Mainstream Party Anti-Minority Rhetoric
Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures

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PhD Dissertation

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Acknowledgements

This part of the dissertation is usually where people, in addition to thanking all the ones that helped them along the way, also take the opportunity to wax poetic about the process of doing a PhD. I will allow myself to do exactly the same, and for good reason. As the saying goes, the owl of Minerva takes flight only with the falling of the dusk. Only now, at the end of the process, do I feel like I can begin to make sense of the past three years.

What is immediately evident is that doing a PhD is not easy. Driven by an ardent desire for understanding the world, you embark on a journey without a clear road map, uncertain where it will lead or whether you will even reach your ultimate destination at all. In some ways, this journey is representative of a more universal story. Hans Castorp travels to the Swiss Alps expecting a brief visit, but ends up on a seven-year long journey of intellectual self-discovery. Eugène de Rastignac arrives in Paris driven by an ambition to make his own way in the world. Per Sidenius leaves the Danish countryside for Copenhagen, hoping to achieve something for posterity. It is no coincidence that literature is rife with stories like these. Doing a PhD is, in a more modest way, a version of that journey, and I, in a more modest way, see myself reflected in that story. In the pursuit of knowledge, I undertook the task of writing a PhD, a task that involved long hours at the office, tight deadlines, occasional dead ends, and no small amount of stress. Yet whatever difficulties the process involved, I was never truly alone in it. Along the way, I benefited from the patience, advice, friendship, and encouragement of many people, without whom I certainly would not have reached my destination.

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momentarily feeling dejected at the prospect of having to re-write my introduction again so as to ”highlight the puzzle more clearly” or ”be less wordy”, I always had a distinct impression that the dimly lit path in front of me was slightly more illuminated, and that my project was headed in the right direction.

Jens Peter, you often made sure to inquire about how I was doing, and you took the time to provide encouragement whenever I was dealing with the many trials and tribulations inherent in academic life. I especially appreciated your ability to push me to think about the broader questions and implications of my work, which I think my research benefited greatly from. I enjoyed your company, in no small part due to your great sense of humor, and it was extremely reassuring to know that your door was open at any time - something I made liberal use of.

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Although I said I would not mention any names, I must make an exception for my office mate during all three years of doing my PhD, Mathies Jæger Andresen. Mathies, few people have spent as much time with me during this process as you have, and I am grateful for your willingness to discuss not only our academic work but also just about everything under the sun. I especially appreciated how our conversations about everything from Aristotelian ethics to the latest developments in Bosnian politics offered a welcome break from our academic work. Sharing an office with you made the journey of doing a PhD all the more enjoyable.

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”I believe that my opinions are correct, but I’m cognizant of the fact that my opinions may be wrong.”

– Abu Hanifa

Preface

This is an article-based PhD dissertation titled *Mainstream Party Anti-Minority Rhetoric: Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures*. It consists of this summary report and the following four research articles:

- Paper A: Karčić, Ali. "When Mainstream Parties Talk Like the Far Right: Evidence from Parliamentary Speeches in Western Europe". *Revise and Resubmit, Party Politics*.
- Paper B: Karčić, Ali. "From Symbols to Substance: Mainstream Party Responsiveness on Immigration". *Working Paper*.
- Paper C: Karčić, Ali. "Credible Prejudice? When and Why Mainstream Party Adoption of Far-Right Rhetoric Weakens Anti-Prejudice Norms". *Political Behavior, Accepted*.
- Paper D: Haas, Nicholas, Karčić, Ali & Schuessler, Julian. "Meditation Increases Expressions of Joy and Shifts Democratic and Intergroup Attitudes". *Under Review*.

The aim of the summary report is to synthesize the four articles into a unified account of the causes, the consequences of, and possible countermeasures to mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric. The report develops the overarching theoretical argument, explains the methodological choices and data sources used across the articles, and summarizes the main empirical findings. In doing so, it shows how mainstream party rhetoric is shaped by party competition, how it can affect citizens' perceptions of social norms, and how some of its consequences may be mitigated through emotional regulation.

Chapter 1
Introduction

In contemporary democratic politics, questions concerning immigration and ethnic minorities seem to reappear with remarkable regularity on the political agenda. Turn on the television, open a newspaper, or scroll through social media, and there is a good chance that the discussion will in some way pertain to ethnic minorities or immigration, both in the narrow sense of the word, such as border protection, asylum, and admission rules, or related to more fundamental questions about national identity, multiculturalism, religious and ethnic diversity, and the very role of ethnic minorities in modern democratic societies. This is not to say that minorities have not been a subject of political contention for many years. They very much have. Historically in Western Europe, however, political mobilization around the issue has been mostly limited to a few actors on the fringe of established politics, usually what we would denote as radical right, or far right, political parties and movements, at least in the post World War 2 era. Interestingly however, there is a good chance that the politician you are watching on TV may in fact not be a far right politician at all, but rather the opposite, namely a politician from an established, mainstream party in your country. Almost irrespective of what Western country you are watching the news in, it is not altogether unthinkable to encounter views associated primarily with far-right actors appearing in the rhetoric of political elites who represent the mainstream, whether they be Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, or Conservatives. In short, you might get a distinct feeling that various types of exclusionary rhetoric about immigration and ethnic minorities, whether that be in the form of calling for more restrictive immigration policies, or in the form of direct attacks on ethnic minorities, has proliferated among the political mainstream - or at least that is how it seems.

The apparent shift is visible across many democratic countries. In Denmark, the two biggest mainstream parties, the Social Democrats and the Liberals (Venstre) have both made topics surrounding immigrants and ethnic minorities a central part of their party program. Danish

mainstream politicians increasingly speak about parallel immigrant societies, diverging cultural norms practiced by Muslims, and immigrant crime as threats to Danish values, public safety, and the sustainability of the welfare state. This rhetoric has been accompanied by major restrictions policy-wise as well, such as adoption of more restrictive family reunification rules, and tightening of citizenship requirements. In France, Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly invoked the specter of a growing "Islamist separatism" to justify expanded state oversight of mosques and Muslim civil society organizations, such as private schools and charities, and placed Muslim communities at the center of a broader debate about loyalty to the Republic and adherence to norms of secularism. In Sweden and Germany, where mainstream parties long maintained strong firewalls against the far right, they now increasingly make overtures to parts of the electorate that hold more anti-immigrant opinions by adopting the rhetoric of Sverigedemokraterna and the Alternative für Deutschland respectively. It is no different across the Atlantic, where the 2016 Trump presidency marked a new era in American politics characterized by more overt hostility toward minorities, from the so-called "Muslim ban" targeting visitors from several majority-Muslim countries to high-ranking politicians' prejudiced remarks aimed at Hispanic immigrants.

If this apparent shift is real, it is difficult to overstate its potential. Mainstream parties are among the most central actors in democratic politics. They form governments, pass legislation, run public institutions, and set much of the agenda around which political conflict unfolds. Their rhetoric is therefore not simply one voice among many in public debate. If anti-immigrant or anti-minority rhetoric is espoused by parties that citizens recognize as particularly credible, and legitimate, it may hold more political weight than when voiced by actors with limited access to power. In this way, mainstream party rhetoric may shape the direction of public policy, the behavior of other parties, and the terms through which immigration and minority issues are discussed in public debate. It may also matter beyond formal politics. Mainstream parties have historically served as custodians of political and social norms, including norms of tolerance and civility. If these parties change their rhetoric vis-à-vis immigrants and ethnic minorities, such changes may also affect more than just citizens' attitudes, but also their perceptions of social norms more generally.

For these reasons, it is important to understand if and why mainstream parties use anti-minority rhetoric in the first place, and what consequences this rhetoric has for citizens. This dissertation addresses both questions.

1.1 The Literature - What Do We Know?

My dissertation builds on three bodies of research. The first concerns party competition and mainstream party responses to the far right. The second concerns the effects of elite rhetoric on citizens' attitudes and perceptions of social norms. The third concerns inter-group attitudes. Taken together, these literatures provide important insights into immigration politics and minority inclusion, but they also leave open the central questions of the dissertation: if, when, and why mainstream parties use anti-minority rhetoric, through what mechanisms it shapes citizen beliefs, and what can make citizens less receptive to it.

According to the literature on party competition, the main explanation for why mainstream parties become more restrictive on immigration and more critical of, for example, ethnic and religious minorities, centers on the electoral pressure exerted by far-right parties. Across Western democracies, far-right parties have played a central role in politicizing immigration, national identity, multiculturalism, and related issues (Golder, 2016; Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2008). As these parties gain support, mainstream parties must decide whether to ignore, oppose, or accommodate the agenda of far right parties. In the literature on party competition, accommodation refers to a strategy in which mainstream parties respond to challenger parties by adopting parts of their policy agenda (Meguid, 2005, 2008). The logic is rooted in spatial accounts of electoral competition: if far-right parties attract voters by taking restrictive positions on immigration, mainstream parties may have incentives to move closer to these voters in order to reduce electoral losses. Applied to immigration politics, the expectation is therefore that mainstream parties may adopt more restrictive positions to win back voters/prevent further defections and thereby reduce the electoral appeal of the far right. A large body of empirical work has examined whether mainstream parties in fact respond in this way. Some studies find that mainstream parties shift toward more restrictive immigration positions when far-right parties gain support (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Han, 2015; Spoon & Klüver, 2020; Van Spanje, 2010). Other work suggests that accommodation has often been more limited. Despite public demand for more restrictive immigration policy, mainstream parties in Western Europe have in many cases enacted comparatively modest policy reforms (Brady et al., 2020; Lahav, 2004) and remained weakly aligned with public preferences on immigration (Natter et al., 2020; Odmalm & Bale, 2015; O'Grady & Abou-Chadi, 2019). Mainstream parties thus face strong electoral incentives to respond to immigration concerns, but their policy responses appear

more limited than standard accounts of electoral accountability would lead us to expect. Relatedly, existing work has mainly examined whether mainstream parties adopt more restrictive immigration positions, support stricter asylum rules, or tighten citizenship requirements. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the rhetorical side of this process. That is, we know less about whether mainstream parties also change the way they talk about ethnic minorities and immigrants when they face electoral pressure from the far right (Kollberg, 2026). Given that political elites may have incentives to communicate differently from how they act, there are good reasons to suspect that rhetorical and positional accommodation could follow different patterns.

This gap is notable because the rhetorical side of politics is likely to matter in its own right. We know much less about whether mainstream parties change how they talk about immigrants and ethnic minorities, despite a long tradition of research showing that elite rhetoric matters for citizens. The dissertation therefore also draws on a second literature concerning the consequences of elite rhetoric for citizens. Political communication research has long emphasized that citizens rely on elite cues when forming political opinions (Zaller, 1992). This is especially relevant for immigration and minority politics, where many citizens have limited direct experience with the groups being discussed and instead encounter the issue through parties, media, and public debate (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Hopkins, 2010). A substantial body of work shows that elite communication can shape immigration attitudes, threat perceptions, and evaluations of minority out-groups (Brader et al., 2008; Helbling, 2014; Hopkins, 2010). Such effects also extend to overt expressions of prejudice and hostility. When elite rhetoric links immigrants or minorities to crime, terrorism, welfare dependency, or cultural conflict, it may make negative stereotypes more salient and thereby worsen attitudes toward the groups being discussed (Brader et al., 2008; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). More recent work has extended this argument from citizens' own attitudes to their perceptions of the surrounding social environment. Anti-prejudice norms regulate the public expression of prejudice by making some forms of speech and behavior appear socially unacceptable (Bicchieri, 2006; Blanchard et al., 1994; Cialdini et al., 1991). Elite rhetoric may therefore matter not only because it changes what citizens themselves believe, but also because it changes what citizens think others believe. Studies of norm erosion show that norm-challenging rhetoric can embolden prejudiced expression and shift perceptions of what kind of speech is publicly acceptable (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Crandall et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021). However, this literature has almost exclu-

sively focused on either far-right/populist politicians, or, in an American context, Donald Trump specifically (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Crandall et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021). Less is known about whether similar effects occur when prejudiced rhetoric is expressed by other actors, such as mainstream parties (Valentim et al., 2025). This is an important limitation because mainstream parties occupy a different position in politics than political outsiders such as the far right. We therefore still know relatively little about whether mainstream parties utilize prejudiced rhetoric, whether such rhetoric can change social norm perceptions, and if so, through what mechanisms norm change occurs.

Finally, to understand the consequences of elite rhetoric for citizens, it is also necessary to consider what is known about the receptivity of such rhetoric. If political rhetoric can activate prejudice, strengthen stereotypes, or weaken anti-prejudice norms, a natural next question is whether such attitudes and perceptions can be reduced. A third relevant literature therefore concerns the reduction of prejudice, discrimination, and out-group hostility. This literature often begins from the observation that prejudice is rooted in stereotypes and misperceptions about social groups. Citizens may overestimate differences between groups, hold inaccurate beliefs about minority behavior or values, or rely on generalized stereotypes when evaluating out-groups (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Bordalo et al., 2016; Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2019). This suggests one possible route to reducing prejudice: providing corrective information. Yet existing research gives reason for caution. Information treatments can correct factual misperceptions, but such belief updates often fail to produce corresponding changes in policy preferences, prejudice, or downstream behavior (Alesina et al., 2023; Hopkins et al., 2019). This is consistent with broader evidence that immigration attitudes are highly stable over time and resistant to short-term contextual change (Kustov et al., 2021). One reason is that people often process corrective information through prior beliefs, identities, and motivated reasoning, especially when the information contradicts prior beliefs or concerns politically salient groups (Ecker et al., 2022; Flynn et al., 2017). Prejudice and out-group hostility are therefore not only products of factual misunderstanding, but are also tied to identity, emotion, group threat, and willingness to update beliefs.

A large literature has examined other routes to prejudice reduction, including inter-group contact, perspective-taking, and counter-stereotypical information. Contact theory suggests that interaction between members of different groups can reduce hostility under favorable conditions, especially when contact involves equal status, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp,

2006). Other interventions attempt to reduce prejudice by encouraging perspective-taking or changing how people process information about out-groups (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Kalla & Broockman, 2020; Paluck & Green, 2009). However, many such interventions rely on relatively light-touch designs, short-term outcomes, and settings where the durability and behavioral consequences of attitude change remain uncertain (Paluck et al., 2021). The broader lesson is sobering: out-group attitudes are difficult to improve, especially in polarized environments and on highly salient issues such as immigration.

1.2 Research Question and Argument

In sum, existing research provides several important starting points. We know that mainstream parties may respond to far-right pressure on immigration, and that elite rhetoric can shape citizens' attitudes toward out-groups as well as their perceptions of social norms. We also know that prejudice and out-group hostility are difficult to reduce, as out-group evaluations may be shaped by identity and negative affect. Yet important questions remain. We know less about if and when mainstream parties adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric or more overtly anti-minority rhetoric in the first place. We also know less about whether, and through which mechanisms, mainstream parties can shape citizens' beliefs when they use such rhetoric. These gaps motivate the central research question of the dissertation:

Why do mainstream parties use anti-minority rhetoric, through what mechanisms does it shape citizen beliefs, and what can make citizens less receptive to it?

The dissertation answers this question by advancing three connected arguments. First, I argue that anti-minority rhetoric should be understood as a distinct form of mainstream party response to immigration politics. Existing research has mainly examined whether mainstream parties accommodate far-right pressure by adopting more restrictive policy positions. I argue that mainstream parties may also respond rhetorically. They may change how they speak about immigration and ethnic minorities, even in the absence of policy change. Additionally, I argue that mainstream parties may utilize different rhetorical strategies depending on the context, namely by relying on symbolic responses or substantive, policy-oriented responses. I theorize that electoral pressure from the far right can increase incentives for symbolic responses, while increasing is-

sue salience of immigration makes purely symbolic responses less sufficient and pushes parties toward substantive rhetoric that involves clear policy commitments.

Second, I argue that mainstream party rhetoric matters for citizen beliefs because mainstream parties occupy a distinctive position in democratic politics. Prejudiced rhetoric from far-right actors may be interpreted by citizens as the language of political outsiders. Similar rhetoric from mainstream parties may carry a different social meaning because these parties are perceived as uniquely normatively credible and legitimate, due to their status as representatives of not only the political system but society as a whole. I therefore argue that mainstream party rhetoric can shape citizen perceptions of social norms. When mainstream parties use prejudiced rhetoric, citizens may interpret it as a signal about what kinds of speech and behavior are acceptable in public. The central expectation is therefore that mainstream party rhetoric may weaken anti-prejudice norms by changing citizens' perceptions of what is socially acceptable, thus possibly normalizing prejudiced expression.

Third, I argue that citizens can be made more positive toward outgroups and more resistant to norm-breaking rhetoric from political elites, but that doing so requires focusing on emotion rather than cognition. Much existing work on prejudice reduction starts from the idea that hostile attitudes are rooted in stereotypes, misperceptions, or lack of information. I argue that this is only part of the story. Out-group hostility is also sustained by anxiety, distrust, threat perceptions, and negative affect. If this is the case, then interventions that focus only on correcting factual misperceptions may be insufficient. The dissertation therefore examines meditation as a scalable intervention that may improve intergroup attitudes and reduce receptivity to norm-breaking elite rhetoric by strengthening emotional self-regulation.

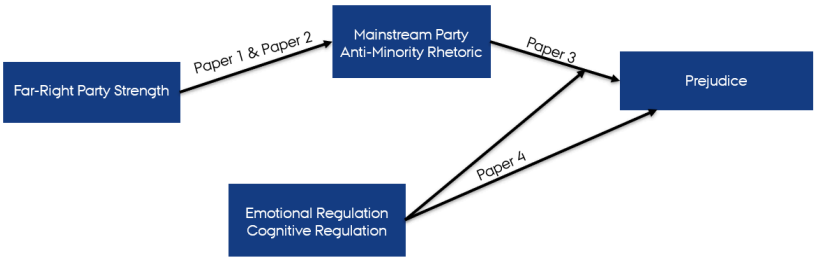
1.3 Contributions of the Dissertation and Overview of Papers

Figure 1.1 depicts the theoretical model connecting the four articles that make up the dissertation.

The first two articles examine the causes of mainstream party anti-immigrant rhetoric. They ask when and why mainstream parties adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric, and how such rhetoric relates to more conventional forms of party responsiveness. The first article, *"When Do Mainstream Parties Talk Like the Far Right? Evidence from Parliamentary*

Speeches in Western Europe" (henceforth "Paper A"), examines whether mainstream parties adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric in response to far-right electoral pressure. Using more than one million parliamentary speeches from nine Western European countries over a period of almost thirty years, the article measures anti-immigrant rhetoric through computational text analysis and links these measures to far-right party strength, salience of immigration, and far-right rhetoric. The article finds that mainstream parties become more likely to use anti-immigrant rhetoric after far-right electoral success. It also finds evidence of discursive spillover, whereby far-right anti-immigrant rhetoric is associated with subsequent mainstream rhetoric independently of far-right electoral strength. This article contributes to the dissertation by establishing rhetorical accommodation as a distinct empirical phenomenon. Existing research has examined whether mainstream parties move toward the far right in terms of what policy positions they adopt. The article shows that accommodation can also occur in the language mainstream parties use in public discourse. By constructing a cross-national measure of mainstream party anti-immigrant rhetoric, the article also contributes methodologically to the study of party competition through parliamentary speech data.

Figure 1.1: Theoretical model of the dissertation



The second article, *"From Symbols to Substance: Mainstream Party Responsiveness on Immigration"* (henceforth "Paper B"), asks how mainstream parties respond to voter concerns about immigration despite historically limited substantive policy change. The article starts from a tension in the literature on democratic representation: if parties are electorally accountable to voters, and if many voters demand more restrictive immigration policy, why have mainstream parties often appeared only weakly responsive on immigration? I argue that this puzzle partly

reflects a narrow understanding of responsiveness. Mainstream parties may respond symbolically by *standing for* voters, signaling recognition and attentiveness to their concerns without specifying what policy action should be taken. They may also respond substantively by *acting for* voters, linking anti-immigration rhetoric to specific policy commitments. The article argues that symbolic responsiveness is attractive because it allows parties to signal attentiveness while preserving flexibility over costly policy commitments. Yet symbolic responses are not universally sufficient. When immigration becomes highly salient, voter attentiveness increases, making it harder for parties to rely on symbolic rhetoric alone. Under these conditions, mainstream parties are pushed toward more policy-oriented rhetoric. Empirically, the article studies Danish parliamentary speeches from 1997 to 2022 and uses the 2015 migrant crisis as a shock to immigration salience. I find that mainstream parties frequently responded to immigration concerns symbolically before they did so substantively. After the 2015 migrant crisis, however, anti-immigration rhetoric became more substantive, especially among center-right parties. The contribution is therefore to show that mainstream parties may have been more responsive to immigration concerns than previous research suggests, but that this responsiveness often took symbolic rather than substantive form, and that the balance between the two shifts when immigration becomes highly salient.

The third article, *"Credible Prejudice? When and Why Mainstream Party Adoption of Far-Right Rhetoric Weakens Anti-Prejudice Norms"* (henceforth "Paper C"), turns from the causes of mainstream party rhetoric to its consequences. It asks whether prejudiced rhetoric from mainstream parties weakens anti-prejudice norms among citizens. The article builds on the observation that anti-minority rhetoric has historically been associated with far-right parties but argues that mainstream parties may be especially consequential when they adopt similar language. The argument is that mainstream parties possess greater normative credibility and legitimacy than far-right parties because they are seen as custodians of liberal-democratic norms and as representatives of society as a whole. When these parties use prejudiced rhetoric, citizens may therefore interpret it as a signal that prejudice is more socially acceptable than previously assumed. The article tests this argument using both observational and experimental evidence. Observationally, it measures prejudiced rhetoric in parliamentary speeches across six European countries from 1994 to 2022. Experimentally, it uses survey experiments in Germany and Denmark to test whether prejudiced rhetoric from mainstream parties affects citizens' perceptions of anti-prejudice norms differ-

ently than similar rhetoric from far-right parties. I find that mainstream party prejudiced rhetoric weakens perceived anti-prejudice norms more than prejudiced rhetoric from far right parties in Germany, where mainstream parties have historically been more reluctant to adopt far-right rhetoric, but not in Denmark, where mainstream use of such rhetoric has been more sustained. This suggests that the norm-weakening effects of mainstream party prejudice depend on the prior strength of anti-prejudice norms and the extent to which such rhetoric has already been normalized. The article contributes to the literature by bridging research on elite rhetoric and mainstream party accommodation. It does so by examining the normative consequences of mainstream parties' adoption of prejudiced rhetoric. The article theorizes and empirically tests normative credibility and legitimacy as the mechanism through which mainstream parties may exert greater influence on anti-prejudice norms than far-right actors. Building on the accommodation literature and a growing body of anecdotal evidence, it also conducts a systematic cross-national analysis of parliamentary rhetoric, documenting how mainstream parties have used prejudiced language over time. Finally, the article expands the empirical scope of existing experimental work by comparing Germany and Denmark, thereby assessing both the generalizability of prior findings and the conditions under which mainstream prejudiced rhetoric reshapes citizens' perceptions of anti-prejudice norms.

The fourth article, *"Meditation Increases Expressions of Joy and Shifts Democratic and Intergroup Attitudes"* (henceforth "Paper D"), extends the theoretical model by turning to possible countermeasures. It asks whether improved emotional and cognitive regulation can make citizens less hostile toward out-groups and less receptive to prejudiced rhetoric from political elites. The article starts from the premise that prejudice is not only a cognitive phenomenon, rooted in factual misperceptions or lack of information, but also an emotional phenomenon. Hostility toward out-groups is often sustained by anxiety, distrust, threat perceptions, and negative affect. For that reason, interventions aimed only at correcting factual beliefs may be insufficient. The article examines this argument by studying meditation as a scalable way of improving emotional self-regulation. In a 15-day online experiment in the United States, respondents were randomly assigned to mindfulness meditation, compassion meditation, or a control condition. I find that the intervention affected several politically relevant inter-group outcomes. Treated respondents became more likely to condemn anti-Muslim prejudiced rhetoric from political elites, more supportive of civic rather than ethno-cultural understandings of national belonging, and less likely to hold extreme meta-

perceptions of out-group members. At the same time, I find limited evidence that more conventional factual information treatments produced similar effects. The mechanism analyses suggest that these effects are more consistent with improved emotional regulation than with belief correction or cognitive regulation alone.

1.4 Roadmap

The dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework. It first explains why mainstream parties may adopt anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric in response to far-right pressure and changing issue salience. It then turns to the citizen-side consequences of such rhetoric by developing an argument about anti-prejudice norms, social referents, and the normative credibility and legitimacy of mainstream parties. The chapter concludes by discussing why conventional prejudice-reduction interventions often fall short, and why emotional regulation may make citizens less receptive to prejudiced elite rhetoric.

