

Immigration as the Key Structuring Issue of Party Politics in Europe

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Abstract

How do political party positions on immigration relate to the dimensions that organize European politics? In this paper, we use Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data from 2006 – 2019 to show that European party positions on immigration have an increasingly strong connection to party stances on European integration, consistent with recent arguments on the emergence of a transnational cleavage. We go on to show that it is not only the European dimension with substantial immigration content. In pooled analyses we find that a party's immigration position outperforms any other single issue indicator in predicting where a party stands on all three main dimensions of European party competition: economic left-right, GAL-TAN, and EU dimensions. Our results highlight the outsize significance of immigration as a political issue in Europe during the first two decades of the 21st century.

Even before the increase in refugee flows and asylum applications in 2015 and 2016, immigration had been a central topic of party competition in early 21st century European societies (Bale et al. 2010; Pardos-Prado 2015; Hutter and Kriesi 2022). As the focal issue of the radical right party family, the most successful group of challenger parties in Europe, the topic of immigration and border politics features prominently in the ascendance of the socio-cultural dimension in European party politics (Abou-Chadi 2016; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). In addition to its strong association with the cultural dimension, arguments about the emergence of a new transnational cleavage in Europe suggest that the political positions of parties towards immigration are increasingly aligned with party stances on European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2018; De Vries 2018; Jolly et al. 2022). Although the economic left-right dimension continues to structure many European party systems, the correlation between party positions on economic left-right, GAL-TAN (Green/Alternative/Libertarian-Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist), and European integration vary considerably across the continent (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2012). Within this paper, we build on this by examining the relationship between party stances on immigration and party positioning on the major dimensions of contemporary European party competition.

Our analysis of Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data on party positioning in Europe between 2006 – 2019 illustrates the centrality of immigration to the party politics of Europe. Across four waves of CHES data, we show that party positions on immigration are increasingly correlated with party stances on European integration, a finding consistent with the emergence of a transnational cleavage with cosmopolitan and nationalist poles (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Jackson and Jolly 2021). We extend these findings in subsequent analysis using the information on issue-specific party positions available in the CHES since 2006. Across the range of issue positions available in the data, the stance of a party on immigration is the most informative for a party’s positions across the economic left-right, GAL-TAN, and European integration dimensions. While some specific economic issues correlate more highly with economic left-right, for instance, no single issue correlates with all three dimensions at

such high levels.

In this article, we first demonstrate the rising salience of immigration across time and space in Europe, whereas most other issues have hardly moved. Next, we use simple correlations to show that immigration is not only more highly correlated with the three dimensions since 2006, but that it is also more highly correlated with nearly all the specific issue dimensions. Finally, using simple scaling techniques, we show that including immigration in a scale with any of the three dimensions does more to increase the average interitem correlations in the scale than any other single variable, suggesting that immigration is a key common link between the three dimensions. Preliminary work with machine learning and LASSO models verifies the rising importance of immigration in structuring European party competition in the 21st century.

1 Background and motivation

There has been a sharp increase in attention to cultural topics in the manifestos of European parties over the last three decades (Hall 2022). Over the same time period, the salience of immigration increased markedly for parties of both the mainstream left and right (Dancygier and Margalit 2020). What are the ramifications of this increased attention to the cultural dimension in general and immigration in particular for the other major dimensions of European party competition? In addressing this question we take up recent calls to “examine in particular the role of immigration as a newly dominant issue in the politics of advanced industrial economies” (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019). By providing a detailed analysis of party positioning on immigration in contemporary Europe over time we also address “How...mainstream parties respond to the strategies of issue entrepreneurs? When do new issues become mainstream issues?” (Hobolt and de Vries 2015).

Our conjecture is that the increased salience of immigration will mean that party positions

on this issue area will correlate with not only the cultural dimension but increasingly party stances on European integration as well as the economic left-right dimension. The suggestion that party positioning on immigration and European integration have become more intertwined is supported empirically in CHES data (Jolly et al. 2022) and consistent with existing arguments about changing cleavage structures (Hooghe and Marks 2018; De Vries 2018; Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Jackson and Jolly 2021). Our anticipation of a stronger relationship between immigration and economic left-right may initially appear less intuitive.

Immigration has been and will remain closely associated with the cultural dimension, but it is of growing significance to matters more often associated with left-right politics (Dehdari 2021). Already in the early 2000s, for example, the left-right self-placements of Dutch citizens were driven more by attitudes on immigration than by preferences on redistribution (DeVries et al. 2013).

