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Competence voting and Populist radical right parties

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Abstract – English

The electoral successes of parties classified as right-wing populist in Western democracies currently pose challenges for researchers. While research on right-wing populism has become one of the most popular and fastest-growing fields in political science in recent years and numerous meta-theories such as the cultural backlash thesis or the “losers of modernization” exist, there is a lack of concrete approaches that can explain the electoral success of right-wing populist parties. This is particularly the case for the concepts of issue ownership, widely discussed in electoral research, and their independent variable, issue-handling competence. While competence as a determinant of voting behavior plays a crucial role in various theoretical strands such as valence, issue ownership, and issue yield theory, the mechanisms, especially on the demand side and at the micro level, are rarely thoroughly differentiated. This applies particularly to right-wing populist parties, which are often associated with issue ownership on the issue of immigration, but which have rarely been theoretically detailed and empirically investigated. In this thesis, a unified definition of perceived issue-handling competence is derived from the existing theoretical strands. Furthermore, it is then examined how issue-handling competence affects voting behavior, in particular the voting behavior for right-wing populist parties, using the example of the AfD. For this purpose, the dataset from the Issue Competition Comparative Project (ICCP) for Germany is used. Germany and the AfD represent an interesting case, as the AfD, as a relatively young populist radical right party, is not yet suspected of having built what is called a “history of attention” in ownership theory and a distortion, due to a high level of party identification, therefore seems unlikely. In a first step, a modified version of the Issue yield index, the credibility index, is used to examine which issues should deliver the greatest electoral gains for which parties. Subsequently, at the micro level, it is examined which issues, and which facets (position, competence, priority) emerge as decisive factors for voting behavior. It is shown that, especially for AfD voting, the migration issue at the competence level represents the decisive factor for voting for the AfD. On the other hand, the formulated hypotheses can only be partially confirmed for voting for the SPD or CDU/CSU. None of the observed competence or position effects remain in the control model, which integrates party identification. Accordingly, the thesis concludes that the formulated theoretical expectations are suitable for explaining voting behavior for the AfD; however, questions remain regarding how this relates to the often extreme positions of the party and its electorate. Although no significant interaction effect can be found, a look at the margins and predicted probabilities suggests that the relationship, between extreme positions and competence, expected by the theory, is likely to exist. It remains to be further investigated how competence perception depends on issue priority or extreme policy positions. Moreover, it needs to be clarified under which conditions it acts as a strong predictor of voting behavior.

Abstract - Deutsch

Die Wahlerfolge als rechtspopulistisch eingestufte Parteien in westlichen Demokratien stellen Wissenschaftler derzeit vor Herausforderungen. Während die Rechtspopulismusforschung in den vergangenen Jahren eines der populärsten und schnellst wachsenden Forschungsgebiete der Politikwissenschaft ist und zahlreiche Metatheorien wie die These des Cultural Backlash oder der Modernisierungsverlierer existieren, mangelt es an konkreten Ansätzen, welche die Wahlerfolge von rechtspopulistischen Parteien erklären können. Dies gilt insbesondere für die in der Wahlforschung vielfach diskutierten Konzepte der *Issue-ownership* und ihrer unabhängigen Variable der *Issue-handling-competence*. Während Kompetenz als Determinante der Wahlentscheidung in verschiedenen Theoriesträngen wie der *Valence*-, *Issue ownership*-, und der *Issue yield-theory* eine entscheidende Rolle spielt, sind die Mechanismen vor allem auf der *Demand-side* und der Mikro-Ebene selten ausführlich ausdifferenziert. Dies gilt insbesondere für rechtspopulistische Parteien, welche zwar häufig mit einer Issue-ownership vor allem beim Thema Migration in Verbindung gebracht werden, welche jedoch selten theoretisch detailliert ausgearbeitet und untersucht wurden. In dieser Arbeit wird aus den bestehenden theoretischen Strängen eine einheitliche Definition für wahrgenommene Issue-handling-Kompetenz gebildet und anschließend untersucht, wie sich Issue-handling-Kompetenz auf das Wahlverhalten und insbesondere das Wahlverhalten rechtspopulistischer Parteien anhand des Beispiels der AfD auswirkt.

Dazu wird der Datensatz aus dem Issue Competition Comparative Project (ICCP) für Deutschland verwendet. Deutschland und die AfD bilden einen interessanten Fall, da die AfD als eine relativ junge rechtspopulistische Partei noch nicht im Verdacht steht, dass was man in der Ownership Theory eine „history of attention“ aufgebaut zu haben und auch eine Verzerrung durch ein hohes Maß an Parteiidentifikationen unwahrscheinlich scheint. In einem ersten Schritt wird mithilfe einer modifizierten Version des *Issue-Yield-Indexes* dem *Credibility-Index* untersucht, welche Themen, für welche Parteien die größten Wahlerfolge liefern sollten. Anschließend wird auf der Mikro-Ebene untersucht welche Themen und welche Fassetten (Position, Kompetenz, Priorität) sich als entscheidende Faktoren für die Wahlentscheidung herausstellen. Es zeigt sich dabei, dass besonders für die AfD-Wahl das Migrationsthema auf der Kompetenz-Ebene der entscheidende Faktor für die AfD-Wahl darstellt. Andererseits lassen sich die aufgestellten Hypothesen nur teilweise für die Wahlentscheidung für die SPD oder CDU/CSU bestätigen. Keiner der beobachteten Kompetenz- oder Positions-effekte bleibt im Kontrollmodell bestehen, welches die Parteiidentifikation integriert. Dementsprechend kommt die Arbeit zu dem Schluss, dass sich die aufgestellten theoretischen Erwartungen gut für die Erklärung der Wahlentscheidung der AfD eignen, jedoch Fragen offenbleiben, wie dies mit den oft extremen Positionen der Partei und ihrer Wählerschaft zusammenhängt. Es lässt sich dort zwar kein signifikanter Interaktionseffekt finden, ein Blick auf die Margins und Predicted probabilities lässt es jedoch als wahrscheinlich erscheinen, dass der durch die Theory erwartete Zusammenhang besteht. Es muss weiterhin untersucht werden, wie die Kompetenzwahrnehmung von Themenpriorität oder extremen inhaltlichen Positionen abhängt. Außerdem ist zu klären, unter welchen Bedingungen sie als starker Prädiktor der Wahlentscheidung wirkt.“

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1. Introduction

Increasing populist radical right parties (PRRP) electoral vote-shares and survey values can be observed in nearly every European democracy in the recent years (Rooduyn et.al., 2023). From the perspective of party competition, members of this party family seem to be an electoral *perpetuum mobile*. No matter which strategy is adopted by the competing parties, it seems to help the Populist Radical Right Party to increase their vote-share even further. While the metatheories provide several satisfying or partly satisfying approaches explaining why voters tend to vote for a PRRP, there are only very limited attempts to disentangle the mechanisms of party competition, explaining why competing parties fail to regain voters support from PRRP-voter's (Mudde, 2018). This shall be the aim of this thesis implementing the notion of *competence* voting.

One of the observed mechanisms in party competition is that mainstream parties tend to adopt challenger issues, so called accommodation, increasing the general saliency of the challengers' issues such as migration (Williams, Hunger, 2022). At the same time, recent studies indicate that accommodative strategies seem to not be a promising approach for competing parties to decrease the challengers vote share. This confronts researchers with a contradiction since the traditional perception of the voter as a rational choice actor, choosing the party which promises to him the most expected benefit, would expect voters to elect the more promising party. Mainstream parties should be able to expect an electoral benefit from accommodation, benefitting from their "greater legislative experience", providing a higher expected utility to voters by their higher likeability to reach government participation (van Spanje, 2017:21). Therefore, accommodating another party's policy position is theoretically a suitable way of dealing with a challenger. Nevertheless, recent empirical results underpin former Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's statement that voters tend to "prefer the original to the copy" (Krause et.al., 2023:127/ Kitschelt, 2018/ van Spanje, 2017).

This thesis suggests a solution to the appearing theoretical contradiction that voters don't respond to accommodation. A theory of competence voting for PRRP is developed, offering a possible solution why voters tend to "prefer the original". The general assumption is that while accommodation is a fitting strategy for addressing the spatial side of issue competition, increasing the proximity to voters, this change of position does not influence the competence-side of issue competition, why accommodating parties, might lack credibility for the adopted issue positions. The theoretical framework within the dynamics of issue-politics is formed assuming that, unless PRRP provide few or no government participation at all, they still can be

perceived as competent in handling specific issues, which is a central factor determining the electoral choice for them. At the moment there is no “stringent account of the radical right’s development from a valence and ownership perspective” (Kitschelt, 2017: 181). Hence, the term of *competence voting* of this thesis, will be derived from valence theory, issue ownership theory and Issue Yield Theory, providing a new framework for explaining vote-intentions and electoral results. Afterwards, it is tested whether voters base their vote decision more on their competence perceptions than on their issue positions and the results for the PRRP will be compared to the results from the largest mainstream competitors SPD and CDU/CSU. For the analysis, the case of Germany and the AfD and the use of the in 2017 conducted Issue competition comparative project data is selected (ICCP). The ICCP-data provides a large number of issues also conducting perceived issue handling competence and issue priority. The AfD as a relatively new party, which managed to enter the national parliament for the first time in 2017, provides a good case for testing hypotheses regarding competence perception apart from a potential partisan bias, caused by long term build party identification.

In this manner, a possible explanation emerges for why PRRPs appear so attractive to voters and why voters may still support a challenger even though the accommodator would offer a higher likelihood of actual government participation and factual policy implementation. Therefore, if competence perceptions are the determinant of the vote-choice for a PRRP, this could explain the contradicting aggregate phenomena of failing accommodation.

Leading to the research question:

“What role does competence-perception play determining the vote choice for PRRPs?”

While the reactions and relations of other parties and especially the right-wing mainstream parties towards PRRPs were broadly studied and discussed, there are only very occasional approaches researching why these reactions seem to unfold no effect at the ballot-box. In distinction to existing research, the reasoning of this paper shall not occur through meta-theories as the “cultural backlash” or the “economic anxiety-thesis” but by examining the mechanisms of party-issue-competition and the competence-side of issue-voting (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2018). The question shall be answered by adopting the theoretical framework of issue politics adding the facade of competence-voting. The theoretical embedment and hypothesized mechanisms of competence-voting will be derived from the issue ownership and valence theory since both are operationalized on the basis of competence perceptions as their independent variable, providing theoretical mechanisms.

The strand of issue politics functions as a fitting framework as it was developed in research as a reaction to changing party competition away from cleavage politics and unidimensional spatial competition (Franzmann et.al., 2020/ Green-Pedersen: 2007). Caused by de-ideologization, it is assumed that parties nowadays are enabled to choose “relatively free” from various issue positions (Franzmann et.al., 2020: 612). Party competition has therefore transformed to being determined by saliency of issues and the ability of parties to adapt to the “distributions of preferences” within the electorate (De Sio, Weber, 2020: 722). The analysis of the side of perceived competence in issue politics promises to provide an interesting approach to the voting decision adapting to younger developments of party competition apart from the traditional spatial analysis.

Referring to the competence-side is furthermore promising because it is more related to the affective (associative) level of the vote-choice and expanding the existing analyses, closing theoretical gaps emerged from the spatial analyses (Bellucci, 2006). Engaging in PRRP and “politics of competence” promises to solve central dilemmas of modern party competition while remaining accessible to insights generated by traditional spatial, valence and issue politics approaches (Green, Jennings: 2017). Finally, the observations grasped by the Issue yield theory will allow to form a unified framework (de Sio et.al. 2014).

The research question is addressed using data from the 2017 Issue Comparative Project (ICCP). The ICCP dataset includes 17 issues along with party credibility and priority ascriptions, enabling a detailed issue analysis. The results indicate that, in particular, credibility on the immigration issue is the main determinant of the intention to vote for the AfD. While there is some evidence that credibility also matters for voting for the CDU/CSU and the SPD, this evidence is more fragmented and less clear, especially because most effects are mediated by party identification.

2. Theory: Issue politics and the matter of competence in electoral research

The research interest was caused by a macrophenomena but the research question and theory mainly lie on the micro-level of the vote-choice and the micro-dynamics in issue competition. Therefore, it must on the one hand be understood how the dynamics of party competition cause the behavior of the parties, which will be done through the “issue politics” perspective. On the other hand, a theory needs to be further developed on, how this behavior is related to the individual vote decision, explaining the dynamics observed at the micro-level. Based on these theoretical considerations hypotheses about competence voting and PRRP can be formed

2.1 The general framework of issue politics

As stated within the introduction, the issue politics framework has developed in criticism of spatial party politics analysis. In spatial party politics analysis, it is assumed that voter's assess the political positions by "one or more ideological or policy dimensions". Based on this assessment, voters then are rational actors who maximize expected utility by selecting the party closest to them (Sanders, et al., 2011: 288). Electoral benefit is, by this means, gained by parties by reassessing their positions in the spatial space according to the distribution of voters within the political space. This is often described by analyses based on the left-right axes. The central determinant of the vote choice is ideological "proximity" (Sanders, et al., 2011: 289).

The framework of issue politics agrees on parties as vote maximizers and voters as agents of their expected utilities. Though in issue politics the multiplicity of issues is seen as "strategic resource" for parties allowing them to choose selectively from a wide set of issues, maximizing their vote (De Sio, 2017: 396). An important demarcation to former theories of party behavior is that parties can occupy issue positions relative freely beyond ideological restrictions (D'Alimonte 2020). Parties then "engage in political competition by adopting a selective emphasis" instead of a repositioning among the political space (De Sio, 2017: 395). Party behavior is therefore in the theory characterized by a "disproportional" focus on specific issues, which gains them associative connection and credibility claims based on their focus on specific issues. A similar phenomenon is also captured by the theory of issue ownership (See 2.3) (De Sio, 2017).

