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When political rhetoric threatens migrant labor-market integration.

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
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Jennifer J. Shaneberger

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Dedication

My graduate degrees would not be possible without the support of my life partner and loving husband, Jim. He taught me how to steady my mind, heart, and hands in order to balance many things while making uphill journeys. I'll never forget how he abandoned the comfort of our home in Tennessee to brave a year in Sweden doing research or the crucial role he played in developing a community for us there.

And when we returned to the States with carts and carts of baggage—including two guitars—walking two dogs and our daughter through Newark Airport, how he forged ahead... when I finally broke.

And to my children, Jaden Kenneth and Lylia Helen, who have both given me permission to travel extensively—even though it meant they would have to sacrifice either my care or their comfortable home. These two have hearts for social justice, minds dedicated to understanding others, wills as strong as their mother's, and actions based in kindness and respect. I could not be more proud of who they are becoming, and I know they are equally proud of me.

May this finished work remind us that all the effort we are making will eventually pay off.

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More specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Kyung Joon Han. His knowledge of migration issues and party positions was crucial to this project. His thoughtfully crafted, numbered lists of items to address created a structural framework through which I could navigate the difficult process of improving this work. I especially appreciated the way he made complex ideas understandable with simple words and phrases, and how he asked short, direct questions that instantly added clarity—for example, “Is that what you tested?” Without his support, I could not have obtained the Fulbright Fellowship, which funded the qualitative portion of this and future work.

The guidance of committee member Dr. Jana Morgan has not only shaped my ability to build theoretical frameworks from which I can design and analyze empirical tests, but she has also provided an example of the kind of academic leader I hope to become. Her feedback has always been rooted in a genuine desire to improve my capacity to perform the unique and challenging work of answering important questions. She has modeled how to be strong and direct while offering compassionate support. I knew from the first course I took with her on the politics of the marginalized that, if she joined my committee, she would be committed not just to the completion of a dissertation, but to my future success as a researcher. The tools I gained from her—particularly in time management and writing accountability—were almost as valuable as the constructive comments she made on the substantive chapters of this work.

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humor. Though he's a respected professor that everyone takes quite seriously, he also brightens and lightens the room. Lord knows, we need this in academia.

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Additionally, I am grateful to Linköping University's Division of Migration, Ethnicity and Society (REMESO). Dr. Anders Neergaard and the REMESO faculty were welcoming, constructive, and supportive. The courses I was allowed to audit and the presentations I gave shaped my understanding of the unique aspects of Swedish culture and policy that shine through in this work. Dr. Neergaard's expertise in discrimination and the migrant experience in Sweden was crucial to my success, as was his encouragement.

Consequently, REMESO faculty member Kristoffer Jutvik was, unexpectedly, instrumental in my development as a quantitative researcher and in my ability to navigate Swedish cultural norms. Dr. Jutvik and I co-author an offshoot of this research, located at the intersection of housing policy and migrant labor market integration. Co-authoring for the first time has been one of the most satisfying learning experiences of my career. The process helped me connect the introverted work of organizing literature, theorizing, and analyzing data to a collaborative process where the paper evolves through joint effort. Sharing this experience across cultures with a Swede made it all the more meaningful.

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"There's no society we've been able to observe without these hierarchically organized categories." – Dr. James Sidanius

Professor James (Jim) Sidanius gave us Social Dominance Theory. His life path—through the United States, Algeria, France, and Sweden—echoes my own in surprising ways. Perhaps this shared geography helps explain why his work resonates so deeply with my lived experience. The following excerpt from [Sidanius and Roso \(2020\)](#) illustrates how his biography provided a unique vantage point from which he constructed the theory that underpins this research:

"Dr. Sidanius was an American protester against the Vietnam War who left the U.S. in political dissent. He traveled through Canada, Algeria, and France before settling in Sweden, where he lived as a refugee for fourteen years. He renounced his American citizenship and sought a new identity.

The name Sidanius was computer-generated through the Swedish Royal Patent Office. Rejecting 'Brown'—the name of the slave owner who had once 'owned' his family—he initially wanted to adopt 'Uhuru,' meaning 'freedom' in Swahili, but was denied due to Swedish naming restrictions. Of all the options, Sidanius was simply the name he found 'least ugly.' Only four people in the world now bear it: himself, his son, his wife, and his ex-wife.

In Sweden, he became part of a small expatriate American community of Vietnam War resisters and civil rights activists. He also socialized briefly with the Black Panthers in Algeria, including Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, though he later distanced himself from them due to concerns about their behavior.

After returning to the U.S. for a postdoctoral fellowship at Carnegie Mellon, he held academic positions at the University of Texas, NYU, and later UCLA. Coming home was both a relief and a revelation: while racism had become less overt, the structural hierarchy—Whites at the top, African Americans at the bottom—remained. This duality inspired Social Dominance Theory, his framework for understanding how group-based hierarchies persist even as societal norms evolve."

- Adriane Roso

Abstract

This dissertation examines how anti-migrant political rhetoric influences migrant labor-market integration in European Union countries. It argues that exclusionary discourse functions not only as symbolic expression but as a signaling system that reinforces social hierarchies and constrains access to opportunity. Drawing on Cue Theory and Social Dominance Theory (SDT), I develop Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory (RHST) to conceptualize political speech as a mechanism of symbolic governance that encodes stratification intent.

Chapter 2 introduces RHST, identifying four rhetorical mechanisms—dominance, egalitarianism, threat, and blame—and situating them within SDT’s hierarchy-enhancing vs. hierarchy-attenuating framework. Drawing on interviews with Swedish political elites, I show that anti-migrant rhetoric operates across party lines, with even center and center-left actors deploying conditional inclusion frames that normalize exclusionary norms.

Chapter 3 traces the diffusion of exclusionary rhetoric using time-series cross-national data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). I find that Center Parties respond more to the rhetorical salience of Radical Right Parties than to their electoral performance, suggesting that discursive adaptation, rather than direct vote competition, drives the spread of exclusionary language.

Chapter 4 tests the reception of elite rhetoric using individual-level data from the EUENGAGE survey. Results show that exposure to anti-migrant rhetoric is associated with heightened exclusionary attitudes among both the general public and business elites, indicating that rhetorical signals influence the perceptions and preferences of institutional gatekeepers.

Chapter 5 assesses whether exclusionary rhetoric is associated with labor-market integration outcomes for migrants across 19 EU countries (2007–2022). Using fixed-effects regression models with standardized predictors, I find that increases in anti-migrant rhetoric are significantly associated with declines in migrant employment parity, even when controlling for macroeconomic conditions, policy indicators, and demographic variables.

Taken together, the chapters offer a multi-level account of how anti-migrant rhetoric diffuses across party systems, shapes attitudes among both publics and elites, and correlates with structural exclusion in the labor market. While the study does not claim causality, it demonstrates that rhetorical environments are closely linked to integration outcomes. This dissertation contributes to scholarship on political communication, migration, and social inequality by showing how elite discourse functions as a stratifying force that interacts with institutions to shape the lived experiences of migrants.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	xii
List of Figures	1
1 Introduction	2
1.1 Terminology and Party Classification	3
1.2 Research Questions and Contributions	4
1.3 Structure of the Dissertation	5
1.4 Conclusion	7
2 Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory: Political Cues, Social Dominance, and Migrants	9
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 Political Rhetoric	11
2.2.1 Rhetoric Influences Attitudes Toward Migrants	12
2.2.2 Threat as a Rhetorical Mechanism	14
2.3 Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory	16
2.4 Party Overview	18
2.5 Applying RHST to Elite Discourse	20
2.5.1 Dominance Cues	20
2.5.2 Egalitarian Cues	21
2.5.3 Threat Cues	22
2.5.4 Blame Cues	24
2.5.5 Institutional Mediation of Rhetorical Effects	25
2.6 Conclusion	25
3 How Anti-Migrant Sentiment Spreads Through Party Systems	27
3.1 Introduction	27
3.2 Rhetoric versus Position: A Review of Existing Approaches	29
3.3 Theory	31
3.4 Methodology	33
3.4.1 Variable Construction	35

3.5	Empirical findings	42
3.6	Conclusion	47
4	Anti-Migrant Rhetoric and Its Impact on Public and Business Attitudes	50
4.1	Shifting public opinion toward migrants	52
4.2	Theory: Anti-Migrant Political Rhetoric and Public Attitudes	54
4.3	Methodology	57
4.3.1	Data Sources	57
4.3.2	Variable Construction	57
4.3.3	Model Specification	59
4.3.4	Descriptive Statistics	60
4.3.5	Preliminary Visualization	60
4.4	Empirical Findings	61
4.5	Discussion	64
4.6	Conclusion	66
5	Anti-Migrant Rhetoric and labor-market Integration: A Longitudinal Analysis	68
5.1	Introduction	68
5.2	Migrant labor-market integration	70
5.3	Theory	73
5.3.1	Alternative and Complementary Explanations	74
5.4	Methodology	76
5.4.1	Data and sample	76
5.4.2	Model	76
5.4.3	Outcome: labor-market Integration	77
5.4.4	Independent and Control Variables	79
5.5	Empirical Findings	83
5.6	Conclusion	87
6	Conclusion	89
6.1	Key Findings: The Reach and Impact of Anti-Migrant Rhetoric . . .	89
6.2	Theoretical and Methodological Contributions	91
6.3	Implications for Politics and Policy	91
6.4	Final Reflection and Future Research	91
	Bibliography	93
	Vita	105

List of Tables

2.1	Rhetorical Mechanisms in RHST and Their Hierarchical Effects . . .	16
3.1	Radical Right Wing Parties by Country	37
3.2	Summary Statistics of Key Variables	40
3.3	Countries by Region	42
3.4	Change in RRP AMR and EX impact on CP Ambiguity	43
3.5	Change in CP anti-migrant and Exclusionary rhetoric, time-series hierarchical model	46
4.1	Descriptive Statistics	60
4.2	Effect of Anti-Migrant Rhetoric on Attitudes of Citizens and Business Representatives	62
5.1	Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables	81
5.2	Effects of Anti-migrant Rhetoric and Welfare Spending on Integration (Standardized)	84

List of Figures

1.1	Research Design Overview: From Rhetorical Theory to Empirical Application	6
2.1	Causal flow of Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory	17
2.2	Ideological Placement of Major Swedish Political Parties (Approximate)	19
3.1	Ideological Placement of Party Families	36
3.2	Change in anti-migrant rhetoric overtime by party type and country .	39
3.3	Average anti-migrant rhetoric from 2007 to 2021 mapped by country	41
3.4	Average marginal effects of anti-migrant rhetoric on CP ambiguity, from model 1	44
3.5	Average marginal effects of radical right exclusion rhetoric on probability of center party ambiguity, from model 2	45
4.1	Relationship between Anti-Migrant Rhetoric and Public Attitudes toward Migrants in Nine EU Countries	61
4.2	Marginal effect of anti-migrant rhetoric on mass attitudes	64
4.3	Marginal effect of anti-migrant rhetoric on business attitudes	65
5.1	Density of foreign employment by country, 2007- 2021	71
5.2	Welfare Spending and Labor Market Integration, country average 2007 - 2022	76
5.3	Foreign and native employment, 2007–2022	78
5.4	Mapped average integration by country, 2007-2021	79
5.5	Average labor-market integration scores by country, 2007–2021	80
5.6	Average anti-migrant rhetoric by country with spread, 2007-2021 . . .	82
5.7	Anti-migrant rhetoric and integration, density by country	83
5.8	Marginal Effects of Anti-migrant Rhetoric (Baseline Model)	85
5.9	Marginal Effects of Anti-migrant Rhetoric by Welfare Spending (Standardized)	85

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Hungary does not need a single migrant for the economy to work, or the population to sustain itself, or for the country to have a future. This is why there is no need for a common European migration policy, whoever needs migrants can take them, but don't force them on us, we don't need them. For us, migration is not a solution but a problem... not medicine but a poison. We don't need it and won't swallow it."

—Viktor Orbán, Hungarian Prime Minister, 2016

When political leaders equate migrants to poison, they are not merely expressing personal opinions; they are shaping public discourse and influencing societal attitudes. Migration has long occupied a prominent place on the European political agenda, but the 2015 to 2016 influx of migrants into [European Union \(EU\)](#) countries intensified debates over intake quotas and integration strategies. Countries such as Hungary adopted restrictive immigration policies, often coupled with xenophobic rhetoric, resulting in labor-market shortages due to simultaneous emigration and constrained immigration. Conversely, nations including Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, and Denmark, which admitted significant numbers of migrants during this period, continue to face challenges related to integration. In several cases, integration efforts have been labeled ineffective, sparking criticism of incumbent governments.

This dissertation focuses on the [EU](#) from 2007 to 2022, a period marked by intensified migration flows and increasing political salience of migration across member states. While national governments retain primary authority over migration and labor policies, the [EU](#) sets common normative, legal, and discursive frameworks that shape national-level discourse and integration practices. This temporal and regional scope allows for the analysis of how elite rhetoric operates within a multi-level governance context. Sweden serves as the primary qualitative case due to its historically inclusive welfare regime and its dual experience of generous asylum intake and growing political

backlash. For cross-national comparisons, the dissertation examines 16 EU member states, selected based on data availability and variation in both party rhetoric and migrant integration outcomes.

Although political science has long examined the institutional and policy dimensions of migration, fewer studies have systematically evaluated how symbolic politics—particularly elite rhetoric—shapes social hierarchy and material inequality. This dissertation addresses that gap by treating rhetoric not as an expressive or strategic byproduct of politics, but as a structuring force that guides public sentiment, institutional behavior, and ultimately migrant incorporation.

This dissertation investigates the impact of political rhetoric on migrants, focusing in particular on labor-market integration. Employment is a critical component of the integration process, signifying a migrant’s capacity to navigate the host country’s institutional, linguistic, and cultural structures. Gainful employment not only offers financial stability to migrants but also contributes to the host society’s economic sustainability.

To explore this issue, the dissertation draws on Cue Theory and Social Dominance Theory (SDT). In developing this analysis, I introduce a new theoretical framework: Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory (RHST), which integrates insights from SDT and Cue Theory. RHST conceptualizes elite political rhetoric as a structured signaling system that shapes group hierarchies by transmitting dominance, egalitarian, threat, and blame cues. These rhetorical signals influence how migrants are positioned in society, either as deserving contributors or as cultural, economic, or security threats. RHST contributes to existing literature by formalizing the link between elite discourse and hierarchical social outcomes.

Cue Theory posits that citizens, often lacking detailed political knowledge, rely on signals from political elites to form opinions (Zaller, 1992). When politicians employ anti-migrant rhetoric, they transmit cues suggesting that migrants pose threats, potentially fostering public support for restrictive immigration policies and undermining protections for migrants’ rights. SDT conceptualizes societies as hierarchically organized systems in which dominant groups seek to maintain their advantage (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). Individuals vary in their orientation toward group-based dominance, and political elites play a central role in either reinforcing or attenuating these hierarchies through both rhetoric and policy. Anti-migrant rhetoric can function as a hierarchy-enhancing device, framing migrants as threats to the dominant group’s cultural, economic, or physical security.

1.1 Terminology and Party Classification

In this dissertation, I use the term center parties rather than mainstream parties to describe the Social Democratic, Christian Democratic, Liberal, and Conservative

party families, as classified by the [Comparative Manifesto Project \(CMP\)](#). This terminology shift reflects both the declining normative coherence of the mainstream and the inclusion of radical parties in contemporary governance. Center here refers to parties that occupy a position between the far left and far right, excluding both extremes. These parties have historically been associated with consensus politics and have varying but generally integrative approaches to migration. By contrast, I classify the Sweden Democrats as a [Radical Right Party \(RRP\)](#), due to their nationalist and exclusionary ideological profile.

1.2 Research Questions and Contributions

This dissertation asks: *How does anti-migrant political rhetoric shape migrant labor market integration in [EU](#) countries?* I approach this question by disaggregating it into three analytical components: (1) the production of elite rhetoric, (2) the diffusion of rhetorical cues across party systems, and (3) the reception and material consequences of these cues. Conceptually, I frame rhetoric as a form of symbolic governance that shapes public attitudes, institutional behavior, and access to opportunity.

Drawing on [RHST](#), I argue that elite rhetoric operates through distinct mechanisms—dominance, egalitarianism, threat, and blame—that signal migrants’ relative status within national hierarchies. These rhetorical cues influence not only citizen attitudes, but also institutional actors responsible for mediating economic inclusion.

To address this overarching question, the dissertation is organized around three sequential components:

1. **Elite Rhetoric and Framing (Chapter 2):** How do Swedish political elites construct and communicate hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating messages about migrants? What rhetorical cues, particularly threat and blame, emerge across the party spectrum?
2. **Rhetorical Diffusion Across Party Systems (Chapter 3):** How do center parties across EU member states adjust their rhetoric in response to radical right challengers? Does rhetorical contagion occur even in the absence of major electoral gains by radical parties?
3. **Reception and Consequences (Chapters 4–5):** How does exposure to exclusionary rhetoric affect both attitudes and outcomes? Chapter 4 investigates how citizens and employers respond to rhetorical cues using survey data, while Chapter 5 examines whether elevated anti-migrant rhetoric is associated with declining labor-market integration across EU and OECD countries, controlling for policy and economic factors.

The European Union provides a strategic context in which to investigate these questions. Although migration policy is largely national, the EU sets discursive,

normative, and legal frameworks that influence public debates and integration practices across member states. Sweden, the primary qualitative case, offers insight into elite discourse within a historically inclusive welfare regime. Cross-national quantitative analyses extend these findings by assessing rhetorical effects at both attitudinal and institutional levels.

RHST offers a complementary theoretical framework that builds on existing accounts while reorienting attention toward the stratifying function of elite rhetoric. Rather than focusing solely on institutional design or attitudinal predispositions, **RHST** centers the role of political language as a mechanism of stratification. It formalizes how rhetorical cues operate across contexts and identifies their consequences at both discursive and material levels.

This study contributes to political science in three key ways:

Theoretical: I develop **RHST**, integrating Social Dominance Theory and Cue Theory to explain how rhetoric signals group-based social order and institutional roles.

Empirical: I combine qualitative interviews, manifesto analysis, survey data, and panel models to trace how rhetoric diffuses, how it is received by publics and gatekeepers, and how it shapes labor market outcomes—linking discourse to material inequality.

Normative: By highlighting the symbolic power of rhetoric in shaping access to work and inclusion, this dissertation reframes debates about migrant integration as fundamentally about social hierarchy, not just individual adaptation.

1.3 Structure of the Dissertation

The structure of the dissertation is summarized in Figure 1.1, which maps the progression from theoretical foundations to empirical applications.

The dissertation proceeds in six chapters. Chapter 2 defines political rhetoric and introduces **RHST**, framing political speech as a symbolic governance mechanism. This chapter also establishes the theoretical foundation of the dissertation by explaining how **RHST** synthesizes key insights from **SDT** and Cue Theory. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Swedish politicians across party lines, the chapter analyzes how rhetorical cues function in elite discourse and how they vary across political orientations. Despite Sweden’s inclusive welfare regime, the analysis shows that hierarchy-enhancing rhetoric has become embedded in the language of center and center-left actors. Through close attention to framing strategies, this chapter illustrates how rhetorical mechanisms, particularly threat and blame cues, redefine the boundaries of belonging and subtly shape the legitimacy of policy proposals.

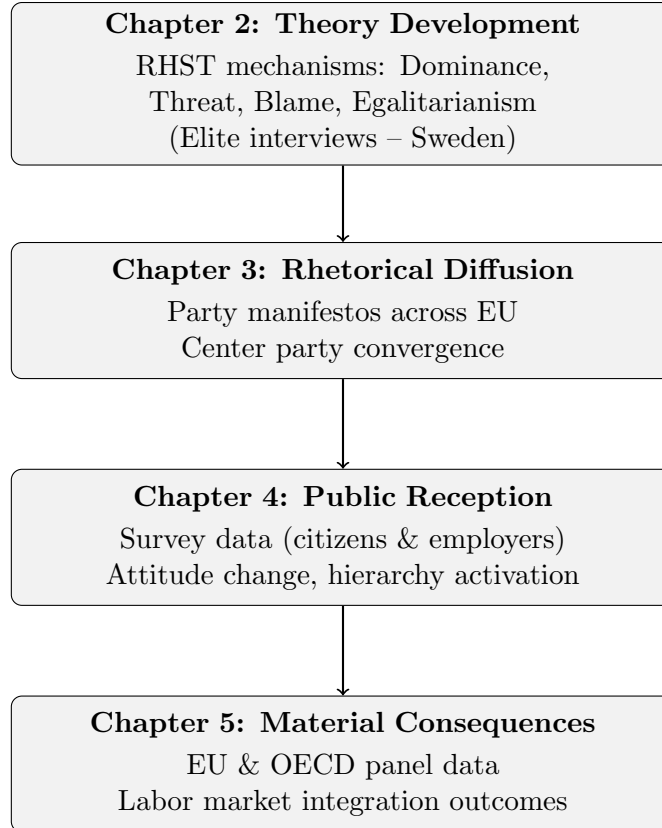


Figure 1.1: Research Design Overview: From Rhetorical Theory to Empirical Application

The chapter makes the case that even in contexts celebrated for their progressive orientation, elite discourse helps sustain social stratification.

Chapter 3 investigates rhetorical contagion in a cross-national comparative framework. It asks how and why mainstream parties adjust their language in response to the discursive strategies of radical challengers. Drawing on time-series data from the [CMP](#) from 2007 to 2022, the chapter analyzes how [Center Party \(CP\)](#) in 16 EU member states respond to the rhetorical innovations of [RRP](#). By introducing a measure of rhetorical ambiguity, the chapter evaluates whether [CPs](#) adapt their positions through clearer articulation of exclusionary claims or maintain vagueness to balance competing pressures. The findings show that [CPs](#) reduce ambiguity and incorporate generalized anti-migrant frames when [RRPs](#) escalate their rhetoric, even when those parties do not gain substantial electoral traction. This chapter contributes to the literature on political communication by distinguishing rhetorical contagion from electoral contagion, demonstrating that shifts in party language often precede or exceed changes in voter support.

Chapter 4 examines the reception of political rhetoric among both the general public and economic elites. Using multilevel regression models applied to EUENGAGE survey data and [CMP](#) indicators, the chapter evaluates how anti-migrant discourse shapes attitudes toward migrants across nine countries. It focuses particularly on business representatives, a group frequently overlooked in public opinion studies. The analysis finds that exposure to exclusionary rhetoric increases the likelihood of holding negative views toward migrants, even among employers and business actors who may otherwise favor labor-market inclusion. By highlighting the role of rhetorical cues in shaping perceptions across different societal groups, this chapter emphasizes the indirect but potent influence of political language on labor-market access. These results expand Cue Theory by demonstrating that elite signals resonate not only with mass publics but also with institutional actors who control gateways to economic opportunity.

Chapter 5 addresses the structural consequences of political rhetoric. It asks whether and how exclusionary discourse affects migrant labor-market outcomes across [EU](#) and [OECD](#) countries. Using time-series cross-sectional data from 2007 to 2022, the chapter models the relationship between anti-migrant rhetoric and indicators of labor-market integration, including employment gaps and occupational mobility. The analysis controls for a range of policy and economic variables, including [Gross Domestic Product \(GDP\)](#) per capita, welfare state generosity, and migration flows. The results indicate a robust and negative association between rhetorical exclusion and labor-market integration. Elevated levels of anti-migrant rhetoric are associated with declining rates of employment among migrants, suggesting that rhetoric contributes to institutional bias and the erosion of equitable opportunity. This chapter provides the clearest evidence that political speech not only shapes perception, but also materially alters the distribution of resources and rights within host societies.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by synthesizing the theoretical and empirical findings. It reflects on the recursive relationship between rhetoric and hierarchy: how exclusionary cues produced by elites diffuse across party systems, shape public and institutional attitudes, and ultimately manifest in structural inequality. The chapter argues that political rhetoric must be understood not merely as background noise to policy debates but as a causal force in its own right. Rhetoric builds social boundaries, legitimizes unequal treatment, and constrains the life chances of migrants. The final chapter also revisits the implications of [RHST](#) and offers directions for future research on political communication, social stratification, and migration governance.

1.4 Conclusion

This dissertation establishes a clear relationship between political rhetoric and migrant integration outcomes. It provides empirical support for [SDT](#) by showing how

elite rhetoric can reinforce group-based hierarchies. It also expands Cue Theory by demonstrating how elite discourse not only shapes attitudes but produces behavioral and institutional consequences. Through an integrated analysis of party rhetoric, public opinion, and labor-market outcomes, this research illustrates the formative role of political language in shaping social inclusion and exclusion. Rhetoric, I argue, is not merely symbolic, it constitutes a discursive infrastructure that informs citizen behavior, structures access to opportunity, and shapes the lived experiences of migrants.

This dissertation does not reject structural, institutional, or policy-based explanations for migrant integration outcomes. Rather, it introduces a complementary mechanism rooted in elite political communication. While frameworks such as [Migrant Integration Policy Index \(MIPEX\)](#) highlight formal policy barriers and welfare regimes shape labor incentives, [RHST](#) foregrounds the symbolic dimension of exclusion. It argues that rhetoric serves as a signaling system that legitimizes inequality by shaping attitudes and justifying hierarchies.

These findings underscore the responsibility of political leaders in cultivating inclusive discourse and the risks posed by rhetorical strategies that marginalize vulnerable groups. This project advances a simple but consequential proposition: political speech matters. It cues social boundaries, legitimizes exclusion, and contributes to the reproduction of structural inequality. By developing [RHST](#) and applying it across multiple methods and levels of analysis, the dissertation shows how elite discourse shapes the lives and life chances of migrants in contemporary Europe.

Chapter 2

Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory: Political Cues, Social Dominance, and Migrants

2.1 Introduction

How does political rhetoric influence public perception and institutional behavior toward migrants? This chapter explores how political actors use language to construct the boundaries of national belonging, and how that language reverberates through society to affect migrant integration. Political rhetoric is not merely expressive; it is strategic. Individual politicians use rhetoric to persuade voters and signal preferences, while parties use it collectively to shape policy agendas and delineate social norms. As parties debate within parliamentary settings, their rhetoric defines what is acceptable, what is desirable, and what is threatening. Anti-migrant rhetoric, in particular, frames migrants as economic, cultural, or security threats. While this type of discourse originates with right-wing parties, it has increasingly been adopted by center parties, especially since the 2015 asylum influx.

To understand the societal consequences of political speech, I apply two complementary frameworks: [SDT](#) and Cue Theory. [SDT](#) explains how social hierarchies, originally designed to facilitate group efficiency, are preserved and justified over time, particularly through the classification of individuals into dominant and subordinate groups ([Sidanius and Pratto, 1999](#)). In this chapter, migrants are conceptualized as a subordinated group positioned outside the native majority. [SDT](#) posits that rhetoric can either reinforce dominance or challenge it, depending on whether it enhances or attenuates group-based hierarchy. These dynamics are often embedded in bureaucratic processes such as those governing employment, education, housing, and citizenship.

Cue Theory, by contrast, focuses on information processing. It assumes that citizens, constrained by limited attention and expertise, rely on elite cues when forming political opinions (Zaller, 1992). In this framework, elites do not simply reflect public sentiment; they actively shape it. Political rhetoric becomes a top-down influence that guides how citizens interpret social phenomena and assess the legitimacy of different groups.

Together, SDT and Cue Theory suggest a troubling causal chain. Political elites craft exclusionary messages, which activate dominance-oriented predispositions among citizens. These predispositions, in turn, manifest as exclusionary attitudes, discriminatory behavior, and institutional gatekeeping. Rhetoric thus functions not only as a vehicle for persuasion but also as a mechanism of symbolic governance.

