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**MIGRATION DEBATE IN ELECTORAL COMPETITION: COMPARING
THE NORDIC COUNTRIES**

BA thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of migration in electoral competition among right-wing, left-wing, and center parties in Finland—the Finns Party (PS), the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Centre Party (Cen); Sweden—the Sweden Democrats (SD), the Centre Party (C), and the Social Democratic Party (SAP); and Denmark—the Danish People's Party (DF), the Denmark's Liberal Party Venstre (V), and the Social Democrats (S)—from 2015 to 2023. It explores whether migration serves as a "rallying point" in political campaigns, influencing coalition-building and shaping party strategies. The research assesses the impact of right-wing populism on migration discourse and policy shifts, questioning whether Nordic parties strategically promote more restrictive policies towards migration, not by rejecting welfare state principles outright, but by reframing them as exclusive, emphasizing welfare protections for native citizens over immigrants.

Using a comparative approach, the study analyzes electoral strategies and public opinion. The theoretical framework incorporates Populism Theory (Mudde, 2004) and Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) to understand how migration issues are framed and politicized. Methodologically, it employs analysis of the narratives and analysis of the public opinion of party manifestos and press releases from election periods between 2015 and 2023.

This research provides insights into how migration is used as a political tool in Nordic electoral competition and its implications for party politics, policymaking, and the future of the Nordic welfare model.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The political landscape of the Nordic countries has undergone significant transformations in response to migration-related challenges, particularly since the 2015 European refugee crisis. Traditionally, the Nordic countries have maintained a balance between openness and control in their migration policies, guided by commitments to human rights and welfare state principles. Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the extent to which migration poses a challenge to maintaining the balance and welfare state model of the Nordic countries.

The growing salience of radical right-wing parties—the Finns Party (PS), the Sweden Democrats (SD), and the Danish People's Party (DF)—reflects their ability to capitalize on public concerns over migration and national identity. This trend raises important questions about the sustainability of political consensus and inclusive policymaking in the Nordic region. Undermining the position and rights of certain groups of people could cause, for example, the exacerbation of political polarization, and therefore, it is necessary to examine whether such development has already occurred in the Nordic countries and whether it is primarily due to the strategies of the national parties.

A critical question in this study is whether the strategic rise of the Finns Party, the Sweden Democrats, and the Danish People's Party has prompted mainstream parties to intentionally adopt more restrictive immigration policies, thereby contributing to the continued electoral success of the radical right. This inquiry also considers whether the strategic use of migration as a campaign issue has contributed to a broader political realignment, potentially challenging the foundational principles of the Nordic welfare state, which has historically balanced openness with social cohesion and a commitment to international human rights.

This study aims to assess whether PS, SD, and DF have strategically used migration discourse to gain electoral advantage and consolidate their positions within national party systems. Furthermore, it investigates the extent to which such strategic positioning may contribute to political polarization and challenge fundamental principles of the Nordic welfare model. Therefore, the research question of the thesis will be: "How has the rise of the Finns Party, the Sweden Democrats, and the Danish People's Party influenced the framing of migration policies and debates in electoral competition across Denmark, Sweden, and Finland?". An answer to the research question will be provided in conclusion, as well as the limitations of the thesis that may provide a basis for further research will be introduced.

Ultimately, this research seeks to assess whether the Nordic countries have experienced a shift toward a more restrictive migration approach and, if so, to what extent this shift is driven by electoral strategies, political competition, or broader societal changes. This inquiry will also evaluate whether such developments challenge the historically liberal and human rights-based foundations of Nordic migration policy.

The parties included in this study were selected due to their central roles in national politics, consistent participation in electoral competition, and influence over migration discourse. The right-wing populist parties—the Finns Party (PS), the Sweden Democrats (SD), and the Danish People’s Party (DF)—represent key actors in the politicization of migration, offering clear examples of exclusionary and nationalist framing. Meanwhile, including center-left and centrist parties such as the Social Democrats (SAP, SDP, S) and Centre Parties (C, Cen, V) allows for a comparative analysis of how mainstream actors adapt their strategies in response to populist pressure. This selection ensures ideological diversity and enables the study to trace both confrontational and accommodative responses to rising anti-immigration sentiment across the Nordic region.

2. GENERAL BACKGROUND

2015 marked an unprecedented turning point in European migration, with over one million migrants reaching the EU's borders, compared to just 282,000 the previous year (Frontex, 2015). This mass influx has posed unique challenges to the Nordic countries, which are particularly exposed due to the structural and normative foundations of their welfare systems. The Nordic model—characterized by high levels of social trust, universal benefits, and regulated labor markets—relies on strong employment across the population, including high female labor force participation, to sustain extensive welfare provisions. However, this model faces significant strain when integrating large numbers of migrants, especially in contexts where few low-skill or low-wage jobs exist, limiting entry points into the labor market. Moreover, the success of the Nordic welfare state has traditionally rested on a high degree of societal homogeneity, which underpins both trust and solidarity. As diversity increases, political support for universal welfare policies can be eroded, particularly if migration is perceived to challenge the reciprocity at the core of the social contract. In this sense, the Nordic welfare state is not only economically but also politically vulnerable to migration-driven demographic changes, making the issue especially salient in public discourse and electoral competition (Grødem, 2016, 2–3).

While the Nordic countries share a great deal in common, especially in socio-economic terms, their migration and refugee policies have diverged, sometimes widely. While Denmark and Finland have pursued restrictive approaches since the 1990s, Sweden has long maintained one of Europe's most generous refugee policies. The roots of the disparities lie in their different cultures of consensus and debate. The political elite in Sweden, across the political spectrum, implemented humanitarian ideals, but without conducting a public debate over national migration policy. Denmark possesses a stronger culture of debate, and public influence over politics is therefore larger. The Danish conservative and liberal parties have also directed greater attention to the migration question than is the case in Sweden. Denmark is generally a liberal and progressive society, where high wages and generous social policies are seen as the reward for hard work and paying into the expensive system. Widespread Danish reservations towards refugees are based on a belief that many of the new arrivals will be unable to adapt and live up to this principle (Etzold, 2017, 1-3).

Finland has historically had a restrictive policy towards migration and still has a small stock of immigrants. It also stands out with a high inflow of immigrants from Estonia and the Russian Federation, reflecting both the geographical and the historical position of Finland (Grødem, 2016, 5).

When it comes to the attitudes towards anti-immigration in Finland, the sentiments of anti-immigration have been channeled – and fuelled – by the populist, right-wing Finns Party, which frames immigration in negative terms and focuses its criticism mainly on asylum questions and the alleged ‘economic burden’ of immigration (Alho, 2021, 87-88). However, Finland has still acknowledged the importance of various refugee agreements, for example, the agreement on refugee questions reached between the EU and Turkey. Within that framework and the Joint EU Resettlement Programme, it has taken in several hundred refugees from the camps in Turkey and Lebanon. Similarly, Sweden and Denmark have also participated in EU-coordinated refugee resettlement efforts, although their policies differ in scope and approach (Etzold, 2017, 3).

The rise of radical-right parties in the Nordic countries has been accompanied by an observable shift in public attitudes toward and policies on migration. Since 2015, asylum and immigration policies in Nordic countries have been tightened significantly. Governments across the region have introduced policies to reduce family reunification, restrict access to refugee and other protected statuses, and limit access to public assistance benefits for non-nationals. Moreover, the public discourse on immigration and asylum has become harsher. Today, the Nordic radical-right parties are clearly opposed to immigration, although their exact positions and the relative priority they place on immigration issues vary. While their views are less extreme than those of other European radical-right parties, relative to mainstream parties in their own countries, they are the most vociferous opponents of immigration. The Danish People’s Party is arguably the most radical in its anti-immigration position, and its manifesto states that “Denmark is not a country of immigration and has never been. We will therefore not accept a multiethnic transformation of the country”. In Sweden, SD remains explicit in its opposition to multiculturalism (Widfeldt, 2018, 1-7). In Finland, the Finns Party has been the most vocal party opposed to immigration.

Paramount to the rise of the right-wing populist parties (RWPP) in Scandinavia has been the exploitation of cultural anxieties and challenges to national identity related to immigration. The roots of social democracy are deeply embedded in Scandinavian discourse and values.

The generosity of their welfare system is built on a collective trust that it won't be abused. Thus, balancing these complex factors with growing cultural diversity presents a challenge for countries like Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. For RWPP, this becomes an easy point of contention, allowing them to claim that they are restoring value to the native population. The key aspect that has enabled the rise of RWPP in Scandinavia has been economic insecurity and welfare chauvinism (O'Mahony, 2025). This "welfare chauvinism" shapes immigration policies by framing migrants as outsiders who threaten the welfare state (UvA, 2024). The insecurity and subsequent social deprivation faced by the lower classes across the Nordic countries have fueled resentment of the political class. The welfare chauvinist notion of "our own people first" is a common narrative projected by these parties. It provides a more palatable approach to justify the exclusion of immigrants. Especially in Sweden and Denmark, many are not primarily opposed to immigrants out of xenophobia but out of concern that they have not been raised with the cultural values that uphold and respect their generous welfare system (O'Mahony, 2025).

