Voters Affective and Threat Response to Progressive Symbolic Politics

Francesco Colombo & Tobias Widmann

Aarhus University

12/06/2024

AARHUS
UNIVERSITET

The research question

RQ: How do voters respond to the use of gender inclusive language?

The research question

RQ: How do voters respond to the use of gender inclusive language?
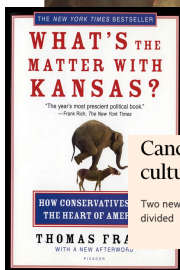
Voters responses:

- ▶ Emotional responses
- ▶ Threat responses

Motivation

Snow White and the depressing culture war over Disney's 'woke' remake

Two years away from release, the film is already mired in controversy and confusion, with one US channel even making its own anti-woke rival movie. Is this remake really needed?

Everything you wanted to know about the culture wars – but were afraid to ask

Politicians like to provoke them, academics like to analyse them. Yet most people don't even know what they're all about

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS?

"The year's most prescient political book."
—Frank Rich, The New York Times

HOW CONSERVATIVES
THE HEART OF AME

THOMAS FRA
WITH A NEW AFTERWOR
PICADOR

Cancelled: can liberal democracy survive the culture wars?

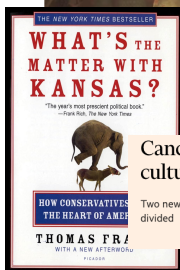Two new books warn of the dangers of separatism as both right and left envision a society divided

Flashpoints in the culture wars: (clockwise from left) Keira Bell, Rhodes Must Fall, Churchill's statue, Last Night of the Proms, Oliver Dowden, Harry and Meghan's Oprah interview and, last but not least, Brexit. Composite: Rex; Getty; PA; David Levene; EPA; Reuters

Motivation

Snow White and the depressing culture war over Disney's 'woke' remake

Two years away from release, the film is already mired in controversy and confusion, with one US channel even making its own anti-woke rival movie. Is this remake really needed?

Everything you wanted to know about the culture wars – but were afraid to ask

Politicians like to provoke them, academics like to analyse them. Yet most people don't even know what they're all about

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS?

"The year's most prescient political book."
—Frank Rich, *The New York Times*

HOW CONSERVATIVES
THE HEART OF AME

THOMAS FRA
WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

PICADOR

Cancelled: can liberal democracy survive the culture wars?

Two new books warn of the dangers of separatism as both right and left envision a society divided

Flashpoints in the culture wars: (clockwise from left) Keira Bell, Rhodes Must Fall, Churchill's statue, Last Night of the Proms, Oliver Dowden, Harry and Meghan's Oprah interview and, last but not least, Brexit. Composite: Rex; Getty; PA; David Levene; EPA; Reuters

Why are symbolic conflicts so important to voters, even if they have no distributive consequences?

- ▶ Symbolic politics on cultural issues provides relevant cues to voters
    - ▶ Signalling set of values, social hierarchies, social norms
- ▶ When progressive: a commitment to social change and inclusive society

- ▶ Symbolic politics on cultural issues provides relevant cues to voters
    - ▶ Signalling set of values, social hierarchies, social norms
- ▶ When progressive: a commitment to social change and inclusive society
- ▶ Voters perceptions:
    - ▶ Affective channel: emotions
    - ▶ Cognitive channel: threat perception

The case study: Germany

Gender-inclusive language

Male: Politiker

Female: Politikerinnen

Gender-inclusive: Politiker:innen; Politiker/innen; etc.

Other forms: using intrinsically gender-inclusive terms; employing male and female versions together within the same sentence;

Research design

Complementary research designs:

1. Observational evidence from Twitter

2. Experimental evidence from a vignette study

Research design

Complementary research designs:

1. Observational evidence from Twitter
   - ▶ Evidence from population data
   - ▶ Effect and issue evolution
2. Experimental evidence from a vignette study

Research design

Complementary research designs:

1. Observational evidence from Twitter

   ▶ Evidence from population data
   ▶ Effect and issue evolution

2. Experimental evidence from a vignette study

   ▶ Stronger causal leverage
   ▶ Mechanism testing

Data

Twitter data

- ▶ MP's tweets population
  - ▶ 2014-2021
  - ▶ $N_{tweets} = 1,223,588$
  - ▶ Gender-inclusive language (treatment)
- ▶ Citizens' replies
  - ▶ $N_{replies} = 21,242,808$
  - ▶ Emotional content (outcome)

