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Making the government accountable: rethinking immigration as an issue in the European Union

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, European countries have experienced two relevant waves of immigration. These 'immigration shocks' have contributed to increase dramatically public attention on immigration issues but also to structure political competition on both the supply and the demand side of democratic representation. While immigration issue has been traditionally conceived as a positional issue, the consensus among voters and the policy convergence of mainstream parties seem to resemble Stokes' model and competition is on a valence issue instead of position issue. Therefore, the present paper analyses whether and to what extent voters punish incumbents for high levels of immigration. Using data from the European Election Study, the analysis confirms that while voters perceiving high levels of immigration punish incumbents, performance voting depends on individual-level attributes such as partisanship and salience, but also country-level factors like the government clarity of responsibility. Finally, immigration performance voting is not moderated by issue ownership. However, the perceived competence of parties to manage immigration reveals a direct and independent effect on incumbent vote intention.

1. Introduction

A basic feature of a quality democracy is the principle that citizens hold the government accountable for its performance. An extensive literature has traditionally analysed electoral accountability through the lens of economic voting theory, showing that voters evaluate national economic conditions, punishing poor and rewarding good performance (Duch & Stevenson, 2008). Recent research has enlarged the scope of the performance voting theory to other policy or non-policy related factors (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Clarke et al., 2009; Ecker et al., 2015; Fumarola, 2018; Singer, 2011; Stokes, 1992). This research belongs to the wider valence framework elaborated by Donald Stokes (1963) who theorizes the existence of a principal-agent linkage in which voters act as the principal evaluating governments on the basis of their ability to achieve shared and desired policy outcomes. In the last decade, the traditional valence issue agenda that structured party

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competition in Europe for fifty years has been reshaped to include even issues other than economy, including crime, immigration and terrorism (Clarke et al., 2009, p. 309). This paper aims to provide a contribution in this regard, relying on the idea that positional and valence issues are different but not permanent and separated dimensions. Therefore, the nature of specific issues depends on contingent factors that bring them nearer to the positional or the valence side of a continuum (De Sio & Weber, 2014; Green & Jennings, 2017). The present article focuses on immigration and its adaptation to the analytical framework of the performance voting literature.

In recent years, European countries have experienced two relevant waves of immigration; a first one driven by the EU enlargement towards the Central and Eastern European neighbours; a second one represented by the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers, especially from unstable and poorer regions of the African continent (Grande et al., 2019). These 'immigration shocks' have contributed to dramatically increase public attention on immigration issues but also to structure political competition (Alonso & Fonseca, 2011; Grande et al., 2019; Van der Brug et al., 2015). Studies on the politicization of immigration in Europe find evidence of the impact the electoral success of radical right parties has had on both the supply and the demand side of democratic representation. On the one hand, mainstream parties react by changing their strategy, sharpening their position on the issue to form coalition governments to exclude radical right parties from government or to give them 'a share of the spoils of office, possibly as a full-blown coalition partner or else as some kind of support party' (Alonso & Fonseca, 2011; Odmalm & Bale, 2015, p. 366; cf. van Spanje, 2010). On the other hand research reveals that the electoral success of the radical right and the increased politicization of the issue, has an impact on people's attitudes towards immigration (Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015; Semyonov et al., 2006; Sprague-Jones, 2011). While the immigration issue is ideologically loaded, the consensus among voters and the policy convergence of mainstream parties seem to resemble Stokes' model 'wherein competition is on a valence issue instead of a position issue' (Green, 2007, p. 630).

In this scenario, citizens might be motivated to make vote choices based on their perceived level of immigration in the country. Therefore, the article analyses the electoral consequences of retrospective evaluations of immigration using the reward-and-punishment framework. Recent research on issue voting suggests, in fact, the partial assimilation of immigration to the valence issue agenda (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Alonso & Fonseca, 2011; Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015; Odmalm & Bale, 2015). As a consequence, voters would evaluate parties on the basis of their ability to achieve a generally desired policy goal, i.e. they are expected to support governing parties for lower levels of immigration and punish them for higher levels. Moreover, following the established literature on retrospective voting, the article tests the conditional effect of individual and country-level factors. Finally, the potential role of a second valence dimension, namely issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996) is tested.

I employ survey data from the 7th round of the European Election Study (EES) to analyse immigration performance voting in 27 European Union (EU) Member States. Results point out some similarities with traditional studies on performance voting but also some peculiarities. Retrospective evaluations of immigration performance turn out to be a strong determinant of voting behaviour in the EU, especially for non-partisan voters. Moreover, analysis reveals how the strength of immigration performance voting is context-

dependent, i.e. depends on the extent to which institutional settings allow voters to assign responsibility to policymakers. Finally, while the accountability effect is stronger for voters considering immigration a salient issue, the perceived competence of incumbent government shows only an independent – maybe simultaneous – effect on incumbent vote intention rather than the hypothesized conditional effect on performance voting. Considering the growing level of politicization of this issue, studying immigration in the EU represents not only a contribution to the literature on performance voting but also to the study of voting behaviour in comparative perspective.

2. Immigration performance voting: a (Quasi-)Valence model

Within EU member states, immigration has gradually become a 'hot topic' since the beginning of the 1990s (Akkerman, 2015; Boswell, 2003; Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2017). Election campaigns as well as governments' policy agendas are increasingly influenced by debates on this issue. In recent years, a large body or research has shown how electoral competition on immigration has been deeply reshaped by the combined action of exogenous and endogenous factors (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Grande et al., 2019; Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015; Mudde, 2004; van Spanje, 2010). On the one hand, the dramatic increase in immigration happened in the last decades, and later magnified by the 2008 economic and 2015 migration crisis, has increased the perceived (economic and cultural) costs of integration while the increased media attention has greatly contributed to the politicization of the issue. On the other hand, European countries have experienced the dramatic rise of, in some cases, strong radical right populist parties that have successfully exploited these challenges to boost their consensus (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). The joint effect of these contingent factors has radically influenced both the supply and demand side of the chain of representation, i.e. mainstream parties and voters.

