# Does Mainstream Populism Work?

## Populist Rhetoric and the Electoral Fortunes of Mainstream Parties

Markus Kollberg
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
markus.kollberg@hu-berlin.de

October 28, 2024

Conditionally accepted at *Political Science Research and Methods*

**Abstract**

Much work is concerned with the effects of mainstream parties accommodating the positions of populist radical right parties. Little is known about the role of political rhetoric in mainstream party responses to radical right challengers though. This is a significant gap given the evident shifts in mainstream party discourse across European democracies. Using a pre-registered survey experiment in Germany, I analyse how voters react when mainstream parties engage in populist rhetoric and adopt radical right issue positions. Theoretically, I propose that voters, particularly those with populist attitudes, may use populist rhetoric as a heuristic when evaluating parties. I find that, in line with spatial theories of voting, voters penalize or reward mainstream parties based on their adoption of radical right positions, but that the use of populist rhetoric does not significantly impact voter evaluations. These findings demonstrate the relevance of programmatic party strategies in mainstream-challenger competition and cast doubt on the effectiveness of populist rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Party Competition, Radical Right Parties, Populism, Survey Experiment

# 1 Introduction

Populist radical right (PRR) parties challenge mainstream parties by combining radical anti-immigration and anti-globalisation positions with a thin populist ideology depicting politics as an endless struggle between "evil elites" and "the people" (Mudde, 2004). This populist ideology commonly manifests in parties' communication – which I refer to as *populist rhetoric*. The success of PRR parties has sparked controversy about the extent to which mainstream parties (should) accommodate the issue-positions of PRR challengers by moving to the right, especially on immigration policies (see, amongst others, Meguid, 2008; Bale et al., 2010; Krause et al., 2022; Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Chou et al., 2021; Hjorth and Larsen, 2022). Much less is known about the role of discursive responses to PRR success and competition over issues other than immigration though.

Incorporating discursive party strategies – such as engaging in populist rhetoric – into analyses of party competition is an important endeavor. First, there is a rich experimental literature demonstrating that populist rhetoric can be an effective communication strategy. Populist rhetoric affects how voters attribute blame (Hameleers et al., 2017, 2018), evaluate out-groups (Hameleers and Schmuck, 2017; Hameleers and Fawzi, 2020), assess party leaders (Bos et al., 2013), perceive their own group identities (Bos et al., 2020), and understand societal problems (Busby et al., 2019). Parties might also use such rhetoric to discredit competitors and highlight their novelty (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). While this literature demonstrates that populist rhetoric affects political behavior, it remains a question of an ongoing academic debate to what extent such rhetoric also has a direct electoral appeal (e.g., Dai and Kustov, 2023; Kittel, 2024; Castanho Silva et al., 2022; Neuner and Wratil, 2020).

Second, there is mounting evidence that mainstream parties increasingly engage in populist rhetoric. In his influential article, Mudde (2004) posits that mainstream parties will use "populist themes and rhetoric to try and fight off the challenge" of successful PRR parties (563). Since then, an important body of scholarly work has investigated whether this "populist zeitgeist" has come about. Scholars have asked to what extent parties have adopted populist rhetoric in reaction to changes in their electoral performance (Rooduijn et al., 2014; Hunger, 2020; Breyer, 2022; Licht et al., 2024), which issues parties talk about in a populist manner (Bernhard and Kriesi, 2021), how parties (Ernst et al., 2017a,b) and leaders (Zulianello et al., 2018) use populist rhetoric in their social media strategies, as well as how the media employs populist narratives (Rooduijn, 2014; Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2020). More recently, Esguerra et al. (2023) leverage the quasi-random assignment of committee memberships in the German

parliament providing causal evidence that populist rhetoric "spills-over" from PRR to mainstream party politicians. In addition, there is plenty of qualitative evidence from examples like the British Conservative Party (e.g., Baldini et al., 2020; Bale, 2018, 2023) and the Austrian People's Party under the leadership of former chancellor Sebastian Kurz (e.g., Wodak, 2018) suggesting that mainstream parties do engage strategically in populist rhetoric. This body of work demonstrates that mainstream parties do adopt populist rhetoric when competing with PRR challengers. However, the effects of this strategy thus far remain unknown. By addressing this gap, this experiment makes an important contribution to the literature on party competition between mainstream and PRR parties.

I argue that mainstream parties can respond to PRR challenges in two dimensions. First, there is spatial and programmatic competition over which party's position comes closest to voters' ideal points (Downs, 1957). There, mainstream parties can react to PRR success with *positional accommodation*, that is, with "moving to the right" (Meguid, 2008). Second, there is discursive competition. Here, mainstream parties can engage in populist *rhetorical accommodation*; a strategy in which they emphasise thin populism in their rhetoric. Theoretically, I propose that voters – in particular, those with populist attitudes – might use populist rhetoric as a heuristic when evaluating a party (Sniderman et al., 1993; Chong and Druckman, 2007). Depending on the distribution of populist attitudes in the electorate and their importance for voters' assessment of parties, mainstream parties might be able to appeal to voters using populist rhetoric. Hence, I ask: *What are the effects of mainstream parties engaging in populist rhetoric?*

I conduct a factorial vignette experiment on a high-quality sample of German voters (n = 4,042) to assess the causal effects of rhetorical and positional accommodation. The vignettes describe a scenario in which the PRR *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) challenges Germany's center-right Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) or the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) using populist rhetoric and demands a more radical policy position on one out of three issues: immigration, the war in Ukraine or inflation. The scenario is manipulated in the extent to which the mainstream party accommodates the AfD positionally and/or rhetorically. The outcome of interest is the propensity to vote for the respective mainstream party.

The results demonstrate that mainstream parties cannot accommodate populist challengers by engaging in populist rhetoric. Voters penalize or reward a mainstream party for policy positions conditional on their own issue preferences but do not react to different types of rhetoric. In line with spatial theories of voting, the results show that voters on the right and voters with pronounced populist attitudes reward mainstream parties for moving to the right, whereas centrist and left voters, as well as voters with less populist attitudes penalize mainstream parties for po-

sitional accommodation. However, none of these groups is particularly susceptible to populist rhetorical accommodation. This is despite respondents clearly identifying the rhetoric as populist, as demonstrated by the included manipulation checks. There is no heterogeneity in these effects for different issues, the two different mainstream parties, or typical socio-demographics.

These findings advance the understanding of party competition between mainstream and PRR parties. They question the alleged link between populist rhetoric and the electoral success of political parties by demonstrating that programmatic rather than rhetorical party strategies matter to voters when evaluating mainstream against PRR parties.

# 2 The Case for Rhetorical Accommodation

The increasing success of PRR parties across Europe has spared a lively academic and political debate about how mainstream parties should response to such challenges. Most scholarly work is concerned with mainstream parties' programmatic responses, with a focus on immigration (e.g., Meguid, 2005, 2008; Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Schumacher and Van Kersbergen, 2016), and their electoral implications (Krause et al., 2022; Chou et al., 2021; Hjorth and Larsen, 2022; Dahlström and Sundell, 2012). Arguments in this debate often follow a traditional Downsian logic of spatial competition (Downs, 1957): If mainstream parties moved to the right, there would be no space for PRR parties and voters with radical policy preferences would return to mainstream parties. The empirical evidence for this logic is mixed. This is because mainstream parties face a trade-off between maintaining those voters who prefer moderate policy positions (i.e., those in the center) while appealing to those who prefer more radical positions (i.e., those on the right). In addition, accommodation might have unintended long-term consequences, like the legitimization of radical positions (Krause et al., 2022; Vrakopoulos, 2022; Dahlström and Sundell, 2012). That being said, there are certainly conditions – for example, in a Block party system like Denmark (Hjorth and Larsen, 2022) or in combination with ostracism (Van Spanje and De Graaf, 2018) – under which positional accommodation might pay off.

Theoretically, I propose that there are two dimensions of mainstream party responses to PRR success: The spatial and programmatic dimension, in which mainstream parties can engage in a *positional accommodation* strategy. And the discursive dimension of party competition, which offers the possibility of populist *rhetorical accommodation*. In rhetorical accommodation, mainstream parties mimic the populist rhetoric of their challengers. Given that these two strategies are not mutually exclusive, mainstream parties can also engage in a combination of positional and rhetorical accommodation (*full accommodation*). Finally, there is also the ab-

sence of these two strategies, i.e., the mainstream party neither changes its position nor does it adopt populist rhetoric (*no accommodation*). This logic is visualized in Table 1 below.

| | | **Position** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Moderate | Radical |
| **Rhetoric** | Non-Populist | No Accommodation | Positional Accommodation |
| | Populist | Rhetorical Accommodation | Full Accommodation |

Table 1: Overview of Accommodation Strategies

But, why should populist rhetorical accommodation work? Influential work in public opinion challenges spatial voting models (e.g., Zaller et al., 1992; Achen and Bartels, 2017). Instead, it argues voters to base their decisions on cognitive shortcuts (heuristics) (Sniderman et al., 1993) – especially, frames offered by elites (Entman, 1993; Chong and Druckman, 2007). By "select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient [...]" politicians can "influence human consciousness" (Entman, 1993, 52). What differentiates populist rhetoric from other communication strategies is that, as an ideology, it can interact with voters' populist *attitudes* (e.g., Wuttke et al., 2020; Castanho Silva et al., 2019). By tapping into such pre-existing sets of beliefs among voters, political parties might be able to leverage populist rhetoric for their own electoral benefit.

That being said, recent work argues that politicians also face trade-offs when using populist rhetoric (Dai and Kustov, 2022) – similar to the those described for spatial competition. Clearly, there is heterogeneity in the extent to which voters prefer populist rhetoric: While some voters might credit parties for strongly-worded criticism of elites and praises of the people, others might shy-away from parties that use such rhetoric (e.g., Gennaro et al., 2019; Levy et al., 2022; Dai and Kustov, 2022). The extent to which populist rhetorical accommodation can influence a mainstream party's success will thus depend on the preferences for such appeals in the electorate and on how influential these are in shaping voters' assessments of a party, relative to the strength of voters' policy preferences. Therefore, I zoom in on three relevant sub-groups: Voters with populist attitudes, voters who prefer radical policy positions, and PRR voters.

