

Can wedge strategies by mainstream parties cross-cut the anti-immigration far right vote? ☆

Violeta I. Haas ^{a,*}, Lukas F. Stoetzer ^b, Petra Schleiter ^c, Heike Klüver ^a

^a Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany

^b Witten/Herdecke University, Germany

^c University of Oxford, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Anti-immigration campaigns have helped far right parties to establish themselves in party systems around the world. We examine whether mainstream parties can employ wedge issue campaigns that divide the far right anti-immigration vote to win back electoral support. Wedge issues that cross-cut the anti-immigration vote may enhance the electoral support of mainstream parties, as long as they do not simultaneously alienate pro-immigration voters. We evaluate this expectation using a panel survey experiment conducted during the 2021 German federal election. The first wave allows us to identify wedge issues that the mainstream CDU/CSU can stress to cross-cut the anti-immigration vote. The second wave raises the salience of these issues by manipulating the perceived issue agenda of the CDU/CSU using hypothetical campaign posters. While our results show that wedge issue strategies are not effective on average, exploratory analyses reveal the potential of strategically targeted messaging in winning back support of some anti-immigration voters.

1. Introduction

Which campaign strategies can mainstream parties employ to win back voters from far right anti-immigration parties without alienating their core supporters? Across Europe and beyond, anti-immigration campaigns have helped far right parties to put extensive pressure on their mainstream competitors. In the 2017 German federal election, the far right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) secured representation in the German Bundestag by garnering the support of anti-immigration voters with a campaign focused on the refugee crisis (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019). In recent years, similar anti-immigration campaigns have driven the electoral success of far right parties such as the *Rassemblement National* in France, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* in Austria, the *Swedish Democrats* in Sweden, *VOX* in Spain, or most recently the Portuguese *Chega*.

In examining the responses that are open to mainstream parties to win back voters from the far right, the existing literature discusses two strategies, accommodation and dismissal. Accommodation is a strategy by which moderate parties adopt the anti-immigration positions of the

challengers (Spoon and Klüver, 2020; Chou et al., 2021; Krause et al., 2022; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Meguid, 2005). However, this has inherent risks. Adopting anti-immigration positions may not only alienate moderate voters, who are a critical section of the electorate of mainstream parties (see e.g. Chou et al., 2021), it also increases the salience of immigration, emphasizing the very issue that drives the far right's electoral success (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008). Alternatively, mainstream parties can dismiss the immigration issue, starving it of attention and making it less salient for voters (Meguid, 2005). This raises the question which alternative issues mainstream parties can effectively focus on in election campaigns against anti-immigration parties.

We argue that strategic attention to wedge issues can be used by mainstream parties to cross-cut the anti-immigration vote. According to Schattschneider, a political party can be conceived as “a coalition of inferior interests held together by a dominant interest” (1960, 69-70). Wedge strategies exploit this multi-dimensionality of voter preferences by stressing issues that have the potential to split a party's electorate. While supporters of anti-immigrant far right parties are unified by

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: violeta.haas@hu-berlin.de (V.I. Haas), lukas.stoetzer@uni-wh.de (L.F. Stoetzer), petra.schleiter@politics.ox.ac.uk (P. Schleiter), heike.kluever@hu-berlin.de (H. Klüver).

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their opposition to immigration, they often diverge in their preferences regarding other policy issues (Hansen and Olsen, 2019). This preference diversity makes cross-pressured supporters, i.e., those who disagree with their party about an issue other than immigration, potentially persuadable (Hillygus and Shields, 2009). While the literature traditionally presents the wedge issue strategy as the preserve of political minorities, opposition and challenger parties (e.g. Jeong et al., 2011; Riker, 1986; Van de Wardt et al., 2014), we propose that it is equally open to mainstream parties.

Mainstream, catch-all parties have unique opportunities to employ wedge strategies because, unlike anti-immigration parties that focus predominantly on a single issue, they take positions on a broad range of issues that voters may care about. This enables mainstream parties to credibly stress issues that concern and divide anti-immigration voters. Effective wedge strategies “exploit cracks in the opposition while attempting to consolidate one’s own side” (Schattschneider, 1960, 67). Optimal wedge issues should therefore be highly divisive for supporters of the anti-immigration far right party, but not for the mainstream party’s core voters. A campaign that primes such wedge issues and raises their salience may plausibly be an effective mainstream party response to anti-immigration challengers.

We test this expectation using an original panel survey with an embedded experiment in the context of the 2021 German federal election. The first survey wave allows us to identify issues that the mainstream CDU/CSU can raise to cross-pressure anti-immigration voters that are likely to support the far right AfD. The second wave includes an experiment, using hypothetical campaign posters, which enables us to evaluate whether raising the salience of these wedge issues increases voter support for the CDU/CSU. This research design has several advantages. Compared to existing observational approaches (see e.g. Druckman, 2004; Hillygus and Shields, 2009), our experiment identifies the causal effect of wedge issue campaigns on voter preferences. Moreover, in contrast to the hypothetical context in which many campaign interventions are studied (see review by Kalla and Brookman, 2018), we field our study in the midst of a federal election campaign.

