

**Intra-Party Dynamics of Social Democrats and
Immigration:
Dilemmas, Policy Shifts and Constraints**

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Abstract

Immigration has become one of the most contentious issues in European politics, especially since the 2015 refugee crisis. For social democratic parties, the growing saliency and politicisation of immigration highlighted their immigration dilemma. This dilemma is linked to their electoralist strategies, ideological roots as well as the changing political landscape across Europe. The dissertation focuses on intra-party dynamics, a critical but often overlooked aspect of how social democrats manage this dilemma, exploring the nature, extent and influence of these dynamics on the decision- and policy-making processes and policy shift attempts. The overarching research question of the dissertation is *how do intra-party dynamics influence social democratic parties' and actors' decision-making processes and policy shift manoeuvres on immigration?*

The main argument is that the party elites, even with the formal authority to change policies, often refrain from policy shifts on challenging issues, such as immigration, as they perceive that these shifts will lead to adverse reactions and backlash from the party activists. These intra-party actors, though lacking direct decision-making power, manage to exert significant influence over the leaders' and elites' policy and discourse developing processes on immigration by limiting their electoralist manoeuvres and strategies.

The dissertation provides a comparative analysis of two major European social democratic parties, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Danish Social Democrats (S). While the SPD struggled to enact significant immigration policy shifts due to ideological divergences, the Danish Social Democrats successfully implemented restrictive immigration reforms, overcoming similar intra-party challenges. The study uses a combination of qualitative content analysis of party congress speeches and manifestos, public discourses, and semi-structured interviews with party elites to examine the factors influencing these policy decisions. This comparison highlights the contributing factors, such as the ideological framing of policies, the extent of party elite cohesion, and the perception of the party leadership, its abilities and image by the party activists.

This research contributes to the literature by conceptualising the influences and effects of these intra-party dynamics on policy decisions, referred to as nestedness. It also demonstrates how social democratic parties can transform these dynamics, offering broader insights into the balance between ideology and electoral strategies amid rising far-right parties and immigration's growing politicisation in Europe.

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1. Introduction

Immigration has become one of the most contentious issues in European politics, particularly in recent decades. While the 2008 financial crisis and 2010 Eurozone crisis heightened socioeconomic insecurity, especially amongst the economically vulnerable segments of society, the 2015 refugee crisis caused a significant escalation of anxieties and worries about labour competition, welfare state access and sociocultural harmony in Europe (Hutter and Kriesi, 2022). These crises and the anxieties they invoked in society have deepened public disenchantment with mainstream politics, allowing the far-right to gain political and electoral ground, even entering government coalitions (Marx and Naumann, 2018; Rydgren, 2013.). Moreover, the politicisation of immigration is not only about the numbers nor solely limited to its own; it intersects with other policy areas, such as labour market competition, wages, housing, and cultural issues, contributing to the spreading of anti-immigration sentiments (Kortmann and Stecker, 2019; Sides and Citrin, 2007). While mainstream parties of centre-left and centre-right have responded, or attempted to respond, to these crises and address the worries and anxieties in various ways, the 2015 crisis significantly left its mark on European politics, as immigration is still considerably salient almost ten years later, influencing elections, party policies and voter behaviour. In the midst and aftermath of the refugee crisis of 2015, the left of the mainstream, the social democrats, arguably had to reckon with a much more complicated dilemma, and the Herculean task of solving it, regarding their immigration policies due to the divergence between their ideological roots and evolving electoral strategies, as well as the balance between their vote-, office- and policy-seeking behaviour. While this dilemma did not emerge during this period (see, for example, Kitschelt, 1994), the 2010s and its crises led to its resurgence and exacerbation, in line with the increasing salience and politicisation of immigration.

The immigration dilemma presents a critical challenge for social democratic parties. Historically supportive of internationalism and immigrant rights, these parties now face a tension between their working-class base, which tends to have relatively restrictive views on immigration, and their growing support from educated, middle-class urban voters with more progressive views (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011). Although immigration policies are not the sole cause, they are central to the shift in social democratic support, touching on issues like prioritising the ‘native working-class’ – topics that far-right parties have exploited (Hutter and Kriesi, 2022; Rovny, 2013). Despite attempts to reconcile these diverging bases, social democrats have often failed to convince both working-class and middle-class voters, resulting

in an unconvincing stance on immigration (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011; Bale et al., 2010; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022; Schmidtke, 2016). This dissertation addresses the overlooked question of how and under what conditions social democrats choose their strategies on immigration, whether by adopting restrictive positions, holding their ground, or diffusing the issue. As a considerable part of mainstream politics, social democrats have been grappling with this issue considerably, affecting their electoral and political fortunes, as well as their political image and ideological navigation both in their respective national party systems and at the European level. Through exploring their strategies, this dissertation contributes and furthers the current and arguably one of the most significant predicaments of social democrats, its effects on the cohesion of the parties, and how the party elites navigate this processes, providing findings and insights on their agency, political behaviour and ideological outlook.

This dilemma marks a critical point in the electoral and political decline of social democrats across Europe (Downs, 2011). It stems from their effort to move politically to the centre, balancing the retention of the working-class vote while appealing to the middle class – an ongoing electoral challenge for decades (Przeworski and Sprague, 1986). The immigration dilemma highlights the political, ideological, and strategic impasses they face. Key questions arise around the strategies social democratic parties choose, why they opt for specific approaches, whether they benefit electorally, and which factors influence these decisions. Additionally, it is crucial to consider that political parties are complex organisations with various actors, agendas, and motivations. They are not merely agents of public opinion; many other factors shape their policies and decisions (Müller and Strøm, 1999; Wenzelburger and Zohlnhöfer, 2021).

While there is considerable research on the social democratic parties and their dilemma on immigration, these focus on the social democratic voters, party systems or election manifestos (see, for example, Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Alonso and Fonseca, 2011; Bale et al., 2010; 2013; Carvalho and Ruedin, 2020; McManus and Falkenbach, 2022). These works explore and provide crucial findings and further the understanding of the social democratic immigration dilemma; however, two significant aspects and factors tend to be overlooked: the complexity and diversity of party organisation and its influence over the agency, abilities and limitations over the policy-makers within these parties, i.e. the intra-party dynamics. Although the intra-party aspect of the social democratic dilemma is brought up and briefly mentioned, there is no thorough exploration of the nature of intra-party

dynamics and its effects on the immigration decision- and policy-making in the social democratic parties. This dissertation addresses this research gap. A key focus of this dissertation is intra-party dynamics, which play a crucial role in understanding the agencies and influences of political actors. Political parties are not monolithic; they consist of various strata of actors with differing motivations, powers, and access to resources (Strøm, 1990). These internal differences shape expectations for political decisions and outcomes, making the study of intra-party dynamics essential for understanding these processes. Hence, one of the critical arguments of this dissertation is that these intra-party dynamics are decisive and significantly influential on the policy-shifting capabilities of social democratic parties on immigration.

However, intra-party dynamics are often referred to as a ‘black box’ in the literature, as the interactions and politics within parties are rarely publicised and are typically kept internal (Allern and Saglie, 2012; Ceron, 2019; Kölln and Polk, 2023). This non-publicised aspect of intra-party dynamics significantly influences the methodological approach of this dissertation, as well as its engagement with existing literature on intra-party dynamics and empirical research. To explore the dynamics in question, I rely on perspectives and perceptions of the party elites, who have access to and control of the decision- and policy-making processes and directly benefit from the politics, that can illustrate the non-publicised interactions and processes and their influence on their policy manoeuvre capabilities, between the elites and the other intra-party actors.

One of the most influential concepts in studying intra-party dynamics is the Special Law of Curvilinear Disparity or May’s Law. This theory suggests that actors within political parties have varying ideological stances, with party activists and mid-level elites being more ‘extremists’ than high-ranking elites, members, or voters (May, 1973). While May’s Law has been debated, particularly regarding its generalisability across different parties and policy areas (see Bäckersten, 2022; Kitschelt, 1989; Van Holsteyn, Ridder and Koole, 2017; Wager et al., 2022), research indicates that ideological discrepancies within left-wing parties are especially pronounced on politically and ideologically salient issues. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will test and illustrate the application of this ideological variance among social democratic intra-party actors, particularly between more ideologically motivated activists and party elites, focusing on their differing approaches to immigration policy and decision-making.

Considerable research examines how intra-party dynamics influence party policy-making, often focusing on the official powers of intra-party actors, such as voting rights, electoral processes, and committee participation, or the profile of party members, i.e., their ideological inclinations and preferences (see for example, Bernardi et al., 2017; Ceron and Greene, 2019; Greene and Haber, 2015; Sandri and Amjahad, 2015; Schumacher and Giger, 2018; van Haute and Carty, 2012). However, these studies tend to overlook the ‘black-box’ nature of policy-making within intra-party settings.

This dissertation investigates how intra-party dynamics within social democratic parties influence decision-making on immigration policies, particularly in light of ideological and political challenges, electoral concerns, and party system factors. It explores why and how these parties choose specific strategies on immigration, whether adopting restrictive positions, maintaining expansive stances, or diffusing the issue, all within the constraints imposed by intra-party dynamics. In addressing the research gap identified above and engaging with the puzzle of the social democratic dilemma, this dissertation poses the central research question: How do intra-party dynamics influence social democratic parties’ and actors’ decision-making processes and policy shift manoeuvres on immigration? Through this question, the dissertation contributes to research on intra-party dynamics, party politics, and immigration policy-making, offering an in-depth exploration of the social democratic dilemma.

The dissertation’s main argument is that party elites refrain from shifting immigration policies when they anticipate dissent from activists, balancing their vote- and office-seeking goals with the need to manage intra-party dynamics and avoid internal backlash. This is conceptualised as *nestedness* (of party activists) in intra-party dynamics, a novel contribution to the literature, building upon the role of anticipated reactions (Friedrich, 1963), as its key finding and argument to explain the constraints perceived by the party elites from the intra-party actors on immigration policy shifts. This perceived influence of party activists on party elites and their decision-making processes directly affects their ability and willingness to manoeuvre on policy changes, particularly on contentious issues like immigration. While the party elites officially maintain the ability to initiate changes, the lack of support and the potential of dissent from the intra-party actors and the resulting image that the public may observe from this process, e.g., in-fighting, disharmony and indecision, cause them to abstain as the political costs of a potential shift outweigh the electoral benefits. Hence, this dissertation explores the factors that contribute to the nestedness of party activists, as well as

how the party elites perceive the intra-party dynamics, the ‘red lines’ of the intra-party actors on immigration, and how the potential of intra-party conflicts influence their decision-making. Furthermore, another essential venue I address is investigating how the party elites navigate these dynamics and whether and how they seek to transform them to maintain the intra-party balance and shift their policies to maximise their electoralist strategies. The following chapters elaborate on and empirically examine this theoretical contribution in the context of German and Danish social democratic parties.

The methodological approach in this study is designed to meet its theoretical and empirical objectives by analysing the policy positions and discourses of political parties using various sources, such as party congresses, documents, and public discourse. Party congresses, even though their processes and official structures vary, are typically venues for decision-making and intra-party discussion for political parties (Ceron and Greene, 2019; Cross and Katz, 2013), and this dissertation analyses congress speeches to understand how party actors frame and position themselves on immigration. Semi-structured interviews with party elites are conducted to gain deeper insights into intra-party dynamics, providing a richer understanding beyond public records. These interview findings are then triangulated with content analysis to ensure research validity. The study compares the German and Danish social democratic parties, which followed similar paths on immigration policies until the 2010s and diverged afterwards, significantly after the 2015 refugee crisis, where the Danish social democratic party transformed its immigration policies towards a restrictive outlook while SPD maintained its expansive approach. Comparing these cases allows the dissertation to explore its research question and argument on intra-party dynamics and their role in immigration policy shifts in social democratic parties, as the former party managed to take action on the issue, while intra-party dynamics constrained the latter.

This research tackles a societally and politically relevant question by examining social democratic parties’ immigration policies from an intra-party perspective, addressing a significant gap in the literature. It aims to contribute empirically and theoretically to understanding how political parties and actors frame and develop their policies and discourses and the conditions under which they shift policies. The study balances the analysis of electoral strategies with intra-party dynamics, cohesion and stability. Additionally, it sheds light on the role of party leaders and elites, the balance between ideology and pragmatism in social democratic politics, and how the immigration dilemma influences programmatic and discursive policy-making.

The dissertation has the following structure: In the subsequent chapter, Theoretical Framework, the existing literature and theoretical approaches are discussed and reviewed, the groundwork for the research puzzle and contributions of this dissertation are explored in detail, and research methods in line with the conceptual and theoretical contributions are presented. This section focuses on the politicisation of immigration, social democratic ideology, politics, and intra-party dynamics to develop a coherent background to the empirical work. Moreover, the research design section provides further details and discusses the case selection, methodology and overall implementation.

There are three chapters focusing on the empirics that form the main body of this cumulative dissertation. The first of the three, *The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and Immigration Policies: An Intra-Party Perspective*¹, focuses on the party congresses of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) to explore the intra-party dynamics, discourses, and positions on immigration through the speeches of intra-party actors, testing the application of May's Law for a social democratic party on immigration and establishes the lack of manoeuvres and shifts, i.e. non-action, occurring on policy and discourse levels (Chapter 3). This chapter serves as the foundation for understanding how ideological discrepancies of intra-party actors are reflected in the party's positions and offers that the divergence between activists and party elites influences the policy outcomes on immigration.

Second, *How do intra-party dynamics impact the party elite's immigration policy manoeuvres? The case of German Social Democrats*² establishes the public discourses and policy developments of the SPD's immigration policies, and building upon the previous article's findings, explores how the nature, contributing factors and extent of these constraints and how the party elites navigate them throughout their decision- and policy-making processes. Hence, this chapter offers empirical findings on how the intra-party dynamics constrain the attempts and manoeuvres of the SPD party leadership and elite regarding a restrictive policy shift, in line with their electoralist strategies, resulting in a non-action by the

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party and *status quo* on immigration policies, while providing factors regarding the nature of the nestedness, i.e. leadership skills and party system landscape (Chapter 4).

While the former chapter focuses on how the intra-party dynamics cause the party elite to constrain their manoeuvres from the immigration policy shift, the third empirical study, *From dissent to cohesion: Immigration policy shift and intra-party dynamics in the Danish Social Democratic Party*³, explores a contrasting and diverging case. This chapter investigates the Danish Social Democrats and how the party leadership and elite managed to transform the intra-party dynamics, overcoming these constraints to implement restrictive immigration policies while maintaining the internal support of and avoiding detrimental backlash from the party actors and also outlines their processes and approaches on how they navigated this transformation, as well as the internal and external factors related to this shift (Chapter 5).

These three chapters collectively examine intra-party dynamics and the varying approaches of party actors toward immigration in both the German and Danish social democratic parties. They highlight the divergences in aims, expectations, and ideological perspectives of actors and analyse how these dynamics shape decision- and policy-making processes. By providing a comparative framework, the chapters demonstrate how intra-party dynamics can effectively constrain party elites and leadership in their policy manoeuvres, as well as how party elites may attempt to navigate or counter these internal influences to implement immigration policy shifts.

In the final part, titled Analysis and Conclusion (Chapter 6), I outline and discuss the overarching outcomes of the findings and theoretical approaches and provide a conclusion alongside recommendations for future research. The initial chapter, Introduction, the following Theoretical Framework, and the final chapter, Analysis and Conclusion, together constitute a *general framework* for the dissertation, providing insights into and detailing its structure, coherence, and contribution.

³ Published as a peer-reviewed journal article: Orhan, S. A. (2024). From dissent to cohesion: Immigration policy shift and intra-party dynamics in the Danish Social Democratic Party. *Party Politics*, 1–12.
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2. Theoretical Framework

Politicisation of immigration: positioning and framing

Immigration has gained significant political salience in recent decades, particularly in Europe. After the 2008 financial crisis, immigration was increasingly blamed for labour market competition, unemployment, falling wages, housing shortages, and strain on the welfare state (Rydgren, 2013). The issue has been politicised across various policy fields, mobilising those who feel threatened by globalisation, mainly the ‘losers of globalisation,’ who see immigration as diminishing their perceived socioeconomic status and welfare access (Kriesi et al., 2006). The globalisation of markets and the neoliberal economic policies widely adopted by centre-right parties in the 1980s led to increased migration, particularly from the Global South, transforming the social fabric and triggering a ‘frantic search for identity’ among the working-class (Tsarouhas, 2012: 111). Additionally, neoliberal shifts in welfare state policies reduced safety nets and redistributive measures, shifting the focus from societal solidarity to individual responsibility, further heightening anxieties about labour market competition and socioeconomic status (Bommes and Geddes, 2000; Joppke, 2024).