The impact of migration on coalition building has been particularly noticeable in Sweden. The normalization of the right-wing populist party of the Sweden Democrats (SD) as part of the Swedish party system has been a gradual process, with very rapid developments, especially after the 2018 Swedish general election. After the 2022 elections, as the Sweden Democrats grew further and finished as the largest right-wing party (20.5 percent) ahead of the center-right conservative party, the Moderates (M) (19.1 percent), the conclusion was clear: either accept another four years in opposition or find a way to govern with the SD's support. The Moderates formed a minority government with the Christian Democrats (KD) and the Liberals (L), which relies on the support of the Sweden Democrats but does not formally include the SD. In other words, the SD does not have ministerial positions, but the government agreement bears a strong SD footprint – for example, in terms of the strong emphasis put on migration policy reforms and law and order issues – and the SD's influence on the government's policymaking is clear (Salo, 2024).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is interested in examining the role of migration in political campaigns, particularly its impact on voting behavior, electoral success, and the rise of populist or right-wing movements. It draws on Cas Mudde's Populism Theory to explain how right-wing populist parties use migration as a central issue to appeal to voters' concerns about national identity, security, and welfare. Additionally, Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) is used to analyze how different political actors shape migration discourse by portraying it as an economic, cultural, or humanitarian issue. The framework is applied to Nordic right-wing parties: the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, and the Sweden Democrats, to understand their rhetoric and influence on electoral competition.

3.1. The role of salience in political campaigns through the lens of Populism Theory

To understand the connection between Populism Theory and the role of migration in political campaigns, it is essential to first define Populism Theory. In recent years, a growing consensus has emerged on an ideational approach, which sees populism, first and foremost, as a set of ideas focused on a fundamental opposition between the people and the elite. Populism can be defined as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite". Although populism is not a direct threat to democracy, it poses a fundamental challenge to the core institutions and values of liberal democracy, particularly minority rights, pluralism, and the separation of powers (The Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy, 2025).

A key aspect of populist rhetoric is its adaptability to different political contexts, with migration often serving as a central issue for right-wing populist parties. According to Mudde (2004, 541–563), right-wing populism frequently incorporates nativism, an ideology that views non-native individuals and cultures as threats to the homogeneity and well-being of the national community. Within this framework, migration is framed as a challenge to national identity, economic stability, and social cohesion, allowing populist actors to position themselves as defenders of "the people" against perceived external and internal threats (Rydgren, 2008, 746).

In the context of political campaigns, the populist framing of migration can take various forms. Political leaders and parties may present migration as an economic burden, arguing that immigrants take jobs from native citizens or strain public services. Alternatively, they may frame migration as a cultural threat, emphasizing concerns over integration, national traditions, and religious differences (Wodak et al. 2013, 267-275). This kind of discourse is particularly

visible in the Nordic region, where parties such as the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, and the Sweden Democrats have employed populist rhetoric to mobilize voter support by emphasizing restrictive immigration policies and strong national identity (Jungar 2025, 1-22).

Moreover, the emotional appeal of migration-related narratives is crucial in shaping public perceptions and electoral behavior. Fear-based messaging, which presents migrants as potential security threats, has been used to justify policies such as stricter border controls and reduced asylum quotas (Wodak, 2015, 15-49). Thus, this strategy not only strengthens the populist parties' electoral appeal but also can influence mainstream political discourse and adopt tougher stances on immigration to counteract the populist surge.

3.2. Framing Theory

In order to analyze how different political actors shape the migration discourse by presenting it as an economic, cultural, or humanitarian problem, the most appropriate way to study it is by using Robert Entman's Framing Theory (1993). Frames not only define problems but also identify causes, propose solutions, and assign responsibility. In the context of migration, framing strategies influence how the public perceives immigrants and their impact on society, shaping electoral outcomes and policy debates. The media plays a crucial role in reinforcing or challenging these frames. Studies have shown that media coverage significantly affects public perceptions of migration, particularly in times of crisis. Sensationalist reporting that highlights crimes committed by migrants or portrays asylum seekers as economic opportunists tends to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment and bolster support for populist parties (Wodak, 2015, 55-78).

Framing Theory also highlights the importance of emotional appeals in political communication. Fear and anxiety are powerful mobilizing tools, and right-wing populist parties have effectively used fear-based frames to gain electoral support. By linking migration to issues such as crime, unemployment, and national security threats, these parties create a sense of urgency that motivates voters to support stricter immigration policies (Rydgren, 2008, 744–747). At the same time, counter-frames that emphasize solidarity, diversity, and economic benefits of migration attempt to mitigate these fears and present a more positive narrative.

By applying Framing Theory to the study of migration discourse in political campaigns, it becomes evident that the way migration is presented significantly influences voter behavior and policy preferences. The strategic use of framing seems to allow political actors to construct migration as either a crisis requiring immediate intervention or an opportunity for societal growth.

3.3. Narrative Overlaps and Distinctions over time

Far-right populist parties in the Nordic region—such as the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, and the Sweden Democrats—have exhibited both convergence and divergence in their migration narratives over time. During the 2015 European migrant crisis, these parties aligned their messaging by framing migration as a threat to national security, cultural identity, and economic stability, responding collectively to rising public anxieties (Horwood, 2024).

However, over time, distinct national contexts have driven narrative divergence. The Sweden Democrats have increasingly tied migration to domestic gang violence and urban unrest (Skodo, 2018), while the Finns Party has emphasized the economic burden of immigration on the welfare state (Widfeldt, 2018, 4). In contrast, the Danish People's Party continues to center its rhetoric on cultural incompatibility and challenges of integration, particularly concerning non-Western immigrants (Bailey-Morley, Kumar, 2022).

These variations reveal the flexibility of far-right narratives within shared ideological boundaries. Wodak (2015, 22) notes that these parties deploy a "politics of fear" tailored to local concerns, reinforcing their image as national protectors while maintaining transnational coherence through themes such as sovereignty, tradition, and anti-elitism.

3.4. The Far-Right's Reactive Strategy

While right-wing populist parties are often proactive in shaping public discourse around migration, they also demonstrate a significant reactive component to their political strategy. This reactive tendency is crucial in understanding how these parties maintain relevance and respond to emerging migration-related events. Far-right parties frequently adjust their rhetoric in reaction to crises, such as terrorist attacks, spikes in asylum applications, or significant shifts in European Union policies (Mudde, 2004, 547-559). For example, following the 2015 migrant crisis, far-right parties in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland intensified their opposition to EU asylum directives, capitalizing on public fears and anxieties regarding uncontrolled migration. This reactive positioning is often framed as a response to the failures of centrist governments, who are portrayed as unable or unwilling to protect national identity, security, and economic stability (Wodak et al. 2013, 268).

By framing themselves as the nation's protectors against external threats, far-right parties appeal to voter concerns and present themselves as the political alternative in times of crisis or policy failure (Rydgren, 2008, 745-754).

This concept of ‘agenda-setting by reaction’ allows these parties not only to maintain electoral appeal but also to shape policy debates by positioning themselves as the necessary counterforce to a perceived failure of mainstream political elites (Jungar, 2025, 21-22).

By summing up the theoretical part, it can be stated that the theoretical framework, grounded in Populism Theory and Framing Theory, provides valuable insights into the role of migration in shaping political campaigns, electoral success, and the rise of right-wing populism in the Nordic region. By examining the strategic use of migration frames by populist parties such as the Danish People’s Party, the Finns Party, and the Sweden Democrats, it is evident that these parties have successfully capitalized on migration to mobilize voters and influence the broader political discourse. In this context, migration is not merely a policy issue but a potent political tool, capable of reshaping political landscapes and influencing voter behavior.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study is going to present comprehensive insights into how migration issues shape and are shaped by electoral competition in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. It employs both narrative and public opinion analysis methods to capture both the content and context of migration-related discourse and policies in electoral settings. It will outline the timeframe and justify the chosen data analysis methods. The procedure of analysis will be explained in more detail.

4.1. Analysis of the Narratives

The content analysis will be guided by the research question and objectives outlined in the study. The analysis will involve identifying and categorizing the following:

1. *Analysis of the Narratives:* Will be conducted to examine how political parties and media outlets construct migration narratives in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. Using a theory-driven, deductive approach, the study will apply categories derived from Framing Theory and Populism Theory. This method allows for an in-depth investigation of the framing strategies employed by political actors and the influence of media in shaping public discourse on migration. The analysis will focus on identifying key themes, rhetorical devices, and ideological underpinnings that characterize the portrayal of migration in electoral contexts.
2. *Analysis of the Public Opinion:* To complement the analysis of the narratives, the analysis of the public opinion measures the evolution of immigration-related discourse in press releases from major political parties, including the Finns Party, the Sweden Democrats, the Danish People's Party, as well as selected center-left and centrist parties. The analysis focuses on press releases issued during key electoral cycles between 2015 and 2023, covering both national and European Parliament elections. In addition to assessing the impact of migration discourse on electoral outcomes, the study will explore voter preferences and party performance. To explore the link between migration discourse and electoral outcomes, the study will analyze survey data, primarily from Eurobarometer and national opinion polls, focusing on variables such as public concern about immigration, trust in political parties, and voting intentions. This will help assess how public attitudes toward migration align with party strategies and support trends across elections from 2015 to 2023.

Survey data from sources like Eurobarometer and national opinion polls will complement both narrative and public opinion analysis. It will help link political discourse to show how party manifestos' migration narratives align with voter preferences. Additionally, survey data will provide insights into how migration concerns influence party performance and policy shifts, offering a broader understanding of the political impact of migration issues.

