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## **The (Spatial) Land Before Time: On the Dominance of Affection over Rational Choice and the Fallacy of Explaining Populist Support via Party Communications and Issue Proximity**

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### **Abstract**

This article investigates the 2017 German federal elections and provides several key insights. First, it introduces a novel methodological approach for measuring saliency and party positions using a language model combined with multi-class topic classification and stance detection. This method is highly efficient, requiring only minimal manual coding. Analysis of both manifestos and party press releases revealed that only the latter passed all extensive validation checks. However, even with this valid measurement, it is evident that voter perceptions of party positions often misalign with the signals conveyed, suggesting that unfiltered macro-level communications are highly problematic for understanding micro-level voting behavior. Second, employing a Bayesian conditional choice mixture model, the results indicate that rational choice explanations, such as the spatial model, retrospective voting, and prospective selection, account for less than 10% of voting behavior, with the remaining 90% driven by affective considerations like emotional attachments to parties and social identities. Finally, the analysis shows that supporters of the right-wing populist AfD are even less influenced by issue proximity compared to supporters of mainstream parties. Despite the AfD's alignment with many voters on the immigration issue, its support is primarily driven by strong national identities and ethno-cultural nationalism, with the party exclusively benefiting from the latter.

**Keywords:** *Issue Voting, Affective Voting, Populism, National Identity, Conditional Choice Mixture Models*

## Introduction

In the spatial land before time, voters deliberately contemplate who to support come election day. They thoroughly examine every party manifesto and attentively listen to all campaign messages. This makes them understand where each party stands on the issues they care about most. People then carefully compare these party locations to their own positions, which are exogenous and reflect their true preferences. What follows is easy elementary school calculus: the voters choose the party closest to their ideal point. Elections, in this environment, pose a straightforward and efficient way to translate citizens' preferences into politics. Ah, the good old days!

Of course, this idyllic picture is an exaggeration of reality. Yet, there are three essential aspects worth examining in more detail. The first aspect concerns whether citizens can adequately derive party positions on specific issues through their direct communications. Research shows that people generally have low levels of political awareness, with substantial variance between individuals (Zaller, 1992; Converse, 2006). This raises the question of whether unfiltered party communications, such as manifestos, can even be valid sources of constructing measurements. An answer to this question is relevant, especially since the literature on the success of emerging, niche, and radical parties almost exclusively relies on party positions derived from election manifestos (Meguid, 2008; Dahlström & Sundell, 2012; Spoon & Klüver, 2021). If direct forms of party communications are not valid measurements in the first place, the findings of an entire subfield studying the impact of party strategies on voter decision-making are on shaky grounds.

Secondly, the traditional Downsian (1957) spatial model remains ubiquitous today, mostly because of its normative appeal. It is widely believed that voting based on policy issues is a more sophisticated and desirable form of political behavior compared to unreflectively following long-term partisan attachments (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). However, the spatial model demands a high, perhaps too high, level of sophistication, attentiveness, and political interest from each citizen. As a result, two other theories have emerged to salvage the "rationality" of ordinary voters. On one hand, retrospective voting suggests that voters reelect incumbents who have improved their well-being and punish those who failed to do so (Fiorina, 1981). On the other hand, saliency theory focuses on prospective selection, arguing that voters base their decisions on which candidate or party "owns" a certain issue, i.e., appears most competent (Petrocik, 1996; Budge, 2015).

On the contrary, theories in the tradition of the Michigan School (Campbell et al., 1960; W. E. Miller et al., 1996) also incorporate more "irrational" elements into their explanations of how voters decide which party to support. These affective factors include, inter alia, positive evaluations of a particular candidate or identification with a specific

party. C. Achen and Bartels (2017, p.299) even claim that "for most citizens most of the time, party and group loyalties are the primary drivers of vote choices." However, what has not been thoroughly studied is how the rational and affective accounts of voter decision-making balance each other out. It seems very unlikely that voters strictly adhere to either of these two approaches in a black-and-white fashion.

Lastly, the type of parties that voters support could influence the balance between rational and emotional factors in their decision-making. The rise of populist parties across Europe in recent decades (Mudde, 2004; Kriesi et al., 2008) raises the question of whether support for these parties is driven even more by emotional motives than by rational decision-making, compared to mainstream parties. Current studies generally treat populist parties the same as other niche parties (Spoon & Klüver, 2021; Krause et al., 2023). Niche parties, according to Meguid (2005), are characterized by their rejection of traditional class-based politics and their focus on a single issue that does not align with preexisting party system cleavages. Examples of niche parties include green, ethnoterritorial, and nationalist parties, but originally not populist parties. Therefore, it is important to explore how populism interacts with classic notions of issue voting and whether the spatial model applies to a lesser degree to populist parties.

This article examines the 2017 German federal elections (Bundestagswahl) and makes several key contributions to addressing the three questions posed. First, I introduce a new methodological approach for deriving measures of both saliency and party positions from party communications. By using a language model (LM) combined with methods of multi-class topic classification and stance detection, I demonstrate that, unlike party manifestos, party press releases provide a source of party communication with very promising validity across several tests. The strength of the proposed methodology lies in its scalability and resource efficiency, as only a limited number of sentences need to be manually coded. However, comparing the derived party positions with how voters rank them across three different issues reveals that the vast majority of them do not accurately perceive these signals. This provides tentative evidence that relying on unfiltered macro-level party communications to study micro-level voting behavior is, to put it mildly, problematic.

Second, using a Bayesian conditional choice mixture model, I analyze the balance between rational and emotional voting. The results support the assertion of C. Achen and Bartels (2017). Rational factors, namely party distances, retrospective voting, and prospective selection, account for only about 10% of voting behavior. The remaining 90% of vote choice is driven by the affective component, which includes long- and short-term emotional attachments to parties and related social identities.

Finally, in a refined mixture model, I provide preliminary evidence that supporters of the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) are even less driven by spatial considerations compared to supporters of other parties. Adjusting for rationalization

biases with a Bayesian hierarchical scaling model (Bølstad, 2024b), I find that, although for the majority of voters the distance to the AfD is the shortest, this fact does not significantly impact support for the party. On the flip side, having either a strong national or ethno-cultural national identity increases support for the AfD by an average of 5 pp. While high values of national identity tend also to benefit center-right parties to a lesser extent, only the AfD significantly benefits from strong ethno-cultural national identities.

For better clarity, this article is divided into two main sections. The first part focuses on party communications. It begins by discussing potential pitfalls identified in the current literature. This is followed by an outline of the empirical approach and the proposed methodology, along with validation checks. The section then presents the results, concluding with a brief discussion of the findings. The second section reviews research on issue voting, the Michigan model, and support for populist parties. It proposes a theoretical argument why affective considerations may be more influential than elements of rational choice. Subsequently, it connects populism to a synthesis of self-categorization theory (SCT) and social identity theory (SIT), suggesting that a strong (ethno-cultural) national identity might drive support for right-wing populist parties. After that, I outline the case selection, data, and operationalization of concepts used in the analysis. I address rationalization biases in micro-level party position data using the aforementioned scaling model and test the hypotheses with Bayesian conditional choice mixture models. The section concludes with a brief discussion of the results.

## **Party Communications and Voter Perception**

### **Literature Review**

As briefly mentioned earlier, most research on the success of niche parties follows the seminal work of Meguid (2005, 2008) and uses election manifestos to assess how shifts in party positions at the macro-level influence voting decisions. This approach has increasingly been adopted by studies focusing on populist parties rather than traditional niche parties (Berman, 2021). The Position-Salience-Ownership (PSO) theory (Meguid, 2008) outlines three strategies that mainstream parties can use toward niche parties: a dismissive strategy, where mainstream parties ignore the niche party's issue to signal its lack of importance, thereby hurting the niche party's prospects of electoral success; an accommodative strategy, where mainstream parties adopt the niche party's issue to undermine its distinctiveness and attract like-minded voters; and an adversarial strategy, where mainstream parties oppose the niche party's stance. The latter reinforces the niche party's issue ownership and potentially boosts its electoral support. Additionally, the theory highlights that strategic actions can influence issue salience and ownership across the political spectrum, allowing parties to target oppo-

nents regardless of ideological proximity.

The findings of subsequent research in this tradition, which either adds or replaces niche parties with populist parties, have been mixed. For instance, observational studies using manifestos to estimate party positions report both positive (Van Spanje & De Graaf, 2018; Spoon & Klüver, 2021) and negative (Dahlström & Sundell, 2012; Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2021) effects on the electoral success of mainstream left parties when applying accommodative strategies towards right-wing populist parties on immigration policy, i.e., taking a more restrictive stance on immigration. One notable exception is the work by Hjorth and Larsen (2022). In a survey experiment among Danish voters, they credibly manipulated the policy position of the Social Democrats during coalition negotiations and found that accommodation attracts voters opposing immigration while simultaneously repelling pro-immigration voters. Although the internal validity of their study is convincing, the external validity of their results is debatable, as they could ensure that their treatment groups were perfectly aware of the manipulated party positions. It remains questionable whether this setting accurately reflects reality. While the latest observational studies on party strategies and the success of populist parties have made valuable contributions, such as including individual-level data to limit the risk of ecological fallacy (Krause et al., 2023), there remain some very concerning aspects in this line of research that need to be addressed.

## **Potential Pitfalls of Contemporary Research**

The main justification for using party positions derived from election manifestos, primarily from the Manifesto Project (MARPOR) database (Lehmann et al., 2024), is that these data "provide estimates of party policies cross-nationally and for an extended time period. Furthermore, the comparability of our results is ensured since these data were used in related studies" (Krause et al., 2023). However, comparability and long-term availability are only reasonable arguments if the derived measurements are valid. Below, I will briefly revisit some critical remarks from previous research and add a couple of new points on why using MARPOR data might be particularly problematic for investigating micro-level voting behavior.

Reliability is crucial when coding textual data. One major issue with the MARPOR data is its unit of analysis: coders use "quasi-sentences," which are fragments of or complete sentences related to distinct policy propositions. This method is much less reliable than using natural sentences, which would offer perfect reliability (Däubler et al., 2012). Moreover, the inter-coder reliability for classifying these quasi-sentences into the category system is well below acceptable standards. An experiment that closely followed the MARPOR approach found that even with detailed instructions, prior coding experience, and excluding the least reliable coders, the reliability of the CMP scheme

remains problematic, with Fleiss's  $\kappa$  values as low as 0.31 (Mikhaylov et al., 2012). Thus, the reliability of measurements taken from MARPOR is doubtful.

Even more concerning are the findings about "shifts" in party positions, which are central to the PSO theory's understanding of party strategies. Research by Benoit, Laver, and Mikhaylov (2009) indicates that when bootstrapped uncertainty estimates are applied to MARPOR policy positions, most differences between party positions over time are merely random noise due to measurement errors, rather than actual policy changes. Only about 25% of these shifts are statistically significant. Additionally, a study by J. Adams et al. (2019) found that shifts in MARPOR data, expert surveys, and mean positions from general social surveys are essentially uncorrelated, implying that any conclusion drawn from these data solely depend on which source was used. This issue affects not only shifts in individual party positions over time but also cross-sectional differences between parties (Benoit, Laver, & Mikhaylov, 2009). Hence, to the best of my knowledge, there is currently no reliable and valid measurement of party positions derived from textual data available that matches the geographical and temporal scope of the MARPOR database.

The PSO theory hinges on a crucial assumption that connects party strategies to voters' perceptions. Specifically, "[m]ainstream party tactics must be accompanied by changes in voters' perceptions of party position [...]" (Meguid, 2005, p.351). Surprisingly, none of the applied studies, including the original one, have tested this assumption. For this endeavor, the choice of party communication source is essential. While election manifestos are undoubtedly vital strategic communications, one must question their intended audience. It is unrealistic to believe that manifestos are written to signal policies to ordinary citizens. Even political scientists rarely read them unless their research focuses on them. If experts do not bother, why would the average person? The point here is not to say that election manifestos are not useful for party signals in general. They can be valuable sources for analyzing the fulfillment of electoral pledges (Thomson et al., 2017), government formation processes (Däubler, 2012), or the dynamics of coalition government (König et al., 2022). Nonetheless, I contend that the signals in election manifestos are primarily aimed at elites, such as other parties and the media. Moreover, media coverage of manifesto content is often filtered and framed in various ways. Therefore, it is far-fetched to assume that manifesto signals are directly absorbed by citizens.

One final aspect to elaborate on is the lack of adhering to the theoretical prerequisites of issue voting. A prototypical issue voter casts their ballot based on their preferences, which might seem straightforward, but it involves three essential elements (Brody & Page, 1972). First, the issue must be personally salient enough for the voter to care about it. Second, the voter needs to have a clear and subjective preference on the matter. Third, the voter must be able to perceive the positions of all parties

on the issue. Policy-oriented evaluation — where voters compare party stances with their own exogenous preferences — represents only one of several possible cognitive processes. The other two processes involve biases. One is a persuasion mechanism, where voters align their preferences with the positions of favored parties, thereby internalizing those positions. The other is a projection process, where voters project their personal preferences onto party positions (Brody & Page, 1972; C. Achen & Bartels, 2017). The latter can manifest in two ways. On one hand, voters might perceive parties they favor as being closer to their own positions than they actually are, a phenomenon known as assimilation bias. On the other hand, voters may push parties they dislike further away from their own position than is objectively the case, known as contrasting bias (Bølstad, 2020). From this discussion, a couple of important conclusions can be drawn. First, it is puzzling why most studies use full, representative samples of the electorate to analyze issue voting, thus ignoring the theoretical prerequisites. Not every voter is concerned about issues like immigration, has a preference on the topic, or can indicate party positions. Including such respondents in studying the effects of accommodation strategies seems misguided. Second, if there are rationalization biases present, macro-level sources of direct party communications are misleading. When voters perceive the policy space in a distorted manner, the only viable solution is to rely on survey data and correct for biases in self- and party-placement answers using scaling models. This kind of correction is not feasible with direct macro-level party communications, as the policy space does not correspond with the micro-level surveys that capture voting preferences.

In sum, the potential pitfalls of the current literature on party strategies include relying on highly unreliable MARPOR data, interpreting measurement errors as policy differences and shifts, studying micro-level behavior using macro-level indicators that individuals are unaware of, conflating the most likely issue voters with the entire electorate, and failing to test whether rationalization biases distort their results.

## **Data and Methods**

To test whether unfiltered party communications are a valid measurement for studying micro-level voting behavior, I rely on two different sources. I employ the new methodological approach on both election manifestos and party press releases. Although it is unrealistic that voters actually read the latter directly, they do appear to have some advantages vis-à-vis manifestos. For example, press releases are not a snapshot of reality taken once every few years but provide a constant flow of policy stances from parties throughout the legislative periods. Not only do press releases better adapt to unforeseeable events during a legislative term, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but they can also reduce uncertainty estimates of policy positions because there is sim-

ply much more textual data available. Moreover, in press releases, parties do not face any constraints on what type of policy stances they communicate. The same is not true for manifestos, which usually have to be approved by whole party congresses, which could water down policy stances due to compromises, and need to address specific issues salient at the onset of elections. Other mediums of party communication, like the content of speeches in parliament, are restricted by the agenda, which in some countries like the UK is almost completely dominated by the government, so opposition parties cannot freely address the issues they want. Finally, statements from press releases are also frequently quoted by traditional media or shared by a party's politicians on social media, which yields higher levels of recognition compared to manifestos (Erfort et al., 2023).

Regarding the coding scheme categorizing the policies, I rely on the one from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) for Germany (Breunig et al., 2023). I focus on the years 2013 to 2017, reflecting the scope of the subsequent analysis in the second main part. The CAP and MARPOR category systems differ in that CAP focuses on strict topical classification of issues, whereas MARPOR is concerned with ideological policy goals. While this distinction may seem subtle, Green-Pedersen (2019) has shown significant differences in attention levels regarding environmental policies and that the weakest correlations between estimates from both schemes are on immigration policies. This is likely because MARPOR does not have a specific category for immigration, requiring an awkward combination of multiple categories that may cover a broader range of content than just immigration policies. There are two important advantages of using the CAP scheme over MARPOR. First, the German CAP project circumvents the quasi-sentences problem by taking natural sentences as the unit of analysis. Second, the inter-coder reliability for election manifestos in the CAP project is 0.88 (Breunig et al., 2023), which is a significant improvement over both reliability issues of the MARPOR data. Thus, using CAP data enables one to start the analysis with highly reliable data.

The empirical approach consists of two stages. In the first step, I fine-tune a pre-trained LM by providing the already manually coded CAP codes for the 2013 election manifestos as training data.<sup>1</sup> After that, I use this fine-tuned model to conduct multi-class topical classification according to the CAP category scheme on both the 2017 election manifestos and all party press releases published during the respective legislative term, which I obtain from the Political Documents Archive (Benoit, Bräuninger, & Debus, 2009) and the PartyPress database (Erfort et al., 2023), respectively.<sup>2</sup> I use

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<sup>1</sup>For this, I relied on the "BERT" architecture (Devlin et al., 2018). More specifically, I used the pre-trained "bert-base-german-cased" LM (Chan et al., 2019), which is freely available on the Hugging Face website. The implementation in Python utilizes the "Simple Transformers" library (Rajapakse, 2024).

<sup>2</sup>Training a model on manifestos and applying it to press releases involves cross-domain classification. Research using election manifestos and parliamentary protocols as two different sources has



the results of this first step to calculate saliency estimates for each party by following the log-transformation approach of Lowe, Benoit, Mikhaylov, and Laver (2011).<sup>3</sup> One advantage here is that, unlike in the positive-negative coding scheme of MARPOR, these estimates also include neutral sentences for each issue.

The final step is about retrieving policy positions. For this, I mirror the issues utilized in the subsequent analysis. Specifically, I use three items from the 2017 campaign panel of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) (2019). Respondents were asked to place political parties based on how restrictive they are on immigration policy, the trade-off between favoring tax cuts or welfare benefits, and the trade-off between favoring economic growth or measures to combat climate change.<sup>4</sup> To obtain comparable data from the topical classification, I filter the following CAP categories: Immigration and Refugee Issues (Immigration issue); Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform + Social Welfare (Tax-Welfare trade-off); Environment + Domestic Macroeconomic Issues (Environment-Growth trade-off).

To estimate policy positions, I rely on stance detection, which is essentially another classification task. Unlike sentiment analysis, stance detection identifies the position or attitude expressed in a statement, regardless of its sentiment. This distinction is crucial because a particular stance can be conveyed through either positive or negative sentiment (Bestvater & Monroe, 2023). For example, blaming governments for impeding sea rescue missions or criticism of the missions themselves both carry a negative sentiment but represent opposing stances.

The coding scheme I use for stance detection is rather simple and has three categories. The first category represents traditional right-wing positions, which oppose climate change measures and open-border immigration policies while favoring welfare state retrenchment, low taxes, and laissez-faire economics. The second category covers left-wing positions that are the opposite of these right-wing stances. The third category captures neutral or unrelated sentences, including purely factual statements, those where the left-right stance is unclear, and instances of topical misclassification. This Neutral/Other category provides an additional sanity check, enhancing the validity of the results. Since the latter is excluded from the calculation of policy positions, it does not affect the resulting estimates.

To start the process, I randomly sampled 263 sentences from the pool of manifestos and press releases. These sentences were stratified across parties and issues to assess the inter-coder reliability between two expert coders. Following this, 300 sentences (50 per party) from each of the five relevant CAP categories were manually coded. Since stance detection is a complex task and the initial cross-validation

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shown that this generally works (Osnabrügge et al., 2023), but that LMs clearly outperform traditional multinomial regression models (Wang, 2023b).

<sup>3</sup>I drop all sentences categorized as "Non-Policy".

<sup>4</sup>All translated survey items for this and subsequent analyses are listed in Table 8 in the Appendix.

results during hyperparameter tuning indicated a need for improvement, I adopted an active learning approach (B. Miller et al., 2020). This involved manually coding an additional 210 sentences per issue, focusing on those where the model showed the most uncertainty, that is, those sentences with the lowest differences between category probabilities. With the stances classified for each sentence, I calculated the policy positions of parties using the log-transformation approach by Lowe et al. (2011). I follow Benoit, Laver, and Mikhaylov (2009) and obtain uncertainty estimates using their recommended bootstrapping approach.

## Measurement Validation

For the validation checks, I adopt the terminology outlined by Adcock and Collier (2001), which distinguishes between content, convergent, and construct validity. Content validity ensures that the measurement captures the full scope of the concept. Since I rely exclusively on classification methods, in this case, it involves checking how well the machine codings align with "gold standard" human categorization. Convergent validity examines how well the measurement correlates with other established variables. To assess this, I compare the retrieved saliency scores with data from the Chapel Hill Experts Survey (CHES) database (Jolly et al., 2022) and the policy positions with both CHES scores and the mean policy positions taken from the 2013 and 2017 GLES campaign panels (German Longitudinal Election Study, 2016, 2019).<sup>5</sup> Finally, construct validity, arguably the most essential part of the validation process, assesses whether the measurement is actually measuring what it is intended to. Testing well-established findings or hypotheses is a straightforward approach to ensure construct validity (Adcock & Collier, 2001; Grimmer & Stewart, 2013).

