Include, Exclude, or Coopt: How Political Parties Affect Public Opinion towards New Minorities in Western Europe.

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Introduction
As three Western European democracies—Austria, the Netherlands, and Italy—have survived the inclusion of a populist right party in government and these parties experienced severe electoral losses immediately thereafter, government responsibility seems to be the best cure available for ridding Western European voters of their taste for radical right-wing populism. However, the reason why many scholars, politicians, and commentators were worried about such inclusions in the first place was not primarily the electoral prospects of the populist right parties. Instead, elites were worried about the signal that such inclusion would send to voters concerning the acceptability of xenophobia and racial prejudice. After all, populist right parties across several Western European countries had risen from insignificance to substantial political influence since the mid 1980s mainly because of the attention that their provocative restrictionist statements on asylum and immigration policy had granted them and the way in which these statements resonated with parts of the public. Did mainstream parties by accepting the populist right as a normal member of the party system increase the demand for ever more restrictive asylum policies? Did they fuel prejudice towards easily distinguishable minority populations—people of color, Muslims, and those who speak the national language with a foreign accent?

This paper discusses the theoretical approaches that make some political scientists prone to answer the questions above in the affirmative, and it points out why others would expect to disconfirm them. It then goes on to examine how three different political responses to what is termed an asylum crisis affected the majority populations’ views on Western Europe’s new minorities. The three different responses studied were the Austrian mainstream right’s (OVP) inclusion of the Freedom Party (FPO) in government in October 1999; the Flemish mainstream parties’ insistence on excluding Vlaams Blok (VB) from governing coalitions throughout the 1990s; and, finally, the Danish mainstream right’s (Venstre) decision to campaign on asylum policies that were nearly as restrictive as those of the Danish People’s Party (DF) before the 2001 parliamentary election. Which of these mainstream party responses, if any, fuelled xenophobia and prejudice? Why?
The asylum crisis in the 1990s.
While by no means justifying the populist right’s electoral successes, the pronounced peak in the number of asylum applications received in most Western European countries in the early 1990s created an opportunity structure for parties that wanted to push national chauvinist and exclusionary policies of various sorts. It did so, because the peak depicted in figure 1 meant that many governments experienced asylum related problems of a practical nature. Where should the asylum seekers be housed? How should governments process the extraordinary amount of applications? Should applicants be allowed to work while waiting for the reply? This kind of government unpreparedness accompanied by the dramatic numbers of applicants made great news stories for tabloids and broadsheets across Western Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

[Figure 1 about here]

The early 1990s peak in asylum applications and the increased attention towards issues of multicultural coexistence that it brought about needed not necessarily to lead to high levels of xenophobia and calls for more restrictive asylum policies. Indeed, most mainstream parties of the left and right sought initially to avoid politicizing these difficult and delicate political issues. However, the attempted mainstream consensus was broken very quickly for opportunistic or ideological reasons by populist right parties, who exploited the asylum crisis to promote more or less ideologically rooted national chauvinist and exclusionist agendas (Mudde 2000; Gardberg 1993).

As a result, governing mainstream parties were caught in a real political dilemma in the early 1990s. There was little that could be done at the time to control the temporary peak in asylum applications. Meanwhile populist right parties used the event and the media attention it brought about to whip up xenophobic sentiment. A clear example of such populist right behavior at the time took place in the 1989 parliamentary election campaign in Norway when the comparatively speaking moderate Progress Party created much debate around the claims of a letter that turned out to be false. The letter pretended to have been written by a Muslim immigrant and boasted that there would soon be more mosques than churches in Norway (Ekeberg and Snoen 2001). Did it matter what mainstream parties did in response to this tricky situation—an asylum crisis
combined with unacceptable challenges from populist right parties determined to gain as much attention and votes from it as they possibly could?

