Asymmetric realignment: Immigration and right party voting

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A B S T R A C T

The second decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a significant 'rightward drift' as populists in the West scored striking electoral gains. We argue that this reflects a shift in the power of electoral cleavages that is asymmetric in nature. Specifically, voters for whom immigration is salient are more likely to switch to conservative and national populist parties than to liberal or left-wing parties. We leverage data from three prominent cases, the United States, Britain and Germany, to demonstrate that immigration-specific asymmetric realignment occurred in the three countries. These findings have implications for our understanding of electoral politics, populism and the emerging 'culture divide' in party systems.

In recent decades, many Western democracies have experienced a realignment whereby voters have abandoned their traditional loyalties and driven a rightward drift in politics. This has been reflected in increased public support for populist radical right (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Mudde, 2007; Rydgren 2018) and conservative parties (Gidron and Ziblatt 2019). These parties have attracted stronger levels of support from working-class and non-graduate voters who used to support left-wing parties or had drifted into apathy (Evans and Tilley 2017; Goodwin, 2023; Rennwald 2020). Such voters have mainly moved left to right, in part, to express their preference for lower rates of immigration (Oesch 2008; Rydgren 2012). Amid the wider rise of the 'cultural dimension' in Western politics (Kriesi et al., 2008), such shifts have been symbolized by strong support for populists in France's industrial north-east (Mayer 2014), Boris Johnson's success in Labour's working-class Red Wall (Cutts et al., 2020), and the defection of white working-class voters from the Democrats to the Republicans ahead of, and during, the Trump presidency (Sides et al., 2019). At the same time, while many workers or 'left authoritarians' (Lefkofridi et al., 2014) have switched from left to right, left-wing parties have increased their support among university graduates and middle-class professionals who hold more pro-immigration attitudes (e.g., Fieldhouse et al., 2019; Benedetto et al., 2020). Yet, analyses of the relative size of these countervailing flows are rare (though see Gidron 2022). What is missing is an assessment of the *asymmetry* of the unfolding realignment in Western politics. In short, which political parties benefit most, electorally, from the political realignment over immigration which has been taking place in many Western democracies in the first two decades of the twenty-first century?

We address this gap by examining the idea of asymmetric realignment to account for the rightward drift in Western democracies. In existing work, the notion of realignment refers to two related but distinct phenomena. One type of realignment, *symmetric realignment*, occurs when groups and issue publics alter the way they map onto parties, changing the composition of party support without leaving one party better off. Another form, *asymmetric realignment*, is more consequential, and is often what scholars mean when using the term 'realignment.' Asymmetric realignment occurs when a shift in the demographic and issue composition of parties is accompanied by the rise of a new party, or type of party, to a position of dominance.

While scholars often neglect to distinguish the two forms of realignment, Gidron (2022) shows how a 'stable asymmetry' has characterized West European value publics between 1990 and 2017, wherein voters who are left-wing on economic issues but right-wing on even one cultural issue shift to the right. Thus, both culturally conservative but economically progressive voters, and culturally liberal but economically right-wing voters, move to, or remain on, the right, handing right-wing parties an important advantage. Yet, in the literature, the idea of asymmetric realignment remains under-developed and often escapes serious attention, especially across multiple countries.

We build and expand on this work by presenting a fine-grained analysis of asymmetric realignment in three major democracies: the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany. While there can be different reasons for realignments to be asymmetric, when it comes to the political events that unfolded in recent years, we contend it has been differences in the salience of immigration among 'pro-immigration' and 'anti-immigration' voters which have driven this electoral change.

Specifically, we demonstrate that in all three countries, conservative and populist radical right parties prospered electorally because of an

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asymmetric realignment around immigration, which was made possible because of its increased salience among anti-immigration voters (Kaufmann 2018; Kustov 2022; Messina 2007). After demonstrating how some voters moved from left to right, and others right to left, we show that when voters realign politically over immigration it is conservative and populist radical parties which, on average, gain support. That is, people are more likely to move from the left to the right than vice versa. These results are similar across different datasets and countries. In addition, we do not find similar realignments taking place over economic issues. Amid the rise of the cultural dimension in Western politics (e.g., Hooghe and Marks 2018; Bornschier and Kriesi 2012; Van der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009), and growing 'culture wars' over immigration, multiculturalism, and diversity, our findings have significant implications for the study of electoral politics, populism, political realignments, and the culture divide in Western democracies.

1. Symmetrical and asymmetrical realignments

Political realignments have long attracted interest among academics (Burnham 1970; Cutts et al., 2020; Highton 2020; Key, 1959; Sundquist 1983). However, little attention has, so far, focused on different types of realignment, i.e., the distinction between *symmetric* and *asymmetric* realignments. Symmetric realignments occur when voters switch allegiance in a way that does not give a particular party a lasting electoral advantage. Citizens may switch parties in response to the rise of new issues, movements, or debates.

For example, in the U.S., the Republicans experienced growing support among evangelical Christians in the 1980s which was mirrored in declining support among anti-religious right voters, who switched to the Democrats (Putnam and Campbell 2010). At other times, democracies have experienced more gradual secular realignments. V.O. Key Jr. (1959) referred to these longer-running realignments as representing a movement 'from party to party that extends over several presidential elections', and which appears to be independent of the peculiar factors influencing individual elections.

Yet this focus on symmetric realignments does not pay sufficient attention to how the issues which underpin realignments might vary in their level of salience among different groups of voters and thereby lead to an *asymmetric* realignment. In such cases, a particular political party or type of party establishes a clear electoral advantage over their competitors. In the U.S., for example, the 1896–1928 alignment was characterized by cultural conflict, outside the South, between Anglo-Protestant rural and skilled working-class voters, and a coalition of 'wet' (anti-Prohibition) urban elites and largely Catholic 'New Immigrant' unskilled workers. This fell along party lines, with Republicans pushing immigration restriction and Prohibition against Democratic opposition. While these cultural divisions persisted into the New Deal alignment (1932–68), the 'national origins' immigration quota legislation in 1924, and then the economic crisis of 1929, subsequently reduced the salience of cultural questions in relation to economic ones.

In more recent years, a growing number of scholars have pointed to the importance of asymmetric realignment by exploring, at the individual-level, specific groups of voters, though mainly 'cross-pressured' voters who do not sit neatly on the traditional left-right grid. The most detailed and impressive study, so far, is by Gidron (2022), who draws on twenty-five years' worth of survey data to show how West European politics is characterized by asymmetry: while support for left parties is common among voters with progressive attitudes on all issues, it is enough to be conservative on one issue to nudge voters to switch to right-wing parties.