While social demographic determinants of the voting behavior stay relevant, a decline in their importance has been observed empirically since the 1970s. Researchers during the 1960s focused on the social demographic determinants of electoral behavior, studying a "frozen" party system where competition was dominated by class conflicts and mainly about the ability of parties mobilizing their "supporters" (D'Alimonte et.al., 2020: 521/Lipset, Rokkan, 1967). During the 1990s and 2000s, it was observed that in a world of an interconnected globalized economy and multilevel conflicts, it became more difficult for parties emphasizing unique policy-positions.

For example, the Eisenhower campaign figured the growing importance of issues as "Korea, corruption and communism on which the candidate had significant credibility" (De Sio, 2017: 396). These issues were not related to an intense left-right polarization and Eisenhower could reach electoral gains by a perceived credibility advantage. This development has led to an increased focus of parties on trying to point out their issue-handling competence, resulting in

an increased focus on issue politics and party competence also by researchers (De Sio, 2017). This phenomenon was often captured by researchers, using the Stokesian framework of valence-politics. The development of an unstable and changeable party-system in almost every western democracy was observed by researchers during the 2000s and the 2010s. This has resulted in new appearing challenger parties which managed to utilize new issues and policy-positions to successfully compete with formerly „catch-all“-parties (D’Alimonte et.al., 2020).

The transformation of party competition has been reasoned by researchers by an increase of “party dealignment and individualization of vote choice” (De Sio, 2017: 397). Therefore, further relevance for the issue politics framework was gained and new concepts like the issue yield theory have emerged (De Sio, Weber, 2014).

De Sio outlines two frameworks during the development of his yield theory, which have developed since, explaining the transformation of electoral choice. The first is the shift towards valence politics. Within the valence framework, a focus of parties on their issue handling competence was assumed, focusing on issues such as economic growth where a positional consensus is expected, making it difficult to reach electoral gains through unique policy positions. Secondly, the approach of issue politics and so-called saliency theory emphasizing selective focus of parties on promising issues centered the analytical lenses leading to the issue ownership theory (Budge, Farlie, 1983/ Petrocik, 1996/ De Sio, 2017). In the theory of this thesis, considerations from both approaches shall be combined, explaining the vote-choice and the electoral success of PRRPs through a lens of perceived competence which is featured in both strands as independent variable.

Before this can be further elaborated, an overview of the theories, a clear definition what *competence-voting* comprises and how its dynamics affect party competition and the vote-choice, need to be developed. Evaluating the competence-shares of the valence theory and ownership theory (saliency theory), concrete micro-mechanisms for perceived competence and competence-voting can be derived.

Following the desire to create a unified framework of competence-voting, this selection is based on D’Alimonte’s outlining that these theories are the known “generalization attempts” which have developed applying thoughts from the valence framework and are connected to competence as a determinant of the vote choice (D’Alimonte et al., 2019: 525). Subsequently, the more modern approach of issue yield will be included as it provides valuable insights on the party competition aspect of competence and allows to integrate aspects of the other theories.

Afterwards, the elaborated mechanisms will be applied to populist radical right parties since no approach through the lense of competence-perceptions has yet been developed for them (Kitschelt, 2018).

2.2 Issue competence and valence: same but different

If one takes a look at the relevant literature, it can be noticed that the term of “competence-voting” is only used rarely. Most of the papers dealing with competence perceptions as predictor of the vote-choice use the term of “valence voting” (Green, Jennings, 2017). This also applies for papers dealing with issue ownership, which in theory is a distinct concept (i.e. van der Brug, 2017/ Green, Jennings, 2017). The reason why this shall be avoided in this thesis is that the concept of valence is as well strongly connected to the consensuality of issues. Furthermore, it has been used very broadly in the literature and therefore became a “rather nebulous” concept, not exclusively referring to competence-voting (Green, Jennings, 2017²: 7).

To understand what exactly competence-voting describes, it is nevertheless valuable to figure out how perceived-competence is used as an independent variable within the valence literature to discover which mechanisms apply on the theoretical level. When the valence of an actor is mentioned in the following section, it is therefore, referred to the perceived competence of the actor and it is not related to the agreeability of a discussed issue.

The theory of valence was developed by Stokes in 1963 in critics of spatial analysis (Evrenk, 2018). Stokes borrowed the term “valence” from Lewinian psychology and defined it as “linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate” (Stokes, 1963: 373). Based on a more psychologist understanding of the vote-choice Stokes argued that spatial models fail to explain the full complexity (Evrenk, 2018). Valence should therefore depict the affective (associative) side, theorizing how voters connect issues to parties and how parties can benefit from this connection and influence it (Green, Jennings, 2017).

In Stoke’s theory, parties’ competition on the competence assets was limited to so called “valence issues” where all voters agree on a desirable issue-goal and the parties compete about who is perceived as the best fitted, implementing that policy as no profiling by a unique position is possible (Kitschelt, 2018). Future research has widened the concept underlining that “practically any issue can be a valence issue if political competition becomes about competence” (Green, Jennings, 2017²:197).

To understand which mechanisms, apply for valence politics and how valence theory describes party competition, Evrenk characterizes, building on Stokes's work, three main differences between valence and spatial politics (Evrenk, 2018). At first, in valence politics issues or goals are desired by all voters. Furthermore, competence evaluation makes political actors distinguishable even if they share the same policy-positions. At last, as competence is an attributed quality, it cannot be set as "freely" by the political actor as its policy-position (Evrenk, 2018: 4). Therefore, valence competition, hence competence competition in valence theory, follows different mechanisms (further elaborated under 3.4) (De Sio, 2010).

These differences result from the way competence-perception is build. According to valence theory, the voter "learns" the parties' competence by the experiences made with the parties. In earlier writings Stokes connected this learning to the "succeeds of success", which accounts especially for economic well-being and reducing the achievement of competence mainly to performance in government participation. While it seems logically trivial that competence perception is based on performance, it was questioned empirically and by later theories. For example, Green and Jennings highlighted the importance of external factors as the state of economy (Green, Jennings, 2017²). Additionally, the observation that also parties without any government participation are perceived as competent has also questioned the reduction of competence-perception to performance.

The recent approach of Green and Jennings emphasizes the role of "major re-evaluations" which occur through policy-/performance-shifts or major political events (Stokes, 1992:148, Green, Jennings, 2017²: 96).

According to valence theory, the competence perception of a political actor is therefore responsive to various external circumstances as political events, external performance determinants and incidents from the past, which partly lie out of his zone of influence. Therefore, valence campaigning is often limited to saliency decisions and negative campaigning (Stokes, 1992).

From the perspective of issue politics, the central aspect of the Stokesian theory is the distinction between valence und positional issues. Stokes defined positional issues as "those that involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which a distribution of voter preferences is defined" and valence issues as "those that merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate" (Stokes 1963: 373). From the party-side perspective valence-politics is therefore more related to the handling of the saliency of the different goals than to the positioning (Stokes, 1992).

In brief, the valence-theory reveals that competence-competition is sometimes more related to symbols than to content. The advantage a party gains from a competence-perceptions is based on “symbolic content (..) and the process that form the valences” (Stokes, 1992: 147). Or as Stone and Simas summarize:

“election outcomes are sometimes more dependent on which party is associated with such outcomes (or blamed for their opposites) than on which party is closer to the electorate on how best to achieve them.” (Stone, Simas, 2010: 372).

2.2.1 Competence in valence theory

Stokes borrowed the term of valence from psychology to develop a concept recognizing also affective shares within the vote-decision and explaining why “bonds matter in politics” (Evrenk, 2018: 1). While delivering an interesting theory and influential terminology, Stokes left future researchers without a concrete definition or precise operationalization. This caused dispersal in the valence literature, hence there exist numerous concepts, definitions and operationalizations. Therefore, Green and Jennings tend to speak of a “valence soup” (Green, Jennings, 2017: 714).

Likewise, various theories and concepts within the literature are operationalized the same way, using perceived competence as their independent variable. Hence, papers about issue ownership, valence and performance often are all using a form of a “perceived competence”-item. That culminates within a soup of a field where concepts overlap theoretically and are not clearly differentiated while overlapping concepts lack of mutual (Green, Jennings: 2017).

In this thesis, competence shall be understood as a general different level on which voters by associative ascription form an opinion about parties and on which political competition between parties can appear. Elections are in valence theory in this sense not only the result of different positions of parties but also on aspects as “management, delivery, trust, good government” or to cut it down “competence” (Green, Jennings 2017²:1). When a government or party is seen as “incapable of running” no position on the spatial level can save it.

2.3 Issue ownership and saliency

The concept of Issue ownership was developed by Budge and Farlie in 1983 and later on specified by Petrocik (van der Brug, 2017). Petrocik defined it as “the ability to resolve a problem of concern to voters. It is a reputation for policy and program interests, produced by a history of attention, initiative and innovation toward these problems” (Petrocik 1996: 826). The

expected mechanism on electoral results is then strongly related to the saliency theory (Walgrave et al., 2015).

While the valence literature was characterized as a soup, Walgrave et al. conclude, after reviewing 15 years of issue ownership literature, that the “field of issue ownership is scattered and that results are blurred” (Walgrave et al., 2015: 792). This results from various strands which have developed, sometimes only partially overlapping or running parallel to each other without intersecting (Walgrave et al., 2015). Walgrave et al. reason this development by the dual use which was already embedded within the origins of the theory. While Budge and Farlie (1983) introduced the term of owning issues to explain electoral results, Petrocik focused on finding an explanation why parties tend to pick a selective emphasis of issues (Walgrave et al., 2015). Issue ownership therefore features two facets. The notion of competence in issue ownership can therefore be adapted two-sided. At first about “issues on which a party should prefer to focus election campaigns” on and “the relationship between voting behaviour and the saliency of issues on which a party is considered the ‘issue owner’” (Green, Jennings, 2017²: 56). The Issue ownership theory formulates mostly mechanisms for the supply side while hypotheses for the demand side stay mostly implicit or are adapted from saliency theory.

In general, ownership theory is based on the assumption that parties can become the owners of issues by affective connection. The owning party then has an incentive to focus on owned issues, capturing the concept of “issue emphasis as a strategic campaign resource” (De Sio, Weber, 2020). Implicit is an increase of the owned issues saliency which is then expected to increase the owning parties electoral share (van der Brug, 2017).

Issue ownership is more complicated to grasp when it comes to the demand side as the dynamics are in most conceptualizations the implicit result of increasing saliency (Walgrave et al., 2015). Saliency covers as the empirically researched driver of electoral results but is mainly researched on the aggregate level while concrete conceptualizations of its effect on the individual level lack attention (van der Brug, 2017). On the aggregate level, it was shown several times that ownership is useful to predict electoral results but the mechanism on the individual level is under researched (Bélanger, Meguid, 2008).

Since the origin of the theory already contained a dual argument mentioning attention and competence, a dispersal in literature has developed, distinguishing the demand side into “associative ownership” and “competence ownership” (Walgrave et.al., 2015: 780). Associative ownership refers to the associative connection of a party with an issue (for example: green parties and environmental issues). Competence ownership means that a party is perceived as

competent handling an issue (Kitschelt, 2018). Associative ownership will not be considered in this thesis because it is not directly referred to competence and not measured within the dataset. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that both factors are, while being theoretically independent, related empirically (Lachat, 2014). A party associated with an issue is usually also expected to be perceived as more competent on the issue. But this connection between associative- and competence-ownership is partly controversially discussed within the literature (Lachat 2014). Research has indicated that this connection might be to lesser extent existent for issues that can easily be positioned in the spatial room (Walgrave et.al., 2012). The issue ownership of green parties for environment makes them usually not be perceived as competent by right-sided voters while the opposite accounts i.e. for immigration, PRRPs and leftist voters (Lachat, 2014). Rather, the evidence suggests that there is a part related to position and a part related to association within competence-ownership. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind this relationship exists but does not constitute a natural law. The factor of a “history of attention” should therefore not be completely excluded when theorizing perceived competence from ownership perspective, representing as well the relevancy issue positions have (Petrocik 1996: 826).

To grasp how the issue ownership mechanism unfolds an impact on the micro-level, a closer look on the saliency theory is necessary (Bélanger, Meguid, 2008). Bélanger and Meguid state that the “impact of issue reputation on an individual’s vote choice is conditioned by issue salience“ (Bélanger, Meguid, 2008: 479). While the attribution of issue-handling competence is permanently embedded within the individuum, it is expected to only unfold an impact on the decision when the issue gains priority for the voter. In addition, it is assumed that the individual priority is to a high degree predetermined by the public saliency of the issue. This makes the relevance of perceived competence dependent on the priority the voters ascribe towards issues, which in turn relies on the general saliency of the issues (Bélanger, Meguid, 2008). To summarize, the theory assumes an ideal-typical configuration in which voters have information about which party is most competent to handle each issue and vote for the party that owns the issues they consider most important, depending on issue salience. (Bélanger, Meguid, 2008).

2.3.1 Competence in ownership theory

As commonly valence concepts, issue ownership is also operationalized through perceived issue competence. The most common formulation in survey questions are “variations of the ‘best party to deal with an issue’ formulation”, using terms such as “handle”, “better job” or “is best placed” (Walgrave et al., 2015: 786). It is often filtered through a “most important problem”

question considering the saliency aspect in issue-ownership by evaluating voters priority preferences (Walgrave et al., 2015.). If a party is considered as the issue owner is then dependent on the empirical fact which party is rated as most competent or as competent by most of the people.