Empirical strategy

Empirical strategy:

$$emotion_t = \beta_1 gender\text{-}inclusive_t + \gamma p + \theta_y + \vec{T}_t + \epsilon_p \qquad (1)$$

- ▶ Outcome: positive/negative emotions ($emotion_t$)

- ▶ Treatment: gender-inclusive language ($gender\text{-}inclusive_t$)

- ▶ Politician FEs: ϵ_p

- ▶ Year FEs: θ_y

- ▶ Tweet-level controls ($\vec{T}_t$)

- ▶ Politician clustered SE

Polarizing effect of gender-inclusive language

Effect of gender-inclusive language

Negative Replies   •   Positive Replies
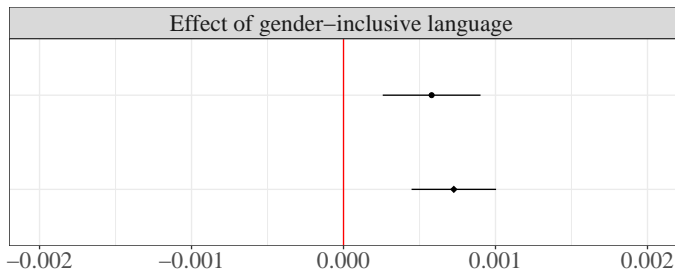
Additional results

Twitter data

- ▶ Polarizing effect only when politicized

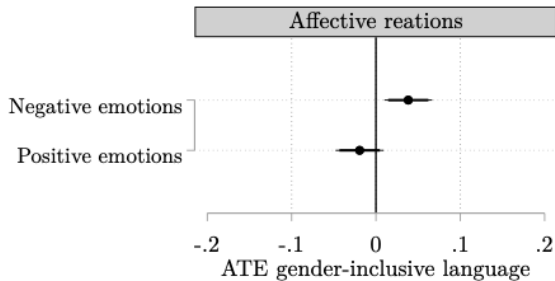- ▶ Backlash for SPD and positive for Greens and The Left

The vignette experiment

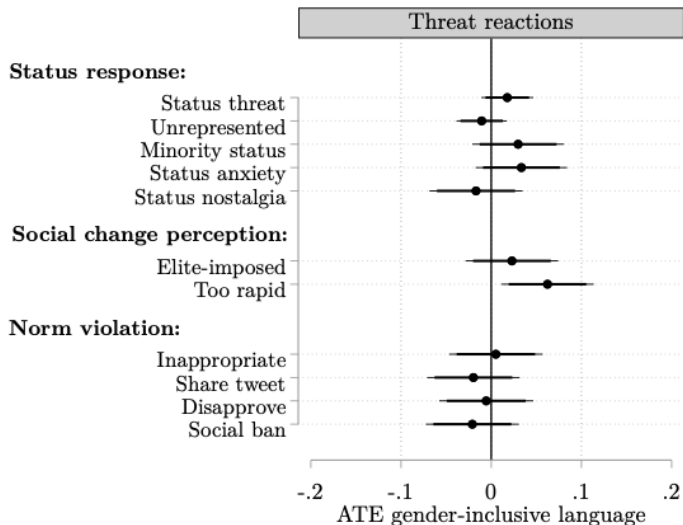| Gender	Weiblich
Party	CDU
Representative tweet	******** ******** @***** Für alle Bürger in Not ist die Sozialhilfe ist ein wichtiges Sicherheitsnetz. Wir Politiker wollen daran arbeiten, die soziale Gerechtigkeit zu fördern und niemanden zurückzulassen. #Sozialhilfe #Bürgergeld #Zusammenhalt 3:14 PM · Oct 1, 2023 · Twitter Web App

▸ Examples

Outcomes

▶ Negative emotions (fear, anger, disgust)

▶ Positive emotions (hope, pride, gratitude)

Outcomes

- ▶ Negative emotions (fear, anger, disgust)

- ▶ Positive emotions (hope, pride, gratitude)

- ▶ Status threat (threat, unrepresented, minority threat, anxiety, nostalgia)

- ▶ Social change (too fast, elite imposed)

