if the next federal election was held on Sunday. The corresponding binary variable indicating whether a given candidate in a given choice task was elected constitutes the outcome of interest in the analyses below.²⁰

To test how elite positioning on immigrant crime affects vote choice, the experiment varies the candidate's *position on the deportation of criminal foreigners*—a topic that is both specific to immigrant crime and familiar to voters, as it is frequently mentioned in the public discourse about immigration. Deportation of criminal foreigners also enjoys extremely high support in the German public, thus capturing the widespread concern about immigrant crime—an important premise of my theoretical argument. In a pretreatment item, 89% of respondents agreed with the statement that criminal foreigners should be deported (the lowest level of agreement was among voters of the Greens with 82%).

Despite the clear picture on the public opinion side, elites vary in their positions on this issue. While in principle all major German parties support deportations of criminal foreigners, especially if the crime in question was severe, progressive politicians sometimes deviate from the official line. For example, in the wake of the 2015/2016 NYE sexual assaults in Cologne, a prominent member of the Green faction in the Bundestag stated that “crime will not be solved through deportations” (Deutschlandfunk, 2016). During the 2021 electoral campaign, the Greens and the SPD rejected calls by the CDU to deport criminal refugees to civil-war countries (Monath, 2021). Reflecting this variation in elite positioning, in the conjoint experiment the relevant candidate attribute can take one of three levels, which vary in their restrictiveness: “no deportations,” “for severe crimes,” “for

¹⁹ The sixth task was identical to the first one except that the order of candidates was flipped. It was included to correct for measurement error per (Clayton et al., 2023). The correction does not noticeably affect treatment effects (see SI, pp. 14–15). As an additional robustness check, I excluded respondent tasks that were completed in less than 10 s (as a proxy for low

attention). Results, which are very similar to those in the main analysis, are shown in the SI, pp. 15–16.

²⁰ As a secondary outcome variable, I also asked respondents to evaluate each candidate on a scale from 1 (“disapprove strongly”) to 7 (“approve strongly”). Analyses using this outcome variable are shown in SI, pp. 16–17.

any crime.” Since parties on the right have been much clearer in their positioning on this issue, the CDU/CSU and the AfD candidates were not assigned the “no deportations” category.

To explore how elite framing of the immigration–crime issue conditions the effect of law-and-order positioning, I included the candidate’s belief about the *primary cause of immigrant crime* as the second attribute. Reflecting political debates on group-centric crime, where cultural factors are pitted against socioeconomic causes, in the experiment, the candidate either believes that immigrant crime is due to “immigrants’ cultural background” or due to “poverty and social inequality.” Since the far right consistently frames crime among immigrants in a culturalized way (Hestermann & Hoven, 2020), while the Greens strongly reject such framing, this attribute is only varied for the centrist candidates (i.e., SPD and CDU/CSU).

The final candidate attribute proxies elite positioning on a salient sociocultural issue in Germany, namely adoption rights for same-sex couples. I chose this specific issue because positions can be credibly varied within the center right: In the 2017 Bundestag vote that legalized same-sex marriages and, by extension, adoption rights, three-quarters of the CDU/CSU faction voted against the proposition, while the overwhelming rest supported it. To ensure more realistic candidate profiles, I did not vary this attribute for the AfD and the Green candidates.

I collected complete responses from exactly 6,000 individuals using the online panel of the survey company *Bilendi*. The sample is nationally representative of the German adult population in terms of age, gender, and federal state. The unit of analysis is a respondent-choice ($N = 30,000$). All analyses shown below use standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

Overall, voters strongly punish lenient positions on immigrant crime.²¹ The left panel in Figure 5 shows that this punishment is felt across all political parties included in the experiment. The more interesting question, however, is whether parties’ own voter bases are sensitive to candidate positioning on deportations of criminal immigrants. I examine this question in the right-hand panel of Figure 5, where I look at the effects by the candidate’s party within the subsample of respondents that indicated that they voted for that candidate’s party in the 2021 federal elections with their second (party) vote. Across the ideological spectrum, political parties risk losing voters by being too lenient on the immigration–crime issue. Even Green party voters strongly penalize their party’s candidates when they reject the deportation of criminal immigrants. While the probability of choosing the Green

