
Deconstructing a Decade of Migration Discourse in the European Parliament

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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).

This increasing politicisation can be understood through *agenda-setting theory*, which examines how political actors influence which issues receive attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By strategically emphasizing migration in parliamentary debates, populist parties actively shape the political agenda, potentially pulling centrist parties into their discursive framework. In German media debates it has been indicated that the discursive strategies of far-right actors influence the communication of mainstream parties in the context of migration (Saldivia Gonzatti & Völker, 2026). Expanding this finding to parliamentary debates, we ask: (RQ1) *Do parties systematically put migration on the agenda?*

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 from 1999 to 2022, with right-wing populist groups leading the trend (Subtil & Verger, 2024). Seeing these underlying shifts in rhetoric, we investigate: (RQ2) *Can parties be differentiated in how they talk about migration?*

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). Consequently, we pose (RQ3): *Do parties resort to anti-immigration narratives?*

These previous successes in deconstructing and quantifying highly impactful political trends inspired the present

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investigation of how the growing prominence of right-wing populism and immigration as a salient political issue manifest in EP debates, with potential implications for broader societal discourse and legislative outcomes.

Analyzing all parliamentary speeches between 2014 and 2024, we employ unsupervised topic modeling to break down the prevalence of migration debates relative to other topics over the last decade, and provide evidence of agenda-setting strategies employed by right-wing populist groups (Section 2). By embedding migration-labeled speeches into vector representations, we examine the semantic dimensions along which party groups can be differentiated and identify [wording too strong?] an increased use of previously identified anti-immigration narratives by right-wing groups (Section 3).

2. Data and Methods

2.1. Dataset description

To analyze how migration is discussed in the EP, we rely on the *ParlLawSpeech* (PLS) dataset (Schwalbach et al., 2025), providing us with a large-scale corpus of more than half a million verbatim parliamentary speeches alongside rich metadata, covering European legislatures between 1999 and 2024.

We restrict our analyses to the last two complete legislative periods (2014–2024), as the 2015/2016 “refugee crisis” marks a qualitative shift in the nature and salience of migration-related debates that could bias topic-model estimation. This shift is reflected in the proportion of migration-labeled speeches, which remains around 1% prior to 2014 but rises to over 2.5% thereafter.

We further enrich the PLS corpus with additional speaker-level metadata obtained from the EP’s Open Data Portal API, in particular the national party affiliation of each Member of the European Parliament (MEP) at the time a speech was delivered.

To contextualize and validate patterns observed in parliamentary speech, we also draw on expert’s perceptions of party positions from the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey* (CHES) of Rovny et al. (2025). CHES is a long-running study, surveying hundreds of country experts who estimate the ideological positions of national political parties across Europe on a wide range of dimensions, such as general left–right ideology, European integration, and issue-specific policy stances, e.g. experts are asked to place parties on a scale from 0 (“strongly favors liberal policy on immigration”) to 10 (“strongly favors restrictive policy on immigration”). Since 1999, the survey has been conducted roughly every four years, including 2014, 2019 and 2024, offering repeated cross-sectional measurements of party positions that

enable the study of ideological change over time. While parliamentary speeches capture how parties communicate and frame political issues, CHES provides an independent, expert-based assessment of where parties are positioned in ideological space. Combining the two allows us to triangulate latent patterns in political discourse against an external benchmark that is not derived from the same textual data. Importantly, CHES scores are not used to label or classify individual speeches, but instead serve as contextual variables against which aggregated speech patterns can be compared.

2015 and 2016 anomaly In 2015 and 2016, there is a drastic increase in the number of speeches compared to the other years (72,964 in 2015 and 16 on average, compared to 10,098 in the other years on average). This difference can be explained with a rule-change that was adopted by the parliament at the end of 2016, discontinuing so-called ‘written declarations’ that allowed party members to hand in short expressions of opinion on a certain issue [TODO ref]. Omitting all ‘written’ speeches (TODO: explain what written flag means) can normalize the number of speeches per year. However, for the general analysis, we keep written declarations as part of the dataset because they can contain relevant stances of the parties on political issues. Since written declarations could be co-signed by multiple speakers, they can appear duplicated in the dataset. These duplicated items were removed, keeping only the first instance of a duplicated speech.

