



How do intra-party dynamics impact the party elite's immigration policy manoeuvres? The case of German Social Democrats

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Abstract

This article examines the Social Democratic Party of Germany's (SPD) approach to immigration and the role of party activists in shaping its policies. The article delves into the party's response to the 2015 refugee crisis and its aftermath, utilising the discourse taken by the party's leading figures and interviews with party elites, exploring their perceptions of activists and their constraints on immigration policies. The findings reveal that the influence of party activists is beyond their official power within the organisational structure, and their nestedness within the party affects the party elite's policy- and decision-making on immigration. Given the potential backlash from activists, the study underscores the party elites' cautious approach to policy shifts and emphasises the significance of leadership skills, the party's image and electoral motivations in navigating intra-party dynamics and policy-making. Ultimately, the research highlights the delicate balance SPD elites seek in addressing immigration issues within its party structure.

Keywords Social democracy · Intra-party dynamics · Party elite · Party activists · Immigration · Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)

Introduction

In the last decade, immigration has become one of Europe's most politicised, salient issues. With the refugee crisis of 2015, increasing anxieties about socio-economic well-being and the perceived threat of immigration opened a field for far-right political parties. Their discourse gained traction, especially among blue-collar workers and people who felt left behind by the political system, also termed 'losers of globalisation' (Kriesi et al. 2012). Characterising immigration as a threat to

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the economy and culture, far-right parties were capable of mobilising these sentiments (Alonso and Fonseca 2011). While the anti-immigration discourse broadened its appeal, especially among the working class, the left-wing parties faced a political dilemma. Most parties failed to develop a stance that appealed to the working class's relatively more conservative and restrictive policy expectations, at the same time increasingly relying on the highly educated, urban and progressive vote (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020; Yilmaz 2012).

Some social democratic parties turned to restrictive immigration positions as a solution, mostly diverging with the far-right discourse to varying degrees (Meret 2021; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein 2022). Others either downplayed immigration as an issue or kept their positions (Bale et al. 2010). Yet, in overall, the immigration dilemma and attempts to respond caused considerable tensions within political parties (Odmalm and Bale 2015). This article focuses on the intra-party aspect and explores the relationship between intra-party dynamics and restrictive shifts on immigration and how the activists influence and constrain the party elite's manoeuvres on this issue.

Intra-party dynamics provide an insight into the power balance between party actors, such as the party elite and the party activists, and illustrate how political parties function, strategise and operate (Ceron 2019). Existing research points out that the activists are relatively more ideological and less pragmatic in politics, prioritising the implementation of their political principles than the party elite, who tend to be more concerned about votes and office (May 1973; Strøm 1990).

There is considerable research on how parties strategise from the intra-party dynamics perspective (for example, Meyer and Wagner 2019; Schumacher et al. 2015) that investigates the responsiveness, conflicts and policy shifts primarily relying on quantitative methods (Hennl and Franzmann 2017). On the other hand, Hertner (2013) researches the perspectives and decision-making capabilities of the party leadership in European Union policy-making, Marx and Schumacher (2012) focus on the role of intra-party structures on welfare state retrenchment in social democratic parties, Pettitt (2007, 2011) explores the party congresses and intra-party democracy, and Rathgeb and Wolkenstein (2022) delve into the social democratic parties' dynamics on immigration policy and intra-party agreement.

While these insightful contributions exist, the perceptions of social democratic intra-party actors, their impact on policy shifts and party strategies, and how they position themselves accordingly, are not examined in detail. Hence, this article concentrates on these dynamics and actors, seeking an answer to the question: how does the party elite's perception of party activists and intra-party balance influence, shape or constrain their decision-making process on immigration policies?

This article focusses on the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) as its case study. Firstly, Germany, especially around 2015, experienced a significant influx of refugees and immigrants, which led to politicisation and increased saliency of the topic, which was also reflected in public debates and election results. Furthermore, as one of the largest and most influential social democratic parties in Europe, SPD experienced the immigration dilemma in full effect and, since then, has failed to develop a convincing narrative on the issue (Rennwald 2020; Wolkenstein 2020).



Also, the party faced intra-party challenges and considerable political changes in the last decades (Jun and Jakobs 2021).

I argue that aside from the official power routes, organisational structures and statutes constituting intra-party democracy, party activists can establish pressure points and internalised impact within the party to influence and constrain the electoralist manoeuvres of the party elite, even of a pre-emptive nature. The extent of activists' influence over the party elite depends on how the elite perceives them, activist strength in the party, and the salience and ideological importance of the policy issue to the party and the activists.

The immigration dilemma of social democrats

The immigration dilemma of the social democrats garnered a considerable amount of interest. At its core, this dilemma emerges from a divergence between the ideological tenets of social democracy, electoral concerns and vote maximisation (Hildebrandt and Jäckle 2021; Hinnfors et al. 2012; Polacko 2022). Ideologically, social democracy argues for socioeconomic solidarity and fair redistribution. Regarding immigration, as Hinnfors et al. (2012, p. 589) offer, extending this supportive and egalitarian approach to 'less well-to-do group(s) such as refugees and immigrants ... would sit comfortably with social democratic ideological foundations'. Hence, a considerable part of the left-wing parties and actors, including social democrats, would consider and portray immigration through the issues of fundamental human rights, solidarity and anti-discrimination (Helbling 2014; Odmalm and Bale 2015). At the same time, throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, social democratic parties undertook a considerable ideological shift, becoming less apprehensive towards neo-liberal market policies and de-emphasising their redistributive policies and welfare state (Green-Pedersen et al. 2001), arguably undertaking a more pragmatic and electoralist approach.

With the electorate's increasing perception of competition and globalisation, this outlook on immigration has led social democratic parties somewhat to diminish their appeal to their traditional working-class base. Furthermore, social democratic or left-wing parties in general, started to gain more ground with an electorate of liberal, universalist and multiculturalist views on immigration who have higher education and income levels (Alonso and Fonseca 2011).