For the period between 2013 and 2017, the literature provides clear guidelines on this matter. Regarding saliency, the AfD prominently emphasized immigration during and after the so-called immigration crisis that began in 2015. Immigration became their top priority, and they highlighted it more than any other major German party (Gessler & Hunger, 2022). In terms of policy positions, Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to open the border in the summer of 2015 and other related policies shifted the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) toward less restrictive immigration policies. Meanwhile, the AfD, under new leader Frauke Petry, radicalized its stance on immigration, advocating for highly restrictive and even xenophobic policies. This position placed the AfD significantly further to the right compared to both its previous stance and the positions of other parties (Mader & Schoen, 2019).

Considering content validation, I first split the 14,328 precoded CAP sentences from

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<sup>5</sup>Unlike individual survey scores, mean policy positions are not prone to the aforementioned rationalization biases (C. Achen & Bartels, 2017).

the 2013 manifestos into a training set (70%) and a test set, ensuring stratification by policy issues. For hyperparameter optimization, I used 3-fold cross-validation. This method involves dividing the training data into three parts and alternately training the model on two-thirds of the data while using the remaining third for validation. I optimized hyperparameters following practices similar to those described in the original BERT paper (Devlin et al., 2018) and Wang (2023a). Specifically, I varied the number of epochs (i.e., the number of training rounds) among 5, 10, and 15, and the learning rate (i.e., the step size for gradient descent) among  $3e-4$ ,  $3e-5$ , and  $3e-6$ . I chose the macro F1-Score as the evaluation metric. The F1-Score is the harmonic mean of precision and recall. I deem this metric appropriate because it does not prioritize false positives or false negatives, for which I have no theoretical reason to do so. Using the macro version of the F1-Score is a more conservative measure as it ensures that all categories, including those with fewer observations that are generally harder to predict, are weighted equally. Table 4 shows the results of the hyperparameter tuning. The optimal combination was found to be 10 epochs at a learning rate of  $3e-5$ , which achieved an average macro F1-Score of 0.64 across the 3 folds.

The predictions on the test set are shown in Table 5 in the Appendix. The macro F1-Score is 0.66, indicating no drop in performance between the training and test data due to overfitting. Compared to the results reported by (Osnabrügge et al., 2023) for their within-domain text classification on the MARPOR scheme (0.42 and 0.52 for the 44- and 8-category systems, respectively), this model clearly outperforms theirs, suggesting an overall good, though not perfect, fit regarding content validity. Furthermore, the five issue categories used in the subsequent stance detection step perform similarly well, with none of the individual categories having F1-Scores lower than 0.60. This suggests that the predictive performance for these policies is balanced.

For content validation in the stance detection step, the intercoder reliability on the 263 sampled sentences, measured with Cohen's  $\kappa$ , has a value of 0.66. According to (Landis & Koch, 1977), this is considered a "substantial" level of agreement, implying that the 3-category system is reliable enough for usage. I performed the same data split and hyperparameter optimization as for the topical classification, except I increased the folds of the cross-validation to 5, since each detection model only has 210 labeled training observations. Table 6 in the Appendix reports the results of this process. As mentioned earlier, since the initial results seemed improvable, I decided to adopt an active learning approach. In the second round, I adjusted the learning rate to vary between  $1e-5$ ,  $3e-5$ , and  $5e-5$ , as the other two learning rates from the first round produced worse results throughout. As indicated in Table 6, the second round's best performance metrics are on average higher than those in the first round (e.g., from 0.46 to 0.52 for the Environment issue), but the standard deviation over the 5 folds indicates that this improvement is rather modest.

The predictions of the stance detection models on the test set are shown in Table 7 in the Appendix. Although the macro F1-Scores are generally lower than those for topical classification, the models perform relatively equally across issues, with none of the macro F1-scores falling below 0.50. While certainly not perfect, these results are encouraging given that stance prediction is a much more demanding task compared to topical classification. Furthermore, the performance is still better than the results reported by Osnabrügge et al. (2023) for the 44-category scheme and far above the original MARPOR reliability values (Mikhaylov et al., 2012). Besides that, the Neutral/Other category helps reducing the impact of non-positional and misclassified policy content. Therefore, I consider these results good enough to proceed with further validation checks.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding convergent and construct validation, I first focus on saliency before addressing policy positions. I calculate the correlations between saliency measurements from CHES, election manifestos, and press releases.<sup>7</sup> To get comparable estimates for the continuously issued press releases, I split them into two parts: one covering the period before the onset of the immigration influx until January 1, 2015, and the other for the remaining part of the legislative term. Given that the CHES scores are measured on a different scale, I ensured comparability through standardization grouped by year, source, and policy.

Figure 1 shows the plots for each source combination, including a locally estimated smoothing (LOESS) line to better visualize the correlations across the range of saliency scores. In the top left panel, the saliency scores between manifestos and press releases are only weakly correlated regardless of the saliency values ( $r = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.24$ ). The top right panel shows a modest correlation between manifestos and CHES scores ( $r = 0.49$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ), although the smoothed line indicates that the less salient policy issues are rather uncorrelated between the two sources. The bottom left panel reveals a strong correlation between the saliency in press releases and expert scores ( $r = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This holds for both low- and high-salient issues, whereas only the few observations with medium saliency scores seem uncorrelated. However, the latter might also constitute the hardest task for experts to rate. In sum, convergent validation tentatively favors press releases over election manifestos.

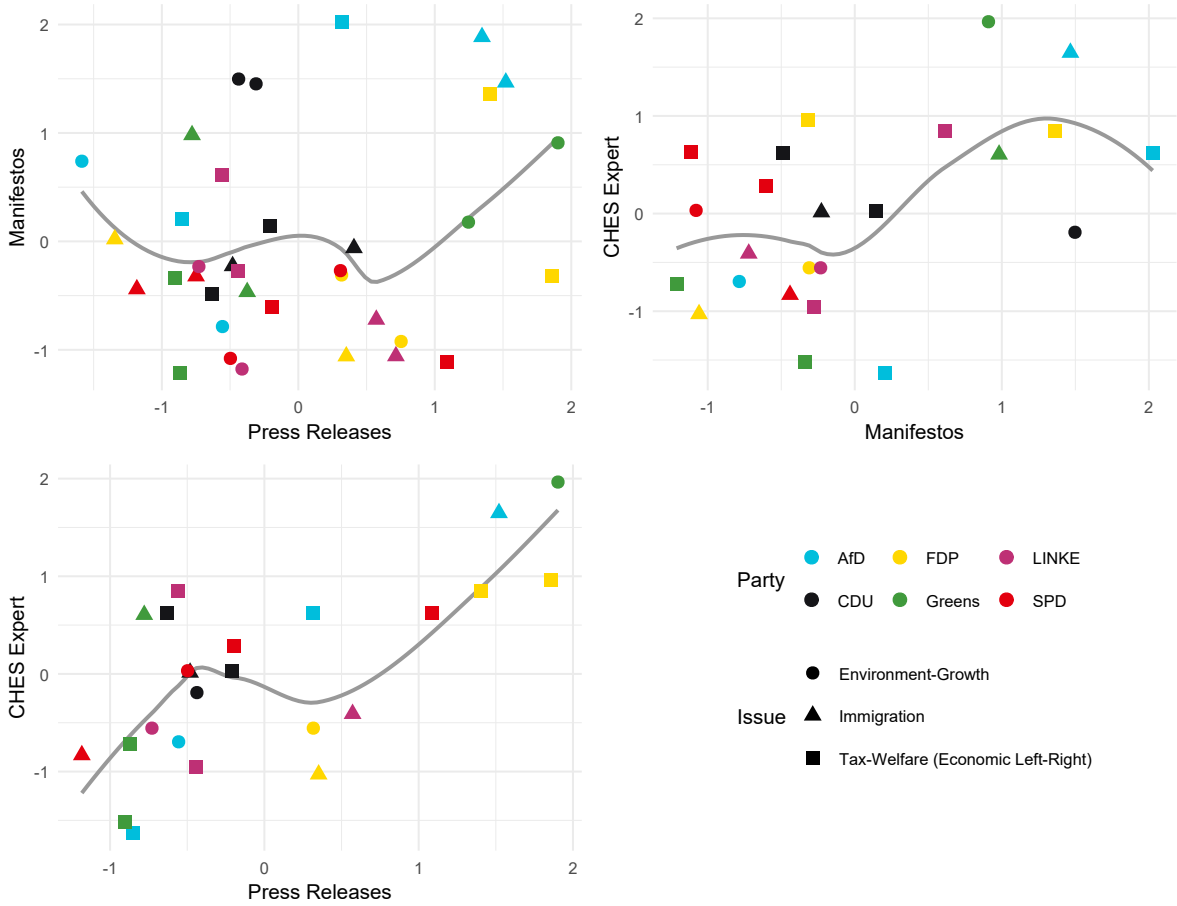
Regarding construct validity, Figure 2 shows the issue proportions in the election

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<sup>6</sup>To my knowledge, no other study has used the approach outlined here to code policy positions, which makes more direct comparisons difficult.

<sup>7</sup>The following CHES items were used: "IMMIGRATE\_SALIENESS" for the immigration issue (only available for 2019); "LRECON\_SALIENESS" for the tax-welfare trade-off (2014 and 2019); "ENVIRO\_SALIENESS" for the environment-growth trade-off (only available for 2019). Although these dates do not exactly coincide with the Bundestagswahlen (2013 and 2017), this is of less concern since the observations fall either before or after the immigration crisis in 2015, arguably the most important political event during that time. Moreover, the 2019 estimates still occur before the next major political event, the COVID-19 pandemic.

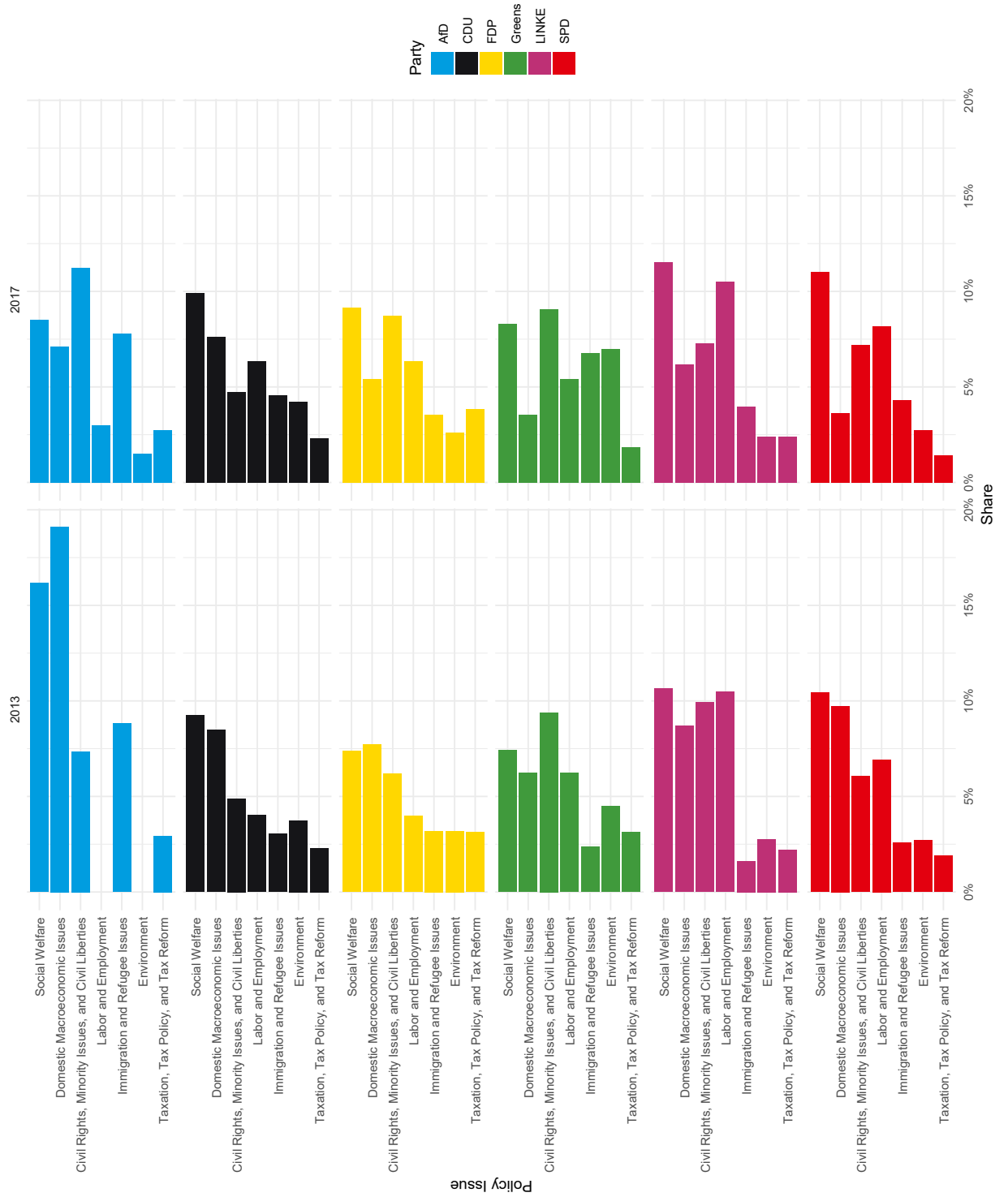
Figure 1: Correlations Between the Aggregated Means of Saliency Scores Across Different Sources and Issues



manifestos. The plot displays the top three most salient issues across parties from the 2017 election manifestos,<sup>8</sup> including the other four relevant policy issues from the positional analysis. Although the AfD reported the highest saliency for the immigration issue in 2017 with a proportion of about 8%, the difference compared to the Greens’ manifesto (7%) is fairly small. Moreover, immigration is only the third-most salient issue for the AfD in 2017 and compared to their 2013 manifesto, the saliency of immigration even dropped by approximately 1 pp. These findings are completely at odds with scholarly accounts of the political situation around that time (Gessler & Hunger, 2022), demonstrating that manifestos in this case are not a valid measurement of saliency.

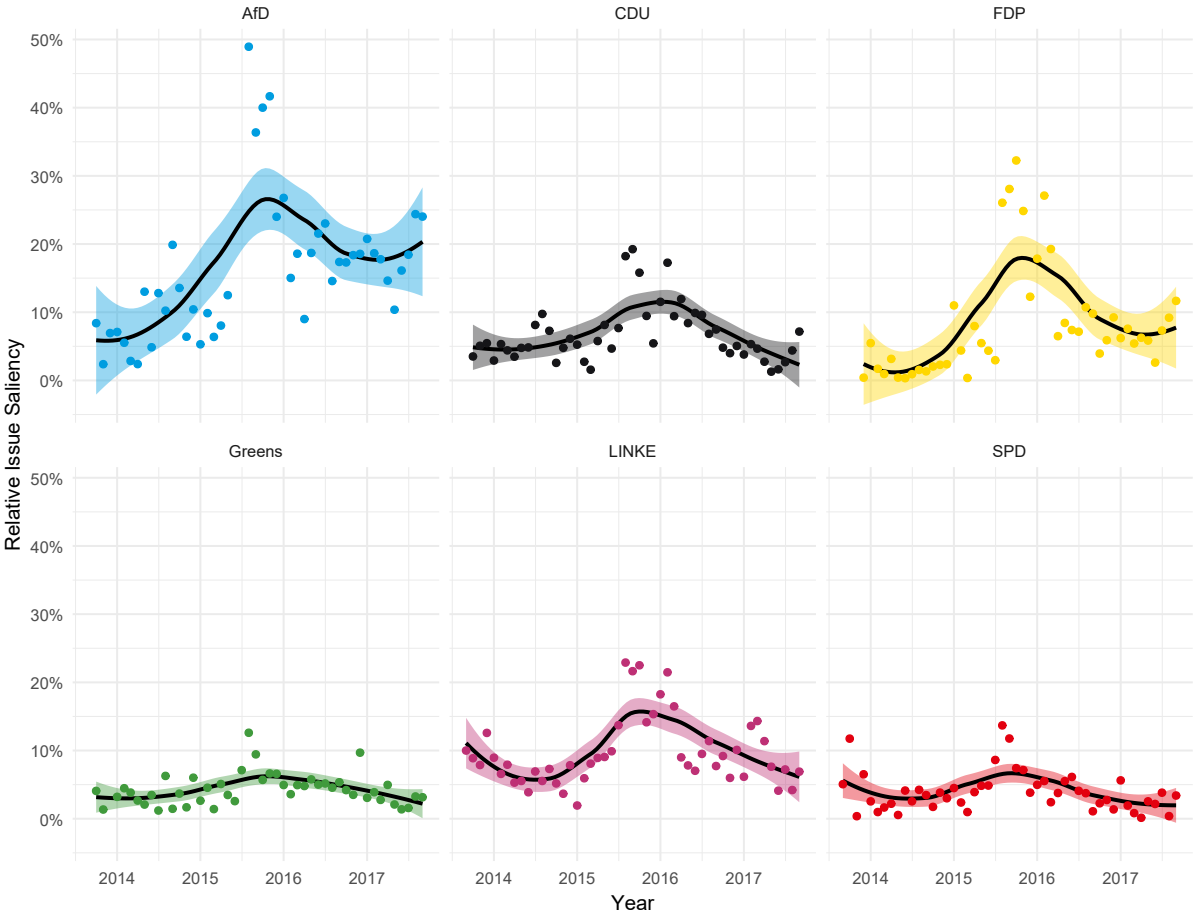
<sup>8</sup>These are: Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties; Labor and Employment; Social Welfare.

Figure 2: Issue Saliency in Party Manifestos



Examining the press releases, immigration was indeed the most prevalent issue for the AfD throughout the legislative term, accounting for approximately 16% of all press releases. For none of the other parties was immigration the most salient policy issue, and the overall shares were considerably lower (CDU 6%; FDP 9%; Greens 4%; SPD 4%; LINKE 10%). Figure 3 depicts the monthly estimates of the proportion of press releases dedicated to immigration policy across parties for the whole legislative term, including a smoothed LOESS line. The plot underlines the significant increase in the saliency of the immigration topic for AfD press releases starting in 2015. Although other parties mirrored the increased saliency dedicated to the issue during the peak of the immigration crisis in the summer of 2015, unlike the AfD, the prevalence of the topic substantially diminished shortly thereafter and their peaks are considerably lower. The results of this plot provide strong evidence for the construct validity of the press releases. They also largely coincide with the study by Gessler and Hunger (2022). Overall, the press releases offered promising results throughout all validation checks.

Figure 3: Saliency of Immigration Issue in Party Press Releases



Moving on to policy positions, convergent validity is assessed by analyzing the correlations between the different sources, hereby including the survey mean positions from

the GLES studies.<sup>9</sup> Comparability is again ensured through standardization grouped by year, source, and policy.

Figure 4 depicts the relationships between the four different sources. In the top left panel, the mean survey positions and CHES policy evaluations almost perfectly correlate with each other ( $r = 0.92$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The top right panel shows that manifestos and press releases also have a strong correlation ( $r = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but this mainly applies to positions on the far-left and far-right. Moderate policy stances of the Greens, CDU, and FDP appear uncorrelated. The convergent validity of manifestos deteriorates when compared to external sources. Although there is a substantial correlation with CHES ( $r = 0.65$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and survey mean positions ( $r = 0.75$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), this strong relationship mainly reflects center and far-right positions. On the far-left, manifestos and external sources are even slightly negatively correlated. In contrast, press releases show a near-perfect correlation with both CHES ( $r = 0.86$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and survey means ( $r = 0.88$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), across the entire range of policy positions. A test of dependent correlations reveals that the difference between manifestos and press releases is statistically significant for both CHES ( $p < 0.01$ ) and survey means ( $p = 0.01$ ). In conclusion, press releases exhibit significantly higher convergent validity compared to manifestos.

To assess the construct validity of the position measurements, Figure 5 displays the mean policy position estimates and their corresponding 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals on the immigration issue.<sup>10</sup> The top row of these plots shows the policy stances from press releases after January 1, 2015, the 2017 election manifestos, and the first differences between these two sources. The row below shows policy shifts in the party's positions. For press releases, this means comparing positions before and after the start of 2015. For manifestos, it indicates shifts between the 2013 and 2017 manifestos. The bottom panels display the first differences in party stances from the top row.

