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Abstrakt

Diese Arbeit untersucht, ob die Politisierung des parlamentarischen Diskurses und die daraus folgende affektive Polarisierung symmetrisch über das politische Spektrum hinweg entsteht oder überproportional vom rechten politischen Rand getragen werden. Dies wird unter Bezugnahme auf die Immigrationsdebatte im österreichischen Parlament über acht Legislaturperioden zwischen 1996 und 2022 erforscht werden. Politisierung wird dabei nicht als inhärentes Merkmal bestimmter ideologischer Akteure verstanden, sondern als strukturelle Eigenschaft des Parteienwettbewerbs. Auf Grundlage des ParlaCAP-Korpus wird Politisierung über zwei direkt beobachtbare Dimensionen operationalisiert, die Salienz eines Themas und die Ausweitung der beteiligten Akteure, während affektive Polarisierung, gemessen als feindselige oder delegitimierende Sprache gegenüber politischen Gegnern, als nachgelagerte Folge behandelt wird. Die Salienz wird über den Anteil eines Themas an der Gesamtdebatte gemessen, die Akteursausweitung über den Wortanteil und die Zahl einzelner Redner und Rednerinnen einer Partei im Verhältnis zu ihrem Mandatsanteil sowie die Animosität auf Sprecherebene über einen LLM, der auf den Originaltexten angewendet und gegen manuelle Kodierung validiert wurde, gemessen.

Österreich wird als besonders ungünstiger Fall für die Symmetrieerwartung gewählt, da es mit der FPÖ eine der ältesten Rechtsparteien Westeuropas aufweist. Dennoch stützen die Ergebnisse die Symmetrieannahme über alle vier Hypothesen hinweg. Die Arbeit kommt zu dem Schluss, dass Politisierung und affektive Polarisierung im österreichischen parlamentarischen Diskurs strukturell und nicht ideologisch bedingt sind, und liefert ein übertragbares Forschungsdesign für die Untersuchung vergleichbarer Dynamiken in anderen parlamentarischen Demokratien.

Abstract

This thesis examines whether politicisation in parliamentary discourse, and the affective polarisation that follows from it, emerges symmetrically across the political spectrum or is driven disproportionately by the political right, as much of the existing literature implicitly assumes. It investigates the immigration debate in the Austrian Parliament across eight legislative periods between 1996 and 2022, treating politicisation as a structural property of party competition rather than an inherent trait of particular ideological actors. Drawing on the ParlaCAP corpus of parliamentary speeches, the analysis operationalises politicisation through two directly observable dimensions, issue salience and actor expansion, and treats affective polarisation, measured as hostile or delegitimising language towards political opponents, as a consequent phenomenon. Issue Salience is measured by the number of words labelled on a specific topic actor expansion via party word share and unique-speaker participation relative to seat share, and speaker-level animosity via zero-shot classification with a large language model applied to the authentic German texts, validated against manual coding.

Austria is treated as a least-likely case for symmetry, given the long institutionalised presence of one of Western Europe's oldest far-right parties. The findings nonetheless support symmetry across all four hypotheses. Immigration salience emerged episodically, peaking during the 2015 refugee crisis, driven by the combined operation of sustained FPÖ issue ownership and an exogenous shock rather than unilateral agenda-setting. Actor expansion followed a poles-versus-mainstream structure, with both the FPÖ and the Greens overrepresented while the governing parties remained underrepresented. Affective polarisation likewise emerged at both poles, with the Greens matching or exceeding the FPÖ's animosity in several periods. Crucially, regression analysis showed that this affective symmetry is driven primarily by government versus opposition status rather than by ideology: opposition status produced a strong increase in animosity across nearly all periods, while the left-right effect weakened or lost significance after controlling for it. The study shows that politicisation and affective polarisation in Austrian parliamentary discourse are structurally rather than ideologically determined, and it offers a transferable research design for examining comparable trends in other parliamentary democracies.

Pledge of Honesty:

“On my honour as a student of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorised assistance on it.”

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

I confirm that artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this thesis in the following ways. As described in the methodology, a large language model (Gemini 2.5-flash) was employed as the central classification instrument for the automated detection of animosity in parliamentary speech; the design, validation, and interpretation of this classification are documented in Chapters 5 and 6. Beyond this methodological use, Grammarly was also used for language editing, including corrections to grammar, spelling, and phrasing. Claude was used as a research aid to support the development of the argument after the foundational literature had been identified independently; all sources were located, read, and manually verified by me, and no source was cited on the basis of an AI tool's representation of it without my own examination of the original. The substantive analysis, interpretation of results, and conclusions of this thesis are my own.

In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas

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1. Introduction

Politicisation and polarisation have become increasingly well-known problems across many democracies worldwide. (McCoy and Somer 2019)

Polarisation in this context does not only refer to the growing distances between party ideologies, but also affective polarisation, which refers to partisan animosity that can affect social cohesion within a society.

At the same time, the politicisation, the process of certain formerly mundane and technocratic issues becoming highly contested in discourse, has become more prevalent (De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016). Therefore, this thesis examines how issue-specific politicisation might act as a precursor to polarisation in parliamentary discourse.

Focusing on speeches from Austrian parliamentary debates between 1996 and 2022 and leveraging advanced large language models for textual analysis, this thesis aims to quantitatively study the extent to which the politicisation of topics can lead to affective polarisation and how to measure this polarisation at the speaker level.

Austria, as a relatively old democratic system, offers a rich context, with its multiparty system, surges in far-right issue entrepreneurship, and observable shifts in parliamentary rhetoric. By looking for rhetorical shifts on both sides of the political spectrum, this thesis tries to add to the scientific body by not only focusing on polarization on the far-right political spectrum.

1.1 Politicisation as a Precursor to Political Polarisation

The concept of politicisation is older than its current usage suggests. Already in 1969 writing in the context of European Integration, Philippe Schmitter introduced one of the earliest and most concrete formulations of the term politicisation as it “refers initially to a process whereby the controversiality of joint decision making goes up. This in turn is likely to lead to a widening of the audience or clientele interested and active in integration” (Schmitter 1969).

This definition already contains the main elements that the following academic scholarship was built upon in developing a general theory of political contestation: rising controversy, expanding actor involvement, and the definition of what counts as a political question (Hooghe and Marks 2009, 2012). This theory is the foundation of the logic this

thesis follows and advances, that issues becomes more controversial, it consequently draws in more political actors and as more actors engage, the intensity of the conflict escalates.

In its established form today, politicisation refers to a process by which a formerly unconflicted issue moves from the technical sphere into one of public contestation and partisan conflict (De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016; Zürn 2019). As already outlined in the 1969 quote, the process is multidimensional; De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke (2016) identify three constitutive dimensions: a rise in issue salience within the political debate, an increase in the polarisation of positions among the political actors engaging with it, and an expansion of the range of actors involved. These are co-present analytical dimensions rather than stages in a fixed temporal order. This process of politicisation is not a descriptive state but a highly dynamic and observable process through which the borders of political contestation are actively constructed and continuously reconstructed (Carmines and Stimson 1986; Green-Pedersen 2007).

A clarification is of essence here, because polarisation enters this framework in two distinct senses. In the definition by De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke (2016) the polarisation of positions, the divergence of policy stances among actors engaged with an issue, is itself one of the three dimensions of politicisation. This positional polarisation must be differentiated from affective polarisation, which refers to the hostility and negative evaluation of political opponents (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). This thesis does not aim to measure positional polarisation as it operationalises the politicisation process through two dimensions that can be observed directly and continuously in parliamentary speech, namely issue salience and actor expansion, while treating affective polarisation not as a component of politicisation but as a resulting consequence.

Each dimension captures a different aspect of how political contention intensifies, and combined they describe a full process through which an issue moves from a technocratic, irrelevant topic to the centre of multi-party conflict.

One of the central arguments of this thesis is that politicisation of an issue does not just describe an intensification of political debate, but act as a structural precursor to affective polarisation, a process this thesis traces empirically through the quantitative analysis of legislative speech. Stated this way, the argument is not a circular one that

politicisation produces polarisation, but the more specific claim that the joint escalation of issue salience and actor expansion precedes the emergence of affective hostility between political camps. This proposed logic, from issue salience through actor expansion to affective polarisation, is the theoretical core of this thesis.

The case of Austria between 1996 and 2022 provides an interesting context in which to examine this process. The long-established presence of a strong right-wing party, recurrent external shocks, like the Balkan wars and the 2015 refugee crisis and the good availability of longitudinal parliamentary speech data across eight legislative periods make it an empirically interesting case for investigating the conditions under which increased politicisation might lead to affective polarisation.

Crucially if the politicisation to polarisation mechanism is found to generate affective polarisation in a symmetric distribution, rather than being mainly driven by right-wing actors it would challenge one of the dominant assumptions in the existing literature.

1.2 The Problem of Political Polarisation

Politicisation, as previously described in the preceding section, is not inherently problematic. Some degree of political fighting is a necessary and constructive feature of democratic life, as without disagreement between parties, the electoral public faces no real choice and the representative function of a parliamentary democracy loses its purpose (Dalton 2008; Koedam, Binding, and Steenbergen 2025; Mouffe 1999). Politicisation can therefore also be understood as a normal part of a functioning democracy, the mechanism through which a specific issue enters public debate, where competing interests are expressed and political accountability is exercised.

The problem therefore does not arise from party polarisation itself but from its evolution into a particularly hostile form, where political opponents are not longer treated as legitimate competitors within a shared democratic framework but as enemies whose defeat justifies the erosion of the very rules that structure democratic competition. In their book “How Democracies Die” Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) detect this discursive shift as the starting point for democratic backsliding. In their account the process often starts with demagogues verbally attacking critics in harsh and provocative terms, as enemies or even a threat to the nation. As a consequence these attacks prove dangerous, since once the electoral public comes to view opponents as illegitimate, actions against them become easier to justify.

Democracy in this reading, depends not only on formalized institutions but on a normative commitment among political actors to regard one another as legitimate challengers rather than existential threats (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019).

The difficulty herein lies exactly in the fact that this boundary is itself heavily contested. Germany's 2025 classification of the party AFD (Alternative für Deutschland) as a confirmed right-wing extremist organisation as a whole reignited the debate about where the boundary between defending the democratic framework and delegitimising a political actor actually lies (Euronews Deutschland 2025; Riffler 2025).

This normative dimension of democratic stability connects to the concept of affective polarisation. McCoy and Somer (2019) find across eleven comparative case studies that when polarisation reaches the point at which a society is divided into multiple mutually hostile camps, democratic institutions come under pressure.

For this thesis the normatively problematic dimension of polarisation is not ideological distance but affective and rhetorical instruments through which the political debate is conducted.

1.3 From Ideological to Affective Polarisation

The concept of polarisation entails two analytically distinct but related dimensions that must be differentiated before any measurement strategy can be argued. The first ideological polarisation, which refers to the distance of policy positions between parties or voters across a left-right or issue-specific dimension ((Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Dalton 2008). In their conception, polarisation refers to how far political actors are on policy questions and an increase in polarisation means that the distance between competing political positions is growing.

The second, affective polarisation, is a concept independent of positional distance. Introduced and operationalised most prominently by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes. (2012), affective polarisation refers to the degree to which political actors or groups hold a negative affect towards opposing parties and their respective supporters, treating them as a disliked out-group rather than as legitimate competitors within a shared democratic framework.

This animosity towards political outgroups in the US has steadily increased over the past 50 years even in periods where measurable policy positions had not significantly diverged (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). This increase was also replicated by other scholars in

other countries and regions like Reiljan (2020) and Garzia, Ferreira Da Silva, and Maye (2023).

This decoupling of the two dimensions of polarization has important implications. As a political system can have parties that have ideologically converged while at the same time still exhibiting high levels of mutual hostility. However, this also works in the opposite direction, parties that are ideologically very distant but conduct debate within mutually respected norms.

Abramowitz and Webster (2016) captured this dynamic through their concept of negative partisanship, demonstrating that voters increasingly tend to shape their political identity through the dislike of the opposing party rather than through positive attachment to their own.

For this thesis this distinction is of a vital importance, as the central empirical question whether hostile and delegitimising rhetoric in parliamentary debate emerges symmetrically across the political spectrum as a topic becomes politicised.

1.4 Current Research Gap

Research on politicisation and polarisation has substantially deepened the understanding of how issues move from technocratic consensus into open political contestation. Yet across much of this scholarship, analytical attention has been distributed unevenly, though rarely by explicit design. The frameworks that dominate the field are formulated in actor-neutral terms: the literature on issue entrepreneurship speaks of "challenger parties," or of parties that are losers on the dominant dimension of competition (Hobolt and De Vries 2015; De Vries and Hobolt 2020), while the literature on mainstream-party responses speaks of "niche parties," a category that in Meguid's (2005, 2008) writings expressly encompasses green and ethno-regionalist parties alongside the radical right. Neither framework is, by definition, about the right. In their empirical application to immigration and European integration, however, the actors cast in the driving, agenda-setting role are overwhelmingly radical-right parties, whereas mainstream and left-wing parties appear predominantly as responders that change their positions once a challenger has forced an issue onto the agenda (Meguid 2005, 2008; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). The right-wing focus of this body of work is therefore largely implicit: it is not stated as a theoretical premise but emerges from the cases the literature has chosen to examine. This concentration is not in itself an error, as the

electoral strengthening of radical-right parties is a well-documented phenomenon. It does, however, raise a methodological concern that the literature has begun to acknowledge from within: Carvalho and Ruedin (2020), analysing immigration claims across seven Western European countries, observe that the overemphasis on the extreme right has left mainstream and left-wing parties comparatively unexamined.

In the field of populism literature, Hunger and Paxton (2022), in a systematic review of nearly 2,800 journal articles published between 2004 and 2019, find that empirical research on populism has often been disproportionately oriented towards right-wing populism, leaving left-wing populist actors relatively understudied. To a similar extent Bonansinga (2022) reinforces this critique in a study of left-wing populist rhetoric in France, noting that the assumption that left populism generates combative rather than hostile discourse has rarely been empirically tested. The article discovers that left-wing actors do deploy enemy-based narratives directed to political outgroups, which is a dynamic missed by the predominant focus on right-wing rhetoric.

This pattern extends beyond only the populism literature. Studies of affective polarisation have relied primarily on mass surveys and voter thermometer scales, that capture partisan effects on a general public level, rather than examining how political elites themselves produce hostile rhetoric across the party spectrum (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Wagner 2021; Reiljan 2020). Herold et al. (2023) find that in a large-scale survey of over 20,000 respondents spanning 10 European countries, individuals positioning themselves on the left of the political spectrum display the highest average levels of affective polarisation, exceeding right- and far-right voters in most issue areas examined. If this assumption of right-wing asymmetry is already challenged on the level of mass public attitudes, further study to examine the process at the level of parliamentary discourse becomes more important.

The consequence of this predominant analytical focus on right-wing actors may indicate a risk of systematic bias. Another limitation is that existing studies examine politicisation through electoral or media arenas, using party manifestos, press releases and newspapers rather than through the institutionalised setting of parliamentary debate (Hutter and Grande 2014; Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019), where sustained politicisation unfolds across legislative terms and through repeated confrontation of political actors across the spectrum. Parliamentary discussions offer a new point of

observation as they can be examined longitudinally in an institutionalised setting across all parties simultaneously.