The growing politicization of the immigration issue in Europe since the 1990s, has inevitably challenged the mainstream parties, both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum. The pressure exerted by the combined effect of exogenous and endogenous factors has pushed other parties to adapt their policy programmes and mobilization strategies, with a progressive sharpening of stances on the immigration issue and generalized convergence towards more restrictive policies (Givens & Luedtke, 2005; Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015). The literature on party competition and immigration provides consistent evidence regarding mainstream left and right parties' convergence due to the growing salience of the issue and the rise of challenger niche parties. In their comparative study on ten EU countries, Alonso and Fonseca (2011) use data from the Comparative Manifesto Project to show the increasing salience of immigration in the national contexts since the mid-1970s and how international dynamics like globalization and Europeanization of the agenda might have contributed to the radicalization and convergence of mainstream parties' policy positions on the issue, although with different intensity. Givens and Luedtke (2005), as well as Hinnfors and colleagues (2012) found similar results analysing the evolution of immigration policies in the European context. They show how mainstream right, but also left-wing parties, gradually move towards equally restrictive policy preferences and that this process started several years ago.

Dynamics of convergence towards more restrictive positions on immigration, similar to the one documented for parties and policymakers have been found in European public opinion. In a comparative study on attitudes towards immigration in Europe, Sprague-Jones (2011) shows how the rise and the magnitude of radical right parties might be able to shape people's views on the issue. Along with that, other country-case studies have highlighted the evolution of public attitudes towards immigration that, with different intensity, has shifted towards more restrictive stances. These studies show that respondents' attitudes towards crime, asylum/immigration and the risk of terrorism have been often unified into the immigration/integration divide (Clarke et al., 2009; Odmalm & Bale, 2015). Besides the already mentioned exogenous and endogenous factors that of course influenced not only policymakers' but also citizens and voters' behaviour, other elements could have favoured the spread of negative attitudes in the electorate. The increased politicization of the issue triggered media attention as well as general concern about immigration among voters (Morales et al., 2015). A number of studies show that the salience of immigration issues in the media might be able to shape people's attitudes (Boomgaarden & Vlieghenthart, 2009; De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006), and that these issues are attractive for the media (Brighton & Foy, 2007).
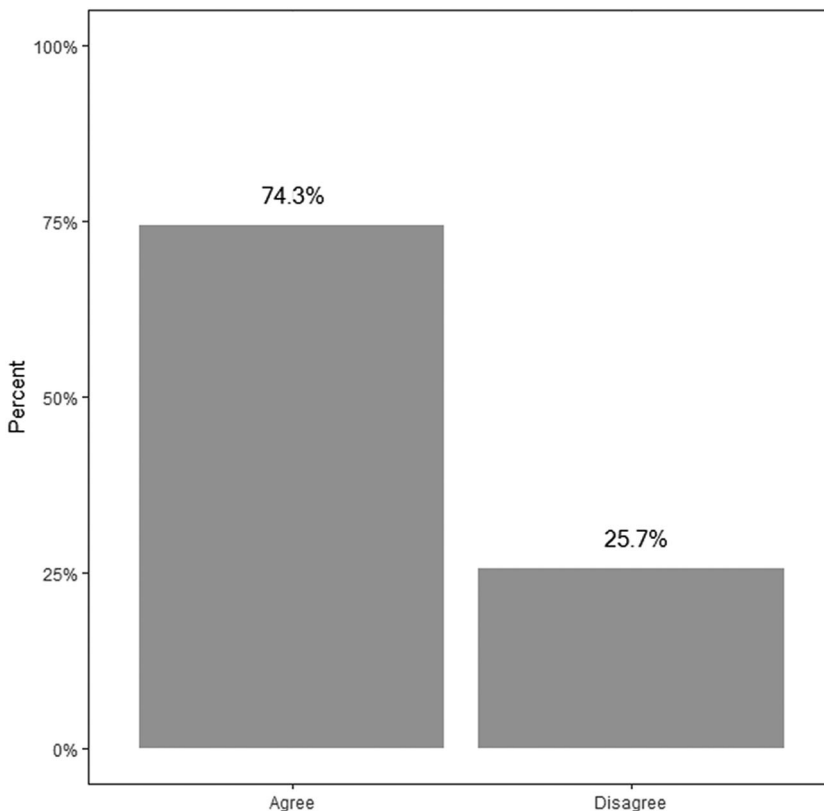

Figure 1. Attitudes towards immigration in the European Union. Note: The question was as follows: 'For each of the following statements, please tell me to what degree you agree or disagree with each statement: […] Q67: Immigration to [country] should be decreased significantly'.

With 74.3 per cent of respondents in favour of more restrictive immigration policies, survey data presented in Figure 1 show how skewed EU public opinion appears on this issue. However, responses to the question have been dichotomized, excluding 'neither agree nor disagree' responses, don't knows and refusals. Therefore, agrees include respondents strongly agreeing and agreeing with a restriction of immigration, while disagrees comprise strongly disagree and disagree responses to the question. While the distribution presented above seems to be closer to Stokes' definition of valence issue, indicating a quite consistent degree of agreement among the electorate, the debate is still open. Stokes (1992) himself does not explicitly assume that voters should unanimously agree on candidate or party valences to treat such issues as valence issues. Moreover, as stressed by Odmalm and Bale (2015) simply knowing what the electorate thinks about immigration does not allow us to fully account for either the positions the parties adopt or for when the issue is (or is no) emphasized by parties. However, they also recognize the growing empirical evidence about a gradual convergence of mainstream parties towards more restrictive positions that, combined with the general consensus among EU voters on the direction that such policies should take, might push scholars to reconsider immigration as a (*quasi-*)valence question (Green, 2007).

