Divergence over Conformity: Change in Immigration Attitudes after the Electoral Success of an Anti-Immigration Populist Party in the Finnish 2015 Parliamentary Elections

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Abstract

The populist, anti-immigration oriented Finns Party was considered the winner of the Finnish 2015 parliamentary elections. In a representative sample of young adults (*N* = 606), a longitudinal pre- post-election design revealed that attitudes towards immigration became more favorable among those disappointed by the outcome and those who did not vote for the Finns Party. Among the latter, both supporting the green-red rival parties and disliking the Finns Party independently predicted increased support for migration. Other attitudes did not change. The results highlight the importance of social processes and identity concerns, particularly self-categorization, as drivers of attitude change. Whereas previous work has focused on conformity dynamics, our results suggest that diverging from an unwanted identity may be associated with attitude change.

Keywords: attitude change, elections, anti-immigration attitudes, political psychology, self-categorization

Divergence over Conformity: The Ironic Effects of the Electoral Success of an Anti-Immigration Populist Party in the Finnish 2015 Parliamentary Elections

Finland witnessed a shift of power in the 2015 parliamentary elections. The largest opposition party, the Centre Party Finland, became the largest party in Finland with 49 out of 200 seats in parliament (14 seats more than in the preceding 2011 election) and 21.1 % of the vote. However, the gains of the Centre Party were much smaller than expected, and the results were generally considered an extraordinary victory for the Finns Party (e.g., Arter, 2015). The Finns Party, despite losing one seat, became the second largest party with 38 seats and 17.7 % of the vote. This was considered a major victory because a) their relative standing became better than ever before, b) their popularity had sky-rocketed in the 2011 elections, in which they recorded an unprecedented 15-percentage-point advance, and they were now able to consolidate their power, and c) they were certain, for the first time, to be included in the upcoming government (Vatanen, 2015). In terms of ideology, the Finns Party is a populist and nationalist-oriented far-right single-issue party comparable to other Nordic populist parties and other nationalist and right-wing populist movements in Europe that are anti-EU and anti-immigration (Van Spanje, 2011).

We examined the effect of the election outcome – i.e., the success of the Finns party – on attitudes towards immigration. Fueled by the historic influx of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East, immigration was the most hotly contested topic in the run-up to the elections. In its 2015 election program the Finns Party employed negative and racialising descriptions of migrants from Africa and the Middle East. These groups were essentialised and inferiorised on basis of both cultural habits (e.g., do not want to adopt European notions of gender equality and freedom of speech) and economic matters (e.g., expensive free-rider who do not have the skills needed in the labour market). Their immigration program demanded a reduction in the number of refugees and other (non-western) migrants and dehumanised these groups as mere economic costs, depriving them of any worth beyond perceived economic usefulness/uselessness (Keskinen, 2016).

On the one hand, one could expect an increase in anti-immigration sentiment. People’s attitudes are often determined by the attitudes of others (Cialdini, 2005), and the election outcome could give the impression that anti-immigration attitudes are common and socially acceptable. Previous research on the expression of prejudice bears evidence of very high conformity to social norms – there is a very close fit between group norms about the expression of prejudice and group members willingness to express that prejudice (Crandall, Eshleman, & O’Brien, 2002). Expectation of increasing anti-immigration sentiment could also be derived from research showing that people adjust their wishes to come to terms with irreversible outcomes. This has also been shown in the context of elections, when people elevate their evaluations of the winning candidate and derogate the losing candidate, regardless of initial preferences (Beasley & Joslyn, 2001).

On the other hand, one could expect increased support for immigration. Self-categorization theory, which generally analyses group processes in terms of the distinction between personal and social identity, suggests that where one disagrees with out-groups, their perceived difference from self explains and justifies the disagreement, and there is no need to agree. In fact, when the immediate situation increases the salience of a social categorization and associated identity, group member’s attitudes shift towards a perceived ingroup norm or prototype that best defines the group in contrast to other groups in the immediate social context (Hogg, Turner, & Davidson, 1990). I.e., when exposed to out-group sources of influence, people polarize away from those sources, towards a more extreme in-group position (David & Turner, 1996). Consistent with this, in the aftermath of two other recent populist victories – the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump – the reactions of those who voted otherwise have been marked by shame, disbelief, embarrassment and trepidation at national peril (e.g.., Green et al., 2016). Similar feuds, in which the shocked and appalled elite was accused of living in a “red-green bubble” of their own making, also broke out after the Finnish parliamentary elections (Hamilo, 2015). Based on self-categorization theory one could expect that the people living in the green-red bubble; i.e., people sympathetic to the Left Alliance (LA; a left-wing party) or Green League (GL; an environmental party; both with 7-9% of the vote) would further increase their already strong support for immigration (Westinen, Kestilä-Kekkonen, & Tiihonen, 2016).