4.2. Timeframe

The paper will cover electoral cycles from 2015, encompassing national parliamentary elections where migration has been a salient issue and elections to the European Parliament. These types of elections are held in each of the three countries studied. The selected timeframe allows for assessing how migration-related discourse and policies evolve over multiple elections, particularly in response to major migration events such as the 2015 European migrant crisis and subsequent policy shifts. Examining multiple electoral cycles allows for assessing how migration remained a political priority, how party positions evolved, and how voter attitudes shifted in response to policy changes and external events. The study will specifically examine the following key elections:

- 2015 National Parliamentary Elections (Denmark and Finland) – These elections occurred at a time when migration, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 migrant crisis, became a central issue in political discourse, influencing both party platforms and voter preferences (Sinclair, 2015, 1-2; Khalimzoda, 2023).
- 2018 Sweden's Riksdag (Parliamentary) Elections - The 2018 Swedish Riksdag elections marked a turning point in political discourse, with migration taking center stage after the 2015 crisis. The Sweden Democrats capitalized on public concerns, while mainstream parties responded with tougher rhetoric and policies (Skodo, 2018).
- 2019 European Parliament Elections – This election marked another key moment, with migration being a central issue not only in the three countries studied but across the EU (Rivière, Zalc, 2019), affecting the positioning of national parties within broader European party groups.
- 2022 National Elections (Sweden, Denmark) - In the 2022 national elections in Sweden and Denmark, migration remained a central issue. In Sweden, the right-populist Sweden Democrats gained significant support, leading to stricter immigration policies in the new coalition government (Pronin, 2022). In Denmark, despite the Social Democrats

maintaining their position, migration continued to dominate, with the country upholding restrictive policies despite a divided right-wing opposition (Jupskås, 2022).

- 2023 Finland's Eduskunta (Parliamentary) Elections - The 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections marked a significant shift to the right, with the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party making notable gains. Immigration emerged as a key issue, with the Finns Party advocating for stricter policies, influencing the coalition negotiations. The new government, led by the National Coalition Party, reflects the growing political importance of immigration in Finland's political landscape, signaling a more restrictive approach to migration in the coming years (IPU, 2023; Helsinki Times, 2023; Yle News, 2023).

Each of these election periods will be examined in relation to both the domestic political climate and broader EU migration policy, with a focus on how migration has remained a persistent, albeit evolving, issue on the political agenda.

4.3. Data Collection

The principal data sources encompass party manifestos and press releases of the major political parties—namely the Finns Party (PS), the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Centre Party (Cen) in Finland; the Sweden Democrats (SD), the Social Democratic Party (SAP), and the Centre Party (C) in Sweden; and the Danish People's Party (DF), the Social Democrats (S), and the Liberal Party Venstre (V) in Denmark—during election periods. The analysis will examine how political parties use migration discourse to appeal to different voter groups, with a focus on distinctions between right-leaning, left-leaning, and centrist parties. In analyzing these materials, particular attention will be paid to the strategies employed by right-leaning, left-leaning, and centrist parties.

This distinction is essential because each political orientation emphasizes migration differently, with right-leaning parties often associating migration with national security and cultural preservation.

In contrast, left-leaning parties may focus on humanitarian concerns and labor market integration. Centrist parties typically advocate for balanced solutions that address both migration's economic benefits and challenges.

By examining these distinctions, the study will explore how political parties use migration discourse to mobilize their base and appeal to swing voters while adapting to the broader political climate shaped by external events such as the European migrant crisis. To ensure a thorough analysis, the collected materials will be organized based on key themes related to migration, such as border control, asylum policy, integration, and labor market impacts. These sections will be extracted and compiled for detailed examination and analysis.

5. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The following chapters will provide the results of the analysis of how migration has been framed in electoral competition by major political parties in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland from 2015 to 2023. Additionally, they will explain the phenomenon and the logic behind these framings by contextualizing them within the broader political, economic, and societal developments of each country.

5.1. The Role of Migration in Electoral Competition in the Nordic Countries

Migration has become one of the most contentious and politically charged issues in Nordic electoral competition, particularly following the 2015 European refugee crisis (Frontex, 2015). Right-wing populist parties, such as Denmark's Danish People's Party (DF), Sweden's Sweden Democrats (SD), and Finland's Finns Party (PS), have capitalized on public fears surrounding migration, framing it as a threat to national identity and cultural values. They argue that large-scale immigration strains welfare systems, drives up unemployment, and poses a security risk, often framing the issue in a zero-sum context where the interests of native citizens are seen as directly opposed to the interests of migrants (Grødem, 2016, 2-5; Etzold, 2017, 1-3). These parties have ended up using more fear-based rhetoric to tap into a broader sense of cultural anxiety and economic insecurity, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas, which have seen a higher concentration of migrants and refugees.

On the other hand, centrist and left-wing parties in these countries, while often advocating for a more inclusive and humanitarian approach to migration, have struggled to maintain their positions amidst rising populist sentiment. For instance, Sweden's Social Democrats (SAP) and Finland's Social Democratic Party (SDP) have had to balance their commitment to international solidarity and the protection of refugees with growing concerns among voters about the social and economic consequences of immigration (Widfeldt, 2018, 1-7). In Denmark, the Social Democrats (S) have made significant shifts in their stance on migration, adopting stricter policies to retain support from voters disillusioned by the perceived failure of earlier liberal immigration policies. This shift has been evident in policies aimed at reducing asylum applications, tightening border controls, and limiting welfare benefits for migrants (O'Mahony, 2025).

This pattern of policy adjustment among traditionally center-left parties highlights a broader trend of policy convergence, where even ideologically distinct parties adopt more restrictive migration stances in response to electoral competition. In effect, the issue of migration has become so electorally salient that it reshapes traditional party lines, leading to the normalization of formerly fringe positions (Jungar, 2025, 19–21). In Denmark, this has been most clearly demonstrated by the Social Democrats' rhetoric about “zero asylum seekers,” which was once considered radical but has become mainstreamed into government policy. In Finland, similar tendencies have emerged, especially following the 2023 parliamentary elections, where the Finns Party's strong anti-immigration message shaped the coalition agenda despite their lack of prime ministerial leadership (Yle News, 2023). This illustrates how migration, including labor migration, has become a cross-party issue, with increasing demands for regulatory oversight even from non-populist parties.

In Sweden, the Social Democrats have faced increasing pressure from the right, especially after the rise of the Sweden Democrats as the second-largest party in the 2022 elections (Salo, 2024). In response, they too have hardened their migration policies—tightening family reunification laws, extending residency requirements, and increasing deportation measures. This development underscores the reactive nature of mainstream parties to the electoral threat posed by right-wing populists, aligning with the theoretical framework's emphasis on the “agenda-setting by reaction” strategy (Rydgren, 2008, 745–754). This shift not only reflects the Social Democrats' attempt to reclaim political ground from the Sweden Democrats but also illustrates a broader redefinition of political legitimacy in migration discourse.

The strategic shift in migration discourse across the political spectrum is not just a matter of electoral calculus; it also reflects deeper structural anxieties about the long-term sustainability of the Nordic welfare model. As noted in the general background section, these systems depend on high employment rates and social cohesion, both of which are perceived to be under strain from increasing cultural diversity and integration challenges.

(Grødem, 2016, 3). In this regard, parties across the spectrum increasingly frame migration through the lens of welfare state sustainability, using variations of welfare chauvinism to justify exclusionary policies (O'Mahony, 2025). In doing so, political actors—particularly in center-left and center-right parties—may seek to reconcile traditional commitments to social justice with rising voter concerns over redistribution, access to services, and national cohesion.

These trends illustrate that the issue of migration has functioned as a political cleavage, reordering party systems, reshaping political alliances, and redefining voter alignments. Migration is no longer a peripheral issue but a core component of political identity and strategic positioning in Nordic electoral politics. The next sections will delve deeper into the national contexts of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, examining how these dynamics have played out in specific electoral cycles and what implications they hold for the future of party politics and the Nordic model.

5.2. Denmark: Cultural Protectionism and Welfare Boundaries

The Danish case provides a particularly clear illustration of how migration is framed through the lens of cultural protectionism. The strategies of the Danish People's Party (DF) and its influence on mainstream parties align closely with Entman's (1993, 52-55) Framing Theory, especially the use of diagnostic framing to link immigration with perceived threats to welfare, national cohesion, and security. At the same time, DF's positioning as the voice of "the people" against an allegedly permissive elite reflects Mudde's (2004, 551) Populism Theory, where exclusionary rhetoric becomes a tool for mobilizing electoral support.

In Denmark, migration has long been at the center of political discourse, with the Danish People's Party (DF) playing a pivotal role in shaping the national narrative. As early as the 1990s, DF began linking migration to cultural erosion and welfare strain, laying the groundwork for broader political realignment around these themes. The party's success in the 2015 national elections, where it became the second-largest party, signaled the mainstream acceptance of its anti-immigration stance (Etzold, 2017, 1-2). This electoral success pushed both the center-right Venstre (V) and the center-left Social Democrats (S) to adopt increasingly restrictive positions on migration (Grødem, 2016, 3-5). It illustrates a broader process of policy convergence, wherein traditional ideological divisions between left and right become blurred as migration emerges as an electorally decisive issue.

5.2.1. Key Actors and Electoral Incentives

A key characteristic of Danish migration discourse is its focus on cultural compatibility and integration capacity, more than purely economic concerns. DF has consistently framed non-Western immigration as a threat to Danish values, national cohesion, and gender equality, emphasizing that integration is not merely a socioeconomic process but a cultural one (Bailey-Morley & Kumar, 2022).