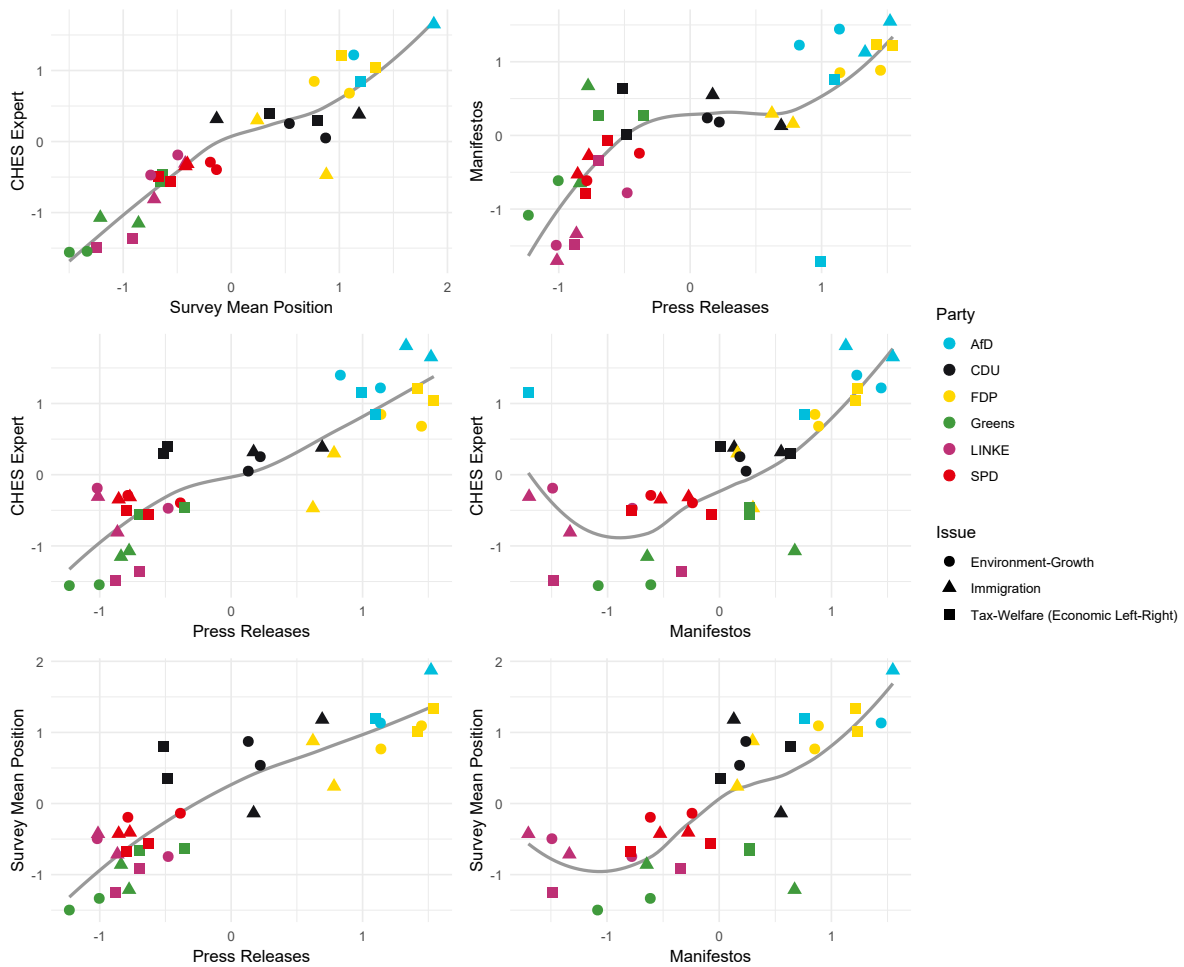
Regarding the policy positions in the top row across all three issues, both press releases and manifestos appear to provide reasonable mean positions. However, the first differences reveal that the choice of the source can yield quite different estimates. If a slightly narrower 90% confidence interval were applied, three party positions (SPD, Greens, FDP) would differ significantly. Even for LINKE, the confidence interval covers a range from -0.5 to 0.5, which includes almost half of the entire distribution of policy positions, indicating that substantively important differences occurred in some of the bootstrapped samples. The two policy shift panels confirm that in their press releases under Chancellor Merkel, the CDU significantly shifted to the left, while the AfD shifted significantly to the right. In contrast, the election manifestos suggest a statis-

<sup>9</sup>The following CHES items were used: "IMMIGRATE\_POLICY" for the immigration issue (2014 and 2019); "LRECON" for the tax-welfare trade-off (2014 and 2019); "ENVIRONMENT" for the environment-growth trade-off (2014 and 2019). Note that the environment item is equivalent to the GLES survey question.

<sup>10</sup>Equivalent plots for the two trade-off issues can be found in Figures 11 and 12 in the Appendix.

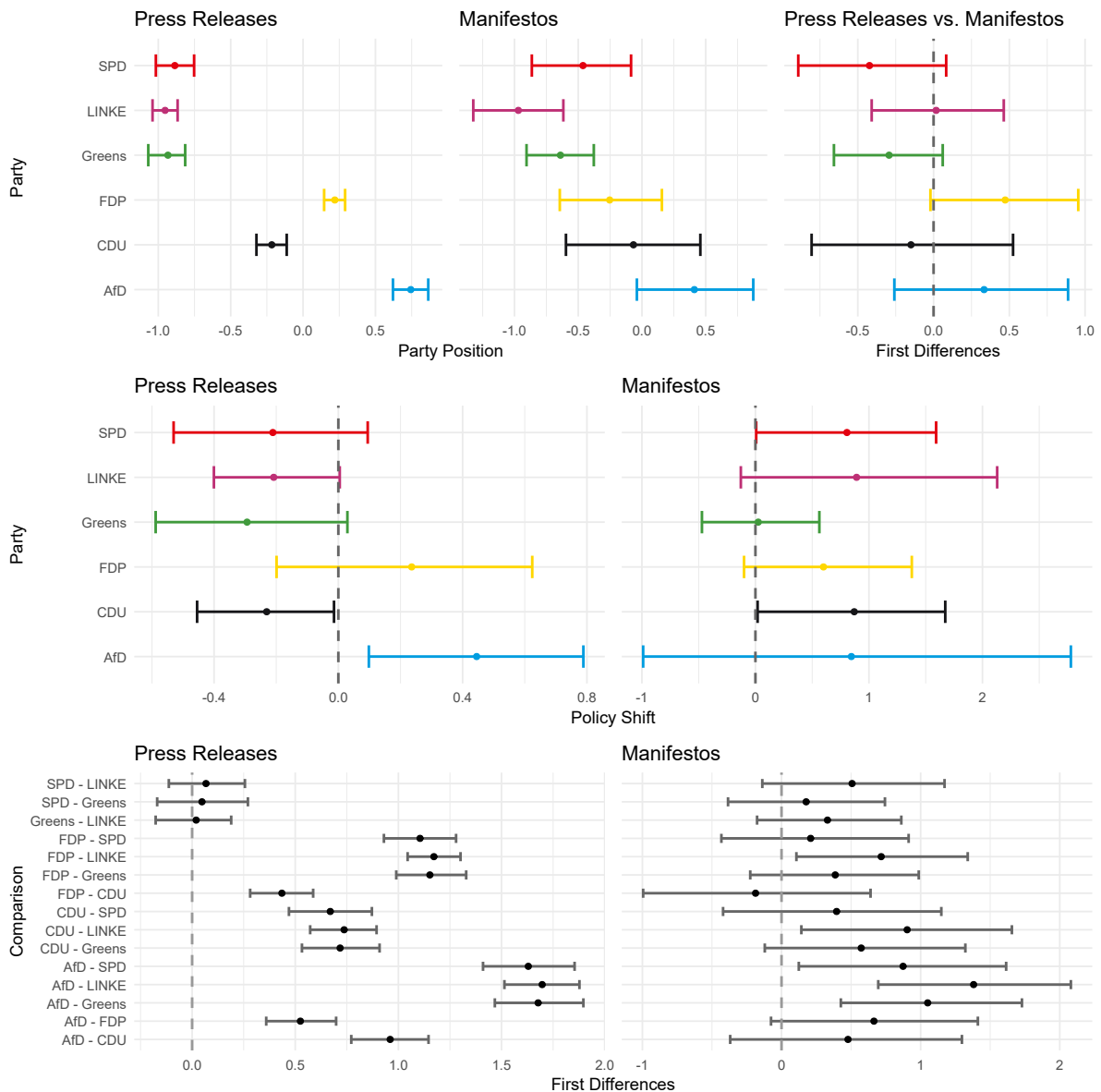


Figure 4: Correlations Between the Aggregated Means of Policy Position Scores Across Different Sources and Issues



tically significant shift to the right for the CDU, indicating an accommodative strategy. Additionally, the manifestos fail to show a rightward shift for the AfD, clearly contradicting the political realities of that time (Mader & Schoen, 2019). The bottom row panels reveal another pitfall of the manifestos. While press releases indicate that the AfD is significantly further to the right than any other party, the manifestos fail to detect a difference between the AfD and both the CDU and the FDP. These findings convincingly prove that policy positions from the election manifestos are not a valid measurement for the case analyzed here. For the subsequent test on whether voters perceive direct party communications, I can only rely on the party press releases, which have passed all validation checks and shown promising results.

Figure 5: Party Positions on Immigration Issue



## Results and Discussion

To assess whether voters perceive the positions that parties communicate, I rely on the aforementioned three policy items from the GLES. More specifically, I subset the data to include only respondents who participated in the after-election wave 8 of the 2017 Bundestagswahlen.<sup>11</sup> To detect most-likely issue voters for the immigration issue, I filter participants who indicated that immigration was the most important political problem at that time. For the two trade-off issues, I only keep respondents who said these issues

<sup>11</sup>For reasons explained later, I remove respondents from Bavaria from the sample.

were very important.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, I deliberately dropped all observations that were not able (or willing) to place themselves and the parties on the respective issues.

The test to determine whether respondents understand the policy positions in the press releases is straightforward. Since the survey scales and party communications operate in different spaces, I only require participants to rank the parties on the issues according to the parties' signals, as long as these signals showed significant differences. For example, on the immigration issue, a respondent is considered to have accurately received and understood the policy stances if they rank the AfD as having the most restrictive stance, followed by the FDP, and then the CDU. For the remaining three parties — the SPD, Greens, and LINKE — there is no imposition concerning any specific ranking order among them since their positions were not significantly different. They only need to be ranked as less restrictive than the AfD, FDP, and CDU. This ranking logic applies equivalently to the two trade-off issues.

Table 1 reports the results of how many participants accurately ranked the parties according to the signals from the press releases. The numbers are astonishingly low. The immigration issue seems to be the most comprehensible, but even then, only 5% of respondents were able to correctly rank the parties. Limiting the sample to the most-likely issue voters creates little improvement, as the share of correct answers increases only slightly to 8%. The more demanding trade-off issues fare even worse. Only 28 respondents out of 11,324 perceived the party stance signals from direct party communications on environment-growth policies. Furthermore, between a quarter and a third of respondents in the entire electorate either have no preference regarding the issue or cannot place the parties. This number aligns with previous research, thus indicating that the case analyzed here marks not an exception (Aldrich et al., 2018).<sup>13</sup> The important takeaway from this test is clear: voters, even the most-likely issue voters, do not perceive the perceive the policy positions from direct party communications.

In the following, I want to provide an explanation of why the election manifestos fared so badly in the validation checks. The first point considers the general blurring between the policy positions of the parties. Here, the reason is rather simple: manifestos provide far less data than the continuously issued press releases. Less data automatically yields less precise estimates and creates large overlaps between party positions when incorporating uncertainty estimates. The second aspect concerns the rather odd accommodation of the CDU in the 2017 election manifesto. There may have indeed been a right-shift between the 2013 and 2017 manifestos, as the CDU may have

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<sup>12</sup>The reason for this differentiation is that it is not quite clear how broadly one should define the trade-off issues in terms of categories from the open-ended answers to the most important political problem.

<sup>13</sup>In general, individual factors such as income, educational attainment, and political attentiveness, along with institutional factors like majority or proportional electoral systems, play an important role in explaining why people fail to place parties on the issue scales (Aldrich et al., 2018). However, explaining this pattern is not the focus of this paper.

Table 1: Voter Perceptions of Party Positions from Press Releases

Policy Issue	Sample	Correct Order	Wrong Order	Missing	N
Immigration	Electorate	545	8,143	2,636	11,324
Immigration	Issue Voters	115	1406	0	1,521
Tax-Welfare	Electorate	259	7,525	3,540	11,324
Tax-Welfare	Issue Voters	70	1,261	0	1,331
Environment-Growth	Electorate	28	7,818	3,478	11,324
Environment-Growth	Issue Voters	10	1,285	0	1,295

tried to appear tougher on immigration given that Merkel’s open-border policy received considerable backlash in its aftermath. However, these signals then are a snapshot aiming at future policies rather than reflecting actual policy stances throughout the legislative term. Lastly, the absent right-shift in the AfD manifestos can be explained by examining them in more detail. The AfD was founded in 2013 as a purely eurosceptic party advocating for leaving the common currency and against bailout bonds for highly indebted Eurozone countries. Most likely due to limited resources, their 2013 manifesto contained only four pages, with exactly four sentences dedicated to immigration policy. These included restrictive stances, such as demanding a stricter immigration system modeled after the Canadian point system and opposing immigration “into” the social security system, but also a liberal statement that politically persecuted persons must receive asylum in Germany. These mixed signals are the reason why the policy shift in election manifestos (see mid-right panel in Figure 5) has these huge uncertainty estimates. One has to be aware that when taking election manifestos as a source, inferences about party stances for the AfD over a 4-year period are based on four sentences. This automatically assumes a moderate stance of the party on immigration up until 2017, which is a distortion of political reality. Now one could claim that the transition of the AfD from 2013 to 2017 presents a special case. However, it is precisely this period of the rise and establishment of populist parties that the research on party strategies aims to explain. Furthermore, it is the rule rather than the exception that newly emerged parties start out with short manifestos due to limited resources.

The initial part of this study offers two key insights. Firstly, the proposed methodology shows that snapshot party signals from election manifestos are not a reliable source for studying how actual party policy stances evolve over time. In contrast, press releases have proven to be a much better source for tracking party positions, performing well in all validation tests. This new methodology has a significant advantage: it is resource-efficient and highly scalable, making it possible to study many countries over extended periods, as long as press releases are available. As a result, the main argument for using MARPOR data becomes far less compelling. Additionally, press releases provide a constantly updated view of party positions. For studies interested

in the changing dynamics of coalition governments, which currently rely on static manifesto positions and lose precision over the legislative term when analyzing bill initiations (König et al., in press), incorporating dynamic policy stances from press releases could substantially improve model performance.

Secondly, the investigation into whether voters actually perceive the policy signals that parties send out in their direct communications revealed that they do not. This finding holds true not only for the general electorate but also for the subset of most-likely issue voters—those who see the issue as personally important, have a clear preference, and can place the parties on that matter. The implications of this result are quite troubling, as it suggests that the entire body of research analyzing the impact of macro-level party communications on micro-level voting behavior is on shaky ground. The vast majority of citizens do not accurately perceive these signals. There are two possible reasons for this. On one hand, people might perceive party positions indirectly through filters such as traditional and social media, which can frame policy stances in various ways. On the other hand, rationalization biases might be causing the inaccurate perceptions among the most-likely issue voters. To address this issue, one cannot rely on macro-level party communications. Instead, survey data is needed to accurately assess the extent of issue voting in the Downsian tradition, as I will demonstrate in the upcoming section.

# Issue Voting vs. Affective Voting

## Literature Review

The literature on issue voting has identified several factors that increase its likelihood, which can be broadly categorized into individual, institutional, issue-dependent factors, and the type of issue voting. Research indicates that individuals with more resources—such as higher income, formal education, and a strong interest in politics—are more likely to engage in issue voting (Aldrich et al., 2018). However, there is an opposing view suggesting that the most attentive and resourceful voters might be even more prone to rationalization biases due to their partisan attachments. This is because they are exposed to and internalize more “colored” partisan cues (Zaller, 1992; C. Achen & Bartels, 2017). Less contentious is the argument that not all issues matter to people equally. Therefore, it is important to segment issue voter groups into different issue publics, in line with classic theoretical frameworks (Fournier et al., 2003).

Institutional accounts indicate that both the fragmentation and polarization of the party system, as well as the electoral system, are important. In other words, a higher number of relevant parties, distinctive political positions, and proportional representation increase the likelihood of Downsian issue voting (Lachat, 2011). Regarding retrospective voting, Hobolt, Tilley, and Banducci (2013) find that single-party governments facilitate this mechanism by making it easier for citizens to either blame or credit incumbents.

The extent of issue voting depends significantly on the nature of the issues themselves. In their seminal article, Carmines and Stimson (1980) distinguish between two types of issue voting. Hard issues involve a deliberate evaluation of policy benefits between different electoral choices, similar to the Downsian model. Although hard issue voting is always possible, its occurrence depends on individual factors such as interest and knowledge. In contrast, easy issues provoke “gut responses” and can engage both well-informed and less informed voters. These issues are typically prominent on the political agenda and are symbolic rather than technical, focusing on broad policy goals instead of detailed means for achieving them. The prevalence of easy issue voting is more influenced by whether parties present these issues than by the voter’s ability to engage with them.

In their review of the issue voting component from the Michigan school, Schoen and Weins (2014) conclude that retrospective voting places the fewest demands on citizens and is therefore more prevalent than prospective selection and spatial voting. However, C. Achen and Bartels (2017) show that voters often engage in “myopic, blind retrospection,” which contradicts rational accountability. For example, they find that voters punish incumbents for events entirely beyond their control, such as shark attacks.

Building on the original Michigan model, W. E. Miller et al. (1996) present a sequence of factors influencing voting behavior. The temporal ordering implies that earlier factors primarily impact voting through mediation by those closer to the election day. Their model begins with stable socio-demographic characteristics, such as sex and educational attainment. These characteristics influence party identification, which in turn affects policy preferences. Policy preferences shape retrospective evaluations of government performance. These evaluations influence impressions of candidates' qualities, which then impact prospective selection considerations. Overall, their theoretical model can be categorized into deterministic constants (socio-demographic characteristics), three elements of rational choice (Downsian issue preferences, retrospective voting, prospective selection), and two affective concepts. One of them persists over a long period (party identification) while the other is relatively short-lived and may vary from one election to another (candidate qualities).

Having already covered the three rational choice mechanisms, I will now briefly summarize the literature on the two affective elements, starting with short-term subjective candidate evaluations. Most original research in the Michigan tradition focused on U.S. presidential elections, so its relevance to other political systems may be limited. In U.S. presidential contests, individual candidates are central, while in European party democracies, candidates are viewed more as party representatives. Research shows that candidate orientations, while crucial in the U.S., do not translate well to other political contexts. For example, although chancellor and prime minister candidates in Germany and the UK play a notable role, their influence on voting behavior diminishes once long-term affection in the form party identification is controlled for (Brettschneider, 2001; Schoen, 2003).

Partisan identification, viewed as a long-term emotional attachment to a political party, is one of the key innovations of the early Michigan school. While the concept has been extensively discussed, the debate has by now mostly been resolved<sup>14</sup>. Research supports the idea that party identification serves as a lasting "perceptual screen" acquired during early adulthood socialization that significantly impacts how people perceive politics (Campbell et al., 1960). Although partisanship is not entirely static and may occasionally shift in response to particularly powerful and polarizing issues among people who are aware of party differences and consider them important, it nevertheless plays a crucial role in shaping policy preferences, values, perceptions of performance, and voting behavior (Johnston, 2006; Carsey & Layman, 2006). Unlike candidate effects, partisanship is influential not only in the U.S. but also in many European countries, where it exerts a similarly strong impact (Schoen & Weins, 2014).

What the literature is missing so far, however, is how affective and rational components interact in shaping people's voting decisions. While newer empirical approaches

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<sup>14</sup>For an overview of earlier debates, see Carsey and Layman (2006).

under the umbrella term "unified spatial models" (J. F. Adams et al., 2005) combine elements such as party identification and voter-party distances with promising predictive results, analyzing coefficient sizes from single-equation models does not reveal how these distinct underlying factors balance each other. The empirical approach I introduce below aims to address this gap.

Regarding the third research question on how populism interacts with issue voting, Berman (2021) identifies three different explanations for the success of populist parties: party strategies, supply-side factors, and demand-side factors. The first part of this study has already highlighted potential issues with current research on party strategies. Supply-side arguments view populism as a "symptom of growing dissatisfaction with democracy" (Berman, 2019) and suggest that its success stems from the unresponsiveness of political institutions. Research on supply factors indicates that populist parties benefit from populist attitudes, low levels of political trust, and dissatisfaction with the political system's performance (Akkerman et al., 2014; Rooduijn et al., 2016; Magni, 2017; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Geurkink et al., 2020). These factors focus on politics, such as the role of compromise in decision-making, elements of direct democracy, or attitudes toward the political elites. Yet questions about political processes remain silent on policies, which are crucial for issue voting. Therefore, I will concentrate on the insights provided by demand-side arguments in the literature.

Research on demand-side explanations of populist success is divided into two separate camps. The economic perspective argues that heightened economic insecurity and inequality create divisions between the educated, urban elite and the less-educated, rural working and middle classes, fueling support for radical political movements among those negatively affected by changes caused by globalization, neoliberalism, and technological advancements (Han, 2016; Rovny & Rovny, 2017; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Burgoon et al., 2019). On the other hand, cultural accounts emphasize that social and cultural changes, such as rising immigration, declining traditional values, and increased mobilization of women and minorities, have led to feelings of alienation among some groups, particularly white men, fostering support for right-wing populists who promise to protect their cultural identity (Oesch, 2008; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Mutz, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Some approaches seek to integrate both perspectives, suggesting that support for populist parties can be understood through the lens of social integration. This view posits that feelings of social marginalization — stemming from both economic disadvantage and cultural alienation — can drive individuals to support populist movements, with status anxiety playing a central role in these dynamics (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020).

