

From toleration to recognition

explaining change and stability in party responses to the Danish People's Party

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From toleration as recognition: Explaining change and stability in party response to the

Danish People's Party

Abstract (200 words)

The opposition from other Danish political parties toward the Danish People's Party (DPP) predominantly take the form of tolerant opposition. DPP is mostly treated as an ordinary political opponent, and the main governing parties in Denmark (the Social Democrats and Liberals) have adapted to the challenge by intensifying their co-optation and cooperation strategies, in effect recognizing their policies and rhetoric on immigration. Subsequently, opposition from the international community and civil society has increasingly conflated its critique of DPP with the ruling government. Using process-tracing methods sampling newspaper articles, the article sheds light on facilitating and constraining factors explaining variation in the timing and execution of strategies undertaken by the main governing parties. Analysis focus on a period after DPP's emergence (1997–2001) and a period involving extensive cooperation between DPP and other parties (2014–2019). I conclude that political collaborators, liberal democratic ideology and institutions, and civil society have been unable to constrain dominant factions within the parties which sought to respond to DPP success by addressing popular grievances and societal developments through co-optation and cooperation strategies. While the responsiveness of the political establishment has improved democratic representation of certain grievances, their tactics have led to the deterioration of rights of foreigners.

Keywords: populism, populist radical-right, defensive democracy, party strategies, Denmark, the Danish People's Party

Introduction

Denmark has long been regarded a case where populist, radical-right challengers such as the Danish People's Party (DPP) "are treated as ordinary political opponents and whereby forms of cooperation remain possible" (Rummens and Abts 2010, p. 649). Since DPP was established by breakaway representatives from the Progress Party in 1995, the main governing parties in Denmark (the Social Democrats and Liberals) have adapted to the challenge by co-opting their policies and rhetoric on immigration (Stubager et al 2021) and cooperating with the party in parliament (Christiansen 2017; Salo and Rydgren 2021). Nevertheless, there are differences in the timing and intensity of responses; whereas the party and its leaders were frequently labeled as extremist, faced coercive forms of confrontation from civil society, and were subject to an unsuccessful attempt at ostracism in the 1990s, the party has since achieved its ambition of being considered a normal party (Christiansen 2017).

The article applies Bourne's (2023) typology to identify tolerant and intolerant responses undertaken by public authorities, political parties, and civil society actors toward DPP in a period after its emergence (1997–2001) and a period involving extensive cooperation with other parties (2014–2019). Considering the responses toward DPP predominantly being undertaken by political actors, the article seeks to answer the following question: Why did the main governing parties intensify co-optation and cooperation strategies toward DPP, and what explains the (cross-party) differences in the timing and execution of such strategies?

The article answers this by identifying the facilitating and constraining factors affecting party strategies toward DPP. By explaining party strategies with an emphasis on party competition and liberal democratic constraints, the article adds to the existing literature, which either has focused on how political parties have responded (Meret 2021), only discuss the research question at a very general level (Heinze 2018), has focused on the strategies of DPP itself (Christiansen 2017) or aimed at explaining strategies of just a single party (Bale et al 2010; Salo and Rydgren 2021).

I argue that the tendency and variation in responses are explained by multiple factors: intra-party dynamics, external shocks, party system constraints, and the competitive strategies, leadership, and success of DPP itself. Gradually, the main governing parties have chosen to recognize and provide representation of the grievances raised by DPP and their voters rather than safeguarding liberal principles and rights. While Denmark's status as an acclaimed liberal democracy remains intact (V-Dem Institute 2022), the implications of this strategy have undermined the rights of foreigners. Indeed, it remains debatable whether the political elite has failed their purpose by choosing not to contain the threat of DPP or if their responsiveness should be applauded as a democratic achievement (Stubager et al 2021).

Mapping of IoPPs

To map responses toward DPP, I applied Bourne's (2023) Initiatives opposing Populist Parties (IoPP) typology, which classifies initiatives towards populist parties along two dimensions: whether the initiating actor is a public authority, political party, or civil society actor and whether the mode of engagement with populist parties is tolerant or intolerant. Intolerant initiatives suspend normal engagement with the populist party and subject it to exceptional treatment, often legitimized with reference to it threatening liberal democratic principles or institutions. Tolerant engagement involves treating the party as any other normal party. I mapped and categorized initiatives covering the emergence of DPP (1997–2001) and a period involving extensive cooperation with other parties (2014–2019).

Confirming findings from previous studies (Bale et al 2010; Christiansen 2017; Heinze 2018; Meret 2021), the data revealed how opponents mainly apply tolerant means when engaging with DPP. In the first period of investigation (1997–2001), however, DPP was subject to a few (but noticeable)

intolerant measures, involving a failed attempt at *ostracism* and violent forms of *coercive confrontation* by civil society actors toward party leader Pia Kjærsgaard. Initiatives in the sample are predominantly undertaken by political parties and politically controlled public authorities (i.e. government representatives) and take the form of *co-optation*, *cooperation*, and *political persuasion*. Condemning (and demonizing) practices are harsher in the first period, whereas cooperation and co-optation on the immigration issue intensify throughout. In the second period, mainstream parties converged with DPP on the issue, competing instead on ownership in a symbolic “valence competition” (Salo and Rydgren 2021). Here, policy development was highly populist; crisis-invoking and characterized by appeals to swift action (see Moffitt 2016, p. 45).

