Stigmatization and prosecution in news media and anti-immigration party support

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Abstract

The emergence of anti-immigration parties in mature democracies has triggered various reactions. These reactions, disseminated via news media, include systematic stigmatization of these parties as well as the prosecution of their members for hate speech. What are the effects of these responses in the news on the electoral support for these parties among news consumers? Using an experimental approach, we confront a sample representative of the Dutch electorate (N=526) to one of six versions of a manipulated news video about a new anti-immigration party. We find that stigmatization of the party reduces the propensity to vote for that party, and even more so if it is mentioned that a prominent member is prosecuted for hate speech than if not. Either way, the effect is moderated by anti-immigrant attitude and mediated by the party’s perceived legitimacy. Our findings suggest that particular reactions which they face present considerable hurdles for anti-immigration parties.

Keywords: Anti-immigration party; New party; Far right; Populism; Elections; News media; Stigmatization; Demonization; Hate speech prosecution; Perceived party legitimacy; Experiment
In established democracies, anti-immigration parties have been one of the most successful party types in recent decades (e.g., Gallagher, Laver & Mair, 2011). They have obtained more than 15% of the national vote share at least once in several contexts, including Denmark, Flanders, France, and the Netherlands. Unsurprisingly, these parties are nowadays represented in the national parliament of most mature democracies, and are junior government coalition partners in countries such as Austria, Italy, New Zealand, and Norway.

The emergence of this party type has sparked off various responses. One type of reaction is the stigmatization of these parties. By stigmatization we mean the association of these parties, whether justified or not, \(^1\) with political currents that are beyond the pale in the particular context in which they operate. In the case of anti-immigration parties in contemporary Western societies, this commonly involves association with fascism, right-wing extremism or Nazism (Van Heerden & Van der Brug, 2017; Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018).

Another response that anti-immigration parties may face is prosecution of their members. Based on a 1965 UN Treaty \(^2\) that has been ratified by 179 countries, all around the world measures have been adopted to prosecute hate speech. Perhaps as a result, high-profile politicians have been prosecuted for hate speech in several countries, including Finland, Germany, Greece, and Slovakia. Justified or not, \(^3\) these criminal proceedings instituted against these politicians may have left a lasting mark on the public image of their parties.

Given their impressive strings of victories, it seems plausible to argue that such responses do not negatively affect anti-immigration parties’ electoral support. At the same time, however, it seems just as plausible to argue that they do. As citizens usually follow news about political parties via news media (if at all), what news media report about parties (and how they do so) is arguably

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\(^1\) To be sure, we refrain from making statements about the extent to which these associations are justified.


\(^3\) To be clear, we do not engage in discussion about the justification of these legal proceedings.
of key importance to parties’ image – especially when as impactful as stigmatization and prosecution. So, to what extent does such news negatively affect their support?

This question is important in several respects. For science the question is relevant in that it touches on discussions about reactions to extremism (Downs, 2001; Widfeldt, 2004) and its effects (Meguid, 2008; Downs, 2012) as well as on debates about news media framing and its effects on voting (Walgrave & De Swert, 2004; Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018; Shah et al, 1996; Van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014). For society more generally, this is an important question in light of evaluation of intended and unintended consequences of these responses. Yet, the question has hardly ever been addressed before.

In this paper, we address this question by way of an experiment. This allows the drawing of valid inferences about the effects under study, and the testing of hypotheses regarding the mechanism underlying any such effects found. It has the additional benefit of cross-validating earlier non-experimental findings on stigmatization only, based on a survey of a sample representative of the Dutch electorate (Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018). The experiment also goes beyond this cross-validation, extending the tests to hate speech prosecution as well.

**Theory**

To address the question of consequences of stigmatization and prosecution for anti-immigration party voting, we first need to touch on reasons for voting for these parties more generally. Who votes for an anti-immigration party, and why? In several disciplines, many studies have tried to explain the vote for anti-immigration parties. Various factors have been mentioned and tested, including psychological factors (Bakker, Rooduijn & Schumacher, 2016), socio-economic background traits (Lubbers, Gijsberts & Scheepers, 2002), country aspects (Arzheimer, 2009), neighbourhood characteristics (Dinas & Van Spanje, 2011), ideological preferences (Van der Brug, Fennema & Tillie, 2005), policy preferences (Ivarsflaten, 2008), and news media content (Burscher, Van Spanje & De Vreese, 2015) – often, combinations of these factors are investigated.
In recent years, in the literature a shift has taken place toward reactions to the presence of anti-immigration parties (e.g., Art, 2006; Downs, 2012). These reactions include co-opting their core policy issue positions (e.g., Meguid 2008; Van Spanje, 2010; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018), stigmatization and exclusion (Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018; Linden & Klandermans, 2006; Van Heerden & Van der Brug, 2017), systematic political boycotting (Van Spanje & Van der Brug, 2007; Art, 2011; Van Spanje & Weber, 2018), and legal action (Fennema, 2000; Van Spanje & De Vreese, 2014; Van Spanje & De Vreese, 2015). In accordance with literature on historical cases, combinations of restrictive and accommodative measures have been found to limit a challenger’s electoral appeal (Capoccia, 2005; Van Spanje, 2018).