However, while insightful, much of this literature remains focused on either mass public attitudes or specific groups of voters, leaving it unable to explore the broader process of asymmetric realignment. To address this gap, we demonstrate across three cases how the increased salience of immigration has led to asymmetric realignment, benefitting populist radical right and conservative parties more than their left-wing

counterparts. Specifically, we look beyond voters to make a more fundamental contribution to theories of realignment by showing how three factors are key to explaining this process.

The first is the salience of an issue in the population compared to other issues. When voters consider an issue to be highly salient, they become more likely to question their traditional political loyalties, which may be based on issues they now consider less salient. The second is the relative salience which people on opposing sides of an issue attach to it when it comes to their vote choice at elections. When an issue is more salient among voters on one side of a debate, voters become more likely to drive an asymmetric realignment. Third is the modal opinion in the population. When it comes to an issue such as immigration, asymmetric realignment will be greater if a) immigration is salient for a large share of anti-immigration voters, b) the issue has a higher salience among anti-immigration voters than pro-immigration voters, and c) more voters, on average, express anti-immigration views.

To illustrate the importance of meeting all three conditions, we can distinguish between micro- and macro-asymmetric realignment. A party might score a net gain of voters by foregrounding an issue such as immigration restriction which satisfies conditions a) and b) above. However, if c) does not obtain, there may be indirect negative effects on a party or leader's image which could outweigh the positive impact of adopting a particular issue position. For instance, if people treat anti-immigration measures as a violation of social norms, they may engage in a more negative portrayal of a party. This could result in indirect negative effects on a party, reducing its support more than it gains from the dynamics of a) and b) above (Harteveld and Ivarsflaten 2018; Schaffner 2022). In this case, we would see issue-based (i.e., micro-asymmetric), but not macro-asymmetric realignment.

In sum, to explore the role of asymmetric realignment over immigration, we outline the following two hypotheses:

H1. Immigration attitudes are more strongly associated with left to right switching than right to left *switching*.

H2. Immigration attitudes are better predictors of left-to-right switching than economic attitudes.

For the first hypothesis, we thus expect that people with anti-immigration attitudes are more likely to switch from the left to the right than people with pro-immigration attitudes are to switch from the right to the left. For the second hypothesis, we expect that these dynamics is primarily related to the salience of immigration and not economic issues.

Accordingly, this paper develops a more fine-grained understanding of the processes of changing sorting patterns and shifts in dominance. It contributes to the literature by concentrating not merely on which kind of voter moves where, but on the number of each; that is, on how symmetrical realignments are.

2. Case selection: United Kingdom, United States, and Germany

We test our hypotheses using the case of vote switching between the 2010 and 2019 general elections in the United Kingdom, held either side of the 2016 Brexit referendum, the 2012 and the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, which culminated with the Donald Trump presidency, and between 2016 and 2018 in Germany, in the wake of the refugee crisis. All three countries experienced a sharp increase in the overall salience of immigration (Abrajano and Hainal, 2017; Messina 2007) and, therefore, provide a unique opportunity and sufficient variation to study how voters realign amidst these changes and how different parties were affected by these changes.

In the UK, the vote for Brexit (Clarke et al., 2017) took place against the backdrop of a sharp increase in the overall rate of immigration and the arrival of a national populist party, namely, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which campaigned against immigration, the established parties and EU membership (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin and

Milazzo, 2015). During the 2000s and 2010s, both the level and salience of immigration increased sharply (McLaren and Johnson 2007). By 2014, net migration had reached a historic record of 300,000 per annum and was ranked by voters as the most important issue facing the country.[1] Though UKIP initially appealed to disillusioned Conservatives, from 2012 the party changed strategy to recruit support from working-class and self-employed voters who had often voted Labour in the past (Evans and Mellon 2016).

At the 2016 Brexit referendum, national populists and pro-Brexit Conservatives targeted working-class Labour seats, nearly 60 per cent of which voted for Brexit (Clarke et al., 2017). Heightened concern about immigration not only helped drive support for UKIP but the Leave victory at the Brexit referendum (Clarke et al., 2017; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). The Conservative Party subsequently advanced strongly in working-class, white, older, and less well-educated areas and, in 2019, won a large parliamentary majority after capturing dozens of pro-Brexit Labour seats (Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Cutts et al., 2020).

In the United States, between the 1930s, when polling began, and the early 1990s, no voters considered immigration a pressing concern. Yet since then, the salience of immigration increased, albeit sporadically. The higher immigration levels of the 1990s were accompanied by increased media coverage of the issue (Jardina 2019). A noticeable increase occurred during the 2006–7 period, following a post-2003 increase in border apprehensions and large-scale pro-immigration protests against Obama-era legislation, which sought to criminalize those assisting undocumented immigrants (Wright and Citrin 2011).

Critically, trends since 2014 reveal a historically new development of the increased salience of immigration. This has been especially the case among Republican identifiers, prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Immigration rose above the 10 percent salience mark among Republicans in mid-2014, after the number of unaccompanied Central American children at the border reached nearly 70,000. By the time Trump entered the Republican primary in June 2015, immigration had already been a leading issue for 10 percent or more of Republicans for an unprecedented twelve months. While undocumented migration declined during Trump's first year in the White House, this changed in 2018 when border apprehensions and a 7000-person Central American "migrant caravan" attracted media coverage.[2] In 2018, there was then a second major increase in salience more than a year after Trump's inauguration and two and a half years after he announced his primary bid with racist remarks on Mexican immigrants. By September 2019, 67 percent of Republicans said illegal immigration was 'a very big problem', tied with drug addiction as their highest-ranking issue. By contrast, just 23 percent of Democrats viewed illegal immigration as a very big problem.[3] The U.S. case appears to have been less a consequence of rising immigration per se – though immigration played a role – than of a supply-side factor: Trump's willingness to break a bipartisan taboo over politicizing immigration (Bursztyn et al., 2017).

In Europe, overall, levels of immigration and the salience of the issue also increased significantly during the early 2010s before peaking during the so-called refugee 'crisis' during 2014–2015 when EU member states such as Germany welcomed large numbers of refugees who were fleeing war in Syria (Dennison 2020). While the overall number of immigrants entering Germany remained below the one million mark

throughout much of the 1990s and the 2000s, in 2015 the country welcomed more than two million persons from abroad, including nearly one million refugees from Syria.[4] Immigration levels then remained elevated, above 1.5 million per annum until 2019, while igniting a considerable national debate. In 2016, Germans identified immigration as the most pressing issue facing the European Union, with 57% taking this view, followed by terrorism (Eurobarometer 2016). The increased salience of this issue was also further reflected in the breakthrough of the populist radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD). Between 2013 and 2017, the AfD's share of the constituency vote increased from 1.9 to 11.5 percent while its number of seats jumped from zero to 94, with anti-immigration sentiment the strongest driver of support for AfD (Hansen and Olsen 2019; Wurthmann et al., 2021).