2.4 Issue Yield

The Issue Yield theory is a more modern approach to issue politics and party behavior and provides several valuable explanations for the dynamics of issue politics also considering competence and issue competition (De Sio, Weber, 2014). For this reason, a slight introduction into the yield theory will be made that later applying adaptations to the concept of party-competence, competence-voting and issue ownership are traceable.

Developed also in relation to the Downsian spatial model of party politics and the median voter theorem, de Sio argued that the existing models lack explanations considering the multidimensionality of issues, which has developed in the recent decades (De Sio, 2014). According to De Sio in both ownership and saliency theory the profiles of political parties would result in a political equilibrium since no party ever had an incentive to change its issue profile (De Sio, Weber, 2020). In response, the yield theory adopts a more realist view of parties. In yield theory, parties seek to adopt as best as possible to the distributions of preferences within the electorate. If a party decides to put emphasis on issues, this decision is “conditionally on their ability to bring the party a competitive advantage” and whether the issue “preserves internal unity“ (De Sio, Weber, 2020: 726).

The issue yield theory is therefore the theoretical adaption to the described development in party competition of voter dealignment and the shift toward issue politics. It is defined “as the degree to which an issue allows a party to overcome the conflict between protection and expansion of electoral support” (De Sio, Weber, 2014). Within the issue yield theory, the spatial and ideological level of party competition are completely left aside (D’Alimonte et al., 2020). The theory offers the theoretical and empirical adaption to the fact that modern parties tend “to rely on cross-ideological issue strategies packaging together the different [and sometimes ideologically inconsistent] issue opportunities” (De Sio, Lachat, 2020: 688). The parties are considered as rational choice actors who try to maximize their electoral outcome apart from ideology. In this manner, it can be explained why parties’ issue focus constantly changes apart from the riding the wave approach or saliency theory (De Sio and Weber: 2020). The theory

mainly assumes two mechanisms to which party behavior is responsive, both referring to the state of “distributions of preferences” (De Sio, Weber, 2020: 722).

At first, parties are “political entrepreneurs that strategically exploit those issue opportunities that are compatible with their existing party constituency” (De Sio and Weber, 2020: 721). A party needs to respect the own supporters’ base to maintain the member and party structure. It is assumed that issues which are accepted within the supporter’s base provide low risk of losing voters why it is attractive for a party to focus on them. Secondly, parties take in account the goal of maximizing the vote-share, which can be done by evaluating the consensuality of an issue within the electorate (De Sio, Weber, 2014). A vote-maximizing party is assumed to always position in the way that attracts as many voters as possible. Based on these assumptions, an index is calculated, matching the share of voters agreeing on an issue position and the share of partisans agreeing on an issue position.

$$\begin{array}{l} i = \text{proportion of the electorate supporting a policy} \\ p = \text{proportion of the electorate supporting a party} \\ f = \text{proportion of the electorate supporting both policy and party} \end{array} \quad \text{scaled issue yield} = \frac{f - ip}{p(1 - p)} + \frac{i - p}{1 - p}$$

Figure 1. Issue yield index (De Sio, Weber, 2014).

This way, a measure is generated, indicating what electoral benefit an issue proposes for a party, by which party behavior can be explained better than by the general saliency of an issue (De Sio, Weber, 2020).

2.4.1 Yield and competence

Later on, the matter of competence was also implemented within the yield to develop a unified concept for positional (divisive) and valence (consensual) issues (D’Alimonte et al., 2020).

Within the issue yield literature generated in the frame of the ICCP, it was decided to use the term of *credibility* instead of competence because the term provides a “greater generality” that also accounts for valence issues (D’Alimonte et al., 2020). Credibility refers primarily to the extent to which an actor is committed in undertaking or attempting the actions they articulate, rather than to their actual capacity to achieving them.

D’Alimonte et al. claim that framing this as credibility allows respondents to assess better which party might be credible even if they do not agree on the goal (D’Alimonte et al., 2020). Within this thesis, the terms competence and credibility are used synonymously. This results by the fact that in the German questionnaire, of which the data will be used, using the term

“Kompetenz” as credibility entails a case of partial semantic non-equivalence. This reflects a conceptual and terminological imprecision that, cannot be fully resolved in translation. Since respondents within the survey got only asked who is credible for issues on which they agree, this problem should be of subordinate relevance. D’Alimonte argues that the shift to credibility perceptions is necessary “understanding how politicians seek political support“ (D’Alimonte et al., 2020: 520).

$$\text{refined issue yield} = \frac{(f-ip)intcred}{p(1-p)} + \frac{(i-p)cred}{1-p}$$

Figure 2. Credibility weighted issue yield (De Sio, Weber, 2020: 730).

At this point, the issue yield approach reaches a limitation as it does not deliver direct insights about, in which direction party competition and voter transfer does appear. According to the credibility-weighted yield, the CDU/CSU as well as the AfD reach a relatively high issue yield on the migration issues. For example, is P15¹: “Require foreigners in Germany to fully adapt to national culture” (yield=0.37), “Limit the number of refugees” (P1= 0.34) and “Make immigration rules more restrictive” (P2=0.34). matching perfectly with the assumption, one would formulate based on issue ownership and PRRP theory. But as the data shows also the CDU/CSU has one of those issues among their tenth highest yields. The issue of “Limit the number of refugees” reaches a yield-value of 0.29 and is the CDU/CSUs 9th highest yield. The issue yield theory does not formulate any assumptions for party competition, leaving unresolved what would actually happen if the issue increases in saliency and which of both parties would be benefitting at the ballot-box According to the theory of this paper, an increase in saliency should benefit the party which has to be considered the profiter from competence perspective (see 3.4 and 7.).

3. Issue competence as determinator of vote choice

In this section, based on the introduced theories referring to party issue competence, it will be discussed what issue competence on the micro level is, how voters form their perceptions and how party competition on competence takes place.

As competence is primarily used as an independent variable to explain voting behavior in valence and ownership theory, the matter of what constitutes ownership and in turn competence has long been under-researched (Walgrave et al., 2015). By the definition of Stokes in valence

¹ For an overview of the issues in the dataset see the Appendix Table A1

theory competence measures refer to how voters use it in differentiation to spatial considerations. Arguments for the benefit of competence measures besides positional measures are that it indicates also the affective share of the vote decision, delivering an alternative explanation for voting behavior besides spatial and proximity considerations. Furthermore, as assumed by the concept of ownership theory competence underlies in general a higher stability than issue positions, being a more fundamental attitude structure of the electorate (Green, Jennings, 2017²)

3.1 The constitution of competence

To understand what role competence plays for the voters and in party competition. it is necessary to figure how competence is gained. Within valence theory, there are only occasionally approaches explaining how competence advantages are gained besides the diffuse emphasis of “symbolic assets”, lacking concrete operationalizations (Green, Jennings, 2017:702). From ownership perspective, while most arguments are formed for the macro level, implicit mechanisms can be derived to the micro-level (van der Brug, 2017).

Within the literature, there are mainly three reasons why a respondent could think a party is competent on an issue. The respondent thinks the party has a good track record (performance), the respondent thinks the party is good at recruiting competent politicians in general or the party is good at attracting politicians who are competent for one specific issue (positional recruiting). Last appears when the respondent thinks the party has developed good positions on the issue which will allow it to handle the issue well (positional proximity) (van der Brug, 2017). A logical gap emerges since the information which is available for a respondent to evaluate the aspects is mostly insufficient. Except for parties who have recently been in office and had the relevant issue at their ministerial portfolio, there is no reliable information for forming an opinion, making it unlikely that competence perceptions are only based on the evaluation of government performance. This accounts especially for PRRP which, even beyond, have in various cases a proven record of their poor ability to recruit competent personal (Mudde, 2007). Hence, potential factors forming a perceived competence are according to van der Brug “1) competence [performance], 2) salience/priorities/commitments and 3) policy positions” (van der Brug, 2017: 531).

While there might not always be reliable information about performance, there is available information about the other two factors. The respondents allegedly are aware of how salient an issue is, how committed parties are on the issue, what priority it has for himself and the parties’

positions on the issues (van der Brug, 2017). This matches also to the assumption of saliency theory that saliency is the main driver of electoral results by influencing the voters priority.

The difficulty to grasp what competence is about results in a wide range of projected reasons within the literature. In general, the literature on sources of ownership can be clustered into two strands. One dealing with parties' behavior assuming a relative instable state of competence and one perceiving competence as rather stable, analyzing long-term changes, suggesting that ownership changes are rather rare (Seeberg, 2017).

Stiers and Dassonneville, who analyze perceived competence from the party competition perspective, focus similarly to van der Brug on the three factors of "issue attention", "extremity of issue position" and "issue performance" (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025: 1096).

Their argument for focusing on these factors is based on the reason that "parties have a substantial level of control over them", which is only sufficiently plausible, as parties' competence-perception might also be determined by factors where they lack control over, as is shown by Green and Jennings conceptualization of "major-events" and external factors. The three factors are nonetheless relevant as long as handling with short- and mid-term changes and can be reasoned by former empirical findings (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025: 1096). As Petrocik has already argued and various research has indicated, issue ownership is "a matter of track record" (Walgrave, De Swert, 2007: 39). This makes it plausible that competence perceptions are also responsive to a party's issue attention although it might take time to receive a benefit. In addition taking an extreme position might help to be perceived as more competent. This is because an extreme position is assumed to increase a parties media coverage, which strengthens the perceived link of the issue and the party which voters ascribe to competence (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025). The same effect is reached by receiving attacks from other parties on an issue, which becomes more likely when an extreme position is adopted (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025). An extreme position also allows a party to sharpen its profile, forming another incentive (Wagner, 2012). In pure logical terms, performance appears as the most logical determinant of perceived competence. When a party is in charge governing a certain issue, it can validly show the functionality of its issue positions and "deliver on its promises" (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025: 1099). This can happen due to selective emphasis of specific issues, from government, ministry or parliament or by achieved results, which are perceived as desirable (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025).

According to their results, the main driver of competence is issue attention, which is particularly strong for opposition parties. Interesting, since of two different kinds, are their results regarding

extreme policy positions. Their analysis indicates that extreme issue positions, while in general not being rewarded, can indeed increase perceived competence on specific issues for opposition parties. This effect has not been found for governing parties (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025). For governing parties, the largest driver of competence perception is as expected the performance on an issue, which increases if they hold the dependent ministerial portfolio.

Similar dynamics are also indicated by qualitative analysis of party issue competence. Wagner and Zeglovits studied in 2014, by qualitative interviews, how people form an answer to the question how competent an party is, regarding a specific issue. According to their results, respondents indeed lack information about specific party-issue-handling-competence. Voters therefore tend to form opinions about party issue-handling competence by relying on preformed attitudes, which accounted especially for non-salient issues. Additionally, problems appear when voters try to evaluate the performance of opposition parties. It seems that competence often was the result of the perceived attention a party was willing to give an issue or position (Wagner, Zeglovits, 2014).

From the rational voter perspective, the analysis of competence perceptions would be limited to these measures. But as the theories have appointed, competence has psychological and affective roots as well. However, as the presented theories emphasize, competence also has psychological and affective foundations. Consequently, competence perceptions are treated as a more fundamental dimension of voter evaluations than positional attitudes within the electorate. (Green, Jennings, 2017²).

3.2 Ownership change

As researchers have captured, that while competence perceptions are to a small extent responsible to short-term changes' responsive to the three mentioned factors, the general level of competence perceptions for an issue and a party seem to be relatively stable (Seeberg, 2017/ Green, Jennings, 2017). This observed dynamic fits good into classical ownership theory, which suggests that an affective connection is formed by voters, building a "reputation for policy" which loss shouldn't occur too frivolously (Petrocik, 1996: 826). Green and Jennings therefore suppose a concept of ownership change which captures this stability of an affective connection while still being able to include observed changes and fluctuation of perceived issue competence (Green, Jennings, 2017).

Green and Jenning suppose from the ownership perspective that competence is a more stable measure. In their comparative analysis, they assume that competence perceptions lie on a

fundamental level of politics, stating that competence perceptions stay relatively stable on similar level, which is why a disruption with the potential to change the connection from one party to another needs a major event, as they call “performance shocks” or “major symbolic policy change”. “Ownership change should occur when something happens that is so clear a signal, and so symbolic, that widely held beliefs about political parties are thrown into question” (Green, Jennings, 2017²: 96). Preconditions of such change are that an issue is salient and a competitor tries to challenge the issue-ownership. According to Green and Jennings, this can lead to a “major re-evaluation of a party’s strengths and weaknesses” which appears by “political significance and public salience” (Green, Jennings, 2017²: 99). An example of their theory is the case of the SPD and the environmental issue in 1987-1990. The Chernobyl disaster of 1987 and the problems with acid rain in Germany could not be promisingly handled by federal governments where the Greens had participated. Afterwards, the SPD increased the emphases of the issue and managed to gain ownership for the environmental issue (Green, Jennings, 2017²)

3.3 How stable is perceived competence and ownership ?

The matter to what extent which theories apply is dependent on the question whether it is referred to short-term, mid-term or long-term developments and on the matter how fluctuated competence perceptions within the electorate are. This general conflict was already laid out in Petrocik’s development of the concept of issue ownership as Petrocik did introduce ownership as a short-term and a long-term concept with “modest interest in clarifying” (Seeberg, 2017: 476). Within research there have been debates and contradicting results regarding this question. Typically, when spoken about ownership it is referred to a conceptualization of long-term competence which is a quite stable construct with less variation (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025/ Petrocik, 1996). However, as elaborated above, emphasis has also been placed on the fact that competence underlies variation and long-standing reputation needs to be “continuously defend(ed)” in order to maintain advantages (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2025: 1097).