In the next section, we briefly highlight the increasing salience of immigration across Europe since 2010 using CHES data.

2 Immigration Salience

In the CHES trend file, experts have placed parties on the major dimensions since 1999, but specific issue positions only since 2006 and specific issue salience since 2010. So we can offer only a short snapshot comparison, but it is illuminating.

Table 1 displays the mean salience scores and standard deviations for immigration and three other policy issues included in the 2010 and 2019 rounds of the CHES. The salience scales range from ‘Not important at all’ (0) to ‘Extremely important’ (10). Averaging across all parties, the salience of immigration increased from 5.5 in 2010 to 5.9 in 2019. As illustrated in the difference in means column of Table 1, this increase in salience was substantially larger

Table 1: Immigration Salience Over Time

	2010		2019		Diff. in Means	Std. Error
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
Immigration	5.5	2.0	5.9	1.9	0.4	0.2
Redistribution	6.0	1.5	6.1	1.4	0.2	0.1
Environment	4.5	2.0	4.7	2.1	0.2	0.2
EU	6.0	1.7	6.1	1.5	0.1	0.2

Source: CHES Trend File

than corresponding changes in salience for redistribution, environment, and EU positioning, themselves topics where one might reasonably expect increased in salience during this range of time.

In Table 2, we subset the data by Central and Eastern European and Western European EU member states to explore regional variation in immigration salience. In 2019, the mean salience score for parties in Western Europe was 6.0; for parties in the Eastern countries the mean salience of immigration was 5.7 on the 0 – 10 scale. However, the East/West difference in immigration salience is considerably smaller than regional differences in the importance of environment and the European Union, where the West parties attribute more significance to the environment relative to those in the East, and the EU is more salient in the East than the West. In sum, although immigration is more salient to the parties of Western Europe than those in the East, the differences are small in comparison to other salient issues, and the importance of immigration as an issue area holds across Europe.

In Table 3, we return to comparing the salience of immigration over time, but here restrict the sample to right-wing parties, as defined by having left-right positions to the right of the median position (i.e., including center-right and far right parties on general left-right). As is clear from the table, the salience of immigration increased markedly for right-wing parties between 2010 to 2019, much more so than any of the three other policy areas. Much of the

Table 2: Saliency Across East-West in 2019

	East (N=113)		West (N=134)		Diff. in Means	Std. Error
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
Immigration	5.7	1.8	6.0	1.9	0.4	0.2
Redistribution	6.0	1.1	6.3	1.6	0.3	0.2
Environment	4.0	1.8	5.3	2.2	1.3	0.3
EU	6.5	1.5	5.7	1.5	-0.7	0.2

Source: CHES Trend File

Table 3: Saliency Across Time for Right-Wing parties

	2010		2019		Diff. in Means	Std. Error
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
Immigration	5.9	2.1	6.6	2.1	0.8	0.3
Redistribution	5.3	1.1	5.6	1.0	0.3	0.1
Environment	3.7	1.3	3.6	1.5	0.0	0.2
EU	6.1	1.7	6.2	1.5	0.1	0.2

Source: CHES Trend File. Parties included if above the median on left-right.

increase in saliency shown in Table 1 above is thus driven by the heightened importance of immigration for parties of the right, in particular, which speaks to the challenges faced by the parties of the mainstream right in an era of rising right-wing populism (see, e.g., Bale and Kaltwasser 2021).

The growing saliency of immigration to parties of the right is further visible in Figure 1, which displays the mean saliency scores by party family over four waves of the CHES data between 2006 and 2019.¹ Not surprisingly, immigration was most salient for the Radical Right of all party families throughout the time period, and the saliency of immigration for the radical right even increases between 2006 – 2019, as displayed in the top-left corner of the graph. Looking to the top-center panel, we see that the saliency of immigration increased

¹Note that these family codes are subjective and some parties may fit in multiple categories. With that said, this coding allows us to look across these groups and compare the changing importance of immigration to the parties in those groups.

substantially for the centre-right Conservative party family, which stands in stark contrast to changes in salience on the other side of the left-right divide where there are either no meaningful changes in the importance of immigration (Socialists), or the salience of the issue area actually decreases over time (Radical Left, Regionalists, and Greens). This is consistent with others that highlight immigration as a politicized topic for the centre-right (Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2022) and that the salience of immigration has been and continues to be driven by the Radical Right (Hutter and Kriesi 2022).