Chapter 3 presents the data and methodological approach used across the dissertation. The chapter describes how political rhetoric is measured using parliamentary speeches and text-as-data methods, how citizen attitudes and norm perceptions are measured in the survey experiments, and how open-ended survey responses are used to capture emotional expression and cognitive complexity. It also outlines the observational, quasi-experimental, and experimental research designs used in the four papers.

Chapter 4 summarizes the main empirical findings. It first presents the findings on mainstream party rhetoric, focusing on far-right success, rhetorical spillover, and the distinction between symbolic and substantive responses. It then examines how mainstream party prejudiced rhetoric affects citizen attitudes and social norm perceptions, and why mainstream parties are especially influential social referents. Finally, the chapter presents the findings on emotional regulation as a possible countermeasure to out-group hostility and receptivity to prejudiced rhetoric.

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation. It synthesizes the main findings, discusses their broader implications for party competition, democratic norms, and minority inclusion, and outlines the dissertation's limitations and avenues for future research.

Chapter 2
Theory

"Speech was given to man to conceal his thoughts."

– Charles Maurice de Talleyrand

This chapter develops the theoretical framework connecting the dissertation's three central questions: why mainstream parties adopt anti-minority rhetoric, how such rhetoric can reshape citizens' perceptions of what is socially acceptable, and how its consequences might be mitigated. I begin with a theory of party competition, arguing that mainstream parties use anti-immigrant rhetoric as a strategic response to electoral pressure from the far right. I then turn to political behavior on the micro-level, namely social norms, arguing that mainstream parties are especially influential in weakening anti-prejudice norms because voters perceive them as more normatively credible and legitimate social referents than far-right parties. Finally, I discuss emotional regulation as a potential countermeasure, arguing how and why it can improve out-group attitudes.

2.1 Mainstream Party Anti-Minority Rhetoric

This section theorizes why mainstream parties adopt anti-immigration and anti-minority rhetoric. Building on the literature on party competition and far-right accommodation, I argue that mainstream parties may adopt such rhetoric as a strategic response to electoral pressure from the far right. While existing research has mainly understood accommodation as a matter of policy positioning, I extend this logic to rhetoric: mainstream parties may respond to electoral pressure not only by changing

what policies they support, but also by changing how they talk about immigration, immigrants, and ethnic minorities. I then distinguish between symbolic and substantive rhetorical responsiveness. Mainstream parties may respond symbolically by acknowledging restrictive voter concerns without committing themselves to concrete policy action, or substantively by linking anti-immigration rhetoric to specific policy proposals. I argue that symbolic responses are attractive because they allow parties to signal responsiveness while preserving flexibility. Whether they remain sufficient depends on issue salience.

2.1.1 Party Competition and Far-Right Accommodation

A key premise of the theoretical argument is that what mainstream parties do is shaped by voters, as well as by other parties. Parties compete with one another for electoral support, and their positions are therefore shaped by the environment in which they operate. According to the Downsian spatial theory of party competition, parties seek votes by positioning themselves as close as possible to the median voter (Downs, 1957). A party system can be disrupted once new, so-called challenger parties enter the system (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020), which prompts mainstream parties to change their position to move closer to what is now perceived as the new median voter position and thereby ward off voter losses. In Western Europe, by far the most important challenger parties on the issue of immigration and ethnic minority politics have been far-right/radical right parties. These parties have played a central role in politicizing immigration, national identity, multiculturalism, and minority inclusion, often by presenting themselves as the only actors willing to represent voters dissatisfied with the political mainstream (Golder, 2016; Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2008). Mainstream parties may remain the central dominant actors of establishment politics, but they are not insulated from this pressure. When far-right parties gain support, they can push mainstream parties to shift their platforms, their issue emphasis, and, as I argue here, their rhetoric.

From this perspective, the adoption of anti-minority rhetoric by mainstream parties can be understood as a form of accommodation of the far right. As discussed in Chapter 1, a large body of research suggests that mainstream parties move closer to challenger parties by adopting their policy positions, often as a way of appealing to voters attracted by those challengers (Meguid, 2005, 2008). I extend this logic to rhetoric. Building on recent work distinguishing rhetorical from positional accommodation (Kollberg, 2026), I treat the two as related but distinct strategies. Po-

sitional accommodation refers to mainstream parties moving their policy stances closer to the far right, for instance by endorsing more restrictive immigration policies. Rhetorical accommodation refers to mainstream parties adopting more negative or exclusionary language toward immigrants and minorities, regardless of whether their underlying policy positions change. Although the two forms of accommodation are distinct, I expect both forms of accommodation to respond to electoral pressure from the far right in a symmetrical manner.

There are good reasons to study rhetorical accommodation in its own right. A host of research has documented the consequences of inflammatory speech by political elites directed toward immigrants and minorities. Hostile elite rhetoric can embolden prejudiced individuals to express and act upon their prejudices by eroding anti-prejudice norms (Newman et al., 2021). Elite rhetoric plays a central role in anti-immigrant attitudes (Czymara, 2020; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014), in how citizens perceive ethnic and national identities (Pérez, 2015), and can contribute to political radicalization and deteriorating inter-group relations (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). Moreover, elite discourse surrounding immigration and national identity may be especially influential when mainstream parties, rather than radical right-wing parties, use inflammatory rhetoric (Ekholm et al., 2022; Valentim et al., 2025). Rhetoric matters, and yet relatively little attention has been paid to when and why mainstream elites adopt anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric in the first place (Kollberg, 2026), or what type of rhetoric they use.

The theoretical expectations follow from the logic of accommodation. Mainstream parties are expected to accommodate far-right parties when they anticipate electoral gains from doing so. Far-right success at the expense of the mainstream puts additional electoral pressure on mainstream parties to accommodate them (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020). When the median voter shifts to the right, vote-seeking mainstream elites may reposition closer to the new median voter (Spoon & Klüver, 2020). Existing studies similarly show that mainstream parties become more restrictive when they lose voters to radical right-wing parties (Han, 2015), when far-right parties gain electoral support (Abou-Chadi, 2016), even when far-right parties are unlikely to enter government (Van Spanje, 2010). I expect this logic to apply to rhetoric as well: when far-right parties gain electoral strength, mainstream parties should become more likely to adopt anti-minority rhetoric from them.

However, rhetoric also differs from ideological positioning in several respects. Political rhetoric often contains emotional appeals, the invocation of certain symbols, moral judgments, a specific framing of events, or

the emphasis on specific threats, allowing parties to signal to voters in ways that go beyond just policy positions. As such, accommodation incentives on the rhetorical dimension may differ from those on the policy-positional dimension. For example, while increasingly extreme far-right policy positions may not by themselves induce mainstream parties to accommodate absent electoral success, far-right rhetoric may be more contagious. Far-right parties' use of anti-minority language can shape mainstream discourse and pressure mainstream parties to adopt similar rhetoric, even if their policy positions remain unchanged. Recent scholarship finds evidence of far-right rhetoric spilling over into mainstream discourse when it comes to nativist language (Habersack & Werner, 2023), illiberal immigration discourse (Wagner et al., 2025), and radical right-wing populist rhetoric (Esguerra et al., 2023). I therefore expect mainstream parties to adopt more anti-minority rhetoric when far-right parties themselves make greater use of such rhetoric.

This establishes why mainstream parties may adopt anti-minority rhetoric in the first place. The next question is what kind of rhetorical response mainstream parties adopt. I turn to this question by distinguishing between symbolic and substantive responsiveness.

2.1.2 Issue Salience and Strategic Responses

Given that mainstream parties may adapt their rhetoric in the face of party competition, what sort of rhetorical responses should we expect? I distinguish between symbolic and substantive responsiveness as two ways mainstream parties can respond rhetorically to electoral pressure on immigration. Building on the distinction between symbolic and substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967), I distinguish between two forms of mainstream party responsiveness. Substantive responsiveness refers to anti-immigration rhetoric that advocates a concrete policy response and therefore entails "acting for" voters by advancing their interests. By contrast, symbolic responsiveness is defined as anti-immigration rhetoric that does not include concrete policy commitments. Such rhetoric may acknowledge voter concerns, express concern about immigration, and emphasize its perceived problems and costs, without including any type of overt policy commitment. Advocacy of a concrete policy counts as substantive even if the policy itself serves a largely symbolic purpose because by advocating for a specific policy, parties commit themselves to a course of action and potentially expend political capital in pursuing it. What makes the rhetoric substantive in this sense is therefore its connection

to concrete policy advocacy, rather than whether the proposed policy is ultimately effective or produces substantial societal change.

I argue that mainstream parties are strategically incentivized to rely on symbolic rather than substantive responses on immigration because they face a double bind: On the one hand, far-right competition creates electoral incentives to accommodate demands for more restrictive immigration policy. On the other hand, substantive responses can entail considerable political costs. As Freeman (1995) argues, immigration politics in liberal democracies is often shaped by organized interests, such as employers and businesses, that benefit from immigration and therefore have strong incentives to oppose restrictive reforms. Public demand for restrictive policy can thus coexist with organized pressure against restrictive policy change. These constraints are reinforced by administrative capacity, legal obligations, and humanitarian commitments, including obligations under EU law and international refugee conventions (Freeman, 1995; Helbling & Kalkum, 2018; Ruhs, 2022). Mainstream parties may consequently have incentives to signal responsiveness to demands for restriction while remaining cautious about concrete policy commitments. Symbolic responsiveness offers a way to navigate this double bind. By using anti-immigration rhetoric without attaching it to specific policies, mainstream parties can acknowledge and validate voter concerns while preserving flexibility over future policy choices. Once parties advocate concrete policies, they invite voters to evaluate whether those proposals are subsequently pursued or implemented, and they risk electoral punishment if their commitments remain unfulfilled (Matthieß, 2020; Naurin et al., 2019). Symbolic responses are less binding. They allow parties to appear attentive to immigration concerns without assuming the political, economic, legal, or administrative costs associated with substantive reforms. I therefore expect mainstream parties to rely especially on symbolic responses when the electoral incentives to signal responsiveness are stronger than the incentives to undertake costly policy change.

Does this mean that cheap talk is sufficient in assuaging voters, and that parties can avoid any long-term policy commitments altogether? I argue that this is not the case. Whether parties can rely on symbolic responses depends chiefly on issue salience. Under conditions of "politics as usual", voters devote limited attention to the policy content of party rhetoric and are unlikely to closely monitor whether general expressions of concern are attached to concrete policy advocacy. This is consistent with research showing that voters are often inattentive to policy details and that policy positions often play a limited role in how citizens evaluate political elites (Adams et al., 2011; Lenz, 2012). On immigration, such

inattentiveness may be especially pronounced because citizens often misperceive migration inflows, the size of immigrant populations, welfare dependency, and crime rates (Huang, 2023; Jørgensen & Osmundsen, 2022). In such contexts, symbolic responses may be enough. When immigration becomes highly salient, however, the logic changes. As the issue moves to the forefront of the political agenda, voter attentiveness to immigration as an issue increases. Existing research similarly suggests that immigration attitudes become more electorally consequential when immigration is salient (Schnaudt & Stecker, 2022), and that salience is a central mechanism through which challenger parties gain traction and pressure mainstream parties (Dennison & Geddes, 2019). Under these conditions, symbolic responsiveness becomes less sufficient, while substantive, policy-oriented responsiveness becomes more valuable. In short, mainstream parties may initially respond to far-right pressure symbolically, but once issue salience increases, mainstream parties will then also respond substantively.

2.2 A Theory of Anti-Prejudice Norms

The previous section argued that mainstream parties have strategic incentives to adopt different types of anti-immigrant rhetoric. Yet this raises a broader question: what happens when such rhetoric crosses into overt hostility or prejudice toward ethnic and religious minorities? Existing research has studied the effects of elite rhetoric on out-group attitudes extensively, showing that political communication can shape how citizens think about immigrants, Muslims, refugees, and other minority groups. I argue, however, that focusing only on attitudes leaves out a crucial part of the story. Anti-minority rhetoric may also affect citizens' perceptions of social norms; in other words, what they believe others see as socially acceptable public behavior. In the following, I therefore develop a theory of anti-prejudice norm perceptions, explaining why and how prejudiced elite rhetoric from political parties can weaken citizens' perceived strength of the norm against expressing prejudice.

2.2.1 What Are Social Norms?

Social norms are important. They represent established standards for what is considered proper conduct in society. They regulate individual behavior, and thereby ensure relative predictability and a minimal level of mutual trust necessary for cooperation and coordination between

members of society. Put differently, norms structure our expectations about how other people act in a given social situation (Alvarez-Benjumea & Winter, 2018). Norms promote certain types of behavior, and inhibit other types of behavior, through a distinctly different mechanism from something like legal regulation. Instead of formal punishment, conduct that is considered norm-breaking may be socially sanctioned, and the perpetrator may face possible social repercussions like stigmatization, and incur reputational costs. If someone believes that a norm-breaking action will result in social sanctions such as these, they will be much less likely to partake in that action. Depending on the strength of the social norm, and the severity of the sanctions associated with violating the norm, adhering to the correct behavior as prescribed by the norm is the most rational course of action – even if it might otherwise go against personal preferences (Kuran, 1995). Timur Kuran uses the concept of preference falsification to explain how individuals may publicly conform to a social norm while privately disagreeing with it. As an illustrative example, think of Vaclav Havel's famous greengrocer: the greengrocer places a sign with the slogan "Workers of the World, Unite!" in his shop window every day, not because he believes in it, but because public compliance signals conformity and helps him avoid the social costs of dissent. The result is that public opinion can become separated from private preferences. Each individual may perceive that they are in a small minority of dissidents, and as such must falsify their real preferences in public – even though a majority of the population may in fact dislike the system. Due to preference falsification, the social norm can remain potent, despite the fact that many people secretly disagree with it. In other words, norms persist within society because of individuals' preference to conform, given the expectation that others will also conform (Arias, 2019).

This also means that for a social norm to actually regulate individual behavior, a large enough number of people must at least publicly profess allegiance to the norm – As Michael Chwe argues, support for the norm-prescribed behavior must be made common knowledge (Chwe, 2013). The term common knowledge here refers to the knowledge citizens have about the permissibility of a certain type of behavior, in conjunction with their knowledge of other citizens' knowledge about the behavior. Taking anti-prejudice norms as an example, a group of people will each refrain from making a racist or discriminatory remark, if each person feels that the others are respecting the anti-prejudice norm. In effect, all of them thereby respect the anti-prejudice norm (Chwe, 2013, pp. 19–21). In this case, the norm of anti-prejudice is effectively enforced because every member of the group has a clear idea that everyone else is aware of

the norm. In practice, social norms are often reproduced through public ceremonies and public information campaigns, with the dual aim of transmitting information to individual citizens, and indicating to people in general that others are aware of the information. When the Danish prime minister held her 2024 New Year's speech, a nationally televised annual event with approximately 1 million viewers, she used the occasion to publicly condemn antisemitism and call for mutual respect and tolerance. As such, the prime minister affirmed norms of tolerance and anti-prejudice, by informing citizens that antisemitism was wrong, and by portraying this belief as a subject of "common knowledge". Theoretically, individuals who otherwise might have deigned to express antisemitic views, now choose not to do so, because they see the anti-prejudice norm as common knowledge, and therefore anticipate large social sanctions.

2.2.2 Social Referents and Anti-Prejudice Norms

Where social norms represent collective expectations about appropriate behavior, social norm perceptions refer to the way individuals perceive those expectations. This distinction is important because individuals do not observe social norms directly, but rather infer them from the behavior of others (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). Following Bicchieri (2006), social norms are based on two types of expectations: empirical expectations about what others do, and normative expectations about what others believe ought to be done. In the language of social psychology, the first corresponds to descriptive norms, the second to injunctive norms (Cialdini et al., 1991). Individuals form these perceptions by looking to social referents, i.e. actors whose behavior provides information about what is socially acceptable in a given setting. These referents may be peers, family members, colleagues, community leaders, or high-status individuals whose conduct is especially visible or socially informative. Paluck et al. (2016), for example, show that students who were socially well-connected within their school networks were particularly important in disseminating anti-bullying norms among their peers, because they were considered well-connected. Their behavior mattered not (only) because of their privately held convictions about bullying, but because other students looked to them when inferring what kinds of behavior were acceptable in the school environment. The broader point is that some actors carry more normative weight than others. When they comply with a norm, violate it, or sanction violations of it, they provide information about the strength of the norm itself (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). This is

true for anti-bullying norms in a school environment, as well as for more fundamental social norms that operate at the level of society.

One such norm, and indeed the social norm at the center of this dissertation, is what might be referred to as the "anti-prejudice norm", or the "norm of tolerance" (Crandall et al., 2002). In most Western liberal democracies, overt expressions of prejudice toward ethnic, religious, or racial minorities are widely considered unacceptable, and have broadly been met with social sanctioning. Notably, this does not mean that prejudice does not exist. Rather, it means that public expression of such prejudice is unlikely, precisely due to expectations of social disapproval (ibid.). As Mendelberg (2001) shows in her account of racial appeals in American politics, the strengthening of anti-prejudice norms changed how politicians appealed to conservative white voters in the American South. As overtly racist speech became increasingly unacceptable, politicians relied more heavily on implicit racial appeals and avoided openly racist language. In this sense, the rise of anti-prejudice norms did not remove racial prejudice from politics, but it did make overt prejudice more costly to express in public. Similarly, citizens may hold negative stereotypes about minority groups, but refrain from expressing them if they believe that others will view such expression as unacceptable. Political elites are particularly important social referents in this respect. Given their role as highly public and socially endorsed actors, they provide citizens with information about the boundaries of acceptable conduct. Elites signal the permissibility of certain forms of speech and behavior by stating what is right or wrong, in addition to indicating what kinds of beliefs are socially acceptable to express in public (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021). Since norm-breaking behavior is costly, and since independently assessing the strength of a norm is difficult, political elites help citizens orient themselves in the normative environment. Regarding norms of tolerance and anti-prejudice specifically, political elites can influence whether citizens perceive prejudiced expressions as socially acceptable. If a politician challenges the norm environment by making disparaging comments about ethnic or religious minorities, the signal citizens receive about the strength of the anti-prejudice norm becomes less clear. If enough politicians or parties challenge the norm in this way, citizens may become uncertain about whether prejudiced expression will still be socially sanctioned. In turn, this lessens the need for preference falsification and makes citizens more likely to express privately held prejudices publicly. Over time, the norm may weaken, or break down entirely.

The argument so far establishes two points. First, anti-prejudice norms matter because they regulate the public expression of prejudice

even when private attitudes remain unchanged. Second, citizens infer the strength of such norms from public signals sent by socially relevant actors. A key part of the theoretical argument underpinning the dissertation is to extend this logic to political parties. The primary role of political parties is of course to pass legislation, but they are also highly visible social referents whose rhetoric can inform citizens about what kinds of speech is socially acceptable. I claim that when parties publicly condemn prejudice, they may reaffirm the boundaries of acceptable discourse. When they use prejudiced rhetoric themselves, they may instead make those boundaries less clear. In the following section, I elaborate on this argument in detail.

2.2.3 Normative Credibility and Legitimacy

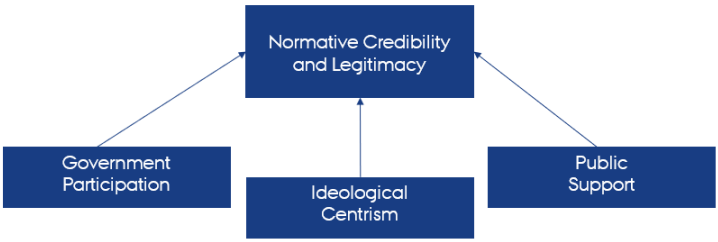
If political parties can shape norm perceptions through their rhetoric, does this mean that far-right parties, with their frequent and unapologetic use of inflammatory rhetoric targeting immigrants and ethnic minorities, are the most consequential norm signalers? I argue that this is not the case. Far-right parties may be highly visible norm-breakers, but they are also limited in their ability to change the broader norm environment because many citizens do not see them as credible representatives of society as a whole. As discussed above, political elites can influence perceptions of norm strength by providing information about what is considered socially acceptable (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021). Yet, I argue that the ability to send credible signals about the norm environment varies considerably across parties. Some parties are more likely than others to be interpreted as legitimate signalers of what is socially acceptable in society.

This argument extends recent work on inter-party dynamics. Existing research shows that mainstream party strategies toward challenger parties shape both voters' willingness to support those parties electorally (Jacobs & Pilet, 2025; Van Spanje & De Graaf, 2018) and their perceptions of challenger party legitimacy (Daur, 2025). Less attention has been paid to whether the same logic extends beyond party evaluations to perceptions of social norms. Some recent work suggests that it does, showing that mainstream politicians erode anti-prejudice norms more than far-right politicians, but remains agnostic about why exactly this is (Valentim et al., 2025). Building on the argument of the previous section, I argue that citizens look to high-status social referents for cues about what kinds of behavior are socially acceptable. Mainstream parties should therefore matter electorally, as well as normatively. This is consis-

tent with Axelsen (2024), who argues that mainstream party strategies such as the cordon sanitaire are best understood as social meta-norms through which mainstream actors signal and enforce the boundaries of legitimate politics. I refer to this capacity to shape perceptions of what is socially acceptable as a party's *normative credibility and legitimacy*.

Why are mainstream parties more likely to be seen as normatively credible and legitimate? I argue that this perception is shaped by three characteristics associated with mainstream status. First, parties in government are more likely than opposition parties to be viewed as legitimate representatives of the political system and society, especially when they govern in broad multiparty or grand-coalition governments that signal wider consensus. Second, parties with greater numerical support should be seen as more normatively credible than parties with limited support. A higher vote share signals broader public backing and makes the party appear more representative, whereas low support suggests the opposite. Third, parties closer to the ideological center should be perceived as more credible representatives of the wider public than parties at the fringes. Because centrist parties are more readily seen as representative of the median voter, they are also more likely to be treated as indicators of what the average citizen finds acceptable. These three characteristics are not separate causal mechanisms, but constitutive dimensions through which mainstream party status is conferred, and through which citizens come to perceive parties as credible and legitimate signalers of what is socially acceptable.

Figure 2.1: Normative Credibility and Legitimacy



This implication may appear counter-intuitive, given that far-right parties are often the actors that attract the most attention for their visible and unapologetic use of norm-challenging rhetoric. Yet precisely because they are widely recognized as actors on the political fringe, their statements may be less likely to change perceptions of norm strength. By

contrast, mainstream parties are better positioned to undermine or reinforce social norms because they possess greater normative credibility and legitimacy. Due to their ideological moderation, numerical support, and frequent participation in government, their messages are more readily interpreted as representative of the political system and wider society. When mainstream parties adopt prejudiced rhetoric, they may therefore alter common perceptions of what kind of speech is socially acceptable. Regardless of their own private attitudes, citizens should be more likely to update their perceptions of anti-prejudice norms when they are exposed to prejudiced rhetoric from mainstream rather than far-right parties.

2.3 Mitigating the Consequences of Anti-Minority Rhetoric

This section examines how out-group hostility might be reduced. It proceeds in two steps. First, I discuss why conventional interventions often struggle to produce durable changes in out-group attitudes. These interventions typically target cognition by correcting misperceptions, providing new information, or attempting to change social norm perceptions directly. Second, I develop the argument that such approaches should be complemented by interventions targeting emotional regulation. The central claim is that out-group hostility is sustained by inaccurate beliefs or mistaken norm perceptions as well as by emotional reactions such as anxiety, threat, distrust, anger, and frustration. As such, an effective strategy for reducing out-group hostility should seek to both correct what citizens believe and improve emotional regulation.

2.3.1 Why Conventional Treatments Often Fail

A large body of research shows that prejudice and discrimination partly come from stereotypes and misperceptions about social groups. Citizens often overestimate group differences, exaggerate the prevalence or threat posed by minority groups, and draw faulty inferences from inaccurate beliefs about out-group behavior, welfare use, crime, or cultural distance (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Bordalo et al., 2016; Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2019; Lutz & Bitschnau, 2023). This suggests an obvious route to reducing out-group hostility: if prejudice is sustained by false beliefs, then correcting those beliefs should make citizens less hostile toward the groups in question. This rests on the assumption that citizens can be

made more tolerant by receiving more accurate information about the social groups toward whom they hold negative attitudes. Yet empirical evidence on this point is mixed. Research on political misperceptions shows that false or unsupported beliefs are often resistant to correction, especially when they are connected to prior attitudes, partisan motivations, or identity-relevant commitments (Ecker et al., 2022; Flynn et al., 2017). Even when corrective information succeeds in changing what people report as factually true, these updates do not reliably translate into changes in downstream attitudes. In studies of immigration attitudes, citizens frequently overestimate the size of immigrant populations and hold inaccurate beliefs about immigrants' socio-economic characteristics. Providing corrective information can reduce these misperceptions, but it often has weak or inconsistent effects on policy preferences, social distance, or broader evaluations of immigrants as a group (Alesina et al., 2023; Hopkins et al., 2019). The same challenge is present when we look at interventions aimed at changing norm perceptions in particular. The social norm argument presented in the previous section implies a cognitive process. Citizens do not simply express or suppress prejudice automatically. Rather, they interpret signals from their environment, infer what kinds of speech are socially acceptable, weigh the expected costs and benefits, and decide whether to reveal or falsify their preferences accordingly. In this sense, prejudiced expression is information-sensitive: citizens use cues from parties, media, peers, and other social referents to judge whether expressing hostility toward a given out-group is likely to be tolerated or sanctioned. This also means that cognitive interventions should, in theory, be well suited to reducing behavior that conflicts with anti-prejudice and tolerance norms. From this perspective, the solution appears straightforward: if citizens draw the wrong conclusion based on information they draw from their environment, then researchers should provide them with accurate information instead.

