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Immigration and the European Left

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In altering the population of a state, immigration has consequences for many of the conditions that center-left governments have historically sought to address. Employment and competition in the labor market, the promotion of skills, and the achievement of greater income equality in a society are all likely to be affected by the arrival of a significant number of newcomers. Focusing on Western Europe, an area that has become a key destination for migrants from around the world in the past three decades, this chapter considers how center-left governments have responded to the political pressures created by large scale international migration since the cold war. It is hypothesized that the left faces distinct political dilemmas in dealing with immigration, dilemmas that reflect a potential conflict at the electoral level between the universalistic values that represent the left’s main ideological appeal and its commitment to promote the interests of some of its core domestic constituencies. The move to restrict immigration in Europe during the last three decades, often under governments of the left, seems to lend support to this hypothesis. However, as will be discussed, the policies toward immigration under governments of the center-left in Europe have also varied substantially across countries, suggesting that the intensity of those electoral dilemmas may depend on other factors, such as the structure of national economies and the characteristics of different European welfare states.

We begin with a discussion of the particular political dilemmas that immigration presents for the left and then go on to a brief description of the major trends in the historical evolution of immigration in Europe over the last three decades. These trends can be linked to the three phenomena emphasized in this volume: the end of rapid post-war economic growth during the 1970s, the end of the cold war, and the intensification of globalization. Based on cross-country quantitative data, we find that, on average govern-
ments of the left have been at least as likely to restrict immigration in Europe as governments of the right. Nevertheless, we see very significant differences across countries, with center-left governments in some countries pursuing very expansive immigration policies while in others they have opted clearly to pursue policies that restrict immigration in practice. In the following pages we explore how the left, when in government, has responded to the phenomenon of large scale migration from outside the EU in four of the Union’s largest member states: Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain. One common trend that we see across these countries is that center-left governments have sought to recast the immigration debate by altering the bases on which foreigners are admitted to fit other national economic objectives, such as economic growth and the promotion of better skills. They have often counted on segments of business as an ally in this effort. Yet in some countries (notably Germany among our cases) they have encountered significant opposition from within their own ranks and ample segments of the electorate, while in others they have pursued very expansive immigration policies. The chapter concludes by offering a possible explanation for these differences in immigration policy and considers what they tell us about the wider implications of immigration for the European left.

Immigration and Left Partisanship

Unlike other aspects of globalization such as financial integration, trade competition, and the rise of the service economy, immigration is rarely considered an issue with clear partisan implications. Setting aside an important literature on the rise of the new radical right (e.g., Betz 1993; Kitschelt with McGann 1995), scholarship on the politics of immigration in Europe has tended to emphasize factors that apply equally across party lines. Based on her influential study of France and Britain, Jeannette Money, for instance, has argued that immigration is primarily a matter of local politics, proposing an “electoral geography” perspective according to which governments of whatever ideology will opt to curtail immigration whenever electoral districts in which native citizens compete economically with immigrants for jobs and public resources become crucial to the outcome of national elections (Money 1999). One implication that can be taken from her findings is that immigration is fundamentally neutral from a partisan perspective, with the exception of its possible contribution to the rise of the radical right. Other authors have further added to this view by noting that early efforts to restrict immigration in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s were promoted with equal intensity by politicians of both left and right. Thus Schain (2006) has documented
how Communist Party politicians in France were among the first to promote efforts to restrict immigration, and Karapin (1999) points to anti-immigrant popular mobilization in key electoral districts in Britain and Germany to explain the decision by governments of both left and right to restrict immigration laws from the 1960s on.

To observe that both left and right governments have pushed for restricting immigration in Europe, or for that matter that immigration preferences tend to be specific to locality, does not obviate the possibility that parties of the left and of the mainstream right face fundamentally different political dilemmas in deciding upon policies involving immigration. Indeed, while arguments in defense of the rights of immigrants are commonly associated with the left, there are at least two reasons to believe that immigration creates particular electoral difficulties for the left and hence that governments of the left have particular incentives to restrict immigration. The first reason is that immigration has different economic impacts on different segments of the electorate upon which the left relies. As a number of political economists have pointed out, the costs and benefits of immigration accrue unequally to different income segments of the population. Immigration tends to weaken the labor market position of native low-skilled workers while improving that of high-skilled workers and professionals whose labor productivity and cost of living are improved by a larger supply of low-skilled and low-wage workers (Scheve and Slaughter 2001). Given that low-skilled workers also represent the prime beneficiaries of publicly subsidized housing, healthcare, and education, and that they are more likely to find themselves living in proximity to low-skilled immigrants, competition in jobs carries over to competition over such public resources and space. To the extent that voters view immigration in terms of their rational economic self-interest and that parties of the left must put together an electoral coalition spanning low-skilled workers, high-skilled workers, and professionals, the left is likely to face an electoral trade-off over immigration. Moreover other economic trends, such as the rise of the service economy and associated efforts to make labor markets more flexible (for instance the recent Hartz reforms in Germany) are likely to aggravate these electoral trade-offs by reducing traditional forms of labor market security for the working class in Europe.

In addition to the division over immigration policy that derives from the differing labor market positions of the center-left’s potential electorate, political economists also postulate another way in which immigration can be expected to represent a particular problem for parties of the left. To the extent that the immigration of low-skilled workers (the primary recipients of social transfers) changes the income distribution so as to push former recipients up
the relative income scale (turning them into median voters), the preference of the median voter may well move toward lower spending levels (Nannestad 2007). If so, immigration would represent a serious threat to the ability of the center-left to protect the European welfare state, and with it a centerpiece of its raison d’être.

