To lead or to follow?
Mainstream parties' strategies and radical right success
- the German case

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0.1 Introduction

Western European party systems face substantial changes in the last thirty years. After green parties entered the electoral arena in the nineteen eighties, today's new challenger parties come from the radical right (Abou-Chadi 2016; Meguid 2005). The existing literature has been trying to establish the relationship between the emergence challenger of parties and mainstream parties' political strategies. Do established parties merely react to the rise of challengers or do they have agency to shape electoral outcomes? Or are both simply affected by changes in public opinion?

All three theories can be inferred from the issue competition literature: In her seminal contribution, Meguid extends the classical Downsian model of party competition and argues that mainstream parties do not only affect challenger parties' success by taking positions towards new issues that challengers campaign on, but that by simply ignoring a new issue, mainstream parties can prevent challenger parties' success (2005). Her comparative study of 30 challenger party entries in 17 European countries between 1970 and 2000 finds strong support for the hypothesis that when mainstream parties employ dismissive strategies, challenger parties perform worse.

More recently, studies find that parties are not the sole agents deciding which issues to identify and might be forced to position themselves on certain issues (Spoon, Hobolt, and Vries 2014: 363f). This is because challenger parties pose a credible threat to mainstream parties - the more dangerous that threat (i.e. the higher the electoral share of the challenger), the more likely mainstream parties make the new issue their own. Investigating emerging green parties in 19 West European countries from 1980 to 2010, Spoon, Hobolt and De Vries find that green parties' success in the previous election increases the emphasis of green issues in mainstream parties' manifestos (2014).

In the same study, results also indicate that mainstream parties tend to follow public opinion in that they are more likely to emphasise green issues when the public sees them as relevant (Spoon, Hobolt, and Vries 2014: 372). This is in line with evidence indicating that political parties respond to voters' perception of which topics are relevant. In this view, political parties 'ride the

wave' of public support by emphasising issues that are salient in the electorate rather than their own issues (Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016: 384). An analysis of German parties' press-releases from 2000 to 2010 corroborate this theory.

More classical theories of issue ownership argue that parties 'own' an issue that voters connect to their party and that these parties benefit electorally when an issue becomes salient (Petrocik 1996). Supporting this idea, studies find that when immigration is a salient topic in the media, radical right parties profit electorally (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2006).

0.2 Hypotheses

Radical right parties' issue ownership arguably lies in the realm of immigration. For the German case, this leads us to the following hypotheses when applied to radical right challenger parties:

H1: AfD success follows mainstream party emphasis of immigration (*issue emphasis hypothesis*)

H2: Mainstream party attention to immigration follows polling results of the AfD (*threat hypothesis*)

H3: Mainstream parties' devotion to immigration is driven by public salience of the issue (*riding-the-wave hypothesis*)

H4: Success of the radical right is driven by public salience of immigration (*issue-ownership hypothesis*)

0.3 Analytic Strategy

In order to test these hypotheses, this study will illuminate the German case, studying the rise of the far-right 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) and mainstream parties' (SPD, CDU/CSU) communication in the same period. Past studies have mainly used data from party manifestos and connected them to election results in time-series cross-sections when investigating the link between mainstream parties' strategies and challenger party success (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2019; Meguid 2005; Spoon, Hobolt, and Vries 2014). This measurement has the major disadvantage that it is available once per election and hence allows only coarse-grained measurement across time. Additionally, it is unclear whether it measures salience, position, or even intra-party conflict ([SOURCE]). Finally, elections constitute a very specific period in party systems that might not be representative of the whole electoral cycle. I will hence collect data to construct a more fine-grained measure of mainstream parties' issue emphasis, the AfD's electoral success, and public issue attention and subsequently estimate a time-series model.

I use web scraping techniques to collect nearly 30,000 press releases by the parliamentary groups of German mainstream parties SPD and CDU/CSU between January 2000 and May 2019 from the websites of the SPD parliamentary group and a portal for journalists collecting press releases.

To identify whether press releases are concerned with immigration, I hand-code around 1,500 of them. This hand-coding is coding press releases as concerned with immigration when they are primarily a) talking about immigration to Germany or b) talking about the integration of foreigners into the German society. This excludes several topics which are often related to immigration, such as humanitarian action for refugees in other countries, war in other countries, general border policy not mentioning migration, EU-integration, and - in the German case - policies relating to German minorities outside of Germany, as long as they are not concerned with their immigration to Germany.

Building on these hand-coded data, I employ supervised machine learning to classify the remaining over 28,000 press releases. Comparing several cross-validates vectorizers and classifiers trained on test sets with oversampled minority class, I will be able to identify a superior classifier. Taken together, this results in a data set of nearly 30,000 press releases with an indicator showing whether they are concerned with immigration.

This data will be averaged on the monthly level to create a time-series of mainstream parties devotion to the immigration-issue. It will then be merged with monthly polling averages of the German far-right AfD party from the Poll of Polls website and GoogleTrend data indicating how often topics related to immigration where searched in Germany in that period, resulting in a data set with monthly data on public and mainstream party attention to immigration and the current electoral performance of the AfD from April 2013 to May 2019.

Lastly, I will use this data to estimate several VAR-models including public attention to immigration, mainstream parties' emphasis of immigration, and AfD polling to identify the way these indicators affect each other.

In total this undertaking will hence make several contributions:

- A data set of German mainstream parties' press releases between 2000 (2009 for the SPD) and 2019 with an indicator whether they are concerned with immigration.

- A classifier for German political text, indicating whether this text is about immigration.

- A data set with monthly data on mainstream parties' attention to immigration, polling result of the AfD, and public attention to immigration.

- A time-series analysis to investigate the link between mainstream parties' strategies, public issue salience and challenger party success.

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