A Semantic Map of (Migration Discourse in?) the European Parliament

Giorgi Gogelashvili [* 1] **Samia Haque** [* 2] **Jakob Kleine** [* 3] **Dennis Stroh** [* 4] **Quirin Unterguggenberger** [* 5]

Abstract

Motivated by the rise of populism in Europe since the late 1990s, this study investigates ideological shifts in European Parliament (EP) speeches using natural language processing. Drawing on the novel ParLawSpeech dataset (Schwalbach et al., 2025) which contains 574,199 speeches from 1999 to 2024 alongside metadata on speaker identity, we use sentence embedding models to examine the semantic content and emotional tone of parliamentary debates over time.

We expect that speech embeddings will form clusters reflecting party affiliation and ideological alignment. In step with recent political developments, we further hypothesize an increase in negative sentiment within the immigration debate among centrist and right-wing groups, accompanied by growing semantic similarity between these two factions over the past two decades. Finally, we test whether established migration-related narratives associated with right-wing populism can be identified in parliamentary discourse and how their prevalence has developed over time.

1. Introduction

The continued success of right-wing populist parties in the 21st century is widely regarded as a major threat to European democracy and integration (Fossum, 2023; Rummens, 2017). Populist rhetoric is commonly defined as constructing an antagonism between a 'pure people' and a 'corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2007). Right-wing populism is also closely tied to the issue of immigration. Parties of this ideology have played a central role in the increasing politicisation of immigration (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022), which represents a crucial factor for their political success (Kende & Krekó, 2020). Over the past decade, immigration has become an increasingly salient issue in European election campaigns (Dekeyser & Freedman, 2023) as well as in media coverage (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017).

Electoral gains of populist parties have manifested in significant changes of parliamentary discourse (Schwalbach, 2023). A recent quantitative analysis of EP speech embeddings has identified a gradual increase in emotional rhetoric since 1999, with right-wing populist groups leading the trend (Subtil & Verger, 2024). In the German national parliament, an LLM-based study has revealed increasing anti-solidarity messaging around immigration, not only for right-wing, but also christian-conservative and liberal parties (Kostikova et al., 2025). This trend begins around 2015, which marks the onset of the so-called 'refugee crisis' (Brücker et al., 2020).

More fine-grained analyses of the migration discourse have revealed the use of common underlying narratives, defined as 'selective depictions of reality' and 'patterns of interpretation' through which the issue is relayed to the public. Social media posts from populist leaders commonly employ anti-immigrant frames like 'immigrants take our jobs' or anti-establishment narratives such as 'our sovereignty is under threat' (Seiger et al., 2025).

This report provides a quantitative assessment of how the growing prominence of right-wing populism and immigration as a salient political issue manifests in debates in the European Parliament, with potential implications for broader societal discourse and legislative outcomes. All parliamentary speeches between 2004 and 2024 as recorded by the ParLawSpeech dataset inform the analyses.

Speeches are first classified into topics using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to identify immigration-related debate and to estimate its prominence over time. Analyses of the distribution of migration-related speeches across predefined debate agendas provide quantitative evidence consistent with agenda-setting strategies employed by right-wing populist groups. With the use of speech embeddings, we examine the semantic dimensions along which party groups can be differentiated and find evidence for an increasing use of previously identified anti-immigrant and populist narratives by right-wing politicians.
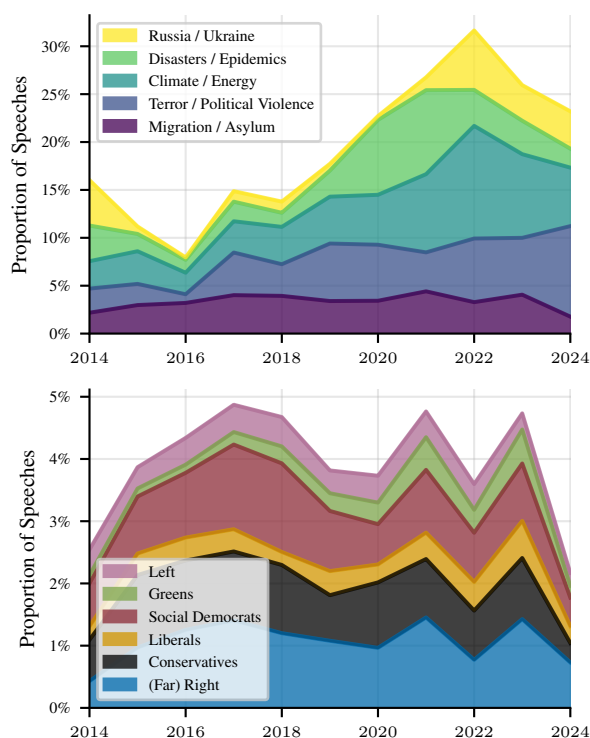
Figure 1.

2. Data and Methods

3. Results

4. Discussion & Conclusion

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