# 3 Research Design

Disentangling the effects of populist rhetoric observationally is challenging because it is usually enmeshed with host ideologies (Hunger and Paxton, 2022). Moreover, voters' perceptions of these strategies will be strongly affected by individual information-seeking behavior and are thus subject to bias (Leeper and Slothuus, 2014). To isolate the causal effects, I conduct a factorial vignette survey experiment on a representative sample of German citizens (n = 4042).[1] The German case provides several advantages: German mainstream parties have experienced serious intra-party disagreements about how to respond to an emerging radical right challenger (the AfD) with some factions arguing for an accommodative approach and others for an adversarial approach (Dilling, 2018). This makes Germany a typical case of competition between PRR challengers and mainstream parties.[2]

To begin, participants are asked an established question battery to capture their populist attitudes (Castanho Silva et al., 2019).[3] Then, respondents are asked for their preferences on one out of three issues: immigration, further military support for Ukraine, and active economic policies in reaction to the cost-of-living crisis. I argue this selection to be a reflection of relevant issues that PRR and mainstream parties compete over today. Immigration undoubtedly is the focal issue for competition between radical right and mainstream parties (Abou-Chadi, 2016). Admittedly, policies in response to the cost-of-living crisis and military aid for Ukraine are not conventional radical right issues. However, all these issues have in common that the radical right in Germany acts as an issue-entrepreneur attempting to split the internally-divided electorates of mainstream parties (Hobolt and de Vries, 2015; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). At the time of fielding the experiment, the AfD promoted significantly more anti-immigration, pro-Russia, and pro-controlled economy positions than most mainstream parties in Germany, which are internally split on these issues.[4] In addition, all these issues were salient during the fieldwork of this survey. Testing the effects of accommodation strategies on these different issues is relevant for this design because one would expect accommodation to work in particular for such contentious issues that voters might base their voting decisions on (Meguid, 2008).

[1] The survey was administered as part of a *YouGov* omnibus in Germany in November 2022. YouGov's German omnibus uses a quota sample representative of the German adult population by age, gender, and region. For further information see https://yougov.co.uk/about/panel-methodology

[2] It is important to note that German mainstream parties actually engage in populist rhetoric. In addition to existing anecdotal examples (e.g., Tagesspiegel 2023, Esguerra et al. (2023) also provide (causal) evidence for a spill-over of populist rhetoric from radical right to mainstream parties in Germany. While I do not claim that populist rhetoric or radical right positions are extremely common in mainstream parties in Germany, they are also not unheard of.

[3] The questionnaire is included in the Pre-Registration.

[4] I provide further details on the issue-specific dynamics of party competition over these three issues using MARPOR data (Lehmann et al., 2023) in Appendix section 5.5.

For each issue, the first paragraph of the vignette is held constant and describes a fictitious parliamentary debate in which the AfD criticizes mainstream parties' employing typical populist tropes[5] and promotes its policy position. The second paragraph is then manipulated in two dimensions: First, I randomize whether the respective mainstream party is the CDU/CSU or the SPD, and second, I manipulate the mainstream party strategy which can be either (1) No Accommodation, (2) Positional Accommodation, (3) Rhetorical Accommodation, or (4) Full Accommodation.

In the first condition, the real position of the two mainstream parties on the given issues is used. These positions are presented without populist rhetoric (*no accommodation*). The second condition uses the same non-populist rhetoric but promotes a position that is more similar to the proposal of the AfD (*positional accommodation*). While these AfD-like proposals are certainly not representative of the party's median positions, there are factions within these parties that advocate for such positions; the arguments will therefore appear plausible to participants. The third condition promotes the original policy position but frames the policy using populist rhetoric (*rhetorical accommodation*). Populist rhetoric here contains all three elements of populism as a thin ideology: An overtly positive appeal to a fictitious, homogeneous group of "the people"[6], a strongly-worded critique of "the elites"[7] as well as a dualistic worldview of politics as a constant struggle of "the people" versus "the elites"[8](Mudde, 2004). The fourth condition combines an AfD-like policy position with populist rhetoric. One example for the rhetorical accommodation condition is presented in Figure 1 below.[9]

The survey contains two questions nudging participants to engage with the vignettes cognitively. One of the questions directly taps into the logic of spatial party competition and asks respondents whether they think that the mainstream party (as presented in the vignette) has "moved towards the AfD". The other question asks respondents explicitly to think about whether the mainstream party's "choice of words resembles the choice of words of the AfD". These questions also serve as manipulation checks to test whether respondents have actually perceived the vignettes in the intended way.

[5] "Being out of touch with the people and only doing politics for the establishment."

[6] E.g., "We take the will of the people serious.", "We stand up for the real interests of the people."

[7] E.g., "We turn against those who lost track of reality and have no sense for the interests of the ordinary people."

[8] E.g., "Politics is about enacting the will of the people."

[9] The English translation reads as follows: "The [SPD-CDU/CSU] wants to support refugees who are in danger because they face political prosecution in their home countries. To do so, we propose a fair and European mechanism for distributing newly arriving refugees. We reject a complete stop of immigration. We take the will of the people serious and stand up for the interests of the German people. We turn against the ideas of naive ideologues, who only care for their own advantage. Politics is about enacting the will of the people." All vignettes are in the pre-registration.

The outcome variable is the propensity to vote for the respective mainstream party. I measure these preferences by asking respondents to consider the vignette and evaluate how likely it is that they would vote for that party on an eleven-points scale.[10]

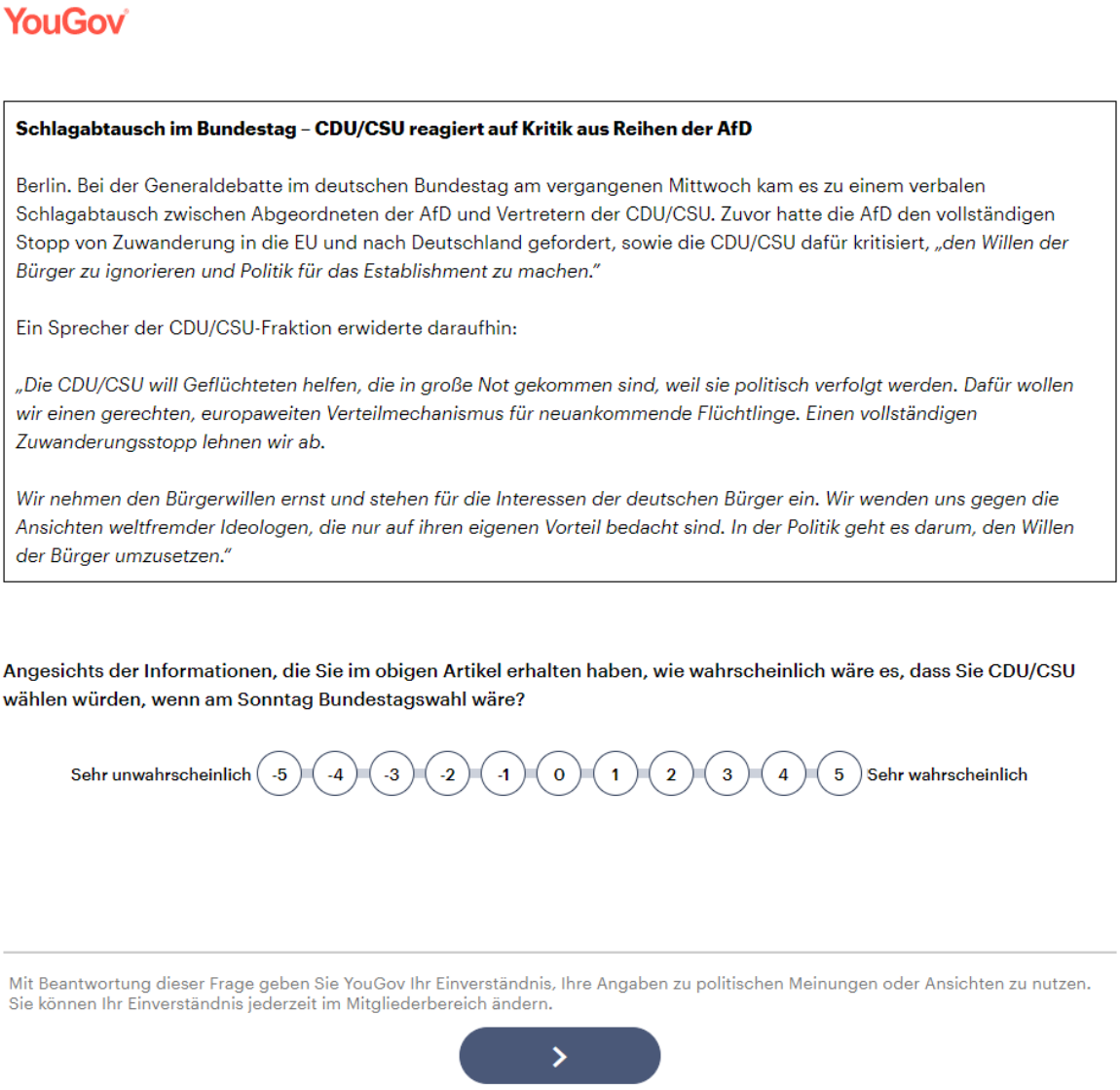


Figure 1: Screenshot of Main Survey Page (Rhetorical Accommodation)

[10]Another possibility would have been to investigate whether respondents actually switch from the PRR to the respective mainstream party. Having said that, it seems unlikely that a simple vignette treatment describing a hypothetical scenario would be strong enough to prompt such a switch. In addition, using such a switching outcome would come with non-trivial difficulties in terms of statistical power. I discuss the consequences arising from this design choice in the conclusion.

# 4 Results

Following the pre-registration, I analyse the effects of rhetorical, positional and full accommodation averaging across all respondents, all issues, and both mainstream parties. Figure 2 visualises the means in the propensity to vote for the respective mainstream party in all four conditions. On average, there are no significant differences between these categories. The results of Model 1 in Table 2 confirm this finding. Holding constant the issue and the mainstream party, neither rhetorical, nor positional accommodation, nor a combination of these two affect the propensity to vote for the respective mainstream party.