Supporters of the three moderate parties (with 15-22 % of the vote), the Centre Party of Finland (CPF; a center-right party with agrarian roots), the National Coalition Party (NCP; a moderate right-wing party), and the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDPF; a moderate left-wing party), could be expected to be less affected by the feuds between the Finns Party and its red-green ideological rivals. However, people may be motivated to diverge from disliked others also in situations which group identity is not particularly salient. For instance, people seek to diverge from behaviors supported by low-status others (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006) and shift their attitudes away from those of obnoxious others (Cooper & Jones, 1969). Disliking the Finns Party, regardless of other party preferences, could thus also increase support for immigration.

We sought to investigate how the success of the far-right Finns Party affected the immigration attitudes of the general electorate. Based on the previous literature, one could expect either anti-immigration attitudes (convergence hypothesis) or pro-immigration attitudes (divergence hypothesis) to take hold of the country. The election results could also have different effects on different people. Especially those who were disappointed with the results or did not vote for the Finns Party could be expected to strengthen their support for migration. Both sympathizing with the red-green ideological rivals of the Finns Party and disliking the Finns Party could thus be associated with increased support for migration. The Finns Party primarily attracted voters with their anti-immigration appeal, and we therefore did not expect their victory to affect attitudes pertaining to more general economic or moral attitudes.

**Methods**

**Participants and Procedure**

The limitations of using college student samples for research on sociopolitical attitudes are well-known (e.g., Henry, 2008). Our participants were young adults recruited via a marketing research company (Norstat Finland) internet survey panel. Of those 744 participants who took part at the pre-election measurement point, 606 (359 women) also took part at the post-election measurement point. Sample size was determined by monetary constraints. No participants were excluded.

Participants’ mean age (pre-election) was 24.7 (*SD* = 3.16, range 18-29 years; we focused on young adults for purposes unrelated to the present research questions). Election Day was April 19th, 2015. Participants completed the pre-election survey between March 23rd and April 16th, and the post-election survey between April 20th and May 4th. Occupation-wise, most participants were full-time employed (41%) or students (39%), but a notable fraction were unemployed (11%). Regarding education, roughly half had received secondary education (54 %) and somewhat fewer post-secondary education (36 %), but a notable percentage had only received primary education (9 %). The samples provided by commercial survey firms have previously been shown to provide relatively representative, non-biased and good quality data (Chang & Krosnick, 2009).

**Measures**

**Political Attitudes**. Attitudes towards immigration were measured by two items. Participants indicated, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) their agreement with the items ‘Finland receives too many immigrants’ (*reverse scored*) and ‘Finland will become a better place to live when people from other countries move here’. We included four items assessing economic conservativeness (pertaining to the level of welfare benefits and the tax code) and two items assessing traditional moral conservativeness (pertaining to the length of prison sentences and the legalization of marihuana). Mean scores, standard deviations, and reliabilities are presented in Table 1.

**Voting Behaviour.** At the post-immigration measurement point, participants were asked to indicate whether they had voted and for which party they had voted.

**Party preferences.** At both the pre- and post-election measurement points, party preferences were measured with an item asking the participant to rate each of the major parties on a scale from 1 (*do not like at all*) to 5 (*like very much*).

**Disappointment.** At the post-election measurement point participants indicated on a scale from 1 (*not at all disappointed*) to 4 (*extremely disappointed*) how disappointed they were with the election results. No other measures in any way pertaining to the elections or the current research were administered.