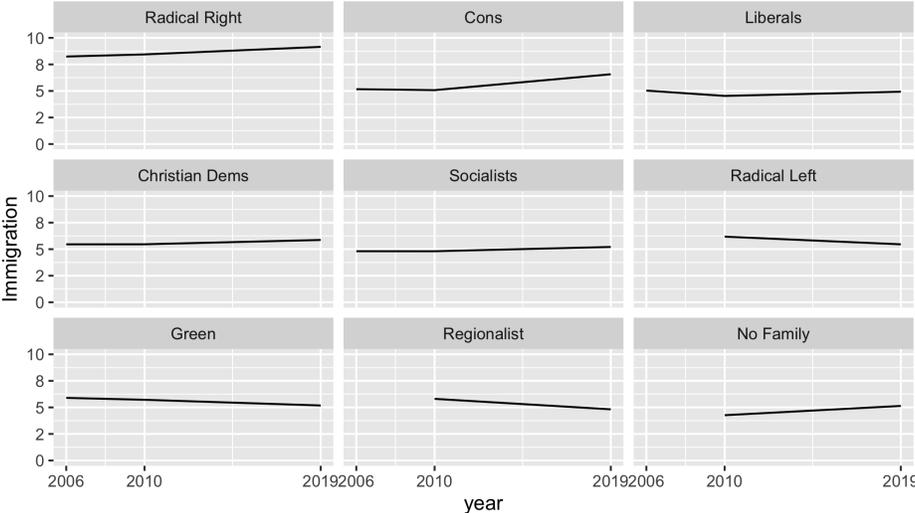


Figure 1: Immigration Salience by Party Family

Our examination of immigration policy salience for political parties in Europe using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey is generally consistent with content analysis of party manifestos. These studies report an increase in manifesto space devoted to cultural topics (Hall 2021) and an increase in salience of immigration in the manifestos of centrist party manifestos between the 1990s and 2000s (Dancygier and Margalit 2020). Yet, as Dancygier and Margalit go on to highlight in their paper, immigration is a multi-faceted issue area that touches on both cultural and economic politics, and as Hall illustrates in other work (Gidron and Hall 2017), economic and cultural factors frequently interact during important political processes. In the next section, we build on this work by examining how the issue area of immigration

relates to major dimensions of party competition over time.

3 Correlates over Time

In Tables 4 and 5, we present the simple bi-variate correlations between party positions on immigration and the stances of these parties on the major dimensions of party competition in Europe: economic left-right, GAL-TAN, and the EU dimension. Table 4 displays these relationships for 2006 and Table 5 reports the same information for the 2019 CHES wave. The correlations between immigration and these three dimensions is substantially stronger in 2019 than 2006, as is immediately apparent when comparing the immigration columns of both tables. The table provides additional interesting information about the relationship between economic left-right and GAL-TAN ideology and party positioning on European integration. Specifically, the correlation between economic left-right positioning and party stances on the EU declines considerably between 2006 and 2019; in contrast the correlation between a party's GAL-TAN positioning and European integration sharply increases over the same time period. Cumulatively, we take this as additional evidence that both the relevance of cultural politics has increased in this time period, and more importantly that party positions on immigration have become more closely intertwined with how parties position themselves on all three major dimensions structuring competition in European party systems. Figure 2² graphically displays the relationship between immigration position and each of the 3 dimensions over time. The correlations between immigration and both economic and social position marginally increase, whereas the correlation with EU position more than doubles between 2006 and 2019.

²Note that these are the absolute values of the correlations because immigration and EU are negatively correlated.

Table 4: Correlations in 2006

	Immigration	Economic L-R	GAL-TAN	EU
Immigration	1	.	.	.
Economic L-R	0.45	1	.	.
GAL-TAN	0.79	0.29	1	.
EU	-0.23	0.37	-0.23	1

Source: CHES Trend File.

Table 5: Correlations in 2019

	Immigration	Economic L-R	GAL-TAN	EU
Immigration	1	.	.	.
Economic L-R	0.52	1	.	.
GAL-TAN	0.88	0.40	1	.
EU	-0.51	0.10	-0.56	1

Source: CHES Trend File.

We start our examination of immigration policy’s relationship to the larger dimensions of European party competition by considering how this item correlates with the other CHES variables which consistently load together in factor models as GAL-TAN. As visualized in Figure 3, the correlations tend to get stronger over time, but there is variation across variables. Unsurprisingly, the largest correlation is with multiculturalism followed closely by ethnic minorities. In terms of the variables as measured, these three variables are linked together and could be scaled together. Liberal positions on immigration also tend to correlate highly with positions that prefer civil liberties to tough crime-fighting measures.

