

Trick of the Traits.

An experimental study on trait ownership and mediated leader effects.

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Abstract

Research has shown that citizens' subjective party leader perceptions, especially in terms of leadership traits, affect voting behavior. What remains a largely unresolved question, however, is which trait evaluations matter most. The main goal of this study is to test how media messages of party leaders in terms of their leadership traits affects voters' perception of those party leaders and to what extent trait ownership moderates this relation. The theory of trait ownership states that just as parties can own issues, party leaders can also own related character traits. It also shows that right-wing parties own 'competence' traits (including political competence and vigorousness), while left-wing parties own 'character' traits (including integrity and communicative skills). This leads us to hypothesize that news that describe party leaders positively in terms of the non-owned traits and negatively in terms of the owned traits, will have stronger impact on voters than news that describe party leaders positively in terms of the owned traits and negatively in terms of the non-owned traits. This paper tests these hypotheses by mean of an experiment (N=1444), by exposing German-speaking participants to news media messages in which the party of the party leader (right-wing and left-wing), the tone of the message (positive and negative) and the discussed traits (competence and character) are manipulated. The results strongly support the hypotheses and show that trait ownership can explain differences in effects of trait evaluations in the media for different parties.

Introduction

It is generally accepted that party leaders are important forces in democratic elections. Research has shown that the subjective leader perceptions, especially in term of their leadership traits, affect citizens in their voting behavior (e.g., Mughan, 2000; Bittner, 2011; Aarts, Blais, & Schmitt, 2013; Garzia, 2013; Lobo & Curtice, 2014). Shifting the attention to mediated leader effects, i.e., the electoral impact of news media coverage of party leaders, the literature shows that both the prominence of the politicians and the tone in which they and their personality traits, are discussed in the news media matter for vote intentions (e.g., McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997; Mughan, 2000; Kleinnijenhuis, Maurer, Kepplinger, & Oegema, 2001; Soroka, Stuart, Bodet, Young, & Andrew, 2009; Hopmann, Vliegenthart, De Vreese, & Albæk, 2010; Eberl, Wagner, & Boomgaarden, 2017; Aldering, van der Meer, & Van der Brug, 2018; Aldering, 2018). However, what remains a largely unresolved question in the study of mediated leadership effects, is which trait evaluations matter *most*. The main goal of this study is thus to test how news messages about party leaders that highlight leadership traits affect voters' perception of those party leaders, based on the idea that this effect substantially depends on trait ownership.

The theory of trait ownership states that just as parties can own issues, party leaders can also own related character traits (Hayes, 2005). For example, Hayes shows that the Republican party owns 'competence' traits, such as political competence and vigorousness, while Democrats own 'character' traits, including integrity and communicative skills. Moreover, based on the expectancy violations theory, he argues that overcoming the expectations gap, i.e., successfully trespassing onto the trait territory of the other party, yields the most electoral gain. Although the theory of trait ownership is mainly tested in the two-party system of the US, we believe that it will play a role in moderating mediated leader effects in multi-party systems in the European context as well. Bittner, for instance, argues that 'there is no reason to believe that this is purely an American phenomenon' (Bittner, 2011: 77), and analyzes leader effects comparatively, by pooling data of thirty-five election studies across seven countries (even though twenty-four of them took place in *de facto* two-party systems). Thus, based on their ideological differences, right-wing parties in multiparty systems are likely to own 'competence' related traits, while left-wing parties are likely to own 'character' related traits.

This study is the first to tests the impact of this trait ownership within mediated leader effects. We conduct a survey experiment in German speaking countries (Germany and Austria), were we hypothesize that news media coverage with positive depictions of a candidate on non-owned traits, and negative depictions on owned traits, have the largest impact on voters' perceptions of the candidate and, subsequently, their voting behavior. Beyond testing the moderating impact of trait ownership, our study also strengthens the causal claim of (the conditionality) of (mediated) leader effects. Most research on

(mediated) leader effects studies the influence of subjective leader perceptions on electoral decision making. However, the relationship between subjective leader perceptions and party support is highly endogenous: feelings toward the party leader cannot be easily distinguished from feelings towards the party as a whole and party preferences are also likely to influence party leader perceptions (e.g., Page & Jones, 1979; Bittner, 2011; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2013; Garzia, 2012). The bulk of the evidence for (mediated) leader effects is based on correlational data, which has a hard time dealing with this endogeneity. Although attempts have been made to more strongly assess the causal direction of (mediated) leader effects, for instance by making use of instrumental variables (Garzia, 2012) or by linkage analysis using panel data (Aaldering et al., 2018; Aaldering, 2018), very few studies focus on the causality of these (mediated) leader effects by using an experimental setting.

Mediated Leader Effects

As the spokespersons of political parties, party leaders are highly visible political actors. That is to say, they campaign most publicly for their parties and communicate the party message to voters. Besides, because of their institutional position, they can influence a number of political processes and outcomes. Although political leadership has long received little attention as explanation for voting behavior, more recently most scholars agree that party leaders have an electoral effect and are important forces in democratic elections. The literature has predominantly studied the extent to which voters change party preferences because a party leader persuades partisans to defect from the party they usually vote (or for which they voted in the last election), and to cast their ballots for the party they lead instead, which is usually referred to as *leader effects*. The primary focus in the leader effects literature is on the psychological variable of a leader's personality: the public values certain personality traits in political leaders, and these can be sufficiently attractive to persuade voters to deviate from their habitual voting choices and cast their ballots for another party. The general perception of a party leader has its foundations (at least partly) in the public's perceptions of a leader's character (Shabad & Andersen, 1979; Greene, 2001; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013). A wide variety of books and articles that study these leader effects demonstrate that favorable perceptions of a party leader in terms of his/her personality increase electoral support for that leader's party (e.g., Mughan, 2000; Bittner, 2011; Aarts et al., 2013; Garzia, 2013; Lobo & Curtice, 2014).

Various scholars have suggested that the mechanism by which party leaders affect voters runs through news coverage of those leaders (e.g., King, 2002; Bittner, 2011). Even though most scholarship on leader effects is implicitly based on the influence of subjective leader perceptions in terms of their character traits in the minds of voters on voting behavior, this paper shifts the attention towards *mediated*

leader effects, i.e. the electoral impact of media coverage of party leaders. There are at least three reasons why news media coverage of party leaders is important when studying leader effects.