1.5 Research Question

Therefore, this thesis aims to examine politicisation and polarisation in parliamentary discourse as a sequential, speaker-level process that unfolds over time. While existing research has convincingly demonstrated rising polarisation in contemporary democracies, current literature often assumes that politicisation and normatively problematic forms of polarisation are driven disproportionately by actors on the right of the political spectrum. This research aims to close this research gap by using longitudinal and speaker-topic level analyses of parliamentary speech to determine if the perceived asymmetry is a structural reality or a result of a limited analytical lens. Filling this literature gap might prove to be essential to understand if politicisation is a universal discursive escalation driven by both sides of the political spectrum.

The central thesis of this research is that politicisation in parliamentary discourse, understood as the joint escalation of issue salience, actor expansion, and affective polarisation, is not an inherent trait of ideological actors but a structurally symmetric process that emerges as an issue gains prominence. Under conditions of continued party competition, each of these dimensions intensifies across the political spectrum rather than being confined to one ideological group.

To investigate this process the thesis will focus on the domain of immigration. Immigration is used as it represents a paradigmatic wedge issue, one that activates the core ideological principles on both sides of the political spectrum and is therefore co-constructed rather than owned by a single actor, making it a relevant test of the symmetry expectation. The full justification for this is then deepened in Section 4.2

Rather than presupposing when immigration becomes politicised or which actors drive politicisation, the study adopts a data-driven approach that first identifies spikes in issue salience within parliamentary debate and subsequently examines how these spikes relate to expansion of actors involved and translate into affective polarisation at the level of individual speakers. This sequencing reflects the theoretical expectation that politicisation precedes polarisation by expanding the scope and intensity of political contestation.

Empirically, the analysis focuses on Austrian parliamentary debates between 1996 and 2022. Austria constitutes a demanding least-likely case for the presence of symmetry in politicisation. The sustained presence of an institutionalised far-right party (the FPÖ) would lead one to expect politicisation in Austrian parliamentary discourse to be skewed towards the right. Notably, this case-study expectation runs counter to the cross-national, mass-level evidence reported above, where left-leaning respondents exhibit the highest average affective polarisation (Herold et al. 2023); this divergence is precisely why the elite parliamentary arena warrants separate scrutiny, and why an expectation of a relatively restrained Austrian left is treated here as a proposition to be tested rather than assumed. If the process of politicisation is nevertheless found to emerge symmetrically across the political spectrum, even in a case structurally weighted towards right-driven asymmetry, this would offer evidence against dominant interpretations that treat politicisation as an inherently right-skewed phenomenon. Therefore, the central research question guiding this study is how politicisation emerges in parliamentary discourse and whether affective polarisation subsequently develops symmetrically across the political spectrum. To address this question, the analysis focuses on speaker–issue polarisation over aggregate party-level measures, thereby mitigating distortions introduced by asymmetric party systems, as is the case in Austria and allowing for a more granular assessment of discursive conflict within and across parties.

The study advances three core expectations. First, it expects that rising issue salience appears in a structurally symmetric manner across left- and right-wing actors, while accounting for external shocks. This expectation follows from issue-competition theory, which holds that party agenda attention is reciprocal: once an issue enters the party-system agenda, parties are compelled to engage with it regardless of which actor raised it, and mainstream parties take up issues introduced by challengers rather than ignoring them (Green-Pedersen 2007; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Second, it expects that increases in issue salience precede the emergence of actor expansion, the second pillar of politicisation as formulated by De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke (2016), as heightened salience draws a broader range of party representatives into debate. Actor expansion is measured as the number of individual speakers of each party in a debate relative to that party’s seat share in the given legislative term. Third, it expects that affective polarisation, expressed through hostile or delegitimising

language toward political opponents, also emerges symmetrically across the political spectrum once issues become politicised.

A critical caveat qualifies this expectation. Since opposition parties face stronger institutional incentives to criticise government policy in parliamentary debate than governing parties, who tend to be more constrained by coalition discipline, observed symmetry in hostility could also reflect opposition status. To address this, the thesis includes a fourth robustness check to test whether differences in animosity between left- and right-leaning parties remain negligible once government/opposition status is controlled. Only if symmetry persists after controlling for institutional position can it be attributed to the politicisation process rather than to structural opposition incentives.

1.6 Contribution

This thesis advances the literature on politicisation and polarisation by employing a strictly quantitative text-as-data methodology to study parliamentary conflict. Instead of qualitative case interpretation or manual discourse analysis, it applies large-scale computational analysis of parliamentary speech to investigate politicisation as a dynamic process across issues, speakers, and legislative periods. The primary contribution is the integration of longitudinal parliamentary text data with a speaker-level design, which facilitates tracing the emergence of politically salient issues, the entry of actors into debates, and the subsequent intensification of affective conflict.

Measuring actor expansion by speaker participation relative to party seat share enables assessment of whether politicised issues mobilise broader segments of parliamentary parties beyond specialised spokespersons. This approach enhances analytical precision compared to existing accounts that focus primarily on parties, public opinion, or electoral competition.

The contribution is therefore twofold: the thesis establishes a framework for analysing the unfolding of politicisation within parliamentary discourse at the speaker–issue level, and it presents a transferable research design for investigating comparable processes in other parliamentary democracies with similar textual data. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from predefined assumptions about the drivers of polarisation to the observable conditions under which parliamentary conflict becomes more salient, more broadly mobilised, and more affectively charged.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Politicisation Literature

Politicisation usually refers to a specific issue moving from a technical and consensus driven sphere into one of partisan contention.

Work on European integration has identified a shift from a permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus as European Union topics became politicized among domestic parties and national public debates (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Zürn 2019).

Politization as a general concept is defined with three dimensions: rising issue salience, polarization of opinion on the topic as well as an expansion of actors engaged in debate. De Wilde, Leupold and Schmidtke (2016) formalise this definition, noting that an issue is therefore politicised when it is widely salient with significant public debate and clear opinion polarisation among the political elite or the public.

The first-dimension salience is mostly not spontaneous, but produced through political attention, which is primarily driven by governments, parties and the media selectively driving attention towards certain problems and away from others. This can be done as a political strategy to gain electoral popularity on an issue. This allocation is one of the primary mechanisms through which politics is structured over time (B. D. Jones 2007; Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019). This dynamic of increased salience is well documented in agenda-setting research, where political attention is treated as a scarce resource that parties compete for (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019).

Consequently, the highly strategic logic of pushing certain issues is particularly visible in the immigration debate, where the intensification of political conflict has been shown not to originate from shifts in public attitudes but from the deliberate choices of party actors to invest in the issue to gain electoral relevance (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019; Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019).

The Second Dimension, actor expansion, refers to the increased participation of different actors. In a parliamentary setting, which is the focus of this thesis, actor expansion is observable as an increase in the number and diversity of legislative actors who intervene on a given topic. A shift from committee specialists and designated spokespersons towards a broader plenary discussion (De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016). This expansion systematic is not merely a quantitative change but mostly a qualitative one, as

more diverse actors enter the debate, their individual framings and interests increase the likelihood of open conflict and therefore reducing the conditions for quiet consensus (Hooghe and Marks 2012). The personalisation of political competition has reinforced this dynamic, as the growing visibility of individual politicians as autonomous political actors, rather than as simple party delegates, creates additional incentives for members of parliament to carve out visible positions on salient issues (Rahat and Kenig 2018). This personalisation of political actors might even increase over the coming years as more and more campaigning is done on social media with very individualised differentiation (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Vaccari and Valeriani 2021).

Actor Expansion as a dimension is therefore both a symptom and a catalyst of politicisation, as it signals that an issue has become sufficiently visible to attract broader public engagement, while at the same time intensifying the contestation it reflects.

The third dimension, the polarisation of political positions, refers to the divergence of substantive positions on a politicised issue. As an issue becomes more salient and draws in more actors, incentives for strong political positional differentiation drastically increase. Parties that invested in a topic and used it as an electoral resource have strong reasons to mark clear boundaries between their position and that of their competitors, making moderation increasingly strategically costly (Green-Pedersen 2007; Schwalbach 2023). Positional polarisation thus completes the politicisation process as outlined

Taken together, these dimensions imply a recognisable pattern. Rising issue salience draws additional actors into the debate, the actor expansion intensifies the visibility of disagreement and the consequent positional shift sharpens the borders between different political camps. This sequencing is not original to this study: Carmines and Stimson (1986) describe issue evolution as precisely such a process, by which a latent concern hardens over time into a line of partisan conflict. What gives the sequence a symmetrical expectation is the reciprocal logic agenda-setting identified by Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010), as when a party forces an issue onto the party-system agenda, its rivals are compelled to engage with it rather than ignore it, so that escalation along each dimension is not confined to the actor that initiated it.

This matters because the frameworks most often used to explain how issues become politicised are formulated in actor-neutral terms. The literature on issue entrepreneurship treats the driving actor as any loser on the dominant dimension of issue

competition regardless of ideological direction (Hobolt and De Vries 2015; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Meguid's (2005, 2008) position-salience ownership model of mainstream party reactions expressly encompasses green parties alongside the far right.

Nevertheless, neither framework is, by definition, about one side of the political spectrum. In their empirical application to immigration, however, the agenda-setting role is overwhelmingly assigned to far-right challengers, while mainstream and left-wing parties appear primarily as responders (Meguid 2005, 2008; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020).

Other empirical Studies have investigated politicization across different domains. Hutter and Grande (2014), for example, have examined national election campaigns across 5 West European countries between 1970 and 2010 and discovered that the issue of European Integration remained a low-salience, low-polarisation issue for decades but showed increased upticks during the 1990s-2000s.

During crises, such as the Euro-Crisis in the 2010s politicisation can spike dramatically as shown by Hutter and Kriesi (2019) who investigated Southern European Countries where integration debates have become more salient and divisive after the Financial Crisis in 2008, especially when fringe parties centred their campaigns around the same issue.

On an international scale, Zürn (2019) investigates and contrasts politicization across national, European and global governance areas, discovering that while all use the a common core definition, the research on this phenomenon in different arenas rarely interacts. The paper argues for a more integrated approach among the "levels" of governance, as national-level politicization sets a broader stage for political contestation on a supra-national or international level.

A linking feature of this body of research is its empirical setting. As these studies observe politicisation primarily through the electoral and media arenas, utilising party manifestos, press releases and newspaper coverage (Hutter and Grande 2014; Hutter and Kriesi 2019). The parliamentary arena is comparatively under-studies, despite offering a distinctive observational benefit: politicisation can be traced longitudinally in an institutionalised setting, across all parties.

Despite the extensive work on politicisation in US and EU studies, there is a gap linking issue-specific politicisation to its downstream effects, such as affective polarisation.

While many studies measure the politicisation of issues, fewer assess how this dynamic translates into emotional or hostile polarising dynamics within parliamentary debates. To investigate this, this thesis departs from the standard reading of politicisation in one critical respect. Whereas De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke (2016) treat positional polarisation as an intrinsic third dimension of politicisation itself, this research treats politicisation strictly through the two dimensions that can be observed directly via participation in parliamentary speech: issue salience and actor expansion.

2.2 Polarisation Literature

The concept of polarisation includes two distinct dimensions that have to be separated. The first, ideological polarisation refers to the divergence of policy positions between parties along a left-right or issue-specific dimension (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Dalton 2008). The second, affective polarisation, refers to the degree to which political actors hold negative feelings towards opposing parties and their supporters, treating them as a disliked out-group (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Ideological polarisation is reviewed as it constitutes the third dimension of politicisation in the aforementioned framework by De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke (2016); this thesis treats it as a component of the politicisation process, while affective polarisation is the outcome it seeks to explain.

Earlier literature on polarization largely focused on the United States as a case study, where ideological polarisation has been treated as an elite-level phenomenon captured through the divergence of legislator positions and behaviour (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008). In European multiparty systems, where strict party discipline limits the information gained by individual voting records, elite positions are instead recovered from party manifestos and expert surveys (Bakker et al. 2015).

The ideological polarisation, meaning the divergence of party positions, has long been debated, with some arguing that the American public remains mostly moderate in their political view (Fiorina and Abrams 2008) and others discovering a clear partisan divergence (Mason 2018).

Fiorina and Abrams (2008) survey concludes that while party elite rhetoric diverges from one another, public opinion and self-classification remained moderate. Nevertheless, due to the minute impact of social media, this sentiment might have changed as it has become more prevalent. Mason (2018), in contrast to Fiorina and Abrams, identifies a clearer partisan sorting of the electorate over time.

In more recent work, Young et al. (2026) presented a finding that the ideological opinion clusters have separated further since 1988, where the left-leaning cluster shifted more significantly than its right-leaning counterpart, which is indicative of ideological movement that might not have been symmetric across the spectrum.

The Affective dimension of polarisation has been highlighted by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes. (2012), who defined it as the extent to which opposing partisans are seen as a disliked outgroup. They demonstrated that partisan animosity in the United States increased over recent decades even in periods when measurable policy attitudes had not correspondingly diverged, establishing that affective and ideological polarisation can move independently of one another.

Abramowitz and Webster (2016) capture a related dynamic through the concept of negative partisanship, showing that voters increasingly define their political identity through dislike of the opposing party rather than positive attachment to their own. This decoupling has important implications: a party system may exhibit ideological convergence alongside intense mutual hostility, or substantial ideological distance conducted within mutually respected norms. For a study concerned with how an issue becomes affectively charged, this distinction is essential, since rising hostility need not presuppose growing ideological distance.

Comparative research has extended this lens well beyond the United States, though it has required adapting measures built for two-party competition to more complex multiparty settings. Reiljan (2020) introduces a novel measurement, the Affective Polarisation Index (API), to compare partisan affect in 22 European and North American democracies. His findings reveal that the affective polarisation visible in Europe often correlates with ideological polarisation, though some countries exhibit intensive partisan animosity without the presence of large left-right gaps. Wagner (2021) develops a complementary measure designed for multiparty systems, based on the spread of positive and negative affect across the electorate rather than on a single dyadic in-party/out-party contrast, an approach particularly suited to fragmented systems such as Austria's.

To a similar extent Boxell et al. (2024) used longitudinal survey data across western democracies and conclude that the US has experienced a steeper long-term increase, compared to many European countries that saw modest rises or stable trends.

Meanwhile, Garzia, Ferreira Da Silva, and Maye (Garzia, Ferreira Da Silva, and Maye 2023) provide an 18-country view over six decades, confirming that while US citizens have clearly become more affectively polarised, this trend is by no means generalisable to all established democracies, with patterns elsewhere remaining country-specific and sensitive to how affective polarisation is conceptualised and measured. Herold et al. (2023), surveying over 20,000 respondents across 10 European countries, find that individuals who place themselves on the left exhibit the highest average affective polarisation across most issue areas examined.

Altogether, the existing literature shows that polarisation is multifaceted and context dependent. However, most comparative studies use mass survey data, and fewer try to examine polarisation in parliamentary discourse.