The scepticism of working-class and the lower segments of society, i.e. lesser-qualified or educated workers and precariously employed, toward immigration is not solely rooted in socioeconomic concerns; national identity, cultural values, and misinformation also play significant roles (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Sides and Citrin, 2007). As Europe attracts immigrants from culturally distinct countries, increasing diversity has sparked a backlash from those who perceive multiculturalism as threatening their values, society, and economic well-being (Eger and Kulin, 2022; Kriesi et al., 2012). While the accuracy of this perceived threat is beyond the scope of this dissertation, its impact on European politics is undeniable, particularly with the rising influence of anti-immigrant far-right parties (Spies, 2013; Spoon and Klüver, 2020; van Spanje, 2010).

The alienation of these groups from mainstream parties and political elites created opportunities for far-right mobilisation, which capitalised on protective stances against immigration, competition, and multiculturalism, especially during the crises: the 2008 Financial Crisis, the 2009 European Debt Crisis, and the 2015 Refugee Crisis (Berman and Kundnani, 2021; Geddes and Scholten, 2016; Marx and Naumann, 2018). While the first two crises destabilised European societies socioeconomically, the latter, driven by worsening global conflicts, led to an influx of refugees that caught most European states and the EU

unprepared. The rising prominence of immigration as an issue further fuelled far-right parties' politicisation efforts, as the influx of refugees, primarily from North Africa and the Middle East, significantly shaped public perceptions of immigration and asylum seekers (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kortmann and Stecker, 2019).

To appeal to public anxieties and scepticism, far-right parties promoted an exclusionary protectionist state, or welfare chauvinism, and advocated for cultural homogeneity by restricting or eliminating immigration (Bommes and Geddes, 2000; Alonso and Fonseca, 2011). They shifted to a protective stance on economic issues while maintaining a hard-line approach to immigration and cultural matters – a 'new winning formula' that replaced their 1980s blend of liberalism and authoritarianism (de Lange, 2007). As the working-class became alienated from mainstream politics during various crises, far-right parties attracted these voters, leading to the 'proletarianisation' of the far-right (Arzheimer, 2013: 82-83). Consequently, far-right parties began to be viewed as the 'new working-class parties', a role traditionally held by social democrats since the post-World War II era (Arzheimer, 2013; Yilmaz, 2016).

Mainstream political parties of centre-right and centre-left have responded to immigration and the rise of the far-right in various ways (Odmalm and Bale, 2015). Research shows that these responses differ by party type. For instance, the far-right competes with the centre-right for 'small business owners' and social democrats for 'production workers' (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). Centre-right parties are more likely to adopt or accommodate the far-right's anti-immigrant positions, using this stance to compete in elections or secure parliamentary support (Downes and Loveless, 2018; Bale, 2003).

On the other side of the spectrum is the social democratic parties, which draw their policies and discourses from left-wing ideology, aiming to reconcile the liberal framework and socialist outlook through reform and democratic gains. Social democrats have undergone numerous transformations since their initial rise to prominence in the early 20th century, gradually becoming less radical and more reformist over the years, reconciling with and adopting the increasingly liberal framework and political structure (Berman, 2006; Keman, 2011). While there is no singular 'social democracy', these transformations naturally influenced their electoral appeal, turning them into more 'big tent' and broadly appealing parties and providing opportunities for other parties to target their voter and supporter bases (Arzheimer, 2013). Regarding immigration, the 'proletarianisation' of the far-right, increasing

politicisation and salience of immigration significantly affected the social democratic responses and positioning on the matter. In line with external pressures from the party systems and critical junctures and internal political transformations, Bale et al. (2010) identify three main strategies used by social democrats in the early 2000s regarding immigration: defusing, holding, and adopting. The defusing strategy involves downplaying immigration by focusing on other issues while holding means maintaining pre-existing positions without being swayed by the heightened politicisation. The adopting strategy sees social democrats partially embracing the far-right's anti-immigrant discourse. Each strategy has led to internal conflicts within the parties due to varying electoral success, public resonance, or clashes with their ideological values (Bale et al., 2010; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022). None of these strategies, however, have emerged as a definitive electoral or political solution for social democrats (Arzheimer, 2013; Bandau, 2022; Downs, 2011; Salo and Rydgren, 2021).

A critical research gap remains: concepts like competing, adapting, accommodating, and defusing alone do not fully capture the complexities of policy shifts, issue framing, and decision-making. What is the extent, nature, focus, and content of these strategies? The following section provides a conceptual framework to understand better how parties approach immigration and how their strategies translate into policy and discourse.

A conceptual framework for immigration

While there is significant discussion of the politicisation of immigration as a policy issue (see, for example, Eger and Kulin, 2022; Hutter and Kriesi, 2022; Kymlicka, 2015; Kymlicka and Banting, 2006), how (positioning) and why (framing) parties develop and present their immigration policies and discourses should be further explored and conceptualised, providing an in-depth exploration of *how* and *why* questions of social democratic parties' immigration policies and discourses, combining these two dimensions to offer a comprehensive understanding and profile of their approach to immigration.

The first to be explored is the positioning. This dimension offers the position of a political party and actors on a policy issue, as in *how* the party approaches the topic (Ruedin and Morales, 2019). Parties and their actors can position themselves for or against particular policies and demands, expectations or offers emanating from these policies. The positioning depends on a multitude of internal and external factors – they position in line with their ideology, electoral expectations and ambitions, intra-party dynamics, national political

landscape, and their previously existing inclinations, among other factors (Abou-Chadi and Stoetzer, 2020; Budge, 1994; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013).

Relying on the existing literature, I consider the positioning of immigration policies and discourses in two categories: *expansive* (pro-immigration) and *restrictive* (anti-immigration) (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011; Carvalho and Ruedin, 2020; Van der Brug et al., 2015). These approaches can be applied to several immigration policies, from integration to the labour market to cultural approach to education, allowances, and even the number of immigrants allowed into the country and the conditions for immigration and to the economic and sociocultural aspects of immigration (Grande, Schwarzbözl and Fatke, 2019; Odmalm, 2012). Therefore, expansive immigration policies advocate for increasing immigration numbers, and enhancing the rights and access of immigrants in areas such as integration measures, the labour market, social benefits, and cultural diversity, while restrictive policies aim to decrease, limit, and control immigration by reducing the number of immigrants allowed, tightening eligibility criteria, opposing multiculturalism, and restricting access to social benefits and integration programmes. However, Lehmann and Zobel (2018) point out that parties may sometimes take conflicting and contrasting positions on the intricate aspects of immigration, such as opposing welcoming new immigrants while championing the education or integration of the already residing immigrants or a party can have an expansive positioning on the number of immigrants coming into the country, advocating an increase, and have restrictive views on the required qualifications for immigration, limiting the eligible pool of potential immigrants. These policies and propositions co-exist, although parties may offer more expansive positions than the restrictive ones and vice versa.

A significant part of the literature investigates immigration policies of political parties and actors only on this scale of positioning, whether expansive or restrictive (see, for example, Abou-Chadi, 2016; Alonso and Fonseca, 2011; Vrânceanu, 2019). These works significantly contribute to the literature and provide insights. However, two critical shortcomings remain: over-generalisation and saturation. In the case of the latter, parties may adopt a restrictive stance on one aspect of immigration, such as labour migration, while taking a more expansive approach on another, such as asylum seekers. Simply labelling a party as expansive or restrictive on immigration can, therefore, oversimplify the nuances and complexities of their actual policy positions. Moreover, as discussed above, many different policies can be considered in the same positioning category, yet they differ significantly in their framing, leading to the saturation of the analysis by overlooking the reasoning and

justification behind these positions. While the positioning dimension provides insights into how parties approach immigration, the critical question of why they adopt these positions remains neglected (Helbling, 2014).

Hence, the policy framing must account for why the actors position themselves in a particular way on the issue. Involving framing in the categorisation of immigration policies and offering a two-dimensional approach brings crucial nuance to understanding and investigating immigration policies of parties and actors. There is growing utilisation of this type of approach, combining dimensions of positioning and framing and analysing policies with different applications, outcomes and methods (see, for example, Elias, Szöcsik and Zubet, 2015; Gianfreda, 2021; Østergaard-Nielsen, Ciornei and Lafleur, 2019; Wonka, 2016).

Exploring the justification and reasoning behind why parties offer their positions offers a much more complex and nuanced view of their immigration policies. For example, a party can argue for more immigration to meet labour market demands or to provide humanitarian protection and shelter to people under duress; although both policy offers are expansive, they are at the same time considerably different from one another regarding their justification, intent and reasoning. Hence, involving the ‘why?’ question provides a valuable and insightful dimension and nuances in understanding immigration policies. In line with this, I include the second dimension: the framing.

Drawing from the literature, I offer two primary categories for the framing dimension: *principled* and *pragmatic* (Colombo, 2021; Tavits, 2007). These categories do not denote specific positions but rather how positions are framed; for instance, principled framing can support either a restrictive or expansive stance. In a sense, parties can develop principled expansive or principled restrictive positions, such as citing human rights for increasing the number of accepted asylum seekers and identity-related or nationalistic ideologies for limiting it, both relying on their principles. In line with this, the former category offers justifications emerging from the parties’ moralistic, ideological or ethical values, while the latter analyses immigration policies from a cost-and-benefit perspective (Tavits, 2007). The justifications and reasonings parties rely on are closely related to their ideological inclinations, identity, and background, as they significantly influence their discourse and policy-making (Helbling, 2014). For example, nationalistic and identity frames are much more common for the right-wing parties, while emphasising human and civic rights is prevalent among left-wing (Helbling, 2014; van Spanje, 2010).

Another aspect to be considered in the framing dimension is the policy shifts. Tavits (2007) argues that changing policies on a principled issue may be perceived as back-tracking or lack of credibility, while a lack of change in pragmatic issues as unresponsiveness. This difference is rooted in the framing and the approaches that parties utilise. If a party emphasises its core beliefs to justify its immigration policy, e.g., accommodating more refugees in line with its ideological stance on human rights – in that case, it will be more problematic for that party to argue for fewer refugees in the future. On the other hand, the cost-and-benefit analysis is open to change, less constant, and much more reliant on external factors; therefore, parties can shift their pragmatic frames much more easily in comparison (Colombo, 2021; Tavits, 2007).

Table 1: *Conceptual framework on positions/frames of immigration policies*

<i>Position</i>	<i>Framing</i>	
	Principled expansive	Pragmatic expansive
	Principled restrictive	Pragmatic restrictive

In line with the two dimensions above, this dissertation combines them and offers a conceptual framework for immigration policies (see Table 1). This framework is utilised through qualitative content analysis, which allows research to establish the discursive approaches and positions of intra-party actors on immigration, analysing their speeches in line with the concepts above (Schreier, 2012). Additionally, the conceptualisation contributes to the body of literature on immigration policy analysis, evaluating multiple aspects of immigration policy, from asylum seekers to refugees and labour migrants and how the party actors contextualise and approach these topics in socioeconomic, cultural and ideological perspectives. Considerably, this framework relates and combines framing and positioning with each other, considers them collectively, and aims to place the political parties and actors on their overall approach to immigration (in the four categories mentioned above), displaying its complexity and multi-faceted nature. Maintaining this multi-faceted nature also provides insights into how the positioning and framing have changed over the years, indicating an intricate aspect of the policy shifts, responsiveness, and establishing the outlook of intra-party actors.

In addition to the positioning framework, this dissertation also focuses on another critical aspect of immigration policy categorisation: anxiety. As discussed earlier, the growing salience of immigration in European societies has led to significant anxiety regarding socioeconomic and cultural issues, particularly among the working-class and more vulnerable segments of society (Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008; Kriesi et al., 2012). This anxiety has been effectively mobilised and politicised by far-right parties, especially as mainstream centre-right and social democratic parties have increasingly adopted more competitive, globalised and neo-liberal economic policies that affected the socioeconomic standing of certain parts of society (Arzheimer, 2013). This anxiety was heightened by a growing influx of immigration, causing further worries regarding the economy, society and cultural stability (Manwaring and Kennedy, 2018; Yilmaz, 2016). Whether these worries were well-founded or merely exist as a worry is beyond this dissertation's scope; however, they have influenced the political landscape considerably in the last decades (Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008; Kriesi et al., 2012).

References to this anxiety, made by political parties and actors, specifically address public perceptions and concerns about immigration. Therefore, this category does not focus on immigration policies directly, such as the number of immigrants or their access to the welfare state, but rather on the perceptions and anxieties that immigration itself causes within the society. For example, while discussions about immigrants' access to the labour market fall within the categories discussed above, references to societal anxieties about the growing (or shrinking) number of immigrants entering the labour market would fall under the anxiety category. Although this latter type of discourse does not involve a specific policy position or frame on immigration, it still reveals the approach of political parties and actors to addressing public concerns and societal anxieties related to immigration. Subsequently, parties and actors may offer policies to rectify these anxieties, in that case, those propositions would be evaluated in terms of framing and positioning. Thus, this category aims to capture how parties and actors engage with societal anxieties and public perceptions surrounding immigration, offering insights into how these concerns are addressed alongside their policy propositions.

Actors offer a variety of immigration policies and approaches – it is rare for a political entity to display a singular outlook on a whole policy field. These actors may be pragmatic and expansive on some issues while being principled expansive on others, for example. These variations are shaped by electoral and political ambitions and public opinion and are

simultaneously constrained by ideology, intra-party dynamics, and the party's identity and background (Hertner, 2015; König, 2017; Schmidtke, 2015; 2016). To examine the constraints on immigration policy and decision-making arising from these factors, this dissertation will explore the social democratic ideology and intra-party dynamics in the following section, offering a comprehensive theoretical overview of the approaches, frameworks, and dilemmas these actors face.

Social democracy and its ideological tenets

Before exploring how social democrats approach immigration, it is essential to understand their core ideological tenets. Social democratic parties, representing a compromise between socialism and capitalism, have played a significant role in European politics, particularly after World War II. Especially in this period, social democracy became a significant part of politics, bringing labour movements and working-class politics into the mainstream, initiating crucial policies and changes on welfare, labour rights and society (Berman, 2006). Since its conception, there have been common social democratic principles, but social democratic parties vary in their positions, aspirations and policies (Powell, 2004). The basic principles of social democracy include egalitarianism, solidarity, social and economic justice, and, to some extent, internationalism (Berman, 2006; Hinnfors, Spehar and Bucken-Knapp, 2012; Keating and McCrone, 2015). In this sense, social democracy became an indispensable part of European politics, representing a significant side of the European project, and understanding and exploring social democracy, its values and its dilemmas would also provide insights into the conflicts and issues European politics and societies are facing in the recent decades.

While these ideological tenets influence the policy-making and identity of social democrats, social democracy must be understood as rooted in compromise, which marked its emergence as a political force in the late 19th century (Berman, 2006; Thomson, 2000). Founded initially by revolutionary movements and trade unions to challenge the capitalist and conservative establishment, these parties initially organised a revolutionary struggle (Berman, 2006). Over time, this struggle shifted towards a reformist approach, seeking to democratically transform society, politics, and economics, leading to political compromise (Thomson, 2000; Przeworski, 1986). Social democratic politics have since evolved as a compromise between socialist policies and capitalism, initially aimed at replacing capitalist structures with socialist ones through democratic processes and later adapting to appeal to

broadener electorates and sustain political momentum (Keman, 1993; Przeworski and Sprague, 1986).

While the initial and primary target of the social democratic parties was the working-class, over the years, this gradually broadened to other parts of the society alongside a different set of policies to support this political compromise (Przeworski, 1986). In this constant state of compromise, the social democratic goals and principles became more flexible and open to adaptation, or simply more pragmatic, in their national political setting (Keman, 1993).

There are varieties of this compromise, which also can categorise different periods of social democracy, mainly into three periods. First is where the parties emerged and utilised electoral means to reform countries towards socialism, and second is the extension of the compromise and adoption of the Keynesian model with a heavy emphasis on social protections and welfare state access to restrain and limit the extend of liberal economy while providing a sound protection to the working and lower classes (Benedetto, Hix and Mastroiocco, 2020; Keman, 1993). This period, which lasted from the 1950s to the late 1970s, is known as the ‘golden age of social democracy’, also referred to as the ‘golden age of welfare capitalism’, where social democratic governments successfully implemented a multitude of policies that provided worker rights, safety nets and welfare state access, and somewhat tamed of the effects of the market over the working-class (Kuisma, 2007; Moschonas, 2002; Tsarouhas, 2012). The third and most recent category, most commonly referred to as the Third Way, is the accommodation of the neo-liberal outlook alongside competition, entrepreneurship and privatisation, deemphasising the importance of the welfare state and abandoning the previously sought-out reformation and taming of the liberal market (Fagerholm, 2013; Rennwald, 2020). This phase was initiated as a response to increasing de-industrialisation and globalisation, gaining political momentum, especially by a new generation of social democratic politicians who deemed the previous Keynesian models outdated and stagnant (Bremer, 2023).

