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Do they know what they represent? Parliamentary candidates' perceptions of their own party's positions

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ABSTRACT


In the realm of democratic representation, a politician's success depends on their accurate perception of their party's issue positions. This enables them to represent these positions and shape public perceptions effectively. The GLES Candidate Study 2021 is used to examine the accuracy with which parliamentary candidates perceive their party's positions on the two central issues: immigration and social welfare. The analysis examines the impact of ideological distance and perceived divergent issue positions between the candidates and their parties. In general, candidates show relatively high accuracy in perceiving their party's issue positions. Furthermore, candidates who perceive a small distance on the left-right dimension to their party exhibit heightened accuracy, particularly on the immigration issue position. Moreover, candidates who perceive differences between themselves and their party have a more accurate perception of their party's immigration issue position. These factors, however, do not affect the accuracy of candidates' perception on social welfare issue position. The findings have important implications for the examination of political elites and public opinion. The article discusses the possibility of politicians misinterpreting their party's actual issue positions, emphasizing the nuanced nature of political perception in the realm of democratic representation.

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Introduction

Knowing the position of one's party is essential for politicians to be successful in democratic representation. As a central part of their parties, politicians and especially candidates represent their party and its positions to the public and

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voters, requiring precise knowledge of those positions. Otherwise, they cannot adequately represent their party to the public or act in the interest of their party, or only by chance (regarding ideological congruence, cf. Dalton 1988), which could lead to miscommunication (regarding voters' perception, cf. Belchior 2014). This, in turn, could lead to cognitive dissonance among voters when individual parliamentary candidates and the party offer different or even opposite positions.

Previous studies have examined how voters perceive party positions or politician positions (e.g. Banducci, Giebler, and Kritzinger 2017; Busch 2016; Carroll and Kubo 2018; Dahlberg 2013; Drummond 2011; Evans and Andersen 2004; Imre 2023; Merrill, Grofman, and Adams 2001; Vegetti, Fazekas, and Méder 2017), and how politicians perceive the ideological or policy preferences of voters and the public (e.g. Belchior 2010, 2014; Broockman and Skovron 2018; Clausen, Holmberg, and deHaven-Smith 1983; Enyedi, Pedrazzani, and Segatti 2020; Hedlund and Paul Friesema 1972; Miller and Stokes 1963; Schoultz and Wass 2016; Varone and Helfer 2022; Walgrave et al. 2023). In addition, Kübler (2024) recently explored mutual perceptions between electorates and candidates. Overall, findings show that these perceptions are often biased. But what about the perception of parliamentary candidates' own party positions?

If perceptions of their own voters are biased, perceptions of their own party positions might also be biased. To the best of our knowledge, however, hardly any study has analyzed how accurately candidates know their party's positions. Only Naurin (2016) examines party representatives' knowledge of their party programs by assessing their knowledge of the number of election pledges in Sweden, finding generally low levels of knowledge.

In this article, we address this research gap. To this end, we analyze the perceptions of the party positions by the parliamentary candidates for the 2021 German federal election on two central political issues: the position on the *social welfare issue* and the *immigration issue*. Moreover, we analyze the influence of the perceived ideological distance to their own party and the perception of candidates that they have a diverging issue position compared to their party on the analyzed issues.

The article is organized as follows. First, we examine political representation and why parliamentary candidates should have an accurate perception of their own party's issue position. Next, we examine the influence of ideological distance and how the perception of divergent issue positions between the parliamentary candidates themselves and their party might influence perceptual accuracy and derive theory-driven hypotheses. The following section describes the research design. We describe the data used, the method, the operationalization of the variables, and briefly discuss how the *actual* party positions are measured. The fifth section presents the analysis of the results. In the first step, we look descriptively at the parliamentary

candidates' perception of their party positions. In the second step, the results of the analysis are presented. The article ends with a summarizing conclusion.

Our analysis shows that, on average, candidates perceive their party's position relatively accurately, as measured by expert ratings. Candidates who are ideologically closer to their party, or who perceive a difference between their own position and their party's position on the immigration issue, are more accurate in assessing their party's position on this issue. However, neither factor influences the accuracy regarding the party's position on social welfare issue.

Political representation and candidates' perceptual accuracy

Representation of the people by political parties and politicians is essential for representative democracies. Only when politicians act in the interests of their voters and the public do they fulfill their fundamental role as representatives of the people in representative democracies (Dahl 1971; Easton 1975; Norris 2011; Pitkin 1967). In parliamentary systems, however, parties are the primary intermediaries between the people and the political system (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; Mair 2023). It is shown that in these systems, voting behavior is mainly influenced by parties rather than individual candidates. The parties mainly determine campaigns, and the political issues emphasized in election manifestos. Thus, the electoral process in parliamentary democracies is dominated by political parties (Dalton 1988; Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). Therefore, especially in such systems, candidates represent not only their electorate in the political space but also their party to the public (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999).