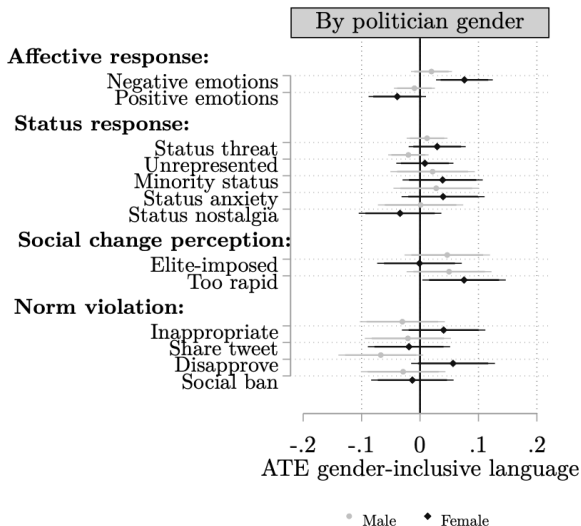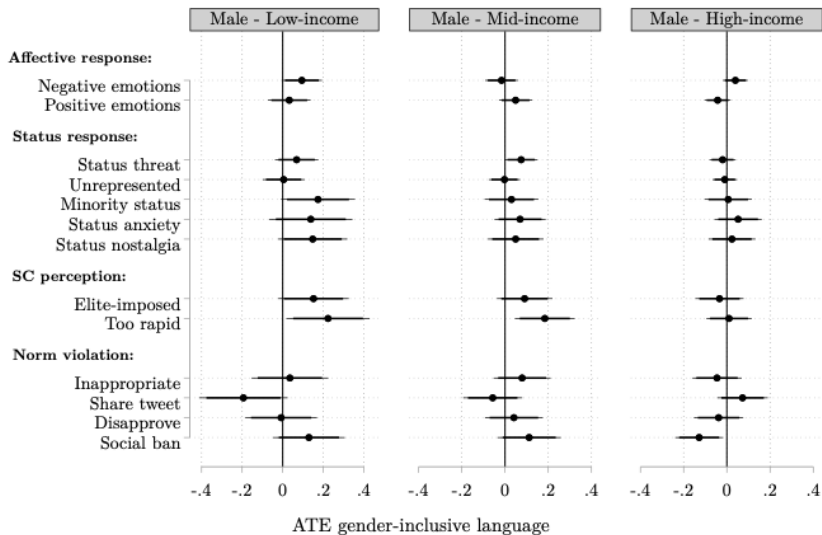- ▶ Norm-violation (inappropriate, sharing, disapproval, social ban)
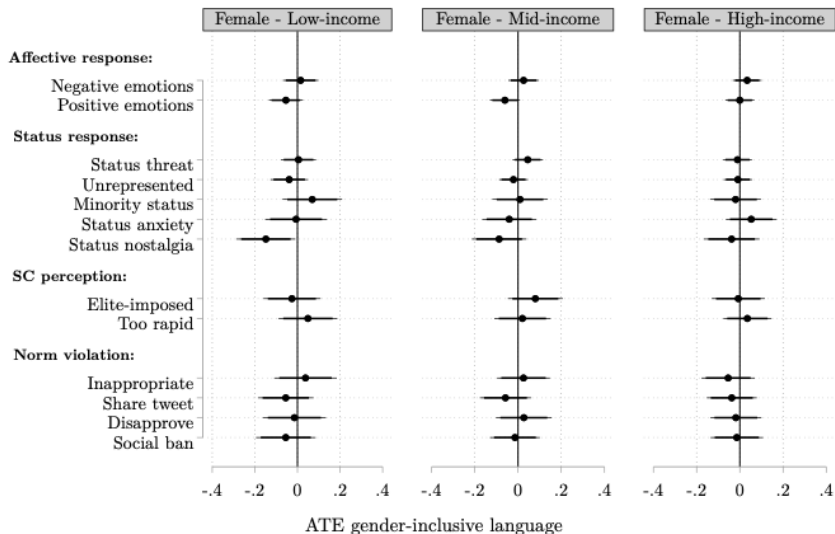
Emotional response

Threat response

Threat reactions

Status response:
Status threat
Unrepresented
Minority status
Status anxiety
Status nostalgia

Social change perception:
Elite-imposed
Too rapid

Norm violation:
Inappropriate
Share tweet
Disapprove
Social ban

ATE gender-inclusive language

Depending on the sender's status

By politician gender

Affective response:
Negative emotions
Positive emotions
Status response:
Status threat
Unrepresented
Minority status
Status anxiety
Status nostalgia
Social change perception:
Elite-imposed
Too rapid
Norm violation:
Inappropriate
Share tweet
Disapprove
Social ban