While immigration gained more saliency in the last decades, predominantly right-wing and far-right political parties politicised and established themselves as the issue owners. Approaching the issue from economic, social and cultural perspectives, offering protection from the influx of immigrants, sociocultural changes and perceived threats to their livelihoods and identity, many far-right parties targeted the working-class base (Rovny 2013). Far-right's discourse on immigration, revolving around the protection of socioeconomic standing, the welfare state and identity, became an attractive alternative to the social democratic parties, which increasingly turned to economically centrist and liberal on sociocultural issues (Rennwald 2020). Hence, immigration as a political issue emerges as an intersection of multiple



core values for social democrats, from solidarity to redistribution to sociocultural matters, which renders it an ideological and electoral challenge.

As the far-right extended its appeal, social democratic parties responded with three different strategies on immigration. Bale et al. (2010) offer that social democrats either adopted the far-right discourse on immigration to gain support, held their expansive, pro-immigration positions or diffused the issue, aiming to depoliticise immigration and prioritise other issues. Especially moving towards restrictive immigration policies can cause considerable upheaval within the parties, gathering negative responses from the party activists, while it may provide grounds for vote maximisation to the party elite (Downs 2011; Hjorth and Larsen 2020; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein 2022). On the other hand, parties holding their position on immigration did not manage to provide a convincing answer to this dilemma either (Schmidtke 2016). In that regard, social democratic parties who held their positions on immigration and the impact of intra-party dynamics on this lack of change are underresearched and call for much more detailed exploration.

Intra-party dynamics

Political parties contain several actors with different political motivations. At its most basic, these actors can be grouped into the party elite, the party activists and the party members (Kitschelt 1989), and they have different political expectations and varying access to party resources, office and power (Strøm 1990). The party elite, which is made up of the party leadership, party executive and the parliamentary group, will strive to implement electoral strategies and shift policies accordingly to maximise votes and political gains to an extent (Harmel and Janda 1994; Hennl and Franzmann 2017). Activists are the members and, in some cases, non-member sympathisers who actively engage in the party work, provide much-needed groundwork for the parties, supply human resources, take roles in committees and organisational roles and donate their time, energy and money to the party, its causes and campaigns. They are motivated mainly by and pursue ideological-driven positions, as their gains are rarely economic or office-related (Scarrow 2015; Van Haute and Gauja 2015).

These differences are crucial to the political trajectory of a party. Parties can be activist- or leadership-dominated, or the organisational structure may allow for more or less impact by the activists. However, the party elite has relative dominance among intra-party actors over the decision-making over policy shifts, party strategy and manoeuvres (Heidar 2006; Scarrow et al. 2000; Wolkenstein 2020). When the party elite implements a strategy or a political discourse for the party, their goal is to balance their aim to maximise their votes and office goals and appease party activists, ensuring that there is no intra-party strife or dissent (Narud and Skare 1999). Kitschelt (1989) offers that the activists, while ideologically driven, are not wholly inflexible and are aware of the importance of electoral success for the party. However, these intra-party dynamics, including the influence of activists, can constrain the ideological manoeuvring of the party elite and its implementation as the party policy, especially if activists



consider certain manoeuvres as a divergence from the core values of the party (Ceron 2019; Meyer 2013).

Organisationally speaking, the party activists have specific official routes to influence the party's direction, such as conventions or conferences. In those events, party activists, as delegates, may have the right to vote on party policies, leadership or parliamentary candidates (Ceron 2019; Meyer 2013). The levels of intra-party democracy affect activists' impact; some parties may close their decision-making processes to the party activists, while others allow their official input to varying degrees (Lehrer 2012). Although organisational structures allow party activists to veto decisions, without such routes, they may still impose constraints on policy or strategy change and make their voices heard by the party elite (Kitschelt 1989; Wagner and Meyer 2014). How much effectiveness the party elite attributes to the activists and their capability to dissent is decisive on the intra-party balance (Maor 1992; Böhm 2015).

This paper argues that there is a pre-emptive and internalised nature to the constraint caused by potential responses from activists towards the party elite on immigration policy shifts. The party elite perceives the ideological limits of flexibility and expectations of the party activists and their overall influence and orients their political manoeuvres accordingly not to upset the intra-party balance (Friedrich 1963; Mannewitz and Rudzio 2023). Activist influence may not be sufficient or strong enough to shift policy themselves via voting rights or power in policy-making committees; however, their projected power of constraint goes beyond holding organisational powers and constraining and preventing changes initiated by the party elite. The extent of this constraint should be considered in line with the perception of the party elite, as they may over- or undervalue the pressure- or dissent-potential of the party activists relative to the policy field. This article refers to the totality of this influence and pressure by party activists to constrain the party elite's manoeuvre potential as nestedness, where activists can still restrain or permit certain policy changes without achieving domination in the party. I argue that this influence is proportionate to the extent of the party elite's perception of the party activists' ideological limitations and flexibilities and depends on how much power the party elite attributes to the party activists.

The party elite's perception of the activists would prevent them from shifting policy on issues where the activists are the most principled, ideological and attentive, in this case, immigration and social democrats, influencing the policy outcomes. Furthermore, I expect this perception to be affected and strengthened, i.e. the party elite being further influenced and affected by certain factors, such as the higher saliency and politicisation of immigration, the anti-immigration positioning of the other parties in the party system and weak party leadership. Hence, the empirical part, especially the interviews, will investigate these factors as the dimensions of the elite's perception of activists.

Methodology

This article takes SPD as its primary case as several aspects provide opportunities to investigate the relationship between the intra-party actors on immigration. On an organisational level, the party is neither activist nor leadership-dominated, and the



factional or intra-party actor dominance is not persistent; thus, the party dynamics are open to change (Schumacher 2012; Ceron 2019). Even if the leadership of the party is considered powerful and leads the way in policy- and decision-making, the party activists are involved in the process and have a particular, yet limited, level of veto power as well (Jun and Jakobs 2021; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012).