This representation chain results in a triad of representation. According to the principal-agent model¹ (e.g. Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Strøm, Bergman, and Müller 2006), this triad can be described as a relationship of delegation and accountability between the voters, parties, and politicians. The voters are the *ultimate* principals. Parties are the agents of the voters and the politicians' principals. The politicians, in turn, are the agents of the voters and their party (cf. De Winter, Karlsen, and Schmitt 2020). Delegation and accountability, from the politician's point of view, therefore, exist not only for the electorate but also for the party, and the two may sometimes have different preferences. In order to successfully represent the party, politicians need to know their party's positions well, especially the candidates in elections, as they are frequently confronted with specific voter expectations. Even if the politicians have diverging positions from their party, they should know their party's positions on central issues. Accurate perception of one's own party's position is therefore considered a necessary precondition for

¹The principal-agent model is used as a heuristic tool to reduce the complexity of understanding the representation chain, rather than as a *complete theory*, especially by identifying the main actors and their dependencies (cf. De Winter, Karlsen, and Schmitt 2020; Delreux and Adriaensen 2017).

substantive representation of the party (on the perception of voters' positions, cf. Varone and Helfer 2022).

Basically, the normative assumption would be that parliamentary candidates are well aware of their actual party position. In Germany, for example, candidates often have a long party socialization, much experience with party positions and party work through the so-called "Ochsentour" (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011, 31), a long and hard way through the party until they are in a position to be nominated as a candidate in elections. Thus, because parties are gatekeepers for candidatures and decide who runs (cf. Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; Saalfeld 1997), knowledge of the party's positions on the key issue dimensions should be high among candidates. Furthermore, many theories of political representation, such as the responsible party/government party model (e.g. Converse and Pierce 1986; Stokes and Miller 1962), assume that parties act as unitary actors, which presupposes that politicians know their parties' positions precisely (cf. Dalton 1988, 212; Naurin 2016).²

However, little is known about the accuracy of politicians' perceptions of their own party's issue positions. Do they meet the normative expectations and theoretical assumptions? Only Naurin (2016) has examined Swedish party representatives' knowledge of the number of pledges in their party's election manifesto, finding generally low levels of knowledge. Although top-level politicians are somewhat better informed, Naurin concludes that elected officials should not be assumed to have detailed knowledge of their party's promises – and that such detailed knowledge may not be necessary. We generally agree with this conclusion but argue for the scope of our article that especially parliamentary candidates should at least know the issue positions of their party on the central political issues that reflect the multidimensional space of party competition (cf. Dassonneville, Fournier, and Somer-Topcu 2023; Marks et al. 2006).

Perceptual inaccuracy can have several consequences. Most importantly, candidates may fail to act in accordance with their party's positions – whether deliberately or by chance – hindering effective political representation. This misalignment can lead to public miscommunication and could lead to cognitive dissonance among voters (cf. Belchior 2014), especially when candidates and parties convey conflicting messages. It may also affect candidates themselves. As Kölln and Polk (2017) show, Swedish party members who perceive ideological incongruence with their party are more likely to evaluate party leaders negatively, switch parties, or resign. Similar long-term effects may be expected among candidates.

²Others challenge the assumption that parties are unitary actors and emphasize that parties unite different opinions and preferences or highlight the influence of party members as veto actors through the increasing democratization of parties (cf. Kölln and Polk 2017, 18–19).

In summary, we conclude that it is necessary for parliamentary candidates to know their own party's positions on key policy issues in order to represent their party to (potential) voters adequately.

Ideological distance and perception of divergent positions

To capture representational dynamics between parties and voters, spatial distance models are often used, typically relying on a unidimensional left–right framework (Downs 1957; Stokes 1963). However, this approach is increasingly seen as overly simplistic, particularly in advanced industrial democracies (Benoit and Laver 2006). Instead, recourse is made to a political conflict structure defined along a socio-economic and socio-cultural conflict line (e.g. Bräuninger et al. 2020, 29; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Schmitt-Beck et al. 2022). The economic dimension includes the *classic* conflict over state intervention (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). The cultural dimension comprises a conflict between green/alternative/libertarians (GAL), with an emphasis on environmental, socially liberal, and alternative participatory issues, and traditional/authoritarian/nationalists (TAN), with an emphasis on traditional values, limiting immigration and maintaining of a national community (Das-sonneville, Fournier, and Somer-Topcu 2023; Marks et al. 2006).

The spatial approach of the more abstract left–right dimension (e.g. Downs 1957; Stokes 1963) can, however, be transferred to multidimensional political spaces (Dalton 2017; Sartori 1976). Following a rational choice perspective, individuals can locate themselves on spatial scales. They can also locate the parties on the scale, with different and competing positions, and are able to perceive the distance between their self-assessment and their own party-assessment. Concerning voters, they are assumed to vote for the party with the smallest distance to their own position (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; Evans and Andersen 2004; Page and Jones 1979).

Our central argument in the following case is that the behavior of political elites, in this case, the candidates for the 2021 German federal election, should not deviate from the population's behavior. If it can be established that most citizens individually succeed in locating themselves in an ideological space (cf. Otjes 2018) that classically spans left and right (Downs 1957), then this should also be possible for candidates in particular. Especially when this dimension is framed accordingly as a “super issue” (Inglehart 1990, 292), in which the most diverse ideas of politics are broken down into a unidimensional structure. Although individuals have different understandings of left and right (cf. Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011), they generally understand and can place not only themselves but also parties on the scale (e.g. Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; Klingemann 1995).