The reconciliation of neoliberalism with social democracy marked a significant turning point for social democrats, becoming the dominant approach among European social democratic parties (Benedetto, Hix, and Mastroiocco, 2020). Bremer (2023: 31) describes this shift as a ‘Faustian bargain’ aimed at capturing more voters with moderate policies and centrist positions. The Third Way, championed by Tony Blair (UK Labour Party) and Gerhard

Schröder (SPD, Germany), represented this new centrist vision, arguing in a policy paper that the left-right dichotomy was obsolete and that social democracy should move beyond ‘ideological straight jackets’ (Blair and Schröder, 1998; Rennwald, 2020: 73). Part of this shift involved retrenching the welfare state by reducing benefits, deregulating the market, and reducing public ownership (Schumacher, 2012). This ideological manoeuvre was pragmatic, driven by electoral concerns and a ‘what matters is what works’ approach, downplaying traditional ideological foundations (Tsarouhas, 2012: 114). Initially, the Third Way succeeded for social democratic parties, particularly during Europe’s relative socioeconomic stability in the 1990s and early 2000s. They managed to offer favourable policies to capital owners while maintaining welfare state protections for the working-class and those affected by globalisation, but this success unravelled with subsequent economic crises (Bremer, 2023: 31-32).

The ideological roots of social democracy trace back to Marxism, where society and politics are viewed through the lens of class rather than nations, countries, or religion (Berman, 2006). This foundation gave social democrats an internationalist perspective, initially aiming to represent ‘the interests of workers and ordinary people everywhere’ (Berger, 2012: 13), transcending national borders (Keating and McCrone, 2015). However, the internationalist character diminished over time as social democratic parties responded to wars, crises, and ideological compromises. Additionally, these parties, organised within national systems and focused on appealing to their citizens, saw their internationalist ideals fade as they became fully integrated into national political systems and mainstream politics, shifting away from their historical goal of replacing capitalism with socialism through democratic means (Berman, 2006; Przeworski, 1986).

As social democrats embraced a Keynesian welfare state model – offering substantial safety nets, redistributive policies, and access to public services – they increasingly adopted a nationalised approach, with policies deeply rooted in the nation-state (Meret and Siim, 2015: 164). European welfare states are primarily defined within national boundaries and solidarity (Meyer and Hinchman, 2007). This nation-state perspective compelled social democrats to make significant policy decisions about who, beyond their nationals, would be included in their welfare state protections (Bommes and Geddes, 2000; Meret and Siim, 2015). This issue became more pronounced in the second phase of social democracy. Although it did not result in overtly anti-immigration policies, several social democratic governments sought to prioritise and protect their national working-classes while maintaining a relatively expansive

stance on immigration, particularly regarding integration and rights (Schmidtke, 2016; Olesen et al., 2019). However, from this period onwards, immigration became an increasing political dilemma for social democratic parties as they struggled to balance their internationalist and solidaristic ideals with the national focus of welfare state politics (Kymlicka, 2015).

In the following decades, when social democratic parties reconciled with neo-liberalism, the outlook shifted again. As these parties became much more open towards competition, global markets and the weakening of the welfare state, their approach towards immigration also adopted ‘liberal positions’, mainly focusing on the cultural aspect (Bremer, 2023: 11; Jobelius and Vössing, 2020). This shift can be construed as a manoeuvre to attract more middle-class voters and appeal to ‘metropolitan tastes’, influencing the social democratic outlook on immigration policies (Tsarouhas, 2012: 114).

During this period, social democratic parties advocated for a more expansive immigration policy, emphasising multiculturalism and diversity while pragmatically addressing labour demands and demographic challenges (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011; Schmidtke, 2016; Odmalm and Bale, 2015). With the rise of the Third Way across Europe, this approach became common among social democratic parties. However, it coincided with the ‘proletarianisation’ of far-right parties, which began appealing to vulnerable segments of society (Arzheimer, 2013; Bale et al., 2010; Meret, 2021). Combined with welfare state retrenchment, this shift strained the relationship between social democrats and the working-class, leading to a political and strategic dilemma on immigration (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011).

Social democratic dilemma on immigration

The social democratic immigration dilemma gained significant attention as the far-right gained support among working-class voters, leading to electoral and political declines for social democratic parties (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Carvalho and Ruedin, 2020). Welfare state retrenchment and shifts toward the political centre allowed social democrats to broaden their appeal, particularly among upper-middle and middle classes, urbanites, and highly educated voters. This shift in support is notable, as Piketty (2020) and Bremer and Rennwald (2022) show that as the neoliberal consensus solidified in Western politics, educated urban voters increasingly supported social democrats, while the working-class gravitated towards right-wing alternatives.

Social democrats adopted an expansive immigration approach, advocating multiculturalism, diversity, and progressive policies while highlighting immigrants' socioeconomic benefits (Bale et al., 2010; Kymlicka and Banting, 2006; Yılmaz, 2012). This strategy attracted educated, urban middle-class support and retained some working-class backing, though the latter declined over time. However, successive European crises disrupted this balance (Bremer, 2023). The balancing act social democrats perform between these groups is not new – Kitschelt (1994: 32) notes that social democrats must choose between appealing to 'traditional, less-educated blue-collar workers or more highly educated white-collar employees'. While the immigration dilemma is not the sole factor in the electoral decline and transformation of social democratic parties, it significantly highlights the divides within their electorate, both current and traditional, as well as the ideological and political crises they face. These choices have greatly influenced the parties' strategic decisions, particularly in the late 2000s and early 2010s, shaping their political direction (Jobelius and Vössing, 2020).

The immigration dilemma becomes more apparent when considering these groups' differing views. The educated, urban middle class favours socioculturally liberal positions and extends welfare state benefits to immigrants, while the working-class often prefers more restrictive policies, viewing immigrants as competitors in the labour market and for welfare access (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011). Social democratic strategies have been unconvincing in addressing this divide, contributing to their political decline and ideological challenges (Bale et al., 2010; Schmidtke, 2016).

The welfare state aspect of this dilemma is also significant. Economically vulnerable groups can perceive increased immigration and diversity as a threat to the welfare state, national solidarity, and social cohesion, which are essential for public support of welfare provisions (Eger and Kulin, 2022; Kymlicka and Banting, 2006). While social democrats in the 2000s advocated for increased immigration and a strong welfare state, this balance was disrupted by the financial crisis of the late 2000s and the subsequent refugee crisis of 2015. The influx of refugees, driven by worsening conflicts and declining living conditions, sparked a public backlash, which was politicised by the far-right (Geddes and Scholten, 2016; van der Brug and Harteveld, 2021). As the socioeconomic system destabilised, so did the social democratic balance, leading to a loss of appeal among their traditional working-class base and difficulties in attracting new voters from their more recent supporter groups (Carvalho and Ruedin, 2020; Rennwald, 2020).

As discussed, social democratic parties tried various strategies to address the immigration dilemma: maintaining their stance, defusing the issue, or adopting anti-immigrant positions (Bale et al., 2010). Most parties either defuse the issue and hold their position, while a few shifted towards more restrictive immigration policies (Bale et al., 2010; Meret, 2021; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022; Schmidtke, 2016). Although some parties, such as the Danish social democrats, succeeded electorally with this more restrictive approach, others faced electoral decline, internal conflicts, and backlash (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Bale et al., 2010; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022).

A substantial body of literature explores the social democratic dilemma over immigration and the strategies these parties use to address it. Spoon and Klüver (2020) suggest that accommodating anti-immigration discourses of the far-right can be advantageous. Hinnfors et al. (2012) examine this dilemma in light of social democratic ideology, focusing on the Swedish case. Schmidtke (2016) calls it an ‘inconvenient issue’ for German social democrats, analysing how the SPD balances electoral politics with ideological identity. Several studies have also investigated far-right political parties, the effects of their increasing political mobilisation and electoral share, and the responses of social democratic parties. These studies find that the growing politicisation of immigration by the far-right compels social democrats to take action on immigration, yet this process becomes complicated due to ideological, political and internal constraints, further exacerbating their dilemma (e.g., Bale et al., 2010; 2013; Eger and Kulin, 2022; van Spanje, 2010).

The Danish Social Democratic Party has drawn particular attention for adopting an anti-immigration stance alongside left-wing economic policies, which has led to electoral and political gains (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). Hjorth and Larsen (2020) and McManus and Falkenbach (2022) examine the Danish Social Democrats’ approach to immigration and its electoral and ideological effects. Other studies, like those by Mariager and Olesen (2020) and Meret (2021), investigate the broader political implications of their policy shift. Salo and Rydgren (2021) focus on the party’s response to the far-right and its impact on immigration and the working-class, with similar research exploring various aspects of this response (Etzerodt and Kongshøj, 2022; Green-Pedersen, 2019; Nicolaisen, 2023). Rathgeb and Wolkenstein (2022) compare the immigration policies of Austrian and Danish social democratic parties to understand their roles in this policy shift.

Bale et al. (2010: 422) note that adopting anti-immigrant discourse will likely cause internal conflicts and create significant political and ideological divides within social democratic parties. However, in-depth research lacks insight into how intra-party dynamics influence social democrats' policy and decision-making and which factors shape these dynamics. A key question arises: if shifting towards more restrictive immigration policies can lead to electoral success without intra-party dynamics hampering the process, as some parties have demonstrated, why do not other social democratic parties follow suit? This dissertation posits that intra-party dynamics are a crucial factor, and this question will be explored in the following chapters.

While addressing this question on the immigration dilemma of the social democrats, I also focus on how the intra-party dynamics constrain the parties and how this constraint can be defused to allow parties to adopt more anti-immigrant discourse and policies, causing a conflict between the electoral motivations and the policy-seeking attitudes of different party actors. Furthermore, in line with the questions above, I aim to address the issues of how the policy shifts happen, as in to what extent policies change, how they are disseminated within the party, and how these strategies outlined above translate into policy- and decision-making for the parties and party actors – what exactly do they adopt and how do the parties present this strategy to its voters and actors?

Intra-party dynamics and their influence

Political parties are not singular, monolithic organisations. There are actors, factions and structures within political parties with different motivations, expectations, aspirations and ideologies, all influencing and affecting the policies, decisions and outcomes to varying degrees, culminating in the ideological and political output of the parties. These also have varying access to resources, executive powers, and voting and vetoing rights within the parties, directly affecting their influence over the official decision-making processes. Furthermore, these actors do not simply convey and cater to the voter preferences or electoral market, but they have their ideological and political inklings and preferences, their agencies, that may diverge from the median voters (Wenzelburger and Zohlnhöfer, 2021). Through this agency, they become active in their manoeuvres in politics rather than passively and exclusively following electoral voter demands.

The actors can be categorised in specific ways, mostly in line with their gains, expectations and access to political resources. An overarching categorisation alongside these

lines would divide these actors into the party elite, the party activists and the party members (Katz and Mair, 1995; May, 1973). The party elite, consisting of the central party organisation, national party executives, party leadership and members of the parliament, has considerable power over the strategies, policies and direction of the party, as well as access to resources (Harmel and Janda, 1994; May, 1973). The party activists are the party members, or in some rare cases, non-members sympathisers, who actively engage in the party work, from partaking in party committees to working in electoral campaigns, handing out leaflets and organising meetings, among other engagements (Scarrow, 2015).

Their motivations and what they gain from politics are crucial distinctions. While the party elite lives ‘from politics’, the activists live ‘for politics’ (Köln and Polk, 2024: 2). To elaborate, the former benefits from politics directly through positions, wages, access to power and resources, there is a professional aspect to it for the party elite. On the other hand, the activists rarely receive these benefits; although they invest their ‘blood, sweat and tears’, their gains are much more politically and ideologically motivated; they would like to see their political vision implemented (Schumacher, 2012: 1028). Hence, their motivations and political behaviour reflect this; while the party elite are more concerned about votes and office and aim to maximise these, the party activists tend to be more policy-seeking (Strøm, 1990). The overall divergence between the actors is theorised as the ‘law of curvilinear disparity’ by May (1973), arguing that party elites are much more centrists, while party activists are considered ‘extremists’. While the applicability of this law is still open to debate and a topic to many publications, the existing literature highlights that there are cases and issues where the divergence between the actors’ motivations exists and is much more apparent (see, for example, Kitschelt, 1989; Narud and Skare, 1999; van Haute and Carty, 2012). Nevertheless, extensive political, ideological and strategic divergences between intra-party actors may lead to disharmony, dissent, factionalism and even splits, influencing the electoral and political fortunes of parties (Ceron, 2019; Close and Gherghina, 2019).

On the other hand, these actors do not have absolute motivations. Party elites still exhibit ideological tendencies and adhere to certain principles, as abandoning them would undermine their credibility, while party activists also seek electoral success to implement their political vision (Kitschelt, 1989; Tavits, 2007). Both groups maintain a degree of flexibility, combining political motivations from ideology, potential gains, and their party roles. This flexibility varies depending on the issue, as ideological values, saliency, and issue ownership can make actors more rigid toward electoral strategies (Bouteca and Devos, 2016).

Furthermore, these actors are not entirely homogenous; some elites align with policy-seeking activists, while some activists support pragmatic strategies (Ceron, 2019; Wolkenstein, 2020). However, the prevailing view among actors, particularly in left-wing parties on ideologically salient issues, clearly reflects the motivational divergence (Kitschelt, 1989; Narud and Skare, 1999; van Haute and Carty, 2012).

Party elites mainly control the party's decision- and policy-making powers (Harmel et al., 1995; van Haute and Gauja, 2015). Although they have the initiative, their office- and vote-seeking attitudes are not unbounded; elites also seek to balance the policy-seeking demands of the activists and cannot solely focus on their strategies (Katz and Mair, 1995; Narud and Skare, 1999). Not maintaining this balance may cause intra-party dissent, affecting the party's image, credibility, and unity, or lead to factional strifes or even splits (Ceron, 2019; König, 2017). Also, while purely catering to the electorate may undermine the intra-party dynamics, prioritising policy-seeking attitudes may alienate or hamper the attraction of new voters.

Policy shifting is one of the areas where this balance becomes rather apparent. Party elites may instigate policy shifts under many circumstances, including electoral decline, changes in issue saliency or public opinion, emergence of challenger parties, aiming to regain, maintain or increase their electoral share or access to office (see, for example, Adams, 2012; Meyer, 2013; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013; Spoon and Klüver, 2020). Although elites may want to shift party positions as a response, their manoeuvre capacities are limited by factors such as their ideological policy spaces, as in parties cannot just 'leapfrog' into other ideologies and policies, and intra-party dynamics, the balance mentioned above (Budge, 1994: 448; Kitschelt, 1989).

There are several ways intra-party actors can influence policy shifts. In the case of manifestos, legislations or political discourses, in most cases, there are party statutes and rules that allow other party actors to offer opinions, partake in the development or ratify programmatic changes (Ceron, 2019; Hennl and Franzmann, 2017). The extent of intra-party democracy is crucial to how much activists can *officially* influence these procedures (Ignazi, 2020). However, these official structures are not the only way activists can influence the party elites' policy shift manoeuvres. Unpopular decisions by the party elite can lead activists to withhold or minimise their party work; they may openly protest the decision in party branches or the media and even quit the party (Ceron, 2019; Müller, 2006). Furthermore,

appearing divided, publicised in-fighting and diverging political outlooks of parties erode their credibility and reliability and even impact their electoral and political fortunes (Greene and Haber, 2015; Klingelhöfer and Müller, 2023).

Therefore, circumventing the voting rights or only receiving barely enough support to change crucial policies may not be sufficient for the party elite to implement them or for other intra-party actors to embrace or endorse them, possibly leading to considerable intra-party dissent. Nevertheless, how does this potential intra-party dissent influence the policy-making processes and constrain the party elite in their manoeuvres and policy shifts? What is its extent, and how does the elite party navigate it? This is the main research question that this dissertation tackles.

Conceptualising the intra-party dynamics and its influence on decision-making:

Nestedness

One of the core arguments and theoretical contributions of this dissertation to the literature is how the intra-party dynamics between intra-party actors influence the decision- and policy-making processes of political parties, which I refer to as *nestedness*. There is growing attention to intra-party dynamics (e.g., Ceron, 2019; Loxbo, 2013; Pettitt, 2011), leadership or activist-dominated parties (e.g., Schumacher, 2012; Schumacher and Giger, 2018), party congresses and motions (e.g., Ceron and Greene, 2019; Pettitt, 2007), voting rights, organisational structures and intra-party democracy (e.g., Borz and Janda, 2020; Cross and Blais, 2012) as perspectives to explore the decision- and policy-making processes in the parties. These works are rather influential; however, they mainly highlight the official routes to power through party statutes, organisational structures, and access to party resources and rights, such as leader selection, acceptance or rejection of party congress motions, and committee participation.

However, I argue that there is a level of influence and its implications beyond the official party structures, selectorate, and intra-party democracy. This *unofficial* aspect is under-researched and not theorised or conceptualised thoroughly for the intra-party setting, although it is alluded to in the literature (for example, Hertner, 2015; Kam, 2009; Mannewitz and Rudio, 2023; Müller, 2006). This dissertation aims to theorise and conceptualise this aspect of intra-party dynamics and empirically illustrate its significant influence on the decision- and policy-making processes of political actors.