While economists suggest that immigration is likely to divide the center-left’s electorate along skill and income levels, these economic issues appear to divide the population of advanced industrialized countries along the same lines as the cultural cleavage between left-libertarian and authoritarian-populist values which appears to have emerged as a major feature of the electoral space in which center-left parties now operate (Kitschelt 1994; Kitschelt with McGann 1995). As Kitschelt’s work suggests, labor market differences such as the new multiplicity of work experiences among the left’s electorate (with male, manual workers threatened by globalization tending to fall in the new authoritarian camp and professionals with higher educational levels and communicative skills tending toward the left-libertarian camp) may translate into other issues of cultural identity and definition. The effect may be to harden antagonistic worldviews among the electorate to the point of rendering the actual individual economic impact of immigration a secondary matter. This cultural-identitarian dimension of immigration cannot be eluded by the left because any choice to restrict immigration (or the rights of immigrants) in order to address the impact on native workers requires some implicit or explicit justification for limiting social solidarity based on identity. Resort to such justification may undermine the perceived ideological coherence of the left, thus threatening one of its key tools in mobilizing voters: the appeal to universal values. At the very least, it is likely to alienate the left-libertarian segment of the center-left’s electorate, contributing to partisan schisms such as that between Social Democrats and Greens in Germany or between the Socialist Party and alternative left candidacies seen in recent French presidential elections.1

Both economic analyses pointing to how immigration affects different sets of voters and cultural analyses of the attitudinal trends characterizing European electorates in the post-Fordist period thus suggest that the European left is likely to face considerable problems in defining its stance on immigration in the electoral space in which it operates. Given the possible tensions in immigration policy preferences among the center-left’s electorate, how have center-left parties in practice addressed the question of immigration and immigration policy in Europe in the last decades?
Immigration and the Left in Europe: A Brief Periodization

Setting aside migratory moves due to postwar expulsions, the history of postwar immigration in Europe can be divided broadly into four periods. The first, lasting from the 1950s to the economic crisis of 1973, saw significant levels of immigration into the richer states of Western Europe through guest worker recruitment programs designed to alleviate labor shortages and Britain’s and France’s preferential treatment of former colonial subjects. The second period was marked by the abrupt ending of active worker recruitment schemes and the curtailment of lax citizenship provisions for former colonial subjects (the latter starting in Britain in the early 1960s). This left only two modalities of immigration into most states of Western Europe—family reunification and asylum laws—which were often defended by courts and public administrations in the face of government efforts to move to a de facto goal of zero immigration. The third period, beginning roughly with the end of the cold war in 1989, was marked by sharp increases in immigration through those two remaining avenues. It would end a decade later with a radical toughening of asylum laws across the EU. Led by Germany, EU-15 member states rescinded their acceptance of asylum petitions for those arriving through a “safe third country” (a condition that applied to virtually all arrivals into the EU-15 by land and many by air). Family reunification criteria were also toughened by several countries (including Germany), resulting in very low net immigration, or even a decline in the immigrant population in many countries. The most recent period has also been marked by the “securitization” of immigration policy following the September 11 attacks and a new emphasis on border control in the face of new, more organized forms of illegal immigration through EU’s southern and eastern borders.

However, as figure 1 makes clear, the move to restrict immigration since 1989 has not been uniform across Western Europe. Some countries, including most strikingly Britain, Spain, and Italy, experienced very large inflows of immigrants from outside the EU until the world financial crisis in 2007. Indeed, the EU-15 area as a whole is estimated to have seen an increase of new residents from outside the area.

What role, if any, have parties of the left had in this recent history of immigration in Europe and in the divergence we observe in the decades preceding the economic crisis? Considering the question from a historical perspective, the first observation is that early postwar immigration regimes across Western Europe did not seem to have had any particularly partisan character. Work-based immigration, or “guest-worker,” programs that represented the main avenue for immigration into the richer states of continental Europe
during the 1950s and 1960s were instituted by Christian Democrats in Germany and the Netherlands, by Gaullists in France, and by Social Democrats in Sweden (Toro-Morn 2004). They were designed to recruit labor temporarily without offering a path to citizenship, and social democratic parties and labor unions alike were willing to go along with this notion of recruiting foreign workers who would not enjoy full social and political rights. On the other hand, in Britain both Labour and Conservative governments supported generous access for former British colonial subjects without tying it to work until 1962 (see Hansen 1999). And in France, where the left remained out of office throughout this period, governments dominated by the center-right embraced a similarly generous policy toward former colonial subjects from North Africa.

At the time of the oil shocks of the 1970s, the left was in a preeminent position across much of Europe. Social democratic governments in Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands took the lead in ending worker recruitment schemes, often in direct response to pressure from labor unions. Meanwhile, British Labour governments took measures to further tighten the restrictions on Commonwealth immigration that had first been introduced by the Conservatives in 1962. Indeed, in the period after the oil shock immigration policy across most of Western Europe seemed to reflect a new consensus between center-left and mainstream right parties to stop the influx of foreigners and the transformation of European societies in a multicultural direction. No less an internationalist than Willy Brandt would declare in January 1973 that it had “become necessary to think carefully about when our society’s ability to take up [foreigners] is exhausted, and when sense and responsibility require

Figure 1. Number of foreign residents by country, 1989–2006 (figures from Eurostat).
a halt.” With the exception of Britain, the consensus was reflected in what appears in hindsight to have been an unspoken agreement between mainstream left and right to end work-based immigration but not to politicize the broader question of Europe’s increasingly multicultural character as a result of past immigration. In many parts of Europe, from France to Austria and Denmark, this modus vivendi was eventually challenged by the electoral rise of anti-immigrant parties in the 1980s, which led sections of the mainstream right to call for restrictions on immigrant rights, often in the language of law and order (France’s “Peyrefitte law” of 1981 and the “Pasqua laws” of 1986 and 1993 are prime examples). In other places—notably Germany—the unspoken agreement appeared to hold until the asylum crisis of the early 1990s.

The sharp rise in asylum seekers that followed the outbreak of conflict in the Balkans as the cold war came to an end posed a challenge particularly to the European left. Many of its historic leaders regarded the right to asylum as a key guarantee against the kind of political persecution experienced during fascism. As a consequence, in places such as France and Germany left party politicians often sided with courts that blocked early restrictions imposed by governments of the right. In the end, however, the combined pressure of anti-immigrant popular mobilization and increased politicizing of the issue by the radical and later mainstream right led center-left governments to accept a radical curtailment of asylum rights, first in France during the 1980s, then in Germany in 1993, then in Germany’s neighbor states. In 2005 the German principle of rejecting asylum seekers who had passed through a safe third country was finally adopted as the common guideline of EU member states.