Public authorities (excluding parties in government) rarely engage, yet there are noteworthy instances in the first period, where foreign bodies subject DPP to different (but tolerant) treatment than other parties by categorizing them as extremist, publishing reports condemning their attitudes as racist and anti-democratic, while denouncing its influence on mainstream parties. In the second period, such initiatives do not target DPP specifically, but apply more broadly to governments and parties passing strict asylum legislation. The most prominent case targeting DPP concerns the EU anti-fraud unit investigation of then-MEP Morten Messerschmidt for the misuse of EU funding.

Pertaining to civil society, adversarial IoPPs are more prevalent in the second period. NGOs and independent bodies do not specifically target DPP, instead condemning all of the parties passing what they consider unsympathetic or illiberal legislation. IoPPs directed specifically at DPP often condemn its stated intention to interfere with decisions made by public media organizations and independent art foundations. While demonstrations *per se* are rarely found in the sample, the cultural elite (scholars, authors, musicians, and newspaper editors) are often publicly disapproving DPP policies and mainstream parties’ adoption hereof.

Explanatory framework

To explain why the main governing parties in Denmark have co-opted and cooperated with DPP, I consider literature on party change and stability. I follow the assumptions of Harmel and Janda (1994 p. 278): Parties are conservative organizations that “only change under pressure,” and that environmental stimuli may act as *facilitators* of change, which is nonetheless carried out by the dominant party faction (Harmel and Janda, 1994, p. 278). Meanwhile, I consider party strategies to be *constrained* by various internal and external pressures (Meguid 2008).

While the emergence and success of DPP in itself may be regarded as a crucial external stimuli facilitating co-optation and cooperation (Harmel and Janda 1994, p. 267), other external facilitators are also important, such as electoral performance, shifts by rival parties, and societal events (Fagerholm 2016). While the literature suggests that changes in leadership or the dominant faction are less instrumental to changes in party positioning than external stimuli (Harmel and Janda 1994; Bille 1997; Fagerholm 2016), factional struggles may be important (Budge et al 2010). Nonetheless, changes in leadership configurations may free the party from past commitments and present a window of opportunity (Backlund 2020, p. 56).

Parties may be constrained by their *reputation* among the electorate or external political actors in approaching DPP (see Strøm et al 1994, p. 319; Downs 2001, p. 29). Concerning their normative/ideological reputation (i.e. allegiance to liberal democratic values and norms), external actors (foreign governments, international bodies or domestic interest groups) may sanction what they consider unprincipled action. Additionally, parties fluctuating wildly in policy positions may appear inconsistent and risk their credibility (Meguid 2008, pp. 35–40). As such, the party and its leaders may be perceived as being “opportunistic or lack[ing] core convictions” (Adams 2012, p. 403). Conversely, waiting for the new challenger to establish itself as an issue-owner before changing policy may result

in the reputational constraint to fortify, as “hesitation will cause the mainstream party to be denounced as a mere ‘copy’ of the ...‘original’” (Meguid 2008, p. 37).

Co-optation may also be *legally constrained* by commitments to jurisdiction and international conventions (e.g. the Danish Basic Law, administrative law, the EU Law, or ECHR) (Backlund 2020, p. 54). As regards the political arena, parties may experience self-imposed *coalition constrains* if they have formed alliances with other parties (Strøm 1990, p. 569). This especially pertains to multi-party systems like the Danish, where single-party majority governments are highly unlikely.

Finally, party strategies may be obstructed by *organizational constrains* pertaining to factional struggles or a lack of leadership autonomy (Meguid 2008, pp. 105–106). A party may lack internal cohesion and need to compromise on a selected strategy to satisfy all factions, or discontent factions may obstruct strategy selection (Strøm and Müller 1999, pp. 294–295).

Case selection and methods

The methods for data collection were adopted as part of the larger project ‘Populism and Democratic Defense in Europe’ to enable comparison across countries and in-depth case studies (see Bourne 2023). Adopting a qualitative research design, the project used a purposive sampling with the aim of discovering a broad range of IoPPs and being able to trace the causal process taking place between initiatives. The sampling strategy thus combines systematic methods and snowballing. Data collection proceeded by systematically sampling the Monday edition of two daily national Danish newspapers, *Berlingske Tidende* and *Politiken*. I scanned the headline and first paragraph of each article to find indication of IoPPs undertaken. On this basis, I snowballed leads to fill missing links and ensure I did not miss noteworthy initiatives. To deal with sampling bias pertaining to journalistic reporting, I triangulated data using secondary sources (e.g. party documents, legislative records, interviews).