-.2   -.1   0   .1   .2
ATE gender-inclusive language

Male   Female

Depending on respondent's status

AARHUS
UNIVERSITET

Depending on respondent's status

ATE gender-inclusive language

Conclusions

- ▶ Consistent negative affective reaction
- ▶ Mostly minority politicians get punished for progressive stances
- ▶ Emotions matter!
    - ▶ Suppress and bias information-seeking (MacKuen et al., 2010; Redlawsk et al., 2010; Suhay and Erisen, 2018)
    - ▶ Influence attitudes (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021)
    - ▶ Influence voting (Rico et al., 2017)
- ▶ Some threat response
    - ▶ Status threat increases for cross-pressured groups (lower- and (less) middle-income male voters)

Discussion

Study 1

- ► Gender-inclusive language
- ► Operationalizing emotions (Twitter)
- ► Gender-inclusive language by party
- ► Gender-inclusive language in time
- ► Effect in time
- ► Effect by Party

Study 2

- ► Tweet examples
- ► Covariates operationalization
- ► Restrictions
- ► Manipulation/attention test
- ► Screening

Study 1: Operationalization

Gender-inclusive language

- ► Politiker*innen

- ► Politiker*Innen*

- ► Politiker:innen

- ► Politikerïnnen

- ► Politiker_innen

- ► Politiker/innen

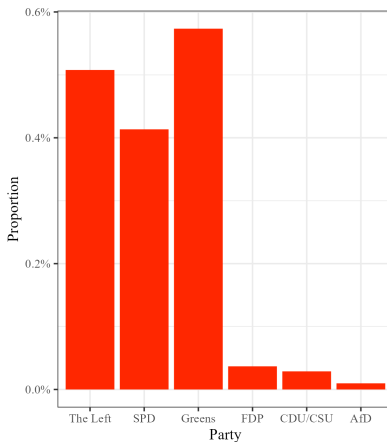# Measuring emotions

Dictionary approach → *ed8*

- ▶ Bag-of-words approach

- ▶ Suitable for German language

- ▶ Not only valence (positive/negative)

- ▶ 8 discrete emotions: anger, fear, disgust, sadness, joy, enthusiasm, pride, and hope

- ▶ Computationally efficient

- ▶ Loss of precision

Study 1: Descriptive statistics
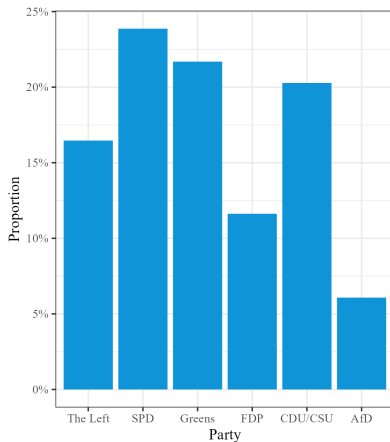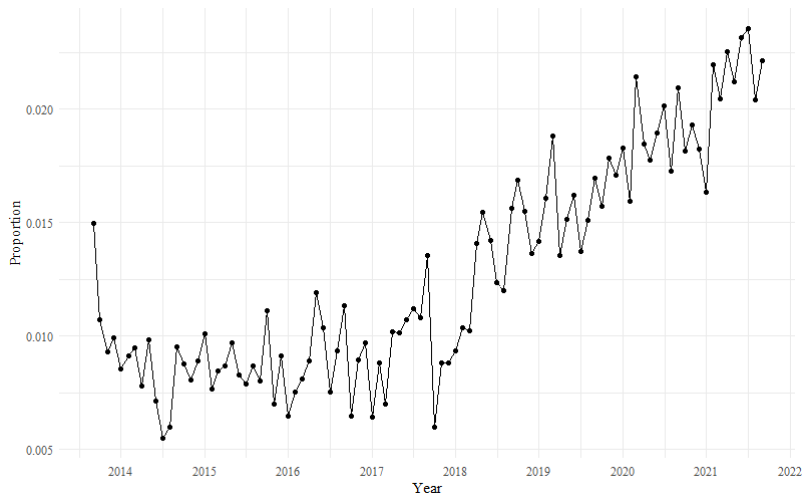
Use of gender-inclusive language