To be sure, asylum was the most wrenching issue for parties of the left in Europe. Yet the record suggests that in practice, if not in discourse, the leadership of left parties in many European states also seconded a stance, most often enunciated by politicians on the right, of restricting net immigration to zero. Starting in the 1990s many European governments toughened requirements for family reunification visas, the last significant avenue for legal immigration into Europe after restrictions on asylum had been passed. The means of doing so varied from lowering the age up to which children could join their parents (to twelve by Germany, fifteen by Austria), to raising the age at which marriage takes place for a valid spousal application (to twenty-four by Denmark, twenty-one by the Netherlands), to increasing the sponsor’s income or housing requirements, as was done in France and the Netherlands. In addition to these new legal restrictions, there is widespread agreement that immigration is highly susceptible to many policies that go well beyond the formal conditions for entry and residence in a country. These range from simple administrative delays in the processing of visas to the conditions under which
foreigners are allowed to obtain employment, access to healthcare services, education, and other social services or benefits. Many, though not all, countries in the EU toughened these conditions during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Given the many ways governments can seek to restrict immigration, it is difficult to assess the overall character of immigration policy pursued by a country under governments of different stripes by only looking at legal requirements for residency. One alternative way to consider the question is to compare levels of immigration under governments of the left and governments of the right. A simple test that pools annual figures available from Eurostat for eleven member states for 1989 through 2006 suggests that the average annual increase in the number of foreigners living in a country as a percentage of the population under governments of the left was just half of what it was under other regimes. When the data are adjusted by subtracting annual inflows of asylum seekers from the annual change in the number of foreigners, the results are similar: an average increase of 0.14% under governments of the left versus 0.23% under governments of the center or right. A more refined regression analysis of the impact of left government on the annual increase in immigrant proportion, controlling for key pull and push factors such as growth, unemployment, time-period (introduced to control for external events in countries of origin such as the Balkan crisis) and social spending, also shows left government to be associated with lower levels of immigration in Europe than governments not controlled by the left.

However, as any visual analysis of developments within countries shows (see figure 1), in spite of these overall results there are clear differences in the extent to which governments have restricted immigration across Europe. In many countries (including Germany, France, and the smaller members of the EU-15) there has been a decisive trend to restrict immigration, and that trend appears more acute under governments of the left. Indeed, it is this set of countries that are responsible for the overall results cited above. By contrast, in three European countries (Britain, Spain, and Italy) governments of the left allowed for large inflows of immigrants through 2006, and in one case (Britain) this represented a marked departure from the previous, right-wing governments. To explore what this might tell us about the politics of immigration in Europe, we next consider the experiences of these three countries alongside that of Germany, the country that arguably has taken the most restrictive turn in its immigration regime over the last decade, a period coinciding with the center-left’s tenure in power.
Diverging Choices: Immigration Policy under the Center-Left in Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain

Germany

Germany has long been one of the premier destinations for immigrants in Europe. At 12.9%, the proportion of its population that was foreign born in 2005 was equal to that of the United States and, until recently, the second-highest in the EU (only Austria, with a foreign-born population of 13.5%, had a higher percentage in 2005). Nonetheless, immigration did not constitute a major point of contention between the postwar right and left until the 1980s. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) showed few differences in its approach to immigration from the mainstream of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) during Germany’s economic miracle years. Both the CDU and the SPD backed the recruitment of foreign guest workers with limited rights of residence in the 1960s, and the CDU supported the ending of the program when the SPD declared a recruitment ban on foreign workers in 1973, thereby effectively ending work-based immigration. In the subsequent period the leadership of both the CDU and the SPD supported the view that Germany was “not a land of immigration” (a phrase most often associated with Helmut Kohl but previously deployed by Helmut Schmidt). This was also reflected in both SPD and CDU governments’ commitment to Germany’s principle of *ius sanguinis* for citizenship status, which precluded large numbers of children of guest workers born in Germany from attaining citizenship. In all these ways Germany’s postwar immigration policy reflected a consensus among the center-left and center-right that immigration was acceptable as an economic imperative but that there was a social limit on the extent to which Germany could integrate foreigners. This position appears to have reflected a strong fear on the part of the German political elite of the potential for xenophobic political mobilization among the German public (Karapin 1999). Hence before the 1980s there was little politicizing of the issue at the national level (Zaslove 2007).

What would ultimately threaten this cross-elite consensus was the arrival, beginning in the late 1970s, of a significant number of political asylum seekers from places like Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Vietnam (Karapin 1999). Both the SPD and the FDP remained formally committed to Article 16 of Germany’s Basic Law (1949), which allowed to asylum seekers whose applications had been rejected at the administrative level a strong right to appeal deportation through the German courts. Yet anti-immigrant mobilization by far-right groups in the Federal Republic’s southern regions led segments of the CDU and the CSU to push for stricter asylum laws in the course
of the national elections of 1980. In the run-up to the elections the regional
government of Baden-Württemberg, then controlled by the CDU, and the CSU
government of Bavaria announced their own restrictions on asylum seekers,
a move later seconded by the SPD mayor of Essen. These decisions were in-
spired by local protests against the settlement of asylum seekers in particu-
lar localities and neighborhoods. The threat that such popular mobilization
would spread led Schmidt’s government to pass special visa requirements
for citizens of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Sri Lanka just before the elections.
However, stronger measures were for the time precluded by the constitu-
tional status of Germany’s asylum law, which could only be changed by a
two-thirds majority vote in the Bundestag.

It would only be with the arrival of far larger numbers of asylum seekers
in the early 1990s that the SPD would agree to give Kohl’s government the
necessary parliamentary support for such a constitutional reform. An amend-
ment in 1993 of Article 16 voided the right of asylum for those having passed
through a “safe third country” on their way to Germany—in practice, a vast
majority of cases. At the same time asylum seekers, who had already been ex-
cluded from obtaining work in Germany, were shifted from the protection of
the Federal Social Assistance Act to a separate social assistance regime that
provided fewer cash benefits along with food vouchers, a measure that clearly
stigmatized this part of the immigrant population. SPD support for such radi-
cal measures to restrict asylum applications appears to have been motivated
by the extensive wave of anti-foreigner violence that occurred after German
unification, which peaked with 3,365 attacks on foreigners in the first half of
1993, and the subsequent wave of intra-German migration (Human Rights
Watch 1994; Karapin 1999). The virtual closure of the asylum route of immi-
gration into Germany is reflected in the sharp curtailment of the previously
rising number of foreigners residing in Germany from 1994 on (see figure 1).