Political responses to the asylum crisis.
While this paper views the asylum crisis of the early 1990s as an event over which no single political party or government in Western Europe had much control, all political parties could choose how to respond to it. Early on, in 1990, the mainstream parties in Austria, Denmark and Flanders responded moderately to the asylum crisis as illustrated by figure 2. The strongest response came from mainstream left parties that called for somewhat more liberal policies. Some mainstream right parties, the OVP in Austria and the CVP in Flanders, defended the status quo. Other mainstream right parties, the Danish Venstre and the VLD in Flanders made moderate proposals for a tightening of asylum policies. By contrast, figure 2 confirms that the populist right parties in Austria, Flanders, and Denmark (FRP at the time) proposed radically restrictive immigration and asylum policies.¹

While mainstream parties responded to the asylum crisis by suggesting only moderate changes in policy, they all responded clearly and negatively to the radical asylum policy proposals and statements of the populist right parties. In none of the three countries were such parties seen as a plausible coalition partner in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and most mainstream right party leaders sought to persuade the public that the populist right’s asylum and immigration policies were simplistic and tainted by xenophobia and racism, and that therefore no one in their right mind would give their vote to these parties. Despite these unequivocal messages from the mainstream parties, the populist right in all three countries received increasing numbers of votes in national elections in the mid 1990s. This seemingly spiteful act of voting for the populist right gave support to those who argued that populist right voters cast their vote in protest

¹ The data used to create figure 2 were collected by Marcel Lubbers (2001). Country experts were asked to recall the positions of political parties on immigration policy in 1990 and depict them on a 0 to 10 scale where 0 meant maximally liberal and 10 meant maximally restrictive asylum policies. The figure is centered on the midpoint of the scale (5.5) and depicts the deviations from it. The numbers approximately confirm the impression given of asylum politics in the early 1990s as depicted in several case studies of the radical right (Hainsworth 1992; Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1995).
against the mainstream (Kitschelt 1995; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Bergh 2002)—a theory that has since been strongly attacked on the grounds that populist right voters agree as much with their parties’ policies as mainstream voters agree with mainstream parties’ policies (Brug et al. 2000; Brug and Fennema 2003). The debate on policy versus protest voting raises the same question as was posed above from a different angle. Were the mainstream parties’ able to exert any influence at all on how the majority population came to view the new minorities? Did their efforts at leading public opinion backfire and cause more xenophobia as in an act of protest?

Theories of how parties interact with public opinion.
Since the 1950s political science has fostered two powerful, yet contradictory, schools for understanding how political parties interact with public opinion.

Spatial theory of party competition holds—mostly out of convenience—that the public’s policy preferences were influenced by events and prior convictions and was therefore unaffected by the argumentation of political parties. Political parties, in this account, compete for votes by strategically altering the choice situations to their advantage by adopting winning policy positions on issues and promoting the importance of their winning issue over others. They do not, by contrast, alter the distribution of voter preferences, so opinion towards new minorities do not depend on parties responses to the asylum crisis (Downs 1957; Riker 1982; Laver and Hunt 1992; Kitschelt 1994; 1995).

Opinion leadership models, by contrast, hold that people do not form solid opinions on a range of issues. Bombarded by information and with only limited interest in politics, most people trust elites to do the work of how to respond to complex and changing social, political and economic phenomena for them. This idea is captured in V.O. Key’s much cited phrase, “the voice of the people is but an echo” (1966). When elites disagree, voters, according to the dominant contemporary account of this view, follow the cues of the party to which they have a prior affinity (Zaller 1992). Political parties thus perform an important function in shaping the public’s response to political events. They don’t compete by jostling to be on the right side of public opinion, but they compete by trying to bring as much of the public as possible to their side.
For the purposes of this paper the spatial theory perspective functions mostly as a null hypothesis. Spatial theory would lead us to expect that the public’s response to the asylum crisis was mainly influenced by the experience of receiving a larger number of asylum applicants than before and their prior convictions of the desirability of and obligation to accepting such applicants in the first place. These prior convictions could for instance concern beliefs about the obligation of helping people in need and about the costs and benefits of accepting refugees. Prejudice against foreigners is also a form of prior conviction that is known to influence people’s views of the desirability of immigration more generally (Mendelberg 2001; Burns and Gimpel 2000). However, parties’ positions on asylum policy should not have any direct impact on voters attitudes towards new minorities in this perspective.

