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Received: 30 April 2023 | Revised: 1 October 2023 | Accepted: 24 November 2023

DOI: 10.1111/gove.12842

Governance WILEY

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Migration debates in the political party arena during the Covid-19 pandemic in Austria

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Funding information
Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the economic contribution of migrant workers in maintaining essential services and access to goods. This new perspective on migrants as essential workers raised expectations in migration studies that it could reinvigorate an inclusive setting in terms of migration debates and policies. Building on this potential, we examine migration debates in the political party arena with a focus on centrist parties. The analysis focuses on Austria, a country with a high dependence on migrant labor in key sectors and a long-standing contestation of migration across the political party spectrum. Drawing on an analysis of parliamentary contributions and press releases by the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) during the pandemic, the study finds that the debates did not change fundamentally. Whilst external shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic have a limited potential to reverse the focus on unwanted migration in European party politics, crises can lead the political center to reemphasize bifurcation strategies in response to shifts in public discourse, as this study of the Austrian case during the pandemic suggests.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic put the spotlight on low-wage workers, many of whom are migrants, and their key role in maintaining essential services and access to goods. While migrants make up less than 5% of the global workforce, they are far more numerous in 'essential' labor roles (Kumar, 2021; OECD, 2020). During the pandemic, the perception of workers previously referred to as low skilled suddenly changed in receiving countries across Europe and North America. From healthcare to deliveries, from geriatric care to the agricultural sector, low-skilled migrant workers were now seen as heroes. Across Europe, people collectively clapped for what were now called 'frontline' or 'essential' workers, who were "(seemingly) willing to sacrifice their lives" for the nation (Tinsley & Begum, 2020).

This raised expectations among migration scholars that this public recognition of migrants as 'essential' workers during the pandemic would potentially allow for more inclusive policies (e.g., Dempster et al., 2020), and create a positive environment for migrant rights (Fernández-Reino et al., 2020). Public opinion research has similarly emphasized that the significant decline in the salience of migration can open windows of opportunity for new migration policies and debates as the 'noise' of immigration politics decreases (Dennison & Geddes, 2019). Indeed, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, citizens of the European Union (EU) ranked health as the most important issue facing the European Union, ahead of the economic situation and public finances, followed by the environment. Migration, by contrast, had dropped significantly, ranking solely at fifth place during the pandemic (Eurobarometer 94, winter 2020/21). At the same time, in 2020 there was a shift toward more favorable attitudes toward migrant workers, especially those working in the healthcare sector (Carter, 2020). The pandemic also hurt the anti-immigrant radical right in terms of voting intentions, especially initially, as it diverted attention away from the populist radical right's strengths (Crulli, 2023).

To date, much of the research on migration and political parties (see e.g., Gessler & Hunger, 2022; Hutter & Kriesi, 2022) has focused on the 2015 'migration crisis'. However, as studies on the politicization of migration have argued (see e.g., Kovář, 2024), research needs to include other crises to better understand how crises in general affect long-established portrayals of immigration and foster newly emerging framings and interpretations of it. Put differently, the focus on Covid-19 introduces a case where perceptions of threat and unwanted immigrants may not be readily applicable, thus working toward a more general understanding of the politicization and framing of immigrants in times of crisis.

In this contribution, we analyze, whether the reliance on migrant labor in key sectors during the pandemic influenced debates on migration in the political party arena. We hereby focus on centrist parties in a country with a long immigration history, and a relatively high reliance on migrant labor during the pandemic: Austria. Centrist parties have traditionally been torn on migration issues and have experienced increasing pressure from populist radical right parties to adjust their rhetoric and policies toward a more restrictive, illiberal pole (Mondon & Winter 2020). Austria with its strong anti-immigrant radical right is a paradigmatic case in this regard.

Whilst migration governance has become an increasingly densely populated field in terms of governance actors, political parties remain key players in shaping the migration governance arena. The way in which the causes and effects of migration are understood and debated by political parties is a fundamental driver of the politicization of migration, which in turn has far-reaching implications for how migration is regulated. Important comparative work on migration debates across Europe has emphasized that it is indeed centrist parties that play a dominant

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role in the politicization of migration (Green Pederson, 2019; Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015a). The analysis of centrist parties is therefore central to understanding the dynamics of migration politics.

To explore the question about the impact of the essential worker perspective, we have collected and systematically coded parliamentary contributions and press releases of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP, center-right) and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ, center-left) between March 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020. We show that the debates in the political party arena have not changed fundamentally. Identified differences in the debate between the two centrist parties are driven by different ideological party profiles and previously established positions and framings, as well as government-opposition dynamics. The migration debates of the political center are characterized by a bifurcation strategy that differentiates between different (needed, wanted and deserving vs. unwanted) migrant groups. Who these groups are differs and is driven by different underlying perspectives (instrumental vs. moral) across the two parties.

2 | THE POLITICAL CENTRE: FAR FROM IRRELEVANT TO THE POLITICS OF MIGRATION

For several reasons, centrist parties are important actors when analyzing questions of migration politics in the context of the pandemic. Several European elections just before the pandemic, including the Austrian elections, saw losses for the radical right, and reinvigorated centrist parties (Williams & Hunger, 2022, p. 544). As parties in office across Europe during the pandemic, they also had to ensure that the economy did not collapse completely, and that basic services, often carried out by migrant workers, were maintained. However, we still know little about the effect of Covid-19 on migration debates of these parties. Despite their central role in migration governance and in driving the politicization of migration in the past decades (see Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015a, 2015b), the focus of existing research has been on the populist radical right (see Bale & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2021; Manwaring, 2021).

Many centrist parties across Western Europe have moved to the right on migration issues in recent decades (Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger, & Mudde, 2022; Spoon & Klüver, 2020). They have been far from consistent, though: Most centrist parties, with a broad membership and electoral base, are confronted with conflicting interests and preferences within their own party, the electorate, and organized interests (see Geddes et al., 2020; Odmalm & Bale, 2015). When it comes to migration, the profile of centrist parties is hence in flux and tended to be ambivalent before the pandemic.