After returning to power in 1998 the political left in Germany took two
major steps intended to create a new immigration regime that would be po-
itically more tenable. First, with the rate of net inflows of foreign residents
slowing to a halt, and responding to growing concern over the integration
of second-generation immigrants, the Red-Green coalition led by Gerhard
Schröder campaigned on a promise to reform Germany’s century-old law
conferring citizenship only on the basis of ancestry rather than birth. The
new law, adopted in 1999, made it possible for the children of immigrants
born in Germany and meeting certain conditions to apply for German citizen-
ship. Indeed, in its original proposals the government sought to make possible
such applications without requiring applicants to renounce their existing citi-
zenship, a matter crucial to the offspring of Turkish and Polish immigrants for
whom abandoning their traditional nationality implied giving up inheritance
erights in their parents’ country of origin. In the end Schröder’s government
was dissuaded from insisting on the possibility of dual citizenship by the out-
come of an election in Hesse, where the CDU successfully used the nationality
law as a wedge issue to win control of the regional government. The new
citizenship law passed in 2000 nevertheless held great symbolic importance,
for it shattered the principle that Germany was not a land of immigration.
This alone was seen as a step forward in promoting the social absorption of
second-generation immigrants. Yet because of the exclusion of dual citizen-
ship, it resulted in citizenship applications by only a fraction of Germany’s
disenfranchised second-generation immigrants (around 750,000 of the origi-
nal 3 million predicted by the government).

Secondly, Schröder’s government attempted to pass a new immigration
law that would have reopened the door for work-based immigration, al-
though only for highly skilled workers. The so-called Schily law (named after
the coalition’s interior minister, Otto Schily), aimed to alter the skill profile
of immigrants by significantly toughening the standards for family reunifica-
tion (the one remaining traditional avenue for immigrants) while replacing
the ban on work-based immigration with a points system that would have al-
lowed residence permits for highly qualified workers in areas in which Ger-
man employers faced labor shortages. The resumption of labor immigration
was backed heavily by German business groups which put strong pressure on
both the SPD and CDU in favor of the law (Ette 2003). On the other hand, a
toughening of family reunification criteria (in particular a lowering of the age
up to which children could join their parents from sixteen to twelve years)
was advocated by both the SPD and the Christian Democratic opposition,
which argued that the age should be lowered to ten years. Family reunifica-
tion was held to be responsible for the low-skill profile of Germany’s immi-
grant population because it necessarily built on the low-skill character of the
earlier guest-worker policy and therefore largely perpetuated its results. The
law also created new integration requirements in the form of language tests
for the extension of residency permits.

Although the policy was legislated by the Red-Green government in 2002,
it was successfully challenged in court on a procedural matter by the CDU,
which argued adamantly against any reestablishment of work-based immi-
geration and any expansion of the criteria for political asylum. The final ver-
ion of the law, passed in 2004 with the support of the CDU in the upper
house, excluded the SPD’s centerpiece—the points-based system of labor im-
migration. It thus maintained the ban on work-based immigration, allowing
only for three exclusions: one-year visas for foreign students after they fin-
ished their studies in Germany; permanent residence permits for top-level scientists and managers; and temporary residence permits for self-employed foreigners investing over one million Euros in designated economic activities (Műnz 2004). As a concession to the Green Party, it did include gender- and non-state-based persecution as criteria for refugee status, although not political asylum. The SPD government’s major objective, to create an immigration policy regime that would alter the profile of immigrants from low-skilled to high-skilled was thus blocked, leaving simply an even more restrictive immigration regime than the one Germany had already adopted in 1993.

The United Kingdom

By contrast to Germany, Britain’s initial postwar immigration regime was not driven primarily by economic considerations but by geopolitical ones. After the war Labour passed the British Nationality Act of 1948, which turned British subjecthood into British citizenship, giving a large number of former colonial subjects an automatic right to migrate to the United Kingdom. Yet far being from a partisan measure, this generous immigration policy represented a straight continuation of pre-war policy, which had aimed to protect Britain’s preeminence within the Commonwealth in a postcolonial era through the creation of Commonwealth citizenship (Hansen 1999; Karatani and Goodwin-Gill 2003). The permissive stance toward Commonwealth immigration implied in Labour’s nationality act thus enjoyed the full support of the Conservative Party, which in turn, after returning to power in the 1950s, would allow the arrival of many former colonial subjects for permanent settlement in the United Kingdom.

This liberal consensus on postcolonial immigration would be shattered by the outbreak of anti-foreigner, and specifically anti-black, violence at the end of the 1950s, which was seized upon by a populist wing of the Conservative Party, epitomized by Enoch Powell (Karapin 1999). In response to a large number of petitions for immigration controls from local party chapters, Harold Macmillan’s government passed the first significant step toward immigration restriction with the first Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962, which subjected the right to settle in Britain to government issuance of a skill-based work permit. Although Labour initially opposed the measure and then worked to have it protect the right of dependents to accompany holders of work permits, it engaged in a dramatic about-face on immigration policy after winning elections in 1964. The new government of Harold Wilson sharply restricted the number of work vouchers, entirely abolishing the category of unskilled labor and significantly reducing that of skilled workers in
1965. In 1968 it passed the second Commonwealth Immigration Act, with the aim of preventing the immigration of Kenyan Asians. The new act for the first time distinguished between “patrial” British citizens (those of British birth or descent) and other Commonwealth citizens, thereby bringing nonwhite immigration to Britain to a virtual end (Hansen 1999).16 At the same time Wilson sought to balance this anti-liberal turn in immigration policy by introducing anti-discrimination legislation in the Race Relations Act (1968).