While the studies above do not explicitly mention it, they can be subsumed under the framework of realistic interest approaches from social psychology. These approaches emphasize that political behavior is driven by perceptions of group gains and losses



(Mason, 2023). Group membership influences political decisions based on how individuals perceive their group's economic or social disadvantages compared to others. Subjective deprivation, expressed by the feeling that one's group is worse off relative to others, is crucial in this context, as it drives group-based political action (Huddy, 2013). For example, marginalized groups, such as women rallying against abortion bans, politically cohere around improving their position due to sharing a common fate.

One problematic implication of the literature so far is the broad scope of their theories, claiming that either economics, culture, or social integration can explain the support of populist parties, both right- and left-wing, across many countries. Economic accounts are especially prone to overstate their ambit, as experimental research on minimal intergroup interactions has shown that economic competition is not necessary for developing group cohesion (Brewer, 1979). Furthermore, a comparative study including the electorates of 15 populist parties from 11 European countries convincingly demonstrated that THE archetypical populist voter does not exist (Rooduijn, 2018). Consequently, caution is advised when generalizing findings from radical left or right party supporters to populist voters as a whole. This is further supported by the recent success of populist parties, as evidenced by the latest French elections where a third of the population supported the right-wing populist Rassemblement National, suggesting that populist support is widespread throughout the population and not confined to specific marginalized groups of "modernization losers." Therefore, the scope of theoretical expectations should be adapted. In a country with only one populist party, this party may draw broader support simply due to a lack of competition, attracting support from multiple social groups rather than a single cohesive group sharing a common fate.

## Theory

The following subsection starts with a revision of the "New American Voter" model (W. E. Miller et al., 1996), presents an expectation of the balance between rational and affective components, conceiving long-term emotional attachments as stemming from social identities, and then relates how right-wing populist parties may effectively appeal to national social identities. To recap, the revised Michigan model identifies deterministic constants (socio-demographic characteristics), rational choice elements (spatial voting, retrospective voting, prospective selection), and affective concepts (party identification, candidate qualities) as crucial for the voting decision.

One predicament of the revised Michigan model is that it imposes a temporal and causal order (socio-demographic characteristics → party identification → policy preferences → retrospective government performance → candidate evaluation → prospective election), which yields irresolvable logical fallacies. The accounts of retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981) and prospective selection propagated by saliency theory

(Petrocik, 1996; Budge, 2015) are alternative explanations to salvage the "rationality" of the ordinary voter, as classic Downsian issue voting may exceed citizens' cognitive capabilities (C. Achen & Bartels, 2017). Essentially because these are alternative explanations, it is illogical to view them only as mediators of spatial voting. If people cannot engage in hard issue voting, there is no total effect to be mediated in the first place. Thus, although the three mechanisms may not be perfectly independent, there is definitely no general causal or temporal relationship between them.

The second point of critique aims at the notion of socio-demographic characteristics as stable factors rather than more dynamic and fluid social identities. This perspective aligns with recent research conceiving partisanship as a social identity, possibly the most important in the political realm (C. Achen & Bartels, 2017; Hahm et al., 2024). The SCT and SIT theories from social psychology provide valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying social identities. SCT attributes group cohesion to cognitive factors, particularly the salience of group identities, which shifts depending on the situational context. This shift from personal to collective identity leads to increased adherence to group norms and self-stereotyping, essential for political cohesion (Turner et al., 1987; Huddy, 2013; Mason, 2023). SIT, closely related to SCT, also incorporates motivational aspects. It emphasizes the need for positive group distinctiveness, where individuals strive to positively differentiate their own group from others to achieve a favorable social identity. This drive for positive distinction can lead to in-group favoritism and may also result in out-group derogation, particularly when a group's status is threatened (Tajfel & C., 1979; Huddy, 2013; Mason, 2023).<sup>15</sup> David and Bar-Tal (2009) provide a valuable synthesis of SCT and SIT by proposing a dual process of social identity formation. The first process is cognitive, involving the categorization of individuals into groups and the attribution of meaning to these group memberships. The second is motivational, focusing on the desire to differentiate one's own group from others, which leads to a preference for in-group norms and values over those of external groups.

Huddy (2013) taps into the development and strength of social identification with certain groups through several key factors. Salience alludes to how situational factors, such as political rhetoric, make certain identities more prominent, with increased clarity often associated with minority status. The differentiation between acquired and ascribed identities highlights that identities personally chosen by individuals are generally stronger than those imposed externally. Moreover, so-called valence aspects reflect that higher-status groups typically foster stronger identities, while negatively regarded groups face more challenges. These latter considerations connect with how the permeability of group boundaries influences the identity management of group mem-

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<sup>15</sup>The key difference between SCT and SIT and the aforementioned realistic interest approaches lies in the fact that SCT and SIT do not require competition between groups or the outlook of a common fate. The power of social identities arises from the cognitive and motivational intrinsic importance attached to a social group.

bers. Individuals in inferior groups might address their undesirable current social identity through social mobility or by altering perceptions of group characteristics to achieve positive distinctiveness (Tajfel, 1974).

It is essential to recognize that individuals possess multiple social identities simultaneously, and the interplay among these identities can influence political bias. For example, when partisanship aligns with other social identities such as race or religion, it can amplify and reinforce political divisions (Mason, 2023). Nevertheless, most socio-demographic groups demonstrate only modest political cohesion (Huddy, 2013). This observation is consistent with research indicating that if an individual's identification with a particular group does not relate to a certain object, that identity is likely considered irrelevant for opinion formation (Cohen, 2003). For instance, identifying as Black may significantly influence views on police violence and racial profiling but exert negligible effects on attitudes regarding climate change measures. Thus, the primary issue with incorporating socio-demographic characteristics, such as sex, as stable factors in theoretical models is that such membership may be irrelevant if the individual does either not strongly identify with their sex or if sex is inconsequential for the specific political issue.

The power of party identification as a social identity lies in its inherently cohesive and political nature, allowing it to function as a perceptual screen for political issues (Campbell et al., 1960; Huddy, 2013). Unlike other social group identities, partisanship provides ready-made stances on almost all political matters, which individuals can easily adopt when asked about their opinions. Changes in party identification due to other social identities and political preferences are rare. As one instance of this, C. Achen and Bartels (2017) mention abortion rights in the U.S., where differences in abortion views led women to change their party affiliation more frequently than their stance on abortion itself. In contrast, men, whose gender identity was naturally less relevant to the topic, were more likely to change their abortion views to align with their preexisting party identification. If people, however, do not identify strongly as partisans, other social identities are likely to play a more significant role in shaping their political opinions.

To summarize the discussion, I identify two distinct components in the revised Michigan model. One is a rational component, encompassing the three alternative accounts of issue voting: the spatial model, retrospective voting, and prospective selection. The other component involves affective considerations, including long-term emotional attachments like party identification and other politically relevant social group identities, as well as short-term affective elements related to specific candidates or parties at a given moment. I assume two key temporal/causal relationships. First, in line with most research, party identification is seen as a confounding factor influencing both issue preferences and vote choice. Although this relationship is not strictly unidirectional, changes typically occur over the legislative term, not in the voting booth. This means

that on ANY given election day, partisanship influences issue preferences rather than the other way around. Second, I assume that short-term emotional attachments mediate the influence of other factors in the model. This is precisely what "short-term" implies. Even the less enduring aspects of retrospective voting, in its rational form, begin temporarily on the inauguration day of a government, long before candidates and parties prepare for new elections. Similarly, issue ownership implies a degree of durability; otherwise, parties could simply "rent" an issue rather than "own" it. Given this framework, I expect that issue voting, in any of its three forms, demands too much from voters, and that on election day, affective considerations significantly outweigh rational choice elements.

**Affective Dominance Hypothesis:** affective voting significantly outweighs rational choice issue voting.

Populism fits well into the discussion of social identities. According to the ideational approach, populism divides society into two opposing groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The concept of the people is intentionally vague, serving as an "empty signifier" (Laclau, 2005) that can adapt to various constituencies. It can refer to the people as the sovereign, the common people, or the nation, each contrasting with the elite based on power, socioeconomic status, or cosmopolitanism, respectively (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The effectiveness of populist rhetoric stems from using broad, ambiguous symbols that bring together diverse groups by focusing on general ideas rather than specific details. This vagueness allows the meanings of the people and the elite to be shaped to fit different contexts and agendas. Left-wing and right-wing populists differ mainly in how inclusively they define the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Left-wing populists typically refer to the people as the "demos, not the ethnos" (March, 2012, p. 122), meaning they base their definition primarily on socioeconomic status. In contrast, right-wing populists focus more on nationality and ethnocultural backgrounds, thereby narrowing the boundaries of who belongs to the in-group.

The key strength of the populist message lies in its portrayal of "the people" as pure, in contrast to a corrupt elite. This aspect is often overlooked by the currently widespread realistic interest approaches. Research on SIT highlights the importance of positive group distinctiveness, where individuals seek to positively differentiate their own group from other out-groups (Tajfel & C., 1979). In contrast, the realistic interest framework views supporters of populist parties as "modernization losers" suffering from social status decline or anxiety (Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Gidron & Hall, 2020). However, this perspective fails to explain why people would want to align themselves with such a "loser" group. The appeal of populism lies in its ability to present the ordinary citizen as virtuous — a notion that resonates with

people across various social strata, not just the economically disadvantaged or those with xenophobic views. This broad, inclusive appeal helps explain why populist parties attract such significant voter support, far exceeding the proportion of modernization losers in Western societies.

To explain the success of right-wing populist parties, national identity as a social group identity may play an important role. National identity can be defined as a "subjective or internalized sense of belonging to the nation" (Huddy & Khatib, 2007, p.65). It represents a strong and enduring psychological attachment to the nation-state, with its significance varying over time. While national attachments might seem politically dormant at times, evidence shows that underlying levels remain relatively constant across different contexts (Huddy, 2023). This suggests that political parties can leverage citizens' identification with their state in virtually every country. Defining the people in terms of the nation is particularly attractive for right-wing populist parties because citizenship inherently confers rights and fosters a sense of belonging to a large community. Moreover, the desire for positive group distinction makes national identity more appealing than identifying solely with a lower social class. In principle, every citizen, regardless of social status or income, can identify with the nation. This allows populist rhetoric to broaden the in-group while narrowing the out-group to a small, cosmopolitan elite perceived as undermining national identity, thereby expanding potential constituencies.

National identity is seen as a superordinate concept that encompasses several sub-components, varying in meaning among citizens and influencing their support for policies such as national security and immigration (Huddy, 2013). Factor analyses have demonstrated that national identity is empirically distinct from its subcategories, such as nationalism and patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007).<sup>16</sup> These subcategories are strongly correlated, as one would expect from such hierarchically organized concepts. Typically, national identity involves a mild positive bias towards one's own country and a preference for fellow citizens, but it does not necessarily entail negative feelings towards outsiders (Huddy, 2023). This attachment provides a foundation for other national sentiments and adherence to national norms. Empirical studies support the view that national identity functions as a cohesive force, correlating with greater trust in co-nationals, increased compliance with national norms, and reduced ethnic and partisan division (Mummendey et al., 2001; Sniderman et al., 2004; Levendusky, 2018). Additionally, national identity is often one of the earliest forms of self-categorization learned in childhood (David & Bar-Tal, 2009). This fits well within the framework of long-term affective elements in the revised Michigan model.

Although national identity does not automatically lead to out-group derogation, this

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<sup>16</sup>Patriotism is a facet of national identity and is characterized by a deep, inclusive attachment to one's nation, often associated with trust in national institutions. The literature distinguishes between several types of patriotism, such as symbolic and constructive patriotism (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). However, for this study, the in-group favoring aspect of national identity is sufficient.

tendency is inherent in its subcategory of ethno-cultural nationalism. Nationalism involves a sense of national superiority and often results in xenophobia and negative views of other ethnic and cultural groups. It tends to create rigid boundaries between groups, fostering division and undermining social cohesion (de Figueiredo Jr & Elkins, 2003). Distinguishing between in-group favoritism and out-group derogation is crucial. For instance, recent research on affective polarization indicates that, unlike in the U.S., affective polarization in Europe is primarily driven by in-group favoritism rather than out-group derogation (Hahm et al., 2024).

A key question is whether the success of right-wing populist parties is due to in-group favoritism through national identity, out-group derogation associated with ethno-cultural nationalism, or a combination of both. Additionally, it is important to explore how this discussion about national identity and populism connects to issue voting, specifically how parties can leverage social identities to influence voter behavior.

The connection between populism and issue voting can be established by understanding that a populist vote often aligns with what Carmines and Stimson (1980) describe as an easy issue vote. Right-wing populist parties exploit the dormant national identity inherent in nation-states, which mainstream parties often overlook. They offer symbolic policy responses that prompt easy issue voters to react instinctively. For example, slogans like "Take Back Control" from the United Kingdom Independence Party provide simplistic solutions to complex issues, devoid of technical details. The notion of leaving the European Union is presented as a panacea, promising not just a restoration of national sovereignty but also solutions to funding the National Health Service instead of sending money to Brussels and halting immigration — claims that were overstated as achievable merely by exiting the EU. The populist appeal offers voters clear choices for easy issue voting, while mainstream parties grapple with the technical complexities. This can lead observers to mistakenly think that voters are engaging in hard issue voting through detailed policy analysis, rather than responding to symbolic appeals tied to social identities. Yet, it is important to recognize that while populist parties are currently adept at using easy issue voting solutions, they do not have a monopoly on this approach. Center-right parties can also appeal to in-group favoring national identities, whereas left-wing parties might struggle to credibly establish such appeals or might even alienate voters with cosmopolitan predispositions. The key point is that, nowadays, right-wing populist parties are often the only political parties offering the easy voting option by mobilizing otherwise dormant national identities. Thus, regarding national identity, right-wing populist parties may only benefit to the extent that they face little competition from mainstream right parties on this social identity.

**National Identity In-Group Favoritism Hypothesis:** a strong national identity increases support for center-right mainstream and right-wing populist parties that appeal to this social identity.

In contrast, the ethno-cultural nationalist agenda followed by many right-wing populist parties in Europe is less likely to be adopted by center-right parties for both ideological and strategic reasons. Ideologically, mainstream right-wing parties may not share the xenophobic elements inherent in ethno-cultural nationalism. Strategically, this form of national identity is often linked to stable personality traits, such as authoritarianism, which are less common among the electorate (Huddy, 2023). This can limit its appeal and risk alienating voters who do not have such extreme dispositions. As a result, I expect that only right-wing populist parties will benefit from strong ethno-cultural national identities.

**Ethno-Cultural Nationalism Out-Group Derogation Hypothesis:** a strong ethno-cultural national identity exclusively increases support for right-wing populist parties that appeal to this social identity.

## Case Selection, Data, and Methods

To provide tentative answers to questions about the balance of rational and affective voting considerations and the extent of issue voting in the success of right-wing populist parties, I decided to analyze the 2017 German Bundestag election. This choice is based on the fact that this election presents an exceptionally challenging case for my hypotheses. First, Germany has a fragmented and polarized political system, as supported by Figures 5, 11, and 12 from the first main section of this study. Combined with its mixed-member electoral system, which ensures proportional representation, these factors are expected to increase the prevalence of spatial issue voting (Lachat, 2011). Second, evidence suggests that the refugee crisis forced a re-evaluation of party positions, with Chancellor Merkel's pro-immigration policies leading to a realignment of voter support from the CDU to the more immigration-critical AfD (Mader & Schoen, 2019). Issue voting is expected to be most prevalent during such periods of realignment, when newly emerged issues cut across traditional party boundaries and lead to shifts in partisan identification (Schoen & Weins, 2014). Third, Germany represents a particularly challenging case due to its historical context: post-war Germans have consistently shown ambivalent or negative attitudes toward national identity, with survey data indicating general neutrality or rejection of the concept of being German compared to other countries (Mummendey et al., 2001). Lastly, in the 2017 election, the AfD was as close to a traditional niche party as possible. As noted in the first part of the analysis on press releases, it occupied a unique stance on the emerging immigration issue and emphasized this topic far more than any other party. The same does not hold for the subsequent 2021 election, where the AfD broadened its issue focus. For instance, it was the only party denying any human impact on global warming in response to the Fri-

days for Future movement and the sole party opposing any restrictive measurements related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey data used in this analysis comes from the 2017 campaign panel of the GLES, as introduced in the previous section. I focus on three issues: immigration policy, tax-welfare trade-off, and environment-growth trade-off, analyzing only those respondents who meet the theoretical prerequisites for issue voting. I exclude respondents from Bavaria because the multinomial choice models used later rely on the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives (IIA) assumption, which is likely to be violated in this case. In Bavaria, voters can only choose the Christian Social Union (CSU), while the CDU competes in all other states. Although the CDU and CSU are part of the same parliamentary faction, the CSU tends to adopt more socially conservative positions, and Bavarian voters may prioritize regional representation over policy considerations. By excluding Bavaria, I aim to ensure that the IIA assumption holds, as voters in the rest of Germany have the same party options. I consider very small parties outside parliament not to be a significant risk for violating IIA, given their combined vote share in the 2017 election was only 5%.

It is important to note that the subsamples of most-likely issue voters are not representative of the entire electorate. Figure 6 plots the distribution of the dependent variable, vote choice, and clearly illustrates how different subgroups of issue voters cast their votes. These distributions also contrast with the official voting results: CDU 26.8 %; SPD 20.5%; the AfD 12.6%; FDP 10.7%; LINKE 9.2%; Greens 8.9%.<sup>17</sup> One can see that the AfD notably attracted the most votes from those who considered immigration the most pressing political issue, more than doubling its share compared to the general electorate. However, it received fewer votes on the two trade-off issues, though the difference is less pronounced than one would expect given the limited focus on immigration policy.

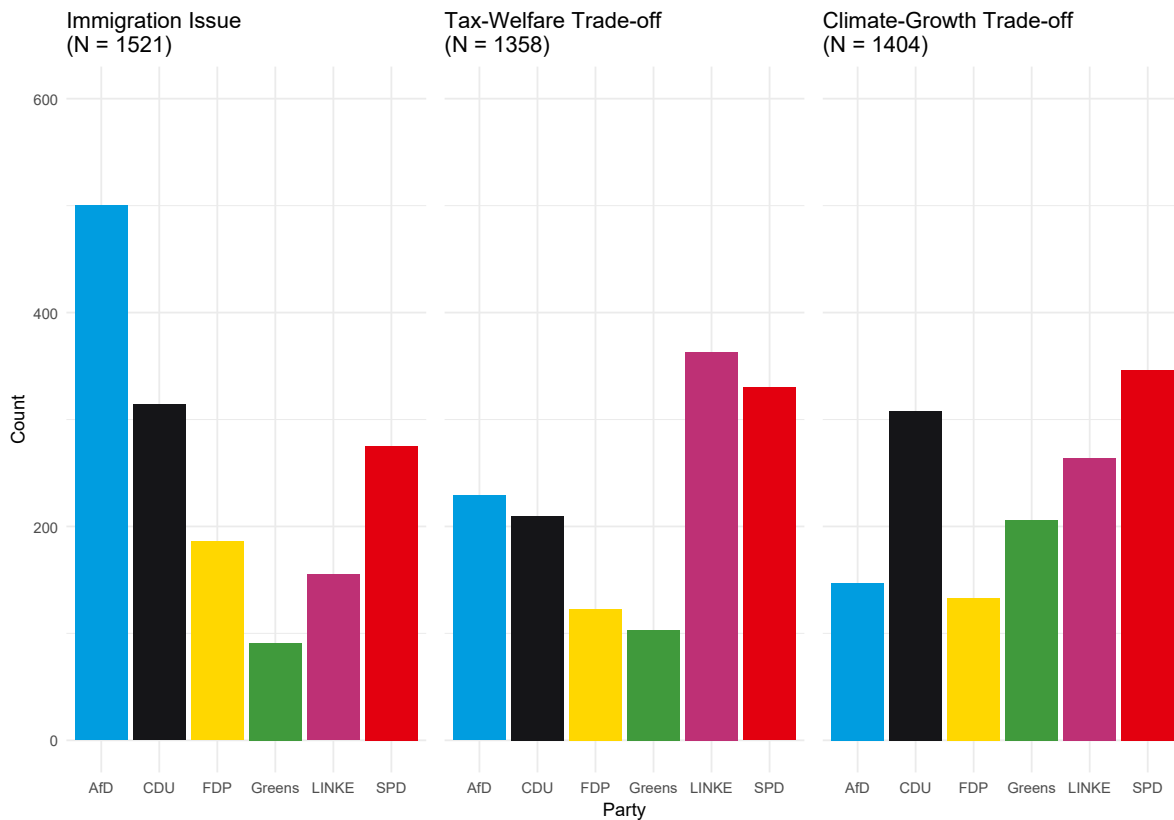
To operationalize social identities, I use survey questions for national identity closely aligned with the seminal study by Huddy and Khatib (2007). Specifically, I create a mean index from three items: (1) how important it is for respondents to be German, (2) how well the term "German" describes them, and (3) whether they use the pronoun "we" instead of "they" when referring to German people. This index has a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ ). For measuring ethno-cultural nationalism as a social identity, I follow the item battery provided by Huddy (2023). Respondents indicate how important various attributes are for being "truly" German, including: being born in Germany, having German ancestors, spending one's entire life in Germany, adhering to German customs and norms, and speaking German without an accent. This index also shows high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). I deviate from the original item set by excluding a question about religion for two reasons. First, adding a

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<sup>17</sup>CSU: 6.2%.