Next, we turn to the relationship between a party’s position on immigration policy and its positions on economic policies. Specifically, we see how the relationship between immigration position and a party’s position toward deregulation, redistribution, and public spending have changed over time. In Figure 4, we see that the correlations between immigration and all three economic policy positions have increased over time, although this increase has certainly not been monotonic. Across the board, however, parties that support more

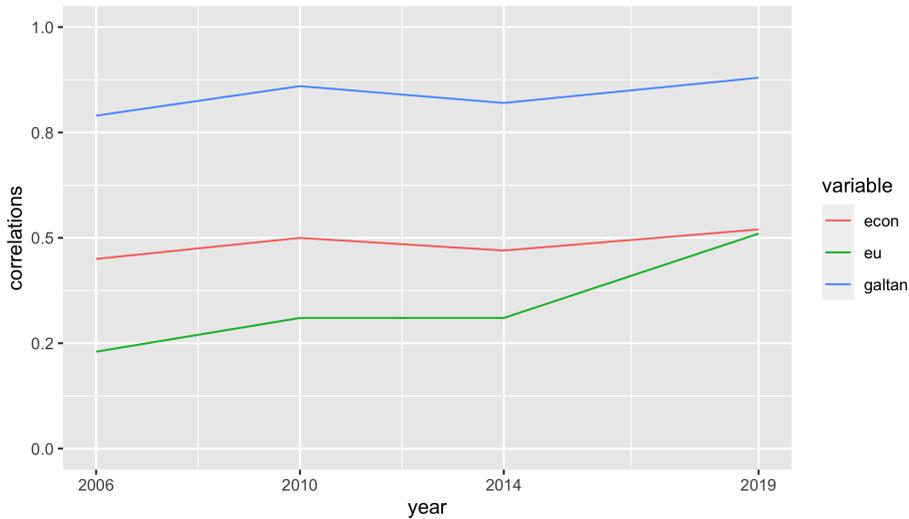


Figure 2: Immigration Correlations over Time

restrictive immigration policies tend to be more and more right-leaning in terms of economic policy. Notice that the correlations tend to be consistently much smaller than many of the GAL-TAN components

We next look at how the relationship between immigration position and a variety of EU policy positions have changed over time. Namely, we see how immigration position is associated with party positions toward EU structural funds (Cohesion), the Foreign and security policy, and position toward the internal market. We present the correlations graphically in Figure 5. Again, noting that the correlation is negative between these variables, we see that the strength of the relationship between immigration and other policy positions has increased over time (in absolute terms). The correlations here are becoming more negative, indicating that over time, parties that are more supportive of restrictive immigration policies are less in favour of EU cohesion, the foreign and security policy, and of the internal market. What is most striking about these relationships is how much stronger they have become over the course of the last 15 years.

These simple analyses demonstrate that the importance of a party's position toward immi-