Our results indicate the existence of a sizable group of anti-immigration voters with cross-cutting preferences on several policy issues, such as investment in social housing, combating fake news, surveillance of the anti-vax movement, and EU membership. Moreover, we demonstrate that wedge strategies, which increase the salience of these issues, effectively reach targeted voters and elevate their perceived importance of the issue. However, the experimental results also suggest that the average effect of the wedge treatment on the propensity to vote for the CDU/CSU rather than the AfD is close to zero, as is the conditional treatment effect among ideologically cross-pressured groups. While not effective on average, we show that these null effects mask substantial subgroup heterogeneity. In particular, an exploratory analysis of treatment effect heterogeneity using machine learning causal inference methods highlights the effectiveness of wedge strategies among subgroups of cross-pressured voters, defined by key pre-treatment covariates including the perceived importance of the wedge issue and partisanship.

This finding is of considerable practical importance. In the context of communication technologies that enable parties to target persuadable voter groups, tailored wedge strategies by mainstream parties are a practical and scalable response to far right challengers. The theoretical contribution of our study lies in advancing two literatures relevant to understanding party competition: work on wedge issues, and on optimal issue campaigns. Specifically, we show that the wedge issue framework, which has been developed in the U.S. two-party context (e.g., Riker, 1986; Schattschneider, 1960; Hillygus and Shields, 2009), applies to the electoral arena in multi-party systems where complex competition across multiple issue dimensions enhances the opportunities for parties to deploy this strategy. Moreover, our paper shows that wedge strategies are open to mainstream parties, not just

political minorities, opposition and challenger parties as has traditionally been assumed (e.g. Riker, 1986; Van de Wardt et al., 2014). We also advance the theoretical literature on optimal campaign strategies by proposing theoretical rules to define optimal wedge issues in a multi-party context and operationalizing them. In addition, we demonstrate that wedge strategies can be used to win back specific voter groups from the far right while preserving the mainstream party’s core support. Thus, wedge-issue campaigning presents an alternative to the two mainstream party responses to anti-immigrant challengers on which the literature has focused to date — accommodating anti-immigrant positions or dismissing the issue (Meguid, 2005).

2. The electoral potential of wedge issue strategies

Research on the rise of far right parties has primarily focused on explaining their electoral support (e.g. Arzheimer, 2009; Cohen, 2020) or assessing the consequences of far right parties’ electoral success for voters, established parties and social norms (e.g. Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Bischof and Wagner, 2019; Valentim, 2021). Less attention has been paid to the strategies that mainstream parties can employ to win back voters from the anti-immigrant far right. In the broader debate about how mainstream parties can effectively respond to challenger or niche parties (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Meguid, 2005, 2008; Pardo-Prado, 2015), issue emphasis strategies, which alter the salience of issues, have been theorized. According to Aragonès et al. (2015), increasing issue emphasis has an attention-shifting effect. By emphasizing an issue, politicians can induce voters to foreground it and weight it more heavily in their electoral choices, while partially ignoring other issues at the time of voting.

The logic of emphasizing issues that are orthogonal to the campaign focus of a challenger is central to the concept of heresthetic and wedge issues (Riker, 1986; Van de Wardt et al., 2014). Hillygus and Shields (2009), for instance, show that candidates in the 2000 and 2004 US presidential elections successfully emphasized non-centrist wedge issues to persuade partisans of the competitor’s party to switch their electoral support. Relatedly, De Sio and Weber (2014) propose an issue yield model of party competition to predict which policy issues are emphasized by political parties. According to the issue yield model, parties emphasize issues in order to achieve two goals — broadening their support in the wider electorate while also mobilizing their own core voters. Combining population survey data and party manifesto scores they muster aggregate-level evidence that issue yield governs party strategies. Yet, the linkage between this research program on party issue strategies and research on individual-level voter responses remains obscure.

We focus on this linkage and examine how emphasizing wedge issues affects the electoral support of political parties. Wedge issues exploit the multi-dimensionality of voter preferences and divide a competing party’s electorate because they cut across the competitor’s support on the issue dimension that is its main focus of contestation. Strategies that raise the salience of wedge issues create cross-pressures between partisan loyalties and policy preferences (Hillygus and Shields, 2009). Cross-pressured partisans may reassess their support for their party if they perceive the wedge issue (on which they disagree with their party) as an issue of raised importance at stake in the election. Naturally, the party that employs wedge strategies must be careful to pick issues that do not split its own voter base.