Figure 6: Distribution of Vote Choice Across Parties and Issues



question about the importance of Christian ideology significantly decreases the internal consistency of the index. Second, and more importantly, religion is less relevant in a secular state like Germany today, and, due to its socialist history, the Christian religion is even less prevalent in Eastern Germany. As a second social identity measure, I use an item asking respondents to subjectively categorize themselves into a social class. This allows me to compare the explanatory power of national identity with that of research suggesting that realistic interests are more important (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020).

For the operationalization of the remaining concepts from the affective choice component, I use the German-specific version of the party identification question (Schoen & Weins, 2014). For measuring short-term affection, I include two items where respondents indicate how much they "like" specific parties and their top-level politicians. These items can be interpreted similar to conventional feeling thermometer questions (Mader & Schoen, 2019). For the short-term emotional factors and the other less durable variables that follow, having panel data is very useful. Respondents might experience cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) after voting and might overstate their liking for the candidate or party they supported. In order to avoid such a potential bias, I use responses from the most recent pre-election wave of the panel.

Regarding the rational choice component, I measure retrospective voting using an

item that asks how satisfied respondents were with government performance over the last four years. This question specifically targets "rational" retrospective voting rather than focusing on the more myopic view of the economy in the months leading up to the election (C. Achen & Bartels, 2017). Prospective selection is measured by asking which party respondents believe is best equipped to handle the most important political problem. I recognize that this operationalization is not optimal for the two trade-off questions, as indicating that these problems are very important may not perfectly align with respondents' answers to the open-ended question about the most important problem. However, this is not of concern with respect to the immigration issue, as I can subset the sample to include only those who specifically identify immigration as the most pressing issue.

The operationalization of Downsian issue voting requires further elaboration, particularly as it is central to the later analysis of the hypotheses concerning right-wing populist support. As discussed in the first main section of this article, there are sources of bias contaminating individual voter perceptions. The first is a persuasion mechanism, where voters align their preferences with those of their favored parties, thereby internalizing these positions. The second is a projection process, where voters project their own preferences onto party positions, either by assimilating favored parties or by contrasting disliked ones (Brody & Page, 1972; Bølstad, 2020). Apart from that, voters tend to interpret the survey scales, i.e., the range used to position themselves and political parties, quite differently. This issue, known as differential item functioning, can manifest in several ways. Some respondents might shift all positions in one direction, while others might stretch or contract the scale, thus moving all positions towards the extremes or the center. Importantly, some respondents might even misunderstand the question and reverse the order of their responses. Therefore, it is crucial to account for these biases and response patterns in any measurement of policy distances to not overstate the explanatory power of the spatial model (Bølstad, 2024b).

To address biases and response patterns, I use the hierarchical Bayesian scaling model introduced by Bølstad (2024b), which has been shown to outperform other scaling models available to date. This model is particularly useful because it allows me to stratify survey respondents by party identification, thus effectively removing the confounding influence of party identification on the relationship between the spatial model and vote choice. However, it is important to note that this method primarily addresses response patterns and projection biases related to party identification. The calculation of self-placements are still based on party placements, which means that persuasion biases might not be fully captured by this approach<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, this is not a major concern for three reasons. First, a natural experiment related to the assassination of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn has convincingly shown that projection effects are more

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<sup>18</sup>I thank Jørgen Bølstad for pointing this out.

prevalent (Dinas et al., 2016). Second, research by Mader and Schoen (2019) on the migration crisis period in Germany found no significant persuasion effects<sup>19</sup>. Third, even if some persuasion effects persist, this would provide a tougher test for my hypotheses, as the explanatory power of hard issue voting would be overstated. I even relax the stringent prerequisites for issue voting by allowing some imputations for party positions. Specifically, I ask voters to place at least three of the six parties. Additionally, to avoid nonsensical response patterns, I require participants to use at least two different party locations.

Figure 7 plots the results from the scaling model stratified by party identification for immigration policy.<sup>20</sup> The top left panel displays the posterior distributions of party positions, clearly showing that respondents perceived the AfD as far to the right, while the other five parties are closely clustered together. The top middle panel presents the posterior distribution of respondents, revealing an interesting pattern. A large majority of the most-likely issue voters closely align with the AfD's position. The peak in this distribution suggests a near-zero policy distance. This observation might lead one to naively conclude that hard issue voting is a very strong explanation for support of the right-wing populists.

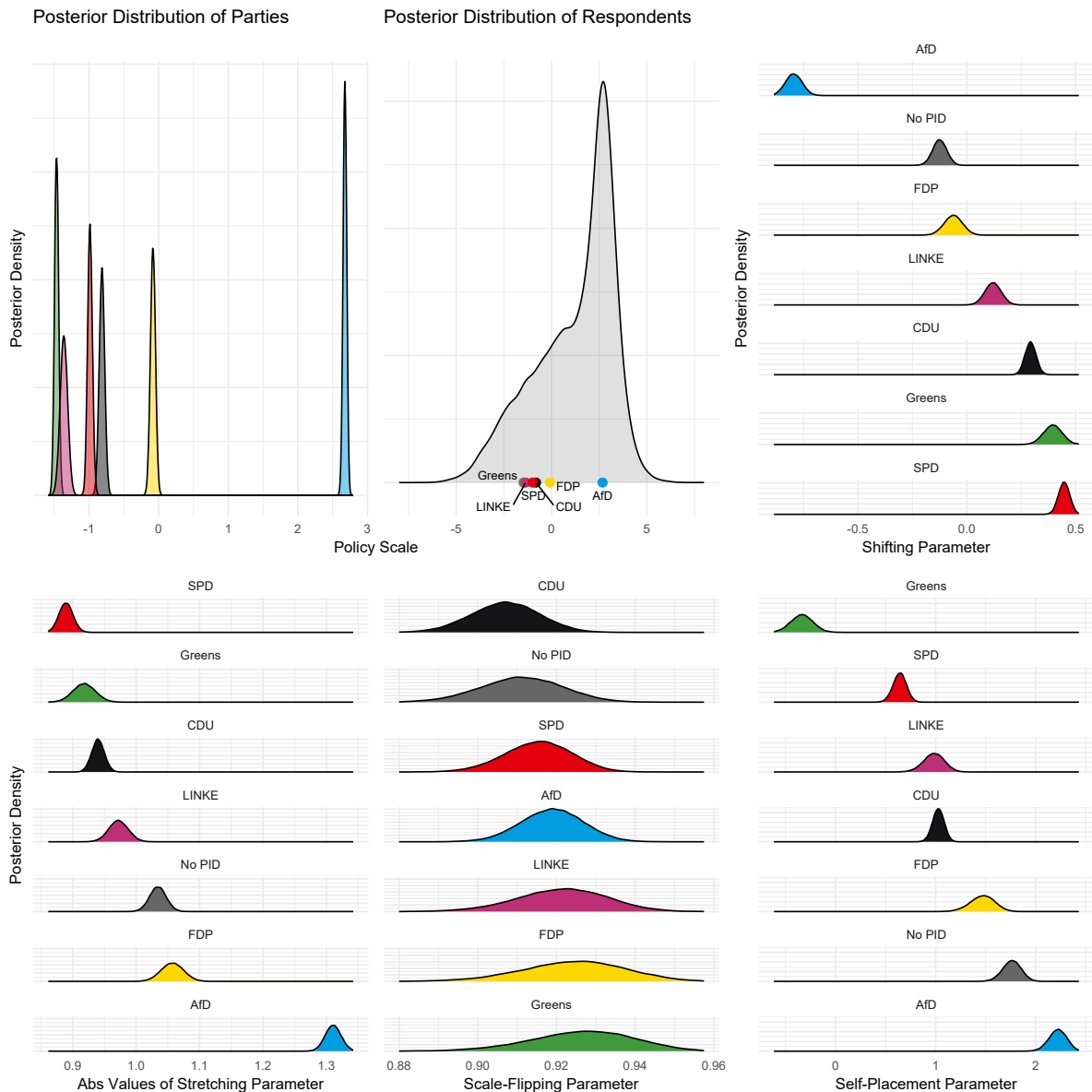
The remaining four panels also reveal some intriguing patterns. Respondents who identify with the AfD are the only group to shift the scale significantly to the left. In contrast, those with no party identification show minimal shifting, while supporters of other parties shift the scale to the right. The differences in the distributions reflect a substantial shift of about 1.25 units when comparing AfD to SPD partisans, given that the original scale covers a range of 6 units. The bottom left panel shows how much respondents contract or stretch the scale. Values below 1 indicate compression, while values above 1 indicate expansion. Most (non-) and other partisans tend to slightly compress the scale, while AfD supporters significantly stretch it. This could tentatively reflect the Manichean worldview typical of populism. The scale-flipping parameter in the middle bottom panel shows that scale flipping was not a major issue for this topic as about 90% of respondents correctly interpreted the scale. Finally, the bottom right panel presents the corrected self-placement parameters. It is notable that many distributions do not overlap, highlighting the strong influence of partisanship on political attitudes. Green supporters are positioned farthest to the left (least restrictive on immigration), while AfD supporters are farthest to the right. Interestingly, those with no party affiliation are the second most right-leaning group. Looking at the two trade-off issues paints a different picture. The posterior distributions and differential item functioning parameters generally follow a standard left-right distinction. Partisans of center-right to far-right parties (AfD, FDP, CDU) and center-left to far-left parties (SPD, Greens, LINKE) behave

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<sup>19</sup>They use the term "cueing" effects, which is equivalent to persuasion bias.

<sup>20</sup>Figures 13 and 14 in the Appendix show the results for the two trade-off issues.

Figure 7: Results of Scaling Model on Immigration Issue Stratified by Party Identification



Note: Calculation relied upon the hbamr package for R (Bølstad, 2024a).

similarly, with non-partisans often falling between these two blocs.

To obtain the measurements for the spatial model, I calculate the mean of the posterior distribution for each respondent and each of the six parties, and then compute the absolute distances for each respondent-party combination. To account for the impact of issue emphasis, an important factor in research on niche party success (Meguid, 2005, 2008), I multiply the distances by the absolute saliency scores obtained from the party press releases<sup>21</sup>. This adjustment further favors hard issue voting in support of the AfD, as it emphasized the immigration issue the most. Figure 15 in the Appendix shows a tile plot illustrating the resulting measurement values for distances ranging

<sup>21</sup>Unlike with party positions, there is no evidence of individual biases regarding saliency.

from 0 to 10 and saliency scores from -5 to -1.

In order to test the derived hypothesis, I employ a Bayesian conditional choice mixture model. Introduced to political science by Imai and Tingley (2012), mixture models offer an alternative to traditional regression methods that combine numerous explanatory variables from multiple theories into one equation—a practice termed “garbage-can regressions” by C. H. Achen (2005). Unlike model selection techniques such as AIC, which assume that a single theory explains all observations, mixture models recognize that different observations may be better explained by different theories. Finite mixture models assume that observations come from one or a combination of several models, measuring the relative predictive power of competing theories. This method allows for the simultaneous testing of multiple theories and, most importantly, accounts for uncertainty in model selection, thereby avoiding the issue of underestimated standard errors associated with single-model approaches (Imai & Tingley, 2012).

Applying a classic rational choice framework, voters choose to vote for the party that provides them with the highest utility. However, this utility is influenced not only by rational factors but also by affective considerations. Formally, the utility  $U$  of voter  $i$  voting for one of the  $J$  parties, assuming that the error terms of each of the  $K$  mixture components  $\epsilon_k$  follow a Gumbel  $(0, 1)$  distribution, is given by the following stochastic process:

$$U_{ij} = \lambda \frac{e^{RC_{ij}}}{\sum_{j=1}^J e^{RC_{ij}}} + (1 - \lambda) \frac{e^{AC_{ij}}}{\sum_{j=1}^J e^{AC_{ij}}}$$

subject to the constraints that  $u_j \geq 0$ ,  $\sum_{j=1}^J u_j = 1$ , and  $\lambda \in (0, 1)$ . The mixing parameter  $\lambda$  indicates the degree to which the voting decision is driven by either rational choice (RC) or affective choice (AC). These two competing theories are parameterized with the following two systematic components:

$$RC_{ij} = \alpha_{1j} + \gamma_j(|loc_i - loc_{ij}| \cdot |sal_j|) + \zeta_j prospissuecomp_{ij} + \tau_j retrospecperf_i + \epsilon_{1ij}$$

$$AC_{ij} = \alpha_{2j} + \beta_j socident_i + \eta_j partyid_{ij} + \delta_j shortaffect_{ij} + \epsilon_{2ij}$$

where the coefficients of  $\alpha_{kj}$  refer to those for the intercepts for each component,  $\gamma_j$  to the distance-saliency measurement,  $\zeta_j$  to prospective selection,  $\tau_j$  to retrospective voting,  $\beta_j$  to the social identity variables,  $\eta_j$  to party identification, and  $\delta_j$  to short-term affection. I employ the following weakly informative prior distributions:

$$\lambda \sim Beta(5, 5)$$

$$\alpha_{kj} \sim N(0, 1.5)$$

$$\gamma_j \sim N(-0.1, 1)$$

$$\zeta_j \sim N(0.1, 1)$$

$$\tau_j \sim N(0, 1)$$

$$\beta_j \sim N(0, 1)$$

$$\eta_j \sim N(0.25, 1)$$

$$\delta_j \sim N(0.1, 1)$$

These priors are weakly informative and generally more reasonable than using a flat

Normal distribution because the choice model operates on the log odds scale. Normal priors with variances around 1 lead to a distribution that is nearly uniform on the outcome probability scale. In contrast, a flat prior with a large variance tends to concentrate expectations on extremely high or low probabilities (McElreath, 2018).<sup>22</sup> For the mixing parameter, I set a completely flat Beta prior distribution due to the lack of prior research on how rational and affective voting might mix. The 5, 5 combination reduces the likelihood of extreme probability values in the posterior. For chooser-specific variables, which do not vary across choices, I set the mean of the Normal priors to 0. For example, having a strong national identity might positively affect the AfD but negatively affect the Greens, yet the value for each respondent remains consistent across all parties. The intercepts, as baseline utilities, follow this approach but with slightly increased variance to accommodate stronger party preferences induced by factors not captured by the model. For choice-specific variables that vary across choices, I use prior means informed by previous research. Specifically, higher values for the distance-saliency measure are expected to decrease utility (-0.1), while viewing a party as competent should increase utility (0.1). Given that party identification is arguably the most important factor in explaining party support, I set a slightly higher prior mean (0.25). Finally, liking a party or candidate is also expected to raise voters' utility (0.1).

To make the conditional choice mixture model identifiable, two additional constraints are needed. First, as in any multinomial choice model, chooser-specific variables are not identifiable because of the simplex constraint in the denominator, where the probabilities for all categories must sum to 1. This means that including parameters for all categories on choice-invariant variables makes it impossible for the model to distinguish between them. A common method is to set the coefficient for one party to 0, using this as a baseline to interpret the coefficients for other parties. However, this approach can be somewhat arbitrary. For example, one could simply set the Greens as reference category and be happy about many statistically significant coefficients for the AfD. Instead, I use a sum-zero constraint, where the sum of all coefficients must equal 0. This provides a more objective solution and allows for clearer interpretation. The coefficients represent the effect of a variable for a party compared to the average effect across all parties, thus positive values indicate that a variable has a stronger effect for a specific party than for the average across all parties.

Second, finite mixture models are degenerate when all component distributions are identical and therefore indistinguishable based on the data. This leads to permutation invariance in the likelihood function, resulting in a posterior distribution with multiple modes, each corresponding to a different labeling of the components (Betancourt, 2017). In simpler terms, the model cannot distinguish between components because swapping labels from "rational" to "affective" does not change the model itself. To ad-

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<sup>22</sup>This does not apply to the prior of the mixture parameter.

dress this, I ensure identifiability by leveraging theoretical assumptions. Specifically, the spatial model predicts that greater distance leads to lower utility (negative coefficient), while the Michigan model suggests that party identification increases utility (positive coefficient). Since these effects are choice-specific and not constrained to sum to 0, I can enforce identifiability by setting the coefficients for party identification to be strictly greater than those for the distance-saliency measure. This approach prevents label switching and resolves the degeneracy problem. With this in place, I can now proceed to present and discuss the results.

## Results and Discussion

To understand how rational and affective components mix, I begin by examining the best affective component model-specification on the central immigration topic.<sup>23</sup> I first evaluate whether short-term partisan emotional attachments offer a better model fit than feelings towards a candidate, as suggested by literature outside the U.S. context (Brettschneider, 2001; Schoen, 2003). Additionally, I investigate whether, as some scholars have previously claimed, asking respondents about their partisanship might result in an overly accurate model fit because respondents might confuse party identification with vote choice, thereby erroneously providing the same response twice (Rose & McAllister, 1990). To assess model fit, I use the Loo Information Criterion (LooIC), which evaluates predictive performance through leave-one-out cross-validation and is considered superior to traditional measures like AIC (Aki et al., 2017). The LooIC also provides the valuable Bayesian property of uncertainties for its point estimates. As shown in the top three rows of Table 9 in the Appendix, the model using party identification and feelings towards a party yields the best fit.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the model with only short-term candidate and party attachments outperforms the combination of party identification and candidate affections suggests that voters do not misunderstand the party identification item. Consistent with the literature, short-term party attachments are more significant in the German context than in the U.S. Therefore, I use the model that includes party identification and short-term partisan attachment as the main model for all subsequent analyses.

To better understand how well this "best" model fits, an aspect not entirely clear from looking at the LooIC numbers alone, the top panel of Figure 8 shows the posterior predictive performance of the model. This test provides a clearer view of how well the model predicts the data it was trained on. In the plot, the colored bars represent the reported relative vote shares of the parties among the subsample of most-likely issue

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<sup>23</sup>All Bayesian conditional choice mixture models were computed using Stan for R (Stan Development Team, 2024). The models were fitted using 4 parallel chains, each with a warm-up of 1,000 draws followed by 1,500 used post-warmup draws.

<sup>24</sup>All of the tested models include national identity and subjective class identification.



voters. The black dot indicates the median of the posterior distribution across the 6,000 post-warmup draws, and the error bars show the 95% Bayesian credible intervals. As depicted, the model’s predictions closely match the actual sample data, with all credible intervals encompassing the true vote shares. The model does show some minor issues distinguishing between CDU and FDP voters: CDU votes are slightly overestimated, while FDP votes are slightly underestimated. This is not entirely surprising given the ideological similarity between the two parties and the way voters perceive them, as shown in the posterior party distribution in the three scaling model plots where these parties are consistently neighboring each other. Overall, the model fit appears good enough to support reliable inferences.

