

Exploring the Restrictive Shift on Immigration and the Role of Intra-Party Politics in the Danish Social Democrats¹

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Abstract

This article explores the Danish Social Democratic Party's (S) adoption of restrictive immigration policies and the influence of intra-party dynamics from 2005 to 2019, comparing different leadership periods with varying strategies, ideological inclinations and intra-party support. Combining an analysis of S' immigration policies with insights from twelve interviews with party elites, I identify key factors contributing to intra-party cohesion and how it was achieved. The article outlines the party elite's perception of potential backlash from intra-party actors as a constraint on its strategies. The interviews highlight that party activists' perception of capability and political skills in party leadership, coherent and ideologically grounded discourse on immigration developed by the party elite, and its dissemination and securing factional alignment within the party elite are crucial to achieving intra-party cohesion and gaining the support of intra-party actors regarding a restrictive immigration policy shift in a social democratic party.

Introduction

The Danish Social Democratic Party (*Socialdemokratiet* or *Socialdemokraterne*, S) and their restrictive turn on immigration has become one of the most compelling cases amongst European social democrats. Unlike their counterparts, S decisively employed an anti-immigration discourse, while other social democratic parties struggled to devise a persuasive strategy. This shift is relevant to the immigration dilemma of social democratic parties, where they lost their appeal to the traditional working-class voter base and gained more support amongst urban middle classes, which was in line with their considerable support for immigration (Hinnfors et al., 2012). Navigating this trade-off causes discontent within the parties, leading to intra-party strife and dissent amongst party actors (Bale et al., 2010). While what to do on immigration policy itself is a source of in-fighting for most European social democratic parties, S stand out by displaying a cohesive and

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supportive intra-party outlook alongside a restrictive immigration outlook (Rathgeb and Wolkenstein, 2022), even shown as a blueprint for its sister parties (see for example Gabriel, 2019).

Previous scholarship has explored the party's policy shift from multiple angles, where Hjorth and Larsen (2020) argue the success is connected to the Danish traditional bloc politics and beneficial from an office-seeking perspective, while McManus and Falkenbach (2022) refer to S' electoral gains as 'a hollow victory'. Meret's (2021) chapter investigates the incentives for the party and the party's changing discourse. Rathgeb and Wolkenstein (2022) focus on the Danish and Austrian social democratic parties' organisational structures for achieving intra-party cohesion over immigration policies. Mariager and Olesen (2020) explore the 'conservative turn' of Danish Social Democrats from its previous role as the pursuant of social change. Considerable attention is paid to how the S competed, reacted and cooperated with the anti-immigrant far-right parties and their policies (Etzerodt and Kongshøj, 2022; Nicolaisen, 2023; Salo and Rydgen, 2021). In addition, there are primarily quantitative works, taking S as one of its many case studies and focusing on different aspects of policy and policy shift in Europe-wide comparisons (for example, Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Polacko, 2022; Spoon and Klüver, 2020). While these are insightful, they do not examine the dynamics and factors of the immigration policy change and the ideological transformation of the party. These dynamics warrant further exploration and analysis since the parties' decision-making processes and internal life are considered a 'black box' (Kölln and Polk, 2023).

This article aims to unearth the 'black box' of intra-party dynamics of the Danish Social Democratic Party, examining the factors influencing cohesion amid and after the challenging shift. The question is how the Danish Social Democratic Party achieved intra-party cohesion and alignment in adopting a restrictive immigration policy. Thus, the article explores how the party navigated potential internal strife over the years, considering diverse leadership and political inclinations within a comparative framework.

I argue that, after experiencing years of intra-party division on immigration, S

managed to unite on the issue and convinced the intra-party actors while shifting to a restrictive position through the intra-party actors' perception of the leadership as strong and skilful, leadership developing a coherent, ideologically grounded and transformative discourse surrounding the issue, the factional alignment on the party elite level, alongside external shocks to the party system. Furthermore, I assert that the party elite's perception of potential dissent or backlash from the party activists, beyond the official powers from the party statutes, constrains the party elite's manoeuvre potential on policy shifts. However, considerable changes in the factors above allowed the intra-party actors to be convinced and unite behind the message on immigration and leadership.