Fig. 1 provides a schematic representation of our theoretical argument. To identify issues with wedge potential, i.e., issues that allow a mainstream party to win back the support of anti-immigration voters without endangering its own electoral base, we examine issues other than immigration on which the mainstream party and the right wing challenger have opposing positions. Wedge issues are not new issues such as the environmental issue which Green parties have introduced in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, wedge issues are characterized as

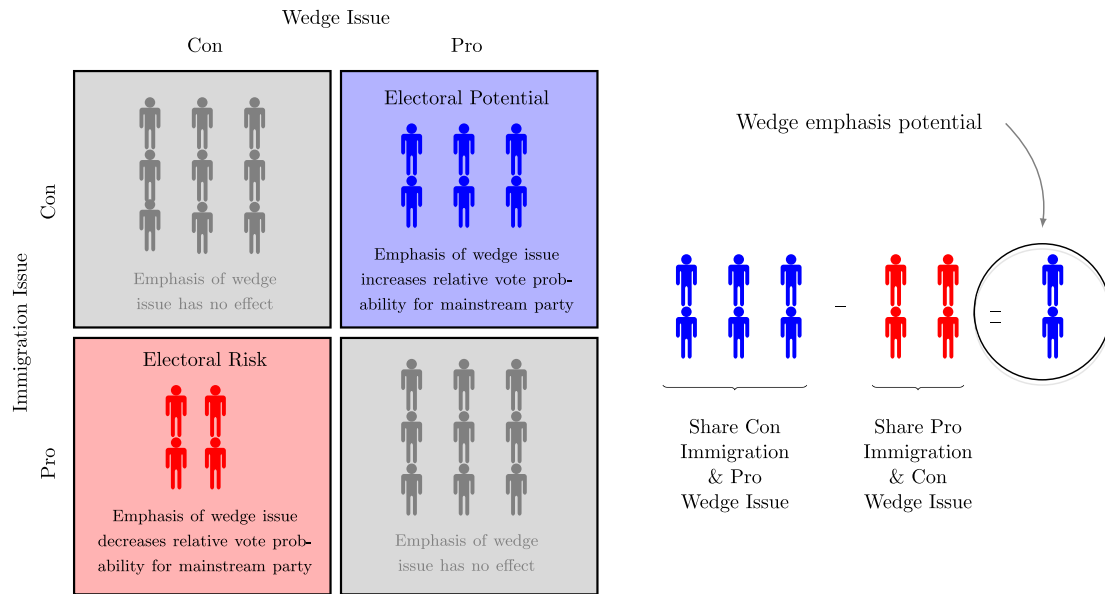


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the theoretical argument.

issues on which competing parties have opposing positions and campaigning on wedge issues allows for winning new voters while not losing voters to the competitor. With regard to the question of how mainstream parties should compete with right wing populist parties who own the immigration issue, we focus on two voter groups: anti-immigration voters who support the position of the mainstream party on the alternative issue, and pro-immigration voters who do not support the mainstream party position on the alternative issue. The relative size of these two groups of voters with cross-cutting issue preferences determines the risks and opportunities of a wedge strategy that shifts attention away from immigration to an alternative issue. If the wedge strategy is to succeed, it must split the anti-immigration vote effectively without significantly reducing the mainstream party's existing support. Thus, the group of anti-immigration voters who support the alternative issue must be larger than the group of pro-immigration voters who are alienated by the mainstream party's position on the alternative issue. For example, raising the salience of investment in social housing could successfully win back anti-immigration votes for a mainstream party if more anti-immigration voters favor social housing than pro-immigration voters oppose it.

In the Supplementary Materials (SM, section A) we formalize this argument and show that the difference in size of the two cross-pressured voter groups determines a campaign issue's wedge potential. The more the wedge issue attracts support from anti-immigration voters and the less it alienates pro-immigration voters, the higher its electoral potential. That is, the overall effect of the wedge strategy is captured by the marginal increase in the difference of the probability of voting for the mainstream party versus the far right party. In the following sections, we show that wedge issues with high electoral potential are easily identifiable using survey data. We then employ an experimental design to evaluate the electoral potential of wedge strategies focused on these issues.

3. Research design

We assess the effectiveness of a wedge issue campaign by a mainstream party against an anti-immigrant right wing challenger in the context of the 2021 German federal election. The election was marked by fierce competition between the conservative mainstream party CDU/CSU and the right wing anti-immigrant AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). In the previous 2017 German federal election, a significant influx of refugees into Germany had made immigration a

dominant campaign issue and helped the AfD to enter parliament. The perceived importance of the issue had enabled the AfD to attract supporters from sizeable sections of the electorate with anti-immigration attitudes (Hansen and Olsen, 2019; Arzheimer and Berning, 2019), including prior CDU/CSU supporters. In 2021, fighting an effective campaign against the anti-immigrant AfD was a key challenge for the CDU/CSU. In the context of this real-world campaign, we employ a two-wave panel survey design with an embedded experiment (approved by the Institutional Review Board) to evaluate the potential effectiveness of wedge issue campaigning by the CDU/CSU.