However, this is easier said than done. Changing social norm perceptions is not as straightforward as changing first-order beliefs, i.e. private attitudes. A first-order belief concerns what the respondent personally thinks about a subject: whether immigrants commit crime, whether Muslims reject democratic values, or whether a policy solution is effective. Such beliefs can, at least in principle, be changed by providing new information about the subject itself. Norm perceptions are second-order beliefs. They concern what respondents think other people believe. Changing these beliefs requires convincing respondents that the broader social environment is different from what they thought: that other citizens are in fact less tolerant of prejudice, that prejudiced expression

carries a real risk of social sanctioning, or that relevant social referents continue to uphold anti-prejudice norms. This is a demanding task because norm perceptions are not simply beliefs about the object of prejudice, but beliefs about the wider social environment. Changing them requires citizens to become convinced that the boundaries of social acceptability are different from what they previously assumed. In real life, such perceptions are shaped by many sources at once, including parties, media, peers, and everyday social interactions. Corrective information or countervailing norm signals may therefore be insufficient if citizens continue to react to out-groups with anxiety, threat, anger, or frustration. For this reason, I propose shifting attention from cognitive regulation to emotional regulation. The next section develops emotional regulation as a potential means of reducing out-group hostility and strengthening resistance to prejudiced rhetoric from political elites.

2.3.2 Emotional and Cognitive Regulation

The preceding discussion suggests that conventional interventions face two related limitations. First, information-based treatments may correct factual misperceptions without reliably changing downstream attitudes toward out-groups. Second, interventions aimed at changing norm perceptions require respondents to update demanding second-order beliefs about the broader social environment. Both approaches therefore rely on cognitive regulation: they attempt to change people's attitudes and behavior by altering how citizens process new information. Studies of political misperceptions and misinformation suggest that factual corrections face two obstacles. Citizens may resist corrective information when it conflicts with prior attitudes, partisan motivations, or identity-relevant commitments (Ecker et al., 2022; Flynn et al., 2017). This points to a broader feature of human judgment. As Kahneman (2011) argues, people rely on two broad modes of thought: a fast, automatic, and intuitive system that generates immediate impressions, and a slower, more effortful system associated with deliberate reasoning. Political judgments are therefore not always formed by carefully weighing evidence from a neutral starting point. They are often shaped first by immediate impressions, emotional associations, and intuitive reactions, which then influence how subsequent information is interpreted. This is especially important for out-group attitudes. Feelings of anxiety, threat, distrust, anger, and frustration can structure how citizens evaluate out-groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, even when they possess accurate factual information about them. Theories of inter-group threat argue that prejudice

is often rooted not only in beliefs about what out-groups are like, but also in a feeling that they threaten the in-group's material interests, cultural values, social status, or sense of security (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2009). Similarly, socio-functional accounts of prejudice show that different groups evoke different emotional reactions depending on the kinds of threat they are perceived to pose (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). As an example, a person may hold negative views of Muslims partly because they believe Muslims reject democratic values. Even if that misperception is corrected, and the person updates their factual beliefs, they may still hold broadly negative views of Muslims if the group continues to evoke negative feelings (Kalkan et al., 2009; Sides & Citrin, 2007).

What follows from this diagnosis? If out-group hostility is sustained both by what people believe and by how they feel, then interventions aimed at improving out-group attitudes should not exclusively be aimed at cognition - they should also target emotion. I argue that emotional regulation offers a complementary route to reducing out-group hostility because it addresses the affective reactions that often make prejudice resistant to informational correction. The argument is that improved emotional regulation, understood as individuals' capacity to manage affective responses such as anxiety, anger, threat, and frustration (Gross, 1998, 2015), can reduce out-group hostility through two mechanisms. First, it may have a direct effect on attitudes. If citizens become better able to regulate feelings of threat, anxiousness, and frustration, they may become less receptive to prejudiced claims about out-groups, even without developing warmer feelings toward those groups. Second, emotional regulation may have an indirect effect by making cognitive interventions more effective. If corrective information fails because negative emotions stand in the way, then reducing those emotions should make citizens more open and more responsive to new information. In other words, emotional regulation may help citizens rely more on the non-emotional mechanisms of information processing that conventional interventions already assume. Returning to the example above, information stating that Muslims overwhelmingly support democracy may have limited consequences if citizens remain anxious or frustrated about the role of the Muslim minority in society. But if citizens become better able to regulate those reactions, the same information may become more consequential for their overall evaluation of Muslims as a minority group. I therefore claim that emotional regulation can improve out-group attitudes both directly, by reducing negative affect, and indirectly, by making factual information more effective.

Chapter 3
Data & Methods

"On the whole, a man who denies the existence of the effects arranged according to the causes in the question of arts, or whose wisdom cannot understand it, then he has no knowledge of the art of its Maker"

– Ibn Rushd

3.1 Measuring Political Rhetoric

Political rhetoric constitutes a great many things. Contemporary politicians communicate in a fast-moving media environment in which public attention is fragmented, and political messages compete for this attention with a host of other information. Parties employ communication professionals and social media managers, produce targeted campaign material, prepare television and press appearances, and increasingly seek to speak to voters directly, through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Much political communication is therefore immediate, visual, personalized, and designed for audiences well beyond formal political institutions. Against this background, the empirical focus of this dissertation may appear comparatively conventional: I choose to measure political rhetoric primarily through politicians' parliamentary speeches. A reasonable objection to this choice is that parliamentary speeches are not the most visible or influential form of political communication, for most people. Voters are more likely to encounter parties through TV, newspapers, or social media, than by listening to plenary debates. Given that the purpose of this dissertation is, in part, to understand how politi-

cal rhetoric affects voters, one might therefore argue that parliamentary speeches may seem too distant from how ordinary citizens engage with politics. However, I argue that using parliamentary speeches as a measure of political rhetoric confers several valuable advantages, and that the apparent criticisms of parliamentary discourse as a measure are overstated.

First, parliamentary speeches allow for a more fine-grained analysis of rhetorical change over time than many alternative sources. Party manifestos, coalition agreements, and party programs are valuable indicators of parties' programmatic policy commitments, but they are produced at relatively long intervals and often around elections or government formations. Using such sources to study rhetoric therefore relies on the assumption that parties change how they speak only between election cycles, and that no change occurs within an election cycle. This assumption has been criticized in the literature, as empirical evidence suggests that parties often undergo such changes within shorter timeframes (Laver, 2005; Schwalbach & Rauh, 2021), and parliamentary behavior may shift as parties adapt to new coalitional or competitive circumstances (Mershon & Shvetsova, 2008). Parliamentary speeches do not require this assumption, because they occur frequently and regularly throughout the election cycle, making it possible to gather data on political rhetoric on a much more fine-grained time scale and to study rhetoric as an ongoing part of political competition rather than as an episodic feature of election campaigns.

Moreover, parliamentary speeches provide a comparatively consistent basis for cross-party and cross-national comparison. Political communication outside parliament varies considerably across contexts. Parties differ in terms of access to media, campaign resources, social media strategies, and willingness to use personalized or populist styles of communication. For example, work on populist communication shows that populist and far-right actors often make especially active use of digital media because these platforms allow them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and rely on more direct, personalized, and affective forms of appeal (Breyer, 2023). This creates a problem for empirical analysis, as we may be comparing apples to oranges. The same concern applies across countries, where media systems, platform use, and campaign styles vary substantially. Comparisons based on social media posts or media appearances therefore risk conflating party rhetoric with the unequal opportunities and incentives attached to different communicative arenas. This problem of heterogeneity is much less of a concern when we measure rhetoric through parliamentary speeches because parliamentary speakers all operate within a

shared institutional setting, under a common set of formal rules and procedures, and in relation to a common parliamentary agenda. This makes parliamentary debate speech a more comparable source of party rhetoric than many forms of mediated or campaign communication.

What, then, about the claim that parliamentary speeches do not matter because voters rarely listen to them? While true that most voters do not directly engage with parliamentary speeches, a host of empirical evidence suggests that parliamentary discourse still plays a big role for structuring the landscape of politics. For example, research has shown that politicians changed their rhetorical strategies when parliamentary speeches became televised, suggesting that MPs are at least not "screaming into the void" (Gennaro & Ash, 2023). Other work shows that parliamentary activity can matter electorally, with members of parliament who speak more frequently being rewarded electorally (Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier, 2019). Moreover, even under the assumption that plenary debates do not directly move voters, parliamentary speeches can still structure the political agenda outside of parliament, with downstream effects on public discourse in a variety of ways (Fernandes et al., 2021; Proksch & Slapin, 2014; Widmann & Simonsen, 2025). Parliamentary speeches therefore clearly matter, even if their effects on citizens are often indirect rather than direct.

For these reasons, I choose to measure rhetoric from political parties through the use of parliamentary speeches. The value of this measure lies in its frequency, comparability across time and space, and direct significance for democratic politics and public discourse.

3.1.1 Immigration-Related Rhetoric as a Concept

In this dissertation, I use parliamentary speeches to identify several related, but conceptually distinct, forms of rhetoric concerning the topic of immigration. "Immigration" denotes rhetoric about asylum, refugees, and border control, as well as topics like integration of ethnic and religious minorities, citizenship, national identity and multiculturalism more generally. At the broadest level, I thus operationalize "anti-immigration" rhetoric as any type of rhetoric that expresses negative or restrictionist views on any of the aforementioned topics. Such rhetoric may describe immigration as socially costly, integration as unsuccessful, multiculturalism as problematic, or national identity as being under threat. While a party's rhetoric is likely to broadly reflect its policy positions, anti-immigration rhetoric can also involve emotional appeals, moral judgments, and particular ways of framing immigration and minority groups

that go beyond simple position-taking. I further distinguish between two types of broad anti-immigration rhetoric: Substantive responses, and symbolic responses. Substantive responses refer to political rhetoric that explicitly contains policy signals, i.e. concrete policy advocacy and policy commitments, including specific reforms, legislative proposals, or criticisms of current policies. Symbolic responses, on the other hand, denote anti-immigrant rhetoric that is absent any policy content - one example could be the statement "Foreigners make our country less safe". In comparison, the statement "We should allocate more funding to border control" exemplifies substantive anti-immigrant rhetoric. This distinction follows directly from the theoretical argument presented in subsection 2.1.2. Note that I measure both types of responsiveness through speech, because speech provides a common parameter for comparison across different types of parties. If substantive responsiveness were measured only through enacted policy, smaller parties and parties in opposition might appear less responsive simply because they have fewer opportunities to pass legislation. I therefore examine both forms of responsiveness through speech, without claiming that this captures everything parties do.

Lastly, I distinguish between broader anti-immigration rhetoric and anti-minority rhetoric more specifically. The former refers to negative or restrictionist statements about immigration and related issues, the latter refers to rhetoric that directs hostility toward immigrants, ethnic minorities, or religious minorities, as social out-groups. Following the conceptualization developed in Paper C, I understand this as a form of prejudiced rhetoric, defined as "any disparaging statement referring to a social category as a whole or to its members" (Cervone et al., 2021). This includes language that invokes negative stereotypes, frames the social group as a threat, or otherwise antagonizes the group in question. The central feature is that negative qualities are attached to the group itself, usually through stereotypes in the form of unfounded generalizations (Bordalo et al., 2016). Statements portraying Muslims as terrorists, immigrants as criminals, or ethnic minorities as culturally incompatible with the national community as a whole would therefore constitute anti-minority rhetoric. In comparison, the statement that citizenship requirements should be stricter counts as anti-immigration rhetoric but not necessarily as anti-minority rhetoric. Anti-minority rhetoric thus captures a narrower and normatively more consequential form of political speech. Where anti-immigration rhetoric constitutes an ordinary part of democratic discourse, anti-minority rhetoric entails a clear deviation from it.

3.1.2 Text-as-Data Approaches

Across the papers of the dissertation, I measure immigration-related rhetoric using parliamentary speech text corpora. The precise implementation differs somewhat across the individual papers, but the shared measurement logic is the same. The first step is to construct the full parliamentary speech corpus. Comparative parliamentary speech data remains fragmented, with uneven coverage across countries, time periods, and data infrastructures (Sebők et al., 2025). I therefore compile the corpora by importing, merging, and harmonizing parliamentary speech data from different sources, converting them into a common machine-readable format with comparable information on country, party, speaker, date, and the speech text itself. The second step is to identify the parts of parliamentary discourse that concern immigration in the broad sense defined above. I do this using country-specific keyword dictionaries related to immigration and adjacent issues. This filtering step identifies the set of speeches and text segments in which anti-immigration or anti-minority rhetoric could plausibly occur. The third step is to divide the relevant speech text into quasi-sentences, a standard unit of analysis in text-as-data research on party competition and political discourse (Lowe et al., 2011). Finally, each quasi-sentence is classified according to the relevant conceptual categories. The quasi-sentences are coded as anti-immigration rhetoric, substantive anti-immigration rhetoric, symbolic anti-immigration rhetoric, anti-immigrant rhetoric, or anti-minority rhetoric. These classifications are then aggregated to the party-month across countries and time periods. The resulting measures capture the prevalence of different types of rhetoric within a party's parliamentary discourse over time.

For Paper B, I rely on a manually coded corpus of more than 16,000 parliamentary quasi-sentences from Denmark between 1997 and 2022. The quasi-sentences were randomly drawn from the broader set of immigration-related parliamentary speech text and coded by a team of four trained student assistants. All coders were provided with a common coding manual and instruction sheet specifying the conceptual definitions and coding rules. When quasi-sentences were difficult to interpret in isolation, coders were instructed to consult the full parliamentary speech. Each quasi-sentence was coded on two dimensions. First, coders assessed whether the statement constituted anti-immigration rhetoric. Second, coders assessed whether it contained concrete policy advocacy. Statements that contained anti-immigration rhetoric without policy content were coded as symbolic responses, whereas statements that linked anti-

immigration rhetoric to specific policy measures, reforms, legislative proposals, institutional changes, or criticism of current policy were coded as substantive responses. Ambiguous cases could be marked as uncertain and accompanied by written comments, allowing coding decisions to be reviewed and harmonized across coders. A subset of the material was independently coded by multiple coders to assess inter-coder reliability.

For Papers A and C, the empirical analyses rely on a large cross-national corpus of parliamentary speeches. Paper A uses parliamentary speech data from nine Western European democracies: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Austria, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Paper C uses a related corpus covering Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Austria, the Netherlands, and Germany from 1994 to 2022. In total, these corpora contain close to one million parliamentary speeches, covering several decades of party competition across multiple national contexts. Given the scale of the data and the need for interpretation beyond keyword matching, I use automated classification to measure anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric. Automated classification using large language models has become increasingly common in political science, not least because such models make it possible to classify large text corpora with limited or no task-specific training data (Burnham et al., 2026; Kristensen-McLachlan et al., 2025). Yet, despite the apparent benefits, the most widely used LLMs are often proprietary models, such as GPT-4, meaning that data classifications cannot be replicated, and that the underlying model parameters and training data are unknown. As such, proprietary models are clearly at odds with open-science standards of transparency and reproducibility (Barrie et al., 2024). For those reasons, I use an open-source model, namely the Political DEBATE model developed by Burnham et al. (2026). Political DEBATE is a fine-tuned encoder model pretrained on political text and based on the Natural Language Inference (NLI) framework, meaning that text is first paired with a short statement (called a hypothesis), and then classified based on whether the semantic interpretation of the text fits with the proposed statement. All quasi-sentences are thus passed through this NLI classifier, and assigned a value 0 to 1 denoting the probability of the statement conforming to the hypothesis, in this case whether the text involves anti-immigration rhetoric (Paper A) or anti-minority rhetoric (Paper C). The two papers share a classification approach, but use different keyword filters to identify the relevant statements. Paper C draws on the Danish human-coded validation, while the Paper A additionally includes human-coded validation from the United Kingdom and Norway.

3.2 Measuring Citizen Attitudes and Perceptions

While political rhetoric constitutes the core macro-level concept of interest, I measure several distinct but related concepts on the individual level. These concepts can broadly be grouped into two categories, out-group attitudes and social norm perceptions, both of which tap into the potential consequences of anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric. Out-group attitudes refer to citizens' own evaluations of immigrants, Muslims, ethnic minorities, and other politically relevant out-groups. Social norm perceptions refer to citizens' beliefs about what other people think, what other people do, and what other people are willing to tolerate or sanction. Across the dissertation, I measure both because anti-minority rhetoric may affect not only what citizens personally think about minority groups, but also their second-order beliefs, i.e. what they believe others believe. In the following, I elaborate on each measure in turn.

The first set of measures captures out-group attitudes. I measure these attitudes using standard instruments from the literature on prejudice, inter-group relations, and immigration attitudes: feeling thermometers, stereotype batteries, perceived threat, and social distance items (Bogardus, 1925; Bordalo et al., 2016; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). In Paper C, respondents report feeling thermometer evaluations, answer social distance items, and evaluate both positive and negative stereotypes about Muslims and six other common out-groups, both ethnic and non-ethnic, which are combined into one positive and one negative indexed measure per group. In Paper D, related outcomes include feeling thermometer evaluations of immigrants and out-partisans, agreement with an ethnically prejudiced political statement, perceived extremity of immigration attitudes among out-groups, and support for civic nationalism. Together, these measures capture both direct evaluations of out-groups and broader orientations toward inclusion in a diverse political community. The second set of measures captures social norm perceptions. In Paper C, I measure social norm perceptions using randomized text vignettes. Respondents are presented with short descriptions of hypothetical social situations in which a person engages in norm-breaking prejudiced behavior toward a minority group. For example, one vignette describes a person refusing interaction with a minority-group member, while another describes a person making a disparaging statement about an ethnic minority group. The target group in the vignettes varies across Muslims, Jews, and Romanians, which makes

it possible to examine the perceived social acceptability of norm-breaking prejudice toward all three groups separately (see Figure 3.2). After each vignette, respondents are asked two questions: how many people in their country they think would find the behavior acceptable, and how many people they think would engage in the behavior. The first item captures perceived injunctive norms, or beliefs about what others approve of. The second captures perceived descriptive norms, or beliefs about what others do (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1991). I measure both because the anti-prejudice norm has both an injunctive and a descriptive component: it concerns whether people believe prejudice is disapproved of, and whether they believe others refrain from expressing it. Lastly, in Paper D, I measure responses to prejudiced political rhetoric using a short text vignette containing a prejudiced statement by a politician. Respondents are first asked whether they personally agree or disagree with the statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). I then measure social norm perceptions more directly by asking: "Out of 100, how many Americans do you think would find it socially unacceptable to make a statement like this in public?".

This vignette approach has two advantages. First, it measures perceived norm strength in relation to concrete social behavior rather than abstract principles of tolerance. Second, it separates respondents' own attitudes from their beliefs about the social environment. Respondents are asked whether they personally approve of prejudiced behavior and about what they believe others would accept or do. This makes the measure well suited for studying the strength of anti-prejudice norms, where the central question is precisely whether citizens perceive prejudice as socially sanctioned or socially permissible (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021). Taken together, these measures allow the dissertation to distinguish between changes in private attitudes and changes in perceived social permissibility. This distinction is central to the project. Mainstream party rhetoric may not immediately alter citizens' underlying evaluations of minority groups, but it may still affect what citizens believe others will, or will not accept.

3.2.1 Open-Ended Survey Responses

Besides out-group attitude items and social norm perception items, I utilize open-ended survey responses as a measure. In Paper D, these responses are collected in the longitudinal experiment between days 2 and 14. After completing the daily survey, respondents are asked to write about how they feel, either in general or in relation to specific topics that

vary across days. On some days, respondents are also asked to choose their own topic and write about whatever they want. Open-ended responses are useful because they allow respondents to formulate opinions in their own words, rather than fitting their answers into pre-defined response categories, thus reducing researcher-imposed bias, and makes it possible to detect reactions, themes, and meanings that closed-ended items may miss (Dahlberg et al., 2026). Given that the concept of interest in this case is a person's feelings and emotions, open-ended responses are especially important because they allow me to measure emotions as they are expressed naturally. At the same time, open-ended responses are difficult to analyze at scale, as they are essentially qualitative data. Manually coding large blocks of text is resource-intensive, time-consuming, and vulnerable to coders' subjective interpretations (Dahlberg et al., 2026). For this reason, I follow recent text-as-data approaches that use computational tools to quantify large collections of open-ended responses, as explained in subsection 3.1.2 (Baburajan et al., 2022; Dahlberg et al., 2026; Roberts et al., 2014).

More specifically, I first measure latent emotion in open-ended survey responses using a transformer-based emotion classifier: a DistilRoBERTa model fine-tuned for emotion classification in English-language text. The model assigns predicted probabilities to emotion categories, including joy, anger, and neutral affect. Each open-ended response is passed through the model separately. For each response, the model returns a probability distribution across emotion categories, from which I retain the predicted probabilities for joy, anger, and neutral affect. These scores are then linked back to the respondent identifier, survey day, and writing prompt. The resulting data therefore provide individual-level measures of expressed joy, anger, and neutral affect for each topic on each day of the longitudinal experiment. Second, I measure political topic choice by classifying whether respondents' self-chosen responses concern political or non-political topics, using an automated political text classifier. This captures whether respondents voluntarily direct attention toward political material when they are not required to do so. Third, I measure cognitive regulation as an alternative mechanism by examining linguistic complexity. Specifically, I use the Flesch-Kincaid grade-level score as a proxy for the complexity of respondents' written language. If the intervention primarily affects cognitive elaboration, one might expect respondents to produce more complex written reflections. Because linguistic complexity can vary by topic, the main comparison uses topic-specific prompts where the subject of the response is held constant across treatment groups. Taken together, these measures allow me to use open-ended responses

to assess both emotional expression and cognitive complexity as possible mechanisms.

3.3 Panel Data and Interrupted Time Series

I rely on several different research designs to study the causes and consequences of anti-minority rhetoric. To study why mainstream parties adopt anti-immigration or anti-minority rhetoric, I use observational and quasi-experimental designs based on longitudinal/panel data with political parties as the main unit of analysis. This choice follows from the nature of the object of study. I am interested in a macro-level political phenomenon, namely why mainstream parties adopt anti-immigration or anti-minority rhetoric. Although experiments are indeed the gold standard for causal identification, they are not well suited to study all questions. The party competition dynamics that drive mainstream party rhetoric cannot realistically be randomly assigned in the way we would assign treatments to individuals in survey experimental contexts. Researchers cannot (and should not) experimentally manipulate whether a radical right party gains electoral strength, whether mainstream parties face pressure from voters, or whether a national election campaign becomes centered on immigration. So although experiments constitute the gold standard in terms of research design, I turn to observational and quasi-experimental research designs for the purposes of deducing the causes of mainstream party anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric. A clear strength of this approach is a high degree of external validity, given that I am interested in all mainstream parties across all Western democratic contexts, and across a longer time period, rather than any one single case. In the following, I explain my methodological approach in the two papers where I use observational and quasi-experimental research designs respectively.

In Paper A, I use longitudinal data with party and time fixed effects to study whether mainstream parties adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric as a consequence of far-right party strength. This approach is useful because fixed effects allow the analysis to account for unobserved differences that are stable within units over time as well as common shocks that affect all units in a given period. Unit fixed effects therefore make it possible to compare each party to itself over time, while time fixed effects adjust for period-specific developments that could otherwise be mistaken for the effect of far-right party strength. Substantively, this matters because a simple association between far-right party strength and mainstream anti-

immigrant rhetoric may be driven by stable differences between parties, party systems, or countries. Some mainstream parties are consistently more restrictive on immigration because of their ideological traditions. Some countries have party systems where immigration is generally more salient. Some mainstream parties face stronger radical right competitors for historical or institutional reasons that are also related to immigration. Without accounting for fixed effects, these time-invariant confounders could bias the estimated relationship between far-right party strength and mainstream rhetoric. With party and time fixed effects, the analysis instead asks whether a mainstream party becomes more immigration-focused or more restrictive when far-right party strength changes, net of stable party-level differences and common temporal shocks.