Friedrich's (1963) 'rule of anticipated reactions' offers that influence between political actors constitutes a power structure that is often 'indirect and unstructured'. The concept arises from the notion of actors with power pre-emptively honing their decisions in line with the potential responses, mostly adverse ones, from the recipient of those decisions, even if those decisions are within the reach of their power. Friedrich (1963: 200-201) offers this relationship in terms of 'ruler and ruled' and 'influencer and influenced', while the examples range from constitutional courts to dictators, even reiterating that 'even the most ruthless tyrant is recurrently persuaded to alter his conduct by the thought of the reaction of "the people"'. Protecting the status quo, or the balance, in these relations while achieving comparatively minor changes is deemed a better option than altering the equilibrium to the degree that the influenced responds in a way that undermines the power of the influencer. However, quantifying or measuring the potential dissent is rather complex, if possible; therefore, the influencer should perceive the magnitude of the reaction from the influenced through their capacities, which can be over- or under-estimated due to 'oversight, incomplete information, lack of insight and the like' (Friedrich, 1963: 205-206). The actual extent of potential becomes visible when the status quo changes and the influencer mounts a protest to reverse decisions or course.

The rule of anticipated reactions can provide an explanatory groundwork for how and why political parties shift or hold their positions – especially when approached from the intra-party perspectives. The relationship between the party elites and the activists mirrors the influencer and influenced relationship offered by Friedrich (1963). In line with the party elite's balancing act between appealing to voters and appeasing the intra-party actors, I argue that party elites pre-emptively constrain their attempts at policy shifts on ideologically salient issues where the party actors may dissent and oppose the party line. This influence differs from the official access to power within the party, as it relies on party elites' perception of how activists may react, the extent of support they may rally, and the ideological flexibilities of the intra-party actors on the issue. Furthermore, the party elites may over- or under-estimate the potential for dissent or the support they will receive and act accordingly. Hence, even though party activists cannot decide on or initiate the policy direction officially, neither through vote nor other structures, their perceived potential for dissent by the party elite may constrain or allow the shift. The overall extent of this influence is referred to as *nestedness*, as in the activists' nested structural and crucial position within the party influence dynamics.

The more nested the activists are, the lesser manoeuvre potential the party elite has, and, therefore, they will abstain and avoid shifts that may lead to backlash. To reiterate, this is beyond the official powers the activists yield but related to their ability to display their disapproval publically, such as withholding their party work and voicing their dissent, which will undermine the party's image, credibility and electoral fortunes as a divided, uncertain and quarrelling party. While officially, the party organisation and structure favour and provide more manoeuvring opportunities to the party elite and the leadership as they have more access to resources, able to initiate policies and decisions and yield executive powers (Harmel et al., 1995; Scarrow et al., 2000), the shifts they initiate in policies and discourses still needs to be supported and embraced by the intra-party actors on an unofficial level. Hence, nestedness is not necessarily about the official abilities of the party elite to initiate and achieve policy change but about the nature of influence networks beyond this official structure, where party elites assess the responses of the intra-party actors should they introduce changes that these actors consider going against the party's core values and ideologies and their subsequent adverse responses to cause disharmony and internal strifes.

The nature and extent of the activist dissent should depend on the issue. The political principles and values of the intra-party actors are an essential factor in their flexibility and whether they may react negatively to changes. Arguably, attempting to shift the policy in some instances may receive backlash. As discussed above, immigration constitutes a contested issue for the social democrats. Similarly, manoeuvres that are seen as adopting positions from ideological opposition, politically extreme or fringe parties will be perceived as abandoning or straying from the party's values and principles, e.g. social democrats adopting restrictive positions similar to far-right. Hence, not all policy issues are equally contested by the intra-party actors; some are more viable to change than others.

From the conceptualisation and theoretical discussion above, this dissertation can draw certain factors that affect the constraining nature of nestedness. Increased or high salience of the policy issue, lack of policy shifts and manoeuvres within the party system and weak leadership alongside factional strife and division amongst the party elite will strengthen the party elite's perception regarding the intra-party actors' dissent potential. However, nestedness should not be considered a static notion: strong leadership, factional unity, and successful reframing and transformation of issues may affect and lessen the potential dissent from within the ranks. The perceived trust and support from the activists towards the elite and leadership, which can be considered alongside the weakness or strength of leadership and

factional divisions, can also be considered an important aspect, i.e., more trust by activists will provide more manoeuvring potential to the elites and leadership.

These factors are researched in the following chapters through cases, as discussed above, where two social democratic parties in which the party elite is constrained and contested on immigration by intra-party dynamics. Later, one stays a case of non-action, where the party elite is constrained and cannot implement the shift, and the other turns to action, where the party elite diminishes the constraint and implements the shift on immigration policies.

Research Design

The dissertation utilises a comparative case study design to test its theorisation and related factors and arguments, and it focuses on two parties as its cases: the German and Danish social democratic parties. These cases represent one instance of action (Denmark) and one of non-action (Germany) (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008), where the Danish social democrats successfully, from an intra-party perspective, implemented restrictive immigration policies and discourses while transforming their intra-party dynamics and ideological outlook, whereas the SPD more or less maintained its existing immigration trajectory. The two cases present compelling similarities regarding their policies, directions and ideological outlook; however, the Danish social democrats present a clear divergence in intra-party dynamics and immigration policy shift compared to other social democratic parties, including SPD. By utilising a comparative case study of these two parties, this dissertation tests its argument and related factors regarding the effect and extent of the influence of intra-party dynamics on constraining immigration policies and strategies (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2003). To develop this comparison and explore the validity of this dissertation's argument, the trajectories and circumstances of these parties must be elaborated.

Historically, both parties responded to the guest worker programmes, in which foreign workers, primarily from Turkey but also Italy and Greece, arrived in West European countries to join the labour force to rebuild the economies and production of these countries in the aftermath of the Second World War, in a similar way. Initially, SPD showed solidarity and held pro-immigration views in the 1950s and 1960s; however, they voiced concerns about the integration capacities of Germany and potential parallel societies of guest workers, later terminating the guest worker programme in the 1970s when in government with the Liberals (Schmidkte, 2016). The Danish social democrats followed a similar trajectory during this

period – although initially, their approach focused on solidarity and support for workers’ rights, albeit in a relatively more cautious manner than their German counterparts; in the 1970s, the guest workers programme in Denmark was abandoned by the government led by social democrats, citing cultural differences, integration capabilities and labour competition for Danish workers (Jørgensen and Thomsen, 2013; Olesen et al., 2019). However, both parties turned to more progressive and expansive policies and discourses in the 1980s, advocating rights, access and status for potential and existing immigrants (Olesen et al., 2019; Schmidtke, 2016). Furthermore, these two parties diverged on immigration policies and discourse after the 2015 refugee crisis, where both countries experienced a considerable influx of refugees and immigration and asylum peaked in saliency and significantly politicised. However, through this politicisation and rise of anti-immigrant attitudes, German social democrats maintained their expansive approach, limited their manoeuvres and policy shifts and avoided any programmatic and significant shifts, while Danish social democrats instigated a policy and a discourse shift accompanied by an ideological transformation on immigration (Gessler and Hunger, 2023; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022).

Significantly, immigration policies have been a source of intra-party dispute for both Danish and German social democrats. For both parties, left-leaning factions and figures wanted to maintain a humanitarianism-focused, expansive outlook on immigration; the right-leaning factions preferred more centrist, hence relatively restrictive, positions and discourses on immigration, motivated mainly by vote-seeking agendas (Holtug, 2013; Downs, 2011; Meret, 2021; Schmidtke, 2016). Furthermore, considerably centrist, or moderniser, factions led the parties from the 1990s and onwards. Although these factions and figures wanted to ‘renew’ and ‘modernise’ the social democratic outlook and policies of their respective parties, they also sought a balance between party factions to maintain intra-party cohesion (Ceron, 2019; Dostal, 2017; Mariager and Olesen, 2020). This balancing act, for both parties, resulted in avoiding considerable changes and shifts in immigration policies as the leadership considered the policy issue as too volatile (Meret, 2021; Schmidtke, 2016); even though both parties have strong leadership and executive positions that can yield significant power and have the initiative in decision- and policy-making (Jun and Jakobs, 2021; Mariager and Olesen, 2020). Therefore, for both parties, intra-party dynamics and immigration policies are closely related, as these dynamics dissuaded the party elite from engaging in significant policy shifts, as well as parties maintaining a similar immigration policy outlook and ideological inclination regarding social democracy during these periods.

Both SPD and S faced politicisation and increased saliency of immigration in their respective party systems, as well as an anti-immigration party catering to and successfully gaining the votes of the working-class and politically discontent (Adorf, 2018; Arzheimer, 2013; Hansen and Olsen, 2019; Salo and Rydgren, 2021). There is a distinction between the respective anti-immigrant parties in the two countries; while the Danish anti-immigrant party (Danish People's Party, DF) has gradually become mainstream over the years, participating in government coalitions as outside support and collaborating with other parties, the German counterpart (Alternative for Germany, AfD) faces a *cordon sanitaire* (Bedock et al., 2023; Heinze, 2018). However, it also must be noted that the Danish social democrats were wary of cooperation and alignment with the DF until the mid-2010s and positioned themselves against their policies and discourses on immigration (Nicolaisen, 2023). Still, the following chapters will investigate the role and influence of *cordon sanitaire* and its effects on intra-party dynamics and immigration policies.

The final critical aspect is Danish social democrats' shift, or 'action', on immigration policies potentially being considered a 'blueprint' by other social democratic parties or prominent European actors (Meret, 2021; McManus and Falkenbach, 2022). As a social democratic party that shifted its immigration policies and discourse towards a restrictive position with seemingly intra-party approval and without upheavals, the strategy of the S has been pointed out as electorally and politically beneficial. Among other social democratic parties as Europe (Broer, 2018; NOS, 2018), this perception also considerably extends to SPD, as many different actors point or refer to S regarding immigration policy direction and strategy as a potential path for the party, especially by the right-wing figures within SPD (see, for example, Die Welt, 2024; Haselberger and Monath, 2019; Gabriel, 2019; Garbe et al., 2023; Ruhose, 2019; Sturm, 2023). Hence, comparing these cases where one is the reference point for the other and one taking 'action' and the other not, allows this dissertation to explore the immigration policy shift, the influence of the intra-party actors and dynamics, and how these constraints and affect the decision-makers of the social democratic parties, while their party trajectories in terms of immigration policies and intra-party dynamics have been rather similar, yet diverging significantly in the 2010s. The comparative nature of this study not only allows for an exploration of why S took action and SPD did not, but also assesses whether Danish social democrats' restrictive immigration policy shift could serve as a 'blueprint' for other social democratic parties through investigating and outlining the nature of the shift and how the party elite manoeuvred the intra-party dynamics. By analysing SPD's

intra-party dynamics and the extent of nestedness, the dissertation will also examine why this blueprint has not been, or could not be, fully adopted in Germany and what factors might lead other social democratic parties in Europe to follow or avoid the strategy outlined by S.

The methodological approach undertaken in this dissertation reflects the aims of the theoretical and empirical investigation and complements the comparative case study design. The combination of qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews captures the complexity of intra-party dynamics and immigration policy- and decision-making processes. In the first step, the party congresses provide insights into the discourses of intra-party actors, i.e., elites and activists, and how they approach immigration discourses and their positions and framing. Party congresses can be viewed as a ground for intra-party discussions and communication, but they also involve official decision-making structures, i.e. voting on manifestos by the attendees or members, where the intra-party dynamics, including disputes, debates and disagreements are visible to the public (Ceron, 2019; Ceron and Greene, 2019). Through an inspection of the congress speeches, the intra-party dynamics between these actors, how they show similarities or differences in their approach to immigration policies and the extent of these can be thoroughly outlined. Manifestos are also utilised to draw finalised policy positions on immigration to establish the divergence and convergence between intra-party actors' discourse and the official party policy (Ruedin and Morales, 2019). The speeches in the congresses and manifestos, all publicly available and gathered from SPD's official website (<http://spd.de>), are analysed through a conceptual framework developed further and explored in Chapter 3, combining how the actors frame immigration in terms of pragmatism or principle and how they position themselves for or against immigration. The data were coded according to categories of positioning and framing (principled expansive, pragmatic expansive, pragmatic restrictive and principled restrictive) as discussed above. The unit of analysis of the coding was 'segments', a clear policy offer or a proposition that contains the actor's positioning (approach) and framing (reasoning)⁴ (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2014).

Secondly, this dissertation explored the public discourses, drawing from news, public interviews and columns by prominent party figures, to establish how the German and Danish social democratic party elites discuss, communicate and transform their strategies, positions and potential manoeuvres on immigration as politicians use media to communicate

⁴ The coding process, the codebook and the relevant instructions are provided in exhaustive detail in Appendix 2 of Chapter 3.

significantly to both their voters and the intra-party actors to shape and join the debates and discussions on numerous issues (Kölln and Polk, 2023; Mannewitz and Rudzio, 2023; Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). By utilising the existing scholarly literature and search engines for media content databases, e.g. LexisNexis, I gathered the declarations, propositions and observations by prominent party figures (Krippendorff, 2004). Furthermore, I manually scanned prominent national newspapers in Denmark and Germany to gather interviews and news regarding the social democrats and opinion pieces, columns and books they wrote to crosscheck and avoid missing aspects. This search focused on immigration policies, potential or existing policy shifts and intra-party reactions to the policies and changes. Drawing from these sources, Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate the attempted and realised shifts and manoeuvres in immigration policies, discourses, and intra-party reactions and responses to these from prominent party figures.

The dissertation then turned to semi-structured interviews to explore the nature and cause and effect of intra-party dynamics and the perception of party elites (see the Appendix for the interview guides). Semi-structured interviews are utilised in intra-party research, especially to investigate non-publicised aspects of parties, such as decision-making and influence (see, for example, Albertazzi and van Kessel, 2023; Hertner, 2015; Kölln and Polk, 2023; Wolkenstein, 2020). As interviews are conducted individually and in a private setting, the interviewees, who are party elites with access to and informed about parties' decision- and policy-making on immigration, can provide knowledge and insights that are not publicly available nor discussed (Mosley, 2013). Especially considering that parties and their elites are inclined to avoid displaying divergences and disagreements with their activists, members and factions publicly, utilising interviews become much more beneficial in moving beyond the official image and information available to the public. Moreover, as discussing and disclosing some internal aspects and dynamics of parties may be problematic for their standing within the party and to ensure their openness regarding their perceptions, interviewees were granted anonymity and any aspect that may disclose their identity was removed from the data, the presentation and analysis of it (Mosley, 2013; Willis, 2019). Hence, this method is crucial to test the argument and theory, as nestedness refers to the unofficial influence structures within the party.

Interviewees were drawn from party elites and their related advisors, who have direct access to and involvement with the party structures, such as party or parliamentary committees on immigration, the party's national and central executive, party leadership and

governmental and ministerial positions, responsible for decision- and policy-making on immigration policies. They were directly contacted via e-mail for the interviews with the intention, scope and contents of the research, explicitly offering anonymity from the initial contact. Although the initial step involved contacting a wide range of potential interviewees, the final participants provided a balanced representation of their parties regarding gender, age, factional alignment, period of party involvement, and ideological positions. Meanwhile, snowball sampling was also utilised to expand the pool of participants by inquiring about recommendations from interviewees to establish contact with other prominent figures (Krippendorff, 2004).

This diversity in individual characteristics and perspectives ensures that the interview data captured a broad spectrum of intra-party dynamics, which is critical for the validity and reliability of the findings. The condition of anonymity was reiterated orally at the beginning of every interview, alongside their consent to record the interviews, which was only to be used for academic research and not to be made public. Face-to-face interviews were preferred, as they offer much more depth and context; however, some interviews were conducted via virtual videoconference due to scheduling issues of interviewees (Mosley, 2013). These interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023. The findings and insights from the interviews were analysed thematically. The dissertation utilised a thorough triangulation of analysed documents, speeches and sources to counter any potential biases arising from the interviewees' responses (Bowen, 2009; Natow, 2020). This triangulation also increased the reliability and validity of content analysis and allowed the dissertation to draw further significant findings and observations from the interviews (Natow, 2020).

The timeframe of the research revolves around the critical junctures that shaped and influenced immigration policies and saliency and exacerbated the social democratic dilemma. The 2008 financial crisis and the following 2010 Euro crisis were crucial turning points in Europe's political and economic stability; however, the 2015 refugee crisis is a critical juncture for the saliency of immigration (Green-Pedersen, 2019). While the former crises affected the socioeconomic stability and well-being of the working-class and provided a political opportunity for anti-immigrant far-right parties, the 2015 refugee crisis turned the immigration issue into one of the main topics in politics across Europe (Bale et al., 2013; Eger and Kulin, 2022). During and after the 2015 crisis, immigration has been one of the most contested and salient topics in elections, considerably affecting the political landscapes and party systems (Hutter and Kriesi, 2022; Green-Pedersen, 2019). Hence, to encapsulate

the preceding and succeeding events to the 2015 crisis, analysis of documents, manifestos, and public declarations focuses on a timeline between 2005 and 2019. This timeframe incorporates national elections in Germany and Denmark during and after the refugee crises, respectively, 2015 and 2019 for Denmark and 2017 for Germany, where immigration was extremely salient, politicised and decisive in the outcomes (Gessler and Hunger, 2023; Meret, 2021). The end date of the timeline is in line with the Danish case, as in the 2019 elections, Danish social democrats were proponents of a restrictive immigration policy platform and heavily politicised the issue and managed to win the elections while avoiding intra-party dissent and revolt, which signals a considerable ideological and political transformation (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Nicolaisen, 2023). As the immigration issue peaks towards and after the 2015 crisis, most of the available data stems from these years. Similarly, in the interviews, the questions were focused on this period, which was in line with the aforementioned politicisation and saliency. However, while the timeframe of the research was clearly outlined during the interviews, interviewees were also allowed to draw on more recent events to provide insights into ongoing changes and utilise their newer recollections, as well as regarding the potentially changing political landscape that could affect immigration policy-making and intra-party dynamics, such as the rise of the far-right and the re-increased salience of immigration (Bearman, 2019).