It is important to stress that the valence nature of immigration is of course not a perfect one. It has been traditionally conceived as a positional issue, i.e. a value that was not shared by the entire electorate, given that some voters may not be against more permissive immigration policies. Nonetheless, its growing unpopularity across the broad ideological spectrum gives immigration nowadays some of the characteristics of valence issues, and it is most likely that political parties shift their positions regarding immigration and integration issues (Akkerman, 2015). The increasing saliency of the issue in the last decades and its effects on European party systems and voters' opinion suggest the possibility to treat immigration as a policy vote-winning strategy with 'quasi-valence' attributes. Although economy is considered a valence issue par excellence, several other issues might be able to 'coagulate' large majorities of voters on specific policy outcomes. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, in which traditional national boundaries fade away and the free movement of people is considered a cornerstone of political entities such as the European Union, the assessment of electoral accountability necessarily implies to consider other salient aspects of policy-making, like immigration. According to Donald Stokes, risks of biased conceptualization might arise from any *a priori* classification of position- or valence-issues, that should be instead 'a matter to be settled empirically' (Stokes, 1963, p. 373). Recent research explicitly tackles this problem, considering political issues as placed along one single dimension in which positional and valence represent the extremes of the same *continuum* (De Sio & Weber, 2014; D'Alimonte et al., 2019). In particular circumstances – that sometimes evolve into real 'critical junctures' – a positional issue may assume the characteristics of valence or, on the contrary, a valence issue may configure itself as a positional one, ideally moving along a continuum. In this perspective, a traditionally positional issue such as immigration might be conceived as (*quasi-*)valence when it turns out to be less divisive. It happens when a considerable majority of people considers desirable a particular policy outcome and parties gradually converge on those positions. However, this evolution does not imply a permanent transformation of immigration from positional to valence issue but, rather, a temporary shift

triggered by specific circumstances. These considerations lead therefore to the expectation that perceived levels of immigration have a strong effect on vote choice:

> H1: Perceived lower levels of immigration make voters more inclined to vote for the incumbent government (i.e. "Immigration performance voting hypothesis")

2.1. Contingency effects on immigration performance voting

Research on retrospective performance voting shows that the accountability mechanism is likely to be mediated by individual- as well as country-level characteristics (Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Van der Brug et al., 2007). The first factor that is expecting to moderate immigration performance voting is partisanship. Research stresses its potential effect on evaluations and perceptions of politics and voting behaviour (Evans & Andersen, 2005; Van der Brug et al., 2007; Vivyan et al., 2012). In the framework of immigration performance voting I expect that whether satisfied or dissatisfied with the way in which the incumbent government managed immigration, partisan voters are less likely to switch their preference according to short-term factors such as retrospective judgments (De Vries & Giger, 2013). Voters with weak party identification are expected to rely much more on their retrospective evaluations on immigration than citizens with strong partisan attachment. For this reason, the first sub-hypothesis tests whether immigration performance voting is stronger for non-partisan voters:

> H1a: The influence of immigration evaluations on incumbent vote intention is higher for non-partisans than for voters belonging to a party (i.e. "Partisanship hypothesis").

Moving to the 'contextual' factors that are expected to moderate electoral accountability, the analysis considers how the clarity of government responsibility moderates immigration performance voting. Research shows how the strength of the link between economic government performance and electoral outcome is heavily influenced by the clarity of political responsibility (Hobolt et al., 2013; Schwindt-Bayer & Tavits, 2016; Van der Brug et al., 2007) and, in particular, by the specific characteristics of the government in office. The present article aims to test these assumptions with reference to specific features of the government composition. When voters deal with single-party (or even compact coalition) governments that are stable along the legislature and can count on a clear majority in parliament, they inevitably find easier to assign responsibility for political decisions. This contextual feature turns out to be also relevant in the case of immigration performance voting. In a growing globalized system, as in the case of the European Union, the decision-making process is often shared between different levels of governance. In this situation, voters might consider national governments less responsible for decisions taken on this issue and consider them 'mere executors' of a 'supranational will'. However, survey data suggest that citizens seem to consider national governments more responsible than the EU on this issue, in the same way, they consider them responsible for the national economic conditions[1] (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Therefore, in political contexts where the composition and the characteristics of the national government make it easier for voters to identify the parties that are responsible for political decisions, the effect of immigration perceptions on vote choice is expected to be stronger. These considerations lead to the second sub-hypothesis:

> H1b: The influence of immigration evaluations on incumbent vote intention is higher in contexts characterized by higher clarity of responsibility (i.e. "Contextual hypothesis")

2.2. Party competence and immigration: A second dimension for the valence model?

In their studies on Canadian elections, Bélanger and Nadeau (2014, 2015) have recently enlarged the scope of the valence model of economic voting to the perceived competence of government at dealing with specific issues. Governing parties' performance and competence, they suggest, should represent the components of an 'integrated' incumbent vote model. However, the literature on the valence framework traditionally neglected the potential role of party competence on vote choice, focusing almost exclusively on the impact of retrospective performance evaluations. Only recently, the joint effect of retrospective evaluations and issue ownership on voting behaviour has been tested (Bélanger & Gélineau, 2010; Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Bélanger & Nadeau, 2014, 2015; Plescia & Kritzinger, 2017; van der Brug, 2017). These studies mainly refer to the 'competence' dimension of issue ownership, namely party's perceived ability at handling problems of concern to voters[2] (Petrocik, 1996). The literature on issue ownership illustrates how perceptions of party competence on key issues might influence electoral behaviour: people form their preferences by comparing party utilities and supporting those (governing or opposition) parties with the highest expected utility (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Clarke et al., 2009; Lachat, 2014). This expected utility derives from the perceived competence on an issue that is salient at a given time, therefore parties will try to gain electoral consensus presenting themselves as the most competent.

