Media sentiment and citizen support for right-wing populist parties: evidence from Germany

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to further our understanding of how media sentiment influences voting intentions for right-wing populist parties. Previous research has discussed persuasion and backfire effects in that regard. Drawing on these findings, we demonstrate theoretically, that party evaluation may link media with voting intentions either as a mediator or as a moderator. Repeated cross-sectional German survey data from 2015 to 2017 and an extensive media sentiment analysis from more than 6000 articles enables us to profoundly test these assumptions empirically. Using structural equation modelling, our results indicate, that more negative press coverage is rather associated with higher voting intentions for the right-wing populist party 'AfD', yielding support for backfire effects. Additionally, the results show temporal differences. While party evaluation acts as a moderator for the association between media and voting intentions in 2015, the mediation is significant for the following two years. We briefly discuss possible avenues for future research to explain this change such as a possible change in the party´s ideology or its further establishment. Collectively, these results testify to the importance of party evaluation as key contextual sources of media sentiment on voting intentions.

Keywords: media analysis, AfD, backfire effect, persuasion effect, moderation, mediation

1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of right wing populist parties (RPPs) has fostered a lively academic debate about the factors for their appearance and success. There has also been an inconclusive debate about the role of media for the rise of such parties. Conventional wisdom, such as the literature on persuasion effects holds that positive media sentiment is pushing a party while negative press has the contrary effect (Beck, Dalton et al. 2002; Chiang, Knight 2011; DellaVigna, Gentzkow 2010; DellaVigna, Kaplan 2007; Druckman, Parkin 2005; Enikolopov, Petrova et al. 2011). The basic mechanism in this framework is that negative framing decreases a party´s reputation and vote share (Reeves, McKee et al. 2016). Specifically for RPPs, a recent study by Spanje and Azrout (2019) provides evidence, that utterly negative media framing of such parties does reduce perceived legitimacy and in turn vote propensity, especially among like-minded voters.

Parallel to this line of research, another set of studies demonstrates that new information (i.e. media reports) on an object (i.e. RPPs) might not have the intended effect on the recipient if it conflicts with previous attitudes towards the object. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) first introduced this so-called backfire effect. Since then it has been highly contested by studies which were not able to replicate the original findings (Swire-Thompson, Ecker et al. 2020; Wood and Porter 2016) and others who found similar effects (Bos, van der Brug et al. 2013).

We take this conflicting evidence between persuasion and backfire effects as empiric hypotheses which we attempt to test in this paper by combining media sentiment and survey data regarding the AfD from 2015 to the end of 2017. For a long time, Germany was widely regarded as an exemption within European party systems with regard to the emergence of right-wing populist parties, which were mostly irrelevant during most of the post-war period (Art 2007). This has changed dramatically. Founded in 2013, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has established itself in all regional assemblies (with results between 5.3% up to

27.5%) and the national parliament (2017: 12.6%). The party´s success has sparked a growing amount of literature revolving around questions regarding the party´s supply and demand side factors, its electorate and impact.

We further refine conventional theory on how media sentiment affects voters´ decision-making process by introducing party evaluation into the model. We test two possible ways of how party evaluation may exert influence on the media-voting relationship. First, it may mediate the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions. Meaning that media sentiment alters ones´ evaluation of a party, which in turn changes voting intentions. Second, it could also moderate the relationship. This is to say that the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions depends on ones´ evaluation of the party.

By examining the opposing predictions from persuasion and backfire literature and including party evaluation in the model, we improve on earlier work in several ways. As a theoretical contribution, we move beyond most previous studies on media effects by looking closer at the mechanism underlying the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions by considering mediation and moderation effects in our models. This promises to be a fruitful approach to this field, as it allows us to examine interaction effects as well as indirect effects of media coverage on voting intentions. Furthermore, we are able to examine how the introduction of this variable relates to persuasion or backfire effects.