In its most intense form, this hostility has been characterised by Finkel et al. (2020) as political sectarianism: a combination of othering, aversion, and moralisation through which opponents come to be regarded not as mistaken rivals but as alien and even immoral, with corrosive consequences for democratic cooperation. Altogether, the existing literature shows that polarisation is multifaceted and context dependent. However, most comparative studies rely on mass-survey data, and fewer examine polarisation in parliamentary discourse itself.

2.3 Historical Shocks and the resulting politicisation

External shocks create temporal conditions under which politicisation accelerates. Once an issue enters the party-system agenda through crisis, rival parties must engage with it regardless of prior issue ownership, activating the reciprocal logic of party competition (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Hobolt and De Vries 2015).

Austria's immigration politicisation was shaped by two exogenous shocks. The first occurred in the 1990s through the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which produced substantial refugee outflows and established immigration as an enduring parliamentary concern (Franz 2003). This shock provided the FPÖ with a foundational issue while forcing centre-left parties into simultaneous engagement.

The second and more intensive shock occurred in 2015, when the European migration crisis produced unprecedented asylum flows. Gessler and Hunger (2022), party press releases from Austria between 2013 and 2017, demonstrate that the 2015 crisis triggered dramatic increases in political attention across all parties. Crucially, they find that radical

right parties amplified mainstream party engagement rather than monopolising the issue, confirming that politicisation emerged through reciprocal activation (Gessler and Hunger 2022).

Post-crisis periods typically show partial routinization in which immigration remains salient without the exceptional intensity of the crisis itself, reflecting a broader pattern wherein external crises activate politicisation that subsequently recedes as crises normalise (Hutter and Kriesi 2019). The Austrian case thus provides an opportunity to trace how exogenous shocks interact with pre-existing partisan structures to shape political contestation across time.

2.4 Working Hypothesis

The following hypotheses operationalise politicisation and affective polarisation into empirically testable expectations and specify the environment under which this thesis expects the two processes (Politicisation and Affective Polarisation) to emerge symmetrically. The three core expectations are operationalised below as Hypotheses 1–3. Additionally, Hypothesis 4 specifies a competing explanation to test the robustness of findings on affective symmetry. Throughout, left–right party placement is taken directly from the party metadata in the ParlaCAP dataset (Ljubešić et al. 2025), and the FPÖ and the Greens serve as the focal right–left pair (see Section 3.2) on the immigration discussion. The relevant contrast is not a simple ideological distinction but rather between the wedge parties (for which immigration is an identity-defining issue, namely the Greens and the FPÖ) and the often-governing mainstream parties (SPÖ and ÖVP), whose engagement is expected to be more constrained. Another important caveat is that hostility in the plenary debate may reflect a party’s government or opposition status rather than its ideological position (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010); therefore, government/opposition status is treated as a potential competing explanation.

Hypothesis 1

The salience of immigration in parliamentary debate, measured as the share of words devoted to the issue is generated by actors at both poles of the immigration cleavage

rather than being driven unilaterally by the far right, mainstream governing parties contribute less to the immigration debate than their respective seat share would predict. This hypothesis follows from issue-competition theory, which states that party competition increasingly turns on issues that are rendered salient once a challenger forces an issue on the agenda (Green-Pedersen 2007; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Hobolt and De Vries 2015).

Hypothesis 2

As issue salience increases, parliamentary participation broadens, which can be operationalised as the number of unique speakers per party relative to their seat share and also through the amount of words spoken by one party relative to their seat share in a debate, at the height of salience this expansion of individual actors extends beyond the issue-owning polers to the mainstream parties.

This measurement aims to capture the actor-expansion dimension of politicisation, in which an issue migrates from specialists to the wider plenary (De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016). The expectation is that heightened salience makes immigration an issue parties can no longer leave exclusively to specialists, broadening involvement symmetrically rather than within a single ideological camp.

Hypothesis 3

Affective polarisation, operationalised as the use of antagonistic or delegitimising language towards other political opponents does not differ systemically between left and right leaning parties in high salience political debate, it emerges at both poles.

This is the central claim of the thesis and runs against the assumption that hostile rhetoric is a overwhelmingly right-wing phenomenon. The expectation of symmetry is supported by evidence that left-leaning respondents exhibit the highest average affective polarisation across European democracies (Herold et al. 2023), and that left-wing actors deploy negative out-group narratives that the right-focused literature tended to overlook (Bonansinga 2022). As a connected expectation, periods of higher issue salience might be associated with higher speaker-level animosity, given the observational design, this relationship is interpreted as association rather than causation.

Hypothesis 4

The affective symmetry expected in Hypothesis 3 is not explainable solely by the government/opposition status of a certain party; the difference in animosity between left and right-leaning parties remains non-systematic.

Since opposition parties have a stronger incentive than governing parties to use plenary debate for confrontation to highlight government failure (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Schwalbach 2023), elevated animosity between the FPÖ and the Greens may reflect their frequent status as opposition parties rather than their ideological positions. This separation is essential, as only if left-right differences remain negligible once institutional position is controlled can the symmetry of affective polarisation attributed to the politicisation process itself rather than to structural incentives of opposition status.

3. Case Selection & Historical Context

Austria might seem like a peculiar case in Europe, as in some respects it is. Austria is a comparatively small country whose parliamentary tradition reaches back to the constitutional reforms of the late Monarchy and the establishment of the Reichsrat in 1861 and the creation of the double monarchy in 1867 (Bruckmüller 2001).

After 1945 Austrian politics were shaped by a consociationalism order, in which two major parties governed through grand coalitions and a complex encompassing system of social partnership that muted open parliamentary conflict for a large part of the postwar period (Lehmbruch 2003). At the same time, Austria has sustained one of Western Europe's oldest and most institutionalised far-right parties, whose continuous parliamentary presence makes the country an unusual setting in which to study political conflict (Luther 1991; Parliament Österreich 2026).

3.1 Austria as a critical case

The selection of Austria as the empirical case for this study is not by chance but follows a deliberate case-selection logic. The choice must be justified by the inferential purpose rather than by convenience or familiarity (Gerring 2016; Seawright and Gerring 2008). This thesis treats Austria as a crucial case in Gerring's (2016) sense, as a least-likely case for its own central argument: the proposition that politicisation and the affective polarisation

following it emerge symmetrically across the political spectrum rather than being predominantly driven by the political right.

The logic of the least-likely case, also sometimes termed a “thought test”, rests on the consideration that a confirming observation is least favourable to it (Eckstein 2009; Levy 2008). If a theoretical expectation holds even in a setting structurally biased against it, meaningfulness in that expectation is strengthened considerably more than it would be by confirmation in an average or favourable case.

Austria qualifies as such a least-likely case because its party system contains the typical drivers that the asymmetry thesis presupposes. The Freedom Party is one of the oldest and most institutionalised far-right parties in Western Europe, with a continuous parliamentary presence stretching back to 1949 and repeated participation in national government (Mudde 2007). On the standard reading of politicisation literature, the continued and prominent presence of a far-right party should produce a parliamentary discourse in which politicisation and hostility should be skewed towards the right. Should the thesis fail where conditions most favour it, the disconfirmation carries greater weight (Levy 2008).

3.2 The Austrian Party System

The Austrian Political landscape underwent substantial structural transformation since its modern beginning after the 2nd world war. Since 1945 until the 1980s, Austrian politics was organized around a consensual two party model dominated by the Austrian People’s party (ÖVP) and the Austrian Social Democratic party (SPÖ), which governed predominantly through grand coalitions often reaching between 78 to 85.9% of the total votes in elections (Plasser, Ulram, and Grausgruber 1992; Lehmbruch 2003). This arrangement reflected the legacy of the consociational order (Proporz), whereby a political elite agreement between two major political camps institutionalised cooperation and significantly muted open parliamentary conflict (Plasser, Ulram, and Grausgruber 1992; Lehmbruch 2003; Bruckmüller 2001).

A notable but important early exception to this two-party dominance occurred under the governing phase of SPÖ chancellor Bruno Kreisky, who formed a minority government in 1970 with the support of the FPÖ (Luther 1991; Parliament Österreich 2026). Although the FPÖ did not hold cabinet positions, its tolerance and support of the SPÖ minority government gave the far-right party institutional relevance and political legitimacy early

on, when comparable parties remained politically isolated (Müller 2000). This early entanglement between the SPÖ and FPÖ foreshadowed the FPÖ's later and more explicit government participation.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Austrian party system experienced a broader process of fragmentation and shift from major parties that mirrors developments across Western Europe (Dalton 2004). The entry of the Greens in 1986 and the subsequent rise of the FPÖ as a major parliamentary force under Jörg Haider's leadership fundamentally altered the Austrian political terrain significantly (Mudde 2007; Probst 2003). By the period examined in this thesis (1996-2022), Austria exhibited a multi-party system with typically four to five different parties in parliament (Parliament Österreich 2026).

The period examined in this thesis also saw the entry and exit of several smaller parliamentary parties that contributed to the ongoing fragmentation of the Austrian party system. These include the BZÖ, which split from the FPÖ in 2005 and held parliamentary seats until 2013; NEOS, a liberal party entering parliament in 2013 that remained present throughout the remainder of the period; Team Stronach, a short-lived right-wing populist vehicle active between 2013 and 2017; and Liste Pilz-JETZT, a Green splinter that entered parliament in 2017 before losing representation in 2019 (Kitschelt and Wineorither 2017; Parliament Österreich 2026).

3.2.1 The FPÖ: an institutionalised populist right party

The Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) has been since the election of the 9th of October 1949, continually present in the Austrian Parliament, making it one of the oldest institutionalised far-right parties in Western Europe (Luther 1991; Mudde 2007). Its origins lie in the German nationalist third party of the second republic, a tradition distinct from both the socialist and catholic-conservative camps that dominated postwar Austrian politics (Plasser, Ulram, and Grausgruber 1992; Kitschelt and Wineorither 2017).

The FPÖ's first significant role in government came not through participation but through parliamentary support. In the Kreisky I government (1970–1971), the SPÖ governed as a minority government sustained by FPÖ support in the Nationalrat. Although the FPÖ held no cabinet positions, this arrangement granted the party institutional relevance and political legitimacy at a time when comparable parties elsewhere in Western Europe remained at the margins of political life (Luther 1991). Following the SPÖ's subsequent

absolute majorities under Kreisky, the party's next governmental involvement came through the formal coalition under Chancellor Fred Sinowatz from 1983, in which FPÖ Vice-Chancellor Norbert Steger held cabinet posts for the first time, marking a qualitative shift from parliamentary tolerance to full governmental participation (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich 2026). This coalition dissolved in 1987 after Jörg Haider's election as FPÖ party leader in September 1986 prompted Chancellor Vranitzky to call early elections, ending the SPÖ-FPÖ arrangement and fundamentally altering the trajectory of Austrian party competition (Luther 1991).

Haider's election as party leader triggered a programmatic transformation that Wineroither and Kitschelt (2014) characterise as a sustained vote-seeking repositioning through which the party shed key historical features of the German nationalist third party in favour of a right-wing populist appeal combining anti-establishment rhetoric, welfare chauvinism, and cultural restrictionism. This repositioning proved electorally transformative, with the FPÖ establishing itself across the 1990s as a major force in Austrian politics. A particularly notable dimension of this surge was the sustained realignment of working-class voters away from the SPÖ and toward the FPÖ (McGann and Kitschelt 2005).

Following strong electoral results in 1999, the FPÖ entered government as coalition partner of the ÖVP under Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich 2026). This coalition triggered immediate international controversy when the other EU member states announced they would not promote official bilateral contacts at the political level with an Austrian government integrating the FPÖ, citing in particular the party's attitudes toward foreign and immigrant communities (European Parliament 2000). The sanctions were lifted later that year following an independent assessment, but the episode demonstrated how central the positioning on immigration had become to the FPÖ's political identity. The coalition period also had significant domestic consequences, as governing costs and internal party conflicts culminated in Haider's resignation as party leader and his subsequent founding of the BZÖ in 2005, temporarily splitting the far-right electorate (Kitschelt and Wineorither 2017).

Following the split, the FPÖ rebuilt under the leadership of Heinz-Christian Strache, maintaining a tough stance on immigration and cultural identity while shifting toward a more centrist position on economic redistribution (Wineroither and Kitschelt 2014). The

party steadily recovered its electoral position and the 2015 refugee crisis proved a decisive accelerant, driving a surge in FPÖ support built on its sustained ownership of the immigration issue and consistent parliamentary emphasis on asylum, border control, and integration. (Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019; Hobolt and De Vries 2015)

The 2017 election brought the FPÖ back into government as coalition partner of the ÖVP under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, holding key portfolios including the Interior, Foreign, and Defence Ministries. This coalition collapsed in May 2019 following the publication of the so-called Ibiza video, in which then-FPÖ leader Strache appeared to offer public contracts to a purported Russian investor, triggering a government crisis and early elections (Karner 2021). The FPÖ returned to opposition for the remainder of the period examined in this thesis, though its electoral recovery continued thereafter (Parliament Österreich 2026).

3.2.2 The Greens: The Left Counterpart

Austria did not have a political party to the left of the social democrats until the election in 1986 where the Greens were first elected to Parliament with eight seats. Even though their original focus was mainly focused on environmental policy. At first, they described themselves as an alliance of moderate ecologists, former members of the Socialist Party's left unhappy with the leadership of the moderate Franz Vranitzky, peace activists, Eurocommunists, anti-nuclear activists and Christian leftists (Parkin 1989). The party's origins lay in the Austrian environmental movement of the late 1970s, itself catalysed by the 1978 referendum on nuclear energy, in which a narrow majority voted against the opening of the Zwentendorf nuclear power plant (Kreuzer 1990). This anti-nuclear mobilisation fed into the founding of two separate Green organisations in 1982 which subsequently merged to contest the 1986 parliamentary election under the name Grüne Alternative (Kreuzer 1990; Bundeskanzleramt Österreich 2026).

The party that entered parliament in 1986 was therefore heterogeneous from the outset, combining ecologists, peace activists, feminists, former members of the SPÖ's left wing, and Eurocommunists within a single parliamentary delegation (Kreuzer 1990). This heterogeneity shaped the Greens' early parliamentary identity as a party defined less by programmatic coherence than by its opposition to the established consensus of the two major parties and its commitment to issues, that the mainstream parties have largely neglected (Kitschelt and Wineorither 2017).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Greens gradually consolidated their electoral position and broadened their programmatic profile. Dolezal (2010) identifies the social basis of Green party support across Western Europe as concentrated among younger, more educated, urban voters employed in socio-cultural professions, a pattern clearly visible in the Austrian case, where the Greens drew disproportionately from precisely those voter segments that were most exposed to the post-materialist value shift described by Inglehart (1990). This sociodemographic profile distinguished the Austrian Greens sharply from both the FPÖ's working-class and rural electorate and from the SPÖ's traditional labour base, placing the party in a distinctive competitive position that made it increasingly relevant as a counter-weight to the FPÖ's growing importance (Kitschelt and Wineorither 2017; Oesch 2008).