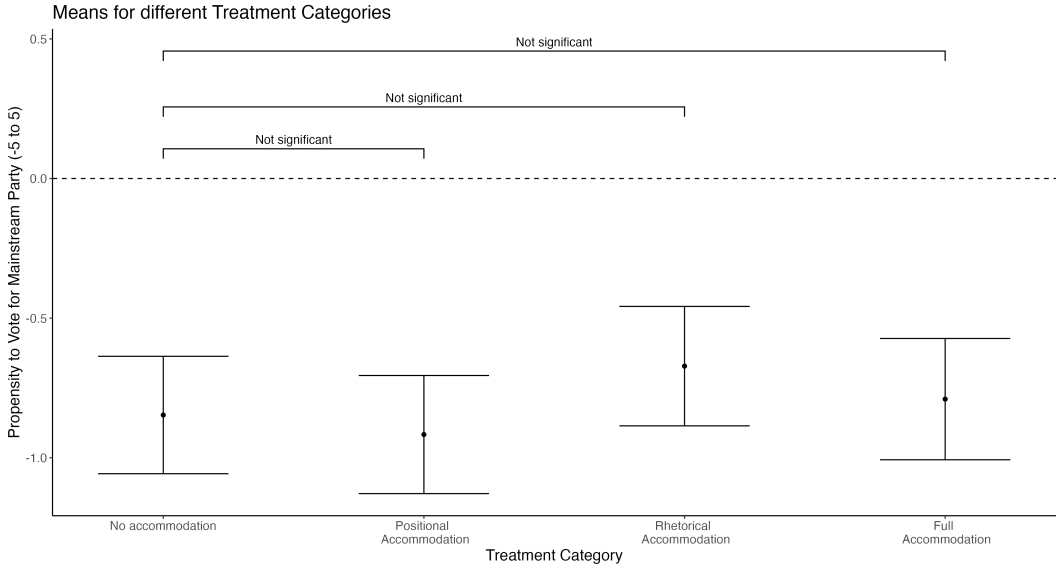


Figure 2: Means of propensity to vote for mainstream party in the four treatment categories with 95% confidence intervals

This result is a consequence of positive and negative effects canceling each other out (see Model 2 in Table 2). Interacting the treatment with the pre-treatment measure of issue preferences, I find that respondents with right preferences (less immigration, no further military support for Ukraine, and more government action in response to the cost-of-living crisis / inflation) reward a mainstream party for moving to the right. As a spatial understanding would predict, voters on the left penalize mainstream parties for accommodating the AfD's positions.[11]

[11] In the case of the three issues tested here, the proportion of respondents preferring the AfD's position over the mainstream parties' positions seems to be large as indicated by the histogram in the second layer of Figure 3.

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $-0.79^{***}$ | $-0.20$ |
| | (0.14) | (0.15) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.18 | 0.29 |
| | (0.15) | (0.17) |
| Positional Accommodation | $-0.07$ | $-0.51^{**}$ |
| | (0.15) | (0.17) |
| Full Accommodation | $-0.05$ | $-0.18$ |
| | (0.22) | (0.24) |
| Respondent LR-Preferences | | $-0.79^{***}$ |
| | | (0.08) |
| Respondent LR-Preferences * Rhetorical Acc. | | $-0.08$ |
| | | (0.11) |
| Respondent LR-Preferences * Positional Acc. | | $0.69^{***}$ |
| | | (0.11) |
| Respondent LR-Preferences * Full Accommodation | | 0.11 |
| | | (0.16) |
| $R^2$ | 0.00 | 0.05 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | $-0.00$ | 0.05 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue and Mainstream Party

Table 2: The average effects of both accommodation strategies and effects conditional on voters' left-right preferences. Alternative model specifications with separate interaction terms are in Appendix table 5.

I visualize the predicted values conditional on *respondents' left-right preferences* in Figure 3 below.[12] The left panel displays the predictions for different mainstream party positions, the right panel the predictions for different types of mainstream party rhetoric. As the results in the first panel show, I find that respondents on the left and in the center clearly prefer mainstream parties not to move to the right. At this part of the scale, the effects of no accommodation (in gray) are more positive than those for positional accommodation (in black). As shown in the panel, these differences are also substantively sizable. In other words, a move to the right causes a more negative evaluation of the mainstream party among left and centrist respondents and a more positive evaluation among radical-right respondents.

In the right panel, the estimates for respondents across the entire left-right spectrum are almost identical and the confidence intervals overlap accordingly. This demonstrates that rhetorical accommodation – across the left-right spectrum – does not increase people's evaluation of mainstream parties. Taken together, these results demonstrate that the match between voters' issue preferences and a party's position – in accordance with spatial theories of voting – is far more predictive for voting behavior than the framing of a position in populist respectively non-populist rhetoric.

[12]This visualization is a slight deviation from the PAP, where I had assumed the effect to be linear.

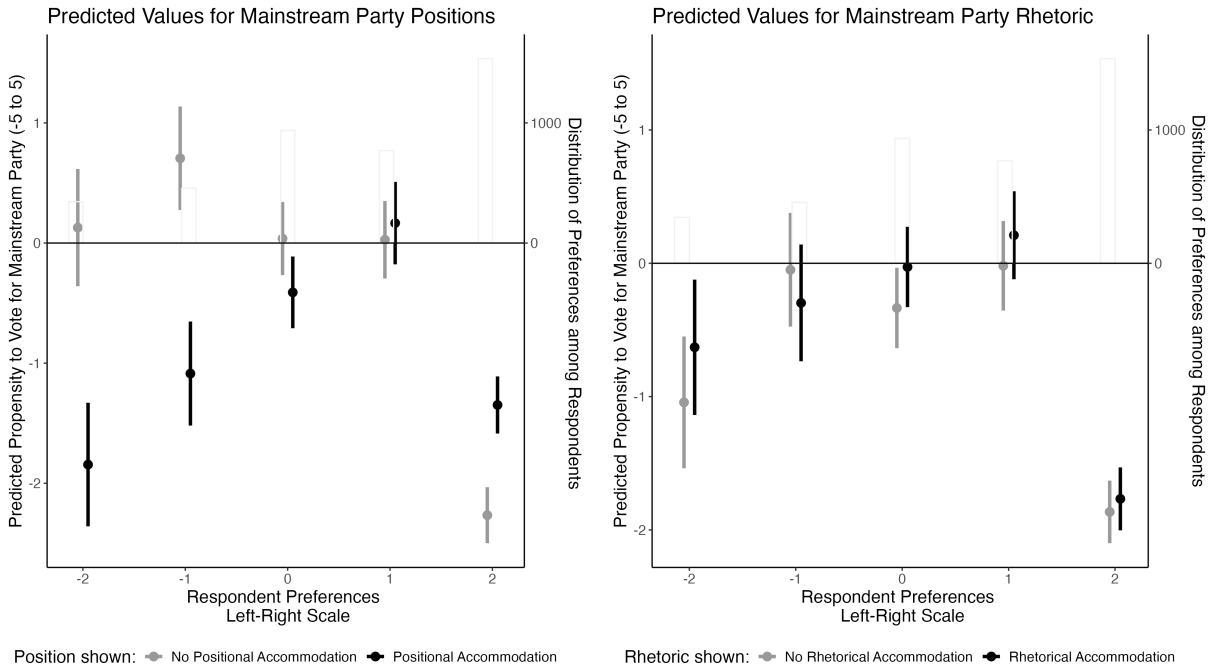


Figure 3: Predicted values for rhetorical and positional accommodation conditional on voters' left-right preferences using a discrete binning of the moderator (see appendix table 6); the distribution of preferences being shown in the underlying histogram.

I assess the differences conditional on the prevalence of populist attitudes among respondents (Appendix Table 8) and based upon past voting behavior (Appendix Table 7). The results follow the same pattern: Voters with pronounced populist attitudes tend to reward mainstream parties for positional accommodation whereas voters with weak populist attitudes tend to penalize mainstream parties for it. I also find past AfD voters to be more likely to reward the respective mainstream party when this party accommodates the AfD's demands, whereas mainstream party voters are penalizing a mainstream party for positional accommodation.[13] The results of both models demonstrate that despite being responsive to changes in issue-positions, none of these groups is susceptible to populist rhetorical accommodation.

What stands out from these analyses is that none of the interactions between populist rhetoric and issue-position are significant. This is surprising, given that one might assume that radical positions could be presented more credibly using populist rhetoric. This indicates that voters attribute far more importance to how mainstream parties respond to PRR challengers positionally than rhetorically. Equally remarkable is the lack of heterogeneity found. In the appendix, I present the results for all three issues (Table 9 and Figure 6) and for the two mainstream par-

[13]Note that due to statistical power, this model uses a dummy capturing past vote for the AfD. Table 11 in the Appendix analyses differences between voters of all parties showing that voters of the Greens and the Left disapprove of positional accommodation the most. The effects for rhetorical accommodation are not moderated by past voting behavior.

ties (Table 10 and Figure 7) separately. I do not find any evidence suggesting that rhetorical or positional accommodation work better for a specific party or when talking about a certain issue.[14]

One concern would be that respondents did not perceive the populist rhetoric and the parties' positions as such. I address these concerns using the manipulation checks included. The left panel of Figure 4 below shows that respondents correctly recognized the radical positions as more similar to those of the AfD. Crucially for this experiment, they did not mistake populist rhetoric for a radical position, there are no significant differences between the two moderate conditions (1 and 3) and the two radical positions (2 and 4) visualized in the left panel. This demonstrates that respondents clearly perceived the rhetorical differences as distinct from the positional ones – an important assumption of this experiment.[15] This suggests that the missing effects of rhetorical accommodation are likely to be genuine null-results.