Empirically, we take advantage of an extensive media sentiment analysis, combined with comprehensive survey data from nearly 100,000 respondents. We believe that this broad coverage provides an excellent opportunity to shed further light on the nexus between media sentiment, party evaluation and voting intention especially for the context of right-wing populist parties. The comprehensive data allows us to split our analyses in regional and temporal sequences to elaborate further on how effects differ within Germany and evolve over time.

On a methodological level, we show how to conduct cutting-edge media sentiment analyses to employ as variables in structural equation models using mediator and moderator terms. We gather and analyze more than 6000 news articles to capture fine nuances in media sentiment. Using a dictionary-based approach, we break down the sentiment of media reports towards the AfD by article, day and month to put them to use as variables in structural equation models. We further consider indirect (mediation) and interaction (moderation) effects in these models to accurately test our predictions. In brief, we also discuss why party evaluation cannot be a mediator and a moderator simultaneously.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Persuasion effect

How does media influence voters´ behavior? A commonly applied framework to connect media effects with voting intentions is persuasion theory (DellaVigna, Gentzkow 2010; Ladd, Lenz 2009). The literature on persuasion effects converges around the proposition, that negative information on a political object (party, leader, statement, …) have negative effects on the evaluation of the object while positive news have positive effects on the evaluation of the object. The tone of news, or 'media sentiment' is an ambiguous concept, thus it comes as no surprise that the related literature differs widely by their independent variable. A considerable share uses various sorts of article-based media sentiment measurements (Eberl, Wagner et al. 2017; Aaldering, van der Meer et al. 2018; Bos, van der Brug et al. 2011; Aird, Ecker et al. 2018; Druckman, Parkin 2005; Gerber, Karlan et al. 2009). A second strand of the literature finds strong effects for endorsements, a rather apparent form of media sentiment (Chiang, Knight 2011; Ladd, Lenz 2009; Reeves, McKee et al. 2016). A third approach investigates the link between the introduction of new media sources and voting decisions (DellaVigna, Kaplan 2007; Enikolopov, Petrova et al. 2011; Gentzkow, Shapiro et al. 2011).

Although it often reveals stunning effects, existing literature of persuasion effects is less interested in tracing psychological, or within-person effects of media input. With few exceptions (van Spanje, Azrout 2019; Druckman, Parkin 2005) the literature mostly ignores mediating or moderating effects in between the exposure to media sentiment and voting intentions or focuses only on within-media moderations (Chiang, Knight 2011; Eberl, Wagner et al. 2017). However, voting intentions are the end of a cognitive process, not their beginning (Goldberg 1966; Campbell 1980). Media may therefore exert influence at stages before the actual voting intention is shaped. Van Spanje and Azrout (2019) show that media reports alter the perceived legitimacy of a political party, which in turn influences citizens` voting intentions. It is important to distinguish this intermediate step from a possible direct effect of media sentiment on voting intentions for several reasons. First, the effects may differ. Although media sentiment may induce a negative image of a party, voters could still be more prone to vote for it (i.e. protest voting). Second, it enables the researcher to test whether the same media slant may have different effects for different groups of voters. Again, van Spanje and Azrout (2019) also show that the loss in legitimacy is strongest for voters that generally sympathize with the party´s policies.

For these reasons, we suggest a research design, which allows us to test for such intra-personal effects of media reception. We elaborate further on this issue in the sections 'The missing link' and the methods section of this paper.