The hypotheses emerging from opinion leadership models are more complex. From this perspective, taking a firm stance against the populist right in a cordon sanitaire will serve to clearly signal that the populist right is illegitimate and that its asylum policies are unacceptable. Following these strong elite cues most voters will, in this perspective, censor their prejudice against foreigners and refrain from voting for the populist right. As a result, the opinion leadership model suggests that mainstream parties will be able to convince a substantial number of voters that a moderate or liberal policy response to the asylum crisis is appropriate. Furthermore, mainstream parties have an advantage over new, rising parties when it comes to influencing public opinion, since they have built up their elite credentials over a long period of time and have established a base of voters, who rely on them for partisan cues.

If the mainstream right makes a high-profile effort to propose more restrictive asylum policies, the expected outcome in the opinion leadership model is that more voters will express xenophobia and call for restrictive asylum policies—particularly this is likely to be true of those who express an affinity for the mainstream right (assuming that the mainstream left takes the opposing view). The change in public perception will come about because the mainstream right will send cues to the effect that more restrictive asylum policies are in their voters’ interest and that the claim for such policies is legitimate within the mainstream of democracies. In this scenario the mainstream right could still seek to stay distinct from the populist right and continue to state that the party
is an unacceptable coalition partner. Such actions could according to the opinion leadership model prevent a large contribution to the vote share of the populist right at least from that segment of the public that is alert to such complex messages. The complex cue would be: More restrictive asylum policies are ok, but the populist right is still beyond the pale. Opinion leadership studies from the US caution against thinking that complex messages will transmit to large parts of the public (Zaller 1992; Mendelberg 2001).

**Government inclusion as a new dimension.**

Including a party into a governing coalition is not usually a behavioral dimension that is considered by these theories of how parties interact with public opinion. However, since such inclusion is one of the options parties have, we need to consider the likely effects of this possibility. Straightforwardly, it could be argued that for a mainstream right party to include a populist right party into government is the same as signaling to voters that all policy differences between the two parties are small or irrelevant. Thus the effects of government inclusion would be analogous to the policy cooptation model described above, where the mainstream right adopted more restrictive asylum policies. In the case of the opinion leadership model, the signal from the mainstream right would be that the policies of the populist right are in the interest of mainstream right voters, and demand for more restrictive asylum policies most likely along with xenophobia would therefore increase.

However, while government inclusion of populist right parties doubtlessly signals that populist right parties are largely acceptable to the mainstream right, it is not obvious that the effects on people’s attitudes towards Western Europe’s new minorities should be the same as when the mainstream right itself campaigns for much more restrictive asylum policies. The two responses cannot be thought of as the same because of structural differences in how a mainstream right party that includes a populist right party after an election can position itself in the asylum and multiculturalism debates as compared to how a mainstream right party that itself wants to become the proponent of restrictive asylum policies must position itself.
In the case of policy cooptation, the mainstream right party will seek to emphasize, explain and justify its change of position as much as possible and in this process is likely to persuade voters that it is in their interest to restrict asylum seekers and multiculturalism. Thus we should expect a shift in opinion towards less tolerance of the new minorities, especially among those who are prone to take cues from the mainstream right.

By contrast, even when we expect a high degree of opinion leadership by the mainstream parties, the inclusion of the populist right into government may not lead to much of a shift in public opinion towards new minorities. Mainstream parties may state before the election that a coalition with the populists are undesirable because of the party’s incitement of xenophobia, and they may campaign on a ticket of moderate or status quo asylum policies. If after the election it turns out that the populist right party gained a very substantial amount of votes, they may reluctantly enter into a coalition arguing that they are responding to the voice of the people although they dislike the populist right parties’ policies. Moreover, they may seek all sorts of symbolic and substantive concessions from the populist right party so as to make it acceptable for coalition participation. In this way, the mainstream right party can include a populist right party into government while still sending a strong signal that the populist’s asylum policies are not in the interest of their own voters.

Summary of hypotheses.