Theory

The core of this immigration dilemma is related to the ideological predicament of social democratic parties regarding their immigration policies. With the rise of anti-immigrant far-right parties and their growing popularity amongst the working-class population, and their discourse about globalisation, increasing economic competition and cultural threats exacerbated by immigration, social democrats found themselves 'tangled in the nettles' (Manwaring, 2021: 139). While the social democrats appealed to educated, middle-class voters with a progressive outlook on immigration, their support from the traditional base, the working-class, who are more inclined towards restrictive views on immigration, has dwindled (Alonso and Fonseca, 2011). As Bale et al. (2010) outline, these parties either downplayed the issue, held on to their position or adopted anti-immigrant positions as their response. However, these strategies and even the nature of this dilemma lead to considerable strife within parties, as it challenges the ideological core values of the social democrats, such as redistribution, solidarity and, historically, internationalism (Rothstein and Steinmo, 2015).

Political parties are not unitary actors with a single direction or motivation but complex organisations with different actors with different expectations and motivations (Müller and Strøm, 1999). In this structure, the party elite tends to be motivated by votes

and office-seeking, while the party activists are policy-seeking (Strøm, 1990). This divergence aligns with their gains, as the former lives ‘from politics’, and the latter lives ‘for politics’ (Kölln and Polk, 2023: 2). However, these lines are somewhat flexible, e.g. activists know that parties need to be electorally successful, and for the party elite, being perceived as too pragmatic in their manoeuvres undermines theirs and the party’s credibility (Kitschelt, 1989; Tavits, 2007). Changes in external factors may provide the grounds for shifts, but initiating the change depends on the intra-party actors (Harmel et al., 1995).

While the party elite yields the executive powers, activists strive to influence the party’s decisions and policies, and the party elite needs the activists for their work on the ground (Scarrow et al., 2000; van Haute and Gauja, 2015). They exert influence through formal structures, such as party committees and voting in congresses, or informal ones, such as pressuring the party organisation or the leadership. Even the party elite’s perception of potential dissent within the party can be a source of influence favouring the party activists (Kitschelt, 1989; Müller, 2006). For the party elite, attracting voters and appeasing the activists becomes a balancing act (Cross, 2018).

This delicate balance between intra-party actors can influence policy shifts. Rather than upsetting this balance in favour of the electorate, the party elite may pre-emptively abstain from policy shifts to avoid an intra-party conflict, in line with how much influence they attribute to activists (Friedrich, 1963; Kitschelt, 1989). The extent of these constraints depends on the saliency of the issue amongst intra-party actors and the party’s core values (Meyer, 2013). The party elite’s perception of activists’ influence and reaction dictates the manoeuvre limits for the possibility of policy shifts. Hence, I expect the party leadership and the elite in social democratic parties to abstain from extensive immigration policy shifts when they perceive it as potentially a source of backlash from the party activists.

Numerous factors stemming from intra-party dynamics, such as influence and perceptions of actors and factions, can change the nature and extent of these constraints. First, as the elite’s perception of the activists’ reactions can constrain the policy-making

processes, the opposite of this dynamic should be considered. Party leaders and elite deemed politically skilful or charismatic by the party activists will have greater autonomy than those perceived as weak (Bale et al., 2019). The leadership successfully depicts itself as able to represent the policy-seeking intentions of activists while making electoral gains, which can contribute to intra-party cohesion (Burns, 1978). Therefore, I argue that the party leadership and elite, perceived as skilful and capable by the activists, will have more autonomy and ground to manoeuvre on policy shifts while achieving or maintaining intra-party cohesion.

Similarly, factions have a crucial position within the parties, influencing policy and competing for resources and position; however, strong leaders who can yield the intra-party actors' support can gain autonomy from factions (Ceron, 2012, 2019). Party leaders who can reconcile factions under their leadership and convince these actors regarding the party's direction may achieve intra-party cohesion on the elite level. This reconciliation is more feasible when the party leadership has the support and approval of the party activists (Harmel et al., 1995; Mutlu-Eren, 2015). Therefore, I expect factional alignment on the party elite level to be a factor for the party leadership to achieve intra-party cohesion when there is a policy shift on a contentious issue.

Policy shifts are also constrained by parties' ideological position and manoeuvre potential (Budge, 1994). However, parties can reinvent themselves, adopt policy positions aligned with new ideological frameworks or alter their political outlook (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009; Crewe and Searing, 1988). The nature of party leadership is essential here; some leaders attempt to engage in radical changes and transform their parties rather than mere policy adjustments (Burns, 1978). Therefore, I argue that the party elite can develop new ideological frameworks to reconcile policy shifts with their ideological values and principles to generate support amongst the intra-party actors to evade the constraints of these dynamics. This can be construed as 'reclaiming' a position (proactive) rather than adopting another party's position (reactive).