Backfire effect

Another theoretical approach to the effect of media sentiment on political attitudes comes from a political psychology perspective. The backfire framework posits that negative framing of a political issue might have an unobvious effect if the recipient already has a strong opinion on the issue in question. Instead of persuading the recipient, the message backfires and reinforces the contrasting view (Nyhan, Reifler 2010). Although similar mechanism had been

described previously under different labels, such as *boomerang effect* (Cho, Salmon 2007) or *resonance model* (Iyengar, Simon 2000), the paper by Nyhan and Reifler (2010) has spurred a lively academic discussion. The authors confront participant in an experimental design with common misperceptions regarding several political issues. They find that especially conservative respondents are highly reluctant to accept corrections to these issues, sometimes even reinforcing confidence in their false belief. Further empirical evidence supports the view, that conservative or right-wing oriented citizens are especially prone to backfire effects, whether in direct interaction (Bail, Argyle et al. 2018; Wojcieszak, Price 2010) or as recipients of divergent media reports (Ecker, Ang 2019; Hart, Nisbet 2012). However, some studies have also failed to replicate such findings. Swire-Thompson, Ecker et al. (2020) find no effect of correcting misinformation on the evaluation of politicians and Wood and Porter (2016) find evidence for persuasion effects in an extensive study, designed to replicate the findings by Nyhan and Reifler (2010).

The evidence in support of a backfire effect is backed by research regarding medical communication (Nyhan, Reifler et al. 2014; Lewandowsky, Ecker et al. 2012). Lewandowsky, Ecker et al. (2012) further demonstrate, that backfire effects are not exclusively conditioning on attributes of the recipient (which they label *worldview effect*), but that the framing of the content may also matter. Following their logic, backfire effects are more likely if the source induces a *familiarity effect* by repeating a familiar – but false – information, even if this information is corrected right after (Weaver, Garcia et al. 2007). Thus, media reports in the form of 'Party XY claims to be discriminated – we show that this is not true…' might actually be counterproductive. This is especially true, if the counter arguments are overwhelming, leading to an *overkill effect* (Sanna, Schwarz et al. 2002). Therefore, if many different media sources provide the audience with many reasons, why a party is 'bad', this may actually backfire in the opposite direction. Recent research also provides evidence, that RPPs might

intentionally use negative press coverage to generate a backfire effect among their audience (Baugut, Neumann 2019).

The missing link: party evaluation

The literature review revealed that both fields have different approaches to the study of media sentiment. While persuasion theory highlights the direct connection between media sentiment and voting intentions, it often misses to explain the cognitive process underlying this effect. Backfire theory does exactly that, but mostly misses the chance to link such intra-personal changes of attitudes to voting intentions. These mutual 'blind spots' of both theories are unfortunate because they impair researchers to see 'the whole picture'. Not only do researches miss a potentially relevant factor for understanding how media affects voters´ decisions. Research designs that do not incorporate both, media sentiment and political attitudes concurrently miss the opportunity to investigate how these factors interact in shaping citizens´ voting decisions. In this study, we attempt to bridge the gap between the two strands by suggesting party evaluation as the missing link that connects media sentiment with voting intentions. In the following sections, we suggest – and later test – two possible ways how party evaluation might affect the relationship between media sentiment and voting intentions.

Party evaluation as a mediator

Evaluation of a party is a widely accepted factor in shaping citizens´ voting decisions (Campbell 1980). However, it is rarely explicitly modelled as such in empirical studies that focus on media-voting relationships. We suggest, that media sentiment does barely exert direct influence on voting decisions, but instead alters one´s evaluation of the party in question (in our case: the AfD), which in turn influences voting intentions for the party. This introduces party evaluation as a mediating factor in the model. Explicitly including this factor promises to offer profound insights how media influences voting intentions. First, it allows

modeling the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions (the direct effect) distinctly from the effect of media sentiment mediated by party evaluation on voting intentions (the indirect effect). Second, it allows for differences between the effects of media sentiment on voting intention and on party evaluation. This includes differences in effect size as well as different signs, e.g. if media sentiment is associated with an increase in voting intentions but a decrease in party evaluation.