2.2. Data preprocessing

Translation To keep the speeches most comparable in the embedding space, we use English translations instead of the original speeches. Until the year X (TODO), the ParlLaw dataset includes a machine translation for each speech. The remaining X (TODO) translations were created using Gemini 2.5-flash (Gemini Team, 2025). We tested its translations on a random sample of speeches that had already been translated by ParlLaw and checked that Gemini 1) preserved speeches which were already in English and 2) created translations whose embeddings are close to ParlLaw’s for non-English speeches (bootstrapped 0.95 confidence interval of mean cosine similarity: 0.969, $n = 1001$). Thus, we assume that Gemini’s and ParlLaw’s translations are similar enough to fill in the missing translations with Gemini’s, and conduct our analysis under the assumption that all translations stem from the same source.

Removing Commentary (TODO) We detect high amount of superfluous commentary in transliterated speeches: markers of the original language, background incidents, and procedural notes. These markers might be source of unwanted bias, which we want to avoid. Fortunately they are predominantly located within parentheses and can be easily removed with rule-based methods. We also observe sub-

stantial redundancy in the opening and closing sections of the speeches. These sections follow similar rhetorical structures but exhibit substantial lexical variation. To identify low-impact sentences we use TF-IDF algorithm to score the amount of information they contain. We construct separate corpora for opening and closing sentences, and an average TF-IDF score is computed for each sentence. Two independent raters annotated a sample of 100 low-scoring sentences for informational relevance. We then fit a logistic regression linking TF-IDF score percentiles to these annotations and used the model to estimate the threshold required to achieve 95% classification accuracy.

2.3. Methods

2.3.1. TOPIC MODELLING WITH LDA

To identify how parties talk about migration, we first have to assign speeches to a semantic topic. For this, we use Latent Dirichlet Allocation (*LDA*) [TODO: source]. LDA fits a probabilistic model on a corpus of documents (here: our parliamentary speeches) and identifies a fixed number of topics in the corpus which are characterized by words that have a high probability of appearing in the topic. For each speech and topic, it assigns a probability of that speech belonging to the topic.

We compared different model fits and chose one based on the its coherence score (final coherence: XX) and through manually inspecting the fidelity of the created topics. Our final model contains 30 topics, one of which assigned highest probabilities for the words X, Y, Z (TODO words), which we call "migration topic".

To determine an appropriate migration-topic probability threshold, two raters sampled 100 speeches from the probability range where the cutoff was expected based on initial tests (prob = [0.20, 0.35]) and classified whether they were migration-related. We then used receiver operating characteristic (ROC) analysis to identify the threshold that minimized the difference between true and false positive rates (prob = 0.25).

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2.3.2. AGENDA SETTING

Seeing that parties influence and shape the debate (Saldivia Gonzatti & Völker, 2026), we investigate whether parties systematically emphasize migration in different contexts, effectively establishing a link between migration and other topics, and putting migration on the agenda. For this purpose, we look at debates where all migration-related speeches stem from the same party block, indicating that migration is not the main topic of the debate but continuously mentioned by that party block. We define such a debate as an instance of agenda-setting by the respective party. To

capture the actual topic of each debate, we assign it a 'true' topic, which is the topic with highest average probability among all speeches in that debate.