The reactions to anti-immigration parties are often associated with the idea of “militant democracy” (Sajó, 2004; Minkenberg, 2006; Thiel, 2009). The idea, dating back to before WWII, is that democratic systems should be enabled to defend themselves against their enemies (Loewenstein, 1937). Antidemocratic movements from the left (e.g., communists) and right (e.g., fascists) should not always be tolerated. Instead, democratic systems should have tools to ward off attacks from these forces, including party bans (Bourne, 2018). Although the idea has been rephrased and challenged in several ways (Fox & Nolte, 2000; Pedahzur, 2004; Bourne, 2012; Capoccia, 2013; Accetti & Zuckerman, 2017) so as to apply to the threats which democratic systems face today, the link with present-day reactions to anti-immigration parties is weak. This said, the underlying assumption that media messages and legal measures can weaken these parties (Van Donselaar, 1995; De Witte, 1997; Downs, 2012) is important to test empirically.

In this paper, two reactions are studied in particular. These are stigmatization of an anti-immigration party, and hate speech prosecution of its members. Concerning stigmatization, there has been an aggregate-level study and an individual-level study. In the aggregate-level study, Van Heerden and Van der Brug (2017) analysed public opinion polls and news media content about what they call “demonization” of the Dutch anti-immigration politician Geert Wilders. They define “demonization” as equating a person with the embodiment of pure evil. Their findings suggest that
demonizing Wilders damaged his party (the PVV) electorally, albeit only in its early phase, from 2004 until 2006 (Van Heerden & Van der Brug, 2017).

In a later phase, in 2014, the PVV was negatively affected by stigmatization. In their study, Van Spanje and Azrout (2018) used a sample representative of the Dutch electorate (N=1,267) to examine the effects of stigmatization in the media at the individual level by linking data from a media content analysis (N=846 news items) to a self-reported news exposure measure. In this content analysis they coded whether the PVV was being associated with foreign parties that were stigmatized. This focus on indirect stigmatization was deliberate, as they expected a direct stigmatization would lead potential PVV voters to view the PVV as a victim of biased media. However, since in the past the PVV was also be rather negative towards other foreign anti-immigrant parties (before their decision to cooperate in the European Parliament), stigmatization of foreign anti-immigrant parties would likely not lead to perceptions of a biased media. By associating the PVV with these foreign anti-immigrant parties (for instance because of their cooperation at the European level), they expected the stigmatization to be transferred also to the PVV by analogy of “guilt by association.” And they indeed found that the more a voter was exposed to news about the PVV being associated with foreign parties that were stigmatized, the lower her propensity to vote for the PVV. This effect may well be related to the idea that many voters “are of two minds” about anti-immigration parties, wanting to vote in opposition with immigration, on the one hand, and not wanting to vote for a party that is outside boundaries of acceptability, on the other (Blinder, Ford & Ivarsflaten, 2013).

Obviously, the effects are unlikely to pertain to all voters equally. Thus, in the last-mentioned study it was argued and demonstrated empirically that a moderator was at play. An individual’s attitudes to immigrants constituted the key moderator, and it was shown that the effect only held up for one third of the electorate that held the most anti-immigrant attitudes. This corresponded fairly well to the segment of the electorate that seriously considered a vote for the PVV in 2014. It
may reflect the finding that many voters do not consider a vote for an anti-immigration party anyway, regardless of how others treat that party (cf. Van Spanje & Weber, 2018).

In addition, an argument was made, and empirical evidence was provided, about the mechanism at play here. The intuition was that a party’s perceived legitimacy would play a role. An anti-immigration party, the argument goes, should have some degree of legitimacy to be acceptable to voters (Bos & Van der Brug, 2010; Blinder, Ford & Ivarsflaten, 2013). For example, a centrist party that took an anti-immigration turn may be more acceptable as a viable option for voters in elections than a neo-Nazi party. In line with this reasoning, Bos and Van der Brug (2010) demonstrated that voters’ propensity to vote for the PVV is strongly related to the extent to which they consider the party legitimate. Concerning, stigmatization its effect on propensity to vote for the PVV was mediated by the extent to which voters perceived the PVV as a legitimate force in society (Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018). Stigmatization lowered the party’s legitimacy, in turn leading to a depressed propensity to vote for it. This leads us to the first hypothesis.

**H1:** Among those who hold anti-immigrant attitudes, stigmatization of an anti-immigration party lowers the legitimacy of that party, which lowers the propensity to vote for that party.

Regarding hate speech prosecution, various effects have been suggested. On the one hand, such prosecution may decrease the electoral support for anti-immigration parties. For instance, the largest Walloon anti-immigration party experienced steep decline after its leader had lost his political rights for ten years. On the other hand, hate speech prosecution of its members may increase a party’s electoral support. For example, the largest Dutch anti-immigration party benefited electorally from the decision to prosecute its leader (Van Spanje & De Vreese, 2015). This, however, appears to be an indirect effect, brought about by increased news media attention to the defendant’s party (Jacobs & Van Spanje, 2018), which in turn leads to soaring support.
We argue that a hate speech prosecution would communicate to the public a similar message as stigmatization. Reason for the prosecution is a violation of the anti-racism norm in Western society and places the party outside the boundaries of acceptability, leading citizens to less likely to vote for the party (Blinder et al., 2013). As this again implies an effect through reducing the legitimacy of the party, and this effect is most likely to only occur among individuals that do not reject the party anyway, we expect for hate speech prosecution the same moderator and mediator as for stigmatization, which inspires a second hypothesis:

H2: Among those who hold anti-immigrant attitudes, a decision to prosecute a prominent anti-immigration party member for hate speech lowers the legitimacy of that party, which lowers the propensity to vote for that party.