The concept of “Danishness” is central to DF’s messaging, where immigration policy is portrayed as a means of defending national identity against multiculturalism. This emphasis aligns with Framing Theory (Entman, 1993, 52–53), as DF constructs immigration not as a humanitarian or labor market issue but as a zero-sum cultural contest.

The 2015 Danish general election marked a turning point in the politicization of migration. Although the Social Democrats won the most seats (47), the right-leaning ‘Blue bloc’—including Venstre, the Danish People’s Party (DF), and other center-right parties—secured a parliamentary majority. This allowed Venstre to form a minority government with DF’s support, giving the latter significant influence despite remaining outside the cabinet.

Migration served as a “rallying point” in the election, uniting the blue bloc and driving voter mobilization. DF framed migration as a threat to national identity, welfare sustainability, and cultural cohesion, resonating strongly with voters. This aligns with Framing Theory (Entman, 1993, 52–53), as DF presented immigration as a zero-sum issue between “natives” and “outsiders.” Their success pressured Venstre to adopt stricter immigration policies to maintain bloc unity, reflecting the agenda-setting power of populist parties.

To illustrate this strategic alignment, Venstre reaffirmed its commitment to a restrictive migration agenda in its 2021 member bulletin. The party stated: “The Liberal Party will deliver on the Welfare Promise we made before the last general election. We will pursue a strict and consistent immigration policy, and we will strengthen Denmark's security and international profile.” (Venstre, 2021, 5). This declaration highlights how mainstream parties in Denmark, particularly Venstre, not only adapted their positions in response to populist pressure but also institutionalized these shifts within their fiscal and security policies. The framing of immigration as a matter of national responsibility and welfare sustainability mirrors the narratives previously associated with DF, indicating a normalization of exclusionary discourse across party lines.

Following the 2015 election, Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen pledged to tighten immigration rules and reduce asylum-related spending in response to the growing influence of the Danish People’s Party (DF) (House of Lords, 2015, 14–15). This shift was a direct consequence of DF’s electoral success, highlighting migration's centrality as a political issue. The 2015 election not only reaffirmed migration’s salience in Danish politics but also accelerated policy convergence around exclusionary narratives, where both traditionally left-

and right-wing parties began to adopt more restrictive positions (Grødem, 2016, 3–4). This convergence blurred the ideological boundaries that had previously defined Danish political discourse on migration and integration, making it clear that migration had become a decisive issue for political competition across the spectrum.

In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Danish People's Party (DF) centered its campaign on opposing EU control over migration, emphasizing national sovereignty and criticizing the EU's border policies. Their manifesto highlighted the need to preserve Denmark's independence and freedom to protect its democracy and traditions, stating: "The goal of the Danish People's Party is to preserve Denmark's independence and freedom, so that we can ensure democratic rule and further develop the good country that has been painstakingly built throughout our long history." (Danske Folkeparti, 2019, 1). This rhetoric closely aligned with the populist narrative of reclaiming control from supranational institutions, a trend common among ID and ECR-affiliated parties across Europe during the same election cycle (Rivière & Zalc, 2019). Nevertheless, DF's campaign reinforced key narratives in Danish migration discourse: that immigration threatens both national identity and the sustainability of the welfare state, and that EU institutions are complicit in this perceived threat.

Moreover, DF's anti-immigration framing remained influential. The Social Democrats, under Mette Frederiksen, won the election by adopting DF's rhetoric, calling for a "zero asylum seekers" policy and emphasizing national cohesion (RFI, 2022). This shift exemplifies what O'Mahony (2025) calls "welfare chauvinism," where welfare access is tied to cultural conformity. As Frederiksen emphasized in 2015, "For us Social Democrats, language and employment are most important. Without them, it is difficult to manage in Denmark and become an active part of society" (Socialdemokraten, 2015, 3). This statement reflects a clear commitment to conditional integration based on individual contribution, reinforcing the convergence of center-left and radical-right discourses on migration.

This convergence is further exemplified by statements from leading Social Democrat figures that validate the framing of migration as a structural problem. As Peter Hummelgaard noted in 2019: "They are fundamentally in agreement with us that there is a problem, which they can also see and which they can hear when they meet people on the street. And I hope that the common recognition that there is a problem, and that there is something unfair in the way we are withdrawing today, will allow us to find common ground on these things." (Socialdemokraten, 2019, 24).

This statement illustrates how the Social Democrats not only acknowledged DF's problem framing but also sought legitimacy in shared societal concerns, reinforcing the mainstreaming of exclusionary discourse.

The 2022 election confirmed this realignment. DF fell further to 2.7%, while the Social Democrats retained power with a platform of strict migration control and welfare protection. Migration remained central, but its political ownership had shifted to the mainstream (Jupskås, 2022). Thus, even as DF declined electorally, their framing reshaped the migration consensus across the party spectrum.

The Danish political discourse on migration, centered around welfare conditionality, cultural incompatibility, and the preservation of national identity, exemplifies the interaction of populist and framing strategies. As Entman (1993, 52-53) outlines, these parties define the problem (immigration), identify its cause (lack of cultural fit or contribution), and offer solutions (restrictive policy), demonstrating the practical application of Framing Theory. Simultaneously, the convergence of mainstream and radical-right rhetoric indicates how populist narratives can successfully restructure the political center (Mudde, 2004, 550-551).

5.2.2. Framing Migration in Press Discourse

Press releases by Danish political parties, notably the Danish People's Party (DF) and the Social Democrats (S), have been instrumental in constructing migration as both a cultural and economic threat. This aligns with Entman's (1993) Framing Theory, which argues that framing highlights specific aspects of an issue to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. In the Danish context, party messaging constructed migration not as a question of humanitarian need or labor market integration, but as a civilizational challenge to national values.

DF's press communications regularly portrayed non-Western immigrants as bearers of incompatible norms, with frequent references to "ghettos," "parallel societies," and "imported values." In a 2021 statement, DF explicitly warned that "mass immigration from the Middle East is leading to the erosion of Danish culture and dangerous social divisions" (Kern, 2021). This language constructs migrants as a cultural threat rather than a vulnerable group, reinforcing DF's broader narrative of defending "Danishness" from multiculturalism.

From 2018 onwards, the Social Democrats increasingly adopted similar framings. While avoiding DF's overt alarmism, Social Democrats' press releases began linking migration to the perceived overuse of welfare benefits, failure to integrate, and pressure on housing and education systems. Some statements emphasized the need to "protect the welfare state from overuse by those who have not contributed," echoing welfare chauvinist logic (Toh, 2023). This shift mirrors the broader convergence described in Section 5.2.1, where S adopted restrictive policies to safeguard electoral competitiveness against DF's appeal.

This discursive shift was particularly evident in Social Democrats' press releases post-2018, which adopted similar framings through more technocratic language while avoiding DF's overt alarmism. Collocation analysis showed increased pairing of "velfærd" (welfare) with "pres" (pressure) and "integration" with "forpligtelser" (obligations) (Socialdemokraten, 2019, 3-31). These suggest a narrative shift from rights-based inclusion to conditional welfare access, echoing the logic of welfare chauvinism (O'Mahony, 2025).

This discursive alignment between left and right reinforces the mainstreaming of exclusionary frames. Both DF and S framed migration as a double-edged threat—culturally corrosive and economically burdensome. The rhetorical emphasis on "shared values" and "our welfare" served to morally justify restrictive policy measures, cloaking exclusion in the language of solidarity and protection.

Moreover, the strategic use of press releases reveals how parties use official communications not only to reflect internal agendas but also to shape public debate. By pre-framing issues for media uptake, parties like DF and S exercised significant influence over how migration was understood by the public. The result is a discursive environment where migration has become institutionalized as a high-salience, morally charged, and cross-partisan issue in Danish politics.

5.2.3. Public Opinion

Public opinion has played a pivotal role in mainstreaming exclusionary migration policies in Denmark. Following the 2015 refugee crisis, Danish voters expressed growing concern over immigration, particularly from non-Western countries. According to Eurobarometer 84, 54% of Danes identified immigration as one of the EU's top issues, far above the EU average of 47% (European Parliament, 2015, 12). This heightened public anxiety over immigration significantly bolstered electoral support for the Danish People's Party (DF), creating fertile

ground for both DF and, later, the Social Democrats to recalibrate their rhetoric and policies in alignment with voter sentiment (Møller Stahl, 2015).

Mainstream parties, especially S, responded by recalibrating their platforms. As O'Mahony (2025) notes, welfare chauvinism—restricting welfare based on cultural conformity—emerged as a key strategy to preserve voter trust while justifying exclusion. Social Democrats' shift toward strict asylum regulations and culturally contingent integration measures clearly illustrates a strategic discursive realignment aimed at reconciling welfare state preservation with exclusionary voter preferences.

This alignment with voter sentiment is further evidenced by polling. A 2025 YouGov survey found that 55% of Danes thought immigration to their country had been too high over the past ten years. (Smith, 2025). This shift reflects what Rydgren (2008, 740) and Jungar (2025, 6) describe as reactive mainstreaming: when mainstream parties adopt populist frames to protect electoral viability.

Significantly, Danish public concerns were driven not only by immigration levels but by perceptions of integration failure. Government reports highlighted issues such as “ghettoization” and cultural segregation, which were amplified in political rhetoric. In this context, migration was increasingly framed as a moral and cultural threat to social cohesion and the welfare state, which Entman (1993, 52) terms the selective amplification of specific issues through framing.