First, because media coverage of party leaders is simply the most likely origin of electoral leader effects, as voters usually do not meet party leaders in real life, but form their judgments of these political actors based on their representation in the media. Today, the most important source of political information is media coverage (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014). Thus, coverage of party leaders in newspapers, on television or radio shows, and on news websites are the most likely sources of leader effects, as voters' subjective perceptions of party leaders are based on their media exposure (e.g., Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Mughan, 2000).

Second, because the personality of a political actor is deemed important for his/her job performance (e.g., Lobo & Curtice, 2014), it automatically has news value and therefore is included in news stories. Evaluating a leader's integrity, for instance, is newsworthy because it assesses how a politician deals with the political power that he/she has, and whether the politician behaves in a way that the electorate want him/her to behave. Thus, evaluating political actors based on their personality traits may be considered part of the watch-dog function of the media in democratic societies.

Third, because journalists like to convey a story through heuristics (i.e., categorize and simplify reality) or frames (i.e., highlight particular aspects of reality), which render complicated issues more palatable to their audiences. Personality traits can be considered such cues, and are also part of news frames (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2018). Framing theory argues that the interpretation of events that is applied by the media influences the way people make sense of reality and that frames have a selective function as they accentuate certain aspects of reality, while they deemphasize others (e.g., Scheufele, 2000; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012). Valenced news framing, more specifically, indicates that frames can demonstrate inherently good and bad connotations by including positive or negative elements that influence the public (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003). Thus, by evaluating political actors in terms of their personality, journalists use traits to convey their interpretation of reality, which has an impact on the electorate.

Taking all this into consideration, a next step is to evaluate which news depiction of personality traits can actually sway voters or are most impactful. Based on a large-scale literature review, Aldering and Vliegthart (2016) provide a conceptualization of five leadership traits that integrates existing research on leadership characteristics. They distinguish five leadership traits. First, *political craftsmanship* captures the skills necessary inside the political arena, including a politician's general knowledge, knowledge on specific issues, and political intelligence, including competence, insightfulness, strategic behavior, anticipation and experience. Second, they include politicians' *vigorousness*, capturing the

'strength' of their leadership, their (self-)confidence and decisiveness and whether they dominate the decision-making process. Third, *integrity* refers to a politician's intrinsic motivation. It captures whether a politician is honest, guided by the needs of the electorate and uncorrupted. Fourth, politicians' *communicative skills* capture both inspiring or visionary leadership and the mediagenic qualities of politicians, including whether a politician comes across as empathic, charming, friendly and relaxed. Fifth, leaders' *consistency* is included, which captures the stability across the visions and actions of party leaders and whether the politician behaves in a predictable manner. Aldering and Vliegenthart (2016) show that these five leadership traits appear regularly in the discussion of politicians in Dutch newspapers.

Trait Ownership and Mediated Leader Effects

The scarce literature on mediated leader effects generally focuses on two aspects of leader portrayal: party leader visibility in the media, and the tone in which leaders are described. Most studies in this field show that both the prominence of party leaders and the tone in which they are displayed in media coverage affects vote intentions. Party support increases when the leader is more visible in the media or when the leader is described positively and decreases when the leader is portrayed in a negative way (e.g., McCombs et al., 1997; Mughan, 2000; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2001; Soroka, Stuart et al., 2009; Hopmann et al., 2010; Eberl et al., 2017; Aldering et al., 2018; Aldering, 2018).

What remains a largely unresolved question in the study of mediated leader effects is which trait evaluations matter most. Some scholars have studied the asymmetrical responses of voters to different trait evaluations, but the results are largely inconclusive. First, extant research based on prospect theory has shown the existence of a *negativity bias* (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992): responses to negative information tend to be stronger than responses to positive news. These asymmetrical reactions to positive and negative triggers are found in a range of fields, including economic information (Soroka, Stuart N., 2006), campaign information (Lau & Pomper, 2002), and perceptions of political parties and party leaders (Lau, 1982; Klein, 1991; Holbrook, Krosnick, Visser, Gardner, & Cacioppo, 2001). Contradictory, however, empirical results show that positive traits evaluations have a stronger impact on voters than negative ones (Wattenberg, 1991; Aarts & Blais, 2013; Aldering et al., 2018; Aldering, 2018), which lends support for the idea that the pull-factors in leader effects are stronger than the push-factors.

Secondly, scholars have studied asymmetrical effects of different traits, assuming that not all leadership traits result in equally strong effect on voters. Here as well, the empirical evidence is inconsistent. Miller and colleagues (1986), for instance, find that performance related character traits such as competence, reliability and integrity, matter most to voters. Somewhat in line with this, others show

strongest leader traits effects for competence (e.g., Lewis-Beck & Nadeau, 2014; Costa & Ferreira da Silva, 2015; Bean & Mughan, 1989, the latter labeling it effectiveness). Johnston (2002), Bittner (2011) and Laustsen and Bor (2017), to the contrary, find that the character dimension of leadership traits, including integrity, empathy and warmth, affect citizens strongest.

This study argues that the influence of leaders' trait perception on voting behavior is conditional upon the leader's party family. Hayes (2005) formulated the theory of trait ownership, which states that the issue ownership of political parties eventually results in the ownership of character traits by these parties. When parties are considered best performing on certain issues over a long period of time, voters might also associate certain character traits that are related to those issues to the politicians of those parties. Studied in the context of the US, he shows that Republicans own the issues of taxes, defense and family values, while democrats own the issues related to healthcare, social welfare and education. Resulting from this, Republican politicians are more often associated with (strong) leadership and morality, while Democrats own the traits compassion and empathy. And these partisan trait stereotypes are quite strong. Rule and Ambady (2010), for instance, show not only that political affiliations of individuals can accurately be discerned from showing a picture of their faces, but also that these judgements based on faces are related to differences in perceived traits among Republicans and Democrats: they show that when participants perceive a person to be powerful/warm (based on their face), this person is more likely to be perceived as Republican/Democrat respectively.