Party evaluation as a moderator

Party evaluation might not only act as a mediator for the connection between media sentiment and voting intentions. Instead, it might affect the relationship itself. Backfire theory suggests, that media sentiment is processed differently across voters. Supporters of the AfD might be reluctant to accept negative news about 'their' party. Instead of persuading them, the message backfires and reinforces their support for the party. In statistical terms, party evaluation functions here as a moderator because the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions differs, depending on the individual´s perception of the AfD. We test this proposition in our empirical model by introducing a multiplicative term consisting of media sentiment and AfD evaluation. Please note that mathematically, one cannot distinguish whether party evaluation acts as a moderator of media sentiment or media sentiment moderates the effect of party evaluation. The second interpretation would mean that the extend to which party evaluation influences voting intentions depends on media sentiment. While acknowledging the central role of media in shaping citizens´ attitudes, it still seems unlikely that the link between attitudes and voting intentions depends on marginal media sentiment changes. Therefore, theoretically, we find the first interpretation much more convincing, although we cannot rule out the other.

Why not both, mediator and moderator?

We discussed above, that party evaluation might act as a mediator as well as moderator. Why not test these assumptions in a single model, including party evaluations as a mediator and a moderator at the same time? Mediators and moderators had been thoroughly distinguished by Baron and Kenny (1986), who also acknowledge that mediators can moderate at the same time. These so-called three-variable-models are also explicitly discussed by prominent research (Preacher, Rucker et al. 2007; James, Brett 1984). However, others are cautious and do not mention them at all (Muller, Judd et al. 2005; Edwards, Lambert 2007). In fact, Baron and Kenny also face critics, especially regarding this specific type of models from the MacArthur approach (Kraemer, Kiernan et al. 2008; Kraemer, Wilson et al. 2002; Karazsia, Berlin 2018). At its core, the argument of this approach regards the temporal sequence of a mediator vis-à-vis the predictor as incompatible with its role as a possible moderator. While a mediator is determined by a predictor and therefore succeeds the predictor variable, a moderator must – at least in theory – precede a predictor to influence its´ impact on an outcome variable. Thus, a variable cannot mediate and moderate the same predictor variable at the same time, as this would violate the temporal sequence. Apart from the argument of temporal sequence, it has been shown that such a three-variable-model is "internally contradictory" (Jacoby and Sassenberg 2014, p. 10) because the claimed conditional indirect effects cannot be observed in such a model.

In conclusion, there is no final accordance on how to treat such three-variables-models. While we do not generally discourage the use of such three-variables-models, for our specific purpose, we refrained from modelling party evaluation as both a mediator and a moderator at the same time. Instead, we test these assumptions in separate models.

HYPOTHESES

Taken together, the findings above have strong implications for the nexus between media sentiment, RPPs and voters´ attitudes. Media framing can backfire under certain conditions and these are likely to be met with regard to RPPs like the AfD. First, because their right-leaning electorate might be in particular prone to backfire effects. Second, the framing of such parties might result in familiarity and overkill effects. Third, the AfD might even actively seek to provoke backfire effects. We therefore expect backfire effects to be visible in our study. In other words, we expect *negative* media sentiment to have *positive* effects on voting intentions

> H1: Negative media sentiment in articles about the AfD is associated with higher propensity to vote for the AfD. (direct effect – Backfire effect) (c')

However, we further expect, that this direct link between media sentiment and voting intentions becomes irrelevant once the indirect link via evaluation of the AfD is introduced. Meaning that party evaluation mediates the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions.

> H2: Evaluation of the AfD mediates the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions. (Mediator/indirect effect) (involves a1 und b1 and c´)

We also hypothesize a moderation effect. The evaluation of the AfD might affect how media sentiment influences one´s voting intention. Respondents that are already supportive of the AfD might react to negative media coverage with an increased backfire effect.

> H3: Evaluation of the AfD moderates (c3´) the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions (c´). The higher the evaluation of the AfD, the greater the negative effect (see H1) of media sentiment.

We depict our models graphically, following Hayes (2015) in Figure 1.