In the first wave of the survey, we establish respondents' issue preferences and perceived issue importance in order to select potential wedge issues. Specifically, we measure respondent attitudes with respect to 24 policy issues – selected from a popular German voting advice application – that cover a wide spectrum of substantive policy areas ranging from social policy (e.g., support for social housing), to policies to address disinformation (e.g., deletion of fake news), and security (e.g., surveillance of anti-vaccination groups). The issues are drawn from the German voting advice application “Wahl-o-Mat” for the 2017 and 2021 German elections. For a complete list of the issues, please see SM section C.1. Throughout, we choose issues that may have wedge potential because the positions of the CDU/CSU and AfD are opposed. For an overview of the issue-specific positions of political parties, see SM section C.2.

Respondents were asked whether they are in favor, opposed, or neutral on an issue, and how important the issue is to them personally. Based on these responses, we select wedge issues as follows: First, the CDU/CSU holds an opposed position to the AfD on the issue. Second, the issue is important to voters. Third, the issue cross-cuts anti-immigration preferences without significantly splitting the pro-immigration vote. In addition, the first wave includes our baseline outcome measures — propensity to vote for a particular party and vote intention, responses to standard political items (i.e., left–right placement, political interest, political knowledge, partisan identification), and sociodemographic questions (i.e., education, employment, foreign born, income, economic situation, religiosity, attachment to national identity).

In the second wave of the survey, we randomize respondents into four treatment groups and a control group. The four treatment groups are exposed to a campaign poster that focuses on an issue with wedge

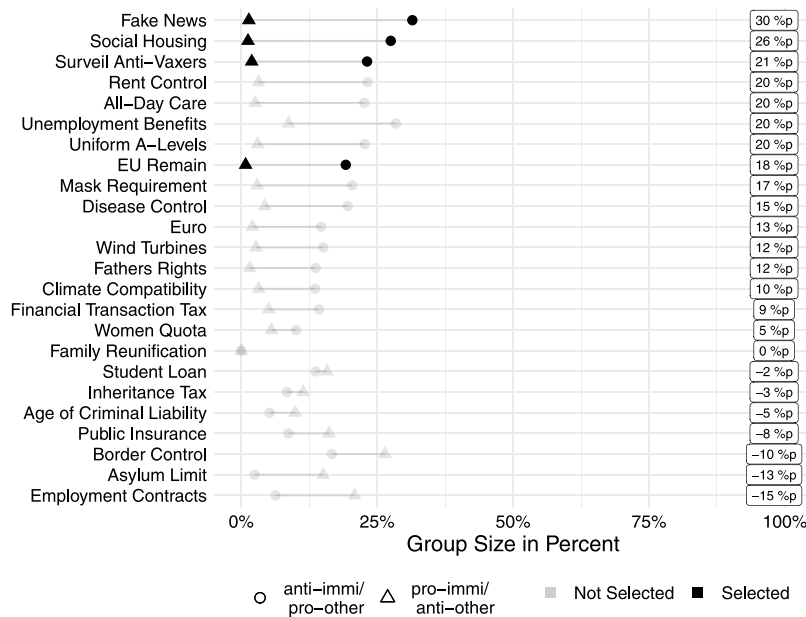


Fig. 2. Wedge issue selection based on cross-pressured voter groups. The figure plots the wedge potential of different policy issues, measured as the difference in the size of cross-pressured voter groups. The wedge potential of each issue is calculated from the theoretical model and shows the difference in size between the groups of anti-immigration voters that side with the CDU/CSU on the issue in question and pro-immigration voters that dislike the CDU/CSU position on the issue. Selected wedge issues indicated in bold font.

potential.² The control group is not shown a campaign poster. Prior to treatment, respondents see information about the policy positions of all parties on the issues in question and answer an attention check question about the parties' positions on one randomly selected issue. This ensures that our campaign poster treatments do not inform respondents about the CDU/CSU's policy position, but only manipulate the perceived issue emphasis of the CDU/CSU.

Post-treatment, the second wave survey repeats three items from the first wave survey, which allow us to evaluate the effect of the posters. First, we ask about the personal importance of the different issues.³ This enables us to evaluate the mechanism of our argument by examining whether our treatments increase the importance that respondents assign to the issue emphasized in the poster. Next, we measure vote intention, and the propensity to vote for the different parties. The vote intention question asks which party the respondent would vote for if there were a federal election on Sunday. The item about propensity to vote asks respondents to indicate how likely it is they would vote for each of the parties, on a scale from 1 (definitely not) to 11 (with certainty).

We recruited a sample of 2500 respondents for wave one of the survey through an online-access panel administered by Respondi, which compensates respondents with a small payment. To ensure that our sample reflects key demographic features of the German electorate, we applied quotas for age, gender, and region.⁴ Wave one was fielded between May 10 and May 19, 2021. The median response time was eight and a half minutes. For wave two of the survey, Respondi recontacted

wave one participants between June 7 and June 23, achieving a sample of 1914 (recontact rate, 76%; median response time, six minutes).⁵

3.1. Selection of wedge issues

Among those issues on which the CDU/CSU opposes the AfD, the distribution of issue preferences in the electorate guides our wedge issue selection (for details of voter support of party issue positions and importance of issues, see SM Figure 8 and SM Figure 9). We anticipate that the wedge potential of an issue depends on its ability to cross-pressure significantly more anti-immigration voters (who side with the CDU/CSU position on the wedge issue) than it alienates pro-immigration voters (who disagree with the CDU/CSU's position on the wedge issue).⁶ We therefore plot the difference in the size of the two cross-pressured groups in Fig. 2. The greater that difference, the greater the expected wedge potential of a CDU/CSU campaign focused on the issue.

