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IFN Working Paper No. 1445, 2022

Misrepresentation and Migration

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Misrepresentation and Migration

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Abstract

In a representative democracy politicians should either implement policies that voters want or policies that politicians believe are in voters long-term interest, even if voters currently oppose them. While the exact balance between these goals is debatable, politicians can also have strong preferences for certain policies. Politicians' policy engagement can tempt them to dismiss voters' preferences and resist information counter to their own policy position. In this paper, we discuss Sweden's generous migration policy and how it can serve as an example where politicians' policy engagement led them to a overly optimistic view of the implications of welcoming a large influx of refugees. Using detailed, repeated, survey data on members of parliament, we show that Swedish politicians favored a much more generous policy towards accepting refugees than voters for a long period of time. Neither observable factors nor expert knowledge can explain this difference between voters and politicians. A more likely explanations is wishful thinking and policy engagement from politicians that continued until political competition increased.

Keywords: Political Misrepresentation, Immigration Policy, Populism, Public Opinion

JEL: P16, O15, P35

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1 Introduction

A long standing question regarding normative democratic theory is to what extent politicians should represent the will of the people or if they should make decisions according to the interest of the people. The potential conflict was addressed already by Edmund Burke when he just got elected and hold a speech for electors in Bristol 1774. Burke told the audience that he would protect them from their opinions, and instead serving their interests. Even though Burke's messages was not well received and he later on lost the re-election, the distinction has contributed to a lively debate within theories of representative democracy (Rehfeld, 2006).

One premise of theories of representative democracy is that politicians have better access to relevant information and are better suited to making hard decisions than voters (Manin, 1997). Recent research has found that this indeed can be the case (Dal Bó et al., 2017; Jokela et al., 2022). As a consequence, it might not be a problem if politicians refrain to act upon the will of the people. However, this assumption relies on the premise that politicians possess superior information and can effectively persuade the public over time that their proposed policies will better serve their interests. Yet, what happens if these premises are wrong; politicians are not well informed nor able to change the public opinion?

There is a substantial body of literature arguing to what extent voters do (or do not) have a correct understanding of the state of the world and to what extent voters favor policies that might not be in their own (long-term) interests (Key Jr, 1966; Lupia, 1994; Caplan, 2001, 2002). Less attention has been paid to political elites and the extent to which they are subject to a biased understanding of policy outcomes and the living conditions of their voters (Lee, 2022; Thal, 2023; Silva & Wratil, 2023). Since politicians have more time and resources to acquire information and have incentives to do so, they should, according to the model of representative democracy, be better informed than their voters. While previous studies of misrepresentation often have focused on the effects of vested interest and lobbying (Olson, 1984), such factors were not important for Swedish refugee policy since there were

little economic gains from the policy. Other studies suggest that politicians would like to follow the public opinion, but they often are uninformed (Butler et al., 2011). It has also been suggested that politicians are responsive when the opinion is relative unambiguous (Fiorina & Abrams, 2012).

For a long period, Sweden received a much larger inflow of refugees than neighbouring countries, as seen in Figure A1. While such differences could be due to many factors, it is likely that official policy affects asylum seekers' demand for asylum consideration in Sweden relative to that for other Nordic countries (Collier, 2013). In fact, refugee policy in Sweden was among the most generous in OECD countries. Today, almost a quarter of the Swedish population has a foreign background. The transformation of Swedish society into one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Europe has been rather swift, and Swedish society has experienced challenges in integrating its new citizens (Barrling & Garne, 2022). Despite growing concerns on consequences and strong opinion from voters, politicians did not change the policies towards immigration. The salience of the refugee policies in Sweden became stronger over the years and the signal was so clear that a new anti-immigrant party made it to the parliament.

In this paper, we discuss the large difference between voters and politicians opinion towards Sweden's generous refugee policies, and where politicians had to change their policies after they seemed to be wrong about the public opinion and the long term consequences of generous refugee programs. We do that by using extensive survey data on both voters and politicians in Sweden regarding the policy towards accepting refugees, including a unique repeated opinion survey of members of parliament. This allows for much more detailed analysis of the differences between voters and politicians from most previous studies.

Our ambition is to present a potential mechanism why politicians could have such different opinions towards immigration compared to voters, even when controlling for co-funding differences such as age or education. Politicians strong opinions towards accepting refugees were not driven by neither strong public opinion support nor positive economic forecasts

from experts. Indeed, there is little or no evidence that accepting refugees is positive for the economy in the long run, according to both peer-reviewed studies and government expert reports (e.g., [Ruist \(2020\)](#)). Instead, we suggest that large and stable differences in opinion could be explained by politicians having unrealistic expectations and deeply entrenched opinions that they are reluctant to change even if their voters want them to.

The results demonstrate the risk of politicians being too policy engaged and how they become prone to wishful thinking and dismiss critical information. These biases can have effects on the whole political system, where personal opinions of politicians not only had a large impact on refugee policies and society, but also contributed to a populist party with a background in the extreme-right growing to be Sweden's second largest party following the 2022 election. The Swedish case illustrate how established parties could be challenged if are not aligned with public opinion on important issues for citizens over time ([Kertzer, 2022](#)). Understanding such misrepresentation is an important part of understanding the large increase in populist parties especially Western Europe.

2 Elite beliefs and political representation

Should the preferences of politicians matter for what policy is implemented? Simple models of political competition suggests that if voters have single-peaked preferences, political competition will lead to the median voter getting what she wants, regardless of what politicians think in that matter ([Black, 1948](#); [Downs, 1957](#)). However, this is at odds with many empirical observations, and more advanced theories allows of a gap between what voters want and what policies are pursued ([Lindbeck & Weibull, 1987](#); [Johansson et al., 2023](#)). Creating a voting and representation procedure that is optimal is most likely impossible ([Arrow, 1950](#)), and indeed most voting procedures can manipulated ([Gibbard, 1973](#); [Satterthwaite, 1975](#)). This leads to different parliamentary systems affecting how voters preferences gets represented, leading to better or worse representation depending on circumstances and how

questions are formulated (Stadelmann et al., 2013, 2020). Yet, one of leading theorist of representative democracy, Robert Dahl, states ‘a key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals’ (Dahl, 1971).

In short, political congruence is a foundation for a well-functioning representative democracy. Researchers have also shown, that overall, there is a congruence between voters and politicians (Dalton, 1985). Yet, there is an ongoing debate whether certain groups in the society are more listen to, and the congruence between the affluent and politicians are better then it is for other groups (cf. Gilens & Page (2014) and Enns (2015)) The literature on political congruence has therefore been more focused on when and on what policies politicians and voters align their opinions (Bernauer et al., 2015).

There could be more than one particular reason for why there are poor political congruence. Politicians and other elite groups might have, in general, quite different opinions than the average voter (Lasch, 1995). These differences can be hard to decrease if politicians overestimate the knowledge that they have about a topic, especially if they are policy engaged. Experimental evidence suggests that politicians who see themselves as experts more easily dismiss voters with opinions opposite to their own (Pereira & Öhberg, 2020). Politicians could also disregard opinions from voters with lower education, and voters whose opinions politicians disagree with are likely to have less influence in shaping politicians’ views (Butler & Dynes, 2016; Sevenans & Walgrave, 2022). Similarly, nonpolitical experts can be wrong in a systematic way when they work in insulated organizations (Koppl, 2018).