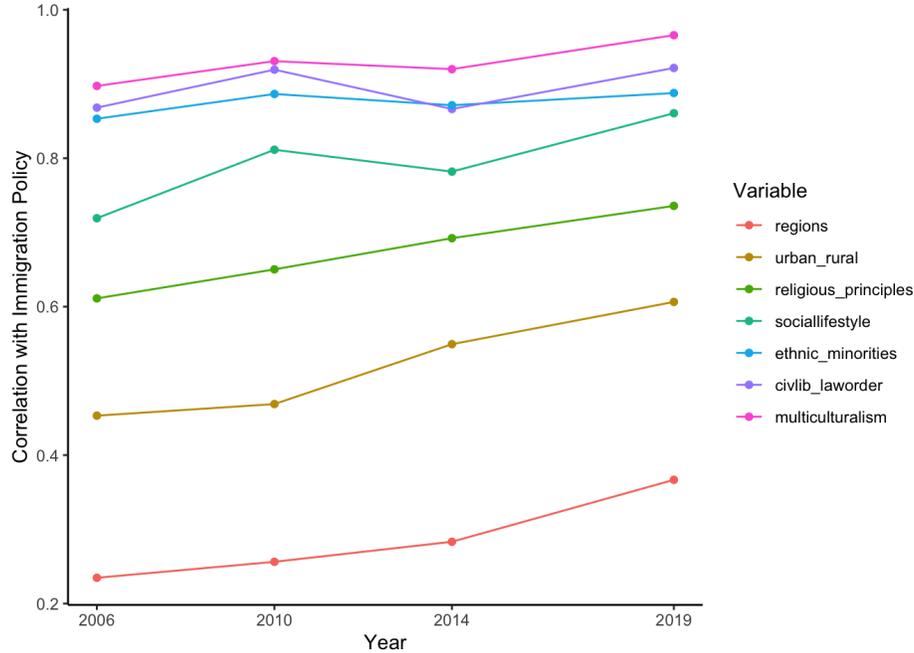


Figure 3: Immigration and GAL-TAN Issues Correlations over Time

gration vis-à-vis its position on any of the 3 dimensions of European party competition has increased steadily over the first two decades of the 21st century. The same holds true for every specific issue in the CHES data. Similarly, the correlations among the three dimensions have also increased over time, with the exception of EU and economic left-right. This potentially brings into question our current understanding of the multidimensional nature of European party politics. Previous research has demonstrated that the degree to which one, two, or three dimensions adequately capture the space of party competition varies across Europe (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2012), but these patterns are almost certainly changing. In short, if knowing a party’s immigration position can powerfully predict a party’s position on nearly any other issue, then immigration itself is the key structuring issue in European party competition.

One approach to assessing this potential change is to examine the average interitem correlations between party positions on the three main dimensions over time. If the average interitem correlation were to increase over time, this would be indicative of a simpler space

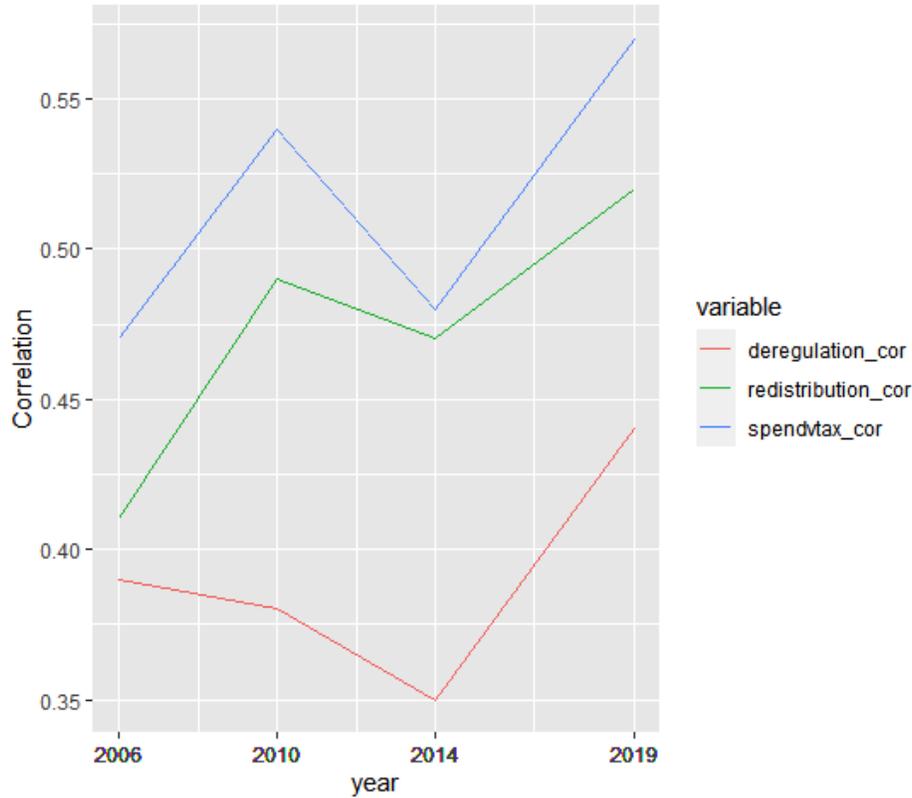


Figure 4: Immigration Correlations with Economic Left-Right Issues over Time

in which parties are competing. When we compute the interitem correlations between left-right economic position, social policy position (GALTAN), and EU position, we find that the average interitem correlation has increased from 0.14 in 2006 to 0.29 in 2019. The fact that the average correlation between the 3 dimensions has doubled over this time frame suggests that a party’s positions across these three dimensions are becoming more closely linked.