In Paper B, I use a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences interrupted time-series design to study whether the salience of immigration affects mainstream party rhetorical strategies. To this end, I utilize the 2015 migrant crisis as causal leverage because it represents a clearly timed and plausibly exogenous shock to the salience of immigration. The interrupted time-series framework allows me to assess both immediate and gradual effects of an intervention, under the assumption that the intervention point is well defined and that the intervention itself is exogenous to the observed time series (Shadish et al., 2002). The core idea is to conceptualize the observed time series as consisting of two components: an unperturbed process and a perturbed process (Hansen et al., 2016). The unperturbed process represents how mainstream party rhetoric would have evolved in the absence of the salience shock, while the perturbed process captures how the time series changes once the shock has occurred. In Paper B, the pre-crisis trajectory of mainstream party anti-immigration rhetoric serves as the unperturbed process, while changes after September 2015 constitute the perturbed process induced by the migrant crisis. The difference-in-differences component accounts for the fact that mainstream parties may differ in their pre-crisis trends regarding symbolic and substantive anti-immigration rhetoric. This allows me to assess whether the crisis changed the trajectory of substantive rhetoric net of pre-existing trends. This design is well suited for the analysis for several reasons. First, the onset of the crisis represents a clearly defined shock to immigration salience, unlikely to have been caused by prior trends in mainstream party rhetoric. Second, the timing of the intervention, September 2015, allows for a clear separation of pre- and post-crisis observations. Third, the dataset contains continuous monthly observations of party rhetoric and policy positions over multiple years and parties, making it possible to estimate both pre-crisis

trajectories and post-crisis changes in level and slope. By modeling the counterfactual trajectory based on pre-crisis patterns, the design makes it possible to evaluate the immediate and sustained effects of increased immigration salience on mainstream party behavior in a quasi-experimental framework.

3.3.1 Assumptions and Threats to Inference

The observational and quasi-experimental designs used in Papers A and B allow me to study party behavior in real political settings, across long periods of time and multiple party systems. However, they also rest on assumptions that are important to make explicit. Unlike survey experiments, these designs do not rely on random assignment. The empirical strategies therefore cannot eliminate all threats to causal inference. Instead, they aim to make the comparisons as credible as possible by using over-time variation, fixed effects, temporal ordering, and theoretically motivated research designs.

For Paper A, two threats are especially important. The first concerns unobserved time-varying confounding. The main identifying assumption is that changes in far-right strength, immigration salience, or far-right rhetoric are not driven by unobserved factors that also directly cause changes in mainstream party rhetoric. Party fixed effects account for stable differences between parties, such as ideology, historical traditions, or long-standing positions on immigration, while time fixed effects account for common period-specific shocks. However, the design remains vulnerable to time-varying confounders. Sudden changes in migration flows, terrorist attacks, economic crises, media attention, or public concern about immigration could simultaneously increase far-right support and mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric, biasing the estimation of effects. The second threat concerns reverse causality. Mainstream parties may respond to far-right parties, but far-right parties may also respond to mainstream parties. For example, far-right parties might intensify their rhetoric after mainstream parties begin talking more about immigration, or mainstream accommodation might itself affect far-right support. This is a general challenge in studies of party competition, where parties observe and react to one another continuously. I address these concerns in two ways. First, the models include party and time fixed effects, which reduce bias from stable party-level differences and common temporal shocks. Second, the analyses use lagged explanatory variables, meaning that previous far-right strength, immigration salience, or far-right rhetoric are used to predict subsequent mainstream rhetoric. This im-

poses temporal ordering and makes the empirical test more consistent with the direction of the theoretical argument. While they improve the validity of the analyses, these choices do not fully solve the problem of causal identification. The results should therefore be interpreted as evidence of temporal association consistent with the theoretical argument, rather than as definitive proof of causality.

For Paper B, the interrupted time-series design relies on a different set of assumptions. In this research design, I use the 2015 migrant crisis as a plausibly exogenous shock to the salience of immigration as a way of measuring the effect of salience on mainstream parties' rhetorical strategies. The advantage of this design is that the crisis was not caused by prior changes in Danish mainstream party rhetoric and therefore provides a useful intervention point for studying how parties respond when immigration becomes more salient. However, two challenges to the design are worth mentioning. The first challenge is that the 2015 migrant crisis is, in essence, a "bundled treatment". Although I interpret the crisis primarily as a shock to immigration salience, it likely had an effect on many things beyond only the issue salience of immigration. Notably, the crisis may have affected factors that also play a role for mainstream party rhetoric such as voter attitudes, and electoral support for mainstream parties. The design therefore cannot isolate the effect of immigration salience from every other political development produced by the crisis. The second challenge concerns pre-existing trends. Mainstream parties may already have been moving toward more substantive rhetoric before 2015. If so, post-crisis changes could partly reflect the continuation of an existing trajectory rather than a response to the treatment. This is a general concern in interrupted time-series designs where the pre-intervention trend must provide a credible counterfactual for what would have happened in the absence of the intervention. I address these concerns in two ways. First, the empirical models control for relevant time-varying political factors, including party support and immigration attitudes where possible. Second, the design explicitly models pre-crisis trends and estimates whether the post-crisis level or trajectory of symbolic and substantive responses changes relative to those trends. In this sense, the analysis uses a difference-in-differences logic within the interrupted time-series framework by asking whether rhetoric changes after the crisis above and beyond what would be expected from the pre-crisis trajectory. These choices do not fully eliminate the threats to inference, but they make the empirical test more consistent with the theoretical argument. The results should therefore be interpreted as evidence about how mainstream parties responded to the 2015 migrant crisis as a

salience-increasing event, rather than as a perfectly isolated estimate of salience alone.

The observational and quasi-experimental designs used in Papers A and B are well suited for studying party behavior in real political settings. They allow me to examine how mainstream parties respond to far-right pressure and voter attentiveness to the immigration agenda across actual party systems, long time periods, and naturally occurring political events. This external validity is essential for the first part of the dissertation, where the object of interest is macro-level party behavior that cannot realistically be randomized. At the same time, these designs cannot fully eliminate threats to causal inference. Even with fixed effects, lagged explanatory variables, controls for time-varying factors, and pre-crisis trend adjustments, the possibility of unobserved confounding, reverse causality, and bundled treatments remains. The results from the observational and quasi-experimental analyses should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution. However, to examine the individual-level consequences of mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric, I turn to the gold standard of causal research design: experiments.

3.4 Causal Identification in Experiments

As argued in the previous section, observational and quasi-experimental approaches are best suited for testing the macro-level claims about when mainstream parties change their rhetoric on immigration. However, I also make theoretically motivated claims about individual behavior: whether exposure to anti-minority rhetoric changes citizens' attitudes and norm perceptions, and whether improved cognitive and emotional regulation can make citizens more positive toward out-groups and more condemnatory of norm violations. For these individual-level questions, internal validity is of chief importance. The reason is that the effect of mainstream party rhetoric unfolds alongside many other features of the political and social environment. In the real world, citizens encounter party rhetoric together with media coverage, campaign dynamics, public debate, interpersonal discussion, and prior partisan attachments. Without random assignment, it is therefore difficult to know whether changes in attitudes or norm perceptions are caused by the rhetoric itself, or by the broader political context in which the rhetoric appears. Merely measuring exposure to mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric and, for example, perceptions of anti-prejudice norms, is therefore not a good way of testing the theoretical argument due to the many potential confounding factors.

Ideally, we could obtain a perfect estimate of a causal effect by observing the same person in two different states of the world: one in which they receive the treatment, and one in which they do not. To know the effect of mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric, for example, we would want to observe the same citizen's attitudes and norm perceptions both after and without exposure to anti-minority rhetoric. Similarly, to know the effect of an emotional regulation intervention, we would want to observe the same respondent both with and without the intervention. The difference between these two outcomes would be the causal effect of the treatment. This is impossible, however, because we cannot turn back time and observe the same respondent again under different conditions. A respondent either receives the treatment or not. The other outcome is counterfactual. This is often described as the fundamental problem of causal inference: the outcome we need in order to know the causal effect is precisely the outcome we cannot observe.

Experiments offer a way to address this problem. In principle, if we had a control group that was identical to the treatment group before treatment, any systematic difference observed between the two groups after treatment could be attributed to the treatment itself. The reason is simple: if the groups are otherwise identical, then the treatment is the only relevant difference between them. Random assignment is a way to approximate nearly identical treatment and control groups (Gerber & Green, 2012; Imbens & Rubin, 2015). By assigning respondents to treatment and control conditions at random, experimental designs make exposure to the treatment unrelated to any of the respondent's background characteristics that may otherwise affect the outcome. Naturally, random assignment does not guarantee that treatment and control groups will be perfectly identical in any single case. Purely by chance, the treatment group may differ in important respects from the control group. However, as the sample size of both groups increases, random imbalances between treatment and control groups tend to become smaller, and the average difference between the groups tends to move toward zero. Since the probability that a highly educated person will be assigned to the control group is equal to the probability that she will be assigned to the treatment group, the average education level across both groups will, in expectation, be identical. As the law of large numbers implies, these group averages should converge toward the same population average as sample size increases; and, by the Central Limit Theorem, the remaining sampling variation around this average also becomes normally distributed (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Gerber & Green, 2012; Mutz, 2011). In short, experiments provide strong conditions for causal inference, as-

suming that the treatment assignment is indeed random, and that the sample size is large enough for the law of large numbers to take effect. Under these conditions, the control group provides a credible approximation of the missing counterfactual, allowing differences in post-treatment outcomes to be interpreted as the causal effect of the treatment.

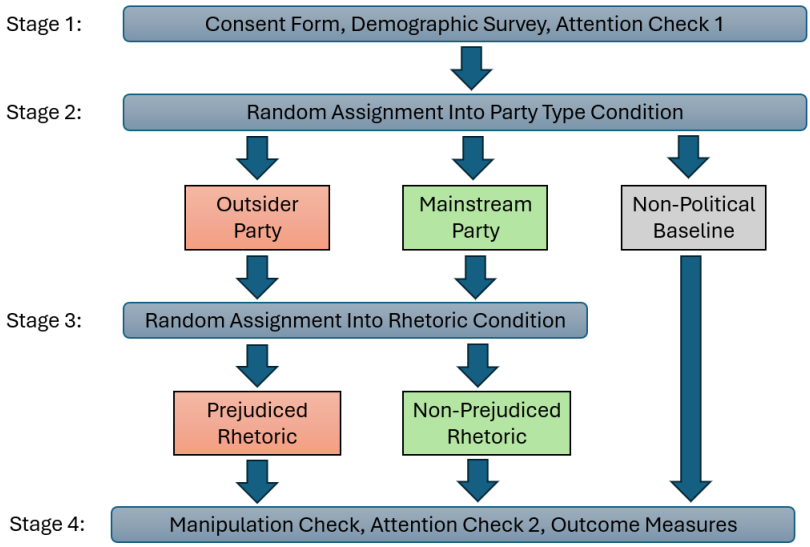
The next sections describe the experimental designs used in Papers C and D. Paper C uses two survey experiments to isolate the effect of mainstream versus far-right prejudiced rhetoric on norm perceptions. Paper D uses a longitudinal experiment, in combination with a vignette and conjoint experiment, to test whether emotional regulation can improve inter-group attitudes and make citizens more resistant to norm-breaking rhetoric from elites.

3.4.1 Paper C

Paper C uses two preregistered survey experiments to identify the effect of mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric on citizens' perceptions of anti-prejudice norms. The experiments were conducted in Germany and Denmark, two cases selected because they represent different stages in the process of mainstream accommodation of the far right. Germany is a case with comparatively limited pre-existing mainstream accommodation and stronger anti-prejudice norms, while Denmark is a case with extensive mainstream accommodation and weaker anti-prejudice norms. This case selection makes it possible to test the argument in a setting where mainstream prejudiced rhetoric should still have room to weaken norm perceptions, and in a setting where such rhetoric may already have been normalized to a greater extent. The experimental design manipulates two features of elite rhetoric: the type of party delivering the message and the content of the message. Respondents are first randomly assigned to read about either a mainstream party, a far-right outsider party, or a neutral baseline condition. In the mainstream party condition, the party is described as electorally successful, ideologically centrist, experienced in government, and accustomed to cooperating with other parties. In the far-right outsider party condition, the party is described as electorally weaker, ideologically distant from the center, excluded from government, and isolated from cooperation with other parties. Respondents in the party conditions are then randomly assigned to read either prejudiced or non-prejudiced statements attributed to the party leader of the aforementioned party. To mask the intent of the study, both vignettes include three statements, and in the prejudiced rhetoric condition one of the three statements is swapped with a statement that expresses preju-

dice toward Muslims. All other statements concern ordinary policy issues such as the economy, education, and government efficiency. The design therefore allows me to estimate both the effect of prejudiced rhetoric in general and whether this effect depends on whether the rhetoric comes from a mainstream party or a far-right outsider party, while holding all else equal.

Figure 3.1: Experiment Flowchart



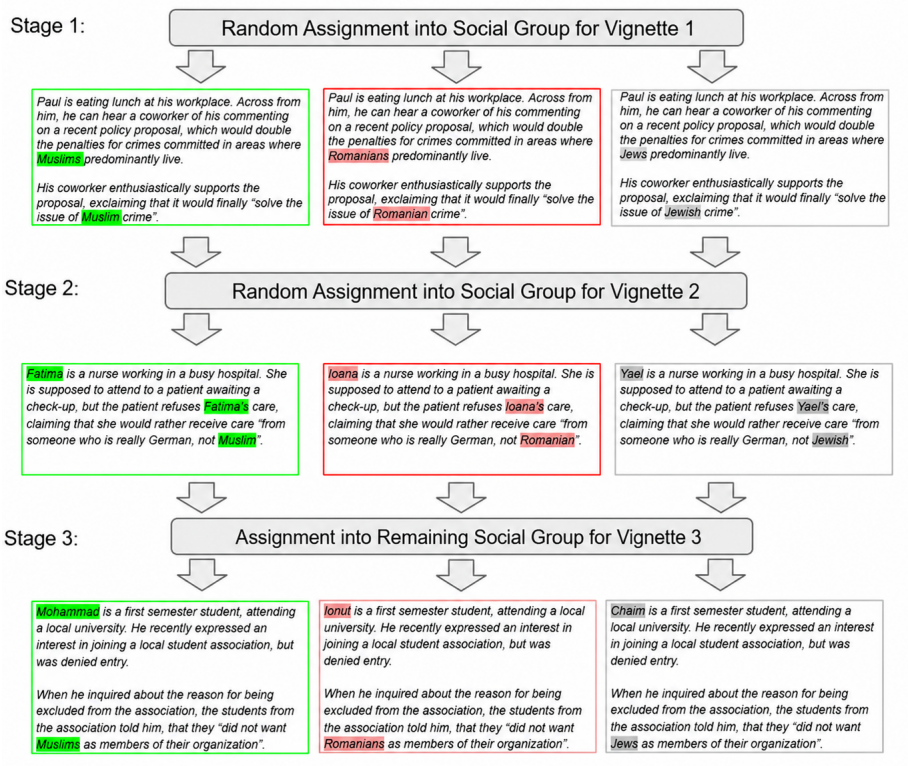
The experiment uses fictitious parties rather than named real-world parties. Respondents are explicitly asked to imagine a hypothetical party, and the party treatment is conveyed through the characteristics attached to that party rather than through an existing party name or leader. This design choice helps isolate the theoretical treatment of interest: the normative credibility and legitimacy associated with mainstream party status. If respondents were instead exposed to real parties or politicians, their responses could reflect pre-existing partisan attachments, prior beliefs about the party, evaluations of specific leaders, or other idiosyncratic associations rather than the experimentally manipulated party characteristics. Using fictitious parties therefore improves information equivalence across treatment conditions by ensuring that respondents receive the same type of information about the party and differ only in the attributes assigned by the experiment (Dafoe et al., 2018; Johns & Kölln,

2020). A possible concern is that hypothetical treatments may lead to an overestimation of treatment effects compared to treatments involving real political actors. However, existing evidence suggests that hypotheticality in survey experiments does not necessarily change the substantive conclusions researchers draw about the magnitude or direction of treatment effects (Brutger et al., 2023). Moreover, the design does not make the entire stimulus artificial. Although the party names and party leaders are fictitious, the statements respondents read are real quotes taken from party leaders in the real world. This strengthens the ecological validity of the experiment because respondents are exposed to rhetoric that resembles what they could plausibly encounter in actual political discourse, while the fictitious party frame preserves experimental control over party identity. Additionally, the experiment focuses specifically on rhetoric targeting Muslims rather than immigrants or minorities in general. Muslims are a theoretically useful case because Islam and Muslim minorities have become central to European debates about immigration, integration, cultural diversity, and religious tolerance. These issues have been highly salient on the political agenda in many European countries, and they are also an area where mainstream parties have frequently accommodated far-right rhetoric (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Lesińska, 2014). Muslims therefore constitute a substantively important case for studying anti-prejudice norms: the group is politically salient, normatively contested, and central to contemporary conflicts over the boundaries of acceptable political speech.

The main outcome is perceived anti-prejudice norm strength. After the treatment, respondents read three short vignettes describing fictitious social situations in which a person engages in prejudiced behavior toward an out-group. The vignettes include situations involving Muslims, Jews, and Romanians, although the Muslim-specific outcome is the preregistered main outcome because the treatment itself targets Muslims. After each vignette, respondents answer two questions. First, they estimate how many out of 100 people in their country would find the behavior acceptable. This item captures perceived injunctive norms or beliefs about what others approve of. Second, they estimate how many out of 100 people would engage in the behavior themselves. This item captures perceived descriptive norms or beliefs about what others do. The items are recoded so that higher values indicate stronger perceived anti-prejudice norms.

The experiments were fielded online in Germany and Denmark. The German experiment was conducted by Cint among voting-age respondents in September 2024, with a total sample of 2,200 respondents. The

Figure 3.2: Outcome Measure Flowchart



Danish experiment was conducted by Epinion in April 2025, with a total sample of 5,114 respondents. The German sample size was based on a preregistered power analysis for the five-group design, while the larger Danish sample was collected as part of a broader data collection effort. The surveys also included post-treatment manipulation checks asking whether respondents correctly perceived the topic of the vignette and whether the party had been described as mainstream/centrist or fringe/outsider. Both samples were representative on key demographics. In the German experiment, respondents who failed attention checks were excluded, and respondents identifying as Muslim were excluded from the analytical sample in accordance with the preregistered analysis plan. In the Danish experiment, attention checks and quality-control exclusions were handled by the polling company based on similar criteria.

3.4.2 Paper D

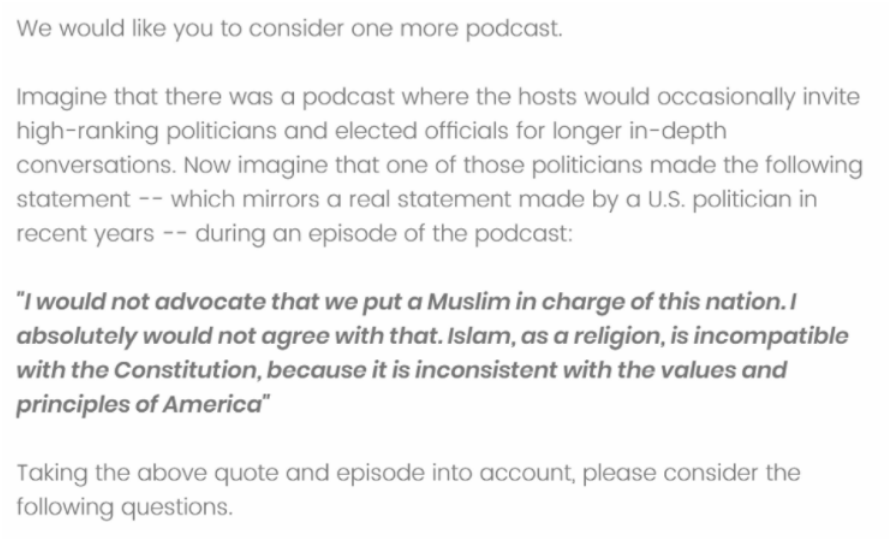
Paper D uses a longitudinal randomized experiment to test whether emotional and cognitive regulation can improve out-group attitudes and make citizens more condemnatory of norm violations. The experiment manipulates these regulatory capacities through repeated guided meditation exercises. This choice is motivated by existing research showing that meditation can affect self-regulatory processes related to attention, stress, emotional reactivity, and well-being (Simonsson, Goldberg, et al., 2022; Simonsson, Narayanan, & Marks, 2022; Sparacio et al., 2024; Ziegler et al., 2019). Meditation is therefore useful as a treatment, because it provides a scalable intervention that plausibly targets both the emotional and cognitive mechanisms developed in the theory section. Mindfulness meditation is especially relevant for cognitive and attentional regulation because it trains respondents to notice thoughts, sensations, and distractions without immediately reacting to them. Compassion meditation is especially relevant for emotional regulation because it explicitly cultivates warmth, care, acceptance, and benevolent concern toward the self and others. The study was conducted among adults in the United States and lasted 15 days. Participants completed a baseline survey on day 1, daily treatment or control sessions between Days 2 and 14, and an endline survey on day 15. The final analytic sample consists of 873 respondents, who were randomly assigned into one of the three conditions. In the mindfulness meditation condition, respondents listened to guided meditation exercises designed to cultivate non-judgmental awareness of present-moment experience. In the compassion meditation condition, respondents listened to guided meditation exercises that built on mindfulness practice but placed greater emphasis on warmth, kindness, acceptance, and benevolent concern toward the self and others. In the control condition, respondents did not meditate but listened to informational podcast-style audio episodes about meditation, including its history, types, scientific background, and possible benefits. The control condition therefore holds constant exposure to audio content about meditation while removing the active practice component. Across conditions, the audio materials were comparable in format and length, and respondents answered comprehension questions after each daily session. Notably, the study was presented to participants as a study about podcasts rather than as a study about out-group attitudes or social norm perceptions. This framing was used to reduce demand effects and limit the likelihood that respondents would infer the specific purpose of the intervention. The daily materials were delivered remotely through

links embedded in the survey questionnaire, and respondents only received access to the next session after completing the previous one. This design makes it possible to estimate the effect of repeated exposure to the treatment over time, rather than the effect of a brief one-shot intervention.

Emotional and cognitive regulation is measured in several ways. Emotional regulation is measured by asking respondents to indicate their degree of anxiousness, trust, and risk willingness, as well as by assessing the emotional tone of respondents' open-ended survey responses (see subsection 3.2.1). Cognitive regulation is measured by cognitive reflection tasks, Raven's Progressive Matrices, self-reported stress, and by assessing linguistic complexity in respondent's' open-ended responses (see subsection 3.2.1). This distinction is central to the design because the theoretical argument developed in this dissertation is that interventions may reduce out-group hostility not only by changing what citizens know, but by changing how they emotionally react to political and social outgroups. The design therefore allows me to distinguish between emotional mechanisms, such as reduced anxiousness or more positive emotional expression, and cognitive mechanisms, namely improved cognitive performance and decreased cognitive load. In addition to the longitudinal meditation treatment, Paper D contains several embedded experiments. At baseline and endline, respondents complete a conjoint experiment about hypothetical podcast episodes. Respondents choose between and rate pairs of podcast episodes that vary experimentally on attributes such as source, topic, argument, expertise, affective tone, and complexity. This conjoint experiment measures which kinds of political and informational content respondents are more willing to select into. The study also includes vignette experiments in which respondents evaluate hypothetical podcast episodes covering five different issues, including immigration, pro-Palestine protests, partisan violence, free trade, and support for Ukraine. These vignettes vary by source identity (liberal/conservative) and argument direction (pro/counter), making it possible to examine receptivity to attitude-consistent and counter-attitudinal information. Most importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, Paper D also includes an experiment testing reactions to mainstream elite prejudiced rhetoric toward Muslims. Respondents are asked to imagine a podcast that occasionally invites high-ranking politicians and elected officials for in-depth conversations. They are then randomly assigned to consider either a prejudiced statement about Muslims or a non-prejudiced control statement about education. In the prejudiced rhetoric condition, the politician states that they would not support putting a Muslim in charge of the na-

tion and that Islam is incompatible with the Constitution and American values. In the control condition, the politician discusses the importance of education and high school completion. Just as with the experiment in Paper C, the statement is attributed to a hypothetical unnamed politician, but the statement itself is a direct quote from a real politician.

Figure 3.3: Prejudiced Rhetoric Experiment (Treatment Group)



After reading the podcast vignette, respondents answer three outcome questions. First, they indicate how likely they would be to listen to the episode on a 1–7 scale. Second, they estimate how many out of 100 Americans would find it socially unacceptable to make a statement like this in public. Third, they report how much they agree or disagree with the statement on a 1–7 scale. The second and third item constitutes the main outcome measures, because it measures perceived anti-prejudice norm strength, and expressed support/opposition to norm-breaking rhetoric. It captures whether respondents believe that prejudiced elite rhetoric would be socially sanctioned or socially tolerated by the broader public, and whether respondents themselves tolerate or sanction such rhetoric.