Within the party system, SPD mainly competes with the centre-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) primarily for the centrist voters and with Greens and The Left (Die Linke) over progressive and left-wing voters (Hansen and Olsen 2019). While the vote switch from SPD to far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has been somewhat limited, SPD has failed to attract the losers of globalisation, which considerably prefer AfD (Wurthmann et al. 2021; Steiner et al. 2023). Although in the 1970s, the party owned the immigration issue, in the following decades, centre- and far-right parties, CDU and AfD, much more prominently politicised it (Gessler and Hunger 2022; Seeberg 2017). Since then, SPD has had issues developing a unified vision on immigration, which has led to intra-party conflicts (Schmidtke 2016). All these dimensions provide a dynamic intra-party balance on immigration, where it is possible to investigate the relationship between the intra-party actors and their impact on policy-making and the positioning of the party elite.

This article has a two-pronged qualitative approach. First, I provide insights into the SPD elite's approach towards immigration and the overview of positions and declarations in the 2015 refugee crisis and its aftermath until 2019. The timeframe covers a period where the issue became overwhelmingly salient (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2023) and a general election where immigration was one of the most emphasised topics. I turn to newspaper articles, press releases, interviews by the party elite and secondary literature to outline these positions. This step explores the policy manoeuvres, both programmatic and discursive, initiated by the party elite and generated public responses and debates from within the party—as attempts to alter the *status quo* of the SPD's immigration stances and reactions from internal opposition. To provide a comprehensive perspective, scholarly literature and news databases and significant national newspapers were examined for developments focusing on immigration policies and SPD.

In most cases, the party elite has greater access to mass media, and most of the declarations are from high-level politicians, both offering a discourse or opposing it (Mannewitz and Rudzio 2023). There is a factional element to these statements as well. Three main factions should be highlighted: SPD's right-wing is mainly concentrated on *Seeheimer Kreis*, the left-wing is aligned to *Parlamentarische Linke*, while *Netzwerk Berlin* has a more moderate and pragmatic positioning (Braunthal 2003; Ceron 2019; Mannewitz and Rudzio 2023). These factions are well-organised and influence the party's direction, although they have no official status. Additionally, an SPD politician can be affiliated to or aligned with several factions simultaneously; hence, there are overlaps between factions.

Interestingly, in the last decades, names aligned with *Seeheimer Kreis* secured positions in the party leadership, increasing the influence of the party's right-wing on the party elite level (Ceron 2019). Therefore, most of the public debates and declarations to the media are on an elite level and they are somewhat divided



on factional alignment, as the party's right-wing tries to shift policy towards more restrictive positions while the left reacts negatively. This conflict may happen on an elite level, but intra-party support is still crucial for the political implementation and internalisation of these discursive manoeuvres.

Second, I utilise six semi-structured interviews conducted with the SPD party elite to establish their perceptions on the party policy shifts on immigration, the impact of activists, and how they position themselves and respond to this dynamic (see Appendix 1 for more details). The participants are either directly involved or a part of the decision- and policy-making processes regarding immigration through certain positions within the party. Four interviewees are current or former members of the national executive committee (*Parteivorstand*) and the Migration and Integration Working Group (*Arbeitsgruppe Migration und Integration*) in the parliament, while one interviewee is a political advisor to a member of the parliamentary executive committee (*Fraktionsvorstand*).¹ Hence, the participants have considerable power, access or information regarding the policy-making, developing strategy and rhetoric, and producing policy papers and legislation, including the limitations and grounds to manoeuvre, about immigration on the national level.

Finally, the aim is to triangulate these approaches and provide a background and depth to the insights from the interviews to develop corroborative findings on intra-party dynamics and the perception of the party elite of activists (Natow 2020).

Social Democratic Party of Germany and immigration

Background and overview

Since the guest workers programme (*Gastarbeiter programm*), which was devised to supply the country's much-needed labour force, Germany experienced many flows of immigrants and refugees and the political tensions emanating from immigration (Downs 2011). From the beginning, the SPD was in a positional dilemma, balancing its policies between supporting international solidarity and protecting the ethnically German working class from competition (Schmidtke 2016). This balancing act, in a way, shows that the immigration dilemma is not necessarily a recent phenomenon. While the party wanted to protect the rights of immigrant workers, SPD leaders such as Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt offered restrictive positions, too. Brandt abolished the guest worker initiative and warned against reaching the limits of Germany

¹ The participants may have multiple positions or held another position previously—for example, *Parteivorstand* members can be current or former *Fraktionvorstand* members or MPs. Their most relevant and prominent roles are reflected here. To elaborate on these boards and committees, *Parteivorstand* is responsible for the direction and strategy of the party, providing leadership and decision-making initiative; also organises electoral campaigns and makes public declarations concerning the party, while *Fraktionsvorstand* oversees overall policy development and parliamentary strategies, shapes the party's rhetoric and policy proposals and coordinates party discipline. The *Arbeitsgruppe* is also a part of the parliamentary group initiating and drafting legislation, developing strategies and discourse and supplying political perspectives and policy input focusing solely on immigration and integration matters.



to handle the influx (Williams 2014); Schmidt declared that when more guest workers were demanded against shortages, ‘No Turk comes across the border to me any more’ (Grunenberg 1982).

While in the 1980s, CDU implemented a series of restrictive immigration and citizenship legislations, in 1992, SPD and CDU reached a compromise on a restrictive policy about asylum seekers (Triadafilopoulos 2019). Later, SPD and Greens formed a coalition government, which passed comprehensive citizenship legislation for immigrants in 1999 and the country’s first encompassing immigration law in 2004, aiming to attract qualified workers and supply labour shortages (Green and Hess 2016). Otto Schily, the interior minister and SPD politician, led the policy effort, arguing that immigration should serve the economic interests and Germany should be considered ‘an immigration country’ (Geddes and Scholten 2016, p. 83). CDU/CSU opposed Schily’s propositions due to worries about the cultural and demographic aspects (Kruse et al. 2003). SPD’s youth wing (colloquially known as *Jusos*) fiercely criticised Schily, arguing that this formulation saw immigration in purely pragmatic and economic terms, overlooked the humanitarian component and failed to amend the asylum process (SPD 2001).