We carefully selected four policy issues that exhibit varying degrees of wedge potential for our experimental design. Three issues on which the CDU/CSU position has the highest potential to split the anti-immigration vote (i.e., Deletion of Fake News, Social Housing, and Surveillance of the Anti-Vax Movement), and one with somewhat less wedge potential (i.e., European Union Membership). For each of these issues, we develop a hypothetical CDU/CSU campaign poster as our treatment (see SM section C.3). Fig. 3 shows the "Deletion of Fake News" poster, which emphasizes the policy stance of the CDU/CSU on this wedge issue that cuts across the preferences of anti-immigration

² A fifth treatment group sees a poster that focuses on immigration. Since this is an issue without potential to wedge the anti-immigration vote, we exclude it from the main analysis. See SM section D.13 for additional analyses including this treatment group.

³ The survey also includes issue preference questions in the second wave, which we analyze in more detail later.

⁴ Quota sampling is an established and widely used sampling strategy in work that aims to understand electoral behavior (Groves et al., 2009). Research shows that estimated treatment effects in online access quota samples are comparable to representative population samples (Mullinix et al., 2015).

⁵ In SM section D.7 we use Lasso regression to show that political interest is predictive of taking part in the second wave. Other factors such as vote decisions, vote propensities, identification, education, left-right position do not influence participation in the second wave.

⁶ While the wedge effect also depends on the relative change in voting probabilities among the two cross-cutting groups, this does not influence the direction of the issue emphasis effects (see SM section A).



Fig. 3. Campaign poster treatment on fake news. Translated statement: “operators of websites should be legally obligated to delete false information (‘fake news’) that has been brought to their attention. For a Germany in which we live well and with pleasure”.

voters without alienating those with pro-immigration views. The treatments are realistic and employ the corporate, real-world design of CDU posters.⁷

3.2. Results

Our analysis proceeds in four steps. First, we examine the mechanism by which we expect wedge issue campaigns to influence voter preferences, namely raised subjective perceptions of issue importance. Second, we turn to the average effect of the wedge issue treatments on overall support for the mainstream CDU/CSU vs. the anti-immigration AfD. Third, we examine how the ideologically cross-pressured voter groups (anti-immigration/pro-wedge issue, as well as pro-immigration/anti-wedge issue) respond to our treatments, and fourth, we explore which voter attributes characterize those subgroups of cross-pressured voters that are particularly responsive to the wedge issue campaign treatments.

Our research design is similar to a difference-in-differences approach with randomized exposure to the treatment. We leverage the panel structure of our survey and contrast the difference in variables of interest (i.e., issue importance, propensity to vote, and vote intention) from the first to the second wave of our survey between the treatment and control groups.⁸ Fig. 4 presents the results of our mechanism test and both vote intention outcomes. We estimate (standardized) effects using linear regression models with a number of first wave control variables.⁹

Turning first to the theoretical mechanism, we anticipate that wedge issue campaigning affects the electoral support of parties by raising the importance that treated respondents assign to the wedge issues. We test

this mechanism by examining the effects of the wedge issue treatments on the change in perceived issue importance from the first to the second survey wave in the treatment groups compared to the control group. The left-hand panel in Fig. 4 shows that all of our treatments except “Surveillance of Anti-Vaxers” raise the perceived importance of the wedge issues among the treated as anticipated. Ceiling effects are likely to explain why the “Surveillance of Anti-Vaxers” treatment does not raise the perceived importance of this issue further, which was already highly important to respondents prior to treatment (see SM Figure 9).¹⁰ We conclude that all of our treatments, except “Surveillance of Anti-Vaxers”, successfully manipulated perceived issue importance.

Next, we turn to the effect of the wedge issue treatments on our two dependent variables, *relative* and *absolute* support for the mainstream party. We measure respondents’ *relative* support for the mainstream party vs. the anti-immigration AfD as the propensity to vote for the CDU/CSU minus the AfD. The treatment effect estimates the change in relative party support from the first to the second survey wave in the treatment groups compared to the control group. The central panel of Fig. 4 presents the results and shows null effects. All effect estimates are close to zero and never statistically significant for any of the wedge issue interventions (see SM Figure 6 for analyses of the propensities to vote for the two parties separately). Since relative support may be driven by changes in the propensity to vote for the CDU/CSU (of central theoretical interest to us) as well as the AfD, we also examine whether the wedge issue interventions increase the *absolute* support for the CDU/CSU measured by the intention of respondents to vote for the CDU/CSU.¹¹ As the right-hand panel of Fig. 4 shows, this test yields a further set of null results. These results demonstrate that none of the

⁷ An overview of all selected issues and the associated campaign posters is available in SM section C.3.