Alternatively, in contrast with H2 it is possible that hate speech prosecution in and of itself fails to change legitimacy or vote propensities. This is because voters, and particularly potential voters for an anti-immigration party, may not be all too impressed. A decision by the Public Prosecutor to file legal proceedings for a making a public statement that these voters may actually agree with, may not move the needle much.

This may change, however, if also an additional cue is present, a stigmatization cue. In that case, voters may come to think of the prosecution decision in terms of having committed an awful crime, usually done by those who are beyond the pale. In that case, prosecution only scares off potential supporters when decided for in combination with stigmatizing the defendant’s party.

H3: In the presence of a decision to prosecute a prominent anti-immigration party member for hate speech, among those who hold anti-immigrant attitudes, stigmatization of an anti-immigration party lowers the legitimacy of that party, which lowers the propensity to vote for that party more than in the absence of such decision.
Methods

Design and participants

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online survey-embedded experiment. The experiment had a 2 (experimental factor: stigmatization versus no stigmatization) x 2 (experimental factor: prosecution versus no prosecution) x 2 (quasi-experimental factor: high versus lower anti-immigrant attitude) between-subject design. Fieldwork was performed from June 25, 2018 until July 10, 2018 by Kantar Public. From their database of 160,000 eligible voters, a random sample was drawn, representative of the Dutch population in terms of age, gender, education, area of residence, socioeconomic status and voting behaviour (N = 526).4

To avoid reporting of non-attitudes (Bishop, 2005; Converse, 1970) we did not force an answer from our respondents. This led to missing observations for several items. We used three alternative ways to deal with these missing observations: (1) we applied list-wise deletion at the item level, i.e., removing a respondent if no answer was given to any of the questions (N = 273); (2) if a respondent gave an answer to at least one item measuring each concept, we calculated the constructs based on the data that was available, only removing respondents who had missing observations at the level of the constructs (N = 369); (3) we imputed missing data using a regression method (N = 526). Below we report the result using the first option, i.e., list-wise deletion at the item level, as with the smallest sample we also have the least power (and thus significant results are least likely to be found). We used the other two alternatives as sensitivity tests. Reassuringly, the results directly parallel those we present for list-wise deletion at the item level.

Procedure

The respondents selected to participate received an invitation email from Kantar Public with a link to the survey. The survey consisted of a pre-test questionnaire, a manipulation, and a post-test questionnaire. To mask the objective of our study, respondents were told that they would take

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4 Actually, this experiment was part of a larger experiment, including also 5 more conditions not relevant to this study. The total sample drawn was N = 984.
part in a study about reactions to news. To uphold this story, the manipulation was embedded in a newscast with additional topics (the average life expectancy in the Netherlands, educational choices made by students and declining popularity of sports and physical exercise among adolescents) and we also asked questions related to these topics. Before manipulation we measured the moderator, anti-immigrant attitudes, as well as several political attitudes – both general and with regard to FvD. Respondents were consecutively assigned to one of six conditions, after which they received the manipulation. The manipulation consisted of a news broadcast of 60 seconds, in which we manipulated both whether a politician of FvD was stigmatized and whether there was a prosecution cue. After manipulation, we measured (in this order) the dependent variable, the mediator and the manipulation checks. Finally, the respondents received a debriefing, explaining the goal of the study as well as explaining the manipulation.

**Manipulation**

The stimulus material was a manipulated broadcast of ‘NOS News in 60 seconds’, a currently running short version of the main news program in the Netherlands. This long version has been produced by Dutch public broadcaster NOS since 1956 and attracts around 2 million viewers per day. The short version is broadcast three times a day, and is available both on television and online. Using original footage from NOS, we compiled an episode, consisting of three news stories that were originally aired by NOS and a news story that we edited and manipulated. The compiled item also consisted of NOS footage and used our own voice-over. A professional recorded the voice-over in a professional editing studio. The three other stories were about life expectancy, education, and physical exercise. These items were selected on the basis of their low likelihood to prime respondents about any political issues, reducing the risk of our results being contaminated by these items.

In the manipulated news story, we showed FvD MP Theo Hiddema. We made six versions of this news item. In four conditions, the voice-over told the respondents that Hiddema made controversial remarks about Muslims and that he was unavailable for comments because he was in
Paris. In the stigmatization condition, the voice-over said that Hiddema was unavailable for comments because he was in Paris “as a guest of the extreme right party Front National”. Similar as Van Spanje and Azrout (2018), we do not directly stigmatize the party or its politicians (i.e., label FvD an extreme right party), as potential voters for the party might just see this as evidence of a biased media. So instead of a direct stigma on the party, we associate FvD with a foreign anti-immigrant party and label that foreign party as extreme right. Similar as Van Spanje and Azrout (2018), we expect this indirect stigmatization to also stigmatize FvD through the analogy of “guilt by association”.

In the prosecution condition, the voice-over ended the news story by saying that Hiddema would be prosecuted for his statements about Muslims. In the control condition, that sentence was left out. In two additional conditions, Hiddema did not make controversial remarks about Muslims, but made remarks about the Dutch Senate. One of these conditions included the stigmatization sentence, another did not. This adds up to the analytical setup shown in Table 1. For the distribution of respondents between the conditions and the actual manipulated wording in the stimulus material, we refer to the appendix.