As for the center-left (social democracy), not only have their former constituencies shrunk significantly in the recent decades as the working class has declined, but their profile has also changed. Social democratic parties across Europe have been forced to mobilize and appeal to new segments of society to maintain their electoral strength or limit their losses (Abou-Chadi, Cohen, & Wagner, 2022). Although they tend to be more liberal than their conservative opponents (Carvalho & Ruedin, 2018), often center-left parties have also targeted voters who are skeptical about migration. In doing so, center-left parties have sought to balance nativist claims — defending their 'own' workers — with human rights expectations (Manwaring, 2021).

Contrary to popular assumptions about the 'anti-migrant working class', the working class (made up of service and production workers) is split on attitudes to immigration, with production workers slightly less favorable of immigrants and multiculturalism than service workers (Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger, & Mudde, 2022, pp. 13–14). Moreover, immigrants themselves are a

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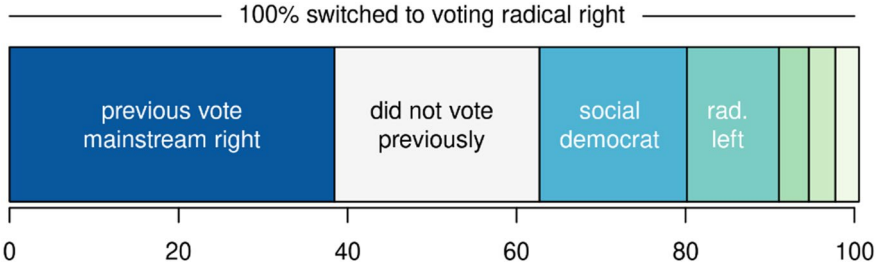


FIGURE 1 Vote switching from other parties to radical right parties, Western Europe, 2000–2018. Redrawn from Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger, & Mudde, 2022, Figure 1, based on national election surveys in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Vote switching in percentages of voters who switched to a radical right party (100% = all voters who switched to voting for a radical right party). Example: almost 40% of voters who switched to the radical right previously voted for a party of the mainstream right (dark blue, on the left).

significant part of the contemporary working class in Europe, that is, groups that tend to vote against (with variances across groups and countries) anti-migrant, nativist parties and causes to the extent that they are enfranchized (see e.g., Bhambra, 2017). Social democratic parties have lost increasingly educated segments of the new working class, with more favorable views on immigration to their political opponents. These segments of the electorate have instead opted to vote for Green or radical left parties (Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger, & Mudde, 2022). Put simply, research suggests that there is less to gain and potentially even more to lose by mobilizing anti-immigrant attitudes (see also Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020, for a slightly contradicting perspective Spoon & Klüver, 2020). However, as noted above, while social democratic parties aim to balance liberal and restrictive approaches, they have in the past supported, and initiated, strict immigration policies (Hinnfors et al., 2012; Manwaring, 2021; Salo & Rydgren, 2021).

Migration is also a challenging issue for center-right parties. Center-right parties face a dilemma between market liberalism and sovereignty/nationalism: Many of the center-right's traditional core voters are well educated and in the higher income bracket, with managers, small business owners, and the self-employed over-represented (Harteveld, 2021). Economic conservatism, that is, the support for free-market capitalism and weak state intervention, remains the most important issue for center-right supporters (ibid., 64). In advanced market economies, migrant labor has become a structural requirement for economic growth. As a result, important segments of the traditional center-right electorate tend to favor open borders. Moving too far to the right on migration issues can frighten economically liberal voters, as well as business sectors, which tend to be important supporters of the center-right (Hadj Abdou et al., 2022). Simultaneously, the center-right electorate is also composed of more culturally conservative voters who can be mobilized by the radical right. The center-right needs to appeal to voters who would otherwise find in the radical right a convincing alternative to vote for. In terms of positional proximity and issue ownership, the populist radical right is after all, the closest competitor of the center-right (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020). Indeed, the center-right has lost most votes to the populist radical right in the recent decades (Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger, & Mudde, 2022; see Figure 1, which shows that almost 40% of voters switching to radical right parties previously voted for the mainstream right). Although the center-right is undoubtedly a heterodox party family (Bale & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2021), research has found that the more successful the radical right is at the ballot box, the more restrictive the position of the center-right on immigration tends to be (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020).

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3 | THE AUSTRIAN CASE

Austria was hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. With a population of around 9 million people, there were over 5.6 million cumulative cases and more than 21,000 cumulative deaths by the end of 2022 (WHO, 2022). The country relied relatively heavily on migrant labor in key sectors, before, during, and after the pandemic. For instance, 68% of the workers in the cleaning sector are foreign nationals; in food production the percentage was 33%, and in retail 22%. In the care sector, the proportion of foreign nationals was 27% (Bundesministerium für Arbeit, 2020). The number of migrant workers was and is particularly pronounced in the highly feminized live-in care work sector: 92% of live-in care workers in Austria were female, of which 98% were foreign nationals (Amnesty International, 2021).

Overall, in the pandemic year 2020, 1.3 million people worked in so-called system relevant or essential sectors, of whom 18% had a foreign citizenship. In the capital city of Vienna, this figure was 34%, that is, every fifth to every third worker who was central to maintaining the country during the lockdown was a foreign national (Schönherr et al., 2022).

Migration is an important factor in the country's demographic make-up. Without migration, the country's population would shrink in the coming years and decades (Statistik Austria, 2022). According to the latest available data (January 1, 2023), Austria had a population of 9,104,772 million. 19% of this population (1,729,820 million people) were foreign nationals, 21.7% (1,975,860 million) were born abroad. If we add to this percentage all the Austrian nationals who were born in Austria but both of whose parents were born abroad (second generation), the share of the country's population with a so-called migration background amounts to more than a quarter of the population (26%, 4%) (Statistik Austria, 2023).

Austria is also a country, where migration has been a highly relevant electoral issue since the 1990s, with historically strong populist radical right parties mobilizing the anti-migrant vote and challenging the political mainstream on migration issues (Gruber & Bale, 2014; Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022). The two centrist parties, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), have been increasingly involved in the politicization of immigration since the mid-1990s (Gruber, 2014; Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015b), and have, to varying degrees, over time accommodated positions of the anti-immigrant radical right.