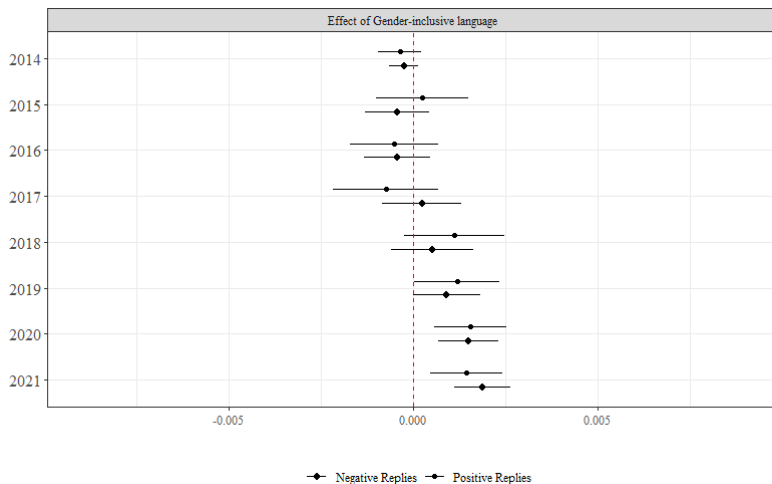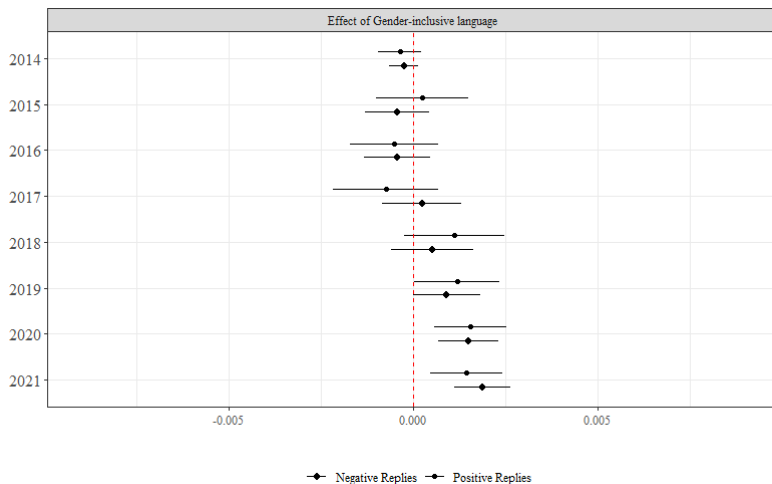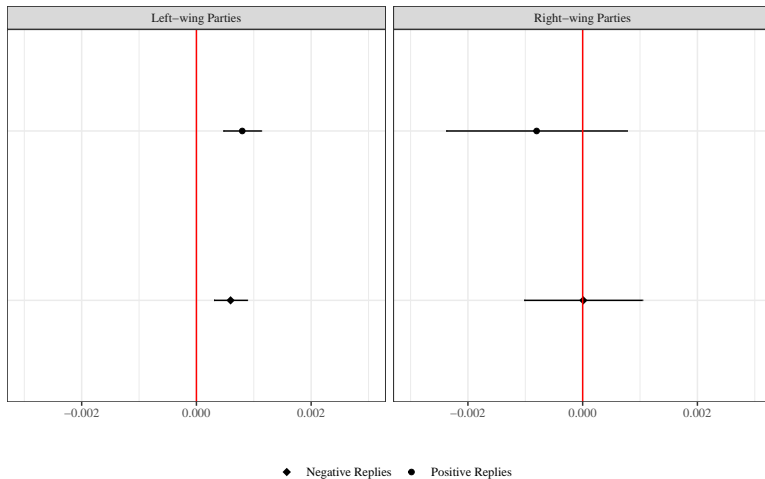# Use of gender-inclusive language