3.5 Overview of Data and Research Designs

Table 3.1: Overview of the dissertation papers

Paper	Research question	Research design	Data	Sample size
A	When and why do mainstream parties adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric?	Longitudinal fixed-effects analysis	Parliamentary speeches and electoral polling from nine Western European countries, 1994–2024	$n = 5{,}954$ party-month observations
B	When do mainstream parties respond to immigration symbolically or substantively?	Interrupted time-series difference-in-differences design	Parliamentary speeches from Denmark, 1997–2022	$n = 806$ party-month observations
C	Does prejudiced rhetoric from mainstream parties weaken anti-prejudice norms and why?	Randomized vignette experiment	Survey experimental responses	Germany: $n = 2{,}200$; Denmark: $n = 5{,}114$
D	Can emotional and cognitive regulation make citizens less accepting of prejudiced rhetoric?	Longitudinal experiment, vignette experiment, and conjoint experiment	Survey experimental responses	United States: $n = 873$

Chapter 4
Findings

"The question is, should we change social institutions or human hearts? The only real answer is both. But where do we start? With the heart, of course."

– Alija Izetbegović

This chapter presents the main empirical findings of the dissertation. It follows the theoretical logic developed in Chapter 2 by moving through three questions. First, why do mainstream parties adopt anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric? Second, through what mechanisms does it shape out-group attitudes and perceptions of anti-prejudice norms? Third, can emotional regulation improve out-group attitudes and make citizens less receptive to prejudiced rhetoric from political elites? The chapter therefore moves from the causes of mainstream party rhetoric to its consequences and finally to possible countermeasures.

4.1 What Explains Mainstream Party Rhetoric?

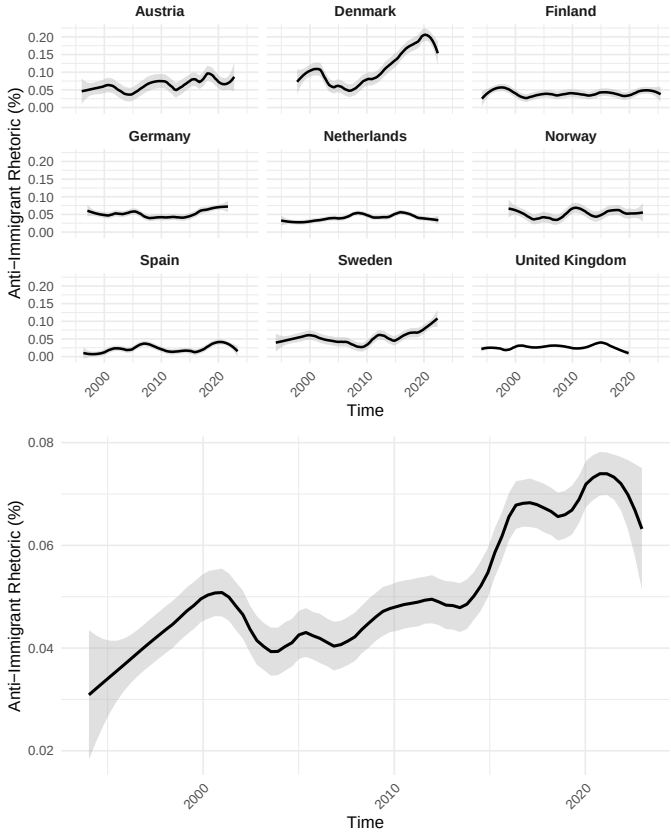
The first set of findings concerns why mainstream parties adopt anti-immigration rhetoric in the first place. The argument is that mainstream parties use rhetoric strategically. When far-right parties gain electoral support, they threaten mainstream parties by attracting voters who hold restrictive views on immigration. I argue that as far right parties experience electoral success, they exert a greater amount of pressure on mainstream parties, which induces mainstream parties to accommodate the rhetoric of the far right. The observable implication is straightforward: far right strength is expected to be strongly correlated with how much

anti-immigrant language mainstream parties are likely to employ. Similarly, I expect rhetorical spillover from far right parties to mainstream parties, meaning that the amount of far right anti-immigrant rhetoric should also be associated with more mainstream party anti-immigrant rhetoric. A second set of hypotheses concerns the type of immigration-related rhetoric used by the mainstream. As explained in the theory section, political parties can respond to voters through either symbolic or substantive rhetoric. Due to the double bind of immigration politics, I expect that mainstream parties will prefer symbolic over substantive responses under normal circumstances, but adopt a higher degree of substantive responses during periods where immigration is highly salient.

4.1.1 Far-Right Success and Mainstream Party Accommodation

Figure 4.1 reports the descriptive results indicating the propensity of mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric as a proportion of total immigrant-related rhetoric across all periods and all countries, including a pooled trend line for all countries. The bottom panel pools the results across all nine countries in the sample and shows that anti-immigrant rhetoric constitutes 3–8% of all mainstream party rhetoric on immigration and related topics. The pooled results also show that anti-immigrant rhetoric was relatively low during the 1990s and early 2000s, before gradually increasing from around 2010–2013 onward and reaching its highest level shortly after 2020. The country-specific trends in the top panel show considerable cross-national variation. Although the increase is most pronounced in Denmark, anti-immigrant rhetoric rises in prevalence to varying degrees in all countries in the sample except Norway and Finland. The descriptive evidence therefore suggests both a general increase in mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric over time and important differences in how strongly this pattern appears across national contexts. Although these percentages may appear modest, they partly reflect the use of quasi-sentences rather than full speeches and a broad keyword filter for identifying immigration-related speech. They should therefore be interpreted as a conservative indication, or potential lower bound, of the broader prevalence of anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Figure 4.1: Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric From Mainstream Parties Over Time

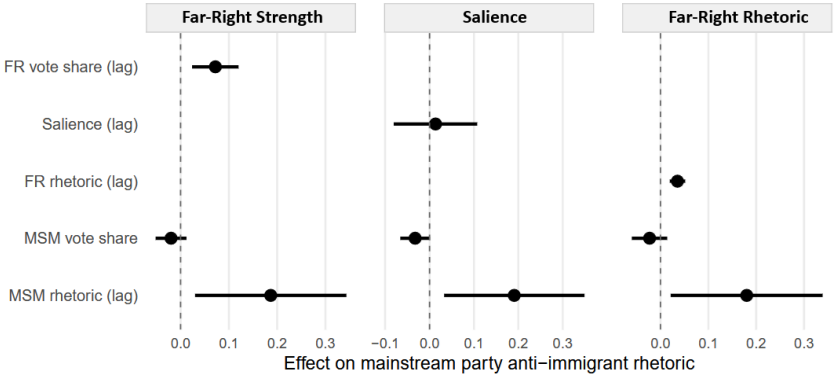


Note: n=21.178. Anti-immigrant rhetoric is calculated as the relative frequency of parliamentary speech quasi-sentences that include anti-immigrant or anti-minority rhetoric, averaged at the week level, with 95% confidence intervals. Anti-immigrant rhetoric is therefore expressed as a percentage, scaled from 0 to 1. Loess smoother applied. Top panel shows country-level anti-immigrant rhetoric, and bottom panel shows anti-immigrant rhetoric pooled across all countries in the sample, in the period 1994–2024. All countries are assigned equal weight in the pooled results.

What can explain this increase? The main explanatory results are presented in Figure 4.2. The figure reports the results from the empirical analysis, focusing on the three central expectations: far-right electoral strength, immigration salience, and rhetorical spillover from far-right

parties to mainstream parties. Starting with lagged far-right electoral strength, the results show that far-right intended vote share, controlling for mainstream party intended vote share, is significantly and robustly associated with more mainstream party anti-immigrant rhetoric ($\beta = 0.072$, $p < 0.01$). This is in accordance with expectations: When far-right parties surge in the polls, mainstream parties appear to accommodate them by adopting more anti-immigrant rhetoric than they otherwise would. Substantively, the effect size indicates that a one percentage-point increase in far-right party support is associated with a 0.072 percentage-point increase in mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric in the following month. A ten percentage-point increase in far-right strength therefore corresponds to an approximately 0.72 percentage-point increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric. This is a fairly substantial effect, given that the average amount of anti-immigrant rhetoric is around 5%. Contrary to expectations, there is no clear evidence that immigration salience is associated with more mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric. While immigration salience is positively correlated with mainstream party anti-immigrant rhetoric, the association does not reach statistical significance at conventional levels ($\beta = 0.013$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that mainstream parties do not simply become more restrictive whenever immigration receives more parliamentary attention. Finally, the results show evidence of rhetorical spillover from far-right parties to mainstream parties. Far-right party anti-immigrant rhetoric is positively and significantly associated with mainstream party anti-immigrant rhetoric ($\beta = 0.036$, $p < 0.001$). In other words, when far-right parties increase the amount of anti-immigrant rhetoric in their parliamentary speeches in one period, mainstream parties use more anti-immigrant rhetoric in the following period. This supports the argument that far-right parties influence mainstream parties not only by attracting voters but also by changing the language of immigration politics.

Figure 4.2: Estimated Effect on Mainstream Party Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric



Note: n = 5954. Plot shows coefficient estimates from linear regressions with 95% confidence intervals (robust standard errors). Country, time and party fixed effects terms included. "FR" = Far Right Party, "MSM" = Mainstream Party.

In sum, the empirical analysis lends support to the expectation that far-right electoral strength leads to mainstream rhetorical accommodation, and to the expectation that far-right rhetoric spills over into mainstream party speech. By contrast, the analysis does not provide support for the expectation that immigration salience alone increases mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric. These results are robust to alternative operationalizations of the dependent variable, including translating all parliamentary speeches into English prior to classification. They are also robust to excluding observations where no far-right party was represented in parliament, disaggregating mainstream parties into center-left and center-right parties, and using alternative temporal specifications in which the key predictors are lagged by two or three months. Although the effect sizes are somewhat larger for center-right parties, far-right pressure is not confined to them, suggesting that the main findings generalize across the mainstream ideological spectrum. Taken together, Paper A makes two points: 1. Mainstream parties do indeed rely on anti-immigrant rhetoric, and 2. Far-right electoral success is associated with more mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric, and far-right rhetoric itself spills over into mainstream parliamentary speech. Mainstream party accommodation is therefore not only a positional but also rhetorical phenomenon.

4.1.2 From Symbolic to Substantive Rhetoric

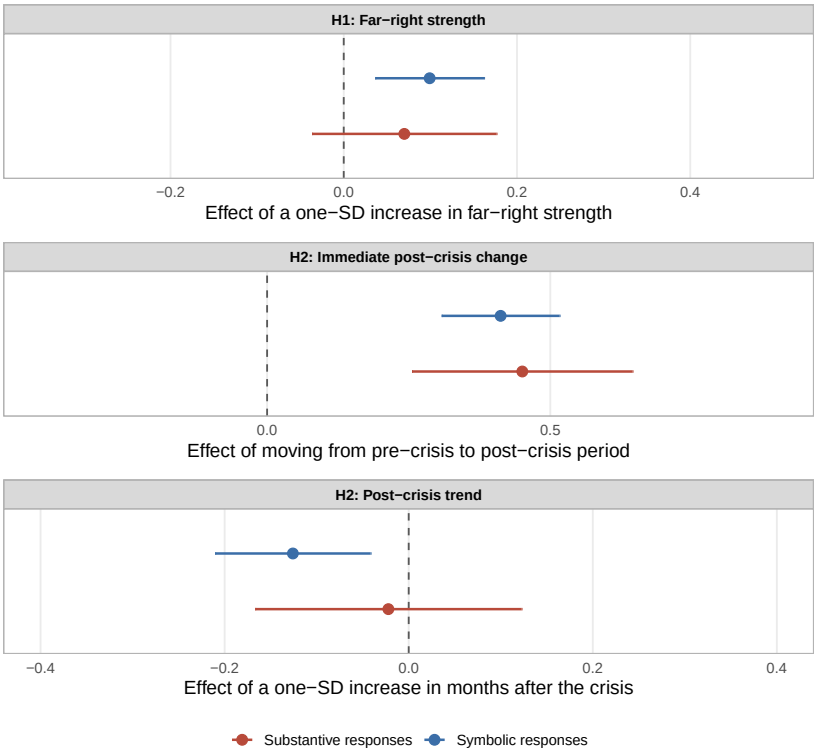
Paper B examines a related, but distinct, question: when mainstream parties respond to immigration-related voter pressure, what kind of rhetoric do they use? I expect far-right pressure to primarily induce symbolic responses, while heightened immigration salience should make symbolic responsiveness less sufficient and push mainstream parties toward more substantive, policy-oriented rhetoric. Paper B tests this argument using Danish parliamentary speeches from 1997 to 2022.

Before turning to the formal hypothesis tests, I first look at the baseline levels of symbolic and substantive responses by mainstream parties on immigration. These results are in accordance with expectations, as they clearly indicate that mainstream parties were in fact responsive to voters on immigration, but that such responses were almost exclusively symbolic in nature. Almost 90% of all responses are symbolic during the period of 1997 to 2015, whereas substantive responses increase in frequency in the following period up to about 40% of all responses. Descriptively, the data thus suggest that symbolic rhetoric dominated the rhetoric of mainstream parties up until approximately 2015, with a marked increase in substantive responses in the following period. Importantly, the data shows that the pre-migrant crisis period was not characterized by the complete absence of mainstream party attention to immigration, but rather the fact that responses tended to be absent of any policy commitments.

Turning now to the main results, the theoretical expectations are twofold. First, far-right electoral strength should lead mainstream parties to increase symbolic anti-immigration rhetoric, but not necessarily substantive rhetoric, because symbolic responses allow them to acknowledge voter concerns without committing to concrete policy change. Second, once immigration becomes highly salient for voters in the wake of the migrant crisis, symbolic responses should become less sufficient, pushing mainstream parties toward more substantive, policy-oriented rhetoric. The main results are reported in Figure 4.3. The first, uppermost, panel tests whether far-right electoral strength is associated with symbolic and substantive responses. The results support the expectation that mainstream parties respond to far-right pressure primarily through symbolic rhetoric. More specifically, a ten percentage-point increase in far-right vote share is associated with a statistically significant increase in symbolic anti-immigration rhetoric ($\beta = 0.273$, $p = 0.002$). Since the model is estimated as a Poisson count model, this corresponds to approximately a 31% increase in the expected count of symbolic responses

$(\exp(0.273) = 1.31)$. This is substantively meaningful, especially because changes of this magnitude in far-right support are realistic in the Danish context. By contrast, far-right strength is not significantly associated with substantive anti-immigration rhetoric ($\beta = 0.192$, $p = 0.198$). This pattern supports the argument that mainstream parties initially accommodate far-right pressure by "standing for" voters symbolically, rather than by "acting for" voters through concrete policy advocacy.

Figure 4.3: Test of Main Hypotheses



Note: n=806 party-month observations. The figure reports standardized coefficient estimates from separate party-month Poisson count models of symbolic and substantive anti-immigration rhetoric. The first panel reports the association between far-right electoral strength and mainstream party rhetoric. The second and third panels report the immediate post-crisis change and the post-crisis trend from the interrupted time-series salience models, where the September 2015 migrant crisis is used as the intervention point. Points represent coefficient estimates, with horizontal bars indicating 95% confidence intervals.

The second and third panels of Figure 4.3 test whether heightened immigration salience changes this pattern. Here, Paper B uses the 2015 migrant crisis as a shock to the salience of immigration. The results show that both symbolic and substantive responses increased immediately after the crisis, but the substantive increase was especially large. Symbolic responses increased significantly after the crisis ($\beta = 1.784$, $p < 0.001$), corresponding to an expected count almost six times higher than before the crisis. However, the post-crisis trend for symbolic rhetoric is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.008$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that the immediate increase was followed by a gradual decline. Substantive responses also increased immediately after the crisis ($\beta = 2.397$, $p < 0.001$), corresponding to an expected count almost eleven times higher than before the crisis. Unlike symbolic rhetoric, the post-crisis trend for substantive rhetoric is not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.007$, $p = 0.119$). This indicates that the crisis produced an immediate and sustained increase in policy-oriented anti-immigration rhetoric. Overall, the results support both hypotheses, as far right pressure was indicative of mainstream party symbolic responses, while increased immigration salience increases mainstream parties' use of both symbolic and substantive rhetoric, with the largest increase observed for substantive responses.

I further probe the interpretation of these results in three ways. First, I examine whether the 2015 migrant crisis in fact increased voter attentiveness to immigration, which is the mechanism through which salience is expected to change party strategy. Paper B shows that immigration became substantially more important to Danish voters during the crisis period. I draw on Eurobarometer data showing that the share of Danish respondents naming immigration as one of the most important issues facing the country increased sharply, reaching more than 80% in late 2015. This increase was especially pronounced among center-right respondents, who were generally more likely than center-left respondents to identify immigration as a salient national issue. Drawing on more fine-grained Google Trends data shows the same pattern where immigration-related search interest spiked around September 2015, reaching the highest level in the full period. Data on news coverage of immigration-related topics also increased sharply during the same period. This evidence is descriptive, but it is consistent with the theoretical mechanism: the migrant crisis made voters more attentive to immigration, thereby increasing the pressure on mainstream parties to move beyond only symbolic recognition.

Second, I examine whether the shift toward substantive responsiveness is strongest among the parties that should be most exposed to this pressure, namely center-right parties. Insofar as the rhetorical strategies adopted by mainstream parties are driven by electoral competition from the far right, any changes in responsiveness should be more pronounced among center-right parties, rather than center-left parties, since the former is more directly at risk of voter defection. This is indeed what the results show. Among center-right parties, the expected count of symbolic responses is approximately eight times higher after the crisis ($\beta = 2.102$, $p < 0.001$), while the expected count of substantive responses is more than thirty times higher ($\beta = 3.483$, $p < 0.001$). Formal interaction models confirm that the immediate post-crisis increase in substantive rhetoric is significantly larger among center-right parties than among center-left parties ($\beta_{\text{difference}} = 1.680$, $p < 0.001$). This supports the argument that heightened salience pushes parties toward substantive rhetoric especially when they face direct competition from the far right and are expected by voters to handle immigration competently.

Third, Paper B examines whether substantive rhetoric is meaningfully different from symbolic rhetoric by testing whether the post-crisis increase in substantive responses is accompanied by changes in immigration policy. If substantive responsiveness captures policy-oriented rhetoric, it should be more closely connected to actual restrictive policy output. The results support this interpretation. After the migrant crisis, Danish immigration policy became significantly more restrictive across several measures, including the number of restrictive reforms, the magnitude of restrictive reforms, and the overall direction of policy change. After the migrant crisis, anti-immigration rhetoric is more strongly associated with the overall direction of policy activity over the following three months ($\beta = 0.417$, $p = 0.021$), and with the magnitude of restrictive reforms over the following six months ($\beta = 0.209$, $p = 0.008$). This provides additional validation of the distinction between symbolic and substantive responsiveness, as substantive responses were followed up by concrete legislative output.

Taken together, Paper B shows that mainstream responsiveness on immigration is multi-dimensional. Far-right pressure primarily encourages symbolic accommodation, where parties acknowledge voter concerns without committing to concrete policy change. When immigration becomes highly salient, however, voters become more attentive to the issue, symbolic responses become less sufficient, and mainstream parties, especially on the center-right, move toward more substantive, policy-oriented rhetoric. The broader implication is that mainstream parties

may have been more responsive on immigration than previous research suggests, but that much of this responsiveness has taken symbolic form until public attentiveness made concrete policy commitments harder to avoid.

4.2 How Mainstream Party Anti-Minority Rhetoric Shapes Voter Attitudes

The previous section investigated when and why mainstream parties accommodate rhetoric from the far right. I now turn to the question of what consequences mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric has for citizen out-group attitudes and social norm perceptions. The theoretical argument is that mainstream parties do not only respond to the political environment; they may also reshape it. When mainstream parties use prejudiced rhetoric toward minorities, they signal to citizens that such expressions of prejudice are socially acceptable. Importantly, prejudiced rhetoric is expected to be especially effective in eroding anti-prejudice norms when it comes from mainstream parties, rather than outsider parties like on the far right, because of their inherent normative credibility and legitimacy. This section presents the main findings from Paper C.

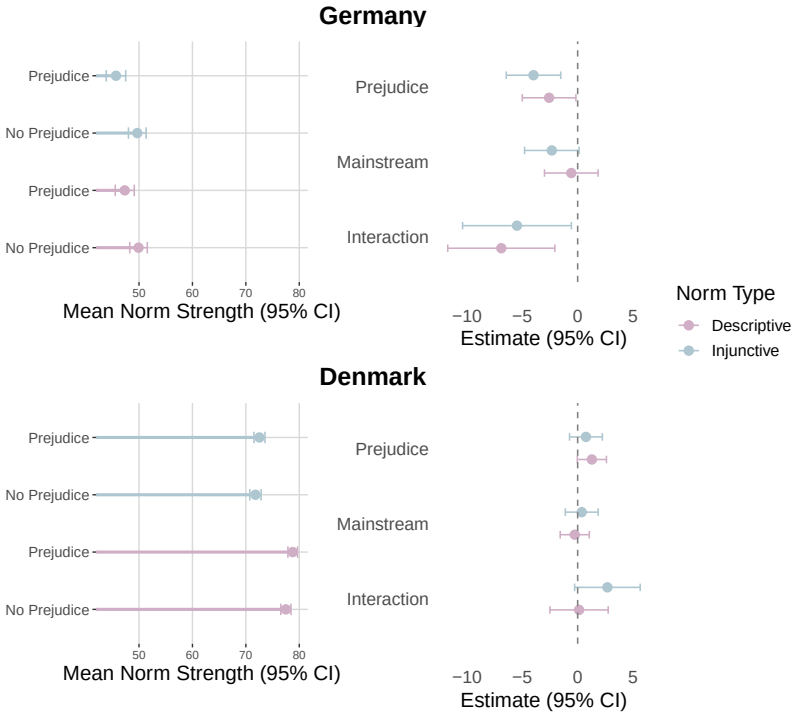
4.2.1 The Effects of Prejudiced Rhetoric on Social Norm Perceptions

To test these arguments, Paper C uses two preregistered survey experiments fielded in Germany and Denmark. Figure 4.4 reports the main results. The figure shows the effects of prejudiced rhetoric and party type on perceived norm strength in Germany and Denmark. The left-hand plots show group-level means, while the right-hand plots show coefficient estimates from the regression models. The upper plots show the German results, and the lower plots show the Danish results. Several things are worthy of note.

First, the results show that prejudiced rhetoric weakens perceived anti-prejudice norms in Germany. Respondents who were exposed to prejudiced rhetoric report lower perceived norm strength than respondents in the non-prejudiced rhetoric condition. The difference is approximately four points on the norm-strength scale and is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$, t-value = 4.26). This means that respondents who were exposed to prejudiced rhetoric toward Muslims became more likely to believe that such prejudice was socially acceptable in society. This is the

case both for the injunctive norm measure and the descriptive norm measure, meaning that respondents perceived prejudice toward Muslims as less socially sanctioned, and as occurring more often.

Figure 4.4: Coefficient Plot of Effects on Norm Strength



Note: n = 6140. Left-hand plots show group-level means with 95% confidence intervals, pooled across party type. Right-hand plots show coefficient estimates from linear regressions with 95% confidence intervals. Upper plots show data for Germany, and lower plots show data for Denmark.

Second, the results show that the effect of prejudiced rhetoric in Germany is concentrated among respondents exposed to mainstream party rhetoric specifically. The interaction between party type and prejudiced rhetoric is negative and statistically significant for both injunctive and descriptive norm perceptions. In substantive terms, this means that prejudiced rhetoric weakens perceived anti-prejudice norms much more strongly when it comes from a mainstream party than when it comes from an outsider party. In fact, there is no statistically significant effect

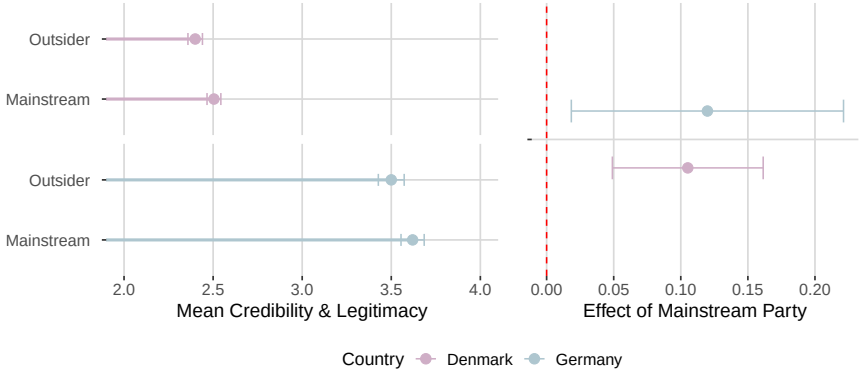
of prejudiced rhetoric on social norm perceptions when we only look at outsider parties. This is the key finding of Paper C, and it lends direct support to the main theoretical argument that mainstream parties are uniquely capable of changing social norms. The norm-weakening effect of mainstream prejudiced rhetoric, while not large in absolute terms, is substantively meaningful by conventional standards (Cohen's $d = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$, t-value = 3.89). Third, the findings in the Danish case differ substantially from the results in the German case. In Denmark, prejudiced rhetoric has a weak and inconsistent effect on social norm perceptions, both for descriptive and injunctive norm measures. To summarize the main findings, the results support the overall theoretical argument, but only in the German case. In Germany, prejudiced rhetoric weakens perceived anti-prejudice norms, and this effect is strongest when the rhetoric comes from a mainstream party. In Denmark, the same pattern is not observed. Paper C therefore suggests that mainstream party rhetoric can erode anti-prejudice norms, but that this effect depends on the broader political context. In the following section, I first report the findings pertaining to the theorized mechanism connecting mainstream prejudiced rhetoric to weakening social norms, namely normative credibility and legitimacy. Afterwards, I further investigate and discuss the differing results in Denmark and Germany.