To better understand this process, I introduce an original theoretical contribution: RHST, which synthesizes SDT and Cue Theory to conceptualize political rhetoric as a structured signaling system that produces hierarchical effects. It identifies four rhetorical mechanisms—*dominance*, *egalitarianism*, *threat*, and *blame*—that elites use to manage public interpretation and define social boundaries. RHST formalizes political speech as a discursive infrastructure that shapes material access to opportunity, legitimizes exclusion, and either reinforces or disrupts group-based hierarchy.

Sweden is an instructive case for theoretical development. As a Nordic welfare state, it ranks highest in the (Solano and Huddleston, 2020), yet it continues to exhibit one of the European Union’s most persistent employment gaps between native-born and foreign-born residents. This paradox, in which progressive integration policy coexists with structural exclusion, suggests that discourse may condition integration outcomes, even in egalitarian settings. Since the Sweden Democrats entered Parliament in 2010 with an explicitly anti-migrant platform, exclusionary rhetoric has diffused across both center-right and center-left parties. By 2022, such rhetoric had become central to political debate.

Although this chapter does not test causal effects directly, it establishes the discursive mechanisms through which rhetoric may influence labor-market outcomes. By analyzing elite discourse, it lays the theoretical groundwork for the empirical chapters that follow, which examine the diffusion of exclusionary rhetoric across Europe and assess its measurable consequences.

This chapter draws on original qualitative interviews conducted in 2024 with representatives from six of the eight parties represented on the Swedish Riksdag’s Labor Market Committee. The Center Party and Christian Democrats declined to participate despite multiple requests. The six included parties span the ideological spectrum and represent the dominant positions in both governing and opposition blocs. Each interviewee was informed that their responses would be anonymized and treated confidentially. While individual identities remain protected, participants

were explicitly asked to speak on behalf of their party’s position on migration and labor-market integration. Their responses are therefore treated as representative of party-level rhetorical strategies rather than personal opinion. This design enables a comparative analysis of elite discourse across the ideological spectrum.

2.2 Political Rhetoric

I draw from two key scholars to define political rhetoric as effective communication that contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief, and incorporates persuasion toward a preferred social norm (Condor et al., 2013; Fairclough, 1992). I assume this rhetoric will be enacted through parliamentary debates, public speeches, and other political communication, rather than remain static text. In democratic systems, where leadership is contingent on public approval, constant persuasion is required. Therefore, public discussion and debate are not ancillary but central to political leadership. Persuasive texts are intentionally crafted and arranged in a deliberate rhetorical style. These texts are often delivered with conviction by policymakers or candidates who have committed speeches to memory, infusing their delivery with personal energy. In this way, rhetoric becomes operational: it is deployed strategically to persuade voters. Through rhetorical expression, politicians signal their policy preferences, whether explicitly or implicitly (Condor et al., 2013).

Rhetoric shapes group identities through the process of commemoration or acknowledging, honoring, and recycling past events to construct collective memory (Hutton, 1993; Neal, 1998; Schwartz, 1982; Zerubavel, 1995). Group memory, as Foucault (1977) suggests, relies not on what is objectively true, but on what is selectively and repeatedly remembered. Political rhetoric operates at the frontier of this memory-making. It serves not only to recount the past but to strategically curate it, foregrounding events that align with ideological goals while omitting or reframing those that do not. When politicians invoke history, explaining “how we got here”, they are not merely narrating events, they are encoding those events with moral and political significance that informs present boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

This mechanism is vividly illustrated in the Sweden Democrats’ 2018 manifesto, which embeds anti-migrant rhetoric into a commemorative frame. The statement, “As a result of uncontrolled immigration, war-experienced terrorists are walking the streets and taking advantage of our welfare and asylum system,” is not just a contemporary policy critique, rather, it is a mnemonic device. It links past decisions with present insecurity, casting migrants as the aftershocks of a historical misstep. In doing so, the party constructs a narrative of national decline that is both moral and temporal, inviting listeners to remember a purer past disrupted by foreign presence. This strategic invocation of memory strengthens in-group cohesion by reifying a shared

sense of loss and grievance, while legitimizing exclusionary policy proposals in the name of historical correction.

Because elections are cyclical, political commemorations also follow a cyclical pattern. By embedding slogans and catchphrases into campaign rhetoric, politicians make it easier to recall past events during election cycles (Denton Jr, 1980). Different political groups may “remember” the same events differently, resulting in alternative commemorative narratives. This occurs because political parties interpret events through the lens of their ideological preferences. As a result, they develop conflicting perspectives on causes and implications, and diverge on what constitutes an appropriate path forward. Politicians may construct arguments aimed at a universal audience, a particular audience, or a strategic composite of both (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Van Eemeren, 2010). The expansion of mass media, including radio, television, internet, and social media, has broadened the reach of these messages and diversified their audiences. Media technologies now allow politicians to target messages to specific groups, but they also enable audiences to self-select the political content to which they are exposed (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). When citizens primarily engage with information from one party or ideological perspective, it can result in confirmation bias, whereby individuals more readily accept information that aligns with their beliefs and dismiss contrary evidence (Oswald and Grosjean, 2004).

2.2.1 Rhetoric Influences Attitudes Toward Migrants

Political rhetoric functions as a heuristic through which citizens, constrained by limited political knowledge and attention, interpret complex political phenomena. As outlined above, Cue Theory explains that citizens often rely on elite-provided informational shortcuts to navigate complex political issues. In the context of migration, this means that elite discourse becomes a primary channel through which public attitudes toward migrants are shaped—especially when that discourse frames migrants as threats or norm violators.

The influence of rhetorical cues has been studied using diverse methodological approaches. Sánchez-Junquera et al. (2021), for instance, employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to develop a taxonomy of stereotypes in Spain’s parliamentary speeches. This analysis revealed how politicians systematically present migrants through reductive and stigmatizing frames. Such stereotypes disregard the diversity within migrant populations, instead portraying them as victims, burdens, or threats. CDA is grounded in the assumption that language is not neutral; rather, it is a tool for reproducing and contesting power relations (Fairclough, 1992). Political rhetoric, therefore, serves not only to persuade but to position migrants within a discourse of hierarchy and exclusion.

These rhetorical patterns are evident across national contexts. In the UK, Lamb (2014) shows how nationalistic rhetoric, when paired with dehumanizing portrayals,

contributes to a discourse that marginalizes migrants. Similarly, [Calderón et al. \(2020\)](#) analyzed far-right Twitter discourse in Spain, identifying common forms of hate speech such as irony, humiliation, falsehoods, and incitement to violence. These studies demonstrate that elite rhetoric often employs strategies that frame and prime the public to perceive migrants as undeserving, dangerous, or morally inferior.

Understanding why such portrayals are effective requires recognizing immigration as a multidimensional issue that complicates public opinion formation ([Burns and Gimpel, 2000](#); [Chandler and Tsai, 2001](#); [Mayda, 2006](#)). Immigration touches on labor markets, cultural identity, national security, and welfare policy, dimensions that often pull citizen attitudes in contradictory directions ([Hellwig and Kweon, 2016](#)). Cue Theory provides a model for understanding how citizens resolve these tensions. According to [Zaller \(1992\)](#), the political cues citizens receive, accept, and sample determine how they evaluate complex issues. Shifts in elite rhetoric alter the informational environment, thereby changing which considerations are most salient when citizens form opinions.

Framing and priming are the cognitive mechanisms that make political cues powerful. Goffman defined frames as mental templates used to interpret events ([Goffman, 1974](#)), while priming theory explains how prior exposure to certain concepts enhances their accessibility in future judgments ([Meyer and Schvaneveldt, 1971](#); [Iyengar and Kinder, 1987](#)). Even minimal exposure can be effective: for example, reading words associated with aging has been shown to influence walking speed ([Bargh et al., 1996](#)). When political rhetoric persistently frames migrants as criminals or burdens, it primes negative associations that guide not only attitudes but also behavior.

These attitudinal effects can be compounded through the process of moral disengagement. Bandura theorized that individuals justify unethical behavior when social cues indicate that such actions are acceptable or even virtuous ([Bandura, 1999](#)). When political elites implicitly legitimize discrimination or violence against migrants, some individuals act accordingly without experiencing moral dissonance. [Dancygier \(2023\)](#) found that in Germany, radical right-wing voters were more likely to support candidates who endorsed violence against refugees, illustrating how elite cues can normalize hate-based responses.

Reactions to these cues are shaped by individual predispositions. [Bohman \(2011\)](#) found that right-leaning citizens are especially responsive to nationalist rhetoric. This pattern has been confirmed through studies using [CMP](#) data and public opinion surveys ([Helbling, 2015](#); [Schmidt-Catran and Czymara, 2023](#)). Nationalist rhetoric emphasizes shared culture, language, and history, implicitly defining who qualifies as a member of the national community ([Renan, 1990](#)). These discursive boundaries elevate the in-group while designating migrants as out-group members, intensifying exclusionary responses.

In sum, anti-migrant rhetoric acts as a top-down cueing mechanism. It does not merely reflect public sentiment; it actively constructs the lens through which migrants are perceived and evaluated. This rhetorical framing has measurable consequences for attitudes, norms, and behavior. The chapters that follow build upon this theoretical foundation to examine empirically how political cues influence both public and elite attitudes, as well as migrants' structural integration into the labor-market.

2.2.2 Threat as a Rhetorical Mechanism

The primary mechanism through which political rhetoric influences public opinion is by communicating threat. Here, Cue Theory and SDT intersect. Zaller argues that threat-based cues are especially influential when they align with individuals' predispositions and levels of political attentiveness (Zaller, 1992). SDT explains these predispositions through the concept of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), defined as an individual's degree of preference for hierarchy between social groups (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999, 2001).

SDT views individuals as embedded within stratified societies, and their Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) reflects how strongly they support group-based dominance. These orientations develop through interactions with hierarchical institutions and are reinforced by the benefits or disadvantages individuals experience within those systems. Members of dominant social groups tend to exhibit higher SDO, which correlates with reduced empathy and greater resistance to redistributive or inclusionary policies. Experiments conducted by Sidanius and colleagues found that individuals high in SDO were less likely to assist migrants when they were framed as a threat, highlighting a behavioral link between SDO and intergroup exclusion (Sidanius et al., 2004). In contrast, individuals low in SDO are more receptive to Hierarchy Attenuating (HA) ideologies that emphasize egalitarianism and group inclusion (Pratto et al., 1994, 2013).

Ho et al. (2012) advanced the theory by dividing SDO into two subdimensions: Social Dominance Orientation Dominant (SDOD) and Social Dominance Orientation Egalitarian (SDOE). SDOD captures overt preferences for group-based dominance and is associated with aggressive attitudes such as racism, support for violence, and belief in zero-sum competition. SDOE represents more subtle forms of hierarchy maintenance through support for system-legitimizing ideologies and opposition to affirmative action or redistributive programs (Jost and Thompson, 2000; Hindriks et al., 2014). Political rhetoric that frames migrants as threats activates both subdimensions: SDOD may trigger direct hostility and support for punitive measures, while SDOE may reinforce support for policies that maintain social boundaries.

Survey research confirms that perceived intergroup threat, whether cultural, economic, or demographic, plays a central role in shaping anti-migrant attitudes. Native citizens are particularly sensitive to perceived cultural differences between themselves

and migrant groups (Sniderman et al., 2004; Hanson et al., 2007; Dancygier and Donnelly, 2013). Interestingly, greater ethnic diversity among migrant populations has been associated with lower threat perceptions, suggesting that exposure to multiple outgroups may diffuse fear through increased familiarity (Dancygier and Laitin, 2014). In contrast, economic threats, such as perceived competition for jobs, public benefits, or housing, remain consistent predictors of exclusionary attitudes, particularly among economically vulnerable or less-educated citizens (Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2013).

These threat perceptions are not confined to attitudes; they often manifest in behavior. Citizens who perceive migrants as a threat to their material or symbolic status are more likely to support restrictive policies concerning citizenship, immigration quotas, and multicultural education (Callens and Meuleman, 2017). These beliefs can also translate into everyday acts of exclusion, such as refusing to rent housing to migrants or excluding them from hiring pools. Such behaviors are often rationalized as self-protective, but they reinforce structural barriers to integration.

Classic group conflict theories explain these responses as driven by perceived competition between groups (Blalock Jr, 1967; Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Blumer, 1958). Gorodzeisky and Semyonov (2016a) explore how anti-migrant attitudes in Europe stem from both threat perceptions and racial prejudice. Using hierarchical modeling of European Social Survey data, they find that migrants are perceived as a distinct source of threat, separate from longstanding racial or ethnic minorities. This suggests that migrant-specific discrimination may follow a different logic than prejudice toward other marginalized groups.

Conzo et al. (2021) examined the behavioral consequences of threat-based rhetoric using experimental methods. Participants exposed to negatively framed portrayals of migrants exhibited greater physiological and emotional hostility, and they displayed in-group favoritism in economic transactions. This suggests that exclusionary rhetoric not only shapes attitudes but also leads to inefficient or discriminatory economic behavior. In labor markets, such dynamics can reduce the likelihood that migrants are hired or treated fairly, despite economic incentives to do otherwise.

Together, Cue Theory and SDT describe a sobering causal chain: political elites deploy rhetoric that frames migrants as threatening; these cues activate dominance-oriented predispositions among citizens; and these predispositions manifest in exclusionary attitudes, behaviors, and policy preferences. In labor-market contexts, these dynamics obstruct structural integration by limiting migrants' access to jobs, housing, and institutional participation. If accepted broadly and without challenge, anti-migrant rhetoric could foster conditions where meaningful integration becomes systematically unattainable.

2.3 Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory

Building on the preceding insights from SDT and Cue Theory, this section formally outlines RHST. RHST conceptualizes political rhetoric not only as an expression of elite preference or ideology, but as a signaling system with hierarchical effects. It identifies four distinct rhetorical mechanisms—*dominance*, *egalitarianism*, *threat*, and *blame*—each of which contributes to either the reinforcement or disruption of group-based stratification.

Table 2.1 summarizes these mechanisms and their relationship to social hierarchy, providing a framework for systematic coding of elite rhetoric.

- **Dominance cues** **Hierarchy Enhancing (HE)** signal native group superiority through appeals to cultural primacy or institutional legitimacy.
- **Egalitarian cues** **HA** promote group parity, challenge narratives of cultural or moral inferiority, and invite the public to consider structural causes of inequality.
- **Threat cues** **HE** depict migrants as endangering economic security, cultural identity, or public order, often implicitly activating dominance-oriented predispositions.
- **Blame cues** assign responsibility for social or economic problems either to migrants (**HE**) or to institutions and structures (**HA**).

While RHST identifies three HE mechanisms and only one HA mechanism, this asymmetry reflects the empirical dominance of exclusionary discourse in elite rhetoric. Egalitarianism, while present, is less frequently and less assertively articulated across party lines, particularly when framed alongside labor-market conditionality or cultural conformity. The imbalance is therefore not a theoretical bias, but an analytical reflection of observed rhetorical patterns.

Table 2.1: Rhetorical Mechanisms in RHST and Their Hierarchical Effects

Rhetorical Cue	Effect on Hierarchy	RHST Function
Dominance	Enhancing (HE)	Signals group superiority; affirms native primacy.
Egalitarianism	Attenuating (HA)	Promotes group parity; critiques hierarchy and social exclusion.
Threat	Typically HE	Activates exclusionary responses by portraying migrants as cultural, economic, or security risks.
Blame	HE or HA (context-dependent)	Assigns responsibility for social problems to either migrants (HE) or institutions/systems (HA).

Figure 2.1 illustrates the causal logic of RHST, showing how rhetorical signals interact with individual predispositions and institutional processes to influence migrant integration outcomes.

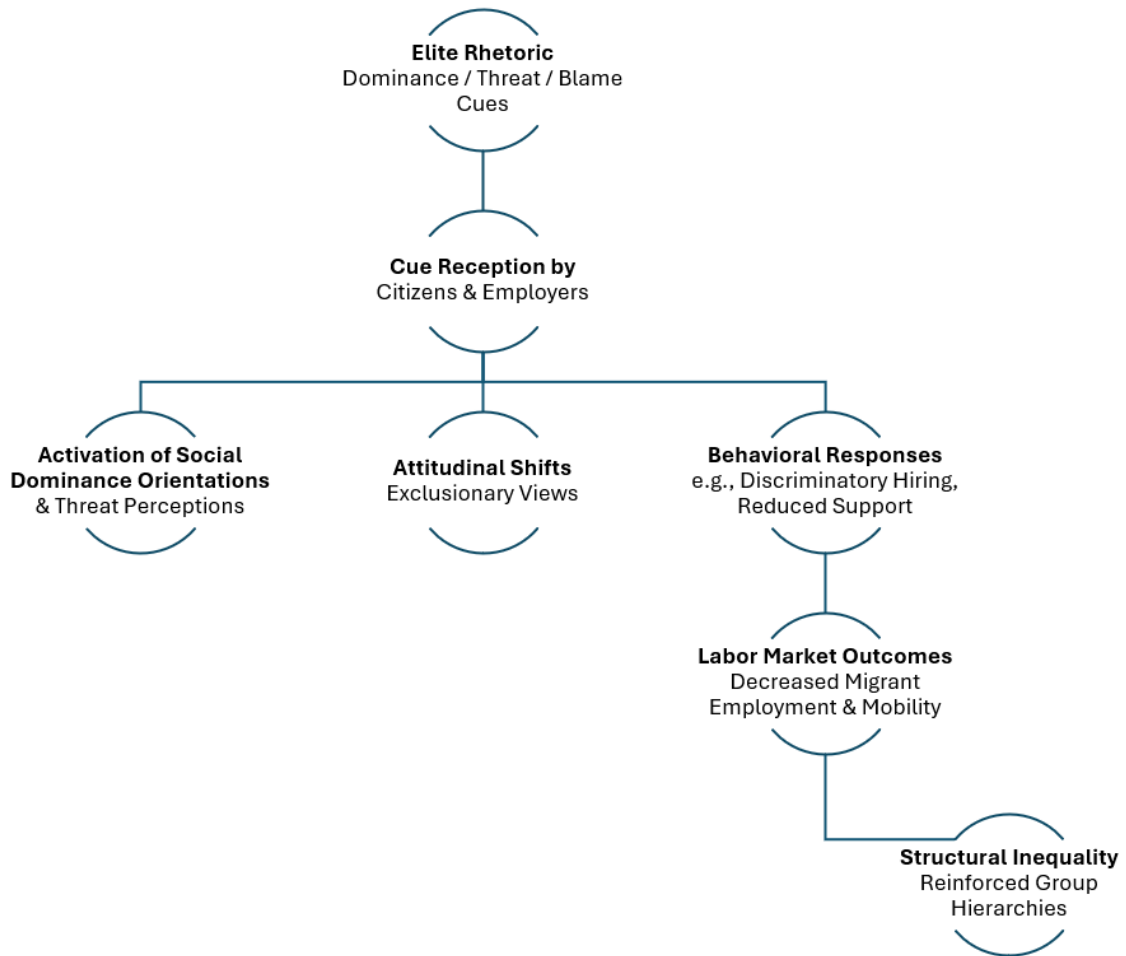


Figure 2.1: Causal flow of Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory

Finally, blame is included due to its centrality in framing theory and political psychology; it reflects the attribution of responsibility for social problems, often to marginalized out-groups (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Schneider and Ingram, 1997). Blame cues are frequently deployed to shift the locus of causality onto migrants, legitimizing exclusion while minimizing institutional accountability. Together, these mechanisms capture the range of rhetorical strategies used by political elites to manage symbolic boundaries and condition public responses to migration.

The innovation of RHST lies in its ability to distinguish *rhetorical intent* from *rhetorical function*. That is, what a speaker aims to convey may not align with the effect their language has on social hierarchies. A politician may employ egalitarian language to appear inclusive (e.g., “*everyone should belong*”) while embedding conditional terms that reinforce native primacy (e.g., “*as long as they become like us*”). This dual focus enables RHST to capture the layered, often contradictory nature of political rhetoric.

Moreover, RHST allows researchers to code elite speech not merely for sentiment or ideology, but for its stratifying effects. By treating rhetoric as a form of symbolic governance, RHST aligns with broader theories of discursive power, where language is a vehicle for institutional legitimation and boundary-making. It offers a toolkit for identifying how political actors use speech to draw moral and civic distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and in doing so, structure the terrain of social belonging.

Justification of Mechanisms

The four rhetorical mechanisms that compose RHST—dominance, egalitarianism, threat, and blame—are derived from Social Dominance Theory’s distinction between hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating narratives (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). While RHST includes three hierarchy-enhancing mechanisms (dominance, threat, blame) and one attenuating (egalitarianism), this imbalance reflects the empirical prevalence of exclusionary cues in elite discourse across European party systems. Egalitarian rhetoric is not absent from political discourse, but it tends to be more conditional, reactive, or marginal, specifically among centrist parties navigating rising populist pressure. Future work may refine or expand this typology, but the current framework reflects the dominant rhetorical strategies used to justify or contest migrant exclusion.

2.4 Party Overview

This study draws on interviews with representatives from six Swedish parties represented in the Riksdag. Each party holds distinct ideological positions and rhetorical approaches to migration and integration. **Figure 2.2** below illustrates

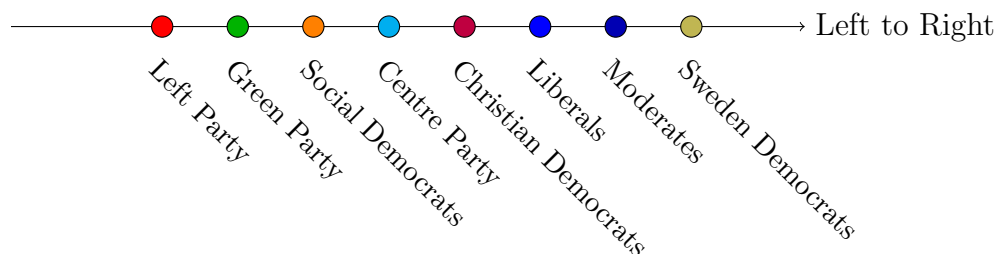


Figure 2.2: Ideological Placement of Major Swedish Political Parties (Approximate)

their approximate placement on the left–right ideological spectrum, providing visual context for the rhetorical variation discussed in this chapter.

The **Social Democrats** (Socialdemokraterna) are a center-left party rooted in social democratic tradition. As the largest opposition party, they support generous welfare provisions but have increasingly adopted restrictive rhetoric on migration, primarily since the 2015–2016 asylum crisis. They advocate conditional integration based on labor-market participation and cultural conformity.

The **Moderate Party** (Moderata samlingspartiet) is a center-right liberal-conservative party and the leading force in the current governing coalition. They support market liberalization and efficiency in public services, often pairing pro-integration rhetoric with policies emphasizing individual responsibility, rule of law, and linguistic assimilation.

The **Sweden Democrats** (Sverigedemokraterna) are a nationalist and right-wing populist party. Though not formally in government, they provide external support to the ruling coalition via the Tidö Agreement. They adopt strongly exclusionary rhetoric, portraying migration as a threat to national identity, welfare resources, and public safety. They advocate for restrictive migration policies and cultural assimilation.

The **Left Party** (Vänsterpartiet) is a socialist and feminist opposition party advocating for redistribution, labor rights, and anti-discrimination. They emphasize structural barriers to integration and frame migrant inclusion as a social justice issue. Their rhetoric highlights institutional responsibility over cultural adaptation.

The **Green Party** (Miljöpartiet de Gröna) is an environmentally focused party aligned with progressive values. Though currently in opposition, they maintain a pro-migrant stance centered on human rights and sustainability. They highlight systemic barriers and advocate for inclusive integration strategies grounded in empathy and fairness.

The **Liberal Party** (Liberalerna) is a centrist party supporting individual rights, education, and integration through civic participation. As a junior member of the

governing coalition, they combine support for migrant inclusion with calls for language proficiency, rule adherence, and labor-market activation.

This ideological diversity allows for the examination of rhetorical variation across the political spectrum, from inclusionary narratives grounded in equality and institutional reform to exclusionary frames emphasizing cultural threat and group-based blame. Two parties currently represented in the Swedish Riksdag are not included in this study. The **Centre Party** (Centerpartiet), a centrist liberal-agrarian party with generally pro-migrant positions, and the **Christian Democrats** (Kristdemokraterna), a socially conservative party aligned with the governing coalition, both declined to participate in the interview process despite repeated invitations.

2.5 Applying RHST to Elite Discourse

The remainder of this chapter applies [RHST](#) to qualitative interviews with Swedish political party representatives. The following sections present illustrative quotes organized by rhetorical mechanism—dominance, egalitarianism, threat, and blame—to demonstrate how elite rhetoric functions as a stratifying discourse across the ideological spectrum.

2.5.1 Dominance Cues

Dominance cues are rhetorical signals that affirm or naturalize the superiority of the dominant or native group. These cues often appeal to cultural primacy, national tradition, or institutional legitimacy, positioning native populations as standard-bearers of civic virtue and social cohesion. In the context of migration, dominance rhetoric draws moral boundaries between “us” and “them,” casting conformity to dominant norms as a precondition for belonging.

These messages frequently appear in statements that frame native cultural practices as universal benchmarks. For example:

“We have certain values in Sweden—equality, hard work, punctuality—and migrants need to adapt if they want to be part of our society.”
(Moderate Party MP)

Here, the speaker lists national values as normative traits, implying that migrants must assimilate to be accepted. The tone is not overtly exclusionary, but it encodes a cultural hierarchy in which native customs are the default, and migrants are expected to adjust. Such framing reinforces stratification by constructing native identity as both standard and superior.

Dominance cues may also surface through appeals to moral order. These often link integration not only to employment but to cultural and ethical conformity:

“It’s not just about getting a job. It’s about understanding our way of life—how we raise our children, how we treat women. These are Swedish values.” (Social Democrat)

This quote ties labor-market participation to adherence to culturally specific behaviors. While framed as egalitarian, it implicitly asserts native authority over the terms of inclusion. Dominance rhetoric here emerges through moral gatekeeping, reinforcing native norms as a civilizational standard.

More explicitly, some statements portray migrants as existential threats to foundational institutions:

“You can’t integrate people who fundamentally reject our legal and democratic institutions. If they don’t accept our laws, they have no place here.” (Sweden Democrat)

This framing links social inclusion to institutional loyalty. By drawing a hard boundary around legal adherence, it casts native citizens as rightful members and migrants as conditional participants—if not outright outsiders. The quote illustrates how legal rhetoric can function as a proxy for cultural exclusion.

Finally, dominance cues may take a defensive posture, portraying accommodation as surrender:

“What worries me is that we’re starting to bend our rules to accommodate others. That’s not inclusion—that’s surrender.” (Liberal Party)

This rhetoric implies that adapting institutions to support migrant inclusion erodes national integrity. It constructs dominant norms as fragile and under siege, reinforcing the idea that cultural compromise threatens societal cohesion.

2.5.2 Egalitarian Cues

Egalitarian cues promote group parity, affirm shared humanity, and challenge narratives of cultural or moral inferiority. These cues typically emphasize structural explanations for inequality, advocate inclusive policy responses, or call for empathy across group boundaries. In the context of migrant integration, egalitarian rhetoric invites the public to recognize migrants as legitimate social participants, often by highlighting shared values, rights, or aspirations.

One common form of egalitarian signaling affirms the principle of equal opportunity:

“Everyone deserves a fair chance. If you’ve come here legally and want to contribute, you should be treated the same as anyone else.” (Green Party)

This quote frames inclusion in terms of fairness and contribution. While conditional on legal entry and willingness to work, the rhetoric prioritizes structural access over cultural similarity. Migrants are positioned as equal participants, not because they

mirror the dominant group, but because they seek to engage constructively with society.