3. The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and Immigration Policies: An Intra-Party Perspective

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Abstract

This article investigates the immigration policies and positions of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) from the perspective of intra-party dynamics. As far-right parties and anti-immigration discourses gained ground in Europe, social democratic and left-wing parties responded with different political strategies on immigration. This paper investigates the case of the German SPD and looks for possible policy changes (or the lack of them) in a timeframe where immigration was a highly salient, politicised issue. The paper focuses on the period between 2005 and 2017, utilising party congresses and manifestos to establish, analyse and compare the positions of intra-party actors, namely, the activists and the party elite and the official party line. A conceptual framework developed from the literature establishes the actors' and party's frames and positions, providing insights into their approach to immigration. The article then analyses the SPD's positions within the timeframe and tests May's Law on SPD intra-party actors and their discourses on immigration. The results highlight that May's Law holds for the SPD's intra-party actors on the issue of immigration. Findings also suggest that activists influence the official party positions although this is limited, as the official policies are closer to the party elite's positions.

4. How do intra-party dynamics impact the party elite's immigration policy manoeuvres? The case of German Social Democrats

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Abstract

This article examines the Social Democratic Party of Germany's (SPD) approach to immigration and the role of party activists in shaping its policies. The article delves into the party's response to the 2015 refugee crisis and its aftermath, utilising the discourse taken by the party's leading figures and interviews with party elites, exploring their perceptions of activists and their constraints on immigration policies. The findings reveal that the influence of party activists is beyond their official power within the organisational structure, and their nestedness within the party affects the party elite's policy- and decision-making on immigration. Given the potential backlash from activists, the study underscores the party elites' cautious approach to policy shifts and emphasises the significance of leadership skills, the party's image and electoral motivations in navigating intra-party dynamics and policy-making. Ultimately, the research highlights the delicate balance SPD elites seek in addressing immigration issues within its party structure.

Introduction

In the last decade, immigration has become one of Europe's most politicised, salient issues. With the refugee crisis of 2015, increasing anxieties about socioeconomic well-being and the perceived threat of immigration opened a field for far-right political parties. Their discourse gained traction, especially among blue-collar workers and people who felt left behind by the political system, also termed 'losers of globalisation' (Kriesi et al., 2012). Characterising immigration as a threat to the economy and culture, far-right parties were capable of mobilising these sentiments (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011). While the anti-immigration discourse broadened its appeal, especially among the working-class, the left-wing parties faced a political dilemma. Most parties failed to develop a stance that appealed to the working-class's relatively more conservative and restrictive policy expectations, at the same time increasingly relying on the highly educated, urban and progressive vote (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Yilmaz, 2012).

Some social democratic parties turned to restrictive immigration positions as a solution, mostly diverging with the far-right discourse to varying degrees (Meret, 2021; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022). Others either downplayed immigration as an issue or kept their positions (Bale et al., 2010). Yet, in overall, the immigration dilemma and attempts to respond caused considerable tensions within political parties (Odmalm and Bale, 2015). This article focuses on the intra-party aspect and explores the relationship between intra-party dynamics and restrictive shifts on immigration and how the activists influence and constrain the party elite's manoeuvres on this issue.

Intra-party dynamics provide an insight into the power balance between party actors, such as the party elite and the party activists, and illustrate how political parties function, strategise and operate (Ceron, 2019). Existing research points out that the activists are relatively more ideological and less pragmatic in politics, prioritising the implementation of their political principles than the party elite, who tend to be more concerned about votes and office (May, 1973; Strøm, 1990).

There is considerable research on how parties strategise from the intra-party dynamics perspective (for example, Meyer and Wagner, 2019; Schumacher et al., 2015) that investigates the responsiveness, conflicts and policy shifts primarily relying on quantitative methods (Hennl and Franzmann, 2017). On the other hand, Hertner (2013) researches the perspectives and decision-making capabilities of the party leadership in European Union

policy-making, Marx and Schumacher (2012) focus on the role of intra-party structures on welfare state retrenchment in social democratic parties, Pettitt (2007; 2011) explores the party congresses and intra-party democracy, and Rathgeb and Wolkenstein (2022) delve into the social democratic parties' dynamics on immigration policy and intra-party agreement.

While these insightful contributions exist, the perceptions of social democratic intra-party actors, their impact on policy shifts and party strategies, and how they position themselves accordingly, are not examined in detail. Hence, this article concentrates on these dynamics and actors, seeking an answer to the question: how does the party elite's perception of party activists and intra-party balance influence, shape or constrain their decision-making process on immigration policies?

This article focusses on the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) as its case study. Firstly, Germany, especially around 2015, experienced a significant influx of refugees and immigrants, which led to politicisation and increased saliency of the topic, which was also reflected in public debates and election results. Furthermore, as one of the largest and most influential social democratic parties in Europe, SPD experienced the immigration dilemma in full effect and, since then, has failed to develop a convincing narrative on the issue (Rennwald, 2020; Wolkenstein, 2020). Also, the party faced intra-party challenges and considerable political changes in the last decades (Jun and Jakobs, 2021).

I argue that aside from the official power routes, organisational structures and statutes constituting intra-party democracy, party activists can establish pressure points and internalised impact within the party to influence and constrain the electoralist manoeuvres of the party elite, even of a pre-emptive nature. The extent of activists' influence over the party elite depends on how the elite perceives them, activist strength in the party, and the salience and ideological importance of the policy issue to the party and the activists.

The immigration dilemma of social democrats

The immigration dilemma of the social democrats garnered a considerable amount of interest. At its core, this dilemma emerges from a divergence between the ideological tenets of social democracy, electoral concerns and vote maximisation (Hildebrandt and Jäckle, 2021; Hinnfors et al., 2012; Polacko, 2022). Ideologically, social democracy argues for socioeconomic solidarity and fair redistribution. Regarding immigration, as Hinnfors et al. (2012: 589) offer, extending this supportive and egalitarian approach to 'less well-to-do group(s) such as refugees and immigrants ... would sit comfortably with social democratic

ideological foundations'. Hence, a considerable part of the left-wing parties and actors, including social democrats, would consider and portray immigration through the issues of fundamental human rights, solidarity and anti-discrimination (Helbling, 2014; Odmalm and Bale, 2015). At the same time, throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, social democratic parties undertook a considerable ideological shift, becoming less apprehensive towards neo-liberal market policies and de-emphasising their redistributive policies and welfare state (Green-Pedersen et al., 2001), arguably undertaking a more pragmatic and electoralist approach.

With the electorate's increasing perception of competition and globalisation, this outlook on immigration has led social democratic parties somewhat to diminish their appeal to their traditional working-class base. Furthermore, social democratic or left-wing parties in general, started to gain more ground with an electorate of liberal, universalist and multiculturalist views on immigration who have higher education and income levels (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011).

While immigration gained more saliency in the last decades, predominantly right-wing and far-right political parties politicised and established themselves as the issue owners. Approaching the issue from economic, social and cultural perspectives, offering protection from the influx of immigrants, sociocultural changes and perceived threats to their livelihoods and identity, many far-right parties targeted the working-class base (Rovny, 2013). Far-right's discourse on immigration, revolving around the protection of socioeconomic standing, the welfare state and identity, became an attractive alternative to the social democratic parties, which increasingly turned to economically centrist and liberal on sociocultural issues (Rennwald, 2020). Hence, immigration as a political issue emerges as an intersection of multiple core values for social democrats, from solidarity to redistribution to sociocultural matters, which renders it an ideological and electoral challenge.

As the far-right extended its appeal, social democratic parties responded with three different strategies on immigration. Bale et al. (2010) offer that social democrats either adopted the far-right discourse on immigration to gain support, held their expansive, pro-immigration positions or diffused the issue, aiming to depoliticise immigration and prioritise other issues. Especially moving towards restrictive immigration policies can cause considerable upheaval within the parties, gathering negative responses from the party activists, while it may provide grounds for vote maximisation to the party elite (Downs, 2011;

Hjorth and Larsen, 2020; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022). On the other hand, parties holding their position on immigration did not manage to provide a convincing answer to this dilemma either (Schmidtke, 2016). In that regard, social democratic parties who held their positions on immigration and the impact of intra-party dynamics on this lack of change are underresearched and call for much more detailed exploration.

Intra-party dynamics

Political parties contain several actors with different political motivations. At its most basic, these actors can be grouped into the party elite, the party activists and the party members (Kitschelt, 1989), and they have different political expectations and varying access to party resources, office and power (Strøm, 1990). The party elite, which is made up of the party leadership, party executive and the parliamentary group, will strive to implement electoral strategies and shift policies accordingly to maximise votes and political gains to an extent (Harmel and Janda, 1994; Hennl and Franzmann, 2017). Activists are the members and, in some cases, non-member sympathisers who actively engage in the party work, provide much-needed groundwork for the parties, supply human resources, take roles in committees and organisational roles and donate their time, energy and money to the party, its causes and campaigns. They are motivated mainly by and pursue ideological-driven positions, as their gains are rarely economic or office-related (Scarrow, 2015; Van Haute and Gauja, 2015).

These differences are crucial to the political trajectory of a party. Parties can be activist- or leadership-dominated, or the organisational structure may allow for more or less impact by the activists. However, the party elite has relative dominance among intra-party actors over the decision-making over policy shifts, party strategy and manoeuvres (Heidar, 2006; Scarrow et al., 2000; Wolkenstein, 2020). When the party elite implements a strategy or a political discourse for the party, their goal is to balance their aim to maximise their votes and office goals and appease party activists, ensuring that there is no intra-party strife or dissent (Narud and Skare, 1999). Kitschelt (1989) offers that the activists, while ideologically driven, are not wholly inflexible and are aware of the importance of electoral success for the party. However, these intra-party dynamics, including the influence of activists, can constrain the ideological manoeuvring of the party elite and its implementation as the party policy, especially if activists consider certain manoeuvres as a divergence from the core values of the party (Ceron, 2019; Meyer, 2013).

Organisationally speaking, the party activists have specific official routes to influence the party's direction, such as conventions or conferences. In those events, party activists, as delegates, may have the right to vote on party policies, leadership or parliamentary candidates (Ceron, 2019; Meyer, 2013). The levels of intra-party democracy affect activists' impact; some parties may close their decision-making processes to the party activists, while others allow their official input to varying degrees (Lehrer, 2012). Although organisational structures allow party activists to veto decisions, without such routes, they may still impose constraints on policy or strategy change and make their voices heard by the party elite (Kitschelt, 1989; Wagner and Meyer, 2014). How much effectiveness the party elite attributes to the activists and their capability to dissent is decisive on the intra-party balance (Maor, 1992; Böhm, 2015).

This paper argues that there is a pre-emptive and internalised nature to the constraint caused by potential responses from activists towards the party elite on immigration policy shifts. The party elite perceives the ideological limits of flexibility and expectations of the party activists and their overall influence and orients their political manoeuvres accordingly not to upset the intra-party balance (Friedrich, 1963; Mannewitz and Rudzio, 2023). Activist influence may not be sufficient or strong enough to shift policy themselves via voting rights or power in policy-making committees; however, their projected power of constraint goes beyond holding organisational powers and constraining and preventing changes initiated by the party elite. The extent of this constraint should be considered in line with the perception of the party elite, as they may over- or undervalue the pressure- or dissent-potential of the party activists relative to the policy field. This article refers to the totality of this influence and pressure by party activists to constrain the party elite's manoeuvre potential as nestedness, where activists can still restrain or permit certain policy changes without achieving domination in the party. I argue that this influence is proportionate to the extent of the party elite's perception of the party activists' ideological limitations and flexibilities and depends on how much power the party elite attributes to the party activists.

The party elite's perception of the activists would prevent them from shifting policy on issues where the activists are the most principled, ideological and attentive, in this case, immigration and social democrats, influencing the policy outcomes. Furthermore, I expect this perception to be affected and strengthened, i.e. the party elite being further influenced and affected by certain factors, such as the higher saliency and politicisation of immigration, the anti-immigration positioning of the other parties in the party system and weak party

leadership. Hence, the empirical part, especially the interviews, will investigate these factors as the dimensions of the elite's perception of activists.

Methodology

This article takes SPD as its primary case as several aspects provide opportunities to investigate the relationship between the intra-party actors on immigration. On an organisational level, the party is neither activist nor leadership-dominated, and the factional or intra-party actor dominance is not persistent; thus, the party dynamics are open to change (Schumacher, 2012; Ceron, 2019). Even if the leadership of the party is considered powerful and leads the way in policy- and decision-making, the party activists are involved in the process and have a particular, yet limited, level of veto power as well (Jun and Jakobs, 2021; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012).

Within the party system, SPD mainly competes with the centre-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) primarily for the centrist voters and with Greens and The Left (Die Linke) over progressive and left-wing voters (Hansen and Olsen, 2019). While the vote switch from SPD to far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has been somewhat limited, SPD has failed to attract the losers of globalisation, which considerably prefer AfD (Wurthmann et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2023). Although in the 1970s, the party owned the immigration issue, in the following decades, centre- and far-right parties, CDU and AfD, much more prominently politicised it (Gessler and Hunger, 2022; Seeberg, 2017). Since then, SPD has had issues developing a unified vision on immigration, which has led to intra-party conflicts (Schmidtke, 2016). All these dimensions provide a dynamic intra-party balance on immigration, where it is possible to investigate the relationship between the intra-party actors and their impact on policy-making and the positioning of the party elite.

This article has a two-pronged qualitative approach. First, I provide insights into the SPD elite's approach towards immigration and the overview of positions and declarations in the 2015 refugee crisis and its aftermath until 2019. The timeframe covers a period where the issue became overwhelmingly salient (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2023) and a general election where immigration was one of the most emphasised topics. I turn to newspaper articles, press releases, interviews by the party elite and secondary literature to outline these positions. This step explores the policy manoeuvres, both programmatic and discursive, initiated by the party elite and generated public responses and debates from within the party—as attempts to alter the status quo of the SPD's immigration stances and reactions from internal opposition. To

provide a comprehensive perspective, scholarly literature and news databases and significant national newspapers were examined for developments focusing on immigration policies and SPD.

In most cases, the party elite has greater access to mass media, and most of the declarations are from high-level politicians, both offering a discourse or opposing it (Mannewitz and Rudzio, 2023). There is a factional element to these statements as well. Three main factions should be highlighted: SPD's right-wing is mainly concentrated on Seeheimer Kreis, the left-wing is aligned to Parlamentarische Linke, while Netzwerk Berlin has a more moderate and pragmatic positioning (Braunthal, 2003; Ceron, 2019; Mannewitz and Rudzio, 2023). These factions are well-organised and influence the party's direction, although they have no official status. Additionally, an SPD politician can be affiliated to or aligned with several factions simultaneously; hence, there are overlaps between factions.

Interestingly, in the last decades, names aligned with Seeheimer Kreis secured positions in the party leadership, increasing the influence of the party's right-wing on the party elite level (Ceron, 2019). Therefore, most of the public debates and declarations to the media are on an elite level and they are somewhat divided on factional alignment, as the party's right-wing tries to shift policy towards more restrictive positions while the left reacts negatively. This conflict may happen on an elite level, but intra-party support is still crucial for the political implementation and internalisation of these discursive manoeuvres.

Second, I utilise six semi-structured interviews conducted with the SPD party elite to establish their perceptions on the party policy shifts on immigration, the impact of activists, and how they position themselves and respond to this dynamic (see Appendix 1 for more details). The participants are either directly involved or a part of the decision- and policy-making processes regarding immigration through certain positions within the party. Four interviewees are current or former members of the national executive committee (*Parteivorstand*) and the Migration and Integration Working Group (*Arbeitsgruppe Migration und Integration*) in the parliament, while one interviewee is a political advisor to a member of the parliamentary executive committee (*Fraktionsvorstand*).¹¹ Hence, the participants have

¹¹ The participants may have multiple positions or held another position previously—for example, *Parteivorstand* members can be current or former *Fraktionsvorstand* members or MPs. Their most relevant and prominent roles are reflected here. To elaborate on these boards and committees, *Parteivorstand* is responsible for the direction and strategy of the party, providing leadership and decision-making initiative; also organises electoral campaigns and makes public declarations concerning the party, while *Fraktionsvorstand* oversees overall policy development and parliamentary strategies, shapes the party's rhetoric and policy proposals and coordinates party discipline. The *Arbeitsgruppe* is also a part of the parliamentary group initiating

considerable power, access or information regarding the policy-making, developing strategy and rhetoric, and producing policy papers and legislation, including the limitations and grounds to manoeuvre, about immigration on the national level.

