The Politicization of Immigrant Groups

As part of the European SOM project (funded under Framework 7 of the European Commission), we examined which immigrant groups are politicized in public claims-making, and how they are portrayed. The analyses are based on a sample of 11,000 newspaper articles spanning seven countries and a period of 15 years: Austria, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, 1995 to 2009. Covered are claims in the news, that is, statements made by any kind of political actor about immigration and integration, particularly statements about immigrant groups that suggest a change to current policies.

In a first step, we examined which groups are politicized: about which groups claims are being made. Two things are noteworthy in this regard. First, by far the most common group referred to in claims in the news is the generic “immigrants” where no particular distinctions are made. This is the case for almost all countries, although the proportion of claims about this generic group of immigrants varies significantly across countries. Second, asylum seekers are the most commonly referred to immigrant group that is identified more specifically: typically between 10 and 30 per cent of all claims are about asylum seekers. This is striking given that asylum seekers constitute only a fraction of the immigrant population in the countries under study. Usually fewer than 3 per cent of the immigrant population are asylum seekers. By contrast, some of the largest immigrant groups are not mentioned much in claims in the news: immigrants from other European countries.

There are interesting trends over time when it comes to which groups are addressed predominantly in claims in the news. Asylum seekers were dominant in this regard in the late 1990s, when typically 30 to 40 per cent of claims made were about asylum seekers. While more recently asylum seekers remain politicized, they are no longer this dominant in the debate on immigration and integration. A rather drastic change can be observed for refugees as an immigrant group: since 2004, the proportion of claims about refugees has dwindled drastically. This may simply reflect a discursive shift in the debate, where the label asylum seeker may recently be used indiscriminately to cover both asylum seekers and refugees.

A change in the opposite direction can be observed for Muslims in four of the countries under study. As groups addressed in claims in the news, Muslims have really only emerged in the early 2000s. Here Switzerland is notable in that by 2009 Muslims have become the most common object actor. Although the popular initiative on banning the construction of minarets is an obvious explanation for 2009, the number of claims has increased steadily over time. Similarly, it can be argued that the successful plebiscite was only possible because of increased politicization of Muslims. No increase in claims about Muslims can be determined in Spain and Ireland, where there are hardly any claims about Muslims, and in the Netherlands, where Muslims have low but permanent presence in claims in the news.

Bibliography