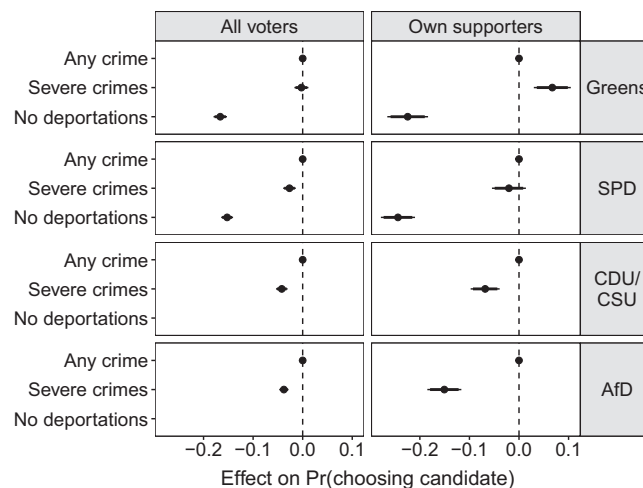


FIGURE 5 Effect of positioning on immigrant crime on probability of candidate choice, by candidate party. *Note:* Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients with 90% and 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Controlling for the candidate’s party. Own supporter is coded based on self-reported vote for the candidate’s party (i.e., second vote) in the 2021 federal elections.

party candidate among supporters of the Greens is 68% in the “for any crime” condition, it decreases by one-third (22 pp.) when moving to the “no deportations” condition. A similar effect is found for the Social Democrats. Interestingly, the figure also suggests that the Green party cannot become too restrictive without risking to suffer some moderate losses among its own voter base (see the estimate for the “for severe crimes” category).

So far, I have shown a sizable penalty against lenient positions on the deportation of criminal foreigners. Next, I investigate if the center-right CDU/CSU as the traditional law-and-order party can benefit from soft positions on immigrant crime among progressive parties by attracting supporters of those parties. To test this possibility, I create binary variables that equal one if the position of the CDU/CSU candidate is more restrictive than the position of the Green party/SPD candidate and zero if the CDU/CSU candidate is equally or less restrictive than the Green party/SPD candidate. I then regress the outcome of interest—vote choice for the CDU/CSU candidate—on this binary variable *within* the subsample of supporters of the less restrictive party.²²

Figure 6 displays the results of this analysis. Consistent with my argument and the panel analysis, the center-right CDU/CSU can gain progressive voters by being more restrictive than leftist parties on the issue of immigrant crime. Among Green party supporters, vote choice for the center right increases by

²¹ In the SI (p. 12), I show the overall effects for all candidate attributes.

²² In the SI (p. 17), I show results when using a three-level categorical variable of relative restrictiveness (levels: *less restrictive*, *equally restrictive*, *more restrictive*).

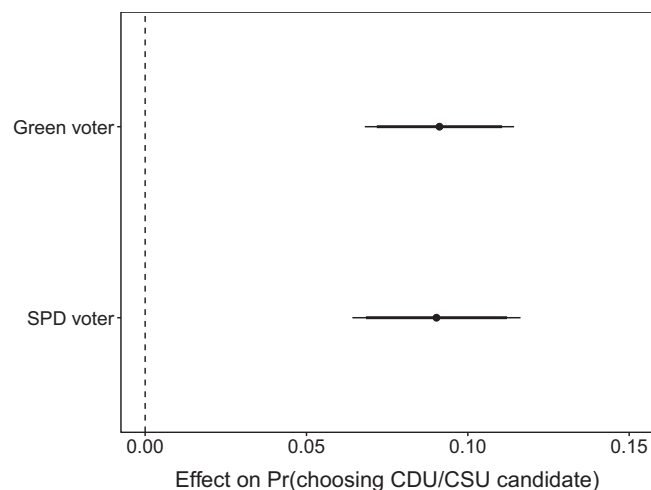


FIGURE 6 Left-wing defection to the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). *Note:* Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients with 90% and 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. The coefficients show the effect of the CDU/CSU being more restrictive on immigrant crime than the Greens/the Social Democratic Party (SPD) on CDU/CSU candidate choice. Models are estimated within the subsample of voters of the less restrictive party indicated on the y-axis.

nine percentage points when the center right is more restrictive on deportations than the Greens.²³ The effect is of similar magnitude in the subsample of SPD voters.²⁴ In sum, this analysis replicates the defection effect among Green party voters from the panel survey in an experimental setting. It also confirms the idea that the SPD's generally more moderate positioning on immigrant crime prevents significant voter losses to the right.