In spite of the uni-dimensional focus of the theories on interaction of parties and public opinion, the discussion above revealed that mainstream parties’ responses to the asylum crisis was in fact two dimensional. As table 1 illustrates, the first dimension consisted of the policy responses. On this dimension moderate policies predominated. The exception on that dimension is the Danish mainstream right, which changed its policies and started proposing restrictive asylum policies in the 2001 election campaign. Reflecting the debate above about whether or not inclusion of the populist right into government changed the policy response of the Austrian OVP as much as those of the Danish Venstre, the Austrian 1999 case appears in between the moderate and restrictive categories. By contrast, their coalition policy was evidently inclusionary at that point.
The two other cases considered (and all mainstream right parties in the three cases in 1990) pursued exclusionary coalition policies towards the populist right along the second dimension.

In terms of attitudes towards foreigners, the spatial model serves as a null hypothesis expecting no attitudinal changes after the changes in mainstream parties’ responses to the asylum crisis. The predictions of the opinion leadership model are fleshed out in table 2. It shows that the opinion leadership model expects the largest attitudinal change to take place in Denmark. There it is expected that the mainstream right will have fuelled antipathy towards the new minorities in the process of campaigning for their own more restrictive asylum policies. The model expects some, but less change of attitudes in the same direction to have taken place in Austria. In Flanders, very little change is expected to take place.

Empirical evaluation of the hypotheses.
Ideally, we would have had an all European multiwave panel study conducted at regular intervals between the 1980s and today to evaluate the hypotheses above. This study should have asked respondents about their absolute and relative asylum and immigration policy preferences, indirectly tapped their prejudice against foreigners, and also asked about their vote and party affinities. Such survey data would have allowed us to make fine tuned and precise evaluations of the hypotheses above. Unfortunately no such data exists, and we therefore have to answer what I consider to be a crucial question in Western European politics—about the extent of parties’ opinion leadership on asylum and multiculturalization policies—by creatively using and interpreting the data that the social science community did gather in this period.

Since the cross-country comparison is important here (and I could not find any national election or social surveys that asked remotely comparable questions in Denmark, Austria, and Belgium) I chose to rely on international surveys. It turns out that the World Value Survey collected in 1990 included all three countries of interest and asked some questions tapping prejudice towards new minorities. Crucially, also, a question tapping very similar attitudes was asked in the European Social Survey which also included all three countries and was collected mostly in 2003. We therefore have two roughly similar
measures tapping prejudice towards new minorities before and after the policy responses of the mainstream right parties in our three cases started differing. The questions are not perfectly similar and so they unfortunately do not allow us to say if there was an overall increase in prejudice towards foreigners in these three counties. They do however allow us to answer the question of crucial interest here: When we compare public opinion in the three countries, do we find that it had changed in ways consistent with the opinion leadership model or with the null hypothesis of the spatial model?

The measure of prejudice against new minorities in 1990 is constructed of three items in the World Value Survey. The survey instructed the respondents as follows: “On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?” If the respondent answered either people of a different race, or immigrants, or Muslims, he or she was coded as prejudiced, otherwise the respondent was coded as unprejudiced.

The 2003 measure of prejudice against new minorities was constructed of the item in the European Election Survey that most resembled that in the World Value Survey. It asked: “Suppose you were choosing where to live. Which of the three types of area on this card would you ideally wish to live in? (1) Almost nobody minority race/ethnic group; (2) Some minority race/ethnic group; (3) Many minority race/ethnic group; (4) It would make no difference.” Those who answered almost nobody of minority race/ethnic group were coded as prejudiced against foreigners, and the rest were coded as unprejudiced.

The question asked in 2003 is less direct than the questions asked in 1990 about tapping prejudice against foreigners, since it asks about the ideal neighborhood rather than about whether or not the respondent would prefer not to live next to certain types of people. Moreover, it says “almost nobody” instead of asking the respondent to state categorically that they would prefer not to live next to immigrants, people of different races, or Muslims. It is therefore to be expected that more people are prejudiced according to the 2003 measure than according to the 1990 measure. To what extent the question wording affected the answer is very hard to say, and I will refrain from speculating about that in this paper. What is important is that both questions tap a similar
kind of resentment towards new minorities, and that we have measures that are comparable across the three countries.