What is driving this simplification of the contestation space? To help answer this question, we compute the average interitem correlation between the three dimensions and each of the policy positions contained in the data. If the addition of a variable were to increase this interitem correlation, this would be illustrative of that variable serving as a common link between the three dimensions. That is, any variable that has a non-trivial correlation with each of the three dimensions will lead to an increase in the interitem correlations. Clearly, an increase could be driven by one strong relationship and two weak ones, but on average a

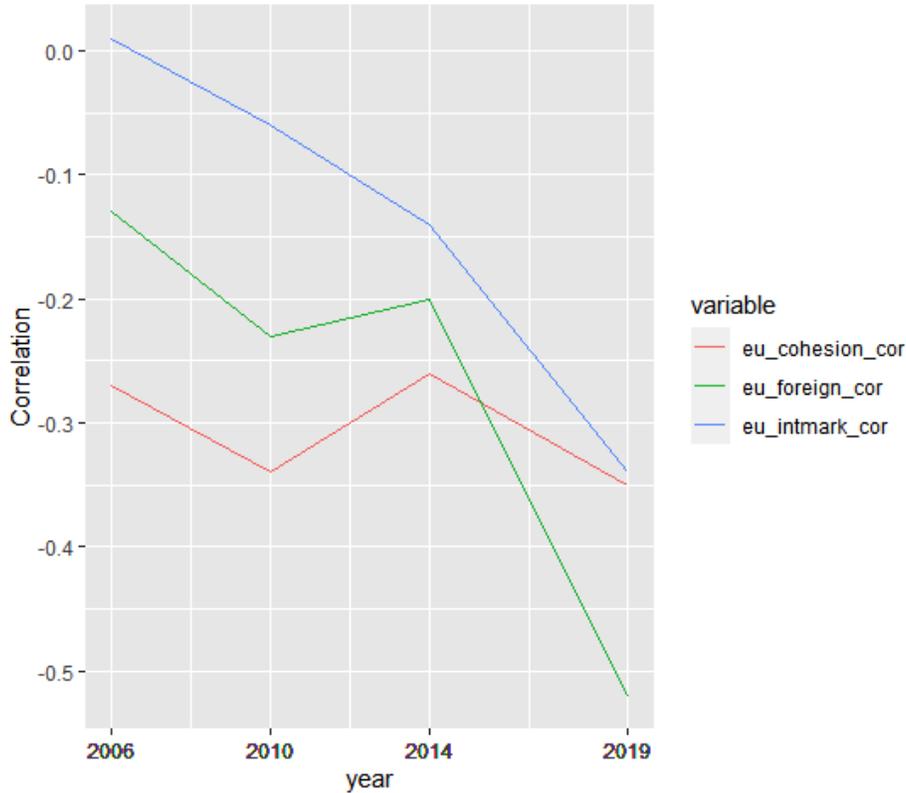


Figure 5: Immigration Correlations with EU issues over Time

variable that is associated with all three dimensions will have a higher correlation than those that are linked to only one.

In Figure 6, we show the average interitem correlation between the three dimensions and each of the specific policy variables. The red line near the bottom of the graph is the baseline—the average interitem correlation (henceforth IIC) between left-right economic, GALTAN, and EU positions. The big increase in the IIC for the baseline is evident between 2014 and 2019. We can see that regardless of which variable we add to the three dimensions, there is an increase in the average IIC, but the pattern of this increase over time varies across policies. For clarity's sake, we present a subset of these positions in Figure 7. Here we can see that the inclusion of policies such as immigration, multiculturalism and civil liberties vs law and order all lead to large increases in the average IIC and that this effect has increased over time. On the other hand, we see that positions toward the internal market and deregulation,

whilst still increasing the ICC when added, are less related to the three dimensions in 2019 than they were in 2006.