Since taking up the issue, the SPÖ has adopted an ambivalent approach, however, with a notable restrictive orientation when it comes to labor migration (Manwaring, 2021). As Manwaring (2021, 154) puts it: "On immigration policy, the SPÖ has long-juggled a set of coalescing and contradictory forces, seeking to defend its welfare state, balance 'welfare chauvinist' claims, evince a convincing 'securitization' narrative, and offer a coherent internationalist and human-rights strand to its political strategy on immigration." In the last electoral manifesto of 2019, the slogan used to summarize its position on immigration was "integration before immigration", indicating a restrictive migration position in opposition to a rather liberal integration policy. Regarding labor migration, the party emphasized that the main objective should be to limit wage dumping, and opposed the lowering of income thresholds under the skilled migration program. It also opposed the expansion of the list of labor shortage sectors to which migrants from third countries can be admitted until full employment is reached in Austria. At the same time, the party called for better integration of refugees already in Austria into the labor market, underlining its position of "integration before migration" (SPÖ election manifesto 2019, 62).

The center right, by contrast, has adopted a more clear-cut strategy of accommodating populist radical right positions since the 2015 'migration crisis', relying heavily on an anti-migration strategy in mobilizing voters. This strategy can be regarded from that moment on as a core

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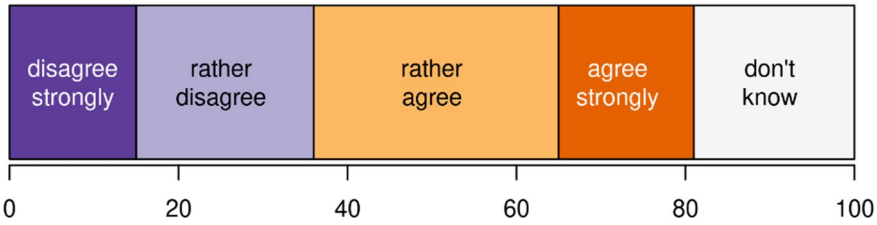


FIGURE 2 Survey response to Question: People with migration background contributed significantly in key sectors to handling the Covid-19 crisis? in Austria, 2021. ÖIF, 2021. Example: almost 30% of respondents 'rather agreed' with the statement that 'people with migration background contributed significantly in key sectors' (orange); those who 'rather agree' (orange) or 'agree strongly' (red) make up just over half the respondents.

feature of the party, overriding the business-friendly client politics which has characterized the party in the past (Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022). The ÖVP has thus radicalized and reinforced its anti-migration stance in recent years, successfully attracting the anti-immigrant vote (ibid.).

Despite the Austrian center right's ownership of economic issues, economic perspectives on migration have been marginal. In its 2019 election manifesto, for example, the party dedicated only one line explicitly to migrant labor, arguing that Austria lacks skilled workers for certain sectors and adding that it must strive to fill these gaps with domestic workers. If this was not possible, workers from the European Union could be recruited, and only if this was not possible should qualified workers from countries outside the European Union be recruited (ÖVP manifesto 2019, 35, point 90).

In line with the high politicization of immigration, the Austrian population has been relatively skeptical about migration compared to other European immigration countries (Gruber, 2014, p. 86), albeit with differences depending on the type of migrants. As elsewhere, the public prefers so-called 'high-skilled' migrants to 'low-skilled' migrants (Neumann & Moy, 2018; Weijnar & Van Kloppenfels, 2020). This has been the case, despite the country's heavy reliance on migrant workers in the key sectors outlined above, many of which though would have been described as low skilled in pre-pandemic times. However, there is some evidence that positive attitudes toward these groups increased during the pandemic (Figure 2). Related to the decreasing salience of the migration issue we have also seen a weakening of the anti-immigrant radical right during the early phase of the pandemic (Betz, 2020), with the FPÖ regaining momentum in terms of voting intentions only in later waves (Crulli, 2023).

3.1 | Guiding assumptions for the Austrian case

Given the developments during the pandemic, that is, the reframing and high visibility of migrant labor as essential labor in public debate, and some shifts in public opinion, as well as the weakening of the anti-immigrant radical right, we could indeed expect a shift in the debate on migrants by the centrist parties. However, it seems far-fetched to expect a complete overhaul of the migration debate by these parties. Change, as party scholarship has argued, is inherently risky, as it can damage a party's reputation, or harm future coalition negotiations and alienate voters (Koedam, 2022). At the same time, we can also expect differences when it comes to change depending on whether a party is in government or in opposition (Rovny, 2012). For example,

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positions will be likely to be moderated by government responsibilities, while opposition status allows more flexibility in framing the issue.

Based on these assumptions that parties are constrained by their established agenda and positioning, as well as by governance, and possibly by considerations of future coalition negotiations, we can formulate specific expectations about the politicization and framing of immigrants in a moment of crisis. We can expect that both centrist parties debate 'essential workers' as a category of immigrants that is seen as relevant in the crisis. Regarding the way in which this category—and migration more broadly—is politicized, based on the expectations formulated above, we however expect the following differences between the Austrian center-right and the center-left: for the center right party given that it made migration a core issue in pre-pandemic times, we expect a bifurcation strategy (see Kolbe, 2021), that is, exhibiting a different rhetoric for different migrant groups. This rhetoric would be distinguishing between those migrants who are now considered essential (labor migrants), while maintaining a more restrictive stance toward those who are not framed as essential.

