

Party Competition Over Democracy: Democracy as Electoral Issue in Germany

Lea Kaftan 

Survey Data Curation, GESIS—Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Germany

Correspondence: Lea Kaftan (lea.kaftan@gesis.org)

Submitted: 29 April 2024 **Accepted:** 24 July 2024 **Published:** 8 October 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Challenging Democracy: How Do Ideas of Populists and Disenchanted Citizens Align?” edited by Reinhard Heinisch (University of Salzburg) and Oscar Mazzoleni (University of Lausanne), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i385>

Abstract

Elected leaders increasingly undermine liberal democratic institutions with the support of their voters, openly challenging liberal democratic institutions in election campaigns. However, political scientists thus far have lacked the theoretical and empirical tools to study the role of elections in democratic backsliding. This article theorizes the degree to which democracy in general and liberal democracy more specifically can and should be conceptualized as valence and positional issues in multiparty electoral competitions of established liberal democracies. By investigating how German citizens and parties of the postwar period spoke about democracy per se and liberal democracy in their regional and national election manifestos, this article shows that democracy per se and liberal democracy, in particular, have been issues of different qualities in German postwar elections. While parties have used references to democracy in general as a mixed issue, showing both signs of valence and positional issues, parties' emphasis on liberal democracy is shaped by a positional logic. Social and direct democracy have also been positional issues. Studying democracy and its various conceptions as electoral issues will help us address many important questions concerning the stability of democracies, shifting researchers' focus to the competition of parties over citizens' support for reforms that undermine or stabilize liberal democracy.

Keywords

direct democracy; liberal democracy; Germany; party competition; positional issues; social democracy; valence issues

1. Introduction

Liberal democracies are increasingly threatened by democratically elected governments that openly promote restrictions on liberal rights, such as the protection of minorities and judicial autonomy in Poland and Hungary

(Drinóczy & Bień-Kacała, 2019; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Sadurski, 2018, 2019). These attempts at executive aggrandizement have become increasingly relevant for the stability of liberal democracy (Bermeo, 2016) and are often tolerated by supporters of governments (Carey et al., 2022; Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham & Svobik, 2020; Simonovits et al., 2022). Rather than toppling democratic systems through military coups, illiberal and authoritarian leaders increasingly use the electoral arena to undermine liberal democracy.

There is ample anecdotal evidence that these leaders do not hesitate to publicly promote their illiberal or authoritarian reforms. Opposing parties seem to respond to these threats by campaigning for liberal democracy. Fidesz and PiS have won substantial electoral support in Hungary and Poland, respectively, despite—or because of—their attacks on liberal democracy (Kornai, 2015; Sadurski, 2018). In Poland, an electoral alliance, the Civic Coalition, was formed in opposition to PiS' nationalist politics and its attacks on liberal democracy. The Civic Coalition won enough support in the 2023 election to form a government. However, institutions of democratic systems also politicize long before democratic backsliding becomes evident. For example, Brexit politicized the questions of whether democracies should entail referenda and whether referenda should be binding (Blick & Salter, 2021). Allen and Mirwaldt (2010) showed that different conceptions of democracy and democratic values are indeed mentioned by parties in election campaigns, even in liberal democracies.

Because we have only recently started to study how and when parties politicize different conceptions of democracy (Allen & Mirwaldt, 2010; Bowler et al., 2017; Engler et al., 2023; Gessler, 2019), we still lack a theoretical framework to study the reasons and consequences of making democracy itself an issue of democratic elections. I propose using existing theories of party competition, especially the concepts of valence and positional issues, to study when and why parties politicize democracy and its different conceptions. More precisely, I focus on how German citizens have positioned themselves towards democracy per se—irrespective of what that term means to citizens or parties—and towards liberal democracy, a democratic system with a strong focus on checks and balances, the protection of minority rights, and the rule of law. Consequently, I study whether German parties politicized democracy per se or liberal democracy as valence or positional issues in national and regional election campaigns between 1977 and 2017. In Appendices D and E of the Supplementary File, I extend the analysis to social and direct democracy.