Selecting from the vast array of actors undertaking IoPPs, I narrow the scope to focus on the two main governing parties—the Social Democrats and Liberals—and compare their strategies toward DPP after their emergence (1997–2001) and at the height of their electoral success and parliamentary influence (2014–2019). In so doing, the article sheds light on how the parties cope differently with constraints in two vastly different temporal contexts. I have selected the Social Democrats and Liberal Party, as DPP particularly appeals to their respective voter segments (Stubager et al 2021). Moreover, I expect them to be most heavily affected by the emergence and success of DPP, as they both strive for votes not merely as an end-goal but to seek office and policy influence (see Strøm 1990, pp. 572–573; Kosiara-Pedersen 2018, p. 48). Drawing comparisons across these timespans allows me to examine why the Liberals reacted more coherently and swift to the immediate DPP challenge and why the radical right constitutes a lesser challenge to the Social Democrats in the final analysis.

The article applies process tracing techniques to identify the causal process taking place as parties change and intensify their respective strategies toward DPP. Process tracing methods allow me to make within-case inferences about causal mechanisms by carrying out an in-depth case study (Beach and Pedersen 2013). The ambition of the current article is case-centric and thus focuses on explaining a particular outcome (Gerring 2006; Beach and Pedersen 2013, p. 18). To explain the main governing parties' strategies toward DPP sufficiently, the analysis is conducted through an iterative process, whereby I infer potential explanations from previous studies pertaining to general patterns or the Danish case while being open to the empirical evidence itself.

Change and stability in party responses

The Social Democrats (1997–2001): Tactics constrained

When DPP emerged in 1995, the Social Democrats formed the government together with the Social Liberals and Centre Democrats (the latter leaving the government in 1996). From 1997 onwards, the

Social Democratic response to DPP was characterized by hesitant and modest *policy co-optation* along with an effort to *demonize* DPP and an inconsistent attempt to *ostracize* them. The Social Democrats thereby attempted to play a double game of imitation and dissociation. Policy-wise, the Social Democrats tightened legislation on integration, citizenship attainment, and family reunification. The most important (and lasting) IoPP was the Integration Act of 1998, which sought to disperse refugees across municipalities and implement a lower-level introduction benefit (which was later abolished due to lack of effect). The Social Democrats were preoccupied with policies aimed at solving integration issues rather than accommodating DPP demands to restrict admission. Even legislation which in effect restricted admission was framed as “addressing barriers of integration” (Ritzau 2000). Party leadership enhanced the co-optation strategy by appointing two new interior ministers in this period, the one more rebellious and tough on immigration than the other. Karen Jespersen in particular amplified the co-optation strategy rhetorically, suggesting that asylum seekers with criminal convictions be placed on a deserted island and initiating a value debate opposing multiculturalism and presenting Muslim values as a threat to Danish culture. Concurrently, the Social Democrats attempted—and failed—to ostracize DPP. This was legitimized by associating DPP proposals and behaviors with extremism, xenophobia, and even Nazism. Most famously, PM Poul Nyrup Rasmussen declared that: “You will never be *Salonfähig!*” (Statsministeriet 1999). Nevertheless, the ostracism strategy was inconsistent with practice—only extending to immigration and integration—as the Social Democrats invited DPP to state budget negotiations and collaborated on local government formation.

Facilitators: External trends and internal factions

Several factors *facilitated* the Social Democratic co-optation strategy. Demographic changes and challenges integrating newcomers in tandem with increased media attention to the immigration issue (Hervik 2006) prompted the Social Democrats to debate these issues, both internally and in public (Bjørklund and Andersen 2002, p. 128). The topics had gained prominence in the 1980s, coinciding

with the increasing numbers of asylum-seekers and public concerns regarding the negative impact of immigration on Danish society (Andersen 1999). Following internal factional struggles, the party settled on integration as their solution to the immigration issue. When the party assumed office in 1993, Minister of the Interior Birthe Weiss began an extensive policy development process aimed at enacting Denmark's first Integration Act (Jønsson 2018). Yet as polls showed a dramatic increase in DPP's vote share in the fall of 1997 prompted by a hostile campaign toward immigrants and refugees by tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* (Hervik 2006), the Social Democratic leadership felt inclined to react, appointing Aarhus Mayor Thorkild Simonsen, an outspoken critic of government policies, to signal a tougher stand on integration before presenting the Integration Act proposal (Bjørklund and Andersen 2002). Before the establishment of DPP, immigration had neither dominated elections (Stubager et al 2020, p. 18) nor been decisive for vote choice (Stubager et al 2021, pp. 150–151), but their emerging electoral threat rendered it priority policy for the Social Democrats.

Internal factional struggles were decisive for making the party leadership intensify this strategy. Since the 1980s, Social Democratic mayors from the municipalities surrounding Copenhagen had promoted a right turn on immigration (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008, p. 623). Despite the party leadership attempting to accommodate this faction with the Integration Act and appointing Simonsen as Minister, the mayors continued to air their frustrations with government policies publicly, arguing that preventing “ghetto” formation and limiting immigration would undermine DPP (Thobo-Carlsen 1999). Party leadership initially disagreed, insisting that the issues had been dealt with through the Integration Act and claiming that public criticism was damaging the party. As internal disputes persisted, Simonsen felt inclined to propose a new law in early 2000 restricting legal rights to family reunification.