The 2017 parliamentary election represented a severe rupture in this trajectory. Following internal disputes over candidate selection, the prominent long-serving Green parliamentarian Peter Pilz left the party and founded a competing list, Liste Peter Pilz, later renamed JETZT, which successfully entered parliament while the Greens fell below threshold for the first time since 1986, losing all parliamentary representation (Buzogány and Scherhauser 2018). The party's exit was the product of both structural pressures, including the fragmentation of the centre-left vote and internal organisational failures (Buzogány and Scherhauser 2018). Notably, this exit occurred despite the simultaneous election of former Green party leader Alexander Van der Bellen as Federal President, an institutional achievement that could not compensate for the party's parliamentary collapse (Österreichisches Parlament 2026).

The Greens' return at the 2019 snap election, that was triggered by the collapse of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition was dramatic. The party entered government for the first time in its history as coalition partner of the ÖVP under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich 2026). This coalition, which lasted through the end of the period examined in this thesis, represented a significant institutional shift for the Greens: from permanent opposition to governmental responsibility, and from the margins of the Austrian party system to its centre.

3.3 Comparative Perspective

A comparison with Germany illustrates most directly the exceptional character of Austria's far-right party trajectory. Germany provides the most analytically proximate

comparison given the two countries' shared linguistic, cultural, and institutional features, including proportional representation, federal structures, and the legacy of consociational governance. Despite these similarities, the two countries diverged fundamentally in their far-right parliamentary trajectories across the postwar period. Whereas the FPÖ and its predecessors held continuous parliamentary seats at the federal level from 1949 onwards, Germany's federal parliament remained effectively free of a significant far-right party for over six decades (Arzheimer 2015).

This divergence was not accidental but the product of a deliberate strategic doctrine attributed to CSU leader Franz Josef Strauß, who argued that „*Rechts von der CDU/CSU darf es keine demokratisch legitimierte Partei geben*“ - there must be no democratically legitimised party to the right of the CDU/CSU - a principle that oriented the German centre-right toward occupying the entire right flank of the political spectrum so as to deny electoral space to more extreme competitors (SWR Kultur 2024; Berg 2022). This strategy proved largely effective for decades, as repeated attempts by parties such as the Republicans (REP) and the Deutsche Volksunion (DVU) to establish a durable far-right presence at the federal level consistently failed (Arzheimer 2015).

The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), founded in 2013 initially as a Eurosceptic protest party (Arzheimer 2015), represented the first party to durably break through this barrier, entering the Bundestag in 2017 (Weisskircher 2020). Crucially, the AfD achieved this breakthrough only after shifting from its original economic focus toward immigration restrictionism in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis, a shift that transformed the party from a professors' protest movement into a populist radical right force (Weisskircher 2020). By the time the AfD became a significant federal political actor, the FPÖ had already been in continuous parliamentary presence for nearly seven decades and had participated in government on multiple occasions. The Austrian case therefore represents a party system in which far-right institutionalisation is not a recent development but a structural feature of the entire postwar period, making it a particularly demanding context for examining the dynamics of issue politicisation and parliamentary conflict.

4. Data and Research Design

4.1 Dataset ParlaCAP

The empirical analysis draws on the ParlaCAP dataset, a large-scale corpus comprising approximately eight million parliamentary speeches from 28 European national and regional parliaments. ParlaCAP is designed explicitly for comparative political analysis and combines harmonised plenary speech transcripts with rich metadata on speakers, parties, institutions, and time. It builds on the ParlaMint 5.0 infrastructure, which standardises parliamentary texts across languages and legislatures, and extends it by adding substantive content annotations suitable for large-N, longitudinal research (Ljubešić et al. 2025; Erjavec et al. 2025).

Topical content in ParlaCAP is assigned using the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) framework, which classifies each speech into one of 22 major policy domains. This coding scheme is widely used in agenda-setting research and allows for consistent comparisons of issue salience across countries and over time (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019).

Topic assignment in ParlaCAP is performed automatically using a multilingual transformer-based model trained on manually annotated parliamentary data, enabling scalable yet theoretically grounded measurement of politicisation through shifts in parliamentary attention (Ljubešić et al. 2025; Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019).

In addition to topical coding, each speech is annotated for sentiment using the ParlaSent model, which captures evaluative tone on an ordered scale ranging from negative to neutral to positive sentiment. It relies on multilingual transformer architectures and is specifically calibrated for parliamentary language, improving cross-linguistic comparability and contextual validity relative to generic sentiment classifiers (Rauh et al. 2024). (Mochtak et al. 2025; Ljubešić et al. 2025)

Together, the combination of large corpus size, CAP-based topic assignment, and sentiment annotation makes ParlaCAP particularly well suited for analysing issue salience and affective dynamics in legislative discourse.

4.2 Issue / Topic Selection

One of the primary reasons for selecting topics to measure politicisation is that such topics often need to function as “wedge issues,” activating core ideological principles across the political spectrum. Immigration exemplifies this distinctive position in public discourse by activating diverse “moral foundations” as conceptualized by Haidt (2012). For political conservatives, immigration often raises concerns related to authority and security, leading to appeals for national sovereignty and cultural cohesion. Conversely, individuals on the political left tend to emphasize care and fairness, constructing arguments centred on human rights and social justice.

Because both political orientations interpret immigration through morally charged perspectives, the issue’s public salience is amplified by both sides. Evidence from the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019) demonstrates that periods of intense legislative focus on immigration rarely result from unilateral action. Instead, agenda-setting is characterized by a reciprocal dynamic, in which initiatives from one political faction prompt immediate and equally robust mobilisation from opposing actors.

The complexity of immigration debates is further highlighted by their inability to be adequately captured within a simple “left-versus-right” economic framework. Instead, immigration encompasses multiple dimensions. The economic axis includes tensions between labour market competition and narratives of economic growth, while the cultural or identity axis is defined by the tension between universalist and communitarian values (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

This multidimensional character necessitates engagement from both sides of the political spectrum. Researchers analysing parliamentary debates have observed that when one side frames immigration as an “economic threat,” the opposing side responds by framing it as a “humanitarian duty.” These framing contests underscore that the politicization of immigration is a co-constructed and interactive process (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019; Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019).

Another reason immigration serves as an ideal topic for further discussion in this thesis is its relevance to Cleavage Theory, as articulated by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). This theory asserts that social conflicts become politicized when they resonate with entrenched structural divides. Actors aligned with integrationist positions, often

associated with the political left, promote politicization by advocating for inclusive models of citizenship and increased global mobility. In contrast, demarcationists on the other side of the spectrum advance politicization by emphasising the importance of protected borders and policies that privilege national interests.

Because these positions are mutually exclusive, debates about "opening" borders inherently generate counter-debates about "closing" them. The intensity of public discourse thus serves as an indicator of the extent to which both sides contribute equally to the politicisation of immigration.

This selection of immigration is further reinforced by recent comparative evidence on affective polarisation across Europe. Herold et al. (2023), in a large-scale study across ten European Union member states based on approximately 20,000 respondents surveyed by YouGov in fall 2022, examined affective polarisation across seven policy domains: immigration, the war in Ukraine, pandemic policy, climate change, social benefits, gender equality, and sexual minorities. The study finds that immigration emerges as the issue area with the **highest and most asymmetric levels of affective polarisation**, particularly among left-leaning respondents, who display the strongest negative hostility toward immigration-restrictive positions. This pattern is notable because the data suggest that left-leaning Europeans exhibit particularly intense affective reactions. Examining this issue in Austrian parliamentary discourse thus provides a strategic test of whether this mass-level asymmetry holds at the elite level.

4.3 Sample Selection

High-salience immigration debates are operationalised using a two-part threshold: immigration accounts for at least 10 percent of total words in a debate or debates contain more than 10,000 words classified as immigration-related. This threshold is theoretically justified by the definition of politicisation in Chapter 2: an issue becomes politicised when it enters public contestation and moves beyond technocratic consensus. Debates below this threshold risk capturing routine, specialist discussion rather than politicisation itself. The threshold maximises observable conflict at the cost of potential selection bias: high-salience debates are more likely to contain affective language than low-salience discussions, so the measured animosity reflects discourse when immigration is already contested, rather than the modal tone of all immigration speech.

This scope is appropriate for the research question: the thesis examines how politicisation unfolds, not the prevalence of hostile rhetoric across all contexts.

The application of this threshold on the ParlaCAP dataset yielded 73 high-salience debates between 1996 and 2022 across eight legislative periods.

4.4 Text as Data Model

The analysis of political text rests on a substantial tradition of treating text "as data": selecting a corpus and abstracting its features into a structured, typically quantitative form (most commonly a document–feature matrix) that can then be analysed with statistical and machine-learning tools, rather than read and interpreted directly (Benoit 2020). Recent developments in artificial intelligence and large language models have further strengthened computational text analysis for studying politicisation and polarisation across large corpora of speeches and documents. Nielbo et al. (2024) characterise the evolution of this field as three successive stages. The earliest feature-based models rely on manually engineered features, such as bag-of-words representations, processed by comparatively simple classifiers; they are transparent but limited in their ability to capture context. These were followed by representation-learning models built on the transformer architecture and on language-representation models such as BERT, which learn contextual elements directly from text rather than requiring them to be specified in advance. The most recent stage comprises generative models such as the GPT and Llama families, which can perform classification and interpretation based on natural-language instructions without task-specific training. Crucially, these stages are cumulative rather than substitutive, each remaining suited to different analytical problems (Nielbo et al. 2024). This progression also reframes a long-standing trade-off in the field: traditional quantitative text-as-data methods scale to large corpora but treat words as features and rely on strong assumptions that abstract away meaning, whereas qualitative human interpretation captures meaning but does not scale (Benoit et al. 2026). Large language models are attractive precisely because they are expected to ease this trade-off, extending the text-as-data paradigm from statistical representation toward interpretative tasks at scale and in the source language, while remaining systematic and, with appropriate run design, replicable (Benoit et al. 2026).

A concrete example of this evolution is the pairwise comparison approach introduced by Wu et al. (2023), which estimates latent political positions by prompting an instruction-

tuned LLM, specifically GPT-3.5, to compare pairs of lawmakers on a given dimension. In this zero-shot learning setting, the model is asked to identify which of two politicians is, for example, more liberal or more likely to support gun control based on their names and party affiliations. These comparisons are then structured into a unidimensional scale using a Bradley-Terry model, producing "Language Model Pairwise comparison" (LaMP) scores. Validation against established benchmarks shows that Ideology LaMP scores correlate highly (0.967) with traditional DW-NOMINATE scores. More importantly, the authors demonstrate that this method can estimate stances on specific issues like gun control or abortion where roll-call voting data is often sparse or non-existent, and these estimates effectively predict real-world behaviours such as interest group ratings and legislative votes.

Parallel to this, Le Mens and Gallego (2025) proposed the "Asking and Averaging" method, which focuses on positioning individual text units rather than the actors themselves. In this framework, an LLM (such as GPT-4o, Llama 3, or MiXtral) is directly queried to score a short text, like a tweet or a single sentence from a manifesto, on a numerical scale (e.g., 0 to 100) for a focal ideological dimension. The position of a political actor or a longer document is then determined by taking the simple average of these unit-level scores. This approach has proven highly effective in diverse contexts, including positioning US Senators based on samples of their tweets, scaling British party manifestos, and analysing multilingual EU policy speeches delivered in ten different languages. The authors found that position estimates obtained through the best-performing LLMs exceed a 0.90 correlation with expert benchmarks and human coding, generally outperforming traditional supervised text classifiers.

The sophistication of LaMP and Asking and Averaging comes at costs relevant to this research. Both methods require either pairwise comparisons (LaMP) or scoring of individual text units (Asking and Averaging), introducing per-comparison variance and aggregation choices. This thesis instead employs binary LLM-based animosity detection, operationalised in Chapter 5. While less granular than positional scaling, this approach prioritises direct measurement of observable hostility over latent estimation of ideological position. This choice is justified by the research question: whether politicisation generates *affective* polarisation symmetrically, not whether it produces measurable shifts in *positional* polarisation.

5. Measurement Strategy

While Chapter 4 surveyed the data and previewed advanced LLM-based scaling methods for estimating ideological positions, this thesis employs a transparent approach that aligns with its core research question. The measurement strategy operationalises politicisation through two directly observable dimensions, issue salience and actor expansion, while treating affective polarisation as a separate, consequent phenomenon that politicisation may precede or facilitate. Rather than estimating latent positional shifts, the analysis focuses directly on observable discourse phenomena: the relative attention paid to immigration across parliamentary sessions, the breadth of actor participation in debates, and the presence of hostile or delegitimising language directed at political opponents.

This choice reflects two commitments. First, positional polarisation is bracketed, as it constitutes neither a defining dimension of politicisation nor the outcome the thesis seeks to explain. Second, simpler operationalisations that use automated topic classification already present in the dataset and LLM-based paragraph-level animosity detection offer greater transparency and replicability than latent-estimation approaches.

5.1 Measuring Salience

In a first step, politicisation is operationalised through issue salience, defined as the relative attention devoted to policy issues in parliamentary debate. Following agenda-setting and issue competition scholarship (Green-Pedersen 2007; B. D. Jones 2007), salience is proxied by the volume and share of words allocated to specific topics within plenary speeches. Adopting a time-series approach, this first stage follows the changes in salience across legislative terms from 1996 to 2022. Changes in salience, both abrupt and gradual, will be interpreted as indicators of politicisation dynamics. Importantly, while immigration is the main focal point of this thesis, this inductive strategy does not presuppose when the issue becomes politicised but instead allows the data to reveal shifts in parliamentary attention, which can subsequently be related to exogenous shocks such as the Balkan wars or the 2015 refugee crisis. This focus on issue salience is made due to the aforementioned availability of categorized data.

5.2 Measuring Actor Expansion / Party Competition

Actor Expansion will be quantified in two ways, firstly the amount of words used by a party in a specific debate will be divided with the amount of seats that they hold, presupposing that a party that holds 10 % of the seats should use 10 % of the speaking time in words. A second way this paper will present and examine actor expansion is by identifying unique speakers in each legislative term, enabling time-series comparisons and identifying how dispersed a topic is among members of a given political party.

5.3 Measuring Affective Polarisation

The study then turns to affective polarisation, understood as the use of emotionally charged, antagonistic, or delegitimising language toward political opponents (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes. 2019). While affective polarisation has primarily been studied through survey data, recent work highlights its discursive manifestations in elite communication (Rheault et al. 2016; Wagner 2021). To capture this dimension, a LLM classifier approach enabling the systematic identification of evaluative and hostile language directed across party lines.

5.3.1 Conceptual Definition

Following Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes. (2019), animosity is operationalised as any expression of hostility, contempt, derogation, or strong negative evaluation directed towards another political actor, party, or political group. This includes direct insults, accusations of bad faith, delegitimising framing of opponents' positions, and rhetorical moves that treat political rivals as moral threats rather than legitimate competitors. Importantly, we exclude criticism of European Union policies or other nation-states in the abstract, as such criticism does not target domestic political actors. We distinguish animosity from mere disagreement: a speech that rejects an opponent's policy position without negative personal evaluation is classified as non-animos (label 0).

5.3.2 LLM Based Classification

Animosity detection employs the Gemini 2.5-flash model in a zero-shot classification regime on the original German parliamentary texts. The analysis operates directly on German-language speeches without translation, preserving rhetorical nuance, parliamentary idiom, and culturally embedded forms of hostility that would be flattened or distorted by translation. The ParlaCAP dataset provides optional translated texts; these are not used for classification.