A rhetorical distinction between "immigrants' and 'essential workers' may open up opportunities to positively frame some migrant workers — demonstrating government responsibility and crisis response, as well as reaching out to more pro-open borders/business segments of the electorate— without contradicting their established position on the issue more broadly. This expectation takes into account potential constraints on the center-right to change its position on immigration due to considerations of future coalition negotiations with the radical right. At the provincial level, the center-right did indeed re-enter into coalitions with the anti-immigrant radical right in the years following the pandemic. Although this expectation is arguably less strong given the weakness of the radical right FPÖ during the first pandemic period we analyze. However, in addition to considerations of future coalitions, existing coalition configurations during the period analyzed may also play a role. Maintaining their position and rhetoric on migration more broadly would allow the center-right to signal consistency to voters, despite having entered into a coalition with the pro-immigration Greens shortly before the pandemic, a development that might otherwise have been difficult for many conservative voters to accept.[1]

A crisis situation should also encourage instrumental frames and arguments that 'there is no alternative' for governing parties (Bitschnau et al., 2021), while opposition parties should be freer in the way they frame the issue, although we expect the parties to maintain frames and issues on which they are strong. In this sense, we can expect that the center-left to take a positive stance in line with left-wing narratives of equality, as they were less likely to face immediate negative consequences from the electorate as the public was more favorable. This may also have mitigated the tendency of left-wing parties to be critical of low-wage migrant workers that is based on left-wing protectionism and concerns about wage dumping.

4 | MATERIALS & METHOD

To better understand the way immigrants were politicized during the pandemic, and in particular in what way 'essential' workers were discussed by the two Austrian centrist parties, we draw on a text corpus that includes all parliamentary debates and press releases of the ÖVP and SPÖ in Austria between March 1, 2020 and the end of the year on December 31, 2020. This is a period, in which the key role of migrants was particularly visible. To identify contributions in parliament and press releases, we used keywords (in German, English translations are given in square brackets: migra* OR Zuwanderung [migration] OR asyl* [asylum]) and manually selected relevant

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documents in the Austrian Press Release Databank (APA OTS) and the Archive of the Protocols of the Austrian Parliament. We chose parliamentary debates and press releases because, in contrast to other party material such as election manifestos, they are a frequent source of data and reflect parties' strategies throughout the election cycle (Gessler & Hunger, 2022). This search yielded 95 documents, which we coded manually.[2]

To better understand politicization, we used a claims-making perspective. A claim is an intentional and directional articulation of a political demand, which includes calls to action, but also policy proposals and critiques (Van der Brug et al., 2015). We cover both oral claims (in parliamentary debate, transcribed) and written claims (in press releases). For the purposes of this article, we do not differentiate within parties and only include claims that can be attributed to either party. We could identify $N = 214$ distinct claims, of which 57 were by the ÖVP and 157 by the SPÖ, a difference reflecting the fact that the SPÖ issued more press releases, not necessarily that they gave more weight to the issue. The claims were coded according to the codebook and definitions in Van der Brug et al. (2015), albeit with a smaller number of variables, and fewer categories to adapt the codebook to the analysis at hand.

For each claim, we coded the immigrant group or how immigrants were referred to (essential workers; a combined category for refugees/irregular migrants, i.e., categories that tend to be politically conceptualized as 'unwanted' migrants; generic migrants when claims referred to 'immigrants' etc. in an undifferentiated way; labor migrants and migrants from the European Union, which tend to be politically conceptualized as 'wanted' migrants); the frame or justification for the claim (no justification given; instrumental frames highlighting costs and benefits; references to the rule of law; and moral principles including human rights), a positional statement (5-point scale from 'strongly negative' or exclusive to 'strongly positive' or inclusive), and how the claim is positioned relative to the status quo (policy should change; a minor change is needed; policy should not change). In coding claims, we capture how party actors construct immigrants, that is, an 'essential worker' could have been described as a 'labor migrant', but the person or organization chose not to. In other words, the same immigrant may be referred to differently by different political actors. Analytically, we provide descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations with relatively broad categories to account for the limited number of observations in the data.

5 | FINDINGS

A key issue in the public debate during the Covid-19 pandemic was the lack of labor supply due to border closures, and related to this, the poor working conditions of migrant workers in key low-wage sectors. The dependence on circular migrant workers, especially in the care sector, even led the anti-immigrant radical right party FPÖ to call on the government to allow the mobility of care workers (OTS March 27, 2020). The ÖVP-Green government that was in office during the pandemic, like other EU governments at the time, took special measures to allow the mobility of foreign workers in key sectors, despite the general restrictions on mobility: it initiated negotiations with neighboring countries on free passage of essential workers and exempted commuters in the health sector from quarantine regulations. National and provincial governments also arranged for special trains and flights to bring in care and harvest workers from abroad (Biffl & Martin, 2020).

If we look at the claims made by the centrist parties during the period analyzed, we see that essential workers were not at the center of the debate. For both parties, the focus was on another category of migrants, namely asylum-seeking migrants, including the category (albeit relatively

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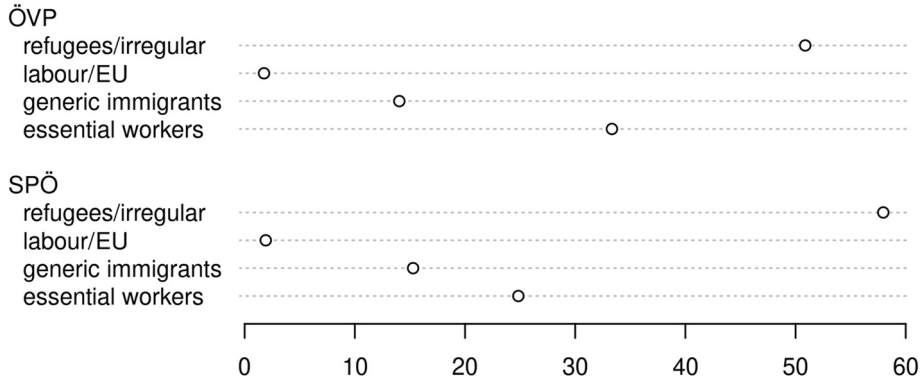


FIGURE 3 Migrant groups highlighted in political claims by the two centrist parties in Austria, in 2020. Shown is the percentage of all claims about immigration by party referring to a particular immigrant group. The categorization follows how party actors referred to the immigrants in their claims. The sum of percentage points for each party adds to 100%. $N = 214$ claims.