If British Labour, like center-left parties elsewhere in Europe, took a populist stance in restricting immigration during the 1970s, it has played a very different role over the last decade. As figure 1 illustrates, after more than a decade of sharp decline in the number of foreigners living in Britain during the Thatcher years (and only a modest reversal of this trend in the first half of the 1990s), the Labour victory of 1997 set the stage for a significant increase in immigration into Britain (most of it from non-EU states). Taking the view that immigration could be beneficial to Britain’s economic modernization when and where it supported economic activity, the government of Tony Blair set out on a two-pronged strategy of expanding the issuance of new work permits for third-country foreigners while at the same time moving to deter asylum applicants whom it identified as a burden on Britain’s purse. In a white paper titled “Fairer, Faster and Firmer: A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum” (1998) the new government decried “backlogs, inadequate control resources, and outdated procedures” in the existing system of asylum review, which made “it extremely difficult to deal firmly with those who have no right to be here” (Home Office 1998, paragraph 3.3). At the same time it began to increase the number of work permits granted for those seeking employment in key sectors. In 2002 Labour introduced the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme, arguing that legitimate, work-based immigration could bring “huge benefits: increased skills, enhanced levels of economic activity, cultural diversity and global links” (Home Office 2002, 9). It also increased visas for low-skilled, casual work. In the following year Blair promised to halve new asylum applications while moving Britain to a points-based system of immigration. “Operating at different ends of the employment spectrum,” all of these initiatives were intended “to improve the supply of labour to the United Kingdom economy, to ‘meet the challenge’ of a globalizing environment” (Walters 2004, 239). The effect was a sharp upward turn in the number of foreign citizens residing in Britain, from just under 2 million in 1996 to almost 3.5 million in 2006, the overwhelming majority non-EU citizens (OECD 2007e).
Britain’s move to managed, skill-based migration under Blair represents one of the major turns in European immigration policy in the last decades. Nevertheless, two other member states that in the past were major sources of migration to the rest of Europe—Italy and Spain—account for a much greater share of the expansion in immigration that the EU has experienced over the last two decades. Italy’s registered immigrant population rose in 1989–2006 from just under half a million to over two and a half million. Spain’s transformation has been even more spectacular. In just over a decade the country has seen immigration (measured in terms of resident foreign citizens) rise from marginal levels (under 400,000 in 1991) to the highest level in the EU in proportion to total population. By 2008 foreign citizens residing in Spain, at over five million, represented just over 11% of the population (El País, 20 June 2008).

This dramatic rise of immigration into the two southern member states is often attributed to the restrictive turn in other EU-15 states and to the difficulties that Spain and Italy have had in controlling illegal immigration because of shortcomings in border control and a lack of internal controls on the employment of illegal migrants. Scenes of boatloads of African migrants arriving in Lampedusa, the Canary Islands, or Spain’s southern coast, and of the dramatic human tragedies often associated with their attempts, dominate press coverage of the phenomenon. Yet however dramatic and significant, illegal arrivals by sea represent a small fraction of immigration in the two countries (19,900 for Italy in 2007, 18,000 for Spain according to the UNHCR). The dramatic increases in registered immigration in fact stem from clear choices on the part of the Spanish and Italian governments that have produced a far more liberal stance on immigration than what is now prevalent in the northern states of the EU-15. The key features of this liberal stance in the two countries have been (1) permissive family reunification rules, (2) generous terms for the issuance of work permits in sectors deemed to have particular labor needs, (3) the extension of social rights to both legal and irregular immigrants, and (4) repeated amnesties for irregular migrants who can show employment. While different in some significant ways (in particular with regard to the use of immigration amnesties), the immigration regimes developed and maintained by the two southern member states thus bear a significant resemblance to the more expansive work-based immigration regime introduced in Britain.

One way in which the Spanish and Italian cases nonetheless are different from the British is that the policies allowing for large-scale immigration in
the two southern states have been carried out with almost equal intensity by governments of the left and the right. This is particularly striking in Italy, where governments of the right in the last two decades have included the Northern League, a party formation with an explicit stance against immigration whose leaders often engage in xenophobic appeals. When the right has been in power in Italy, its pattern has been to pass tough and even jarring “law and order” measures that make headlines (most recently the discriminatory treatment applied to Romanian gypsies), without actually restricting the overall levels of immigration. Thus Silvio Berlusconi’s government of 2001 expanded the total yearly quota for third-country (non-EU) migrants from 89,000 in 2001 to 170,000 in 2006 (Cuttitta 2008). And the Bossi-Fini law that it passed in 2002 (which required the expulsion of immigrants whose residence permits had not been renewed, and for the first time linked new residence permits to the prior attainment of work contracts) was accompanied by the largest immigration amnesty Italy had ever seen. It resulted in the legalization of almost all of the 700,000 immigrants who applied (Migration Policy Institute 2004). Meanwhile in Spain, the center-right Partido Popular passed its own amnesties for illegal immigrants in 1996, 2000, and 2001 and in the process approved approximately 400,000 applications (Maas 2006).

If governments of the right have thus been surprisingly liberal in their immigration policies in Italy and Spain, the left has generally gone further. In Italy the center-left in 2006 successfully ran on a platform of easing the immigration restrictions that had been imposed by the Bossi-Fini law. Romano Prodi’s government subsequently adopted an open-door immigration policy, abolishing the requirement of prior work contracts for the granting of residence permits. And while Italy sparked controversy across the EU in 2007 when it legislated the expulsion of EU immigrants charged with violent crime (a measure taken in response to popular outcry over a spike in crime attributed to Romanian immigrants), its policies for granting residence and work permits to foreign applicants remained among the most liberal ever seen in the EU (Chaloff 2005). In Spain the Socialist government that took office in 2004 went on to pass Spain’s most generous immigration legislation yet, granting full access to healthcare, education, and other social services to both legal and illegal immigrants, and passing an amnesty regularizing the status of over 600,000 further immigrant residents who could prove that they had employment.
Implications and Conclusions

As the cases discussed above suggest, there have been ample differences in the stances toward new immigration taken by governments of the left in Europe in the last two decades. Germany’s SPD in 1993 went along with a constitutional revision that set the stage for a toughening of asylum rules not only in Germany but across the EU. Later, when in government, it attempted to shift to a selective, skills-based immigration regime that would have raised the skill profile of Germany’s immigrant population (an attempt at which it failed owing to opposition from the Christian Democrats). And while the Red-Green coalition government sought to improve the integration of second-generation immigrants by changing German citizenship law, it also toughened criteria for family reunification, the principal remaining channel for low-skill immigration into Germany, and introduced new requirements for the renewal of residence permits. The result has been a virtual freeze on net immigration into Germany over the last decade.