Table 1
Analytical setup of the experiment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stigmatization:</th>
<th>Prosecution:</th>
<th>Stigmatization:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>experimental condition</td>
<td>control condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experimental condition</td>
<td>controversial statements, guest of the extreme right, will be prosecuted</td>
<td>controversial statements, will be prosecuted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control condition</td>
<td>controversial statements, guest of the extreme right</td>
<td>controversial statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>guest of the extreme right</td>
<td>[no relevant information]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Randomization check. To test whether randomization was successful, we compared the experimental conditions on age ($F(3,269) = 0.77, p = .513$), gender: ($\chi^2(3) = 1.34, p = .721$), education ($F(3,269) = .43, p = .735$), being a native ($\chi^2(3) = 4.61, p = .202$), political interest ($F(3,269) = 0.63, p = .597$), left-right self-placement ($F(3,269) = 0.16, p = .926$), left-right placement
of FvD ($F(3,269) = 0.41, p = .747$), identification with FvD ($F(3,269) = 0.64, p = .590$), and anti-immigrant attitude (as a continuous variable, $F(3,269) = 0.25, p = .863$; as our experimental factor: $\chi^2(1) = 0.02, p = .881$). No significant differences between the conditions were found, so we conclude that the randomization was successful.  

**Manipulation checks.** We tested whether or not respondents noticed the manipulations. Concerning stigmatization, we did so in two ways. First, by analysing respondents’ answers to the question of to what extent Hiddema can be considered “extreme right.” On a seven-point scale from “not at all” (0) to “completely” (6), he was considered substantially more “extreme right” by respondents in the stigmatization conditions ($M = 4.94, SD = 1.61$) than by those in the control conditions ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.68$) and this difference is statistically significant ($F(1,261) = 4.469, p = .035$).

Second, we also tested our stigmatization manipulation by asking in a multiple choice question why Hiddema was in Paris. Recall that in the stigmatization conditions, he was a guest of “the extreme right party Front National” while no reason was given in the other conditions. In the stigmatization conditions, 80.4% of respondents correctly picked that reason out of four multiple choice options. This is quite reassuring for our manipulation of stigmatization.

To test the manipulation of the prosecution cue, we first asked respondents what had been said about Hiddema’s statement about Muslims (this question was not asked to respondents in the condition that he made statements about the Senate). In the answering options we had the respondents choose between that Hiddema would be prosecuted, that he would not be prosecuted, and that no information about prosecution was provided. In both the experimental condition (72.8%) and the control condition (72.2%) a vast majority of respondents gave the correct answer. We thus conclude that our manipulation of prosecution was successful.

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5 When using the alternative of regression imputation to handle missing observations, we did find significant differences between the conditions with regard to age and gender. We also ran our models using age and gender as covariates, which did not substantially change our results.

6 To avoid a potential prime by measurement of the manipulation checks, we asked all questions regarding the manipulation checks after measurement of the dependent variable and the mediator, at the very end of our survey.
Measurements

**Dependent variable.** Respondents’ propensity to vote for FvD is tapped by a question asking them to indicate the likelihood that they will ever vote for a particular party. A gold standard, this question has been included in various election surveys (Van der Eijk & Niemöller, 1984; Van der Eijk, Van der Brug, Kroh, & Franklin, 2006). Respondents answer the question using a scale ranging from “I will never vote for this party” (0) to “I will surely ever vote for this party” (10), or can choose an explicit “don’t know” option. Besides the relevant item in this paper, the propensity to vote for FvD ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 2.78$), we asked propensities to vote for several Dutch parties, presented in random order.

**Mediator.** We measured voters’ perceptions of legitimacy of FvD using four statements: “To what extent does FvD comply with the laws, you think?”; “To what extent do you think FvD has the right to get access to power?”; “To what extent does FvD leadership respect the rules of our democracy, you think?”; and “To what extent do you think FvD abides by the prevailing social norms in our society?” Respondents answered on a scale from “not at all” (0) to “to a high degree” (6). The items form a single scale (eigenvalue of 3.42 and 85% explained variance) that is highly reliable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$, $M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.64$, with higher values indicating a higher perceived legitimacy).

**Moderator: Anti-immigrant attitudes.** We measured our quasi-experimental factor before the manipulation (to avoid being contaminated by the stimuli). We first asked the respondents to evaluate five statements regarding immigrants on a scale from 0 to 6 (1) whether immigrants should be allowed to live in the Netherlands while holding on to their traditions; (2) whether immigrants impose themselves upon those who do not want them; (3) whether immigrants have more

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(e.g., asking about Hiddema being extreme right or showing a visit to the Front National as an option for a reason to be in Paris potentially primes respondents with a similar stigmatization cue also in our control condition and thus might contaminate our manipulation).

7 Item is reversely coded. Also, this item was actually measured on a 10-point scale, which was rescaled 0-6 to not have a stronger influence on the final scale. Creating the scale with or without this item correlated .99 so leads to virtually identical measurements.
influence on political parties than is warranted; (4) whether immigrants are too demanding in their pursuit for better treatment; (5) whether immigrants make more financial gains than what they are entitled to. The items loaded on one factor (eigenvalue of 3.42 and 68% explained variance) and formed a reliable scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$, $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.39$, with higher values indicating a stronger negative sentiment towards immigrants). In line with previous work (Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018), we dichotomised this variable, as we are theoretically interested in those who hold the strongest anti-immigrant attitudes. We created two groups: the 33% most negative towards immigrants versus all others.