Moreover, there is also evidence showing that politicians’ prior beliefs affect how they process new information and that an increased amount of information can even impair their ability to understand the presented facts (Baekgaard et al., 2019). It also fits well with psychological research that finds that moral opinions tend to be difficult to change with just persuasion and arguments (Haidt, 2001; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Graham et al., 2013). If politicians have such deeply entrenched opinions, neither information on the consequences

of a policy nor information on their own voters' opinions may convince them to change their opinions easily. Politicians can therefore manage to convince themselves of a position that they do not want to change (Cowen, 2005; Galeotti, 2018). Moral opinions are to a certain extent luxury goods, and less well-off voters might not share these with elite politicians, especially not during more difficult economic circumstances (Abou-Chadi & Kayser, 2017; Enke et al., 2022).

Within a political party with a strict hierarchy or when different subjects are sensitive to discuss, politicians might have private skepticism on a subject but do not want to show this in public since they are afraid that it may affect them negatively. Even when politicians understand that their previous position was incorrect, they might not have any incentive to change their position since this could signal incompetence to voters (Dur, 2001). This was, e.g., the situation in the former Communist countries in Eastern Europe, where many elites were skeptical of the success of the planned economy but did not dare question this since they believed that it was a success (Kuran, 1997). When official policy changed, it became possible to voice an opinion that previously was not politically correct to express and the opinion quickly changed to a new equilibrium (Morris, 2001). In a democratic system dominated by political parties, individual politicians may refrain from voicing their concerns and instead agree with policy that is dictated from above (Prendergast, 1993).

If politicians have different opinions than their voters, it is important to understand if these differences can be explained by observable factors such as age, gender and education, and if these differences varies across political parties and over time. Yet, the poor political congruence could also be related to politicians' knowledge of their voters opinions, and politicians' own understanding on the subject, as well as how increased political competition from the an anti-immigrant party affect politicians' opinion.

3 Data and analysis

To study the gap in opinion between voters and politicians, we use a combination of surveys of voters and politicians to see how the two groups differ in their opinion on accepting refugees, and to examine politicians' understanding of their voters' opinions, as well as politicians' views of the economic effect of accepting refugees.

3.1 Surveys on politicians and voters

For voters, we use an annual survey performed by the Swedish SOM-Institute. We denote this *Voter Survey*. The survey has asked questions regarding voters' views of accepting refugees for a long period, creating a yearly quasipanel. The survey is large and aims to provide an unbiased estimate of opinions in the population. For politicians, we use a unique long-run survey of members of parliament that has been carried out, with some gaps, since 1968 (*Riksdagsundersökningen*) We denote this *Politician Survey*. The most recent survey was performed in 2018, and the question on opinions towards accepting refugees has been asked since 1994, which we take as the starting year for our analysis. We use the question "Do you think it is a good idea to accept fewer refugees?" as our main dependent variable in our analysis. It is important to note that this question, as well as the general debate in Sweden, considers refugees and not labor immigration. The answer is coded on a 1–5 scale, with 1 representing "very much agree" and 5 "very much disagree". A lower score therefore represents a more negative view of accepting refugees and vice versa. In addition to this survey question, we have information on both voters' and politicians' age, gender, education and residence. Table 1 provides summary statistics for these surveys.

We complement our analysis with surveys of municipality and regional politicians, performed for the years 2008, 2012 and 2017 (Karlsson, 2017). While shorter, these allow us to ensure that the results do not depend on the sub-sample of nationally elected politicians. Finally, we use a separate panel survey for 2015 and 2017 that includes municipality, re-

Table 1: Summary statistics

	Observations	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.
Voters				
Reduce immigration of refugees	112360	2.6	3	1.29
Age: 18–24	145711	.079	0	.27
Age: 25–34	145711	.13	0	.341
Age: 35–49	145711	.22	0	.417
Age: 50–64	145711	.28	0	.447
Age: >65	145711	.29	0	.451
Education: Basic	147582	.2	0	.398
Education: High School	147582	.43	0	.495
Education: College	147582	.37	0	.483
Female	152015	.52	1	.5
Politicians				
Reduce immigration of refugees	2479	3.8	4	1.18
Age: 18–24	2754	.013	0	.114
Age: 25–34	2754	.13	0	.335
Age: 35–49	2754	.37	0	.482
Age: 50–64	2754	.46	0	.499
Age: >65	2754	.027	0	.162
Education: Basic	2379	.054	0	.227
Education: High School	2379	.25	0	.43
Education: College	2379	.7	1	.458
Female	2803	.45	0	.497

Notes: Summary statistics for main variables over the years 1994-2018.

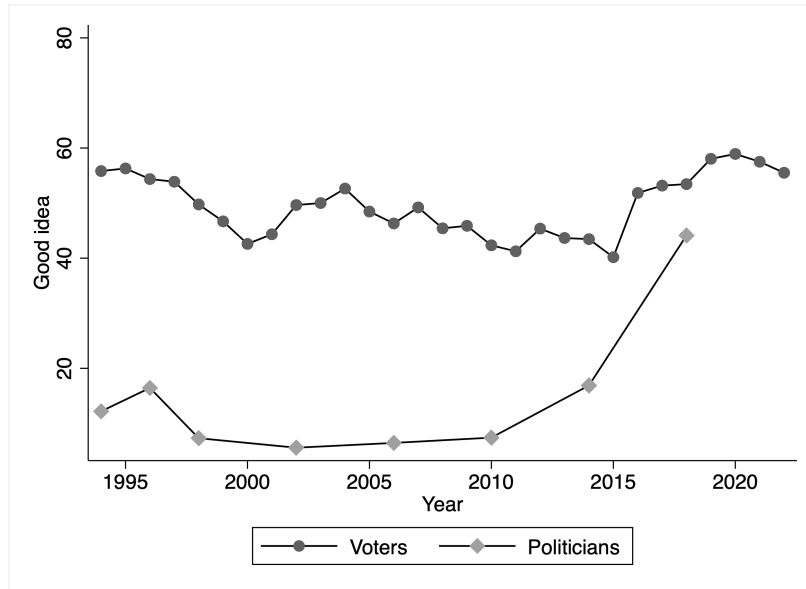
gional and national politicians. The main reason for including this survey is that it is the only survey that has asked politicians about their beliefs about the economic consequences of accepting refugees.

Together, these surveys allow us to analyze the difference between voters and politicians and try to control for the impact of observable characteristics on these differences. For both the voter and politician survey, we plot the difference between the average opinions of voters and politicians regarding accepting refugees in Figure 1 and separated by party in Figure 2. We also check the difference between the typical blocks in Swedish politics, grouping the 4 non-socialist parties together into a right-wing block, the 2 socialist and 1 green party into a left-wing block and the nationalist Sweden Democrats party into a separate block, in Figure A2 in the Appendix.