Studies show that voters tend to have higher perceptual accuracy when they perceive themselves as ideologically closer to a party (Busch 2016;

Dahlberg 2013; Imre 2023). These individuals are more motivated to seek information about party or candidate positions. According to motivated reasoning theory, they are also more likely to invest cognitive resources in processing political information to confirm their perceived proximity (Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Nasr 2021). This heightened motivation leads to greater political knowledge and, in turn, more accurate perceptions of the party's or candidate's actual stance. Moreover, the feeling of an ideological attachment is typically associated with higher levels of political interest, which further enhances attention to relevant political information (Campbell et al. 1960). Among parliamentary candidates – who serve as key identification figures and concrete electoral choices – this dynamic should be especially pronounced: the closer they feel to their party ideologically, the more accurately they are likely to perceive its position. Given their typically high levels of political interest and engagement, candidates are among the most politically active citizens in a democracy, actively seeking to influence political outcomes. This strong involvement should further enhance their motivation and ability to perceive their party's ideological stance accurately, leading to our first hypothesis:

H1: The smaller the ideological distance of parliamentary candidates to their party, the more accurate their perception of their party's position.

In addition to fundamental ideological positions, however, individual issue positions can also be approached in a similar analytical way. Especially in everyday politics, positions derived from rather broader values and ideologies play a role (Campbell et al. 1960). There is no doubt that “people like to be reassured that they are right” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 86). In a figurative sense, this is a phenomenon in which a state of issue congruence is desired, i.e. an issue position projection takes place (e.g. Clausen 1977; Clausen, Holmberg, and deHaven-Smith 1983; Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996). What is meant here is that individuals wrongly assume that their own position corresponds to their party's position. There is ample evidence in the literature that this phenomenon exists when it comes to the misperception of politicians assuming the public opinion's stances (e.g. Belchior 2014; Clausen, Holmberg, and deHaven-Smith 1983; Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996; Pereira 2021).

However, the situation should be different when parliamentary candidates are asked to position themselves and their party on an issue, and there is a discrepancy between their own issue position and their party's position. Such a perception of divergent positions³ between oneself and one's own

³We use here the term “perception” because we are interested in the candidates' subjective assessment, which does not necessarily imply any degree of actual knowledge about the position. Instead, we are more interested in whether candidates think they have a different position than their party, rather than whether this is *actually* the case.

party contradicts Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's (1954) indication of a desire for issue congruence and could lead to a stronger engagement with the issue in question. For parliamentary candidates in elections – particularly in systems with strongly party-centered campaigns (cf. Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011) – knowing the party's positions is essential. Candidates who perceive issue position divergences with their party may therefore sharpen their perception of the party line, potentially increasing perceptual accuracy. Candidates who perceive a discrepancy between their own issue position and that of their party demonstrate an awareness of the internal diversity within political parties, which are rarely ideologically uniform. This suggests a more nuanced understanding of the broader party platform and reduces the likelihood of projecting personal beliefs onto the party as a whole. As a result, such candidates are less prone to self-serving biases and more likely to assess their party's stance based on objective cues – such as leadership signals, manifestos, or expert evaluations. This aligns with findings showing that external benchmarks often reflect party positions more accurately than individual self-perceptions (Kübler 2024). Consequently, we expect candidates who recognize issue divergences with their party to exhibit higher perceptual accuracy. Thus, our hypothesis is as follows:

H2: Parliamentary candidates who perceive a difference between their own issue position and their party's issue position have a more accurate perception of their party's actual positions.

Research design

Case selection and data

To test our hypotheses, we use data from the Candidate Study 2021 (GLES 2023) of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). While previous research has focused primarily on Sweden and its proportional representation system, Germany offers a particularly relevant case for gaining new insights into political candidates operating in a mixed-member electoral system where parties play an integral role in political representation. In such systems, the incentives for candidates differ depending on their type of candidacy, influencing whether they align more closely with constituency preferences or party positions (Wurthmann and Sältzer 2025). Whereas candidates in proportional representation systems are generally more inclined to follow party positions, mixed-member systems create varying incentives that shape candidate behavior (Coffé 2018; Sältzer 2022; Schürmann and Stier 2023). The German case thus provides valuable new perspectives. Moreover, the structure of the German party system in 2021 closely mirrors that of typical Western European party systems, characterized by both socio-economic and socio-cultural conflict dimensions (Dassonneville, Fournier, and

Somer-Topcu 2023; Debus and Wurthmann 2024; Steiner 2024; Wurthmann and Wagner 2025). This two-dimensional nature of party competition enhances the generalizability of our findings, suggesting that they may be applicable beyond the German context.

Furthermore, the GLES Candidate Study provides quite good data for our purpose. The GLES Candidate Study is a full survey of the constituency and party list candidates of the SPD, CDU, CSU, Greens [“BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN”], FDP, AfD, and The Left [“DIE LINKE”] for German federal elections. The GLES Candidate Study incorporates the German Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS) data collection. While the CCS data is a valuable resource for cross-national analyses of candidate behavior, it only includes a question on candidates’ left-right self-placement and lacks sub-dimensional issue positions. In contrast to CCS, the German GLES Candidate Study includes additional questions on the candidates’ positions on the immigration issue and the social welfare issue. It also includes the parliamentary candidates’ perceptions of their party’s position. The response rate of the GLES Candidate Study 2021 is 28.7 percent ($N = 735$), compared to the total number of 2,558 parliamentary candidates running for the 2021 German Bundestag from the parties with parliamentary group status before the election (Bäuerle, Rodrigues, and Burger 2024).⁴ Thus, more than a quarter of the candidates participated in the studies, allowing us to work with a large sample of German parliamentary candidates. After excluding cases with missing values on the variables of interest (e.g. because some candidates did not answer all questions), a final sample of 661 parliamentary candidates remains.