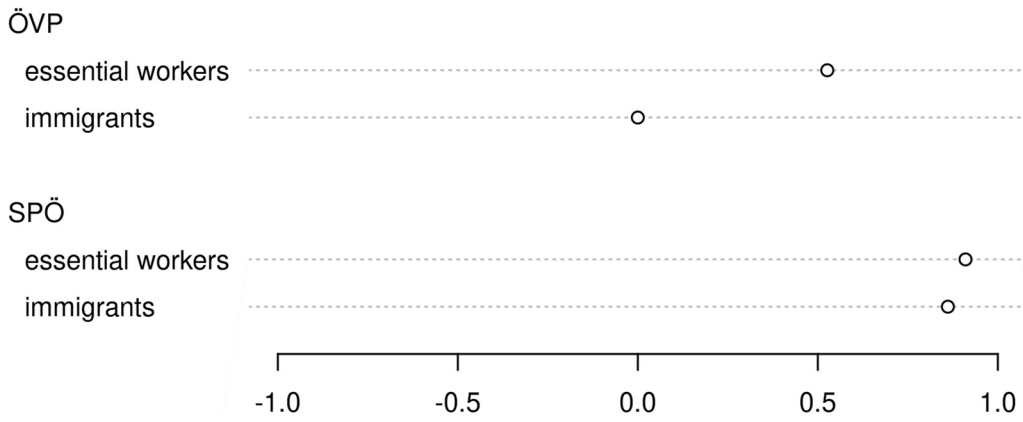


FIGURE 4 Position on immigrants and essential workers in political claims by two mainstream parties in Austria, in 2020. Shown is the mean position in all claims about immigration by party ('immigrants') and the position in the subsample of claims that refer to 'essential workers' in particular. Positions were measured on a 5-point scale from −1 (negative, exclusive) to +1 (positive, inclusive). The categorization (essential worker, immigrant) follows how party actors referred to the immigrants in their claims. $N = 214$ claims.

small) irregular migrants (Figure 3). This is not to say that 'essential workers' were irrelevant: about a third of claims by the ÖVP related to essential workers, and about a quarter of claims by the SPÖ.

When it comes to the direction of the claims (positive, neutral, negative), our data shows that the SPÖ generally made positive claims for both 'essential workers' and other types of immigrants (Figure 4). For the ÖVP, on the other hand, we can see that their claims about essential workers are more positive — compared to claims about other types of immigrants, which are on average neutral (partly due to claims about refugees, which tend to be negative), suggesting that they have indeed relied on a bifurcation strategy. Thus, for the ÖVP, we can observe more variance in the positions depending on the type of immigration discussed (standard deviation 0.73), while the SPÖ tends to take a generally positive stance on migration with less variation (standard deviation 0.30). This is in line with our main expectations that

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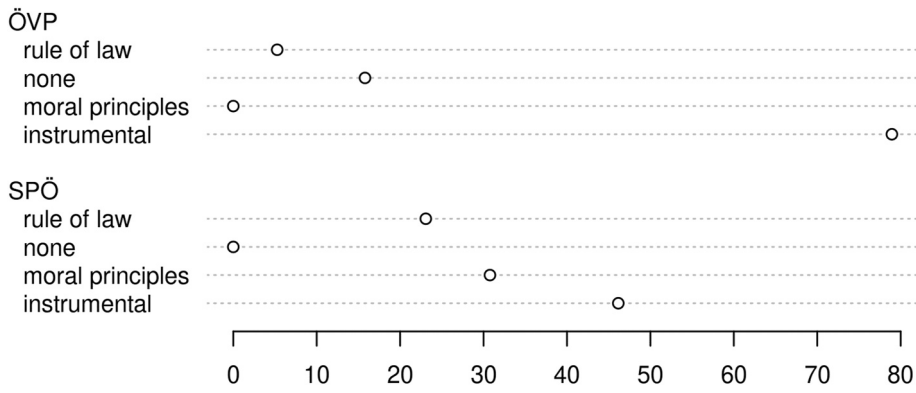


FIGURE 5 Justifications used in claims about essential workers by two mainstream parties in Austria, in 2020. Shown is the percentage of all claims about essential workers by party using a particular justification. The label 'moral principles' subsumes moral principles and human rights. The sum of percentage points for each party adds to 100%. $N = 58$ claims.

the center-right would rely on a bifurcation strategy, adopting a more positive stance on key workers and a more negative stance on other migrant groups, whilst the SPÖ would adopt a more positive stance.

A pronounced difference emerges in the justifications (frames) used by the two parties in their claims about essential workers. The center-right ÖVP almost exclusively uses instrumental frames, while for the SPÖ we see more variety in the frames used, with moral principles and human rights much more common than for the ÖVP, which is in line with our expectation that parties would rely on framings in which they are typically strong. While the overall emphasis (Figure 3) and position (Figure 4) on essential workers is not radically different between the two parties, the arguments used to substantiate and justify the claims are quite different (Figure 5). This difference largely reflects the different ways in which overall immigration has been framed during the period under observation (Figure A1 in the appendix).

There is also a clear difference between the parties in terms of whether they advocate for change or call for the maintenance of the status quo in the field of migration. 95% of the claims by the center-left SPÖ contain a call for change, whereas in 5% of the claims the party advocate the status quo.[3] In contrast, the ÖVP called for the status quo in 47% of the claims, for minor changes in 10% and for changes in 43% of the cases. We interpret these differences as government and opposition dynamics, with the center-left in opposition calling for more change and the center-right in office tending to justify the status quo. The importance of government and opposition dynamics is supported by an analysis of whom the claims by the centrist parties are directed at. Whether centrist parties are in government or in opposition matters considerably. Figure A2 in the appendix shows that many claims by the SPÖ and by the ÖVP are directed at each other. Interestingly, for both parties, the respective opposing centrist party features more prominently as an addressee than the radical right, which is in line with our expectation about potential future coalition considerations of the center-right with the radical right.