Voter sentiment in Denmark did not merely follow political rhetoric—it shaped it. The Danish case illustrates a mutually reinforcing dynamic in which public anxiety, media framing, and party strategy interacted recursively, legitimizing the ideological convergence of both left- and right-wing actors around increasingly restrictive migration policies.

From 2015 to 2022, Denmark's electoral discourse on migration shifted from a politically polarizing topic to a normalized and institutionalized policy consensus. Initially driven by the Danish People's Party, restrictive migration narratives were gradually absorbed by mainstream actors, particularly the Social Democrats. The salience of migration remained consistently high, with DF's decline offset by Social Democrats' appropriation of its frames, illustrating a transition from reactive accommodation to proactive agenda-setting by mainstream parties.

5.3 Sweden: From Moral Exceptionalism to Restrictive Pragmatism

Sweden presents a case of dramatic narrative convergence. The Sweden Democrats (SD) have systematically reframed migration as a driver of insecurity and societal fragmentation (Skodo, 2018)—frames reflecting Entman’s causal and prognostic framing model (Entman, 1993, 52). The rise of SD and the subsequent strategic adaptation by mainstream parties is also a common case of populist agenda-setting by reaction, where dominant parties adopt right-wing populist frames to protect their electoral base (Mudde, 2004, 560-561; Minkenberg, 2007, 1-6).

Sweden’s migration policy, long grounded in international solidarity and universal welfare (Etzold, 2017, 1–3), faced a pivotal rupture during the 2015 refugee crisis. The unprecedented inflow of asylum seekers exposed weaknesses in integration and welfare systems, creating fertile ground for challengers to Sweden’s humanitarian exceptionalism and accelerating a shift toward defensive nationalism.

Migration thus has emerged as a central rallying point in Swedish elections, crystallizing public anxieties around security, welfare access, and national identity. Electoral competition increasingly revolved around migration-related issues, with parties forced to position themselves clearly in response to the growing salience of migration debates.

The Sweden Democrats (SD) emerged as the key disruptor, framing migration as a cultural, security, and economic threat (Widfeldt, 2018, 4–5). By amplifying fears of crime, welfare dependency, and cultural fragmentation, SD fractured the political consensus and forced mainstream parties to adjust their positions. This shift exemplifies "agenda-setting by reaction," where populist actors drive the strategic realignment of established parties (Minkenberg, 2007, 1-3).

Concurrently, the rise of welfare chauvinism (O’Mahony, 2025) redefined the foundations of social solidarity, embedding cultural compatibility as a precondition for welfare access. Instead of contesting SD’s narratives, mainstream actors absorbed them, normalizing exclusionary frames. These developments entrenched the Sweden Democrats as a central force, fundamentally reshaping Swedish electoral competition and migration discourse.

The following sections examine how SD transitioned from a marginal force to a central actor in Swedish politics, reshaping migration debates and redefining political legitimacy.

Through sustained electoral gains and strategic framing, SD compelled mainstream parties to adopt more restrictive positions, demonstrating how right-wing populists can transform the political landscape without directly entering government.

5.3.1. Political Entrenchment of the Sweden Democrats

The political entrenchment of the Sweden Democrats (SD) demonstrates how an initially marginalized party can, through sustained external pressure, not only reshape party competition but also redefine the political agenda without formal government participation. SD's strategy combined incremental electoral gains with consistent issue framing, compelling mainstream actors to reposition themselves on migration, security, and national identity.

Following the 2015 migration crisis, SD's central narrative - portraying migration as an existential threat to welfare sustainability, social cohesion, and national security — resonated more broadly with a public increasingly concerned about integration failures (Widfeldt, 2018, 4–5). This shift in public sentiment directly disrupted the established party system. While the Social Democratic Party (SAP) and the Moderates (M) initially sought to isolate SD through a "cordon sanitaire," the steady growth in SD's electoral support, from 12.9% in 2014 to 20.5% in 2022, rendered isolation politically unsustainable (Salo, 2024).

Under mounting pressure, mainstream parties reframed migration as a problem requiring stricter controls and culturally conditional integration. SAP, historically aligned with humanitarian ideals, pivoted toward advocating "orderly migration" and "integration before immigration," mirroring key elements of SD's discourse (SAP, 2021, 33-34). This shift was clearly formalized in SAP's 2022 election manifesto, which states: "We have tightened migration policy, and this line remains firm" (Socialdemokraterna, 2022, 11). The quote affirms the party's strategic alignment with a more restrictive policy direction, reinforcing the normalization of exclusionary frames under populist pressure. The Moderates also adopted a securitized agenda, calling for reduced asylum quotas and stronger border controls to neutralize SD's growing electoral appeal (Skodo, 2018). These shifts illustrate how right-wing populist framing can fundamentally alter the strategic positioning of established parties.

The theoretical lens of "agenda-setting by reaction" (Minkenberg, 2007, 1-6) is crucial to understanding this process. SD did not need cabinet positions to reorient the political center; its electoral rise recalibrated mainstream parties' cost-benefit calculations, forcing them to compete on the terrain SD had set.

Migration and national identity, once peripheral, became the dominant electoral cleavages, displacing traditional socio-economic divides rooted in labor-market regulation and welfare expansion.

Moreover, the normalization of welfare chauvinism (O'Mahony, 2025) further deepened this transformation. Public and political discourse increasingly framed welfare access as conditional upon cultural compatibility and societal contribution, drawing SAP and the Moderates closer to SD's ideological framing (Widfeldt, 2018, 6–7). This reframing shifted the evaluative criteria for political legitimacy from universalist humanitarianism to a protectionist nationalism, illustrating how populist pressure can reshape issue salience and the normative boundaries of acceptable politics.

The 2022 elections solidified these dynamics. Although SD remained formally outside the governing coalition, the new center-right government, led by the Moderates, incorporated many of SD's migration and integration priorities into the Tidö Agreement — effectively institutionalizing SD's influence over national policy (Salo, 2024). In doing so, SD demonstrated how sustained external pressure can achieve substantive agenda control even without holding ministerial office.

In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Sweden Democrats (SD) used the campaign as a strategic opportunity to reinforce their anti-immigration agenda at the EU level. Their campaign framed migration not only as a domestic concern but as a result of systemic failures by Brussels, particularly in securing Europe's external borders. SD emphasized a narrative of "regaining control," linking immigration with rising crime, welfare strain, and cultural fragmentation—consistent with their long-standing nativist messaging (Oskarson, 261-265). By Europeanizing their migration discourse, SD effectively broadened the scope of their populist messaging beyond national borders.

Thus, the political entrenchment of SD exemplifies a broader populist strategy: using electoral leverage to force systemic adaptation among established parties, elevate new issue priorities, and fundamentally recast the ideological architecture of the political landscape.

5.3.2. Media-Focused Messaging and the Politics of Security

Following the Sweden Democrats' (SD) political entrenchment, migration discourse in Sweden increasingly converged around security-related frames, particularly in party press releases and

media narratives. Applying Entman's Framing Theory (Entman, 1993, 52-55), SD and later mainstream parties strategically linked migration to crime, social fragmentation, and public safety issues. This framing not only legitimized restrictive policies but also shifted public perceptions, reinforcing the portrayal of migrants as a primary source of societal insecurity.

SD's press releases during the post-2015 period systematically associated immigration with rising criminality. The party has frequently cited instances of violence and riots as evidence of "failed integration," constructing a causal link between non-Western immigration and threats to public order (Åkesson, 2021, 24-31). This approach exemplifies what Wodak (2013) describes as the "politics of fear," where migration is framed not through humanitarian or economic lenses, but as an existential risk demanding urgent state intervention (Wodak et al. 2013, 27-29).

SD's 2022 manifesto further intensifies this narrative by framing immigration as a direct threat to the Swedish welfare state and national progress. The party claims: "It has been a long time since major progressive reforms were implemented in Sweden to strengthen the welfare state for ordinary people. The increased tax revenues generated by growth have gone to other things, primarily immigration." (Sverigedemokraterna, 2022, 6). Moreover, SD explicitly challenges Sweden's humanitarian self-image, stating: "Swedish welfare is not capable of being accessible to the entire world's population, and nor should it be." (Sverigedemokraterna, 2022, 6). These statements reflect a zero-sum framing in which migration is blamed for stagnation in public services and fiscal strain. They also reveal a shift from purely cultural or criminal threat narratives to a broader portrayal of immigration as fundamentally incompatible with the preservation of national welfare and social progress.

Mainstream parties, particularly the Moderates and the Social Democrats, gradually incorporated similar framings into their communications. For example, in the 2022 election campaign, the Moderates' manifesto stressed the need to "reduce immigration" and to "restore order to immigration and integration" as prerequisites for successful integration, warning that otherwise Sweden risks "a growing shadow society, with social exclusion, illegal work, and crime" (Moderaterna, 2022, 24). Similarly, the Social Democratic Party's 2022 election manifesto emphasized the need for stronger border controls and tougher crime policies, implicitly framing migration and failed integration as security challenges (Socialdemokraterna, 2022, 7-9).

Despite this shift toward securitized rhetoric in campaigns and press releases, official party documents from the Social Democrats still echoed earlier humanitarian values. For example, in their 2021 policy guidelines, SAP stated: "Crime erodes cohesion and makes it more difficult to build a society based on solidarity. Therefore, the fight against crime and its causes is also a clear equality issue. In the next ten years, the whole of society needs to join forces to combat segregation and prevent criminals from affecting local communities. Sweden should not have any vulnerable areas." (SAP, 2021, 30). This framing illustrates the party's continued emphasis on egalitarian values, even as it adapts to securitized pressures from populist challengers.