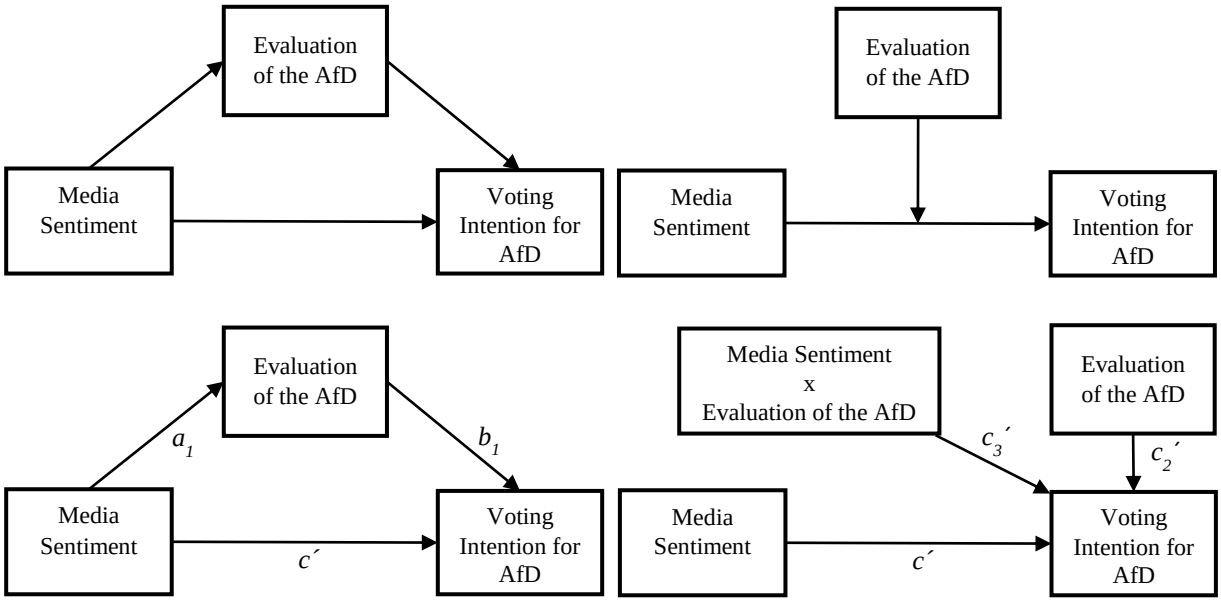

Figure 1: Illustration of our models in conceptual form (upper row) and statistical form (bottom row). Left column shows the mediation, right column the moderation model.

MEASURING MEDIA SENTIMENT

How can media sentiment be measured? Researchers are faced with various challenges when investigating the link between media and voting intentions and scholars have taken divers paths to ensure validity. Literature on persuasion effects typically uses singular events and looks at their effects on vote shares or other aggregated data, while backfire effects are mostly studied as within-persons effects. We try to combine the merits of both approaches.

The starting point for all such studies is usually a change in the independent variable, the media. This could be a new media source stepping into the market (DellaVigna, Kaplan 2007; Enikolopov, Petrova et al. 2011), a change in the endorsement of a popular media source (Reeves, McKee et al. 2016; Ladd, Lenz 2009) or a change in the framing of the party in question (van Spanje, Azrout 2019). All approaches have their merits, but operationalizing

media sentiment faces various pitfalls (Ladd, Lenz 2009). First, the effect found for a media source, that is rather obviously biased might not be representative for the impact of other media sources that have a slant but are not utterly one-sided. The same applies to endorsements, which are strong and very direct attempts to influence citizens. Their effects might thus differ for more subtle forms of media sentiment. In addition, clear endorsements before elections are very uncommon in German Newspapers and TV channels. Second, relating the effect of a newly introduced media outlet on voting decisions to its bias in reporting may be regarded as an inductive fallacy. Often it is not possible to control whether a different media source with a different bias could have had the same outcome as the one under study.