In sharp contrast to this turn in Germany, New Labour in Britain opened the doors of the British labor market to new immigrants from outside the EU. At the same time, it shifted immigration into Britain from a rights-based system to a skills-based system that gave access to those types of migrants demanded by British business, both at the high and the lower ends of the skills spectrum. Under Blair’s leadership the Labour government rejected the notion (which seemed to prevail in Germany) that there is a necessary trade-off between allowing more immigrants and achieving successful social integration; it opted instead to facilitate labor market access for the spouses and children of those workers recruited under the new points-based system, betting that this would also mean more successful integration. Only in the face of a worsening electoral outlook and heightened anger from labor unions at the large inflow of low-skilled workers did Gordon Brown’s government choose to restrict the immigration of third-country nationals who fell outside the high skills category, promising 500,000 new “British jobs for British workers” just as the first signs of the world financial crisis appeared (Guardian, 10 September 2007).

Finally, in Italy and Spain, the two countries accounting for the largest increases of third-country immigration into the EU over the last decade, both left and right governments have chosen to allow high levels of immigration. While governments of the right (in particular in Italy) have sought to counteract the perception of this reality through headline-catching “law and order” measures, left parties have distinguished themselves primarily by extending social rights to immigrants, including non-regularized ones, as a
way to promote integration. In both countries governments have made ample use of amnesties to bring illegal migrants into the formal economy, and in Spain the first government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero made healthcare available to all residents, regardless of their residency status. On the other hand, in both Italy and Spain as in Britain, governments of the left have been able to garner the support of both business and the labor unions for their immigration-friendly policies by basing the issuance of new work permits to immigrants on a selective system favoring those sectors facing labor shortages, ranging from the low-skill construction and domestic work sectors to information technology.

If parties of the center-left can be expected to face similar electoral conflicts over immigration policy on theoretical grounds, how are we to account for the observed differences in their immigration policy choices, in particular as regards overall levels of immigration? One common explanation, the presence or absence of an electorally viable radical right, does not account for the variation among the four cases examined above: the radical right did not represent a serious electoral threat in national or even regional elections in Germany, whereas it does have significant electoral weight in Italy and even participates in government. Nor can the choices be attributed to the existing levels of the immigrant population, given that Germany’s share of immigrants, while high, had been surpassed by that of Spain as early as 2004, when the Socialist government chose to pass yet another amnesty and expand the social rights of illegal immigrants.

A different and more convincing explanation of the contrast between the German SPD’s choice in favor of immigration restriction and the more liberal stances of center-left governments in Britain, Spain, and Italy would focus on the ways immigrants are economically integrated in the different countries. Looking first at the labor market, one striking contrast between Germany and the other three countries is the wide range in their gaps between the unemployment rate for immigrants and the rate for the native population. In 2005 unemployment in Germany stood at 17.5% for foreign-born men and 10.6% for native-born men, and at 16% for foreign-born women and 10% for native-born women. In the United Kingdom and Spain these gaps were considerably smaller: in the United Kingdom there was a difference of only 2.8% for men and 3.4% for women; in Spain only 2.5% for men and 1.5% for women. In Italy the situation was slightly different: unemployment was a bit higher for native-born men (6.2%) than for foreign-born men (6%), though the rate for foreign-born women was somewhat lower than for native-born women. Still, the contrast with Germany is striking. Moreover, in both Spain and Italy the labor market participation rates of foreigners was considerably better.
than that of native-born citizens: in Italy, 81.6% compared to 69.4% for men, 46.7% compared to 45.3% for women; in Spain, 79.5% compared to 74.4% for men, 60.4% compared to 50% for women (OECD 2007e).

The reasons for this poor labor market performance of immigrants in Germany are complex. They seem to include obstacles to labor market integration by foreigners and their children that are created by German legislation, the low skill profile of the immigrant population compared to the native population (an inheritance from the low-skill focus of the guest-worker program), and the poor performance of the German economy, compared to the other three economies, at generating low-skill employment (Constant and Zimmermann 2005). The last of these features also implies that the left in Germany faces a particularly acute conflict between the interests of its low-skilled electorate and immigrants. Thus it is noteworthy that precisely when it introduced its first new immigration law, Schröder’s government was seeking to reduce the high unemployment level among low-skilled workers through radical reforms of the labor market, including the introduction of more flexible employment contracts in the service sector and major cuts in unemployment pay. The so-called Hartz reforms were highly controversial, threatening the SPD’s internal integrity. In this context slowing the inflow of new, low-skilled workers must have appeared as a good way to ease tensions in the labor market, and with it the potential electoral cost of the labor market reforms.

While all of this may explain why the center-left in Germany would be under particular pressure to restrict immigration, it does not explain why similar governments in the other three countries would not also act on such pressure. Here it must be said that Britain’s managed migration policy, even before Brown’s clampdown on low-skilled, third-country immigration, was structured so as to allow the government to keep a grip on the political tension that immigration might create among its voters. By limiting immigration to either high-growth or high-skill sectors, the managed migration policy also allowed the government to limit immigration in lower-growth sectors, where it might have had a more obvious impact on lower-skilled native workers.

An alternative explanation for Labour’s original open-door policy may be the weakness of British labor unions, which were in a poor position to resist Blair’s new open-door policy toward migrants in the face of consistent pressure from British business in favor of a more liberal immigration policy. Indeed, the outbreak of wildcat strikes protesting the hire of Italian and Portuguese workers in British oil refineries and energy companies in early 2009 illustrates the weakness of organized labor in influencing the Labour governments’ immigration policy and the consequent sense of frustration among
blue-collar workers. However, it would be difficult to make a similar case for Italy, where unions mobilized politically against the immigration restrictions imposed by the Bossi-Fini law, or Spain, where Zapatero’s government has based immigration policy on tripartite agreements and where the unions participate in setting annual immigration quotas. Looking at the actions of unions with regard to immigration policy in the latter two countries, it is noteworthy that their position on immigration has remained generally very favorable (Watts 2002).