In line with its position as the governing party, the center right has repeatedly resisted calls from the center-left opposition for a more liberal approach. If we look only at claims about essential workers, the picture is slightly different, although we are limited by a small number of observations. We see that the ÖVP demands slightly more change for this group, calling for change in 47% of the cases, minor change in 18%, and no change in 35%, indicating more openness when it

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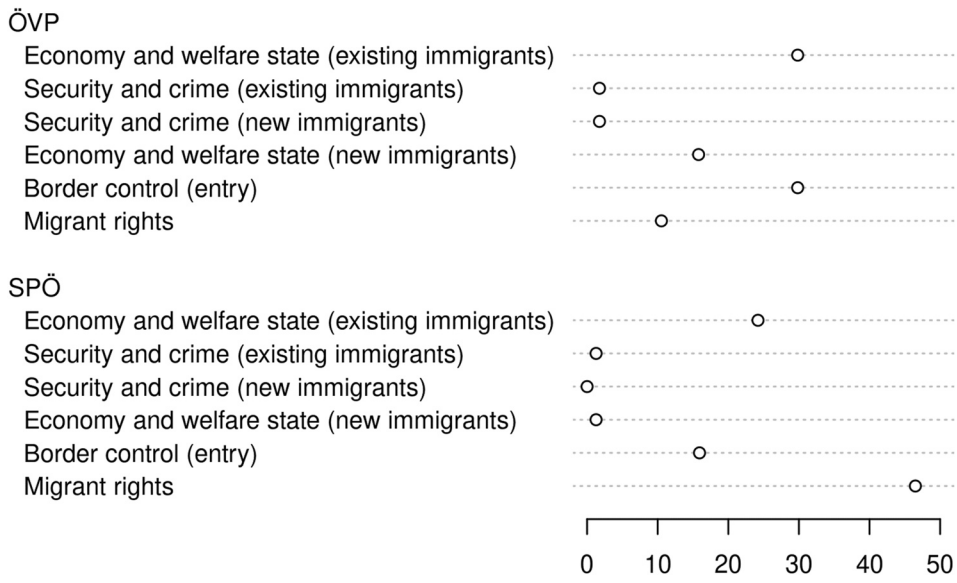


FIGURE 6 Issues in claims about immigration by two mainstream parties in Austria, in 2020. Shown is the percentage of all claims about immigration by party using a particular justification. The sum of percentage points for each party adds to 100%. $N = 214$ claims.

comes to this group of migrants. The SPÖ calls for change in 88% of cases, while in 12% of cases no change is called for.

Many of the described differences between the parties on these dimensions were driven by the focus of the center-left on immigrant integration (of existing immigrants in the country) and migrant rights (of people on the move or trying to enter Austria), and the center-right's focus on border control (Figure 6). On border control, the center-right had a clear focus on protecting the external borders to keep migration in check, in line with its image as a hardliner on migration control, which the party has used especially since the 2019 national elections (Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022). This focus was also manifested in the refusal of the governing center-right in 2020 to accept unaccompanied minors from Greece (and the Moria camp) (see e.g., parliamentary debate, 28. April 2020, p. 272).

The center-left's generally positive stance and emphasis on migrant rights was in turn reflected in the debate over the Moria refugee camp, and in its strong focus on migrant integration. The SPÖ used the debate on essential workers, pointing out the key contribution of these workers to repeatedly to attack the government's approach to migrant integration (e.g., OTS, May 26, 2020).

In line with its strong focus on immigrant integration, the SPÖ also used the debate on essential workers to support its claims for a liberalizing reform of the Austrian restrictive citizenship law, which the People's Party has been blocking for years. “An easier access to citizenship is not only relevant from a democratic viewpoint, but it is also an opportunity to recognize the heroes and their engagement in this crisis”, the party emphasized (OTS June 15, 2021).

The reference to key workers was also used by the center-left to argue against a policy backed by the center-right to reduce social benefits for children of EU citizens working in Austria, who live abroad, that is, to adjust these payments to the standard of living where these children actually live (OTS, March 29, 2020, see also parliamentary motion by the SPÖ, April 3, 2020). This policy was introduced by the government under the previous ÖVP/FPÖ coalition in the wake of a politicized debate about mobile EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe, who were

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portrayed as welfare scroungers. The center-right, on the other hand, continued to use the issue of welfare also during the pandemic to highlight alleged abuses by migrant residents, which can be seen as part of their bifurcation strategy, in line with its ideological position on cutting welfare.

Whilst the center-left often used the reference to key workers to argue for rights-based immigrant integration policies and equality objectives, we find a less clear pro-migrant position on labor immigration, that is, recruitment from abroad. On one occasion, a representative of the center-left party argued that "bringing in foreign workers would be a mockery against unemployed Austrians in times in which unemployment rates are the highest since 1945" (Parliament February 25, 2021). Other center-left party representatives argued that if wages were higher in the first place, recruitment of nationals would not be an issue, and stressed that workers from the European Union would be available (ibid.). In response to the government proposal to grant easier access for foreign care workers to the Austrian labor market the SPÖ, called for the limitation of such a measure until enough natives could be brought into the health and care sector in Austria (OTS April 18, 2021). Representatives of the center-left used the pandemic to argue that the crisis showed that relying on foreign workers is unsustainable and that the country needed to invest in training domestically (OTS March 11, 2021). While overall, a positive position prevailed during the period analyzed, there were clear instances of a protectionist argumentation when it came to labor migration. Thus, our expectation that the pandemic and the focus on essential workers would limit the left-wing protectionism of the center-left in migration debates was not confirmed. Put differently, we can also see a kind of bifurcation strategy in the case of the center-left, distinguishing between those migrants who are already settled or are vulnerable (such as refugees), and potential labor migrants to be recruited.

The ÖVP, on the other hand, adopted a much more utilitarian position on migrant workers, who were seen as needed. We can thus partly see a return of the center-right to a more utilitarian approach, similar to its business-friendly client-politics that existed before the adoption of a hard-line position on migration in the aftermath of the 2015 migration crisis.