**Results**

Those who participated only at the pre-election measurement point did not differ from those who participated both pre- and post-election (*F* < 1 for the differences on all attitude measures). To establish that elections were actually perceived a victory for the Finns Party, we ran a one way ANOVA that showed that those who had not voted for the Finns Parry were disappointed with the outcome whereas those that had voted for them were not (*M* = 2.37 (*SD* = 0.90) vs. *M* = 1.74 (*SD* = 0.67); *F* (1, 604) = 39.545, *p* < .001). In terms of bivariate correlations, being disappointed with the election results was correlated *r* (577) = - .49 (*p* < .001) with liking the Finns Party. These results, as well as all other results were virtually identical regardless of whether age and sex were controlled for.

Pre- and post-election attitude scores are shown in Table 1. Paired samples *t*-tests showed that immigration attitudes were more positive after the elections. Supporting a connection between disappointment in the outcome and change in immigration attitudes, the partial correlation (controlling for pre-election immigration attitudes) between disappointment and post-election immigration attitudes was *r* (603) = .16 (*p* < .001).

Regarding change in immigration attitudes as a function of voting behavior, a GLM that predicted post-election immigration attitudes with pre-election immigration attitudes (*F* = 334.70, partial eta squared = .36, *p* < .001), dichotomously coded voting behavior (*F* = 12.00, partial eta squared = .02, *p* < .001; voters of the Finns Party were coded 1, everyone else 0), and their interaction (*F* = 29.15, partial eta squared = .05. *p* < .001) showed that those who had voted for the Finns Party differed from those who had not. Change on the other two attitude measures did not interact with voting behavior (both *F* < 1). Follow-up *t*-tests showed that among those who voted for the Finns Party, immigration attitudes did not change, whereas among those who did not vote for the Finns Party, attitudes towards immigration became more favorable (Table 1). Note that the results are opposite to those that would be expected based on regression to the mean.

We argued that change in immigration attitudes could be associated with both support for the Left Alliance or Green League, or by dislike of the Finns Party. Before pursuing this question, we first established that attitudes towards immigration varied in the expected manner according to party preferences. Table 2 shows that supporters of the Finns Party indeed opposed immigration, whereas supporters of the Green League and Left Alliance were for immigration. Neither economic conservatism nor traditional moral conservatism differentiated supporters of the Finns Party. Among those that did not vote for the Finns Party, we computed partial correlations (controlling for pre-election immigration attitudes) between post-election party preferences and immigration attitudes. These were -18, -.07, .03, .08, .14, and .16 (all *r* > .14 significant at *p* < .001), for the Finns Party, Centre Party, National Coalition, Social Democrats, Left Alliance, and Green League, respectively. These correlations suggest that both sympathizing with the Left Alliance or Green League, as well as disliking the Finns Party, were associated with attitude change. To investigate the independent predictive power of party preferences, we ran a regression analysis in which we predicted post-election immigration attitudes with pre-election immigration attitudes, liking of the Green League (β = .07, *p* < .01), and liking of the Finns Party (β = -.08, *p* < .01). Both supporting the Green League and disliking the Finns Party independently and to a similar degree predicted attitude shift in favor of immigration. The results were similar when the Green League was replaced by the Left Alliance (β = .06, *p* < .01; due to multicolinnearity, we did not enter the Green League and Left Alliance simultaneously).

**Discussion**

The election success of the Finns Party in the 2015 Finnish parliamentary elections was, somewhat ironically, followed by an increase in pro-immigration sentiment among the general electorate. Our results underline the importance of divergence dynamics in explaining attitude change. The results are particularly interesting considering how notoriously difficult it is to change people’s political attitudes. Such attitudes do not easily respond to reason or logic (Taber & Lodge, 2006), in part because they may have distinct psychological or physiological underpinnings, but also in part because of their importance for social identity (Cohen, 2003). Previous research that has investigated the social processes that underlie attitude change has focused on the importance of conforming (Levitan & Verhulst, 2016). Our results suggest that attitude change may also be associated with the motive to diverge.

Consistent with self-categorization theory, especially supporters of the red-green parties polarized towards their ingroup’s immigration favorable norms. However, mere dislike of the Finns Party, regardless of own party preferences, was also associated with increased support for immigration. An underlying mechanism could be fear of being misidentified as a supporter of the Finns Party (Berger & Heath, 2008); both the risk and cost of being misidentified can have increased in the heated political climate that prevailed after the elections. However, experimental research would be necessary to identify the exact causal and mediating mechanisms that underlie the type of attitude change that we report on.