In all three of these countries -the UK, US, and Germany-immigration has risen up the priority list for citizens in the period of interest here, particularly those who favour a more restrictive policy and who exhibit more negative attitudes toward immigration. In contrast, the issue has remained less salient for more liberal-minded voters who tend to focus on other concerns. We hold that this produces an "asymmetric effect" in electoral politics, namely that conservative parties which craft a more anti-immigration appeal can win support from anti-immigration voters without suffering an offsetting loss of pro-immigration voters to left parties.

The evidence since 2010 in all three countries appears to indicate that the advantage of right-wing parties adopting an anti-immigration stance outweighs the disadvantages. Yet the conclusions are not unequivocal. While right parties in Britain increased their share of the popular vote ten points from 32.4 percent in 2010 to 42.4 percent in 2019, the U.S. Republicans slipped from 47.2 percent under Romney in 2012 to 46.2 percent under Trump in 2016, even though the Democrats also declined from 51.1 percent to 48.2 percent. While the evidence above demonstrates important changes in support for different parties, scholarship currently lacks evidence on the symmetry of the immigration effect: the extent to which right- or left-wing politicians benefitted from realignment over the immigration issue. Different sub-types of asymmetric realignment may also be at work. The relatively greater ethnic diversity of America, its lower opposition to immigration compared to much of Europe, and its limited left-right electoral volatility might suggest asymmetric realignment is a European phenomenon.

3. Methods and data

We use representative survey data from the UK (England and Wales), the US and Germany. We rely on four high-quality data sources, the 2017 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES), 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and the 2014-23 British Election Study Internet Panel (BES). All four datasets are collected in a time where we observe greater vote switching from the left to the right than from the right to the left, i. e., asymmetric realignment.

For immigration, we rely on measures of immigration preferences and immigration salience. The first measures respondents' preferred level of immigration. The second measures how important the respondent perceives the issue of immigration to be. These measures are available in all four datasets but differ in their measurements. We use the ANES to examine whether people finding immigration important were more likely to switch parties between 2012 and 2016. To measure the salience of immigration, we use the ANES item, 'What would you say is the single most important problem the country faces?' For immigration preferences, we rely on a five-point ANES measure on whether the level of immigration should increase or decrease (all measures are available in

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Online *Appendix A*).

In the CCES, immigration salience is measured with a five-point scale from immigration being of 'no importance at all' to of 'very high importance'. Immigration attitudes are measured with a series of eight 'tick all that apply' options related to what the respondent thinks the U. S. government should do about immigration, e.g., 'increase the number of border patrols'. As these items differ significantly from each other and the questions used in the other datasets, we also run the statistical models separately for each of the items to disentangle how the specific items might differ in the extent to which they drive any asymmetric realignments.

For the BES, immigration salience is measured using the most important issue (mii) question in the first wave, creating a dummy variable carrying a value of 1 where immigration is mentioned and 0 otherwise. As with the ANES data, immigration attitudes are measured with a five-point scale running from 'increase a lot' to 'decrease a lot'. For the GLES, immigration salience is measured with: 'In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing Germany today?', where answers mentioning immigration are coded 1, and 0 otherwise. However, in the GLES data there is no question explicitly mentioning immigration. Instead, immigration attitudes are measured with a 5-point scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree' with the statement 'Refugees who come to Germany for economic reasons should be deported.'

Fig. 1 shows the distribution of immigration attitudes for the datasets where we have immigration attitudes measured in terms of preferences for more or less immigration, i.e., the BES and ANES, and the question tapping into immigration preferences in the GLES. In BES and ANES, we see greater support for a decrease in immigration than for an increase in the period of interest. The evidence is similarly strong in the GLES data. For the CCES data, we find that the support for immigration differs substantially across the various items, with little support for highly controversial items such as 'Ban Muslims from immigrating to the U.S.' and 'Identify and deport illegal immigrants' (the descriptive statistics for all eight items are available in Online *Appendix B*). In general, across the three countries, voters express more anti-immigration than pro-immigration attitudes.

In all four datasets we further rely on measures of economic attitudes. Specifically, we use items that in one way or another tap into views of public spending. The variables are coded so greater values indicate greater support for public spending. In the BES, we use a measure on whether the respondent believes cuts to public spending in general have gone too far. In ANES, the item is related to whether federal spending on Social Security should be increased. In CCES, the question is related to whether spending on welfare should increase or decrease. Finally, in GLES, the question is related to whether respondents prefer lower taxes on a seven-point scale (from 'lower taxes, although this results in less social services' to 'more social services, although this results in raising taxes'). Descriptive statistics for all datasets are available in Online *Appendix B*.

Importantly, across all datasets, we expect the shifts over time to be asymmetric, i.e., for immigration attitudes and salience to be more likely to correlate with a left voter's switch to a right-wing party than a right voter's switch to a left-wing party. The outcome variable is vote switching, whether people change their vote from one election to the next and in which direction. We rely on self-reported measures of vote choice (in 2016 and 2018 in Germany, in 2010 and 2019 in the UK, in 2012 and 2016 in the US). We use a longer period (2010–19) in the UK to capture the gradual shift that aggregate data on immigration attitudes

by party suggest took place, though, as a robustness check, we examine the 2015–19 period in Online *Appendix C*.[5] The more multi-party nature of the German and UK party system compels us to group multiple parties under aggregate 'left' and 'right' labels. We believe this can be justified for analytical purposes even as we acknowledge that allocating the Liberal Democrats to the 'left' category and the UKIP and Brexit parties to the 'right' may be contested.

Last, we use questions related to the salience of public spending to test a counter-hypothesis, namely, that variation in the salience of economic redistribution better accounts for their vote switching than variation in the salience of immigration. In the models, we control for gender, age, education, employment status, and ideology (see Online *Appendix A* for all question wordings). Age, for example, has showed to correlate with vote changes, whereas younger people are more likely to shift left and older people more likely to shift right (Geys et al., 2022).

4. Results

First, we demonstrate that the salience of immigration is higher for anti-immigration voters than pro-immigration voters. That is, we explore the correlation between immigration salience and immigration attitudes across our four datasets. *Fig. 2* shows the association between immigration attitudes and immigration salience, as well as between economic attitudes and the salience of economic issues. Across all datasets, respondents with anti-immigration attitudes tend to rank immigration as a higher priority than respondents who express more pro-immigration attitudes. While the correlations vary in size, they are all moderate to high. This replicates the key finding from Kustov (2022), i.e., a strong correlation between immigration salience and anti-immigration attitudes.