A supervised fine-tuning approach was initially trialled using GBERT, a German-language BERT model, fine-tuned on a manually labelled subset of the corpus. This approach proved inferior in both accuracy and efficiency: the fine-tuned GBERT classifier substantially underperformed the zero-shot LLM on held-out validation data and also required considerably more time to run. Because the additional labelling and training effort yielded no gain in classification quality, the zero-shot LLM regime was adopted as the more accurate and more efficient alternative. Rather than fine-tuning on a labelled corpus, the model is therefore provided with a binary decision rule and a definition of animosity, then applied directly to the German source text.

Preprocessing for LLM input: Before each five-sentence paragraph is sent to the model, standard parliamentary opening phrases ('Meine Damen und Herren!', 'Hohes Haus!', 'Herr Präsident', 'Frau Präsidentin', etc.) are removed to reduce token consumption and

API costs, without altering substantive political content. This preprocessing is applied only for the LLM classification stage; the salience measurement (Section 5.1) uses unmodified German text with CAP topic labels.

The prompt supplied to the model is structured as follows:

- Definition: The animosity definition from Section 5.3.1.
- Rules: (1) Negative evaluation towards other political groups → label 1;
(2) Neutral, factual, respectful language → label 0;
(3) Mere disagreement without negative evaluation → label 0.
- Exclusion rule: Negative comments about the European Union or other nation-states in general are ignored (not counted as animosity toward domestic political actors).
- Output format: Strict binary (0 or 1) followed by a brief explanation.

All classifications were performed with temperature = 0, ensuring deterministic outputs and supporting replicability, though LLM replicability remains subject to backend version changes (a limitation discussed in Chapter 8).

The unit of analysis is a five-sentence paragraph. Speech-level animosity scores are computed as the proportion of paragraphs per speech classified as 1 (animosity present), enabling within-speech variation to be preserved.

6. Empirical Analysis

The following chapter presents empirical findings on the politicisation and affected polarisation of the immigration debate within Austrian parliamentary discourse from the 20th to the 27th legislative periods. Drawing on the operationalisation established in the previous Chapters, the analysis is structured around three dimensions: salience, party competition and actor expansion, and affective polarisation. The results are then interpreted within a historical context, with particular emphasis on the enduring role of the FPÖ in Austrian immigration politics, the Greens as a counterpoint, and the 2015 refugee crisis as a pivotal moment of intensified parliamentary contestation.

6.1 Issue Salience over Time

This section examines the temporal pattern of issue salience across Austrian parliamentary debates from 1996 to 2022. Salience is operationalised as the volume of parliamentary speech devoted to immigration, measured through the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) topic classification system within the ParlaCAP dataset (Ljubešić et al. 2025). For this analysis, only the CAP topic label is used; sentiment scores and LLM-based animosity classifications (see Section 5.3) are excluded to ensure that salience measurement captures the extent of parliamentary attention to immigration regardless of the tone or affective quality of that attention.

Immigration debates were identified by aggregating the number of words classified as immigration-related within each parliamentary debate day. A debate was classified as high-salience if immigration accounted for at least 10% of the total words in that debate or if the debate contained more than 10,000 immigration-classified words. This threshold is theoretically justified in Section 4.3: it excludes routine or specialist discussion and retains debates in which immigration constitutes a substantively significant topic, even when the debate covers multiple policy domains.

Across the eight legislative periods examined (1996–2022), the dataset contains 73 high-salience immigration debates. Table 1 presents the complete breakdown by legislative

period.

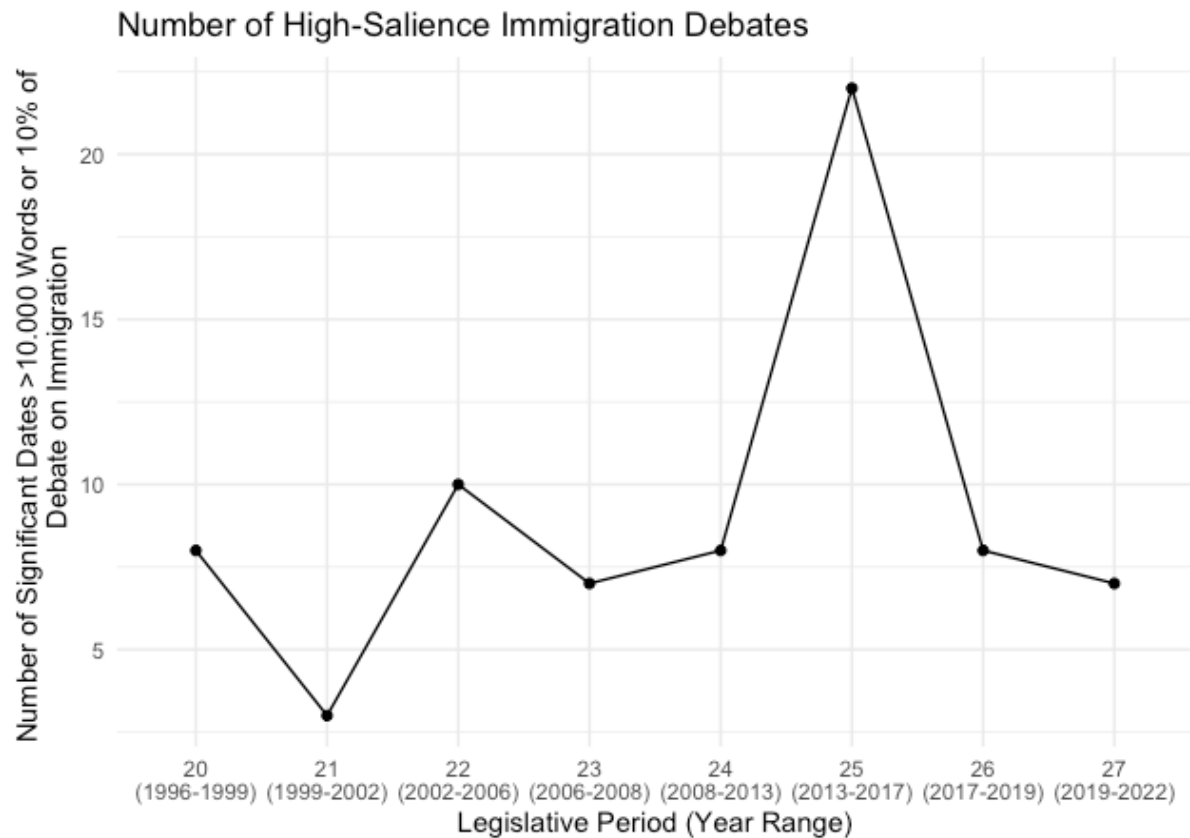


Figure 1: Number of Significant Immigration Debates

Legislative Period	Years	#High-Salience Debates	Total Immigration Words	Mean Words/Debate
20	1996–1999	8	174,906	21,863
21	1999–2002	3	47,191	15,730
22	2002–2006	10	143,148	14,315
23	2006–2008	7	88,850	12,693
24	2008–2010	8	128,290	16,036
25	2013–2017	22	467,282	21,240
26	2017–2019	8	88,499	11,062
27	2019–2022	7	79,774	11,396
TOTAL		73	1,217,939	16,684

Table 1: High-Salience Immigration Debates by Legislative Period (1996–2022)

The temporal pattern shows significant episodic variation rather than linear growth or decline. The 20th legislative period (1996–1999) contains eight high-salience debates. Following this level, salience declines sharply in the 21st period (1999–2002), with only three high-salience debates recorded. The issue resurges in the 22nd legislative period

(2002–2006), with ten debates, followed by seven debates in the 23rd period (2006–2008) and eight debates in the 24th period (2008–2010).

The most pronounced finding is the concentration observed in the 25th legislative period (2013–2017). This period contains 22 high-salience immigration debates, accounting for 467,282 immigration-classified words. This represents a 175% increase in the number of debates relative to the preceding 24th period and accounts for 38.3% of all immigration words in the entire 73-debate sample. The 25th period stands as a distinct peak relative to all other periods examined.

In the post-25th-period years, salience declines. The 26th legislative period (2017–2019) shows eight debates with 88,499 words, and the 27th period (2019–2022) shows seven debates with 79,773 words. These figures approximate the levels observed in the early-to-mid 2000s.

Across all 73 debates, the mean debate size is 16,684 words ($SD = 8,808$), with a median of 14,312 words. The range extends from a minimum of 3,227 words (December 22, 2004) to a maximum of 44,541 words (June 11, 1997). The 25th period's average debate size (21,240 words) exceeds the overall mean, indicating that both the number and average length of high-salience immigration debates peaked during this period.

The salience data reveal a pattern characterized by episodic intensification rather than steady growth. Immigration appeared as a recurring parliamentary issue across all eight legislative periods, but the frequency and volume of debate concentrated dramatically in the 25th period. This pattern establishes the empirical baseline for the analysis of party competition and affective polarisation that follows.

6.2 Party Competition and Issue Ownership

Following the establishment of immigration's temporal salience, the analysis proceeds to identify which parties contributed most to this prominence.

This section examines which parties contributed disproportionately to immigration debates relative to their institutional size. Two measures operationalise this: the first is the word share versus seat share, which measures the volume of speech devoted to immigration per party, and the second is speaker participation, which measures the breadth of individual speakers engaging on immigration within each party and period.

6.2.1 Word Share vs. Seat Share

For the word share measure, each party's total words spoken in high-salience immigration debates is divided by the number of parliamentary seats held in that legislative period. A party's seat share is the percentage of total seats. The difference (word share minus seat share) indicates overrepresentation (positive values) or underrepresentation (negative values). A difference of +5% means a party spoke 5

percentage points more than its seat share would predict; a difference of -5% means it spoke 5 points less.

For the speaker participation measure, the analysis counts the number of unique individual speakers per party in each legislative period, then divides by that party's seat count. This captures whether politicised issues mobilise broader party delegations beyond designated spokespersons.

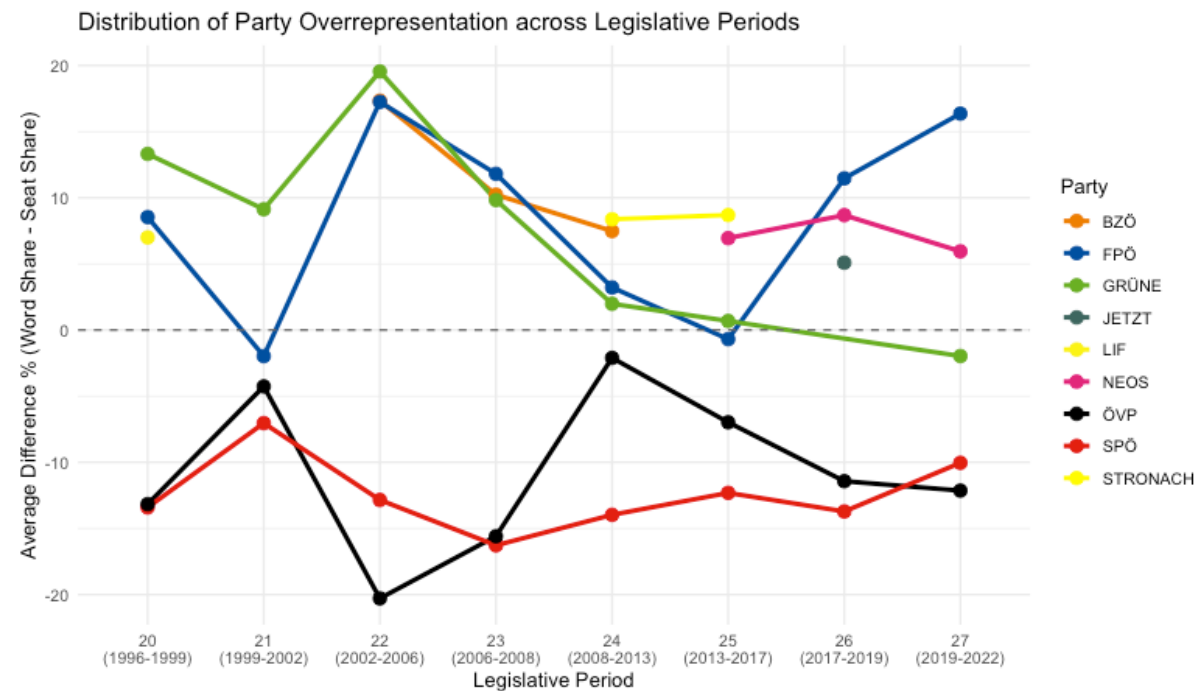


Figure 2: Average Party Over/Underrepresentation by Legislative Period (1996-2022)

Figure 2 visualises the data, showing each party's average over- and underrepresentation across the eight legislative periods. The pattern reveals distinct trajectories. The FPÖ is overrepresented in most periods, with differences ranging from -2.0% (period 21) to +17.2% (period 22), and strong overrepresentation (+16.4%) again in period 27. The exception is period 25 (2013–2017), where the FPÖ's difference approaches zero (-0.7%), despite this being the peak salience period identified in Section 6.1.

The Greens (GRÜNE) show consistently positive differences in earlier and mid-period legislative sessions, with notable overrepresentation in period 22 (+19.5%) and period 23 (+9.8%). In period 25, the Greens' difference approaches zero (+0.7%). In period 27 (2019–2022), following the party's re-entry to parliament after the 2019 election, the Greens show underrepresentation (-2.0%).

The Social Democrats (SPÖ) and Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) are consistently underrepresented across all periods, with differences ranging from -2.1% to -20.3%. The SPÖ's underrepresentation is particularly pronounced in periods 23 and 26 (-13.7% to -16.3%), while the ÖVP shows severe underrepresentation in period 22 (-20.3%) and moderate underrepresentation in other periods.

Smaller and newer parties show mixed patterns. The BZÖ appears in periods 22–24 with overrepresentation (+7.5% to +17.3%). Team Stronach appears only in periods 24–25 with overrepresentation (+8.4% and +8.7%). NEOS enters in period 25 and remains overrepresented in periods 25–27 (+5.9% to +8.7%). JETZT (Liste Peter Pilz) appears in period 26 with moderate overrepresentation (+5.1%).

6.2.2 Speaker Participation

Speaker participation, measured as the number of unique individual speakers per party relative to that party's seat count, varies significantly across parties and periods. This metric captures the breadth of party delegation involvement in immigration debates. Figure 3 presents the speaker-per-seat ratios across the eight legislative periods.