⁸ See SM Table D.8 for balance tests, which show that the experimental groups are balanced on covariates.

⁹ All regressions account for wave one measures of political interest, political knowledge, party identification, vote intention, subjective left-right placement and a left-right classification generated by factor analysis of issue positions. The regressions using propensity to vote (ii) and vote intention (iii) as outcomes further control for wedge issue positions and importance in wave one. Running the same models without controls yields essentially the same results (see SM Figure 10).

¹⁰ Examining the difference in the issue preferences of respondents between wave one and two in each treatment group compared with the control group, we also find that one campaign poster persuades voters to alter their issue stances (see Fig. 5). Specifically, respondents are more likely to favor the deletion of fake news when they see the poster. We observe no treatment effects for other issue preferences. Note that this persuasion effect is not the focus of our theoretical argument, but it can be expected to further boost the support for the CDU/CSU (who favors these issues) relative to the AfD (who opposes these issues).

¹¹ Here, we use the second wave’s vote intention as outcome, while conditioning on the first wave’s vote intention. SM Figure 7 shows the results when analyzing the vote intention for the AfD instead.

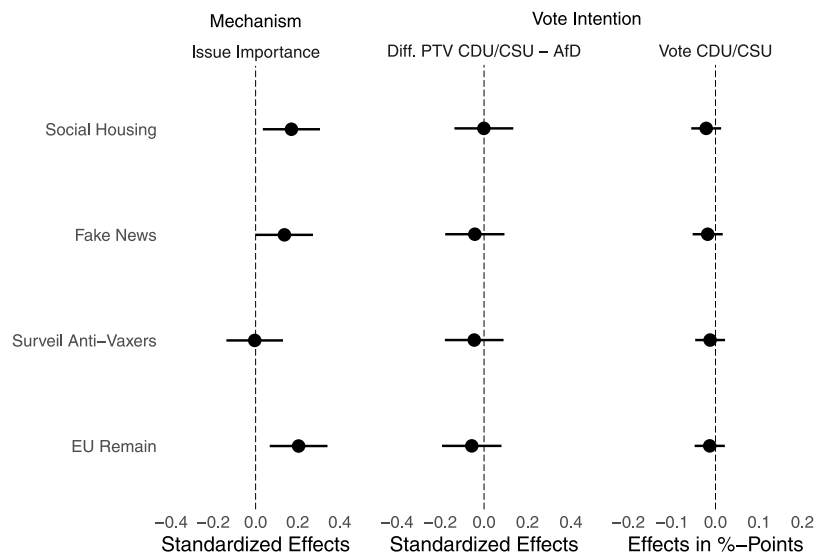


Fig. 4. Treatment effects of the wedge issue campaign posters. The figure depicts effects on the difference in wave one and wave two attitudes between each treatment group and the control group regarding (i) perceived issue importance (left-hand panel), (ii) the propensity to vote for the CDU/CSU minus AfD (central panel), and (iii) vote intention for the CDU/CSU (right-hand panel). We report (standardized) point estimates from linear regression models conditioning on several first wave covariates along 95% confidence intervals.

wedge issue campaigns significantly raise relative or absolute support for the CDU/CSU on average.¹²

We theoretically anticipate the treatment effects to arise from the responses of those voter groups that are ideologically cross-pressured by the wedge issue campaigns, that is anti-immigration/pro-wedge issue voters and pro-immigration/anti-wedge issue voters. We anticipate that the former (anti-immigration) voter group is persuadable, so that mainstream parties can win back its support by activating ideological cross-pressures through wedge issue campaigning, which should generate positive treatment effects. To investigate if the cross-pressured voter groups react to the treatment exposure as expected, we narrow our focus to examine the conditional average treatment effects on these cross-pressured voters.¹³

Fig. 5 plots the effects focusing on the relative propensity to vote for the CDU/CSU vs the AfD and shows null effects, not only for pro-immigration/anti-wedge issue voters, but also for anti-immigration/pro-wedge issue voters, which is contrary to our theoretical expectations and suggests that cross-pressure based on the two issues alone is not sufficient to understand the effect of wedge issue campaigns.

The final part of our empirical analysis is of exploratory nature, and examines potential heterogeneity among these ideologically cross-pressured groups in response to the wedge treatments. Specifically, we employ a causal forests approach to identify subgroups based on covariates, where treatment effects differ from the overall causal effect (Wager and Athey, 2018).¹⁴ This allows us to establish among which groups of ideologically cross-pressured voters the wedge issue treatments actually worked.

¹² We further verified the robustness of our results by repeating the exercise for the subgroup of first wave AfD and CDU/CSU voters (see SM Figure 11 and 12).

¹³ See SM Table D.2 for an overview of the size of cross-pressured voter groups by wedge issue. Note that the groups of pro-immigration/anti-wedge issue voters are necessarily small, as we specifically selected issues with high wedge potential, i.e., issues with the ability to cross-pressure significantly more anti-immigration/pro-wedge issue voters than alienating pro-immigration/anti-wedge issue voters (see Fig. 2).