Constraints: Past policies and political alliances

The Social Democratic efforts to compete on the immigration issue were constrained by their past policies and political alliances. The party was often framed by DPP as being responsible for past failures to integrate immigrants and refugees, which profited from having “clean hands” (Rydgren 2004, p. 496). In addition, the reactive and reluctant policy response constrained the Social Democrats’ ability to appear credible once they chose to prioritize strict(er) immigration policies (see Meguid 2008, p. 37). For example, bending to external and internal pressure to restrict access to family reunification conflicted with previous attempts at downplaying the issue and presenting it as settled. Unsurprisingly, a majority of voters perceived this as a mere tactical move by the government when the law was reached with Liberal and Conservative support in May 2000.

While respectful of international conventions, the Social Democrats cared less about international normative reputation in the face of domestic issue competition. Confronted with criticism from the Council of Europe, who asserted that the mainstream parties share the responsibility for the spreading of xenophobic values in Danish society, the Social Democratic party leaders delegitimized their report and rejected its conclusions. Instead, the Social Democrats’ coalition partner, the Social Liberals—opting for a more liberal position on immigration—constrained the Social Democrats by blocking stricter measures envisioned by the party. Karen Jespersen’s advancement of several radical initiatives had violated such constraints, with the Social Liberals claiming that the Minister’s conduct was threatening government cooperation and demanding an explanation from Nyrup, who also faced internal dissent (Larsen and Nielsen 2000). Nyrup initially backed her in public but was subsequently forced to redirect focus and to tone down the rhetoric. The Social Democrats thus found it difficult to deliver a coherent response, and the government failed to settle the immigration issue (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008, p. 623).

The Liberal Party (1997–2001): Tactics unleashed

When DPP was established in 1995, the Liberal Party had been in opposition for two years after the so-called Tamil case brought down the Conservative-led government. In the first period studied, the Liberals intensified their *co-optation* strategy and approached DPP to engage in *parliamentary cooperation*. After the 2001 election, the party established a government (with the Conservatives) based solely on DPP support. Policy-wise, the Liberals began pursuing new immigration and integration policy after losing office in 1993, more or less intentionally accommodating the Progress Party (and later DPP) demands while abandoning mainstream consensus on the matter (Bjørklund and Andersen 2002, pp. 127–129; Holm 2006; Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008, p. 372). The Liberals promised to tighten legislation on family reunification, immigration, and integration before the 1998 election. In the following election term, they intensified their criticism of government policies on immigration and co-opted DPP to increase the salience of the issue. Before the 2001 election, the Liberals presented a comprehensive program to combat “uncontrolled immigration”, including proposals to repatriate rejected asylum seekers, restricting requirements for family reunification, and reintroducing lower social benefits for immigrants (Venstre 2001). Despite supporting elements of DPP proposals, the party rejected the most radical of them, such as stopping all immigration inflow and abandoning the Schengen Agreement. Likewise, the Liberals condemned the most transgressive DPP behavior and rhetoric despite the party itself co-opting elements of their style to amplify their co-optation strategy. Rhetorically, the party promoted and dramatized the immigration issue intensively in the prelude to the 2001 election, which helped make immigration the second-most discussed issue in the campaign (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). Over the course of the period, the Liberals appeared more willing to engage in *parliamentary cooperation*. Before the 1998 election, the Liberals had been reluctant to pursue such active collaboration. Instead, they adopted a “take it or leave it” approach to immigration, denying DPP bargaining power but giving them the opportunity to vote in favor (Hardis

1998). Even after the unexpected election loss in 1998, new chairman Anders Fogh Rasmussen preferred turning to centrist parties to constitute a center-right coalition (Bille 1999, p. 378). This changed, however, as Fogh proposed a form of *parliamentary cooperation* upon suggesting in 2001 that the mainstream parties should negotiate a national pact on immigration with DPP.

Facilitators: Relief of coalition constraints and new leadership

Multiple factors facilitated the Liberals' co-optation strategy and pursuit of more active collaboration with DPP. A precondition was the lack of constraints compared to the Social Democrats. Reputationally, the Liberals were not constrained in collaborating with DPP, as they had already previously governed with passive Progress Party support (1982–1993)—even briefly accepting more active influence on a potential right-wing government during the 1994 election campaign (Bjørklund and Andersen 2002, p. 127). Moreover, when the Social Democrats failed to live up to their own attempt at ostracizing DPP, the Liberals were unlikely to be sanctioned for engaging. Coalition constraints pertaining to policy co-optation proved more complicated. Despite being relieved of formal coalition constraints in 1993, when the centrist parties shifted sides as a consequence of the Minister of Justice's administrative malpractice in the aforementioned Tamil case (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008, p. 372), the importance of centrist-party mandates for constituting a government remained. Illustrative hereof was resigning PM Poul Schlüter's decision not to take electoral advantage of a campaign, which would presumably be for or against the Tamils, as such a strategy would scare away the centrist parties for good (Christiansen 2017, pp. 54–55). Indeed, polls prior to the 1998 election indicated that the Liberals and Conservatives could not assume office relying solely on DPP, and the Centre Democrats absolute demand not to tighten asylum policies inhibited the co-optation strategy. While the Liberals markedly changed policy and rhetoric after 1993 (Holm 2006, p. 107; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008, pp. 622–623), they nevertheless balanced proposals to appeal both to centrist parties and DPP.