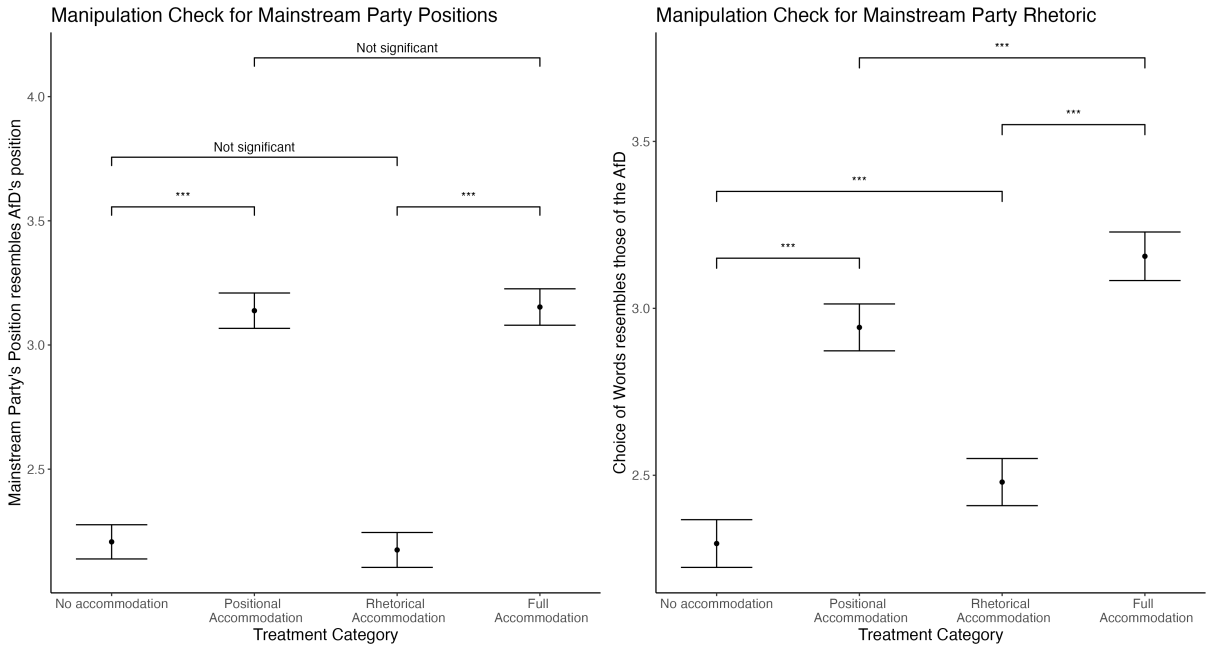


Figure 4: Means of manipulation tests (0-5) in the four treatment categories with 95% confidence intervals

That being said, the manipulation checks do reveal some complications. Respondents got the impression that positional accommodation resembles the AfD's choice of words too (compar-

[14]Exploiting the randomization of the mainstream party shown in the respective vignettes, I also test whether mainstream parties could appeal to their own voters using populist rhetoric (see Appendix Table 12). I do not find evidence for such a mechanism though (bearing in mind that I am reaching the limits of statistical power with these analyses).

[15]These findings are underscored by a pre-test in which respondents were asked to describe these vignettes using their own words. Participants' responses to the rhetorical accommodation vignettes were remarkable as they frequently described the mainstream parties' language as "aggressive", "polemic", and "populist".

ing 1 and 2, respectively 3 and 4 in the right panel). This implies that the observed effects for moving to the right might, in part, be driven by respondents' perceiving this as an imitation of the AfD's rhetoric. This could be a problem if respondents' perceptions of the mainstream party rhetoric varied conditional on their left-right preferences as this would bias the results observed for positional accommodation – this was not the case here though (see appendix table 4). Instead, I argue, that this finding offers two important insights: First, voters get the impression that when mainstream parties accommodate the radical right, they also sound more like the radical right – an important side-effect for mainstream parties to consider. And second, party rhetoric and party positions are clearly tightly intertwined in voters' minds. This demonstrates the need for careful experimental work that randomizes party positions independently from party rhetoric.

Finally, one might be concerned that the mainstream party strategy was presented as a direct response to a PRR challenge in the vignette. Experimentally manipulating the processes of a party mov*ing* to the right and adopt*ing* a certain rhetoric is challenging because it requires respondents to be informed about the status quo and then to think about potential changes. To circumvent this challenge, the vignettes were designed to present mainstream party strategies as a direct response to a PRR challenger – and, as indicated by the manipulation checks, this approach was successful. In addition, I argue that this approach is externally valid given that journalists and comments frequently discuss mainstream party strategies as a direct response to PRR success.[16] That being said, even if one assumed the design of the vignette (or the inclusion of the manipulation checks) to be too obvious to respondents, this would make the null-result for rhetorical accommodation an even more remarkable finding.

# 5 Conclusion

In this note, I demonstrate that mainstream parties' attempts to accommodate PRR challengers by engaging in populist rhetoric do not affect voters' propensity to vote for mainstream parties. I find that voters penalize or reward a mainstream party for their policy positions but do not respond to rhetorical accommodation. Although mainstream parties might receive credit for accommodating a PRR challenger from radical right voters and voters with populist attitudes, they risk getting penalized by left and centrist voters as well as voters with weak populist attitudes. The extent to which positional accommodation is successful will thus be determined by the distribution of issue preferences in the electorate relative to the mainstream party's position. However, even among those sub-groups of the electorate which one might assume to be

[16]For examples from Germany, see Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2022, Hessicher Rundfunk 2023.

particularly susceptible to populist rhetoric, rhetorical accommodation does not work.

These findings make a significant contribution by challenging the widely-assumed link between populist rhetoric and electoral performance. Theoretically speaking, populist rhetoric does not appear to be a useful heuristic for voters when assessing political parties. This stands in contrast to findings from earlier work on populist rhetoric. Why could that be the case? Earlier work on populist rhetoric has tested the effects of thin populism mostly in combination with other elements of political communication such as blame attribution (e.g., Hameleers and Schmuck, 2017) and emotive rhetoric (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2017), or with positional cues (e.g., Bos et al., 2013). The factorial design employed here overcomes this challenge and shows that these elements might be the main drivers of the observed effects. In contrast, the appeal of thin populism appears to be fairly limited. This contributes directly to a growing body of work that aims to disentangle the effects of populist appeals from policy positions associated with populist parties (e.g., Dai and Kustov, 2023; Kittel, 2024; Neuner and Wratil, 2020; Castanho Silva et al., 2022).

One important limitation of this experimental design is a consequence of the outcome variable chosen: This experiment only looks at the *immediate* and *direct* effects of accommodation. It zooms in on specific mainstream parties and analyses the effects of accommodation on their electoral fortunes. In reality though, such party strategies will have effects on other parties too. Hjorth and Larsen (2022) for example argue that in a block party system like Denmark, positional accommodation might repel centrist voters to other mainstream parties while winning over voters from the PRR resulting in a net positive effect of accommodation. Future research should thus look into the consequences of different types of accommodation beyond the accommodating and the accommodated party, as well as into the role that different issues play in moderating the effects of accommodations strategies.

Finally, two additional words of caution: First, despite being a typical case, most voters will associate populist rhetoric with a specific political party in Germany, which is likely to affect its appeal. In countries where populist rhetoric is commonly used by various parties, rhetorical accommodation might thus play out differently. Second, there might be other forms of rhetorical accommodation such as "dog-whistle politics" (e.g., Bonikowski and Zhang, 2023; Albertson, 2015), or "tough talk" (e.g., Lutz, 2021) that mainstream parties might use to appeal to PRR voters. I hope to inspire more research on discursive party strategies that develops a better theoretical and empirical understanding of how discursive and issue-based competition relate to each other.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Benjamin Lauderdale, Christopher Wratil and Tom O'Grady for their support in pursuing this project. Tarik Abou-Chadi, Ivo Bantel, Emily Frank, Fabian Habersack, Sara Hobolt, Sophia Hunger, Michael Jacobs, Moritz Marbach, Lisa Zehnter, and Andrei Zhirnov provided invaluable feedback at different stages of this project. Previous versions of this paper were presented at EPSA 2023, at the ECPR Joint Sessions 2023 and at the University of Vienna. I thank the three anonymous reviewers at PSRM for their excellent suggestions.

## Funding

This research project received funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant Number: ES/P000592/1), UCL's Department Research Fund and the PhD Opportunity Fund, the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes, and the Einstein Stiftung (Grant Number: EVF-BUA-2022-691).

## Research Ethics

This research was declared exempt from ethical review at University College London (UCL). The Pre-Registration including the full questionnaire and all treatment texts can be accessed via https://osf.io/pru6y.

# References

Abou-Chadi, T. (2016). Niche party success and mainstream party policy shifts - How green and radical right parties differ in their impact. *British Journal of Political Science*, 46(2):417–436.

Abou-Chadi, T. and Krause, W. (2020). The causal effect of radical right success on mainstream parties' policy positions: A regression discontinuity approach. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(3):829–847.

Achen, C. and Bartels, L. (2017). *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press.

Albertson, B. L. (2015). Dog-whistle politics: Multivocal communication and religious appeals. *Political Behavior*, 37:3–26.

Baldini, G., Bressanelli, E., and Gianfreda, S. (2020). Taking back control? Brexit, sovereignism and populism in Westminster (2015–17). *European Politics and Society*, 21(2):219–234.

Bale, T. (2018). Who leads and who follows? the symbiotic relationship between ukip and the conservatives–and populism and euroscepticism. *Politics*, 38(3):263–277.

Bale, T. (2023). *The Conservative Party After Brexit: Turmoil and Transformation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Bale, T., Green-Pedersen, C., Krouwel, A., Luther, K. R., and Sitter, N. (2010). If you can't beat them, join them? Explaining social democratic responses to the challenge from the populist radical right in Western Europe. *Political studies*, 58(3):410–426.

Bernhard, L. and Kriesi, H. (2021). Populism in election times: a comparative analysis of 11 countries in western europe. In *Varieties of Populism in Europe in Times of Crises*, pages 48–68. Routledge.

Bonikowski, B. and Zhang, Y. (2023). Populism as dog-whistle politics: Anti-elite discourse and sentiments toward minority groups. *Social Forces*, page Forthcoming.

Bos, L., Schemer, C., Corbu, N., Hameleers, M., Andreadis, I., Schulz, A., Schmuck, D., Reinemann, C., and Fawzi, N. (2020). The effects of populism as a social identity frame on persuasion and mobilisation: Evidence from a 15-country experiment. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(1):3–24.

Bos, L., Van Der Brug, W., and De Vreese, C. H. (2013). An experimental test of the impact of style and rhetoric on the perception of right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders. *Acta Politica*, 48(2):192–208.

Breyer, M. (2022). Populist positions in party competition: Do parties strategically vary their degree of populism in reaction to vote and office loss? *Party Politics*, Forthcoming.

Busby, E. C., Gubler, J. R., and Hawkins, K. A. (2019). Framing and blame attribution in populist rhetoric. *The Journal of Politics*, 81(2):616–630.

Castanho Silva, B., Andreadis, I., Anduiza, E., Blanuša, N., Corti, Y. M., Delfino, G., Rico, G., Ruth-Lovell, S. P., Spruyt, B., Steenbergen, M., et al. (2019). Public opinion surveys: A new scale. In Hawkins, K. A., Carlin, R., Littvay, L., and Rovira Kaltwasser, C., editors, *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Theory, Method & Analysis*, pages 150–177. Routledge.

Castanho Silva, B., Neuner, F. G., and Wratil, C. (2022). Populism and candidate support in the us: The effects of "thin" and "host" ideology. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, pages 1–10.

Chong, D. and Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Reviev of Political Science*, 10:103–126.

Chou, W., Dancygier, R., Egami, N., and Jamal, A. A. (2021). Competing for loyalists? How party positioning affects populist radical right voting. *Comparative Political Studies*, 54(12):2226–2260.