The difference between voters and politicians is large, regardless of whether we look at the average voter and politicians or at political blocks. If we instead focus on each political party,

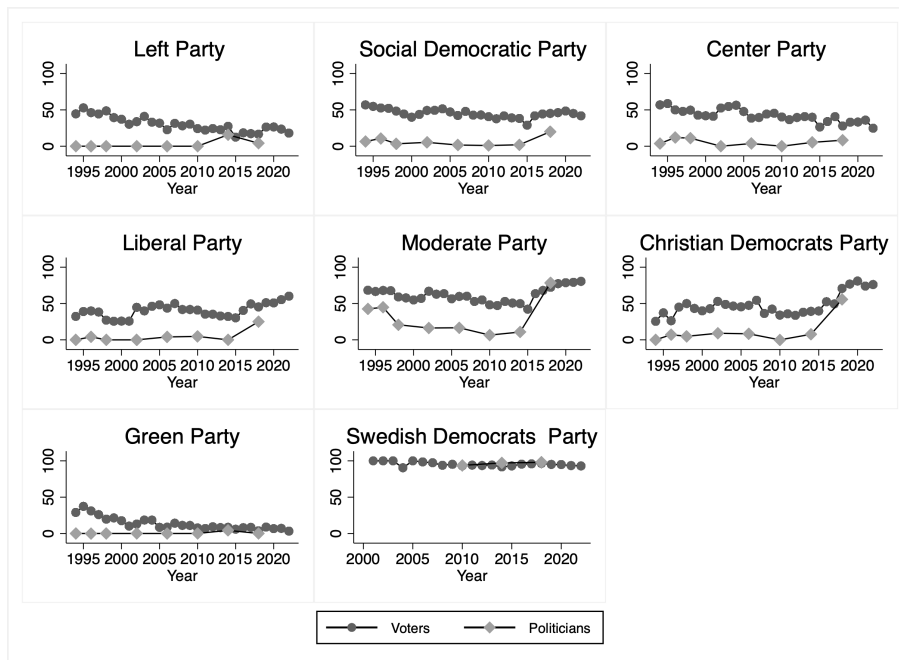
we can see that the two most extreme parties, the Greens and the Sweden Democrats, have the most overlap between politicians and voters. For the two largest political parties, the centre-left Social Democratic Party and the centre-right Moderate Party, there is a large and stable difference between voters and politicians, which closes only in 2018 for the Moderate Party.

Figure 1: Aggregate opinion of voters and politicians



Share of voters and politicians who think it is a good idea to accept fewer refugees.

Figure 2: Opinion of voters and politicians by party affiliation.



Share of voters and politicians who think it is a good idea to accept fewer refugees by political party.

3.2 Econometric analysis

To test whether the difference between voters and politicians is due to observable characteristics, we run the following regression:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta \text{Politician}_{it} + \Gamma_{it} + \delta_i + \theta_t + \epsilon_{it},$$

where Y_{it} is the individual response to each of the survey questions, α is a constant, and β is the coefficient of interest since it tells us the average difference in voters' and politicians' opinions. To account for year-specific effects common to all respondents, we always include year fixed effects, θ_t , and regional fixed effects δ_i . We include a vector of control variables, Γ_{it} , with controls for gender, the level of education (basic, high school, and university), and age (five age brackets). Finally, ϵ_{it} is an error term. Our estimation sample includes only years when surveys were conducted on both voters and politicians.

We first present the aggregate result in Table 2, divided by political party in Table Table 3 and finally and the time-varying results by political party in Figure 3. Starting with the results in Column 1 in Table 2, we find a significant difference between voters and politicians, despite the control variables. On a 5 degree scale, politicians are about a 1 one negative towards accepting fewer refugees than voters.

Since increased political competition should force politicians to adopt to the voters positions, and that a new party allows voters to be better represented, we should see an effect of the entry of the Swedish Democrats in 2010. We interact the dummy variable for politicians with a dummy variable that is equal to one for the years 2010 and beyond. The coefficient in Column 2 is significant and negative, which confirms the political competition theory. Notice that the dummy variable for Politicians is even greater than in Column 1, due to the fact that this coefficient now measures the time period 1994-2006 when the distance between voters and politicians was the largest observed. Our main results do not change when we switch to an ordered logit estimator in Column 3.

Turning to Table 3, we find significant differences between voters and politicians in all political parties. The largest spread between voters and politicians can be found in the Liberal Party, with a coefficient of 1.40. The Swedish Democrat politicians are the only ones who are more positive towards accepting fewer refugees than their voters, but the difference is small (-0.18). The results also hold if we switch from using ordinary least squares (OLS) as an estimator to an ordered logit estimator. The results are presented in Table A1.

To see if the results change over time, in Figure 3 we find large significant differences between voters and politicians in all parties until 2018. In 2018, the gap between politicians and voters closes for the Center, Liberal, Moderate, Christian Democrat and Green Party. In the Left Party and the Social Democrat Party, politicians are slightly more negative to accepting fewer refugees than their voters even in 2018. Swedish Democrat politicians are slightly more positive towards accepting fewer refugees than their voters, but the difference is small. It is interesting to note the spread between the politicians and voters for the Green and Left party. Despite their voters being negative towards reducing immigration, these politicians are even more negative, creating a gap between voters and politicians. It is interesting to note that the difference between voters and politicians disappears due to politicians adopting the opinion of voters, the opposite of what has often been discussed in previous literature finding that politicians shape the opinion of voters (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 2017; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021).

As a robustness check, we run the same regressions for municipality and regional politicians. The results in Table A2 and Figure A4 in the Appendix show a large difference between voters and politicians for most years.

Table 2: Aggregate OLS and ordered logit results

Voters and politicians opinions			
	(1)	(2)	(3)
	OLS	OLS	O-Logit
Politician	0.97*** (0.03)	1.15*** (0.03)	1.47*** (0.04)
Female	0.16*** (0.01)	0.16*** (0.01)	0.24*** (0.02)
Age bracket: 25-34	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.16*** (0.05)
Age bracket: 35-49	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.16*** (0.05)
Age bracket: 50-64	-0.16*** (0.03)	-0.17*** (0.03)	-0.22*** (0.05)
Age bracket: >65	-0.20*** (0.03)	-0.21*** (0.03)	-0.25*** (0.05)
Education: High School	0.18*** (0.02)	0.17*** (0.02)	0.27*** (0.03)
Education: College	0.76*** (0.02)	0.75*** (0.02)	1.11*** (0.03)
Politician#Post 2010		-0.48*** (0.06)	
Constant	2.28*** (0.05)	2.26*** (0.05)	
Observations	27,084	27,084	27,084
R-squared	0.15	0.15	

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Regional and time fixed effects.