The new leadership following the 1998 election helped the Liberals to intensify their co-optation and cooperation strategies (Green-Pedersen and Odsmalm 2008, p. 373). Despite outgoing chairman Ellemann-Jensen having campaigned for a bourgeois government based solely on right-of-center parliamentary support in 1998, his approach to DPP was less compromising than that of his successor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who initially appealed to the centrist parties after assuming the chairmanship (Bille 1999, p. 378). Ellemann-Jensen did not intend to rule with DPP as an active coalition partner and condemned their “demagogic” behavior and political attitudes on several occasions (Hardis 1998), whereas Fogh engaged in a far more pragmatic, accommodating approach. Evidently, this was clearest on the immigration issue, where Ellemann’s “take it or leave it” approach stood in contrast to Fogh proposing a national compromise. Fogh eventually abandoned his initial appeal to the centrist parties, as coalition incentives for forming a pure right-wing alliance emerged with electoral polls throughout 2001 repeatedly favoring such a majority. Thus, governing solely on the strength of DPP mandates became the most likely path back into office (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008, p. 622). Illustrative hereof was Fogh’s speech at the Folketing opening in October, where he presented immigration as a threat and rejected centrist party warnings not to promote such an agenda (Karker et al 2001). Politicizing the immigration issue paid off: Immigration dominated the 2001 election campaign, and the right-wing parties won the majority (Andersen 2003; Green-Pedersen and Odsmalm 2008).

The Social Democrats (2014–2019): Embracing DPP and relief of political constraints

In the second period under investigation, the Social Democrats intensified their policy *co-optation* strategy and engaged in more obtrusive *co-optation* of the populist DPP style. Simultaneously, the party began engaging in dyadic *parliamentary cooperation* with DPP, hinting at potential *governmental cooperation*. After the 2001 election, the Social Democrats largely accepted the strict, right-

wing immigration policies (Bale et al 2010, p. 415; Christiansen 2017, p. 59) while attempting to downplay the issue when campaigning on socio-economic policies in the run-up to the 2011 election (Meret 2021, p. 179). In the wake of the financial crisis (2011–2015), the Social Democrats assumed office with the Socialist People's Party and Social Liberals. Switching track on economic policy, the government continued the neo-liberal reform program of the right-wing government (Salo and Rydgren 2021, p. 26) while passing modest liberalization of immigration and integration legislation (Christiansen 2017, p. 63; Jønsson 2018, p. 189).

At the Folketing opening in October 2014, Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt declared the intention of the Social Democrats to *co-opt* and accentuate DPP positions on refugees and asylum. The party passed legislation with the right-wing parties to deny family reunifications within the first year of arrival and to enforce temporary residence permits. In the prelude to the 2015 election, the party blatantly *co-opted* DPP's protectionist populism with the *Denmark You Know*-campaign, appealing to refugees and immigrants to provide for themselves. After losing control over government in 2015, the Social Democrats under new leader Mette Frederiksen made a right-turn on immigration, which was substantiated in a new party manifesto and the extensive *Fair and Realistic* policy program, which introduced a change in focus from integration to limiting admission. This proposed, among other things, relocating asylum reception centers to places outside Europe and introducing annual limits on non-Western immigrants. From the opposition, the party pressured the right-wing government to adopt stricter measures on asylum and integration and supported most government initiatives in parliament. The party supported a DPP demand for a “paradigmatic” shift: from integration to repatriation of refugees. Simultaneously, the party engaged with a *stylist co-optation* of populist manners. Abandoning crisis-era austerity measures and aiming at addressing the grievances of “those not recognized by the rest of society,” Frederiksen presented a down-to-earth, people-centered image, which stood in stark contrast to the cosmopolitan, elitist image of her predecessor, “Gucci

Helle” (Salo and Rydgren 2021, pp. 29–33). Under Thorning-Schmidt, the Social Democrats had displayed little interest in collaboration with DPP, attempting instead to denounce the party’s economic policies as irresponsible. Nonetheless, beginning in 2016, the parties began *collaborating in parliament*, blocking several government proposals and campaigning together for new retirement rights, even going so far as to hint at future governmental cooperation.

Facilitators: Refugee crisis, leadership change, and new partnerships

An impending electoral embarrassment and the external shock of the unfolding refugee crisis prompted party leadership to adopt stricter immigration policies. By 2014, the Social Democrats found themselves in a historic crisis and felt the electoral threat of DPP, who framed the party as being elitist and out of touch with its original voter constituency (Salo and Rydgren 2021, pp. 28–30). In May 2014, DPP outperformed the Social Democrats in the EP elections, with national polls projecting similar results. According to the chief Social Democratic analyst, with national elections to be held within twelve months, the party decided on a strategy to draw back uncertain DPP voters (Kulager 2021). The impending refugee crisis provided pressure and opportunity for the party to pursue aggressive policy co-optation. In July 2014, the Social Democrats and Social Liberals attempted to reach a compromise to continue with current immigration policies should they return to power after an election. However, increasing numbers of asylum seekers from Syria sparked media attention and led opposition parties to accuse the government of being co-responsible by relaxing asylum legislation. Initially, the Social Democrats proclaimed the government’s adherence to a strict policy, arguing that the current circumstances were “due to the cruel civil war that is taking place in Syria” (Reissmann 2014). However, as the number of asylum-seekers kept rising throughout the autumn and recent internal analyses identified strict asylum policies and rhetoric as key to luring back DPP voters, Thorning-Schmidt chose to exploit the circumstances and proclaimed a new course in policy (Kulager 2021).