We try to reduce such effects of selectiveness through a balanced measuring of media sentiment. Instead of looking at strong biases or clear endorsement, we are trying to capture the general tone of voice in reports about the AfD. We achieve this by using established dictionaries to measure the sentiment of reports on this party. This is equivalent to counting pre-defined negative and positive words within each article and computing an overall sentiment for reports for each day. Instead of looking at a new media actor or its change of bias, we look at several established media sources all together and track their change of sentiment over time.

To generate our media sentiment variable, we started with all articles that are listed in NexisUni and mention "AfD" in their title or lead text. The results were filtered by date, using only those that were published between 1.1.2015 and 31.12.2017 and which appeared in either 'Die Welt', 'Tagesspiegel' or 'taz, die tageszeitung'. We chose these news outlets, as they represent a conservative, a liberal and a leftist view on politics. All three of them are rather quality than tabloid newspapers. After cleaning the dataset for duplicates or non-informative segments (e.g. election results in table form) we are left with 6660 results. We then matched

the words appearing in these articles with three commonly used dictionaries for German political language. These are *LSD* (Young, Soroka 2012), *LIWC* (Tausczik, Pennebaker 2010) and the *augmented dictionary* by Rauh (2018) (referred to as *Rauh* hereafter), which relies on two other dictionaries (*GPC* by Waltinger 2010 and *SentiWS* by Remus, Quasthoff et al. 2010). All three list positive and negative words in dichotomous fashion. The number of positive and negative matches per article were then processed following the formula proposed by Lowe, Benoit et al. (2011).

$$x = \frac{\log(positive\ matches + 0.5)}{\log(negative\ matches + 0.5)}$$

The result is a value between -1 and 1 for each article, where positive numbers indicate positive sentiment and vice versa. We aggregated these values to reflect daily sentiment and aggregated these to monthly scores. These scores represent our variables 'LSD', 'LIWC' and 'Rauh' respectively. We merged these variables with the Politbarometer survey dataset on a monthly basis.

INDIVIDUALLY BASED MEASURES

AfD evaluation

Evaluation of the AfD could be a mediator or a moderator of the relationship between media sentiment and voting intentions for this party. To assess evaluation of the party, we used a single indicator, asking the respondents: 'In general, what do you think of the AfD?' The item is identical in all waves of Politbarometer over the full timeframe of this study. Thus, we can expect possible measurement errors to be at least equal across all respondents. The Likert-type response options for this item ranged from 1 = 'strongly like' to 11 = 'strongly dislike'. We coded higher scores as indicating a more positive attitude towards the AfD.

Voting intentions

Voting intention for the AfD is the main dependent variable of our study. It is coded as a dichotomous dummy variable indicating whether one would vote for the AfD (1) or not (0) if general elections would be held the upcoming Sunday. The item´s wording is identical for all waves under study. Over the entire dataset, roughly 8% stated that they would vote for the AfD but regional and temporal differences are evident. In eastern Germany, the average is 11.8%, in western Germany 5.7%. Over the three-year period, the share first increased from 5.8% in 2015 to 10.8% in 2016 but decreased again for 2017 (7.7%).

Controls

Acknowledging the correlational nature of our data, we include several control variables to reduce the risk of systematic covariations between our main variables and sociodemographic features of the respondents. *Educational attainment* was assessed in four categories ranging from elementary school to A-Level completion. *Gender* is measured as a dichotomous variable, where females are denoted as '1'. *Age* was included as a 10-category-variable, as no other format is available in the dataset. *Left-right-alignment* is a 11-point-scale with higher scores indicating more right-wing stands.

ANALYTICAL METHOD

To accurately test our predictions, we conduct conditional indirect effects analyses (Preacher, Rucker and Hayes 2007). This specific form of structural equation modelling (SEM) is particularly well-suited for the present purpose as it allows estimation of mediating (i.e., indirect path from media sentiment via AfD evaluation to voting intention) and moderating relations (i.e., the interaction between media sentiment and AfD evaluation). Technically, before hypotheses testing, we first examine direct associations between media sentiment or

the respondents´ evaluation of the AfD on their voting intention, holding all other variables constant. Next, to test for a mediation effect of party evaluation, we examine the presence of significantly indirect slopes for the paths from media sentiment via party evaluation towards voting intentions. Finally, we test for the presumed moderating relation between media sentiment and party evaluation. All analyses reported here are based on bootstrapped parameter estimates and standard errors estimated routine implemented in Lavaan version 0.6-5 (Rosseel 2012).