The discourse of Germany being a ‘country of immigration’ (*Einwanderungsland*) is later taken up by the party as a part of their official position on the issue. From the 2005 election manifesto until the 2017 one, SPD manifestos include this proposition, and the general outlook of the policy is built around it. Throughout these years, SPD has maintained a somewhat expansive position towards immigration while highlighting considerably pragmatic attitudes (König 2017; Schmidtke 2015). Also, the party’s overall approach throughout this period does not shift extensively; the intra-party dissent on immigration is still considerable, showing that the party actors are not united or content with the party’s positions (Jolly et al. 2022; Polk et al. 2017).

Elaborating on the intra-party dissent, the intra-party actors, whether committees (formed by activists) or individuals, may have differing views and inclinations regarding policy and strategy (Debus and Bräuninger 2009; Wolkenstein 2020). However, on an aggregated level, SPD activists have a very distinct outlook on politics compared to the party elite and the electorate. Regarding the left–right spectrum, the party members lean further to the left than SPD voters (Spier 2019). With a focus on immigration, the SPD activists’ positions are more left-wing than the party line (Schofield and Kurella 2015). Similarly, Orhan (2023) offers that the SPD activists and elites have diverging discourses on immigration; the former consistently prioritises principled and pro-immigration positions, and the latter is much more pragmatic and comparatively less expansive, and while activists are more concerned about ideological and humanitarian aspects, party elites focus further on the costs and benefits of immigration.

This divergence became rather public with a book by Thilo Sarrazin, an SPD politician and state-level minister. In the book, Sarrazin argued against immigration due to genetic hierarchies (between Germans and migrants) and cultural and demographic replacement of the native population (Downs 2011; Piwoni 2015), which was heavily scrutinised in the party congress (Lißmann 2010; SPD 2010). However, Sarrazin also had his fair share of supporters from the German public and among



party members (Mitra 2022; Der Spiegel 2010), and the SPD party leadership, although critical of Sarrazin, addressed the inadequacy of engagement with immigration and integration policies within the party (Gabriel 2010).²

The refugee crisis: 2015 and onwards

Europe experienced a refugee and immigrant influx in 2015, with the worsening of conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. In Germany, unlike her conservative predecessors, Chancellor Angela Merkel assumed a relatively open position and allowed more than a million refugees into Germany, famously claiming 'We can do this' (*Wir schaffen das*) (Triadafilopoulos 2019). SPD was a part of Merkel's grand coalition government as the junior partner, and the party mostly converged with Merkel's agenda on immigration during the crisis (Dostal 2017; Berman and Kundnani 2021). The 2017 elections took place under the refugee crisis' shadow, where CDU and SPD lost votes, and AfD gained considerable ground (Hansen and Olsen 2019).

Between 2015 and 2019, SPD had three party leaders: Sigmar Gabriel (2009–2017), Martin Schulz (2017–2018) and Andrea Nahles (2018–2019). The latter two had their leadership stints cut short by national (2017) and European election (2019) defeats where SPD received historically low vote shares. Gabriel, on the other hand, had a long-term leadership marked by his accumulation of power; as Jun and Jakobs (2021, p. 84) put it, Gabriel 'tended to ignore the preferences of the party on the ground' and 'increasingly became the sole decider over the fate and well-being of the party'. During the crisis, the SPD leadership displayed a pro-immigration position and aimed to convince the electorate about the benefits of immigration for Germany. An article by Sigmar Gabriel in SPD's newspaper (*Vorwärts*) illustrates this very clearly, where the party leader warns against hostility against refugees, urges people to unite behind the governmental efforts, as well as engaging debates with the society and argues:

For the SPD, it is essential that people who are persecuted or have to leave their home countries because of wars or civil wars not only find a new home with us. We want to help them quickly learn our language and attend our schools and universities—because only then can they find work. These people with a permanent perspective of staying are an asset to our country. Because they enrich us culturally, mitigate demographic change, alleviate the shortage of skilled workers and give our social security system more stability. (Gabriel 2015).

While the party's pragmatic yet expansive attitude continued, Sigmar Gabriel also warned that, after Donald Trump's election, if a party lost the working-class

² Following the book's publication in 2010, party figures wanted to expulse Sarrazin from the party; however, this was unsuccessful. After 'long negotiations' and Sarrazin declaring his commitment to social democratic values, the party leadership withdrew the motion for expulsion (Der Spiegel 2011). However, Sarrazin was expelled from the party in 2020 after writing another book in 2018, titled *Hostile Takeover* (Deutsche Welle 2020).



electorate, this would not be compensated by winning ‘the hipsters in California’ (Gabriel 2017). Calls for a more restrictive policy, especially after the peak of the refugee crisis, started much more decisively from the party’s right-wing. Thomas Oppermann, leader of the parliamentary faction, urged for ‘taking the control back on immigration policies’ and argued that the country needs stricter rules, secure borders and faster processing while recognising the humanitarian responsibilities and the potential benefits (Oppermann 2017). Another intra-party debate emerged about where to process and accommodate refugees, which Oppermann argued for keeping refugees in North Africa, while more left-wing figures in the party responded with criticism (Der Spiegel 2017).