Dahlström, C. and Sundell, A. (2012). A losing gamble. How mainstream parties facilitate anti-immigrant party success. *Electoral Studies*, 31(2):353–363.

Dai, Y. and Kustov, A. (2022). When do politicians use populist rhetoric? Populism as a campaign gamble. *Political Communication*, Forthcoming.

Dai, Y. and Kustov, A. (2023). The (in) effectiveness of populist rhetoric: A conjoint experiment of campaign messaging. *Political Science Research and Methods*.

De Vries, C. E. and Hobolt, S. B. (2020). *Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe*. Princeton University Press.

Dilling, M. (2018). Two of the Same Kind?: The Rise of the AfD and its Implications for the CDU/CSU. *German Politics and Society*, 36(1):84–104.

Downs, A. (1957). An economic theory of democracy. *Harper and Row*.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4):51–58.

Ernst, N., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., Blassnig, S., and Esser, F. (2017a). Extreme parties and populism: an analysis of facebook and twitter across six countries. *Information, communication & society*, 20(9):1347–1364.

Ernst, N., Engesser, S., and Esser, F. (2017b). Bipolar populism? the use of anti-elitism and people-centrism by swiss parties on social media. *Swiss political science review*, 23(3).

Esguerra, E., Hagemeister, F., Heid, J., and Leffler, T. (2023). Accommodation of right-wing populist rhetoric: Evidence from parliamentary speeches in germany. *CRC TRR 190 Rationality and Competition*.

Gennaro, G., Lecce, G., and Morrelli, M. (2019). Intertemporal evidence on the strategy of populism. *IGIER Working Paper*, pages 1–22.

Hameleers, M., Bos, L., and de Vreese, C. H. (2017). "They Did It": The Effects of Emotionalized Blame Attribution in Populist Communication. *Communication Research*, 44(6):870–900.

Hameleers, M., Bos, L., Fawzi, N., Reinemann, C., Andreadis, I., Corbu, N., Schemer, C., Schulz, A., Shaefer, T., Aalberg, T., et al. (2018). Start spreading the news: A comparative experiment on the effects of populist communication on political engagement in sixteen european countries. *The international journal of press/politics*, 23(4):517–538.

Hameleers, M. and Fawzi, N. (2020). Widening the divide between them and us? The effects of populist communication on cognitive and affective stereotyping in a comparative European setting. *Political Communication*, 37(5):612–634.

Hameleers, M. and Schmuck, D. (2017). It's us against them: A comparative experiment on the effects of populist messages communicated via social media. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9):1425–1444.

Hameleers, M. and Vliegenthart, R. (2020). The rise of a populist zeitgeist? a content analysis of populist media coverage in newspapers published between 1990 and 2017. *Journalism Studies*, 21(1):19–36.

Hjorth, F. and Larsen, M. V. (2022). When does accommodation work? Electoral effects of mainstream left position taking on immigration. *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(2):949–957.

Hobolt, S. B. and de Vries, C. E. (2015). Issue Entrepreneurship and Multiparty Competition. *Comparative Political Studies*, 48(9):1159–1185.

Hunger, S. (2020). *Is there a populist zeitgeist?: coming to grips with an elusive phenomenon*. PhD thesis, European University Institute.

Hunger, S. and Paxton, F. (2022). What's in a buzzword? A systematic review of the state of populism research in political science. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10(3):617–633.

Kittel, R. C. (2024). Let's talk populist? a survey experiment on effects of (non-) populist discourse on vote choice. *European Journal of Political Research*.

Krause, W., Cohen, D., and Abou-Chadi, T. (2022). Does accommodation work? mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties. *Political Science Research and Methods*, pages 1–8.

Leeper, T. J. and Slothuus, R. (2014). Political parties, motivated reasoning, and public opinion formation. *Political Psychology*, 35:129–156.

Lehmann, P., Franzmann, S., Burst, T., Regel, S., Riethmüller, F., Volkens, A., Weßels, B., and Zehnter, L. (2023). The manifesto data collection. manifesto project (mrg/cmp/-marpor). version 2023a. *Berlin/GÃ¶ttingen: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin fÃ1/4r Sozial-forschung/GÃ¶ ttinger Institut fÃ1/4r Demokratieforschung. Descargado de https://doi. org/10.25522/manifesto. mpds. 2023a doi*, 10.

Levy, G., Razin, R., and Young, A. (2022). Misspecified politics and the recurrence of populism. *American Economic Review*, 112(3):928–62.

Licht, H., Abou-Chadi, T., Barberá, P., and Hua, W. (2024). Measuring and understanding parties' anti-elite strategies. *Journal of Politics*.

Lutz, P. (2021). Reassessing the gap-hypothesis: Tough talk and weak action in migration policy? *Party Politics*, 27(1):174–186.

Meguid, B. M. (2005). Competition between unequals: The role of mainstream party strategy in niche party success. *American political science review*, 99(3):347–359.

Meguid, B. M. (2008). *Party competition between unequals. Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4):542–563.

Neuner, F. G. and Wratil, C. (2020). The populist marketplace: Unpacking the role of "thin" and "thick" ideology. *Political Behavior*, pages 1–24.

Rooduijn, M. (2014). The mesmerising message: The diffusion of populism in public debates in western european media. *Political studies*, 62(4):726–744.

Rooduijn, M., De Lange, S. L., and Van Der Brug, W. (2014). A populist zeitgeist? programmatic contagion by populist parties in western europe. *Party politics*, 20(4):563–575.

Schumacher, G. and Van Kersbergen, K. (2016). Do mainstream parties adapt to the welfare chauvinism of populist parties? *Party Politics*, 22(3):300–312.

Sniderman, P. M., Brody, R. A., and Tetlock, P. E. (1993). *Reasoning and choice: Explorations in political psychology*. Cambridge University Press.

Van Spanje, J. and De Graaf, N. D. (2018). How established parties reduce other parties' electoral support: the strategy of parroting the pariah. *West european politics*, 41(1):1–27.

Vrakopoulos, C. (2022). Political and ideological normalization: quality of government, mainstream-right ideological positions and extreme-right support. *European Political Science Review*, 14(1):56–73.

Wodak, R. (2018). Vom rand in die mitte–„schamlose normalisierung ". *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 59(2):323–335.

Wuttke, A., Schimpf, C., and Schoen, H. (2020). When the Whole Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts: On the Conceptualization and Measurement of Populist Attitudes and Other Multidimensional Constructs. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2):356–374.

Zaller, J. R. et al. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge university press.

Zulianello, M., Albertini, A., and Ceccobelli, D. (2018). A populist zeitgeist? the communication strategies of western and latin american political leaders on facebook. *The International journal of press/politics*, 23(4):439–457.

# Online Appendix

## 5.1 Manipulation Check

| | Choice of Words | Resembles PRR Position |
|---|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $2.30^{***}$ | $2.21^{***}$ |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | $0.18^{***}$ | $-0.03$ |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Positional Accommodation | $0.65^{***}$ | $0.93^{***}$ |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Full Accommodation | 0.03 | 0.05 |
| | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| $R^2$ | 0.08 | 0.15 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.08 | 0.15 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table 3: Results of Manipulation Checks

| | Model 1 |
|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $2.30^{***}$ |
| | (0.04) |
| Rhetorical Acc. | $0.15^{**}$ |
| | (0.06) |
| Positional Acc. | $0.69^{***}$ |
| | (0.06) |
| Full Acc. | 0.08 |
| | (0.08) |
| Rhetorical Acc. * Respondent LR-Preferences | 0.05 |
| | (0.04) |
| Positional Acc. * Respondent LR-Preferences | $-0.06$ |
| | (0.04) |
| Full Acc. * Respondent LR-Preferences | $-0.08$ |
| | (0.06) |
| $R^2$ | 0.09 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.08 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table 4: Manipulation Checks for Perceptions of Rhetoric conditional on Respondent LR-Preferences