For the economy, by contrast, there is no correlation between a respondent's preferences (e.g., towards cuts to public spending in general or lower taxes), and how highly they rank the economy as an issue. In other words, when people find immigration salient, they are more likely to have anti-immigration attitudes. On the other hand, when people find the economy salient, they are not more or less likely to have specific economic preferences. People who find the economy salient are equally likely to favour lower and higher spending.

To test Hypothesis 1, concerning the importance of immigration attitudes to the direction of vote switching, we proceed to model how immigration preferences relate to vote switching. Table 1 provide estimates from multinomial logistic regression models across the four datasets. Non-switching between two elections is the baseline condition across all models (e.g., voted for the left in both 2010 and 2019 in the BES). Accordingly, the coefficients for the 'immigration attitude' variable represent the association between anti-immigration attitudes and the likelihood of switching, with separate models for switching left or right. The first two models display our results for the UK.In model 1, we observe a statistically significant effect of anti-immigration attitudes on having switched from a right party to a left party between the 2010 and 2019 elections. In model 2, however, we find a stronger positive association between anti-immigration attitudes and switching from left to right.

The next two models consider our U.S. data from the ANES. The findings are consistent with the asymmetric pattern in the UK. We find no significant effect of anti-immigration attitudes on switching from right to left, but a strong and significant association between anti-immigration attitudes and switching from left to right. Interestingly, the ANES models show no significant association between economic

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[5] For instance, the ANES shows that the difference in the share of white Republicans and Democrats favouring reduced immigration jumped from 12 to 50 points between 2012 and 2016. In Britain, the BES reveals a gradual increase from 20 to 40 points difference between left and right voters between 2010 and 2019.
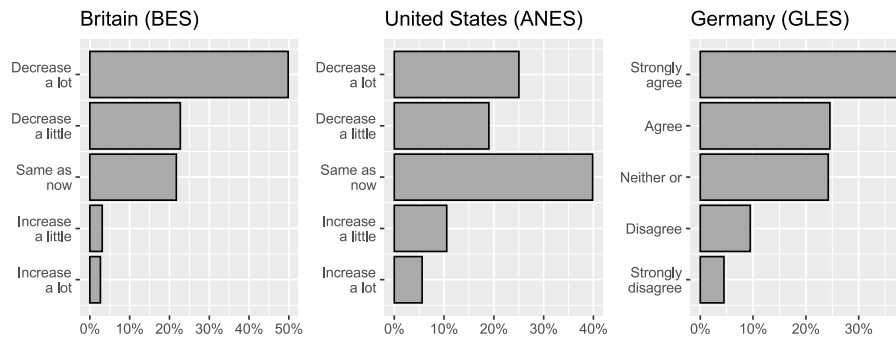
Note: Data on immigration attitudes is from 2015 in BES, 2016 in ANES, and 2016 in GLES. For full question wording, see Online Appendix A. N = 24,289 (BES), 3,621 (ANES), 5,761 (GLES).

Fig. 1. Distribution of immigration attitudes in Britain, the US and Germany.
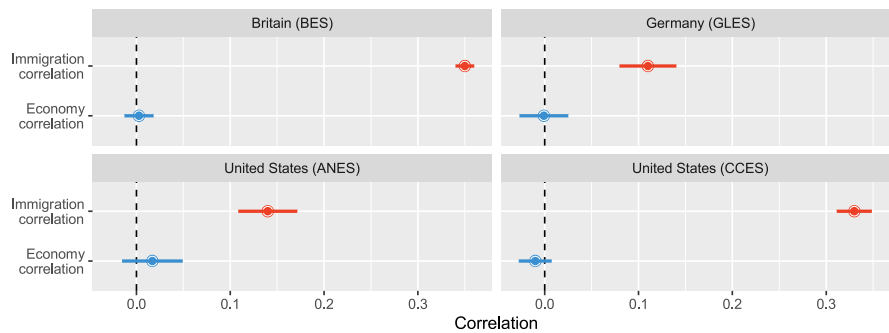
Note: For question wordings and descriptive statistics of the measures, see Online Appendix A and B. For a formal test of the effect of issue salience on attitudes, see Online Appendix D.

Fig. 2. Correlations between attitudes and salience - immigration and economy.

Table 1
Switching to opposite party family.

	Britain (BES)		United States (ANES)		United States (CCES)		Germany (GLES)	
	Move left	Move right	Move left	Move right	Move left	Move right	Move left	Move right
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Immigration attitude	−0.79***	2.04***	−0.18	2.14***	−1.99***	2.49***	0.20	0.55***
	(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.55)	(0.38)	(0.35)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.21)
Economic attitude	−0.31	0.58***	−0.23	0.42	−0.40	−0.53**	0.02	0.02
	(0.27)	(0.21)	(0.48)	(0.34)	(0.32)	(0.22)	(0.26)	(0.23)
Male	0.06	−0.08	−0.03	0.24	−0.23	−0.33***	−0.07	−0.40***
	(0.12)	(0.09)	(0.28)	(0.18)	(0.15)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.11)
Age	−0.02***	−0.004	−0.001	−0.004	−0.02***	−0.02***	−0.01*	−0.02***
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Education	0.17***	−0.21***	0.07	−0.12***	0.01	−0.18***	−0.16***	−0.14***
	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Unemployed	0.73	−0.62	−0.71	0.38	−0.08	0.17	−0.22	0.02
	(0.46)	(0.61)	(1.02)	(0.42)	(0.42)	(0.25)	(0.35)	(0.28)
Ideology	0.23***	−0.06***	−0.07	−0.04	0.26***	−0.27***	0.07**	−0.05*
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
	(0.52)	(0.45)	(1.23)	(0.77)	(0.53)	(0.37)	(0.46)	(0.40)
N (total)	4559		1907		9547		5514	
N (same party)	3648		1718		8946		4846	
N (move left/move right)	310	601	53	136	188	413	290	378
Akaike Inf. Crit.	5426.90	5426.90	1426.37	1426.37	4985.78	4985.78	4943.93	4943.93

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from multinomial logistic regression models. *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

attitudes and vote switching in either direction. The next two models report the results from the CCES data. Here, we find that more liberal immigration attitudes predict a shift from right to left. However, even here, we find a stronger positive association between immigration attitudes and switching from left to right. Note, too, that the CCES immigration measures differ somewhat from those of the BES and ANES. In Online *Appendix E*, we show that all eight individual items, predict switching from left to right, but do not all predict moving from right to

left. Importantly, this suggests that the magnitude of the asymmetric realignment can be conditional upon the measures being applied in the datasets.