The stability is also relevant regarding van der Brugs concerns what competence perceptions do measure. If the ownership structure of an electorate would be completely stable, competence perceptions could be considered a factor not to a strong extent responsive to positions, campaigning or government performance as those are very fluid. If competence perceptions are as stable as party-identification and partisanship they would potentially not lead to any more valuable insights, than these existing measures and furthermore be problematic as determinant of vote choice (Green, Jennings, 2017²/ Seeberg, 2017). If ownership was completely fluctuated

competence perceptions probably could be determined by short-term evaluations of a party's position, candidate or issue handling performance and hence, potentially not deliver any valuable insights beyond these factors (Seeberg, 2017).

Empirical results indicate that neither is the case. Ownership seems to set the general level for performance evaluations while performance then grasps the short- and mid-term-evaluations. Green and Jennings observe that the general variation in ownership perception within the electorate does not differ from the variations of not owned issues. The general perception of ownership just leads to competence perceptions on a higher level (Green, Jennings, 2017²)

3.4 Competence competition from yield perspective

While the yield theory delivers valuable insights for the framework of issue politics, it can be questioned how competence competitions transfer to the microlevel if the ownership theory is considered (De Sio, Weber, 2014). D'Alimonte et al. highlight in their paper, also using the German ICCP data, that CDU/CSU and the AfD both have a high yield on the "Limit number of refugees" issue. This implies that both would benefit from focusing on the issue (D'Alimonte et al., 2020). The yield approach makes, in order to form a unified concept of issue politics, "various simplifying assumptions" especially regarding party competition (De Sio, Weber 2014: 882). The consideration underlying the index theory only make implicit assumptions about party competition, supposing that voters who are ideologically closer to a party, are more likely to have similar preferences. Therefore, it is assumed that those voters are as well convincible for the party. These considerations ignore the fact that this issues also possesses a potential risk when a competing party appears as a "traditionally" owner of the issue (De Sio, Weber, 2014: 882). To solve this problem, De Sio and Weber propose the use of a formula for the "Effective number of competitors (ENC)" in alienation to the *Effective numbers of parties* by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) (De Sio, Weber 2014: 883). Since this approach is only functioning on the macro-level and not delivering insights about the direction potential party competition and voter transfers might function, a different approach called the credibility yield is presented within the first section of the results.

At the point of party competition, issue ownership and the general concept of valence interfere. Since a substantial assumption of ownership theory is that it matters to a lesser extent what position on an issue is taken on, but how salient the issue is and what handling competences a party gets ascribed. Similarly, in valence theory, it is assumed that the question of competence becomes relevant when parties become more difficult to distinguish, which accounts in classic

valence theory for valence issues as they offer no credible option to maintain a dismissive position (Green, Jennings, 2017²). In its logic of competition, this thought can be transferred also as a theoretical mechanism for issue competition between specific parties when they offer similar positions to the voter. For issue positions offered by several parties, the competence perception of the individual voter should then be the decisive factor why to choose one party and not another. On the party level, if an issue position is adopted by another party, this should then lead to an increased emphasis of the competence side of an issue and increased focus on competence during the campaigning.

Competence competition differs in its mechanisms from spatial competition. “While parties in general have full control over their policy position on an issue, they will have less control over their perceived competence” (De Sio, 2010: 3). In the valence theory, Stokes argued that on agreeable (valence) issues the competing parties would try to emphasize or hide the links between the issue and itself, whether the connection is beneficial or not (Stokes, 1963). As elaborated, competence perceptions have been defined as learnt by the electorate. Hence, the sources of competence perceptions are gained through a positive “reputation and credibility” responsive to events from the past (De Sio, 2010: 3). This limits the degree parties can adapt short-term strategies to improve their ascribed issue competence or gain ownership.

3.4.1 Competition with challengers

When a challenger party enters the electoral arena established parties are, according to issue politics, confronted with a central dilemma apart from the spatial decision on their issue position (Meguid, 2008). Either they can adopt the issue or ignore it. Ignoring an issue is, according to saliency and issue ownership theory, expected to lead to a decline in the vote share of the challenger due to its decreasing effect on saliency. However, this strategy carries the risk of failing to challenge the ownership of the new party.

In opposition, adopting the issue increases its legitimacy and “signals its prioritization” (Meguid, 2008: 28). When parties decide to adopt a challengers’ issue, they can either take a distinct position leading to an “adversarial” strategy or decide to pick a similar position, resulting in an accommodation (Meguid, 2008: 28). The central assumption is that “like-minded voters” who are in spatial terms closer to the mainstream “desert the niche party” (Meguid, 2008: 28f.). The assumption in this thesis is that the determinant factor for vote choice is delivered through perceived competence which might not be addressed by positional changes.

If accommodation is an approach failing to address the competence-level, what opportunities do parties have to address competence?

The question how parties can address the voters competence perception is strongly dependent to what concept of competence perception it is referred to and to the question how competence perceptions are built. Based on the under 3.2 elaborated concept of major evaluations, a very limited understanding of competence campaigning is presented. Green and Jennings' ownership change theory reduces parties to the capitalization of major-events or comprehensive policy reorientation, which contains considering the issue yield literature huge risks for parties (Green, Jennings, 2017²). It further needs to be studied how parties can successfully capitalize major events. But also Green and Jennings acknowledge, that competence perceptions in general are not as stable as an ownership might be and are responsive to short-/ and mid-term-fluctuations (Green, Jennings, 2017²).

According to Green and Jennings, ownership defines a general level on which an issue is rated for a party. On this in general higher level of competence ascription, owned issues are as fluctuated as not-owned issues. This means a competence perception of a party can be weakened while it is not clear if that is beneficial for competing parties since it is unlikely to completely lose ownership (Green, Jennings, 2017²)

“Electors are not fooled by what the party says (...) Issue perceptions become largely monitored by party images and identifications (...) the question hinges on (...) whom mass publics rely for believing, or not believing (Sartori, 1976: 330-1. cit. in Stokes, 1992: 153f.)

As stated in the literature, studying competence captures a part of the affective and symbolic side of the voting decision and therefore analyzed various instable, semi-stable and stable competence measures. In contrast to spatial analyses of party politics, competence does not assume a fully rational voter, but rather a voter with affective and symbolic relationships to parties, which can therefore own, at least to a limited extent, issues and competence perceptions. Those perceptions cannot be changed by spatial and positional adoptions while positional changes as well as proximity are less relevant for the voting decision. This should account especially for the choice of PRRP-voters as their decision is characterized as extremely emotional and.

3.5 Endogeneity

Within the literature, it was several times criticized that competence measures are endogen to partisanship and therefore issue ownership is a redundant concept.

As van der Brug has criticized the concept of perceived competence, arguing that voters lack all relevant information about party competence, he concludes that perceived competence should be completely dependent to issue position (van der Brug, 2017).

As stated, before issue ownership is defined as an issue a party is being received by “most people” as competent or as being “best” handling an issue (van der Brug, 2017: 528). This, according to van der Brug’s considerations, constitutes an inherent problem that becomes particularly apparent when dealing with challenger parties. In comparison to challenger party’s mainstream parties are strongly established institutionalized organizations which have established a strong connection towards partisans. If competence perception underlies a partisan bias this would make them rank them more competent regarding every arising issue (van der Brug, 2017). As ownership is defined as “Shared public opinion about party competence”, it only reaches its explanatory value if it also catches a slice of bipartisanship (Green, Jennings, 2017²).

Following the conceptualizing ownership is supposed to be more constant than other measures of political attitudes since it is stronger connected to the “long-term commitments” parties dedicate do issues. Hence, it is expected that these commitments are credited not only by partisans but the whole electorate, making competence measures less endogenous compared to other measures of political attitudes (Green, Jennings, 2017²: 69).

Considering the critics of van der Brug and the arguments of Green and Jennings, a more functional understanding of ownership can be formed, considering the central thoughts of issue yield. Recognizing the yields argument that an issue is only then beneficial for a party when the position is shared by the own supporter-ship and the whole electorate, addressing an issue not shared by the own supporter ship possesses the risk of losing the party base and the supporters. Otherwise, a high “yield” can only be generated when an issue also promises a high potential within the whole electorate (De Sio, Weber, 2014).

Considering the appearing partisan bias within competence perceptions, competence ascriptions of a party should only then be beneficial for the party when their commitment to an issue is recognized beyond the own voters’ base.

This accounts especially for challenger parties, which usually challenge the political establishment leading to polarized opinions towards them within the electorate (Williams, Hunger, 2022). Therefore, due to partisan bias and affective rejection, they probably won’t reach high absolute numbers in matters of competence. Nevertheless, they may potentially

establish valuable ownership if their credibility on an issue is recognized by the electorate as a whole, promising possible electoral gains in future elections. In opposite, catch-all center parties have usually the strongest supporters base which guarantees them a high base-level of competence ascriptions on every issue, which might only rarely result in high electoral gains.

4. Populist radical right and competence

At the moment, there is no “complete, stringent account for the radical right’s development from a valence and issue ownership perspective” (Kitschelt, 2018: 181). The assumption that competence considerations also play a role for the election of for PRRPs was formed as a reaction to the empirical phenomenon of failing strategies by competing parties (Krause et al., 2023). Building on the previously discussed theories of issue politics, issue competence, and the phenomenon of failing mainstream party strategies, this thesis seeks to develop a vote-decision theory that includes competence perceptions as a determinant also for the vote choice for PRRP.

Engaging and benefitting from competence perceptions is traditionally connected to established mainstream parties as it is assumed that it involves a positive track record handling an issue or an established ownership (de Vries, Hobolt, 2020). At first sight, it therefore seems not plausible that competence also matters for the vote of a PRRP. Populists have often a proven record of recruiting incompetent personal (Mudde, 2007). In distinction to mainstream parties most PRRPs usually struggle to find cooperative partners and have therefore rarely participated in governments, which is why no information about actual issue handling performance is accessible. This accounts especially for the selected case of the AfD, as the party has neither participated in any government on federal nor on state level in Germany. Furthermore, Franzmann et al. have, also using the issue yield dataset and framework, discovered that the AfD is likely to benefit more from positional issues where they can obtain a unique issue position while traditionally connected to competence competition provide higher yields for the Mainstream parties SPD and CDU/CSU (Franzmann et al., 2020). Therefore, if the competence perception is really the dominant factor for explaining the vote choice in favor of the AfD, it needs to be understood what that means.

As competence-perception is according to the theories not only formed by a rational evaluation of available information but also by “symbolic assets” and “learnt by the electorate”, Green and Jennings’ concept of “major events” provides a theoretical explanation for why researching competence of PRRPs promises to deliver further insights even if no relevant government participation has appeared (Green, Jennings, 2017: 702). Although a record of performance

from the past is missing, voters still can have an affective connection of parties and issues increasing their competence perception if a party has managed to capitalize an issue or a unique policy position due to a major event (Green, Jennings, 2017²).

As various studies have indicated, the electorate of PRRPs is mostly concerned about the migration issue (Williams, Hunger, 2022). Additionally, many scholars have put emphasis on PRRPs as issue-owners of the migration issue. Considering the refugee crisis in 2015, it can be spoken of a major political event as Green and Jennings have conceptualized theoretically. Several studies have indicated that the migration crisis has led to an extent of politicization of the migration issue, which was especially capitalized by PRRP (Temizisler et al., 2023). Challenger parties in general tend to claim issue entrepreneurship for issues crosscutting the existing cleavages of an electorate because it allows them to increase their electoral potential and gaining public attention (Williams, Hunger, 2022). Furthermore, as Stiers and Dassonneville have shown, their extreme position has the potential to help them gain a high amount of media coverage, making them be perceived as very committed to the issue, increasing their perceived competence and the saliency of issues and hence, the priority it has for voters (Williams, Hunger, 2022).

Furthermore, as has been shown, the success of PRRPs leads to increasing amount of center parties adopting their issue positions (Williams, Hunger, 2022). As in valence theory was stated, party competition shifts towards competence when parties' positions are indistinguishable. Hence, dealing with accommodation, it can be argued that this also shifts the political competition towards the competence/credibility side of the issues, increasing the relevancy of competence perceptions also dealing with PRRPs. These considerations of competence competition in valence theory were formulated for valence issues but can as a principle also be assumed for party competition over positional issues as migration when parties adopt similar positions or when the opinion of the voters tends to become consensual (Green, Jennings: 2017²).

As Green and Jenning state "Position issues can be transformed into valence issues if the relevant evaluation concerns which party can deliver" (Green, Jennings, 2017²: 8). This applies to a special degree to issues which affect peoples' every day-life and are "obtrusive" for them (Green-Pedersen, Seeberg, 2025: 251).

From these perspectives considering saliency theory, the strategy of accommodation should even have an increasing effect of the vote-share of PRRPs as was slightly indicated by Krause et al. (Krause et al. 2023). When parties accommodate policy positions, they also reach an

increase of the saliency as a party's own agenda setting and elite discourses shape the public assessment of issues and problem awareness (Williams, Hunger, 2022). If mainstream parties which unite the majority of the electorate in their supporter's base accommodate a challenger's position, this results "in greater public attention for the issue" (Williams, Hunger, 2022: 547). Williams and Hunger also find empirical evidence for this argument, highlighting that "accommodation (..) is associated with public salience" and "linked to the degree to which individuals are concerned" with the issue (Williams, Hunger, 2022: 561). The ineffectiveness of accommodation, which is in spatial terms a change of position, could be explained by the fact that changing positions in spatial terms does not automatically imply a change in competence terms, deeming a party also credible for a position (Green, Jennings: 2017). Aligning to mechanisms of issue ownership theory, it is assumed that PRRPs possess a competence-ownership on specific issues, which is why positional changes fail to regain voters support for the accommodating parties and the competence side had to be addressed.