Measuring “actual” party positions and dependent variable

In the literature, there are several ways to measure party positions. Each measurement has advantages and disadvantages (e.g. Bakker and Hobolt 2013; Ecker et al. 2022; Volkens 2007). The most commonly used measures are party positions derived from party manifestos, expert surveys, and elite surveys (cf. Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). Others are, for example, the position of voters or electorates, roll call votes of legislators, content analysis of politicians’ speeches, or media analysis (Bakker and Hobolt 2013; Saiegh 2009). Overall, it must be acknowledged that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to measure the *actual* positions of the parties. It is always an approximation of the actual position (cf. Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). Therefore, the measurement of actual party positions should be seen more as a benchmark or a proxy (cf. Kurella and Rapp 2024; Vegetti, Fazekas, and Méder 2017).

⁴For more information about the sample composition and completion rates of the GLES Candidate Study 2021, see section E in the Online Appendix.

To measure the *actual* party positions on the central issues in Germany, we use data from the Open Expert Survey 2021 (OES21; Jankowski et al. 2022). For our study, we argue that expert survey data are a suitable proxy for actual party positions. First, the literature shows that expert surveys can be used to extract valid estimates of party positions (e.g. Hooghe et al. 2010; Marks et al. 2007). Second, the wording of the questions used in the OES21 and GLES is very similar, enabling a good comparison between these two studies. Third, the OES21 was conducted in the context of the 2021 German federal election, for which the GLES Candidate Study 2021 was also conducted. Fourth, with a sample of a total of 361 political scientists⁵ from different academic status groups participating in the OES21, we have a fairly large sample base, which reduces some of the potential bias by aggregating the ratings of all experts (cf. Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011, 132). In order to check the robustness of our analysis due to the selection of the measure of the actual party position, we perform analyses with different dependent variables (see Method section).

The analyzed social welfare issue spans from *tax increases to improve social services* to *cuts in social services to allow for tax cuts*. After reversing the response scale in the GLES data, a lower value represents *more social services and higher taxes*, and a higher value represents *lower taxes and fewer social services* in both GLES and OES21. The immigration issue spans from the *facilitation of immigration for foreigners* to the *restriction of immigration for foreigners*. The response scale ranges from *facilitate immigration* to *restrict immigration* in both databases (for the original wording of the questions in German, see Table B2 in the Online Appendix). Each scale ranges from 1 to 11, while scores below six represent a more left-wing/GAL position and scores above six represent a more right-wing/TAN position.⁶

To measure perceptual (in)accuracy, we calculate the absolute distance between the candidates' perceptions of their own party positions and the *actual* party position (i.e. median expert position).⁷ The variable "perceptual inaccuracy" can take values between 0 and 10, where 0 means a perfectly accurate perception of position and 10 means a highly inaccurate perception of one's own party's position. In the case of our study, the perceptual

⁵Of the 361 experts, 285 rated all parties on the social welfare issue and 226 rated all parties on the immigration issue.

⁶The GLES scales range from 1 to 11 with an odd number of points, whereas the expert surveys use a 1 to 20 scale with an even number of points. To ensure comparability, we rescaled the OES21 data to match the GLES Candidate Study 2021. This involved merging the two central categories (i.e., 10 and 11 to 6) and applied the same procedure to the remaining scale points until only the categories at the two extreme points of the scale remained. The two extreme points were kept as separate categories on the scale. We acknowledge the limitations of comparing differently scaled measures and address this issue in the conclusion.

⁷We use the median, as it is less sensitive to outliers than the mean. Figures B1 and B2 in the Online Appendix illustrate the dispersion of expert ratings on the issues examined.

inaccuracy measure on the immigration issue ranges from 0 to 9, and on the social welfare issue, from 0 to 7 (see Table B1 in the Online Appendix).⁸

Independent variables

We measure ideological distance using the left-right self-assessment of the parliamentary candidates and the median expert assessment of the parties' general left-right position.⁹ To do this, we calculate the absolute distance between the median expert left-right position of the parties and the candidates' own left-right positions. The resulting variable ranges from 0 (perfect perceived congruence) to 10 (maximum perceived distance), although in our data it ranges only from 0 to 4 (see Table B1 in the Online Appendix).

Perceptions of divergent issue positions are measured using a dichotomous variable for each issue. We operationalize this measure dichotomously to ensure conceptual clarity and distinguish meaningful differences from minor deviations. This approach avoids introducing artificial granularity that could otherwise distort the results. Given the low variance observed in the distribution (see Tables B3 and B4 in the Online Appendix), a continuous measure would not be appropriate for our analysis. The variables are coded as 0 when parliamentary candidates' self-assessments on immigration issues, respectively, social welfare issue align with their party's assessment of the same issue, and as 1 when the assessments differ.