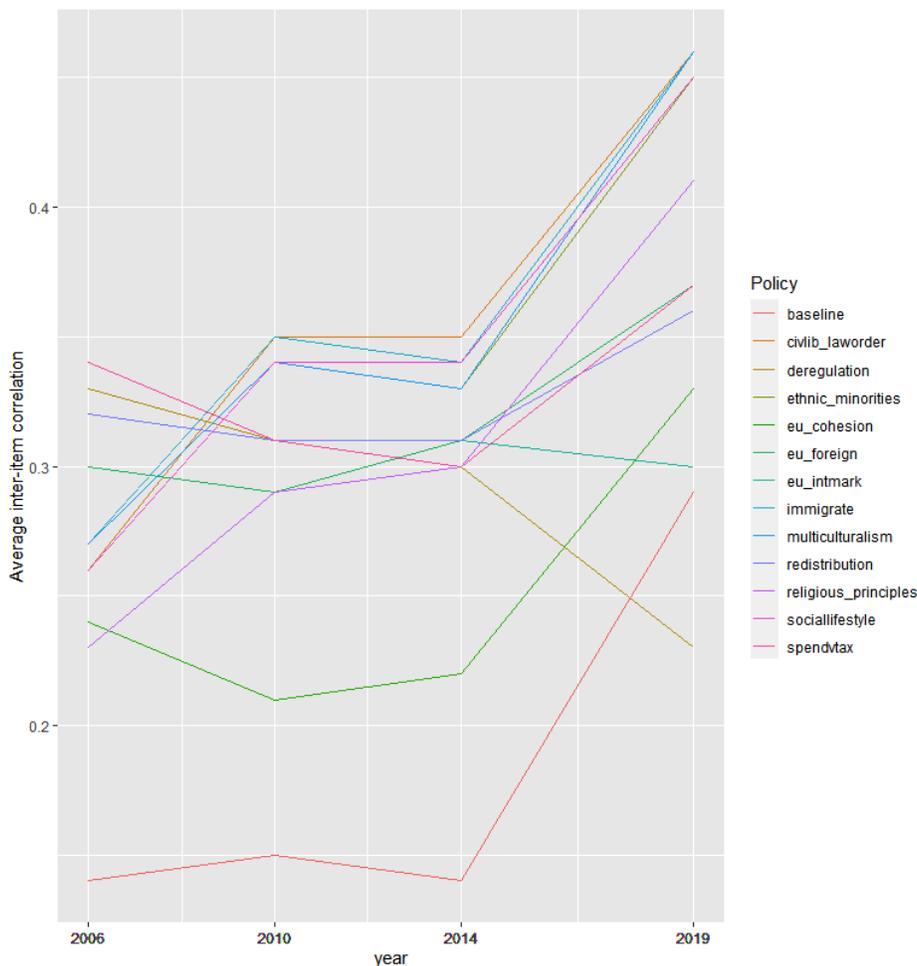


Figure 6: Interitem correlations over time

Lastly, in Figure 8, we show the change in the average IIC for each variable across years. In 2006, the variables that had the biggest increase on the average IIC were the economic positions, indicating that parties' positions on redistribution, deregulation, and spending vs cutting taxes had the strongest relationship with all three dimensions. Between 2006 and 2019, this story has rather drastically changed with positions toward immigration, multiculturalism and law and order replacing economic policies as those that most closely link the three main dimensions. As discussed earlier, these issues themselves have high interitem

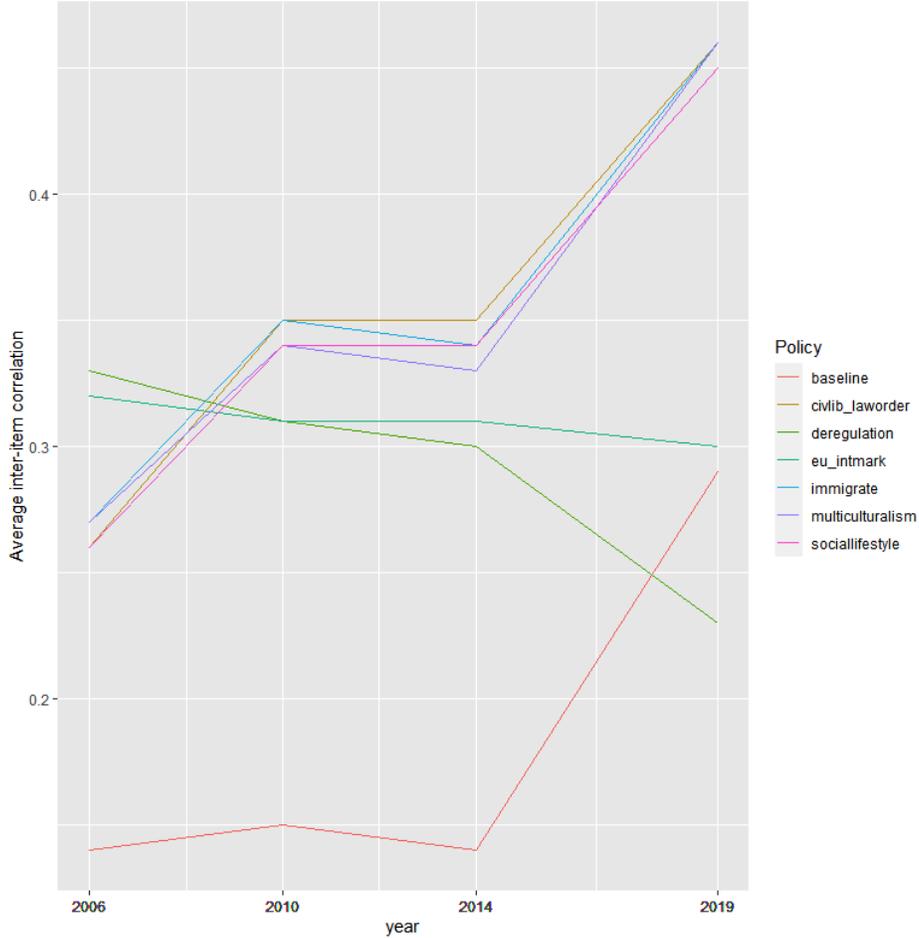


Figure 7: Interitem correlations over time: subset

correlations and are likely measuring a common latent variable.