Competence as a more attributed quality can not be set as freely, which could explain the mainstream parties' difficulties to regain voters from PRRPs as the modus of competition might work differently when the competence side needs to be addressed (Meguid, 2005). This results by the fact that the competence appeal of a party is an over a long-time developed stance, which is only to small degrees responsive to short-term adjustments (Seeberg, 2017/ Green, Jennings, 2017²).

It has indeed been argued that especially dealing with PRRP, mainstream parties are tempted to choose a competence strategy since opposing, the often extreme policy positions of PRRP, they can introduce themselves as a "responsible governing" counterpart (Green-Pedersen, Seeberg, 2025). But the issues which challengers tend to put emphasis on can also be a double-edged sword for mainstream parties. Relying on valence-campaigning obtains the risk of lacking credibility caused i.e. by bad government performance or general crises (de Vries, Hobolt, 2020). Populists in contrast tend to incorporate the emphasis of other parties' incompetence in their anti-elites discourse, emphasizing competing parties' corruption and incompetence (Roberts, 2018).

5. Operationalization

Since a review of the literature revealed that a "complete, stringent account for the radical right's development from a valence and issue ownership perspective" is lacking, it is the aim of this thesis to close this gap (Kitschelt, 2018). Thereby, theoretical answers supported by empirical analysis shall grasp the relation of competence perceptions and the vote of PRRP.

Deriving from presented theories, the following can be summarized about perceived issue competence:

1. Issue Politics

Voters do not access the political space but assess specific issues and the party's position and competence/credibility on them (De Sio, 2017).

2. Valence

Competence-perception is an important factor determining the vote-choice. The measure most likely is a constitution of learnt behavior and affective connection. The more difficult it is for voters to distinguish the party positions, the more competence relevance increases as a factor determining vote-choice (Green, Jennings 2017²).

3. Ownership/saliency

Ownership theory states that voter connect issues to parties perceiving them as more competent on these issues. As the saliency of an issue increases, so does the priority of the issue for the voter, therefore determining his vote-choice. The connection of a party to an issue is influenced by its position, attention and governing-performance on the issue. But competence perceptions are more stable than positional distributions, therefore, to gain or change ownership besides small varieties a major event as a performance shock, an exogenous shock or a major-policy shift are necessary.

4. Issue yield

Parties evaluate the distribution of preferences within their party base and within the whole electorate. A rational vote maximizing party behaves according to the distribution of preferences, trying to reach as many voters as possible. While doing so, the party has to respect its base and should therefore only benefit from issues which match inner party agreement with outer party agreement (De Sio, Weber: 2014)

These conclusions lead to the following issue competence definition:

Issue competence is a factor determining the vote choice which is formed within the electorate by a long-term affective connection of issues and parties but to a certain degree responsive to short-term party's action in performance, position and commitment.

Affective connection means an introduced link most likely emerged by long term evaluations of *commitment* and what Green and Jennings call the *major political event*. While small

fluctuation of parties' competence for issues are possible, changes in the degree that ownership is contested or changed are rarely observed (Green, Jennings, 2017²)

While ownership theory is lacking a concrete conceptualization how electoral results are determined and changed on the micro-level apart from adopting saliency theory, the issue yield theory offers concrete mechanisms for the relation between issues, their distribution of preferences, the party's position and party competition (De Sio, Weber, 2014). At the same, time issue yield also lacks a concrete idea for party competition and what happens if a salient issue or issue position is addressed by multiple parties.

Evaluating the presented theories and the observed macro-mechanism of failing accommodation, it is expected that the direction and thus also the decision at the micro level is determined by the question of which party is more strongly attributed to which issue at the affective level and thus "accepted". This should be able to be shown at the individual when competence ascriptions determine the vote-choice leading to H1.

H1: The competence perceptions of issues are the central determinator of the vote choice.

Regarding PRRP and especially the case of the AfD, the migration issue and the capitalization of the issue during the refugee crisis delivers a textbook example of a political major event shaping a potential issue ownership. To discover which issues should form competence perspective beneficial for which parties, within the first part of the results the mechanisms and directions of competence competition are evaluated using a competence adapted version of the issue yield index. It is expected that the issues where parties have the highest credibility yield are the decisive issues to vote for them, leading to H2.

H2: H1 accounts for the issues which must be considered as the issues with the highest yield by analyzing the credibility yield.

As was argued within the literature that competence variations do not only refer to a party's "competence" observed during performance, it is also expected that the extent to which competence matters is also dependent on the respondent's position on the issue.

H3a: Found competence effects are expected to interact significantly with issue position

Additionally, as was analyzed, the main driver of ownership/competence shaping the electoral outcome is dependent on saliency increasing individuals' priority, it is also expected that the extent to which competence shapes the vote-decision is also dependent on the individual priority of the issue.

H3b: Found competence effects are expected to interact significantly with issue priority.

6. Data and Methods

The dataset used for the analysis was conducted by the issue competition comparative project (ICCP). Within this research project, public opinion data was collected before an electoral campaign in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and the United Kingdom via a CAWI-survey (De Sio, Weber, 2020). The Data was conducted in 2017 before the federal election in 2017 in Germany. The survey provides valuable insights about issue competition evaluating up to 17 issues as well as their credibility and priority measures. The decision which issues were relevant in which country was made by different teams of scholars. This provides a limitation regarding the selected issues as some issues might at first become relevant during the campaign (Franzmann et al., 2020). The data was chosen because it delivers an outstanding number of issues evaluating position, competence and priority which allows to do detailed issue analysis. The dependent variable for the analysis is called vote-intention and measured via the question: “If there was a second chamber election tomorrow/next Sunday” which party would you vote for?

The sample was conducted with a non-probability quota via CAWI featuring a selected number of issues which were selected by regional experts. Comparing the electoral choice in 2017 to the data, the sample is overrepresenting left-party voters with 18,02% of the votes (9,2% at the federal election), featuring Greens with 7,62% (8,9%), SPD 22,49% (20,5), FDP 10,04%(10,7%), CDU/CSU 29,2% (32,9%) and AfD 12,82% (12,6) and Non/irregular/”others”-voters are with 17,38% of the whole sample (N=1001) which are underrepresented in comparison to the federal election (25,5%) (Bundeswahlleiterin.de).

Competence is operationalized within the ICCP by using the question “Which Parties have in your opinion the competence to reach this goal” after accessing a positional issue coded 1-6, where 1-3 constitute one issue position and 4-6 the opposite position (De Sio et al., 2019). The questionnaire allows multiple selection which should guarantee a higher degree of nonpartisanship rating a party as competent, as also nonpartisanship should feel able to recognize competence of other parties besides their own partisan bias, as they still can select their party on every issue.

6.1 The case of the AfD

Since the 1980s, PRRPs have been present in many European democracies, while Germany remained an exception until the AfD was founded in 2013 (Arzheimer, Berning, 2019). During

the origins and its early phase, the AfD has not been a radical right party but based on euroscepticism, economic liberalism and conservative social policies stand. This has changed when former chancellor Angela Merkel decided to temporarily suspend the Dublin Regulation which led to a flow of refugees arriving in Germany in 2015. This development increased the saliency migration issues in Germany and the AfD managed to successfully reposition on the issue which has caused rising survey values till the entering of the German parliament with 12,6% at the federal election in 2017 (Arzheimer, Berning, 2019). While various studies have examined a high politicization, the role of media and PRRPs was often highlighted. Furthermore, Temizisler et al. find concrete evidence for an increase in politicization of the issue following the refugee crisis of 2015 and highlight “that Salience is the essential dimension of politicisation“ (Temizisler et al., 2019: 741). This is important to be kept in mind as they conclude that “salience cannot be substituted by polarization” when a party tries to push an issue (Temizisler et al., 2019:741).

As the AfD was founded in 2013, it is in international comparison a relatively new PRRP. According to classic theory of competence, it therefore is not very likely that people in general consider the party as very competent on issues by a proven record of performance or a long history of issue commitment. As the survey was conducted in 2017, it was conducted before their second federal election at all and before the first election where the party managed to enter the national parliament. On the Basis of Green and Jennings suggestion that a major political event is necessary to gain issue ownership, the AfD already had with the Refugee crisis 2015 an appearing major event which could be capitalized to achieve an ownership. Several studies have established that the refugee crisis was a decisive element in the party's formation. During the crisis, the party largely abandoned its more moderate Eurosceptic orientation and shifted further to the right in its issue profile, consolidating its programmatic orientation around the migration issue (Arzheimer, Berning, 2019).

This forms an interesting case, as the AfD in 2017 in Germany was still relatively new to the party system, having fewer supporters and especially less affective connections than today. Making it unlikely that a strong “history of attention” has been implemented by the party (Petrocik, 1996: 826)

6.2 Methods

In a first step, a macro analysis of the issues featured in the dataset shall be applied, analyzing which party must be considered the owner on the issues and who should be expected to benefit from which issues. Since the classical operationalization of issue ownership provides potential

inaccuracies, it is argued for application of an alternative yield index and the results are presented. Afterwards, for the micro-level analysis in a first step the 17 issues featured in the dataset are compressed by confirmatory factor analysis which is controlled on by explanatory factor analysis. All issues were coded in such a way that the lower the value is, the more conservative the positional stance is. For the EU-issues the more internationalist position was treated as liberal and the more nationalist position as conservative. The scree-test has led to a selection of 4 issue dimensions which are labeled as Migration (P1, P2, P15), Labor Market Policy (P7, P8, P9, P11, P12), Climate (P3, P13, P14), and EU-politics (P4, P5, P10). Issues P16 and P17 were excluded due to content mismatch and issue P6 was removed from the Labor Market dimension because it exhibited an insufficient factor loading on the labor market factor². The models were controlled using controlling indicators (CFI, TLI, RMSEA, SRMR)

As the analysis focuses on the relationship between the positional and competence dimensions, the models are estimated for the AfD, CDU/CSU, and SPD in order to provide a broader empirical basis and contextualization of the results. These parties were selected because they represent the two main competitors of the AfD and thus allow for a broader comparative scope. The Firth logit command in Stata is applied to address potential separation on certain issue positions for some parties, and all variables are standardized to make their coefficients comparable.

7. Results

7.1 Macro-level evidence: who is the “true” issue owner?

Technically, the theory of this thesis could be framed within the ownership framework. The reason this is avoided is that the ownership framework mainly focusses on the macro-perspective and its concrete mechanisms on the microlevel are theoretically less executed and empirically weaker substantiated (van der Brug, 2017). Since the analysis in this thesis shall focus on the microlevel, it is not directly transferable and therefore not advisable only relying on ownership perspective. This methodological aim can also be undermined by a first look at the data. Considering the three explained theories, it needs to be figured which party must be expected to be benefitting from which issue. Figure 3 displays the percentage of people ranking a party as credible on an issue, within the ICCP-dataset of Germany from 2017. Regarding the figure it is noticed that by the traditional operationalization of ownership as *the party who is*

² For an overview of the issues, the dimensions, the loadings and the controlled efa-model see the Appendix Table A2

perceived by most people as competent, the AfD would not be considered as the owner of the immigration issues (P1, P2, P15) or any other issue. The AfD gets outperformed on perceived credibility by the CDU/CSU at all three issues mentioning immigration.

As van der Brug mentioned, when regarding perceived competence it is likely that the aggregate effects are also the results of a partisan bias. In the used dataset, this accounts especially for the CDU/CSU as 23,98% of the sample have indicated the intention to vote for the CDU/CSU and only 10,59% for the AfD.

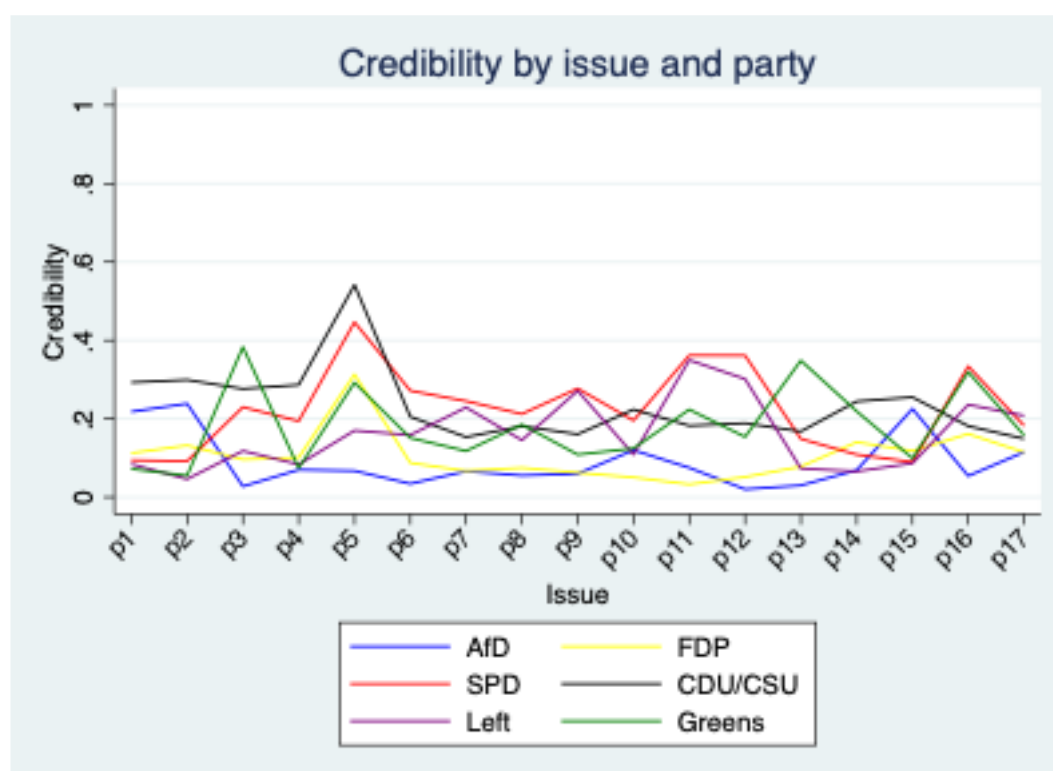


Figure 3: Credibility ratings by Issue and Party

Additionally, the issue yield theory has suggested that parties should only benefit from so called “Bridge policies”, which allow parties to increase their electoral share while “still being associated to the party’s identity” (De Sio, Weber, 2014: 872). Following these considerations, issues which, accordingly to the classical theory of ownership, should benefit the CDU/CSU, such as the immigration issue in this case, might be of greater benefit for other parties if they generate a higher yield.