## 5.2 Balance Test

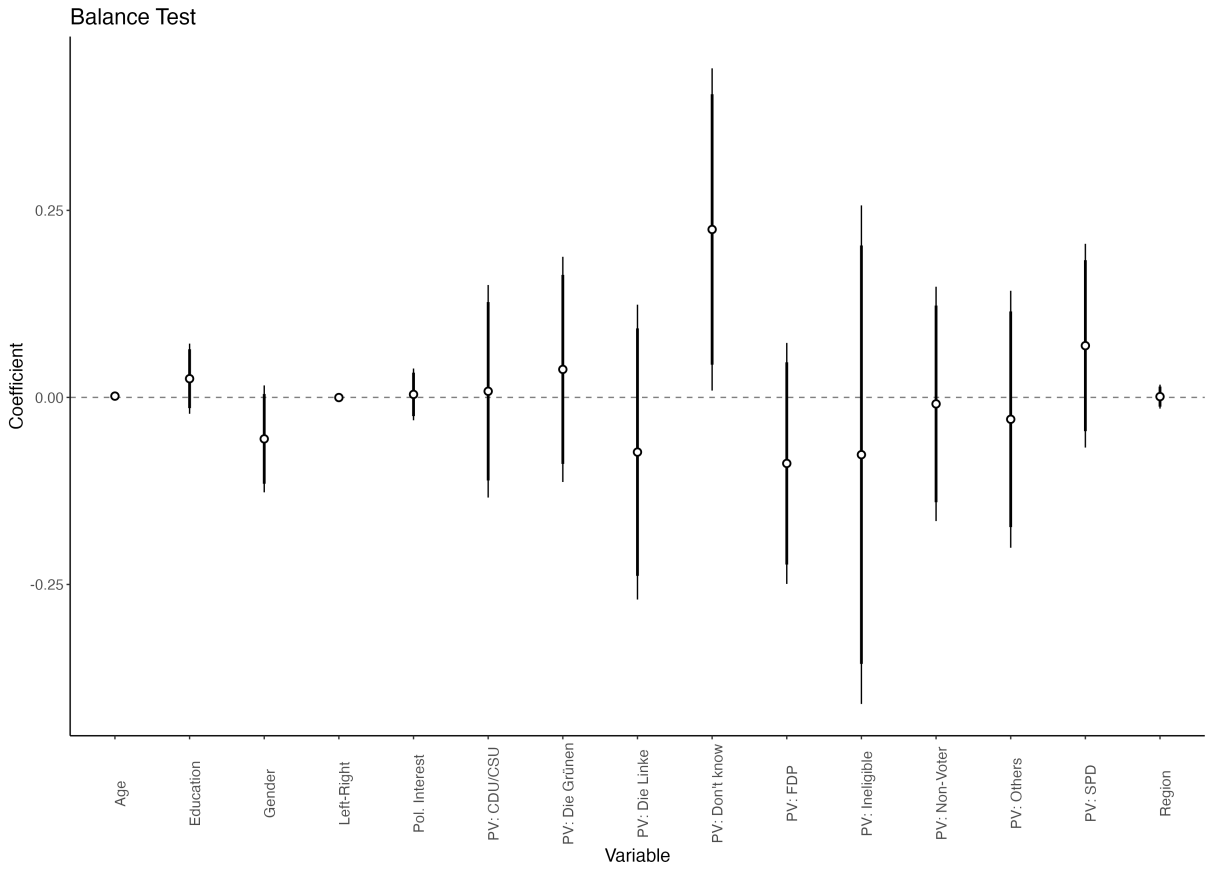


Figure 5: Balance Test

## 5.3 Heterogeneity in Treatment Effects

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $-0.39^{**}$ | $-0.18$ | $-0.19$ | $-0.20$ |
| | (0.15) | (0.15) | (0.15) | (0.15) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.21 | 0.23 | 0.25 | 0.29 |
| | (0.15) | (0.15) | (0.16) | (0.17) |
| Position Accommodation | $-0.06$ | $-0.55^{***}$ | $-0.55^{***}$ | $-0.51^{**}$ |
| | (0.15) | (0.16) | (0.16) | (0.17) |
| Full Accommodation | $-0.09$ | $-0.11$ | $-0.11$ | $-0.18$ |
| | (0.21) | (0.21) | (0.21) | (0.24) |
| Respondent LR-Preferences | $-0.47^{***}$ | $-0.83^{***}$ | $-0.82^{***}$ | $-0.79^{***}$ |
| | (0.04) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.08) |
| Respondent LR-Preferences * Rhetorical Acc. | | | $-0.02$ | $-0.08$ |
| | | | (0.08) | (0.11) |
| Respondent LR-Preferences * Positional Acc. | | $0.74^{***}$ | $0.74^{***}$ | $0.69^{***}$ |
| | | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.11) |
| Respondent LR-Preferences * Full Accommodation | | | | 0.11 |
| | | | | (0.16) |
| $R^2$ | 0.03 | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.03 | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 | 4042 | 4042 | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue and Mainstream Party

Table 5: Effects conditional on Voters' Left-Right Preferences (all interactions)

| | Model 1 |
|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | −0.16 |
| | (0.33) |
| Positional Accommodation | −1.80*** |
| | (0.51) |
| LR-Preferences -1 | 0.96* |
| | (0.45) |
| LR-Preferences 0 | 0.06 |
| | (0.39) |
| LR-Preferences 1 | 0.09 |
| | (0.40) |
| LR-Preferences 2 | −2.18*** |
| | (0.37) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.59 |
| | (0.50) |
| Positional Accommodation * LR-Preferences -1 | 0.07 |
| | (0.67) |
| Positional Accommodation * LR-Preferences 0 | 1.32* |
| | (0.59) |
| Positional Accommodation * LR-Preferences 1 | 1.91** |
| | (0.61) |
| Positional Accommodation * LR-Preferences 2 | 2.78*** |
| | (0.56) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation * LR-Preferences -1 | −0.77 |
| | (0.66) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation * LR-Preferences 0 | −0.31 |
| | (0.59) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation * LR-Preferences 1 | −0.38 |
| | (0.60) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation * LR-Preferences 2 | −0.42 |
| | (0.55) |
| Full Acc. | −0.35 |
| | (0.72) |
| Full * LR-Preferences -1 | 0.21 |
| | (0.95) |
| Full * LR-Preferences 0 | 0.42 |
| | (0.84) |
| Full * LR-Preferences 1 | 0.40 |
| | (0.87) |
| Full * LR-Preferences 2 | 0.22 |
| | (0.80) |
| $R^2$ | 0.08 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.08 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue and Mainstream Party

Table 6: Effects conditional on Voters' Left-Right Preferences (discrete binning)

| | Model |
|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $-0.46^{**}$ |
| | (0.15) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.18 |
| | (0.16) |
| Position Accommodation | $-0.18$ |
| | (0.16) |
| Full Accommodation | $-0.03$ |
| | (0.22) |
| Past AfD Vote | $-3.17^{***}$ |
| | (0.37) |
| Past AfD Vote * Rhetorical Acc. | $-0.02$ |
| | (0.52) |
| Past AfD Vote * Positional Acc. | $1.42^{**}$ |
| | (0.51) |
| Past AfD Vote * Full Acc. | $-0.35$ |
| | (0.74) |
| $R^2$ | 0.05 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.05 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue and Mainstream Party

Table 7: Effects conditional on Past Voting for the AfD

| | Model |
|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $2.94^{***}$ |
| | (0.57) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.22 |
| | (0.81) |
| Positional Accommodation | $-1.49$ |
| | (0.82) |
| Full Accommodation | 0.32 |
| | (1.17) |
| Populist Attitudes | $-1.06^{***}$ |
| | (0.16) |
| Populist Attitudes * Rhetorical Acc. | $-0.02$ |
| | (0.23) |
| Populist Attitudes * Positional Acc. | 0.41 |
| | (0.23) |
| Populist Attitudes * Full Acc. | $-0.09$ |
| | (0.33) |
| $R^2$ | 0.03 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.03 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue and Mainstream Party

Table 8: Effects conditional on Populist Attitudes

| | Model |
|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $-0.81^{***}$ |
| | (0.20) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.31 |
| | (0.27) |
| Positional Accommodation | $-0.25$ |
| | (0.27) |
| Full Accommodation | 0.09 |
| | (0.38) |
| Inflation (base: Immigration) | $-0.19$ |
| | (0.26) |
| Ukraine (base: Immigration) | $-0.04$ |
| | (0.26) |
| Inflation * Rhetorical Acc. | $-0.19$ |
| | (0.38) |
| Inflation * Positional Acc. | 0.61 |
| | (0.38) |
| Inflation * Full Acc. | $-0.36$ |
| | (0.53) |
| Ukraine * Rhetorical Acc. | $-0.19$ |
| | (0.38) |
| Ukraine * Positional Acc. | $-0.08$ |
| | (0.38) |
| Ukraine * Full Acc. | $-0.09$ |
| | (0.54) |
| $R^2$ | 0.00 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.00 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue

Table 9: Heterogeneity between Issues (Reference Category: Immigration)

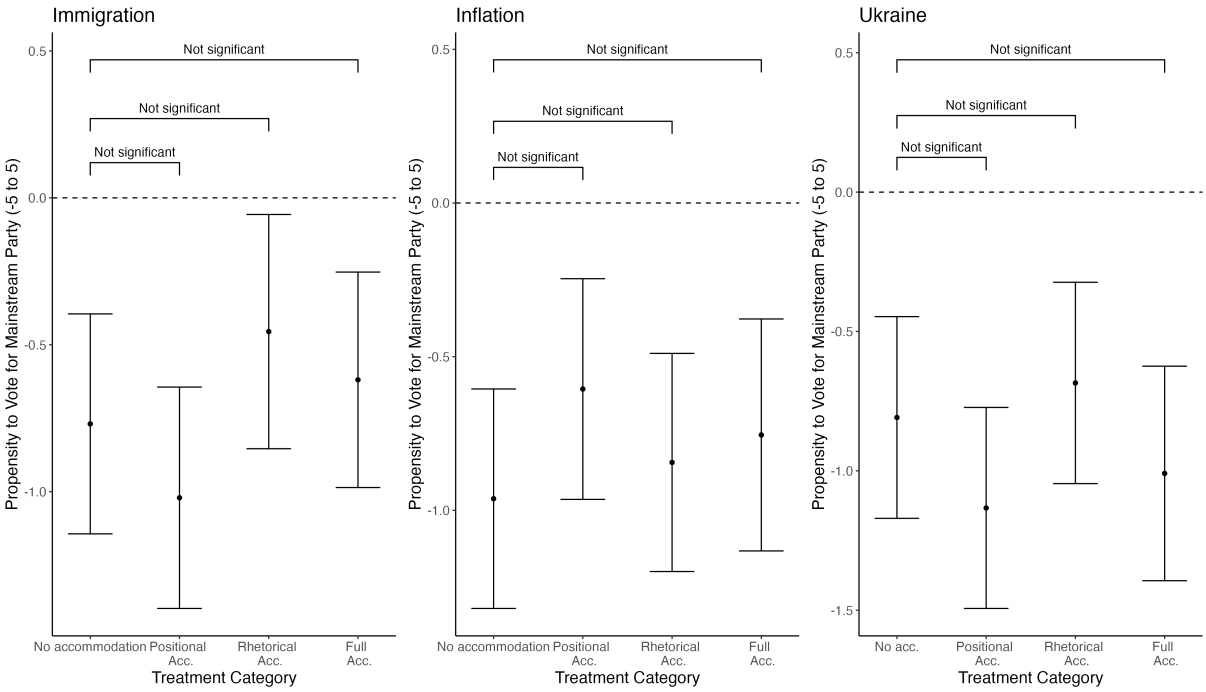


Figure 6: Means in Treatment Categories for the three issues with 95% confidence intervals

| | Model |
|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $-0.80^{***}$ |
| | (0.17) |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.23 |
| | (0.22) |
| Positional Accommodation | $-0.01$ |
| | (0.22) |
| Full Accommodation | $-0.24$ |
| | (0.31) |
| SPD (base: CDU/CSU) | 0.09 |
| | (0.22) |
| SPD (base: CDU/CSU) * Rhetorical Acc. | $-0.10$ |
| | (0.30) |
| SPD (base: CDU/CSU) * Positional Acc. | $-0.13$ |
| | (0.31) |
| SPD (base: CDU/CSU) * Full Acc. | 0.37 |
| | (0.44) |
| $R^2$ | 0.00 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | $-0.00$ |
| Num. obs. | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue

Table 10: Heterogeneity between Mainstream Parties

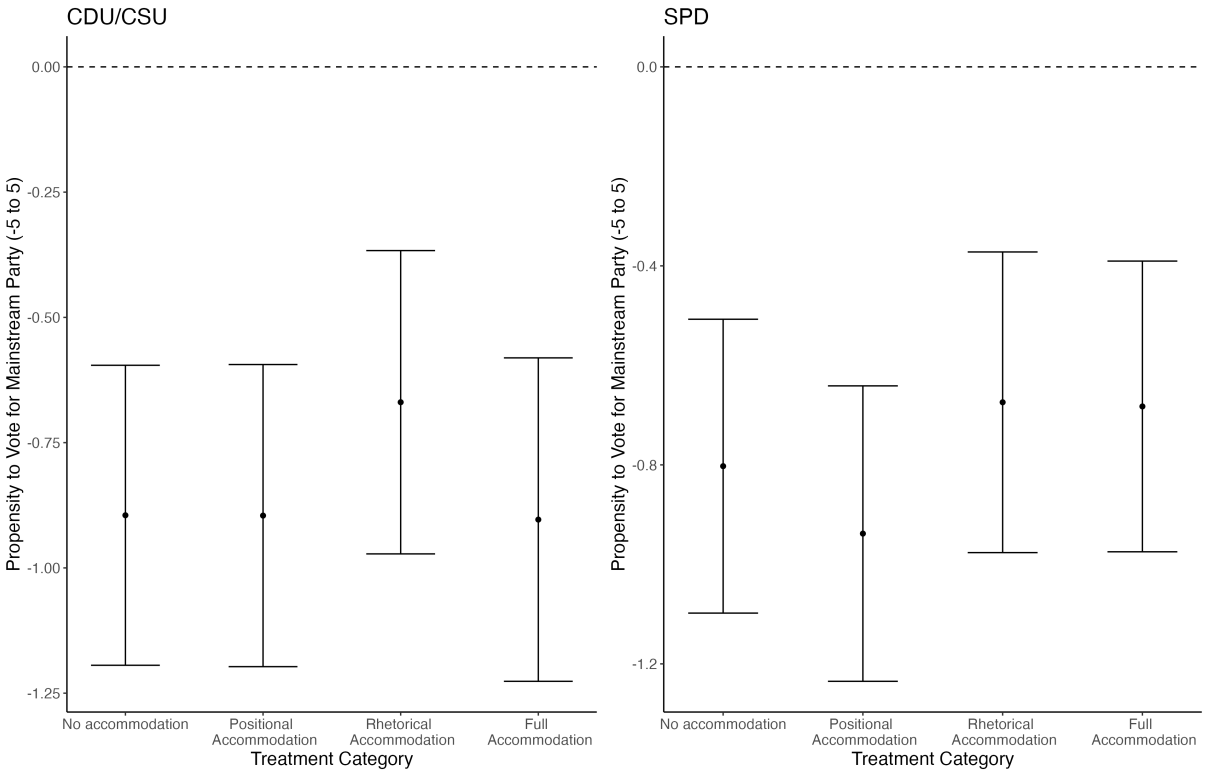


Figure 7: Means in Treatment Categories for both mainstream parties with 95% confidence intervals

| | Model |
|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $-3.59$ $(0.35)^{***}$ |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.15 (0.48) |
| Positional Accommodation | 1.24 $(0.47)^{**}$ |
| Full Accommodation | $-0.38$ (0.68) |
| CDU/CSU | 3.77 $(0.42)^{***}$ |
| Die Grünen | 3.19 $(0.45)^{***}$ |
| Die Linke | 1.72 $(0.57)^{**}$ |
| Don't know | 2.99 $(0.66)^{***}$ |
| FDP | 2.99 $(0.46)^{***}$ |
| Ineligible | 3.83 $(0.97)^{***}$ |
| Non-voters | 2.02 $(0.45)^{***}$ |
| Others | 1.67 $(0.49)^{***}$ |
| SPD | 4.31 $(0.41)^{***}$ |
| Positional * CDU/CSU | $-0.69$ (0.59) |
| Positional * Die Gruenen | $-2.62$ $(0.62)^{***}$ |
| Positional * Die Linke | $-1.91$ $(0.81)^{*}$ |
| Positional * Don't know | $-1.65$ (0.92) |
| Positional * FDP | $-1.36$ $(0.66)^{*}$ |
| Positional * Ineligible | $-1.24$ (1.31) |
| Positional * Non-voters | $-0.63$ (0.64) |
| Positional * Others | $-0.80$ (0.71) |
| Positional * SPD | $-1.90$ $(0.57)^{***}$ |
| Rhetorical * CDU/CSU | 0.25 (0.60) |
| Rhetorical * Die Gruenen | $-0.05$ (0.63) |
| Rhetorical * Die Linke | $-0.02$ (0.81) |
| Rhetorical * Don't know | 0.28 (0.96) |
| Rhetorical * FDP | $-0.00$ (0.67) |
| Rhetorical * Ineligible | $-0.60$ (1.42) |
| Rhetorical * Non-voters | $-0.23$ (0.64) |
| Rhetorical * Others | 0.21 (0.70) |
| Rhetorical * SPD | $-0.18$ (0.57) |
| Full * CDU/CSU | $-0.23$ (0.84) |
| Full * Die Gruenen | 0.59 (0.88) |
| Full * Die Linke | 1.64 (1.18) |
| Full * Don't know | 0.19 (1.29) |
| Full * FDP | 0.48 (0.96) |
| Full * Ineligible | 1.77 (2.00) |
| Full * Non-voters | 0.13 (0.91) |
| Full * Others | $-0.58$ (1.02) |
| Full * SPD | 0.65 (0.80) |
| $R^2$ | 0.12 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.11 |
| Num. obs. | 4042 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue and Mainstream Party

Table 11: Heterogeneity of Effects by Past Vote (Baseline: AfD)

| | Focal Party: SPD | Focal Party: CDU |
|---|---|---|
| No accommodation (Intercept) | $-4.13$ (0.44)$^{***}$ | $-3.00$ (0.47)$^{***}$ |
| Rhetorical Accommodation | 0.43 (0.62) | $-0.17$ (0.66) |
| Positional Accommodation | 1.41 (0.62)$^{*}$ | 0.94 (0.63) |
| Full Accommodation | $-0.83$ (0.88) | 0.29 (0.92) |
| CDU/CSU | 2.90 (0.53)$^{***}$ | 5.11 (0.59)$^{***}$ |
| Die Grünen | 4.54 (0.58)$^{***}$ | 1.71 (0.60)$^{**}$ |
| Die Linke | 3.18 (0.75)$^{***}$ | 0.23 (0.75) |
| Don't know | 3.61 (0.86)$^{***}$ | 2.28 (0.89)$^{*}$ |
| FDP | 2.55 (0.59)$^{***}$ | 3.46 (0.63)$^{***}$ |
| Ineligible | 4.28 (1.32)$^{**}$ | 3.27 (1.24)$^{**}$ |
| Non-voters | 2.28 (0.58)$^{***}$ | 1.68 (0.60)$^{**}$ |
| Others | 2.08 (0.65)$^{**}$ | 1.16 (0.65) |
| SPD | 6.29 (0.52)$^{***}$ | 2.17 (0.55)$^{***}$ |
| Positional * CDU/CSU | $-1.57$ (0.77)$^{*}$ | $-0.24$ (0.80) |
| Positional * Die Gruenen | $-2.75$ (0.80)$^{***}$ | $-2.58$ (0.83)$^{**}$ |
| Positional * Die Linke | $-2.12$ (1.07)$^{*}$ | $-1.71$ (1.08) |
| Positional * Don't know | $-2.34$ (1.20) | $-0.83$ (1.22) |
| Positional * FDP | $-1.30$ (0.86) | $-1.37$ (0.88) |
| Positional *Ineligible | $-0.82$ (1.69) | $-1.88$ (1.81) |
| Positional * Non-voters | $-1.07$ (0.84) | $-0.09$ (0.84) |
| Positional * Others | $-1.22$ (0.96) | $-0.29$ (0.92) |
| Positional * SPD | $-1.85$ (0.75)$^{*}$ | $-1.60$ (0.75)$^{*}$ |
| Rhetorical * CDU/CSU | $-0.50$ (0.76) | 0.91 (0.83) |
| Rhetorical * Die Gruenen | $-0.07$ (0.81) | 0.11 (0.84) |
| Rhetorical * Die Linke | $-0.52$ (1.04) | 0.31 (1.09) |
| Rhetorical * Don't know | 1.26 (1.24) | $-0.75$ (1.30) |
| Rhetorical * FDP | $-0.48$ (0.88) | 0.23 (0.90) |
| Rhetorical *Ineligible | 0.10 (1.80) | $-1.94$ (2.02) |
| Rhetorical * Non-voters | $-0.58$ (0.82) | 0.20 (0.87) |
| Rhetorical * Others | $-0.24$ (0.92) | 0.71 (0.94) |
| Rhetorical * SPD | $-0.75$ (0.74) | 0.48 (0.77) |
| Full * CDU/CSU | 0.69 (1.09) | $-1.24$ (1.15) |
| Full * Die Gruenen | 1.13 (1.14) | 0.10 (1.19) |
| Full * Die Linke | 2.14 (1.53) | 1.24 (1.57) |
| Full * Don't know | 0.02 (1.69) | 0.28 (1.71) |
| Full * FDP | 1.32 (1.24) | $-0.23$ (1.29) |
| Full *Ineligible | 1.68 (2.63) | 3.01 (2.76) |
| Full * Non-voters | 0.84 (1.19) | $-0.77$ (1.23) |
| Full * Others | 0.79 (1.33) | $-2.23$ (1.37) |
| Full * SPD | 1.25 (1.04) | $-0.51$ (1.08) |
| $R^2$ | 0.23 | 0.24 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.22 | 0.23 |
| Num. obs. | 2073 | 1969 |

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Controlling for Issue

Table 12: Heterogeneity by Past Vote for different Focal Parties

## 5.4 Issue-Specific Dynamics of Party Competition in Germany

The manuscript investigates the effects of party strategies in the context of three issues: immigration, further military support for Ukraine, and active economic policies in reaction to soaring inflation. In the Fall of 2022, the AfD promoted significantly more anti-immigration, pro-Russia, and pro controlled economy positions than the mainstream parties in Germany. In the following I visualize these issue-specific dynamics of party cometition using MARPOR data (Lehmann et al., 2023).

For immigration, I use item number "per601 2" / "National Way of Life: Immigration: Negative". This coding category encompasses statements advocating for "the restriction of the process of immigration, i.e. accepting new immigrants.". As the visualization below demonstrates, the AfD is significantly more anti-immigration than all other German parties.