4 Discussion

In this working paper, we present preliminary analysis that demonstrates the central role of immigration as an issue in party competition. This may be conventional wisdom given the high profile of far right challenger parties who own that issue, but we argue that it goes beyond simply an issue becoming more salient for one party family. To some degree, this argument extends beyond the burgeoning literature on the transnational cleavage by

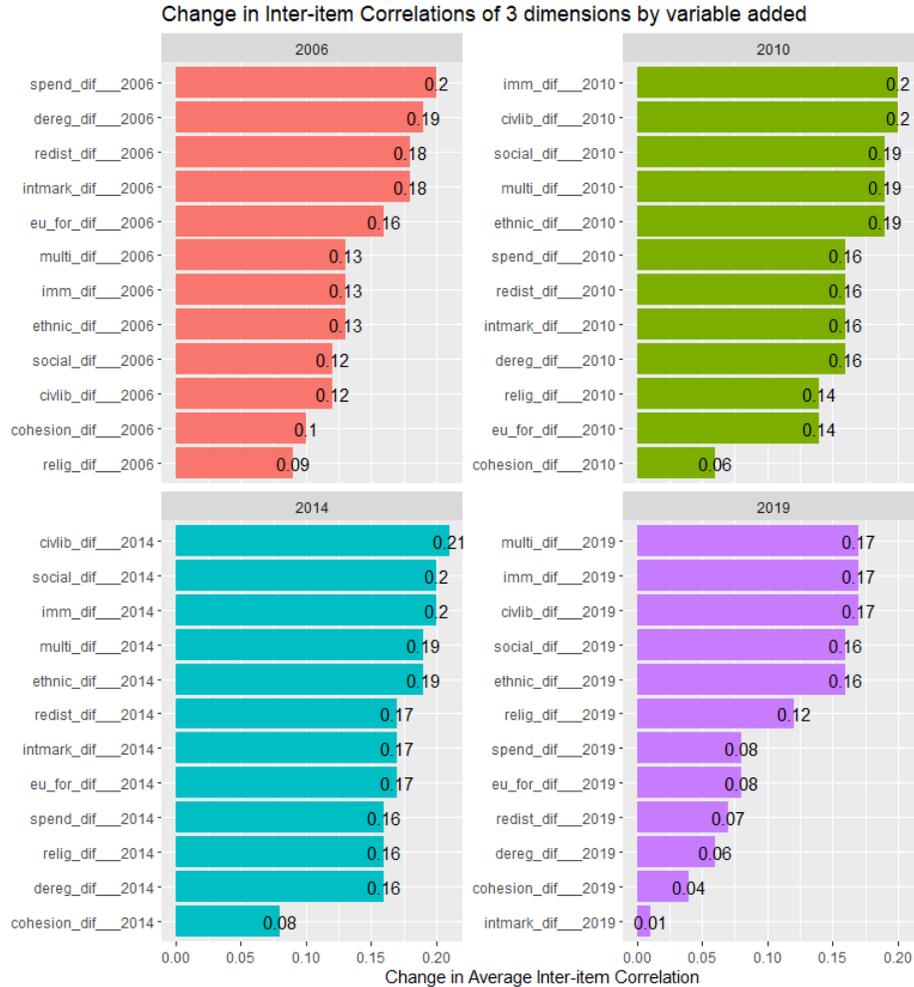


Figure 8: Changes in IIC

showing that immigration not only connects with immigration, as that literature argues, but that it also connects to economic left-right and GAL-TAN. In short, this preliminary analysis demonstrates that knowing a party’s immigration position can powerfully predict a party’s position on nearly any other issue. Thus, immigration itself is the key structuring issue in European party competition.

With that said, this is simply preliminary analysis. We are also working on more sophisticated machine learning and LASSO models to better understand the relationships among these variables and the central role of immigration, and simultaneously developing the theoretical model undergirding the exploratory empirical work in this paper.

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