**Analysis.**

The bar chart in figure 3 compares the percentages of the population that was prejudiced in Flanders, Austria, and Denmark in 1990 to those that were so in 2003, and it tells an interesting story. First of all, it is important to note that the majority of the public in no country and at neither time was xenophobic by any of these measures. That said, at both points in time the Flemish public expressed clearly more resentment towards foreigners than the Danish and the Austrian publics—37 percent according to the 1990 measure and 48 percent according to the 2003 measure. The Danish expressed the least amount of prejudice on the 1990 measure when 20 percent did not wish to have Muslims, immigrants, or people of different races as their neighbors. As many as 27 percent of Austrians felt the same way. In 2003, however, the image had changed significantly. By then, the Danish public had changed from expressing much less xenophobia than the Austrian public to expressing slightly more resentment towards ethnic minorities. [Figure 3 about here].

To illustrate the nature of the changes in figure 3 better, without assuming that the overall increase in xenophobia shown in figure 2 is significant, figure 4 maps the changes in expression of xenophobia that occurred beyond uniform effects that could be caused by question wording or international events that is likely to have affected expression of antipathy towards new minorities in the three countries equally, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Since on average 28 percent of the Austrian, Flemish and Danish publics expressed xenophobia in 1990, while on average 40 percent did so in the same countries in 2003, the net change is the difference between country and overall average in 1990 less the difference between country and overall average in 2003. The results of this straightforward arithmetic shown in figure 4 conveys that between 1990 and 2003 in Denmark an increase in the number of people who expressed xenophobia beyond what could be expected from a transnational trend or

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2 In the Danish case, this means that the net change was calculated as follows: (Danish average in 1990 – overall average in 1990) – (Danish average in 2003 – overall average in 2003), i.e. (20 - 28) – (37 - 39.6) = 5.3
the framing effects of the survey took place. In Flanders between 1990 and 2003, very little change in the number of people that expressed xenophobia took place beyond what could be expected from an overall European trend. By contrast, during the same period in Austria, there was a clear decline in the number of people who expressed xenophobia relative to the expected level.

[Figure 4 about here].

The trends in figure 4 lend strong support to the opinion leadership hypotheses in the Danish case. There the mainstream right’s shift towards making restrictive asylum policies a key part of their program in the 2001 election campaign was accompanied by a shift in public opinion towards greater antipathy towards foreigners. In Flanders, a weak opinion leadership hypothesis can be supported, in that the continued elite consensus on a moderate response to the asylum crisis and exclusion from government of *Vlaams Blok* between 1990 and 2003 did not result in any shifts in public opinion beyond what could have been expected. However, a stronger claim of opinion leadership suggesting that the insistence on a *cordon sanitaire* from the local elections in 1994 and onwards led the public towards more tolerance is not supported. As figure 3 shows, both in 1990 and in 2003 public opinion in Flanders was the most hostile towards new minorities of the three countries studied here. There was no increase in xenophobia beyond what could be expected, but neither was there a significant decline beyond what could be expected.

The trends in Austria suggest that government inclusion has the opposite effect on public opinion towards new minorities from policy cooptation. In exactly the opposite way from Denmark, the change in public opinion in Austria between 1990 and 2003 turned towards more tolerance towards asylum seekers and immigrants than could be expected. Not entirely in line with the opinion leadership thesis, then, this finding suggests that the response to the asylum crisis in Austria was the most successful at dampening xenophobia of all the three cases studied. This point will be elaborated further below.

**The effect of party affinities.**

One of the main contentions of the opinion leadership thesis held that when elites disagree, voters who have an affinity for a particular party will be more easily influenced
by this party’s arguments. If indeed opinion leadership by Venstre in Denmark spurred an increase in xenophobia there and that no similar leadership was exercised by the OVP, we would expect that more of those who felt close to Venstre would express antipathy towards new minorities after the party had changed its policies than those who felt close to the mainstream right in Austria. This would happen because Venstre had spent more time and effort campaigning to convince their voters that asylum seekers presented a problem to their voters, while the OVP had not done so. We would expect that the leadership exercised over CVP sympathizers should be more similar to that of the OVP.