Before the 2017 election, Gabriel announced that he would not be running for chancellor and pointed to Martin Schulz as his predecessor, leaving his party leader post as well. In the party congress, Schulz got elected unanimously (Jun and Jakobs 2021). Towards the election, Schulz claimed that he wanted to make immigration one of the prominent issues of the campaign and said, ‘Those who play for time and try to ignore the issue ... are behaving cynically’ (Die Zeit 2017), yet he failed to construct a compelling discourse or vision on immigration (Marx and Naumann 2018). In the 2017 election manifesto, SPD paid considerable attention to immigration, offering more restrictive immigration positions than the previous ones while maintaining most of the party’s programmatical tenets about immigration (Orhan 2023). The manifesto clearly highlights the humanitarian responsibilities, right to asylum, transparency and efficiency of the procedures while bringing up the need for faster deportations for rejected asylum claimants, lowering the ‘excessive demands’, ‘ensuring control’ and supporting voluntary returns (SPD 2017, p. 74). The manifesto offers that human rights must be prominent while presenting numerous restrictive positions to establish control and efficiency over immigration. Furthermore, the party’s pragmatic approach to immigration to supply labour demands from previous years is restated, alongside heightened efforts to integrate immigrants into society (SPD 2017).

The 2017 elections ended with a historically low vote share for SPD, as well as an incoherent political message and a highly unpopular decision, especially with activists, to form a government with CDU, followed by Schulz’s resignation (Faas and Klingelhöfer 2019; Jun and Jakobs 2021). Andrea Nahles, who was the leader of Jusos in the 1990s and a left-wing faction *Forum Democratic Left 21* but later on politically repositioned herself towards the centre, became the front-runner candidate, securing the endorsement of outgoing Schulz and numerous leading party figures (Braunthal 2003; Jun and Jakobs 2021). However, her election showed discontent in the party, as she received only 66 per cent of the congress vote, one of the lowest in SPD’s history (Kerr 2020).

As the leader, she made overtures towards a restrictive immigration policy, stating that Germany ‘cannot take everyone in’ and that refugees should be accommodated in North African countries, aligning with CDU and CSU (Der Spiegel 2018). She later gained support from the right-wing of the party by offering an immigration vision around ‘realism without resentment’ (Monath 2018), arguably following the Danish Social Democrats (S) leader Mette Frederiksen’s ‘fair and realistic’ immigration policy discourse (Cordsen 2018; also see Meret



2021). However, the response from the rest of the party was considerably harsh, e.g. then-Jusos leader Kevin Kühnert reacted by saying that Nahles is 'playing along with AfD's game' by adopting their discourse (Szymanski 2018). Nahles' leadership ended abruptly in June 2019, after SPD received only 15 per cent in the European elections and she lost her party's support (Scantamburlo and Turner 2020).

SPD faced another internal debacle after the 2019 Danish elections, which S won with a restrictive immigration platform, ignited by ex-leader Sigmar Gabriel. In an op-ed, Gabriel wrote that SPD elites did not want to engage with 'the uncomfortable topic' of immigration, while it was a rather salient issue for the electorate. Gabriel also explored the different inclinations of the intra-party actors and strategies:

While resistance and inner-party protests are already stirring again in the German Social Democrats, even to the relatively harmless initiatives of the German government to speed up the deportation of foreigners who are obliged to leave the country and against illegal migration, the Danish Social Democrats have committed themselves to a policy on foreigners and asylum that is 'robust', to say the least. Whereas in Germany, it is a matter of rejecting a relatively small group of asylum seekers at the German–Austrian border who have already begun asylum proceedings in another EU country, the Danish Social Democrats do not want to conduct the asylum proceedings in Europe at all, but rather, if possible, in safe centres outside Europe (Gabriel 2019).

In the article, Gabriel pointed to Otto Schily as a predecessor of similar restrictive policies offered by S regarding accommodating and processing refugees outside Europe. Furthermore, Gabriel added that social democracy's failure to respond to globalisation and open borders caused its core electorate to turn elsewhere for answers, which S managed to reverse by going "'right" in terms of domestic policy and "left" in terms of economic and social policy' (Gabriel 2019). As an overview, Gabriel argued that SPD can become successful electorally if they orient towards S and its approaches towards social welfare and immigration policies. Gabriel's strategic suggestion for SPD was controversial. Thomas Oppermann declared a similar position and called for a 'humanitarian refugee policy and a progressive immigration policy with tough rules' (Der Spiegel 2019). These overtures, however, also received backlash from numerous SPD figures, primarily due to ideological incompatibilities, arguing that employing this strategy would lead to 'giving up (SPD's) principles' (Monath 2019).

The overview of this period provided some perspective into the overtures of SPD leadership regarding immigration. Initially, the party's leaders showed inclinations to employ a more restrictive discourse on immigration, not necessarily to the extent of adopting far-right positions but moving rightwards from the party's prior position, highlighting their electoralist intentions. As Sigmar Gabriel offered, these attempts, whether on a governmental or party level, receive backlash from the party activists. Also, there were signs of electoralist inclinations from the party leadership, employing discourses that appeal to a broader electorate. However, these overtures seemed to stay mostly within the party elite, did not become part of the party's official line, nor were embraced by the other party actors and the *status quo* was maintained.



Elite perceptions and intra-party constraints for SPD

Establishing the party elite's perception of activists and intra-party dynamics and their influence on the immigration policies of SPD is crucial to understanding the complex dynamics of immigration policy shifts. Furthermore, I will explore which conditions and changes can affect the intra-party dynamics and result in policy changes in immigration.

Firstly, participants were asked how they perceived the SPD's immigration policy. When asked about providing definitions for the party's policy, one said 'anxious' (Interview #4 2022), and the other 'Janus faced' (Interview #2 2022). Interviewee #4, who is on the 'very left' of the party, elaborated that the party actors lack self-confidence regarding speaking out or taking steps on the issue, which would lead to political loss, either votes or intra-party support, sometimes both, a sentiment shared by other interviewees (#5, #6 2023). Interviewee #2 (2022) reflected that the SPD 'invites the immigrants with one hand while pushing them away with another' and emphasised that the party needs 'a humanitarian and a regulated policy', arguing that the SPD currently has an open outlook; however, the contents of the policy do not reflect that, which leads to political inconsistency.