Besides showing that the American electorate perceives Republicans as stronger leaders with more morality and Democratic leaders with more compassion and empathy, Hayes (2005) argues that overcoming the expectation gap is most important in the influence of leadership traits on voting behavior: scoring high on non-owned traits or scoring low on owned traits most strongly influences voters. '(...) the existence of party-based trait perceptions may generate a baseline of expectations in the minds of voters about how representative of certain traits each party's candidates should be in comparison to their opponents. The degree to which candidates deviate from these expectations – either in overcoming them or falling short – could shape voters' candidate evaluations and, subsequently, their vote choice' (Hayes, 2005: 911). This is in line with the psychological theory of expectancy violation, which states that behaving more favorable or unfavorable than what is expected based on descriptive stereotypes is, respectively, rewarded or punished by others, for instance by more extreme evaluations in the direction of the expectancy violation (for examples of the expectancy violations theory relating to gender stereotypes, see Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987; Jackson, Sullivan, & Hodge, 1993; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). The empirical results confirm Hayes' theory: Republican party leaders gain electorally most when they score high on the leadership traits owned by Democrats, and vice versa (Hayes, 2005).

As in the USA, political parties can own issues in European party systems as well. It has been shown that right-wing parties in European democracies own issues as economic policy, taxes, defense, crime and immigration (the latter two currently mainly being owned by right-wing populist parties or extreme right parties), while left-wing parties are issue owner on issues such as unemployment, healthcare, education, social welfare and the environment (the latter mainly owned by green parties) (e.g., Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012; Stubager & Slothuus, 2013; Lachat, 2014; Walgrave, Van Camp, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2016; Dejaeghere & van Erkel, 2017). Thus, based on these ideological positions, we can assume that left-wing parties in Europe own traits as integrity, compassion and empathy (just like the Democrats in the USA), while right-wing parties own the traits competence and decisiveness (as do the Republicans).

Based on trait ownership theory, we can connect four of the five traits of the conceptualization of leadership traits of Aldering and Vliegenthart (2016) to political parties in Europe. We expect that the candidates of right-wing parties are more strongly associated with political competence and vigorousness, while the candidates of left-wing parties are more strongly associated with integrity and communicative skills. Testing the idea that overcoming the expectation gap will affect voters most strongly, we come to the following expectations concerning electoral gain:

H1a: Positive discussion of a right-wing party candidate in terms of his/her integrity and communicative skills will have a stronger (positive) effect on voters' leader perception than positive discussion of a left-wing candidate on these traits.

H1b: Positive discussion of a left-wing party candidate in terms of his/her political competence and vigorousness will have a stronger (positive) effect on voters' leader perception than positive discussion of a right-wing candidate on these traits.

Based on the theory of trait ownership, one could also formulate expectations on what is electorally most harmful for candidates. The logic of 'overcoming the expectations gap' is that the unexpected assessment of the candidate has the strongest effect. This logic applied to the negative effects of negative trait evaluations would assume that scoring low on the traits the party of the candidate owns is electorally most damaging. Voters expect certain qualities of party leaders, belonging to their owned traits, and when party leaders do not fulfill this expectation, by receiving negative evaluations in media coverage on those traits, we expect voters to be extra disappointed.

H2a: Negative discussion of a left-wing party candidate in terms of his/her integrity and communicative skills will have a stronger (negative) effect on voters' leader perception than negative discussion of a right-wing candidate on these traits.

H2b: Negative discussion of a right-wing party candidate in terms of his/her political competence and vigorousness will have a stronger (negative) effect on voters' leader perception than negative discussion of a left-wing candidate on these traits.

Research Design

Design, sample and case selection

To test the theory of trait ownership in a multiparty context, we developed a 2*2*2 post-test only survey experimental design, in which we manipulate a news media message about a fictitious political candidate according to (1) personality trait (competence/character), (2) tone of the evaluation (positive/negative), and (3) political party of the politician (right-wing/left-wing). A fictitious political candidate was chosen, to isolate the impact of the manipulation in the media message from the leader evaluations of actual candidates (see Brooks, 2013 for a detailed discussion of the advantages of fictitious candidates in experiments). The news article is shown in the style of a Reuters article, to minimize source cue effects (e.g., Turner, 2007).

We did this study in the German speaking context, by running the same experiment in Germany and in Austria. In the German experiment, the name of the candidate was Thomas Brockmann, the right-wing party is the Christian democrat CDU and the left-wing party is the social democrat SPD, and the candidate is running for president of the Senate in the state of Bremen. In the Austrian experiment, the candidate is named Wolfgang Maier, the Christian democrat is the ÖVP and the social democrat party is the SPÖ, and the candidate is running for the position of Governor in the state of Burgenland. Besides the candidate's name, the political parties and the office the candidate is running for, the experiments in both contexts are identical. The CDU/ÖVP and SPD/SPÖ are selected as these are the largest (and most established) political parties on the left and right of the ideological spectrum in Germany and Austria respectively.

The experiment was conducted on 1445 participants in total: 1001 participants belong to the German sample (collected by running the experiment in the SoSci panel, a panel that includes mainly German citizens and is based on self-enrollment) and 444 participants in the Austrian sample (collected by

PUMA¹ running the experiment for us on a representative sample on Austrian citizens). The analyses in this study are based on the combined sample of German and Austrian participants for two reasons. First, the experiments are largely identical, and we do not expect any differences in the effects for both countries, as their political systems and media systems are very much alike. Second, the Austrian sample is smaller than anticipated beforehand. After reading the stimulus material, participants were asked two simple questions about the information in the news article², to test whether the stimulus material was read carefully. Participants who answered both questions wrong, were excluded from further analysis. This constituted 23 participants in the German sample and 173 in the Austrian sample. As many Austrian participants had to be excluded from the analysis, the statistical power in the remaining sample is too low to test the hypotheses. Because of the low statistical power, the significance of the effects in the country samples differs in some instances from the significance in the combined sample, but the direction of the effects is almost always the same³. The German experiment was conducted in May 2018 and the Austrian experiment in August 2018.

Stimulus material

The manipulation occurred in two steps. First, all respondents receive some very basic information on a (male) fictitious political candidate for local office, which includes the name of the candidate, his age, his family situation, where he was born, what he studied and where he worked before he became a politician. The short biography is presented in the style of the website of the party, with the party name prominently shown, to cue to party manipulation very clearly, see figure 1 for an example. Except for the political party the candidate belongs to, the short biography is identical in all ten experimental groups.