There is another characteristic which the United Kingdom shares with Italy and Spain and which sets all three countries apart from Germany and other continental EU members: the United Kingdom’s liberal welfare state is quite weak in the provision of services such as childcare and elder care (Ungerson 2003). And for different reasons, so are the Spanish and Italian welfare states. Consequently, in all three countries there is high demand for cheap immigrant labor both from institutional employers such as nursing homes and hospitals and from private households. Comprehensive data on such employment are difficult to attain. Yet there is evidence in all three countries of the important role that immigrants play in providing these services. In the United Kingdom, for instance, a high proportion of nurses and elder care providers are from the Philippines (Lyon and Glucksman 2008). In Italy 34% of the almost 700,000 immigrants regularized during the amnesty of 2002 applied on the basis of employment in domestic work, and according to one report immigrants account for over 43% of domestic employment. And in Spain that figure is believed to be above 52% (Eiro Online 2006, 2007).

This role of (primarily female) immigration in the provision of key services is important because it suggests that significant segments of the center-left’s electorate, including in particular median-income households which have become increasingly dependent on two incomes (which require external help with child or elder care in the absence of publicly provided care services) will have a very concrete personal interest in a liberal immigration regime. That the rise of female immigration has coincided with a rise of (native) female labor market participation rates in the two southern European countries attests to the importance that immigrant labor plays in the role of many two-income families (Chaloff 2005). In all three countries (Britain, Italy, and Spain) immigration thus compensates median-income households for the shortcomings of a residual-liberal or late and not fully developed welfare state. This tendency not only turns immigrants into a functional substitute for more comprehensive social provision. It also creates an infrastructure of personal contacts that is likely to counter anti-immigrant sentiment in the relatively affluent segment of the left’s electorate—a segment that might
otherwise turn to welfare chauvinism. By contrast, where care services are provided by the state either publicly or by allowing mothers to stay out of the job market through generous family allowances, this type of private stake in immigration is likely to be lacking.

These observations also speak to the broader relationship between immigration and welfare states. Whereas economists have tended to interpret lower levels of social spending and redistribution in countries such as the United States as a consequence of ethnic diversity—and hence a lack of social cohesion (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 2001)—the recent experiences of Britain, Italy, and Spain suggest an opposite causal relationship: that higher immigration is encouraged by lower levels of social provision because it compensates for shortcomings in the welfare state. This relationship means that a correlation between lower social spending and ethnic diversification need not necessarily reflect any inherent conflict between multiculturalism and generous welfare spending but rather an effect of low social spending on rates of immigration. On the other hand, moves to restrict immigration in Germany and elsewhere among the corporatist welfare states of northern Europe may have more to do with the failure to integrate immigrant populations into the labor market, which in turn is more likely to turn them into welfare recipients. Restrictions on the acquisition of citizenship for the children of immigrants, limitations on family reunification, and restrictions on labor market access to family members who join legal immigrants—all represent barriers to labor market integration, and they may create the social dependence that is seen to spark welfare chauvinism in places such as Germany.

All this suggests that how immigration affects parties of the left is likely to depend on how immigrants are integrated into the labor market and on how the arrival of newcomers interacts with the characteristics of European welfare states (whether immigrants are rendered welfare state dependents by laws meant to discourage them from arriving in the first place, or whether they act as functional substitutes for citizens but without access to social policies). The environment will be shaped by the choices of parties on the right to politicize, or not to politicize, the immigration issue. But it will also be shaped by the politics of the welfare state (although in much more complex ways than simple theories of welfare chauvinism would have it), the characteristics of labor and product markets (both matters of government regulation), and past policies that have affected the characteristics of the immigrant population and its degree of economic and social integration. In this regard past German governments of both left and right, which have insisted on restricting long-term avenues of integration (including paths to citizenship for the children of immigrants and the ability of asylum seekers to obtain em-
ployment), seem to have created a climate in which it has been more difficult for the left to advance a new type of immigration policy in recent years—more so than for governments of the left in the other three countries.

This discussion of how the politics of immigration differ for center-left parties across Europe does not answer the question of whether large-scale immigration places the left at a consistent electoral disadvantage vis-à-vis parties of the right. The electoral tensions that immigration creates specifically for the left may mean that the issue can easily be exploited by parties on the right for electoral gain and at little political risk. In particular in countries where an anti-immigrant far right has emerged (such as Italy, discussed above, and France), it can be argued that the mainstream right has successfully exploited the issue to its advantage in the face of a left hamstrung by its internal tensions. In Italy, for instance, mobilization of anti-immigrant sentiment played an important role in the right’s return to power in 2001, even though Berlusconi went on to oversee a substantial increase in legal immigration levels while appeasing his populist partners through tougher deportation standards and new requirements for legal immigration enshrined in the Bossi-Fini law. Nicolas Sarkozy’s victory over Ségolène Royal in 2007 has been at least partially attributed to his tough, often controversial stance on immigration and immigrants, or the children of immigrants. And in Germany the staunch commitment of the CDU and the CSU to block plans for a new, skilled-based labor immigration policy has been credited with helping to bring about the Christian Democrats’ sequence of regional electoral victories in Hesse in 1999 and then 2003, Lower Saxony in 2003, and, most importantly, North Rhine–Westphalia in 2005. The last of these brought down the last Red-Green state government and prompted the federal elections that brought an end to the left coalition government.

However, while politicizing immigration may indeed create tensions for the left and thus tend to work predominantly in favor of the right in the short term, it is not costless or unproblematic for the mainstream right. An uncompromising stance on immigration, such as that pursued by segments of the CDU and CSU during the years of the Red-Green coalition, can result in ideological tensions within the right as well. Such tensions, both between different CDU regional leaders and between the party and church organizations, were evident during the prolonged negotiations of a compromise between Schröder’s government and the CDU after the failure of the first Schily law. Mainstream right parties face their own tensions over immigration because business, one of its key constituencies, typically favors more open immigration policies. This was evidenced both in Germany, where business organizations lobbied aggressively in favor of Schröder’s efforts to reopen work-based
immigration, and in Italy, where business opposed the requirement imposed by Bossi-Fini of prior work contracts for residence permits. Tough talk on immigration by right-wing politicians is thus less likely to result in immigration restrictions during periods of right-wing government than the electoral rhetoric of the right might imply. And this may ease the political pressure on the left that political victories by the center-right in the context of increased global migration flows might otherwise produce.