Over the last few decades, questions related to immigration, immigrant workers, and asylum seekers have become increasingly contested issues among public opinion but also at party level (Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015). The literature on the saliency of immigration identifies the growth of immigrant population and its composition one of the main drivers of its politicization (Grande et al., 2019; Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2017). The salience of an issue, in fact, relies on two preconditions (Lavine et al., 2000), i.e. accessibility and importance. The first depends on the availability of information on the issue, while the second depends on the expected impact of the issue on individuals' well-being. In the last decade immigration-related issues have constantly gained room in news media and information in general with the documented effect of defining the boundaries of public debate over the issue (Boomgaarden & Vlieghenthart, 2009; McLaren et al., 2017). Moreover, immigration as an issue has the potential to cut across several policy areas, involving economic and cultural dimensions (Odmalm & Bale, 2015). The high levels of labour migration from the poorer regions of Europe, as well as the recent wave of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers from poorer and unstable African and Asian countries have been increasingly perceived as a 'threat' to several aspects of European life. The perceived potential impact on traditional culture, public services and crime has consolidated immigration as one of the most topical and pressing political issues in Europe.

Recalling Stokes' classification of positional and valence issues, Green and Jennings (2017) underline that 'issues become about competence when the politics of the time makes them so', i.e. that the politicization of an issue will lead parties and public opinion to focus more on management, delivery and competence. The sharp increase in the salience of immigration since the early 2000s suggests therefore that voters' considerations about party competence constitute a relevant factor for the evaluation of government performance. The concept of competence, in fact, seems to be well connected

with Stokes' conceptualization of valence issues, defined as 'performance issues' that are generally 'positively or negatively valued by the electorate' (Stokes, 1963, p. 373). In this perspective, I expect that citizens would cast their vote not only on the basis of their retrospective evaluations of immigration but also because of government (perceived) competence at handling the issue. Voters can use their retrospective evaluations of immigration as an information shortcut, and the strength of the effect might depends on the extent to which people are concerned with the issue. These considerations lead to the last two, interconnected, hypotheses:

> H2: Immigration performance voting is stronger for voters considering immigration a salient issue (i.e. "Saliency hypothesis")

> H3: When voters consider immigration a salient issue, immigration evaluations have greater positive effect on vote intention if a government party is perceived as the issue owner (i.e. "Competence hypothesis")

3. Data and methods

To test the theoretical propositions, I employ individual-level data from the 7th round of the EES Voter Study (Van Egmond et al., 2013). It is a cross-national survey collected immediately after the 2009 European Parliament elections in 27 EU Member States. The sample size for each country consists of roughly 1000 respondents, making the total sample composed of 27,069 respondents. However, because of the listwise deletion used to remove don't knows, refusals, respondents who said they would not vote, would spoil the vote or vote blank, and missing responses, the final sample consists of 15,259 observations. The special battery of questions administered in several European Member States during the same period allows to analyse the effect of individual perceptions of immigration on voting behaviour. This peculiarity makes it the most complete comparative survey to study the phenomenon under investigation.[3]

3.1. Dependent variable

At the individual-level a measure of national vote intention is used as dependent variable[4]:

> "*If there were a national election tomorrow, for which party on this list would you vote?*".

Responses to this item are dichotomized (0-1), distinguishing between individuals who would vote for an opposition party (0) and respondents who would vote for a government party (1). Government party voters represent 44.2 per cent of the respondents, while opposition party voters represent 55.8 per cent of the respondents.

3.2. Independent and moderating variables

At the individual level, the key explanatory variable is a measure of immigration evaluation and is based on the following survey item:

> "*And over the last 12 months, has immigration in [COUNTRY] increased a lot, increased a little, stayed the same, decreased a little or decreased a lot?*".

The original variable is recoded as having values ranging from −1 ('Increased a lot/ Increased a little') to 1 ('Decreased a lot/ Decreased a little') with the medium value 0 ('Stayed the same'). The decision to use this question follows the same logic traditionally employed in adopted on retrospective voting. According to the influential study of Duch and Stevenson on retrospective voting (2008, p. 46), 'the key elements of this question are that it is retrospective, it refers to the state of the [issue], and it concerns change rather than its absolute level'. Analysing the immigration issue in the framework of the valence model thus implies the use of peculiar measures. The selected independent variable allows, in fact, to capture retrospective assessments of the change in the immigration level, assuming its reduction as the shared policy goal.

To test the moderating effect of partisanship on immigration performance voting, i.e. if non-partisans rely more on their retrospective evaluations than those who feel close to a party, I use the following question:

> "Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular party? If so, which party do you feel close to?"

Responses to the question are coded assigning 'zero' (0) to those who don't feel close to any party and 'one' (1) to those who feel close to any opposition or government party.

I also test the moderating effect of the political context, in particular the government clarity of responsibility, using an additive index derived from Bengtsson (2004) that exclusively focuses on the dispersion of power within the current government. It is based on three important features of government status, i.e. 'parliamentary support for the government' (minority or majority support); 'diversion of power' (coalition or single-party government); 'government stability' (less than or two/more years in power). One point is assigned to each aspect considered 'clear' while zero points are assigned to each aspect classified 'not clear'.[5] Values for each aspect are then summarized. Consequently, countries are coded as having values between 0 (low clarity) and 3 (high clarity).

To test the saliency of immigration in the EU countries and its moderating effect on performance voting, a measure based on the traditional MIP ('most important problem') open-ended question is included:

> "What do you think is the most important problem facing [COUNTRY] today?"

Responses to the question are dichotomized (0-1), distinguishing between voters who indicated issues strictly related to immigration – such as national immigration policy, asylum seekers, refugees, xenophobia, migrant workers – to be the most important problem (1) and voters who indicated another issue as the most important problem (0). Moreover, this question is strictly related to the second key independent variable, i.e. party competence as measured by the following item:

> "Which political party do you think would be best at dealing with [MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM]?"