(Figure 1 about here)

Then, we provided respondents with a news article in which the candidate is discussed. This article includes politically and personally neutral information on a campaign event in which the candidate is described to participate. Moreover, it contains the manipulated experimental conditions in which the party of the candidate and some very general issue standpoints of the corresponding ideology are described, and a discussion of the candidate in terms of his traits (political competence and vigorousness

¹ See: <https://www.puma-plattform.at/>

² We asked them what the candidate had studied and which TV show he will be in, both are mentioned in the news article.

³ The analyses for the country samples separately are available upon request.

or integrity and communicative skills). Thus, the article describes the candidate without providing any political or personality based cues except for the ones that were manipulated. The article is two paragraphs long (about 300 words) and the manipulations are equal in length and placement within the article.

The party manipulations are '*[candidate] is a strong believer in Christian democratic and conservative values. He advocates economic liberalization and opposes [country's] large public sector. He wants to modernize the social welfare system and opposes 'uncontrolled' immigration*' for the right-wing parties, and '*[candidate] is a strong believer in social- democratic values and is center-left oriented. He strongly advocates freedom, social justice and solidarity, and wants to decrease the level of unemployment. He rejects neoliberalism and supports strong labor unions*' for the left-wing parties. To manipulate the tone of the competence-trait evaluation in the article, we included the sentence '*[candidate] is mostly praised for his competence: he is often described in the media as a politicians who is intelligent and decisive*' or '*[candidate] is mostly criticized for his competence: he is often described in the media as a politician who is not very intelligent and decisive*' to the news message. For evaluations on the character trait dimension, we added '*[candidate] is mostly praised for his character: he is often described in the media as a politician who is reliable and sympathetic*' or '*[candidate] is mostly criticized for his character: he is often described in the media as a politician who is not very reliable and sympathetic*'. Figure 2 shows an example of the Reuters news article that respondents received⁴.

(Figure 2 about here)

Measures

After reading the short biography and the news article, the participants are questioned about their opinions about the candidate. The main dependent variable is the candidate's overall sympathy score (on a scale from 0 to 10, could you indicate how much you like or dislike the candidate). Additionally, we asked participants to their competence assessment of the candidate (on a scale from 0 to 10, could you indicate how much the phrase capable/strong leader/experienced describes the candidate), their character assessment of the candidate (on a scale from 0 to 10, could you indicate how much the phrase

⁴ The stimulus material was pre-tested on a group of 113 communication science students of the University of Vienna. The results of the pre-test showed that participants who received a positive trait evaluation of the candidate indicated that the media message was more positive in tone than the participants who received a negative trait evaluation, the quality of the article and the level of information in the article was not considered differently over the different experimental groups, and there are no differences between the participants who received positive or negative trait evaluations in the way they indicate that the article describes the candidate based on his political standpoints.

caring/honest/charming describes the candidate), and their propensity to vote for the candidate if they were eligible to vote for him. Before participants read the stimulus material, they had to fill out their gender, age, nationality, the state in which they live, their political interest score, their left/right score, vote choice in the last elections and their media behavior.

Descriptive statistics

In total, there were 10 groups in the experiment: eight experimental groups and two control groups (one for the right-wing party and one for the left-wing party) that received the short biography and the Reuters article, but without any trait evaluation in it. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the 1445 participants on the left-right scale (self-placement) and Figure 4 shows the percentages of participants that voted on the right-wing and left-wing parties included in the experiment in the 2017 general elections. These figure clearly show that the participants' pool is not representative for the German and Austrian society in terms of political preferences. The participants in the experiment are more left-wing oriented than society in general, and the participants voted (much) less often on the right-wing parties than German and Austrian voters in general (Germany: in sample 16.18% voted for the CDU and 17.18% for the SPD and in society 32.93% voted for the CDU and 20.51% for the SPD; Austria: in sample 20.50% voted for the SPÖ and 16.67% for the ÖVP and in society 26.9% voted for the SPÖ and 31.5% for the ÖVP). Table 1 presents some descriptive statistics over the 10 different experimental groups. Most interestingly, it shows that the average sympathy score differs strongly between the groups that received stimulus material based on the right-wing candidate and the groups that received stimulus material based on the left-wing candidate: because the sample is more left-wing oriented, the average sympathy scores for the left-wing candidate are structurally much higher than for the right-wing candidate.

(Figure 3 and 4 about here)

(Table 1 about here)

Results: Mediated Leader Effects

First, we test whether there are effects of the evaluation of the candidate in the media message based on leadership traits at all, see Table 2. Model 1 in the table shows that there is a positive effect on the sympathy score for the candidate when participants received the treatment with positive trait evaluations and model 2 shows that there is a negative effect of negative trait evaluations. Thus, participants who read the media message in which the candidate was evaluated positively, have a higher sympathy score for the

candidate than participants who did not read the positive media message, while the ones who read the negative evaluation score the candidate lower on sympathy than those who did not read the negative message. However, when both the positive and the negative trait evaluation are tested in the same model (model 3), and the reference category is thus those respondents who read no trait evaluation at all (experimental groups 1 and 6), there is still a negative effect of negative trait evaluations, while the positive effect of positive trait evaluations becomes insignificant. The negative effect of negative trait evaluations in Model 3 is 0.57, which indicated that receiving negative trait evaluations in the news article decreases the sympathy score for the candidate with 0.57 on a 0 to 10 scale. The findings show that negative trait evaluations have stronger impact on voters than positive ones.

(Table 2 about here)

Model 4 and 5 test the specific effects of positive and negative competence and character evaluations in media messages on the candidate's competence and character assessment, respectively. Model 4 shows that positive trait evaluations on the candidate's competence (experimental groups 2 and 7) have no effect on the competence assessment of the candidate, while negative trait evaluations on the candidate's competence in media messages (experimental groups 3 and 8) have a significant and negative effect. Reading the news article in which the candidate is criticized on his competence decreases the competence assessment of the candidate by 1.72 (on a 0 to 30 scale). Model 5 shows the effects of character evaluation in the media message on the overall character assessment of the candidate and shows that positive character evaluations in the media (experimental groups 4 and 9) increase character assessment by 0.98, while negative character evaluations (experimental groups 5 and 10) decrease character assessment by 0.79 (both on a 0 to 30 scale).