Research Design

This article employs a two-pronged approach in its research. First, I inspect the party's immigration policies and positions through media sources (newspapers, public interviews), party documents and secondary literature. The aim is to map the changes in the positions and highlight surrounding external and internal factors through the immigration policies. Furthermore, this overview allows the article to delve into the complex and primarily non-publicised intra-party dynamics in the following step, allowing grounds for triangulation of the sources (Natow, 2020).

Moreover, I utilise twelve semi-structured interviews with the S' party elite. The party elite have access to decision-making processes within the party, and their perception of the intra-party networks is crucial to the cohesion regarding policy changes (Ceron, 2019; Meyer, 2013), and interviews offer unique access to insights unattainable through alternative data sources (Mosley, 2013). They can provide the nature of the constraints they perceive regarding policy shifts and the responses from the intra-party actors while providing a crucial link between the leadership and activists. Given the sensitive nature of intra-party discussions, interviewees were guaranteed complete anonymity to ensure candid and open responses. These interviews took place between May and October 2023. Participants are either current or former members of the parliament (*Folketing*), national executive (*Hovedbestyrelse*), party leadership or advisors close to key party executives.

After a brief insight into the pre-2005 period, I focus on 2005 to 2015, where Helle Thorning-Schmidt was the leader, and 2015 to 2019, the period of Mette Frederiksen until the elections, where S became the government once again. During this timeframe, the saliency of immigration grew in Denmark and became a considerable and even decisive topic during elections (Green-Pedersen, 2019; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2016). The timeline provides grounds for a comparative approach as well. Thorning-Schmidt is from the party's right-wing, contrasting Frederiksen's left-wing background, highlighting their divergent ideological outlooks. Looking at leadership periods has its merits regarding the research focusing on S. The party's decision-making process is highly accumulated in a

top-down manner, referred to as ‘top-management’ (*topstyring*), where the party leadership, alongside the party elite, has the power to decide over the discourse and strategy of the party (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2015).

Danish Social Democrats’ Immigration Policies

In the early 90s, prominent left-wing politician Svend Auken, known for declaring that ‘a refugee is a friend you have not met yet’ (Auken, 2009), led the party in opposition. Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, a right-leaning moderniser, succeeded him in 1992, serving as prime minister until 2001. Rasmussen’s assertion that the far-right party DF ‘will never be part of the household’ (Thomsen, 2017) reflects the party’s stance on anti-immigrant attitudes. After the 2001 defeat, Mogens Lykketoft took over but resigned after the 2005 election loss due to excessive internal disagreements (Yilmaz, 2016). Intra-party tensions, notably between the right and left factions, were prevalent during this period (Knudsen, 2012). Immigration, a contentious policy area, led to conflicts, with social democratic mayors expressing concerns about integration in areas with migrant concentrations. Despite warnings, the S leadership failed to develop a coherent approach, resulting in ‘the internal disagreements and debate had been silenced from above’ (Meret, 2021: 230-231). The party’s attempts to adopt restrictive immigration positions faced challenges due to high intra-party disagreements, maintaining the hold-and-defuse strategy (Bale et al., 2010).²

Helle Thorning-Schmidt became the leader in 2005. She presented a vision aligned with Third Way politics, aiming to modernise the party, repositioning it towards the centre of economic and sociocultural matters, and arguing that class-based politics were outdated (Yilmaz, 2016). She made certain declarations favouring a hard-liner immigration policy (DR, 2005); however, these were not adopted programmatically. The

² Kosiara-Pedersen’s (2017) research provides excellent insights into the positions of S party members from 2012: The party members do not perceive immigration as a threat and are closer to pro-immigrant views (-49,2 on a ± 100 scale). Although S members have the least favourable views on immigration in the red bloc (compared to EL, SF, and RV), they are still distinctly closer to these parties than the blue bloc ones and place themselves, on average, on the expansive side of the issue.

party treaded water in the early election in 2007, as they were still reeling from the intra-party disagreements (Carlsen, 2015). In the following 2011 elections, Thorning-Schmidt downplayed the growing salience of immigration by shifting the attention towards socioeconomic issues, such as the 'labour and housing market and the welfare state' (Meret, 2021: 233). Before the election, Thorning-Schmidt declared that there would be 'no more restrictions on foreigners', complained that the DF influenced the policy for 'far too long' (Bonde, 2010) and called on right-wing parties to stop the scare campaign (Berlingske, 2011).