In turn, answers are coded as for the main independent variable, ranging from −1 to 1: government party as the most competent (1); opposition party as the most competent (−1); none are competent (0). Since we are interested in the effect of competence at dealing with immigration, only those respondents who indicate immigration issues as the most important problem are included to test the last hypothesis (H_3). For this reason, the sample analysed in the last model consists of 4049 observations.[6]

3.3. Control variables

Finally, variables usually employed as individual controls in analyses on voting behaviour – social class (on a five-point scale), gender (dummy) and age (in full years) – integrated by a traditional measure of sociotropic evaluation of the economy as control for economic voting are included (Nadeau et al., 2012). The original five-point scale to measure responses to this questions has been inverted and recoded as ranging from −1 ('a little worse/ a lot worse') to 1 ('a little better/ a lot better') with 0 as medium value ('stayed the same'). Apart from individual economic perceptions, the socio-demographic controls will not be discussed in the results given that they are not the principal focus of the present study.

3.4. Methodology

Given the structure of data collected at the micro and macro level and the binary nature of the dependent variable, I employ Multilevel Logistic Regression Models (MLRM) to estimate different effects among variables with random intercepts accounting for unobserved heterogeneity among countries[7] (Gelman & Hill, 2007). Individual respondents (level 1) are, in fact, nested into countries (level 2) that have different sets of parameters for the random factors, allowing intercepts to vary by nation. Several tests to assess the reliability of the findings are presented and provided in the Supplementary Material.

4. Results

Table 1 presents hierarchical logistic regression models (Models 1–5) in which the hypotheses are tested. All the models predict vote intention in relation to individual evaluations of immigration. Model 1 tests the direct effect of immigration evaluations on vote choice in the 27 EU countries ('Immigration performance voting hypothesis'). The second model presents the interaction effect of partisanship on performance voting ('Partisanship hypothesis'), while the third model tests the conditional effect of clarity of responsibility ('Contextual hypothesis'). Model 4 examines the moderating effect of issue salience ('Saliency hypothesis') is tested, while Model 5 finally analyses the conditional effect of party competence on immigration performance voting ('Competence hypothesis').

We start by analysing whether voters rely on immigration when they form electoral preferences. Model 1 presents the results. In line with the main hypothesis, retrospective evaluations have a positive and statistically significant effect on incumbent vote intention. People that perceive levels of immigration in their country decreasing are more likely to vote for governing parties. An increase by one unit in the level of immigration perceptions, increases the probability of vote for the incumbent by ~9.2 percentage points. Compared with the coefficient of economic perceptions, immigration evaluations show an equally decisive on voters' choice: a one-unit change in economic perceptions decreases the probability to vote for incumbent parties by ~8.7 percentage points.

Moving to the individual- and country-level factors that might affect immigration performance voting, Model 2 tests the interaction effect of party affiliation on the accountability link. The negative and statistically significant coefficient, along with the marginal effect presented in Figure 2, corroborates sub-hypothesis H1a.

Table 1. Multilevel logistic regression models of incumbent vote intention.

	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3	MODEL 4	MODEL 5
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES					
Immigration evaluation	0.463*** (0.024)	0.641***(0.045)	0.105 (0.074)	0.246*** (0.029)	0.721*** (0.060)
Issue ownership					1.500*** (0.058)
MODERATING VARIABLES					
Partisanship	0.219*** (0.041)	0.194*** (0.041)	0.221*** (0.041)	0.251*** (0.041)	0.379*** (0.100)
Clarity of responsibility			−0.515 (0.293)		
Issue salience				−0.607*** (0.046)	
INTERACTION TERMS					
Immigration evaluation * Partisanship		−0.250*** (0.053)			
Immigration evaluation * Clarity			0.192*** (0.038)		
Immigration evaluation * Salience				0.575*** (0.056)	
Immigration evaluation * Ownership					−0.040 (0.069)
CONTROLS					
Social class	0.115*** (0.018)	0.116*** (0.018)	0.113*** (0.018)	0.116*** (0.018)	0.106* (0.043)
Age	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.001)	−0.005* (0.002)
Gender	−0.085* (0.036)	−0.083* (0.036)	−0.080* (0.036)	−0.079* (0.036)	0.095 (0.096)
Economic evaluations	0.451*** (0.031)	0.451*** (0.031)	0.447*** (0.031)	0.459*** (0.031)	0.360*** (0.070)
Constant	−0.771*** (0.227)	−0.756*** (0.228)	0.197 (0.593)	−0.606* (0.235)	−1.350*** (0.246)
Variance (countries)	1.193	1.196	1.058	1.288	0.487
N: countries	27	27	27	27	27
N: individuals	15,330	15,330	15,330	15,330	4,049
Log Likelihood	−9,273.3	−9,262.2	−9,258.6	−9,079.5	−1747.4
Akaike information criterion (AIC)	18,562.6	18,542.4	18,537.3	18,179.0	3514.8

Notes: Dependent variable: National vote intention for incumbent government parties (0-1).
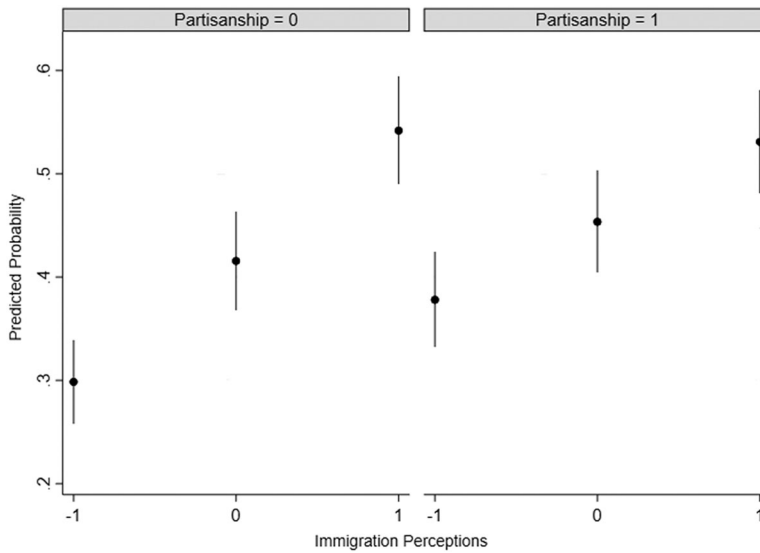Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients: *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