Model 6 in Table 2 has the same independent variables as Model 3, but the dependent variable is vote intention for the candidate instead of sympathy score. The results mirror the findings for sympathy scores: when both the positive and negative trait evaluations are included in the model, the positive trait evaluation is significant (i.e., no significant difference between the control groups and the groups who received positive trait evaluations), while the negative effect of negative trait evaluations is significant (i.e., participants in the groups who received negative trait evaluations are significantly less likely to vote for the candidate than participants who received positive trait evaluations or no trait evaluations at all).

In sum, regarding the baseline hypothesis of mediated leader effects, the results of this experiment are somewhat mixed. Voters are affected by negative trait evaluations in media messages, both based on negative evaluations of a politicians' character and competence. When confronted with

these negative trait evaluations, voters lower their assessment of the candidate's sympathy, competence and character, and the likelihood to vote for the candidate significantly decreases. However, citizens seem largely unaffected by positive trait evaluations in media messages, as these only increase the character assessment of the candidate, but not affect the candidate's overall sympathy score, likelihood to vote for the candidate and competence assessment.

Results: Mediated Leader Effects and Trait Ownership

Next, we hypothesized that deviating from what is expected will have the strongest effects on voters. More precisely, we expect that positive evaluations on non-owned traits will have the strongest positive effects, while negative evaluations on owned traits will have the strongest negative effects. To test for the trait ownership effects, the analyses are conducted including interaction terms between the trait evaluations and the political party that the candidate was described to belong to in the stimulus material. Figure 5 plots the effects of positive and negative trait evaluation on competence for the candidate of the right-wing parties (CDU/ÖVP) and for the left-wing parties (SPD/SPÖ) on the overall sympathy score for the candidate (Table 3, model 7 shows the exact values of the marginal effects). The figure shows, first of all, that describing the candidate in positive terms on his competence when the candidate was said to belong to a right-wing party does not affect voters. When the candidates was portrait as someone from a left-wing party, however, the positive evaluation on his competence has a significant positive effect on the sympathy score for the candidate. Thus, the marginal effects indicate that positive competence evaluation are more important for left-wing candidates than for right-wing candidates. Figure 5 shows, furthermore, that describing the candidate negative in terms of his competence in the media message has a significant negative effect on the sympathy score when the candidate belongs to a right-wing party, while it does not have an impact on voters when the candidate runs for a left-wing party. Even though the interaction terms in the regression analysis (see Appendix 1) are insignificant, indicating that the differences between the right-wing and the left-wing party are not statistically significant, the marginal effects show that positive evaluations on competence result in a positive effect for the left-wing party and not for the right-wing party, while negative evaluations on competence results in a negative effect for the right-wing party and not for the left-wing party, confirming our expectations.

(Figure 5 and 6 about here)

Figure 6 shows the marginal effects for positive and negative trait evaluation based on the candidate's character for the candidates of the right-wing and left-wing parties. The figure shows, first, that the negative evaluation of the candidate's character in the media results in a negative effect on the overall sympathy assessment of the left-wing candidate, but doesn't affect the evaluation of the right-wing candidate. The figure shows, secondly, that positive trait evaluations in the media do not seem to affect voters in their sympathy towards the candidate, not for the candidate of the CDU nor for the candidate of the SPD. However, the marginal effects in Table 3 show that the positive effect of positive trait is one-sided significant for the right-wing party ($P=0.084$). Again, even though the interaction terms in the regression analysis (see Appendix 1) are insignificant, the marginal effects lead to the interpretation that positive trait evaluations on a candidate's character only affect the right-wing party (if they affect sympathy scores for the candidate at all), while negative evaluations only affect the left-wing party.

(Table 3 about here)

Robustness

To test the sensitivity of the findings to the specifics of the model, we test additional models with different dependent variables. First, model 9 in Table 3 shows the marginal effects for positive and negative competence evaluations in the media on the overall competence assessment of the candidate. It shows that positive evaluation of the candidate in terms of his competence in the media does not affect the overall assessment of the competence of the character at all: not for the right-wing party, nor for the left-wing party. The negative trait evaluations on competence, however, have the same dynamic for the overall competence assessment as for the overall sympathy assessment. It shows that negative competence evaluations in the media only negatively affect the competence assessment of the right-wing candidate (and here the interaction term is significant, indicating that the effect is significantly larger for the right-wing candidate than for the left-wing candidate). Second, model 10 in Table 3 shows the marginal effects for positive and negative trait evaluations based on the candidates' character on the overall character assessment. The findings mirror the effect on the candidate's sympathy score: positive character evaluation in the media positively affect the character assessment of the right-wing candidate and have no effect for the left-wing candidate, while negative trait evaluations on a candidate's character have a negative impact on the character assessment for left-wing candidates but does not hurt right-wing candidates (and here the interaction term is significant as well, indicating that the effect is significantly larger for left-wing parties than for the right-wing parties).

As sympathy for a candidate does not automatically indicate a vote for the candidate's party, we, thirdly, test the marginal effects of positive and negative trait evaluations on the likelihood to vote for the party of the candidate. Model 11 in Table 3 shows that positive competence evaluations in the media do not affect the vote intention for left-wing nor right-wing candidates⁵, while negative trait evaluations on competence decrease the likelihood to vote for the candidate of the left-wing and of the right-wing party⁶. Thus, the effects of a candidate's competence evaluation in the media do not seem to follow the pattern expected based on trait ownership, but show that competence evaluations affects parties irrespective of their political color. The impact of positive and negative character evaluations on vote intentions, on the other hand, mirror the impact on sympathy scores and on character assessment, see model 12 in Table 3. Positive character evaluations increase that likelihood to vote for the right-wing party and do not affect vote intention for the left-wing party, while negative discussion of a candidate's character in the media decreases the vote intention for the left-wing candidate but does not affect the likelihood to vote for the right-wing candidate. Thus, on overall the findings seem quite robust to other model specifications, especially for trait evaluations based on the character of the candidate.

Conclusion

Based on correlation data, there is tentative evidence that the media portrayal of party leaders in terms of their character traits affects voters in their perceptions of party leaders and, ultimately, in their vote choice. However, experimental studies, in which the causality of mediated leader effects is most convincingly showed, is scarce. Moreover, which trait evaluations most strongly impact voters remains an unresolved question. This study argues that to answer this question, the theory trait ownership must be applied. Therefore, we tests how partisan stereotypes moderate the impact of specific traits in mediated leader effects.