Egalitarian cues also surface through efforts to humanize migrants and reframe integration challenges as institutional, not individual:

“We often forget that many of these people were engineers, teachers, professionals in their own countries. They’re not helpless—they’re just navigating a new system.” (Social Democrat)

Rather than highlighting migrant deficits, this quote points to existing capacities and contextual barriers. The speaker redirects attention away from cultural mismatch and toward structural adjustment, challenging the dominant discourse that often casts migrants as uniformly unskilled or dependent.

Some egalitarian rhetoric merges moral argument with pragmatic appeal, emphasizing that inclusion benefits the broader society:

“If we invest in language training and job matching early, it benefits everyone. Integration is not charity—it’s smart policy.” (Left Party)

This framing legitimizes inclusion not on moral grounds alone, but on mutual interest. It recasts integration programs as rational investments, not burdensome obligations, thus expanding the rhetorical space for egalitarian policy even in resource-sensitive contexts.

Other statements emphasize normative commitments to dignity and fairness by challenging bureaucratic and discriminatory obstacles:

“People come here with hope. It’s our responsibility to make sure that hope isn’t crushed by bureaucracy or discrimination.” (Green Party)

This quote positions integration as a shared moral project and critiques institutional barriers that undermine it. The speaker invokes a collective responsibility to preserve migrants’ aspirations, thereby reinforcing egalitarianism not only as an ideal but as an actionable commitment to fairness in practice.

2.5.3 Threat Cues

Threat cues depict migrants as endangering the dominant group’s well-being and are frequently used to justify exclusionary responses. Drawing on intergroup threat theory, these cues reference economic burden, cultural fragmentation, security risk, or institutional decay. They are especially effective when they resonate with latent social anxieties, encouraging citizens to view migrants not as individuals, but as collective threats.

Economic insecurity is one of the most common themes in threat-based rhetoric:

“We’re seeing more strain on the welfare system, and it’s not sustainable if people keep coming who aren’t contributing.” (Moderate Party)

This quote links migration to fiscal pressure and the depletion of public resources. Although the language appears pragmatic, it casts migrants as an unsustainable burden, implicitly suggesting a zero-sum competition for state benefits between native and migrant populations.

Another recurring theme frames migrants as culturally incompatible:

“Some of these groups don’t share our values. They form parallel societies, and it’s dangerous for cohesion.” (Sweden Democrats)

The idea of “parallel societies” portrays migrants as socially and morally divergent, threatening the integrity of national identity. This kind of rhetoric constructs cultural difference as not merely distinct, but actively destabilizing, reinforcing an in-group/out-group logic.

Threat rhetoric can also invoke public safety concerns:

“Police have reported an increase in gang violence linked to foreign-born youth. We can’t ignore what’s happening in our cities.” (Liberal Party)

The association between crime and migrant status promotes a narrative in which migration is a source of danger. Even when evidence is anecdotal or incomplete, such claims prime fear and may legitimate more punitive or exclusionary policy responses.

Some threat cues focus less on migrants themselves and more on their perceived institutional consequences:

“People are losing trust in our institutions when they see rules bent for newcomers. We need to make sure the system is fair to everyone.” (Moderate Party)

Here, the speaker argues that migration undermines procedural integrity and weakens public confidence in governance. The concern over fairness, while superficially inclusive, positions migrants as outside and possibly corrosive to institutional norms, subtly reinforcing hierarchical distinctions.

Finally, threat rhetoric may operate on symbolic or emotional registers:

“When whole neighborhoods change overnight, it’s hard for people to feel at home in their own country.” (Sweden Democrats)

This quote appeals to sentiments of displacement and nostalgia, portraying demographic change as cultural erosion. Rather than criticizing specific actions or policies, the statement frames migrant presence itself as a destabilizing force, activating symbolic and affective dimensions of threat.

2.5.4 Blame Cues

Blame cues assign responsibility for social, economic, or cultural problems, often reducing complex dynamics to simplified narratives of cause and effect. Within the RHST framework, blame can function in two opposing directions. When directed at migrants, it enhances group-based hierarchy by positioning them as the source of societal strain. When directed at institutions or systemic structures, it attenuates hierarchy by recognizing structural barriers to inclusion and advocating reform.

Blame directed toward migrants typically frames integration challenges as the result of individual behavior or cultural incompatibility:

“We’ve tried to help, but some groups simply don’t want to integrate. They isolate themselves and create problems in their communities.” (Moderate Party)

The speaker attributes failure to integrate to a lack of willingness among migrants. This narrative shifts responsibility away from institutional shortcomings and toward migrant agency, reinforcing a view of exclusion as self-imposed.

“There are cultural clashes when people come here and refuse to adapt. That’s not our fault—it’s theirs.” (Sweden Democrats)

This quote presents a more direct expression of blame. Migrants are depicted as active agents of discord, absolving the host society of responsibility. The rhetoric constructs an oppositional dynamic, reinforcing group boundaries and legitimizing exclusion.

“If you come to Sweden, you follow our rules. If you don’t, you shouldn’t expect to stay.” (Liberal Party)

Here, the message reinforces conditional inclusion based on adherence to native norms. The implication is that failure to integrate reflects personal unwillingness, reinforcing the idea that belonging must be earned through full compliance with dominant cultural standards.

In contrast, blame directed at institutions reframes integration problems as structural and policy-driven, not behavioral:

“We talk a lot about integration, but our agencies aren’t providing the support migrants actually need. That’s where the breakdown happens.” (Green Party)

The speaker redirects focus to administrative failures, portraying integration challenges as the result of insufficient support rather than migrant deficiencies. This framing highlights the role of institutional design in shaping outcomes.

“People want to work, but the system makes it nearly impossible. The language requirements, the credential barriers—it’s demoralizing.” (Left Party)

This quote outlines specific obstacles that migrants face in accessing employment. By focusing on systemic hurdles, the rhetoric invites reforms rather than sanctions and implicitly challenges meritocratic assumptions about equal opportunity.

“We keep expecting people to integrate without giving them the tools to do so. That’s not realistic, and it’s not fair.” (Social Democrats)

This final example expresses moral accountability, emphasizing the gap between expectations and support. The speaker critiques the institutional environment rather than the individuals navigating it, reinforcing an egalitarian perspective on responsibility.

2.5.5 Institutional Mediation of Rhetorical Effects

While RHST centers rhetorical cues as upstream influencers of public attitudes and social hierarchies, their material impact is mediated through institutional logics and bureaucratic mechanisms, especially those governing labor-market participation. Institutions such as public employment services, vocational training centers, and workplace regulation bodies serve as transmission belts between elite discourse and migrant experience (Béland, 2005; Schmidt, 2008). When dominant political rhetoric portrays migrants as unskilled, linguistically deficient, or culturally incompatible, these messages can shape how frontline staff interpret eligibility, readiness, or fit (Lipsky, 1980; Brodtkin, 2011). For instance, caseworkers may subconsciously delay or deprioritize migrants’ access to job-matching services based on stereotyped expectations embedded in public discourse. Conversely, egalitarian rhetoric can support institutional cultures that foreground migrant potential and emphasize structural solutions (Bygnes and Eldring, 2019). These rhetorical-institutional feedback loops underscore that political speech is not only symbolic, but infrastructural; it organizes the operational criteria through which inclusion is granted or denied. RHST thus situates institutions not as neutral administrators, but as sites of ideological implementation where hierarchy is either reproduced or contested.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter introduced RHST, a theoretical framework that integrates insights from SDT and Cue Theory to explain how political rhetoric functions as a mechanism of symbolic governance. RHST conceptualizes elite rhetoric as a structured signaling system through which politicians influence public perceptions of social hierarchies. These signals, categorized as dominance, egalitarianism, threat, and blame, help shape whether migrants are interpreted as legitimate members of society or as outsiders who pose challenges to cultural cohesion, economic stability, or public security.

Drawing on qualitative interviews with Swedish party representatives, the chapter illustrates how [RHST](#) can be applied to identify and classify rhetorical patterns across the ideological spectrum. Dominance-oriented cues, particularly those emphasizing cultural threat, labor-market conditionality, and institutional loyalty, appeared in multiple party discourses and were especially pronounced in right-wing rhetoric. Egalitarian messages also emerged, though less frequently, offering counter-narratives that highlighted structural constraints and advocated for inclusive reforms. Importantly, [RHST](#) enables a distinction between rhetorical intent and rhetorical function. This distinction shows that inclusive language may, in some cases, reproduce social stratification when it includes implicit conditions for belonging.

Although this chapter does not offer causal claims about the effects of rhetoric, it contributes a conceptual toolkit for analyzing how elite speech may shape public meaning-making around migration. [RHST](#) extends [SDT](#) by showing that hierarchical norms are reinforced not only through formal policy, but also through language that naturalizes group-based dominance. It expands Cue Theory by emphasizing the discursive mediation of attitudes, focusing on how rhetorical signals circulate within public communication environments and influence social interpretation, political legitimacy, and perceptions of moral deservingness.

Sweden provides an illustrative case for exploring [RHST](#)'s analytic potential. Despite progressive integration policies and a historically egalitarian ethos, the increasing use of exclusionary rhetoric, especially since the rise of the Sweden Democrats, suggests that political speech may contribute to shaping the boundaries of migrant inclusion, even within welfare-state contexts. While these patterns are not necessarily generalizable, they underscore the value of attending to elite discourse as a potential driver of social closure.

In summary, [RHST](#) offers a lens for examining how political rhetoric participates in the reproduction or disruption of group-based hierarchy. It provides a method for analyzing rhetorical strategies that may appear ideologically moderate or inclusive, yet carry stratifying effects. These insights lay the theoretical foundation for the next chapter, which shifts the analysis from the national to the cross-national level. Chapter 3 applies [RHST](#) to 16 European countries, examining how rhetorical signals vary across party families and institutional settings, and how they may contribute to broader patterns in public discourse and migrant integration.

Chapter 3

How Anti-Migrant Sentiment Spreads Through Party Systems

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 introduced [RHST](#), a framework that conceptualizes political rhetoric as a structured system of cues: dominance, egalitarianism, threat, and blame. These rhetorical forms shape symbolic boundaries and contribute to the reinforcement or disruption of social hierarchies. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Swedish political elites, Chapter 2 demonstrated how these mechanisms function within a single-party system.

This chapter extends the [RHST](#) framework to a cross-national analysis of elite rhetoric across 16 European countries. It investigates the transmission of rhetorical cues, with particular attention to anti-migrant signaling, and examines how these cues diffuse across party systems. The analysis centers on the interaction between [RRP](#) and [CP](#). Using manifesto data from the [CMP](#), I assess whether [CPs](#) adopt exclusionary rhetoric in response to rhetorical escalation by [RRPs](#), and whether such shifts are driven by electoral competition or by discursive contagion.

[RHST](#) provides a conceptual tool for this comparative analysis by distinguishing between hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating cues. Rather than treating all exclusionary rhetoric as ideologically equivalent, [RHST](#) enables a finer-grained classification of rhetorical adjustments. For example, nationalist and assimilationist appeals are identified as dominance- or threat-based cues, while multiculturalist or empathetic frames function as egalitarian signals. This allows for the interpretation of rhetorical change not merely as discursive repositioning, but as symbolic participation in the maintenance or erosion of group-based stratification. Applying this framework across cases, this chapter evaluates whether [CPs](#) contribute to the normalization of hierarchy-enhancing discourse as they respond to rhetorical pressures from [RRPs](#).

Anti-migrant rhetoric has become more prominent across European political landscapes. While [RRPs](#) are typically the primary drivers of exclusionary discourse, even ideologically centrist parties, including social democrats and market liberals, have increasingly adopted restrictive rhetorical strategies. This expansion is not solely a function of electoral realignment. It reflects a broader transformation of the discursive environment. According to Cue Theory, once elite discourse becomes saturated with threat-based narratives, the normative baseline shifts. In this context, [CPs](#) adjust their rhetorical signals to maintain strategic relevance within a changed political field.

Waves of migration, particularly the 2015–2016 refugee crisis, accelerated these dynamics. [RRPs](#) exploited these moments to reframe migration as a multidimensional threat, raising the salience of exclusionary frames and shifting the agenda of party competition ([de Vries and Hobolt, 2012](#); [Boin et al., 2009](#)). These rhetorical moves fit within the [SDT](#) model introduced in Chapter 2, where elite signals serve to reinforce perceptions of threat and legitimize hierarchical boundaries. By positioning migrants as symbolic or material risks, [RRPs](#) produced cues that influenced public sentiment and triggered rhetorical adaptation by other actors.

Existing scholarship has explored the “contagion effect,” whereby the rising popularity of [RRPs](#) induces policy or rhetorical convergence among mainstream parties ([Van Spanje, 2010](#); [Abou-Chadi, 2016](#)). Some scholars focus on vote-based contagion, suggesting that parties adopt restrictive rhetoric to retain or reclaim support ([Downs, 2002](#); [Norris, 2005](#)). Others argue that such shifts may inadvertently legitimize [RRPs](#), amplifying their appeal and expanding the discursive reach of exclusionary frames ([Lochocki, 2018](#); [Krause et al., 2022](#)).

Yet the precise mechanisms driving these adaptations remain debated. One hypothesis is that parties do not fully align with exclusionary rhetoric, but instead increase ambiguity, presenting contradictory or vague messaging. [Han \(2022\)](#) finds that such ambiguity may be strategic, allowing parties to manage internal divisions or appeal to ideologically diverse voters. However, rhetorical ambiguity complicates empirical analysis, particularly when relying on content-coded data like manifestos, which may not fully capture deliberate vagueness or mixed signals.

Another explanation centers on crisis exploitation. When migration is framed as a crisis, parties may feel compelled to respond, regardless of their ideological orientation. [RRPs](#) frame such crises as existential threats, creating discursive pressure for [CPs](#) to engage even when their internal positions remain unsettled ([Keeler, 1993](#); [Rochefort and Cobb, 1984](#)). In these moments, rhetorical shifts are less about electoral calculus and more about preserving relevance in a transformed discursive context.

This chapter examines how [CPs](#) in 16 European countries (Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom) responded to [RRP](#) rhetorical strategies between 2007 and 2022. Using time-series cross-sectional

data from the [CMP](#), I analyze changes in [CP](#) anti-migrant rhetoric and rhetorical ambiguity. I define [CPs](#) based on ideological positioning rather than vote share, acknowledging that some [RRPs](#) now hold significant institutional power. This classification allows for consistent cross-national comparison while retaining analytical focus on rhetorical shifts among non-radical parties.

The findings support the hypothesis that rhetorical contagion, rather than electoral threat, is the primary driver of [CP](#) rhetorical adjustment. As [RRPs](#) intensify exclusionary cues, [CPs](#) reduce ambiguity and modestly increase anti-migrant rhetoric. However, they tend to avoid overtly nationalist frames, suggesting a preference for generalized exclusionary discourse over ideologically extreme signaling.

By applying [RHST](#) to a cross-national dataset, this chapter contributes to the broader argument that political rhetoric is not merely expressive. It is a tool of symbolic governance that shapes hierarchies and boundaries of belonging. Even modest rhetorical shifts by [CPs](#) can reinforce hierarchy-enhancing norms. [RHST](#) offers a framework for identifying and classifying these shifts, illuminating how discursive adaptation operates across party systems and contributes to broader processes of stratification. The mechanisms traced here constitute a key link between elite-level discourse and material outcomes for migrant populations.

3.2 Rhetoric versus Position: A Review of Existing Approaches

This study is at the intercept of two bodies of literature. The first examines how exclusionary political rhetoric impacts public opinion. The second looks at political party positions and how these adjust based on factors linked to party competition. The shared focus on specific political conditions that are especially consequential for migrants has researchers using the same or similar proxy variables to discuss slightly different things. More specifically, their use of the same variables from the [CMP](#). Political rhetoric can be measured in several ways such as text analysis of speeches or quotes in news articles, but one of the most accessible ways is using proxy variables from the [CMP](#). Manifestos are the result of negotiation processes within the party, which are generally agreed on at an official party convention ([Volkens et al., 2020](#)). Party manifestos represent the collective voice of the party, and therefore they have been used to measure a party's position on key policy areas ([Budge et al., 2001](#)).

The process of changing a party's policy position is nuanced. Parties engage with the right-wing narratives using different strategies. Parties change their tactics over time. For example, a party may choose to ignore the [RRPs](#) rhetoric and limit their accesses to the agenda. They could further attempt to isolate them by forming coalitions to block them or even impose legal restrictions ([Meguid, 2005](#)). If these measures are not enough to move their rhetoric to the periphery, then, they may choose to

engage by co-opting, parroting, or adopting another party’s core policy issue position (Van Spanje and de Graaf, 2017). Another engagement tactic is collaborating within the legislative arena (Bratton and Rouse, 2011). Still, a party’s prior ideological commitment as well as their supporters’ preference impact their responses to RRP (Han, 2015; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016). The strategy a party uses could be shaped by internal division as well as external pressure.

Scholars examining political party positions on multiculturalism use the CMP variable that proxies plurality along with its antithesis, the proxy for assimilation. Han (2015) describes these variables as indicators of political party positions regarding multiculturalism, specifically the variable Pro-Multiculturalism (per607) measures a party’s positive statement on multiculturalism while Anti-Multiculturalism (per608) measures negative positions. They include public opinion measures from the European Social Survey (ESS) and World Values Survey to test party’s responsiveness to shifts in the opinions of citizens who voted for the party. The results suggest a difference between the way in which right-leaning Mainstream Parties (MP) shift their positions on multiculturalism compared to left-leaning. MPs that lean to the right shift to a more restrictive position when the salience of the issue increases. Mainstream parties have been found to blur their immigration position when their supporters are divided on their preferences (Han, 2022). The ambiguity in their rhetoric creates confusion and it makes it more difficult to pin-point a party’s position on an issue. Scholars argue that position ambiguity as well as selective issue emphasis comprises political parties’ issue competition (Han, 2022). Still, political parties do not simply respond to the rhetoric of other parties. They also respond to public opinion. Studies have demonstrated that when RRP increase their voteshare, MPs are more likely to co-opt their restrictive rhetoric (Van Spanje, 2010; Abou-Chadi, 2016). Others have shown that left leaning MPs respond to their supporter’s opinions, especially when RRP gain in voteshare (Han, 2015).

The literature examining political rhetoric assumes a top-down effect, which is grounded in cue theory (Zaller, 1992). Bohman (2011) was one of the first to use data from the CMP to represent nationalistic articulation (CMP Code: Nationalistic Statements (per601)) and test it on public opinion data from the ESS. She finds an individual’s political ideology impacts their attitudes toward migrants. If nationalistic rhetoric is used, right-leaning citizens are more likely to increase their anti-migrant attitudes. (Helbling et al., 2015) used variables from the CMP to represent exclusion rhetoric that proxy statements given by politicians in public debates to represent nationalist sentiment combined with assimilation narratives. This framed rhetoric as either exclusive (nationalistic per601, assimilation per608) or inclusive (non-nationalist per602, plurality per607). Using survey responses from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) for public opinion, they find that mobilizing national identity is effective in triggering exclusionary attitudes. When politicians tout the importance of the national identity, citizens tend to favor the exclusion of minorities. Further, Schmidt-Catran and Czymara (2023) also use the exclusion and inclusion

proxies from the [CMP](#) and test them both against the [ESS](#) responses. Their multilevel model confirms a positive relationship between exclusionary elite rhetoric and anti-immigration attitudes. Results from these studies conclude that when political rhetoric uses nationalistic sentiment combined with assimilation narratives, anti-migrant attitudes increase among citizens.

In this chapter, I bridge these literature. I use the term rhetoric to describe the variable of interest, rather than position. It appears that the main difference in the literature is the top down versus bottom up approach. Since the scholars use the same set of variables in their research, the difference in language seems largely semantic rather than substantive. In keeping with the definition of political rhetoric as effective communication that contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief and incorporates persuasion toward a preferred social norm ([Condor et al., 2013](#); [Fairclough, 1992](#)), I assume this rhetoric will be employed (ie. parliamentary debates, public speeches). As politicians employ the rhetoric, they may be influenced by feedback from citizens and other political actors. The feedback could influence their positions, and therefore change the collective party rhetoric. With this research, I am particularly interested in the ways in which parties interact with each other.

3.3 Theory

This chapter investigates how [CPs](#) in Europe respond rhetorically to the growing salience of anti-migrant narratives championed by [RRPs](#). While prior research emphasizes positional contagion through electoral threat ([Van Spanje, 2010](#); [Abou-Chadi, 2016](#)), this study focuses on rhetorical contagion, how discourse, not just vote share, drives mainstream party behavior. I argue that CP responses are shaped by three interlinked mechanisms: *issue entrepreneurship*, *crisis exploitation and blame*, and *discursive contagion*. These mechanisms collectively force [CPs](#) to either clarify or strategically obscure their positions in high-salience contexts.

[RRPs](#) function as *issue entrepreneurs* by introducing, elevating, and reframing immigration as a high-stakes political issue. Through consistent and salient anti-migrant messaging, [RRPs](#) shift the political agenda toward exclusionary concerns, even when they do not dominate electorally ([de Vries and Hobolt, 2012](#); [Hobolt and de Vries, 2015](#)). This aligns with the theory of issue ownership, where certain parties are perceived as more competent on specific issues ([Petrocik, 1996](#)). As immigration becomes more salient, [CPs](#) are pressured to respond rhetorically, even if they cannot credibly claim ownership.

The core logic is not simply positional convergence, but agenda-setting: [RRPs](#) make immigration a focal point of debate, and [CPs](#) face reputational risks if they appear silent or disengaged. This sets the stage for rhetorical shifts.

A key mechanism through which RRP amplify issue salience is *crisis exploitation*. Events like the 2015 migration crisis serve as discursive turning points, allowing RRP to frame immigration as a threat to national security, economic stability, or cultural identity (Boin et al., 2009; Keeler, 1993). Drawing on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), I posit that CPs’ rhetorical responses in such moments are shaped by the degree to which they are held publicly accountable for perceived crisis mismanagement. According to SCCT, when attribution of blame is high, political actors are more likely to shift from neutral or accommodative messaging to defensive strategies intended to protect institutional legitimacy (Coombs, 2007). For CPs, this may involve adopting exclusionary frames not as a reflection of preference, but as a mechanism to manage reputational risk.

Simultaneously, RRP deploy *blame strategies* to portray CPs as ineffectual or complicit in the very problems they are tasked with solving. This logic aligns with Blame Game Theory, which holds that political actors preemptively alter communication to avoid being scapegoated by opponents or punished by voters (Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2002). CPs may thus reduce rhetorical ambiguity or selectively co-opt exclusionary rhetoric not to attract RRP voters, but to deflect accountability and neutralize public criticism.

While traditional contagion theory emphasizes positional shifts in response to electoral losses (Downs, 1957), recent work highlights the importance of *discursive contagion*, the spread of framing, language, and tone across parties (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Han, 2022). In this view, RRP influence CPs not because they win more votes, but because they dominate the rhetorical environment.

Empirical studies suggest that mainstream parties are more likely to adjust their *rhetoric* than their *policy outputs* when responding to intensified anti-migrant narratives by RRP (Lochocki, 2018; Bale et al., 2010). This distinction reflects both analytical focus and practical constraints. Most cross-national studies rely on manifestos, speeches, or public statements, data sources that capture rhetorical shifts but not necessarily policy implementation. Moreover, institutional barriers, coalition dynamics, and legal norms often limit the extent to which CPs can enact substantive policy change, particularly in areas like migration that are heavily regulated and politically sensitive (Bale, 2008; Strøm, 1990). As a result, rhetorical adjustments serve as a lower-cost, more flexible strategy for signaling responsiveness to voters and elites, even when ideological or procedural barriers inhibit actual policy change.

Hypothesis 1. *Center Parties are less likely to be ambiguous when RRP gain vote share.*

Hypothesis 2. *Center Parties are less likely to be ambiguous when RRP increase anti-migrant rhetoric.*

Although CPs face pressure to clarify their positions, they often navigate ideologically diverse constituencies. In such contexts, *strategic ambiguity*, deliberate blurring or dual messaging, serves as a tool for maintaining electoral coalitions (Schumacher and

van Kersbergen, 2016; Han, 2022). However, as RRP rhetoric intensifies and media scrutiny increases, ambiguity becomes harder to sustain without reputational costs.

This chapter posits that ambiguity decreases under heightened RRP pressure, particularly rhetorical pressure. Conversely, when ambiguity persists, it reflects an adaptive strategy rather than indecision.

Hypothesis 3. *Center Parties increase anti-migrant rhetoric when RRPs gain vote share.*

Hypothesis 4. *Center Parties increase anti-migrant rhetoric when RRPs increase anti-migrant rhetoric.*

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that CPs do not simply react to RRP electoral success. Rather, they respond to a shifting rhetorical environment shaped by issue entrepreneurship, crisis framing, and blame attribution. When RRPs amplify anti-migrant rhetoric or successfully blame CPs for crisis mismanagement, CPs reduce ambiguity and calibrate their rhetoric, even when such shifts do not offer clear electoral returns. Rhetorical contagion, rather than policy convergence, emerges as the dominant pattern of interaction.

These dynamics are not merely strategic; they have hierarchical consequences. As RHST proposes, rhetorical cues, particularly those emphasizing threat, blame, and dominance, function as symbolic signals that reinforce group-based stratification. When CPs adopt or echo exclusionary rhetoric, they contribute to the normalization of hierarchy-enhancing discourse, even when this occurs without full ideological convergence. Rhetorical contagion is therefore important not only because it affects patterns of party competition, but also because it reconfigures the symbolic boundaries of legitimate belonging. This chapter’s hypotheses examine whether CPs participate in this process of stratification through adaptive responses to Radical Right Party cues.

3.4 Methodology

This analysis draws on time-series cross-sectional data from the CMP (Lehmann et al., 2024), combined with economic and political context indicators from the World Bank. The data comprise 16 European countries, most of which are members of the European Union, with the exception of Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The benefit of this data structure is its ability to capture both variation over time and between countries, enabling the modeling of rhetorical change within parties across distinct national and temporal contexts.

To test the first hypothesis, I construct an ordinal dependent variable that captures ambiguity in the rhetoric of CPs. This variable is ordered into four levels and assumes that an unobserved latent construct underlies the observed categories. I use a time-series cross-sectional ordered probit model to estimate the relationship between

explanatory variables and this ordinal outcome. The model accounts for repeated observations of parties over time by clustering standard errors at the party level. The ordered probit framework assumes a latent continuous variable Y_{ij}^* , representing the degree of rhetorical ambiguity for party i in country j , which is mapped onto four observed categories through estimated thresholds. The model takes the form:

$$Y_{ij}^* = X_{ij}\beta + Z_{ij}\gamma + \varepsilon_{ij}, \quad \varepsilon_{ij} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1) \quad (3.1)$$

The observed ordinal outcome Y_{ij} is determined by the position of Y_{ij}^* relative to a set of thresholds. I examine the marginal effects in post-estimation to assess how changes in independent variables influence the probability of observing higher or lower levels of ambiguity. This allows for an interpretation of coefficients in probabilistic terms rather than raw units, reflecting the nature of the ordinal outcome.

While the ordered probit model captures rhetorical ambiguity, the analysis of exclusionary or anti-migrant rhetoric requires an additional step. Here, I employ a hierarchical linear model that captures variation across time, parties, and countries. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how broader contextual factors interact with party-level dynamics. The hierarchical structure enables random intercepts and slopes at each level, accounting for unobserved heterogeneity.