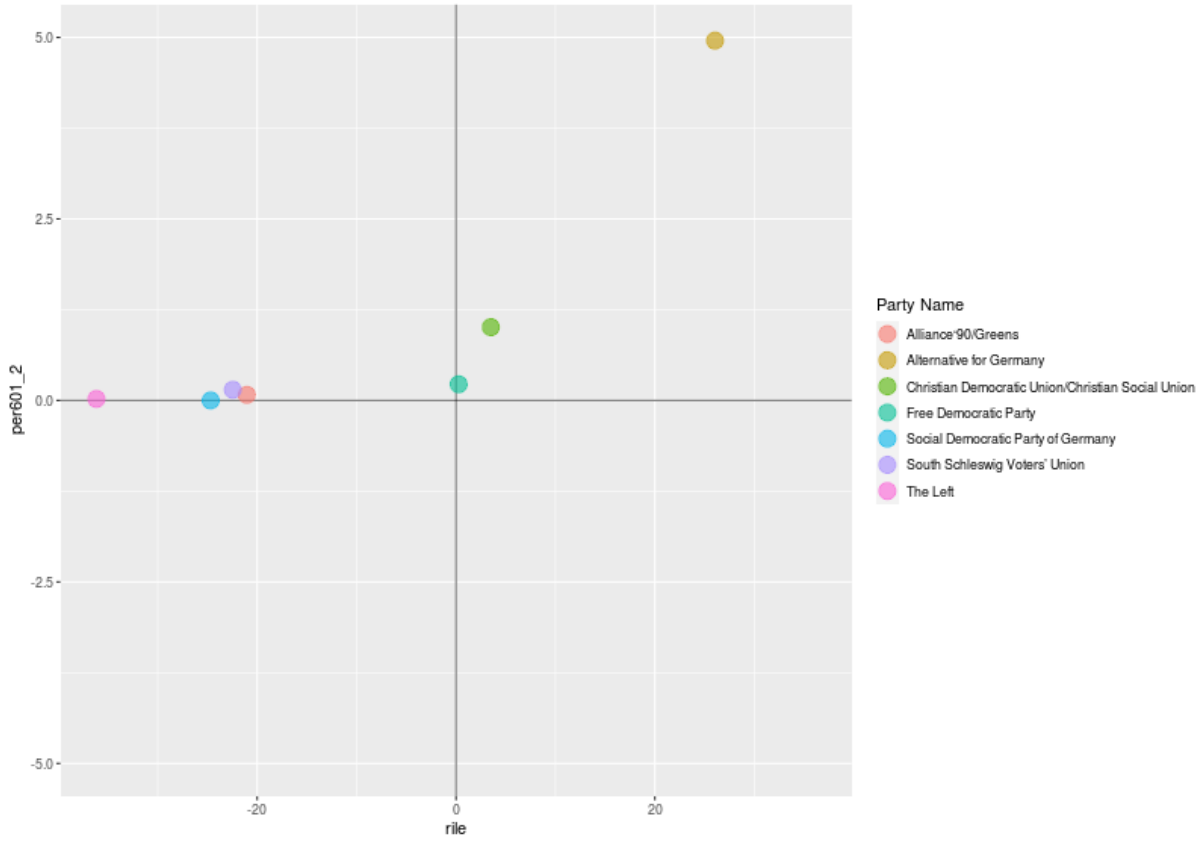


Figure 8: Issue-specific party competition with regards to immigration

For military aid for Ukraine, I use item number "per109" / "Internationalism: Positive" as a useful proxy because it captures parties' positions on the "need for international co-operation" and their "support for UN or other international organizations". This serves as a proxy of the parties' positions on military aid for Ukraine which is mostly organized through international organizations like the EU and NATO. The results below again demonstrate that the AfD had a unique position in the party landscape.

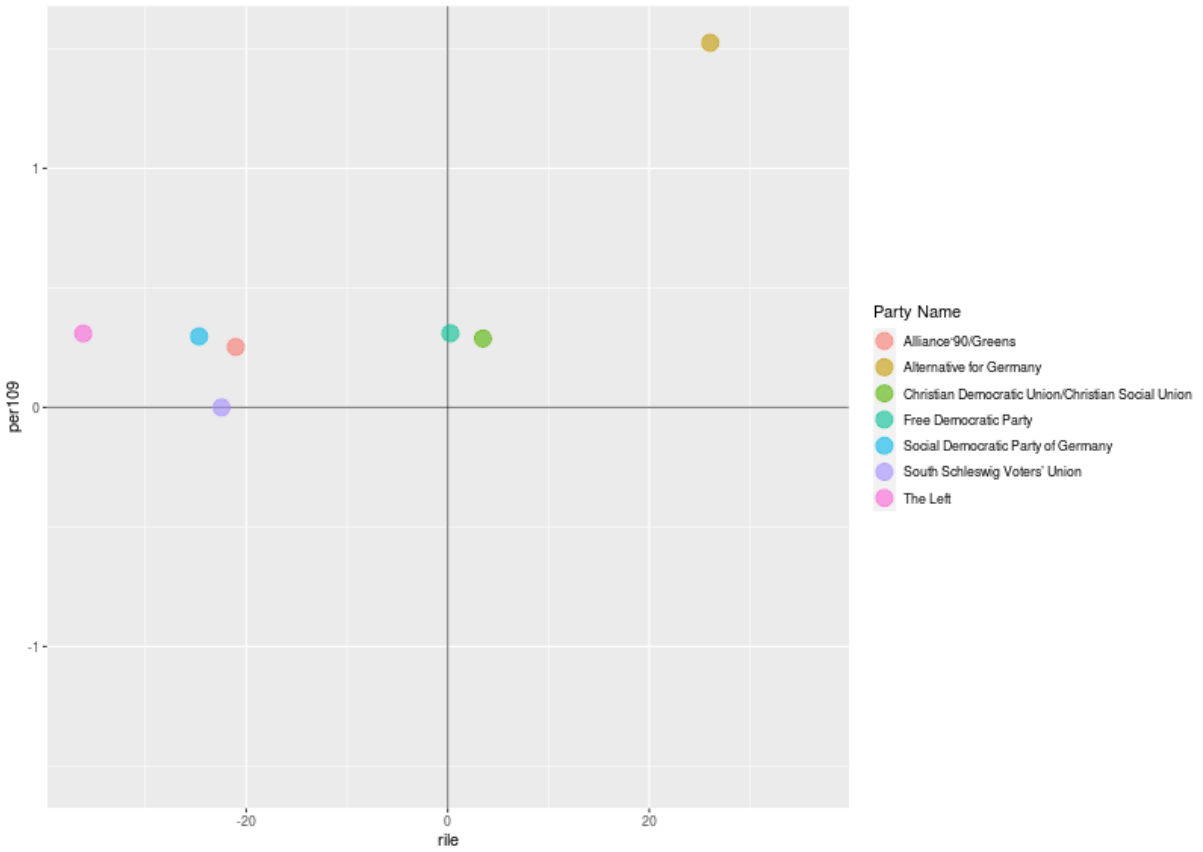


Figure 9: Issue-specific party competition with regards to the war in Ukraine

Finally, to capture the parties' positions with regards to the cost of living crisis, I use item number "per412" / "Controlled Economy", which captures "support for direct government of the economy" including "control over prices". While the AfD's position here is clearly not as different from those of the other parties, it does become apparent that it is unique in the sense that it differs from those of other "right" parties in Germany such as CDU/CSU and FDP. Here, the AfD's position is somewhat more like positions advocated for by left parties in Germany.

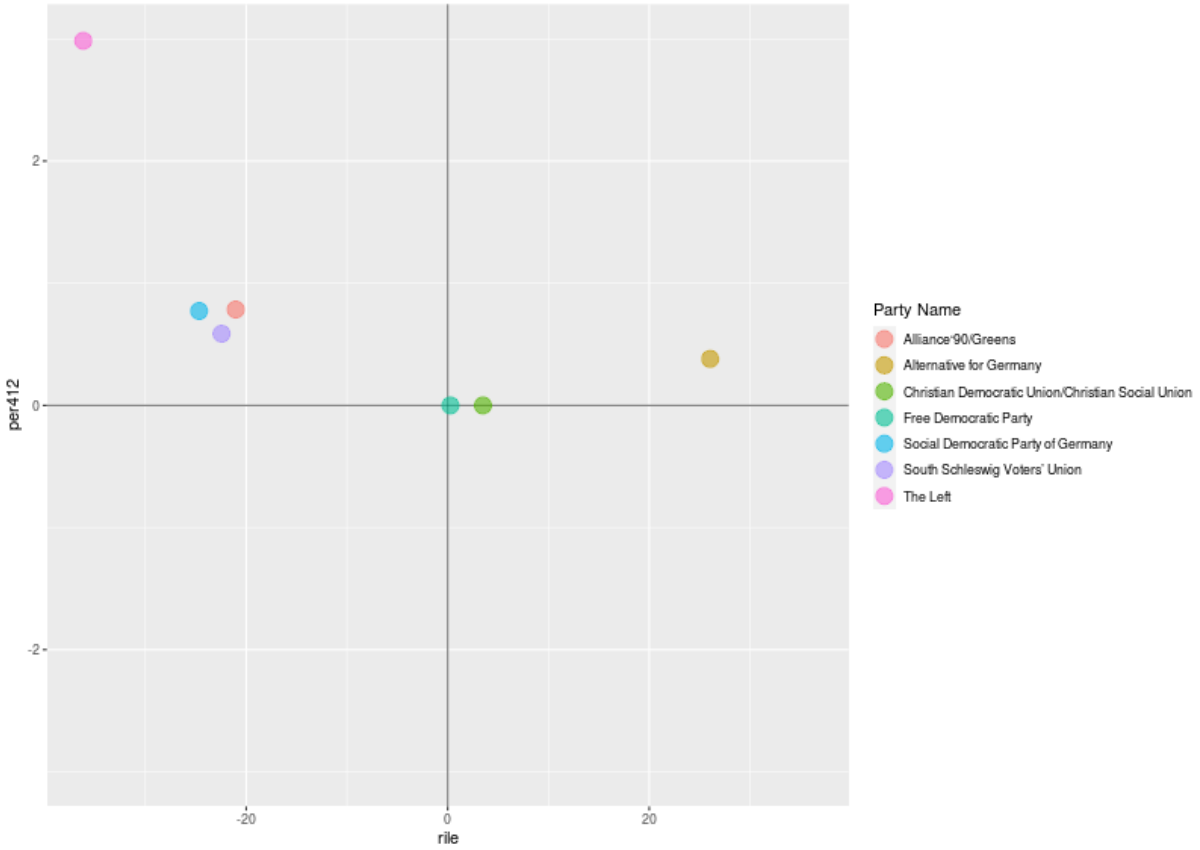


Figure 10: Issue-specific party competition with regards to the cost of living crisis