New leadership after the 2015 election defeat further advanced co-optation and led to cooperation with DPP. Whereas Thorning-Schmidt's initial strategy was modest co-optation, presumably intended to satisfy the Social Liberals and left-wing parties, her successor, Mette Frederiksen managed to make a right-turn on immigration (Meret 2021). Key to Frederiksen's ability to execute this strategy was ideological reinvention, organizational support, and addressing formal coalition constraints. It was a pro-active effort to *accentuate* the immigration issue, which paid allegiance to DPP while creating distance to their allegedly "moralizing" and "elusive" solutions (Tsfaye 2017). This stood in contrast to the previous strategy to reactively accept restrictive immigration legislation in order to *downplay* the issue (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm 2008, p. 377; see Bale et al 2010). Frederiksen addressed the reputational constraints that tormented her predecessors by confronting party history. New key party members promoted the new stand on immigration as a historical break with party policy from the 1990s while aiming to substitute the Thorning-Schmidt-era appeals to "reason" with "emotional appeals" (Winther 2016). Evidently, the new leadership learned from past experiences and accepted that new policy demands investment (see Meguid 2008, p. 28), as exemplified by new policy programs and numerous publications and interviews on the matter. The Social Democrats presented strict immigration policies as integral to a new class-struggle about protecting national culture, rural communities, and working-class identities from the threats of immigration, centralization, and the creative class. Frederiksen has been key to facilitating this ideological reinvention by allying with competing party factions, selecting candidates embodying her strategy, and concentrating power among a smaller circle of politicians and advisers; thereby approximating the hierarchical organizational structure of DPP.

To execute the co-optation strategy, Frederiksen declared her intention in 2018 to constitute a single-party government (Gjertsen 2018). In contrast, Thorning-Schmidt had been unable to deliver on her political promises in government with the Social Liberals (2011–2015), which damaged her

reputation and triggered an uproar among the party base (Salo and Rydgren 2021). In the coalition, the Social Liberals had been able to dictate government immigration policies in a (slightly) liberal direction (Jønsson 2018, p. 189) and compelled it to continue with austerity policies (Meret 2021, p. 179). Conversely, under new leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl, DPP had assumed a center-left position on welfare issues (Kosiara-Pedersen 2020). Approaching DPP may have been crucial for transferring policy ownership from DPP to the Social Democrats (see Meguid 2008, p. 38), which was important after its support for austerity reforms alienated many working-class voters (see Hansen and Stubager 2017). The DPP partnership also made it possible to counter speculation from the right-wing government that the Social Democrats had to make immigration-related concessions to the other center-left parties should they resume office. The 3F trade union paved the way for the Social Democratic approach to DPP when they appealed to DPP in 2013 to oppose the Thorning administration austerity reforms (Salo and Rydgren 2021, pp. 31–35). This stood in contrast to the 1990s, where unions had supported Nyrup's attempts at ostracizing DPP. In 2016, they now favored the Social Democrats joining forces with DPP rather than the Social Liberals. *Cooperation* took place based on mutual recognition between the parties. In contrast to the tense relationship between former DPP chairman Kjærsgaard and Thorning-Schmidt, Thulesen Dahl appeared more willing to cooperate with the Social Democrats under Frederiksen (see Salo and Rydgren 2021, p. 31). After the 2019 election, the Social Democrats resumed office as a single-party government. Despite not improving their share of the popular vote, the co-optation strategy was pivotal for increasing the overall vote for the center-left parties at the expense of DPP, which lost more than half of their seats (see Hjorth and Vinæs 2020; Stubager et al 2021, pp. 105–110).

The Liberal Party (2014–2019): Coalition trouble and liberal illiberalism

In the second period under investigation, the Liberal Party sustained and radicalized the *co-optation* of DPP's immigration and asylum policies, amplified by *co-opting* a populist style by performing

threat and invoking crisis (see Moffitt 2016). The Liberals continued *parliamentary collaboration* with DPP, even appealing to *governmental collaboration* in the 2015 election campaign after having ruled this out previously. The party later abandoned such rapprochements, instead pursuing a cross-bloc coalition in the run-up to the 2019 election. With substantial disparities, the second period replicated the successful partnership in the 2000s, where the Liberals formed a government coalition with the Conservatives, with DPP serving as a semi-office support party. The coalition government's approach to DPP in this decade has been called a "log-rolling" strategy, where DPP received policy rewards (often on immigration) in exchange for supporting the government's liberal economic policies (Christiansen and Pedersen 2014).