Although Thorning-Schmidt attempted to develop a relatively restrictive discourse and move the party towards the centre, emphasising integration rather than limiting immigration (Salo and Rydgren, 2021), this shift caused a negative response from within the party, led by prominent figures, forcing her to react to DF and growing anti-immigration discourse to mitigate intra-party disagreements (Kæmsgaard, 2010; Larsen, 2010). This rhetoric seems motivated by electoralist strategies, where Thorning-Schmidt aimed to appeal to the centre and primarily cater to the urban, educated, middle-class voters and in this period, DF started to be perceived as the new party of the working-class (Salo and Rydgren, 2021; Yilmaz, 2016).

S finished second to Venstre (Liberals, V) in the 2011 elections; however, with the support of the Socialist People's Party (SF) and Radikale Venstre (Social Liberals, RV), S formed a coalition government. Thorning-Schmidt put the Third Way vision into practice and began a reform programme with a neo-liberal outlook, offering a pragmatic approach to immigration, restricting some aspects while liberalising others (Holstein and Øyen, 2014). The party's shift to restrictive positions started around 2014, as the cooperation with DF began, primarily due to the worsening refugee crisis in Europe (Meret, 2021). Thorning-Schmidt started the election campaign with the 2015 New Year's speech, focusing on a new policy direction about immigration (Larsen, 2015).

This declaration offered a restrictive immigration approach, and it was perceived as 'surprising' (Karker, 2015) and as pressing on a previously 'losing cause' for the party

(Selmer and Klindt, 2015). The campaign focused on more restrictions and requirements for immigrants to participate actively in society and the labour market, emphasising that these policies are ‘robust and fair’ (Socialdemokraterne, 2015). While this received criticism for trying to cater to the DF voters (Salo and Rydren, 2021), the intra-party disagreements and debates did not falter (Ritzau, 2014; Skjoldan, 2017). Although S finished the elections in the first place, the party and its potential allies failed to reach a majority. Immigration was one of the most salient issues in the election, as DF received its highest vote and became the second largest party; however, a right-wing minority government, led by V and supported by DF, Conservatives and Liberal Alliance, was formed (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2016). Thorning-Schmidt subsequently resigned, and Mette Frederiksen became the party leader (Mariager and Olesen, 2020).

Frederiksen, a figure from the party’s left-wing, was deemed ‘the party’s future’, who rose through the party’s youth wing, was first elected to the parliament in 2001 and has been a prominent figure since (Raatz, 2015). After becoming the leader, Frederiksen and her milieu transformed the party’s approach to immigration policies. Party figures published articles in the party’s newspaper (*Socialdemokraten*) and wrote books discussing the relationship between immigration and social democracy; Rasmus Stoklund published *Til blå Bjarne* in 2016, and Mattias Tesfaye published *Velkommen Mustafa* in 2017. These books, public discussions and newspaper articles engaged in debates about globalisation, immigration, integration, cultural compatibilities and protecting the working-class, providing an ideological framework for the restrictive immigration policies within the social democratic worldview (Meret, 2021; Simonsen, 2020). In line with the growing emphasis on left-wing economic policies, Frederiksen’s focus shifted from the urban and middle-class voters to the rural and working-class, catering for their preferences and discourse (Salo and Rydgren, 2021).

The culmination of this ideological groundwork was the manifesto-like policy paper titled *Fair and Realistic*. It outlines the rationale of Frederiksen’s era, including protective policies for the native working-class against competition, protection of national

culture, and international development aid to prevent refugee movements (Socialdemokratiet, 2018). The policy paper was also integrated into the 2019 election manifesto, repeating the three central proposals: the number of immigrants and refugees coming should be limited, international aid should target development in the sender countries, and the immigrants in Denmark should completely integrate. The latter point includes measures to prevent ghettoisation and parallel societies, ensuring gender equality and respect for freedoms, almost explicitly pointing to ‘non-Western’ immigrants (Socialdemokratiet, 2019). In the same year, S supported the ‘paradigm shift’ propelled by DF and undertaken by the government regarding the approach towards immigration and asylum matters, moving from the integration of foreigners to the deportation of those who cannot demonstrate the necessity of their residency (Politiken, 2019).

S won the 2019 elections, where immigration was one of the main issues, and formed a minority government with support from other left-wing parties (Green-Pedersen, 2020). As a basis for the government, Frederiksen secured a ‘political understanding on many issues’, titled *A Fair Direction for Denmark*, with these parties, rather than a detailed white paper. This document offers a straightforward approach to immigration; while the discourse is not as hard-liner, the overall points for a strict approach in the S manifesto are included, such as restructuring the asylum system, cultural and political integration, and foreign aid (Socialdemokratiet et al., 2019).