Finally, the aim is to triangulate these approaches and provide a background and depth to the insights from the interviews to develop corroborative findings on intra-party dynamics and the perception of the party elite of activists (Natow, 2020).

Social Democratic Party of Germany and immigration

Background and overview

Since the guest workers programme (Gastarbeiter program), which was devised to supply the country's much-needed labour force, Germany experienced many flows of immigrants and refugees and the political tensions emanating from immigration (Downs, 2011). From the beginning, the SPD was in a positional dilemma, balancing its policies between supporting international solidarity and protecting the ethnically German working-class from competition (Schmidtke, 2016). This balancing act, in a way, shows that the immigration dilemma is not necessarily a recent phenomenon. While the party wanted to protect the rights of immigrant workers, SPD leaders such as Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt offered restrictive positions, too. Brandt abolished the guest worker initiative and warned against reaching the limits of Germany to handle the influx (Williams, 2014); Schmidt declared that when more guest workers were demanded against shortages, 'No Turk comes across the border to me any more' (Grunenberg, 1982).

While in the 1980s, CDU implemented a series of restrictive immigration and citizenship legislations, in 1992, SPD and CDU reached a compromise on a restrictive policy about asylum seekers (Triadafilopoulos, 2019). Later, SPD and Greens formed a coalition government, which passed comprehensive citizenship legislation for immigrants in 1999 and the country's first encompassing immigration law in 2004, aiming to attract qualified workers and supply labour shortages (Green and Hess, 2016). Otto Schily, the interior minister and SPD politician, led the policy effort, arguing that immigration should serve the economic interests and Germany should be considered 'an immigration country' (Geddes and Scholten, 2016: 83). CDU/CSU opposed Schily's propositions due to worries about the cultural and demographic aspects (Kruse et al., 2003). SPD's youth wing (colloquially known as *Jusos*)

and drafting legislation, developing strategies and discourse and supplying political perspectives and policy input focusing solely on immigration and integration matters.

fiercely criticised Schily, arguing that this formulation saw immigration in purely pragmatic and economic terms, overlooked the humanitarian component and failed to amend the asylum process (SPD, 2001).

The discourse of Germany being a ‘country of immigration’ (*Einwanderungsland*) is later taken up by the party as a part of their official position on the issue. From the 2005 election manifesto until the 2017 one, SPD manifestos include this proposition, and the general outlook of the policy is built around it. Throughout these years, SPD has maintained a somewhat expansive position towards immigration while highlighting considerably pragmatic attitudes (König, 2017; Schmidtke, 2015). Also, the party’s overall approach throughout this period does not shift extensively; the intra-party dissent on immigration is still considerable, showing that the party actors are not united or content with the party’s positions (Jolly et al., 2022; Polk et al., 2017).

Elaborating on the intra-party dissent, the intra-party actors, whether committees (formed by activists) or individuals, may have differing views and inclinations regarding policy and strategy (Debus and Bräuninger, 2009; Wolkenstein, 2020). However, on an aggregated level, SPD activists have a very distinct outlook on politics compared to the party elite and the electorate. Regarding the left–right spectrum, the party members lean further to the left than SPD voters (Spier, 2019). With a focus on immigration, the SPD activists’ positions are more left-wing than the party line (Schofield and Kurella, 2015). Similarly, Orhan (2023) offers that the SPD activists and elites have diverging discourses on immigration; the former consistently prioritises principled and pro-immigration positions, and the latter is much more pragmatic and comparatively less expansive, and while activists are more concerned about ideological and humanitarian aspects, party elites focus further on the costs and benefits of immigration.

This divergence became rather public with a book by Thilo Sarrazin, an SPD politician and state-level minister. In the book, Sarrazin argued against immigration due to genetic hierarchies (between Germans and migrants) and cultural and demographic replacement of the native population (Downs, 2011; Piwoni, 2015), which was heavily scrutinised in the party congress (Lißmann, 2010; SPD, 2010). However, Sarrazin also had his fair share of supporters from the German public and among party members (Mitra, 2022; Der Spiegel, 2010), and the SPD party leadership, although critical of Sarrazin, addressed the

inadequacy of engagement with immigration and integration policies within the party (Gabriel, 2010).¹²

The refugee crisis: 2015 and onwards

Europe experienced a refugee and immigrant influx in 2015, with the worsening of conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. In Germany, unlike her conservative predecessors, Chancellor Angela Merkel assumed a relatively open position and allowed more than a million refugees into Germany, famously claiming ‘We can do this’ (*Wir schaffen das*) (Triadafilopoulos 2019). SPD was a part of Merkel’s grand coalition government as the junior partner, and the party mostly converged with Merkel’s agenda on immigration during the crisis (Dostal, 2017; Berman and Kundnani, 2021). The 2017 elections took place under the refugee crisis’ shadow, where CDU and SPD lost votes, and AfD gained considerable ground (Hansen and Olsen, 2019).

Between 2015 and 2019, SPD had three party leaders: Sigmar Gabriel (2009–2017), Martin Schulz (2017–2018) and Andrea Nahles (2018–2019). The latter two had their leadership stints cut short by national (2017) and European election (2019) defeats where SPD received historically low vote shares. Gabriel, on the other hand, had a long-term leadership marked by his accumulation of power; as Jun and Jakobs (2021: 84) put it, Gabriel ‘tended to ignore the preferences of the party on the ground’ and ‘increasingly became the sole decider over the fate and well-being of the party’. During the crisis, the SPD leadership displayed a pro-immigration position and aimed to convince the electorate about the benefits of immigration for Germany. An article by Sigmar Gabriel in SPD’s newspaper (*Vorwärts*) illustrates this very clearly, where the party leader warns against hostility against refugees, urges people to unite behind the governmental efforts, as well as engaging debates with the society and argues:

“For the SPD, it is essential that people who are persecuted or have to leave their home countries because of wars or civil wars not only find a new home with us. We want to help them quickly learn our language and attend our schools and universities—because only then can they find work. These people with a permanent perspective of staying are an asset to our country. Because they enrich us culturally, mitigate demographic change, alleviate the

¹² Following the book’s publication in 2010, party figures wanted to expulse Sarrazin from the party; however, this was unsuccessful. After ‘long negotiations’ and Sarrazin declaring his commitment to social democratic values, the party leadership withdrew the motion for expulsion (Der Spiegel, 2011). However, Sarrazin was expelled from the party in 2020 after writing another book in 2018, titled *Hostile Takeover* (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

shortage of skilled workers and give our social security system more stability” (Gabriel, 2015).

While the party’s pragmatic yet expansive attitude continued, Sigmar Gabriel also warned that, after Donald Trump’s election, if a party lost the working-class electorate, this would not be compensated by winning ‘the hipsters in California’ (Gabriel, 2017). Calls for a more restrictive policy, especially after the peak of the refugee crisis, started much more decisively from the party’s right-wing. Thomas Oppermann, leader of the parliamentary faction, urged for ‘taking the control back on immigration policies’ and argued that the country needs stricter rules, secure borders and faster processing while recognising the humanitarian responsibilities and the potential benefits (Oppermann, 2017). Another intra-party debate emerged about where to process and accommodate refugees, which Oppermann argued for keeping refugees in North Africa, while more left-wing figures in the party responded with criticism (Der Spiegel, 2017).

Before the 2017 election, Gabriel announced that he would not be running for chancellor and pointed to Martin Schulz as his predecessor, leaving his party leader post as well. In the party congress, Schulz got elected unanimously (Jun and Jakobs, 2021). Towards the election, Schulz claimed that he wanted to make immigration one of the prominent issues of the campaign and said, ‘Those who play for time and try to ignore the issue ... are behaving cynically’ (Die Zeit, 2017), yet he failed to construct a compelling discourse or vision on immigration (Marx and Naumann, 2018). In the 2017 election manifesto, SPD paid considerable attention to immigration, offering more restrictive immigration positions than the previous ones while maintaining most of the party’s programmatical tenets about immigration (Orhan, 2023). The manifesto clearly highlights the humanitarian responsibilities, right to asylum, transparency and efficiency of the procedures while bringing up the need for faster deportations for rejected asylum claimants, lowering the ‘excessive demands’, ‘ensuring control’ and supporting voluntary returns (SPD, 2017: 74). The manifesto offers that human rights must be prominent while presenting numerous restrictive positions to establish control and efficiency over immigration. Furthermore, the party’s pragmatic approach to immigration to supply labour demands from previous years is restated, alongside heightened efforts to integrate immigrants into society (SPD, 2017).

The 2017 elections ended with a historically low vote share for SPD, as well as an incoherent political message and a highly unpopular decision, especially with activists, to form a government with CDU, followed by Schulz’s resignation (Faas and Klingelhöfer,

2019; Jun and Jakobs, 2021). Andrea Nahles, who was the leader of Jusos in the 1990s and a left-wing faction Forum Democratic Left 21 but later on politically repositioned herself towards the centre, became the front-runner candidate, securing the endorsement of outgoing Schulz and numerous leading party figures (Braunthal, 2003; Jun and Jakobs, 2021). However, her election showed discontent in the party, as she received only 66 per cent of the congress vote, one of the lowest in SPD's history (Kerr, 2020).

As the leader, she made overtures towards a restrictive immigration policy, stating that Germany 'cannot take everyone in' and that refugees should be accommodated in North African countries, aligning with CDU and CSU (Der Spiegel, 2018). She later gained support from the right-wing of the party by offering an immigration vision around 'realism without resentment' (Monath, 2018), arguably following the Danish Social Democrats (S) leader Mette Frederiksen's 'fair and realistic' immigration policy discourse (Cordsen, 2018; also see Meret, 2021). However, the response from the rest of the party was considerably harsh, e.g. then-Jusos leader Kevin Kühnert reacted by saying that Nahles is 'playing along with AfD's game' by adopting their discourse (Szymanski, 2018). Nahles' leadership ended abruptly in June 2019, after SPD received only 15 per cent in the European elections and she lost her party's support (Scantamburlo and Turner, 2020).

SPD faced another internal debacle after the 2019 Danish elections, which S won with a restrictive immigration platform, ignited by ex-leader Sigmar Gabriel. In an op-ed, Gabriel wrote that SPD elites did not want to engage with 'the uncomfortable topic' of immigration, while it was a rather salient issue for the electorate. Gabriel also explored the different inclinations of the intra-party actors and strategies:

"While resistance and inner-party protests are already stirring again in the German Social Democrats, even to the relatively harmless initiatives of the German government to speed up the deportation of foreigners who are obliged to leave the country and against illegal migration, the Danish Social Democrats have committed themselves to a policy on foreigners and asylum that is 'robust', to say the least. Whereas in Germany, it is a matter of rejecting a relatively small group of asylum seekers at the German–Austrian border who have already begun asylum proceedings in another EU country, the Danish Social Democrats do not want to conduct the asylum proceedings in Europe at all, but rather, if possible, in safe centres outside Europe" (Gabriel, 2019).

In the article, Gabriel pointed to Otto Schily as a predecessor of similar restrictive policies offered by S regarding accommodating and processing refugees outside Europe. Furthermore,

Gabriel added that social democracy's failure to respond to globalisation and open borders caused its core electorate to turn elsewhere for answers, which S managed to reverse by going "right" in terms of domestic policy and "left" in terms of economic and social policy' (Gabriel, 2019). As an overview, Gabriel argued that SPD can become successful electorally if they orient towards S and its approaches towards social welfare and immigration policies. Gabriel's strategic suggestion for SPD was controversial. Thomas Oppermann declared a similar position and called for a 'humanitarian refugee policy and a progressive immigration policy with tough rules' (Der Spiegel, 2019). These overtures, however, also received backlash from numerous SPD figures, primarily due to ideological incompatibilities, arguing that employing this strategy would lead to 'giving up (SPD's) principles' (Monath, 2019).

The overview of this period provided some perspective into the overtures of SPD leadership regarding immigration. Initially, the party's leaders showed inclinations to employ a more restrictive discourse on immigration, not necessarily to the extent of adopting far-right positions but moving rightwards from the party's prior position, highlighting their electoralist intentions. As Sigmar Gabriel offered, these attempts, whether on a governmental or party level, receive backlash from the party activists. Also, there were signs of electoralist inclinations from the party leadership, employing discourses that appeal to a broader electorate. However, these overtures seemed to stay mostly within the party elite, did not become part of the party's official line, nor were embraced by the other party actors and the status quo was maintained.

Elite perceptions and intra-party constraints for SPD

Establishing the party elite's perception of activists and intra-party dynamics and their influence on the immigration policies of SPD is crucial to understanding the complex dynamics of immigration policy shifts. Furthermore, I will explore which conditions and changes can affect the intra-party dynamics and result in policy changes in immigration.

Firstly, participants were asked how they perceived the SPD's immigration policy. When asked about providing definitions for the party's policy, one said 'anxious' (Interview #4, 2022), and the other 'Janus faced' (Interview #2, 2022). Interviewee #4, who is on the 'very left' of the party, elaborated that the party actors lack self-confidence regarding speaking out or taking steps on the issue, which would lead to political loss, either votes or intra-party support, sometimes both, a sentiment shared by other interviewees (#5, #6, 2023). Interviewee #2 (2022) reflected that the SPD 'invites the immigrants with one hand while

pushing them away with another’ and emphasised that the party needs ‘a humanitarian and a regulated policy’, arguing that the SPD currently has an open outlook; however, the contents of the policy do not reflect that, which leads to political inconsistency.

Common ground among the participants was finding a coherent, comprehensive discourse to convey this to the electorate and the party. Interviewee #5 (2023), who is politically pragmatic and ‘somewhere between the centre and the left’ in the party, also mentioned that the public was not ready to have ‘an honest conversation’ about immigration as the discourse and the public were susceptible to straying into populism, fueling anti-immigrant sentiments. Interviewee #2 (2022) highlighted the lack of impetus in the leadership to develop a discourse, as the leadership considers it a potentially dangerous area to manoeuvre. Interviewee #6 (2023), whose self-placement is ‘quite in the middle’ of the party, offered that the party has both ‘academic voters’ and ‘traditional voters’ who expect different approaches to immigration, leading to a conflict of strategy within the SPD. From the elite perspective, SPD has issues and a dilemma in structuring and communicating a coherent immigration policy.

Regarding the intra-party motivations, the party elite identified the activists as policy-seeking and pro-immigration compared to the rest of the party, while the party leadership were perceived as more electoralist and open to restrictive immigration policies. An interviewee (#2, 2022), who is ideologically ‘left in economic and right on societal issues’, mentioned that ‘the party leadership contemplated a move to the right’ and they would have done it if they saw it as feasible and beneficial, both electorally and organisationally. While not everybody in the party elite wanted a restrictive shift, the party leadership wanted to explore the idea, especially during the latter periods of Sigmar Gabriel’s tenure (Interview #1, #3, 2022; #6, 2023). According to one interviewee, in the coalition talks with CDU and CSU in 2017, SPD leadership was ready to accept the vision provided by those parties and did not establish any red lines, which, according to the interviewee, did not fit with SPD’s core values (Interview #1, 2022).

The overall approach shows a prioritisation of electoral motivations from the decision-makers and party leadership in SPD, while the ideological incongruities or incompatibilities are seemingly a lesser issue. These electoral motivations also extend to the activists, however, with caveats. The party activists are aware of the inclinations of the electorate, anxieties and worries about immigration, which, in return, allows them to be more

flexible about the party policy (Interview #3, #4, 2022; #5, 2023). One participant (Interview #4, 2022) said, ‘They (activists) know that we need to win elections’. Another (Interview #3, 2022) mentioned that the sceptical attitude of voters towards the immigrants in their constituency surprised the SPD activists in the area. Some SPD politicians struggle to balance the expectations of their local activists and the electorate due to their differing views on immigration, especially ‘in the East (of Germany)’ or less urbanised areas (Interview #5, 2023). Interviewees #2 (2022) and #6 (2023) reiterated that the party activists, although principled about immigration, also want to have SPD govern and affect other areas of society. Overall, the participants agreed that the party activists have more principled and radical views on immigration; however, they know that SPD is a party with aspirations to win elections.

Interviewees had a converging understanding about the extent of this flexibility or ‘the red lines’. Participants especially emphasised that if SPD changed its policy during or after the refugee crisis, the party activists would completely turn against the party and its elite. Activists were mainly mobilised and reactive to the issues of sea rescue, support and safety for refugees and the right to asylum topics. While labour migration is important, the participants perceived activists as less worried and more flexible on this issue than the refugee policies. However, they also stated that significant breaks from the current policy would cause a major upheaval, no matter which part of the immigration policy. One participant (#1, 2022), who is ‘on the left-wing in the ideological sense’ but ‘always concerned with practical politics’, likened this possible change to leading to similar outcomes to Hartz reforms, where the move towards the political centre disillusioned numerous activists, even causing some to leave the party.