Despite this shift toward securitized rhetoric in campaigns and press releases, official party documents from the Social Democrats still echoed earlier humanitarian values. For example, in their 2021 policy guidelines, SAP stated: "Getting a job and learning Swedish is crucial for integration to work. It lays the foundation for independence and participation in Swedish society and contributes positively to our common prosperity and welfare." (SAP, 2021, 33). This emphasis on inclusion through work and language shows that while electoral messaging hardened, the party's formal stance continued to reflect social democratic principles of integration and equality. It also reveals the coexistence of divergent frames within mainstream parties: one responding to electoral pressures, and another rooted in ideological tradition.

The strategic linking of migration to crime also allowed SD and other actors to propose specific policy remedies such as harsher sentencing, deportations, and integration tests, which portrayed them as offering pragmatic, security-first solutions. This form of "problem definition plus remedy prescription" matches Entman's (1993) criteria for successful political framing. Notably, while SD's rhetoric was more overtly exclusionary, mainstream party frames became increasingly indistinguishable in their securitization of migration by 2022.

The normalization of these frames had significant political consequences. According to the SOM Institute's (University of Gothenburg, 2023, 30) national survey, crime emerged as the most pressing societal issue for Swedes, with 37% identifying it as a top concern, while immigration and integration were cited by 22% of respondents.

This convergence of political and media messaging created a chain reaction: as fear-based frames dominated public discourse, voter demands for stricter migration controls intensified, further incentivizing political actors to adopt securitized narratives (Wodak et al. 2013, 15-19).

As Entman (1993) highlights, media framing not only emphasizes certain problems but also primes audiences to adopt particular causal interpretations and solutions.

Thus, migration frames propagated through party communications reporting after 2015 did not simply reflect societal concerns but also actively reshaped political realities. Migration was increasingly constructed as a security threat rather than a humanitarian or economic issue, repositioning it at the center of electoral competition.

5.3.3. Public Opinion

Parties' responsiveness to changing public attitudes toward migration has played a critical role in transforming the political landscape in Sweden. Since the 2015 refugee crisis, public opinion surveys have consistently indicated a growing restrictiveness in attitudes toward immigration, particularly regarding asylum and integration. According to the SOM Institute's Swedish Trends 1986–2022 report, 55% of respondents in 2022 supported the proposal to accept fewer refugees, up from approximately 40% in 2016 (University of Gothenburg, 2023, 56). This trend is mirrored in Eurobarometer findings. In 2015, 53% of Swedes ranked immigration among the top EU-wide concerns (European Union, 2015, 31). While these figures do not explain party behavior directly, they reflect the broader opinion environment that incentivized mainstream actors like SAP and the Moderates to adopt more securitized and conditional narratives on migration. This attitudinal shift has been especially evident among working-class and rural voters, many of whom have traditionally supported the Social Democrats (SAP) (Dal Bó et al. 2019, 5-22). Growing discontent with the perceived failure of integration has clearly eroded trust in mainstream parties and, therefore, opened space for populist narratives critical of Sweden's migration policy.

The Sweden Democrats have capitalized on these sentiments by presenting a narrative of cultural decline, failed integration, and security threats. Their consistent framing of migration as a driver of urban crime, welfare depletion, and social disorder has not only reinforced public concerns but also created electoral pressure on mainstream parties to recalibrate their positions (Widfeldt, 2018, 5–6; Skodo, 2018). This pattern, wherein established parties revise their rhetoric and policy stances to align with prevailing public opinion, is a very central mechanism of issue co-optation.

Empirical evidence of this adaptation is visible in the post-2018 shift in SAP's communication strategy. Whereas the party previously emphasized humanitarianism and solidarity, recent

campaign material has increasingly stressed integration “obligations,” stronger border controls, and the protection of the welfare state for those “who contribute” (Socialdemokraterna, 2022, 11-13). This rhetorical and policy shift illustrates how the Social Democrats have strategically redefined their migration discourse in response to populist pressure, recasting inclusion not as a right, but as a reward contingent on assimilation and economic utility.

Similarly, the Moderates have responded to voter pressure by hardening their stance on immigration, linking it to broader law-and-order themes. Their 2022 platform calls for the reduction of asylum quotas and the imposition of integration conditions tied to language acquisition and employment (Moderaterna, 2022, 25). This strategic repositioning reflects an effort to reclaim electoral ground from the Sweden Democrats by adopting similar rhetoric and policy proposals, particularly those that frame immigration as a challenge to national cohesion and institutional order.

This responsiveness aligns with the broader pattern of "strategic demarcation" discussed by Minkenberg (2007, 5-8), where parties shift their ideological boundaries in reaction to public pressure and challenge party success. In the Swedish case, voter discontent has not only triggered a rhetorical transformation but has also narrowed the discursive space for pro-immigration narratives. Progressive parties such as the Greens and the Left Party have struggled to maintain a coherent counter-frame in this environment, often relegated to reactive postures rather than agenda-setting roles (Jungar, 2025, 14–15). This indicates a broader reconfiguration of the political opportunity structure, in which right-wing populist framing not only shapes the content of the debate but also constrains the strategic agency of their opponents.

It can be stated that Swedish party responses to voter attitudes on migration illustrate a broader pattern of discursive adaptation under populist pressure. Instead of countering the populist narrative, mainstream parties progressively absorbed its fundamental frames, redefining migration as a benefit contingent on conformity and positioning national unity as a prerequisite for accessing welfare. This transformation marks a significant departure from Sweden’s traditional humanitarian posture and underscores the long-term influence of right-wing populism on the national political discourse.

By consistently linking migration to crime, cultural decline, and economic strain, Swedish parties, especially the Social Democrats and Moderates, have come to rely on fear-based and nationalist frames that echo the core mechanisms of Framing Theory (Entman, 1993, 52–55;

Widfeldt, 2018, 4–6). The discursive adaptation by these parties, driven by the Sweden Democrats' electoral pressure, also confirms the reactive dimension of mainstreaming described in Populism Theory, whereby mainstream parties adopt exclusionary frames and tougher rhetoric to defend their electoral position against rising populist challengers (Mudde, 2004, 555–561). As a result, narratives that were once confined to the political fringe have not only gained legitimacy but have become embedded within Sweden's mainstream political discourse.

Between 2015 and 2022, Sweden moved from a moral-exceptionalist stance on migration to a more restrictive, securitized discourse. The Sweden Democrats' steady electoral gains forced mainstream parties like SAP and the Moderates to harden their stances. Migration shifted from a secondary issue to a primary electoral cleavage, with crime and integration failures becoming dominant themes. This reflects a strategic adaptation over multiple election cycles, where increasing salience drove policy convergence and narrative alignment.

5.4. Finland: Populist Framing and Welfare Nationalism

Finland illustrates the institutionalization of welfare nationalist rhetoric, where the Finns Party (PS) has redefined migration as a threat to both cultural identity and social solidarity (O'Mahony, 2025). This framing resonates strongly with Entman's (1993, 52–55) theory, particularly in terms of how political actors define social problems and attach moral significance to them. Empirical studies show that the Finns Party consistently links asylum seekers and non-European migrants to cultural incompatibility and economic strain, framing them as outsiders who undermine the fairness of the welfare state (Alho, 2021, 86–89). Simultaneously, PS's portrayal of migrants as economic and cultural outsiders aligns closely with Mudde's (2004, 543) understanding of populism as a struggle between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" who enable migration, reflecting broader themes of exclusionary nativism and elite betrayal.

In recent years, migration has evolved from a peripheral issue to a central axis of electoral competition in Finland. This transformation is closely tied to the rise of the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS), which has effectively employed populist and welfare-nationalist narratives to challenge the political mainstream. While Finland's party system remained relatively stable until the early 2010s, the Finns Party's ascent disrupted this equilibrium by framing migration as a threat to national sovereignty, cultural cohesion, and the sustainability

of the welfare state (Alho, 2021, 87-92). Therefore, this reframing not only resonated with public unease during the 2015 refugee crisis but clearly initiated a broader realignment in party strategies

The 2015 parliamentary elections marked a decisive moment in this shift, as the Finns Party surged into government and positioned migration, particularly asylum policy, at the heart of national debate (Alho, 2021, 87–88). Through emotionally charged rhetoric and strategic framing, including warnings about “Islamisation,” “parallel societies,” and uncontrolled migration, the party transformed migration into a rallying point for political mobilization, coalition bargaining, and voter alignment (Yle News, 2016). This framing closely aligns with Entman’s (1993) theory, which explains how political actors define problems, identify causes, and promote specific solutions to shape public understanding. The shift has had lasting effects: not only has it elevated migration as a decisive campaign issue, but it has also triggered a broader discursive slide.

Mainstream centrist and left-leaning parties, including the Social Democrats and Centre Party, have gradually adopted more restrictive positions on migration, often under the logic of preserving the welfare state through conditional inclusion. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the Finnish case exemplifies how right-wing populism can reconfigure mainstream politics by reframing migration as a zero-sum struggle between insiders and outsiders.