2.3.3. SEMANTIC EMBEDDINGS

Semantic embeddings have been widely used in political text analysis (Miok et al., 2024; Nanni et al., 2021; Rudkowsky et al., 2018). Our aim is to capture patterns in how different political groups address migration. We select candidate embedding models from the MTEB leaderboard (Enevoldsen et al., 2025), based on overall performance and parameter count. Final model selection is based on (i) intra- and interparty cosine similarities, (ii) predictive performance of a logistic regression model with political affiliation as our target variable, and (iii) Kmeans clustering quality measured by homogeneity and completeness. Based on these metrics we have selected google/embeddinggemma-300m (Schechter Vera et al., 2025) as our final embedding model, all analysis using semantic embeddings are conducted with this model.

A key concern is that general-purpose semantic embeddings may be primarily capturing stylistic and topical variations and subsequently political group ideologies influence on the embeddings might be negligible. We test whether intra- and interparty similarity distributions differ substantially with a two-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for each candidate model. We apply Bonferroni correction across 8 models ($\alpha = 0.05$, $\alpha^* = 0.05/m$). All models showed significant distributional differences, with test statistic \mathcal{D} ranging between 0.058 and 0.1.

We examine whether party affiliations are encoded in speech embeddings and how these patterns evolve over time. Dimensionality reduction has been used to ascertain parties ideological shift over time and to reveal underlying political dimension with word associations for each reduced axis (Rheault & Cochrane, 2020). Exploratory analysis showed that, although party influence is present, it is not the defining factor of our semantic embeddings. To better understand how party affiliations manifest in the vector space, we aim to identify a subspace of the embedding space in which political and ideological differences become more salient.

To this end, Instead of simply using PCA, we employ Partial Least Squares (PLS). PLS allows us to find directions in the embedding space that are maximally associated with party labels, making it suitable for uncovering latent political dimensions that are not necessarily dominant in the overall variance of the data.

The prevalence of established migration-related rhetoric was assessed using semantic search in a shared embedding space. We used 30 suitable migration narratives that were identified in a recent report by the European Commission's

Joint Research Centre (Seiger et al., 2025, p.130), which were organized into four broader categories or “supernarratives” [list them here?]. Each narrative was represented by a short descriptive sentence, which was embedded using the model’s built-in “retrieval-query” prompt.

Semantic proximity between narratives and speeches was quantified using cosine similarity. Semantic similarity scores were averaged across all narratives belonging to a supernarrative to identify high-level trends. We additionally constructed one comparative narrative at a presumably opposed end of the rhetoric spectrum (“We need to respect humanitarian principles in handling migration”) to ensure that potential party differences cannot be caused by the frequency of certain keywords like “migration” alone.

To validate whether semantic similarity to these narratives captured meaningful political differences, we correlated similarity scores with expert-coded party positions on migration policy and overall ideology from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Rovny et al., 2025). Pearson correlation coefficients were evaluated using a Bonferroni-adjusted significance threshold to account for multiple comparisons. Temporal trends and party-block differences in narrative prevalence were analysed as fixed effects of linear mixed-effects models, which incorporated random intercepts and slopes at the party-block level. Because a separate model was fit for each of the six supernarratives, we Bonferroni-corrected significance levels to $p = 0.05/6$.

3. Results

3.1. Prevalence of migration speeches

LDA organized all speeches into 30 interpretable and broadly coherent topics, with temporal trends in prevalence roughly consistent with salient world events, such as the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 or the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Figure 1). Although the proportion of migration-related speeches per year remained relatively stable, absolute counts peaked in 2015 and 2016, largely due to the use of written declarations (see Section 2). [TODO: insert ratios per party here?]

3.1.1. SETTING THE AGENDA

All parties exhibit signs of agenda-setting behaviour. However, it is significantly more pronounced for far-right parties, with a yearly average of 15.9% of their migration-related speech occurring in debates where they are the only party talking about migration — compared to 6.6% for other parties on average (ANOVA $p < 0.001$). Far-right parties bring up migration mostly in debates where the ‘true’ topic is related to foreign relations (top ‘true’ topics: ‘Trade Relations’, ‘EU Security / Defense’, or ‘Economic Development’) while progressive parties (social democratic, green,

left) link it most to humanitarian situations (‘Disasters / Epidemics’, ‘International Conflicts’, and ‘Debate Etiquette / Brexit’), while for liberal and conservative there is was clear pattern (‘EU Security / Defense’, ‘Debate Etiquette / Brexit’, and ‘Economic Development’). There is no evidence for a systematic change over the years.