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

First results of our analyses reveal interesting patterns, especially with regard time-dependent differences. Our findings are visualized in a forest plot (figure 2).

Direct effect of negative media sentiment on voting intentions (H1)

A direct and positive effect of negative press coverage on voting intentions for the AfD is thoroughly confirmed for respondents in 2015. This holds true for all dictionaries (LIWC, LSD and Rauh) and independent from the inclusion of mediating or moderating terms. However, in 2016 this effect turns insignificantly and eventually becomes positive in 2017 for some dictionary-variable combinations. In sum, negative news had a positive effect on the parties expected vote share in 2015, were irrelevant in 2016 and had potentially negative effects in 2017. This also means hypothesis H1 is only confirmed in 2015.

Mediation effect (H2)

We expected that party evaluation mediates the effect of media sentiment on voting intentions. Again, confirmation of this hypothesis depends on the date of the survey. While we find no evidence of a mediation effect in 2015, there are substantial, significant effects in 2016 and (with the exception of Rauh) 2017. This suggests, that negative media coverage had no significant consequences for one´s sympathy with the party (which is always strongly

related to voting intentions) in 2015 but had a positive effect on sympathy in the following two years. Taken together with the findings above, negative news had a positive effect directly on voting intentions in 2015, but an indirect (mediated) effect via party sympathy in 2016 and – with some doubts – in 2017.

Moderation effect (H3)

We also expected to see a moderation effect between media sentiment and sympathy for the AfD on voting intentions. Our analyses confirm this hypothesis (H3) for 2015. Across all dictionaries, the effect is significantly positive, meaning that negative media sentiment (direct effect is negative) reinforces the `translation` of party sympathy in reported voting intentions. As for the findings below, this changes beginning with 2016, when the effect is insignificant for all dictionaries. In 2017 the findings associated with the Rauh dictionary again deviate from the other two. While there is no significant effect in both LIWC and LSD, Rauh reports a significantly positive effect. However, in general, one could conclude that in 2015, negative media reports had a positive effect on reported voting intentions via two channels, the direct one and a moderated one involving party sympathy. In 2016 and 2017 however, both these trajectories are not significantly related with reported voting intentions. Instead, it is only the mediated link – negative news reinforce the effect of party sympathy on voting intentions – that significantly predicts citizens` voting intentions.