**Analytical strategy**

We use multiple-group structural equation modelling. This is a powerful tool to test for direct and indirect effects in mediation models. By comparing different groups, in this case groups defined by respondents’ attitudes towards immigrants and on whether respondents received treatment, we can assess whether the effects varies across individuals, i.e., whether the effect is moderated. By comparing the fit of a model in which the effects are constrained to be equal between the groups (no moderation) to a model in which the effects are estimated, we test for the statistical significance of the moderation.

**Results**

Our first hypothesis implies an effect of stigmatization on both perceived legitimacy and the propensity to vote for FvD, but only among individuals with anti-immigrant attitudes. We first plotted the means per condition and for the different groups by their anti-immigrant attitudes in Figure 1. As one would expect, we find substantial differences among individuals with anti-immigrant attitudes depending on whether stigmatization was present or not. With regard to perceived legitimacy, we find among the anti-immigrant respondents a mean of 3.73 in the control condition, and with only 2.56 a substantial lower mean in the stigmatization condition. Similarly, the average propensity to vote score is among the anti-immigrant respondents 4.29 in the control condition, and in the stigmatization condition only 2.59. Looking at the respondents who are not
anti-immigrant, we find much smaller differences between the conditions for both perceived legitimacy and the propensity to vote. But to test whether these differences are significant and whether the effect of stigmatization on the propensity to vote is mediated by perceived legitimacy, we turn to our first structural equation model.

We test a model of the effect of exposure to stigmatization on the propensity to vote for FvD, fully mediated by perceived legitimacy of FvD, comparing the anti-immigrant respondents to all others. In our initial model, we did not constrain the paths to be equal between groups, thus allowing for different estimates between the groups. Model fit was good ($\chi^2 (2) = 2.86, p = .240; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .04, 90\% CI [.00, .13]$). The estimates of the regression weights are presented for both groups in Figure 2.

To test whether anti-immigrant attitudes moderate both the effect from stigmatization to perceived legitimacy and the effect from perceived legitimacy to the propensity to vote for FvD, we compare our initial model to models in which the effects are constrained to be equal between...
the groups. The comparison leads in all cases to significant loss of model fit (constraining stigmatization → perceived legitimacy: $\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 8.82, p = .003$; constraining perceived legitimacy → propensity to vote for FvD: $\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 5.19, p = .023$; both paths constrained: $\chi^2_{diff}(2) = 14.01, p = .001$). This shows that both the path from stigmatization to perceived legitimacy and the path from perceived legitimacy to the propensity to vote for FvD are moderated by anti-immigrant attitude, with among the anti-immigrant group showing stronger effects. Based on the results in the models in Figure 2, we find among individuals who do not score high on anti-immigrant attitudes no significant effect of stigmatization on legitimacy and no total effect of stigmatization on the propensity to vote for FvD. In comparison, we do find a significant direct effect of stigmatization on legitimacy ($b = -1.31, b^* = -0.36$) and a significant total effect of stigmatization on the propensity to vote for FvD ($b = -1.72, se = 0.52, p = .001, 95\% CI [-2.76, -0.73], b^* = -0.26$). These findings support H1, replicating previous findings (Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018).

For individuals who score low or medium on anti-immigrant attitudes:

For individuals who score high on anti-immigrant attitudes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stigmatization</th>
<th>Perceived legitimacy</th>
<th>PTV FvD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$b = -0.03, se = 0.21, p = .990$</td>
<td>$b^* = -0.01$</td>
<td>$b = 0.94, se = 0.09, p &lt; .001$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Estimates of regression weights in mediation model explaining the effect of exposure to stigmatization on the propensity to vote for FvD by perceived legitimacy of FvD, comparing high anti-immigrant individuals to low and medium anti-immigrant individuals.

To assess H2, we ran a model similar to the one used for H1, with a complete mediation by perceived legitimacy and comparing the anti-immigrant respondents to all other respondents, but replaced the presence of stigmatization as the exogenous variable by the presence of a prosecution cue. Also this model had good fit ($\chi^2(2) = 3.29, p = .193$; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .04, 90\% CI [.00, .10]) and we present the findings in Figure 3.

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8 Standard error and confidence interval are based on a 5,000 bootstrap sample, using the bias-corrected percentile method.
As Figure 3 shows, we find no significant effect of the prosecution cue on perceived legitimacy for neither the anti-immigrant respondents nor all other respondents. And given the non-significant paths, not surprisingly, constraining the path from the prosecution cue to perceived legitimacy to be equal between the anti-immigrant respondents and all other does not significantly reduce model fit ($\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 0.66, p = .417$). These findings imply that there is no main effect of the prosecution cue on perceived legitimacy ($b = 0.07, se = 0.13, p = .556$), nor a moderated effect (see Figure 3). And in the absence of a direct effect of a prosecution cue on the propensity to vote for FvD and no indirect effect through perceived legitimacy (given no effect of the prosecution cue on perceived legitimacy), we also find no main or moderated effect of the prosecution cue on the propensity to vote for FvD. These findings do no support our second hypothesis.