After establishing the divergent political motivations of intra-party actors, the impact of the activists on decision- and policy-making on immigration becomes much more evident. The participants stated that the party elite is very much aware and considers the (potential or current) responses of the party activists. Adding that the party executive is ‘too professional’ not to measure the activists up, Interviewee #2 (2022) mentioned that the party elite shape their manoeuvres according to the potential responses, even adding that ‘SPD (executive) pays too much attention (to activists)’. Interviewee #5 (2023) quite directly stated that ‘(the party activists) do not know how much power they have’ and ‘(party elite) always pay attention to what they want and respond accordingly’ while emphasising that party activists portray themselves as powerless over the manoeuvres of the party elite, which is not the case according to interviewees. SPD party elite constrains themselves over the potential backlash

and dissent from activists, through their organisational and political presence, on immigration, while the activists do not have an apparent domination within the party. As an example, Interviewee #3 (2022), who self-positioned as ‘centre-left’ of the party, stated that when Sigmar Gabriel wanted to ‘move the party to the right (on immigration)’, SPD’s party executive opposed and prevented this shift because of the (potential and existing) pressures and reactions from the activists.

As one of organisational mediums of these pressures, certain committees and groups within SPD (such as *Jusos* and working groups, *Arbeitsgemeinschaften*) and the influence they yield can be crucial, as they mainly consist of activists. Interviewee #3 (2022) referred to the pressure potential these groups have; they are in constant contact with different parts of the party elite and voice their opinions and expectations on policy. Especially in immigration policy, these groups position themselves as principled and expansive and aim to constrain the party elite as much as possible from diverging from the existing immigration discourse (Interview #3, 2022; #6, 2023). Regarding Jusos, in which all participants considered as radically pro-immigrant than the rest of the party, one participant argued that they lost influence as an organisation within the SPD over the years, yet they are still ‘a stopping force’ when it comes to policy shifts (Interview #4, 2022).

The activists utilise media and their connection to MPs and local organisations as pressure points to voice their concerns about possible or existing policy changes. On the local level, activists voice their concerns in local party meetings, contact other MPs or decrease their party work (Interview #3, #4, 2022; #5, #6, 2023). On the national level, one of the most efficient ways for the party activists to constrain the party is to contact MPs and start social media and emailing campaigns to pressure them. One participant mentioned that social media changed the nature of engagement between the activists and the elites, pointing out that now they follow social media quite closely (especially Twitter and Instagram). If there is a strong reaction or campaign, the party elite will discuss how to handle this and what to do or not to do (Interview #5, 2022).

Party activists and the groups tend to pressure and contact ‘like-minded MPs’, such as MPs from the party’s left-wing, young MPs or those with a migration background. This relationship seems to be reciprocal as the left-wing MPs yield a certain level of power, knowing that they can utilise the support of the activists. The party elite wants to avoid the

image of the SPD as a disorganised and disunited party, which provides more leverage to the activists.

Although there are nuances, the overall perception of the party elite regarding the constraint power and potential of the party activists over the potential shifts in immigration policies is robust. The party can change the wording or emphasise certain aspects of immigration policy to appeal to the electorate with immigration sceptic inclinations; however, the policy itself is not open to change without a tumultuous break in the intra-party balance (Interview #1, #3, 2022; #5, 2023). As the interviewee (#3, 2022) pointed out, the party ‘cannot change the policy, so (they) change the words’; engaging in certain discursive statements without shifting policy to appeal to a broader electorate while appeasing the party activists, or at least not inciting them. This change of emphasis keeps the party line in a status quo, while the political messages may employ specific appealing phrases or overtures that can capture the electorate.

Nevertheless, the party elite offered specific external or internal conditions affecting the intra-party dynamics and policy-making. All six interviewees brought up anti-immigration discourse being too associated with AfD and Germany’s history. Regarding the latter point, interviewees unanimously emphasised the SPD’s place in German history, as an essential guiding aspect of how the SPD perceived itself. Interviewees specifically referred to the National Socialist period of Germany and mentioned the resistance put up by the party and its members, especially Willy Brandt, and their exile and refugee statuses. Although party leaders are keener on electoralist strategies, they know that this background and contemporary self-image emanating from that period impact activists and the representation of SPD (Interview #1, #3, 2002; #5, 2023). Interviewee #5 (2023) offered that the historical struggles of SPD against Nazism are a part of ‘the party’s DNA’, which makes it hard for the leaders to shift policies without a reaction arising from that self-image. This perception leads to SPD politicians acting more cautiously in specific policy areas, immigration being one of them (Interview #2, 2022; #6, 2023). Interviewee #2 (2022) also clarified that other countries did not have this historical aspect, which permits more possibilities for policy shifts on issues like immigration.

Another conditional change was the extent of electoral feasibility. The example of Danish Social Democrats (S) was discussed as a social democratic party that moved towards restrictive policies and benefitted from this turn electorally (see, Hjorth and Larsen, 2020 and

Meret, 2021). The responses from participants varied: Interviewee #1 (2022) disagreed with the ‘excessiveness’ of the negative attitude towards immigration while saying that SPD can learn from the integration policies of S. Interviewee #2 (2022) said that S is an excellent example of what SPD should aim for, although similarly pointed out that S went too restrictive. For the rest of the participants, the extent of S’ policy on immigration seemed ideologically problematic, but they recognised the electoral benefits while voicing feasibility issues for SPD. The general inclination was that a move towards restrictive immigration policies, when electorally beneficial, can be employed for SPD; however, they are doubtful whether ‘the party’, i.e. SPD activists, would allow such a shift, and the response of the activists would be one of the decisive forces. What would provide this feasibility? First of all, as the party elite pointed out, an economic crisis or downturn with high saliency of immigration would be crucial. Furthermore, if the party system, especially CDU, moved to further restrictive positions on immigration, SPD leadership, with an electoralist approach, would have more leverage and incentive for a shift, as it may lead to tolerance of activists. Another aspect of the changes in the political landscape is the situation of AfD, such as the normalisation and mainstreaming of AfD (among the society) and AfD considerably increasing its electoral support when the issue of immigration is salient.

Some participants offered that these changes in the party system would make activists possibly more flexible or provide more incentive to the elite on shifts on immigration. Interviewee #4 (2022) offered that if SPD polls badly, while AfD gains political ground, ‘sadly’ SPD would move towards the right on immigration. Interviewee #2 (2022) similarly suggested that if AfD reaches ‘20 to 30 per cent’, the party would take more restrictive positions to counteract the far-right’s electoral growth, consolidating votes and dictating the political agenda. Interviewee #6 (2023) also declared that the changes in the political landscape and saliency of immigration would allow activists to be more ‘silent’, albeit with limitations and reservations, as the activists would expect information and briefings from the party leadership and policy compromises and advancements in other areas of immigration policy without crossing the red lines.

The last discernable condition is the skills and influence of the party leader. A more skilled and influential party leader was perceived as essential for unifying the party behind a policy change, from the electorate to activists and the elite, while successfully managing the leadership. Almost all the participants mentioned Willy Brandt as a historical example of a successful leader with a clear message who can unify and mobilise the party. However, the

common approach for the contemporary was that SPD lacked a charismatic and skilled leader. Interviewee #4 (2022) said, ‘SPD has been looking for that person for decades’. The SPD’s bureaucratic structure also has a role in the lack of a strong leader; although the SPD leaders are politically experienced, they lose their appeal and influence through the years they spend rising in the party ranks (Interview #1, 2022). This happens ‘with a very slow pace’, and these positions are generally held by older people who ‘have dead bodies in the cellar’,¹³ which prevents them from yielding leadership skills to open the way for a political change in the party (Interview #4, 2022). This process diminishes the impact of politicians, especially over intra-party actors, and younger politicians who quickly rise through the ranks tend to follow the general outlook of the rest of the party’s executive, which causes them to lose credibility and political momentum. Hence, leadership skills, including conveying a compelling political message on immigration (whether expansive or restrictive) and uniting the party behind it, are perceived as an essential aspect of the intra-party dynamics and policy change.

To summarise, the SPD’s party elite considers the party activists as a constraint on their policy-making processes and takes their expectations and limits on immigration into account when developing a policy manoeuvre. The constraining takes place pre-emptively (relying on the party elite’s perception) or in real-time (due to the protest and reactions of the party activists), and it is tied to how organisationally and politically ingrained the activists are in the party, which this article conceptualises as nestedness. The party activists’ unofficial veto power or disincentivising force in SPD, in line with their perceived influence and embeddedness in the party’s functioning, limits the party elite’s potential moves. Participants (#3, #4, 2022) emphasised the functionary aspect of the party activists and the problems the party would face without their commitment during the elections. This is an important aspect, as the party elite considers that only winning electoral support without a convinced activist base is insufficient for political or electoral success.

The interviews provide a clear picture regarding the intra-party balance of SPD on their immigration policy. SPD leadership is open to a policy change on immigration driven by electoralist strategy to a certain extent. Still, they calculate and anticipate the reactions of party activists and carefully design their policies accordingly. This unofficial power and impact yielded by the party activists diminish the possibility of manoeuvres on immigration

¹³ The interviewee translated the idiom ‘eine Leiche im Keller haben’ literally into English; a more common translation would be ‘skeletons in the closet’. The original phrasing of the interviewee is kept as a quote.

policy, internalising the constraint among the party elite, even if the decision is made in the party's higher echelons. The party elite perceives the leader's charisma and skills as a potential, yet crucial way to convince and unite the activists behind the party's immigration positions, restrictive or not. This aspect also touches upon the question of leadership skills posed by Rathgeb and Wolkenstein (2022) regarding the intra-party unity of a social democratic party and restrictive immigration policies.

The party activists may not force their demands on policy change on the party elite, yet they seem to be able to protect the status quo and constrain them in specific areas; the anticipation of a backlash makes the party elite much more apprehensive towards employing electoralist strategies and change policy. As a solution, the party elite tries to avoid the subject altogether, not to send mixed messages and pit the electorate against the activists, or attempt discursive changes to increase their appeal to the electorate without causing intra-party dissent.

Conclusion

This article explored the potential shifts in immigration policies of social democratic parties and how the intra-party dynamics influence and constrain these shifts. SPD provided interesting aspects as a case study: a party with governmental ambitions and potential, with powerful intra-party actors, without a clear dominance of activists or the elite, and a country that experienced the 2015 refugee crisis first-hand and anxieties emerged from it. Analysing the party elite's discourse and policy manoeuvres on immigration and insights and perceptions gathered from the interviews provide a complex intra-party dynamic.

The party elites perceive the activists as a constraint on their policy-making processes and take their expectations and limits on immigration into account when developing their strategies while considering activists positioned as principled and radical on immigration, often diverging from the party's official discourse. The activists' influence is rooted in their organisational and political embeddedness within the party rather than outright dominance or control of party decision-making structures, which grants them unofficial influence routes over immigration policy that is internalised by and pre-emptively impacts the elite and their policy-making. Furthermore, the extent of this constraining influence depends on how much power the party elite attributes to the party activists in line with their perception of potential backlash and dissent.

The party elite's ability to manoeuvre on immigration policy is also significantly influenced by electoral feasibility and political landscape. The perception is that the changes in these factors can make the intra-party constraints more flexible, while any significant departure from the current policy, purely as an electoral move, would face a backlash from the activists. Additionally, how the party activists perceive the party's image, the history of Germany being significant for SPD's case, and the skills and ability of the party leadership are also crucial to the extent of the constraints. To navigate this balance, the party elite sometimes shifts the emphasis on policy discourse without attempting any programmatic change.

These findings contribute to the growing literature on intra-party actors, focusing on the intricacies of their dynamics, actor perceptions and the immigration dilemma social democrats face. As a single case study, this research has certain limitations, such as the unique historical contingencies of Germany. The historical context and its significance in shaping policy shift constraints add a layer of complexity to the study. However, the dilemma of social democrats, the divergent motivations of intra-party actors and internal strife over immigration are not exclusive to Germany but prevalent in Europe, as established by considerable research – while the extent of constraints may differ, the dynamics should prove comparable, especially where immigration is highly salient (for example, Bale et al., 2010; 2013; Hinnfors et al., 2012; Odmalm and Bale, 2015; Salo and Rydgren, 2021; Schwander, 2019; Van Spanje, 2010). Future research addressing and exploring the intra-party dynamics and immigration policy-making in European social democrats when immigration is a salient issue should provide further applicability to the findings of this article.

Overall, the interviews indicate that the party activists possess significant influence over the party elite's decision-making process on immigration. While they may not always succeed in forcing their demands for policy changes, their presence and potential backlash constrain the elite's electoralist strategies. The party elite carefully assesses and anticipates the activists' reactions to avoid divisive situations that could undermine the party's electoral prospects and delicate intra-party balance. Their perception points to the fact that this balance is decisive in the electoral fortunes and ideological direction of European social democracy.

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Appendix

A total of six interviews are used in this article. Interviews #1 to #5 were conducted between Autumn 2022 and Winter 2023, and Interview #6 in Autumn 2023. All the interviews took place in English. Four participants are male, while two are female. They are equally divided, two each, in age cohorts of 1946–1964, 1965–1979 and 1980-present (categorisation is taken from Steiner, 2023). Two of the participants have migration backgrounds. Regarding their factional alignment, two are in *Parlamentarische Linke*, two in *Seeheimer Kreis*; one declared

a close working relationship with both, and another participant from *Netzwerk Berlin* (as a note, some participants switched their factions during their careers or emphasised their working relationship with one faction over the other(s) while maintaining multiple memberships). Furthermore, three participants were in the ranks of *Jusos* before becoming professional politicians. Where the interviewees (all native speakers of German) had problems explaining themselves in English, advisors were asked for their input or subsequently translated via other means. All the participants verbally agreed to interviews to be recorded under the condition of anonymity. They agreed that the interview's contents could be used for academic works without publicising the recordings. These conditions were also made clear when contact was established with the potential interview candidates, whether they agreed to participate or not.

5. From dissent to cohesion: Immigration policy shift and intra-party dynamics in the Danish Social Democratic Party

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Abstract

The high saliency of immigration presented social democratic parties with a strategic quandary on reconciling different values and expectations. Danish Social Democratic Party (S) stood out as it shifted to restrictive policies while achieving intra-party cohesion and avoiding major internal strifes. This article investigates the factors behind S' immigration shift and intra-party cohesion, focusing on a timeframe between 2005 and 2019 by combining an analysis of S' immigration policies with insights from 12 interviews with party elites. Comparing varying strategies, ideological inclinations, and support, I explore the intra-party actors' perceptions, constraining and permissive influences of intra-party dynamics, development and reconstruction of new ideological frameworks and factional alignment. Findings highlight the importance of intra-party dynamics on shifting policies in immigration for social democratic parties, providing further insights on how the S party elite navigated the policy shift while ensuring intra-party cohesion from electoral, ideological and organisational perspectives.

6. Analysis and Conclusion

Discussion

This dissertation examines intra-party dynamics within social democratic parties and how they shape the decision-making and policy approaches, discourses and manoeuvres of party elites. Earlier chapters provide significant insights into the core research question, *how do intra-party dynamics influence social democratic parties' and actors' decision-making and policy shifts manoeuvres on immigration*, concerning the challenges and dilemmas faced by social democrats, and the nature of intra-party dynamics and networks within the political parties. In addressing its central puzzle, the dissertation makes important conceptual and theoretical contributions to both immigration policy and intra-party dynamics literature. These contributions address considerable research gaps in the literature by offering a comprehensive evaluation of immigration policies through the integration of framing and positioning, analysed via qualitative content analysis. Additionally, the research explores the dynamics and perceptions between elites and activists in social democratic parties, focusing on how elites perceive activist influence on their decision- and policy-making processes on immigration.

The dissertation offers robust evidence supporting its argument and novel theoretical contribution to intra-party dynamics: the concept of nestedness. Party elites often preemptively limit their actions and refrain from initiating political manoeuvres or policy shifts, even when they believe such actions could offer electoral benefits. This constraint is driven by the elites' motive to avoid intra-party dissent, conflict, or public displays of division. In the case of the SPD, despite being extensively discussed and advocated by certain figures and factions, the potential backlash from party activists has significantly constrained the initiation of comprehensive, programmatic policy changes on immigration. Similarly, within the S, years of discussions, debates, and internal upheaval regarding the direction of immigration policy were heavily influenced by the positions of activists, shaping the party elite's decisions. Party elites thus carefully navigate and assess intra-party reactions before acting, calculating the potential responses of various actors. This occurs even though official structures may allow them to initiate shifts that they would presume electorally beneficial; however, the ability to initiate these shifts or make decisions does not guarantee any support or embrace of the new platform by the intra-party actors regarding the outcome. Moreover, elites may adjust or modify their immigration discourse to enhance voter appeal without

implementing significant policy changes that could provoke unrest among intra-party actors and factions.