The theory of trait ownership states that just as parties can own issues, party leaders can also own related character traits, and shows that right-wing parties own 'competence' traits (including political competence and vigorousness), while left-wing parties own 'character' traits (including integrity and communicative skills). This leads us to hypothesize that media messages that describe party leaders positively in terms of the non-owned traits and negatively in terms of the owned traits, will have stronger impact on voters than media messages that describe party leaders positively in terms of the owned traits

⁵ Although the interaction term is one-sided significant, with a p-value of 0.083, indicating that the effect is larger for left-wing parties than for right-wing parties.

⁶ Although the negative effect for the left-wing party is only one-sided significant, with a p-value of 0.081.

and negatively in terms of the non-owned traits. This paper allows us to test these hypotheses by providing media messages to German-speaking participants in which the party of the party leader (right-wing and left-wing), the tone of the message (positive and negative) and the discussed traits (competence and character) are manipulated.

The findings show, first, that the mediated leader effects are mainly driven by the negative leader evaluations in the media. Voters' assessment of the candidate in terms of general sympathy, competence and character, and the likelihood to vote for the candidate's party all decrease after reading negative trait evaluations in the news article, both based on negative competence evaluations and negative character evaluations. Voters seems largely unaffected by positive trait evaluations in the media, on the contrary, as these only increase the character assessment of the candidate and not the assessment of the candidate's overall likability and competence, nor the likelihood to vote for the candidate's party. These findings are in line with prospect theory and the literature on the negativity bias, but largely contradict previous research on this topic, for instance when it showed that positive trait evaluations in the minds of voters have stronger effects of overall candidate perceptions than negative evaluations (e.g. Wattenberg, 1991; Aarts & Blais, 2013) and studies that showed that positive trait evaluations of candidates in the media have a stronger effect on voters than negative ones (e.g., Aaldering et al., 2018; Aaldering, 2018).

The findings show, furthermore, strong support for the expected moderating effect of partisan stereotypes on mediated leader effects, based on the trait ownership theory and the expectancy violations theory. The marginal effects of the different trait evaluations in the news article on the overall sympathy score of the candidate show that that positive character evaluations only affect the sympathy scores for the right-wing candidate (if at all) (supporting hypothesis 1a), while the positive competence evaluations affect only the left-wing candidate and not the right-wing candidate (supporting hypothesis 1b). The findings for negative trait evaluations show that negative competence evaluation only affects the right-wing candidate (supporting hypothesis 2b), while the negative character evaluation only has an impact on the sympathy score for the left-wing candidate (supporting hypothesis 2a). The findings are quite robust to other model specifications, especially for trait evaluations based on the character of the candidate.

Thus, these findings show that overcoming the expectations gap is the best electoral strategy for political candidates: positive trait evaluations in the media on non-owned traits provide most electoral gain. On the other hand, candidates are well advised to make sure that they also come across positive on the traits that they own, as negative trait evaluations in the media on owned traits are electorally most harmful.

This study focusses on mediated leader effect in the multiparty systems of Germany and Austria, thereby extending the test of the trait ownership theory beyond the two-party system of the USA.

However, future research could exploit the features of a multiparty system even more, by studying the differentiated effects of trait evaluations in the media for specific party families, instead of only distinguishing between the main right-wing party and the main left-wing party. One can expect, for instance, that vigorousness (i.e., decisiveness and strong leadership) might be especially associated with right-wing populist parties, or that empathy is even more owned by far left parties than by center-left social democrats. Future studies, with larger samples and more statistical power, can tease out more precisely the differences in mediated leader effects on between the specific types of parties within the multiparty systems, besides just comparing the left with the right.

Additionally, besides trait ownership based on partisan stereotypes and ideology, trait ownership might also occur based on gender stereotypes. In general, men are believed to possess *agentic* qualities, such as aggressive, dominant, ambitious, assertive, independent, decisive and self-confident, while women are thought to embody *communal* qualities, such as affectionate, emotional, friendly, helpful, warm, nurturant and honest (e.g., Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Kahn, 1994; Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008; Meeks, 2012; Dan & Iorgoveanu, 2013; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Eagly & Karau, 2002: 574). When these general gender stereotypes are applied to political actors as well (which is not universally found, see for instance Brooks, 2013; Dolan, 2014), there might be differences accordingly in the impact of positive and negative evaluations on specific traits to the assessment of male and female politicians.

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Figure 1: Leader Biography for the CDU



Thomas Brockmann ist der neue Kandidat der CDU für das Präsidentenamt des Senats in der Freien Hansestadt Bremen. Er ist 45 Jahre alt und wurde in Bremerhaven geboren. Thomas Brockmann ist Vater von zwei Kindern. Er studierte Rechtswissenschaft an der Universität Bremen und arbeitete als Jurist in einem Krankenhaus. Thomas Brockmann war einige Jahre politisch für die CDU in der Bürgerschaft, die Bürgervertretung von Bremen, aktiv. Er strebt danach den ideologischen Weg seiner Partei weiterzuführen und hofft, die Wahl zum Senatspräsident mit großer Mehrheit zu gewinnen.

English translation: Thomas Brockmann is the new candidate of the CDU for the office of President of the Senate in Bremen. He is 45 years old, was born in Bremerhaven. Thomas Brockmann is a father of two children. He studied Law at the University of Bremen and worked as a jurist in a hospital. Thomas Brockmann has been politically active for the CDU for some years in the [Bürgerschaft](#), the citizen's assembly of Bremen. He aspires to continue the ideological path of his party and hopes to win the race for chancellor with a large majority.

Figure 2: Example Reuters news article



Neuer Kandidat für das Präsidentenamt des Bremer Senats

Michael Schmidt



BERLIN (Reuters) – Thomas Brockmann kandidiert für das Amt des Präsidenten des Senats in der Freien Hansestadt Bremen für die SPD und folgt damit Carsten Sieling nach. Dieser Wechsel an der Spitze wurde zu einem günstigen Zeitpunkt rechtzeitig vor der Wahl im Herbst 2018 vollzogen, somit hat Thomas Brockmann genügend Zeit die Weichen zu stellen und die Wähler davon zu überzeugen die SPD zu wählen. Thomas Brockmann ist ein überzeugter Vertreter von sozialdemokratischen Werten und ist Mitte-Links orientiert. Er befürwortet Freiheit, soziale Gerechtigkeit und Solidarität und möchte die Arbeitslosigkeit senken. Er tritt gegen Neoliberalismus auf und unterstützt mit großem Eifer Gewerkschaften. Thomas Brockmann wird vor allem für seinen Charakter geschätzt: Er wird in den Medien häufig als verlässlicher und sympathischer Politiker beschrieben.