Control variables

To control for potential confounding factors, we add the party affiliation using party dummies. We chose the governing party after the 2021 German federal election, SPD, as the reference category in the models. According to the literature, parties focus on specific issues that are in line with their ideology and are salient to the public (Budge 2015; Wurthmann and Sältzer 2025).¹⁰ Studies show that parties emphasize issues in their party manifestos that are salient for the voters (e.g. Spoon and Klüver 2014) or are polarized among the public (e.g. Spoon and Klüver 2015). However, this affects, for example, individuals' voting behavior only if the issue is also salient among the individuals (Bélanger and Meguid 2008). In a study of the accuracy of politicians' perceptions of voters' positions, for

⁸While we acknowledge the conceptual value of analyzing directional rather than absolute differences between candidates and parties, data limitations and the small number and size of deviations prevent us from adopting this approach. Nonetheless, focusing on absolute differences offers valuable insight by capturing the overall degree of perceptual (mis)alignment, regardless of ideological direction – an important aspect when evaluating perceptual accuracy.

⁹We used the same rescaling procedure for the OES21 experts left-right scale as for the scale on the two issue positions described above.

¹⁰The GLES Candidate Study 2021 does not include a question on the salience of the issue to the candidates or their party. Therefore, it is not possible to measure issue salience directly.

example, Varone and Helfer (2022) found that politicians are more accurate in their perceptions of voters' positions on issues for which their party is assumed to have an issue ownership, while issues on which parliamentary candidates specialize themselves do not seem to be influential. Thus, it seems necessary to control for the party affiliation. In addition, we control for electoral success (not elected; elected) and length of party membership (in years). As Naurin (2016) shows, top politicians have a better knowledge of their party platforms in elections. In addition, we argue that successful elected candidates are often more involved in the campaign before the election and therefore may have a better perception of their party's issue positions and also often have a higher ideological proximity to their parties. Similar effects could be expected for candidates who have been members of their parties for a long time and who, for example, have become better informed about their party over time which is why we control for length of party membership.

Furthermore, we add variables on sex (male; female), age in years, university degree (no; yes), and dummies for the type of candidature (constituency candidature; party list candidature; constituency and party list candidature) to our models (see Debus and Wurthmann 2024 for a discussion of these indicators' relevance). Studies on voters' perceptual accuracy of party positions found that men, older, and better-educated individuals are more accurate than women, younger, and less educated individuals (Busch 2016; Dahlberg 2013). On the contrary, Esaiasson and Holmberg (1996) find that female representatives in Sweden are somewhat better in their perception of their voters' opinions. In addition, studies show that the type of candidature in mixed-member proportional electoral systems can influence representational role conceptions and behaviors (e.g. Coffé 2018; Klingemann and Wessels 2001). A summary of the descriptive statistics for all variables is provided in Table B1 in the Online Appendix.

Method

We run separate OLS regression models for each dependent variable. The results are presented graphically. The regression table is attached in Table A1 in the Online Appendix. To check the robustness of our results, we compute a *less strict* dependent variable that classifies a perception as correct even if it is one scale point away from the median expert's rating (i.e. if the party position is 6, a perceived party position of 5 is considered as no deviation on the dependent variable, a perceived party position of 4 is considered as a one point deviation on the dependent variable, and so on). Second, we use the median position of the parliamentary candidates' self-assessments of their issue positions as the *actual* party position. Third, we use an alternative measure of the independent variable, ideological distance on the left-right dimension, using the distance between the candidates'

left-right self-assessment and their own party assessment. We will discuss the results in the Robustness Checks section.

Empirical results

Candidates' perceptions of their own party positions

In the first step, we take a look at the deviation of the parliamentary candidates' perception versus the *actual* party positions as we measured them. To do this, we subtracted the *actual* party position, i.e. the median expert position, from the perceived position of the parliamentary candidates. The results are shown graphically at the party level in [Figure 1](#). A negative value indicates a perceived party position more to the left and a positive value indicates a perceived party position more to the right than the median expert rating. As can be seen at first glance, the candidates tend to deviate to the left of the median on both issues. Only the CDU candidates on the median match the *actual* party position on the social welfare issue. Interestingly, all other parties deviate one scale point to the left of the median on this issue, although the dispersion varies between the parties.

Deviations on the immigration issue vary more across the parties. On average, CSU, Green, The Left, and AfD candidates deviate by one scale point to the left of their party's position, while CDU, SPD, and FDP candidates deviate by two points. Green candidates show the least dispersion and deviation, whereas FDP candidates show the most: 95 percent of their responses span three scale points. Looking at the absolute deviation, the dependent variable in the following multivariate analysis, we see the following picture. In general, 25.0 percent of the parliamentary candidates *correctly* perceived their party's position on the issue of social welfare and 21.2 percent on the immigration issue. The mean (absolute) deviation is 1.22 (median: 1, SD: 1.13) for the social welfare issue and 1.54 (median: 1, SD: 1.26) for the immigration issue. Thus, between one-fifth (immigration issue) and one-quarter (social welfare issue) of the parliamentary candidates perceive their party position *correctly*. However, the mean (absolute) deviation is quite small. Over 50 percent of candidates deviate by no more than one scale point on the immigration issue, and over 70 percent do so on social welfare issue. While exact assessments appear moderate at first glance, most candidates locate their party with only minor deviation. Given the difficulty of precisely placing a party on an 11-point scale, such small deviations can be seen as a positive sign for democratic representation from a normative perspective.