Perception of the Party Elite

First, interviewees were asked about the party’s immigration policy. The consensus was that the S’ immigration policy in the 1990s and earlier was very much in line with the rest of the social democratic parties of the time. The central tenets were ‘anti-racism’ and ‘humanitarianism’, while the party avoided ‘debates about integration and high number of immigrants’ (Interview #11). According to interviewees, only a small minority in the party suggested a restrictive turn during that period. However, especially during the late 90s, immigration policies became a proxy topic for intra-party disagreement and factional

strife, yet there was no change in this period as the leadership and the leadership found the topic too costly to handle (Interview #1, #9, #10, #11).

The party elite perceives the restrictive shift as a monumental point in the party's direction. Interviewee #4 stated that this is the most essential decision 'in the last 50 years' and the previous attitude was 'easy' as it avoided the issue, while Interviewee #7 offered that the party saw this exclusively as 'a question of humanitarian policy' and avoided taking steps, which 'opened the door for the DF'. Interviewee #12 defined the shift as 'a step back to where our party should have been'. According to the interviewees, this shift enabled the party elite to re-establish connections with working-class voters by addressing immigration and related policies, including welfare, education, culture, and national values.

Within the party, Helle Thorning-Schmidt is mainly credited with initiating the change. Interviewee #10 pointed out that Thorning-Schmidt wanted to break the uneasy *status quo* on immigration, even before becoming the leader. However, she never made a public attempt until 2015 due to intra-party constraints and the potential backlash (Interview #3, #6, #9, #11). Thorning-Schmidt 'wanted to change the policy in these issues, but ... had a lot of internal conflicts to manage' (Interview #7). The perceived potential dissent from the activists and the party's left-wing hindered the process, leading Thorning-Schmidt to abstain from change, although she aimed to move towards restrictive policies due to its electoral advantages (Interview #5, #7, #9, #10, #12). Changes to immigration policies prior to 2015 were mostly perceived as pragmatic moves to maximise votes rather than an ideological, long-term change, as Interviewee #12 succinctly summarised that these manoeuvres were 'short-term, electoral and pragmatic' and '(communicated) on a tactical level' without 'substantial, well-developed policies'.

Thorning-Schmidt sought possibilities for initiating and implementing the change in immigration policy from 2007, formulating policies to attract more voters while keeping the intra-party in line (Interview #7, #9). This process, known only to a select few, became publicised in 2014-2015 with the rising importance of immigration and the

ensuing refugee crisis as external shocks to the political system. These external shocks changed the national mood and political landscape, allowing her to implement or, at least, initiate a more comprehensive shift.

Perception of Mette Frederiksen's approach to immigration is different, as it is considered much more ideologically grounded, which is highly emphasised by the participants. Interviewees pointed out that the books, debates -both in the public and within the party- and articles by Mette Frederiksen and her close circle have been vastly influential. One interviewee (#4) offered that Frederiksen and her milieu developed a clear plan and a coherent, ideologically grounded message on immigration. The ideological framework behind these books, such as Mattias Tesfaye's *Velkommen Mustafa*, articles and debates seem crucial in influencing intra-party actors, gaining the party elite's and the activists' support. Interviewee #7 added that for these policies to 'trickle down' to activists and integrate into the party's political stance, the political message should move beyond an electoral and pragmatic manoeuvre.

Elaborating on this, Interviewee #9 said that 'Mette (Frederiksen) provided storylines' and 'a common language and ground (to the party)' to talk about immigration, while '(Thorning-Schmidt) gave election campaign promises'. Participants offered that 'Frederiksen took the party on a journey, with a long internal process' (Interview #11) and '(leadership) spent time on explaining why this is an issue' (Interview #12), where party leadership disseminated their new ideological framework to the party organisation, engaging in debates with activists. The reconciliation of social democratic worldview and restrictive immigration and its formulation in a social democratic concept is transformative for the S' intra-party actors. Participants reiterated that party activists, on aggregation, were more pro-immigrant before Frederiksen's leadership, contesting shifts from an ideological perspective. Even the youth-wing, which was much more vocally pro-immigrant, e.g., taking part in pro-refugee protests, aligned with the new economically left but restrictive on immigration political line (Interview #2, #6, #11, #12). Overall, the coherent and persuasive discourse of the leadership on the issue increased the credibility

and trust of intra-party actors towards Mette Frederiksen. Furthermore, the *raison d'être* of the party leadership is pointed out as winning the elections and seeking office, which also legitimises them to the party activists; hence, these policies' perceived political and electoral success also contributed to the convincing processes of the intra-party actors (Interview #9, #10, #11).