For individuals who score **low or medium on anti-immigrant attitudes**:

For individuals who score **high on anti-immigrant attitudes**:

*Figure 3. Estimates of regression weights in mediation model explaining the effect of exposure to stigmatization on the propensity to vote for FvD by perceived legitimacy of FvD, comparing high anti-immigrant individuals to low and medium anti-immigrant individuals.*

For our final hypothesis we add a layer to the multiple group SEM. Apart from comparing the groups of high versus low and medium anti-immigrant individuals, we also compare this factorial with the presence or absence of a prosecution cue. We expect the combination of anti-immigrant attitudes and prosecution cue to matter for the effect of stigmatization on perceived legitimacy, so in our initial model we leave this path unconstrained between groups. Given our results in the previous paragraph, we expect anti-immigrant attitudes to matter for the effect of perceived legitimacy on the propensity to vote for FvD, but we have no reason to expect this path to be moderated by the presence of a prosecution cue. So we constrain this path to be equal between conditions with or without a prosecution cue, but leave it freely estimated between the groups of high and low or medium anti-immigrant individuals. This leads to a good fitting model.
\( \chi^2(6) = 5.67, p = .461; \quad \text{CFI} = 1.00; \quad \text{RMSEA} = .00, \quad 90\% \text{ CI [.00, .08]} \), of which the estimates are presented in Figure 4.

For individuals who score \textbf{low or medium} on anti-immigrant attitudes with a prosecution cue:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Stigmatization} &: b = 0.32, \text{se} = 0.39, p = .413 \\
&: b^* = 0.10 \\
\text{Perceived legitimacy} &: b = 0.92, \text{se} = 0.09, p < .001 \\
&: b^* = 0.63 \\
\text{PTV FvD} &: \\
\end{align*}
\]

For individuals who score \textbf{high} on anti-immigrant attitudes with a prosecution cue:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Stigmatization} &: b = -1.87, \text{se} = 0.57, p = .001 \\
&: b^* = -0.48 \\
\text{Perceived legitimacy} &: b = 1.35, \text{se} = 0.12, p < .001 \\
&: b^* = 0.83 \\
\text{PTV FvD} &: \\
\end{align*}
\]

For individuals who score \textbf{low or medium} on anti-immigrant attitudes \textbf{without} a prosecution cue:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Stigmatization} &: b = -0.25, \text{se} = 0.25, p = .333 \\
&: b^* = -0.09 \\
\text{Perceived legitimacy} &: b = 0.92, \text{se} = 0.09, p < .001 \\
&: b^* = 0.57 \\
\text{PTV FvD} &: \\
\end{align*}
\]

For individuals who score \textbf{high} on anti-immigrant attitudes \textbf{without} a prosecution cue:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Stigmatization} &: b = -0.73, \text{se} = 0.47, p = .120 \\
&: b^* = -0.20 \\
\text{Perceived legitimacy} &: b = 1.35, \text{se} = 0.12, p < .001 \\
&: b^* = 0.70 \\
\text{PTV FvD} &: \\
\end{align*}
\]

\textbf{Figure 4.} Estimates of regression weights in mediation model explaining the effect of exposure to stigmatization on the propensity to vote for FvD by perceived legitimacy of FvD, comparing high anti-immigrant individuals to low and medium anti-immigrant individuals, and comparing with and without a prosecution cue.

Looking at the sizes of the coefficients of the direct effects of stigmatization on legitimacy, we find exactly the pattern as our hypothesis would predict, with the largest negative coefficient among anti-immigrant individuals who also received a prosecution cue, a smaller negative effect among anti-immigrant individuals who did not receive a prosecution cue, and the smallest coefficients among low to medium anti-immigrant individuals. Looking at the significance, we observe that only among anti-immigrant individuals the effect reaches conventional levels of significance (see Figure 4). And with regard to the total effect of stigmatization on the propensity to vote for FvD, we find exactly the same pattern (see Table 2). These patterns bode well for our hypothesis.

In a next step, we put this to a more formal test, comparing our initial model to a model in which there is no moderation. Comparing our initial model to a model in which the path from stigmatization to perceived legitimacy is constrained to be equal between all groups, leads to a significant loss of model fit compared to our initial model \( \chi^2_{\text{diff}}(3) = 10.19, p = .017 \). This implies...
that the coefficient of this path cannot be constrained to be equal between all groups. The question is, however, between which groups do we find significant differences?

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-immigrant attitudes</th>
<th>Prosecution cue</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low/medium</td>
<td>With prosecution cue</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>With prosecution cue</td>
<td>-2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low/medium</td>
<td>Without prosecution cue</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Without prosecution cue</td>
<td>-0.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors and p values are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, using the bias-corrected percentile method.

When we test a model in which the path is freely estimated in the anti-immigrant group with a prosecution cue, and constrained to be equal between the other three groups, we find that this model fits significantly better than the model in which the paths are constrained to be equal between all groups (the no moderation model: $\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 7.17, p = .007$), and it does not fit significantly worse than our initial model in which the path is freely estimated in all groups ($\chi^2_{diff}(2) = 3.03, p = .220$). Given this implies that we find an effect solely among the group of anti-immigrant individuals who also received a prosecution cue, this again bodes well for our hypothesis.