At Level 1 (within-party over time), the model estimates how party characteristics evolve:

$$Y_{ijk} = \beta_{0jk} + \beta_{1jk}X_{ijk} + \varepsilon_{ijk} \quad (3.2)$$

At Level 2 (between parties within countries), variation in intercepts and slopes is explained by party-level characteristics:

$$\beta_{0jk} = \gamma_{00k} + \gamma_{01k}Z_{jk} + u_{0jk} \quad (3.3)$$

At Level 3 (between countries), the model incorporates national-level predictors:

$$\gamma_{00k} = \delta_{000} + \delta_{001}W_k + u_{00k} \quad (3.4)$$

In this framework, Y_{ijk} represents the degree of exclusion rhetoric for party j in country k at time i . The independent variables at each level capture characteristics of the party, contextual factors, and structural national conditions, such as migration inflows or welfare policy configurations. The error terms at each level capture unobserved influences operating within parties, between parties, and across countries.

The CMP data present an additional modeling challenge: missingness in non-election years, as data are only recorded for years in which elections occurred. Because election cycles vary across countries, the structure of the panel is unbalanced. Although the earliest CMP records date back to 1920, the time frame analyzed here spans from 2007 to 2022, constrained by the availability of comparable World Bank indicators and the theoretical relevance of contemporary party competition.

3.4.1 Variable Construction

To measure party rhetoric, I use content-coded manifesto data from the CMP (Lehmann et al., 2024). These data are recorded at the party-year level and include 16 European countries from 2007 to 2022, enabling the analysis of rhetorical shifts over time and across party systems.

To operationalize RHST mechanisms using CMP data, I align exclusionary content such as nationalism (per601) and assimilation (per608) with dominance and threat cues, while multiculturalism (per607) and pro-immigration statements (per602) correspond with egalitarian signaling. Although CMP codes do not explicitly distinguish rhetorical intent, their thematic focus allows for approximation of RHST functions.

The classification of political parties into analytically meaningful categories poses several challenges. As RRP have gained both electoral strength and institutional legitimacy across European systems, the conventional label of “mainstream party” has become less useful for comparative analysis. For instance, in 2015 the Swiss People’s Party captured nearly one-third of legislative seats, and in 2021 the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy in the Netherlands led the national parliament. These examples illustrate that parties often classified as “non-mainstream” in earlier eras now wield significant governing authority, rendering vote-based or institutional prominence an unreliable basis for category construction.

To address this complexity, I adopt a classification scheme that separates parties into three mutually exclusive groups: RRP, CPs, and *Other Parties*, drawing on the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) *parfam* coding. Each party is assigned to a party family upon its initial entry into the CMP, and that assignment remains fixed over time.

CPs are defined broadly to include Social Democratic, Liberal, Christian Democratic, and Conservative party families. These parties span a wide ideological range—from center-left to center-right—but are grouped together based on their intermediate position on the CMP’s left–right spectrum. This middle positioning is relative and comparative: CPs are distinct in that they are neither part of the radical left (e.g., Communist or Ecological parties) nor aligned with the far right (e.g., Nationalist Right parties). Grouping them as CPs does not imply ideological cohesion or

programmatic consensus, but rather a shared exclusion from the ideological extremes. A binary variable, `CP_byte`, is used to identify these CPs in the empirical analysis.

This approach reflects the empirical positioning of liberal, social democratic, Christian democratic, and center-right parties within the comparative center of European party systems. While these parties differ on economic and institutional issues, they often adopt intermediate rhetorical strategies on migration and exhibit similar patterns of discursive adaptation in response to radical right cues. Their inclusion as CPs enables a systematic evaluation of rhetorical contagion across a politically central and electorally influential bloc.

All other parties are classified as “Other.” This includes Green (Ecological), Communist, Agrarian, Regionalist, and Special Issue parties. These parties tend to fall outside the rhetorical or ideological center and are treated separately in the analysis. While many parties in the “Other” group lean left of center, the group is heterogeneous and includes actors with diverse issue profiles.

Figure 3.1 presents an approximate ideological placement of each party family on the left–right spectrum.

RRPs are identified primarily through the CMPs “Nationalist Right” party family (parfam 70), supplemented by select special issue parties known for consistent anti-migrant rhetoric. For example, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) is included in the RRP category despite being formally classified as a special issue party in the CMP. A full list of the RRP used in this analysis is presented in Table 3.1.

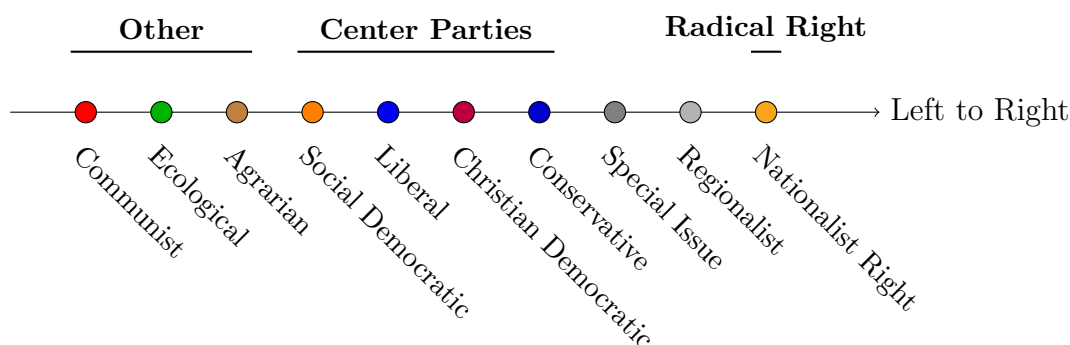


Figure 3.1: Ideological Placement of Party Families

Table 3.1: Radical Right Wing Parties by Country

Austria

Austrian Freedom Party
Alliance for the Future of Austria

Italy

Northern League

Netherlands

Party of Freedom
Forum for Democracy
Right Answer 21

Denmark

Danish People's Party
The New Right

Estonia

Conservative People's Party of Estonia

Norway

Progress Party

Finland

True Finns

Slovakia

Slovak National Party
Movement for a Democratic Slovakia
Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia

France

National Front

Germany

Alternative for Germany

Slovenia

We Are Family
Slovenian National Party

Greece

Popular Orthodox Rally
Greek Solution
Golden Dawn
Independent Greeks

Sweden

Sweden Democrats

Switzerland

Federal Democratic Union
Swiss People's Party

Hungary

Movement for a Better Hungary

United Kingdom

United Kingdom Independence Party

To quantify rhetorical content, I construct the following composite indices:

- **Anti-Migrant Rhetoric (AMR)**: Sum of statements advocating immigration restriction (`per601_2`) and immigrant assimilation (`per608_2`).^{*}
- **Pro-Migrant Rhetoric (PMR)**: Sum of positive references to immigration (`per602_2`) and multiculturalism (`per607_2`).[†]
- **Exclusion Rhetoric (EX)**: Combined score of nationalism (`per601`) and negative multiculturalism (`per608`).
- **Inclusion Rhetoric (IN)**: Combined score of negative nationalism (`per602`) and positive multiculturalism (`per607`).

AMR and **PMR** refer specifically to migrant-focused discourse, i.e., rhetoric that restricts or supports immigration and integration. In contrast, **EX** and **IN** are broader composites that include nationalist and multiculturalist content, respectively. While AMR and PMR isolate rhetoric targeting migrants, EX and IN capture general exclusionary or inclusionary frames that may apply to a range of outgroups, not just migrants. Notably, AMR and PMR are components of the broader EX and IN indices. EX includes both nationalist and assimilationist statements, while IN encompasses multiculturalist and pro-immigration content. These composite variables have been used in prior research to assess elite rhetoric and its relationship to public attitudes (Bohman, 2011; Helbling et al., 2016; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara, 2023). However, a key contribution of this dissertation is to disaggregate AMR and PMR from the broader indices in order to examine the specific effects of rhetoric that explicitly targets migrants. This disaggregation allows for greater theoretical and empirical precision when tracing how anti-migrant discourse travels across party systems. **Figure 3.2** illustrates the changes in anti-migrant rhetoric between CPs and Radical Right Parties by election year across countries.

All variables are calculated at the party-year level. To measure change over time, I compute first differences [$\Delta(t-1)$] within each party (`chAMR`, `chPMR`, etc.). Additionally, I construct country-year means for each party family (e.g., `CchRRPAMR` for the country-average change in **RRP AMR**) to measure the rhetorical climate.

^{*}`per601_2` Includes statements advocating the restriction of the process of immigration, i.e. accepting new immigrants. Might include statements regarding immigration being a threat to national character of the manifesto country, ‘the boat is full’ argument; and the introduction of migration quotas, including restricting immigration from specific countries or regions etc. `per608_2` immigrants Assimilation includes calls for immigrants that are in the country to adopt the manifesto country’s culture and fully assimilate.

[†]`per607_2` Multiculturalism: Immigrants Diversity. Statements favoring the idea that immigrants keep their cultural traits; voluntary integration; state providing opportunities to integrate. `per602_2` Immigration: Positive Statements favoring new immigrants; against restrictions and quotas; rejection of the ‘boat is full’ argument. Includes allowing new immigrants for the benefit of the manifesto country’s economy.

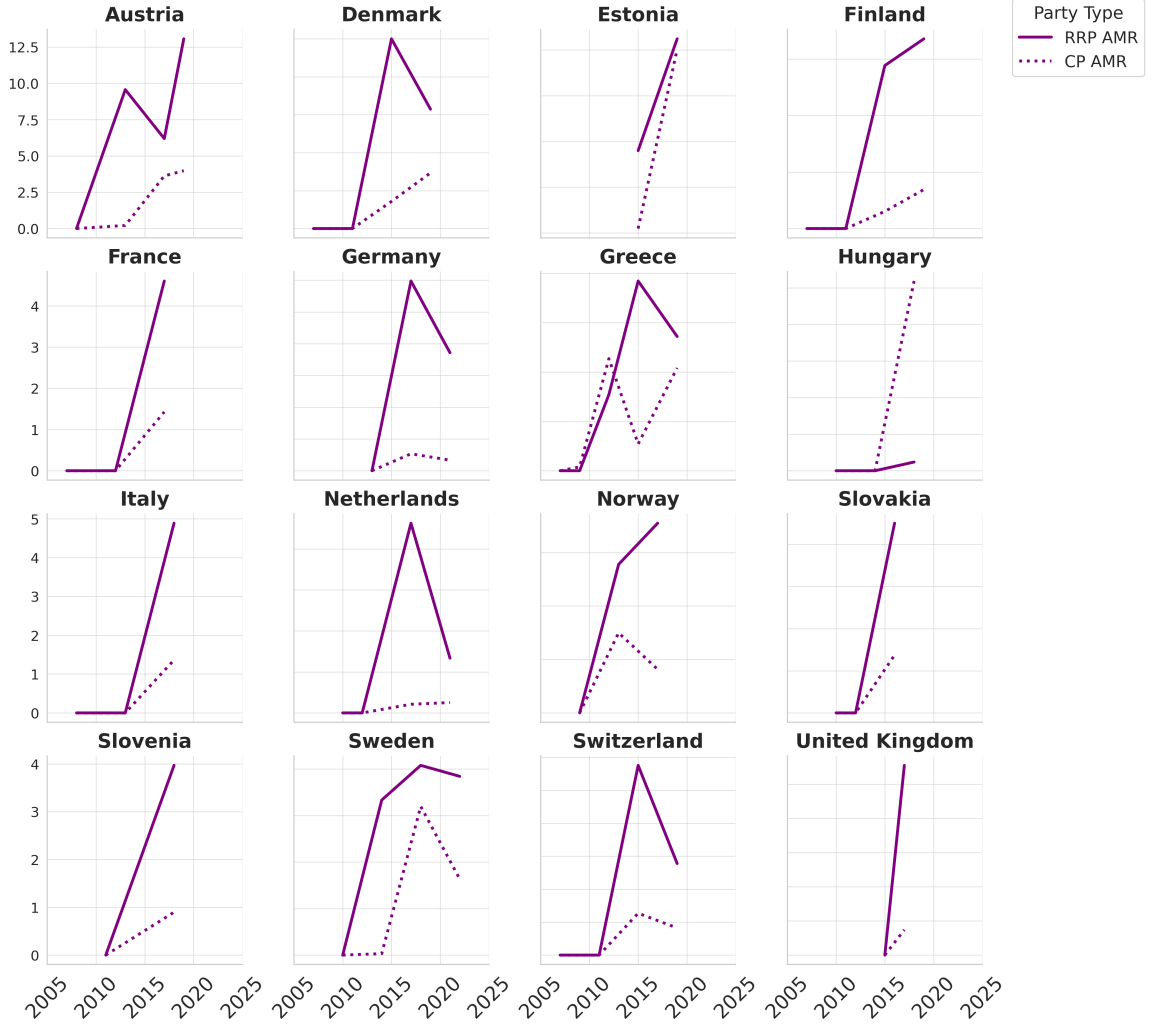


Figure 3.2: Change in anti-migrant rhetoric overtime by party type and country

Change in AMR is the country level mean of the change in AMR $[\Delta(t_{-1})]$. I calculate this for [RRPs](#), [CPs](#), and other parties.

Ambiguity To capture rhetorical ambiguity, I use the difference between AMR and PMR (*difAP*). A value close to zero indicates ambiguity, while higher positive or negative values indicate polarization. I construct a 4-category ordinal variable (*Amb_cat*): 1 = Clarity (highly one-sided), 2 = Mildly clear, 3 = Mildly ambiguous, 4 = Fully ambiguous (*difAP* = 0).[‡]

[‡]The ambiguity variable captures the net balance between pro- and anti-migrant statements, but does not distinguish between simultaneous signaling to multiple audiences (i.e., rhetorical duality). As such, it may underestimate strategic ambiguity employed through mixed messaging rather than overall neutrality.

Additionally, I construct an ambiguity variable (`eAmb.cat`) using the difference between exclusion and inclusion rhetoric (`difINEX`).

Electoral Performance and Competition Electoral success is measured by changes in vote share (`chvote`) from one election to the next. To account for strategic competition, I also include vote share changes of rival parties in the same country-year. These are disaggregated by party family (e.g., `CPchvs_sum`, `RRPchvs_sum`).

Contextual Controls To isolate rhetorical shifts from contextual factors, I include:

- **Ideological shift:** Change in the country-average CMP right-left scale (`chrile.mean`), excluding the focal party.
- **Migration pressure:** Net migration and refugee inflows (from World Bank/OECD), along with foreign-born population (`fbpop`).
- **Economic context:** Change in welfare spending (`chwelfare`).
- **Institutional controls:** Electoral system (`electoral`) coded as proportional, majoritarian, or mixed. Region coded into four categories: North, South, Central, and West Europe.

All external datasets are merged by country and year. To deal with non-election years and irregular time-series gaps, I use hierarchical modeling with random effects to account for clustering at the party and country levels.

Table 3.2: Summary Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Ambiguous categorical	137	3.34	0.89	1	4
Ambig cat EX	130	2.72	0.87	1	4
Δ CP AMR	135	1.03	3.23	-4.55	25.34
Δ CP EX	135	1.01	4.22	-10.67	30.98
Δ RRP AMR country	157	3.83	8.70	-3.37	40.00
Δ RRP EX country	157	1.36	7.69	-13.24	24.47
Δ RRP voteshare country	157	1.75	6.29	-12.34	15.00
Mean of Δ right/left x	157	-1.88	11.11	-36.43	44.31
Δ rival CP voteshare	157	-4.56	8.90	-33.26	12.70
Δ other dif AP country	157	0.22	1.66	-3.32	7.85
Δ other dif EX country	157	0.45	2.98	-4.81	8.29
Δ other voteshare country	157	0.11	2.80	-9.76	6.61
Migrant inflow	157	1.44×10^5	1.87×10^5	2,940	1.38×10^6
Δ Welfare spending	157	0.51	11.44	-27.27	43.08

Because the scope of the cases is rather large with 16 countries, it brings in variation that is difficult to control. To try to further isolate these variations, I divide the countries into four regions, see **Table 3.3**.

Figure 3.3 displays the average level of anti-migrant rhetoric (AMR) across European countries, using a color gradient ranging from dark blue (low rhetoric) to bright yellow (high rhetoric). The map highlights substantial variation in rhetoric intensity, with Hungary (HU) exhibiting the highest levels, followed by countries like Austria (AT) and Sweden (SE). In contrast, countries such as Spain (ES), Portugal (PT), Ireland (IE), and the United Kingdom (UK) show relatively low levels of anti-migrant rhetoric. Countries shaded in light gray are either excluded from the analysis or lack sufficient data. This visualization captures the spatial distribution of AMR, offering insights into national differences in political discourse on migration.

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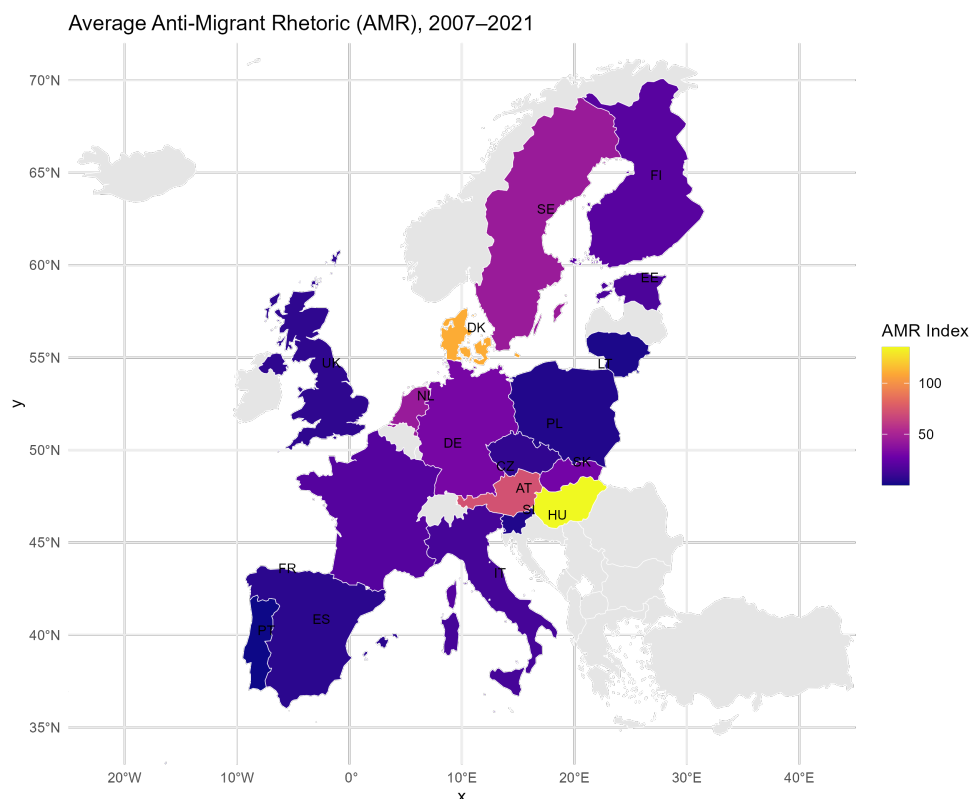


Figure 3.3: Average anti-migrant rhetoric from 2007 to 2021 mapped by country

Table 3.3: Countries by Region

Region	Countries
North	Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden
South	Greece, Italy, Slovenia
Central	Austria, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Switzerland
West	France, Netherlands, United Kingdom

Ireland (IE), and the United Kingdom (UK) show relatively low levels of anti-migrant rhetoric. Countries shaded in light gray are either excluded from the analysis or lack sufficient data. This visualization captures the spatial distribution of AMR, offering insights into national differences in political discourse on migration.

3.5 Empirical findings

I begin the analysis by testing hypothesis one and two using the ambiguous categorical variable as the dependent variable. I assess two different types of rhetorical ambiguity: one based on anti-migrant rhetoric (AMR) and another based on the broader inclusion–exclusion frame. The AMR models have 130 observations and the exclusion models have 125. **Table 3.4** presents the main model estimates.

Model 1 examines the relationship between RRP anti-migrant rhetoric and the level of rhetorical ambiguity in CPs, operationalized as an ordinal variable with four categories. The explanatory variable, change in RRP anti-migrant rhetoric, is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level and negatively associated with the latent propensity for ambiguity. This provides support for *hypothesis 2*. *CPs are less likely to be ambiguous when RRP increase anti-migrant rhetoric.*

Figure 3.4 presents the average marginal effects of changes in RRP anti-migrant rhetoric on the predicted probability that CPs fall into each ambiguity category (1 = clarity, 4 = full ambiguity). Each bar represents the estimated change in predicted probability associated with a one-point increase in country-level RRP anti-migrant rhetoric. The horizontal lines denote 95% confidence intervals, calculated via post-estimation simulation. The results show a statistically significant reduction in the probability of full ambiguity (category 4), with corresponding increases in the probabilities of more clarified positions (categories 2 and 1). These findings suggest that CPs, despite ideological diversity, respond to rhetorical escalation by RRP with modest but measurable clarification in their own rhetoric. This trend supports the theory of rhetorical contagion as a cue-driven adjustment mechanism.

Table 3.4: Change in RRP AMR and EX impact on CP Ambiguity

	(1) Ambig AMR	(2) Ambig cat EX
main		
Δ RRP AMR country	-0.121*** (0.028)	
Δ RRP voteshare country	0.027 (0.020)	-0.022 (0.017)
mean of Δ right/left x	-0.007 (0.011)	-0.005 (0.011)
Δ rival CP voteshare	-0.007 (0.012)	-0.015 (0.010)
Δ other dif AP country	0.042 (0.093)	
Δ other voteshare country	-0.069 (0.046)	-0.096** (0.046)
Migrant inflow	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Δ welfare spending	-0.007 (0.010)	0.016 (0.013)
Mixed	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
PR	-1.703* (1.010)	0.158 (0.448)
Plurality/Majority	-3.794*** (1.256)	0.254 (0.739)
North	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
South	0.529 (0.336)	1.190*** (0.401)
Central	0.244 (0.270)	0.542 (0.433)
West	3.000*** (1.063)	0.226 (0.455)
Δ RRP EX country		-0.022 (0.018)
Δ other dif EX country		0.024 (0.039)
cut1		
Constant	-4.271*** (1.146)	-0.925* (0.477)
cut2		
Constant	-3.233*** (1.052)	0.060 (0.549)
cut3		
Constant	-1.879* (1.010)	1.892*** (0.672)
sigma2_u		
Constant	0.000 (0.000)	0.253 (0.223)
Observations	130	125
R^2		

Source: Comparative Manifesto Project, OECD

In contrast, the variable capturing change in **RRP** vote share is positively associated with CP ambiguity in Model 1, though only weakly significant at the 90% confidence level. This finding does not support *hypothesis 1*. *CPs are less likely to be ambiguous when RRP gain vote share*. Instead, it suggests that electoral competition may induce hedging, particularly among **CPs** that face pressure to balance multiple ideological constituencies—including liberals.

Model 2 examines rhetorical ambiguity in exclusion narratives using an ordinal outcome that captures the balance between exclusionary and inclusionary rhetoric. The primary explanatory variable, change in **RRP** exclusion rhetoric ($\Delta RRP EX country$), is not statistically significant. However, the visual pattern presented in **Figure 3.5** remains consistent with Model 1. Marginal effects suggest a reduced likelihood of full ambiguity and modest increases in clearer positions as **RRP** exclusion rhetoric increases, but the confidence intervals overlap substantially.

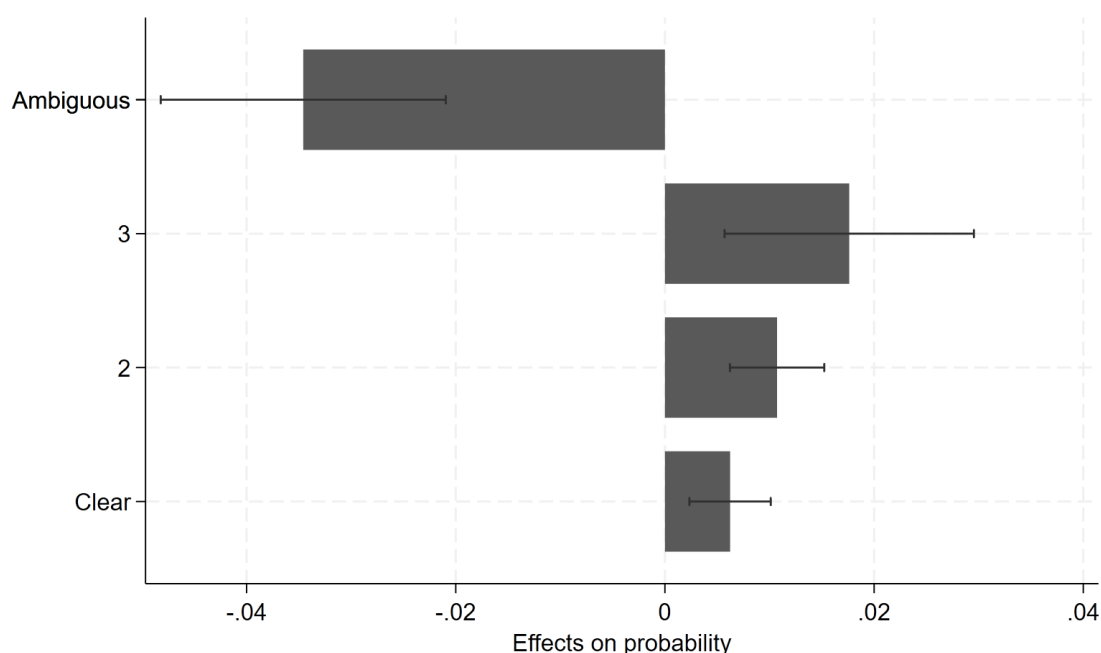


Figure 3.4: Average marginal effects of anti-migrant rhetoric on CP ambiguity, from model 1

Figure 3.5 illustrates these effects using predicted probabilities for each ambiguity category. As in the AMR-based model, the probability of full ambiguity declines as exclusionary rhetoric intensifies, while the likelihood of moderately clear or clarified rhetoric increases. These patterns must be interpreted with caution given the non-significance of the underlying coefficients, but they nevertheless mirror the directional results of Model 1.

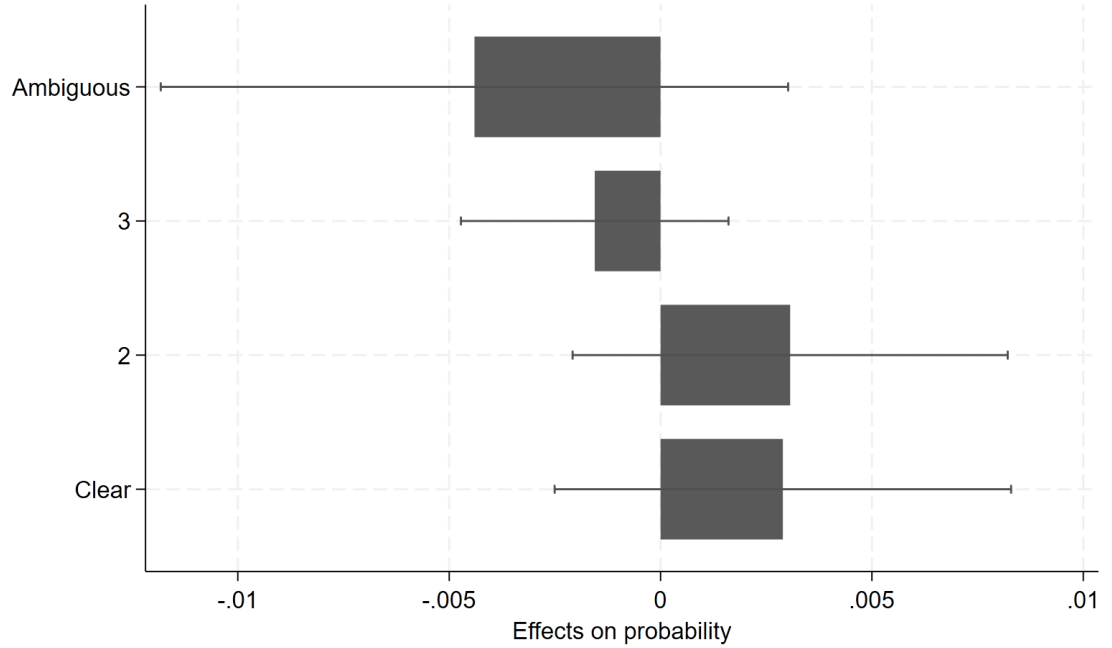


Figure 3.5: Average marginal effects of radical right exclusion rhetoric on probability of center party ambiguity, from model 2

Other significant predictors in Model 2 include change in other parties' vote share (negatively associated with ambiguity), and region, particularly Southern Europe, which shows significantly higher levels of ambiguity. These results indicate that CP rhetoric is not solely shaped by [RRP](#) competition, but also by broader party system dynamics and institutional contexts. Overall, the predicted margins confirm that [CP](#) respond to [RRP](#) rhetorical cues with selective clarification, rather than ambiguity, even in the presence of ideological heterogeneity within the CP grouping.