Er wird in der heutigen Ausgabe von 'Anne Will' zu Gast sein, wo er sich den Fragen von Anne Will stellen wird, zu seinem Leben in der Politik, seinen Ideen zur Steuerpolitik, seiner Meinung zum Umgang mit der Zuwanderung von Flüchtlingen, seinen Plan für die Bildungspolitik und wie er mit seiner neuen Verantwortung in der Funktion als Parteivorsitzender der SPD in Bremen umgeht. Als er noch ein Kind war, träumte er davon ein professioneller Skifahrer zu werden und einmal bei den Olympischen Spielen teilzunehmen, oder als Arzt in Afrika tätig zu sein. „Weil ich bin kein Redner“, sagt er, „ich bin ein Macher.“ Jedoch stellte sich heraus, es wurde die Politik.

English translation: Thomas Brockmann is running for the office of President of the Senate in Bremen for the SPD, succeeding Carsten Sieling. The change in leadership is well before the elections in the autumn of 2018, as to which Thomas Brockmann has enough time to set his own course and convince voters to vote for the SPD. Thomas Brockmann is a strong believer in social-democratic values and is center-left oriented. He strongly advocates freedom, social justice and solidarity, and wants to decrease the level of unemployment. He rejects neoliberalism and supports strong labor unions. Thomas Brockmann is mostly praised for his character: he is often described in the media as a politician who is reliable and sympathetic. He will be starring in tonight's episode of 'Anne Will', where he will be questioned by Anne Will on life in politics, his ideas about taxation, his opinions on how to deal with an influx of refugees, his plan for education and how he handles the responsibilities that come with the function of new party leader of the SPD in Bremen. When he was a child, he dreamed to become a top skier, with the goal to participate in the Olympic Games. Or becoming a doctor in Africa. "Because", he says, "I am not a talker but a doer." Yet, it turned out to be politics.

Figure 3: Frequency plot: Left/Right Ideology

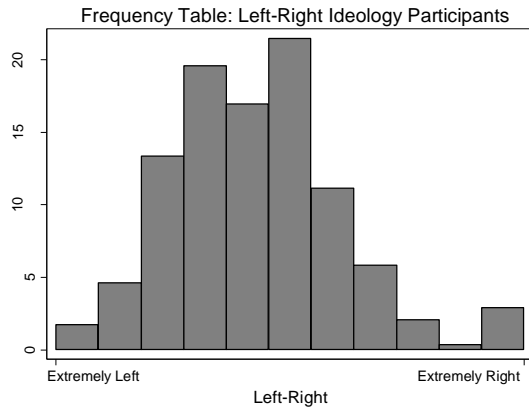


Figure 4: Frequency plot: Vote Choice

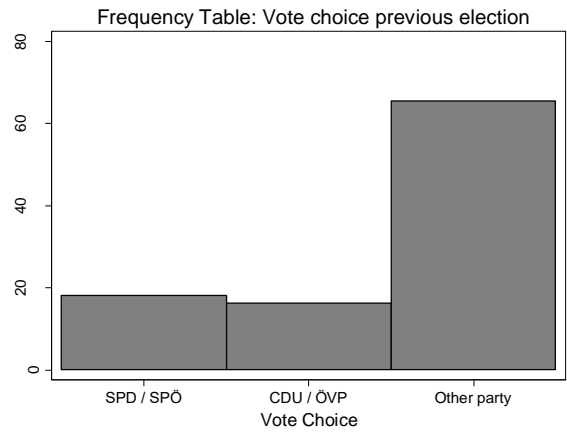
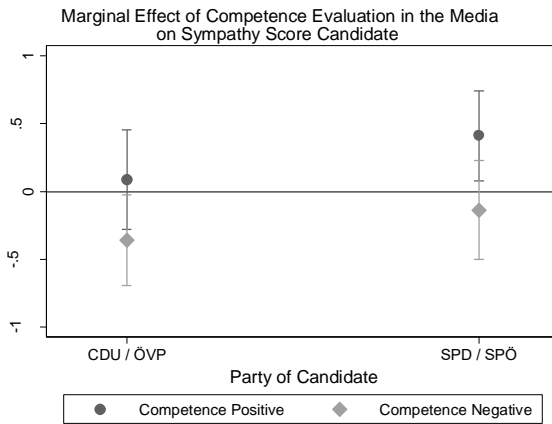
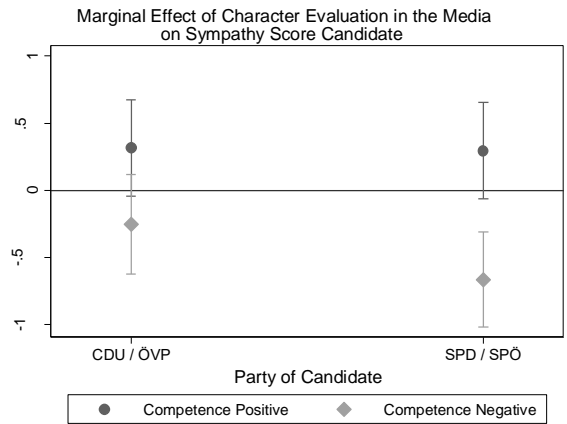


Figure 5: Marginal Effects Plot for Trait Evaluations on Competence



The full regression table on which this figure is based, is shown in Appendix 1 and the exact values of the marginal effects are presented in Table 3, model 7.