Common ground among the participants was finding a coherent, comprehensive discourse to convey this to the electorate and the party. Interviewee #5 (2023), who is politically pragmatic and 'somewhere between the centre and the left' in the party, also mentioned that the public was not ready to have 'an honest conversation' about immigration as the discourse and the public were susceptible to straying into populism, fueling anti-immigrant sentiments. Interviewee #2 (2022) highlighted the lack of impetus in the leadership to develop a discourse, as the leadership considers it a potentially dangerous area to manoeuvre. Interviewee #6 (2023), whose self-placement is 'quite in the middle' of the party, offered that the party has both 'academic voters' and 'traditional voters' who expect different approaches to immigration, leading to a conflict of strategy within the SPD. From the elite perspective, SPD has issues and a dilemma in structuring and communicating a coherent immigration policy.

Regarding the intra-party motivations, the party elite identified the activists as policy-seeking and pro-immigration compared to the rest of the party, while the party leadership were perceived as more electoralist and open to restrictive immigration policies. An interviewee (#2 2022), who is ideologically 'left in economic and right on societal issues', mentioned that 'the party leadership contemplated a move to the right' and they would have done it if they saw it as feasible and beneficial, both electorally and organisationally. While not everybody in the party elite wanted a restrictive shift, the party leadership wanted to explore the idea, especially during the latter periods of Sigmar Gabriel's tenure (Interview #1, #3 2022; #6 2023). According to one interviewee, in the coalition talks with CDU and CSU in 2017, SPD leadership was ready to accept the vision provided by those parties and did not establish any red lines, which, according to the interviewee, did not fit with SPD's core values (Interview #1 2022).



The overall approach shows a prioritisation of electoral motivations from the decision-makers and party leadership in SPD, while the ideological incongruities or incompatibilities are seemingly a lesser issue. These electoral motivations also extend to the activists, however, with caveats. The party activists are aware of the inclinations of the electorate, anxieties and worries about immigration, which, in return, allows them to be more flexible about the party policy (Interview #3, #4 2022; #5 2023). One participant (Interview #4 2022) said, 'They (activists) know that we need to win elections'. Another (Interview #3 2022) mentioned that the sceptical attitude of voters towards the immigrants in their constituency surprised the SPD activists in the area. Some SPD politicians struggle to balance the expectations of their local activists and the electorate due to their differing views on immigration, especially 'in the East (of Germany)' or less urbanised areas (Interview #5 2023). Interviewees #2 (2022) and #6 (2023) reiterated that the party activists, although principled about immigration, also want to have SPD govern and affect other areas of society. Overall, the participants agreed that the party activists have more principled and radical views on immigration; however, they know that SPD is a party with aspirations to win elections.

Interviewees had a converging understanding about the extent of this flexibility or 'the red lines'. Participants especially emphasised that if SPD changed its policy during or after the refugee crisis, the party activists would completely turn against the party and its elite. Activists were mainly mobilised and reactive to the issues of sea rescue, support and safety for refugees and the right to asylum topics. While labour migration is important, the participants perceived activists as less worried and more flexible on this issue than the refugee policies. However, they also stated that significant breaks from the current policy would cause a major upheaval, no matter which part of the immigration policy. One participant (#1 2022), who is 'on the left-wing in the ideological sense' but 'always concerned with practical politics', likened this possible change to leading to similar outcomes to Hartz reforms, where the move towards the political centre disillusioned numerous activists, even causing some to leave the party.

After establishing the divergent political motivations of intra-party actors, the impact of the activists on decision- and policy-making on immigration becomes much more evident. The participants stated that the party elite is very much aware and considers the (potential or current) responses of the party activists. Adding that the party executive is 'too professional' not to measure the activists up, Interviewee #2 (2022) mentioned that the party elite shape their manoeuvres according to the potential responses, even adding that 'SPD (executive) pays too much attention (to activists)'. Interviewee #5 (2023) quite directly stated that '(the party activists) do not know how much power they have' and '(party elite) always pay attention to what they want and respond accordingly' while emphasising that party activists portray themselves as powerless over the manoeuvres of the party elite, which is not the case according to interviewees. SPD party elite constrains themselves over the potential backlash and dissent from activists, through their organisational and political presence, on immigration, while the activists do not have an apparent domination within the party. As an example, Interviewee #3 (2022), who self-positioned as 'centre-left' of the party, stated that when Sigmar Gabriel wanted to 'move the party to



the right (on immigration)', SPD's party executive opposed and prevented this shift because of the (potential and existing) pressures and reactions from the activists.

As one of organisational mediums of these pressures, certain committees and groups within SPD (such as *Jusos* and working groups, *Arbeitsgemeinschaften*) and the influence they yield can be crucial, as they mainly consist of activists. Interviewee #3 (2022) referred to the pressure potential these groups have; they are in constant contact with different parts of the party elite and voice their opinions and expectations on policy. Especially in immigration policy, these groups position themselves as principled and expansive and aim to constrain the party elite as much as possible from diverging from the existing immigration discourse (Interview #3 2022; #6 2023). Regarding *Jusos*, in which all participants considered as radically pro-immigrant than the rest of the party, one participant argued that they lost influence as an organisation within the SPD over the years, yet they are still 'a stopping force' when it comes to policy shifts (Interview #4 2022).

The activists utilise media and their connection to MPs and local organisations as pressure points to voice their concerns about possible or existing policy changes. On the local level, activists voice their concerns in local party meetings, contact other MPs or decrease their party work (Interview #3, #4 2022; #5, #6 2023). On the national level, one of the most efficient ways for the party activists to constrain the party is to contact MPs and start social media and emailing campaigns to pressure them. One participant mentioned that social media changed the nature of engagement between the activists and the elites, pointing out that now they follow social media quite closely (especially Twitter and Instagram). If there is a strong reaction or campaign, the party elite will discuss how to handle this and what to do or not to do (Interview #5 2022).