To further investigate the rhetorical response of [CPs](#), I estimate a set of multilevel linear models, see [Table 3.5](#). These models assess whether changes in [RRP](#) behavior are associated with shifts in Center Party rhetoric, measured continuously as changes in anti-migrant rhetoric (Model 1) and exclusion rhetoric (Model 2). The hierarchical structure accounts for clustering at the party level and allows for country-specific variation in intercepts and slopes.

Table 3.5: Change in CP anti-migrant and Exclusionary rhetoric, time-series hierarchical model

	⁽¹⁾ Δ CP AMR	⁽²⁾ Δ CP EX
main		
Δ RRP AMR country	0.114*** (0.024)	
Δ RRP voteshare country	0.037 (0.034)	0.066 (0.049)
mean of Δ right/left x	0.026 (0.022)	-0.020 (0.033)
Δ rival CP voteshare	-0.017 (0.031)	-0.018 (0.044)
Δ other dif AP country	-0.003 (0.127)	
Δ other voteshare country	-0.052 (0.086)	-0.072 (0.124)
Migrant inflow	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Δ welfare spending	-0.036* (0.019)	-0.041 (0.028)
Mixed	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
PR	0.834 (1.228)	-2.219 (1.739)
Plurality/Majority	2.024 (1.438)	-1.154 (2.050)
North	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
South	-0.549 (0.684)	-0.353 (1.006)
Central	-0.216 (0.536)	-0.758 (0.738)
West	-1.899** (0.747)	-0.544 (1.041)
Δ RRP EX country		0.030 (0.041)
Δ other dif EX country		0.023 (0.103)
Constant	-0.005 (1.307)	3.130* (1.859)
lns1_1_1		
Constant	-21.005 (.)	-26.099 (3816.744)
lns2_1_1		
Constant	-23.331*** (2.828)	-30.844*** (2.739)
lnsig_e		
Constant	0.778*** (0.062)	1.140*** (0.062)
Observations	129	129
R^2		

Source: Comparative Manifesto Project, OECD

Model 1 examines the relationship between changes in **RRP** anti-migrant rhetoric and changes in **CP** anti-migrant rhetoric. The key independent variable—change in country-level **RRP** anti-migrant rhetoric—is positive and statistically significant at the 99% confidence level ($\beta = 0.114$, $SE = 0.024$), providing strong support for Hypothesis 4: **CPs** increase anti-migrant rhetoric when **RRPs** increase anti-migrant rhetoric. This result aligns with the theory of rhetorical contagion, suggesting that **CPs** are responsive to shifts in **RRP** discourse and that such responsiveness is rooted more in rhetorical content than in electoral competition.

In contrast, the model shows no statistically significant association between changes in **RRP** vote share and changes in **CP** rhetoric ($\beta = 0.037$, $SE = 0.034$). This provides no support for Hypothesis 3: **CPs** increase anti-migrant rhetoric when **RRPs** gain vote share, and instead implies that rhetorical alignment occurs independently of electoral threat. Additional covariates—including changes in ideological position, rival party vote share, and migrant inflow—also fail to reach statistical significance. These null results suggest that the diffusion of anti-migrant rhetoric among **CPs** is not simply a function of shifting electoral dynamics or policy positioning, but rather reflects discursive alignment with **RRP** cues.

Model 2, which estimates changes in **CP** exclusion rhetoric, yields no statistically significant effects for either change in **RRP** exclusion rhetoric or **RRP** vote share. This indicates limited support for the idea that nationalist or assimilationist discourse from **RRPs** diffuses into **CP** rhetoric. While the coefficients trend in expected directions, their lack of statistical significance implies that **CPs** are more reactive to broad anti-migrant framing than to specific exclusionary appeals.

Overall, these findings reinforce the argument that rhetorical contagion operates most clearly at the level of generalized anti-migrant discourse. The significant effect of **RRP** anti-migrant rhetoric—coupled with the absence of significant electoral or exclusionary effects—suggests that **CPs** engage in discursive convergence where rhetorical cues are ambient, ideologically accessible, and not tied to more extreme exclusionary frames. Rhetorical responsiveness is evident across ideologically diverse **CPs**.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the conditions under which **CPs** in Europe shift their anti-migrant rhetoric, with particular attention to the influence of **RRPs**. Drawing on theories of rhetorical contagion, issue entrepreneurship, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, and Blame Game Theory, I evaluated whether **CPs** adjust their rhetoric in response to **RRP** electoral gains, changes in **RRP** anti-migrant rhetoric, and contextual factors such as migration flows and welfare spending. Using time-series cross-sectional data and both ordered probit and multilevel linear models, I tested four hypotheses concerning the direction and nature of rhetorical contagion.

The findings provide strong support for the argument that CPs respond more readily to rhetorical signals than to electoral competition. Increases in RRP anti-migrant rhetoric are significantly associated with both higher levels of CP anti-migrant rhetoric and reduced rhetorical ambiguity, confirming that rhetorical contagion pressures CPs to clarify their messaging in response to discursive escalation. Marginal effects plots reveal that as RRPs intensify exclusionary narratives, CPs become less likely to remain fully ambiguous and instead shift toward mildly clarified positions, indicating selective rhetorical adaptation rather than wholesale ideological transformation.

By integrating SCCT, this chapter emphasizes that CPs face not only electoral competition, but also reputational risk management during crises. When RRPs frame migration as a societal crisis and simultaneously attribute blame to governing parties, CPs must respond to reassert control over the narrative. Their rhetorical recalibration can thus be interpreted not only as a reaction to discursive salience but also as a strategic response to perceived reputational threats. This is consistent with SCCT's emphasis on legitimacy restoration through targeted messaging. Moreover, Blame Game Theory helps explain CP reluctance to fully adopt RRP frames: by maintaining partial ambiguity or distancing through generalized exclusionary cues, CPs seek to deflect responsibility without alienating moderate constituencies.

Contrary to expectations rooted in electoral contagion theory, there is limited support for the notion that CPs respond to RRP vote share. While some models show a weak relationship between RRP vote gains and CP ambiguity, this is not consistent across specifications. Instead, rhetorical content, not electoral strength, drives CP shifts. This suggests that rhetorical salience and crisis framing, rather than vote-based competition, exert greater influence on discursive adaptation.

With regard to specific content, CPs appear more likely to echo generalized anti-migrant frames than to adopt explicitly nationalist or assimilationist rhetoric. This selectivity implies reputational calculus: CPs are willing to adopt broader exclusionary cues to demonstrate control or competence, but avoid rhetoric that could be perceived as ideologically extreme or inconsistent with their core platforms. The analysis shows that rhetorical contagion operates across the center spectrum, with parties traditionally associated with both market liberalism and social democracy participating in discursive convergence. This suggests that rhetorical adaptation reflects broader dynamics of symbolic competition and narrative control, not confined to any one ideological tradition.

The chapter contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it empirically distinguishes between rhetorical contagion and electoral threat, offering evidence that CPs shift rhetoric in response to discursive, not electoral, pressures. Second, it introduces a theoretically informed interpretation of CP rhetorical adaptation using SCCT and Blame Game Theory, linking crisis response and reputational politics to party communication strategies. Third, it provides a replicable measurement framework for tracking rhetorical ambiguity in cross-national party competition.

These findings also carry implications for policymaking, as rhetorical shifts may influence the framing of legislative debates and public support for restrictive migration policies, even in the absence of formal policy change.

Future research should explore how these discursive adaptations shape downstream public attitudes, coalition dynamics, and policy agendas. Additionally, differentiating rhetorical responses by type of crisis attribution (e.g., external threat vs. internal mismanagement) could yield further insight into the strategic logic of party signaling. Chapter 4 builds on this foundation by examining whether variation in the prevalence of anti-migrant rhetoric among political elites corresponds with changes in public attitudes, both among citizens and among business leaders engaged in migrant hiring decisions.

Chapter 4

Anti-Migrant Rhetoric and Its Impact on Public and Business Attitudes

This chapter extends the causal chain outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 by examining the societal effects of political rhetoric. If, as shown earlier, [RRP](#) act as rhetorical agenda-setters and [CP](#) respond by adopting or echoing exclusionary rhetoric, then the next step is to understand how these elite signals shape the attitudes of the public and business elites. This chapter tests the core premise of Cue Theory: that citizens interpret complex political realities by relying on heuristics provided by elites. I argue that anti-migrant political rhetoric functions as a potent cue that triggers threat perceptions, activating exclusionary attitudes not only among citizens but also among business representatives who hold gatekeeping power in the labor-market.

This chapter also explicitly applies [RHST](#), introduced in Chapter 2. [RHST](#) integrates [SDT](#) and Cue Theory to explain how political rhetoric functions not just as ideological expression but as a system of symbolic governance. Within this framework, rhetorical signals, categorized as dominance, egalitarianism, threat, and blame, simultaneously reflect elite preferences and produce hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating effects. Political actors strategically deploy these cues to shape perceptions of who belongs, who is deserving, and who poses a threat. [RHST](#) posits that such discourse can normalize exclusion, institutionalize threat narratives, and, over time, entrench social stratification.

As global migration rises due to conflict and climate change, political discourse on migration has become more prominent. In [EU](#) countries, such discourse unfolds both nationally and supranationally. Policymakers increasingly frame migrants in conjunction with social problems, embedding rhetorical signals in public speeches, parliamentary debates, party manifestos, and media engagements. These signals

are not neutral; they are strategically constructed to influence public sentiment and political behavior (Zaller, 1992).

The cumulative nature of these rhetorical signals deserves attention. Since the 2015 European refugee crisis, exclusionary political rhetoric has intensified across the continent and has persisted across electoral cycles. This temporal layering means that citizens and business representatives are not simply reacting to one-off statements but are instead exposed to a stream of repeated cues. These repeated exposures may deepen the internalization of threat narratives and gradually shift normative boundaries of acceptable belief. Thus, this chapter considers not only the content of elite rhetoric but also its saturation and longevity in the political discourse.

Studies have documented the influence of nationalist and assimilationist rhetoric on public opinion, showing how these cues bolster exclusionary attitudes among native populations (Bohman, 2011; Helbling et al., 2016; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara, 2023). However, I argue that anti-migrant rhetoric, even when stripped of overt nationalist appeals, is independently effective at triggering threat responses. Drawing from the CMP), I isolate rhetoric that targets migrants directly, without relying on cultural or nationalistic symbolism. This approach allows for a more precise test of the hypothesis that exclusionary rhetoric alone can shift attitudes.

This chapter also builds on SDT, which explains how individuals with higher SDO are more responsive to cues that reinforce hierarchical group structures. Rhetoric that casts migrants as threats to economic, cultural, or physical security activates these orientations and leads to discriminatory preferences. While this pattern has been well documented among the general public, it is less studied among business actors, despite their critical role in hiring and promotion decisions. This chapter contributes to the literature by examining whether business representatives, like citizens, are influenced by elite-level cues and susceptible to rhetorical signals that enhance hierarchy.

I use data from the EUENGAGE project, which includes both mass and business survey responses across nine EU countries. Using a two-level hierarchical model, I assess the effect of anti-migrant rhetoric on attitudes, controlling for individual- and country-level variables. While businesses are often presumed to favor pro-migrant policies for economic reasons (Freeman, 1998; Statham and Geddes, 2006; Menz, 2011), I theorize that rhetorical signals in the post-2015 climate have altered these preferences among some business elites.

The findings of this chapter demonstrate that anti-migrant rhetoric has measurable effects on public and elite opinion, reinforcing the broader argument that political speech functions not merely as a mirror of public sentiment but as a mechanism of social influence. By tracing the effects of exclusionary rhetoric on both citizen and business attitudes, this chapter establishes a critical link in the dissertation's causal chain. It shows how rhetorical cues disseminated by political elites shape

discriminatory preferences and set the stage for the labor-market exclusion analyzed in Chapter 5.

4.1 Shifting public opinion toward migrants

Citizen's attitudes toward migrants are shaped by many factors. This section demonstrates through existing literature how the most substantial element for shifting attitudes to be less inclusive is a sense of threat. Under [RHST](#), threat-based rhetoric functions as a hierarchical signal, one that frames migrants not merely as economic competitors or cultural outsiders, but as actors whose presence threatens the normative order established by the dominant group. This framing enhances the legitimacy of exclusionary hierarchies by positioning migrants lower within the social structure, regardless of their actual behavior or contributions. Migrants can be perceived as a threat to a citizen's economic security because they increase the competition for employment (e.g. migrants take our jobs). They can be perceived as threat to physical security (e.g. migrants are criminals) or to cultural identity (e.g. migrants practice a different religion).

Some scholars argue that an increased presence of migrants raises fears of competitive threat ([Blalock Jr, 1967](#); [Bobo and Hutchings, 1996](#); [Blumer, 1958](#)). [Gorodzeisky and Semyonov \(2016a\)](#) argue that the source of anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe are a combination of threat and racial prejudice ([Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2016a](#)). They assume the presence of visible racial minorities creates a sense of threat that increases anti-migrant sentiments. They consider competitive threat to be synonymous with socioeconomic vulnerability and use proxies like years of education and labor-market position to represent the individual level and public opinion survey data for anti-migrant attitudes. Using a hierarchical linear model regression where individual respondents are nested within countries, they predict attitudes toward immigrants. Their findings suggest that racial prejudice toward all non-European/non-White minorities does not mediate the effect of competitive threat on anti-migrant attitudes. Rather, migrants are viewed as an independent source of such prejudice, and increasing their presence in society increases prejudice toward them.

This could be because native populations are sensitive to the degree of ethnic and cultural differences between themselves and various migrant populations ([Sniderman et al., 2004](#); [Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007](#); [Sides and Citrin, 2007](#)). Interestingly, greater ethnic diversity among migrant groups has been associated with lower threat perceptions, suggesting that migrants dispersed across smaller, varied communities may be perceived as less threatening than large, concentrated populations of a single ethnicity ([Dancygier and Laitin, 2014](#)). This pattern is likely driven by fears of cultural segregation or demographic displacement, wherein dense enclaves of migrants are seen as forming parallel societies that challenge the majority's identity and status. As a result, native attitudes can become hostile when immigration is perceived to

adversely affect wages, jobs, or social cohesion (Sniderman et al., 2004; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Sides and Citrin, 2007).

However, in contrast to threat-based explanations, the contact hypothesis posits that intergroup prejudice can be reduced through sustained exposure to outgroups under conditions of equal status, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954). Meta-analyses by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) find that contact generally reduces bias, even when these optimal conditions are only partially met. In the migration context, this implies that greater interaction with migrants, particularly in inclusive social environments, can attenuate exclusionary attitudes and foster tolerance.

Still, individual-level perceptions of threat are shaped by a complex interaction of personal and contextual factors. Callens and Meuleman (2017) examine the relationship between integration policies and perceived intergroup threat across 27 European countries. They find that perceptions of economic threat (ET) vary substantially, whereas cultural threat (CT) tends to be more consistent across contexts. Country-level indicators such as GDP and individual-level characteristics like education are negatively associated with ET, suggesting that individuals from more economically stable backgrounds are less likely to perceive migrants as competitors. By contrast, those who are unemployed, dissatisfied with life, or politically aligned with the center or right express higher ET. Importantly, they find that inclusive integration policies lower perceived threat, while higher immigration rates elevate it. Similarly, De Coninck et al. (2021) confirm that citizens living in countries with more robust integration frameworks tend to report lower levels of threat overall.

Scholars have found that if a migrant is perceived as a threat to the citizens' employment, the citizen will more-likely vote for a political party touting policies that are restrictive in terms of access to citizenship, participation in EU migration quotas, or multicultural policies (Callens and Meuleman, 2017). The political implications of the societal threat reaction seem to benefit parties that leverage the migrant problem and construct a platform that offers immigration restrictions as a solution.

Conzo et al. (2021) examined effects of negative and positive discourses about immigration on citizens' attitudes. They use a laboratory and online subject experiment that exposes participants to different video footage of media portrayals of migrants in either a negative or positive frame followed by a self-reporting survey to measure perceptions of outgroup threat. They find that negative portrayals of immigrants generate physiological and emotional hostility toward them. It also drives ingroup favoritism in economic transactions, possibly determining efficiency losses in ethnically diverse markets, relative to ethnically homogeneous markets. This suggests that media representations of migrants directly impact citizen attitudes toward migrants, and negative portrayals could result in economic discrimination.

Shifting the opinion of business representatives concerning attitudes towards migrants is not developed in the literature, and one contribution of this chapter is to offer empirical evidence on the topic. I assume that like citizens, business representatives who make hiring decisions have divergent attitudes. Scholars looking at how to integrate migrants into labor markets often find that businesses use discriminatory practices in hiring processes that negatively affect a migrant’s ability to find and maintain employment (de Beijl, 2000; Lancee, 2019; Quillian et al., 2019). Perhaps, the individuals practicing discrimination are influenced in similar ways as citizens in general.

4.2 Theory: Anti-Migrant Political Rhetoric and Public Attitudes

This chapter theorizes that anti-migrant political rhetoric, even when stripped of overt nationalist sentiment, influences both public and business representatives’ attitudes toward migrants. RHST conceptualizes this environment not merely as a communicative space, but as a battleground for symbolic hierarchy. Through repeated rhetorical signaling with dominance cues that elevate native norms, blame cues that scapegoat migrants, and threat cues that evoke fear, elites construct a discursive terrain that legitimizes unequal treatment. Political elites play a central role in shaping the rhetorical environment in which attitudes form. As they increasingly link migrants to social and economic problems, they trigger psychological and behavioral responses rooted in threat perception, group anxiety, and norm legitimation. These responses not only shape voting preferences and public opinion but may also affect migrant integration, especially in labor markets.

Scholars analyzing political rhetoric in parliamentary debates and party communications have observed that stereotypical portrayals of migrants, such as criminals, economic burdens, or cultural threats, often appear alongside alarmist language regarding immigration “problems” (Sánchez-Junquera et al., 2021; Lamb, 2014). Social media campaigns by far-right parties reinforce these portrayals, sometimes using hate speech, false claims, or dehumanizing metaphors (e.g., invasion, contamination) (Calderón et al., 2020). Normalizing this rhetoric not only stigmatizes migrants but also signals to the public that exclusionary attitudes are socially acceptable.

Citizens interpret such cues through processes described in political communication literature. According to Zaller (1992), elite messaging shapes how individuals perceive issues, especially when individuals lack strong prior beliefs or direct experience. In this view, political rhetoric is not just background noise, it sets the cognitive frame through which citizens evaluate immigrants, influencing public opinion even in the absence of policy change.

Empirical research confirms that exclusionary political discourse increases anti-migrant attitudes among citizens. Scholars frequently use data from the [CMP](#) to capture elite rhetoric, combining nationalist sentiment with calls for assimilation ([Bohman, 2011](#); [Helbling et al., 2016](#); [Schmidt-Catran and Czymara, 2023](#)). These studies consistently find that when politicians frame immigration in terms of cultural purity or national identity, citizens, especially those on the ideological right, express greater support for exclusionary policies and show heightened social distance toward migrants.

While much of the literature examines nationalist rhetoric as a central trigger, I argue that anti-migrant rhetoric alone, without nationalist appeals, is sufficient to activate exclusionary sentiment. When migrants are framed as threats to jobs, security, or welfare systems, this taps into latent anxieties regardless of whether cultural narratives are invoked.

Hypothesis 5. *H1: Anti-migrant political rhetoric increases anti-migrant attitudes among citizens.*

This theoretical mechanism is grounded in group threat theory, which posits that dominant social groups respond with hostility when they perceive outgroups as competing for limited resources or cultural hegemony ([Blalock Jr, 1967](#); [Callens and Meuleman, 2017](#)). Political elites exacerbate this perceived threat through strategic messaging. When repeated and reinforced across party systems, these frames elevate the salience of immigration as a societal crisis, increasing the likelihood that citizens will adopt restrictive policy preferences or support parties with exclusionary agendas ([Norris, 2005](#); [Downs, 2002](#)).

Political rhetoric also performs a norm-setting function. When mainstream parties adopt exclusionary stances or mirror the radical right, they confer legitimacy on attitudes that were previously stigmatized ([Van Spanje, 2010](#); [Abou-Chadi, 2016](#)). This rhetorical contagion extends the reach of anti-migrant discourse and blurs the boundary between fringe and mainstream positions.

This study hypothesizes that anti-migrant political rhetoric influences not only public opinion, but also the attitudes of business representatives. Although businesses may benefit from migrant labor, especially in sectors with shortages, their decision-makers may still form exclusionary attitudes in contexts where anti-migrant rhetoric dominates.

Elite Rhetoric and Business Actors

While most research on political rhetoric focuses on the mass public, business representatives, especially those in hiring or management roles, are also members of the polity and may be susceptible to similar rhetorical cues. Standard literature portrays business actors as rational economic agents focused on productivity, skilled labor, and workforce stability ([Freeman, 1998](#); [Menz, 2011](#); [Jaeck, 2024](#)). However,

as citizens embedded in a broader discursive environment, they may also absorb elite political messaging that activates exclusionary attitudes.

This study theorizes that anti-migrant political rhetoric influences not only public sentiment but also the attitudes of business representatives. Although firms may benefit economically from migrant labor, particularly in sectors facing shortages, individual decision-makers may internalize exclusionary cues when such rhetoric becomes dominant in the political landscape.

Hypothesis 6. *H2: Anti-migrant political rhetoric increases anti-migrant attitudes among business representatives.*

Labor-market integration—the process by which migrants achieve parity with natives in employment, wages, and career mobility—is central to broader societal inclusion. Integration depends not only on formal rights or skills but also on informal perceptions, trust, and assessments of cultural fit. Discriminatory hiring practices, shaped by social attitudes and stereotypes, remain well-documented barriers to labor-market access (de Beijl, 2000; Lancee, 2019; Quillian et al., 2019).

In rhetorical environments where migrants are portrayed as burdens or threats, business representatives may consciously or unconsciously adopt more exclusionary attitudes. These attitudes can result in hiring discrimination, wage suppression, or limited occupational mobility. In this sense, elite rhetoric functions as a distal determinant of labor-market inequality. It does not change laws, but it shapes behaviors.

In summary, anti-migrant political rhetoric alters societal norms and primes group threat responses. Its effects are measurable among both public opinion and elite behavior. Political elites do not simply mirror public preferences; they actively construct the discursive environment in which both citizens and business actors form judgments about migrants. As this rhetoric becomes more prevalent, particularly in the wake of events like the 2015 refugee crisis, its influence reaches beyond party politics and into the economic and social domains that regulate migrant inclusion.

This chapter contributes to existing scholarship by isolating the impact of anti-migrant rhetoric, without nationalist appeals, on two key groups: citizens and business representatives. It provides a framework to understand how rhetorical contagion not only shapes electoral outcomes but also influences labor markets and institutionalizes discrimination through the normalization of threat narratives.

4.3 Methodology

This chapter investigates the relationship between anti-migrant political rhetoric and attitudes toward migrants among both citizens and business representatives. The empirical analysis draws on individual-level survey data merged with contextual country-level indicators. This section describes the data sources, variable construction, and modeling approach.

4.3.1 Data Sources

The analysis draws on data from the EUENGAGE survey, fielded in 2016 and 2017, a period immediately following the 2015 European refugee crisis. This timing is substantively important, as both citizen and elite attitudes were likely influenced by sustained exposure to intensified public discourse on migration. The EUENGAGE survey includes responses from three target groups, citizens, business representatives, and political elites, across nine EU countries: Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. While [Di Mauro and Memoli \(2021\)](#) exclude Greece due to incomplete data, I retain it in the analysis and apply country-level controls to account for potential outlier effects.

To enrich the micro-level survey data with contextual variation over time, I merge the EUENGAGE dataset with country-year indicators from four external sources: the [CMP](#), the [MIPEX](#), the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#), and the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#). CMP data are used to measure elite-level anti-migrant rhetoric across parties and election years. Since CMP records rhetoric only for election years, I apply forward imputation to interpolate party-weighted scores for the years 2016 and 2017. This procedure preserves the temporal continuity needed to model rhetorical exposure at the time respondents were surveyed.

Similarly, MIPEX provides a standardized cross-national measure of formal migrant integration policies across several domains. While MIPEX is not updated annually, I use the most recent scores available during the 2016–2017 period for each country. Together, CMP and MIPEX allow the analysis to track both rhetorical and institutional environments over time. By integrating these data sources into a cross-national panel structure, the study captures how sustained exposure to elite discourse, filtered through institutional context, shapes public and business attitudes toward migrants.

4.3.2 Variable Construction

To measure anti-migrant attitudes among individuals, I construct an index from four survey items. The first asks whether immigrants increase the likelihood of a terrorist attack in the respondent’s country, which captures a perception of national security

threat. The second asks whether the religious practices of immigrants are a threat to the way of life and traditions of the country, reflecting a perceived cultural threat. The third item refers to immigrants as a significant cause of crime, representing a personal safety threat. The final question addresses whether immigrants take jobs that citizens no longer want, which indirectly signals whether respondents perceive migrants as a source of economic competition. Each item is scored on a 1 to 4 scale and recoded so that higher values indicate greater perceived threat. The sum of the four items forms a composite anti-migrant attitude index ranging from 4 to 16, which serves as the dependent variable in the analysis.

Individual-level covariates include the respondent's age, gender, level of education, employment status, and self-placement on a left-to-right political ideology scale. These controls are included based on prior literature that demonstrates their influence on perceptions of threat and openness to migrants. Education level is often negatively associated with perceived economic threat; ideology, particularly right-leaning identification, is typically associated with more exclusionary views (Bohman, 2011; Callens and Meuleman, 2017).

To quantify anti-migrant rhetoric at the country level, I use data from the Comparative Manifesto Project. Two variables are central: `per601_2`, which codes for negative references to immigration framed as threats to national identity or calls for restricting immigration inflows, and `per608_2`, which captures references to migrant assimilation, suggesting that immigrants should adopt the host country's cultural norms. These are averaged at the party-year level and weighted by each party's share of legislative seats, resulting in a country-level weighted mean for each election year. Since the CMP dataset only provides values for election years, I use forward interpolation to impute missing values for intervening years, thereby ensuring continuous coverage for 2016 and 2017.

To account for institutional variation in migrant integration policy across countries, this dissertation includes the MIPEX as a key comparative control. MIPEX provides a standardized index of national integration policies, including labor mobility, education, political participation, and anti-discrimination (Huddleston and Vink, 2015). Its inclusion is crucial for isolating the effects of rhetorical variation from those stemming from structural policy environments. By controlling for MIPEX scores, the models ensure that observed differences in public attitudes or migrant outcomes are not simply reflections of more or less inclusive national policies. However, it is important to acknowledge that MIPEX, while comprehensive, primarily reflects formal policy design and may not fully capture local implementation gaps or informal barriers. Thus, while MIPEX strengthens cross-national comparability, it is complemented by qualitative case data to account for how rhetoric interacts with institutional practice on the ground.