While we can see some impact of the pandemic crisis in terms of party rhetoric, we also need to know whether the public debate about essential workers translates into policy measures for essential workers. In fact, the pandemic has led to some improvements in migrant worker rights: For example, the federal government included previously excluded groups of foreign care workers in the national Covid-19 hardship funds (Leiblfinger et al., 2021). In April 2021, the ÖVP-Green government also issued a decree granting care workers easier access to the skilled migration program, the Red-White-Red Card (the Austrian version of the European Union's Blue Card) for nationals from outside the European Union. This meant that work permits could already be granted during the process of recognition of diplomas (IA 397/A 27.GP 44). In addition, with regard to agricultural workers (a significant proportion of whom are foreign nationals), a reform of the agricultural work law (Landarbeitsgesetz) was initiated in 2020 and adopted in 2021, with some improvements in worker protection.

As our analysis is limited to debates and does not trace policy change, we cannot say to what extent the pandemic caused or merely accelerated these changes, and which political actors were most instrumental in pushing through these changes. We do note, however, that some (albeit limited) pro-migrant labor policy changes occurred in the wake of the crisis — in line with the positive claims around 'essential workers' by both parties examined in this article. An impact on these policies is therefore a plausible course of events — although one beyond the scope of this article. It is also important to note, that policies on other forms of 'unwanted' immigration, such as asylum seeking and irregular migration, remained restrictive.

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6 | CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, migration governance in Europe has been strongly driven by dynamics of politicization and securitization, which have enabled an increasing restrictive turn in migration policy, with a focus on cracking down on unwanted types of migration. The role of migrant workers in essential functions and the respective positive public perception of this role during the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a window of opportunity for political parties to change their perspective and to revitalize a more inclusive stance, especially in countries — such as Austria — that rely heavily on migrants in key sectors of the labor market.

Looking at the main actors in migration governance — mainstream political parties — we have shown, that despite the reliance on migrant workers, the migration debate in Austria during the pandemic remained largely focused on other (unwanted) types of migration, especially asylum-seeking migrants. This suggests that external shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic have a limited potential to reverse the focus on unwanted migration in European party politics. Migration is predominantly seen as a problem, in socio-cultural terms, rather than a normality or a solution concerning economic demands. This, as our analysis shows, favors a continued focus on what is perceived as 'problematic mobility' (Castles, 2017), rather than other types and meanings of migration. Two decades ago, Hollifield (2004) has noted that migration politics in migration-receiving countries is defined by a paradox, as it tends to be shaped simultaneously by openness driven by economic interests and closure driven by securitized and socio-cultural concerns. However, with the increasing politicization of migration, this paradox has become much less pronounced in recent decades, weakening the relevance of economic arguments. Whilst the Covid-19 crisis gave an impetus to the economic perspective of migration policy and politics by highlighting the economic contribution of migrants during the pandemic, it did not succeed in overcoming the prevailing problem perspective of migration. In the Austrian case, this was partly due to a bifurcation strategy on the part of the centrist parties, which allowed them to adopt a positive stance toward needed key workers or wanted migrants, without breaking with previously established perspectives and restrictive positions toward 'unwanted migration'.

In addition to the broader perspective of migration as a problem, the dynamics of party politics can help us to understand this continuity despite a significant external shock, and provides relevant insights into centrist parties, who are conflicted on migration issues. Research on party politics has taught us that parties are more likely to change on secondary issues rather than on core issues (Koedam, 2022). The fact that the pandemic did not end the center-right's focus on immigration control, suggests that migration has indeed become a trademark issue for the party (see also Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022). A continued focus on unwanted immigration, as already established under the Kurz leadership, has allowed the party to signal consistency despite entering a coalition with the pro-immigration Greens, a development that might otherwise have been difficult for many conservative voters to accept.[4] When it comes to labor migrants, however, our analysis showed that the governing center-right indeed adopted a somewhat positive approach to 'essential' migrant labor during the crisis. Their claims, however, were mostly instrumental, with little emphasis on migrant rights.

As expected, the center-right has adopted a bifurcation strategy, recognizing the need for migrant workers, without abandoning its image as 'the' party that controls 'unwanted' migration. It is an image, that distinguishes the party from the openly and allegedly indiscriminate anti-immigrant Freedom Party on the one hand, and from other parties that allegedly do 'nothing' to stop the negative effects of migration on the other hand. To some extent, the positions we have identified indicate a return to the more utilitarian approach to labor migration that was already

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present in the party program before the 2015 migration crisis (Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022). This reorientation toward a utilitarian approach is also supported by the fact, that in the years following the pandemic, which highlighted shortcomings in the Austrian health sector, the recruitment of care workers from Asia, South America, and Africa was increasingly a policy measure supported by conservative politicians (see e.g., Unterholzer, 2023). Their generally neutral stance also suggests that their ability to mobilize the anti-migration sentiment during the pandemic, when the need for migrant labor became increasingly visible, was somewhat constrained by their office responsibilities.

The center-left had an overall more positive stance on immigration than the center-right. The SPÖ's perspective was largely driven by a moral and human rights framing, as opposed to the instrumental framing used by the center-right. The party, however, also differentiated between migrant groups, namely, vulnerable groups (e.g., asylum seekers) and migrant residents versus (potential) foreign migrant workers. Toward the former, a generally inclusive position could be identified, whereas the latter group was addressed in some cases in more protectionist terms, reflecting the contradictory positions identified for center-left parties outside the context of Covid-19 (Manwaring, 2021). The party used the focus on migrant key workers during the pandemic to call for the rights of migrants already residing in Austria, but at the same time opposed new labor migration. Overall, the position and debates of the SPÖ during the pandemic thus underline diverging positions between immigration and integration that existed within the party before the Covid-19 crisis.

In summary, our analysis suggests that the pandemic has not fundamentally changed the debates in the political party arena. Instead, we see a continuation of previous debates by the political center; debates that oscillate between restrictive and inclusive perspectives on 'unwanted' and 'wanted' migrants. Who the 'wanted' migrants are, however, differs across the political center. In line with instrumental perspectives and utilitarian considerations for the center-right, those needed to maintain the economy and services are wanted. A bifurcation strategy has allowed the party to reconcile economic needs and anti-immigration positions. For the center-left, in turn it is above all those who are already living here who are conceptualized as wanted migrants — both in the normative and instrumental sense — and thus deserving of rights. In this sense, there was no need to deviate from established patterns of politicization, and indeed we could not identify any fundamental change in rhetoric. The argument put forward in migration studies that the salience of 'essential workers' would enable a shift in narratives and policies on migration was premature. Instead, the existing patterns of politicization can be understood in terms of party politics and government/opposition dynamics.