Table 3: OLS regressions by party

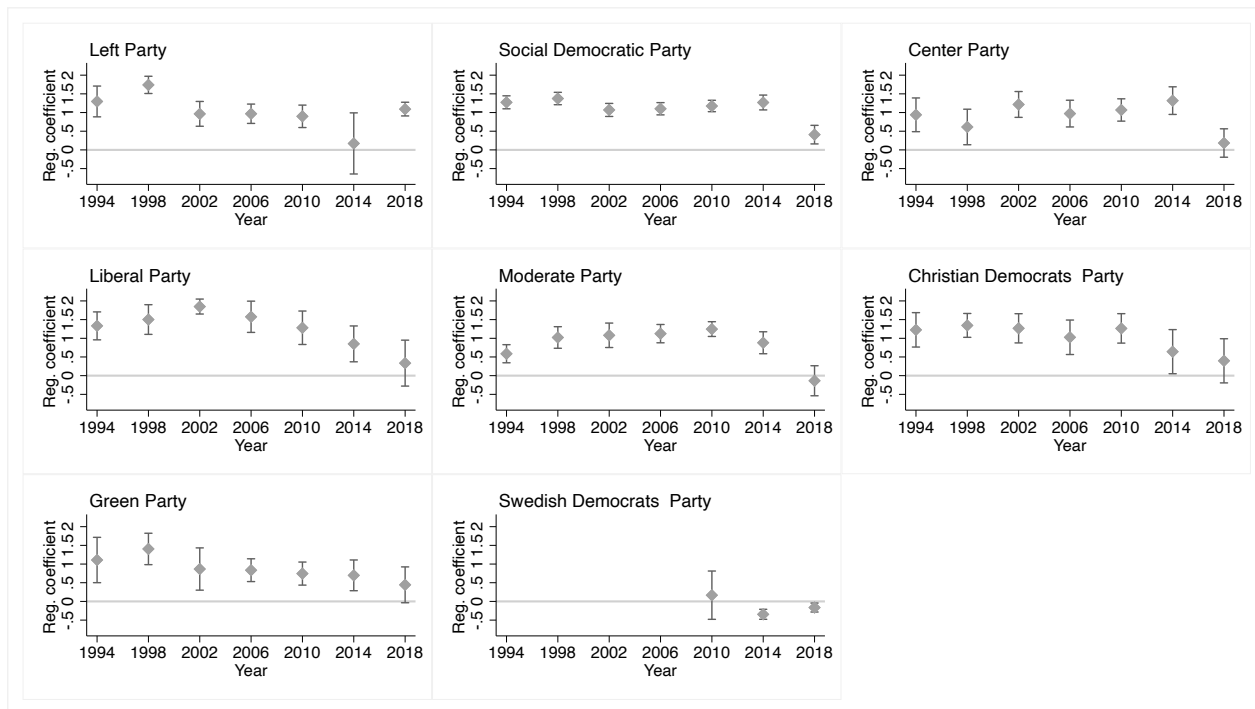
Party	Difference between voters and politicians opinions by party							
	(1) V	(2) S	(3) C	(4) L	(5) M	(6) KD	(7) MP	(8) SD
Politician	1.15*** (0.08)	1.10*** (0.04)	0.90*** (0.08)	1.40*** (0.08)	0.90*** (0.05)	1.08*** (0.09)	0.92*** (0.09)	-0.18*** (0.07)
Female	0.19*** (0.06)	0.05** (0.02)	0.05 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	0.07** (0.03)	0.17*** (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	0.02 (0.04)
Age bracket: 25–34	-0.24** (0.10)	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.12)	-0.03 (0.12)	-0.05 (0.06)	0.13 (0.16)	-0.10 (0.10)	0.03 (0.10)
Age bracket: 35–49	-0.23** (0.10)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.11 (0.11)	0.09 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.15)	-0.14 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.09)
Age bracket: 50–64	-0.35*** (0.10)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.15 (0.11)	0.05 (0.11)	-0.12** (0.06)	-0.04 (0.15)	-0.21** (0.09)	-0.05 (0.09)
Age bracket: >65	-0.22* (0.12)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.23** (0.12)	0.10 (0.11)	-0.08 (0.06)	0.05 (0.15)	-0.29** (0.11)	0.06 (0.10)
Education: High School	0.58*** (0.09)	0.21*** (0.03)	0.23*** (0.08)	0.36*** (0.10)	0.21*** (0.04)	0.22*** (0.08)	0.36*** (0.11)	-0.09 (0.06)
Education: College	1.29*** (0.09)	0.76*** (0.04)	0.81*** (0.09)	0.85*** (0.09)	0.58*** (0.05)	0.62*** (0.09)	1.02*** (0.11)	-0.04 (0.07)
Constant	2.43*** (0.16)	2.40*** (0.08)	2.49*** (0.17)	2.44*** (0.17)	1.75*** (0.09)	2.73*** (0.20)	2.49*** (0.19)	1.12*** (0.10)
Observations	2,036	8,436	1,784	2,063	5,940	1,650	1,784	1,231
R squared	0.28	0.17	0.22	0.21	0.15	0.22	0.21	0.03

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Regional and time fixed effects.

Figure 3: Time-dependent OLS results by political party



Point estimates of the difference between voters and politicians with 95% confidence intervals. Time and regional fixed effects, robust std. errors.

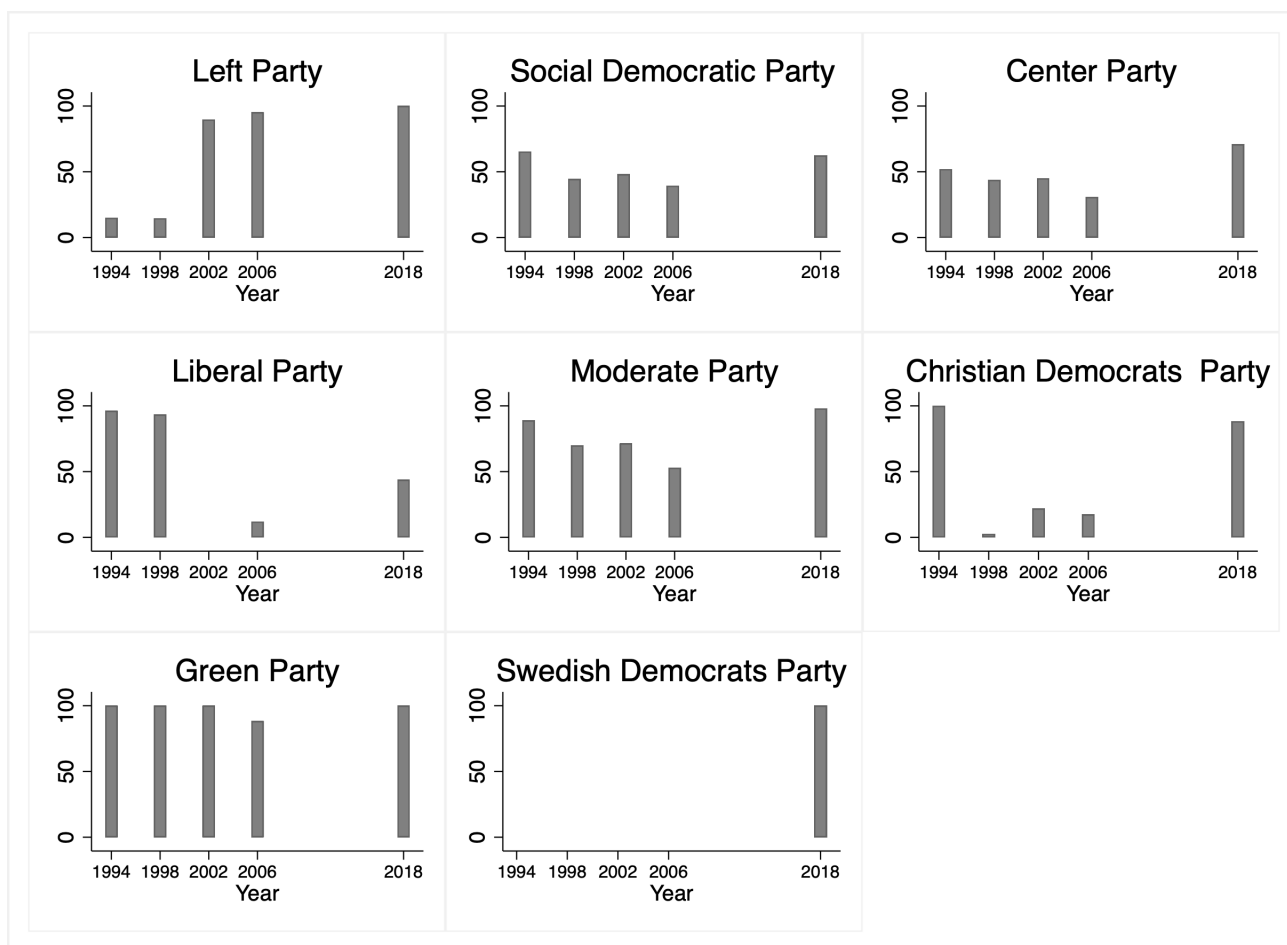
3.3 Politicians' beliefs about their own voters

Could the large differences between voters that we find be due to politicians being unaware of what their voters want? We are able to test this, due to the survey question “What do you think the majority of your own party’s voters think of the following proposal” in the politician survey. This questions is coded as a binary question "What do you think the majority of your own party’s voters think of the following proposal" In this case, they are therefore asked if they think that the majority of their own voters think accepting fewer refugees is a good or bad proposal.