Across the nine countries in this analysis, MIPEX scores range from 44 (Greece) to 82 (Portugal), with a sample mean of approximately 55. This variation reflects

stark contrasts in national policy environments, ranging from restrictive, minimally supportive systems to comprehensive frameworks promoting inclusion. Incorporating MIPEX as a country-level control thus captures key institutional differences that shape how rhetorical signals are filtered and absorbed by both citizens and business elites.

Other contextual country-level controls include [GDP](#) per capita (adjusted for purchasing power parity), the percentage of foreign-born residents in the total population, the native unemployment rate, and union density as a percentage of the labor force. The MIPEX score, ranging from 0 to 100, reflects the inclusiveness of national migration integration policies across areas such as anti-discrimination, education, political participation, and labor-market access. These indicators are drawn from widely used and validated cross-national sources including the OECD and ILO.

All continuous variables are included in their original scales, allowing for direct interpretation in terms of original measurement units.

4.3.3 Model Specification

The empirical models are estimated using design-based survey-weighted linear regressions. In Stata, this is implemented using the `svy` prefix, which adjusts for stratification, clustering, and unequal selection probabilities. Separate regressions are estimated for citizens and business representatives. The survey design includes two levels: the primary sampling unit is the country, and the secondary unit is the individual respondent, with stratification by target group. Survey weights specific to each respondent group are applied.

The general model can be represented as follows:

$$\text{AMA}_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{AMR}_j + \beta_2 \mathbf{X}_{ij} + \beta_3 \mathbf{Z}_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (4.1)$$

In this equation, AMA_{ij} represents the anti-migrant attitude score for individual i in country j ; AMR_j is the level of anti-migrant rhetoric in country j ; $\mathbf{X}_{ij}$ is a vector of individual-level covariates, and $\mathbf{Z}_j$ is a vector of country-level contextual variables.

Although the structure of the data is nested, with individuals grouped within countries, this model does not estimate random effects. Instead, it produces population-average estimates with design-corrected standard errors that appropriately reflect the sampling structure.

4.3.4 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4.1 provides descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis, including both individual-level characteristics and country-level indicators. The attitude toward migrants among the mass public and business respondents (Mass AMA and Business AMA) shows similar central tendencies, with means around 2.6 on a 1–4 scale, indicating moderate ambivalence overall.

The AM rhetoric variable—capturing exclusionary political speech—has a mean of 15.65 but a high standard deviation (16.89), suggesting substantial variation in rhetorical intensity across countries and time.

Demographic controls such as age, education, gender, and ideology display relatively balanced distributions. Notably, the average education level skews relatively high (mean = 3.71 on a 1–5 scale), and left-right self-placement centers near the midpoint (mean = 3.34), consistent with a politically diverse respondent pool.

Among country-level variables, MIPEx scores (mean = 55.35) and union density (mean = 17.67) reflect moderate integration policy strength and labor market protection across the sample. GDP per capita and foreign-born inflows (

Together, these statistics indicate heterogeneity in both public attitudes and structural factors, reinforcing the importance of multilevel modeling in subsequent analysis.

4.3.5 Preliminary Visualization

Figure 4.1 illustrates the country-level relationship between anti-migrant political rhetoric and public attitudes toward migrants. Each point represents a country, and

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Mass AMA	23,795	2.67	0.72	1	4
Business AMA	3,248	2.63	0.71	1	4
AM rhetoric	27,550	15.65	16.89	0	56
Age	27,124	2.94	1.18	1	5
Education	27,273	3.71	0.90	1	5
Gender	27,053	1.48	0.50	1	2
Left-right	27,351	3.34	0.99	1	5
FB inflow %pop	27,550	0.73	0.51	0.28	2.09
MIPEx	27,550	55.35	9.78	44	82
Native unemp	27,550	9.69	6.13	3	23
Union density	27,550	17.67	6.39	9	34
GDP	27,550	39.23	8.20	27.51	55.09

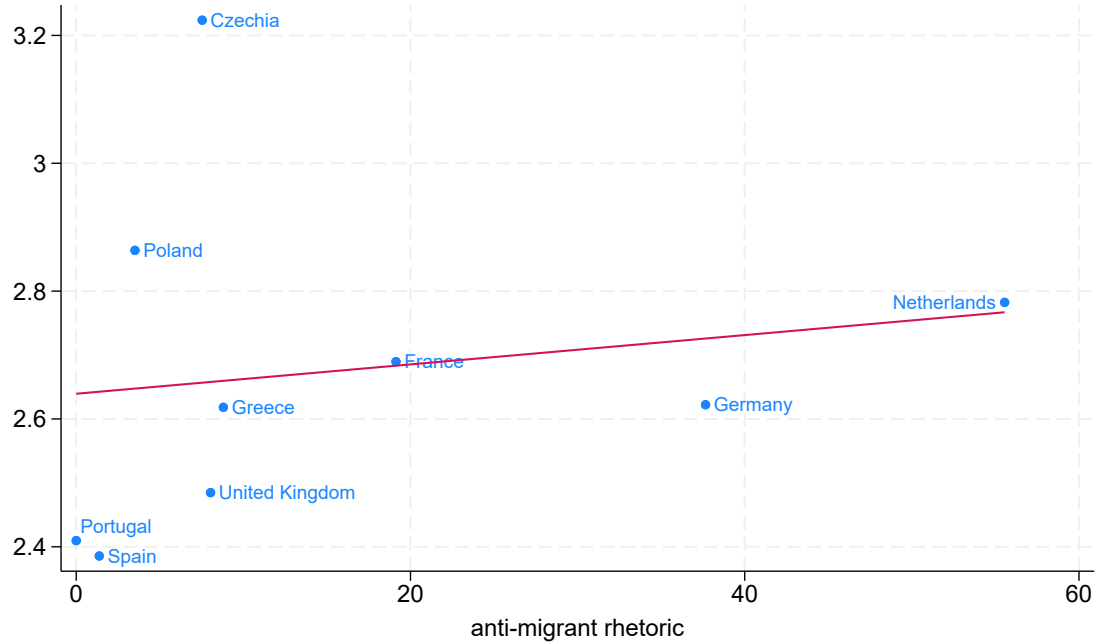


Figure 4.1: Relationship between Anti-Migrant Rhetoric and Public Attitudes toward Migrants in Nine EU Countries

the fitted regression line indicates a positive association, consistent with the theory that exclusionary elite discourse contributes to more negative public sentiment.

4.4 Empirical Findings

This section presents the empirical results from survey-weighted regression analyses assessing the relationship between anti-migrant political rhetoric and attitudes toward migrants among citizens and business representatives. Estimates are reported using unstandardized variables with emphasis placed on the direction, strength, and statistical significance of key predictors.

Table 4.2 displays the regression coefficients and standard errors. **Anti-migrant political rhetoric** is significantly and positively associated with anti-migrant attitudes in both groups: $\beta = 0.006$ ($p < 0.01$) for citizens and $\beta = 0.007$ ($p < 0.001$) for business representatives. These results indicate that even small increases in elite-level exclusionary rhetoric correspond to measurable increases in exclusionary sentiment among both the general public and business representatives.

Age is negatively associated with exclusionary attitudes among business respondents ($\beta = -0.029$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that older business professionals may express

Table 4.2: Effect of Anti-Migrant Rhetoric on Attitudes of Citizens and Business Representatives

	(1) mass	(2) business
Anti-migrant rhetoric	0.006** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)
Age	0.020 (0.017)	-0.029* (0.013)
Some high school	-0.093 (0.063)	-0.121 (0.177)
high school diploma	-0.173** (0.065)	-0.135 (0.175)
College degree	-0.328*** (0.063)	-0.282 (0.174)
Post-graduate degree	-0.446*** (0.062)	-0.295 (0.167)
Gender	-0.013 (0.020)	-0.005 (0.027)
left	-0.021 (0.097)	0.013 (0.132)
center	0.381*** (0.107)	0.357** (0.140)
right	0.460*** (0.126)	0.490** (0.173)
far right	0.727*** (0.148)	0.740*** (0.159)
Inflow foreigners	-0.122** (0.046)	-0.075 (0.051)
MIPEX	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.002)
Native Unemployment	-0.014* (0.007)	-0.022*** (0.005)
Union density (%)	-0.011** (0.004)	-0.001 (0.004)
GDP per Capita	-0.011 (0.007)	-0.018** (0.006)
Constant	3.824*** (0.465)	3.890*** (0.260)
Observations	21656	3170
R^2	0.189	0.156

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models control for demographic and country-level variables. Source: EUENGAGE survey, OECD, MIPEX, and GINI Index.

slightly more inclusive attitudes toward migrants. Among citizens, however, the relationship is positive but not statistically significant.

Education is strongly and negatively associated with anti-migrant attitudes in the citizen sample. Holding a college degree or a postgraduate degree significantly reduces exclusionary sentiment relative to having no formal education ($\beta = -0.328$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.446$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). A high school diploma is also associated with lower anti-migrant attitudes ($\beta = -0.173$, $p < 0.01$). Among business representatives, education shows a consistent negative trend, but none of the coefficients reach statistical significance, which is likely due to smaller sample size and less educational variance in that group.

Gender has no statistically significant effect in either sample.

Ideological self-placement is a powerful predictor of anti-migrant attitudes. Relative to the political left, citizens identifying as center ($\beta = 0.381$, $p < 0.001$), right ($\beta = 0.460$, $p < 0.001$), and far right ($\beta = 0.727$, $p < 0.001$) all express significantly higher levels of anti-migrant sentiment. Business respondents follow a similar pattern, with center ($\beta = 0.357$, $p < 0.01$), right ($\beta = 0.490$, $p < 0.01$), and far-right ($\beta = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$) identifiers reporting increasingly exclusionary attitudes.

Several **country-level contextual variables** are also significant. The *share of foreign-born residents* is negatively associated with exclusionary sentiment among citizens ($\beta = -0.122$, $p < 0.01$), offering support for the contact theory (Allport, 1954). The effect among business respondents is also negative but not statistically significant.

MIPEX scores, reflecting inclusive integration policy environments, are significantly associated with lower anti-migrant attitudes in both groups ($\beta = -0.010$ for citizens, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.009$ for business, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that national context plays a consistent role in shaping opinion.

Native unemployment has a small but significant negative effect in both samples (citizens: $\beta = -0.014$, $p < 0.05$; business: $\beta = -0.022$, $p < 0.001$), which is contrary to standard group threat expectations and may indicate macroeconomic adaptation rather than perceived competition.

Union density is negatively associated with anti-migrant attitudes among citizens ($\beta = -0.011$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that stronger labor organization may foster more inclusive sentiment. No effect is observed for business elites.

Finally, **GDP per capita** is negatively associated with anti-migrant sentiment among business respondents ($\beta = -0.018$, $p < 0.01$), but not among citizens, potentially reflecting differences in how economic performance conditions perceived labor-market pressures.

Figures 4.2 and 4.3 present predicted values from the regression models shown in Table 4.2, plotting the marginal effect of anti-migrant rhetoric on attitudes toward migrants among citizens and business representatives, respectively. In both plots, the x-axis represents the country-level anti-migrant rhetoric score, and the y-axis reflects the linear prediction of the anti-migrant attitude index. Each point on the line indicates the predicted level of anti-migrant sentiment at a given level of rhetoric, with vertical bars representing 95% confidence intervals around those predictions.

For the mass public (Figure 4.2), the plot illustrates a steady, statistically significant increase in exclusionary attitudes as anti-migrant rhetoric intensifies, with relatively narrow confidence intervals suggesting high precision in the estimates. For business representatives (Figure 4.3), the relationship is similar in direction but much less precise; confidence intervals widen substantially as rhetoric increases, indicating greater uncertainty in predictions at higher levels of anti-migrant rhetoric. Nonetheless, the positive slope confirms the core finding: anti-migrant political discourse is associated with elevated levels of exclusionary sentiment in both publics.

4.5 Discussion

The preceding section documented empirical associations between anti-migrant political rhetoric and public attitudes toward migrants. This section interprets those

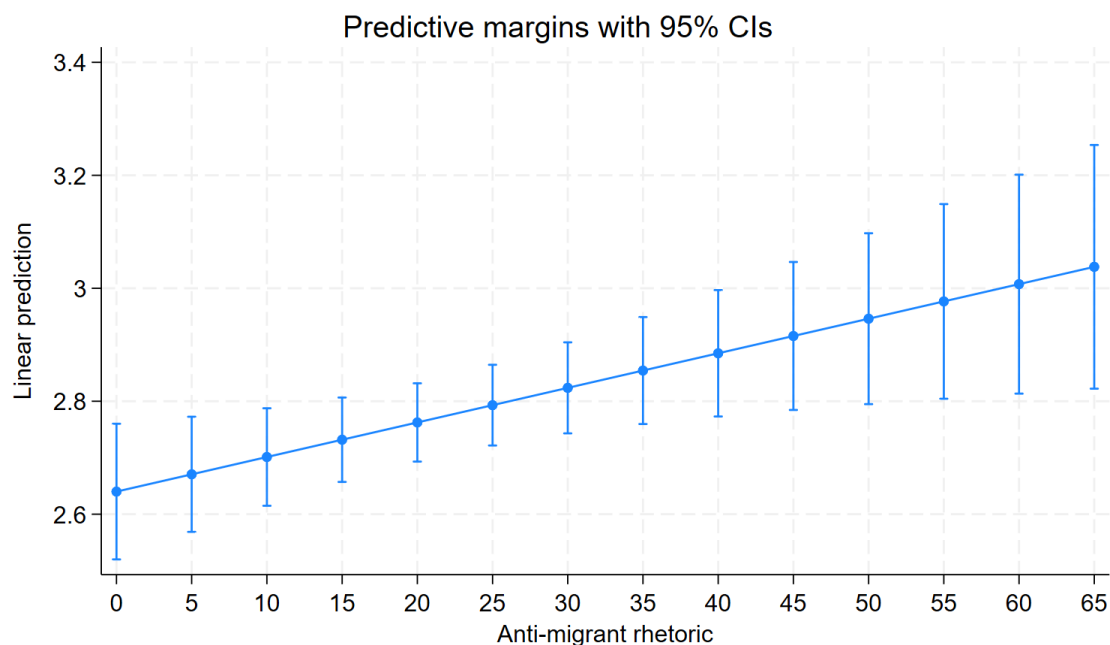


Figure 4.2: Marginal effect of anti-migrant rhetoric on mass attitudes

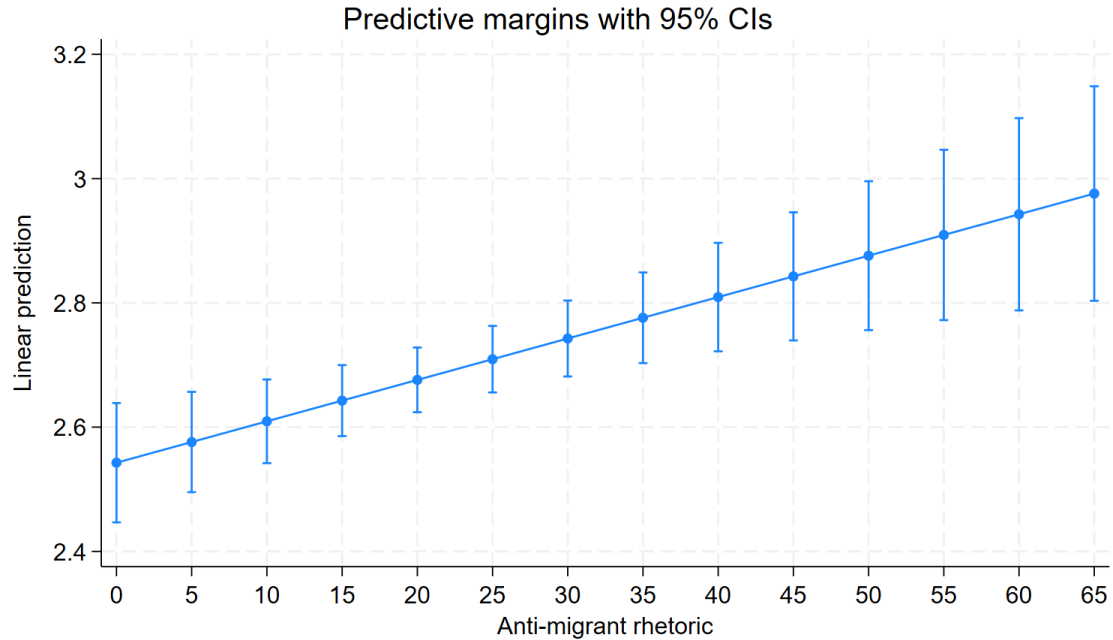


Figure 4.3: Marginal effect of anti-migrant rhetoric on business attitudes

findings in light of relevant theoretical frameworks and considers their implications for how elites shape both mass and elite actor sentiment.

The results confirm that elite rhetoric, specifically messaging that casts migrants as economic, security, or cultural threats, correlates with heightened exclusionary attitudes. This aligns with cue theory (Zaller, 1992), suggesting that political communication can shape attitudes even among individuals with otherwise stable predispositions. The strength of this effect across both the general public and business representatives indicates that elite messaging has a broad reach.

The findings also reinforce group threat theory (Blalock Jr, 1967), particularly through the dominant role of ideology. Respondents who identify with the political right express substantially higher anti-migrant sentiment, reflecting a greater sensitivity to threat-laden cues and a predisposition toward social closure.

The negative association between age and anti-migrant attitudes among business representatives challenges conventional assumptions. One possible explanation is that older business elites have had more prolonged exposure to diverse workforces, resulting in attenuated threat responses. Alternatively, this may reflect generational shifts in professional norms rather than personal ideology.

The consistent effect of education among citizens and the muted effect among business representatives likely reflects ceiling effects and lower educational variance within the

latter group. This indicates that while education is a powerful attitudinal moderator in the general public, its marginal effect among elite actors may be limited.

The inverse relationship between foreign-born inflows and exclusionary sentiment among the mass public runs counter to standard threat predictions. This may reflect social adaptation or normalization effects in more diverse societies, in line with the contact hypothesis or diversity habituation mechanisms.

These findings should also be interpreted within the broader context of a sustained rhetorical shift across European political systems. Over the past decade, exclusionary frames have become increasingly normalized, not just within far-right parties, but also across center-right and even centrist platforms. This longitudinal diffusion of anti-migrant rhetoric means that the public is not reacting to isolated messages, but to a saturated discourse environment in which threat and blame cues are repeated over time. Such cumulative exposure may help explain the persistence and deepening of exclusionary attitudes, even among groups assumed to be economically rational or socially moderate. By extending Cue Theory with a temporal dimension, [RHST](#) offers a framework for understanding how repeated rhetorical signals gradually alter the interpretive lens through which migrants are evaluated. Political communication thus acts not only as an immediate influence but also as a long-term conditioning force in public opinion formation.

Together, these findings suggest that political rhetoric plays a constitutive role in shaping perceptions of migrants, not merely reflecting preexisting attitudes. The inclusion of business actors in this analysis broadens our understanding of how rhetorical environments extend beyond electoral politics to affect the gatekeepers of economic integration.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that anti-migrant political rhetoric is more than symbolic posturing; it is a measurable force in shaping exclusionary attitudes among both the general public and business elites. Using data from nine EU countries, I find that elite cues portraying migrants as threats correlate with increased prejudice, even when those cues are stripped of overt nationalism. These findings support key claims from Cue Theory and group threat theory and also extend the application of [RHST](#) by demonstrating how rhetorical environments embed and reproduce social hierarchies.

[RHST](#) provides a framework for understanding why exclusionary rhetoric affects both citizens and economic decision-makers. When elites deploy signals of dominance, blame, and threat, they legitimize unequal social arrangements and prime gatekeepers, such as employers, to view migrants as outsiders or undeserving. That business representatives, who are often assumed to act on rational economic incentives, also respond to rhetorical cues underscores the broader societal reach of

elite discourse. Political rhetoric, in this view, does not merely reflect ideology; it organizes perceptions and helps structure access to opportunity.

These findings have important implications for both research and policy. First, political speech should be treated as a mechanism of social ordering, not merely as an electoral tactic. Second, efforts to promote migrant inclusion must engage with the discursive context in which integration occurs, not just the formal institutional frameworks that govern it.

The next chapter builds directly on these results by testing whether rhetorical cues translate into structural inequality in the labor-market. If [RHST](#) is correct in conceptualizing elite speech as a hierarchy-enhancing signal, then exclusionary discourse should predict measurable disparities in migrant employment. Chapter 5 investigates this final link in the causal chain by analyzing how political rhetoric shapes material outcomes across European labor markets.

Chapter 5

Anti-Migrant Rhetoric and labor-market Integration: A Longitudinal Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter constitutes the final link in the causal chain developed throughout this dissertation. Building upon the theoretical foundation presented in Chapter 2, the rhetorical diffusion observed in Chapter 3, and the shifts in citizen and business attitudes analyzed in Chapter 4, this chapter investigates how political rhetoric impacts migrants' economic incorporation. Specifically, I examine whether increases in exclusionary rhetoric by political elites correlate with reduced labor-market integration for migrants in EU countries. By tracing how rhetoric operates as a discursive mechanism of exclusion, this chapter completes the argument that political speech has material consequences for the lives of migrants.

Migration to the EU has increased due to economic globalization, geopolitical conflict, and environmental crises. Major surges, such as the 2015 refugee crisis, and more recently, displacement from Ukraine and Belarus, have sparked contentious debates across member states and within EU institutions (of the EU, 2015). These debates center not only on border policy but on the integration of migrants into host societies. Integration encompasses several domains: education, housing, health, language acquisition, and employment. Of these, labor-market integration is especially significant, as it represents a quantifiable outcome of societal inclusion and access to resources (Berry, 1997).

labor-market integration is not just about individual success but signals the ability of a society to accommodate diversity while maintaining cohesion. Employment enables migrants to contribute economically and socially, and to build stability

and interdependence. Yet, despite efforts such as the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 (Commision, 2024), migrants continue to face systemic barriers to employment. Migrants in most EU countries experience lower employment rates and wages compared to natives (Cantalini et al., 2022). This exclusion can produce intergenerational disadvantages, including restricted access to housing and education, creating long-term inequality traps.

While legal frameworks and labor-market structures are commonly studied, I argue that political rhetoric, particularly anti-migrant discourse, plays a crucial role in shaping integration outcomes. Political persuasion operates through elite speech, which, as Cue Theory and SDT suggest, conditions citizen responses and reinforces social hierarchies. As parties articulate positions through speeches, manifestos, and debates, they signal preferred norms and policy directions (Cicero, 1960; Fairclough, 1992). These rhetorical signals are ideologically embedded and transmitted through both direct and mediated channels. Party manifestos, in particular, offer a negotiated articulation of political priorities and serve as accessible proxies for elite discourse (Klingemann, 2006).

The rhetoric used to frame migrants, as either assets or threats, can shape public opinion, legitimize exclusionary attitudes, and normalize discriminatory practices. Research has shown that nationalist and assimilationist rhetoric increases anti-migrant attitudes, particularly when migrants are linked to crime, terrorism, or cultural decay (Bohman, 2011; Helbling et al., 2016; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara, 2023). This framing not only affects voting behavior but influences hiring decisions, housing access, and resource distribution. As outlined by Cue Theory (Zaller, 1992), citizens and institutional actors take interpretive shortcuts from elite cues. Combined with SDT (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999), which posits that societies are stratified by group-based hierarchies, rhetorical signals become instruments of dominance reinforcement. Anti-migrant rhetoric enhances these hierarchies by prompting dominant group members to withhold opportunities and legitimize exclusion.

This chapter operationalizes these dynamics by examining labor-market integration as an outcome variable. I restrict the analysis to EU countries that are also members of the OECD, reducing institutional heterogeneity. This yields a sample of 19 countries: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Using a refined set of CMP variables tailored to anti-migrant rhetoric, I merge this data with OECD employment data and policy measures from the MIPEX. I apply time-series cross-sectional modeling from 2007 to 2022, using fixed effects and clustering by country.

The results demonstrate a statistically significant negative relationship between anti-migrant rhetoric and labor-market integration. As exclusionary rhetoric increases, the employment gap between migrants and natives widens. This finding persists even

when controlling for macroeconomic variables, immigration rates, and integration policies. The implications are substantial: political discourse functions not only as a symbolic or expressive tool but as a structural constraint on migrant incorporation.

This chapter contributes to several areas of scholarship. First, it provides empirical evidence for Cue Theory by showing how elite rhetoric influences structural outcomes beyond attitudes. Second, it supports SDT by demonstrating how rhetorical cues can institutionalize hierarchy, shaping access to economic opportunity. Finally, the findings offer policy-relevant insights: efforts to improve integration outcomes must consider not only legislative reforms but also the rhetorical environment. Shifting the rhetorical environment may support formal integration efforts, though more research is needed to determine how discourse interacts with institutional mechanisms.

This chapter draws on the [RHST](#) developed in Chapter 2, applying its mechanisms, particularly threat and blame, to examine how exclusionary rhetoric affects labor-market outcomes. RHST conceptualizes elite speech as a form of symbolic governance that encodes stratification intent and structures access to opportunity. Here, anti-migrant rhetoric is interpreted through this lens, using CMP indicators that reflect rhetorical frames portraying migrants as security threats or economic burdens. This approach tests RHST’s core claim: that exclusionary discourse produces durable social closure, even without formal policy change.

5.2 Migrant labor-market integration

Migrant labor-market integration is uniquely important for EU countries for a couple of reasons. First, the mobility framework set in place by the Schengen Agreement of 1985 granted EU citizens the right to live and work in any other EU country. One aim of the EU Migration and Asylum Pact of 2024 is to retain migrants within their original host country. The EU average time-frame to achieve citizenship by naturalization is five to ten years, though countries have reported secondary movements for migrant prior to achieving citizenship. Central to reducing this movement is their integration into the labor-market. Additionally, as of January 2023, half of the EU’s population was over the age of 44, and the median age is projected to continue to rise ([Eurostat, 2024](#)). The share of the working age population is expected to decline due to contributing factors like longer lifespans and lower fertility rates. Supplementing the workforce with migrants could be viable solution to compensate for labor shortages produced by the aging population. Still, there are many factors that impact migrant labor-market outcomes, and the level of success among EU countries vary.