Our analysis shows that in the contemporary political space, centrist parties remain caught in ideological and strategic dilemmas that lead to ambivalent approaches, and promote the differentiation of migrant groups (Manwaring, 2021). Beyond emphasizing and blurring (Odmalm & Bale, 2015; Rovny, 2012) centrist parties employ strategies of bifurcation on issues such as migration upon which their constituencies remain divided on. This strategy allows them to respond to shifts in public sentiment and debates in times of crisis. Concerning the wider impact of crises, the clear signs of continuity we have found suggest that a health and economic crisis alone may not be enough to reorient party politics on migration. The analysis of the centrist parties in one of Europe's 'heartlands' of the politicization of migration (cf. Gruber & Bale, 2014) hence suggests that while the low(er) salience of migration during the pandemic, and the initial weakening of the anti-immigration right, seemed to have reduced the 'noise' of immigration politics, its effect on new migration perspectives has remained limited. Whilst the pandemic partly changed the dynamics on the supply side, namely perspectives on migration within the public, the strategic

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choices of parties in Europe, as the findings of this article suggest, tend to be driven to a large extent by party politics.

For future research, it would be interesting to investigate whether crises such as the pandemic or the shortage of labor in aging European societies can exacerbate a policy-discourse gap in the migration domain, where more liberal policies coexist with restrictive party rhetoric (or vice versa), an issue that this article did not explore due to its limitation to party rhetoric. Studies covering longer periods of time could examine under which circumstances bifurcation strategies are used on migration—the results presented here suggest that bifurcation strategies can be useful for center-left and center-right parties, albeit based on different ways of dividing migrants into 'wanted' and 'unwanted' migrants.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to thank Maria Schiller and the three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions. This research was supported by the National Center of Competence in Research nccr — on the move funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation under grant number 51NF40-205605; and the Swiss National Science Foundation grant 200939.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Not applicable.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

Not applicable.

ENDNOTES

[1] We want to thank the anonymous reviewer 3 to point us toward this dimension of coalition politics.

[2] Replication material is available from https://osf.io/gc6eq/.

[3] There were no calls for minor changes by the SPÖ in the claims analyzed.

[4] We want to thank the anonymous reviewer 3 to point us toward this argument. Reviewer 3 also emphasized that after the pandemic conservative politicians backed the recruitment of foreign labor from other continents, which strengthens our arguments, and has been inserted in the article.

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How to cite this article: Hadj Abdou, L., & Ruedin, D. (2025). Migration debates in the political party arena during the Covid-19 pandemic in Austria. *Governance*, e12842. https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12842

APPENDIX

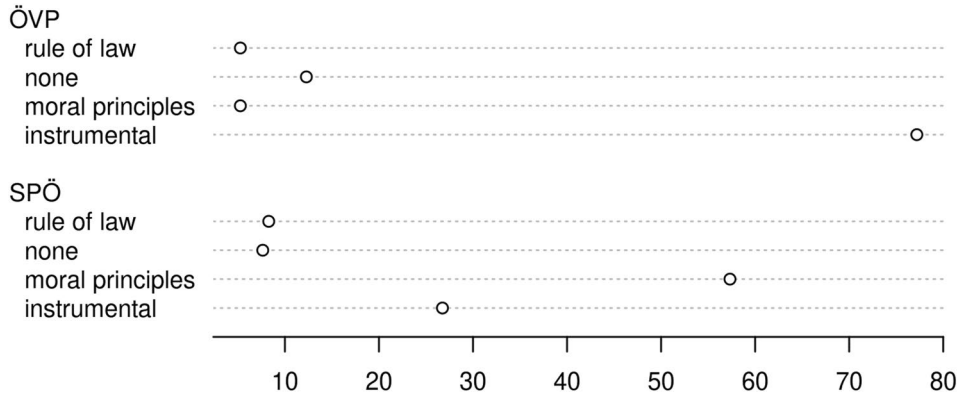


FIGURE A1 Justifications used in claims about immigration by two mainstream parties in Austria, 2020. Shown is the percentage of all claims about immigration by party using a particular justification. The sum of percentage points for each party adds to 100%. $N = 214$ claims.

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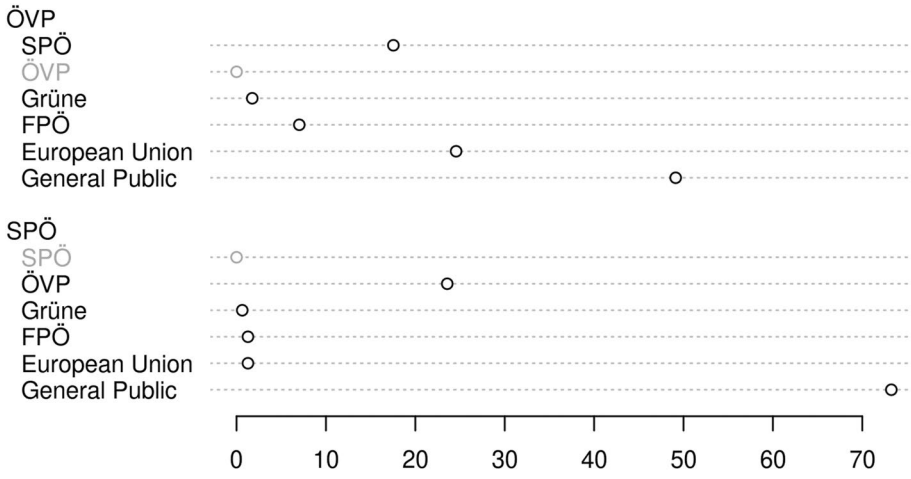


FIGURE A2 Addressee of political claims by the two centrist parties in Austria, 2020. Shown is the percentage of all claims about immigration by party, indicating whom they addressed. The sum of percentage points for each party adds to 100%. $N = 214$ claim.

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