Unfortunately, this question has not been asked for all years regarding accepting refugees, and we lack answers for the years 2010 and 2014. Nevertheless, we have sufficient information to see whether politicians have a solid understanding of their voters' preferences, something

that previous research has found a surprising lack of (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Pereira, 2021). For each year and party, we calculate the share of politicians who correctly identify what the majority of their voters believe, and we plot the results in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Share of politicians who correctly identify the opinion of the majority of their own voters



There is no data for the years 2010 and 2014 and hence no data for the Sweden Democrats except for 2018. In 2002, 0% of Liberal Party politicians correctly reported their voters' opinion.

In general, politicians have fairly low success in predicting the opinion of their voters when the voters disagree with the politicians. When the majority of Liberal Party voters switched from thinking that accepting fewer refugees is a bad policy to being in favor of accepting fewer refugees in 2002, not a single politician correctly identified what the majority of their own voters believed. The Liberal Party also had the greatest difference between voters and

politicians in Table 3.

The Left Party's politicians had a poor track record in 1994 and 1998, when the majority of their voters favored fewer refugees, but much better when the majority of their voters had the same opinion as the politicians in 2002 and onward. The politicians in the two most extreme parties, the Greens and the Sweden Democrats, are also the most correct in their reporting of their voters' opinion. In both of these parties, the immigration policy is an important (for the Swedish Democrats *the* most important) issue where the party leaders have a strong and clear public opinion, leading to strong consensus between voters and politicians.

The different opinions of politicians compared to their own voters could therefore be due to politicians being unaware of what their voters want, and only changing their opinion when political competition made them aware of this misrepresentation. Politicians seem to assume that voters have the same opinion as they have rather than seek information on the subject. However, the lack of correct answers to this question is somewhat surprising, since the information is publicly available to politicians. It should be no problem for politicians to look up what their own voters believe regarding accepting refugees.

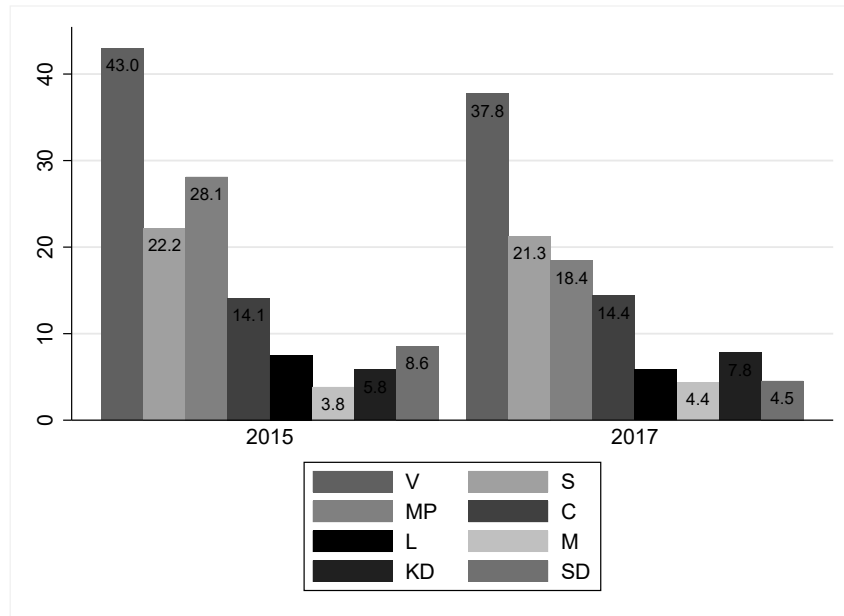
3.4 Expert evaluations of the consequences of immigration and politicians' beliefs

Since the difference between voters and politicians cannot be explained solely by observable data, the difference should be due to differences in personal opinions and ideology between voters and politicians. If politicians, e.g., believe that accepting refugees is positive for the economy, they might wish to pursue a more open policy than their voters prefer since they believe that they are acting in voters' long-term interest.

In two different surveys on politicians' opinions in 2015 and 2017 ($N = 1,514$ and $1,020$, respectively), both local and national politicians were asked how they believe accepting refugees affects the economy, in both the long and the short run. We plot the share that said they believe that accepting refugees is positive for the economy in the short and long run in

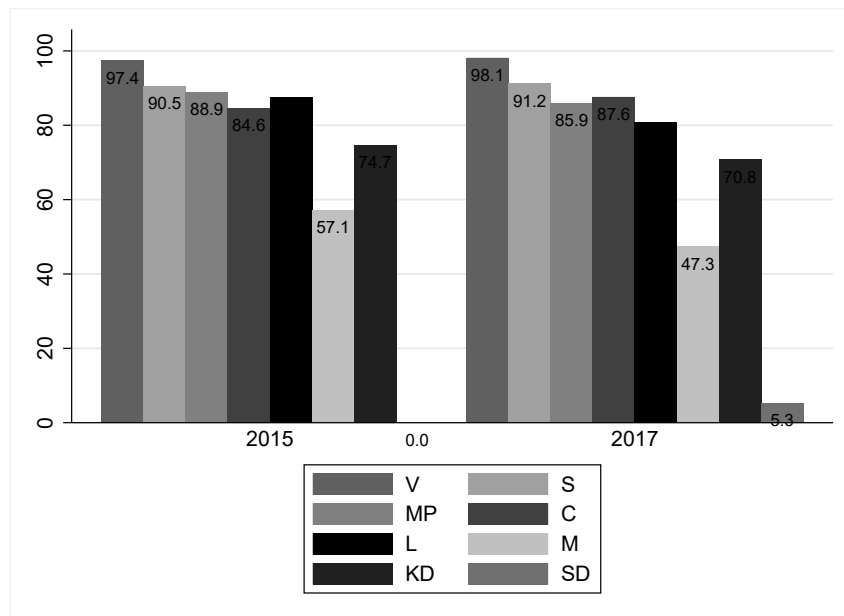
Figures 5 and 6. While a limited number of politicians believe that accepting refugees is positive in the short run, a clear majority of all politicians believe that the impact is positive in the long run. There is not much of a change from 2015 to 2017, despite quite drastic changes in Swedish official policy during this period, with the government trying to reduce the number of immigrants coming to Sweden after November 2015. This finding indicates that the generous policies were not related to groupthink in terms of peer pressure. Swedish politicians did not change their positive evaluation, even though the policies changed. Rather, it implies that politicians truly believed that the future was bright. However, what was the evidence for such optimism?

Figure 5: Share of politicians who believe that accepting refugees is positive for the economy in the short run.



V= Left Party, S = Social Democratic Party, MP = Green Party, C = Center Party, L = Liberal Party, M = Moderate Party, KD = Christian Democrat Party, SD = Swedish Democrats Party.

Figure 6: Share of politicians who believe that accepting refugees is positive for the economy in the long run



See Figure 5 for party abbreviations.

To study if politicians beliefs of the economic impact of accepting refugees is reasonable, we survey, to the best of our knowledge, all available peer-reviewed papers that study the fiscal impact of immigration to Sweden. It is of course possible that the respondents have interpreted the question “good for the economy in the long run” in a very broad way, such that it is good for GDP growth at 100 years, which is difficult to study in a proper general equilibrium model. Nevertheless, looking at the fiscal impact should be a decent proxy for the aggregate economic effects, especially since the fiscal impact is affected by employment and wages, which are important factors for economic growth. We summarize these papers in Table 4. There is no evidence that accepting refugees is good for the economy in these peer-reviewed papers.