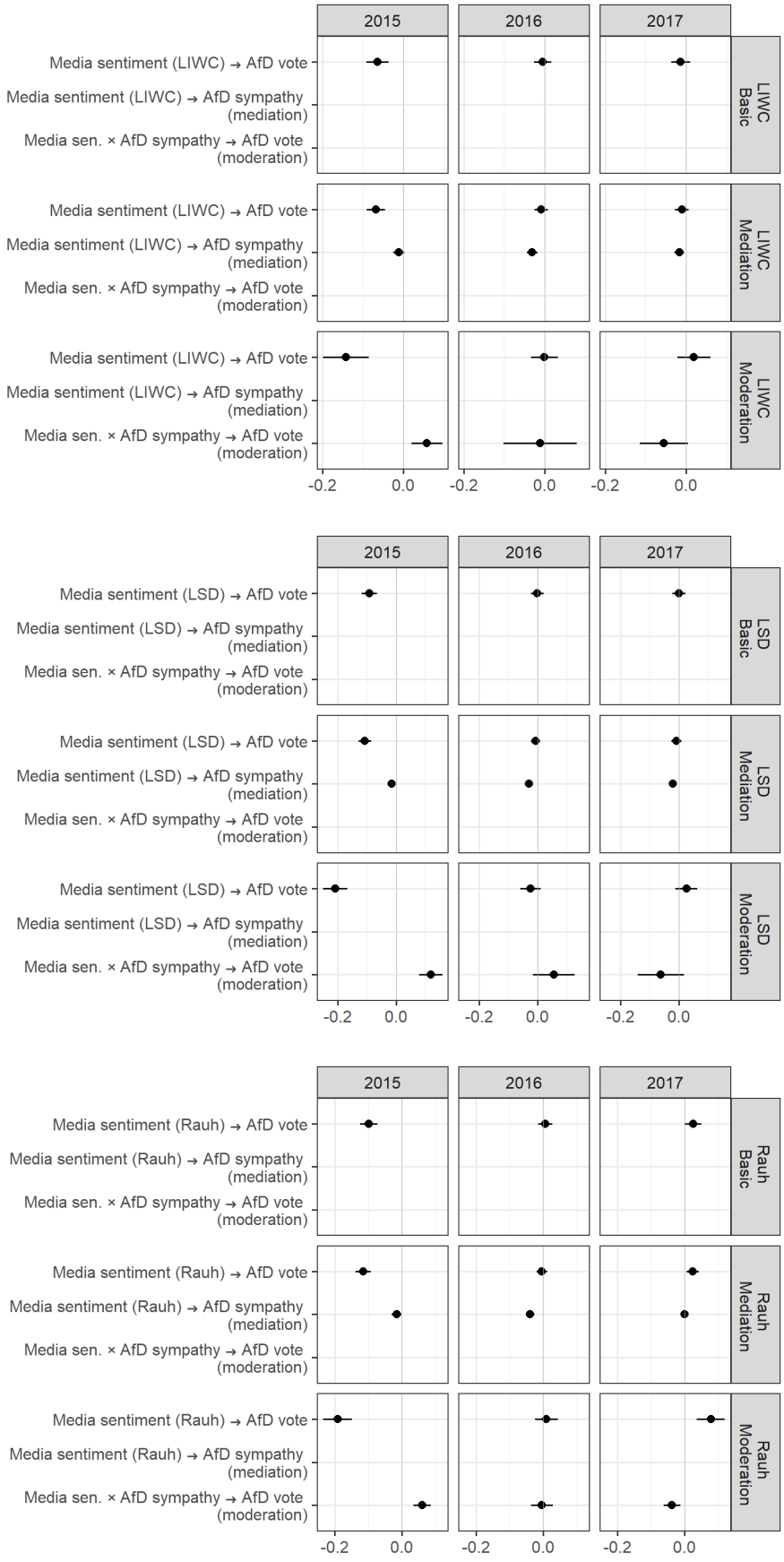

Figure 2: Forest plot illustrating the effect across different years and dictionaries. The direct effect of party sympathy on voting intentions is not reported as it is always outside the displayed scale, but significantly positive in every analysis.

DISCUSSION

This study attempted to further our understanding of how media sentiment influences voting intentions for right-wing populist parties. Previous research has discussed persuasion and backfire effects in that regard. Drawing on these findings, we theorized, that party evaluation may link media with voting intentions either as a mediator or as a moderator. Repeated cross-sectional German survey data from 2015 to 2017 and an extensive media sentiment analysis from more than 6000 articles allowed us to test these assumptions empirically. Using structural equation modelling, our results indicate, that more negative press coverage is rather associated with higher voting intentions for the right-wing populist party 'AfD', yielding support for backfire effects. Collectively, our results testify to the importance of party evaluation as key contextual sources of media sentiment on voting intentions.

However, beyond these specific findings the strong differences in effects between 2015 and the following two years point to a general difference of the party and its electorate in 2015 and subsequent years. Future research may elaborate further on this point and highlight the profound changes the party underwent during these times, with the European refugee crisis, and the parties parliamentary establishment probably taking a key role.

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