The examples considered here suggest that although there is a real potential for the European right to mobilize anti-immigrant sentiment (note the electoral success of the Northern League in an area of Italy whose industrial economy depends greatly on immigrant labor), the left is not therefore locked into an inescapable choice between restricting immigration and permanent electoral defeat. In Spain (2008) and Britain (2001 and 2005) the left succeeded electorally after implementing very liberal immigration policies and running in the face of efforts by the right to politicize the issue. And in Italy the left won in 2006 after running on a promise to lift a measure imposed by the first Berlusconi government to require work contracts for the issuance of new residence permits. In Germany, on the other hand, the political pressure to restrict immigration appears largely to be a function of the low-skill profile of early immigrant labor recruitment policies coupled with the country’s unique problems in creating jobs for low-skilled workers. And something similar may be true for France.

While we note these differences, it is also striking that in all four of the countries considered here governments of the left have actively sought to shape the profile of their immigrant populations in ways that fit the perceived needs of their economies, in particular by raising the skills level of the labor force. Indeed, while these efforts are now being copied by the right (for instance Sarkozy’s government in France), the move to conform immigration policy to other economic policy goals (in particular the raising of the skills profile of the EU’s labor force) is one in which governments of the center-left have played a leading role, two examples being Blair’s “managed migration” model and Schröder’s efforts to introduce a points-based system. One way to understand these initiatives is as an effort by the center-left to counteract the electoral dilemmas that immigration tends to create by reducing the extent to which immigration affects the most vulnerable in society.

Nonetheless, choosing this sort of pragmatism over a rights-based approach to immigration may be problematic in other respects. At the very least it poses a serious question as to how the European left will reconcile its definition of borders among peoples and its commitment to universal human rights. It also cannot be overlooked that the choice to promote high-skilled
Immigration into the EU to ease electoral tensions and resolve Europe’s demographic problems presents a serious moral dilemma. Any further efforts to draw human capital away from labor-exporting poorer countries are likely to have their own negative impact on precisely those areas of the world from which economic migrants in general seek to flee. Thus efforts to alter the politics of immigration in Europe by getting the “right” kinds of immigrants not only places left governments in an awkward moral position. It may also indirectly help to perpetuate the conditions in poorer countries that have produced large-scale immigration in the first place, along with the resulting dilemmas from which parties of the left are seeking to escape.

Notes

1. Inglehart (1971) links post-materialism to the emergence of a cosmopolitan political identity and sense of social solidarity.

2. After the last two EU enlargements, many of the traditional EU member states also experienced significant immigration from new EU member states, including Poland and Romania. The distinction here is drawn because intra-EU migration cannot be directly restricted beyond a transition period that follows a home country’s accession to the EU. Most of the leeway for controlling immigration that EU governments have involves immigrants who are not citizens of other EU member states.


4. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962), passed by a Conservative government, made the right of abode for Commonwealth citizens contingent upon a government-issued work permit. After coming to power in 1964 Labour continued and intensified the Conservatives’ move by drastically cutting work vouchers and passing the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1968), which sought to halt the influx of migrants from African Commonwealth states.


6. In Germany, for example, access to the labor market was eliminated for those seeking asylum decisions at the same time as cash benefits were cut. The immigration bill of 2002 (see more below) also required schools, doctors, and officials to pass on information about possibly illegal migrants, eliminated access to publicly funded healthcare for those overstaying their visa and their dependents, and even reduced legal immigrants’ access to benefits such as child-rearing family allowances.

7. The results and methods are available in Pérez and Fernandez-Albertos 2009.

8. Annual figures for France are not available, but just a comparison of the census data on the number of foreigners residing legally in France every five years suggests that the trend there has been toward zero net growth in the number of foreigners re-
siding legally in France, and that this did not change during years of Socialist government.

9. The share of the population in Germany and Austria that was foreign born well outranked that of France (8.1%) and even Britain (9.7%) in 2005. See OECD 2007e.


11. The perception that German society would not be able to integrate Muslim immigrants in particular was often articulated by the chancellor, including in some of his later recollections of this period. See “Altkanzler Schmidt: Die Anwerbung von Gastarbeitern war falsch,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 24 November 2004. See also “Helmut Schmidt: Multikulturelle Gesellschaft ‘Illusion von Intellektuellen,’” Die Zeit, 22 April 2004.


13. This figure is calculated by subtracting the pre-2000 level of roughly 50,000 naturalizations per year from the higher figures in the six years following the new citizenship law before naturalization figures returned to their historical path.

14. For details on the course of the negotiations of the first Schily Law see the monthly EFMS (Europäisches Forum für Migrationsstudien) Migration Reports for October 2001 to June 2002.

15. The addition of these new criteria was also mandated by an EU directive. For more details on the second immigration law taking effect on 1 January 2005 see the EFMS Migration Report for July 2004.

16. The restrictive turn in Labour’s stance on immigration is widely attributed to the lessons drawn from an unexpected defeat in the Labour stronghold district of Smethwick to a Conservative candidate running on an anti-immigrant platform in 1964 (see Karapin 1999). According to Hansen (1999) it also reflected “a triumph of Callaghan’s strand of Labour ideology—nationalist, anti-intellectual, indifferent to international law and obligation and firmly in touch with the social conservatism of middle- and working-class Britain” (822).

17. Estimates of Italy’s illegal immigrant population vary widely, from as few as 200,000 to one million (Jandl 2008).


19. The number of permits issued consistently exceeds the quotas, which are used to negotiate controls on illegal immigration with sending countries.

20. In Italy the immigrant offices of the labor unions play an important role in facilitating the integration of immigrants; their work includes sanctioning the applications for residence permits of “self-employed” immigrants (see Veikou and Triandafyllidou 2004). In Spain annual quotas for work-based immigration are set after consultation with employers and unions.

21. Some authors attribute this to the “familial” underpinning of social policy in these countries. Yet this explanation seems to be contradicted by far higher levels of public daycare provision and by an important increase in Spain in recent years in pub-
lic spending on early childcare. Other explanations include the high level of spending on old-age pensions in Italy and the relatively late development of a comprehensive welfare state in Spain during a period of fiscal retrenchment.

22. I thank George Ross for putting this point to me.
26. EFMS Migration Reports, March 2001 and January 2002; Ette 2003; and Migration News (University of California, Davis) 8, no. 4 (October 2002).