Study 1: Additional results

Issue-evolution in time

Issue-evolution in time

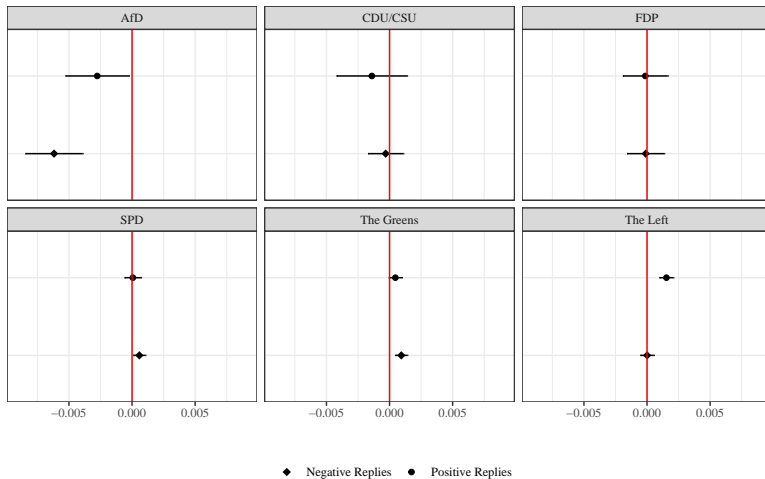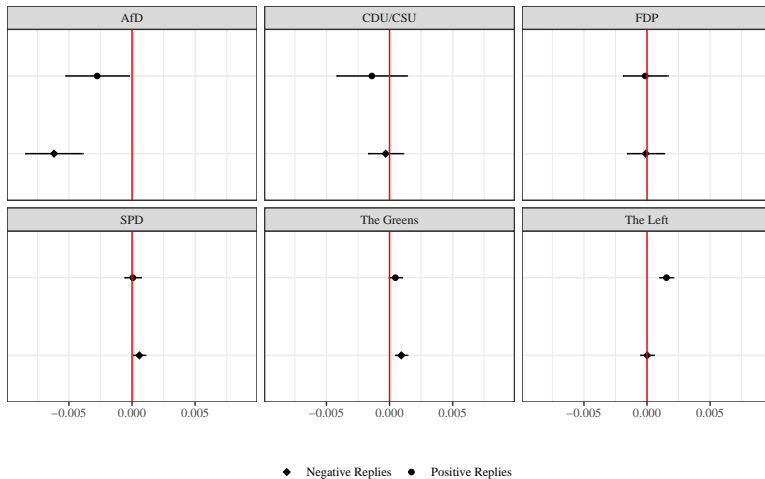# Left-right differences
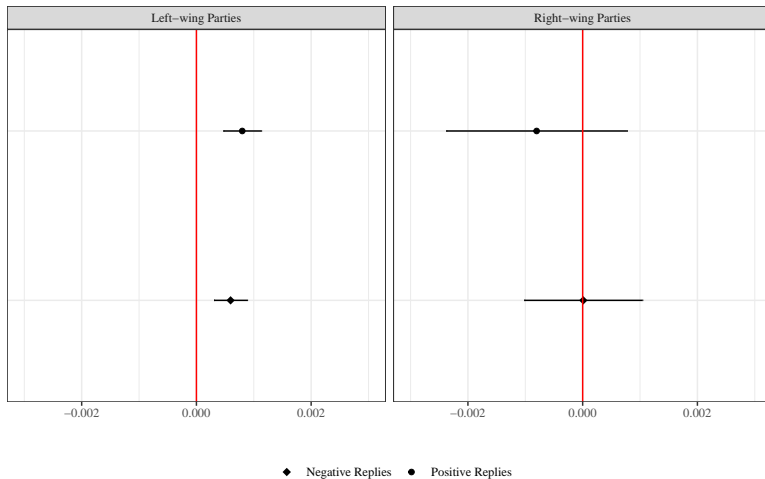
Left-right differences

Party differences

AARHUS UNIVERSITET

| AfD | CDU/CSU | FDP |
| SPD | The Greens | The Left |

◆ Negative Replies   ● Positive Replies

▶ back

Party differences

Study 2: Experimental design

Example tweets

Issue	Position	Gender Neutral	Non-neutral	English
Climate	Pro	Wir Politiker*innen müssen jetzt handeln und mehr Verzicht auf Fleisch fordern, um unseren Planeten für alle Bürger*innen zu erhalten. Der übermäßige Fleischkonsum trägt massiv zum Klimawandel bei. #Klimaschutz #FleischkonsumReduzieren	Wir Politiker müssen jetzt handeln und mehr Verzicht auf Fleisch fordern, um unseren Planeten für alle Bürger zu erhalten. Der übermäßige Fleischkonsum trägt massiv zum Klimawandel bei. #Klimaschutz #FleischkonsumReduzieren	We politicians must act now and demand more abstinence from meat to preserve our planet for all citizens. Excessive meat consumption contributes massively to climate change. #ClimateProtection #ReduceMeatConsumption