From a position in opposition (2011–2015), the Liberals continued cooperating with DPP to oppose what they saw as the government's liberal immigration and asylum policies (Meret 2021, p. 180). In the run-up to the 2015 election, the Liberals proposed differentiated Westerner/Non-Westerner work permit requirements and reduced social rights for refugees. Here, the Liberals cooperated with DPP (and the other right-wing parties) on joint initiatives on law and order, health care, and asylum. Despite approaching DPP with an eye to their participation in government, the Liberals eventually formed a minority government, which was later expanded to include Liberal Alliance and the Conservatives. During its four years in government, the Liberals enacted numerous initiatives restricting legislation on asylum, immigration, and integration. They kept their promises to tighten citizenship rules and lower benefits for immigrants, enacted a "ghetto law," decided to stop receiving UN quota refugees, restricted the free speech of religious "hate preachers" and enacted the controversial "jewelry law," stripping refugees of valuable assets upon arrival to the country. The party also made U-turns on the introduction of border controls, restricted access to family reunification, promises to work to amend the UN Refugee Convention, and they adopted the so-called anti-mask law, prohibiting certain kinds of face coverings in public. Taking up DPP demands for a "paradigmatic shift" on

asylum, the Liberals took steps to make refugee status temporary. Liberal Minister of Immigration Inger Støjberg co-opted the populist DPP style, often presenting Muslim values as a threat to Danish society. Støjberg ostentatiously commemorated each tightening of asylum legislation, in one Facebook post polemically posing with a cake to mark the fiftieth such measure. Nevertheless, collaborating with DPP proved more troublesome than in the 2000s. Several key Liberal figures dissociated from DPP, condemning its immigration rhetoric and tactics. During the 2019 election campaign, Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen eventually abandoned the idea of a government coalition including DPP, instead appealing to “responsible and experienced parties”—in particular the Social Democrats—to constitute a government across the political center (Westersø 2019).

Facilitating co-optation: Refugee crisis and addressing ideological constraints

Several factors facilitated *co-optation* of DPP policies on immigration. Although the Liberals had settled on a strict immigration and asylum policy throughout the 2000s (Christiansen 2017), the party arguably came to enact legislation which it otherwise would not have pursued without outside influence. The Refugee Crisis provided external stimulus, increasing media attention and party competition on asylum, and prompting the Liberal Party to engage (Meret 2021). Initially, the Liberals rejected DPP-demands to introduce border controls and isolate refugees in camps, pursuing alternatives such as EU cooperation, and appealing to the Social Democrats for a broad settlement and to Danish civil society to help refugee integration. By November, however, the government presented 34 restrictive measures on asylum. As the refugee crisis unfolded and limitations of the European asylum system became clear, such national solutions appeared more attractive, although party competition and pressure from DPP were important catalysts for policy change. DPP had been left frustrated by the Liberal government’s appeal to EU and the center-left and moreover saw their position as the sole radical alternative threatened. In addition to the Social Democrats’ stricter asylum policy, both the DPP and the Liberals faced a new competitor on the right, the New Right, which sought to abolish

the right to asylum altogether. For its part, Søren Espersen (DPP) threatened to overthrow the government if the Liberals pursued a broad settlement without DPP (Søndberg 2015). Løkke succumbed to the pressure, promising a more restrictive asylum law than initially planned.

The Liberal Party had to address constraints pertaining to their ideological allegiance to liberalism to enact certain policies (e.g. the anti-mask law and the so-called ‘hate preacher’ act). The solution was to frame illiberal proposals so as to assume a *defence* of liberal principles (see Freeden 2008, p. 26). Whereas, Moffitt (2017, p. 117) has argued that DPP promotes a “liberal illiberalism” by “selectively pick[ing]-and-choose[ing] the most appropriate and useful parts of liberalism and refashion[ing] them for their own illiberal means,” the Liberals followed the same procedure to legitimize their co-optation strategy. The party debate surrounding a DPP-inspired proposal to ban burqa and niqab serves as an illustrative example. Proponents within the Liberal Party picked up the issue after a verdict of the Belgium High Court, arguing that “niqab and burqa is violating personal freedom and equality” (Schmidt 2017). In contrast, opponents within the party maintained that a ban would violate the Basic Law, stating that “it must not be the case that we preach freedom of speech, but that it does not apply to Muslims” (Klarskov 2017). Ultimately, the party settled on a “an anti-mask law,” claiming their opposition to legislate against religious practices, but on masking as such, which “includes—the cunning reader will note—also the burqa and niqab” (Skærbæk 2017). The example shows how the purpose of a proposal—to restrict practices of a particular religious community—is masked so to be contained within a universalist, liberal framework. The Liberals managed to enact several illiberal measures legitimized by claiming to protect Danish liberal democracy against its enemies. By misappropriating liberalism to justify illiberal measures, the party contributed to diluting its contents (Freeden 2008, p. 26), in turn diminishing the constraining potential of liberalism (Moffitt 2017, p. 118).