Another aspect of change is the intra-party actors' perception of the leaders. Continuing with credibility and trust, the party elite offered insights about the different perceptions of the leaders. Even before becoming the leader, Mette Frederiksen had a powerful impression among party activists. Interviewees described her as 'the original social democrat' (Interview #7, #11, #12) and 'social democracy personified' (Interview #9) and that she is on 'the same level' as the Danish people (Interview #5). Frederiksen, coming from the party's left-wing, defending redistribution and the welfare state throughout her political career, is a factor in intra-party actors' perception, providing her with the political trust, which Interviewee #12 referred to as Frederiksen having a 'goodwill buffer'.

The perception of Helle Thorning-Schmidt differs. She was perceived as, both by some party elite and party activists, 'far away from (the people)', having 'a Copenhagen perspective' and not a representative of the Danish working-class but of upper-class. Frederiksen's left-wing credentials and grassroots identity provided her with political autonomy to develop a new framework and convince the party, while Thorning-Schmidt was seen as somewhat of an outsider, not being part of the youth wing, coming from the European Parliament, whose modernising project and her political identity was not internalised by the activists (Interview #4, #7, #9, #10, #11).

The role and influence of factions are important aspects of intra-party dynamics and policy change. Although the S does not have officially organised factions, they have 'coffee clubs' (*kaffeklubber*), which are informally structured yet ideologically and pragmatically formed and crucial in distributing positions within the party (Steen, 2015). The interviewees offered that these clubs were rather influential, and the leadership had

to seek a balance between them regarding positions and policy changes. During Thorning-Schmidt's period, coffee clubs were a source of opposition, and she had to take 'every political decision through the coffee clubs' to get their approval or at least their compliance (Interview #2, #5, #9).

However, the coffee clubs' influence decreased drastically during Frederiksen's leadership. The difference between the two periods is that Frederiksen utilised her overwhelming support from within the party to neutralise the coffee clubs while getting their backing, handing them positions and getting the prominent figures into her closer circle. One participant refers to this (ongoing) period as 'the peacetime' regarding factional strife (Interview #4). While Thorning-Schmidt's attempts to get the factions in line were unsuccessful, some participants suggested that broken election promises, compromises to other parties while in government, and her right-leaning positions led to a much more turbulent situation, especially with the pressure coming from the left-leaning clubs (Interview #1, #9). In addition, Frederiksen and the party's left-wing aligning with the right-wing's immigration positions is influential in the neutralisation of the factions, as Frederiksen was able to distribute positions to both sides without compromising her ideological framework (Interview #3, #4, #9, #10).

The party's decision-making structures and the intra-party actors' involvement in policy-making are considered closed by the interviewees. These structures have not changed considerably in the last decades; the party leadership, alongside the parliamentarians, is the primary source of decision-making and has the initiative and power. However, the party's policy committees and executive boards had more influence during Thorning-Schmidt's leadership (Interview #3, #5, #8). Over time, these committees and their feedback and deliberations received less attention as decision-making circles became smaller during Frederiksen's leadership, while no profound structural change was made to the party's statutes (Interview #3, #5, #8, #9).

While the leadership has the initiative, the participants declared that the party activists and other prominent figures should internalise and accept these decisions.

Interviewee #7 offered, 'You cannot just say... we have made this (policy) change, and now everybody should believe the same'. Similarly, Interviewee #12 declared that policy changes must be 'co-owned', i.e., supported and internalised, by party activists even before reaching the electorate, as the lack of support 'undermines' the party and policies. Another participant (#9) mentioned that the leadership has to face the party with their unpopular policies during the congress or meetings and 'look them in the eye'. This provides the party with a 'dualist' decision-making structure; while the S leadership decides on the agenda and the course, 'the party' react and responds to these choices, adding that '(the leadership) cannot ignore those discussions' (Interview #7). Interviewee #11 stated that this structure is 'more agile, more ability to change agendas and policies', but its main weakness is activists 'do not feel automatically feel obligated by the decisions'. While the power is concentrated on top, their process is heavily influenced by their perceptions of activist preferences and their internalisation of the elite's strategy.