Figure 5 shows that in all three countries studied more of those who had affinities to parties of the right expressed xenophobia than the average in the respective publics in 2003. However, in addition to this uniform trend, figure 5 indeed also shows that the pull towards xenophobia for mainstream right partisans in Denmark is significantly stronger than the pull on mainstream right partisans in Flanders and Austria. Among Venstre partisans, the amount of people who expressed xenophobia exceeded the national average by 9 percent. The comparable figures for Austrian and Flemish mainstream right partisans were four and five percent respectively. [Figure 5 about here].

These results, which support the opinion leadership hypothesis in the Danish case, would be severely undermined if they were caused only by switches of party affinities, meaning that in Denmark all those who were xenophobic had started feeling close to the mainstream right whereas all those who were not xenophobic had stopped feeling such affinity. While some of this dynamic probably did take place in Denmark, the overall shift towards more xenophobia in Denmark suggests that some people changed their mind between 1990 and 2003. Moreover, both the mainstream right and the populist right increased their number of votes in the 2001 election, so it is unlikely that the high number of Venstre partisans who expressed prejudice were caused by a massive shift in affinities from the populist to the mainstream right.

Moreover as figure 6 shows, the correspondence between the opinion leadership thesis and the levels of xenophobia among members of mainstream right parties in

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3 The means for 2003 are shown in figure 1. They were 48 % for Flanders, 37 % for Denmark and 34 % for Austria.
Denmark, Austria, and Flanders is strong. Party memberships are less easily changeable than party affinities, and it is therefore less likely that switching will have caused the results in figure 6. Some voters may have given up their membership in the Danish Venstre in disagreement with the party’s change in asylum policy, but it is unlikely that such protests happened only in Denmark and not in Austria where the mainstream right entered into government with the FPO. While not proving the opinion leadership hypothesis, therefore, the results in figures 5 and 6 support it.

A spurious relationship?
Having confirmed that the dependent variable—antipathy to new minorities—varied over time and across countries in a way that could at least in the Danish and Flemish cases be explained by the varying patterns of mainstream parties’ opinion leadership, we have shown that a causal connection between these are plausible, but we have not proven it. To indirectly test whether the observed variation on the dependent variable is indeed caused by this variable, it remains to show that no other plausible variable is likely to have been responsible for these changes. In a neat time series of data this would involve writing an equation and showing that the relationship between opinion leadership and xenophobia remains robust even when we do control for other plausible explanations. Since the data available do not lend themselves to such rigorous analysis, I will instead discuss whether some other plausible explanatory variables varied in such a way that they could have explained the outcome that we observed.

First, we can eliminate all explanatory variables that may explain xenophobia but are unlikely to have changed between 1990 and 2003 and therefore are unlikely to account for the aggregate level variation that we are interested in here. Such variables include socio-demographic characteristics that have been shown previously to affect xenophobia on the individual level, such as education, gender, and occupation (Sniderman et al. 2001; Lubbers 2001). Such characteristics were quite stable in the period under consideration here and could not easily explain the differences we have observed. With regards to the socio-demographic variable that previous studies have shown to be the best individual-level predictor of xenophobia—education—the tendency
in this decade was towards more people receiving higher education and therefore xenophobia should slowly and uniformly decline. We found no evidence for such uniform decline.

A more plausible alternate cause for the varying pattern of changes seen in the figures above is perhaps the varying scopes and lengths of the asylum crises in the three countries in the period. Studies of populist right voting have found such a connection in the past (Jackman and Volpert 1995; Golder 2003a; 2003b) and they cause us to ask: Did Denmark receive many more asylum applicants per capita than Austria or Flanders in this period? Did Austria receive substantially fewer? Figure 7 graphs the annual number of asylum applications in pro mille of the populations of Denmark, Austria, and Belgium between 1980 and 2002. It shows that the number of asylum applications received varied quite a bit across time but not so much across countries.4 All three countries experienced a spike of applications between 1991 and 1993 and between 1998 and 2001. The first spike was smallest in Flanders and the second spike was smallest in Denmark. Based on the trends shown in figure 7, we should if there existed a direct relationship between number of asylum applicants and xenophobia, see the least amount of xenophobia in Flanders in 1990 because there had been comparatively speaking few asylum seekers annually before that year. By contrast, the change towards more xenophobia should be sharpest in Flanders, because this was the country that received the most asylum seekers per capita later on in the 1990s. Such predictions do not square with the patterns of differences and change in antipathy towards foreigners discussed above. [Figure 7 about here].