Lastly, models 7 and 8 present results for Germany. Here, once again, the evidence is consistent with the other models: immigration attitudes explain left to right vote switching but not right to left vote switching. Overall, the findings support Hypothesis 1, that immigration attitudes are more strongly associated with a switch from left-to-right than right-to-left between 2016 and 2018 in Germany, between 2010 and 2019 in the UK, and between 2012 and 2016 in America (for 2015-19 switching in the UK using alternative panel data, see *Appendix C*).

Other issues lack the same asymmetric switching potential. For instance, economic attitudes (such as public spending preferences) explain movements from right to left as well as left to right, resulting in a symmetric realignment – a kind of ideological sorting – of economically left voters into left-wing parties, and vice-versa. Economic preferences generally carried a smaller coefficient than immigration measures in Table 1, which comports with Hypothesis 2, that immigration attitudes are more important for switching than material preferences. Indeed, we find no systematic patterns for economic attitudes in the three datasets.

Anti-immigration voters tend to rank immigration more highly than pro-immigration voters, as we saw in Fig. 2. Thus, it is not surprising that we find a similar pattern to that in Table 1 (immigration attitudes) for immigration salience. People who report that immigration is their most important issue are more likely to switch from left to right than from right to left across all three datasets. Although we find economic concerns are, at least in some cases, also associated with vote shifts, the ratio of switchers to stayers among those who prioritize immigration is considerably greater than the same ratio among those who prioritize the economy (cf. Hypothesis 2). Again, in our cases, immigration-related right-to-left switching is weaker than immigration-related left-to-right switching.

In sum, we have found systematic evidence for an issue-based asymmetric realignment between parties of left and right in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany in this period (i.e., the 2010s). Immigration is considerably more likely to predict a vote switch from left to right than vice versa. In addition, economic concerns are not as closely associated with switching as immigration attitudes and salience, which show how, when certain conditions are met, these realignment dynamics create political winners and losers.

This said, we do not posit an iron law that holds irrespective of context. These findings concern issue-specific asymmetric realignment in a particular period, the 2010s, in three major western immigrant-receiving countries. Further research is needed to test whether these findings are generalizable across the OECD, much less the world. In addition, we cannot infer from these results that a tough stance on immigration benefits political parties on the right while harming political parties on the left, especially in the longer term. What if a right-wing party's stance on immigration contributes to a general deterioration in its brand and leader images which eclipses issue-specific gains, as noted by Schaffner (2022) for the United States? This would suggest that issue-specific realignment may be offset by a countervailing image-specific realignment. Hence when it comes to macro-asymmetric realignment from left to right around immigration, this may be more of a European than American phenomenon. Here we would note that right parties in Britain increased their popular share of the vote by ten points between 2010 and 2019 (32.4 percent to 42.4 percent). The Republicans, however, dropped from 47.2 percent in 2012 to 46.1 percent in 2016 and, in 2020, they lost the popular vote by 4.4 points.

While the relationship between parties' immigration position and macro-asymmetric realignment is beyond the scope of this paper, there may be a relationship between the proportion of anti-immigration voters in the electorate (which was 25 points lower in the U.S. in 2012 than in the U.K. in 2010) and the seeming absence of macro-asymmetric realignment in the U.S. compared to the U.K. Results could also change if the salience of economic or foreign policy issues rises,

displacing immigration, as occurred in Britain after the Brexit vote, covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine/cost-of-living crisis. Future research would be well placed to probe the relationship between pro-immigration sentiment and negative affect toward right-wing parties or leaders, as well as the effect of shifts in issue salience, to assess whether these overshadow the kind of issue-specific micro-asymmetric realignment noted here.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have demonstrated how the increased prominence of the immigration issue in three Western democracies -the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany-had profound political effects in the 2010s. We have shown how immigration has been strongly associated with party switching, especially among voters who hold anti-immigration views. Drawing on large-scale survey data, we find that public attitudes regarding immigration became increasingly sorted along partisan lines during this period and were associated with vote-switching, albeit in an asymmetric way. Immigration salience and attitudes predicted the likelihood of voters switching from left to right more than from right to left. When it comes to immigration, anti-immigration voters were more politically responsive to this issue than pro-immigration voters in the 2010s. They were more likely to change their vote in response to demand- or supply-side factors which caused immigration to become more salient or clearly associated with one party. The combination of higher rates of immigration and/or the partisan politicization of the immigration debate during the 2010s resulted in considerably more anti-immigration left voters moving towards the German right, UK Conservatives and U.S. Republicans than pro-immigration voters from these parties switching to the left.

Our findings also have important implications for how we conceptualize realignments more generally. The existing literature on realignments tends to elide two distinct phenomena: a) a new pattern of demographic and issue-based voter sorting; and b) the rise of a new party or coalition to a position of multi-electoral dominance. In this paper, we instead advocate a more nuanced approach which distinguishes between symmetric realignment, where the first but not the second condition obtains, and asymmetric realignment, where both take place. In addition, we argue for an even finer-grained approach, which distinguishes between micro-asymmetric realignments around single issues, which may counter each other or be offset by image-based asymmetric realignments, and macro-asymmetric realignments, whereby an issue-based asymmetric realignment translates into an enduring shift in the balance of power.

In the case of the UK, we find a micro-asymmetric realignment over immigration that favoured the right in the 2010–19 period. Realignment over immigration – and the related issue of Brexit – appears to have translated into a macro-asymmetric realignment favouring Conservatives, which at least partly found its expression, at the 2019 general election, in the party's largest majority since 1987. In the United States, we have also discovered a pattern of micro-asymmetric realignment over immigration that favours the right. However, the smaller share of anti-immigration voters in the United States compared to the UK means that a countervailing image-based asymmetric realignment against Trump and the Republicans may be substantial enough to offset or overcome the immigration-specific realignment, which might help to explain how the Democrats were able to return to the White House in 2020. As a result, immigration-based micro-asymmetric realignment may not translate into the macro-asymmetric realignment we saw in the UK, and perhaps in Western Europe (Gidron 2022), in this period. Likewise, events such as the covid-19 pandemic or Russia-Ukraine war can reduce the salience of immigration compared to the economy, which may affect the micro-realignment processes noted here.