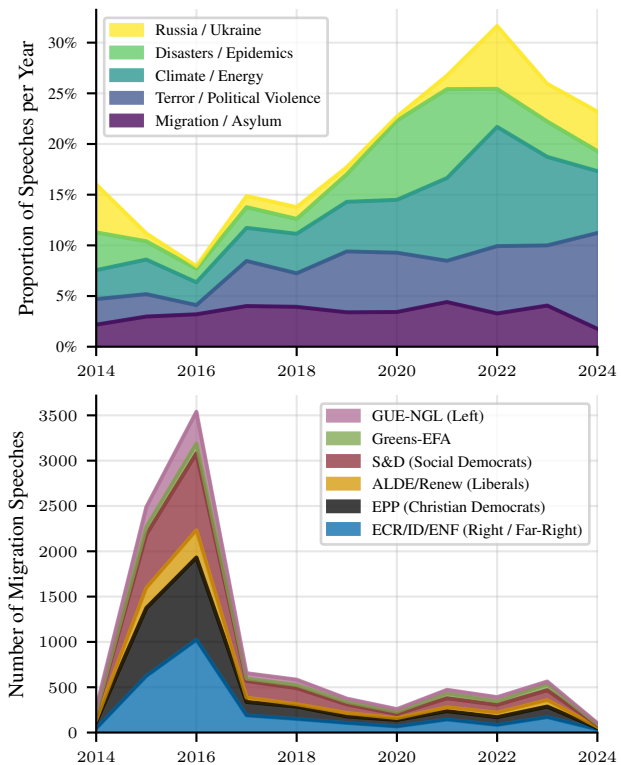


Figure 1. **Top:** Prevalence of selected topics in European Parliament debates over the past decade, as identified by LDA topic modeling. Proportions are computed by dividing by the total number of speeches per year. See repository for an interactive version with all topics. **Bottom:** Absolute number of migration speeches by parliamentary group.

3.2. Interpreting semantic differences

To mitigate and quantify temporal bias in our PLS analysis, we excluded written speeches predominantly occurring in 2015 and 2016 and fitted the PLS model on the remaining 5,433 observations. Furthermore, we employed a leave-one-out cross-validation strategy adapted for temporal data (Roberts et al., 2017). The resulting micro-averaged F1 score was 0.45 ± 0.35 (mean \pm std. across validation folds). While a clear interpretation of the underlying political dimensions requires substantial domain knowledge, we believe that combining word associations with extreme examples of speeches along each cardinal direction provides some clues about their connotations. Based on this analysis,