Increasing populism, nationalist tendencies, and strong public anti-immigration discourses can currently be witnessed in many countries. Indeed, one of the most significant changes across Western European established democracies has been the emergence of successful populist anti-immigration parties, such as Alternative für Deutschland (Germany), the National Front (France), and the Freedom Party (Austria). The election success of these parties, along with Brexit and Trump, could be interpreted as signifying an unstoppable populist wave snowballing across the globe. However, the results of some recent European elections (Spain 2016, Netherlands 2017; France, 2017) in which pro-EU parties or candidates have defeated their anti-EU opponents, suggest that we may not be witnessing the end of liberal democracy. Moreover, the most recent national surveys show that the greatest fear among Europeans today is not more European integration but right wing populism and European disunion (Wind, 2017). Such results, along with the results of the present research, suggest that many Europeans may finally be waking up and reacting against populism, in part by distancing themselves from nationalistic anti-immigration attitudes and discourses.

Empirical analysis of party ideologies and mass attitudes (e.g., Mudde, 2014) suggest that the anti-immigration parties and their supporters have, across Europe, very much in common. Based on this and the above referred to hints of a growing European opposition to populism, we believe that our results could perhaps generalize to other contexts. However, warranting caution and calling for cross-cultural research on this topic, the evidence that even very basic cognitive and motivational processes vary across populations has been accumulating. Future research should also investigate the effects of election outcomes on less value-laden attitudes. The motive to diverge from the views expressed by the Finns Party could have been particularly forceful because the party’s anti-immigration policy could be perceived as immoral – people are very prone to distinguish themselves from groups with questionable morals (e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005). If indeed perceived morality has a role to play in the divergence dynamics underlying attitude change, then our results could be expected to generalize to other contexts in which the morality of the propagated policies raises questions.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and results from pairwise *t*-tests comparing pre- and post-election political attitudes.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All participants (*N* = 606) | | | | Voted for FP | | | | | | | |  |
|  |  |  |  |  | Yes (*n*= 87) | | | | No (*n* = 519) | | | |  |
|  | Pre | Post | *t* | *p* | Pre | Post | *t* | *p* | Pre | Post | *t* | *p* | α |
| Pro-Immigration Attitudes | 2.55  (1.11) | 2.64  (1.12) | 3.683 | <0.001 | 1.75  (0.88) | 1.79  (0.75) | 0.555 | 0.58 | 2.68  (1.08) | 2.78  (1.11) | -3.888 | <0.001 | .84/.82 |
| Economic Conservatism | 3.12  (0.81) | 3.14  (0.84) | 0.870 | 0.385 | 3.14  (0.83) | 3.04  (0.84) | 1.672 | 0.098 | 3.12  (0.81) | 3.15  (0.83) | 1.742 | 0.082 | .64/.67 |
| Moral Conservatism | 2.73  (0.78) | 2.71  (0.79) | -0.926 | 0.887 | 2.60  (0.71) | 2.61  (0.73) | 0.142 | 0.887 | 2.75  (0.79) | 2.73  (0.80) | 1.014 | 0.311 | .33/.31 |

*Note*. Pre and Post refer to the pre- and post-election measurement points, respectively. Numbers in parenthesis are standard deviations. The column labelled α shows the internal consistency reliabilities at pre- and post-election.

Table 2. Bivariate correlations between pre-election liking of political parties and political attitudes (*N* = 542-577).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Liking of Political Parties | Immigration Attitudes | Economic Conservatism | Moral Conservatism |
| Finns Party | -0.48 | 0.08 | -0.04 |
| Centre Party of Finland | -0.07 | 0.23 | 0.17 |
| National Coalition Party | 0.08 | 0.47 | 0.14 |
| Social Democratic Party | 0.17 | -0.26 | 0.10 |
| Left Alliance | 0.27 | -0.45 | -0.06 |
| Green League | 0.39 | -0.22 | 0.05 |

*Note*. All *r* > .14 significant at *p* < .001.