Determinants of candidates' perceptual (in)accuracy

We now go one step further and analyze the influence of two potential determinants: the ideological distance measured on the left-right dimension of the parliamentary candidates to their parties and the perception of a divergent

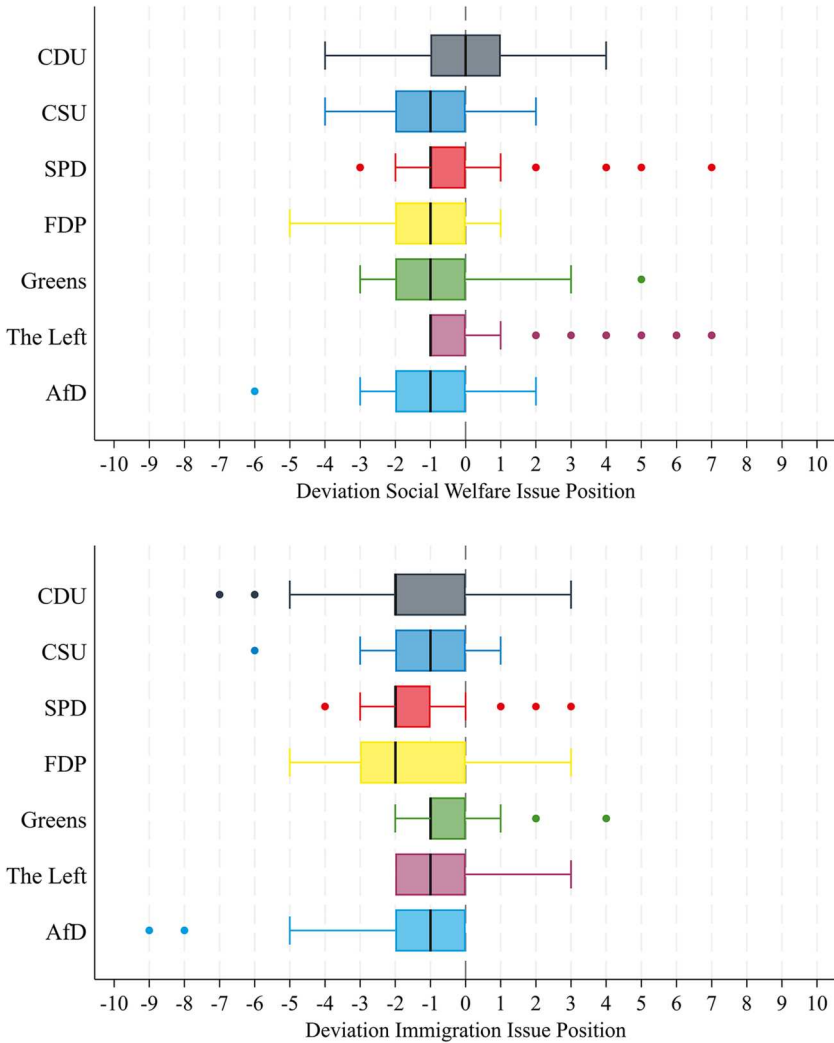


Figure 1. Candidates' assessment of their party positions.

Data: GLES Candidate Study 2021 (ZA7704, v2.0.0), Open Expert Survey 2021; Note: median positions of candidates by party (black lines), plotted with 95%-confidence intervals; negative values indicate a leftward shift in the perceived party position of candidates, positive values indicate a rightward shift; own calculations and visualizations.

issue position between the candidates and their parties. The results of the OLS models are plotted in Figure 2. The blue lines and circle markers show the effects of the variables in the model on the immigration issue. The red lines and diamond markers show the effects of the model on the social welfare issue.

First, we look at the distance measure to assess the effect of the distance on the left-right dimension. As we can see in the immigration issue model, the

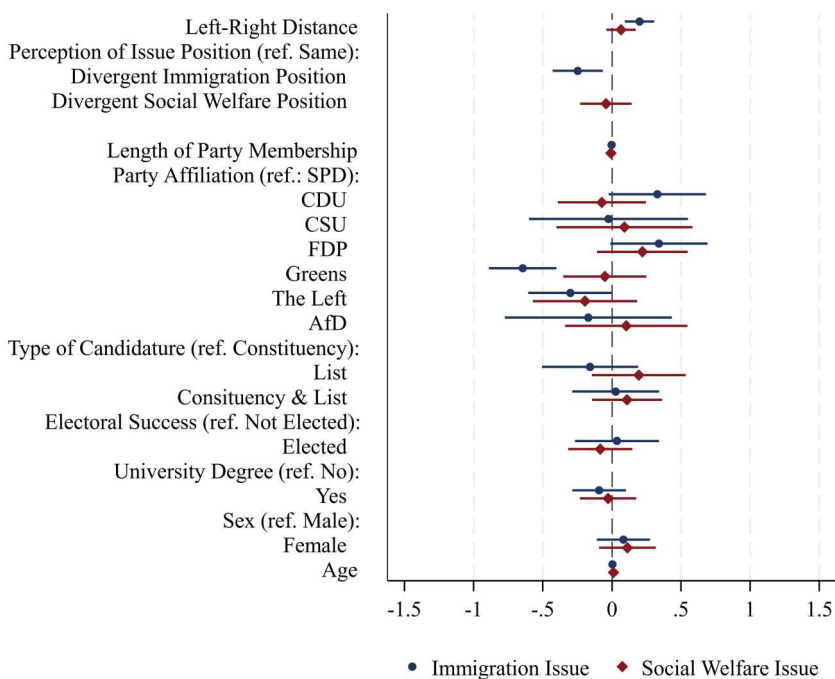


Figure 2. Determinants of candidates' perceptual (in)accuracy.