¹⁴ The causal forests approach forms part of a larger family of approaches that use machine learning algorithms (Athey et al., 2019), and enable us to draw inferences about treatment effect heterogeneity that are substantially more powerful than classical methods based on nearest-neighbor matching (Wager and Athey, 2018).

Fig. 6 splits the ideologically cross-pressured group of anti-immigration and pro-wedge issue voters based on predicted treatment effect strength. Here, we estimate conditional average treatment effects (CATEs) for two subgroups, those observations who (in absolute terms) display an individual treatment effect estimate above and below the median estimate. The estimates to the left-hand side of the figure show the conditional average treatment effects for both below (marked by dots) and above (marked by triangles) median CATE observations. The table on the right-hand side of the figure provides further insight into the qualitative composition of these subgroups. For this, we show the covariates that predict increased (i.e., dot) and decreased (i.e., triangle) relative support for the CDU/CSU compared to the AfD as a result of the treatments. It shows that the social housing wedge issue treatment works precisely as anticipated among cross-pressured voters who, pre-treatment, report higher propensity to vote for the AfD, and higher party identification with the AfD. When these voters are presented with the CDU/CSU campaign raising the salience of investment in social housing – an issue which the AfD does not support, and on which these voters disagree with the AfD – their relative support for the CDU increases sizeably and significantly. Turning to the wedge issue treatments that focus on the CDU/CSUs policies to surveil the anti-vax movement and to remain in the EU, we find that the wedge effect is most evident among voters who, pre-treatment, assign high importance of these issues – these are voters among whom the CDU/CSU is most likely to increase its support compared to the AfD through wedge issue campaigning.

In the supplementary material (SM, Figures 13 and 14) we present two additional causal forest analyses that examine the effect of the wedge issue campaigns among these anti-immigration/pro-wedge issue voters on their separate propensities to vote for the AfD and CDU/CSU. These analyses show that the CDU/CSUs wedge issue campaigns on three issues – social housing, fake news, and surveillance of the anti-vax movement – significantly reduce these voters' propensity to vote for the AfD. However, whether these same three wedge campaigns increase or reduce vote intention for the CDU/CSU is strongly conditioned by pre-treatment partisanship. The wedge campaigns most effectively increase the CDU/CSU support among conflicted voters who, pre-treatment, were already CDU-leaning, but tend to alienate conflicted voters who pre-treatment were disinclined to vote for the CDU/CSU or reported party identification with the AfD.

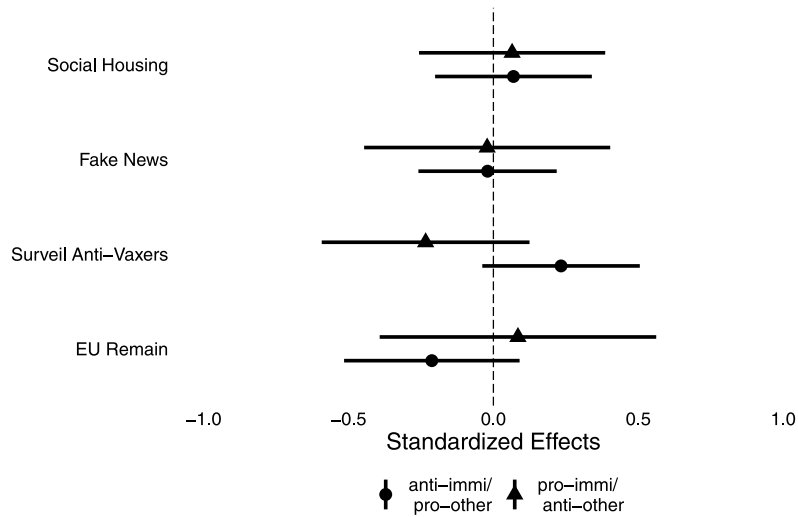


Fig. 5. Average conditional treatment effects among cross-pressured voters. The figure focuses on cross-pressured voter groups and reports standardized point estimates along 95% confidence intervals from a linear regression model with the difference between treatment groups and the control group in propensity to vote for the CDU/CSU versus AfD between waves as outcome variable. The linear regression model conditions on additional first wave control variables.