Example tweets

Issue	Position	Gender Neutral	Non-neutral	English
Climate	Pro	Wir Politiker*innen müssen jetzt handeln und mehr Verzicht auf Fleisch fordern, um unseren Planeten für alle Bürger*innen zu erhalten. Der übermäßige Fleischkonsum trägt massiv zum Klimawandel bei. #Klimaschutz #FleischkonsumReduzieren	Wir Politiker müssen jetzt handeln und mehr Verzicht auf Fleisch fordern, um unseren Planeten für alle Bürger zu erhalten. Der übermäßige Fleischkonsum trägt massiv zum Klimawandel bei. #Klimaschutz #FleischkonsumReduzieren	We politicians must act now and demand more abstinence from meat to preserve our planet for all citizens. Excessive meat consumption contributes massively to climate change. #ClimateProtection #ReduceMeatConsumption

Covariates

Variable	Question wording	Response categories
Gender	How do you describe yourself?	Female, Male, other
Age	How old are you?	
Education	What is the highest level of education you have completed?	No education; Primary education; Secondary general school; Middle school; Vocational training; University of Applied Sciences Entrance Qualification; High school; Bachelor's degree; Master's degree; PhD; Other (open)
Income	What was the total household income before taxes during the past 12 months in Euros?	Less than 25,000; 25,000–49,999; 50,000–99,999; 100,000–199,999; More than 200,000; prefer not to say
Voting	Which party did you vote for in the 2021 federal election?	CDU/CSU; SPD; Die Linke; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Other (open); I have not voted
State	In which state do you live?	[list of German States]
Ethnic origin	What best describes your ethnic origin?	German; Other (open); Prefer not to say
Postal code	Where are you located? (Please enter your postal code)	Postal code

▸ back

Restrictions

Issue – Position	Party			
	Greens	SPD	FDP	CDU
Climate change mitigation - against	X	✓	✓	✓
Climate change mitigation – in favor	✓	✓	X	X
Tik Tok Ban – against	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tik Tok Ban – in favor	✓	✓	X	✓
Welfare – against	✓	X	✓	✓
Welfare – in favor	✓	✓	X	✓

Manipulation checks

Vignette manipulation

- ▶ "Which of the following characteristics was not presented along with the previous tweets?"

Attention checks

Type of check	Question wording	Response categories
Selective	For our research, careful attention to survey questions is critical! We thank you for your care.	I understand; I do not understand
Selective	People are very busy these days and many do not have time to follow the news and understand what goes on in the government. We are testing whether people read questions. To show that you have read this much, answer both 'extremely interested' and 'very interested'.	Extremely interested; Very interested; Moderately interested; Slightly interested; Not interested at all

▸ back

Empirical strategy

Main effects

$$outcome_{iv} = \beta gender\text{-}inclusive_{iv} + \epsilon_i \qquad (2)$$

Interaction effects with treatment condition/subgroup/ attribute

$$outcome_{iv} = \beta_1 gender\text{-}inclusive_{iv} + \beta_2 treatment/subgroup/attribute_i +$$
$$\beta_3 gender\text{-}inclusive_{iv} \times treatment/subgroup/attribute_i + \epsilon_i$$
$$(3)$$

References I

MacKuen, M., Wolak, J., Keele, L., & Marcus, G. E. (2010).Civic engagements: Resolute partisanship or reflective deliberation. *American Journal of Political Science*, *54*(2), 440–458.

Redlawsk, D. P., Civettini, A. J., & Emmerson, K. M. (2010).The affective tipping point: Do motivated reasoners ever "get it"? *Political Psychology*, *31*(4), 563–593.

Suhay, E., & Erisen, C. (2018).The role of anger in the biased assimilation of political information. *Political Psychology*, *39*(4), 793–810.

Rhodes-Purdy, M., Navarre, R., & Utych, S. M. (2021).Populist Psychology: Economics, Culture, and Emotions. *The Journal of Politics*, *83*(4), 1559–1572.

Rico, G., Guinjoan, M., & Anduiza, E. (2017).The emotional underpinnings of populism: How anger and fear affect populist attitudes. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *23*(4), 444–461.