Data: GLES Candidate Study 2021 (ZA7704, v2.0.0), Open Expert Survey 2021; Note: OLS regression; dv: perceptual inaccuracy; robust standard errors used; plotted with 95% confidence intervals; ref = reference category; positive values indicate a higher perceptual inaccuracy and vice versa; own calculation and visualization using *coefplot* by Jann (2014).

ideological distance measure has a positive and statistically significant effect on the perceptual inaccuracy of parliamentary candidates. This means that the more candidates perceive themselves as ideologically distant from their own party, the more inaccurate their perceived party position is. Alternatively, in the words of H1, the smaller the perceived ideological distance of parliamentary candidates to their party, the more accurate the perception of the party's position on the immigration issue. In the social welfare model, we find a negative but statistically insignificant effect. Thus, in this model, we do not find evidence that ideological distance influences parliamentary candidates' perceptual inaccuracy on the social welfare issue (H1).

Turning to the influence of the perception of divergent positions, we see in the immigration issue model that candidates who perceive a divergence between their own and their party's position demonstrate higher perceptual accuracy than those who perceive issue position congruence. Thus, in the words of H2, parliamentary candidates who perceive a difference between their own issue position and their party's issue position have a more accurate perception of their party's *actual* positions. In the social welfare issue model,

the perceived issue difference between oneself and one's own party does not affect perceptual accuracy on that issue (H2).

Overall, the findings offer mixed support for H1. In the immigration issue model, candidates who perceive a smaller ideological distance from their party on the left-right scale show higher perceptual accuracy, but no significant effect is found for the social welfare issue model. Similarly, H2 receives partial support: perceiving divergent issue positions enhances perceptual accuracy on immigration, but not on social welfare.

What do these findings imply for democratic representation? The descriptive results show that candidates have a relatively accurate understanding of their party's positions on key issues like social welfare and immigration. The multivariate analysis further reveals that candidates who feel ideologically close to their party – and those who recognize a difference between their own position and that of the party – are more accurate in perceiving the party's position on immigration. As argued above, accurate perception is a necessary precondition for substantive representation: only candidates who know their party's position can represent it effectively and act responsively. These conditions appear to be largely met by candidates in the 2021 German federal election. Ideological proximity remains a strong predictor, while candidates' reflections of their own position in relation to their own party also seem to have an influence. However, the impact of these factors varies by issue. Thus, the issue at hand also seems to be influential.

Robustness checks

As a first robustness check, we calculated different dependent variables that considered deviations of one scale point as an accurate perception (i.e. if the party position is 6, a perceived party position of 5 is considered as no deviation, a perceived party position of 4 is considered as a one point deviation, and so on). The results are shown in Table C1 in the Online Appendix. As can be seen, the results do not change when we use the alternative dependent variable. The smaller the ideological distance on the left-right dimension, the greater the accuracy of the perception of the immigration issue (H1). Furthermore, parliamentary candidates who perceive that they have a divergent issue position relative to their party still have a more accurate perception of their party's position on the immigration issue than candidates who perceive issue congruence (H2). On the social welfare issue, ideological distance on the left-right dimension and perception of divergent issue positions do not have any significant effects.

In a second robustness check, we used the aggregated median of the parliamentary candidates' self-assessments on the two issues as the *actual* party position. The results presented in Table C2 in the Online Appendix show a different picture than when using the expert data as the *actual* party position.

The effects of ideological distance on the left-right dimension and the perception of having a different issue position are in the theoretically expected direction in the immigration issue model, but not in the social welfare issue model. Furthermore, they are no longer statistically significant in any model. Thus, changing the measure of party positions seems to affect our results.

As an additional robustness check, we used an alternative measure for ideological distance on the left-right dimension using the distance between the candidates' left-right self-assessment and their own party assessment. However, changing the measure of ideological distance does not substantially change the results (see Table C3 in the Online Appendix).

We also tested our models for violations of the regression assumptions. The histograms of the standardized residuals (Figure D1 in the Online Appendix), normal probability plots (Figure D2 in the Online Appendix), and the Shapiro–Wilk test for normal data indicate that the dependent variables in both models are not normally distributed. However, according to the central limit theorem and due to the large sample size, this should not be a problem. Using leverage versus residuals plots (Figure D3 in the Online Appendix) and Cook's D, we tested our models for influential cases and outliers. The results indicate that there are no such cases. The Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) of the independent and control variables are all in both models well below 10 (mean VIF immigration: 1.70; mean VIF social welfare: 1.70). Thus, multicollinearity is not a problem. Visual inspection of the models using residual versus fitted plots (Figure D4 in the Online Appendix) and White's test indicate that we have a problem with heteroskedasticity in both models. Therefore, we calculated robust standard errors in our models.

Conclusion

We began our article with an examination of political representation and why it is necessary for parliamentary candidates to know their actual party positions adequately, asking how accurately candidates perceive their party's issue positions and what influences this perception. We then argued that ideological distance and perception of divergent positions between oneself and one's party should influence the perceptual accuracy of one's own party's positions on the immigration issue and the social welfare issue.