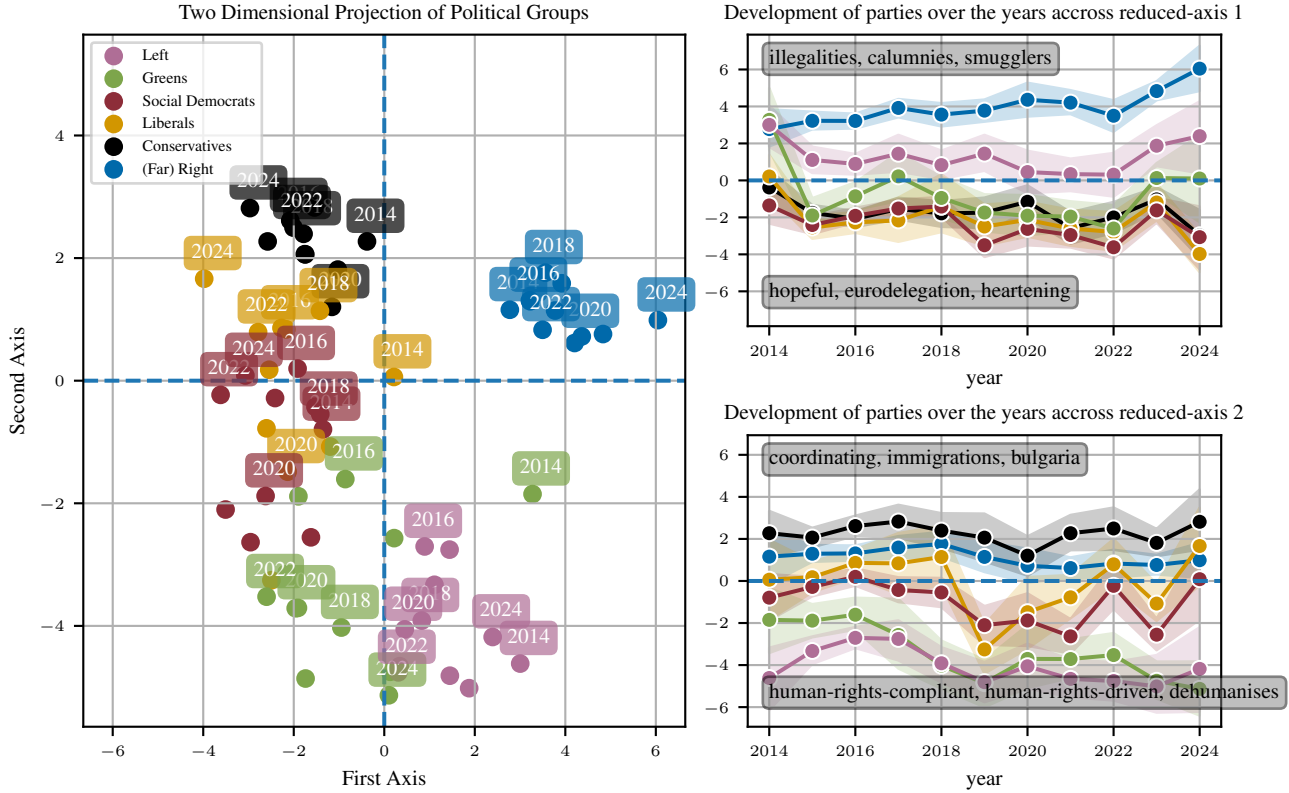


Figure 2. **Left:** Position of each political group. **Right:** Movement of political groups over the time displayed separately for each dimension.

we interpret the first PLS axis as a **conciliatory** \Leftrightarrow **oppositional** discourse spectrum, although it's harder to discern underlying political dimension for the second axis, we presume it to be **moral / human-rights** \Leftrightarrow **pragmatic-benefits / security** debate Figure 2. In this discovered space Pearson correlation with CHES party ratings, shows that axis 1 is most strongly correlated with EU asylum ($r = -0.45$), anti-Islam rhetoric ($r = 0.46$), and attitudes toward ethnic minorities ($r = 0.44$), while Axis 2 displays the strongest correlations with protectionism ($r = 0.57$), EU asylum ($r = -0.55$), and people-versus-elite rhetoric ($r = 0.55$).

3.3. Similarities to Established Migration Narratives

Mean semantic similarities of speeches to two exemplary anti-immigration supernarratives and our constructed humanitarian prompt are visualized in Figure 3. Mixed linear models revealed party differences for the three anti-immigration supernarratives “immigration is a threat”, “immigrants’ culture is problematic”, and “immigration is a burden”, which were significantly higher for far-right speakers (all $d_{\cos} = 0.27$), compared to all other blocks (for threat & problematic $d_{\cos} = 0.25$, for burden $d_{\cos} = 0.24$, all $p < .003$). For narratives falling under “immigrants as victims” or the populist “Us vs. Them”, and the comparison

“Humanitarian” prompt, no consistent differences emerged. For all supernarratives, no significant temporal trends were found.