Analysis and Discussion

Interviews outline three levels of policy change: first is discursive, where the declarations are made to attract voters and signal positions; second is programmatic, changes in the party manifesto and campaign promises; and third is ideological transformation, where the party internalises these changes and adopts them as their core values. Thorning-Schmidt began the second step with the 2015 elections, only to be completed by Frederiksen and followed by the ideological transformation during the four years of opposition. This process is also differentiated by the perceived aims of the party leadership; while the proactive and ideologically principled positions are more likely to be internalised as a part of political identity, reactive and pragmatic positions are perceived as 'campaign promises' and calculated attempts to attract voters. From this perspective, comparing the two leadership periods illustrates a clear difference in perception by intra-party actors. While Thorning-Schmidt pursued pragmatic immigration policies to maximise votes, Frederiksen offered a new ideological framework

to the party.

Additionally, the role of external shocks should not be overlooked. The worsening of the refugee crisis from 2014 provided Thorning-Schmidt with grounds to manoeuvre the party, as interviewees offered that the growing refugee movements changed the national mood and increased the saliency. While the refugee crisis was not the reason for the policy shift, as Thorning-Schmidt aimed to make shifts well before 2015, it provided the grounds for initiating the shift. The leadership's changing focus regarding which part of the electorate to attract and cater to is crucial. While the party turned to urban middle classes between 2005 and 2015, Frederiksen's turn to the working-class population provided the strategy to attract them back from voting for DF. As mentioned above, the immigration shift seems monumental in the changing focus of the party, mainly while Frederiksen employed left-wing economic approaches alongside restrictive immigration policies.

How the intra-party actors perceive the party's leadership seems rather decisive on the manoeuvre capabilities of the party and the intra-party cohesion. Thorning-Schmidt and Frederiksen provide contrasting examples. While the former is perceived as an outsider and not a part of the core base of the party, her affiliation to New Labour and modernising project undermining the intra-party perceptions, the latter is referred to as the 'original social democrat', successfully representing the party's activists and core voters. Frederiksen's left-wing credentials, including her politically principled identity, generated a considerable influence amongst the intra-party actors, garnering their support. This influence and support from the party allowed Frederiksen to neutralise the factions' strength and deliberation processes while providing her political autonomy. Conversely, although Thorning-Schmidt had the immigration issue on her political agenda for a considerable time, she avoided implementing the shift, as potential backlash from within the party would cause divisions and internal strife. The intra-party dynamics limited her ability to make a significant political shift on immigration throughout most of her leadership, only becoming feasible after an external shock to the party system.

From a party organisation perspective, the decision-making structure does not differ throughout this article's timeframe. Empirical sections illustrate that the S' decision-making initiative and process is accumulated at the party's top level. However, this does not give free rein to the party leadership over the party's direction. Even though the party has a closed and top-down decision-making structure, the approval and support of party activists regarding changes and manoeuvres are necessary, even though they may not directly participate in the process. Intra-party actors must still be convinced and internalise the policy shifts, especially on divisive issues like immigration.

Thorning-Schmidt's reluctance to initiate the immigration shift earlier in her leadership and being considerably occupied by intra-party dynamics and potential responses highlight this aspect of the party organisation and decision-making. As the interviewees highlight, the party elite's perception of the potential of dissent and backlash over a new direction on immigration policy, also connected to other aspects of her political outlook, is a constraint on the decision-making. Moreover, the divided intra-party situation increased her reliance on the party factions, diminishing her political manoeuvre opportunities. Eventually, Thorning-Schmidt utilises an external shock to initiate the shift, while Mette Frederiksen achieves internalisation of the shift by the intra-party actors.

Beyond the intra-party actors' perception of Frederiksen, the findings suggest that the convincing of the party activists and elite took place through the ideological reconstruction of the immigration debate. This process revolved around engaging in debates through books, columns, public events and discussions, where certain prominent figures of the party elite developed an ideological explanation for the restrictive immigration policies within the framework of social democracy. This endeavour worked on two levels, convincing the intra-party actors regarding the political vision of Frederiksen's leadership and providing them with 'storylines' and ideological concepts to engage in politically, as one interviewee referred to this process as 'trickle down' of policy, from the party elite to activists and then to the electorate. Reconciliation of restrictive

immigration policies with social democracy, especially with left-wing redistributive measures, successfully transformed the outlook and values of the party actors and turned one of the most contentious issues within the party into a part of its core policies. Interviewees also considered the new ideological framework as a part of leadership's electoralist strategies; however, the means and the outcomes were vastly different from the previous policy shifts.

Furthermore, this transformation relates to the electoral and political success the intra-party actors associate with the restrictive shift. Winning the elections, increasing the vote share, and forming the government also justifies the changes from the intra-party actors' perspective, especially the party elite. Nevertheless, reconnecting with the working-class electorate and winning back their support and votes are considered political successes brought about by the changing immigration policy. This allows the party to balance the policy-, office- and vote-seeking motivations, especially in the aftermath of the ideological transformation on immigration.