Even more to the point, we should expect change in xenophobia between 1990 and 2003 to be most moderate in Denmark, because this was the country that received the least asylum applications per capita of the three countries studied. As discussed above this prediction is exactly the opposite of what we found. In Austria, we may have expected an increase, since the number of asylum seekers per capita was at an all time high there in 2002. So, the changes in asylum applications do not predict the changes in xenophobia. Where we would expect the most change towards xenophobia, in Flanders, there was no change. Where we would expect the least change towards xenophobia, in

4 The sizes of populations were kept constant at the official 1990 level.
Denmark, there was the most change. And finally where we would expect some change towards xenophobia, in Austria, we saw instead a swing towards more tolerance.

**Inclusion in government.**

The final point that seems to somewhat contradict the argument that parties led public opinion towards new minorities to a large extent, is the finding that Austrians expressed much less xenophobia in 2003 than we had expected them to do based on the 1990 poll and the average across countries. How could it be that in a world where parties’ behaviors affect public opinion, the public became less xenophobic in Austria where the FPO was included in government than in Flanders where all mainstream parties maintained a *cordon sanitaire*?

The answer to this question is to be found only if we accept that the populist right parties themselves also exercise quite a bit of opinion leadership. Such a view somewhat contradicts the traditional idea of opinion leadership as being mainly exercised by mainstream elites (Zaller 1992). However, as long as the populist right receives attention and as long as parts of the public come to view these parties as legitimate elites, at least on some issues, there is no reason why these parties could not also exercise opinion leadership. Indeed, by seeking the status of truth-tellers in the area of asylum policies, the populist right parties may have assumed such a leadership role for parts of the public. If the populist right exercised such leadership, as the data and the account below suggests they did, then we should expect the effects of this leadership to be different when the populist right was included in government, as in Austria, from when they were excluded, as in Denmark and Flanders.

In Austria, by assuming government responsibility, the populist right (FPO) all of a sudden found itself in a position where it had to defend the government’s practices in the area of asylum policies. As figure 7 shows, the OVP-FPO coalition certainly did not bring down the number of asylum applicants in their term, and this was in the new context something that the FPO could not use for the purpose of whipping up xenophobic sentiment. Instead the ministers had to convey an image of being in control and working to resolve the asylum crisis in accordance with everyone’s best interest. Moreover, and these are the issues that predictably tore the FPO apart, the party had to focus on other
policy areas than asylum and thereby it lost some of its capacity to convince the public that multiculturalism was not in their interest.

By contrast, the populist right in both Flanders and Denmark were excluded from government responsibility and were, because of their positions as outsiders, uniquely placed to continue their campaign to sway public opinion towards the position that their best interest was a radically restrictive asylum policy and strong constrains on multiculturalism. It is hence the structurally different positions that the populist right parties occupied as a government insider in Austria, on the one hand, and as an outsider in Flanders and Denmark, on the other, that provides the remaining pieces to the puzzle of why the least change towards xenophobia is found in Austria and not in Flanders.

Similar to the other figures above, figure 8 does not prove the account of populist right leadership, but it supports it. It shows that, in 2003, the FPO exercised significantly less opinion leadership on those who felt close to this party than did the DF and the VB. It shows that among those who felt a close affinity to the DF and the VB, the number of people who expressed prejudice exceeded the national averages by 27 and 25 percent respectively. By contrast, the comparative figure for those who felt an affinity for FPO in 2003 was only 18 percent.

[Insert figure 8 about here].

Conclusion
This paper finds strong, yet not conclusive evidence, that how mainstream and populist right parties responded to the asylum crisis affected public opinion towards new minorities. The finding that a significantly higher number of Danes than expected expressed prejudice in 2003 after the mainstream right party started campaigning for a much more restrictive asylum policy fits the opinion leadership hypotheses. The more conventional wisdom of the spatial model that parties respond to public opinion, but play a small part in shaping it, finds little support in the evidence analyzed in this paper.