These are only intuitions, however, and require further investigation. In addition to extending our analysis to continental European countries beyond Germany, further research should explore whether there are

indirect negative impacts of immigration politics on right parties. For instance, the demographic decline of whites relative to minority ethnic groups, which in part underlies the rise of anti-immigration politics across the West, may also be producing a countervailing shift to the left, driven by an alliance of university graduates, ethnic minorities and liberal professionals. While this may not directly stem from the latter's desire for more immigration, it may work indirectly, through more negative right-wing leader and party images, to shape elections. Here researchers would need to pay especially close attention to the relative size of the direct and indirect effects which govern the potential for asymmetric realignment.

Finally, Schaffner (2022) finds that voters who feel racism is highly prevalent in America moved from the Republicans to the Democrats between 2016 and the 2018 midterms in larger numbers than those who believe it to be less prevalent shifted the other way. Parties' immigration policy cues may be contributing to this sorting, though this is a phenomenon which lies beyond the scope of our analysis.

Data availability

The replication material needed to reproduce all models, figures and tables will be made publicly available at the Harvard Dataverse.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102551.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

Asymmetric Realignment

A. Question wording
A.1 BES

Variable	Question wording	Answers	Data collected
Vote	UK General Election vote preference	- I would not vote	*YouGov profile*
		- Conservative	- 2019
		- Labour	- 2015
		- Liberal Democrat	- 2010
		- Scottish National Party (SNP)	
		- Plaid Cymru	
		- United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)	
		- Green Party	
		- British National Party (BNP)	
		- Change UK – The Independent Group (W16)	
		- Brexit Party (W16W17W18)	
		- Independent Candidate (W17W18)	
Immigration attitudes	Do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United Kingdom to live should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now?	5-point scale (Increased a lot, Increased a little, Left the same as it is now, Decreased a little, Decreased a lot)	March 2015
Immigration salience	As far as you're concerned, what is the SINGLE MOST important issue facing the country at the present time?	*Coded responses*	February 2014 - March 2014
Economic attitudes	Do you think that each of these has gone too far or not far enough? Cuts to public spending in general	5-point scale (Not gone nearly far enough, Not gone far enough, About right, Gone too far, Gone much too far)	February 2014 - March 2014
Economic salience	As far as you're concerned, what is the SINGLE MOST important issue facing the country at the present time?	*Coded responses*	February 2014 - March 2014
Male	Gender	Male	*YouGov profile*
		Female	
Age	Age	Age in years	December 2019

Education	At what age did you finish full-time education?	- 15 or under	December 2019
		- 16	
		- 17-18	
		- 19	
		- 20+	
		- Still at school/Full time student	
Unemployed	Which of these applies to you?	- Working full time (30 or more hours per week)	December 2019
		- Working part time (8-29 hours a week)	
		- Working part time (Less than 8 hours a week)	
		- Full time student	
		- Retired	
		- Unemployed	
		- Not working	
		- Other	
Ideology	In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on the following scale?	11-point scale (from 'Left' to 'Right)	February 2014 - March 2014

A.2 ANES

Variable	Question wording	Answers
Immigration attitudes	Do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be decreased a lot, decreased a little, left the same as it is now, increased a little, or increased a lot?	5-point scale (Increased a lot, Increased a little, Left the same as it is now, Decreased a little, Decreased a lot)
Immigration salience	What would you say is the single most important problem the country faces?	*Coded responses*
Economic attitudes	Should federal spending on Social Security be increased, decreased, or kept the same?	Increased

Decreased

Kept the same |
| Economic salience | What do you think are the most important problems facing this country? | Yes if one of following selected: Employment; The economy; Economic inequality |
| Male | Male

Female | |
| Age | Age in years | |
| Education | What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received? | - Less than 1st grade

- 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th grade

- 5th or 6th grade

- 7th or 8th grade

- 9th grade

- 10th grade

- 11th grade

- 12th grade no diploma

- High school graduate - high school diploma or equivalent (for example: GED) 10. Some college but no degree

- Associate degree in college - Occupational/vocational program

- Associate degree in college -- Academic program

- Bachelor's degree (For example: BA, AB, BS)

- Master's degree (For example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA)

- Professional School Degree (For example: MD,DDS,DVM,LLB,JD) |

		- Doctorate degree (For example: PhD, EdD)
Unemployed	We'd like to know if you are working now, temporarily laid off, or are you unemployed, retired, permanently disabled, a homemaker, a student, or what?	- Working now
		- Temporarily laid off
		- Unemployed
		- Retired
		- Permanently disabled
		- Homemaker
		- Student
Ideology	Where would you place yourself on this scale?	11-point scale (from 'Left' to 'Right)

A.3 CCES

Variable	Question wording	Answers
Immigration attitude	What do you think the U.S. government should do about immigration? Select all that apply. - Grant legal status to all illegal immigrants who have held jobs and paid taxes for at least 3 years, and not been convicted of any felony crimes - Increase the number of border patrols on the U.S.-Mexican border - Grant legal status to people who were brought to the US illegally as children, but who have graduated from a U.S. high school - Fine U.S. businesses that hire illegal immigrants - Admit no refugees from Syria - Increase the number of visas for overseas workers to work in the U.S. - Identify and deport illegal immigrants - Ban Muslims from immigrating to the U.S.	For all questions: - Selected - Not selected
Immigration salience	How important are each of these issues to you? Immigration	5-point scale (No importance at all, Very low importance, Somewhat low importance, Somewhat high importance, Very high importance)
Economic attitudes	State legislatures must make choices when making spending decisions on important state programs. Would you like your legislature to increase or decrease spending on the five areas below? Welfare	5-point scale (Greatly increase, Slightly increase, Maintain, Slightly decrease, Greatly decrease)
Economic salience	How important are each of these issues to you? Jobs	5-point scale (No importance at all, Very low importance, Somewhat low importance, Somewhat high importance, Very high importance)
Male	Male Female	
Age	Age in years	
Education	What is the highest level of education you have completed?	No HS High school graduate Some college 2-year

		4-year
		Post-grad
Unemployed	Which of the following best describes your current employment status?	- Full-time
		- Part-time
		- Temporarily laid off
		- Unemployed
		- Retired
		- Permanently disabled Homemaker
		- Student
		- Other
Ideology	How would you rate each of the following individuals and groups? Yourself	- Very Liberal
		- Liberal
		- Somewhat Liberal
		- Middle of the Road
		- Somewhat Conservative
		- Conservative
		- Very Conservative