Does the center right deter progressive voters if it connects crime among immigrants to their cultural background? In addition, beyond the immigration issue, the combination of law-and-order positions with culturally liberal stances might be the most effective strategy in attracting progressive electorates. I address these questions in Figure 7, where I plot the effect of the *CDU/CSU more restrictive* variable by the

different levels of the candidate attributes *primary cause of immigrant crime* (left panel) and *adoption rights for same-sex couples* (right panel), respectively. Surprisingly, the defection effect among progressive voters does not vary based on the center right's framing of the issue. Both Green party and SPD voters are not deterred from a culturalized view on this issue among conservative candidates. Similarly, supporting a roll-back on adoption rights of same-sex couples does not hurt center-right candidates among progressives as long as the candidate is more restrictive on immigrant crime than leftist candidates.²⁵ In sum, among leftist voters, concern about immigrant crime trumps considerations about the cultural "othering" of immigrants or broader sociocultural issues such as the legal treatment of same-sex couples.²⁶

One potential concern with the results of the conjoint experiment, and this study more generally, is that progressive voters might be genuinely concerned about the cultural impact of immigrants but express those fears in the form of more socially acceptable concern about crime. However, in a pretreatment question, 63% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that people from certain cultures are more predisposed toward committing crime. Even among Green party supporters, who we should expect to renounce this "politically incorrect" statement, 40% indicate (strong) agreement (SPD: 58%; Die Linke: 52%; see SI p. 18). Thus, it appears that a significant share of leftist cosmopolitans does not shy away from openly expressing views that assign immigrants an inherent tendency toward criminal behavior based on their cultural background. Further, as I demonstrate in the SI (p. 18), the defection effect exists among those Green/SPD voters that (strongly) agree and those that (strongly) disagree with the statement.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a systematic examination of the electoral politics of immigration and crime in Western Europe. Investigating public opinion in 14 countries, I demonstrate that concern about the consequences of immigration on crime rates is more widespread across supporters of different party families than worries about the cultural or the economic impact of

²³ Given my theoretical interest in progressive voters and in light of the results of the panel analysis, I focus on potential voter movements to the center right rather than to the radical-right AfD. Still, for completeness, SI, p. 13, shows the effects of the AfD candidate being more restrictive on AfD vote choice. While there is no effect among Green party voters, which is unsurprising given the general ideological difference between the parties, SPD and CDU/CSU supporters do switch to the radical right if the latter is more restrictive on immigrant crime than their own party's candidate. However, the defection effects are smaller compared to those found for center-right vote choice among progressive voters.

²⁴ Not surprising given the ideological proximity between the two parties, there is also a very sizable defection effect to the SPD among Green voters ($\beta = .15$; $p < .001$) if the SPD candidate offers a more restrictive position on deportations than the Greens' candidate. However, as SI, p. 13, shows, the defection effect to the CDU/CSU among Green supporters persists and barely diminishes in magnitude even when the SPD candidate also offers a tougher approach to immigrant crime.

²⁵ The respective interaction coefficients, which are not statistically significant at conventional levels, are shown in the SI (p. 14).

²⁶ Since the candidate's positioning on deportations always appeared on top of the attributes table in the experiment, the findings in Figure 7 might also be explained by order effects. However, two facts speak against order effects being a significant issue: First, there are statistically significant and sizable treatment effects for the other two attributes (see SI, p. 12), which suggests that subjects did pay attention to them. Second, the treatment effect for the *adoption rights* attribute (10 pp.), which always appeared on the bottom of the attributes table, is larger in magnitude than the one for *cause of immigrant crime* (2 pp.), which always appeared in the middle.

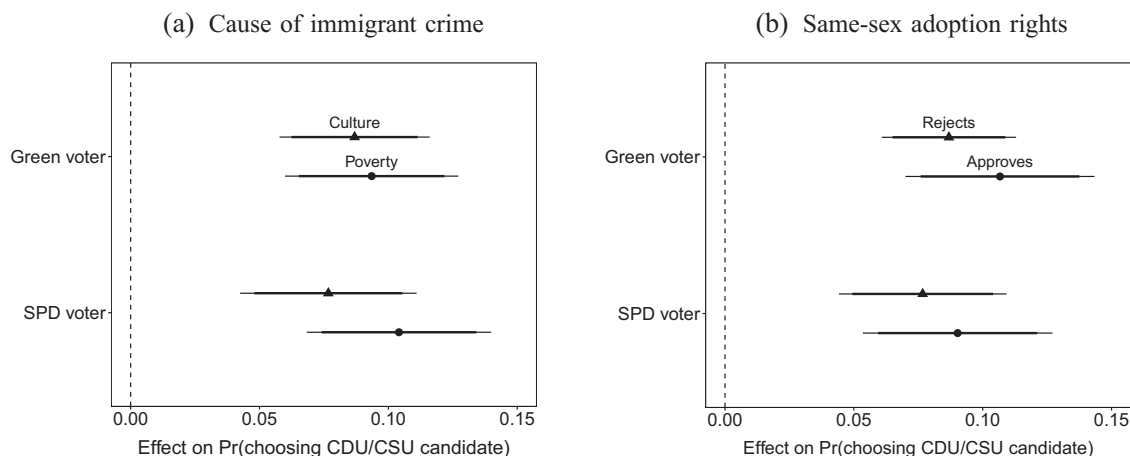


FIGURE 7 Left-wing defection to the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), by other CDU/CSU candidate attributes. *Note:* Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients with 90% and 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the respondent level. The coefficients show the effect of the CDU/CSU being more restrictive on immigrant crime than the Greens/the Social Democratic Party (SPD) on CDU/CSU candidate choice. Models are estimated within the subsample of voters of the less restrictive party indicated on the y-axis.