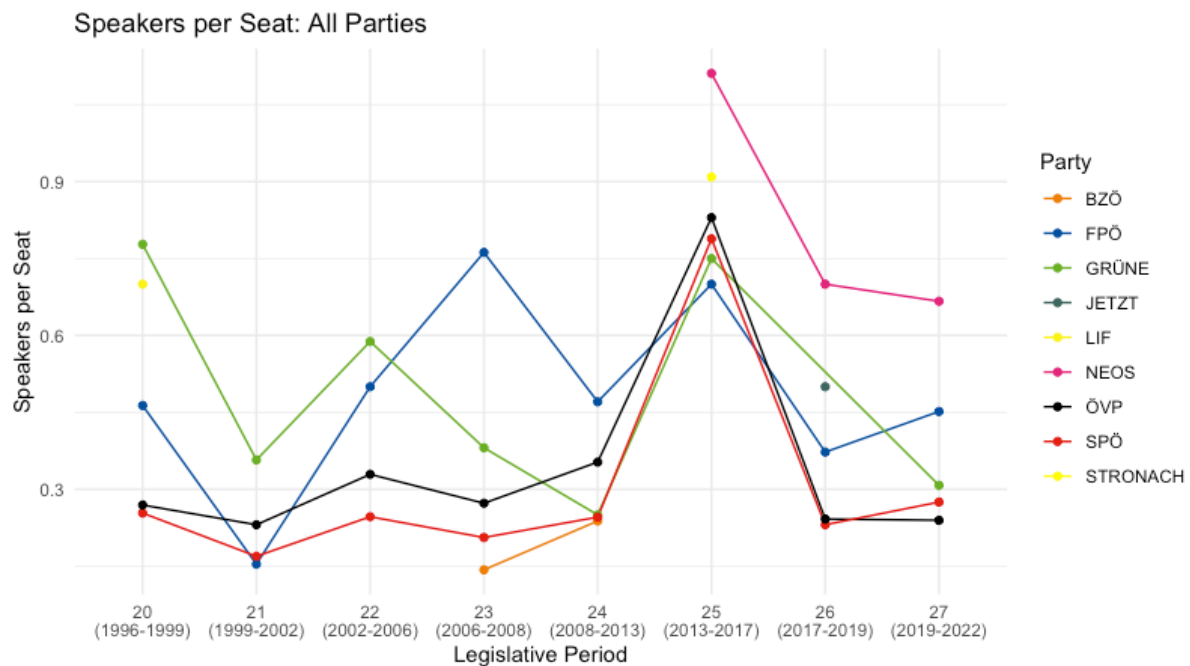


Figure 3: Speaker per Parliamentary Seat by Party and Legislative Period (1996-2022)

Figure 3 shows two notable patterns. First, the 25th legislative period (2013–2017), the peak salience period, shows elevated speaker participation across all major parties, indicating broader delegation involvement. This convergence during high salience suggests that immigration became an issue obligating multiple speakers within each party. Second, smaller parties with fewer seats tend to show higher speakers-per-seat ratios when they participate, as their smaller delegations are proportionally more engaged. The dramatic spike in period 25 for NEOS and SPÖ reflects broad mobilisation of these parties' delegations.

The FPÖ and Greens demonstrate sustained multiple-speaker involvement across most periods, indicating that immigration remained distributed across their parliamentary delegations rather than confined to specialist voices. The SPÖ and ÖVP show more variable patterns, with notably elevated participation in period 25 relative to other

periods, consistent with the finding from Section 6.1 that period 25 represented an exceptionally salient concentration of immigration debate.

The analysis on Party Competition and Actor Expansion reveals that immigration debate participation was not distributed proportionally to party size. Specific parties—principally the FPÖ and Greens, contributed disproportionately to immigration debates in most periods. The mainstream parties (SPÖ and ÖVP) consistently under contributed relative to their institutional size. The 25th legislative period shows convergence: both overrepresented and underrepresented parties increased their participation, and the FPÖ's historic overrepresentation was reduced to near-zero, while the Greens' overrepresentation similarly approached zero. This convergence is visible in both word-share measures and speaker participation, and this is consistent with the issue salience data reported in the previous section, namely when immigration became highly salient, broader participation followed.

6.3 Affective Polarisation

The third and most significant empirical dimension addresses affective polarisation. Whereas previous sections assessed the salience of immigration and the disproportionate participation of certain parties, this section examines how hostile or delegitimizing members of parliament referred to one another during immigration debates. Following Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes. (2019), animosity is defined as any expression of hostility, contempt, derogation, or strong negative evaluation directed towards another political actor, party, or political group. This includes direct insults, accusations of bad faith, delegitimising framing of opponents' positions, and rhetorical moves that treat political rivals as threats rather than legitimate competitors. Criticism of policy positions without negative personal evaluation is classified as non-hostile.

Animosity detection employs the Gemini 2.5-flash model in zero-shot classification on the original German parliamentary texts, preserving rhetorical nuance and culturally embedded forms of hostility that would be distorted by translation. The unit of analysis is a five-sentence paragraph. Paragraphs classified as containing animosity receive a label of 1; those without animosity receive 0. Speech-level animosity scores are computed as the proportion of paragraphs per speech classified as containing animosity (0–1.0). Party-period animosity is the mean speech-level animosity across all speeches by that party during high-salience immigration debates in that legislative period.

The Animosity detection was done with the Gemini 2.5-flash model in zero-shot classification on original German parliamentary texts. The zero-shot approach was selected for the full corpus based on superior recall (0.877) relative to few-shot alternatives. Validation against 400 manually coded paragraphs yielded a precision of 0.774, recall of 0.877, F1 of 0.822, and accuracy of 0.814.

6.3.1 Average Animosity by Party and Period

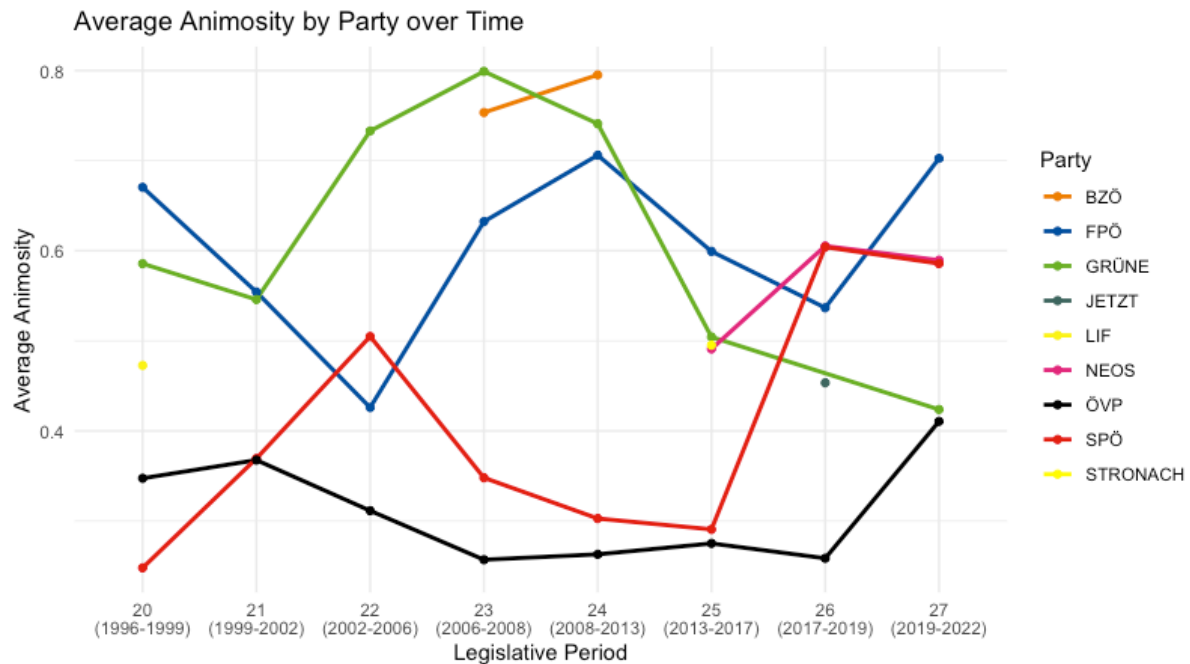


Figure 4: Average Animosity by Party over Time

The FPÖ exhibits consistently elevated animosity across most legislative periods. Mean animosity scores are notably high in periods 20, 22, 23, 24, and 27, with periods 22 and 23 showing the highest concentrations. The FPÖ's animosity decreases slightly in periods 21 and 25, and moderately in period 26, but returns to elevated levels in period 27.

The Greens (GRÜNE) also display elevated animosity scores across multiple periods, particularly in periods 22, 23, and 24, where their mean animosity rivals or exceeds the FPÖ's scores. This pattern demonstrates that high animosity is not confined to the FPÖ. In periods 25 and 26, both the FPÖ and Greens show reduced animosity relative to earlier periods. In period 27, the FPÖ's animosity rises sharply while the Greens' remains more moderate.

The SPÖ and ÖVP show lower average animosity than the FPÖ and Greens in most periods. Both parties display relatively consistent patterns of lower animosity in earlier and mid-period legislative sessions. However, both show elevated animosity in later periods: the SPÖ's mean animosity increases notably in periods 26 and 27, and the ÖVP's rises considerably in period 27. This suggests that animosity became more broadly distributed across parties in later legislative periods.

NEOS enters the analysis in period 25 and shows moderate to elevated animosity in periods 25, 26, and 27, comparable to or exceeding the Greens in these periods. This pattern suggests that newer liberal parties also engaged in affectively charged immigration discourse, though their shorter parliamentary history limits trend analysis.

6.3.2 Distribution of Speech Level Animosity

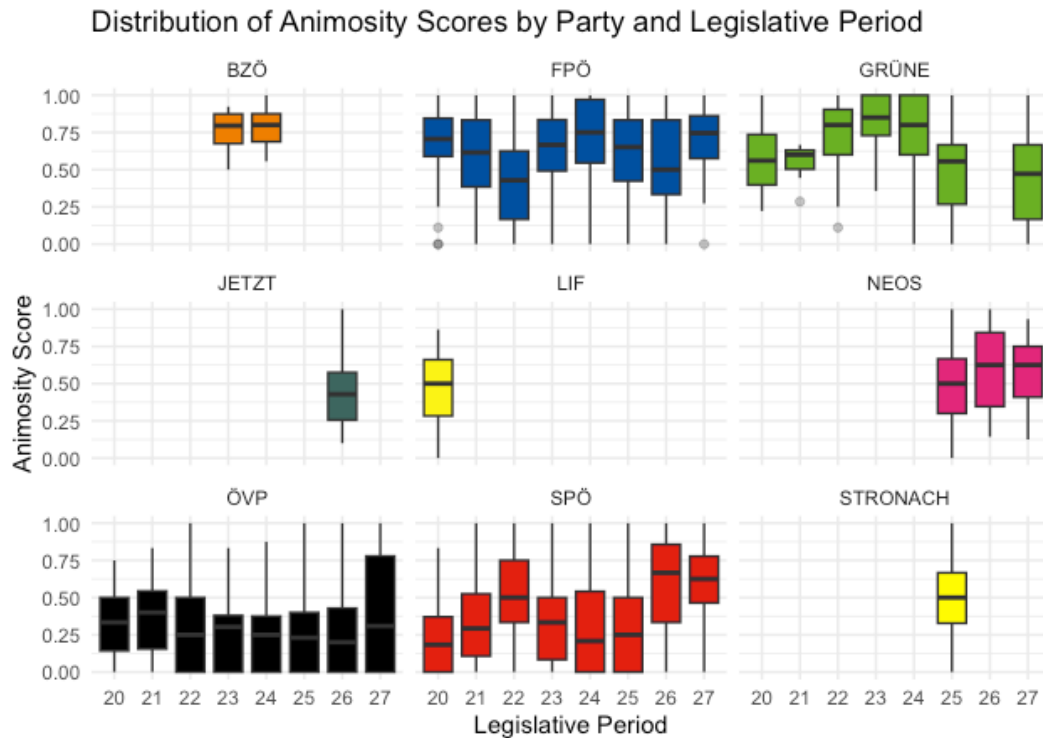


Figure 5: Distribution of Animosity by Party and Period (1996-2022)

The distribution of speech-level animosity within parties reveals substantial variation. The FPÖ shows consistently high median animosity across several periods, alongside broad distributions indicating that some FPÖ speeches are highly antagonistic while others exhibit lower levels of animosity. The Greens demonstrate a similar pattern, with elevated medians in periods 22–24 and increased variation in subsequent periods.

The SPÖ and ÖVP show comparatively lower medians in earlier periods but increased variability and elevated medians in later periods, particularly in periods 26 and 27. This suggests that both mainstream parties' animosity increased over time, with greater variation in individual speaker behaviour in later legislative periods.

The variation visible in distributions indicates that within-party differences are substantial. Even within highly politicised parties, speakers differ significantly in their use of hostile or derogatory language. This variation suggests that animosity is not uniformly distributed within parties but concentrated among specific speakers or in specific speeches.

The animosity classification reveals that elevation affectively hostile language toward political opponents is not confined to a single party or ideological position. Both the FPÖ and Greens show elevated animosity across multiple legislative periods, with particularly high concentrations in periods 22–24. The SPÖ and ÖVP show lower baseline animosity but increasing levels in later periods. The 25th legislative period (peak salience) shows a convergence pattern: the FPÖ's traditionally high animosity decreases, and the Greens' animosity approaches baseline levels. However, later periods (26–27) show renewed

elevation of animosity across multiple parties. The distribution analysis indicates substantial within-party variation: animosity is concentrated among specific speakers rather than uniformly expressed across party delegations.

7. Discussion

7.1 Overview

This thesis argues that politicisation in parliamentary discourse is a structurally symmetric process, emerging from party system dynamics as an issue gains prominence, rather than from the inherent ideology of political actors. This challenges the polarisation literature's assumption that right-wing actors uniquely drive politicisation and its affective consequences.

Politicisation is operationalised through two directly observable dimensions (De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016): issue salience and actor expansion. Hypotheses 1–2 test whether these dimensions emerge symmetrically across the political spectrum; Hypothesis 3 examines whether this symmetry produces affective polarisation; Hypothesis 4 asks whether that affective symmetry reflects ideology or institutional position. The integration of these findings supports the thesis claim that politicisation is a structural property of party competition, not an ideological trait.

7.2 Hypothesis 1: Is Issue Salience Symmetric?

Hypothesis 1 proposes that immigration salience in parliamentary debate emerges in a structurally symmetric fashion across left- and right-wing actors, rather than being driven unilaterally by the far right. This expectation follows from issue-competition theory: once a challenger forces an issue onto the party-system agenda, rival parties are compelled to respond (Green-Pedersen 2007; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Salience is thus a property of the party system as a whole, not of individual actors.

Section 6.1 revealed sporadic rather than continuous salience. The 20th period (1996–1999) shows eight high-salience immigration debates, demonstrating pre-2015 salience rooted in the FPÖ's consolidation as a major challenger party in the 1990s (McGann and Kitschelt 2005; Probst 2003). The 25th period (2013–2017) represents a qualitative rupture: 22 high-salience debates (38% of all immigration words in sample), corresponding to the 2015–2016 refugee crisis. Post-2017, salience partially normalises (8 and 7 debates in periods 26–27), indicating cyclical rather than monotonic growth.

The salience measurement shows the previously discussed agenda-setting dynamics. Political attention is scarce and unevenly distributed (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019). Immigration salience emerges through two mechanisms: sustained party-strategic emphasis (FPÖ issue ownership) and exogenous shocks (2015 refugee crisis). Neither on alone can explain the observed pattern sufficiently. The FPÖ's long

institutional presence (in parliament since 1949) enabled sustained issue ownership over the presence of a crisis catalyst. When the refugee crisis occurred, immigration was already embedded in the party system's competitive structure, amplifying rather than initiating contestation. This demonstrates that salience is a structural outcome of issue competition, not an inherent trait of particular ideological actors.