Figure 2. Effect of evaluations of immigration evaluations on incumbent vote intention depending on the level of partisanship. Note: Predicted probability of incumbent vote intention by performance evaluation for non-partisan and partisan voters. All estimates and the 95 per cent confidence interval are based on Model 2, Table 1.

Immigration perceptions, in fact, reveal a stronger effect on vote intention for non-partisan voters. For these respondents, a one-unit increase in the level of perceived immigration evaluations reduces the probability to vote for the incumbent from 41.6 to 29.9 per cent. On the other hand, immigration evaluations seem to hardly impact partisans' vote choice, as the likelihood of voting for the incumbent merely decreases of less than 8 percentage points.

A second moderating factor is the clarity of responsibility of the current government. Results in Model 3 confirm the third hypothesis: the positive and statistically significant effect (at the 0.001 level) suggests that in countries where the assignment of responsibility is made easier by the configuration of the government – in terms of stability, parliamentary support and ideological cohesion – voters can effectively sanction (or reward) governments for bad (or good) management of immigration as derived by their evaluation.

The plot in Figure 3 presents the predicted probability of incumbent vote intention for different levels of clarity of responsibility. If immigration evaluations decrease by one unit in contexts where government clarity is high (e.g. United Kingdom or Hungary), the probability to vote for the incumbent declines by ~13.2 percentage points. This effect is almost three times smaller in EU member States where clarity is low (e.g. Belgium or Latvia). Here, a deterioration by one unit in immigration perceptions decreases the likelihood of incumbent voting by ~5.9 percentage points.

Model 4 seeks to test whether immigration performance voting is stronger for those voters considering immigration a salient issue. The positive coefficient, significant at the 0.001 level, encourages to accept the second hypothesis (Figure 4).

For these respondents, bad evaluations about government's job decrease the likelihood to vote for the incumbent by ~13.3 percentage points. Conversely, for those voters who do
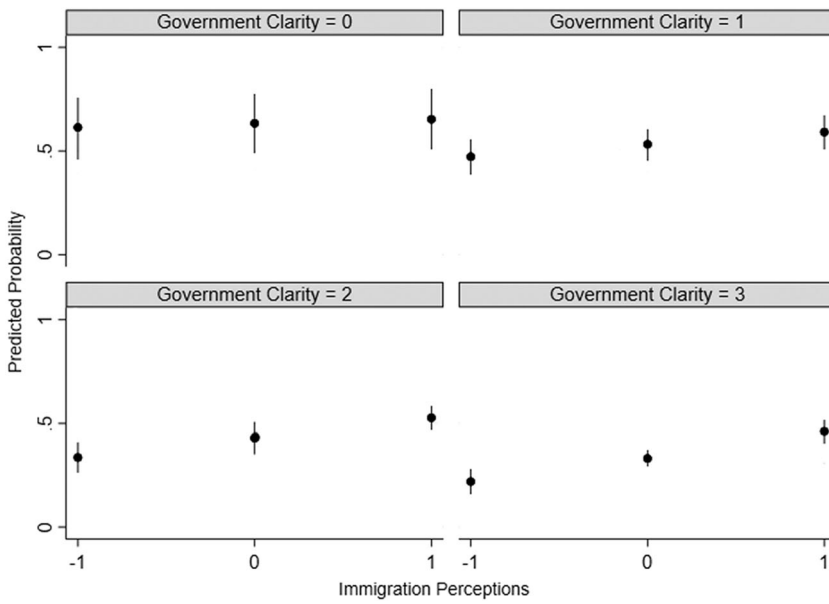
Figure 3. Effect of evaluations of immigration evaluations on incumbent vote intention depending on the level of government clarity of responsibility. Note: Predicted probability of incumbent vote intention by performance evaluation for different levels of government clarity of responsibility. All estimates and the 95 per cent confidence interval are based on Model 3, Table 1.
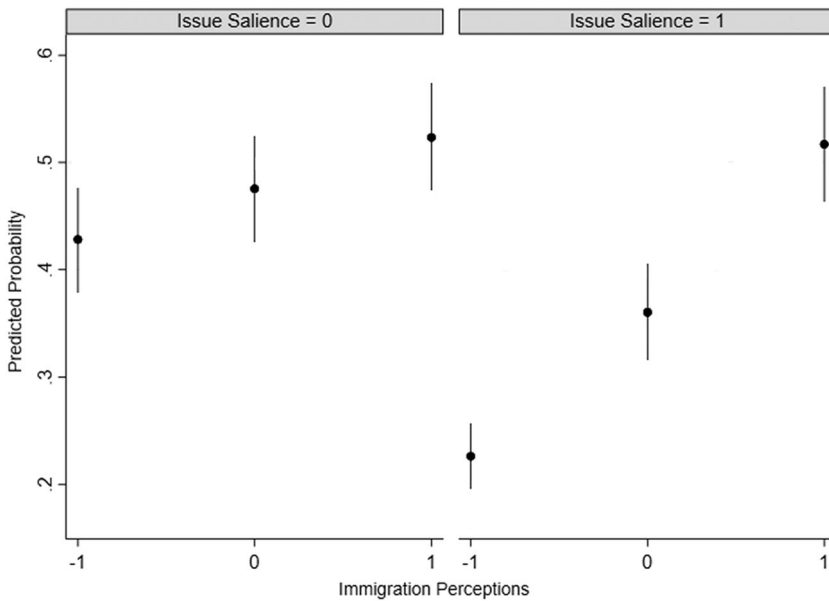