Figure 4 displays the between 0 and 1 lying issue yield values for Germany. As can be seen the issue P1 “Limit numbers of refugees” has the second highest yield for AfD (0.34) and the third highest for the CDU/CSU (0.29) among all positional issues. While it is unlikely that both parties would be able to benefit from the issue at the same time, apart from the value and the

internal party ranking of the issue, yield theory does not provide an assumption about which party would actually benefit if the saliency of the issue increases. The yield cannot be directly transferred to indicating an “ownership” since ownership is not related to the distribution of positional preferences and the yield does not include explicit assumptions about the direction transfers in party competition would apply.

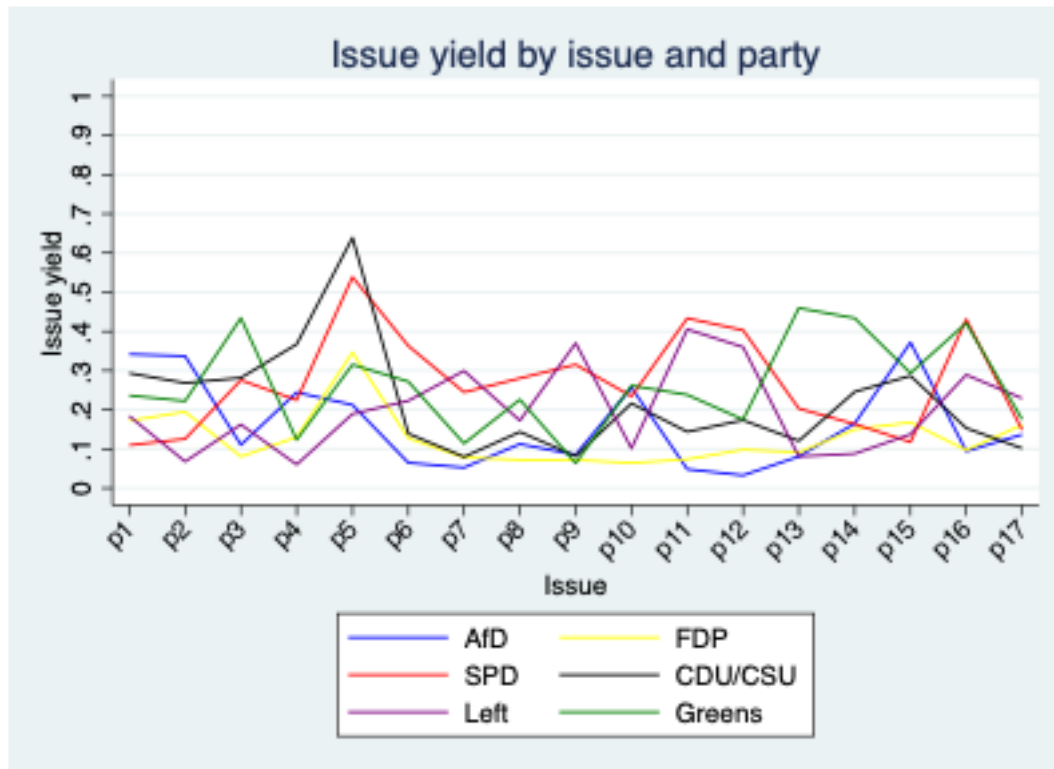


Figure 4. Issue yield by issue and party

The provided solution to the matter of yield, ownership and party competition can take place by evaluating perceived competence from a yield perspective. As was criticized by van der Brug when dealing with competence, it seems to be plausible to contextualize a party’s competence-perceptions when analyzing ownership, also considering the potential distortion by partisanship. This can be absolved when characterizing ownership by adapting the yield index while excluding the factors only related to positions and only using the variables based on credibility. This way, out of the issue yield index a Credibility yield-index can be created, focusing on distribution of credibility perceptions within the electorate, where g is parallel to f of the original index:

g = proportion of the electorate supporting a party and deeming it credible on the issue.

$$\text{Credibility Yield} = \frac{g - \text{cred} * p}{p * (1 - p)} + \frac{\text{cred} - p}{1 - p}$$

Figure 5. Credibility yield formula

Figure 6 displays the scores generated by the credibility yield formula. While it can be noticed that there are only few differences to the weighted yield, regarding the parties ranking on the issues, it can be seen that existing differences partly are extended. The credibility yield puts a stronger penalty on a large supportership and therefore contextualises the perceived credibility stronger in relation to an expected potential, an issue offers to the parties, from the credibility perspective.

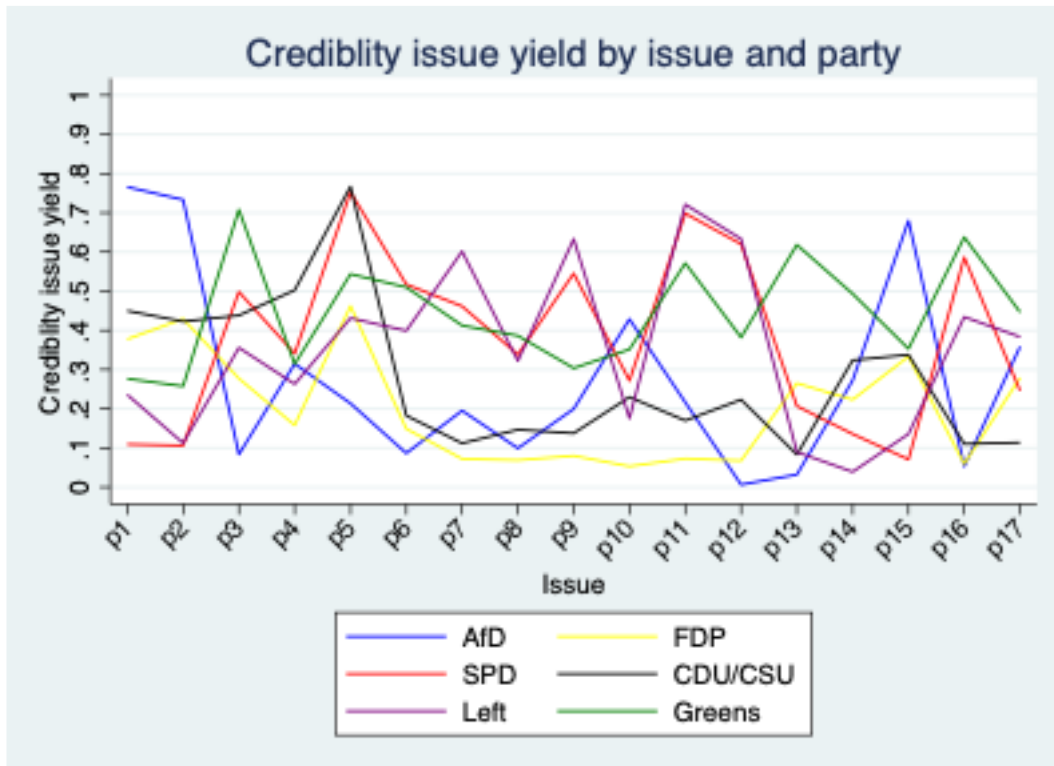


Figure 6. Credibility yield by issue and party

Former studies dealing with the potential partisan bias within credibility perceptions have calculated the credibility minus the intern credibility, which is also a suitable way of figuring who is the “true” owner of an issue in the sense that also a high electoral potential can be expected (See i.e. Dolezal et al, 2014/ Müller, 2000). In comparison to this approach, the credibility-based yield-index possesses the benefits of scaling the credibility difference by $1 - p$, making the index also sensitive to party size. This highlights to what extent credibility gaps matter for parties within the concrete context of their party system, making large potentials for

already large parties unlikely. Because large parties have less external electorate to appeal to, the scaling emphasizes when their credibility outside the core is unusually high or low. Furthermore, the index reflects how effectively a party converts its total credibility into support, relative to its remaining potential electorate.

Green and Jennings provided another approach, which manages more appropriately to grasp this notion of ownership. They propose to operationalize ownership by creating an inner party-ranking for the issues based on perceived competence (Green, Jennings, 2017²). By this method, a relative ranking on parties' ownership can be created dependent on what position an issue has on the inner party ranking. This approach also avoids potential distortions by partisanship and delivers several benefits. It considers the issue structure of the party, apart from respondents' potential partisan biases, probably delivering a good option for predicting parties' behavior. The argumentation for creating a party-based ranking is convincing when researching the relative structure of ownership, as it delivers insights about which issues a party decides to emphasize selectively. However, this operationalization makes ownership completely insensitive to the share of voters and, therefore, to the electoral potential of the party on an issue (Green & Jennings, 2017²). In example a party reaching 3% of voters which all agree on one issue would therefore be considered the owner of the issue, while this doesn't apply any electoral potential to the party if not shared also by nonvoters.

Dealing with the argument of endogeneity, here also a benefit of the datasets possibility to select multiple parties as competent, for a certain issue, comes into force. Even if voters due to partisan bias perceive their party as the most competent on every issue, the respondents still are enabled to also select other parties as competent, on issues they connect on an associative level to them, which then is recognized by the index. Therefore, potential reservations regarding ownership and partisan bias, as formulated by van der Brug, are avoided (van der Brug, 2017).

The argument expressed by this index is that "Issue ownership means something: even if a voter identifies with a party and agrees with its opinions, the voter may still prefer another party to take care of a certain issue" or at least reward the party's commitment on an issue (Seeberg, 2017: 476). This might become the reason to even vote for the party if the issue becomes more relevant to the voter which is illustrated by the credibility-based yield index highlighting the electoral potential from the competence side.

Regarding Fig 6. In comparison to the absolute amount of credibility's, it can be observed that the AfD strongly leads among the issues regarding immigration (P1,P2,P15), towards the factor of the credibility yield supposing that the party's electoral potential on the issue is high. While

the CDU/CSU loses its pole position on the issues expressing missing electoral potential, from the competence side, it still leads on P4 and P5 which refer to the EU-issue. Their value for V6 also indicates a potential on focusing on economic growth from the valence side. The SPD reaches high values among EU (P5) and labor market issues (P6, P11, P12) but has with the CDU/CSU, Greens and Left party also always a strong competitor on the issues.

From this perspective, the phenomena of accommodating could be that the AfD while probably not being the technical owner must be considered the main profiteer of immigration regarding the electoral potential on the issue. If a competing party now would accommodate the issue, its saliency increase would be based on the data expected to be benefitting for the AfD. Inaccuracies regarding a potential partisan-bias within the classical operationalization can also be circumvented by this approach. Emphasizing that parties that manage to unite a large proportion of the electorate in their supporter-ship might be overrepresented as issue owners, while technically other parties should be perceived as the “connected” party to an issue (Green, Jennings, 2017²/ van der Brug, 2017).

7. 2 Microlevel evidence: competence and vote

Similar evidence can be found regarding the micro-level analysis. Tab. 1, 2 and 3 display the results of the regression featuring the four build factor-scores on immigration, labor market, climate and EU. The dependent variable is the vote for the party, coded as a binary variable. On the score variables the lower a value the more conservative the positional stance is. Model 2 includes the credibility of the four dimensions. Furthermore, Model 3 controls for the priority of the dimensions and 4 adds further control variables. Control variables are potential sociodemographic factors as education and class-self-assessment, but also more subjective factors as the perception of the economy retrospective and prospective. Of special interest is the inclusion of party identification as it integrates a control of potential partisan bias.