However, when we test a model in which we have the path in the two anti-immigrant groups in the prosecution cue condition constrained to be equal (and also for the two anti-immigrant groups in the condition without the prosecution cue), we find a model that also fits significantly better than the no moderation model ($\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 6.34, p = .012$) and not significantly worse than our initial model in which all parameters are freely estimated ($\chi^2_{diff}(2) = 3.86, p = .145$). As this model and the model with only the anti-immigrant group with a prosecution cue are not nested within one another, we cannot perform a chi-square difference test. Alternatively, given that these models have the same number of degrees of freedom, we can compare the values of model chi-square, as well as compare Aiken’s information criteria:
Model that supports our hypothesis: $\chi^2 (8) = 8.70, p = .369; \text{AIC: 40.70}$

Model that doesn’t support our hypothesis: $\chi^2 (8) = 9.53, p = .300; \text{AIC: 41.53}$

The comparison shows that the model in which only the anti-immigrant individuals who are exposed to a prosecution cue are set apart fits better (as model chi-square and AIC are lower). But these differences are small, so we should consider these models to be nearly equivalent. We thus need to conclude that our data supports H3, but also does not refute an alternative model in which the prosecution cue does not matter.\(^9\)

As a final step, we plotted the means of all combinations of the stigmatization conditions, the prosecution conditions and anti-immigrant attitudes in Figure 4. Just as before, we observe that among individuals with weak or average anti-immigrant attitudes there are very small differences depending on whether stigmatization and a prosecution cue are present. These differences are, however, much larger when looking at the anti-immigrant respondents. We observe that stigmatization is associated with lower perceived legitimacy and a lower propensity to vote. These differences are largest when also a prosecution cue is present. But although we do observe that among the anti-immigrant respondents perceived legitimacy ($M = 2.04, SD = 1.62$) and the propensity to vote for FvD ($M = 2.37, SD = 2.87$) are lowest when a stigmatization cue and a prosecution cue are present, we also see that a prosecution cue present but no stigmatization leads to the highest average propensity to vote score ($M = 5.12, SD = 3.30$). Although the difference with no stigmatization and no prosecution cue is not significant ($M = 3.72, SD = 3.45; M_{diff} = 1.40, se = 0.81, p = .087$), the difference is rather substantial. In our discussion we turn to the question

---

\(^9\) As an additional assessment of H3, we tested whether or not the prosecution cue enhanced the stigmatization cue on one of our manipulation checks. We find that when the prosecution cue is absent the stigmatization condition has on average a higher score on Hiddema as extreme right of 0.13 compared to when there is no stigmatization, but this difference is not significant ($se = 0.25, p = .623$). In contrast, when the prosecution cue is present, the score on whether Hiddema can be perceived as extreme right is significantly larger when stigmatization is present compared to when stigmatization is not present ($M_{diff} = 0.94, se = 0.33, p = .005$), and this difference is substantially larger than when the prosecution cue is absent. Although in a formal test the interaction is only marginally significant ($p=.052$), we consider this additional evidence in support of H3.
of what this may mean for our conclusions. We do, however, observe that with regard to perceived legitimacy, the anti-immigrant group with a prosecution cue but without stigmatization does not stand out that much. In combination with our randomization checks, as well as observing a less high propensity to vote score for this particular group when treating the missing values in different ways (but with the same substantial conclusions with regard to our hypotheses), we do not expect the group to stand out from the other conditions, other than their attitudes towards immigrants and our manipulations.

Figure 5. Estimated means of perceived legitimacy (left hand side, measured on a 0 to 6 scale) and propensity to vote for FvD (right hand side, measured on a 0 to 10 scale) per stigmatization condition (present or not) by values of the prosecution cue (present or not) and anti-immigrant attitudes (low and average versus strong). The vertical lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.
Conclusion

Anti-immigration parties in mature democracies often trigger fierce responses, such as stigmatization and hate speech prosecution. How do voters react? In this study we have addressed this question using a web experiment about anti-immigrant party FvD based on a sample representative of the Dutch electorate. Confronting respondents with one out of six versions of a manipulated video newscast has revealed two findings. First, for anti-immigrant voters, stigmatization of FvD reduced the party’s legitimacy in their eyes, in turn decreasing their propensity to vote for it. Second, this electoral effect of stigmatization on propensity to vote was slightly stronger if it was also mentioned that a decision was taken to prosecute a prominent party member for hate speech.

This brings us to an important twist to the findings. First, among anti-immigrant voters, we have found the highest party legitimacy and the highest propensity to vote in the condition in which prosecution was present and stigmatization was absent. This suggests that a decision to prosecute a party member for hate speech helps his party electorally, just as in the case of Geert Wilders and his party PVV (Van Spanje & De Vreese, 2015). To what extent this is specific to the Dutch context remains an open question. Second, also among anti-immigrant voters, we have observed the lowest legitimacy and the lowest propensity to vote in the condition in which both prosecution and stigmatization were present. In combination with the reverse finding for prosecution without stigmatization, this suggests that a decision to prosecute a party member alerts voters to qualifications of this event. If no such qualification is given, anti-immigrant voters seem to find the party more attractive, perhaps because it is important enough to be bothered with legal proceedings. If such decision is accompanied with an association with the extreme right, by contrast, voters seem to turn away from it, considering it a less legitimate option. Thus, news media framing of such decision should not be thought of lightly. A decision to prosecute a politician can be either framed as crucial to combat anti-discrimination and important for punishing those who
violate the law, or framed as a political trial and an infringement of free speech – likely with different
effects.