Table 4: Expert studies on the fiscal effects of immigration in peer-reviewed journals

Author	Results
Ekberg (1999)	Positive until the 1970s, negative afterwards
Gustafsson & Österberg (2001)	Negative following the 90s
Storesletten (2003)	Negative, avg USD 20,500 per immigrant
Ekberg (2011)	Positive or negative depending on simulated labor market conditions
Ruist (2015)	Negative
Aldén & Hammarstedt (2019)	Negative
Ruist (2020)	Negative

Of course, politicians might not read peer-reviewed studies. Instead, we focus on expert reports by government agencies and expert groups, such as The Expert Group on Public Economics (ESO), the Swedish Fiscal Policy Council (FPR) and the long-term survey of the Swedish economy (LU) by the Ministry of Finance. We summarize these reports in Table 5. Like the peer-reviewed papers, there is no evidence for positive economic effects from accepting refugees in the expert reports. It should be noted that there is a clear overlap between the authors of the peer-reviewed studies and the expert reports, with peer-reviewed studies being converted to expert reports and vice versa.

The overwhelming conclusion is that refugee immigration to Sweden for the past 30 years has been an economic burden, although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact size of the effect.

Table 5: Expert studies on the fiscal effects of immigration in official government publications

Author	Results
Ekberg (2009)	Negative
Flood & Ruist (2015)	Negative
Långtidsutredningen (2015)	Negative
Aldén & Hammarstedt (2016)	Negative
Ruist (2018)	Negative

This is mainly due to the high levels of persistent unemployment among refugees, resulting in low lifetime earnings, a low taxable income, and dependency on public transfers. This result is, of course, endogenous to Sweden’s current labor market regulation and the scope of the welfare state. Nevertheless, the welfare state and regulated labor market have been stable institutions in Sweden since the Second World War, and it is not obvious that they can easily be abolished ([Bergh & Erlingsson, 2009](#)). Politicians should reasonably take these difficulties into consideration when they think of the long-term economic effects.

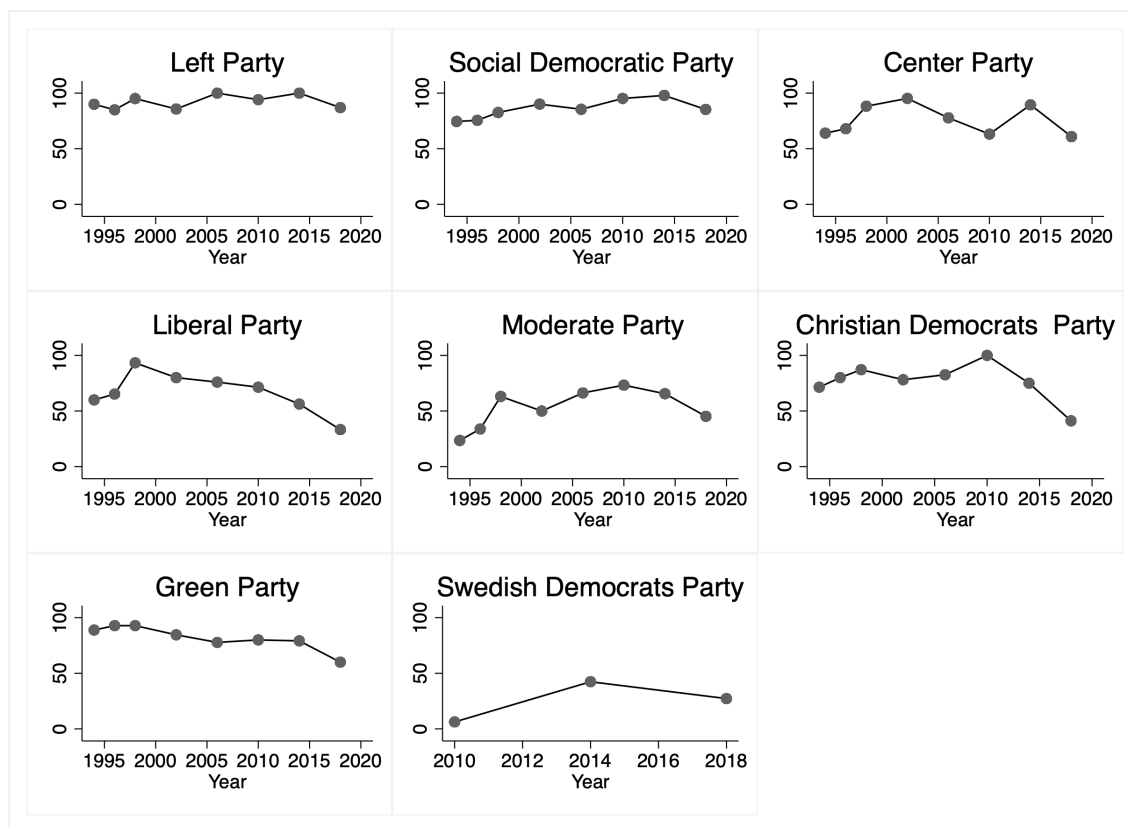
Politicians seem instead to have a much rosier view of the economic impact than experts. This view did not change much between 2015 and 2017, despite the European refugee crisis and the changing of Sweden’s official policy. We interpret this as evidence for deeply entrenched beliefs regarding the positive effect of immigration that do not respond to new information. Indeed, the Swedish National Audit Office (*Riksrevisionen*) pointed out that government propositions did not include a consequence analysis of the effects of immigration, despite this being required in new bills ([Riksrevisionen, 2017](#)).

3.5 Politicians’ engagement in immigration

Finally, to study whether politicians have high policy engagement regarding immigration, we utilize a key question in politician survey. The question "How important are the following duties to you personally as a member of the Riksdag?" allows multiple answers, one being "Promote the interest/views of refugees/immigrants". The answers are coded on a 1–4 scale, with 1 representing that it is very important and 4 not at all important. In [Figure 7](#), we

plot the share of politicians who answer 1 or 2.

Figure 7: Importance of promoting the interests of refugees and immigrants



Politicians from almost all political parties answer that it is important to promote the interests of refugees and immigrants. While there has been a decrease on this measure among, e.g., the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats party, there still seems to be strong political support for the importance of promoting the interest of refugees and immigrants. It is interesting to note that even in the main centre-right political party, the Moderate Party, more than 50 percent of politicians agree with this statement, although immigrants and refugees make up a small portion of their voters. While not conclusive, this suggests that politicians care heavily about the interests of refugees and immigrants even if these are not important in terms of the number of votes that they deliver. This could in turn have led them to disregard information on their voters' preferences and the economic impact of immigration.

3.6 Discussion

Our results show that there are large differences between voters and politicians in their opinion towards accepting fewer refugees. These differences persist even when we control for relevant factors such as age, gender and education. These differences exist in all political parties with the exception of the anti-immigration party Swedish Democrats (where politicians are slightly more negative towards refugees than their voters). The gap between voters and politicians only starts to close following the 2018 election, although some parties still have a gap between voters and politicians. Despite that the opinion of voters in this issue was widely available to politicians, they typically had a poor understanding of their own voters' opinion when voters had different opinions compared to politicians. One reason for politicians' different opinions could be that they believe that accepting refugees is good for the economy in the long run and that this would therefore be beneficial for their voters. There is, however, little evidence for the such long-term economic effects that politicians believe exist. Furthermore, almost all politicians believe that it is important for them to promote the interests of refugees.