5.4.1. The Finns Party and Electoral Breakthroughs

The Finns Party has significantly reshaped Finnish electoral politics by strategically framing migration as a polarizing and mobilizing issue. While its rise began in the early 2010s, the 2015 refugee crisis provided a turning point, enabling the party to portray migration as a national threat to culture, welfare, and sovereignty (Alho, 2021, 87–89; Yle News, 2016). This reframing reflects a broader pattern in which right-wing populists exploit perceived crises to shift political discourse and redefine the boundaries of legitimate debate.

Through emotionally charged language—invoking fears of “Islamisation” and “parallel societies”—the party used what Entman (1993, 52–55) describes as diagnostic and prognostic framing to position migration as the root of social disorder, justifying restrictive border and welfare policies. This resonated with voters concerned about cultural change and economic insecurity.

The strategy proved effective in the 2015 parliamentary elections, where the Finns Party won 17.6% of the vote and joined a coalition government (Statistics Finland, 2015, 1-2). Although it did not lead key ministries, it influenced policy by pushing for tighter refugee quotas, stricter family reunification rules, and cuts to integration services (Alho, 2021, 88–89; Valtioneuvoston kanslia, 2015, 37-38). This illustrates how populist parties can shape institutional outcomes through discursive power alone.

Mainstream parties responded by adopting more restrictive stances. The Centre Party began stressing “controlled migration,” while the Social Democrats shifted toward advocating limited welfare access for migrants (Helsinki Times, 2023). This “contagion from the right” (Bale et al., 2010, 410–426) highlights how radical right actors influence broader political norms by redefining the terms of debate. Broader Eurobarometer trends confirm the rising salience of immigration in Finnish public opinion. In 2015, 41% of Finnish respondents cited immigration as one of the most important issues facing the EU (European Union, 2015, 31).

Although this does not establish a direct causal link, it illustrates the public mood in which the Finns Party’s welfare nationalist messaging gained traction.

This dynamic reflects Rydgren’s (2008, 745–754) “agenda-setting by reaction,” whereby populist pressure compels centrist parties to reposition themselves within the same exclusionary frame. As Jungar (2025, 19–21) notes, this results in the mainstreaming of radical-right narratives across the political spectrum.

The 2023 elections confirmed this trend: the Finns Party increased its vote share to 20.1%, becoming the second-largest party and securing major concessions in the new government’s agenda, including stricter asylum rules and expanded deportation powers (Yle News, 2023). At the core of the party’s success is welfare chauvinism—the idea that social benefits should be reserved for those who culturally and economically “belong.” By portraying migrants as both cultural threats and fiscal burdens, the party legitimized exclusionary policies under the guise of protecting fairness and sustainability (O’Mahony, 2025). Public opinion has followed suit: by 2023, immigration ranked among the top public concerns in Finland, with growing scepticism, particularly toward non-EU migration. Broader Eurobarometer trends, however, suggest a slight decrease in concern about immigration in the EU since 2015, showing that around 28% of the EU’s citizens consider immigration as one of the main issues for the EU (European Union, 2023). Broader Eurobarometer trends suggest a modest decline in public

concern about immigration across the EU since 2015, with approximately 28% of EU citizens now identifying it as one of the most important issues facing the Union (European Union, 2023). Despite this slight decrease, immigration remains consistently ranked among the top perceived challenges, reinforcing findings from national surveys in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. This feedback loop, as outlined by Entman (1993, 55–57), demonstrates how party rhetoric can reshape both policy and public attitudes.

In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Finns Party (PS) used the campaign to reinforce its anti-immigration and welfare nationalist platform at the European level. The party’s rhetoric emphasized the EU’s failure to secure external borders and portrayed pan-European migration policies as direct threats to Finnish sovereignty and welfare sustainability. Rather than advocating “Fix the EU,” PS focused on narratives of “taking back control” and resisting “Brussels-imposed quotas,” aligning with the broader messaging of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group (Rivière & Zalc, 2019).

PS argued that Finnish taxpayers should not bear the costs of immigration failures elsewhere in Europe, linking EU migration policy to domestic welfare strain and cultural fragmentation (The Finns Party, 2019, 7).

This framing employed a dual-level populist strategy: blaming supranational elites for domestic social and economic vulnerabilities while simultaneously positioning PS as the only credible defender of national interest.

This framing mirrors Entman’s concept of causal attribution and prognostic framing (1993, 52), where responsibility is placed on supranational institutions and restrictive policy is proposed as a remedy. The 2019 election thus illustrates how PS integrated EU-level critique into its national strategy, using the European Parliament campaign to amplify its populist framing and solidify its position as a key actor in both domestic and transnational migration debates.

5.4.2. National Identity and Welfare Concerns in Party Communication

The Finns Party (PS) has consistently framed immigration as a direct challenge to Finland’s national identity and social cohesion. Drawing upon both cultural and economic anxieties, its political communication links migration not only to the erosion of shared values but to the overextension of welfare resources. This dual frame—cultural preservation and welfare

strain—resonates strongly with what Entman (1993, 52-54) terms diagnostic and prognostic framing: identifying migration as the root cause of social disorder and proposing policy exclusion as the remedy.

Press releases from the Finns Party routinely emphasize the incompatibility of non-European migrants with “Finnish values” and frame welfare benefits as privileges earned through societal contribution. For example, during the 2023 electoral campaign, PS explicitly advocated that “public benefits must be reserved for those who contribute to society and respect its values” (Perussuomalaiset, 2023, 5-11). This narrative mirrors the welfare chauvinist logic described by O’Mahony (2025), in which welfare becomes conditional upon cultural conformity rather than legal residence.

The rhetoric employed by PS has further been characterized by its moralized tone. Statements often contrast “hard-working Finnish families” with “welfare-dependent migrants,” portraying the latter as both undeserving and unassimilable. This confrontation taps into Rydgren’s (2008, 744–746) notion of “symbolic boundary maintenance,” where cultural insiders are elevated while outsiders are delegitimized. The party’s 2023 manifesto underscores this by proposing a “Finnish-first” policy in housing, healthcare, and benefits access by mentioning “It is untenable that asylum seekers are granted access to many publicly funded services that many Finns find difficult or even impossible to access.” (Perussuomalaiset, 2023, 5-13). This policy logic operationalizes symbolic boundaries into material hierarchies, prioritizing access based on perceived cultural belonging and social contribution. Rather than a universalist welfare model, PS advances a welfare nationalist framework, in which social solidarity is conditional upon ethnic and cultural sameness. This deepens the exclusion of migrant populations and reframes the welfare state as a mechanism of identity protection, rather than redistributive justice.

This discursive approach has pressured other parties to adopt similar narratives. The Centre Party (Cen), while traditionally more moderate, increasingly refers to “responsible migration policy” and “the importance of shared integration values” in its official communications. Among other things, the Party has stated that “Everyone who comes to Finland must comply with our country's laws and the central principles of society, for example, equality between women and men.” (Keskusta, 2023, 48-50).

Similarly, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) has emphasized that migrants must “respect the rules and norms of Finnish society” and that integration policy must prioritize “contribution-

based inclusion”. The Party also mentions that "Immigration and integration needs are strongly concentrated in certain regions, and therefore integration challenges must be solved primarily in these areas." (SDP, 2023, 23). With this action, the party is trying to prevent the emergence of so-called "parallel societies", where the majority of residents are foreigners, and as a result, integration and learning Finnish and Swedish may take a back seat. These shifts illustrate what Bale et al. (2010, 410) describe as “contagion from the right,” where populist narratives diffuse across the political spectrum.

Collocation analysis of party analyses from 2015 to 2023 further confirms this trend. Phrases like “taakanjako” (burden-sharing) and “sopeutuminen” (adaptation) have grown more prevalent, especially in the communications of PS and SDP (Perussuomalaiset 2015, 4-7; SDP, 2015). These lexical patterns reinforce the framing of migration as both an economic and cultural problem that must be managed through conditionality.

Overall, it can be stated that party communication in Finland reflects a convergence toward welfare nationalist framing. The Finns Party has successfully established a narrative that fuses cultural preservation with welfare protection, prompting mainstream parties to recalibrate their positions. Through this discursive shift, migration has been reframed not as a humanitarian or labor issue but as a challenge for national belonging and policy entitlement.

5.4.3. Public Opinion

The discursive shift in party communication has not occurred in a vacuum; it is intimately tied to evolving public attitudes. Finnish voter sentiment has grown more skeptical toward immigration, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis. This shift has not only legitimized exclusionary rhetoric but also contributed to a broader political realignment in which migration has become a decisive factor in party preference and coalition dynamics.

According to the “Eduskuntavaalitutkimus”, Finnish National Election Study (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2023, 130-161), concern over immigration rose significantly between 2015 and 2023, particularly among lower-income, less urbanized constituencies—traditional strongholds of the Centre Party and Social Democrats. The Finns Party capitalized on this disaffection by reinforcing narratives of cultural threat and economic unfairness, consolidating support among these demographics, and displacing former mainstream dominance. During the 2023 electoral campaign, for example, the Finns Party stated that “The long-term goal must be to replace Finland’s current residence-based social security system with a citizenship-based

model.” (Perussuomalaiset, 2023, 5). This proposal reflects the party’s broader welfare nationalist logic, in which access to social support is framed as a reward for cultural conformity and legal belonging rather than a universal right.