Figure 8: Posterior Predictive Checks

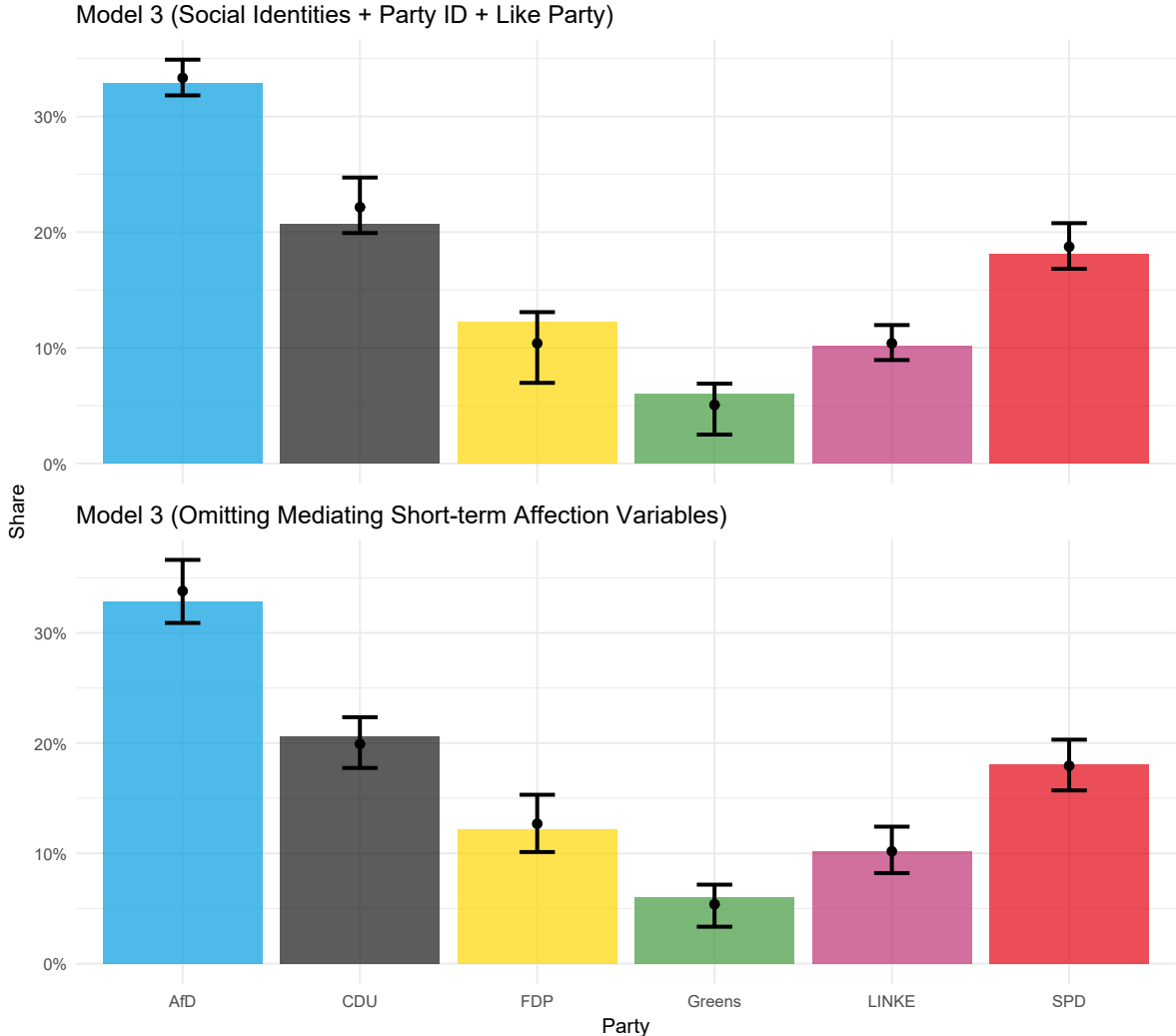
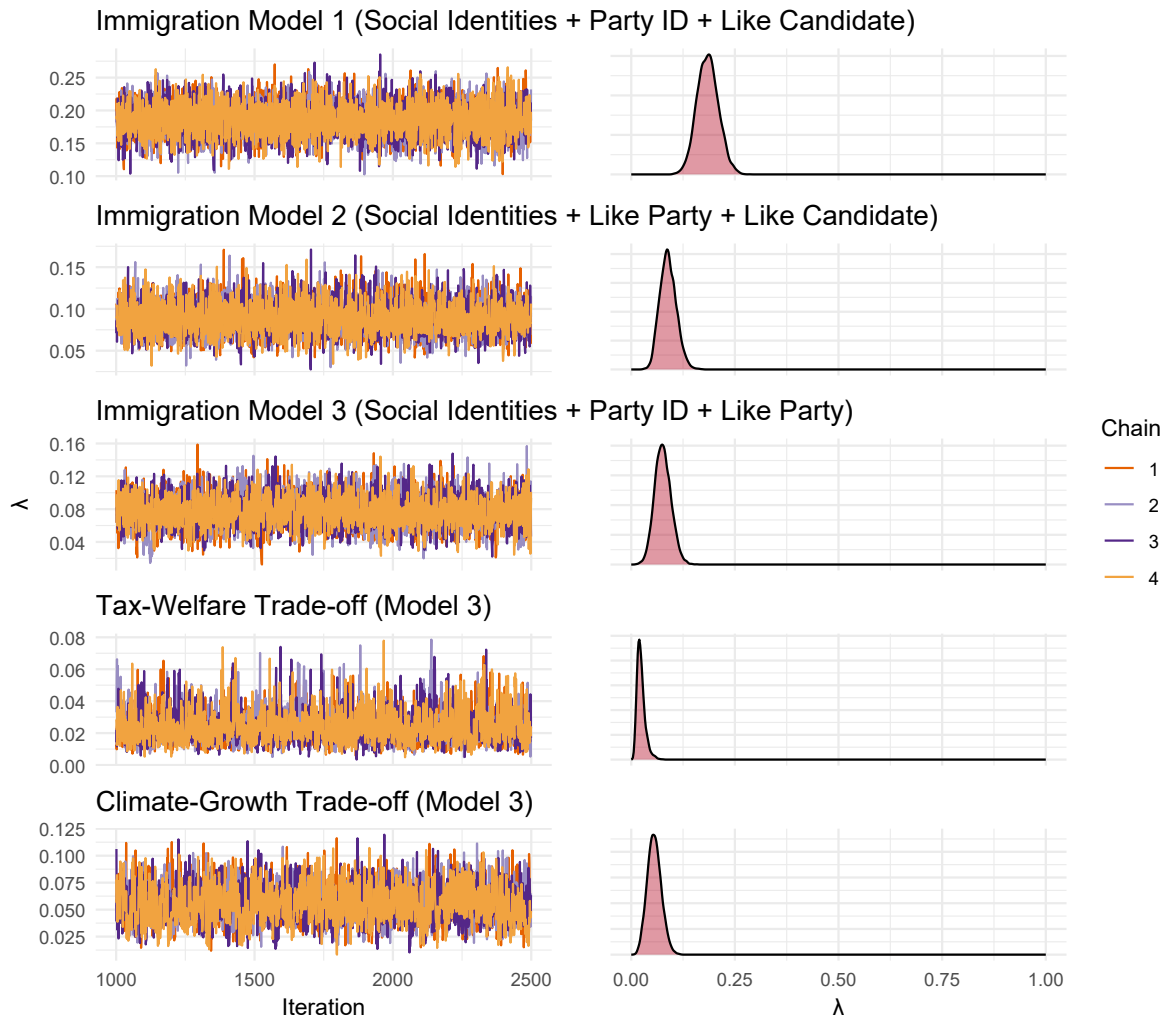


Figure 9 displays the trace and density plots for the mixing parameter of the three models described above, as well as the best-fitting model for the two trade-off issues. The left panels indicate that the chains for the post-warmup draws mixed well, and the

parameter distributions in the right panels are close to normal, suggesting no convergence issues.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 9: Trace and Density Plots of Mixture Parameters Across Different Models and Issues



The mixing parameters provide clear evidence: even in the worst-fitting candidate evaluation model, the rational component never accounts for more than a quarter of the influence on vote choice. For the best-fitting model on the immigration policy, the rational component — including all three theories of rational voting — accounts for only about 10% of voting behavior. The remaining majority of approximately 90% is driven by the affective component. This pattern is not only characteristic of immigration policy but also robust across the two trade-off issues, where the affective component is even

<sup>25</sup>In all models analyzed here and in subsequent analyses, including all their parameters, there were no signs of convergence problems. The trace and density plots showed no issues, and none of the parameters had an effective sample size of less than 5% of the total sample size. Additionally, no Monte Carlo errors exceeded 5% of the posterior standard deviation, and all R-hat values were below 1.05.

more dominant. For the tax-welfare trade-off, the share of the rational component is as low as 3%. These findings provide strong empirical support for the affective dominance hypothesis. They confirm the assertion of C. Achen and Bartels (2017, p.299) that "for most citizens, most of the time, party and group loyalties are the primary drivers of vote choices." This holds true not only in the U.S. context but also in the exceptionally hard case analyzed here, given the fragmented and polarized party system, proportional electoral representation, and the turbulent realignment tendencies following the migration crisis. Despite the normative appeal of classical rational choice theory, the evidence suggests that voting behavior is not adequately explained by it. It is time to face this reality once and for all.

Table 10 in the Appendix summarizes the results from the best-fitting model, including mean estimates and 95% credible intervals for all model parameters. However, the coefficients within the two components could only be interpreted meaningfully if the variables were independent of each other (C. H. Achen, 2005). Since I explicitly assumed that short-term affection serves as a mediating factor, the effects of more durable social identities and rational factors are limited to their direct impact on vote choice. To investigate whether there is a mediated relationship, I conducted an auxiliary mediation analysis. The results, showing some examples where indirect effects are most likely to occur, are summarized in Table 2.<sup>26</sup> As the results show, all examples exhibit statistically significant average causal mediation effects (ACME), while the remaining average direct effects (ADE) remain significant in only 3 out of the 6 tested cases. Consequently, in an adapted version of the conditional choice mixture model, I omit short-term affection variables to obtain an accurate representation of the total effects for hard and easy issue voting.

Relying on an underspecified model that omits theoretically relevant short-term affection variables could be problematic if it results in a significantly worse fit to the data. Indeed, as shown in the lowest row of Table 9, an affective component that includes only party identification, national identity, and subjective class identification provides the poorest model fit among the four tested combinations. However, the lower panel of Figure 8 shows that the posterior predictions still align closely with the actual survey data. At first glance, the underspecified model appears to fit the data even better, especially since it resolves the issues with differentiating between FDP and CDU supporters. However, the larger uncertainty estimates for the AfD suggest why the model performs worse overall. Although the credible intervals still encompass the actual vote

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<sup>26</sup>Note that in the subsequent analysis I focus on Downsian issue voting and social identities for two reasons. First, my remaining hypotheses address hard and easy issue voting. Second, interpreting the coefficients for retrospective voting and prospective selection is still not meaningful because, unlike with the scaling models for position-saliency measurements, I cannot control for the confounding effect of party identification on their relationship with vote choice. For social identities, this issue does not arise, as party identification is incorporated within the same model component.

Table 2: Summary Results of Mediation Analysis

Party	Issue	Mediation Link	ACME	ADE	Prop Mediated
AfD	Immigration	National Identity			
		→ Like AfD	0.02***	-0.01	1.36*
		→ Vote AfD	(0.02; 0.03)	(-0.02; 0.00)	(0.81; 4.71)
AfD	Immigration	Subjective Class Identification			
		→ Like AfD	-0.01***	0.01	1.97
		→ Vote AfD	(-0.02; -0.01)	(-0.01; 0.02)	(-16.9; 15.4)
AfD	Immigration	Position-Saliency Distance			
		→ Like AfD	-0.01***	-0.01**	0.48***
		→ Vote AfD	(-0.01; -0.01)	(-0.02; 0.00)	(0.32; 0.77)
Greens	Immigration	National Identity			
		→ Like Greens	-0.03***	-0.03*	0.50***
		→ Vote Greens	(-0.04; -0.02)	(-0.07; 0.00)	(0.32; 0.89)
Greens	Immigration	Position-Saliency Distance			
		→ Like Greens	-0.02***	-0.01**	0.66***
		→ Vote Greens	(-0.03; -0.02)	(-0.02; 0.00)	(0.50; 0.86)
LINKE	Tax-Welfare	Subjective Class Identification			
		→ Like AfD	-0.01**	-0.02	0.39**
		→ Vote AfD	(-0.02; 0.00)	(-0.04; 0.00)	(0.14; 1.06)
LINKE	Tax-Welfare	Position-Saliency Distance			
		→ Like Greens	-0.01***	-0.01**	0.60***
		→ Vote Greens	(-0.02; -0.01)	(-0.02; 0.00)	(0.45; 0.84)

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001;

parentheses show 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals;

calculation relied upon the mediation package for R (Dustin et al., 2014).

share within the sample, the increased uncertainty carries more weight because the AfD received the highest vote share. Despite this, the predictions are sufficiently accurate to allow reliable inferences about the total effect of hard and easy issue voting on electoral support.

Table 3: Summary Results of Model 3 on Immigration Issue Omitting Mediating Short-term Affection Variables

DV: Vote Choice	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens	LINKE	AfD
<b>Rational Choice</b>						
Intercept*	-2.79 [-4.13; -1.57]	0.06 [-1.16; 1.20]	-0.44 [-1.63; 0.67]	0.98 [-0.62; 2.61]	1.93 [0.75; 3.11]	0.26 [-1.12; 1.63]
Position-Saliency	-0.25 [-0.42; -0.10]	-0.15 [-0.27; -0.03]	-0.22 [-0.43; -0.02]	-0.36 [-0.73; -0.18]	-0.33 [-0.54; -0.14]	-0.21 [-0.49; 0.05]
Prospective Issue	1.91 [1.08; 2.81]	3.05 [2.23; 4.00]	2.55 [1.46; 3.77]	0.98 [-0.23; 2.27]	2.69 [1.64; 3.82]	3.58 [2.71; 4.53]
Retrospective Government Performance*	0.45 [0.31; 0.61]	-0.01 [-0.14; 0.13]	0.06 [-0.12; 0.21]	-0.01 [-0.23; 0.17]	-0.25 [-0.42; -0.10]	-0.23 [-0.37; -0.10]
<b>Affective Choice</b>						
Intercept*	-0.27 [-1.74; 1.17]	0.43 [-1.18; 2.02]	-1.44 [-2.93; -0.01]	0.55 [-1.21; 2.30]	1.51 [0.05; 2.95]	-0.78 [-2.30; 0.74]
National Identity*	-0.12 [-0.43; 0.19]	0.02 [-0.33; 0.36]	0.28 [0.01; 0.57]	-0.30 [-0.70; 0.06]	-0.23 [-0.55; 0.09]	0.34 [-0.01; 0.68]
Subjective Class Identification*	0.10 [-0.21; 0.40]	-0.23 [-0.54; 0.08]	0.34 [0.06; 0.62]	0.03 [-0.38; 0.38]	-0.19 [-0.49; 0.12]	-0.04 [-0.36; 0.28]
Party Identification	3.19 [2.35; 4.13]	3.97 [3.09; 4.96]	3.27 [2.27; 4.37]	3.59 [2.59; 4.71]	3.74 [2.85; 4.77]	4.48 [3.59; 5.49]
Mixture Parameter $\lambda$	0.47 [0.42; 0.52]					
N	1521					

\* Zero-sum coefficients; square brackets show 95% Credible Intervals.

In the following, I will first focus on Downsian issue voting before discussing the results related to social identities. Table 3 presents the summary of results for immigration policy from the model that excludes mediating short-term party attachments.<sup>27</sup> The data shows that the total effects of position-saliency coefficients are statistically significant for all parties except the AfD. This is particularly noteworthy because the scaling model's posterior voter distribution closely matches the AfD's posterior party placement, and adding saliency should benefit the AfD even more due to its strong issue emphasis. This finding is also consistent across the two trade-off issues. For all mainstream parties, hard issue voting has a statistically significant total effect in the expected direction. Specifically, a greater distance combined with less issue emphasis decreases the likelihood of voting for a party. In contrast, Downsian issue voting does not significantly influence the vote decision for the AfD. Thus, one thing we can derive so far is that a populist vote is not a hard issue vote. In the case analyzed here, attributing right-wing populist support to issue proximity would constitute a fallacy.

Examining voting behavior through social identities reveals a different perspective. When considering subjective class identification in terms of realistic interest theories, it becomes clear that this does not explain support for the AfD. The coefficients fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance across all three issues analyzed. This indicates that higher levels of subjective class identification do not significantly decrease the likelihood of voting for the AfD compared to the average impact across all parties.<sup>28</sup> Thus, there is no evidence supporting the importance of status anxiety as suggested by previous literature. Since the analysis here focuses on most-likely issue voters rather than a representative sample of the electorate, this does not entirely rule out the possibility of such an effect. However, the argument loses much of its appeal because status anxiety is typically associated with either cultural struggles related to immigration or traditional economic policies that demand compensation for the negative externalities of globalization (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Two issues explicitly related to these concerns were examined, and no indication was found that status grievances in these realms affect support for the AfD. Among the trade-off issues, only the borderline left-wing populist party, the LINKE, is more likely to receive votes from individuals identifying with a lower social class. However, this is likely more indicative of its traditional left-wing ideology rather than a specific populist appeal, as both issues involve economic policies.

In my theoretical discussion, I identify national identity as a key factor influencing support for the AfD. Indeed, the analysis reveals that a strong sense of national identity is associated with a higher likelihood of voting for the right-wing populist party. This

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<sup>27</sup>Tables 11 and 12 in the Appendix provide summaries for the two trade-off issues.

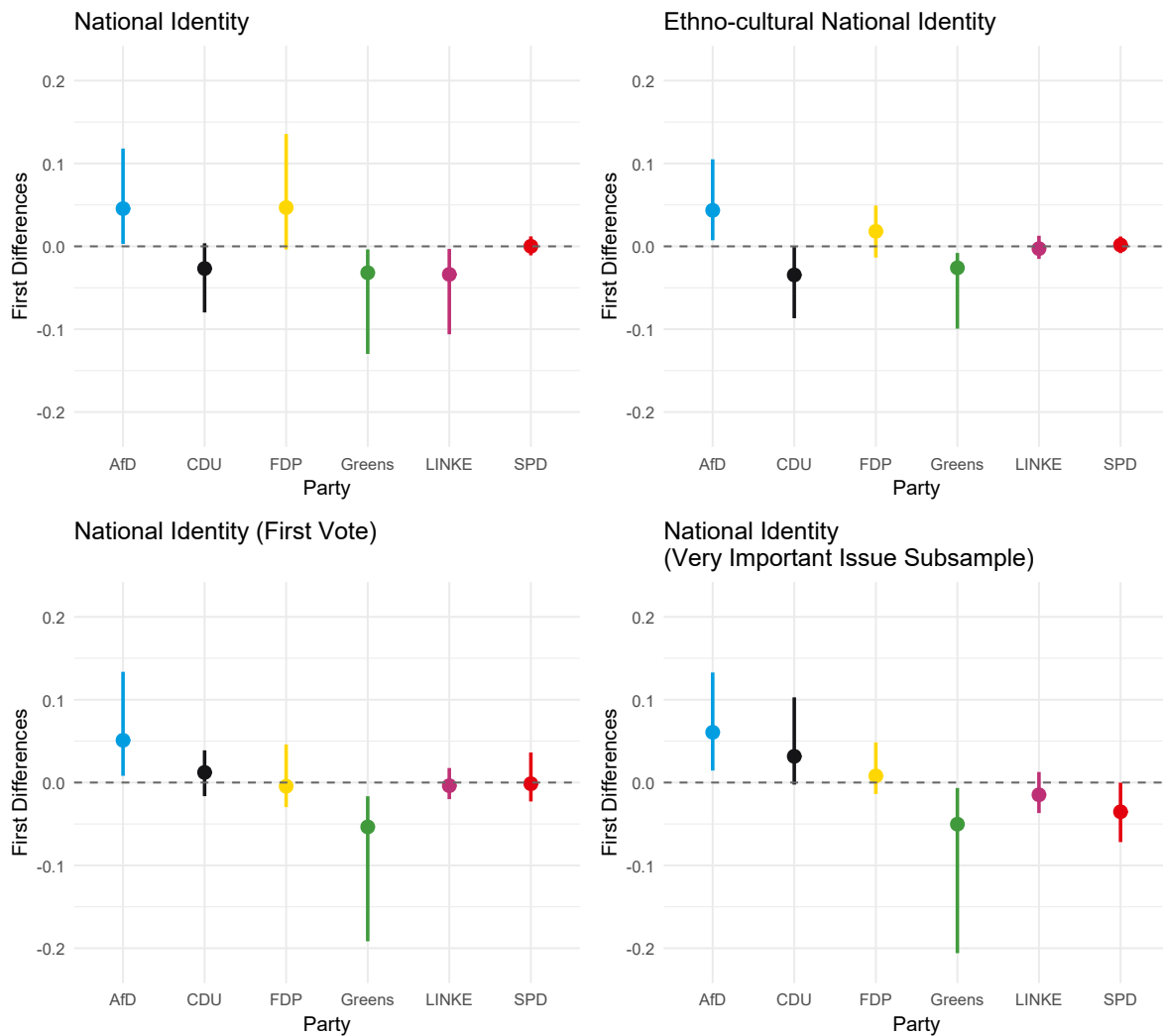
<sup>28</sup>As a rule of thumb, the zero-sum constrained coefficients in the models exert a significant impact on the voting probability for a party if the credible intervals for the coefficients, including both negative and positive values, do not extend beyond -0.1 or 0.1, respectively.

effect is statistically significant across all issues, not just immigration policy but also the two seemingly unrelated trade-off issues. The appeal of populist parties like the AfD lies in their ability to offer simplistic solutions that can be flexibly applied to a wide range of issues, often leveraging national identity. Considering immigration policy, ideological arguments could provide a competing explanation for the AfD's success, namely that it stems from its radical right position, similar to that of the LINKE on economic policies. Yet, such an account cannot explain the impact of national identity on the trade-off issues, which, at face value, are not related to a strong cultural identification with Germany. The easy issue voting argument, however, is able to explain how the populist appeal to national identity extends to economic and climate policies. For example, the AfD uses symbolic arguments to advocate that welfare benefits should be reserved for German nationals or that Germany should focus on domestic issues rather than cosmopolitan concerns like global warming and financing costly EU climate projects. In essence, the AfD's strategy involves employing vague, symbolic solutions to appeal to national identity across various policy areas. This approach not only simplifies complex issues but also provides easy voting options across multiple policy domains.

The national identity in-group favoritism hypothesis suggests that not only right-wing populist parties but also center-right parties can benefit from appealing to national identity. This idea receives some tentative support when we examine immigration policy. All else equal, higher levels of national identity also increase the likelihood of voting for the FDP compared to the average across all parties. In contrast, this effect does not hold for the CDU. This result aligns with the CDU's shift toward less restrictive immigration rhetoric under Chancellor Angela Merkel, who famously promoted the message "Wir schaffen das" in response to the migration crisis. At the same time, higher levels of national identity decrease the likelihood of voting for the Greens. This is consistent with the theoretical expectation, given that the AfD often portrays the Greens as representatives of the disliked elite.