However, a simplistic notion of opinion leadership does not explain the patterns of change across time and countries found in the public opinion data. Firstly, it is not the case that only mainstream parties influence the public’s views of new minorities. The populist right parties also exercise such opinion leadership, and they are particularly
effective at doing so as outsiders, otherwise the decline in prejudice in Austria compared to the absence of such a decline in Flanders cannot be accounted for. Secondly, the data presented here suggests, contrary to the implicit assumptions of the opinion leadership literature, that drawing a distinction between government inclusion and policy cooptation is crucial for understanding how parties and public opinion interact in the area of asylum policy.

Arguably, Western Europe’s boldest mainstream party effort at collectively opposing the populist right, in Flanders, was more effective in stalling prejudice against new minorities than the Danish strategy of approaching the populist right on policy terms. It was however less effective than the Austrian version of approaching the populist right by including the FPO in government. Whereas the Danish case cautions against disregarding opinion leadership, the Flemish case, where we saw xenophobia at the highest level among the three cases studied in both 1991 and 2003 cautions against overestimating it. In particular, the evidence presented here suggests that populist right parties themselves exercise a fair amount of opinion leadership in the areas of asylum and multicultural policies that should not be underestimated.

Finally, the Austrian case suggests very strongly that the cues that are sent to the public with regards to tolerance towards new minorities are significantly different when the populist right is reluctantly included in government than when the mainstream right seeks to campaign on a much more restrictive asylum policy agenda itself. The argument for how this could happen from within an opinion leadership perspective has both a structural and an agency component. In terms of structure, since the OVP did not significantly change its moderate response to the asylum crisis before the 1999 election campaign it made much less of a case for why restrictive asylum policies should be in voters interest than Venstre had to do in Denmark.

The agency component relates to how the OVP included the FPO in government. They clearly demarcated themselves from the unacceptable parts of the FPO’s personnel and legacy. In practical terms this meant that Haider was not part of the government and that a declaration of abidance to democratic norms was signed. The popular demonstrations as well as the international response also sent clear signals to the Austrian
people and may have contributed to the turn towards more tolerance than we would have expected in 2003.

The trends in this paper thus caution us against adopting a simple spatial model to understand party competition over asylum policy in Western Europe. The results are not conclusive, but they lend strong enough support for the claims that parties lead public opinion that this option needs to be studied rather than assumed not to exist. Parties do not simply respond to voters when they change asylum policies they also affect the very public opinion environment within which they operate. This paper suggests that they do so in somewhat more complex ways than predicted by the opinion leadership literature, but that this added complexity easily can be modeled theoretically and analyzed empirically.
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Table 1. Mainstream parties’ responses to the asylum crisis and their changes in Austria, Denmark, and Flanders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COALITION POLICIES</th>
<th>ASYLUM POLICIES</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Restrictive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>Denmark 1990</td>
<td>Austria 1990</td>
<td>Flanders 1990s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Austria 1999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Outcomes expected from the opinion leadership model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COALITION POLICIES</th>
<th>ASYLUM POLICIES</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Restrictive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>Opinion led to be more accepting towards minorities. Prejudice is censored</td>
<td>Opinion led to be less accepting towards minorities. Prejudice is less censored</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>The extent to which opinion is led depends on whether or not the mainstream party manages to mark its distance to the populist right on asylum policies.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data from the UNHCR. Countries included: Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece. The following Western European countries where data was not available for the whole period were excluded: Luxembourg and Ireland.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Percentage of population that prefers not to have new minorities as neighbors.


Figure 4.

Change in percentage of population that expressed xenophobic view beyond expected cross-national trend in Austria, Denmark, and Flanders between 1990 and 2003.

Figure 5.


Figure 6.

Does party membership make voters more or less xenophobic? Percentage above country average who don't want new minorities as neighbors in 2003 by party membership

Figure 7.

Asylum applications in pro mille of the population in Austria, Belgium, and Denmark.

Source: UNHCR.

Figure 8.

Differential effects of populist right opinion leadership on those who felt affinity to the populist right across countries in 2003.