4.2.2 Validating the Mechanism

The previous section showed that mainstream parties change social norm perceptions more effectively than outsider parties. The second part of the theoretical argument concerns the mechanism through which this effect occurs. As a reminder, I argue that this effect can be explained by viewing mainstream parties as especially influential social referents, whom citizens see as representatives of society as a whole - I call this mainstream parties' "normative credibility and legitimacy". To examine this mechanism, I first measure whether respondents perceived mainstream parties as more credible and legitimate. As shown in Figure 4.5, mainstream parties are rated as more credible and legitimate than outsider parties in both countries. The effect is statistically significant in Germany ($p < 0.05$, t-value = 3.67) and Denmark ($p < 0.05$, t-value = 2.09). The magnitude of the difference is modest but substantively meaningful in this context, since social norm perceptions are generally difficult to shift in survey-experimental settings (Bischof et al., 2024). Interestingly, mainstream parties were seen as more credible and legitimate than outsider parties in both Denmark and Germany, even though the norm-eroding effect was

only observed in the German case. Additional associational analyses also show that greater perceived normative credibility and legitimacy of mainstream parties is associated with weaker perceived anti-prejudice norms in Germany, but not in Denmark. In sum, there is strong evidence in favor of the hypothesized mechanism linking mainstream parties to changes in social norm perceptions.

Figure 4.5: Credibility and Legitimacy Score across Party Type Conditions



Note: n = 7314. Left plot shows group-level means with 95% confidence intervals. Right side shows coefficient estimates from linear regressions with 95% confidence intervals.

However, there are several possible alternative explanations of the findings. What if mainstream parties are good at changing social norm perceptions, not because they are credible and legitimate social referents, but perhaps because respondents found mainstream party prejudice to be more surprising than outsider party prejudice? Or perhaps because mainstream party rhetoric was simply more persuasive, in the sense that their private attitudes changed, irrespective of changes in social norm perceptions? I investigate both claims in detail.

The first alternative explanation concerns surprise. One possibility is that mainstream prejudiced rhetoric weakens social norm perceptions not because mainstream parties are seen as credible and legitimate social referents, but because respondents simply find it more unexpected when a mainstream party uses prejudiced language. If this were the case, the treatment effect would not necessarily tell us that mainstream parties are better able to signal what is socially acceptable. It would instead suggest that respondents react more strongly to mainstream party

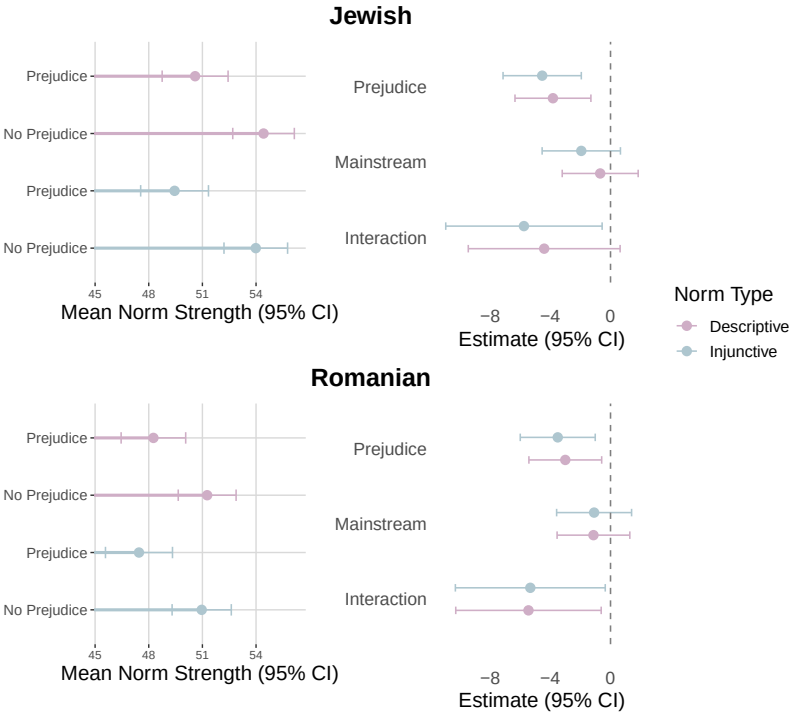
prejudice because it violates their expectations about what mainstream parties usually say. Paper C finds little evidence for this interpretation. I test whether respondents found prejudiced statements from mainstream parties more surprising than prejudiced statements from outsider parties. The results show no statistically significant difference across party types ($p > 0.05$, t-value = -0.28). This null result also holds when the analysis is restricted to respondents in the prejudiced rhetoric condition. In other words, mainstream party prejudice does not appear to have stronger effects because it is perceived as more surprising. This strengthens the interpretation that the effect operates through normative credibility and legitimacy, rather than through a feeling of surprise.

A second alternative explanation is that the results reflect ordinary party cues or persuasion, rather than changes in social norm perceptions. In a party-cue account, citizens update their attitudes because political elites send signals about what they should believe (Zaller, 1992). If this were the mechanism, we would expect prejudiced rhetoric from mainstream parties to change not only perceived norm strength but also respondents' own attitudes toward Muslims. This is not what Paper C finds. Across a range of out-group attitude measures, including feeling thermometers, stereotype evaluations, and social distance items, I find consistent null effects. Respondents exposed to mainstream party prejudice do not become substantially more negative toward Muslims in their private attitudes. This lends additional credence to the social norm explanation, given that only citizens' second-order beliefs changed, and not their first order beliefs. Moreover, if the mechanism were mainly driven by partisan cues, we should expect the effect of mainstream prejudiced rhetoric to primarily influence respondents who support mainstream parties. On the contrary, supporters of outsider parties should be less responsive, because they do not identify with or take cues from the mainstream. The results show the opposite pattern, however. Respondents across the political spectrum, including supporters of outsider parties such as AfD, BSW, and Die Linke, update their norm perceptions in response to mainstream party rhetoric. This suggests that mainstream parties are not only influential among their own supporters. Rather, they function as broadly recognized indicators of the social and political mainstream. Citizens may disagree with them, but still use them as referents for what society at large appears to tolerate, which is in accordance with the theoretical argument.

One more way of validating the proposed mechanism is by estimating the effect of the treatment on social norm perceptions of prejudice pertaining to different social groups. As a reminder, I measure social

norm perceptions of the anti-prejudice norm by presenting respondents with short descriptions of hypothetical social situations in which a person engages in norm-breaking prejudiced behavior toward Muslims. Additionally, I measure social norm perceptions of the anti-prejudice norm vis-à-vis Jews and Romanians, which allows me to estimate the perceived strength of the anti-prejudice norms toward all three groups separately. Importantly, if the effect of prejudiced rhetoric targeting Muslims only appeared for norm perceptions concerning Muslims, one might suspect that the treatment simply changed how respondents thought about that particular group. To examine this, I also measure the effect of prejudiced rhetoric targeting Muslims on norm perceptions toward Jews and Romanians.

Figure 4.6: Treatment Effects on Jews and Romanians (Germany)



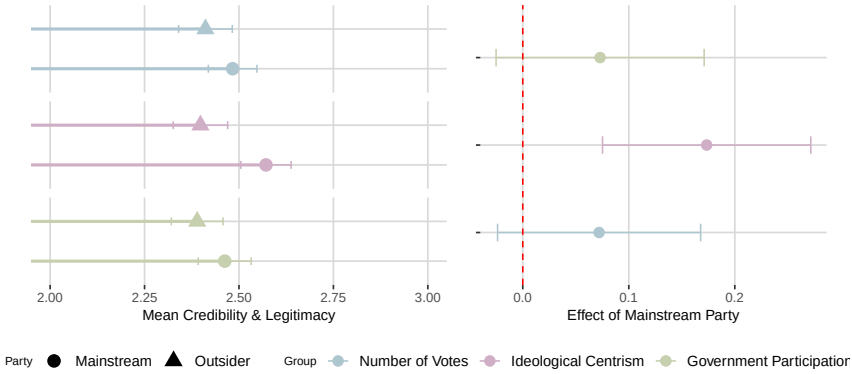
Note: n = 1931. Left-hand plots show group-level means with 95% confidence intervals, pooled across party type. Right-hand plots show coefficient estimates from linear regressions with 95% confidence intervals. Upper plots show data for Jews, and lower plots show data for Romanians.

As shown in Figure 4.6, the effect of prejudiced rhetoric is not limited to Muslims. In Germany, rhetoric targeting Muslims also weakens perceived anti-prejudice norms toward Jews and Romanians. The effects are statistically significant and comparable in magnitude to the main effects reported above. This indicates that even though the treatment only directed prejudice toward Muslims, it still reduced the overall perceived strength of the anti-prejudice norm toward all minority groups included. The implication is that prejudiced rhetoric affected norm perceptions, not by changing the beliefs of respondents on the specific issue of the Muslim minority, but rather by changing the perception of the anti-prejudice norm more broadly.

Given ample evidence that mainstream parties are perceived as more normatively credible and legitimate, and that this is the mechanism through which they are better able to change norm perceptions, an outstanding question is where this credibility and legitimacy comes from. In the main experiment, mainstream party status is treated as a bundled concept. Parties are described as mainstream because they possess several characteristics at once: they are ideologically centrist, they have participated in government, and they enjoy relatively broad electoral support. These are the characteristics that distinguish mainstream parties from outsider parties in the theoretical argument. However, the bundled treatment alone does not reveal which of these characteristics matters most for citizens' perceptions of normative credibility and legitimacy. The Danish experiment in Paper C provides an opportunity to explore this question. In the Danish sample, the party type condition was further disaggregated into three separate conditions, each of which isolated one characteristic of "mainstreamness": ideological centrism, government participation, or electoral strength. This makes it possible to examine whether mainstream parties derive their normative credibility and legitimacy primarily from being located near the ideological center, from having governing experience, or from being electorally large. In other words, the disaggregated treatment allows me to unpack the broader mainstream/outsider distinction and test whether one component of mainstream status is more important than the others.

Figure 4.7 reports the effect of the mainstream party condition separately for each of the three disaggregated treatments. Among the three characteristics, ideological centrism is the only one that clearly increases perceived credibility and legitimacy ($p < 0.01$, t-value = 3.72). In other words, respondents do not rate a party as significantly more credible and legitimate simply because it is described as participating in government or as electorally successful. By contrast, respondents do rate a party

Figure 4.7: Effect of Mainstream Treatment on Legitimacy Across Sub-Conditions



Note: n = 4209. Left-hand plot shows group-level means with 95% confidence intervals. Right-hand plot shows coefficient estimates from linear regressions with 95% confidence intervals.

as more credible and legitimate when it is described as being located in the middle of the ideological spectrum rather than on the ideological fringe. This suggests that the normative credibility and legitimacy of mainstream parties may derive especially from their ideological proximity to the political center. Parties located near the middle of the ideological spectrum may be perceived as closer to the median voter and, by extension, as more representative of society as a whole. This makes them more credible indicators of what kinds of speech and behavior are socially acceptable. However, because this analysis is exploratory, future research should examine more directly whether perceived centrism causally shapes parties' normative credibility and legitimacy, especially because the current analysis does not allow us to discern whether the effect of one condition is significantly different from the effect of another.

Taken together, these analyses strengthen the overall theoretical argument, as they provide additional empirical evidence in favor of the hypothesized mechanism that makes mainstream parties uniquely capable of changing social norm perceptions. The results are not well explained by surprise, since mainstream party prejudice was not perceived as more unexpected. They are not well explained by ordinary party cues, since the treatment affected norm perceptions rather than private out-group attitudes, and since the effect was not limited to mainstream party sup-

porters. The spillover results further suggest that the treatment weakened perceptions of the anti-prejudice norm more generally, rather than simply changing views about Muslims. Overall, the evidence supports the argument that mainstream parties matter because citizens view them as normatively credible and legitimate social referents.

4.2.3 Explaining Cross-Country Effects

The experimental results in Paper C differ markedly across countries. In Germany, mainstream prejudiced rhetoric weakens anti-prejudice norm perceptions. In Denmark, the same effect is not observed, even though respondents in both countries rate mainstream parties as more credible and legitimate than outsider parties. Why, then, does mainstream party rhetoric appear to shift norm perceptions in Germany but not in Denmark?

One plausible explanation concerns the countries' different histories of mainstream accommodation of the far right. Denmark and Germany may represent contrasting political contexts in this respect. In Denmark, mainstream parties have pursued accommodative strategies toward the Danish People's Party for a very long time (Nicolaisen, 2023), with center-right Venstre relying on their parliamentary support from 2001 and the center-left Social Democrats adopting a more cooperative approach from sometime in the mid-2010s. In Germany, mainstream parties have historically maintained a far more exclusionary approach toward the far right, including the establishment of a cordon sanitaire against the Alternative für Deutschland (Daur, 2025), in large part explained by Germany's Nazi legacy and postwar efforts to prevent a far-right resurgence in the country (Blinder et al., 2013; Mendelberg, 2001). These different trajectories could play a big role in shaping how citizens respond to prejudiced rhetoric from mainstream parties. Where mainstream accommodation has historically been limited, as in Germany, such rhetoric may provide relatively new information about the boundaries of socially acceptable political expression. Citizens may therefore revise their perceptions of anti-prejudice norms when a mainstream party expresses prejudice. Where accommodation has been extensive and long-standing, as in Denmark, citizens may already have encountered similar rhetoric repeatedly. To the extent that these prior exposures have already informed their perceptions of the norm environment, a single additional experimental exposure may produce little observable change. From this perspective, the Danish null effect could reflect substantial pre-treatment

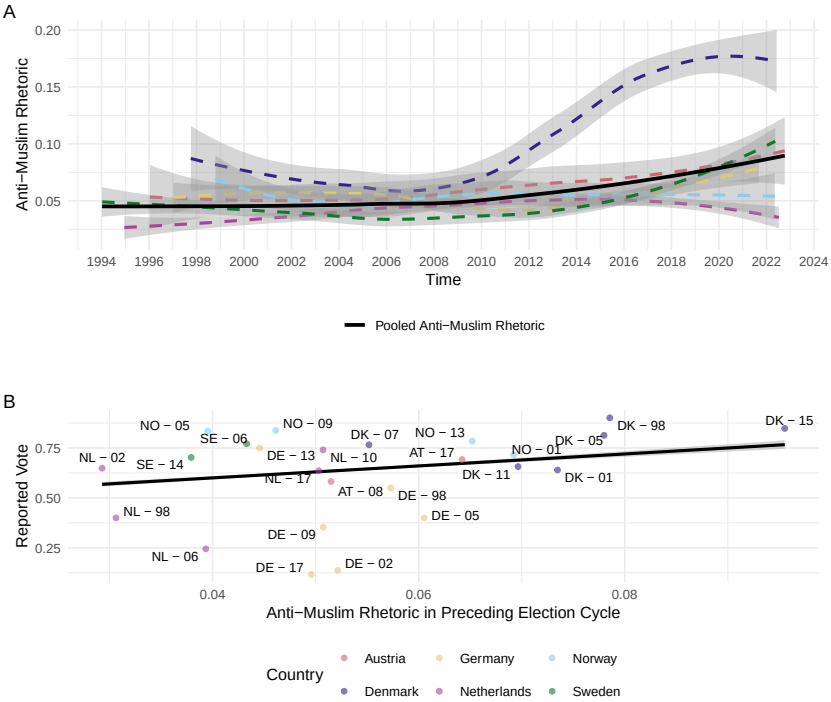
and a correspondingly limited marginal treatment effect, rather than the political irrelevance of mainstream rhetoric.

This interpretation of the cross-country findings is supported by the observational evidence in Paper C, which documents the prevalence of anti-Muslim rhetoric in mainstream parliamentary speeches across six European countries between 1994 and 2022. Anti-Muslim rhetoric is measured as the share of Muslim-related quasi-sentences that directly antagonize Muslims as a social group. This makes it possible to examine whether mainstream parties have increasingly used rhetoric that contradicts established anti-prejudice norms, and whether these changes in rhetoric coincide with weaker norms against expressing far-right views. To measure norms against supporting the far right, I use the reported vote, a measure of how many people publicly state that they vote for a given party, compared to how many people actually voted for that party. Reported vote is a useful measure, because it gives us a sense of how socially acceptable it is to express support for a party's views, and thus an indirect measure of the strength of the social norm. Specifically, I measure the reported vote by dividing the share of respondents in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) who report voting for a far-right party by that party's official vote share in the corresponding election (CSES, 2019). As such, any value below 1 would constitute underreporting, i.e. more people conceal their support for the far right, suggesting social stigma associated with far right viewpoints (Valentim, 2024). While useful as an observational measure of social norms, the measure is also necessarily noisy, as it is vulnerable to sampling error, recall bias, or turnout misreporting.

Figure 4.8 presents the main observational patterns. Panel A shows the prevalence of mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric over time in each country, with the black line indicating the pooled average. Mainstream parties have increasingly used anti-Muslim rhetoric in parliamentary speeches. Between 1994 and 2010, 2–6% of mainstream party discourse concerning Muslims was directly antagonistic. By 2022, this figure had increased to 6–17%. On average, the prevalence of mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric rose from around 4% to almost 10%. This increase is visible in every country in the sample except Norway. Denmark stands out, as Danish mainstream parties employ roughly twice as much anti-Muslim rhetoric as mainstream parties in the other countries included in the analysis. Importantly, the rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric also begins earlier in Denmark, reaching approximately 17% in 2019 before stabilizing. This pattern is relevant to the interpretation of the experimental results - if Danish citizens have been exposed to mainstream prejudiced rhetoric

more frequently and for a longer period, it is likely that their perceptions of what is "normal" political rhetoric have already shifted over time. Under these conditions, a single experimental exposure is unlikely to produce a substantial additional shift in perceived norm strength. While countries with strong anti-far right norms like Germany and Sweden also document increases in anti-Muslim rhetoric, these increases are much more recent compared to Denmark.

Figure 4.8: Anti-Muslim Rhetoric from Mainstream Parties and Reported Vote



Note: Anti-Muslim rhetoric is calculated as the relative frequency of quasi-sentences that include anti-Muslim rhetoric, averaged at the country-week level. In Panel A, the black line indicates average anti-Muslim rhetoric pooled across all countries. Rhetoric is calculated at the country-week level, with 95% confidence intervals. In Panel B, each dot represents one country-election, with ISO-2 codes indicating country names. Anti-Muslim rhetoric is expressed a proportion ranging from 0 to 1.

Panel B in Figure 4.8 shows the relationship between mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric and the reported vote for far-right parties. As mentioned above, the reported vote measure captures the extent to which citizens who hold far-right views are willing to report voting for a far-right party. The relationship is positive and statistically significant. A one percentage point increase in mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric during an election cycle is associated with an approximately 3.1 percentage point increase in reported far-right voting at the following election. Moving from a low (0.02) to a high (0.10) level of mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric corresponds to an increase of approximately 25 percentage points in the reported far-right vote. When mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric is limited, only around half of citizens who hold far-right views report them publicly; when such rhetoric is widespread, approximately three in four do so. The observational evidence is therefore consistent with a connection between mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric and the weakening of norms against publicly expressing far-right views. Mainstream parties have increasingly used antagonistic rhetoric targeting Muslims, and this development coincides with a greater willingness to publicly state support for far right parties. The pattern is especially pronounced in Denmark, where mainstream accommodation began earlier, reached higher levels, and appears to have stabilized toward the end of the observation period. In Germany, by contrast, accommodation has been more limited and more recent. Although these observational associations cannot establish that mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric caused the cross-country difference in experimental effects, they support the interpretation that Germany and Denmark may be located at different stages of a longer process of norm change. Mainstream prejudiced rhetoric may still shift perceived norms in Germany, whereas in Denmark much of the relevant norm erosion may already have occurred.

4.3 Emotional Regulation as a Countermeasure

The preceding sections showed that mainstream parties can weaken anti-prejudice norms when they adopt rhetoric previously associated with the far right. But is there any way citizens can be made less receptive to prejudiced rhetoric from political elites and become more positive toward out-groups in general? As discussed in Chapter 2, I argue that one promising intervention is to improve cognitive and emotional regulation.

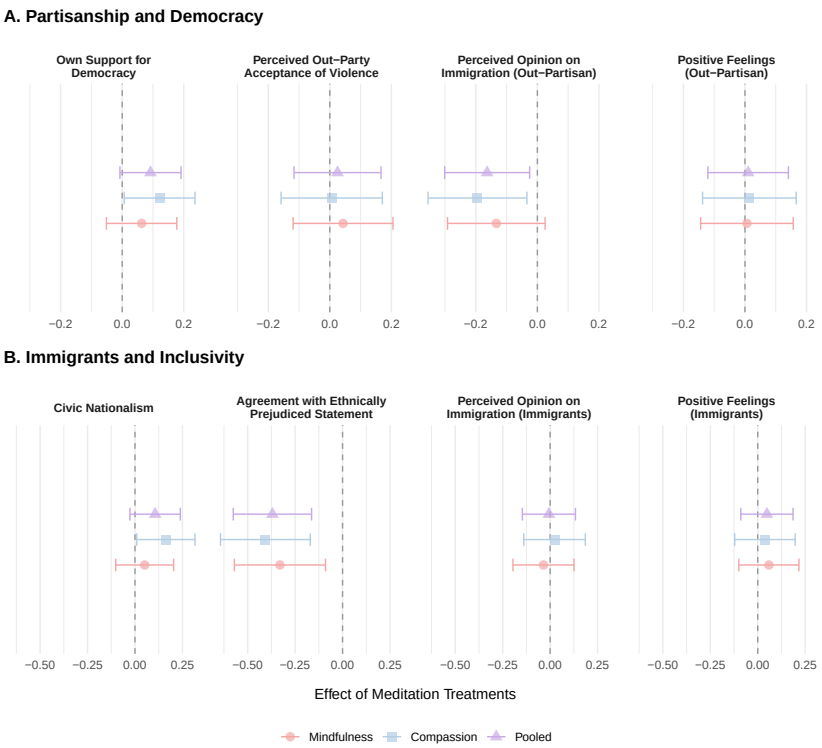
Paper D tests this argument through a longitudinal study involving a 15-day meditation experiment.

4.3.1 Reducing Out-Group Hostility

To test whether improved emotional and cognitive regulation affects out-group attitudes, Paper D examines several outcomes reported in Figure 4.9. The figure reports effects on attitudes toward immigrants and national inclusion as well as democratic attitudes and partisan polarization. In accordance with the preregistered analysis, the results are presented separately for the mindfulness and compassion conditions and after pooling the two treatments. All outcomes are standardized, and the endline estimates adjust for their corresponding baseline values. I first focus on Panel B, which presents the outcomes most directly related to attitudes toward immigrants and ethnic minorities.

I begin with respondents' reactions to prejudiced elite rhetoric. At the end of the 15-day intervention, respondents were exposed to a prejudiced statement targeting American Muslims and attributed to a high-ranking politician. They were then asked whether they personally agreed with the statement, whether they would be willing to listen to someone expressing it, and whether such statements were perceived as socially acceptable in American society. These outcomes capture, respectively, respondents' personal receptivity to prejudiced rhetoric, their willingness to engage with its source, and their second-order beliefs about the prevailing norm environment. As the results in the second column of Panel B indicate, respondents assigned to the treatment condition were significantly less likely to agree with the prejudiced statement than respondents in the control condition ($p < 0.001$, t-value = 3.39). The effect was substantively large: respondents who completed the 15 day meditation treatment were almost half a standard deviation less likely to agree with the statement. On the original seven-point scale, this corresponds to a reduction of approximately 0.75 points, or roughly 17% relative to the baseline mean. The intervention did not, however, significantly affect respondents' willingness to listen to someone expressing the prejudiced statement (all $p > 0.05$). Nor did it change their perceptions of whether such rhetoric was socially acceptable in American society (all $p > 0.05$). Improved regulation therefore reduced respondents' personal agreement with prejudiced elite rhetoric without changing their willingness to hear it nor their beliefs about its social acceptability.