Figure 6: Marginal Effects Plot for Trait Evaluations on Character



The full regression table on which this figure is based, is shown in Appendix 1 and the specific values of the marginal effects are presented in Table 3, model 8.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Experimental groups	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Party	CDU/ÖVP	CDU/ÖVP	CDU/ÖVP	CDU/ÖVP	CDU/ÖVP	SPD/SPÖ	SPD/SPÖ	SPD/SPÖ	SPD/SPÖ	SPD/SPÖ
Trait	No trait	Competence	Competence	Character	Character	No trait	Competence	Competence	Character	Character
Tone	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Nr of Participants	149	144	147	150	142	146	140	138	141	148
Percentage of participants from the German sample	68.5%	68.8%	73.5%	66.7%	66.9%	67.8%	74.3%	69.6%	67.4%	70.0%
Percentage of participants voted for the CDU/ÖVP	18.8%	18.1%	17.7%	22.0%	17.6%	13.7%	13.6%	13.8%	12.8%	14.9%
Percentage of participants voted for the SPD/SPÖ	15.4%	14.6%	21.1%	12.0%	23.9%	19.9%	21.4%	16.7%	17.7%	19.6%
Mean Political Interest	6.8	6.7	6.8	6.8	6.8	7.0	6.9	6.8	6.8	6.9
Mean Left/Right score	4.5	4.4	4.3	4.5	4.4	4.2	4.2	4.7	4.3	4.8
Mean Sympathy score	4.2	4.3	3.8	4.5	3.9	5.2	5.5	4.9	5.4	4.5

Table 2 – Mediated Leader Effects - Main Effects

Mediated Leader Effects						
	Model 1 b/se	Model 2 b/se	Model 3 b/se	Model 4 b/se	Model 5 b/se	Model 6 b/se
Dependent Variable	Sympathy Score Candidate	Sympathy Score Candidate	Sympathy Score Candidate	Competence Score Candidate	Character Score Candidate	Vote Intention for Candidate
Positive Traits	0.48*** 0.10		0.20 0.14			0.01 0.19
Negative Traits		-0.57*** 0.10	-0.43*** 0.14			-0.66*** 0.19
Positive Traits Competence				0.03 0.36		
Negative Traits Competence				-1.72*** 0.36		
Positive Traits Character					0.98** 0.37	
Negative Traits Character					-0.79* 0.36	
Constant	4.00** 0.37	4.38** 0.37	4.26** 0.39	17.09*** 1.02	14.12*** -1.01	3.36*** 0.52
R-Squared	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.09
N observations	1445	1445	1445	1445	1445	1445
<p>† p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001</p> <p>The models additionally control for gender, age, education, nationality, the state the participant lives in, level of education, level of political interest, how often respondents consume (political) news through newspapers, television and the internet, the left/right position of the participant, whether he/she voted for the CDU/ÖVP or SPD/SPÖ in the latest election and whether the participant belongs to the German or Austrian sample (fixed effects model).</p>						

Table 3 – Mediated Leader Effects – Trait Ownership – Marginal Effects

Mediated Leader Effects – Marginal Effects						
	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12
	Marginal effect/se	Marginal effect/se	Marginal effect/se	Marginal effect/se	Marginal effect/se	Marginal effect/se
Dependent Variable:	Sympathy Score Candidate	Sympathy Score Candidate	Competence Score Candidate	Character Score Candidate	Vote Intention for Candidate	Vote Intention for Candidate
Positive Traits Competence for CDU / ÖVP	0.09 0.19		-0.48 0.52		-0.21 0.24	
Positive Traits Competence for SPD / SPÖ	0.41* 0.17		0.55 0.50		0.40 0.25	
Negative Traits Competence for CDU / ÖVP	-0.36* 0.17		-2.64*** 0.49		-0.44* 0.22	
Negative Traits Competence for SPD / SPÖ	-0.13 0.19		-0.72 0.52		-0.47† 0.27	
Positive Traits Character for CDU / ÖVP		0.31† 0.18		1.53** 0.50		0.51* 0.24
Positive Traits Character for SPD / SPÖ		0.29 0.18		0.40 0.54		0.18 0.25
Negative Traits Character for CDU / ÖVP		-0.25 0.19		-0.05 0.51		-0.28 0.24
Negative Traits Character for SPD / SPÖ		-0.66*** 0.18		-1.61*** 0.48		-0.60* 0.25
N observations	1445	1445	1445	1445	1445	1445

† p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

The models additionally control for gender, age, education, nationality, the state the participant lives in, level of education, level of political interest, how often respondents consume (political) news through newspapers, television and the internet, the left/right position of the participant, whether he/she voted for the CDU/ÖVP or SPD/SPÖ in the latest election and whether the participant belongs to the German or Austrian sample (fixed effects model). The tables with the interaction models on which these marginal effects are based, are shown in Appendix 1.

Appendix 1 – Mediated Leader Effects – Trait Ownership

Mediated Leader Effects						
	Model 7 b/se	Model 8 b/se	Model 9 b/se	Model 10 b/se	Model 11 b/se	Model 12 b/se
Dependent Variable:	Sympathy Score Candidate	Sympathy Score Candidate	Competence Score Candidate	Character Score Candidate	Vote Intention for Candidate	Vote Intention for Candidate
Positive Traits Competence	0.09 0.19		-0.48 0.52		-0.21 0.24	
Positive Traits Competence * Left Party	0.32 0.25		1.04 0.72		0.61† 0.35	
Negative Traits Competence	-0.36* 0.17		-2.64*** 0.49		-0.44* 0.22	
Negative Traits Competence * Left Party	0.22 0.25		1.93** 0.72		-0.03 0.35	
Positive Traits Character		0.31† 0.18		1.53** 0.50		0.51* 0.24
Positive Traits Character * Left Party		-0.02 0.26		-1.13 0.74		-0.33 0.35
Negative Traits Character		-0.25 0.19		-0.05 0.51		-0.28 0.24
Negative Traits Character * Left Party		-0.41 0.26		-1.56* 0.70		-0.32 0.35
Constant	3.75*** 0.38	3.65*** 0.38	16.92*** 1.05	12.57*** 1.02	2.63*** 0.51	2.43*** 0.51
R-Squared	0.12	0.13	0.08	0.13	0.14	0.14
N observations	1445	1445	1445	1445	1445	1445
† p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001 The models additionally control for gender, age, education, nationality, the Bundesland the participant lives in, level of education, level of political interest, how often respondents consume (political) news through newspapers, television and the internet, the left/right position of the participant, whether he/she voted for the CDU/ÖVP or SPD/SPÖ in the latest election and whether the participant belongs to the German or Austrian sample (fixed effects model).						