To better understand the effect sizes for the central immigration issue, Figure 10 displays the first differences in predicted probabilities of voting for each party for high levels of national identity (5) compared to low national identity values (1), holding all other variables at their observed values. The top left panel shows that having a strong national identity, as opposed to a weak one, increases the probability of voting for the AfD by about 5 pp. on average, with a credible interval ranging from roughly 1 to 12 pp. This effect is quite substantial and is similar for the non-populist FDP, although the uncertainty estimates for the latter include some small negative values. On the other hand, a higher level of national identity generally decreases the likelihood of voting for the Greens and LINKE by an average of about 3 pp. The credible interval for the Greens suggests that, for some individuals, this effect is very large, leading to a decrease of up to 13 pp.

Figure 10: First Differences in Predicted Probabilities for Vote Choice



To test the robustness of the results, I repeated the first differences simulation using the first vote on the ballot, which follows a majority voting system in Germany. Additionally, I used a different subsample of voters who consider immigration policy very important, applying the same filter used for the two trade-off issues. The results, shown in the bottom left and right panels, indicate that the effects for the AfD and Greens remain consistent with the main model. However, the effect for the FDP disappears and interestingly shifts to the CDU in the alternative subsample, while no party other than the AfD benefits from strong national identity in the first vote. This finding could suggest that, during the analyzed period, the AfD faced little competition in appealing to national identity, which may explain why there is no robust positive effect for other center-right parties. Thus, the national identity in-group favoritism hypothesis is consistently supported only for the right-wing populist AfD. The results neither confirm nor rule out whether this hypothesis applies to center-right parties under different circum-



stances. What is clear is that national identity has a significant polarizing effect on support for the Greens and the AfD.

The top right panel of Figure 10 shows the first differences related to the ethno-cultural nationalism out-group derogation hypothesis. As anticipated, incorporating out-group derogation into national identity's in-group favoritism does not change the effect for the AfD. Moreover, the polarizing effect between the Greens and AfD remains consistent. However, unlike the second vote samples shown in the top left and bottom right panels, where one of the two center-right parties showed increased electoral support from strong national identities, this effect does not apply to increased ethno-cultural nationalism among likely issue voters. Only the AfD gains significant support from social identities that include xenophobic elements. These results tentatively support the hypothesis that right-wing populist parties are the only political actors benefiting from the out-group derogation associated with ethno-cultural nationalism.

In conclusion, the second main part of the analysis offers valuable insights into micro-level voting behavior. It shows that the affective component, which includes party and group loyalties, has a dominant influence on voting choices, accounting for at least 90% of observed behavior across three diverse policy issues among the subgroups of most-likely issue voters. This strongly supports the affective dominance hypothesis and highlights that voting behavior is primarily driven by emotions rather than rational choice. Regarding populism and issue voting, three key patterns emerge: First, while hard issue voting affects mainstream parties by reducing support with greater issue distance and less emphasis, it does not significantly impact the AfD, suggesting that right-wing populist support is not driven by issue proximity but by offering easy issue voting options through symbolic and vaguely defined policy goals. Second, a strong national identity increases the likelihood of voting for the AfD by about 5 pp. Yet, it is unclear whether center-right could benefit similarly from national identity given that the results are not robust in this regard. Lastly, incorporating out-group derogation into the national identity framework confirms that only the AfD significantly gains from ethno-cultural nationalism, with effects similar to those of pure in-group favoritism.

The mixed results regarding the potential for center-right parties to benefit from appealing to in-group favoring national identities point to a very interesting avenue for subsequent research. One aspect to consider is whether parties could credibly appeal to certain social identities or whether their prior policy stances and appeals, such as those to a cosmopolitan pro-European identity, would constrain their credibility with constituencies that uphold strong, dormant national identities. Additionally, unlike the U.S. two-party system, where it is clear which party aligns with strong female identities on abortion, i.e., the Democrats with their pro-choice position, it would be particularly intriguing to explore whether certain parties in multi-party systems can "own" a specific social identity. If they can, then appealing to national identity might be too late

for mainstream center-right parties after a successful right-wing populist party has already emerged and established itself. If they cannot, then offering an easy issue voting option, rather than hard issue policy positions, might still be effective.

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## Appendix

Table 4: Results of Multi-Class Text Classification Hyperparameter Optimization

Epochs	Learning Rate	Avg Macro F1-Score	SD Macro F1-Score
5	3e-4	0.008	0.003
5	3e-5	0.639	0.007
5	3e-6	0.593	0.003
10	3e-4	0.006	0.000
10	3e-5	0.640	0.007
10	3e-6	0.625	0.005
15	3e-4	0.006	0.000
15	3e-5	0.635	0.006
15	3e-6	0.631	0.005

Table 6: Results of Stance Detection Hyperparameter Optimization

Issue	Round	Learning Rate	Epochs	Macro F1	SD
Environment	1	3e-4	5	0.17	0.05
Environment	1	3e-5	5	0.44	0.08
Environment	1	3e-6	5	0.25	0.08
Environment	1	3e-4	10	0.16	0.03
Environment	1	3e-5	10	0.46	0.06
Environment	1	3e-6	10	0.33	0.05
Environment	1	3e-4	15	0.17	0.04
Environment	1	3e-5	15	0.45	0.05
Environment	1	3e-6	15	0.41	0.08
Environment	2	1e-5	5	0.44	0.02
Environment	2	3e-5	5	0.49	0.08
Environment	2	5e-5	5	0.47	0.06
Environment	2	1e-5	10	0.43	0.03
Environment	2	3e-5	10	0.51	0.03
Environment	2	5e-5	10	0.52	0.08
Environment	2	1e-5	15	0.48	0.05
Environment	2	3e-5	15	0.50	0.04
Environment	2	5e-5	15	0.49	0.09
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-4	5	0.20	0.04

Table 6 ctd from previous page

Issue	Round	Learning Rate	Epochs	Macro F1	SD
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-5	5	0.38	0.04
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-6	5	0.19	0.04
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-4	10	0.20	0.04
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-5	10	0.46	0.08
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-6	10	0.27	0.07
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-4	15	0.20	0.04
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-5	15	0.44	0.06
Immigration and Refugee Issues	1	3e-6	15	0.34	0.11
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	1e-5	5	0.35	0.03
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	3e-5	5	0.42	0.05
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	5e-5	5	0.44	0.07
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	1e-5	10	0.43	0.03
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	3e-5	10	0.48	0.07
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	5e-5	10	0.48	0.04
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	1e-5	15	0.48	0.02
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	3e-5	15	0.51	0.05
Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	5e-5	15	0.49	0.04
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-4	5	0.23	0.02

Table 6 ctd from previous page

Issue	Round	Learning Rate	Epochs	Macro F1	SD
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-5	5	0.45	0.10
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-6	5	0.24	0.03
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-4	10	0.24	0.03
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-5	10	0.50	0.09
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-6	10	0.24	0.03
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-4	15	0.24	0.03
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-5	15	0.51	0.10
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	1	3e-6	15	0.25	0.04
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	1e-5	5	0.37	0.06
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	3e-5	5	0.46	0.06
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	5e-5	5	0.39	0.07
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	1e-5	10	0.40	0.05
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	3e-5	10	0.51	0.04
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	5e-5	10	0.49	0.08
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	1e-5	15	0.45	0.04
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	3e-5	15	0.53	0.03
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	2	5e-5	15	0.50	0.05
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-4	5	0.19	0.05

Table 6 ctd from previous page

Issue	Round	Learning Rate	Epochs	Macro F1	SD
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-5	5	0.44	0.09
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-6	5	0.19	0.05
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-4	10	0.19	0.05
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-5	10	0.51	0.05
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-6	10	0.26	0.07
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-4	15	0.19	0.05
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-5	15	0.50	0.07
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	1	3e-6	15	0.34	0.07
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	1e-5	5	0.43	0.05
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	3e-5	5	0.50	0.07
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	5e-5	5	0.55	0.04
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	1e-5	10	0.51	0.04
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	3e-5	10	0.56	0.03
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	5e-5	10	0.56	0.04
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	1e-5	15	0.53	0.02
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	3e-5	15	0.51	0.02
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	2	5e-5	15	0.57	0.04
Social Welfare	1	3e-4	5	0.23	0.10
Social Welfare	1	3e-5	5	0.41	0.04

Table 6 ctd from previous page

Issue	Round	Learning Rate	Epochs	Macro F1	SD
Social Welfare	1	3e-6	5	0.23	0.08
Social Welfare	1	3e-4	10	0.19	0.04
Social Welfare	1	3e-5	10	0.48	0.04
Social Welfare	1	3e-6	10	0.28	0.07
Social Welfare	1	3e-4	15	0.17	0.05
Social Welfare	1	3e-5	15	0.47	0.06
Social Welfare	1	3e-6	15	0.36	0.08
Social Welfare	2	1e-5	5	0.32	0.04
Social Welfare	2	3e-5	5	0.46	0.09
Social Welfare	2	5e-5	5	0.47	0.07
Social Welfare	2	1e-5	10	0.41	0.05
Social Welfare	2	3e-5	10	0.47	0.07
Social Welfare	2	5e-5	10	0.42	0.12
Social Welfare	2	1e-5	15	0.45	0.06
Social Welfare	2	3e-5	15	0.46	0.05
Social Welfare	2	5e-5	15	0.43	0.04



Table 5: Performance of Multi-Class Text Classification on Test Set

Category	F1-Score	N
Non-Policy	0.52	290
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	0.60	315
Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties	0.60	305
Health	0.76	197
Agriculture	0.74	95
Labor and Employment	0.65	252
Education	0.74	229
Environment	0.61	143
Energy	0.79	203
Immigration and Refugee Issues	0.70	101
Transportation	0.75	127
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	0.67	105
Law, Crime, and Family Issues	0.54	173
Social Welfare	0.60	352
Community Development and Housing Issues	0.69	147
Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce	0.68	322
Defense	0.68	92
Space, Science, Technology, and Communication	0.68	152
Foreign Trade	0.58	55
International Affairs and Foreign Aid	0.67	232
Government Operations	0.53	176
Public Lands, Water Management, and Territorial Issues	0.62	22
European Union	0.61	121
Cultural Policy Issues	0.74	93
Macro F1-Score	0.66	4,299
Accuracy	0.65	4,299

Table 7: Performance of Stance Detection on Test Set

Issue	Category	F1-Score	N
Environment	Right-Wing/Anti	0.31	19
	Neutral/Other	0.61	38
	Left-Wing/Favor	0.58	33
	Macro F1-Score	0.50	90
	Accuracy	0.54	90
Immigration and Refugee Issues	Right-Wing/Anti	0.62	28
	Neutral/Other	0.44	25
	Left-Wing/Favor	0.65	37
	Macro F1-Score	0.57	90
	Accuracy	0.59	90
Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	Right-Wing/Anti	0.50	20
	Neutral/Other	0.72	51
	Left-Wing/Favor	0.58	19
	Macro F1-Score	0.60	90
	Accuracy	0.63	90
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	Right-Wing/Anti	0.49	27
	Neutral/Other	0.58	38
	Left-Wing/Favor	0.48	25
	Macro F1-Score	0.52	90
	Accuracy	0.52	90
Social Welfare	Right-Wing/Anti	0.36	20
	Neutral/Other	0.62	38
	Left-Wing/Favor	0.58	32
	Macro F1-Score	0.52	90
	Accuracy	0.56	90

Figure 11: Party Positions on Tax-Welfare Trade-off

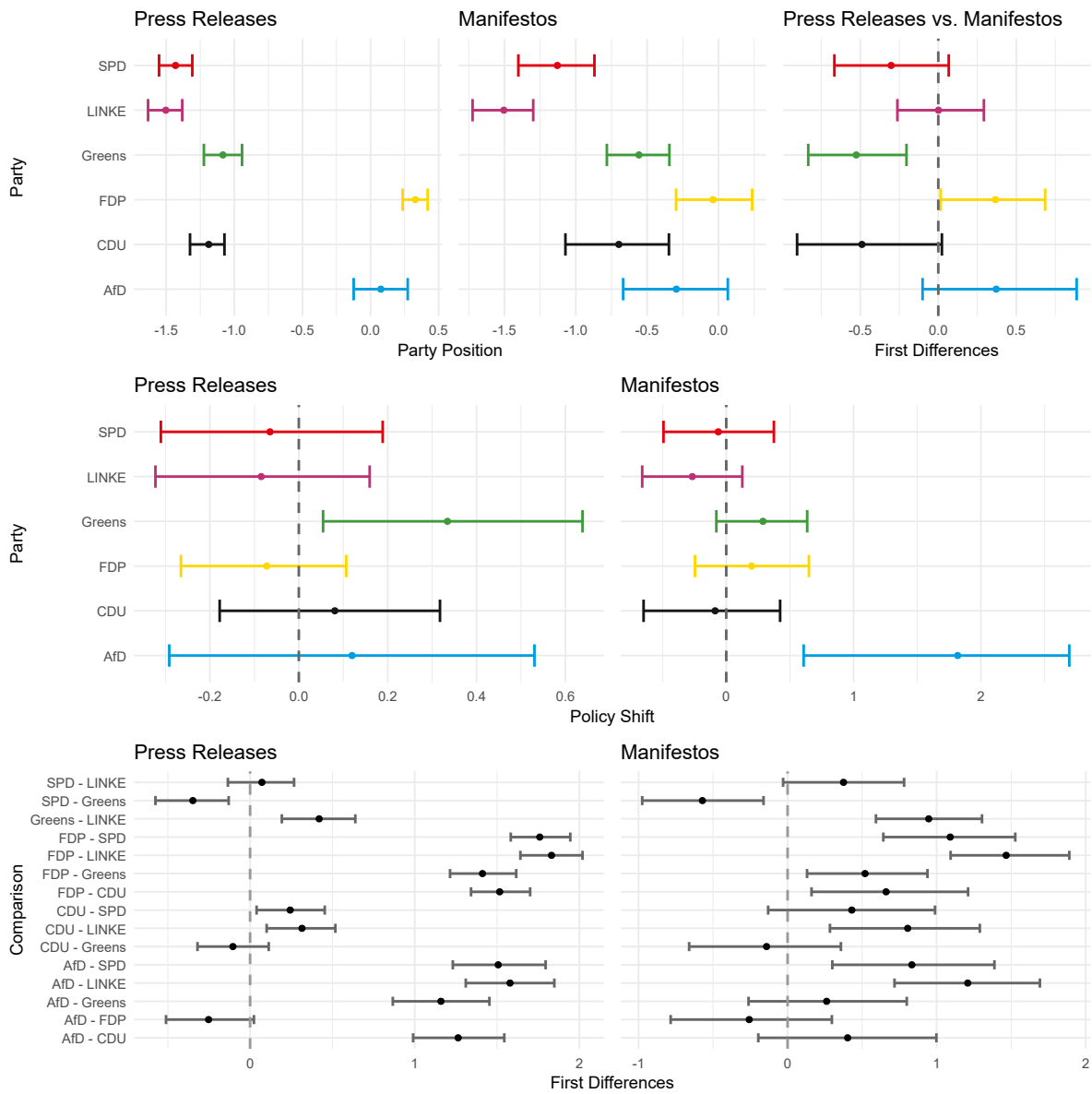


Figure 12: Party Positions on Environment-Growth Trade-off

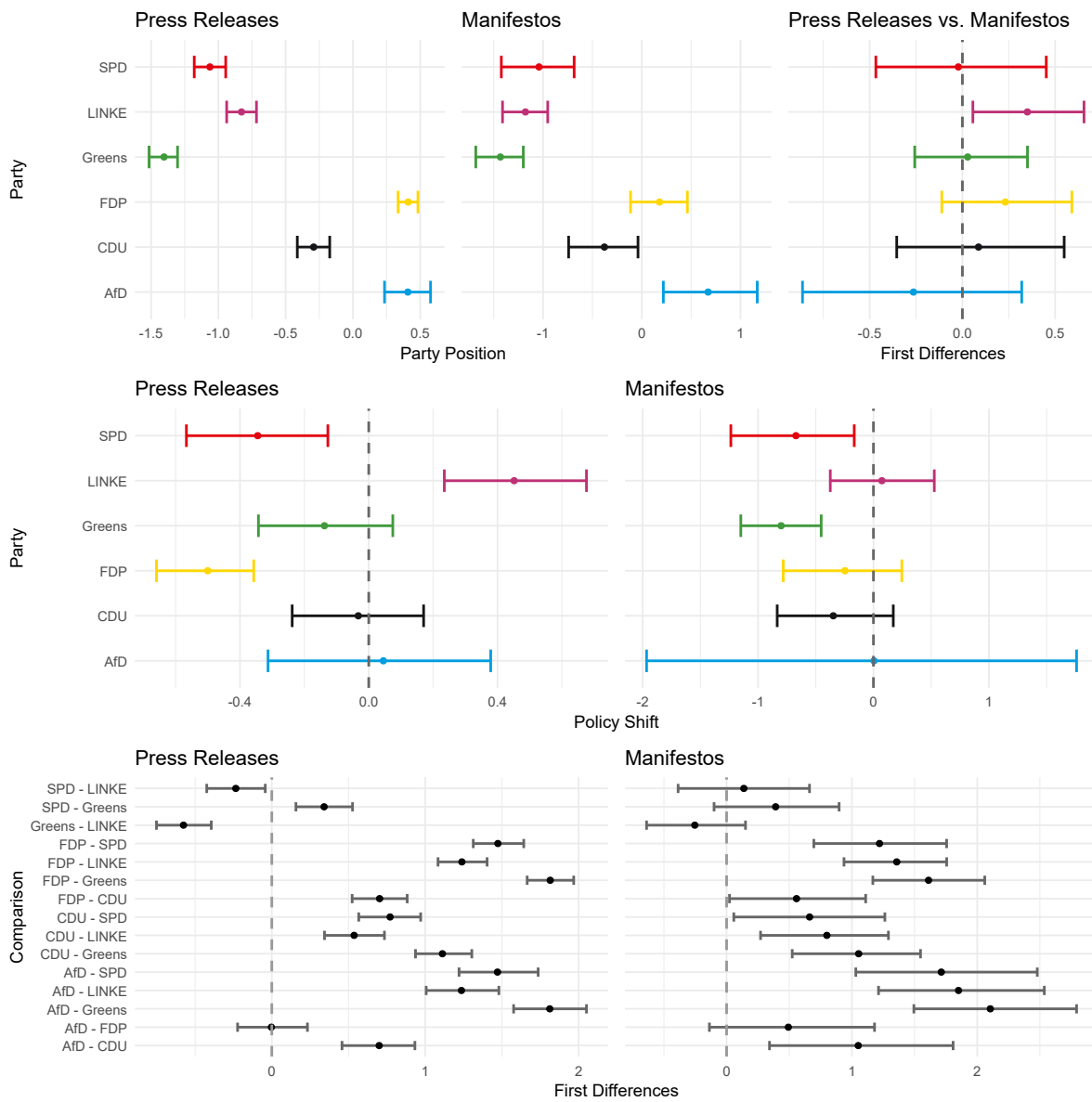


Table 8: Translated Question Wording and Response Scales from the GLES

Wave	Question Wording	Response Scale
8	At the general election you could cast two votes. The first one for a candidate from your district and the second one for a party. What did you mark on your ballot?	Categorical: CDU/CSU; SPD; FDP; Greens; LINKE; AfD; Other
7	What is your personal opinion on "immigration possibilities for foreigners," and where would you place each of the following parties on this matter?	Ordered: 1 = Facilitate immigration possibilities 7 = Restrict immigration possibilities
7	What is your personal opinion on the "trade-off between prioritizing either tax cuts or more expansive welfare benefits" and where would you place each of the following parties on this matter?	Ordered (rescaled): 1 = Increase in welfare benefits at the cost of increase in taxes 7 = Tax cuts at the cost of decrease in welfare benefits
7	What is your personal opinion on the "trade-off between prioritizing either economic growth or fighting climate change" and where would you place each of the following parties on this matter?	Ordered: 1 = Prioritize fighting climate change at the expense of economic growth 7 = Prioritize economic growth at the expense of fighting climate change
7	What is in your opinion currently the most important political problem in Germany?	Open-ended question format
7	And which party is in your opinion able to handle this problem the best?	Categorical: CDU/CSU; SPD; FDP; Greens; LINKE; AfD; Other; All parties equally; No party