Party activists and the groups tend to pressure and contact 'like-minded MPs', such as MPs from the party's left-wing, young MPs or those with a migration background. This relationship seems to be reciprocal as the left-wing MPs yield a certain level of power, knowing that they can utilise the support of the activists. The party elite wants to avoid the image of the SPD as a disorganised and disunited party, which provides more leverage to the activists.

Although there are nuances, the overall perception of the party elite regarding the constraint power and potential of the party activists over the potential shifts in immigration policies is robust. The party can change the wording or emphasise certain aspects of immigration policy to appeal to the electorate with immigration sceptic inclinations; however, the policy itself is not open to change without a tumultuous break in the intra-party balance (Interview #1, #3 2022; #5 2023). As the interviewee (#3 2022) pointed out, the party 'cannot change the policy, so (they) change the words'; engaging in certain discursive statements without shifting policy to appeal to a broader electorate while appeasing the party activists, or at least not inciting them. This change of emphasis keeps the party line in a *status quo*, while the political messages may employ specific appealing phrases or overtures that can capture the electorate.

Nevertheless, the party elite offered specific external or internal conditions affecting the intra-party dynamics and policy-making. All six interviewees brought up anti-immigration discourse being too associated with AfD and Germany's history.



Regarding the latter point, interviewees unanimously emphasised the SPD's place in German history, as an essential guiding aspect of how the SPD perceived itself. Interviewees specifically referred to the National Socialist period of Germany and mentioned the resistance put up by the party and its members, especially Willy Brandt, and their exile and refugee statuses. Although party leaders are keener on electoralist strategies, they know that this background and contemporary self-image emanating from that period impact activists and the representation of SPD (Interview #1, #3 2002; #5 2023). Interviewee #5 (2023) offered that the historical struggles of SPD against Nazism are a part of 'the party's DNA', which makes it hard for the leaders to shift policies without a reaction arising from that self-image. This perception leads to SPD politicians acting more cautiously in specific policy areas, immigration being one of them (Interview #2 2022; #6 2023). Interviewee #2 (2022) also clarified that other countries did not have this historical aspect, which permits more possibilities for policy shifts on issues like immigration.

Another conditional change was the extent of electoral feasibility. The example of Danish Social Democrats (S) was discussed as a social democratic party that moved towards restrictive policies and benefitted from this turn electorally (see Hjorth and Larsen 2020 and Meret 2021). The responses from participants varied: Interviewee #1 (2022) disagreed with the 'excessiveness' of the negative attitude towards immigration while saying that SPD can learn from the integration policies of S. Interviewee #2 (2022) said that S is an excellent example of what SPD should aim for, although similarly pointed out that S went too restrictive. For the rest of the participants, the extent of S' policy on immigration seemed ideologically problematic, but they recognised the electoral benefits while voicing feasibility issues for SPD. The general inclination was that a move towards restrictive immigration policies, when electorally beneficial, can be employed for SPD; however, they are doubtful whether 'the party', i.e. SPD activists, would allow such a shift, and the response of the activists would be one of the decisive forces. What would provide this feasibility? First of all, as the party elite pointed out, an economic crisis or downturn with high saliency of immigration would be crucial. Furthermore, if the party system, especially CDU, moved to further restrictive positions on immigration, SPD leadership, with an electoralist approach, would have more leverage and incentive for a shift, as it may lead to tolerance of activists. Another aspect of the changes in the political landscape is the situation of AfD, such as the normalisation and mainstreaming of AfD (among the society) and AfD considerably increasing its electoral support when the issue of immigration is salient.

Some participants offered that these changes in the party system would make activists possibly more flexible or provide more incentive to the elite on shifts on immigration. Interviewee #4 (2022) offered that if SPD polls badly, while AfD gains political ground, 'sadly' SPD would move towards the right on immigration. Interviewee #2 (2022) similarly suggested that if AfD reaches '20 to 30 per cent', the party would take more restrictive positions to counteract the far-right's electoral growth, consolidating votes and dictating the political agenda. Interviewee #6 (2023) also declared that the changes in the political landscape and saliency of immigration would allow activists to be more 'silent', albeit with limitations and reservations, as the activists would expect information and briefings from the party



leadership and policy compromises and advancements in other areas of immigration policy without crossing the red lines.

The last discernable condition is the skills and influence of the party leader. A more skilled and influential party leader was perceived as essential for unifying the party behind a policy change, from the electorate to activists and the elite, while successfully managing the leadership. Almost all the participants mentioned Willy Brandt as a historical example of a successful leader with a clear message who can unify and mobilise the party. However, the common approach for the contemporary was that SPD lacked a charismatic and skilled leader. Interviewee #4 (2022) said, ‘SPD has been looking for that person for decades’. The SPD’s bureaucratic structure also has a role in the lack of a strong leader; although the SPD leaders are politically experienced, they lose their appeal and influence through the years they spend rising in the party ranks (Interview #1 2022). This happens ‘with a very slow pace’, and these positions are generally held by older people who ‘have dead bodies in the cellar’,³ which prevents them from yielding leadership skills to open the way for a political change in the party (Interview #4 2022). This process diminishes the impact of politicians, especially over intra-party actors, and younger politicians who quickly rise through the ranks tend to follow the general outlook of the rest of the party’s executive, which causes them to lose credibility and political momentum. Hence, leadership skills, including conveying a compelling political message on immigration (whether expansive or restrictive) and uniting the party behind it, are perceived as an essential aspect of the intra-party dynamics and policy change.