This shift reflects not only attitudinal change but also institutional transformation. The 2023 parliamentary elections saw a clear reordering of party competition, with immigration playing a key role in coalition negotiations. The success of the Finns Party forced the National Coalition Party to accept stricter migration stances in its government platform, even though the party traditionally emphasized market liberalism over cultural conservatism (Kinnunen, 2023). This convergence highlights how electoral incentives now increasingly revolve around migration, with parties recalibrating their platforms to reflect the new ideological landscape. As Mudde’s (2004, 563) populism theory suggests, this dynamic illustrates the “contagion effect,” where mainstream parties adopt exclusionary frames to maintain electoral competitiveness. Simultaneously, the Finns Party’s framing of migration as a threat to national identity and welfare sustainability aligns with Entman’s (1993, 52) concept of diagnostic framing, identifying a societal problem and attributing blame in ways that resonate with public anxieties.

The Finnish case thus demonstrates how shifting public mood can create a deeper political realignment. Migration is no longer a niche issue but a central axis of political competition, capable of reordering alliances, redefining party strategies, and reframing the boundaries of national solidarity. The mainstreaming of exclusionary frames in Finland underscores the capacity of right-wing populist rhetoric to reshape political norms even without achieving consistent ministerial dominance. As the 2023 elections demonstrated, migration now functions as a challenge for political legitimacy and coalition viability.

Between 2015 and 2023, Finland experienced a notable discursive transformation in migration politics, shifting from relative marginality to centrality in electoral competition. The Finns Party’s sustained electoral growth and strategic use of welfare nationalist rhetoric compelled mainstream parties, such as the Centre Party and the Social Democrats, to increasingly adopt exclusionary frames and conditional integration policies. Migration evolved from a peripheral concern into a defining electoral cleavage, often framed in terms of cultural preservation and economic fairness.

This transformation illustrates a broader narrative alignment across the party spectrum, where salience and public concern over migration have driven policy convergence and redefined political legitimacy in Finnish party politics.

5.5. Comparative Insights: Framing Migration Across the Nordic Region

Taking into consideration the previously analyzed national cases, it becomes evident that the salience of migration in Nordic electoral politics is not only due to domestic socio-economic concerns but also a result of converging rhetorical strategies among parties across the ideological spectrum. The findings suggest that while right-wing populist actors such as the Finns Party (PS), Sweden Democrats (SD), and Danish People's Party (DF) have been central in initiating exclusionary migration frames, their narratives have gradually been adopted by center-left and centrist parties. This underscores the claim introduced in the theoretical part that populist agenda-setting can restructure the strategic positioning of mainstream actors even without formal institutional pressure (Jungar, 2025, 21-22; Rydgren, 2008, 745-754).

The diffusion and normalization of restrictive migration discourse, however, cannot be solely attributed to populist influence. The analysis also points to broader societal undercurrents, particularly shifts in public opinion, that have significantly influenced party strategies. Across Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, increasing public concern over issues such as cultural cohesion, pressure on welfare systems, and national security has prompted mainstream parties to adopt more restrictive migration positions. This corresponds with framing theory's proposition that political communication not only reflects public concerns but also actively constructs the boundaries of legitimate discourse by defining problems and suggesting solutions (Entman, 1993, 52).

Eurobarometer data from 2015 to 2023 indicates a marked increase in the salience of migration as a political issue across the Nordic region. In the immediate aftermath of the European refugee crisis, concern over immigration surged - 54% of Danes, 53% of Swedes, and 41% of Finns cited it as one of the most pressing challenges facing the EU. While these figures do not prove a direct causal link between public opinion and party behavior, they offer important contextual evidence for understanding the discursive environment in which migration debates took shape. This climate of heightened concern provided fertile ground for political actors, particularly on the right, to reframe migration as a fundamental threat to national identity, social cohesion, and the viability of the welfare state.

Still, national variations persist in how political parties have responded. In Denmark, the Social Democrats' early and proactive embrace of welfare chauvinist narratives illustrates a strategic effort to neutralize the Danish People's Party's electoral appeal. In contrast, Sweden followed a more reactive trajectory, with mainstream parties gradually adjusting to the growing influence of the Sweden Democrats and adopting more securitized and exclusionary language over time. Finland presents a hybrid case: while the Finns Party has driven the populist framing of migration, mainstream parties have adapted in response both to rhetorical pressure and to the practical demands of coalition politics, as seen after the 2023 elections.

These findings support the hypothesis that electoral competition around migration leads to a convergence of party strategies, particularly when right-wing populists gain traction. In all three countries, the framing of migration as a threat has transcended ideological boundaries. However, this convergence has also served strategic purposes: mainstream parties have instrumentalized exclusionary narratives to maintain electoral competitiveness and preserve policy influence in an increasingly fragmented political landscape.

Despite these common patterns, variation in institutional responses remains. In Denmark, a restrictive migration policy has become an established consensus. In Sweden, exclusionary rhetoric has gained legitimacy without formal government participation by SD. In Finland, coalition bargaining has given the Finns Party significant influence over the migration agenda, revealing how populist discursive power translates into concrete policy influence. Therefore, while all three cases confirm the mainstreaming of exclusionary migration frames, the modalities of convergence—whether proactive, reactive, or coalition-driven—differ based on the structure of party systems and the timing of populist breakthroughs.

While the rise of right-wing populism is a visible factor, it is equally important to note that migration frames have been shaped by deeper structural anxieties regarding the sustainability of the Nordic welfare model. Parties across the political spectrum have redefined welfare access through nationalist lenses, embedding the idea that social benefits should be tied to cultural conformity and contribution. Even where alternative explanations exist—such as economic pressures, institutional incentives, or EU-level policy changes—the framing of migration as a matter of deservingness and national protection remains dominant. Thus, the evidence supports the theoretical proposition that exclusionary migration discourse, once confined to the political margins, has become central to the strategic calculus of Nordic electoral politics.

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to answer the research question: How has the rise of the Finns Party, the Sweden Democrats, and the Danish People's Party influenced the framing of migration policies and debates in electoral competition across Denmark, Sweden, and Finland? Drawing on a comparative, multi-method approach, this thesis demonstrates that right-wing populist parties have reshaped migration discourse both through electoral success and by pushing mainstream parties toward more restrictive, welfare-nationalist narratives.

The study finds that across the Nordic countries, migration has evolved from a secondary issue to a core axis of electoral competition. In Denmark, the Social Democrats proactively integrated exclusionary frames once advanced by the Danish People's Party, embedding cultural protectionism into mainstream policy. Sweden's trajectory was more reactive, with the Sweden Democrats' growing influence pressuring traditional parties like SAP and the Moderates to reframe integration along securitized and conditional lines. Finland exhibits a hybrid model: the Finns Party has driven both rhetorical and policy-level adjustments, with mainstream actors responding to populist discourse under the dual pressures of shifting public opinion and coalition dynamics. Across all three cases, the salience of migration has fostered convergence across party lines, anchored in frames emphasizing threat, deservingness, and national belonging.

These findings strongly support the relevance of both Framing Theory and Populism Theory in the Nordic context. Robert Entman's Framing Theory (1993) helps explain how migration has been problematized across party systems as a cultural and economic burden, while the Populist Theory (Mudde, 2004) illustrates how right-wing actors have redefined the boundaries of legitimate discourse. The concept of "agenda-setting by reaction" is particularly useful in understanding how mainstream parties shift their positions to anticipate or contain the populist challenge. This confirms that populist influence has reshaped the core strategies of mainstream politics.

Importantly, the convergence around exclusionary frames is not merely an electoral tactic—it reflects deeper structural anxieties about the sustainability and cultural foundations of the Nordic welfare state. Parties now increasingly link social benefits to cultural conformity and contribution, moving away from universalist welfare ideals. This shift marks a significant transformation in how solidarity and belonging are conceptualized in Nordic societies.

While rooted in the Nordic context, the mechanisms identified—discursive convergence, agenda-setting by reaction, and welfare nationalism—are not exclusive to these cases. Similar dynamics are observable in other Western European countries where right-wing populist parties challenge mainstream narratives and force discursive shifts. However, generalization should be approached with caution: the strength of the welfare state, party system fragmentation, and historical attitudes toward immigration mediate how and to what extent these patterns unfold elsewhere.

This study also builds on and contributes to existing literature. It affirms findings from Rydgren (2005), Jungar (2025), and Bale et al. (2010), while offering a more integrated comparative lens across Nordic cases and extending their work by explicitly analyzing the role of framing in mainstream party adaptation. Moreover, it provides empirical support for recent studies emphasizing the normalization of radical-right discourse in liberal democracies.

Finally, while this thesis focuses on migration, the implications of the findings are relevant for other policy domains. The mechanism of discursive normalization, whereby populist frames infiltrate mainstream agendas, may apply to debates on climate policy, European integration, or gender and family norms. In each of these areas, populist actors increasingly frame issues through nationalistic, moralistic, or exclusionary lenses, and mainstream parties may adopt these narratives to retain electoral viability.

However, this study also acknowledges its limitations. By focusing primarily on press releases, party manifestos, and Eurobarometer data, it does not fully explore other influential discursive arenas, such as social media, televised debates, or party speeches. Future research could benefit from a broader corpus of political communication or by incorporating interviews with party strategists and voters to uncover how narratives are perceived and internalized. Future research could broaden the discursive scope and assess how these narratives are internalized by voters and implemented in practice.

In conclusion, the rise of right-wing populist parties in the Nordic countries has had profound consequences for how migration is framed and politicized. What began as a populist challenge to liberal migration norms has evolved into a systemic transformation of party competition, policy priorities, and welfare state ideology. The mainstreaming of exclusionary discourse, once seen as secondary, is now central to the political logic of electoral competition in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland.

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Tartu, 19.05.2025