The party leadership's capacity to garner support from both factions, elites, and activists – whether in a perceived weak or strong leadership position – along with the saliency of immigration and the positioning of other parties within the party system, directly influences and constrains the manoeuvring capabilities of social democratic elites on immigration issues. A comparative analysis of the German and Danish cases provides insights into these dynamics. In Germany, considerable factionalism and the potential backlash from the policy-seeking activists prevented the party elite from politicising immigration and any restrictive shifts or manoeuvres they may employ in line with electoralist strategies from materialising. By contrast, the Danish social democrats overcame these internal constraints through strong leadership, which diminished factionalism and transformed the party's ideological outlook, securing activist support. Notably, the perception of Mette Frederiksen as a 'true social democrat' among activists enabled the leadership to enact more profound changes, moving beyond short-term electoral manoeuvres that might have been seen as superficial and against their political values by intra-party actors. This also highlights variations in leadership across different periods within the Danish social democratic party, offering a comparative perspective on how leadership strength can shape policy direction and the potential of backlash from intra-party actors.

This ideological transformation presents a compelling aspect – Danish social democrats did not merely *adopt* the restrictive immigration policies proposed by far-right parties but instead crafted a policy outlook rooted in their social democratic ideology. As the previous chapter demonstrates, the restrictive immigration policy framework established in the Danish case, promoted by strong party leadership, succeeded in persuading both activists and factions to endorse the party's new direction. Notably, when an electorally and politically *successful* policy shift occurs, it is still framed, justified, and developed within a distinctly social democratic framework, employing references and discourses emerging from core social democratic values. The party elites do not abandon their principles or simply 'leapfrog' into the positions of other parties; instead, they reinterpret their values, according to Danish social democrats, their traditional ideological values, to develop a more restrictive stance on immigration. This finding contributes valuable insights and nuances into the current understanding of social democratic responses to immigration, particularly regarding the strategy of adopting anti-immigrant positions (Bale et al., 2010).

A similar case can be made regarding the strategy of holding or defusing. Insights from the SPD reveal that when immigration becomes a salient issue, and the far-right capitalises on it, party elites adopt certain discursive elements to broaden their appeal to voters. However, they refrain from making programmatic or ideological shifts. This approach allows the party to address voter concerns about immigration while avoiding intra-party dissent and steering clear of the activists' red lines on the issue. Furthermore, party leaders and elites made notable public statements about potential immigration manoeuvres, possibly as a way to gauge voter and intra-party reactions. In the SPD's case, these declarations faced significant pushback from intra-party actors, mainly from left-wing factions and activists, which not only prevented any concrete policy changes but also damaged the image of the elites and party leadership. Hence, when parties hold or defuse their programmatic positions on immigration, the party elite still actively attempt and seek manoeuvres to extend the party's appeal, yet try to avoid disturbing the intra-party dynamics.

Changes in the party system also significantly influence party elites' perceptions of activist flexibility. As far-right, anti-immigration parties gain traction and increase their electoral share, social democratic elites feel pressured to initiate manoeuvres, particularly when the far-right successfully capitalises on immigration and attracts working-class voters. The mainstreaming and normalisation of the far-right also shape intra-party dynamics and the perception of the party elites. When the far-right consolidates votes and dictates the political agenda, social democratic elites are more inclined to adopt restrictive discourses, believing activists will show greater flexibility as these shifts align with public saliency and expectations. In Denmark, the social democratic response to the far-right became more programmatic and extensive, while in Germany, the SPD's response remained limited to short-term discursive and strategic adjustments. Nevertheless, in both cases, party elites recognised the rise of the far-right as a compelling reason to pursue more restrictive immigration approaches.

Additionally, the positioning of other mainstream parties on immigration plays a crucial role in shaping social democrats' strategies. In Denmark, the centre-right increasingly adopted anti-immigration stances, while in Germany, particularly after the 2015 refugee crisis, the centre-right pursued a more expansive approach, spearheading an effort in Europe to welcome and accommodate a significant number of refugees. This stance posed a constraint for the SPD, according to the party elites, as their primary electoral rivals did not embrace a restrictive outlook, thereby limiting the SPD's potential manoeuvring potential.

Consequently, broader shifts in the party system regarding immigration affect the perceived flexibility of activists towards policy changes, enabling party elites to pursue more significant shifts when other parties initiate considerable changes in their immigration policies.

The findings indicate that social democratic parties divided on immigration tend to avoid engaging with the issue unless it becomes politically salient. During periods of low saliency, a defuse strategy is employed and seen as effective. However, as immigration gains salience and other parties begin capitalising on the issue, social democrats give it more attention, yet they still steer clear of potentially divisive shifts if they foresee intra-party dissent. In the SPD's case, the lack of a unified stance on immigration policy and discourse created challenges for party elites in navigating and politicising the issue, especially during and in the aftermath of the refugee crisis. Similarly, prior to 2015, S faced comparable dilemmas, but under Frederiksen's leadership, the party successfully established a cohesive immigration discourse and vision endorsed by the new leadership.

The findings point to the significance of leadership within the parties and their ability to represent the party activists and rally the party elites directly contribute to their manoeuvring ability on issues. The trust, the image, and the ideological coherence of the leader and figures around the leadership provide them with a level of 'goodwill buffer'. This buffer is finite and does not allow the able leaders to instigate any shift they would like; however, leaders who are seen as ideologically legitimate and representative of the core values, party actors, and their worldview can navigate ideologically cohesive, well-structured policy and discourse shifts, even though politically challenging to the party actors. The leaders' positive perception among the party actors allows them to unite the party elite and provides political grounds for them to transform the party; in contrast, leaders whom party actors constantly challenge and lack overarching support avoid these transformations and maintain their transactional and balancing outlook of the intra-party dynamics (as outlined by Burns, 1978).

This dissertation reaffirms that politicians should be understood and studied as more than mere conveyors and followers of public opinion and electoral demands, as offered by Wenzelburger and Zohlnhöfer (2021). While party elites are undoubtedly concerned with electoral strategies, they also seek to balance voter appeal with intra-party dynamics and the party's ideological framework. These elements shape their decision-making, policy preferences, and political identity, which are influenced by factors such as their background,

factional alignments, and office aspirations. Moreover, party elites recognise that despite having the initiative to enact policy shifts and respond to public opinion, dissent from activists and intra-party disharmony can ‘undermine’ their political manoeuvres, limit their ability to capitalise on these strategies and even cause adverse political outcomes. Although official party structures may offer opportunities and avenues to shift policies without intra-party actors’ official approval or similarly make decisions at the top of the party hierarchy, the political and electoral success and embracing and internalisation of said shifts within the party decisively rely on the unofficial approval and support of the activists. Therefore, while public opinion remains a key incentive, elites must also consider and assess the intra-party dynamics beyond the official structures and potential backlash among other aspects and agencies when addressing immigration.

Finally, combining framing and positioning in analysing immigration policies proves insightful on several fronts. This framework recognises the complexities in parties’ and actors’ policy approaches, understanding that they do not maintain a monolithic stance on immigration. Instead, they adopt multiple approaches and may vary across different issues. This perspective enriches our understanding of policy positioning beyond a single dimension of categorisation, such as pro- or anti-immigrant parties and actors. How actors frame their positions is crucial, allowing this dissertation to distinguish their responses to different aspects of immigration, such as refugees, labour migration, and integration. This distinction also highlights the varying emphasis and salience placed on different aspects of immigration, contributing to the understanding of nestedness and policy shifts. How intra-party actors approach specific areas of immigration influences their flexibility, their *red lines*, and their potential to react negatively to changes initiated by party elites.

Avenues for Future Research

The discussion in this dissertation highlights several areas for future research. First, the concept of ‘changing words while keeping policy’ warrants further exploration to understand how politicians use specific language and discourses to appeal to voters while maintaining intra-party balance. This could enhance our understanding of political rhetoric and offer deeper insights into the limits and red lines of intra-party actors. The inner workings of intra-party dynamics also remain underexplored – how activists and factions organise, collaborate, and position themselves relative to party leadership and how activist support influences party strategies are compelling research gaps that could build on the findings of this dissertation.

Additionally, the ideological dilemmas faced by social democrats, especially in the post-Third Way era, deserve further study. Immigration, arguably the most prominent issue, reflects the broader ideological challenges confronting social democrats today. Investigating the long-term impact of the ideological shift in the 1990s, particularly the Third Way, on intra-party dynamics and its influence on current policy stances could offer valuable insights. Future research could examine these dynamics across various contested policy areas or in different political contexts, such as within the European Union or regional politics.

Finally, although briefly mentioned, the other parties deserve much more attention and research. The intra-party life and dynamics of green parties, conservatives, and the radical left, as well as how this influences their immigration policy-making, present different puzzles, especially considering their factional structures, coalition responsibilities, and office aspirations. As immigration remains a highly salient topic in Europe and anti-immigrant parties continuously capitalise upon it, their responses, directions and strategies on immigration may not be as homogenous and coherent as previously considered.

Concluding Remarks

Since the 2010s, the social democrats have increasingly faced ideological and political dilemmas and crossroads. Their stances on immigration are a considerable factor in the ongoing political decline of the party family. This dissertation engaged with this puzzle – to understand how the social democratic party elites can make certain decisions and not others to attempt to solve their dilemmas. One aspect that seemed to be overlooked was the intra-party dynamics and their influence over the social democratic immigration policies. To address this gap and provide insights into the puzzle, this dissertation offers arguments and relevant factors focusing on the tensions between diverging motivations of intra-party actors and theorising the nature of this influence. Additionally, it also contributes a conceptual framework for analysing immigration policies with a two-dimensional approach, taking framing and positioning into consideration.

This dissertation provides critical insights into the intra-party dynamics of social democratic parties and their influence on immigration policy decisions. Focusing on the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Danish Social Democrats (S), the study underscores the significant role internal actors have in shaping party elites' ability to manoeuvre on contentious and ideologically salient issues, such as immigration. The comparative analysis highlights that although the party elites are concerned and motivated by

public opinion and electoralist strategies, the perceived power of intra-party actors is a crucial constraining factor on their decision- and policy-making processes and their outcomes. The dissertation offers nestedness as a novel theoretical contribution to explain the intra-party actors' constraining influence, which explains why social democratic elites often refrain from policy shifts despite perceived electoral gains. The findings show that party elites pay attention to intra-party reactions, especially from activists, and frequently constrain their actions to avoid internal dissent. This was evident in the SPD, where factionalism and unconvincing and weakly perceived party leadership failed to rally the activists and to initiate shifts toward a restrictive immigration stance, contrasting with the S, who, under Mette Frederiksen, managed intra-party dynamics effectively to transform the party's immigration position.

Furthermore, party systems and external crises and events, such as the rise of far-right parties, have a considerable influence on social democratic elites. While the far-right's rise prompted a restrictive programmatic shift in Denmark, where the party leadership managed to convince the intra-party actors, failing to do so, the SPD only made short-term discursive adjustments constrained by internal divisions. The perception of the leadership's strength and trust amongst party elite and activists, the ability to develop convincing discourses that emanate from the party's ideological values and the extent of factionalism are crucial factors in the shift in immigration policies or the lack of it.

The immigration dilemma of social democrats touches upon a particular junction of party organisation, ideology, and political motivation, and it has not been *solved* or *defused* by the intra-party actors. As immigration remains highly salient and seems like it will only gain more saliency, how the social democratic elites will navigate this dilemma and how they will balance policy-seeking with electoralist strategies, activists, and public opinion and principle and pragmatism will be decisive in how the European politics will be shaped in the following decades profoundly influencing governments, institutions, parties and movements, from left to right, European to local.

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8. Appendix

Interview Guides

Interview Guide for SPD

- Reminder on anonymisation and approval on recording.
 - Brief introduction of the project: how do the perceptions of intra-party dynamics and activists by the party leadership and elite influence their decision- and policy-making on immigration in a social democratic party?
 - Clarify concepts: activist, elite, intra-party dynamics.
-
- 1) For starters: Where do you place yourself ideologically within the party? Do you belong or feel close to any factions?
 - Left / Right / Center
 - Faction? Membership to social movements/interest groups?
 - What are your roles and positions within the party? Previous ones?
 - 2) How important do you think the issue of immigration is to the SPD?
 - 3) How would **you** define SPD's immigration policies?
 - a. Would you consider it *pragmatic*?
 - b. Has it changed over time / reacted to events/incidents in the last two decades?
 - 4) How would you place SPD's position on immigration between expansive (embracing multiculturalism, open borders) and restrictive (closed borders, assimilation, decreasing numbers)? Would you consider party being torn between these positions?
 - a. *If necessary*: elaborate on the dilemma between voter groups: progressive v conservative voters.
 - 5) What do you think about several social democratic parties that opted for more restrictive positions on immigration? Such as Denmark, Austria and Sweden?
 - a. Do you see their approach as a *political success*?
 - b. Clarify: it does not have to be highly restrictive
 - c. How do you perceive the differing views in SPD about these parties and shifts?
 - 6) There were considerable debates within SPD about **more** “considerate”, “robust”, “pragmatic”, and “realistic” immigration policies throughout the years -especially after 2017. Names like Thomas Oppermann and Sigmar Gabriel, or factions like *Seeheimer Kreis*, voiced these potential policy shifts. Do you think the party has had a consolidated position since 2015?
IF YES: Are you satisfied with this consolidated position? Is the electorate too?
 - 7) What is the extent of debate and discussion about an immigration policy shift in the party? How do you see **the response of the party activists**?

Potential questions:

- a. Would the party (executive, elite) consider the possible reactions before taking a position?
- b. What would your response be? **Would you consider these shifts?**
- c. Were these shifts considered at any given moment (as far as you know)?
 - i. *If YES*: Why did these shifts not take place?
 - ii. What is the role of **the party actors**?

If there is activist influence:

- 8) If there was a high demand for a shift from within the party executive and the electorate, under what conditions do you think you (party leadership/elite) can convince the activists?
- Charismatic, influential leader(s)
 - Electoral ‘annihilation’
 - All the parties converging on restrictive positions
 - Significant changes in the economy (negative)
 - Coupled with a high migration influx?
 - AfD votes reaching extreme heights (20+%)
 - Also, demand from the base (activists/members)
 - ‘Not possible, incompatible position’ (ideology)
 - Why no ideological flexibility? Compared to other parties.

If necessary,

- Do you see any way for this to change?
- What could make your position change?
- How would you accept it / do you see a compromise?

Interview Guide for S

- Reminder on anonymisation and approval on recording.
 - Brief introduction of the project: how do the perceptions of intra-party dynamics and activists by the party leadership and elite influence their decision- and policy-making on immigration in a social democratic party?
 - Clarify concepts: activist, elite, intra-party dynamics.
- 1) For starters: Where do you place yourself ideologically within the party? Do you belong or feel close to any factions?
- Left / Right / Center
 - Faction? Membership to social movements/interest groups?
 - What are your roles and positions within the party? Previous ones?
- 2) How important do you think the issue of immigration is to the Socialdemokratiet?
- 3) How would **you** define Socialdemokratiet’s immigration policies?
- a. Would you consider it *pragmatic*?

- b. Has it changed over time / reacted to events/incidents in the last two decades?
 - i. *If yes*, How? How was it in 2009?
- 4) In your opinion, what significantly influenced Socialdemokratiet's shift on immigration?
 - a. Right-wing parties? Divide between 'rural' and 'urban' Denmark?
- 5) Do you consider the party's change on immigration as a political success?
 - a. Does not have to be just electoral success.
 - b. How would you see the balance of different views in the party? Who opposed? Who applauded? **Did the reactions matter?**
- 6) How did the party activists and active supporters respond to the increasing restrictiveness of immigration policy?
 - a. Where did they react (for example social media, congresses, media, private communication)? What was the base of their reaction (ideology, voter concern, principles)?
 - b. How did the party handled/responded these reactions?
 - c. How did the party elite diffuse/eliminate the reactions of party activists?
 - i. *If necessary*: How do party activists respond to anything? Are they active? Do they pressure MPs, party members, party executive? How are the lines of communication between the ranks?
- 7) Would you *consider* Socialdemokratiet's party structure as open or closed?
 - a. Open to interference/input from below (intra-party actors)
 - b. Or the power, decision-making is accumulated on top? What are the practical outcomes?
 - i. *If yes*, why didn't this shift happen before?
 - c. How about the factions? Their situation in the hierarchy?
- 8) What is your *perception* of the relationship between the party elite and the party activists?
 - a. How do the party elite "pay attention" to activists react to policies, shifts, positions?
 - b. Would the party (executive, elite) consider the possible reactions before taking a position?
 - i. *If yes*, how did this dynamic function for the immigration shift?
- 9) How did the outside factors incentivise the party elite and possibly the party activists?
 - Paradigmeskift (paradigm shift) – Did S follow other right-wing parties' lead?
 - DF increasing and peaking its votes (in 2015, %21)
 - 2015 Refugee Crisis
 - Electoral losses (class-based, numerical, etc)
 - Ideological change in the party (after Auken, Rasmussen, Thorning-Schmidt, etc)
 - Personal leadership? (Helle Thorning-Schmidt & Mette Frederiksen?)