Figure 4. Effect of evaluations of immigration evaluations on incumbent vote intention depending on the level of issue salience. Note: Predicted probability of incumbent vote intention by performance evaluation for voters' perceived level of issue salience. All estimates and the 95 per cent confidence interval are based on Model 4, Table 1.
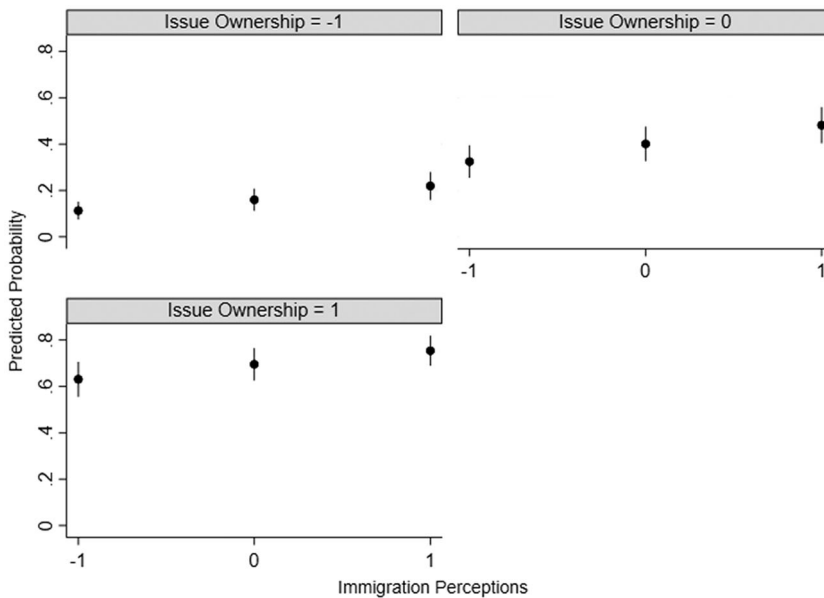
Figure 5. Effect of evaluations of immigration evaluations on incumbent vote intention depending on the level of issue ownership. Note: Predicted probability of incumbent vote intention by performance evaluation for voters' perceived level of issue ownership. All estimates and the 95 per cent confidence interval are based on Model.

not consider immigration a priority in the national agenda, the effect is approximately three times smaller (~4.7 percentage points).

Finally, Model 5 tests the effect of party competence discussed in the third section. Because of the link between 'salience' and 'ownership' questions (the latter asks which is the best party at dealing with the 'most important problem' stated in the former), the sample is subset in order to include only those respondents considering immigration the most important problem. In this way, the new sample, representative of all the 27 EU member States, counts approximately 4000 respondents. Finally, an interaction term between immigration evaluations and issue ownership is included to analyse the effect of party competence on performance immigration voting.

Figure 5 represents the predicted probability of incumbent vote intention for different levels of issue ownership. The almost flat lines confirm the coefficient reported in Table 1. The interaction term, in fact, fails to reach the statistical significance, leading to the rejection of H3.

These findings, therefore, discourage any claim about a potential conditional effect of issue ownership on performance voting suggested by recent research on economic voting and issue ownership. However, the existence of a *double,* but *independent* and *direct* effect of immigration evaluations and issue ownership on incumbent vote intention cannot be excluded. While this assumption is supported by previous studies (cf. Bélanger & Nadeau, 2014; Martinsson, 2009), it seems to find only a very partial confirmation in the present findings with the two variables holding a strong and significant direct effect on the dependent variable. Moreover, the mutual independence of the two variables shown by the interaction coefficient is confirmed also by the very low correlation coefficient ($r = 0.16$).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Scholars define the current political age an 'era of valence politics' (Bale, 2006), where voters are expected to structure their choices primarily on the basis of their evaluations about the competence of governing parties to deliver policy outcomes. Although the immigration issue is 'of course ideologically loaded' (Odmalm & Bale, 2015, p. 366), there is evidence of its transition to a different connotation that has contributed to reshape the traditional valence issue agenda that structured party competition in Europe in the last decades (Clarke et al., 2009). Three factors are considered relevant to activate this process of transformation (Clarke et al., 2009; Green, 2007): the significance of government performance for vote choice, a decline in the association between left–right position and vote choice, and the perceived convergence of mainstream parties. Evidence about this process, characterizing European politics in the last decades, has been well described in the literature on issue competition and immigration (Alonso & Fonseca, 2011; Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015). In particular, increasing consensus on traditionally left–right issues, such as immigration, has important implications for party competition. 'Public opinion […] matters. If it moves, so will parties after a time lag.' (Morales et al., 2015, p. 479). The necessity to study the consequences of this process motivated the analysis of electoral dynamics linked to the immigration issue through the lens of the valence model.

Do voters hold governments accountable for higher levels of immigration? This article provides evidence regarding immigration performance voting across EU Member States. Consistent with research on retrospective voting, the analysis confirmed that voters may sanction incumbents if they (indirectly) judge immigration policy performance on immigration unsatisfactory or ineffective for reaching the desired goal. Moreover, the magnitude of this effect resembles that found in the economic voting literature.

The strength of the immigration performance voting shows to be conditional to specific individual- and country-level factors. Non-partisan voters put greater weight on these electoral 'shortcuts', using perceptions on immigration as one of the main tools to structure their preferences. These findings have two important implications. First of all, it supports the idea concerning the transformation of immigration into a (*quasi-*)valence issue. The increased salient and cross-cutting connotation assumed by this issue in the last decades (Odmalm & Bale, 2015) make it no more exclusively identified with right-wing party platforms but, rather, involves a diffuse convergence of mainstream political parties in a number of European countries (Alonso & Fonseca, 2011; Mudde, 2004). There is, in fact, diffused evidence about the popularity and the widespread support gained by anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic platforms among opposition but also governing parties – and voters – throughout the European Union (Meguid, 2005).