This said, we must remind the reader that what we have carried out is just one experiment
based on one party that operates in one particular political context. In the process of designing the
experiment, choices had to be made under uncertainty, such as whether to have the manipulation
revolve around the party leader or Hiddema. Moreover, FvD is a new party, which may have made
it more amenable to showing empirical results. Furthermore, concerning the prosecution element,
the high-profile hate speech trials of Wilders (from 2009 onward) may have contaminated our
results, as Dutch citizens may keep this experience in mind when confronted with the stimulus
material concerning Hiddema. Also given that we deliberately refrained from information about
Hiddema’s “controversial statements” it is likely that citizens’ perceptions and opinions of the
Wilders case has played a role in the experiment. Thus, whether our results can be generalized to
more established parties and to other times and places remains to be seen.

Keeping in mind these limitations of our study, we nonetheless feel confident in our findings.
This is partly because the result successfully replicated the moderated mediation model of a non-
experimental study about a different party, the PVV (Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018). This is
particularly reassuring given that FvD and the PVV are quite different parties. For instance, at the
time of the experiment FvD was just nine months old, whereas the PVV was founded in 2006 by
Wilders, who had been an MP since 1998. The finding with regard to the prosecution increasing
or decreasing the propensity to vote for the defendant’s party dependent on individual as well as
contextual circumstances fits a bigger picture that emerges from earlier work in this field (Van
Spanje & Weber, 2018). Some parties benefit from such legal proceedings (Van Spanje & De
Vreese, 2015; Jacobs & Van Spanje, 2018), whereas others seem to be hurt by them (Jacobs & Van
Spanje, 2018). Stigmatization, by contrast, seems to have a consistent negative effect (Van Heerden
& Van der Brug, 2017; Van Spanje & Azrout, 2018), which is in accordance with studies in
sociology (Link & Phelan, 2001) and psychology (Major & O’Brien, 2005). Our finding regarding
H3, that stigmatization and prosecution has an additional negative electoral effect, is also in line with the idea that anti-immigration parties are vulnerable to bad press that sticks to them. This is particularly surprising given the unprecedented electoral success that anti-immigration parties in general, and the PVV and FvD in particular, have had. Apparently, just as other political actors, also anti-immigration parties have an Achilles’ heel.

References


## Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table A1</th>
<th>Distribution of respondents between conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No stigmatization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N = 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full data / data imputation</td>
<td>Prosecution cue present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No prosecution cue present (Muslim condition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No prosecution cue present (Senate condition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List-wise deletion by scale</td>
<td>Prosecution cue present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No prosecution cue present (Muslim condition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No prosecution cue present (Senate condition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List-wise deletion by item</td>
<td>Prosecution cue present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No prosecution cue present (Muslim condition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No prosecution cue present (Senate condition)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Entries are number of respondents, depending on how missing data was treated. In the full data / data imputation all respondents are used and missing values are imputed using a regression method; in the list-wise deletion by scale, the scales are calculated on the items that are available per respondent, and cases are deleted list-wise based on those scales (i.e., only respondents with no answer on any item of a scale are removed); in the list-wise deletion by item all respondents are removed from the sample if one or more items used in measurement are missing. The latter way of treating missing values is used in the result section, but using the other options leads to direct comparable conclusions.
Table A2  
*Wording used in the experimental manipulations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No stigmatization</th>
<th>Stigmatization present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prosecution cue present</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dutch:</strong> Theo Hiddema, Tweede Kamerlid van het Forum voor Democratie, is in opspraak geraakt door uitspraken over moslims. Hiddema is momenteel in Parijs en wilde geen commentaar geven. <em>Het OM heeft na overweging besloten toch wel over te gaan tot vervolging.</em></td>
<td><strong>Dutch:</strong> Theo Hiddema, Tweede Kamerlid van het Forum voor Democratie, is in opspraak geraakt door uitspraken over moslims. Hiddema is momenteel in Parijs, waar hij te gast is op het congres van het extreemrechtse Front National, en wilde geen commentaar geven. <em>Het OM heeft na overweging besloten toch wel over te gaan tot vervolging.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>English:</strong> Theo Hiddema, member of the Dutch Second Chamber for the Forum for Democracy, has come into disrepute for making statements about Muslims. Hiddema is currently in Paris and did not want to respond. <em>After consideration, the Public Prosecutor has decided to prosecute him.</em></td>
<td><strong>English:</strong> Theo Hiddema, member of the Dutch Second Chamber for the Forum for Democracy, has come into disrepute for making statements about Muslims. Hiddema is currently in Paris where he is visiting the congress of the far-right Front National and did not want to respond. <em>After consideration, the Public Prosecutor has decided to prosecute him.</em></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Prosecution cue present (Senate)</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dutch:</strong> Theo Hiddema, Tweede Kamerlid van het Forum voor Democratie, is in opspraak geraakt door uitspraken over het nut van de Eerste Kamer. Hiddema is momenteel in Parijs en wilde geen commentaar geven.</td>
<td><strong>Dutch:</strong> Theo Hiddema, Tweede Kamerlid van het Forum voor Democratie, is in opspraak geraakt door uitspraken over het nut van de Eerste Kamer. Hiddema is momenteel in Parijs, waar hij te gast is op het congres van het Extreemrechtse Front National, en wilde geen commentaar geven.</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The underlined parts are the stigmatization manipulation; the italic parts are the prosecution manipulation.