Figure 5.1 shows the average foreign born employment for the 19 EU countries in this study. The average ranges from 62 to 71 percent from 2007 to 2022. In some countries, like Hungary since 2020, the foreign employment rate, around 80 percent, consistently

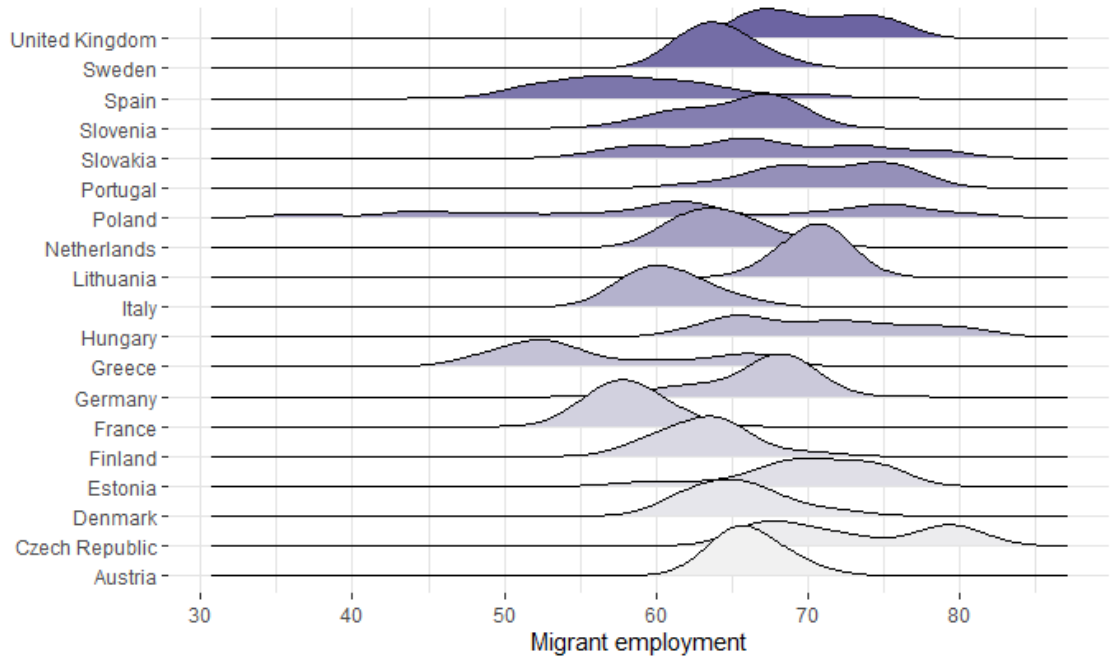


Figure 5.1: Density of foreign employment by country, 2007- 2021

exceeds native employment throughout the time period. Country level factors like labor-market structures and economic growth, education and welfare systems, housing markets, and public opinion also impact the migrant's experience (Åslund and Rooth, 2007). The supply and demand of the host country's labor-market can create or eliminate opportunities for migrants. A labor shortage combined with a high demand for a skill the migrant possesses would allow them to integrate more efficiently. Conversely, if the supply is high, it may be difficult to find employment (Parekh and Vargas-Silva, 2018).

Hungary, for example, had strict anti-immigration and emigration laws during the socialist period from 1949 to 1989. In the post-socialism period, the government pursued transnational corporations and foreign direct investment (FDI) to integrate its domestic economy into the world economy, nearly doubling its gross domestic product from 1990 to 2019 (Ahmadov, 2022). Still, the restructure initially made labor-markets unfavorable for unskilled workers and long term unemployment persisted for them. Dependence on FDI also make it difficult for Hungary's government to increase taxes, which led to cuts in social welfare spending, particularly in unemployment. The economic crisis of 2008 led to waves of emigration until 2015 when Hungary's labor-market began to show signs of improvement. By 2016, labor shortages were noticeable due to the outflow of skilled Hungarians, low birthrates and aging population, low wages, and inadequate education and vocational training for the high number of unskilled workers among the remaining

workforce (of Hungarian Employers and MGYOSZ, 2016). By 2019, over 90 percent of manufacturers reported labor shortages and the country's jobless rate was at 3.6 percent among the lowest in the EU (Alderman and Santora, 2019). Even so, Hungary's government maintained restrictive immigration policies, and the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán consistently espoused anti-migrant rhetoric. Looking at this case as whole, Hungary's foreign born employment exceeds native due to restrictive immigration policies that limit the inflow of migrants to highly skilled labor migrants, coupled with the labor shortages in a tight labor-market.

Labor migrants, entering under a skill orientated migration stream, have more favorable integration outcomes than asylum seekers (Miller, 1999; Cobb-Clark, 2000; Antecol et al., 2003). Because refugees may suffer from post-traumatic stress and need a period of supported recovery before entering the workplace, the delay might frustrate integration goals for periods of time (Bakker et al., 2017; Grand and Szulkin, 2002). In Sweden, the government welcomed asylum seekers with large inflows between 1 and 2 percent of the country's population each year from 2014 to 2018. Being a largely homogeneous society with a robust welfare state, migrants were given housing, monthly stipends, and language training to help them stabilize before entering the labor force. Still, settling large waves of migrants requires infrastructure and the government repurposed apartment buildings that had largely been abandoned in towns with dwindling populations (Bevelander, 2011). Aspects of these geographical locations may have a material impact on migrant labor-market integration. For example, a phenomenon known as local deprivation explains how the areas with inadequate labor-market opportunities negatively impact integration (Anthias et al., 2013). Researchers have found that area deprivation erodes social cohesion (Letki, 2008; Bécáres et al., 2011; Laurence, 2011; Sturgis et al., 2011). For Sweden, migrant labor-market integration has been a struggle as native employment is consistently between 12 and 15 percent higher than foreign born over the time period of this study .

For employers, the ability to verify an applicant's education, work history, and qualifications is important for higher level positions (McManus, 1985). If migrants come from war-torn countries, verifying education and experience can be challenging. If the religious practices of migrants are viewed as contradictory to the dominant culture's or if they require special accommodation, it can hurt their ability to integrate. Other cultural aspects may influence the outcomes differently depending on the migrant's gender. In some cultures, women are not expected to have a professional career, so they may not attempt to enter the workforce. In other cultures, they might marry at a younger age which requires individuals to transition away from education to provide for families reducing their employable skill-set (Vollebergh et al., 2017).

A migrant's position in the labor-market is also influenced by the country's legal framework (Huddleston and Vink, 2015). Immigration and integration policies impact the composition of migrants within a country, their mode of entry, and legal status.

Multiculturalism policies are an indicator of a country's protection for minority groups, which allow them to maintain an identity that is different from the dominant one without being penalized for it through discrimination (Wright and Bloemraad, 2012). Examples of multiculturalism policies are those that acknowledge diversity and move to diminish discrimination or public funding for cultural maintenance efforts (Wright and Bloemraad, 2012). Multiculturalism and citizenship policies are part of a package of migrant integration policies that scholars measure, most commonly, using the MIPEX, which rates five categories of policies: political participation, permanent residence, access to nationality, anti-discrimination, and labor-market. Of the countries in this study, Slovakia has the lowest MIPEX score, hovering around a 36. The restrictive policies limits the number of immigrants allowed to settle in the country, and for the time period studied Slovakia had the lowest foreign inflow of the case countries. This led to major labor shortages in many sectors, specifically automotive, agriculture, healthcare, and plumbing (Central Office for Labour and Family, 2025).

Individual qualities like country of origin, education level, religion, gender, reason for migration, and time in host country interact with the destination's national context (Grand and Szulkin, 2002; Bevelander, 2011; Segendorf and Wretman, 2011). The individual activities that are most positively associated with labor-market integration are adeptness in the host country's language and an understanding of their cultural practices (Schuss, 2018), and participation informal activities and social events (Vollebergh et al., 2017, pg. 192). Networking and building social capital increase a migrant's future occupational levels because participation in more successful native social circles results in the exchange of more readily applicable and useful information on how to participate at a higher level in the labor-market. Individuals that are unable to participate in these social circles or those that are limited to circles of natives with lower education or skill levels, would face a greater risk of unemployment. This process demonstrates how social networks support and aid socio-economic integration (Kleit, 2001). The longer the migrant is in a country, the more opportunity they would have to develop a social network. If a member of their family had immigrated a few years before and established a network, then the transition into the labor-market could be easier. For EU countries that settled large groups of migrants during the 2015 wave, they have had a decade to develop language skills and a social network and this progress should be visible in their integration outcomes.

5.3 Theory

This analysis builds on a top-down model of political communication. Cue Theory holds that political elites serve as opinion leaders, offering citizens interpretive shortcuts about complex issues (Zaller, 1992). Rather than fixed beliefs, citizens hold latent attitudes that can be activated or suppressed depending on elite discourse.

With the expansion of mass media and algorithmic targeting, these cues are increasingly segmented and strategically disseminated (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008).

Exclusionary rhetoric, particularly when framed around cultural threat or economic burden, can shape public attitudes and justify discriminatory behavior. Studies show that nationalist and assimilationist messaging increases anti-migrant sentiment among right-leaning citizens (Bohman, 2011; Helbling et al., 2016; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara, 2023). Hate speech and dehumanizing frames further normalize prejudice, particularly when amplified by far-right political actors (Calderón et al., 2020; Sánchez-Junquera et al., 2021).

To explain how such rhetoric is associated with structural outcomes, I draw on SDT, which posits that group-based hierarchies are reproduced through legitimizing myths and institutional design (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999; Pratto and Stewart, 2011). Institutions aligned with dominant group ideologies become hierarchy-enhancing, distributing resources unequally. Individuals with high SDO are more likely to support these structures and respond to exclusionary cues, particularly under conditions of perceived group threat (Sidanius et al., 2004).

Hypothesis 7. *Increases in anti-migrant political rhetoric are associated with lower migrant labor-market integration.*

This chapter applies RHST, developed in Chapter 2, which integrates Cue Theory and SDT into a unified framework. RHST conceptualizes elite rhetoric as a signaling system that encodes stratification intent and transmits cues that reinforce or challenge group-based hierarchies. Through rhetorical mechanisms such as *threat* and *blame*, exclusionary discourse legitimizes hierarchy-enhancing behavior and can constrain migrant access to opportunity.

The analysis that follows tests this framework by linking political rhetoric to labor-market integration outcomes across EU countries. This theoretical approach extends the mechanisms introduced in Chapter 2, aligns with the rhetorical contagion processes described in Chapter 3, and complements the attitudinal shifts observed in Chapter 4.

5.3.1 Alternative and Complementary Explanations

While this chapter focuses on political rhetoric as a factor shaping migrant labor-market integration, several well-established explanations merit consideration. Welfare state typologies, especially those emphasizing decommodification, have been shown to mediate integration outcomes by altering labor market pressures and institutional incentives (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In highly decommodified regimes, migrants may experience weaker incentives to quickly enter the labor force, which complicates integration despite generous state support.

Institutional factors such as employment protection legislation, skill-matching systems, and union density also condition labor market outcomes independently of rhetoric (Cihan, 2021). Furthermore, cultural or racialized discrimination, based on phenotype, religion, or origin, remains a persistent structural barrier that political rhetoric may amplify but not fully explain (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2016b; Dancygier, 2010).

In Southern European contexts such as Spain and Portugal, welfare state reforms have increasingly emphasized labor market activation and individual responsibility, leading to a recommodification of social protections. While initial expansions in the 1980s and 1990s provided support for vulnerable populations, including migrants, subsequent reforms, particularly during and after the Eurozone crisis, have reduced the protective intensity of the welfare state and tied benefits more closely to labor market participation (Guillén and Palier, 2010; Moreira, 2008; Pereira, 2012). This shift has created additional barriers to integration for migrants, who often face precarious employment conditions, limited access to contributory benefits, and high levels of temporary or informal work (González and Guillén, 2011; Leite and Silva, 2014). As such, the relationship between welfare generosity and integration is contingent and may interact with political rhetoric to either reinforce or attenuate exclusionary dynamics.

Rather than displacing these accounts, RHST offers a complementary framework that focuses on the symbolic and communicative layer of exclusion. It specifies how political speech reinforces or attenuates existing hierarchies, and how these discursive signals interact with institutional contexts to shape opportunity structures.

Figure 5.2 visualizes the relationship between welfare spending and migrant labor-market integration across the 19 EU and OECD countries in this study. Each point represents the average values from 2007 to 2022. The dashed trendline suggests a modest positive association, indicating that higher welfare expenditures are generally associated with improved integration outcomes. However, several countries fall below the trendline, such as France, Germany, and Finland—suggesting under+performance relative to their level of social spending. This divergence complicates purely structural explanations. One possible interpretation is that anti-migrant rhetoric may be more effective at pushing migrants out of the labor market in welfare states, where social safety nets offer alternatives to employment. In contrast, in countries with lower welfare generosity, migrants may be compelled to remain in the labor force regardless of rhetorical hostility due to economic necessity. This pattern underscores the RHST argument that material and discursive environments interact: exclusionary rhetoric may have greater behavioral and structural consequences when institutional buffers exist to absorb those displaced from labor-market participation.

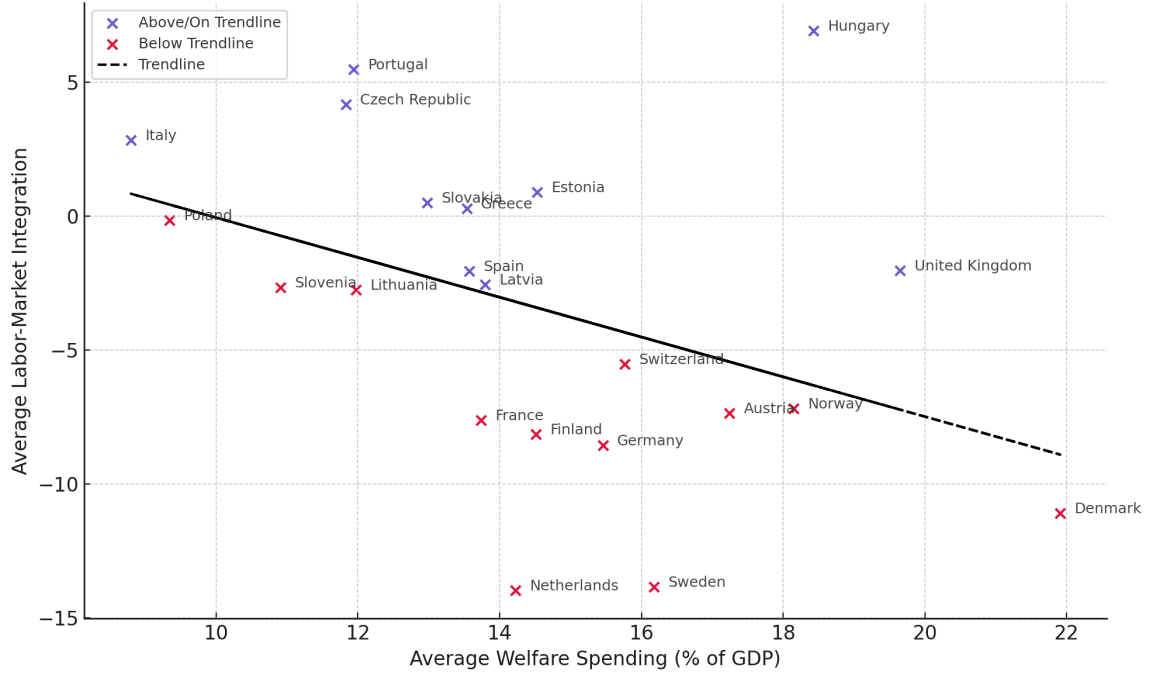


Figure 5.2: Welfare Spending and Labor Market Integration, country average 2007 - 2022

5.4 Methodology

5.4.1 Data and sample

I use a combination of datasets to create the one used for this analysis: [CMP](#), [OECD](#), [MIPEX](#), GINI index, and Eurostat. I begin the analysis at 2007, the year before the 2008 financial crisis. This allows several years of rebound before the 2015 migrant waves. I carry the analysis through to 2022, stopping there due to data availability for the rhetoric variable. I limit the cases to countries that are members of both the EU and OECD: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and [United Kingdom \(UK\)](#). The data set contains one observation for each country and year for all variables. However, observations for Lithuania begin in 2019. This leaves the dataset with 145 observations over 19 countries.

5.4.2 Model

The benefit of modeling with time-series cross-sectional data is that the same interactions between variables can be observed over time. This combines the characteristics of cross-sectional data (from many units at one point in time) and time-series data (from one unit over many points in time) ([Beck, 2001](#)).

To evaluate the relationship between anti-migrant rhetoric and migrant labor-market integration, I estimate a dynamic fixed effects model with country-level fixed effects and clustered standard errors. The equation used is:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{it} + \beta_2 Y_{it-1} + \beta_3 \mathbf{Z}_{it} + \alpha_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (5.1)$$

In this equation, Y_{it} is the labor-market integration score in country i at year t . X_{it} represents the anti-migrant rhetoric score. Y_{it-1} is the lagged dependent variable, capturing the integration score from the previous year. $\mathbf{Z}_{it}$ is a vector of control variables, including income inequality, GDP per capita, population size, welfare spending, union density, migrant inflow, and [MIPEX](#) score. The term α_i accounts for country-specific fixed effects, controlling for unobserved and time-invariant heterogeneity across countries. The error term ϵ_{it} is clustered at the country level to address within-country serial correlation and heteroskedasticity.

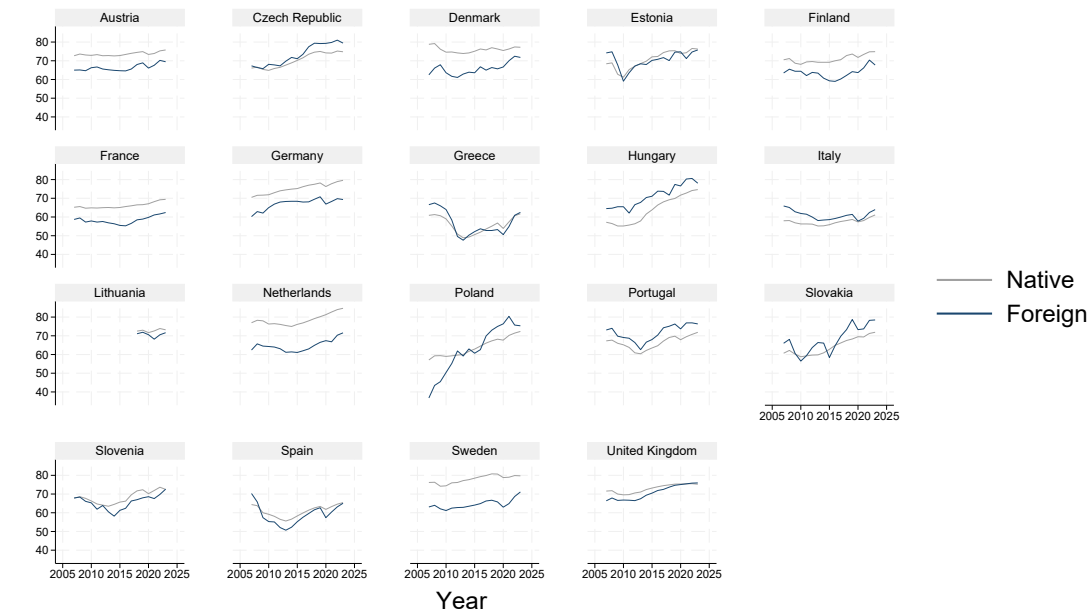
I include the lagged dependent variable Y_{it-1} to account for temporal dependence and serial correlation, particularly given the structural inertia common in labor-market outcomes. This specification allows for short-term shocks to be modeled while also acknowledging that integration is a cumulative and path-dependent process.

To determine whether fixed or random effects were appropriate, I performed a test of over-identifying restrictions ([Schaffer and Stillman, 2006](#)). The test indicates that the excluded instruments are correlated with the error term, suggesting that fixed effects are preferred. Because the data are grouped by country, I cluster standard errors at the country level to account for heteroskedasticity and serial correlation within clusters.

All continuous independent variables are standardized (z-scores) to allow for comparability across predictors. Standardization facilitates interpretation of effect sizes by expressing coefficients in standard deviation units, which is particularly useful when variables are measured on different scales. This approach enables a clearer assessment of the relative importance of anti-migrant rhetoric compared to structural and economic covariates in shaping migrant labor-market outcomes.

5.4.3 Outcome: labor-market Integration

To evaluate labor-market integration, I rely on the relative employment measure introduced by [Böhning et al. \(1995\)](#), which is calculated as the difference between the employment rate of foreign-born individuals and that of native-born individuals within the working-age population (15–64). This continuous variable, sourced from the OECD, serves as a proxy for integration outcomes by controlling for the baseline labor-market opportunity through native employment, while capturing actual performance through migrant employment. Employment is defined here as working



Graphs by English country name

Figure 5.3: Foreign and native employment, 2007–2022

at least one hour during the reference week or holding a job from which the individual is temporarily absent.

Figure 5.3 presents time-series data on native and foreign-born employment from 2007 to 2022. Periods where foreign employment exceeds native employment yield positive integration values, whereas the opposite yields negative values. Perfect integration would occur when the employment rates for migrants and natives converge. The measurement framework accommodates values both above and below zero, reflecting the possibility of migrant over-performance or under-performance relative to natives.

Across countries, the integration measure ranges from -20 (Poland, 2007) to 10 (Slovakia, 2019). **Figure 5.4** maps the average integration scores across case countries. **Figure 5.5** depicts these averages in a bar plot, allowing for easier comparison across countries. Sweden, for example, consistently exhibits low integration with a mean score of -13.8. The dataset mean is -3, suggesting that most EU countries experience an employment deficit for migrants. A one standard deviation shift in the variable corresponds to a 6.8 percentage point change. The standardized version of this measure, ranging approximately from -2.5 to 2, is employed in the regression analyses to facilitate interpretation across predictors.

While this measure provides a useful estimate of employment parity, it has limitations. It does not account for differences in job quality or income levels and treats all forms of

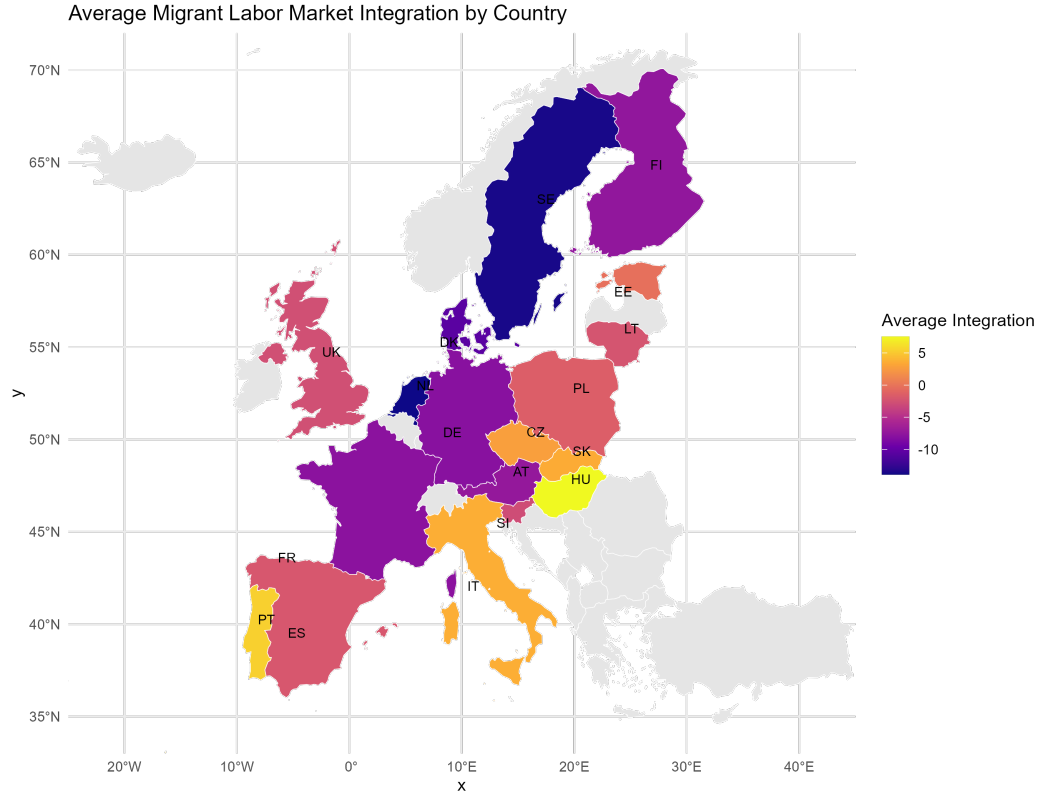


Figure 5.4: Mapped average integration by country, 2007-2021

employment equivalently, whether low-skilled or high-skilled. Furthermore, it reflects only the extent to which migrants are able to enter and remain in the labor force, without disaggregating by legal status or reason for migration.

To account for temporal dependence in employment outcomes, I include a lagged dependent variable capturing the integration score from the previous year. This controls for path dependency and serial correlation inherent in labor-market dynamics, especially in the context of gradual economic recovery or structural labor shortages. As a result, the models begin in 2008, the first year for which lagged values are available.

5.4.4 Independent and Control Variables

The primary explanatory variable is anti-migrant political rhetoric, derived from party manifesto data in the [CMP](#) ([Lehmann et al., 2024](#)). Prior studies typically group multiple indicators into broader categories of exclusionary and inclusionary rhetoric. Two such indicators [Anti-Immigration Statements \(per601_2\)](#), which captures negative references to immigration or calls for restrictions, and [Pro-Assimilation \(per608_2\)](#), which reflects demands for immigrant assimilation, are

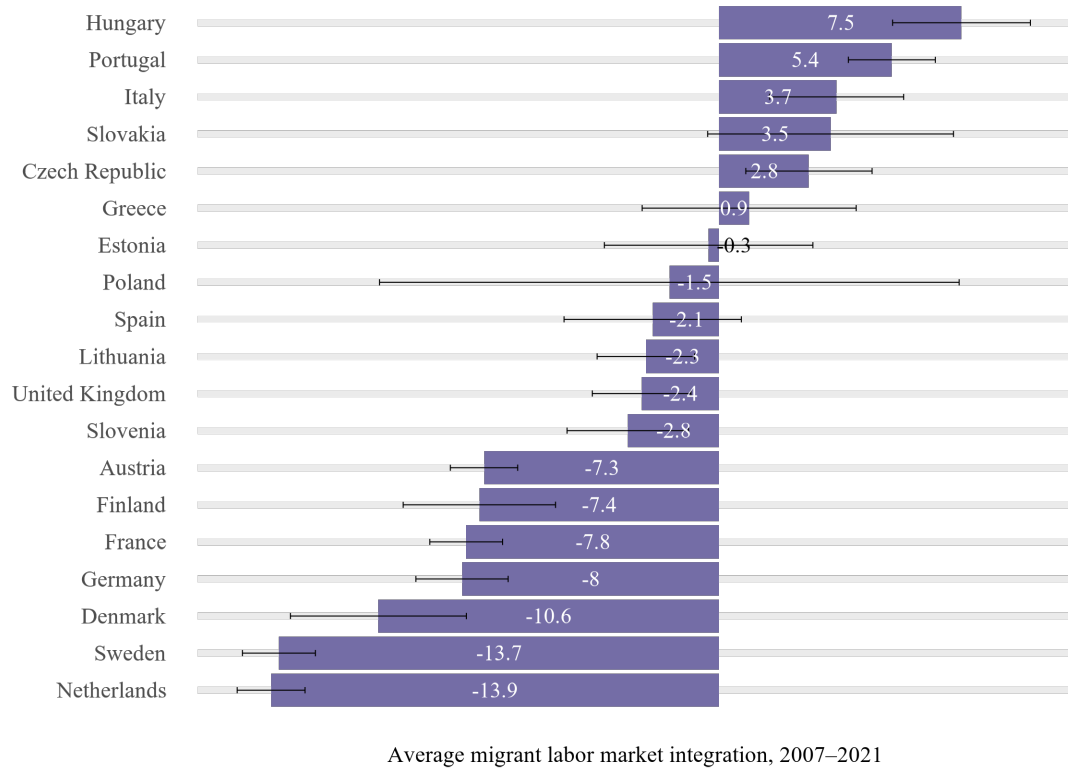


Figure 5.5: Average labor-market integration scores by country, 2007–2021

often combined with nationalism variables were aggregated into the exclusionary score. These two indicators align with RHST mechanisms: **per601_2**, which captures restrictive or alarmist framing of migration, maps onto the *threat* mechanism; **per608_2**, which emphasizes demands for assimilation, reflects the *blame* mechanism, implying that migrants are responsible for social fragmentation or economic strain. This operationalization allows RHST’s typology to be tested in a structural outcome model. Together, these two indicators represent the aggregate rhetorical intensity of threat and blame cues, central mechanisms in RHST’s framework of symbolic exclusion.