Factional alignment within the S is also one of the core aspects of intra-party cohesion. Two facets to consider: Frederiksen's neutralisation of the factions through handing out critical positions to factions' prominent figures and ideological agreement over the party's direction – all through Frederiksen's high intra-party support. With the ideological transformation undertaken and the party's left-wing taking over the right-wing immigration policy, S experiences a 'peacetime' between factions. Overall, left-wing factions and figures of the social democratic parties in Europe tend to maintain rather expansive political positions on immigration. Hence, for S, the left-wing adopting the right-wing's positions allowed the party to enjoy a consensus on a very contentious and divisive issue, as interviewees also suggested that left-leaning figures within the party opposed a hard-line on immigration before Frederiksen's leadership.

Frederiksen's leadership period, in contrast to Thorning-Schmidt, shows an alignment of intra-party actors through these actors' positive perception of the leadership's skills and image, the ideological transformation undertaken by the party elite

and the factional alignment on the party elite level. While the S' decision-making is top-down and the initiative lies with the party elite, the party activists still need to approve and internalise the changes on contentious policy issues, such as immigration, highlighting that support of intra-party actors is crucial. As the insights from the interviews and inspection of the party's policies show, these three key factors were successfully utilised to obtain the intra-party actors' support, leading to an alignment on restrictive immigration policy shift in a social democratic party.

Conclusion

This article investigated the trajectory of Danish Social Democrats' immigration policies, focusing on different leadership periods and exploring the aspects of intra-party dynamics. Through outlining the immigration policies over time and utilising semi-structured interviews with the party elite, this article reveals crucial insights about how S achieved intra-party cohesion as the party's immigration policies turned restrictive, while previously, this was a divisive issue for the party.

By examining immigration policies and conducting interviews with party elites, three pivotal factors—intra-party trust in leadership's political skills, ideological coherence and frameworks, and factional alignment on the party elite level—emerged as critical contributors to intra-party cohesion. A comparative analysis of leadership eras, particularly the shifts under Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Mette Frederiksen from 2005 to 2019, revealed that these factors fostered a cohesive intra-party environment despite adopting restrictive immigration policies. From this aspect, S deviates from other European social democratic parties, where adopting anti-immigration discourses caused serious internal dissent. While external shocks, exemplified by the refugee crisis, provided a window for leadership to manoeuvre, the organisational structure does not meaningfully differ throughout the timeline. Nevertheless, the top-down decision-making of S, even though leadership has the initiative, does not make the outcomes of these policy decisions less reliant on the intra-party actors' influence, support and approval, as the

party elite need their backing on the ground for their policies to ‘trickle down’ to the electorate.

As the article focuses on a single case, its findings have limitations regarding generalisability. Although the single case has a comparative framework, its generalisability to the rest of the European social democratic parties cannot be taken for granted. Focusing on the intra-party dynamics, immigration dilemma and policy shifts in social democrats, the article’s observations and analysis can be extended to the other parties to provide external validity, where immigration is salient and politicised, especially by anti-immigrant parties. While the Danish Social Democrats may seem like an outlier, the factors contributing to the intra-party cohesion can apply to their sister parties in Europe – as the intra-party dynamics and the shortcomings in developing electorally and politically effective immigration policies are comparable (for example, as shown by Bale et al., 2010). As the empirical findings illustrate, S faced similar dilemmas and internal backlash two decades ago, like its sister parties in Europe, although S diverged from this in the latter years. Further investigations can clarify these, providing external validity to the findings here and providing future research venues on social democracy, intra-party dynamics and immigration policy.

This article contributes valuable insights to the broader understanding of social democratic parties’ responses to immigration challenges. These insights can lead to several other research venues and puzzles. While discussing the immigration dilemma is beyond the article’s scope – as this article does not claim what S achieved is the solution to the dilemma – future research can consider the intra-party perception and support and the nature of the policy shifts on immigration, whether restrictive or expansive, concerning the dilemma. As the findings show, questions of who led and how they achieved or attempted the shift in immigration call for comprehensive examinations, highlighting the significance of agency. Exploring the ‘black box’ of S on immigration unveils breadth of factors and implications that could be crucial to our understanding of the retreat of European social democracy and rather complex challenges brought on by

immigration and how parties and intra-party actors approach complex issues, bridging different ideologies, expectations and policies.

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