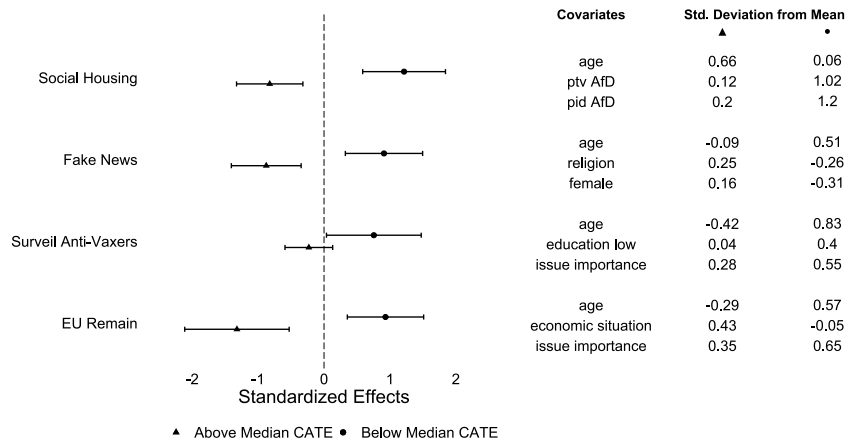


Fig. 6. Heterogeneity among cross-pressured anti-immigration voters. The plot reports standardized point estimates along 95% confidence intervals for subgroups based on the predicted individual treatment effect strength (above or below the median estimate) using a causal forests approach. The outcome is the difference in propensity to vote for the CDU/CSU versus the AfD. The model uses Augmented Inverse-Propensity Weighted (AIPW) Average Treatment Effects and is fitted on several pre-treatment covariates. The Table shows the standardized deviation from the mean among below and above median effect observations for the top three covariates with the highest variation in each campaign poster intervention.

Taken together, these results suggest that in order to succeed, wedge strategies need to be carefully targeted. Indeed, the average treatment effect of the four wedge strategies that we investigate is null, as is the conditional average treatment effect among the target population for mainstream parties employing this strategy — anti-immigration voters who disagree with the right-wing challenger on the wedge issue that the mainstream party supports. However, our causal forest analyses reveal that these null effects mask substantial subgroup heterogeneity, and that the effectiveness of wedge strategies among anti-immigration/pro-wedge issue parts of the electorate tends to be conditioned by two key factors — pre-treatment issue importance and partisanship.

These exploratory findings are intuitively plausible and substantively important. In the competition between mainstream parties and anti-immigrant challengers for the support of persuadable voter groups, average treatment effects may not be the most relevant metric of the success of wedge issue strategies. Current communication technologies such as targeting on Facebook enable parties to address specific persuadable voter groups, which makes tailored wedge strategies by mainstream parties a potentially practical and scalable response to far right challengers.

4. Conclusion and outlook

How can moderate parties respond to anti-immigration campaigns of the far right? We argue that strategic attention to wedge issues in election campaigns can be used by mainstream parties to cross-cut the anti-immigration vote. To evaluate this argument, we use a panel survey experiment in the context of a real election campaign.

Our results indicate that wedge issue campaigns that cross-cut the anti-immigration vote do not enhance mainstream parties' overall electoral support, even among ideologically cross-pressured voters. Although wedge issue strategies are not effective on average, our exploratory analyses highlights the potential of carefully targeted messaging in helping mainstream parties to win back the support of some anti-immigration voters who disagree with the far right challenger party about the issue in question. Specifically, we find that those voters who care particularly strongly about the wedge issue, and those without strong prior partisan commitments (i.e. without strong aversion to the mainstream party or strong support for the right wing challenger party) are persuadable. This finding is of considerable practical importance in a context in which parties routinely micro-target their messages to

specific voter groups (see e.g. Erfort, 2023; Hersh, 2015; Lavigne, 2021; López Ortega, 2021).

The theoretical contributions of the paper are twofold. To the literature on wedge issues, we contribute an understanding that the wedge issue framework, which was originally developed in the US context, also extends to the electoral arena in multi-party systems. Moreover, our findings show that wedge strategies are a tool available to mainstream parties, not only challenger parties and opposition groups, as has traditionally been assumed. For the literature on optimal issue campaigns, we offer a first definition and operationalization of wedge issues in a multi-party context. We also show that wedge strategies can be a successful alternative to the strategies of accommodation and dismissal, which the literature has focused on to date in analyzing mainstream party responses to anti-immigration challengers.

Our paper also opens several avenues for future research. For instance, in examining the generalizability of our findings about the effectiveness of wedge strategies by center-right mainstream parties facing competition from radical-right challengers, future work could explore whether our results can be replicated in other political contexts. Future work might also investigate the effect of repeated or continuous exposure to wedge strategies. While our experiment took place in the context of a real election campaign, with realistic wedge issue interventions, it was not marked by repeated or continuous exposure over the duration of the campaign. We may therefore be underestimating the potential of wedge strategies. After all, real-world issue campaigns often derive their power from reminding voters constantly of the issues at stake in the election. In the literature on optimal issue campaign strategies, our paper also opens up new questions. While we have focused on the competition between mainstream and anti-immigration parties, in most instances, mainstream parties are not particularly interested in winning against a single challenger party, but want to maximize their popular support across the board. Prior work has shown that focusing on particular challengers bears costs (see e.g. Chou et al., 2021). Future research can build on our work and extend the theoretical foundations for campaign issue selection presented here to competition with multiple parties.

Declaration of competing interest

All authors declare they have no competing or conflict of interests. Funding details are outlined in the title page and the submission platform.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102617>.

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