Taken together, this suggests that politicians engaged in wishful thinking and policy engagement, leading them to dismiss information that went against their personal opinion. Our data cannot give a clear answer to why this representation gap was created and persisted for such a long time. There could be several, interconnected, reasons why politicians preferred a different policy than voters. They clearly believed that accepting refugees was good for the economy in the long run and could therefore be viewed as acting in what they believed was their voters' long-term interest. Group-think and peer-pressure could lead to dissenting voices not being heard regarding voters' opinions being dismissed. The sensitive nature of immigration, and fears of being branded as xenophobic, could also have played a part. While neither voters' preferences nor expert evaluations seem to have affected politicians' opinions, increased political competition does seem to lead to a better alignment of voters' and politicians' preferences.

4 Conclusion

The policies towards immigrants has been hotly debated in both Europe and the U.S., with populists claiming that they represent the true will of the people compared to elite politicians (Edo et al., 2019; Rodrik, 2021; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022; Alesina & Tabellini, 2022). In 2015, Sweden experienced a large influx of asylum seekers. In total, 163,000 asylum seekers applied to stay in Sweden. In November of the same year, Sweden changed its policies and imposed stricter regulations for asylum seekers and border controls. The shift was dramatic, with the then prime minister switching from clearly advocating against border controls earlier in the fall towards a much more stern policy a few months later. The political parties went from a consensus, where generous refugee policies were regarded as preferable and a win-win for refugees and society, to a situation where the parties blamed each other for irresponsible policies regarding the large number of immigrants in Sweden and its demanding consequences (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021). One of the top priorities of the new centre-right government, installed in October 2022, was to drastically reduce the number of asylum seekers to Sweden and even encourage immigrants who have problems finding a job to leave the country.

In this study we try to explain the large and persistent differences in opinion between voters and politicians, and how these have shifted dramatically over time. Our analysis has been possible due to a unique combination of repeated surveys of all members of parliament as well as a representative sample of the Swedish population. Such long-term differences in opinion between politicians and voters can be stable depending on the equilibrium political competition (Johansson et al., 2023; Iaryczower et al., 2022b) or on how much weight politicians put on re-election chances relative to that on ideology (Iaryczower et al., 2022a). These differences in opinion do not depend on observable factors such as education or age, and exist in almost all Swedish political parties. Our results suggest that politicians can be quite far from voters in terms of responsiveness and personal opinions for a sustained period of time, but that political competition can lead to politicians adopting to the voters

opinions.

Compared to most previous research on misrepresentation, this is unlikely to be the results of corruption, rent-seeking or corporate lobbying ([Acemoglu et al., 2016](#); [Zingales, 2017](#)). Instead, the differences seems to be due to convictions, wishful thinking and ignoring relevant information. Such an explanation could be better understood by research in moral psychology, rather than standard rational choice ([Haidt, 2012](#)).

Since a likely reason for this re-alignment of politicians preferences is political competition, greater entry barriers in politics and political collusion could lead to larger gaps in preferences and vice versa ([Tullock, 1965](#)). An increasing use of referendums might be a useful tool for better aligning voters opinion with actual policy ([Matsusaka, 2022](#)).

As mentioned in the beginning of the article, Edmund Burke was not re-elected to represent Bristol. Burke failed to convince his voters that there was a tension between their opinion and their own interest. It might be a lesson to be learned from Burke's fate as a politician. We need to better understand the consequences of what happens when politicians are neither well informed nor able to change the public opinion. In Burke's case it ended his career. In Sweden, it changed the entire political landscape.

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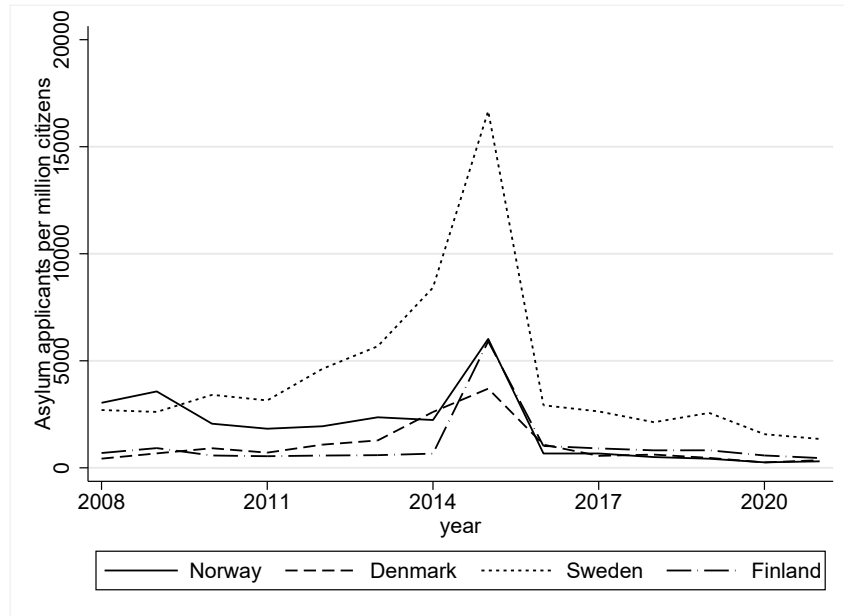
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A Additional figures and tables

Figure A1: Asylum applications per million citizens 2008–2021.



Data: Eurostat.

Figure A2: Voters and politicians opinion on accepting fewer refugees by block.