immigration. While left-wing and right-wing voters are polarized particularly on the cultural dimension, concern about immigration's effect on crime is more uniformly distributed and even extends to highly educated leftist cosmopolitans—a group that is usually perceived to be staunchly pro-immigration. Combining the survey data with expert judgments of party positions, I further identify a *voter-party mismatch* on immigration and crime, as left-wing parties—especially Green and other left-libertarian parties—tend to de-emphasize law-and-order policies, while their supporters exhibit high concern about immigrant crime. Using panel data from Germany, I show that this voter-party mismatch can have electoral consequences: Among voters of the Greens—the political home of cosmopolitans—concern about the impact of refugees on local crime rates increases vote intention for the socially conservative center-right CDU/CSU. In a final step, I use an original candidate-choice conjoint experiment among 6,000 German respondents to confirm the progressive defection to the center right. The experiment also shows that safety threat among progressives trumps potential concerns about stigmatizing immigrants or voting for candidates with socially conservative positions.

The findings in this paper carry important implications for our understanding of electoral politics in Europe. In particular, they suggest that for center-right parties, immigrant crime may prove as a “winning issue” due to muted electoral trade-offs. Typically, these parties move further to the center to capture left-leaning voters, but this risks alienating their base (Meguid, 2005). By contrast, my findings suggest that when immigrant crime is salient, doubling down on their law-and-order profile—without necessarily

moderating their socially conservative positions—allows center-right parties to seize progressive voters while simultaneously appealing to their base. Further analysis of the experiment (not shown) suggest that law-and-order stances by the center right are also effective in attracting a sizable share of radical-right voters. As such, it appears that the electoral trade-offs mainstream parties face on immigration are more subdued than previous research suggests (Chou et al., 2021).

For parties on the left—especially Green and other left-libertarian parties—my results imply that they may need to emphasize law-and-order stances on immigrant crime to not risk losing voters to the right. At the same time, such a move would likely lead to intraparty tensions between vote-seeking and policy-seeking factions. Indeed, recent developments among the German Greens reflect these ideas: The party leadership's slogan for their new, more conservative immigration policy program—“humanity and order”—as well as the name of the party's manifesto for the 2024 European parliament election—“What protects us” (“*Was uns schützt*”)—signal the connection between immigration and law-and-order (Kretschmann & Lang, 2023). This rightward shift, however, promptly generated internal backlash: 500 members of the Green party wrote an open letter to the party leadership criticizing the new strategy (Hackenbruch & Schwietering, 2023). Some politicians even left the party in protest and joined the far-left Die Linke (Lehmann, 2023). It is, however, for future research to explore more systematically how this tension between incentives to respond voter concern about immigrant crime and internal backlash to restrictive immigration and law-and-order

policies shapes the future of progressive politics in Europe.

Finally, the results in this paper come with important scope conditions. First, the salience of the immigration–crime issue should affect whether the voter–party mismatch on the left results in voter shifts to the right. When safety threat dominates the public discourse and is thus perceived as salient by voters, the center right as the issue-owner of law-and-order should be more likely to attract leftist cosmopolitans concerned about immigrant crime (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). This was plausibly the case in Germany during the period in which the panel survey (September 2016 to December 2017) and, to a lesser degree, the conjoint experiment (October to November 2023) were fielded. Second, in comparative perspective, (affective) polarization has been relatively low in Germany (Gidron et al., 2020; Munzert & Bauer, 2013), which makes it more likely to observe voter shifts from progressive to right-wing parties compared to a high-polarization context. Still, empirical research on Germany has also documented increasing political polarization (Ellger, 2024; Ellger et al., 2016; Haffert, 2022). While this development is tied to the rise of the radical-right AfD, as a reaction, the center-right CDU/CSU has also veered to the right under their current chairman Friedrich Merz, who has pursued a more conservative agenda with the goal of revising the CDU's moderate profile established under his predecessor Angela Merkel and is skeptical of forming a coalition with the Greens on the federal level (Kampfner, 2024). The fact that I still find substantial defection from leftist cosmopolitans to the center-right in the conjoint experiment, which was fielded in late 2023, suggests that concern about immigrant crime can shake up electoral coalitions even against the backdrop of heightened polarization.

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ORCID

Jeyhun Alizade  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3218-8939>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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