A.4 GLES

Variable	Question wording	Answers
Immigration attitude	Refugees who come to Germany for economic reasons should be deported	5-point scale (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree)
Immigration salience	In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing Germany today?	Problems mentioning immigration
Economic attitudes	Some people prefer lower taxes, although this results in less social services. Others prefer more social services, although this results in raising taxes. What is your personal view on this issue?	7-point scale (1: lower taxes, although this results in less social services, 7: more social services, although this results in raising taxes)
Economic salience	In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing Germany today?	Problems mentioning economy, taxation, fiscal, deficit, budget, wage and jobs
Male	Please state your gender.	Male, Female
Age	Please enter the year you were born in.	
Education	What's your highest level of general education?	(1) Finished school without school leaving certificate
		(2) Lowest formal qualification of Germany's tripartite secondary school system, after 8 or 9 years of schooling ("Hauptschulabschluss, Volksschulabschluss")
		(3) Intermediary secondary qualification, after 10 years of schooling ("Mittlere Reife, Realschulabschluss or Polytechnische Oberschule mit Abschluss 10. Klasse")
		(4) Certificate fulfilling entrance requirements to study at a polytechnical college/university of applied sciences ("Fachhochschulreife (Abschluss einer Fachoberschule etc.)")
		(5) Higher qualification, entitling holders to study at a university ("Abitur or Erweiterte Oberschule mit Abschluss 12. Klasse (Hochschulreife)")
Unemployed	Which of the categories from this list applies to you?	(1) Unemployed
		(0) In full-time employment; In part-time employment; In a traineeship or apprenticeship; High school student; College student; Retraining course; Short-time work; Alternative community

		service; In early retirement, retirement, on a pension; Maternal/parental leave; No employment (housewife/househusband)
Ideology	In politics people often talk of "left" and "right". And where would you place yourself?	11-point scale (from 'Left' to 'Right)

B. Descriptive statistics

Table B.1: Descriptive statistics, BES

Characteristic	N = 24,289[1]
Left, 2010	0.56 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Left, 2015	0.49 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Left, 2019	0.49 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Male	0.49 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Age	59.75 (13.72) [20.00, 93.00]
Education	3.22 (1.49) [1.00, 6.00]
Unemployed	0.02 (0.12) [0.00, 1.00]
Ideology	5.09 (2.42) [0.00, 10.00]
Immigration attitude	0.78 (0.26) [0.00, 1.00]
Economic attitude	0.66 (0.26) [0.00, 1.00]
Immigration issue	0.27 (0.44) [0.00, 1.00]
Economic issue	0.26 (0.44) [0.00, 1.00]

[1]Mean (SD) [Range]

Table B.2: Descriptive statistics, ANES

Characteristic	N = 3,621[1]
Left, 2012	0.58 (0.49) [0.00, 1.00]
Left, 2016	0.52 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Male	0.46 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Age	49.46 (17.59) [18.00, 90.00]
Education	11.24 (2.31) [1.00, 16.00]
Unemployed	0.05 (0.22) [0.00, 1.00]
Ideology	5.72 (2.46) [0.00, 10.00]
Immigration attitude	0.62 (0.28) [0.00, 1.00]
Economic attitude	0.76 (0.30) [0.00, 1.00]
Immigration issue	0.04 (0.21) [0.00, 1.00]
Economic issue	0.20 (0.40) [0.00, 1.00]

[1]Mean (SD) [Range]

Table B.3: Descriptive statistics, CCES

| Characteristic	N = 13,269[1]
Left, 2012	0.55 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Left, 2016	0.52 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Male	0.48 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Age	56.48 (14.83) [18.00, 95.00]
Education	4.04 (1.44) [1.00, 6.00]
Unemployed	0.05 (0.21) [0.00, 1.00]
Ideology	4.09 (1.85) [1.00, 7.00]
Immigration attitude	0.51 (0.31) [0.00, 1.00]
Economic attitude	0.43 (0.30) [0.00, 1.00]
Immigration issue	0.75 (0.44) [0.00, 1.00]
Economic issue	0.88 (0.32) [0.00, 1.00]

[1]Mean (SD) [Range]

Table B.4: Descriptive statistics, GLES

Characteristic	N = 5,761[1]
Left, 2016	0.53 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Left, 2018	0.51 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Male	0.56 (0.50) [0.00, 1.00]
Age	50.63 (14.11) [17.00, 88.00]
Education	4.56 (1.16) [2.00, 6.00]
Unemployed	0.04 (0.19) [0.00, 1.00]
Ideology	5.45 (2.30) [1.00, 11.00]
Immigration attitude	0.70 (0.29) [0.00, 1.00]
Economic attitude	0.54 (0.25) [0.00, 1.00]
Immigration issue	0.09 (0.28) [0.00, 1.00]
Economic issue	0.03 (0.17) [0.00, 1.00]

[1]Mean (SD) [Range]

Figure B.1: Distribution of immigration attitudes, CCES
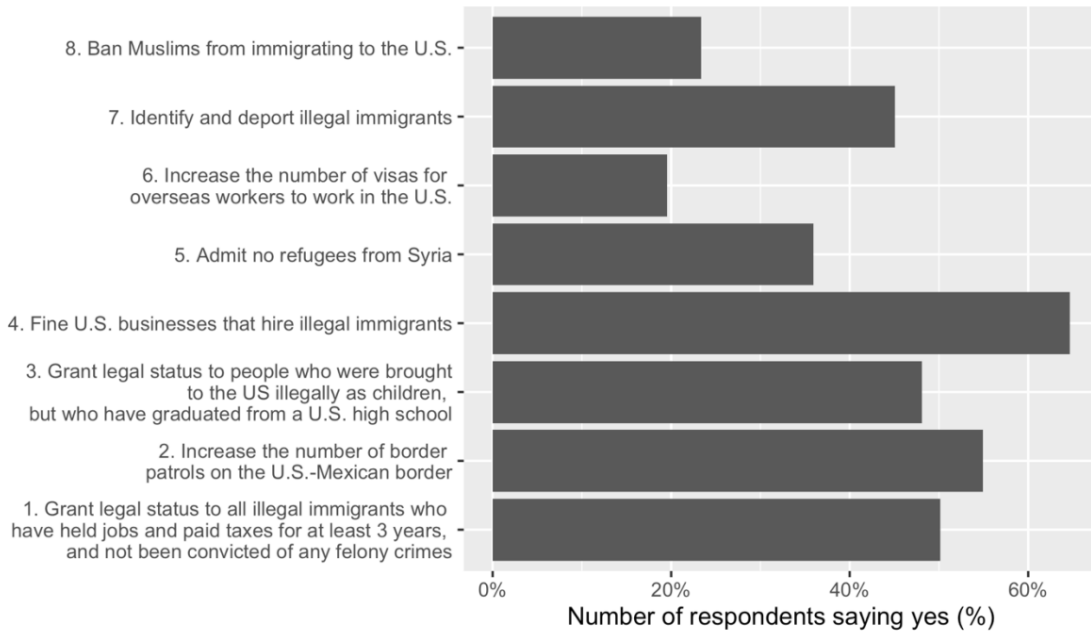
C. Robustness test: 2015-2019 vote switching