The analysis shows that, on average, parliamentary candidates have relatively accurate perceptions of their own party's position, as measured by the experts' ratings. More than 50 percent of the parliamentary candidates are within one scale point of deviation on the immigration issue, and more than 70 percent are within one scale point deviation on the social welfare issue. Furthermore, we find that parliamentary candidates who perceive themselves as ideologically closer to their party on the left-right dimension have a more accurate perception of their party's position on the immigration

issue and that candidates who perceive positional differences between themselves and their party also have a better perception of their party's position on the immigration issue. In contrast, neither of the two factors affects the perceptual accuracy of the party's position on the social welfare issue. Thus, our theoretically expected factors show explanatory power only for perceptions of the immigration issue but not for perceptions of the social welfare issue.

To the best of our knowledge, our study is one of the first looking at parliamentary candidates' perception accuracy of their own party positions (but see Naurin 2016) and the first to look directly at two very central political issue positions: the immigration issue and the social welfare issue. We, therefore, contribute to the literature in the following ways. First, we add another study to the field that looks at a different aspect of political representation and perceptual accuracy. Second, we provide first results on two possible individual-level influencing factors, ideological distance and perception of divergent positions, on the basis of two very central political issues and in an interesting political space where parties are the primary actors in elections.

We are aware that our article has some limitations. One theoretical shortcoming is that according to the literature on the "blurring" of party positions (e.g. Bräuninger and Giger 2018; Somer-Topcu 2015), it could be argued that parties may adopt a strategy of not taking a clear position and thus remaining (strategically) unclear in order to attract voters from different groups. According to this argument, candidates may not be able to accurately perceive their own party's position due to the lack of a clear position. Another potential theoretical shortcoming could be endogeneity concerning Hypothesis 1. We argue that ideological proximity is causally antecedent. However, it could also be the case that people run for a party because of a particular issue position rather than because of ideological closeness. Considering this would require more fine-grained data and a more sophisticated theoretical model. Additionally, due to data limitations, we are unable to incorporate candidates' perceptions of issue salience, as no such measure is available in the GLES Candidate Study. This is particularly unfortunate, as Steiner and Mader (2019) demonstrate the importance of accounting for issue salience in explaining intra-party heterogeneity.

There are also some methodological limitations that should be addressed. Generally, it is difficult for respondents to locate a party and themselves on an eleven-point numerical scale. Furthermore, one could argue that the scale differences between experts and candidates pose a greater challenge because we detect relatively small deviations. However, our robustness check, which uses a conservative rescaling approach – treating minor deviations as no deviations – does not provide additional empirical evidence to raise significant concerns about the validity of our findings. Nevertheless, future research should address these differences using a consistent scale to

further improve comparability. A related important issue in the measurement of (perceived) spatial positions that should be mentioned in this context is differential item functioning (DIF) (cf. Aldrich and McKelvey 1977; Hare et al. 2015; Lo, Proksch, and Gschwend 2014). DIF is a systematic bias that can arise due to differences in how respondents interpret and respond to a measurement scale (Hare et al. 2015, 759–760). Unfortunately, it is not possible to correct the results for potential DIF using an approach like the (Bayesian) Aldrich and McKelvey (1977) technique (e.g. Hare et al. 2015)¹¹ or other rescaling techniques (e.g. Kurella and Rapp 2024) due to the data used. Therefore, individual candidates may interpret the response scales and the differences between the scale levels differently, which could influence the results.

Furthermore, even though we have a sizeable sample of German candidates, we have only small sample sizes of candidates of the radical right AfD and the relatively small CSU, which only ran in Bavaria. In general, elite studies are often challenged by the limited willingness of parliamentary candidates to participate. This could lead to a (systematic) non-response bias that could affect the result if certain groups of candidates systematically do not participate. In addition, the explainable variance is small, which is influenced by the high accuracy of the candidates, especially on the social welfare issue.

Another limitation of our study is that, due to the sample size, we are unable to capture directional differences between candidates and their parties and must instead focus solely on absolute differences. In light of recent findings on party factions (Sältzer 2022) and the positioning of political candidates relative to their parties within political spaces (Debus and Wurthmann 2024), we consider this a particularly promising direction for future research as this could provide deeper insights into the ideological nature of misperceptions and how the direction of disagreement influences candidates' perceptions of their party's position.

There is much further room for further research, but this often depends on data availability. Similar studies in other countries or comparative studies could be conducted to test the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the influence of factors on different levels, e.g. country-level or party-level factors, could be very interesting to analyze. In addition, it would be interesting to study other issues and explore factors that might explain why estimates vary across issues. Perhaps the abstractness of an issue or, as mentioned above, the salience of an issue for the party as well as for the individual candidates could be influential (on voters' perceptions of party positions, e.g. Giebler, Meyer, and Wagner 2021).

¹¹The GLES Candidate Survey 2021 asks candidates only about their own party's position, but not about the positions of the other parties. As a result, there is no common placement of identical stimuli across party lines on a shared scale.

In summary, there is still much room for further research, and more research is needed to better understand parliamentary candidates' perceptions of party positions. Nevertheless, this article provides important first insights into parliamentary candidates' perceptions of their own party positions for the study of political representation.

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Data availability statement

The dataset used in the article is not available from the authors due to privacy restrictions. Access to the used dataset of the GLES Candidate Study 2021 can be requested from the GESIS data archive: <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14100>.

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