For the AfD, as expected, the more conservative stand on each issue-dimension, besides the labor market dimension, has a significant effect. The strongest effect originates, as expected, from the immigration dimension but also significant effects from EU and a conservative stand on the climate-dimension emerges. In the second model, including the credibility factor of the dimensions every effect resolves within the credibility dimension, namely within the credibility dimension of the migration issue, which remains as the only significant effect.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Immigration Score	-0.8266*** (0.2757)	-0.1158 (0.3088)	-0.0716 (0.3365)	-0.2548 (0.3426)
Immigration Credibility	—	4.2385** (1.6917)	4.1869** (1.7227)	4.2742** (1.8302)
Labor Market Score	0.2347 (0.1426)	0.2108 (0.1811)	0.2709 (0.1899)	0.1398 (0.1857)
Labor Market Credibility	—	0.7819 (0.7825)	0.8450 (0.8008)	1.1031 (0.8600)
Climate Score	-0.5828** (0.2289)	-0.5463* (0.3092)	-0.5712* (0.3101)	-0.8223** (0.3440)
Climate Credibility	—	1.7894* (0.9778)	1.7134* (0.9893)	1.4651 (1.0764)
EU Score	-0.7730** (0.2695)	-0.3562* (0.3523)	-0.3086 (0.3528)	0.0181 (0.3934)
EU Credibility	—	-4.9044 (2.8620)	-4.8672* (2.9138)	-5.0754 (3.1325)
Immigration Priority	—	—	-0.9565 (1.4628)	—
Labor Market Priority	—	—	-0.3599 (0.3602)	—
Climate Priority	—	—	-1.2004 (1.4983)	—
EU Priority	—	—	2.1261 (2.6151)	—
Political Interest	—	—	—	0.0112 (0.1688)
Party ID (AfD)	—	—	—	0.4302*** (0.1246)
Class	—	—	—	-0.2182 (0.2168)
Economy Prospective	—	—	—	0.0701 (0.1947)
Economy Retrospective	—	—	—	-0.4114** (0.2058)
Education	—	—	—	-0.1593 (0.1600)
Constant	-3.1505*** (0.2077)	-3.6946*** (0.2708)	-3.6643*** (0.2704)	-3.7663*** (0.2892)

* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.

Table 1. Firthlogit vote intention for AfD(Models 1-4)

Regarding the third model controlling for priority, it appears that no independent effect of priority besides the credibility factor can be found. Evaluating the fourth model including the control variables the effect of immigration credibility also remains, while, as expected, the party identification functions also as a significant predictor. Interestingly within the fourth model, also the effect of the conservative stand regarding the climate dimension is significant. While this finding is technically contrary to H1, it proves that positions can also develop an effect, apart from the competence dimension, emphasizing that competence is not inevitably endogenous to position. Beyond that, also the control variable of a negative stance on the retrospective of the state, of the German economy, functions as a significant predictor of the vote choice for the AfD. This aligns with arguments made from the past about electing the AfD such as the “losers of modernization” or the common framework of deprived disappointed people electing PRRPs (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2018).

The SPD model shows no significant effect for the first model only including position on the four dimensions. A significant effect from the credibility on climate can be observed across model 2 and 3. Interestingly, a negative effect of credibility on EU can as well be found among both models.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Immigration Score	-0.0668 (0.1294)	-0.0648 (0.1517)	-0.0146 (0.1575)	-0.0924 (0.1737)
Immigration Credibility	—	0.4593 (0.5443)	0.4085 (0.5455)	0.3402 (0.6188)
Labor Market Score	0.2808* (0.1218)	0.1194 (0.1455)	0.0288 (0.1593)	-0.2137 (0.1373)
Labor Market Credibility	—	-2.4869 (1.6977)	-2.4436 (1.7035)	-2.1038 (1.9497)
Climate Score	0.0139 (0.1987)	0.0618 (0.2709)	0.1025 (0.2452)	-0.2233 (0.2404)
Climate Credibility	—	9.9636*** (3.5177)	9.8513*** (3.5431)	2.8250 (3.2803)
EU Score	0.4270* (0.2203)	0.2857 (0.3095)	0.2149 (0.2695)	0.3747 (0.2975)
EU Credibility	—	-6.6980*** (1.8659)	-6.5830*** (1.8886)	-0.1467 (1.7410)
Immigration Priority	—	—	-0.1305 (0.8913)	—
Labor Market Priority	—	—	0.2802 (0.2497)	—
Climate Priority	—	—	-0.4626 (0.9696)	—
EU Priority	—	—	0.3750 (1.6323)	—
Political Interest	—	—	—	-0.1355 (0.1085)
Party ID (SPD)	—	—	—	0.6321*** (0.1044)
Class	—	—	—	0.0079 (0.0973)
Economy Prospective	—	—	—	0.1760 (0.1334)
Economy Retrospective	—	—	—	0.0472 (0.1336)
Education	—	—	—	-0.0295 (0.1037)
Constant	-1.5632*** (0.0879)	-2.0399*** (0.1235)	-2.0302*** (0.1232)	-1.7927*** (0.1274)

* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.

Table 2. Firthlogit vote intention for SPD (Models 1-4)

Within the fourth model, no significant effect of any variable besides the party identification can be found displaying that many of the SPDs credibility advantages might be explained to a high degree by party-identification which is also reflected by the fact that the SPD did not reach high values of the credibility yield among climate issues.

Taking a look at Tab. 3, slightly different results can be found for the CDU/CSU. Opposing to the SPD, every positional dimension has a significant effect within the first model. The more conservative stance on every dimension apart from the EU dimension develops a significant effect and the more liberal/internationalist stance on the EU dimension as well. The effects dissolve within Model 2. While for immigration, labor market and climate the more conservative stands and for EU the more liberal stand unfolds an effect. The strongest effect as expected by the macro analysis emerges by the EU-dimension. Surprisingly, all these effects besides the positional one by labor market vanish when credibility is added to the model. Controlling for priority, no significant effect at all can be found. This induces that issue positions appear predictive in isolation, but their explanatory power dissolves once alternative issue-related evaluations are taken into account for the vote for the CDU/CSU.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Immigration Score	-0.6881*** (0.1265)	-0.2586 (0.1619)	-0.2276 (0.1712)	-0.2173 (0.1744)
Immigration Credibility	—	0.3275 (0.3408)	0.3465 (0.3417)	0.1053 (0.3560)
Labor Market Score	-0.4716*** (0.1007)	-0.3076** (0.1270)	-0.2408* (0.1385)	-0.2137 (0.1373)
Labor Market Credibility	—	-2.2602 (1.7219)	-2.3277 (1.7221)	-1.2827 (1.8094)
Climate Score	-0.6321*** (0.1766)	-0.2705 (0.2192)	-0.2905 (0.2224)	-0.2233 (0.2404)
Climate Credibility	—	4.8683 (3.1203)	5.0107 (3.1208)	2.8250 (3.2803)
EU Score	1.4059*** (0.2142)	0.4866 (0.2706)	0.5024* (0.2712)	0.3747 (0.2975)
EU Credibility	—	-1.3036 (1.6502)	-1.4206 (1.6505)	-0.1467 (1.7410)
EU Priority	—	—	-0.0567 (1.6357)	—
Immigration Priority	—	—	0.1478 (0.8929)	—
Labor Market Priority	—	—	-0.2289 (0.2324)	—
Climate Priority	—	—	0.1230 (0.9695)	—
Political Interest	—	—	—	-0.1355 (0.1085)
Party ID (CDU/CSU)	—	—	—	0.6321*** (0.1044)
Class	—	—	—	0.0079 (0.0973)
Economy Prospective	—	—	—	0.1760 (0.1334)
Economy Retrospective	—	—	—	0.0472 (0.1336)
Education	—	—	—	-0.0295 (0.1037)
Constant	-1.2713*** (0.0818)	-1.8506*** (0.1247)	-1.8379*** (0.1242)	-1.7927*** (0.1274)

* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.

Table 3. Firthlogit vote intention for CDU/CSU (Models 1-4)

Like in the SPD models, in the fourth model issue-related effects disappear entirely, whereas party identification remains as only statistically significant predictor of vote intention.

7.2 Priority and position

Formally H3a and H3b are not supported as the interaction term does not reach statistical significance (See Appendix table A3-A5). Although the interaction terms are not statistically significant, it is valuable taking to look at the patterns between credibility position and priority. Figures 7 to 10 show margins and predicted probabilities for the relationship between issue priority and positional stance and the observed credibility effects. immigration credibility is shown for the AfD and climate credibility for the SPD as those where the significant effects in the regression models. The negative effect of EU credibility, on SPD vote intention, is not included as it is theoretically not convincing and reverses in the opposite direction in the single model (i.e., the model without controls and other dimensions). The negative effect of EU credibility is evident only for voters with a negative stance on EU issues; as the EU attitude becomes positive, the effect shifts toward a small positive value. Though overlapping confidence intervals make precise interpretation difficult (See Appendix table A6).

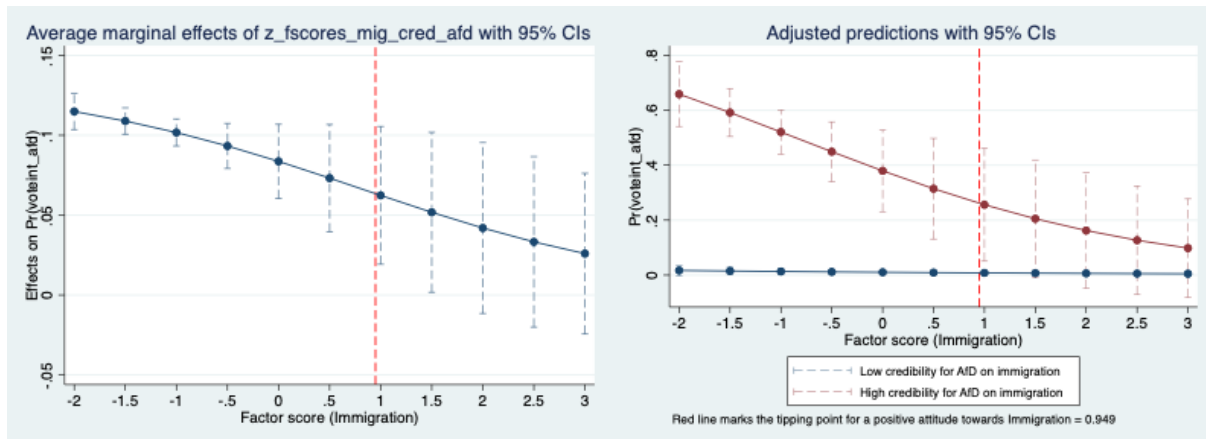


Figure 7. Margins and predicted probabilities for AfD-vote Immigration-credibility and position.

Figure 7 shows that that the position on the migration issue indeed matters for the effect of credibility on vote. As can be seen, observing the margins, a clear linear relation between the position on immigration from negative to positive is illustrated. The effect of immigration credibility on the AfD-vote prevails. The predicted probability of voting for the AfD is about 70% when a respondent holds a negative position on immigration and perceives the AfD as credible. This probability decreases to approximately 10–20% when the respondent holds a positive position on immigration, while the AfD is still considered credible.

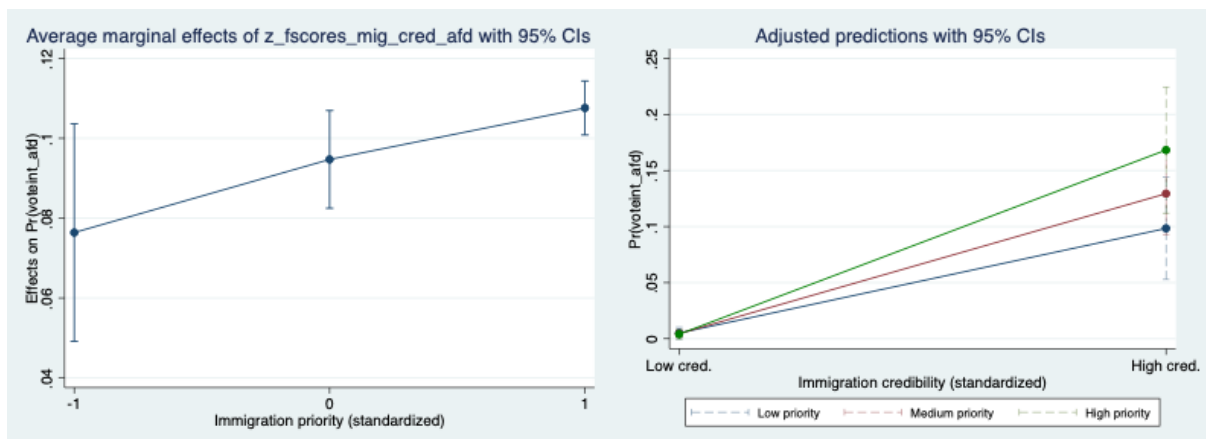


Figure 8. Margins and predicted probabilities for AfD-vote Immigration-credibility and issue-priority

The same cannot be observed for priority, which was already not significant in model 3 of the regression. While a slightly linear relation is indicated, since every confidence interval overlaps no clear conclusion can be formulated.

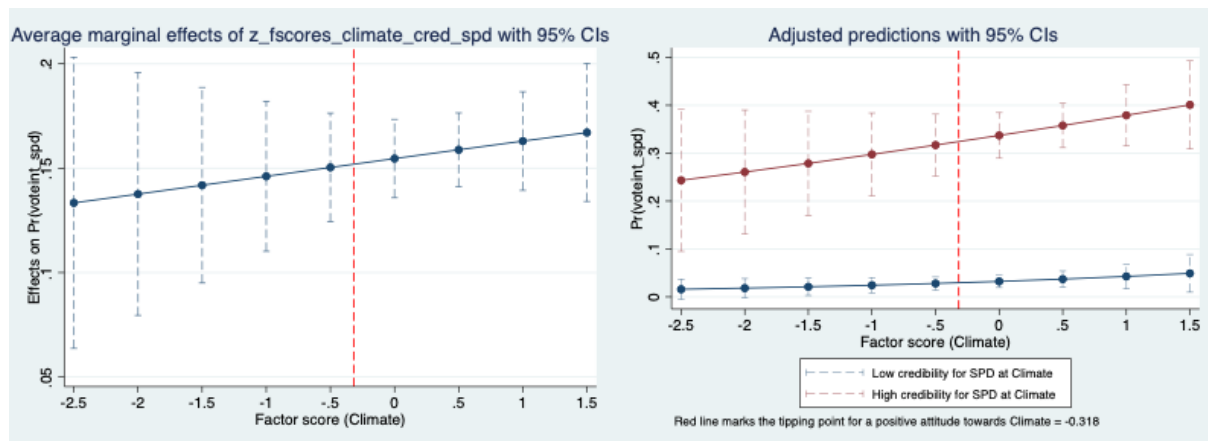


Figure 9. Margins and predicted probabilities for SPD-vote Climate-credibility and position.