The comparative nature of the EES survey data allows also to analyse immigration performance voting across institutional contexts. The analysis confirms the impact of government clarity of responsibility in the 27 EU Member States. This result not only confirms that cohesive and stable executives make voters able to identify who is responsible for policy decisions concerning immigration. It also confirms that voters still consider EU national governments responsible for immigration even in a phase of general 'Europeanization' of national policies and in a context characterized by complex multilevel governance. The increasing level of immigrants and refugees, in particular after the 2015 crisis, has

negatively affected citizens' attitudes boosting disaffection towards the EU institutions much more than towards national governments and parliaments. However, the present findings are in line with recent research showing that the growing Euroscepticism did not impact citizens' ability to differentiate responsibility of the different levels of government and attribute blame accordingly, especially when the immigration issue rises in saliency (Harteveld et al., 2018; Wilson & Hobolt, 2015). This tendency might be caused by the fact that harmonization is more difficult in policy areas like immigration that are highly politicized at the national level so that, aside from a certain level of harmonization in cross-border police and judicial affairs, the prevailing tendency in the EU Member States has been for the primacy of intergovernmentalism rather than supranationalism (Bickerton et al., 2015).

In line with studies on retrospective voting and issue salience (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Ecker et al., 2015; Singer, 2011), the present analysis also shows that voters rely more on performance voting when immigration becomes a salient issue. The saliency of an issue is not stable across time and countries, but it could vary according to its visibility and importance (Zaller, 1992). Situations in which the control of immigration or the allocation of asylum seekers turns out to be a pressing issue, allow the reshaping of citizens' agenda of priorities. In periods in which citizens perceive a dramatic increase in immigration levels, they might feel unsecure regarding their personal or economic situation, so they could use personal evaluations as shortcuts to decide government's fate at elections. Periods of crisis, in particular, magnify such dynamics, strengthening the accountability link between performance and vote but also providing a window of opportunity for opposition parties that make containment of immigration their own. If 'citizens discriminate in their evaluations of the incumbent, placing the most importance on issues that are actually important' (Singer, 2011, p. 304), governments will adapt their policy agenda on the basis of salient issues people pay attention to at a given time. Such considerations may indirectly provide insights on the recent electoral dynamics common to several European countries.

The concept of issue salience is strictly connected to the one of issue ownership, since the influence of the latter on vote choice is conditional upon the perceived salience of the issue (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). In this case, results do not support the existence of a conditional effect of party competence on immigration performance voting, even though they could open up perspectives on the role of issue ownership. The analysis highlights the potential direct, independent, or simultaneous, effect on incumbent vote intention resembling the mechanism that Bélanger and Nadeau (2015) found in their study on Canada or Plescia and Kritzinger (2017) in Austria. According to this research, the perceived party competence would work in parallel to citizens' evaluation of government performance on immigration, with the potential effect of reinforcing or counterbalancing each other depending on the nature of these evaluations (positive/negative) and the owner of the issue (government/opposition). While results seem to support the prominence of performance evaluations on vote intention, further research should focus more on these two distinct components of the valence model and their potential alternative effect to address cross-national variation in electoral accountability.

Notes

1. Both economy and immigration score a mean of 7.25 on the 0–10 scale of national government responsibility for the public. Only healthcare scores a higher mean of 7.91. Calculations are based on data from the 2009 EES Voter Study (Van Egmond et al., 2013).
2. The decision to analyse the 'competence' component of issue ownership – rather than the 'associative' one – should relieve potential concerns about the endogeneity with the dependent variable measuring vote intention. Although Walgrave et al. (2015) suggest that people's perceptions of competence issue ownership are formed not only by their partisanship but also by parties' past performance on that issue, they recognize – in line with previous research on performance voting – that it may be the opposite in presence of salient issues. In this case voters' preferences would 'be determined by parties' performance on the issues they care about and devote attention to. For minor issues, it may be just the opposite'. (Walgrave et al., 2015, p. 787). Given that in the empirical analysis (cf. Model 5, Table 1) I test the conditional effect of issue ownership in combination with issue salience, any potential bias in the estimates should be minimized. Finally, the correlation test between issue ownership and partisanship suggests their mutual independence ($r = 0.30$).
3. The fact that the 7th round of the EES Voter Study was conducted before the breakthrough of the so-called 'migration crisis' in 2014–2015 should not represent a limit for the generalization of the findings for two reasons. First, it was conducted after the onset of the economic crisis that contributed to the spread of anti-migrant sentiment and discrimination especially towards foreign workers. Already in 2009–2010 survey data reported that 72 percent of respondents believed that 'employers should give jobs to nationals over immigrants when jobs are scarce'(Seguino, 2010, p. 184). Moreover, the opportunity to test the likelihood of voting according to individual perceptions of immigration in this phase might also represents a point of strength for the present research. Controlling for potential biases deriving from the spread of the migration crisis such as the intensive news media coverage (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016) among others, should help to estimate the performance voting effect more clearly and make the findings more robust.
4. Vote intention in national elections (also called 'hypothetical vote') is traditionally used as the dependent variable in studies of retrospective performance voting (see e.g. Nadeau et al., 2012; Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Hobolt et al., 2013; Talving, 2018).
5. For more details, see variable description and Table A.3. in the Supplementary Material.
6. However, as Table A.2. in the Supplementary Material shows, even with such a large drop of observations the sample is still representative of all the 27 EU member States.
7. Analysis reported here is carried out using R-studio version 1.0.153 and the glmer function to fit logistic mixed-effects models with a random effect for the countries (Bates et al., 2015).

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