Figure 4.9: Effects of Meditation on Out-Group Attitudes



Note: $n = 873$. The figure shows estimated effects of the meditation treatments on democratic attitudes, civic nationalism, perceived out-party acceptance of violence, agreement with an ethnically prejudiced statement, and attitudes toward partisan and immigrant out-groups. Points represent OLS estimates of treatment effects conditional on baseline values, with horizontal bars indicating 95% confidence intervals. For comparability, all dependent variables have been standardized, and items included in indices are assigned equal weights.

The intervention also affected respondents' conceptions of national belonging. Participants assigned to compassion meditation became significantly more likely to endorse civic criteria for national membership, rather than ethnic nationalist, such as holding American citizenship and respecting the country's laws and political institutions ($p < 0.05$, t-value $= 2.03$). The pooled treatment estimate points in the same direction but does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p > 0.05$). The evidence therefore suggests that compassion-based emotional regu-

lation can encourage a more inclusive, civic understanding of national belonging, although this result is less consistent across treatment specifications than the effect on agreement with prejudiced rhetoric. The remaining outcomes in Panel B show no detectable effects. Neither meditation condition changed how extreme respondents perceived immigrants' opinions on immigration to be, nor how warmly they felt toward immigrants (all $p > 0.05$). Improved regulation therefore reduced agreement with an explicitly prejudiced statement and, in the compassion condition, strengthened civic nationalism, but it did not uniformly alter respondents' broader perceptions or affective evaluations of immigrants.

Panel A extends the analysis to partisanship and democratic attitudes. Respondents assigned to compassion meditation became more supportive of democratic principles even when violating those principles would benefit their preferred party at the expense of partisan opponents ($p < 0.05$, t-value = 2.05). The pooled treatment estimate points in the same direction but falls short of conventional statistical significance ($p > 0.05$, t-value = 1.80). The intervention did not change respondents' perceptions of out-partisan support for political violence (all $p > 0.05$). The intervention also moderated perceptions of partisan opponents. Respondents assigned to compassion meditation perceived out-partisans as holding less extreme positions on immigration ($p < 0.05$, t-value = 2.38), for both treatment conditions. Neither treatment produced warmer feelings toward out-partisans, however (all $p > 0.05$). The intervention thus reduced exaggerated perceptions of partisan disagreement without substantially changing respondents' general affect toward the opposing party. Overall, the results are strongest for outcomes involving evaluations of specific political claims or positions. The intervention reduced agreement with prejudiced rhetoric, encouraged a more inclusive conception of national belonging in the compassion condition, and moderated perceptions of partisan opponents' immigration positions. By contrast, it did not consistently change generalized feelings toward immigrants or out-partisans. Improved emotional and cognitive regulation therefore appears capable of reducing particular expressions of out-group hostility, even when broader affective evaluations remain resistant to change.

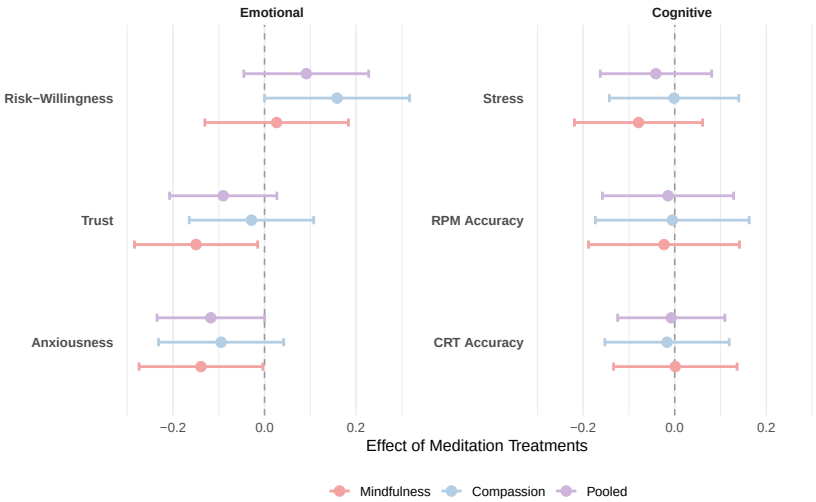
4.3.2 Emotional and Cognitive Outcomes

The results presented above show that the intervention reduced agreement with prejudiced elite rhetoric and affected several other outcomes in a positive manner. I next examine whether the broader pattern of re-

sults is more consistent with emotional responses than with changes in cognitive performance or engagement. Point estimates are often larger in the compassion than the mindfulness condition, although direct comparisons between the two treatment conditions are not statistically significant. To examine the intervention's emotional and cognitive effects more directly, I proceed in two ways. I estimate the treatments' effects on emotional and cognitive outcomes and use text-as-data methods to analyze the emotional content and linguistic complexity of respondents' open-ended answers throughout the intervention.

I begin with the first approach, using the outcomes reported in Figure 4.10. The left-hand side of the figure presents measures related to emotional regulation: anxiousness, interpersonal trust, and willingness to take risks. The right-hand side presents measures related to cognitive regulation: self-reported stress, performance on the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT), and performance on Raven's Progressive Matrices (RPM). As in the preceding analysis, the results are presented separately for the mindfulness and compassion conditions and after pooling the two treatments. All outcomes are standardized, and the endline estimates adjust for their corresponding baseline values. Overall, the results suggest that the treatment generally affected emotional regulation more than cognitive regulation, as subjects who underwent meditation reported both a lower level of anxiousness and a higher degree of risk-willingness. By contrast, there was no effect on self-reported stress or performance on cognitive reflection and reasoning tasks. Interestingly, treated respondents nevertheless spent less time completing these tasks, further suggesting that the intervention primarily affected emotional System 1 processing rather than deliberative System 2 reasoning (Kahneman, 2011). However, direct comparisons between the mindfulness and compassion conditions did not reveal statistically significant differences on these outcomes.

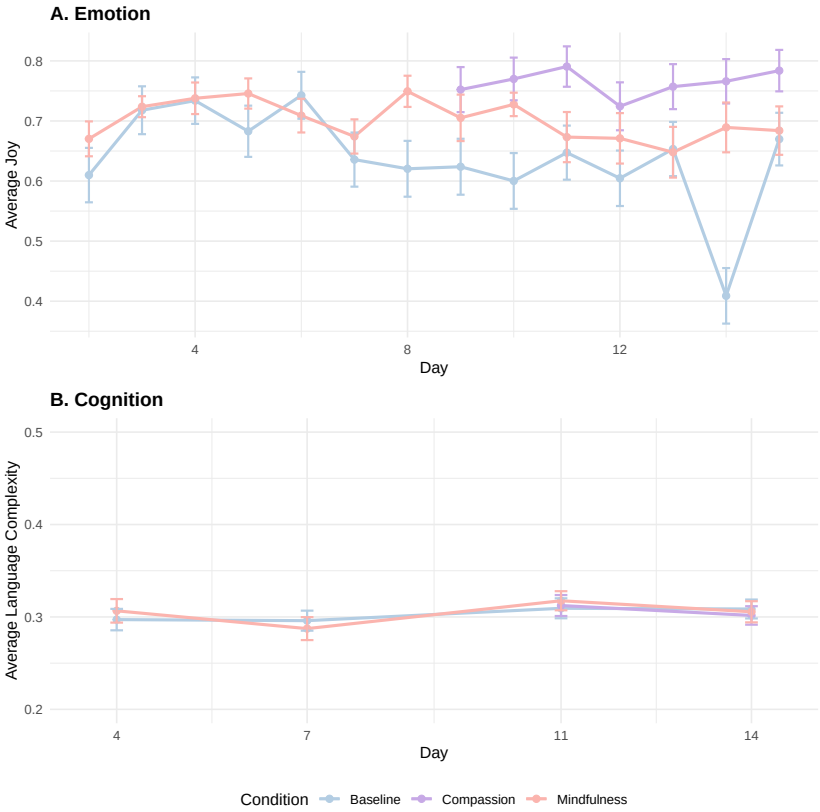
Figure 4.10: Effect on Emotional and Cognitive Outcomes



Notes: $n = 873$. This figure shows estimated effects of experimental treatments on emotional and cognitive measures. Points represent OLS estimates of the effect of the treatment on each measure, with horizontal bars indicating 95% confidence intervals. "CRT" refers to three cognitive reflection tests. "RPM" refers to three Raven's Progressive Matrix tests.

I next turn to the second approach, which uses respondents' open-ended answers to examine emotional expression and cognitive complexity as a proxy for their emotional and cognitive regulation. After listening to the audio assigned on each given day, respondents were required to write at least 250 characters describing how they felt. On selected days, they also answered prompts about specific political topics, including immigration, democracy, national identity, and transgender rights. As detailed in Chapter 3, Paper D uses automated text-analysis methods to classify the emotional content and linguistic complexity of these responses. Figure 4.11 presents the results. Panel A uses the daily prompts about respondents' feelings to measure emotional expression, namely the degree of joy. Panel B examines the linguistic complexity of responses to the topic-specific prompts. Using common topic prompts helps distinguish treatment-related differences in linguistic complexity from differences attributable to subject matter.

Figure 4.11: Average Joy and Complexity in Open-Ended Answers Across Sessions



Note: $n = 873$. Panel A presents average levels of joy detected in respondents' daily open-ended answers, with 95% confidence intervals. Respondents were required to write at least 250 characters describing how they felt. Panel B presents average linguistic-complexity scores from answers to topic-specific prompts administered on selected days, also with 95% confidence intervals. The blue line represents the control condition, the purple line represents compassion meditation, and the red line represents mindfulness meditation.

The results again point toward an emotional rather than a cognitive response. As Panel A shows, respondents in the control and mindfulness conditions expressed similar levels of joy at the beginning of the intervention. By approximately the eighth day, however, the two groups

began to diverge, and respondents assigned to mindfulness meditation expressed consistently higher levels of joy throughout the remainder of the study. Overall, mindfulness meditation significantly increased expressions of joy relative to the control condition ($\beta = 0.06$, 95% CI $[0.05, 0.08]$, $p < 0.001$). The compassion condition was introduced later in the intervention as an extension of the mindfulness treatment. Respondents in the mindfulness and compassion conditions therefore initially expressed similar levels of joy. After the compassion component began, the two groups diverged, with respondents assigned to compassion meditation consistently expressing more joy in their answers. The compassion treatment produced a significant increase in expressions of joy relative to the control condition ($\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI $[0.08, 0.11]$, $p < 0.001$). Pooling the mindfulness and compassion conditions leads to the same conclusion: respondents assigned to meditation expressed significantly more joy than respondents in the control condition ($\beta = 0.08$, 95% CI $[0.07, 0.09]$, $p < 0.001$). The stronger effect in the compassion condition is consistent with the possibility that cultivating warmth and care produced a particularly pronounced change in respondents' emotional states. Panel B provides no corresponding evidence of increased cognitive complexity. When respondents answered prompts about the same political topics, neither meditation condition significantly changed the linguistic complexity of their responses (all $p > 0.05$). There is also no systematic divergence in complexity across treatment conditions over the course of the intervention. The treatments therefore changed the emotional content of respondents' answers without making their reasoning more linguistically complex.

A final set of analyses examines the cognitive outcome more directly by testing whether the intervention changed how respondents selected and processed information. The baseline and endline surveys included embedded conjoint and vignette experiments in which respondents chose between different sources of political information and evaluated political messages. If meditation improved cognitive regulation, treated respondents should be less inclined to avoid or dismiss counter-attitudinal information. The negative effects of oppositional sources and counter-attitudinal messages should therefore be weaker among treated respondents than among those in the control condition. The results provide little evidence of such a pattern. Respondents were generally less willing to select information that challenged their prior attitudes and less likely to be persuaded by it, particularly on salient issues such as immigration. The meditation treatments did not consistently moderate either relationship (all $p > 0.05$). The intervention therefore did not make respondents

more willing to engage with counter-attitudinal information or more responsive to its content, providing additional evidence against a cognitive mechanism.

Taken together, the findings suggest that meditation increased expressions of joy but did not improve cognitive performance, linguistic complexity, or engagement with counter-attitudinal information. This pattern is more consistent with an emotional rather than cognitive response to the treatment.

Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusions

"Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment."

– Edmund Burke

In this dissertation, I set out to answer the following overarching research question: *Why do mainstream parties use anti-minority rhetoric, through what mechanisms does it shape citizen beliefs, and what can make citizens less receptive to it?* In this final chapter, I bring together the main findings of the dissertation and discuss their broader implications. I begin by summarizing the empirical results presented in the previous chapter, focusing on what they show about the causes, consequences, and possible countermeasures to mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric. I then discuss what these findings imply for the study of party competition, anti-prejudice norms, and democratic politics more broadly. Finally, I outline the main limitations of the dissertation and point to avenues for future research.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The four papers collectively address three questions: why mainstream parties adopt anti-minority rhetoric, how this rhetoric affects citizens' perceptions of social norms, and whether its consequences can be mitigated by improving citizens' emotional and cognitive regulation. Taken together, the findings show that mainstream party rhetoric is shaped by strategic competition with the far right, that it can weaken anti-prejudice norms among citizens, and that emotional regulation functions as a potential countermeasure.

The first set of findings concerns the causes of mainstream party anti-immigrant rhetoric. Paper A shows that such rhetoric is neither rare nor constant over time. Across nine Western European countries, anti-immigrant speech constitutes a fairly sizeable proportion of mainstream parliamentary discourse on immigration and has generally become more prevalent, at least since 2010. Its prevalence nevertheless varies considerably across countries, with particularly high levels in Denmark, Austria, and the Netherlands.

The explanatory results show that this development is closely related to competition from the far right. When far-right parties gain electoral support, mainstream parties subsequently employ more anti-immigrant rhetoric in the following period. Far-right rhetoric also spills over into mainstream parliamentary speech: when far-right politicians increase their use of anti-immigrant language, mainstream parties become more likely to use similar language in the following period. These patterns appear among both center-left and center-right parties, although the estimated effects are generally stronger on the center-right. Paper A thus demonstrates that mainstream accommodation of the far right is not exclusively positional or policy-based; it also occurs through the realm of political communication.

Paper B further shows that mainstream parties respond to immigration pressures through different forms of rhetoric. Far-right electoral strength is primarily associated with symbolic anti-immigration responses, in which parties acknowledge and validate restrictive concerns without connecting them to concrete policy proposals. It is not associated with a comparable increase in substantive, policy-oriented responses. Under ordinary conditions, mainstream parties therefore appear able to signal responsiveness while retaining flexibility over costly policy commitments. This balance changes when immigration becomes highly salient. Following the 2015 migration crisis, mainstream anti-immigration rhetoric became considerably more substantive, in the sense that it contained more policy-specific content. The shift was especially pronounced among center-right parties, which face the most direct electoral competition from the far right and possess greater issue ownership on immigration. The post-crisis period was also characterized by an increase in restrictive immigration policies, mirroring the increase in substantive rhetoric. Paper B therefore shows that symbolic and substantive responsiveness are not mutually exclusive or fixed party strategies. Mainstream parties move between them depending on the political context: far-right pressure encourages symbolic accommodation, whereas heightened public attention increases the costs of relying on symbolic recogni-

tion alone, thus prompting parties to adopt more substantive rhetoric as well.

The second set of findings concerns the consequences of mainstream party rhetoric for citizens. Paper C shows that prejudiced rhetoric can weaken perceived anti-prejudice norms, but that its effects depend on both its source and the national context in which it is expressed. In Germany, exposure to prejudiced rhetoric targeting Muslims reduced both injunctive and descriptive perceptions of anti-prejudice norm strength. Respondents became more likely to believe that prejudice was socially acceptable and that others would engage in prejudiced behavior. Crucially, this effect was concentrated among respondents exposed to rhetoric attributed to a mainstream party. Comparable rhetoric from outsider parties did not significantly weaken perceived norms. Mainstream parties therefore appear uniquely capable of changing perceptions of what kinds of political speech are socially acceptable.

The mechanism analyses are consistent with the argument that this influence originates in mainstream parties' normative credibility and legitimacy. Respondents in both Germany and Denmark perceived mainstream parties as more credible and legitimate than outsider parties. Additional analyses lend further credence to the normative legitimacy and credibility argument, as the effects of mainstream prejudiced rhetoric could not adequately be explained through alternative theories, such as elite cues and changes in private attitudes. The treatment also produced spillover effects on perceived norms concerning prejudice toward other minority groups, suggesting that mainstream rhetoric can affect the broader anti-prejudice norm rather than only norms specifically concerning Muslims.

The German results differ from the results in the case of Denmark. In the Danish experiment, prejudiced rhetoric had weak and inconsistent effects on perceived norm strength, and rhetoric from mainstream parties was not significantly more influential than rhetoric from outsider parties. One plausible explanation concerns the countries' different histories of mainstream accommodation. Danish citizens have been exposed to mainstream anti-minority rhetoric for a longer period, whereas German mainstream parties have historically maintained a more exclusionary relationship with the far right. A single experimental exposure may therefore provide relatively new information about the norm environment in Germany but little additional information in Denmark.

The observational evidence in Paper C is consistent with this interpretation. Danish mainstream parties adopted anti-Muslim rhetoric earlier and use it substantially more frequently than mainstream parties in the

other countries included in the analysis. Denmark also exhibits comparatively weak norms against publicly expressing far-right support, whereas these norms are strongest in Germany. More generally, higher levels of mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric are associated with greater willingness among far-right voters to disclose their vote in post-election surveys. These observational relationships do not establish that mainstream rhetoric caused the cross-country difference in experimental effects but are suggestive of a gradual process of normalization of far right rhetoric - a process that has perhaps occurred in Denmark for the past 15 years but only recently begun in Germany.

The final set of findings examines whether citizens can be made less receptive to prejudiced rhetoric and more positive toward ethnic outgroups. Paper D uses an extended meditation intervention as a means of improving emotional and cognitive regulation. The intervention substantially reduced respondents' agreement with a prejudiced statement targeting American Muslims. It did not, however, change their willingness to listen to someone expressing the statement or their second-order beliefs about its social acceptability. The intervention therefore altered respondents' personal receptivity to prejudiced rhetoric without directly strengthening their perceptions of the surrounding anti-prejudice norm.

The treatment also affected several related political and inter-group outcomes. Compassion meditation encouraged a more civic and inclusive conception of national belonging, increased support for democratic principles when violating them would benefit respondents' preferred party, and reduced perceptions that partisan opponents held extreme positions on immigration. These effects did not extend uniformly to every outcome. The intervention did not produce warmer feelings toward immigrants or partisan opponents, change perceived immigrant positions on immigration, or alter beliefs about out-partisan support for political violence. Its effects were therefore strongest for evaluations of specific political claims, principles, and perceived positions, rather than for generalized affect toward out-groups.

The mechanism analyses indicate that these changes are more consistent with emotional than with cognitive regulation. The intervention affected measures related to emotional regulation, including anxiousness and risk willingness, and produced clear and sustained increases in expressions of joy in respondents' open-ended answers. The effects were generally strongest in the compassion condition, which explicitly encouraged warmth and care toward oneself and others. By contrast, the intervention did not improve performance on cognitive reflection or reasoning tasks, increase the linguistic complexity of respondents' political

answers, or make respondents more willing to select into or agree with counter-attitudinal information. Paper D therefore supports the proposition that emotional regulation can directly reduce receptivity to prejudiced rhetoric and improve selected inter-group attitudes. It provides less support for the proposed indirect pathway through which emotional regulation improves citizens' cognitive processing of corrective or counter-attitudinal information. Because the experiment randomly assigned meditation rather than emotional regulation itself, these results should be interpreted as consistent with an emotional mechanism rather than as a causal mediation test.

Taken together, the dissertation identifies a broader political process connecting party competition, political communication, social norms, and citizens' attitudes toward ethnic minorities. Far-right parties place electoral and rhetorical pressure on mainstream parties. Mainstream parties respond by adopting anti-immigrant rhetoric, often symbolically at first and more substantively when immigration becomes highly salient. Because mainstream parties are widely regarded as credible and legitimate representatives of the political system, their adoption of prejudiced rhetoric can weaken citizens' perceptions of anti-prejudice norms. These effects are context-dependent and may diminish once the rhetoric has become sufficiently normalized. Finally, although informational and cognitive interventions face important limitations, improving emotional regulation can reduce citizens' agreement with prejudiced rhetoric and improve selected political and inter-group attitudes. The findings thus show that mainstream party rhetoric is both a consequence of political competition and a potential cause of broader normative change, while also identifying emotional regulation as one possible means of limiting some of its harmful consequences.

5.2 Broader Implications

The dissertation also raises several normative questions that call for further consideration. These questions concern how mainstream parties should respond to electoral pressure from the far right, what responsibilities they have as central actors in democratic politics, and the strategic use of rhetoric in party competition. They also concern the special status mainstream parties appear to hold in the eyes of citizens and what the findings imply for the political behavior of citizens in modern democratic societies. In the following sections, I discuss these broader implications in turn.

5.2.1 Is Far-Right Accommodation the Right Approach?

The findings suggest that mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric should be understood as part of a broader process of party competition, a process that finds its starting point in far right parties. In light of this process, how should we assess the role of mainstream parties in contemporary democratic politics? One plausible answer is that mainstream accommodation of far-right rhetoric is simply a form of democratic representation - "politics as usual". If voters hold restrictive views on immigration, and if far-right parties can garner their support by mobilizing on the issues, mainstream parties may respond by accommodating the position of the far right. From this perspective, accommodation is just an example of parties being attentive to the wishes of voters - after all, parties are supposed to be responsive. They compete for votes, listen to public concerns, and adjust their political program when voters become dissatisfied with the status quo. A party system in which mainstream parties completely ignore voter concerns would also be democratically problematic, because it could leave large groups of citizens feeling unrepresented and undermine the core principles of representative democracy.

However, there are issues with this view. Naturally, parties will tailor their policy programmes to fit public opinion, but public opinion on immigration and ethnic minority integration has been remarkably stable for many years (Kustov et al., 2021). This tells us that what mainstream parties do, i.e. the supply-side of politics, matters independently of public opinion. More importantly, I claim that this view rests on too simple an understanding of democratic politics. Responsiveness is important, but parties are not only supposed to be responsive; they are also supposed to be responsible. As Mair (2009) argues, representative democracy contains a tension between these two principles. Responsive government entails listening and answering to public opinion. Responsible government, on the other hand, requires prudence, consistency, accountability, and attention to external constraints and inherited commitments. In Mair's formulation, responsibility is closely tied to the capacity to govern effectively: to act within accepted legal and procedural rules, avoid reckless or inconsistent decision-making, honor prior commitments, and produce reasonably successful policies. Parties are expected to represent citizens' demands, but they are also expected to govern efficiently, plan beyond the short term, respect institutional constraints - in short, to make good decisions.

This distinction between responsiveness and responsibility matters because representative democracy was never designed as a system of

perfect responsiveness but rather as a balance between the two. Elected politicians are not merely delegates who mechanically reproduce public opinion. They are representatives who are given a degree of autonomy to deliberate, exercise judgment, and act in accordance with their own conscience and with their understanding of the public good. This is especially important when public demands are potentially inconsistent, shortsighted, difficult to implement, or in tension with liberal-democratic principles. A political system in which parties simply mirror whichever voter demands are most electorally threatening would not necessarily be more democratic in any meaningful sense. It would rather be representative of a sort of populist conception of democracy, where the task of political actors is to enact the perceived will of the people as directly as possible, with less regard for institutional constraints or long-term consequences (Mudde, 2004). Such a model has not had a strong track record of producing successful policy, whether in immigration politics or in other policy areas (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Vittori, 2022).

5.2.2 The Viability of a Dual Strategy

Coming back to mainstream parties, the implications are clear: Adopting far-right rhetoric as a response to pressure from the right is not, prima facie, a more democratic approach, since it is not immediately evident why the task of ”responsiveness” should be given primacy over the task of ”responsibility”. To the contrary, issues like minority politics, immigration, multiculturalism etc. are precisely areas where responsible representation may require mainstream parties to consider broader institutional, normative, or social consequences of far right accommodation. What if mainstream parties could be both responsive and responsible? As argued in Paper B, there is a clear theoretical and empirical distinction between symbolic responses and substantive responses. What if mainstream parties could, symbolically, respond to voter concerns regarding e.g. Muslim integration, while at the same time avoiding any major commitments in terms of policy? At first glance, this may seem like a politically attractive compromise: parties can signal responsiveness to voters without committing to restrictive reforms that may be legally difficult, administratively costly, or normatively objectionable.