Out of all expert party ratings, similarities to the three anti-immigration tropes were most correlated with anti-Islam rhetoric ($r = [.39, .45]$) and salience of immigration in their political agenda ($r = [.37, .40]$), on third position followed salience of multiculturalism ($r_{threat} = .37, r_{burden} = .39$) and populist people vs. elite ($r_{problem} = .36$). Immigrants as victims framing had lower correlations with similar dimensions, the us vs. them narrative category correlated most with its equivalent people vs. elite rating ($r = .35$). The humanitarian comparator yielded no significant CHES score correlations.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

Our analysis of European Parliament speeches (2014–2024) reveals systematic patterns in migration discourse. Topic modeling shows right-wing parties disproportionately drive migration salience while strategically introducing it into unrelated debates—particularly economic and security discussions—demonstrating active agenda-setting behavior. Partial Least Squares analysis indicates semantic convergence

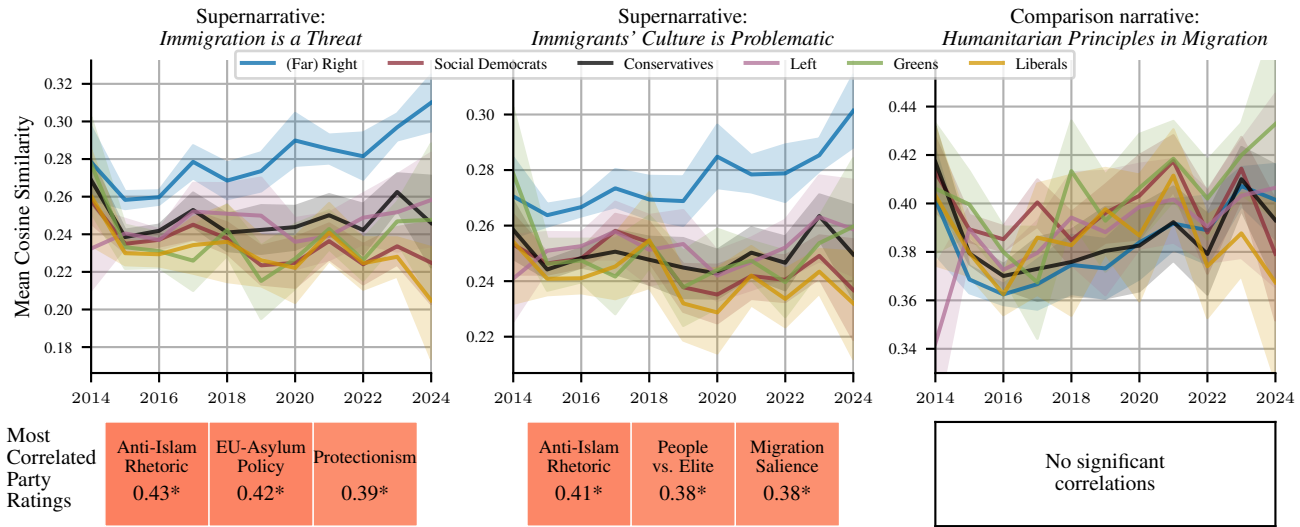


Figure 3.

between centrist and right-wing rhetoric following the 2015 refugee crisis, suggesting diffusion of populist framing.

Our results indicate that far-right rhetoric in the EP is characterized by a higher adoption of previously identified anti-immigrant narratives, without evidence of growth over the last decade. High correlations with established political scales indicate that this approach is a viable and promising computational tool for quantifying rhetoric tropes.

Methodologically, we demonstrate how combining LDA topic modeling, semantic embeddings, and narrative detection can capture both topical focus and rhetorical framing. While translation consistency and temporal confounding present limitations, our findings illuminate how populist discourse enters mainstream parliamentary institutions, with implications for European democratic deliberation.

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