A different image is formed when a look at the positional effect on the climate credibility effect on SPD-vote is taken. While a linear relation is indicated, no clear conclusions can be formulated as all confidence intervals overlap.

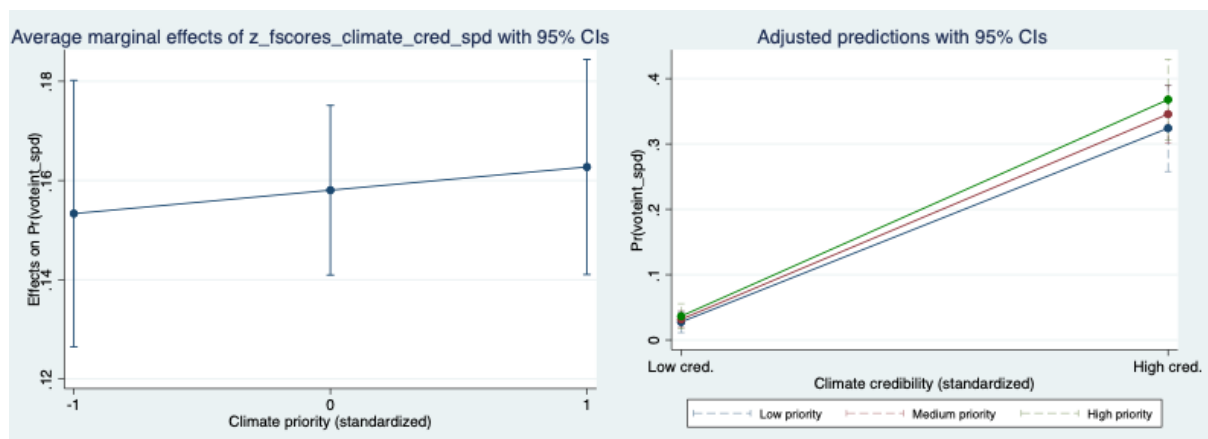


Figure 10. Margins and predicted probabilities for SPD-vote Climate-credibility and issue-priority.

The same accounts for the relation between credibility and priority, where neither margins nor predicted probabilities indicate a relation strong enough to be interpreted and confidence intervals overlap.

8. Discussion

This thesis has delivered valuable insights into the patterns of party issue competition and the competence foundations of voting decisions for PRRPs. A new method was developed to determine which party can expect gains from which issues from the competence perspective using the credibility yield. But the resulting hypotheses can only be partially confirmed. A

strong relation between the credibility on the immigration issue and the vote for the AfD and credibility for climate and the SPD was found. While H1 can be fully accepted for the AfD it has to only be partly accepted for the SPD as the effect does not stay significant across the last model also including party identification. For the CDU/CSU all hypotheses must be rejected as no significant effect of credibility on issues was found.

Hypothesis	AfD	SPD	CDU/CSU
H1	Accepted	Partly accepted	Rejected
H2	Accepted	Rejected	Rejected
H3a	(Accepted)	Rejected	X
H3b	Rejected	Rejected	X

Table 4. Hypotheses overview

This does not mean that credibility as a factor is in general not relevant but that the dimensions more strongly overlap regarding the vote-intention for the CDU/CSU and no independent effects could be found. For the interaction of the aggregate analysis with the issue- and credibility-yield, H2 can only be partly accepted as it only fully accounts for the found yield of the AfD and the migration issue. For the SPD, no clear assumptions on the credibility yield could be made as it was reaching high values on more than one issue-dimension but always was outperformed by a competing party. Nevertheless, on the micro-dimension a significant positive effect of climate credibility was found across the first two models which vanished when party-identification and the other control variables were included. Therefore, H1 can only be partly accepted and H2, which assumed a relation between the credibility-yield and the mechanism on the micro-level, must be refused.

A central problem is that the mechanisms found on the macrolevel do only unsatisfyingly match the results, found on the microlevel, regarding the SPD and CDU/CSU. A phenomenon which is already known from the issue ownership literature but also could not be satisfyingly disentangled within this thesis (van der Brug, 2017).

While the analysis has delivered interesting insights into the role of competence for the vote and party competition, it has clear limitations. Regarding the critics of endogeneity, evidence undermining potential reservations towards competence as predictor of vote-intention can be found regarding the SPD and the CDU/CSU. On the opposite, non such phenomena were observed for the AfD, which might be reasoned in a lower level of party-identification caused by the young age of the party but delivers interesting insights about the pattern of votes for the

party. In general, it stays therefore not convincing that competence must be endogenous to partisanship.

Nevertheless, it needs to be understood more detailed how policy positions shape the competence assessment of the electorate. Especially dealing with challengers who tend to pick extreme positions and are traditionally attracting voters having more extreme positions. It would be premature to think that position is only a marginal factor or extended arm of competence. Nevertheless, it appears meaningful that the observed effect vanishes when competence is included into the models and that this effect stays constant over all models.

While in general researchers have emphasized that extremity does harm the competence association, Stiers and Dassonneville state that for oppositional parties a positional extremity does potentially increase their competence perceptions (Stiers, Dassonneville, 2014). For the question whether accommodation is a fruitful or useless approach, it therefore needs to be further examined when and if accommodating positions of challenger parties can also increase the mainstream parties perceived competence.

Van der Brug has also criticized many of the foundations of the analysis of ownership and competence. While his recommendation to drop competence measures as predictors of vote at all is not convincing, his critics still point to valid vagueness's within the concept. This accounts for his questioning what it means, if a respondent perceives a party as competent which has never been in office before or has no track record on handling an issue (van der Brug, 2017). Therefore, it needs to be further researched why voters not only agree on positional terms with challengers but also ascribe them issue handling competence.

It was managed to create a coherent theory and methodic out of the various theoretical concepts dealing with perceived issue-handling-competence. Limitations of this thesis lie in its tight research approach and focused analytical ground. It is needed in future research to be further understood how the mechanisms of competence ascriptions and issue-positions intertwine. Therefore, the analysis should be extended to more research systems to also compare different contexts, party- and electoral systems. Also, the connection to the macro-mechanisms of party competition which caused the research interest can be further developed by disentangling how challenger parties and their competitors can engage into competence campaigning and how this effects the voter's decision at the ballot-box. If Green and Jennings's analysis proves its validity and parties can use major events to introduce affective connections towards issues, which can strongly shape competence perceptions, historical approaches connecting parties to issues could be a promising future research venue analyzing perceived competence. While the competence

side of the voting decision could theoretically be captured and empirically analyzed, several research gaps could not be closed and further question for future research have erases. Regarding party competition, also the question how ownership can be effectively contested by other parties, containing the question how a major event could effectively be used to gain ownership, are necessary. Also, regarding the question if commitment on an issue or accommodation can lead to ownership change are necessary.

Furthermore, it needs to be determined whether parties' campaigning strategies are more focused on competence- or valence-based campaigning when an issue position is contested by other parties. This may serve to undermine the relevance of the competence level for parties and voters, beyond the affective connection, which may have roots far in the past.

Another limitation is that, unless it could be based on the literature formed a unified concept of competence perception only assumptions about the dynamics towards issue positions and priority were indicated. While no interaction effect was found, it nevertheless was indicated, as often was theoretically reasoned, that these factors might be important drivers of competence, questioning its meaningfulness. It is still lacking concrete evidence what exactly competence-items do measure in relation to the spatial space, saliency and priority.

While the competence side provides interesting insights potentially applying for party competition and accommodation it needs to be stated that direct research of the relevancy of competence during accommodation wasn't delivered. The CDU/CSU, had during 2017, a more liberal stance on immigration and towards asylum seekers as was illustrated by the famous "we can do this" -sentence by chancellor Merkel (Hertner, 2022: 475). The effects observed therefore only give potential assumptions why the effects of accommodation have led to contrary results as expected by some theories of party competition (van Spanje, 2017).

At last, it needs to be kept in mind, that the issue competition field is only one approach to understanding the electoral competition and results. To further understand current developments in democratic electoral systems and challenger parties, this line of research needs to be extended and combined with other approaches, such as analyses through the lenses of established sociological metatheories, including "cultural backlash" or spatial analysis. Regarding competence, it is also possible that the perceived competence of challengers reflects more a sense of distrust and dealignment from previously supported mainstream parties than an ascription of competence to the challengers themselves.

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Appendix

Table A1. List of all Positional Issues

ID	Policy goal a	Policy goal b	Short label
p1	Limit the number of refugees	Accept more refugees	Limit the number of refugees or accept more
p2	Make immigration rules more restrictive	Keep current immigration rules	Restrict immigration rules or keep them
p3	Keep the decision of nuclear power phase-out	Withdraw the decision of nuclear power phase-out	Keep nuclear phase-out or withdraw it
p4	The EU has to enforce refugee quotas in all member states	Each member state should decide on refugee quotas itself	EU should enforce refugee quotas or let each country decide
p5	Stay in the EU	Leave the EU	Stay in the EU or leave it
p6	Use the current budget surplus to reduce taxes	Use the current budget surplus for infrastructure and education	Reduce taxes or invest in infrastructure/education
p7	Increase pension age	Keep current pension age	Increase pension age or keep it
p8	Politics should implement gender quotas	Politics should not enforce gender quotas	Implement gender quotas or not
p9	Reduce income differences	Do not reduce income differences	Reduce income differences or not
p10	To maintain the EURO, Germany should transfer money to poorer countries	Germany should not transfer money to poorer countries in the EURO zone	Transfer money to poorer countries or not
p11	Minimum wages should be increased to at least 10 EUR	Minimum wages should be abolished	Increase minimum wage or abolish it
p12	Deregulate the job market	Keep current job market regulations	Deregulate the job market or not
p13	Build more wind turbines	Stop building wind turbines	Build more wind turbines or not
p14	Diesel cars should be banned	No cars should be banned	Ban diesel cars or not
p15	Require foreigners to fully adapt to national culture	Allow foreigners to preserve their own culture	Foreigners should adapt to national culture or not
p16	Repeal gay marriages	Keep gay marriages	Repeal gay marriages or keep them
p17	Introduce possibilities for binding referenda	Only keep the current possibilities for non-binding referenda	Introduce possibilities for binding referenda or not

Table A2. CFA and EFA control model

Factor	Items (CFA)	EFA Loadings	EFA Uniqueness
Immigration	p1, p2, p15	0.9025, 0.9154, 0.5708	0.2589, 0.2846, 0.5511
Labour market	p7, p8, p9, p11, p12	-0.4322, 0.3796, 0.4674, 0.3660, 0.5122	0.7749, 0.7912, 0.7635, 0.7377, 0.7237
Climate	p3, p13, p14	0.6575, 0.4302, 0.2166	0.6016, 0.7760, 0.8495
EU	p4, p5, p10	0.3711, 0.6448, 0.3791	0.8428, 0.6372, 0.6103
CFA Loadings (unstandardized)			
Immigration	p1, p2, p15	1.000, 0.941, 0.684	-
Labour market	p7, p8, p9, p11, p12	1.000, -1.371, -1.614, -1.831, -1.051	-
Climate	p3, p13, p14	1.000, 0.830, 0.695	-
EU	p4, p5, p10	1.000, 1.690, 2.079	-
CFA Fit-Indices			
Chi ² (df = 71)	324.79, $p < 0.001$		
RMSEA	0.061 (90% CI: 0.054–0.067), $p_{close} = 0.004$		
CFI / TLI	0.908 / 0.882		
SRMR	0.058		
CD	0.988		

Table A3. Interaction effect AfD-vote Immigration and credibility

voteint_afd	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
z_fscores_prioritymig	.0968474	.2572086	0.38	0.707	-.4072722	.6009671
z_fscores_mig_cred_afd	1.744778	.1588064	10.99	0.000	1.433523	2.056033
c.z_fscores_prioritymig#c.z_fscores_mig_cred_afd	.2115095	.152923	1.38	0.167	-.0882141	.5112332
_cons	-3.651025	.2523696	-14.47	0.000	-4.14566	-3.156389

Table A4. Interaction effect SPD-vote climate and credibility

voteint_spd	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
fscores_climate	.2373255	.1558009	1.52	0.128	-.0680387	.5426897
z_fscores_climate_cred_spd	1.362187	.1125289	12.11	0.000	1.141634	1.582739
c.fscores_climate#c.z_fscores_climate_cred_spd	-.0542736	.1377567	-0.39	0.694	-.3242718	.2157245
_cons	-2.038508	.1231924	-16.55	0.000	-2.27996	-1.797055

Table A5. Interaction effect SPD-vote EU and credibility

voteint_spd	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
fscores_eu	.1058648	.2805229	0.38	0.706	-.44395	.6556796
z_fscores_eu_cred_spd	1.319185	.1098629	12.01	0.000	1.103858	1.534513
c.fscores_eu#c.z_fscores_eu_cred_spd	.1585251	.2414235	0.66	0.511	-.3146564	.6317066
_cons	-2.018226	.1214274	-16.62	0.000	-2.25622	-1.780233

Table A6. Margins SPD-vote EU credibility and position