The findings of the dissertation suggest that this is a risky strategy. Symbolic and substantive rhetoric can only be separated under certain circumstances. When an issue is relatively low in salience, voters may be satisfied with symbolic acknowledgement and may not closely monitor whether symbolic gestures are followed up by actual policy com-

mitments. Once voter attentiveness increases, however, symbolic gestures become less sufficient. Voters may begin to demand concrete policy action that matches the rhetoric they have heard. In that situation, mainstream parties that have spent years talking tough on immigration, or criticizing minorities, or deriding proponents of multiculturalism may find themselves constrained by their own language. In other words, talking the talk may increase future costs of not walking the walk. They must either follow through substantively or risk being punished for failing to deliver. Some empirical evidence supports this implication, namely in Paper B, as center-right parties tended to be most affected by shifts in voter attentiveness on immigration, prompting them to adapt their rhetoric to a much greater extent than center-left parties.

5.2.3 Beyond Electoral Politics

There is, however, another problem with this strategy. Adopting the rhetoric of the far right, who frequently employ exclusionary and even hostile rhetoric toward immigrants and minorities, has consequences beyond the realm of electoral politics. As Paper C demonstrates, the costs of far right accommodation also encompass a potential degradation in long-standing democratic norms, like the norm of tolerance and anti-prejudice. This is not to say that prejudiced and exclusionary attitudes do not exist in parts of the population, even in the presence of strong anti-prejudice norms. Some citizens may privately believe, for example, that Muslims are terrorism sympathizers or that Hispanic immigrants are criminals, yet holding an attitude privately is different from expressing it publicly. When prejudice is strongly stigmatized, citizens who hold such views are likely to conceal them because they anticipate social sanctioning by others. This has obvious benefits for democracy, as it helps ensure that democratic discourse remains civil and constructive. Political conflict is unavoidable, and disagreement over immigration, integration of minorities, and national identity is a legitimate part of democratic politics. But when such disagreement takes the form of expressed hostility toward minority groups, the quality of democratic debate suffers. Social expectations that discourage prejudice and encourage tolerance therefore serve an important democratic function.

Certainly, out-group attitudes are difficult to change because they are rooted in identity, threat perceptions, and long-standing stereotypes, meaning that attitudinal change is often slow to occur. But as Paper C indicates, the public expression of prejudice depends both on a person's private convictions and on their perception of what is considered socially

acceptable. Even if we assume that underlying attitudes remain constant, if there are strong social norm signals sent by credible social referents, considerable change can occur very rapidly - think of the example with Havel's greengrocer from Chapter 2.

What is important here is the point that party competition can have consequences outside the arenas to which political scientists usually devote most of their attention, such as what happens at the ballot box, or during parliamentary legislative proceedings. Which parties citizens vote for and which policies are passed are obviously important questions, but the findings of this dissertation suggest that political parties exert influence on the social norm environment directly, and that they do so through the communicative and rhetorical strategies they choose to utilize. When citizens determine how and what preferences to falsify in public, they obviously consider norm signals from a wide variety of social referents, such as family, friends, co-workers and not only political elites. Yet the findings suggest that political elites are also a part of this equation, given that their rhetoric strongly influences voter behavior.

5.2.4 Mainstream Parties in the Eyes of Citizens

What, then, should mainstream parties do when faced with electoral pressure from the far right? This question is particularly pressing at a time when immigration, multiculturalism, and national and religious identity are becoming increasingly prominent in politics. Historically, mainstream parties have answered this question in different ways. In some countries, such as Denmark and Austria, mainstream parties have engaged in long-standing cooperation and accommodation of the far right. In others, such as Sweden and Germany, mainstream parties have relied much longer on exclusionary strategies, and even established so-called cordon sanitaires vis-à-vis far right parties. As the findings in Paper A and Paper B suggest however, mainstream parties in most countries have seemingly converged on accommodating the far right, in large part due to sustained vote losses both to the left and to the right, as we have seen in e.g. France, Germany and the United Kingdom. That this process is by no means accidental is perhaps best illustrated by the British Labour Party's visit to Denmark, where party representatives sought to study how the Danish Social Democrats combined center-left politics with a hardline immigration agenda (The Guardian, 2026).

What are the implications for how mainstream parties should deal with the challenge from the far right? An important implication of the findings in Paper C is that mainstream parties may have more lever-

age than previously assumed. In both experiments, mainstream parties were perceived by voters as being significantly more normatively credible and legitimate compared to far right parties, regardless of what sort of rhetoric they used, even among voters who otherwise support far right parties. Furthermore, the exploratory analyses indicated that the credibility and legitimacy of mainstream parties was not dependent on their vote shares or on their government participation exclusively. This suggests that mainstream parties occupy a qualitatively different position in the political system compared to all other parties, in the sense that they are singularly seen as representatives of the established democratic order and uniquely influential in changing citizens' social norm perceptions, irrespective of how successful they are in any one given election.

This implies that mainstream parties should not be too quick to concede the terms of political debate to the far right. Electoral losses matter, and mainstream parties obviously cannot and should not simply ignore vote losses to other parties, but the findings suggest that their status as mainstream parties does not disappear because of one bad election result or one period in opposition. Rather, their status as "mainstream" seems to be much more robust, and more closely tied to their ideological centrism which theoretically risks being compromised if they move too far to the right. In short, mainstream parties, such as those belonging to the social democratic, Christian democratic, liberal, or conservative party families, should not concede too quickly to the far right out of concern for short-term losses, since their mainstream status gives them a form of normative authority that is not easily lost.

Much ink has been spilled on whether accommodation pays off electorally for mainstream parties (Hjorth & Larsen, 2022; Krause et al., 2023). That question is beyond the scope of the dissertation. At the very least however, the findings in this dissertation suggest that the normative dimension of party strategy should not be ignored. One possible implication is that some combination of continued ostracism or social sanctioning of far-right actors, together with the adoption of policies that are more closely aligned with the demands of voters, could be the best strategy for countering the far right. Some empirical research points in a similar direction, suggesting that mainstream parties may limit far-right success when they adjust policy without fully legitimizing the far right as a political actor, citing cases such as the Front National in France and Vlaams Belang in Belgium in the 2010s (Van Spanje & De Graaf, 2018). Whether this is generally true remains an open question, and mainstream parties should be careful that policy accommodation does not come at the expense of responsible governance. The broader point is that in addition

to competing with the far right on the electoral dimension of politics, mainstream parties also compete in the realm of social norms - and here they have a distinct advantage.

5.2.5 When and Why Are Citizens More Protective of Democratic Norms?

Lastly, I turn to the broader implications for voters, rather than parties, to ask the important question of if and how citizens can be made more protective of democratic norms in the first place. As discussed in subsection 5.1, improved emotional regulation, and not cognitive regulation, can make citizens more willing to oppose prejudiced rhetoric from political elites. At first glance, this finding is quite puzzling given that adherence to social norms is determined by people's desire to avoid incurring reputational costs from others - a distinctly cognitive process of weighing costs and benefits associated with preference falsification. For this reason, we should expect that cognitive regulation matters more for how citizens assess the social acceptability of public speech, and less so their emotional state. Yet the findings in Paper D suggest that emotions matter more than cognition.

How do we make sense of these findings? One implication is that the factors which influence a person's public behavior are not the same as the factors which influence a person's likelihood of sanctioning the public behavior of others. A person may falsify their preference so as not to express a view that is in conflict with the anti-prejudice norm, because to do so is very clearly socially costly. However, there is often no clear social reward for enforcing a norm. In fact, condemning somebody else's behavior can even lead to conflict or invite criticism from others (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). In other words, while the costs and benefits associated with adhering to the anti-prejudice norm, or really any norm, are relatively easily identifiable, the same cannot be said for the costs and benefits associated with the norm policing of others. A speculative implication is therefore that norm adherence may depend more on deliberate assessments of social costs, while norm enforcement may depend more on fast, intuitive, and affective reactions to what feels unacceptable or morally wrong (Kahneman, 2011).

The results also suggest that mainstream parties may need to think more seriously about the emotional dimension of political communication. If emotions matter more than cognition in shaping citizens' attitudes toward ethnic minorities, then purely fact-based appeals may have limited potency. Far-right rhetoric on immigration might be effective pre-

cisely because it speaks in emotional terms, and mainstream parties that wish to push back against the far right may therefore need to use more emotionally resonant appeals too. This is in line with research showing that emotional appeals can shape political attitudes and behavior independently of factual information, and that immigration attitudes are especially responsive to anxiety, group cues, and perceived threat (Brader, 2005; Brader et al., 2008; Dinesen et al., 2016).

The findings in Paper D therefore indicate that making citizens more protective of democratic norms may require more than changing their social norm perceptions. If the goal is not only to make citizens recognize that prejudiced rhetoric violates a norm but also to make them more willing to sanction such norm-breaking behavior, emotions appear to be an important part of the process.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

First, the dissertation relies partly on observational and quasi-experimental research designs, which necessarily limits the strength of some causal claims. Papers A and B study party rhetoric as it unfolds in the real world, across parties, countries, and time. This is a strength because it makes it possible to study mainstream party accommodation under conditions of actual party competition. At the same time, the analyses cannot fully rule out all time-varying confounders. Far-right strength, immigration salience, media attention, public opinion, and mainstream party strategy may move together in ways that are difficult to separate completely. The fixed-effects and interrupted time-series designs improve causal leverage by exploiting variation across units and time, but they do not provide the same level of control as randomized experiments. Future research could therefore build on these findings by combining observational party-level data with designs that more directly isolate the causal effects of far-right success, issue salience, and mainstream rhetorical strategy.

Second, the dissertation raises questions about how political rhetoric should be conceptualized and measured. In Papers A and B, rhetoric is classified at the level of quasi-sentences from parliamentary speeches, either through hand-coding or automated classification. This makes it possible to measure subtle changes in party communication over long periods of time, but it also rests on the assumption that these distinctions correspond to politically meaningful differences in how rhetoric is received by citizens. This is especially important for the distinction

between symbolic and substantive rhetoric. Analytically, it is useful to distinguish between rhetoric that merely acknowledges restrictive concerns and rhetoric that connects those concerns to concrete policy proposals. Yet it remains unclear whether voters themselves recognize this distinction, whether they notice gradual rhetorical shifts in speech, and whether they distinguish between symbol and substance at all. A related methodological challenge is distinguishing between speech as a proxy for policy positions (Gessler & Hunger, 2022) and speech as rhetoric in its own right. Future research could therefore examine more directly when changes in political language reflect shifts in policy positions and when they reflect changes in how parties frame, justify, or communicate those positions. More broadly, it would be particularly useful to study how citizens perceive the trade-off between responsiveness and responsibility. To what extent do voters tolerate a lack of responsiveness from mainstream parties, assuming that mainstream parties are perceived as responsible? Or do voters demand action on immigration, even if it entails large costs? These questions have important implications for mainstream party strategy, especially when parties face pressure from the far right and must decide how to respond.

Third, some findings across the papers raise questions for future research. Paper A finds limited evidence that immigration salience, measured as parliamentary attention to immigration, is associated with more mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric. Paper B, however, finds that a sudden increase in the salience of immigration strongly impacted rhetoric. One possible explanation is that party-level salience and voter-level salience are theoretically and empirically distinct. Future research should therefore examine more directly whether voter-level salience is especially important for shaping mainstream party rhetoric, rather than party-level salience. A related question concerns how the spillover finding in Paper A should be understood. Paper A shows that far-right rhetoric has an effect on mainstream party rhetoric independently of far-right electoral strength. This suggests that far-right influence is not only electoral, but also discursive: the language and framing used by far-right parties can travel to mainstream speech even when mainstream parties are not simply responding to far-right vote share. Paper B helps qualify what this kind of spillover may consist of. If mainstream parties are generally more likely to adopt symbolic than substantive anti-immigrant rhetoric, then rhetorical spillover may primarily involve the adoption of language, issue framing, and symbolic recognition of restrictive concerns, rather than immediate policy commitments. Only when immigration becomes

highly salient to voters should we expect this symbolic accommodation to become more substantive.

Fourth, the experimental findings should be interpreted in light of their country-specific scope conditions. Paper C studies Germany and Denmark, two cases that are theoretically useful because they differ strongly in their histories of mainstream accommodation of the far right. Yet this also means that the dissertation says less about countries located between these two poles, or about cases where the distinction between mainstream and challenger parties is less clear. Countries such as Italy, and several Eastern European democracies, may follow different dynamics because far-right actors are more integrated into the party system, or because the mainstream itself is harder to define. Similarly, the findings in Paper D are limited by the fact that the experiment is conducted only in the United States, a case that differs from the Western European contexts studied in the other papers, both historically and politically. The United States has a distinct history of inter-group relations and anti-prejudice norms, as well as a perhaps uniquely antagonistic political climate, so scholars would do well in examining whether the experimental findings replicate to other liberal democracies in the West. Beyond extending the geographical scope of inquiry, future research should also examine whether weakened anti-prejudice norms can be re-established. If citizens in some countries have already been repeatedly exposed to prejudiced rhetoric from mainstream parties, the question is to what extent this process can be reversed and anti-prejudice norm be re-established. Finally, future research should examine the citizen-side of norm protection more directly. Paper D suggests that emotional regulation can make citizens less receptive to prejudiced rhetoric, but it remains unclear what makes citizens willing to sanction norm-breaking behavior in real political and social settings. This matters because democratic norms are not maintained by elites alone; they also depend on citizens' willingness to react when those norms are challenged.

5.4 Conclusion

Overall, the four papers make distinct but connected contributions. Paper A contributes to the literature on mainstream party accommodation by showing that accommodation of the far right is not only positional or policy-based but also rhetorical. Existing research has primarily studied whether mainstream parties move closer to the far right on immigration policy. Paper A shows that mainstream parties also adopt the language

of the far right, and that this happens both when far-right parties gain electoral support and when far-right rhetoric itself spills over into mainstream parliamentary speech. Empirically, the paper contributes by developing a novel text-as-data measure of mainstream rhetorical accommodation, using parliamentary speeches to track anti-immigrant rhetoric across parties, countries, and time.

Paper B advances the literature on party politics and political representation by addressing a puzzle in the literature on party responsiveness: if mainstream parties are generally responsive to public opinion, why have they often appeared comparatively unresponsive to public demand for more restrictive immigration policy? I argue that this puzzle partly reflects an overly narrow understanding of responsiveness. Mainstream parties can respond to voters in two ways: symbolically, by standing for voters' concerns without committing to concrete policy change, or substantively, by acting for voters through policy-oriented rhetoric. The paper then shows when parties rely on each form of responsiveness. Far-right pressure encourages symbolic responses, while heightened immigration salience makes symbolic responsiveness less sufficient and pushes mainstream parties toward substantive, policy-oriented responses.

Paper C contributes to research on party competition, elite rhetoric, and social norm change by developing a theoretical account of why mainstream parties should be especially influential in shaping anti-prejudice norms. I argue that mainstream parties possess normative credibility and legitimacy because citizens see them as long-standing representatives of the established democratic order. This makes them uniquely capable of weakening anti-prejudice norms when they adopt prejudiced rhetoric from the far right. The paper also goes beyond a simple mainstream versus far-right distinction by examining which characteristics make mainstream parties credible and legitimate in the eyes of voters, including ideological centrism, popularity, and government participation. In addition, I document the rise of mainstream party prejudiced rhetoric toward Muslims across countries, showing substantial variation in the extent to which mainstream parties have rhetorically accommodated the far right. Finally, the paper examines whether prejudiced rhetoric targeting Muslims weakens anti-prejudice norms only toward Muslims, or whether it spills over to ethnic minorities more generally. In doing so, Paper C shows that mainstream party accommodation has normative consequences that extend beyond electoral competition and policy change.

Paper D contributes to research on interventions against inter-group hostility by testing whether improved emotional and cognitive regulation can reduce polarization and hostility toward immigrants and eth-

nic minorities. The paper advances existing work by using a 15-day online intervention on a large and diverse sample, rather than relying on brief one-shot treatments or small convenience samples. Substantively, it applies emotional and cognitive regulation to two highly salient political problems: affective partisan polarization and immigration attitudes. The paper also contributes by explicitly distinguishing between emotional and cognitive mechanisms, showing that the observed effects are more consistent with improved emotional regulation than improved cognitive processing. In the context of the dissertation, this suggests that citizens' resistance to prejudiced rhetoric depends not only on what they know or believe but also on how they regulate the emotional reactions that underlie political judgment.

This PhD project began with a simple observation: immigration, and the status of ethnic and religious minorities more broadly, has become a central object of political conflict in contemporary Western democracies. For a long time, anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric was associated primarily with actors on the political fringe, especially the far right. Yet similar rhetoric now appears more often in the communication of mainstream parties as well. This dissertation shows that mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric is neither incidental nor inconsequential. Mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric is both a consequence of party competition and a potential cause of broader social norm change.

Summary

Immigration and the status of ethnic and religious minorities have become central objects of political conflict in contemporary Western democracies. For a long time, anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric was associated primarily with actors on the political fringe, especially far-right parties. In recent years, however, similar rhetoric has increasingly appeared in the communication of mainstream parties as well. This dissertation asks: Why do mainstream parties use anti-minority rhetoric, through what mechanisms does it shape citizen beliefs, and what can make citizens less receptive to it?

The dissertation argues that mainstream party anti-minority rhetoric is both a consequence of party competition and a potential cause of broader social norm change. Mainstream parties adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric partly because they face electoral pressure from the far right. Insofar as such rhetoric entails expressions of prejudice toward ethnic minorities, it can also change citizens' perceptions of what kind of speech is socially acceptable. Mainstream parties are especially important in this process because citizens perceive them as normatively credible and legitimate social referents.

The dissertation consists of four papers. In Paper A ("When Do Mainstream Parties Talk Like the Far Right? Evidence from Parliamentary Speeches in Western Europe"), I examine when and why mainstream parties adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric. Using parliamentary speeches and electoral polling data from nine Western European countries between 1994 and 2024, I develop a text-as-data measure of mainstream rhetorical accommodation. I find that mainstream anti-immigrant rhetoric has become more widespread over time, that mainstream parties use more such rhetoric when far-right parties become stronger, and that far-right rhetoric spills over into mainstream parliamentary speech.

In Paper B ("From Symbols to Substance: Mainstream Party Responsiveness on Immigration"), I examine how mainstream parties respond to immigration-related voter pressure. My argument is that mainstream parties can rhetorically respond in two ways: symbolically, by standing for voters' concerns without committing to policy change, or substan-

tively, by acting for voters through policy-oriented rhetoric. Using Danish parliamentary speeches and the 2015 migrant crisis as a shock to immigration salience, I find that far-right pressure encourages symbolic responses, while heightened salience makes symbolic responsiveness less sufficient and pushes mainstream parties toward substantive responses.

In Paper C ("Credible Prejudice? When and Why Mainstream Party Adoption of Far-Right Rhetoric Weakens Anti-Prejudice Norms"), I examine whether prejudiced rhetoric from mainstream parties weakens citizens' perceptions of anti-prejudice norms. My argument is that mainstream parties are especially influential because citizens perceive them as normatively credible and legitimate social referents. Combining observational evidence on mainstream anti-Muslim rhetoric with preregistered survey experiments in Germany and Denmark, I find that mainstream prejudiced rhetoric weakens anti-prejudice norm perceptions in Germany, while the Danish results are weaker and less consistent. The findings suggest that the effect of mainstream prejudiced rhetoric depends on broader histories of mainstream accommodation and normalization.

In Paper D ("Meditation Increases Expressions of Joy and Shifts Democratic and Intergroup Attitudes"), my co-authors and I examine whether improved emotional and cognitive regulation can reduce polarization and hostility toward immigrants and ethnic minorities. The argument is that citizens' receptivity to prejudiced rhetoric is shaped not only by cognition, but also by emotional regulation. Using a 14-day online intervention in the United States, we find that emotional regulation can make citizens less willing to agree with prejudiced rhetoric targeting Muslims. The mechanism analyses suggest that these effects are more consistent with emotional regulation than cognitive regulation.

The broader implication is that political rhetoric is an important part of democratic politics in its own right. What parties say, how they say it, and who says it can shape what citizens perceive as socially acceptable. The dynamics of party politics, such as mainstream accommodation of the far right, therefore carry implications beyond the electoral and legislative arena by also influencing social norms.

Dansk Resumé

Indvandring og etniske og religiøse minoriteters status er blevet centrale konfliktspørgsmål i nutidens vestlige demokratier. I lang tid var indvandrerkritisk og anti-minoritetsretorik primært forbundet med aktører på den politiske udkant, navnligt radikale højrefløjspartier. I de senere år er lignende retorik imidlertid i stigende grad også kommet til udtryk i etablerede mainstreampartiers kommunikation. Denne afhandling stiller derfor spørgsmålet: Hvorfor bruger mainstreampartier anti-minoritetsretorik, gennem hvilke mekanismer påvirker den borgernes opfattelser, og hvad kan gøre borgere mindre modtagelige over for den?

Afhandlingen argumenterer for, at mainstreampartiers anti-minoritetsretorik både er en konsekvens af partipolitisk konkurrence og en årsag til bredere forandringer i sociale normer. Mainstreampartier anvender indvandrerkritisk retorik delvist fordi de oplever et vælgerpres fra højrefløjen. I det omfang at dette også indeholder fordomsfuld retorik rettet mod etniske minoriteter, kan den ændre borgernes opfattelser af, hvilken form for tale der er socialt acceptabel. Mainstreampartier er særligt vigtige i denne proces, fordi borgere opfatter dem som normativt troværdige og legitime sociale referenter.

Afhandlingen består af fire artikler. I artikel A ("When Do Mainstream Parties Talk Like the Far Right? Evidence from Parliamentary Speeches in Western Europe") undersøger jeg, hvornår og hvorfor mainstreampartier anvender indvandrerkritisk retorik. Med udgangspunkt i parlamentariske taler og meningsmålingsdata fra ni vesteuropæiske lande i perioden 1994 til 2024 udvikler jeg et text-as-data-mål for mainstreampartiers retoriske tilpasning til den radikale højrefløj. Jeg finder, at indvandrerkritisk retorik fra mainstreampartier er blevet mere udbredt over tid, at mainstreampartier anvender mere af denne retorik, når radikale højrefløjspartier oplever elektoral success, og at radikale højrefløjspartiers retorik smitter af på mainstreampartiers parlamentariske tale.

I artikel B ("From Symbols to Substance: Mainstream Party Responsiveness on Immigration") undersøger jeg, hvordan mainstreampartier reagerer, når vælgere kræver restriktioner på migrationsområdet.

Mit argument er, at mainstreampartier kan reagere på to måder: symbolsk, ved at anerkende vælgernes bekymringer uden at forpligte sig på konkret politik, eller substantielt, ved at forpligte sig på konkrete policyløsninger. Med udgangspunkt i danske parlamentariske taler og ved at anvende flygtningekrisen i 2015 som et eksogent chok der øgede indvandringsspørgsmålets saliens, finder jeg, at elektoralt pres fra den radikale højrefløj fremmer symbolske reaktioner, mens øget saliens gør symbolske reaktioner mindre tilstrækkelige og skubber mainstreampartier i retning af mere substantielle reaktioner.

I artikel C ("Credible Prejudice? When and Why Mainstream Party Adoption of Far-Right Rhetoric Weakens Anti-Prejudice Norms") undersøger jeg, om fordomsfuld retorik fra mainstreampartier svækker borgernes opfattelser af anti-fordomsnormer. Mit argument er, at mainstreampartier er særligt indflydelsesrige, fordi borgere opfatter dem som normativt troværdige og legitime sociale referenter. Ved at kombinere observationelle data om mainstreampartiers anti-muslimske retorik med surveyeksperimenter i Tyskland og Danmark finder jeg, at fordomsfuld retorik fra mainstreampartier svækker opfattelser af antifordomsnormer i Tyskland, mens jeg ikke finder nogen effekt i Danmark. Resultaterne peger på, at effekten af fordomsfuld retorik fra mainstreampartier afhænger af i hvor høj grad den radikale højrefløj historisk er blevet normaliseret af mainstreampartier.

I artikel D ("Meditation Increases Expressions of Joy and Shifts Democratic and Intergroup Attitudes") undersøger jeg sammen med mine medforfattere, om forbedret emotionel og kognitiv regulering kan reducere polarisering og fjendtlighed over for indvandrere og etniske minoriteter. Argumentet er, at borgernes modtagelighed over for fordomsfuld retorik ikke kun formes af kognition, men også af emotionel regulering. Ved hjælp af et 15-dages onlineinterventionseksperiment i USA finder vi, at emotionel regulering kan gøre borgere mindre villige til at erklære sig enige i fordomsfuld retorik rettet mod muslimer. Mekanismeanalyserne peger på, at effekterne i højere grad er forenelige med emotionel regulering end med kognitiv regulering.

Den bredere implikation er, at politisk retorik er en vigtig del af demokratisk politik i sig selv. Hvad partier siger, hvordan de siger det, og hvem der siger det, kan forme borgernes opfattelser af, hvad der er socialt acceptabelt. Partipolitiske dynamikker, såsom mainstreampartiers tilpasning til den radikale højrefløj, har derfor konsekvenser ud over den elektorale og lovgivende arena, fordi de også kan påvirke sociale normer.

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