Just like in previous chapters, I isolate these two indicators and use them independently to create a more targeted measure of anti-migrant rhetoric. By disaggregating them from broader nationalism variables, I focus solely on content that explicitly references migrants. Each party’s rhetoric score is weighted by its share of legislative seats, reflecting its influence on national discourse. I then calculate a country-year average of these weighted scores to construct a continuous anti-migrant rhetoric variable.

CMP data are recorded by party and updated only in election years, which creates gaps for non-election years. To fill these, I apply forward interpolation by assuming the rhetorical environment remains stable between elections. This produces a complete panel with one value per country per year. While this method has limitations, it offers a pragmatic solution for addressing temporal gaps and enabling longitudinal analysis.

To capture additional factors influencing migrant employment outcomes, I include several structural controls. Income inequality is measured by the post-tax Gini coefficient. Population size and log-transformed GDP per capita account for demographic and economic scale. Migrant inflows, expressed as a percentage of the total population, control for potential labor-market or public sentiment shifts related to demographic changes.

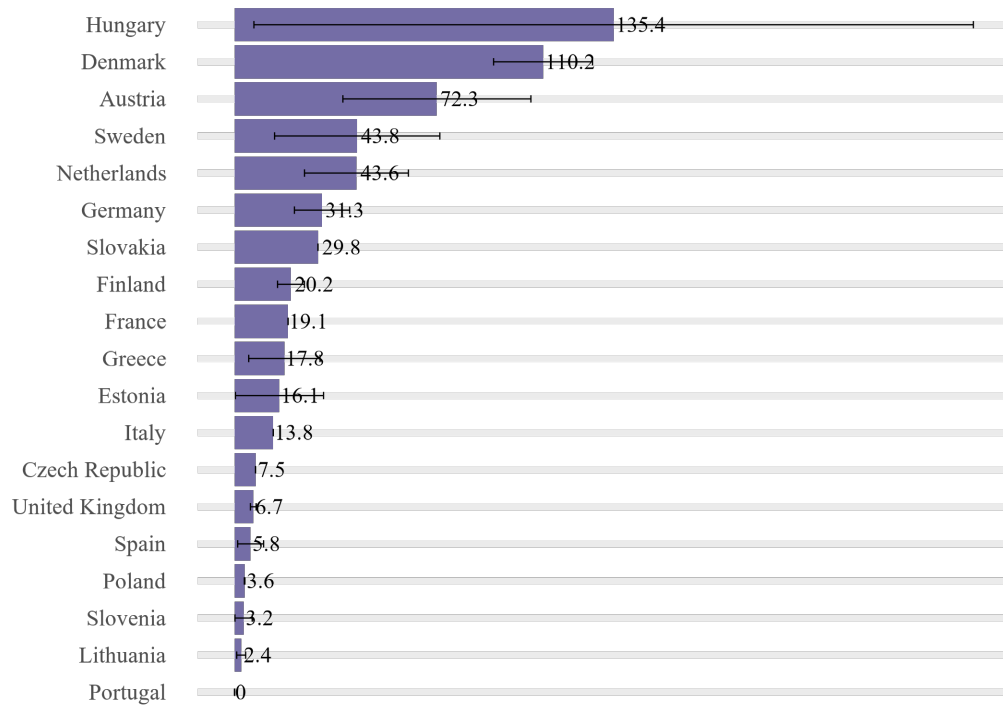
Integration policies are measured using the overall MIPEX, which summarizes national approaches to labor mobility, anti-discrimination, and citizenship access. Welfare generosity is measured as total social expenditures as a percentage of GDP, while labor power is captured by trade union density. All variables are standardized for comparability in the regression models.

Descriptive statistics for all modeled variables are shown in **Table 4.1**. Hungary, particularly from 2018 to 2022, exhibits the highest levels of anti-migrant rhetoric. Elevated rhetoric is also observed in Denmark, Austria, Poland, Estonia, and Latvia. Standardization reduces the magnitude of these outliers to support cross-country comparison.

Table 5.1: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Integration	164	-2.62	6.64	-15.9	10.4
Anti-migrant rhetoric	164	33.54	51.27	0	243.8
Welfare	164	24.18	4.60	16.3	34.9
Integration lagged	164	-2.81	6.75	-15.9	10.4
Inequality	164	0.30	0.04	0.23	0.37
Population	164	2.19e+07	2.44e+07	1.31e+06	8.32e+07
GDP pc log	164	10.65	0.25	10.12	11.08
Migrant inflow	164	0.73	0.42	0.05	2.30
MIPEX	164	55.56	15.28	37.0	87.0
Union density	164	24.56	19.17	4.49	68.19

Notes: All values are unstandardized. GDP per capita is log-transformed. Anti-migrant rhetoric includes both exclusionary and assimilationist content.



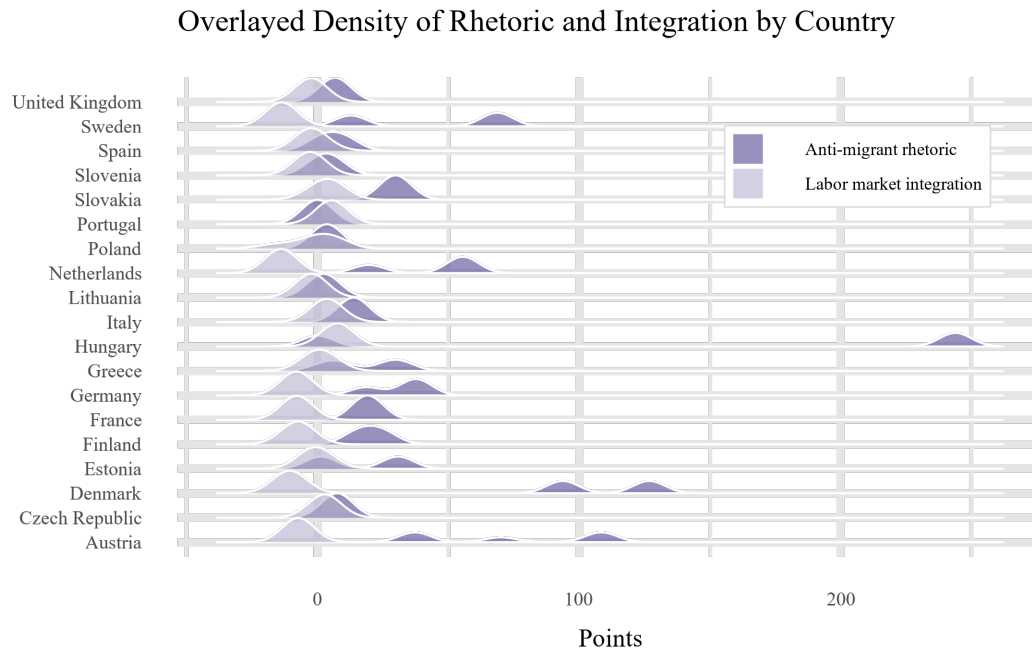
Average anti-migrant rhetoric, 2007–2021

Figure 5.6: Average anti-migrant rhetoric by country with spread, 2007-2021

Figure 5.7 displays density plots for anti-migrant rhetoric and labor-market integration across countries from 2007 to 2021. Each country’s distribution is represented by two overlaid ridgelines: a darker purple line indicating anti-migrant rhetoric, and a lighter purple line representing integration outcomes. The x-axis reflects standardized values, while the height of each curve reflects the frequency of those values over time. Narrow peaks suggest consistency; flatter curves reflect greater variability. In countries like Hungary and Poland, anti-migrant rhetoric is concentrated toward one end of the scale, while integration varies more widely. In others, like Sweden or the Netherlands, both distributions align more closely, indicating a more consistent discourse-policy environment.

Although CMP includes pro-migrant indicators (e.g., [Pro-Immigration Statements \(per602_2\)](#), [Pro-Immigration Multiculturalism \(per607_2\)](#)), these were excluded from the integration models as the focus of this chapter is on exclusionary rhetorical mechanisms, specifically *threat* and *blame*. Future work could examine whether inclusive rhetoric counterbalances exclusionary discourse or if the effects are asymmetric.

Figure 5.7: Anti-migrant rhetoric and integration, density by country



5.5 Empirical Findings

This analysis includes 164 observations across 19 EU countries. **Table 5.2** presents the results of two fixed-effects regression models estimating the effects of anti-migrant rhetoric and welfare spending on migrant labor-market integration. Model 1 includes main effects only, while Model 2 introduces an interaction between anti-migrant rhetoric and welfare spending.

Figure 5.8 displays predictive margins from the baseline model. **Figure 5.9** visualizes the interaction effects across three levels of welfare spending.

Table 5.2: Effects of Anti-migrant Rhetoric and Welfare Spending on Integration (Standardized)

	(1) Integration	(2) Integration
Anti-migrant Rhetoric	-0.094*** (0.018)	-0.110*** (0.037)
Welfare	-0.160** (0.063)	-0.157** (0.065)
Integration lagged	0.449*** (0.076)	0.447*** (0.075)
Inequality	-0.056 (0.114)	-0.059 (0.112)
Population	2.922* (1.559)	3.072* (1.616)
GDP pc log	0.329*** (0.052)	0.331*** (0.053)
Migrant inflow	-0.083*** (0.028)	-0.091** (0.036)
MIPEX	-0.057 (0.151)	-0.073 (0.149)
Union density	-0.111 (0.297)	-0.129 (0.288)
Anti-migrant Rhetoric $\times$ Welfare		-0.018 (0.031)
Constant	0.276 (0.181)	0.294 (0.188)
Observations	164	164
R^2	0.445	0.446

Notes: Data from CMP, OECD, MIPEX, International Labour Organization, and GINI Index. All continuous variables are standardized (z-scores). Standard errors are clustered by country.

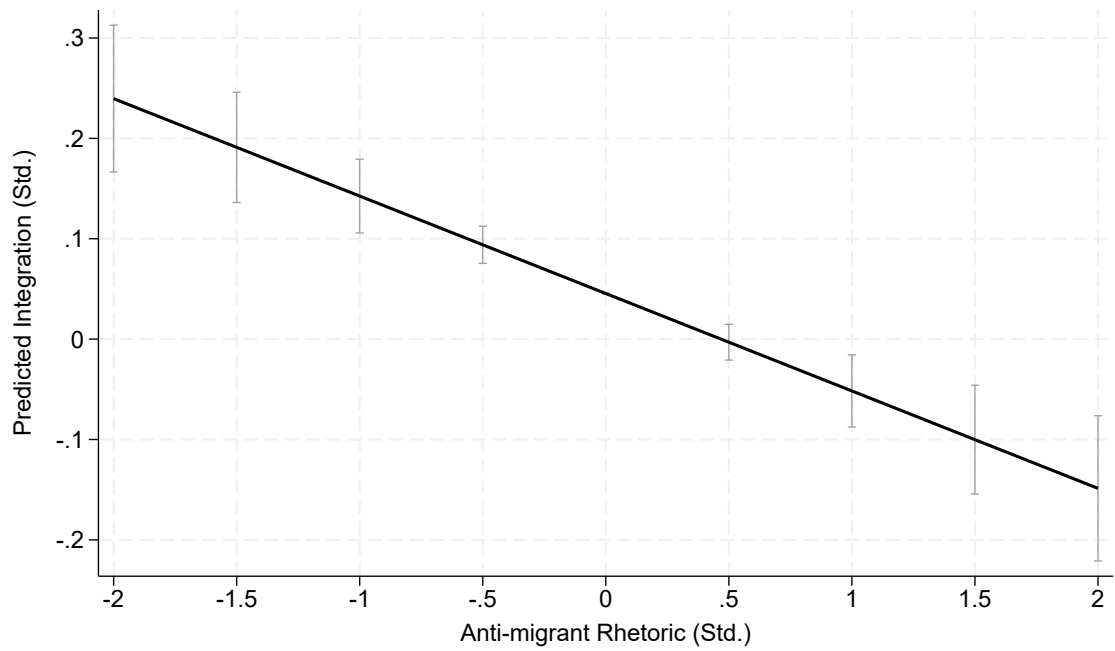


Figure 5.8: Marginal Effects of Anti-migrant Rhetoric (Baseline Model)

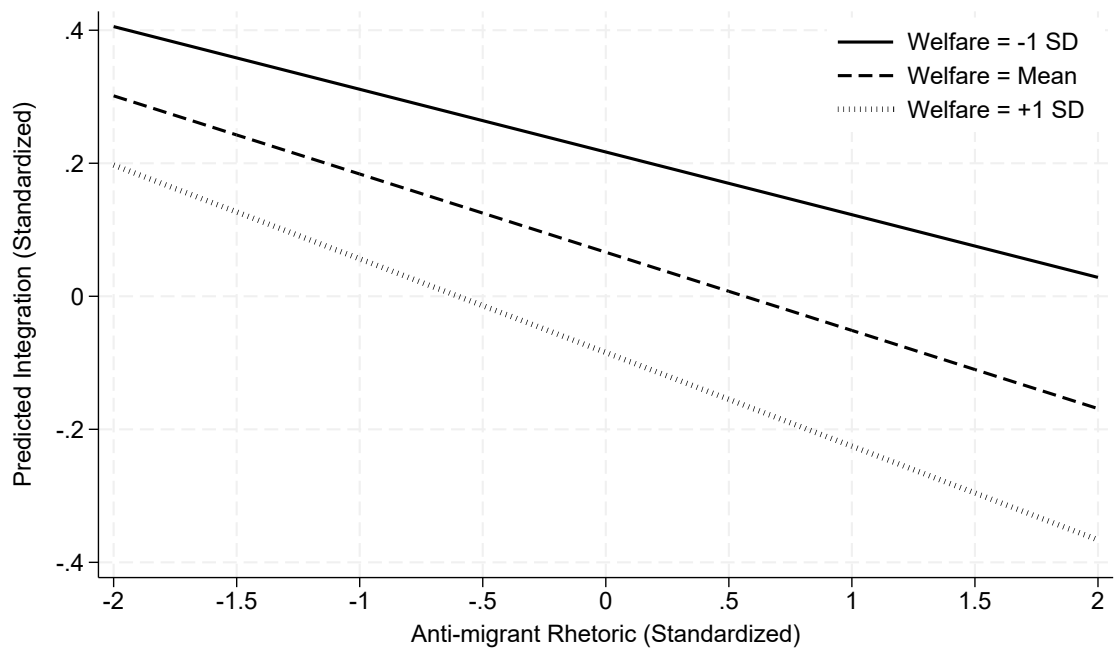


Figure 5.9: Marginal Effects of Anti-migrant Rhetoric by Welfare Spending (Standardized)

Main Results

Model 1 reveals a significant negative association between anti-migrant rhetoric and migrant integration. A one standard deviation increase in anti-migrant rhetoric (51.27 units) is associated with a 0.094 standard deviation decrease in labor-market integration (about 0.62 points on the original 6.64 SD integration scale, or approximately a 0.62 percentage point widening of the employment gap). Because all continuous variables are standardized, coefficients are directly comparable. **Figure 5.8** shows a steady decline in predicted integration as rhetoric intensifies, with greatest precision around the middle of the distribution and wider confidence intervals at extreme values.

Model 2 adds an interaction between rhetoric and welfare spending. Both main effects remain negative and significant: a one SD increase in anti-migrant rhetoric (51.27) is associated with a 0.110 SD decrease in integration, while a one SD increase in welfare spending (4.60 points on the unstandardized scale) is associated with a 0.157 SD decrease. However, the interaction term is not significant ($\beta = -0.018$, $p = 0.51$), suggesting that the relationship between rhetoric and integration does not differ meaningfully across levels of welfare generosity. **Figure 5.9** depicts the interaction, showing slightly steeper slopes under high welfare conditions, but overlapping confidence intervals confirm statistical non-significance.

Controls and Robustness

The lagged dependent variable is consistently positive and highly significant ($\beta \approx 0.447$, $p < 0.01$), confirming strong temporal path dependence in integration outcomes. A one SD increase in prior-year integration (6.75 points) is associated with a 0.447 SD increase in the current year, underscoring the cumulative nature of employment parity.

Among the control variables:

- **GDP per capita (log)** is positively associated with integration ($\beta \approx 0.33$, $p < 0.01$). A one SD increase (0.25) corresponds to a 0.33 SD increase in integration, implying that wealthier economies experience significantly better migrant labor outcomes.
- **Migrant inflow (as share of population)** shows a modest negative association with integration ($\beta \approx -0.09$, $p < 0.05$). A one SD increase (0.42 percentage points) is associated with a 0.09 SD decline in integration—roughly equivalent to a 0.60 percentage point increase in the migrant-native employment gap.
- **Welfare spending** is significantly negative in both models ($\beta = -0.157$), consistent with theories of labor-market segmentation or reduced work incentives in more generous welfare regimes.

Other controls, including inequality (Gini), MIPEx score, union density, and population size, are not statistically significant. This suggests that once rhetoric, economic context, and welfare structures are accounted for, these variables exert limited additional influence on labor-market integration.

Together, these results reinforce the Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory’s core claim: that elite discourse serves as a symbolic yet materially consequential mechanism of stratification. Even without new policy enactments, political speech appears to influence institutional gatekeeping and citizen behavior in ways that shape economic outcomes for migrants.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter investigated whether anti-migrant political rhetoric affects migrant labor-market integration across 19 EU countries from 2007 to 2022. Anchored in Cue Theory and [SDT](#), and unified under the [RHST](#) developed in Chapter 2, I hypothesized that exclusionary rhetoric functions as a hierarchy-enhancing signal. Specifically, I proposed that rhetorical framings portraying migrants as *threats* to security or *burdens* on the economy would condition citizen behavior and institutional norms in ways that systematically disadvantage migrants in the labor market.

The results provide clear support for this hypothesis. Using fixed effects regression on a panel of country-year data, I find that increases in anti-migrant rhetoric are significantly associated with decreases in relative employment for foreign-born individuals. A one-point increase in exclusionary rhetoric corresponds to a 0.011-point decrease in the labor-market integration measure. While the effect of any single unit increase is small, the practical implications are meaningful. A 50-point increase in rhetorical hostility is associated with a 0.55-point drop in integration, which is enough to reinforce marginalization in countries already experiencing employment gaps between migrants and natives. These findings hold even after controlling for macroeconomic conditions, welfare spending, union density, and integration policy, linking elite speech to structural labor-market outcomes.

RHST offers a powerful explanatory framework for understanding these dynamics. Rhetoric is not merely symbolic; it operates as a form of *symbolic governance* that encodes stratification intent and structures access to opportunity. The [CMP](#) indicators used in this chapter, `per601_2` and `per608_2`, capture rhetorical mechanisms of *threat* and *blame*, respectively. By embedding these mechanisms into political discourse, parties transmit hierarchy-enhancing cues that shape how citizens interact with migrants and how institutions mediate inclusion. The empirical evidence presented here confirms that such discourse has material consequences for economic incorporation, reinforcing social closure through informal gatekeeping rather than formal exclusion.

Importantly, this chapter demonstrates that political rhetoric can influence integration outcomes even in the absence of new legislation. Countries with relatively inclusive policies may still see migrants disadvantaged when rhetorical environments are marked by exclusionary signals. This underscores a central claim of RHST: rhetorical ecosystems, not just formal institutions, govern who belongs and who benefits. Political speech is not only reactive to public sentiment; it actively reshapes the social terrain in which integration occurs.

There are, however, methodological constraints. CMP data are coded only in election years, which requires interpolation for interim periods. While common in longitudinal rhetoric research, this introduces assumptions about rhetorical stability that may not fully capture short-term fluctuations. Future research could enhance temporal precision by incorporating other textual sources, such as parliamentary debates, public speeches, or social media, to validate or refine these trends. Additionally, although this chapter focuses on labor-market outcomes, RHST could be applied to other integration domains, including housing, education, or civic participation.

In conclusion, this chapter closes the empirical arc of the dissertation by linking elite rhetoric not only to public attitudes but also to material outcomes. The evidence suggests that exclusionary discourse is more than a symbolic stance. It functions as a mechanism of socio-economic stratification. By merging Cue Theory, SDT, and RHST into a unified analytical framework, this chapter offers a comprehensive account of how political language helps produce and sustain inequality.

The final chapter turns from explanation to synthesis. It weaves together the theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative threads of the dissertation and reflects on the broader implications for democratic resilience, institutional accountability, and the future of migrant inclusion in an increasingly polarized political climate.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine how political rhetoric, particularly anti-migrant rhetoric, shapes migrant integration in European labor markets. Beginning with the observation that migrants are increasingly framed as threats by political leaders, I analyzed the diffusion, reception, and consequences of this rhetoric through multiple analytical lenses and empirical approaches. The findings suggest that political rhetoric is not merely discourse, but a potential mechanism of institutional power that contributes to the construction of societal hierarchies and influences public sentiment and migrant outcomes.

At the same time, the dissertation acknowledges several important limitations. Political rhetoric is only one factor shaping migrant integration, and its relative weight may vary considerably across institutional, economic, and cultural contexts. The relationship between discourse and material exclusion is complex and likely mediated by many unobserved variables. As such, this study does not claim causality, but instead offers evidence of a robust correlation that warrants further inquiry.

6.1 Key Findings: The Reach and Impact of Anti-Migrant Rhetoric

The empirical findings across five chapters suggest that political rhetoric is not peripheral to policy formation or electoral behavior, but plausibly central to the reproduction of social inequality. However, these conclusions rest on a specific set of assumptions about how rhetoric is produced, disseminated, and received. Notably, the use of party manifestos as a proxy for elite discourse may obscure more immediate or informal rhetorical channels, such as media interviews, parliamentary debates, or social media activity.

Each chapter contributes a distinct analytical perspective, together forming a cumulative argument about the symbolic and material power of speech. Still, the recursive mechanism proposed—where rhetoric spreads through party systems, conditions attitudes, and shapes structural outcomes—requires further testing across broader cases, especially outside of the European context.

Chapter 2 laid the theoretical foundation by applying Cue Theory and SDT to elite discourse. Through interviews with Swedish politicians, I demonstrated how rhetorical framing constructs migrants as threats, culturally, economically, and existentially, reinforcing in-group solidarity and out-group suspicion. Even in historically inclusive welfare states, center parties adopted language that legitimated exclusion. These qualitative findings show how political speech embeds hierarchy-enhancing narratives into the political mainstream.

Chapter 3 extended the argument through a cross-national analysis using Comparative Manifesto Project data. The findings revealed that Radical Right Parties (RRPs) serve as rhetorical entrepreneurs: their use of exclusionary language shapes the discursive agenda regardless of electoral gains. Center Parties (CPs) responded not to voter demand but to rhetorical salience, thereby amplifying exclusionary cues. This demonstrated that rhetoric diffuses as a strategic resource, often without electoral payoff but with far-reaching discursive effects.

Chapter 4 addressed the reception of these cues among the public and economic elites. Using EUENGAGE survey data, I showed that exclusionary rhetoric significantly predicts anti-migrant attitudes among both general citizens and business representatives. This connection is pivotal: it links elite discourse to the behavior of those with gatekeeping power in labor markets. It also affirms Cue Theory's central proposition, that elites shape how citizens and institutions understand and respond to migrants.

Chapter 5 provided the most direct evidence of structural consequence. Using time-series cross-sectional data from 2007–2022, I found that increased anti-migrant rhetoric correlates with declining migrant labor-market integration. These effects persisted after controlling for economic, demographic, and institutional factors (e.g., GDP per capita, migrant inflow, and MIPEX scores). Rhetoric, in this context, functions not just symbolically but materially because it legitimizes exclusion and narrows pathways to opportunity.

Taken together, these chapters illustrate a recursive mechanism: exclusionary rhetoric originates among elites, spreads across party systems, is absorbed by the public, and ultimately manifests in institutional outcomes. Political speech may begin as symbolic action, but it becomes material through its ability to shape norms, preferences, and structural barriers. In this way, rhetoric is a mode of governance.

6.2 Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

This dissertation advances theoretical frameworks, expands empirical applications, and offers methodological innovation. Theoretically, it extends Cue Theory beyond public opinion formation to institutional outcomes. Political signals are not merely interpreted by voters, they are enacted by elites and internalized by employers and organizations. This broader application underscores the pervasive influence of rhetoric in democratic systems.

Second, it develops SDT by validating rhetoric as a hierarchy-enhancing mechanism. Whereas SDT has often focused on individual psychological orientations, this study demonstrates that elite discourse functions as a structural tool that activates and legitimizes social dominance in liberal democracies.

Third, it introduces Rhetorical Hierarchy Signaling Theory (RHST), a framework that identifies four rhetorical mechanisms—dominance, egalitarianism, threat, and blame—and analyzes how these shape both perception and institutional response.

Methodologically, the project demonstrates the value of multi-level, mixed-methods design. By combining elite interviews, manifesto analysis, public opinion data, and macroeconomic indicators, I trace a coherent pathway from discourse to integration outcomes. This triangulated approach offers a robust framework for studying how ideational variables like rhetoric become institutionalized.

6.3 Implications for Politics and Policy

The findings have critical implications for democratic discourse, migrant inclusion, and policy design. Political rhetoric is not harmless, nor incidental. When center-left, center-right, or liberal parties adopt exclusionary frames, whether for strategic alignment or electoral gain, they normalize exclusion, embolden the radical right, and weaken prospects for integration. The consequences are tangible: reduced access to employment, housing, and civic life for migrants.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that integration outcomes are shaped not only by institutional architecture, but also by the discursive environment. Legal protections can be undermined if the surrounding rhetoric stigmatizes migrants. Anti-discrimination frameworks must be accompanied by rhetorical responsibility. Political elites must recognize that their words do not merely reflect public attitudes, they shape them.

6.4 Final Reflection and Future Research

This dissertation affirms that political rhetoric can act as a vehicle of social boundary-making and institutional gatekeeping. Yet the evidence presented should

be interpreted with caution. Methodological decisions—such as the interpolation of CMP data, the reliance on relative employment as a proxy for integration, and the use of survey items to approximate rhetorical reception—introduce assumptions that could bias estimates or underrepresent complexity. A more complete understanding of rhetorical effects would benefit from greater attention to temporal lags, multidirectional causality, and interaction with other structural forces.

Future research should not only build on the theoretical framework of RHST, but also critically test its boundaries. For instance, how do migrants themselves interpret, resist, or adapt to rhetorical environments? Do hierarchy-attenuating messages (e.g., egalitarianism) produce measurable inclusionary effects, or are they symbolic concessions in otherwise exclusionary systems? How do policy tools mediate or mute the influence of rhetoric, and what role does civil society play in disrupting rhetorical cycles?

Ultimately, this dissertation advances a simple but important proposition: political rhetoric matters. But understanding how, when, and for whom it matters remains an open empirical and theoretical question. By foregrounding the symbolic dimension of hierarchy, this work contributes to a growing conversation about the discursive foundations of inequality—while acknowledging that much remains to be explored.

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Vita

Jennifer Shaneberger was born and raised in Michigan. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in International Planning and Social Justice from Grand Valley State University in 2011. She continued her education at Western Michigan University, where she received a Master of International Development Administration in 2016 with a leadership emphasis and a research focus on postcolonial conflict and memory.

In 2025, she completed her Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, specializing in International Relations and Comparative Politics. Her dissertation, titled *When Political Rhetoric Threatens Migrant Labor Market Integration*, integrates qualitative interviews, longitudinal statistical modeling, and original theoretical development to examine the stratifying effects of elite discourse on migrants' economic outcomes across European Union and OECD countries. Her research was supported by a Fulbright Fellowship in Sweden, as well as numerous university awards.

Before and during her doctoral studies, Shaneberger held leadership roles in nonprofit and festival programming, including serving as President and CEO of the Grand Rapids Film Festival. Her career spans teaching, applied research, grant writing, and communications consulting. She has taught multiple undergraduate courses, including Comparative Politics and Introduction to Political Science, and is committed to inclusive pedagogy and community-engaged scholarship.

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