To summarise, the SPD’s party elite considers the party activists as a constraint on their policy-making processes and takes their expectations and limits on immigration into account when developing a policy manoeuvre. The constraining takes place pre-emptively (relying on the party elite’s perception) or in real-time (due to the protest and reactions of the party activists), and it is tied to how organisationally and politically ingrained the activists are in the party, which this article conceptualises as nestedness. The party activists’ unofficial veto power or disincentivising force in SPD, in line with their perceived influence and embeddedness in the party’s functioning, limits the party elite’s potential moves. Participants (#3, #4 2022) emphasised the functionary aspect of the party activists and the problems the party would face without their commitment during the elections. This is an important aspect, as the party elite considers that only winning electoral support without a convinced activist base is insufficient for political or electoral success.

The interviews provide a clear picture regarding the intra-party balance of SPD on their immigration policy. SPD leadership is open to a policy change on immigration driven by electoralist strategy to a certain extent. Still, they calculate and anticipate the reactions of party activists and carefully design their policies accordingly. This unofficial power and impact yielded by the party activists diminish the possibility of manoeuvres on immigration policy, internalising the constraint among

³ The interviewee translated the idiom ‘eine Leiche im Keller haben’ literally into English; a more common translation would be ‘skeletons in the closet’. The original phrasing of the interviewee is kept as a quote.



the party elite, even if the decision is made in the party's higher echelons. The party elite perceives the leader's charisma and skills as a potential, yet crucial way to convince and unite the activists behind the party's immigration positions, restrictive or not. This aspect also touches upon the question of leadership skills posed by Rathgeb and Wolkenstein (2022) regarding the intra-party unity of a social democratic party and restrictive immigration policies.

The party activists may not force their demands on policy change on the party elite, yet they seem to be able to protect the *status quo* and constrain them in specific areas; the anticipation of a backlash makes the party elite much more apprehensive towards employing electoralist strategies and change policy. As a solution, the party elite tries to avoid the subject altogether, not to send mixed messages and pit the electorate against the activists, or attempt discursive changes to increase their appeal to the electorate without causing intra-party dissent.

Conclusion

This article explored the potential shifts in immigration policies of social democratic parties and how the intra-party dynamics influence and constrain these shifts. SPD provided interesting aspects as a case study: a party with governmental ambitions and potential, with powerful intra-party actors, without a clear dominance of activists or the elite, and a country that experienced the 2015 refugee crisis first-hand and anxieties emerged from it. Analysing the party elite's discourse and policy manoeuvres on immigration and insights and perceptions gathered from the interviews provide a complex intra-party dynamic.

The party elites perceive the activists as a constraint on their policy-making processes and take their expectations and limits on immigration into account when developing their strategies while considering activists positioned as principled and radical on immigration, often diverging from the party's official discourse. The activists' influence is rooted in their organisational and political embeddedness within the party rather than outright dominance or control of party decision-making structures, which grants them unofficial influence routes over immigration policy that is internalised by and pre-emptively impacts the elite and their policy-making. Furthermore, the extent of this constraining influence depends on how much power the party elite attributes to the party activists in line with their perception of potential backlash and dissent.

The party elite's ability to manoeuvre on immigration policy is also significantly influenced by electoral feasibility and political landscape. The perception is that the changes in these factors can make the intra-party constraints more flexible, while any significant departure from the current policy, purely as an electoral move, would face a backlash from the activists. Additionally, how the party activists perceive the party's image, the history of Germany being significant for SPD's case, and the skills and ability of the party leadership are also crucial to the extent of the constraints. To navigate this balance, the party elite sometimes shifts the emphasis on policy discourse without attempting any programmatic change.



These findings contribute to the growing literature on intra-party actors, focusing on the intricacies of their dynamics, actor perceptions and the immigration dilemma social democrats face. As a single case study, this research has certain limitations, such as the unique historical contingencies of Germany. The historical context and its significance in shaping policy shift constraints add a layer of complexity to the study. However, the dilemma of social democrats, the divergent motivations of intra-party actors and internal strife over immigration are not exclusive to Germany but prevalent in Europe, as established by considerable research—while the extent of constraints may differ, the dynamics should prove comparable, especially where immigration is highly salient (for example, Bale et al. 2010, 2013; Hinnfors et al. 2012; Odmalm and Bale 2015; Salo and Rydgren 2021; Schwander 2019; Van Spanje 2010). Future research addressing and exploring the intra-party dynamics and immigration policy-making in European social democrats when immigration is a salient issue should provide further applicability to the findings of this article.

Overall, the interviews indicate that the party activists possess significant influence over the party elite's decision-making process on immigration. While they may not always succeed in forcing their demands for policy changes, their presence and potential backlash constrain the elite's electoralist strategies. The party elite carefully assesses and anticipates the activists' reactions to avoid divisive situations that could undermine the party's electoral prospects and delicate intra-party balance. Their perception points to the fact that this balance is decisive in the electoral fortunes and ideological direction of European social democracy.

Appendix 1

A total of six interviews are used in this article. Interviews #1 to #5 were conducted between Autumn 2022 and Winter 2023, and Interview #6 in Autumn 2023. All the interviews took place in English. Four participants are male, while two are female. They are equally divided, two each, in age cohorts of 1946–1964, 1965–1979 and 1980–present (categorisation is taken from Steiner 2023). Two of the participants have migration backgrounds. Regarding their factional alignment, two are in *Parlamentarische Linke*, two in *Seeheimer Kreis*; one declared a close working relationship with both, and another participant from *Netzwerk Berlin* (as a note, some participants switched their factions during their careers or emphasised their working relationship with one faction over the other(s) while maintaining multiple memberships). Furthermore, three participants were in the ranks of *Jusos* before becoming professional politicians. Where the interviewees (all native speakers of German) had problems explaining themselves in English, advisors were asked for their input or subsequently translated via other means. All the participants verbally agreed to interviews to be recorded under the condition of anonymity. They agreed that the interview's contents could be used for academic works without publicising the recordings. These conditions were also made clear when contact was established with the potential interview candidates, whether they agreed to participate or not.



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