Table C.1: Multinomial logistic regression models, 2015-2019, BES

	Move left	Move right
	(1)	(2)
Immigration attitude	-0.74***	2.00***
	(0.23)	(0.33)
Economic attitude	-0.74***	1.38***
	(0.24)	(0.28)
Male	0.05	-0.07
	(0.11)	(0.12)
Age	-0.01***	0.01**
	(0.004)	(0.01)
Education	0.13***	-0.14***
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Unemployed	0.06	-0.37
	(0.54)	(0.74)
Ideology	0.14***	-0.06**
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	-1.78***	-5.12***
	(0.47)	(0.60)
N	4705	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4,754.23	4,754.23

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from multinomial logistic regression models. $^* p < .1$, $^{**} p < .05$ $^{***} p < .01$

## D. Regression models: Issue salience and attitudes

Table D.1: Multinomial logistic regression models, 2015-2019, BES

Country	Britain (BES)	Britain (BES)	United States (ANES)	United States (ANES)	United States (CCES)	United States (CCES)	Germany (GLES)	Germany (GLES)
Attitude	Immigration	Economy	Immigration	Economy	Immigration	Economy	Immigration	Economy
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Immigration issue	0.13***	0.002	0.13***	-0.03	0.12***	-0.04***	0.07***	-0.05***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Economic issue	0.002	-0.02***	0.001	0.01	0.01*	0.02***	-0.04*	-0.002
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Male	-0.01	-0.05***	-0.01	-0.05***	0.03***	-0.01***	0.02***	0.01*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age	0.003***	-0.001***	0.002***	0.003***	0.001***	-0.0004***	0.001***	0.001***
	(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0003)	(0.0002)
Education	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.01***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.01***	-0.02***	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Unemployed	-0.03	0.09***	0.02	0.04*	0.02**	0.07***	0.01	0.10***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Ideology	0.02***	-0.06***	0.04***	-0.01***	0.09***	-0.09***	0.04***	-0.03***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Constant	0.55***	1.11***	0.46***	0.99***	0.03**	0.86***	0.49***	0.61***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Observations	5,299	5,145	3,374	3,364	12,786	12,277	5,520	5,514
R^2	0.24	0.32	0.15	0.07	0.45	0.32	0.16	0.09

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from multiple linear regression models.
*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

E. Regression models: Items in CCES
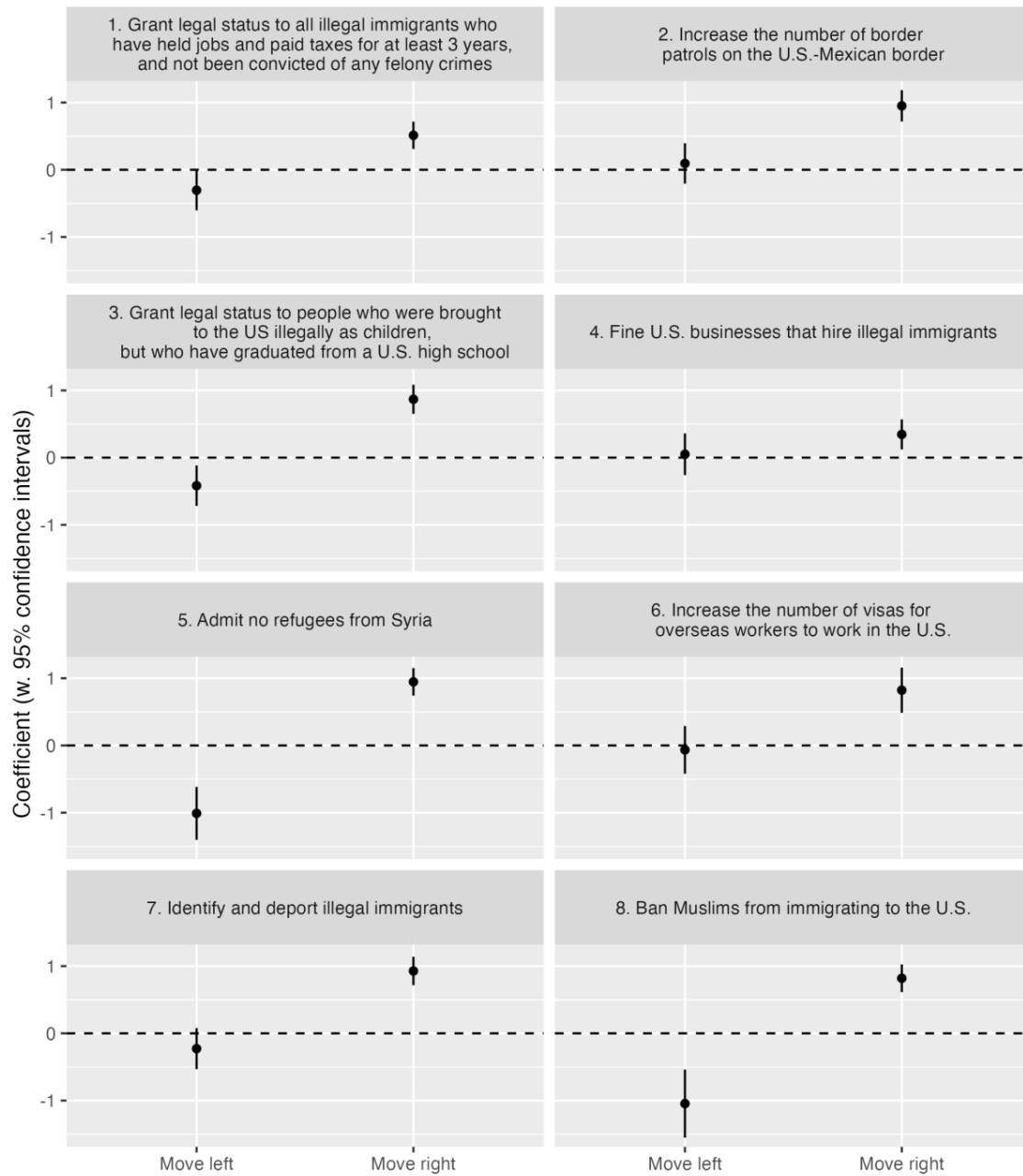
Note: All estimates are from multinomial logistic regression models controlling for gender, age, education, and employment status. The individual items are coded such that a positive value indicates an anti-immigration attitude.