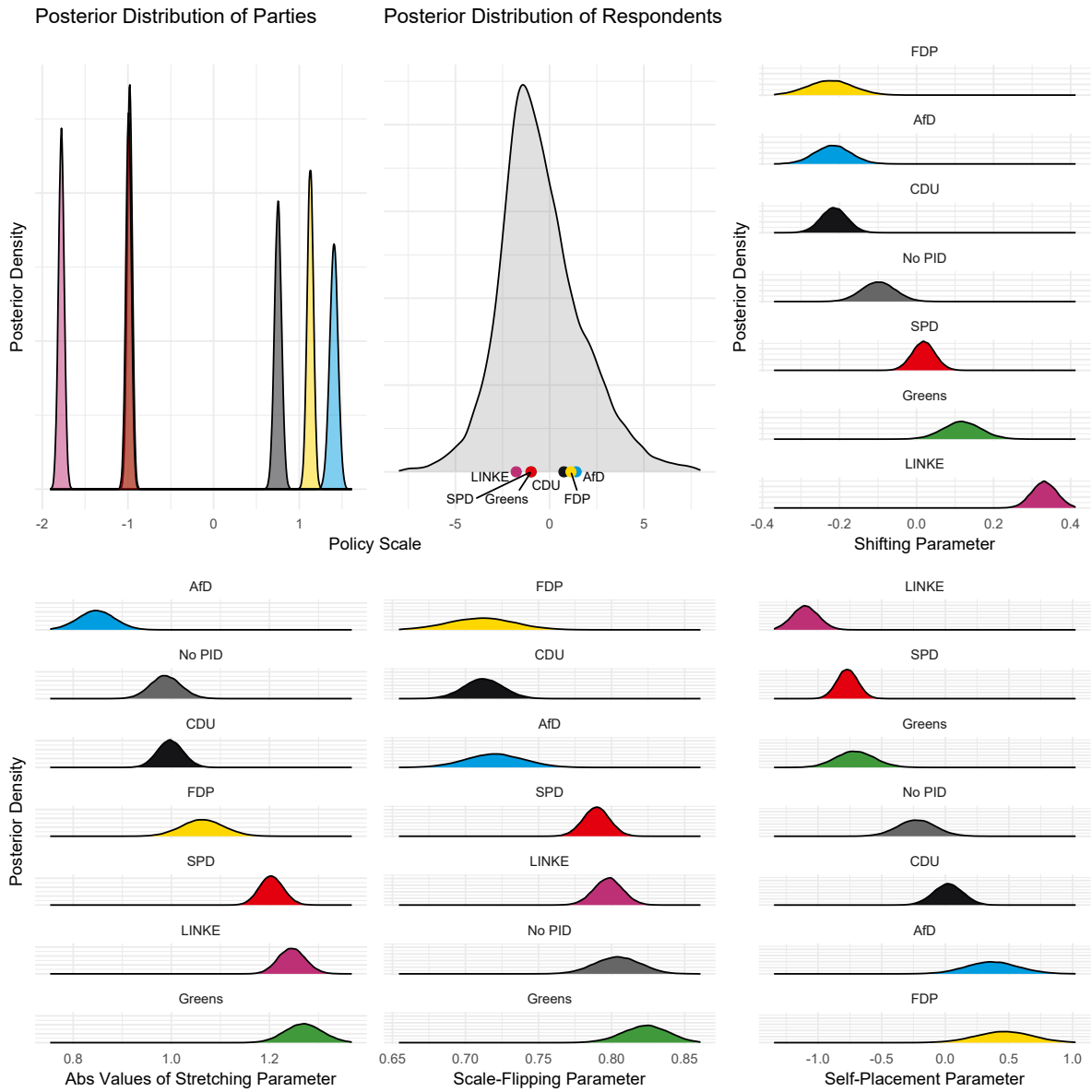
Table 8 ctd from previous page

Wave	Question Wording	Response Scale
8	<p>Item battery: How important are the following issues to you personally?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Immigration possibilities for foreigners</li> <li>- Welfare benefits and taxes</li> <li>- Economic growth and fighting climate change</li> </ul>	<p>Ordered:</p> <p>1 = Very important</p> <p>5 = Not important at all</p>
7	<p>Are you rather satisfied or dissatisfied with the accomplishments of the government over the last four years?</p>	<p>Ordered:</p> <p>1 = Completely dissatisfied</p> <p>11 = Completely satisfied</p>
9	<p>Item battery: National identity as social identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It is very important to me to be German</li> <li>- When talking about Germans, I say "we" more often than "they"</li> <li>- The term "German" describes me well</li> </ul>	<p>Ordered:</p> <p>1 = Does not apply at all</p> <p>5 = Fully applies</p>
9	<p>Item battery: Ethno-cultural nationality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Born in Germany</li> <li>- Having German ancestors</li> <li>- Spent the entire life in Germany</li> <li>- Sharing German norms</li> <li>- Speaking German without accent</li> </ul>	<p>Ordered:</p> <p>1 = Not important at all</p> <p>5 = Very important</p>
1	<p>To which of the following class would you categorize yourself as?</p>	<p>Ordered:</p> <p>1 = Lower class</p> <p>6 = Upper class</p>
8	<p>Do you - in general terms - feel close to a certain party? And if so, which one?</p>	<p>Categorical:</p> <p>CDU/CSU; SPD; FDP; Greens; LINKE; AfD; Other; No party</p>

Table 8 ctd from previous page

Wave	Question Wording	Response Scale
7	<p>Item battery: In general terms, what do you think of each of the following parties?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDU</li> <li>- SPD</li> <li>- FDP</li> <li>- Greens</li> <li>- LINKE</li> <li>- AfD</li> </ul>	<p>Ordered:            1 = Have a very negative opinion of the party            11 = Have a very positive opinion of the party</p>
7	<p>Item battery: In general terms, what do you think of each of the following politicians?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Angela Merkel (CDU)</li> <li>- Martin Schulz (SPD)</li> <li>- Christian Lindner (FDP)</li> <li>- Katrin Göring-Eckardt (Greens)</li> <li>- Sahra Wagenknecht (LINKE)</li> <li>- Frauke Petry (AfD)</li> </ul>	<p>Ordered:            1= Have a very negative opinion of the politician            11 = Have a very positive opinion of the politician</p>

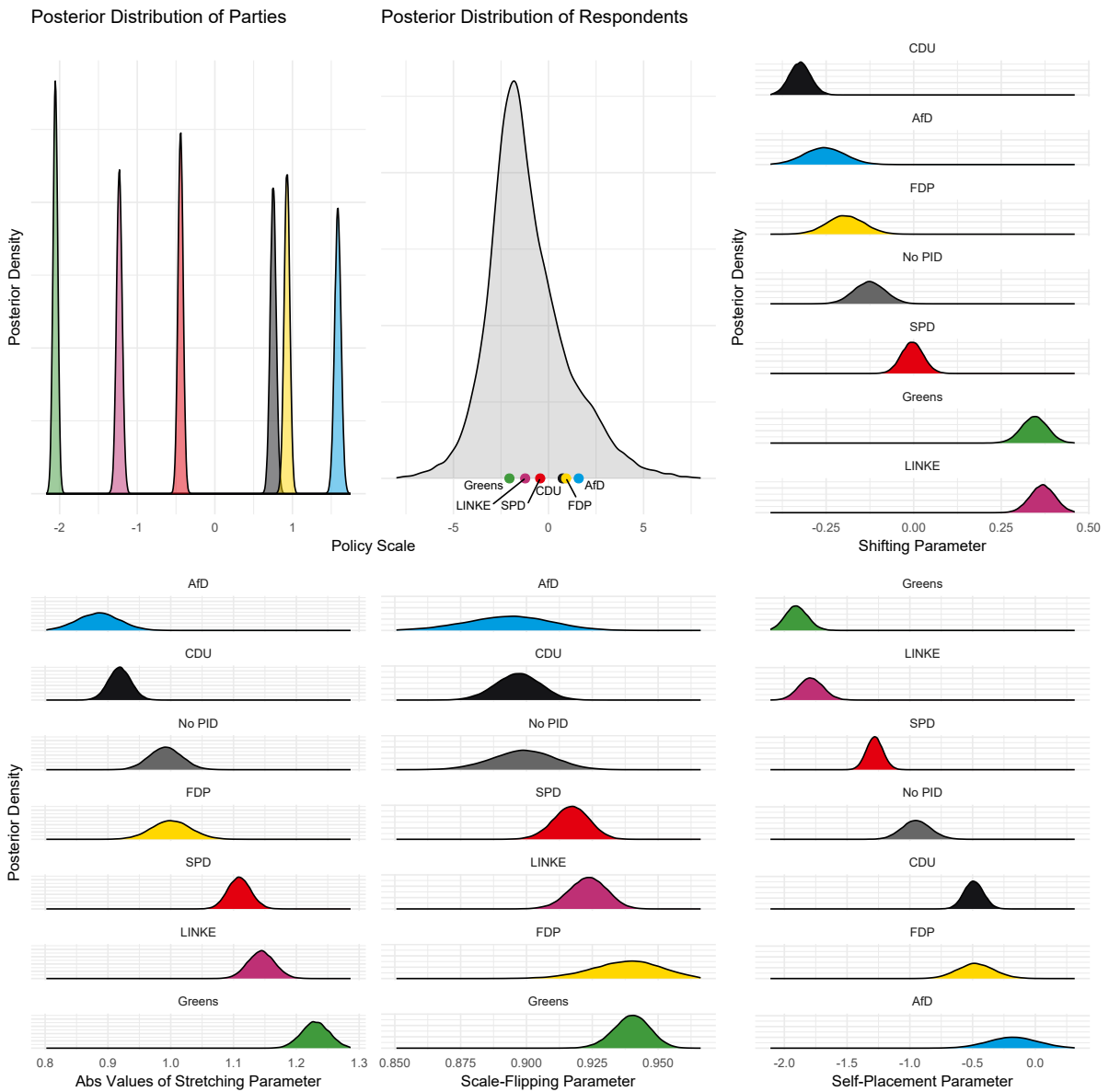
Figure 13: Results of Scaling Model on Tax-Welfare Trade-off



Note: Calculation relied upon the hbamr package for R (Bølstad, 2024a).



Figure 14: Results of Scaling Model on Environment-Growth Trade-off



Note: Calculation relied upon the hbamr package for R (Bølstad, 2024a).

Figure 15: Tile Plot of Position-Saliency Distance Measurement

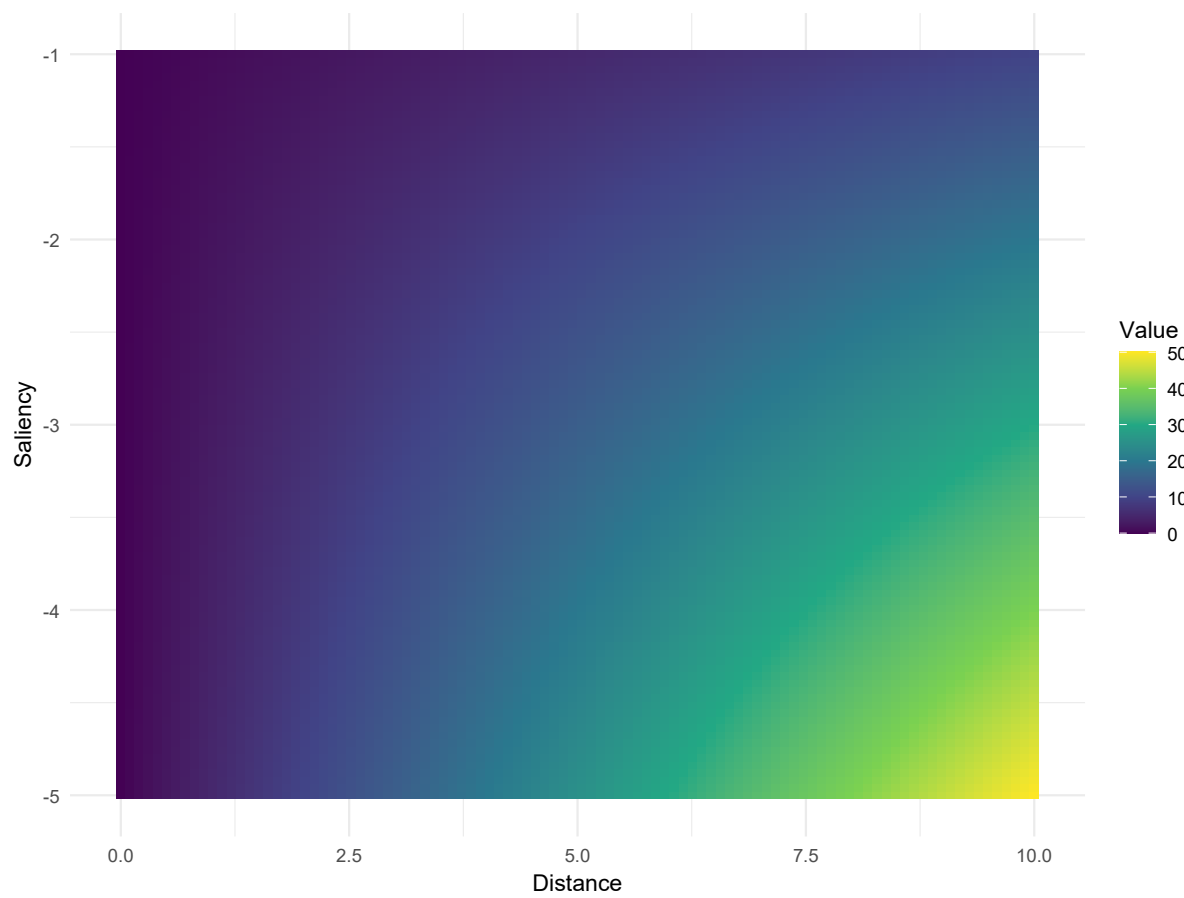


Table 9: Results of Model Evaluation

Affective Choice Component	LooIC	NEff Params	Pareto k >0.7	ELPD Diff
PID + LikeParty	1898.8 (72.9)	41.0 (3.7)	1	-
LikeParty + LikeCandidate	1955.7 (73.8)	42.4 (3.5)	2	-28.5 (14.8)
PID + LikeCandidate	2129.7 (73.5)	40.1 (2.6)	0	-115.5 (22.6)
PID	2559.9 (73.6)	31.7 (1.6)	1	-330.6 (26.8)

Note: Sets of chooser-specific social identity variables always included; calculation relied upon the loo package for R (Aki et al., 2024).

Table 10: Summary Results of Model 3 on Immigration Issue

DV: Vote Choice	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens	LINKE	AFD
<b>Rational Choice</b>						
Intercept*	-0.78 [-2.72; 1.14]	0.44 [-1.53; 2.36]	-0.36 [-2.85; 2.12]	0.12 [-2.67; 2.84]	0.78 [-1.45; 2.89]	-0.20 [-2.48; 2.13]
Position-Saliency	-0.23 [-0.61; 0.09]	-0.14 [-0.42; 0.12]	-0.23 [-1.54; 0.42]	-0.98 [-2.29; -0.13]	-0.24 [-0.64; 0.14]	-0.83 [-2.20; 0.01]
Distance	2.55 [1.01; 4.02]	1.81 [0.14; 3.30]	0.17 [-1.80; 2.22]	0.39 [-1.70; 2.42]	0.60 [-1.39; 2.42]	1.79 [0.30; 3.21]
Prospective Issue	0.46 [0.09; 0.96]	0.23 [-0.18; 0.68]	-0.81 [-2.17; 0.18]	-0.16 [-1.77; 0.72]	0.15 [-0.27; 0.64]	0.13 [-0.35; 0.65]
<b>Affective Choice</b>						
Intercept*	-0.32 [-1.63; 0.94]	0.96 [-0.24; 2.13]	-0.78 [-1.96; 0.36]	-0.26 [-1.69; 1.11]	0.28 [-1.06; 1.55]	0.12 [-1.25; 1.45]
National Identity*	-0.13 [-0.37; 0.10]	-0.05 [-0.27; 0.17]	0.19 [-0.03; 0.41]	-0.11 [-0.38; 0.16]	-0.03 [-0.30; 0.23]	0.14 [-0.15; 0.42]
Subjective	-0.05 [-0.25; 0.15]	-0.32 [-0.52; -0.12]	0.12 [-0.08; 0.31]	0.02 [-0.21; 0.25]	-0.05 [-0.26; 0.16]	0.28 [0.05; 0.51]
Class Identification*	0.95 [0.41; 1.53]	1.46 [0.98; 1.96]	1.51 [0.78; 2.30]	1.03 [0.31; 1.75]	0.83 [0.19; 1.47]	1.90 [0.89; 3.05]
Party Identification	1.05 [0.87; 1.25]	1.02 [0.85; 1.20]	0.99 [0.83; 1.16]	1.05 [0.86; 1.27]	1.01 [0.84; 1.22]	0.97 [0.81; 1.16]
<b>Short-term Party Affection</b>						
Mixture Parameter $\lambda$	0.08 [0.04; 0.12]					
N	1521					

\* Zero-sum coefficients; square brackets show 95% Credible Intervals.

Table 11: Summary Results of Best Model on Tax-Welfare Trade-off Omitting Mediating Short-term Affection Variables

DV: Vote Choice	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens	LINKE	AfD
<b>Rational Choice</b>						
Intercept*	-2.83 [-4.20; -1.58]	0.34 [-0.57; 1.20]	0.61 [-0.58; 1.83]	-0.75 [-1.85; 0.24]	1.43 [0.47; 2.35]	1.20 [0.08; 2.28]
Position-Saliency Distance	-0.27 [-0.48; -0.09]	-0.27 [-0.48; -0.11]	-0.48 [-0.79; -0.25]	-0.32 [-0.61; -0.12]	-0.21 [-0.35; -0.10]	-0.07 [-0.21; 0.06]
Prospective Issue Competence	2.35 [1.47; 3.28]	2.69 [1.98; 3.49]	2.62 [1.39; 3.93]	1.88 [0.71; 3.08]	2.21 [1.44; 3.06]	3.80 [2.81; 4.88]
Retrospective Government Performance*	0.44 [0.28; 0.63]	-0.01 [-0.12; 0.11]	0.11 [-0.06; 0.28]	0.15 [0.01; 0.29]	-0.17 [-0.30; -0.04]	-0.53 [-0.75; -0.33]
<b>Affective Choice</b>						
Intercept*	-0.80 [-2.36; 0.68]	0.68 [-0.88; 2.17]	-1.38 [-2.96; 0.04]	0.57 [-1.15; 2.12]	1.76 [0.35; 3.06]	-0.83 [-2.32; 0.60]
National Identity*	0.02 [-0.30; 0.35]	-0.20 [-0.54; 0.12]	0.43 [0.11; 0.76]	-0.51 [-0.90; -0.13]	-0.16 [-0.47; 0.14]	0.42 [0.10; 0.75]
Subjective Class Identification*	0.09 [-0.23; 0.41]	-0.04 [-0.36; 0.27]	0.06 [-0.26; 0.36]	0.23 [-0.14; 0.61]	-0.22 [-0.49; 0.06]	-0.12 [-0.44; 0.19]
Party Identification	3.52 [2.66; 4.50]	3.87 [3.04; 4.84]	3.57 [2.56; 4.66]	3.54 [2.51; 4.67]	3.49 [2.64; 4.42]	3.91 [3.02; 4.86]
Mixture Parameter $\lambda$	0.45 [0.40; 0.51]					
N	1358					

\* Zero-sum coefficients; square brackets show 95% Credible Intervals.

Table 12: Summary Results of Best Model on Climate-Growth Trade-off Omitting Mediating Short-term Affection Variables

DV: Vote Choice	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens	LINKE	AfD
<b>Rational Choice</b>						
Intercept*	-2.56 [-4.10; -1.23]	-0.07 [-1.06; 0.85]	0.44 [-0.87; 1.65]	-0.17 [-1.32; 0.83]	0.77 [-0.17; 1.69]	1.59 [0.43; 2.70]
Position-Saliency	-0.18	-0.14	-0.22	-0.36	-0.12	-0.09
Distance	[-0.33; -0.06]	[-0.26; -0.02]	[-0.37; -0.09]	[-0.68; -0.14]	[-0.26; -0.00]	[-0.19; 0.01]
Prospective Issue	2.43	2.71	3.11	1.71	2.75	3.52
Competence	[1.53; 3.37]	[1.98; 3.57]	[1.93; 4.31]	[0.85; 2.68]	[1.96; 3.66]	[2.52; 4.65]
Retrospective Government	0.43	0.05	0.04	0.09	-0.18	-0.43
Performance*	[0.26; 0.60]	[-0.07; 0.17]	[-0.15; 0.21]	[-0.03; 0.22]	[-0.32; -0.05]	[-0.62; -0.26]
<b>Affective Choice</b>						
Intercept*	-0.83 [-2.39; 0.63]	1.36 [-0.29; 2.87]	-1.04 [-2.44; 0.32]	0.28 [-1.46; 1.92]	1.35 [-0.29; 2.92]	-1.12 [-2.96; 0.66]
National Identity*	0.10 [-0.23; 0.43]	-0.29 [-0.64; 0.05]	0.13 [-0.17; 0.43]	-0.32 [-0.73; 0.08]	-0.08 [-0.42; 0.25]	0.46 [0.06; 0.86]
Subjective	0.07	-0.10	0.34	0.23	-0.30	-0.23
Class Identification*	[-0.25; 0.39]	[-0.45; 0.25]	[0.01; 0.67]	[-0.16; 0.59]	[-0.61; 0.04]	[-0.62; 0.13]
Party Identification	3.49 [2.63; 4.46]	3.73 [2.83; 4.75]	3.29 [2.21; 4.47]	3.73 [2.77; 4.82]	3.95 [2.93; 5.11]	3.66 [2.62; 4.77]
Mixture Parameter $\lambda$	0.45 [0.40; 0.50]					
N	1404					

\* Zero-sum coefficients; square brackets show 95% Credible Intervals.