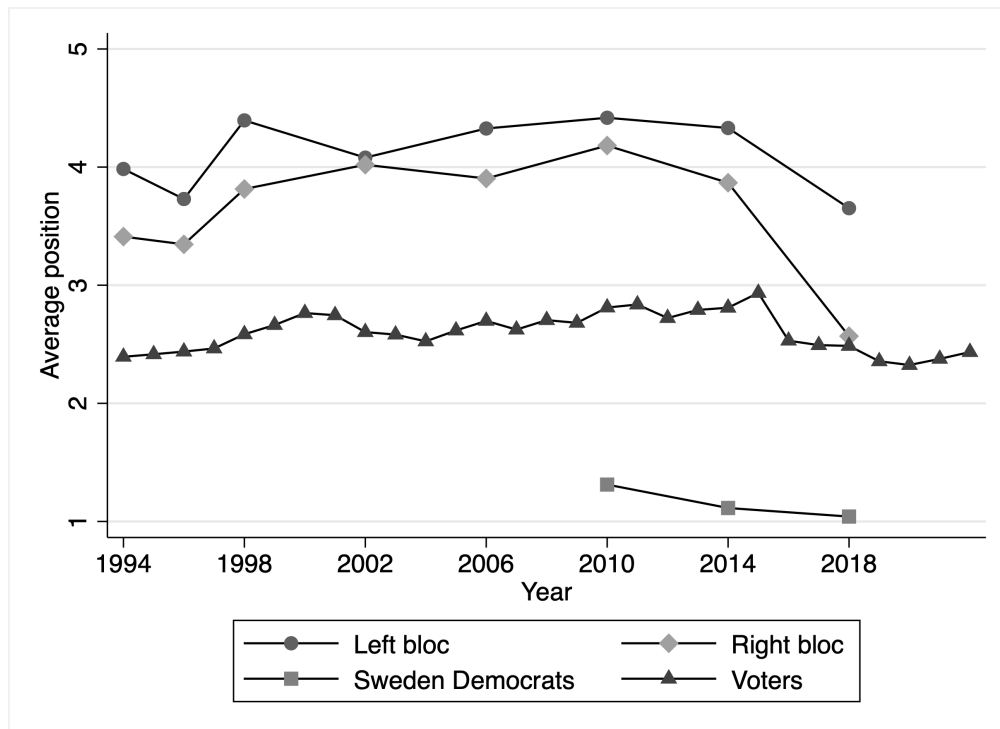


Table A1: Ordered logit regressions by party

	Difference between voters' and politicians' opinions by party							
Party	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	V	S	C	L	M	KD	MP	SD
Politician	2.14*** (0.18)	1.72*** (0.06)	1.55*** (0.15)	2.59*** (0.19)	1.44*** (0.09)	1.69*** (0.16)	1.78*** (0.23)	-1.43*** (0.55)
Female	0.29*** (0.09)	0.08** (0.04)	0.09 (0.09)	0.01 (0.08)	0.11** (0.05)	0.26*** (0.09)	0.10 (0.09)	0.09 (0.17)
Age bracket: 25–34	-0.30* (0.16)	-0.11 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.21)	-0.04 (0.20)	-0.10 (0.11)	0.18 (0.25)	-0.12 (0.17)	-0.06 (0.40)
Age bracket: 35–49	-0.30** (0.14)	-0.08 (0.10)	-0.16 (0.19)	0.14 (0.18)	-0.02 (0.10)	-0.05 (0.24)	-0.26* (0.14)	-0.38 (0.39)
Age bracket: 50–64	-0.51*** (0.15)	-0.02 (0.10)	-0.25 (0.19)	0.10 (0.18)	-0.16* (0.10)	-0.07 (0.23)	-0.34** (0.15)	-0.28 (0.37)
Age bracket: >65	-0.34* (0.18)	0.00 (0.10)	-0.33* (0.20)	0.19 (0.19)	-0.10 (0.10)	0.08 (0.23)	-0.45*** (0.17)	0.22 (0.36)
Education: High School	0.78*** (0.13)	0.35*** (0.05)	0.39*** (0.14)	0.64*** (0.16)	0.41*** (0.08)	0.37*** (0.14)	0.53*** (0.16)	-0.18 (0.19)
Education: College	1.79*** (0.13)	1.21*** (0.06)	1.34*** (0.15)	1.40*** (0.16)	1.02*** (0.08)	1.01*** (0.14)	1.57*** (0.17)	0.05 (0.23)
Observations	2,036	8,436	1,784	2,063	5,940	1,650	1,784	1,231

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Regional and time fixed effects. Robust std. errors.

Figure A3: Share of voters and local politicians who think it is a good idea to accept fewer refugees by party

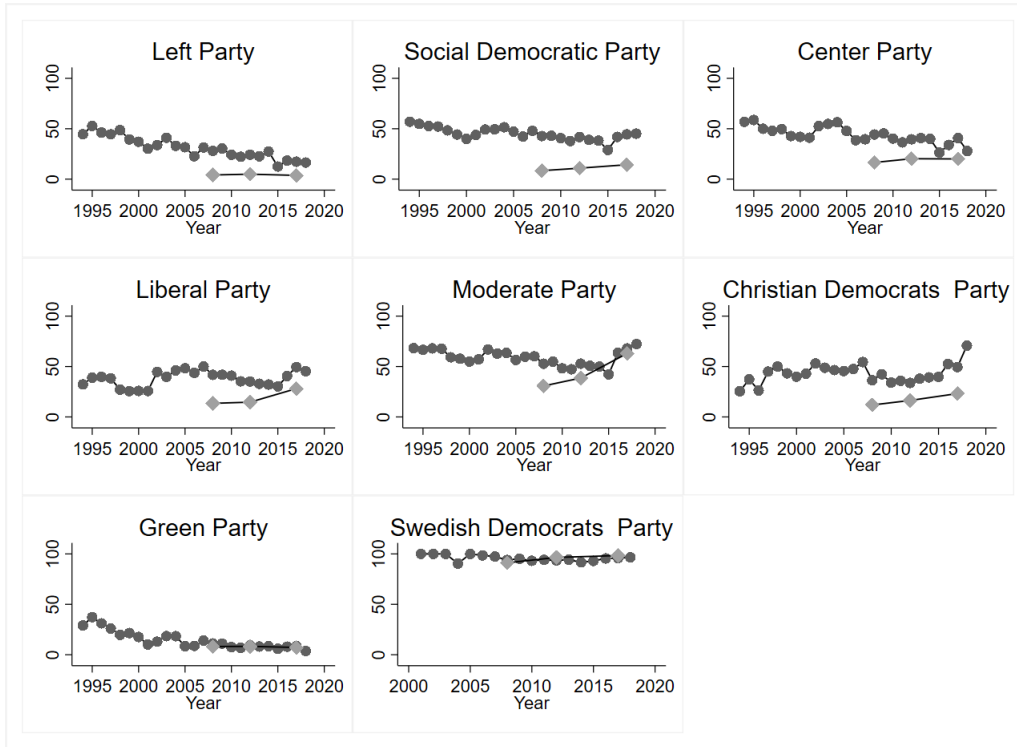
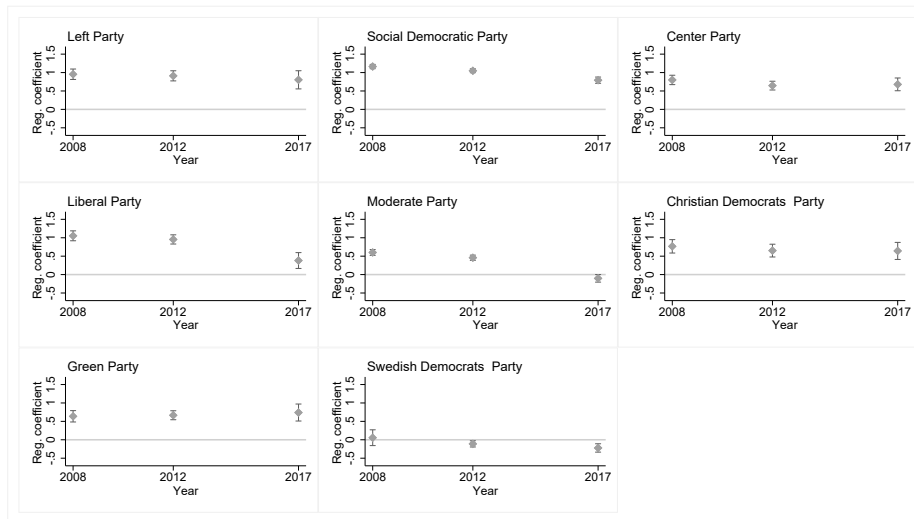


Figure A4: Time-dependent OLS results by political party for local politicians



Point estimates of the difference between voters and local politicians with 95% confidence intervals.

Table A2: Regression for voters and local politicians

Voters and local politicians' opinions		
	(1)	(2)
	OLS	Ordered logit
Local Politician	0.84*** (0.01)	1.22*** (0.02)
Female	0.26*** (0.01)	0.37*** (0.02)
Age: 25–34	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.07)
Age: 35–49	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.06)
Age: 50–64	-0.12*** (0.04)	-0.22*** (0.06)
Age: 65–80	-0.29*** (0.04)	-0.44*** (0.06)
Education: High School	0.11*** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.03)
Education: College	0.43*** (0.02)	0.63*** (0.03)
Constant	2.63*** (0.05)	
Observations	37,537	37,537
R squared	0.15	

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Regional and time fixed effects. Robust std. errors.

Table A3: Correlation matrix for main regression variables

	1	2	3	4
Reduce immigration of refugees (1)	1			
Age bracket (2)	-0.102***	1		
Education (3)	0.235***	-0.274***	1	
Female (4)	0.0941***	-0.0254***	0.0830***	1