Constraining collaboration: Coalition trouble and internal opposition

In contrast to the 2000s, the relationship between the Liberal Party and DPP was conflictual. In the 2019 elections, the Liberals abandoned their strategy to include DPP in a right-wing government, eventually appealing to a cross-bloc coalition. Multiple factors facilitated this change: the behavior of DPP, coalition constraints, organizational constraints, and the likelihood of the New Right gaining parliamentary representation. After the 2015 election, DPP stood firm on four mandatory demands for entering a government coalition with the Liberal Party, instead resuming their role as support party (Christiansen 2016; Meret 2021). Yet the previously successful logrolling-strategy seemed insufficient for DPP, who demanded influence on socio-economic issues after having campaigned on a center-left economic platform and increased their bargaining power by almost doubling its seats in parliament. To pursue their goals, DPP collaborated with center-left parties to obstruct several economic reforms of the government. In retrospect, leaders of the Liberals and their governing-partner, Liberal Alliance, claimed that DPP-chairman Thulesen Dahl was less willing to compromise than his predecessor, Kjærsgaard (Rasmussen 2020; 24syv 2022a). Lars Løkke (Liberals, PM) contended that the DPP leader presented last-minute demands, and he pointed to Thulesen Dahl's populist style as inspiring the idea to seek a cross-bloc coalition (Rasmussen 2020). Coalition constraints pertaining to the relationship between DPP and Liberal Alliance were also influential. In the 2000s, Liberal Alliance support was necessary to constitute a right-wing government, and they often clashed with DPP on welfare reforms and integration policies. This conflict extended to the Liberal Party itself. According to Minister of Justice Søren Pind, the strategy to co-opt DPP on numerous controversial integration measures spawned "severe internal clashes" (24syv 2022b). Several key party members openly opposed immigration policies implemented by their government, with one MP leaving the party over the issue. Compromising on key liberal principles had not contained the radical right, with extremist alternatives to DPP—the New Right and Hard Line—exacerbating the issue competition. When the former seemed likely to enter parliament, Løkke decided to approach the center-left

(Rasmussen 2020), refusing to “constitute a government supported by parties wanting to opt out of the Refugee Convention”—despite hitherto having done so by relying on DPP parliamentary support (Rosendahl 2019).

Conclusion

The Liberal Party and Social Democrats have responded to the Danish People’s Party with increased intensity but varied timing, mainly using co-optation and cooperation strategies while at the same time condemning their most radical demands and behavior. The parties have departed from mere toleration-based responses and come to express recognition of the policies, values, and populist style associated with DPP. Overall, political collaborators, liberal democratic ideology and institutions, and civil society actors have been unable to constrain dominant factions when designing strategies to respond to DPP.

The Liberals adopted stricter immigration policies already before DPP’s establishment after being relieved of coalition constraints when the centrist parties shifted sides to support a Social Democratic government in 1993. Under new leadership after the 1998 election, the party intensified the co-optation strategy. The new leadership chose to engage in more active forms of parliamentary cooperation with DPP to constitute a right-wing government with their active support from 2001–2011. In contrast, the Social Democrats were split internally from the outset on how to respond to DPP, and they were moreover constrained by their coalition partner, the Social Liberals. In the late 2010s, the Social Democrats eventually embarked on an aggressive co-optation strategy after having struggled with a convincing response to the new populist right. This was facilitated by the external shock of a refugee crisis, increased inter-party competition, and leadership changes. Moreover, the strategy of the DPP itself enabled cooperation with the party. Concurrently, the Liberals’ previous successful partnership with DPP turned conflictual. In the 2019 election campaign, party leadership abandoned previous

appeals to include DPP in government, instead pursuing a cross-bloc coalition. The free-floating strategy of DPP, internal disputes within the Liberal Party, and newcomers on the extreme right triggered the new strategy.

Tentative conclusions point to IoPPs having noteworthy perverse effects for liberal democratic principles and rights, while state institutions (e.g. the public media organizations) have largely been safeguarded from DPP attempts at violating the arm's length principle. Most significantly, the main governing parties' co-optation and cooperation strategies have undermined the rights of foreigners. Welfare benefits for immigrants and refugees are now substantially inferior compared to those of the native population, while access to asylum, permanent residency, and family reunification have been restricted considerably. Political majorities have challenged liberal and human rights. The Liberals—in particular—have openly opted to take “process risks”. Consequently, the ECHR ruled against the three-year waiting period for family reunification in a test case, and Liberal Minister of Justice Inger Støjberg was convicted in court of having separated under-aged asylum-seeking couples without individual assessment, which resulted in her impeachment. Notwithstanding the perverse effects, it could be argued that democratic representation has been strengthened by the main governing parties' co-opting of DPP policies (at least among the native population). The parties have aligned with their traditional constituencies, meaning that large sections of the electorate are now better represented than in the 1980s and 1990s; both regarding socio-economic and socio-cultural preferences (Stubager et al 2021, pp. 221–224). Nevertheless, the radical/extreme right has not been contained. Rather, they now comprise several parties all opting to restrict the rights of foreigners and to challenge liberal democratic institutions, such as the ECHR. As regards DPP, however, successive electoral defeats in recent years suggest it has fallen victim of its own success.

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