Hypothesis 1 is supported. Immigration salience results from sustained party strategy and exogenous triggers, emerging as a property of multi-party competition rather than being driven by ideological extremists. Reciprocal engagement with the issue is independent of ideology.

7.3 Hypothesis 2: Does Actor Expansion Occur Symmetrically?

Hypothesis 2 proposes that as issue salience increases, parliamentary participation broadens symmetrically across parties. This operationalises the second dimension of politicisation: "actor expansion" (De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016), where an issue migrates from specialised discussion to generalised parliamentary engagement.

Section 6.2 reveals a cleavage structure: FPÖ and Greens are consistently overrepresented (word share > seat share), while SPÖ and ÖVP are underrepresented. The FPÖ shows overrepresentation in most periods (−2% to +17.2%), with period 25 approaching zero (−0.7%) as mainstream mobilisation reduced relative dominance. The Greens show striking overrepresentation in periods 22–25 (+2% to +19.5%), with highest concentrations in periods 22–23. The SPÖ and ÖVP are consistently underrepresented (−2% to −20%), indicating that large governing parties did not dominate immigration discourse despite institutional size. Speaker-per-seat analysis highlights that period 25 shows the highest speaker participation across all parties, indicating that crisis-driven salience mobilised broader participation.

Actor expansion follows a poles-versus-mainstream structure. The FPÖ and Greens emerge as cleavage opponents, both overrepresented; the SPÖ and ÖVP serve as mainstream, underrepresented. This configuration reflects niche party competition dynamics (Meguid 2005, 2008): issue-owning challengers force mainstream party responses, but mainstream parties respond defensively, not by competing for ownership. The Greens' high participation indicates co-construction of the cleavage: immigration politicisation involved counter-mobilisation. Immigration activates competing moral foundations, the conservative (authority, security) and the progressive (care, fairness) one, thereby producing symmetric actor engagement even with differing ideological opposition (Haidt 2012). SPÖ and ÖVP underrepresentation reflects governing-party constraints, coalition discipline and the need to administratively manage issues, rather than escalating them (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). Only during the 25th legislative period did mainstream parties mobilise in proportion to their seat share.

This pattern shows that actor expansion is structurally driven, with both left and right poles engaging disproportionately due to immigration's status as a wedge issue. Mainstream parties' participation is shaped by institutional position rather than ideological moderation.

Hypothesis 2 is supported. Actor expansion follows a poles-versus-mainstream structure, with both FPÖ and Greens engaging as opposing cleavage poles due to competing stakes. Mainstream parties respond defensively, constrained by their governing position. Taken together with Hypothesis 1, these findings support the central claim: politicisation emerges symmetrically and structurally, not ideologically. Both salience and actor expansion are driven by party-system dynamics and institutional position—once an issue enters the agenda, all parties engage, and the breadth of engagement reflects government or opposition status. This structural symmetry of politicisation is the foundation for the following analysis, raising the question: what are the consequences in terms of affective polarisation of this symmetric politicisation?

7.4 Hypothesis 3: Does Politicisation Produce Symmetric Affective Polarisation?

Hypothesis 3 proposes that affective polarisation, the use of hostile, antagonistic language toward political opponents, emerges symmetrically as a consequence of politicisation. This is an empirical question about whether the symmetric salience and actor expansion established in H1–H2 translate into symmetric hostile rhetoric.

Section 6.3 employed LLM-based animosity classification on high-salience immigration debates. The FPÖ exhibits consistently elevated animosity across most periods, with highest scores in periods 20, 22, 23, 24, and 27. However, the Greens also display elevated animosity, particularly in periods 22–24, where their mean scores rival or exceed the FPÖ's. The SPÖ and ÖVP show lower baseline animosity but elevated levels in later periods (26–27). NEOS, entering in period 25, immediately engages in affectively charged debate. Distribution shows a substantial within-party variation with high-animosity parties (FPÖ, Greens) showing a broad range, indicating that hostility is concentrated among specific speakers rather than uniformly expressed.

The symmetric animosity between FPÖ and Greens contradicts the idea that affective hostility is primarily right-wing. Both parties engage in hostile rhetoric with similar intensity, a finding mirrored in recent comparative studies (Herold et al. 2023; Bonansinga 2022).

A critical caveat remains, since equal animosity does not equal ideological equivalence. The FPÖ targets pro-immigration policies and government failure on border control; the Greens target restrictive asylum rhetoric and humanitarian norm violations. The measurement captures tone (the presence of hostile language) rather than content (targets or justifications). Both can register as animosity while reflecting different

ideological prospects. Immigration functions as a wedge issue, activating competing moral foundations (Haidt 2012): conservatives invest emotionally in authority, security, and loyalty; progressives in care, fairness, and open boundaries. Both sides have equal ideological stakes; both deploy hostile rhetoric at roughly the same rate.

Hypothesis 3 is supported: symmetric politicisation produces symmetric affective polarisation, disputing the notion that hostility is primarily right-wing. However, this symmetry reflects equal ideological stakes on both poles, not ideological agreement. Whether this is driven by ideology or institutional incentives is addressed by the last hypothesis.

7.5 Hypothesis 4: Is Affective Symmetry Driven by Opposition Status Rather Than Ideology?

Hypothesis 4 tests whether symmetric affective polarisation reflects ideology or institutional position. If opposition status explains animosity, affective symmetry is a property of institutional structure, not ideology.

An OLS regression comparing a restricted model (ideology only) to a full model (ideology plus opposition status), reported in full in Appendix B, isolates the two effects across legislative periods. Opposition status is significant in nearly all periods (7 of 8), with effects of 0.10–0.44 animosity points and the strongest effects in periods 23–25. Crucially, the ideology coefficient does not survive this control: it loses significance or reverses sign in most periods—period 25 is the clearest case, where the apparent ideology effect collapses once opposition status is added, and in periods 22–24 it turns negative, meaning left-wing parties display higher animosity than right-wing parties net of opposition status.

Opposition status is the dominant structural determinant of animosity. Opposition parties display systematic 0.23–0.44 animosity boost regardless of ideology. Ideology becomes non-significant or reverses when opposition status is controlled, indicating that apparent ideological gaps are largely artefacts of coalition composition and government status. The 25th legislative period is particularly interesting as in the restricted model, ideology appears explanatory (0.101***), but in the full model, opposition status explains this gap. Therefore the alleged left-right gap is almost entirely due to opposition status.

This is consistent with research on parliamentary opposition incentives (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Schwalbach 2023): opposition parties use parliamentary debate strategically to criticise government and highlight failure. Opposition status creates an electoral incentive to use more escalatory rhetoric, whereas governing parties face constraints on coalition discipline. The Austrian regression demonstrates that institutional structure—not ideology—is the primary driver of affective variation.

Hypothesis 4 is supported. Opposition status, not ideology, is the main predictor of animosity. Taken together, the four hypotheses confirm the central claim: politicisation

in parliamentary discourse is a structurally symmetric process driven by party-system dynamics as an issue gains prominence—not by ideological traits. This symmetry unfolds in two stages: politicisation (salience and actor expansion) arises from structural properties of party competition and institutional position; affective polarisation is likewise symmetric and structurally determined, with opposition status explaining the intensity of animosity. This challenges views that see politicisation and polarisation as unique to ideological extremism or the right and demonstrates that these are universal processes rooted in party-system structure and issue dynamics.

8. Limitations of the Study

This piece of research investigated the politicization of the immigration debate in Austrian parliamentary discourse through quantitative text-as data methodology. By integrating the three dimensions of Politicisation of issue salience, actor expansion and polarization the study systemically accounts for the rise of immigration as a conflictual parliamentary issue between the observed timeframe of the 20th to 27th legislative period. Several limitations of the present study must be acknowledged.

One of the first limitations concerns the selection of high-salience immigration debates. This study restricts the empirical debate analysis to dates where immigration accounted for at least 10 percent of all words spoken or more than 10.000 words in absolute terms in a debate on a given day.

This threshold is theoretically justified as this thesis is interested in politicization and not incidental issue mentions. The main goal was to maximize observable conflict by focusing on debate dates where immigration was substantively relevant. Nevertheless, this editorial decision also generates a potential selection bias. By exclusively focusing on high-salience debates, the analysis may overrepresent observation of heightened conflict and underrepresent routine or technocratic discussions on immigration policy. In other words, the design is focused on identifying politicized discourse is therefore less ideal to estimating the average tone of all parliamentary discussion on immigration.

This limitation is particularly relevant for the animosity results. High-salience debates are more likely to occur during crises or major legislative conflicts and may therefore contain more confrontational language than low-salience debates. Consequently, the measured levels of animosity cannot be taken to represent all parliamentary speech on immigration. Instead, they reflect discourse within debates where immigration had already attained political salience. While this fits the research design, it narrows the scope of inference. The findings should thus be interpreted as evidence of party behaviour when immigration becomes a central parliamentary issue, rather than as a reflection of party rhetoric on immigration in all contexts.

A second limitation pertains to the operationalisation of salience. The use of Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) topic classifications enables the systematic comparison across time and debates, and the Comparative Agendas framework is explicitly designed to measure political attention across policy domains (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019). However, topic classification is inherently imperfect. Some speeches may address immigration indirectly through welfare, security, education, labour-market policy, or European integration, without being primarily classified as immigration. Conversely, some text classified under immigration may include procedural or legalistic discussion that is not politically conflictual. While the CAP classification is an essential structure help for large-scale analysis, it cannot fully represent the semantic complexity of migration-related parliamentary discourse.

The third and most major limitation involves the validity and replicability of the LLM-based animosity classification. This thesis employs Gemini 2.5 to classify paragraph-level expressions of animosity in the authentic German text. This approach does offer unique advantages: unlike dictionary-based methods or bag-of-words scaling models, an LLM can interpret context, negation, indirect criticism, and rhetorical framing. This capability is fundamental, as animosity cannot be reduced to a fixed list of hostile terms. A paragraph may be derogatory without containing explicit insults. Recent literature increasingly recognises the potential of large language models for political text classification and position estimation, particularly where context-sensitive interpretation is necessary (Wu et al. 2023; Le Mens and Gallego 2025).

Nevertheless, the same features that increase the utility of LLMs also introduce methodological challenges. LLM classifications are less transparent than manually coded rules or dictionary-based measures. Even with a fixed prompt, undocumented backend modifications can heavily affect replicability. Consequently, a future researcher using the same prompt and Gemini version may not obtain the same classifications. This is a general limitation of LLM-based social science research: the model is powerful but not fully inspectable and replicable. This thesis aims to mitigate this issue through manual validation of 400 paragraphs and by comparing zero-shot and few-shot prompting. However, the resulting classification should be regarded as a validated approximation rather than a perfectly reproducible measurement instrument.

The use of the authentic German text brings an additional validity concern. Analysing the actual German speeches is preferable to translation, as rhetorical nuance, parliamentary idioms, sarcasm, and culturally specific forms of attack may be lost in translation. However, German parliamentary language features complex sentence patterns, formal conventions, regional references, and party-specific terminology. Even advanced multilingual LLMs may misclassify subtle forms of irony or indirect derogation. This issue is highly relevant in Austrian parliamentary discourse, where political attacks may be conveyed through historically specific references or idiomatic expressions. Manual

validation mitigates this concern and shows good results when incorporated, but does not fully eliminate it.

A fourth limitation relates to the conceptualisation of animosity. In this thesis, animosity is defined as hostility, contempt, derogation, or strong negative evaluation directed toward another political actor, party, or political group. This definition is grounded in the literature on affective polarisation, particularly the distinction between ideological disagreement and negative out-group affect as developed by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2019). They contend that polarisation should be measured not only by policy distance but also by the extent to which political opponents are disliked as out-groups. Applying this concept to parliamentary speech, however, requires adaptation. While Iyengar and colleagues primarily analyse citizens' affective evaluations of parties and partisan groups, this thesis examines elite speech in parliament. Parliamentary animosity is inherently not identical to mass affective polarisation, but should be better understood as an elite-discursive analogue: a measure of hostile rhetorical evaluation

This distinction is significant because parliamentary speech is inherently strategic. Members of Parliament may not solely voice genuine attitudes (Osnabrügge, Hobolt, and Rodon 2021), they also perform for media audiences, potential voters, and opponents. Consequently, a high animosity score may reflect genuine affective polarisation, but it may also indicate strategic opposition rhetoric, or parliamentary theatre. This consideration is particularly relevant for the FPÖ and Greens, whose heightened animosity may stem from both ideological conflict over immigration and their frequent roles as opposition parties. Opposition parties typically have stronger incentives to criticise government policy, whereas governing parties are more constrained by coalition discipline and executive responsibility (Whitaker and Martin 2022). While this dynamic is acknowledged, the empirical design cannot distinguish ideological hostility from institutional role.

A fifth limitation arises from the observational research design. The study identifies temporal patterns and party-level associations but cannot establish causal effects. For instance, the analysis demonstrates that immigration salience peaks during the 25th legislative period, coinciding with the 2015 refugee crisis. While it is historically plausible that the refugee crisis intensified immigration debate, expanded participation, and contributed to affective conflict, the study does not employ a causal identification strategy capable of isolating the effect of the refugee crisis from other contemporaneous developments. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive and interpretive rather than causal.

Similarly, the thesis cannot demonstrate that FPÖ issue ownership caused Green counter-mobilisation, or that increased salience led to higher animosity. The observed sequence is theoretically meaningful: immigration becomes salient, specific parties dominate the issue, more actors participate, and animosity emerges across the cleavage.

However, the empirical design cannot exclude the possibility of reverse causality or omitted variables. High animosity may itself increase salience by making debates more conflictual and attracting media attention. Party competition may drive salience, but increased salience may also compel parties to participate. These relationships are likely reciprocal (Wagner 2021).

Finally, the study is confined to parliamentary discourse. While this focus is appropriate for research on legislative politicisation, it excludes other arenas where immigration politics unfolds, such as election campaigns, party manifestos, press releases, social media, television debates, tabloid coverage, and public opinion. Parliamentary speech constitutes a crucial institutional site, but it does not encompass the entire political field (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018). Future research could therefore aim to triangulate these findings with media data, campaign materials, or voter surveys to assess whether parliamentary animosity corresponds to broader patterns of affective polarisation in Austrian society.

In summary, the study's limitations primarily result from necessary methodological choices. The selection of high-salience debates maximises observable politicisation but restricts generalisability. The LLM-based classifier facilitates context-sensitive analysis but raises concerns regarding validity, and replicability. The observational design uncovers important patterns but cannot establish causality. These constraints warrant careful consideration. Nonetheless, they do not diminish the central contribution of the thesis: the study provides a systematic, historically grounded, and text-based account of how immigration became a salient, highly competitive, and affectively charged issue in Austrian parliamentary politics.

9. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine whether politicisation in parliamentary discourse, and the affective polarisation that follows from it, emerges symmetrically across the political spectrum or is, as much of the existing literature implicitly assumes, driven disproportionately by actors on the political right. Drawing on the ParlaCAP corpus of Austrian parliamentary speeches between 1996 and 2022, and w Comparative Agendas Project topic classification with an LLM-based measure of speaker-level animosity, it followed the immigration debate across eight legislative periods through three observable dimensions: issue salience, actor expansion, and affective hostility. The central argument was that politicisation is not an inherent trait of particular ideological actors but a structural property of party competition, unfolding reciprocally once an issue enters the party system agenda.

The empirical findings support this expectation across all four hypotheses. immigration salience emerged episodically rather than linearly, peaking sharply during the 25th

legislative period (2013–2017) in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis, and showing the joint operation of sustained FPÖ issue ownership and an exogenous shock rather than the unilateral agenda-setting of any single actor (Hypothesis 1). Actor expansion followed a poles-versus-mainstream structure, with both the FPÖ and the Greens systematically overrepresented relative to their seat share while the governing SPÖ and ÖVP remained underrepresented, a configuration consistent with immigration's status as a wedge issue activating competing moral foundations on both poles (Hypothesis 2). Affective polarisation likewise emerged symmetrically: the Greens matched or exceeded the FPÖ's animosity in several periods, contradicting the assumption that hostile, delegitimising rhetoric is a predominantly right-wing phenomenon (Hypothesis 3). Finally, and most consequentially, the regression analysis indicated that this affective symmetry is driven primarily by institutional position rather than ideology: opposition status produced a considerable and consistent increase in animosity across nearly all periods, while the left–right coefficient weakened or lost significance once opposition status was controlled (Hypothesis 4).

Taken together, these results imply that the implications reach beyond the Austrian case. Because Austria was selected as a least-likely case for symmetry, given the long, institutionalised presence of one of Western Europe's oldest far-right parties, the discovery that politicisation and affective polarisation nonetheless emerged symmetrically offers evidence against interpretations that treat these dynamics as intrinsically right-skewed. Hostility in the chamber appears to be a function of where a party sits in relation to government, not of where it sits on the ideological spectrum. This finding challenges a dominant tendency in the polarisation and populism literatures to locate the drivers of discursive escalation in the radical right, and it suggests that the apparent asymmetry reported elsewhere may partly reflect the analytical angle and the observation arena rather than an underlying ideological asymmetry. It also spotlights the analytical payoff of moving from aggregate party-level measures to speaker-level observation within an institutionalised parliamentary setting, where the reciprocal logic of party competition can be traced directly across time.

This structural reading also carries a normative caution. Because the hostility observed here is a function of party competition and institutional position rather than the pathology of a single extremist actor, it is not self-limiting: an upward shift in the baseline intensity of elite rhetoric would therefore according to the evidence, not be confined to one ideological camp but would raise the affective temperature across the chamber as a whole. The thesis measures the level and distribution of animosity within the period studied, not a threshold beyond which democratic norms give way, and its quantitative design cannot establish that rising rhetoric causes institutional decay. Yet the literature framing this study is clear that affective polarisation is the normatively dangerous dimension of political conflict: where opponents come to be treated not as legitimate

competitors but as enemies whose defeat justifies suspending the shared rules of democratic competition, institutions come under strain and backsliding becomes easier to justify (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; McCoy and Somer 2019; Finkel et al. 2020). The finding that delegitimising rhetoric is already distributed symmetrically across the Austrian party system, and intensifies systematically with opposition status, therefore identifies a latent vulnerability rather than a present crisis: should the routine, competition-driven hostility documented here harden into the sectarian register these authors describe, the weakening of democratic norms would be unlikely to remain the property of any one side of the spectrum.

These contributions should be read alongside the study's limitations. The focus on high-salience debates maximises observable politicisation at the cost of representing the full range of parliamentary speech on immigration; the LLM-based classifier enables context-sensitive measurement but is not perfectly transparent or reproducible; and the observational design identifies temporal and party-level associations rather than causal effects. The findings are therefore most appropriately seen as a descriptive and interpretive account of how parties behave once immigration becomes a central parliamentary issue, rather than as a causal model of why this occurs. Within this scope, however, the thesis offers both an interesting result, that the symmetry of politicisation and affective polarisation in Austria is structurally rather than ideologically determined, and a potentially transferable research design. The consolidation of longitudinal parliamentary text, speaker-level actor expansion, and LLM-based animosity detection results in a framework that can be applied to other parliamentary democracies with comparable textual data. Further study may extend the approach to additional wedge issues, incorporate the targets and justifications of hostile rhetoric rather than its mere presence, and triangulate parliamentary animosity with media, campaign, and survey data to assess how far elite discursive symmetry corresponds to affective polarisation in the wider public. Establishing whether the institutional, opposition-driven logic identified here generalises beyond the Austrian chamber is still a valuable direction for comparative research on the discursive foundations of democratic stability.

Appendix

Appendix A.1: Validation Strategy

To validate and check the classification done by Gemini 2.5, 400 five-sentence paragraphs of different speeches was randomly drawn from the full high-salience debate. Manual coding was performed on the original German text, with speaker names and party affiliations redacted to prevent coder bias based on partisan affiliation. The same binary scale (0 = no animosity, 1 = animosity present) used in the LLM classification was applied to manual coding, ensuring direct comparability.

Two prompting strategies were evaluated:

- **Zero-shot classification:** The model receives only the animosity definition and decision rules (Section 5.3.2), without labelled examples.
- **Few-shot classification:** (The prompt is seeded with 12 exemplar paragraphs: 5 positively labelled (animosity present), 5 negatively labelled (no animosity), and 2 mismatch cases where zero-shot classification disagreed with manual labels. The mismatch examples were included deliberately to enable the model to learn where its default zero-shot behaviour was unreliable.

This comparison tests whether providing the LLM with reference exemplars improves performance.

Results

Strategy	Precision	Recall	F1 Score	Accuracy
Zero-Shot	0,774	0,877	0,822	0,814
Few-Shot	0,776	0.869	0,820	0,811

Despite the few-shot design explicitly incorporating mismatch cases to improve performance, the zero-shot model was selected for the full-corpus classification because it achieved marginally superior F1 score (0.822 vs 0.820) and, more importantly, superior recall (0.877 vs 0.869). Precision of 0.774 indicates that approximately 77% of paragraphs classified as containing hostility or animosity by the model are correctly classified, meaning roughly 23% are false positives. Recall of 0.877 indicates that approximately 88% of paragraphs containing genuine animosity are detected, with 12% missed.

However, this validation result carries an important limitation: the 400 manually coded paragraphs represent the training/validation set and may not fully capture the diversity of parliamentary rhetoric in the full corpus of 12,092 paragraphs. The validation sample was drawn from the dataset being analysed, therefore generalisation to novel parliamentary texts from other legislatures or languages cannot be assumed.

Appendix A.2: Robustness Check

Hypothesis 4 posits that elevated animosity among opposition parties may reflect institutional incentives to criticise government policy rather than ideological extremity or issue ownership. To test this, animosity scores are regressed on a binary government/opposition indicator, versus left-right ideology to speaker-level animosity.

Operationalization

The analysis employs ordinary least squares regression with speech-level animosity scores (LLM_score, ranging 0–1) as the dependent variable. Two binary factors are used as predictors with their respective values taken directly from the ParlaCAP database (Ljubešić et al. 2025):

- **party_status:** Opposition (coded 1) vs. Government (coded 0), based on parliamentary coalition membership in each legislative period.
- **ideology:** Right (coded 1; FPÖ, ÖVP, BZÖ, Team Stronach) vs. Left (coded 0; SPÖ, Greens, JETZT), based on standard left-right classification in the dataset.

Two models are estimated across each legislative period:

- Restricted model: $\text{LLM_score} \sim \text{ideology}$ only
- Full model: $\text{LLM_score} \sim \text{party_status} + \text{ideology}$

The comparison tests whether controlling for government/opposition status substantially reduces the observed left-right animosity gap in each legislative term. If ideology remains significant after adding party_status, this suggests genuine ideological polarisation. If ideology becomes non-significant or substantially weakens, this indicates institutional position is the primary driver. Due to the long timeframe analysed and the changes in government constellations, the regression will be run for each legislative period individually.

Appendix B: Robustness Checks

Two models are estimated for each legislative period, a restricted model regressing speech-level animosity on ideology alone, and a full model adding party status (government/opposition) as a predictor. The comparison tests whether the ideological animosity gap observed in Section 6.3 persists after controlling for opposition status.

The restricted model shows the ideology effect in isolation. The full model shows both the ideology effect (after controlling for opposition status) and the opposition status effect itself. This comparison reveals whether opposition status confounds the ideology-animosity relationship and what magnitude of animosity increase opposition status produces.

Period	Restricted Model: Ideology (Right)	Full Model: Ideology (Right)	Full Model: Opposition Status
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20	0.104* (0.053)	0.058 (0.048)	0.301*** (0.048)
21	0.049 (0.083)	0.223 (0.147)	0.218 (0.148)
22	-0.222*** (0.047)	-0.101** (0.051)	0.222*** (0.042)
23	-0.020 (0.066)	-0.035 (0.044)	0.441*** (0.051)
24	0.066 (0.055)	0.033 (0.026)	0.422*** (0.041)
25	0.101*** (0.027)	0.033 (0.026)	0.234*** (0.025)
26	-0.108 (0.063)	— (collinearity)	0.108 (0.063)
27	0.110 (0.067)	0.115* (0.065)	0.165** (0.064)

Table 2: Ideology Coefficient Comparison Across Models

The full model shows two central findings:

- **Opposition Status Effect:** Opposition parties exhibit significantly elevated animosity across nearly all periods (7 of 8). The effect ranges from 0.10 to 0.44 animosity points on a 0–1.0 scale, with the largest effects in periods 23–25 (0.23–0.44). This demonstrates that institutional position (government vs. opposition) is a robust and consistent predictor of animosity. Opposition parties systematically use more hostile rhetoric than governing parties.
- **Ideology Coefficient Change:** Comparing restricted to full model shows how much the ideology coefficient shrinks when opposition status is added. In several periods, the ideology coefficient becomes smaller and loses significance. Most dramatically in period 25 (peak salience), ideology goes from 0.101*** to 0.033 (non-significant). This indicates that opposition status accounts for a substantial portion of the apparent difference in ideological animosity.

Opposition status is statistically significant across nearly all periods (7 of 8), with effect sizes ranging from 0.10 to 0.44 animosity points. In comparison, the ideology coefficient is inconsistent: it changes substantially when opposition status is added to the model, and becomes non-significant in most periods. Period 25 shows the largest shift: ideology coefficient shrinks from 0.101*** to 0.033 (loses significance), while opposition status produces a 0.234*** effect. Perfect collinearity in period 26 prevents estimation.

Appendix C.1: Party Over-/Underrepresentation in Immigration Debates

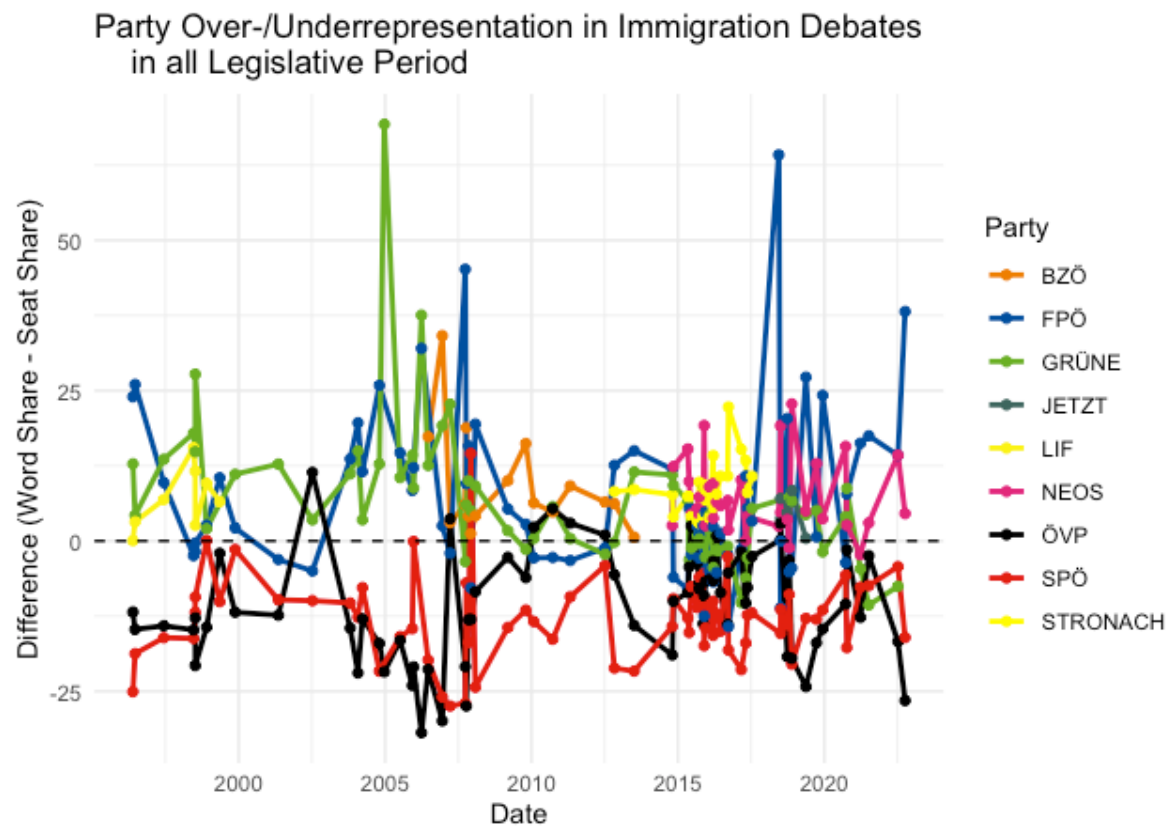


Figure 6: Party over-/underrepresentation in immigration debates across all legislative periods (word share minus seat share)

Appendix C.2: Speaker Over-/Underrepresentation by Legislative Period

Period	Years	FPÖ	GRÜNE	SPÖ	ÖVP	BZÖ	NEOS	Stronach	JETZT
20	1996–99	+8.5%	+13.3%	-13.4%	-13.2%	—	—	—	—
21	1999–02	-2.0%	+9.1%	-7.0%	-4.3%	—	—	—	—
22	2002–06	+17.2%	+19.5%	-12.8%	-20.3%	+17.3%	—	—	—
23	2006–08	+11.8%	+9.8%	-16.3%	-15.6%	+10.2%	—	—	—
24	2008–10	+3.2%	+2.0%	-14.0%	-2.1%	+7.5%	—	+8.4%	—
25	2013–17	-0.7%	+0.7%	-12.3%	-7.0%	—	+6.9%	+8.7%	—
26	2017–19	+11.5%	—	-13.7%	-11.4%	—	+8.7%	—	+5.1%
27	2019–22	+16.4%	-2.0%	-10.0%	-12.1%	—	+5.9%	—	—

Table 3: Speaker Over/Underrepresentation for each legislative period

Appendix D: Source Code

To ensure the computational reproducibility of the empirical findings in this thesis, all source codes have been archived in a public repository.

The Repository can be accessed through: <https://github.com/nikolausagebhard/davienna-parliament-politicisation-thesis>

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