Before introducing the case, this study first derives empirical implications, describing distributions of data that we would expect to see if democracy per se and liberal democracy were politicized in election campaigns as valence, positional, or mixed issues (De Sio & Weber, 2014; Stokes, 1963). Positional issues are those on which citizens and voters take different, contrasting positions (e.g., social spending), whereas valence issues are those on which citizens typically universally agree regarding their desirability (e.g., corruption). In reality, issues might often be mixed issues, with a substantial number of citizens agreeing on the desirability and considerable potential for some parties to mobilize voters using these issues as valence issues, and some room for manoeuvre left for smaller parties to politicize these issues as positional issues (De Sio & Weber, 2014, p. 872). The conditions under which parties politicize democracy per se or liberal democracy should indicate the nature of each of these issues (see Section 3).

Using data from German citizens and party competition in German regional and national elections, this article demonstrates that even in an established liberal democracy, such as Germany, parties use liberal democracy as a positional issue and democracy in general as a mixed issue. Liberal conceptions of democracy are transmitted

mainly by liberal parties. Democracy per se, irrespective of its connotation, is most often put on the electoral agenda by challenger parties and by ecological, socialist, and social democratic parties. Additional analyses in Appendices D and E of the Supplementary File suggest that social democracy and direct democracy are also positional issues of German party competition.

This has implications for how political scientists conceive of debates surrounding democracy in electoral campaigns. Assuming that how parties campaign over democracy affects voters' support for democratic institutions (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002) and that governments need at least some support for their early infringement on democracy, studying party competition over democracy and various conceptions of democracy might serve as an early warning system for potential democratic infringements, just as studying party competition on welfare issues serves as an early warning system for upcoming changes in policies related to welfare systems. When democracies become increasingly challenged by democratically elected governments during election campaigns, political scientists should focus on how theories of party competition can help us understand party competition over democracy.

2. The Politicization of Democracy in Elections

An increasing number of studies investigate when and why parties put democracy on the electoral agenda and take a specific position on it. Gessler (2019) was the first to investigate the factors shaping political systems' politicization. Studying press releases from 15 European countries, she finds that democracy is more salient in parties' press releases when the democratic quality of the country is low and that the tone parties use when speaking about democracy correlates with the parties' challenger status and ideology. Other studies have investigated in depth how parties speak publicly about democracy. Allen and Mirwaldt (2010) have shown for the first time that parties within the same country differ in how they speak about democracy. While radical right parties emphasize the participation of the people, left-wing parties emphasize individual freedoms (Engler et al., 2023). Further research has studied how populist radical right parties politicize democracy, describing substantial changes in their discourses over time (Alekseev, 2024; Bobba & McDonnell, 2016; Kwiatkowska et al., 2022). A final set of studies has focused on parties' position towards direct democracy, arguing that parties promote and implement democracy, hoping for short-term electoral gains (Scarrow, 1997, 1999) and an increase in electoral participation (Scarrow, 1999). Support for more direct participation is, on average, greater within parties that are in opposition and within more right-wing parties (Bowler et al., 2017).

These studies are either interested in the factors that influence the implementation of direct democracy or in providing novel but still descriptive insights into how parties speak about democracy. With this study, I contribute to this literature, arguing that parties use democracy similarly to other policy issues in election campaigns. They can increase or decrease the salience of democracy issues as they increase or decrease the salience of economic or cultural issues. Parties can also position themselves on different issues related to democracy by speaking favourably or unfavourably about specific conceptions of democracy, just as they speak favourably or unfavourably about, for example, different types of welfare systems or immigration schemes. Conceptualizing and studying democracy as an electoral issue will inspire research on how illiberal and undemocratic parties garner support for political reforms through campaigning that gradually undermines liberal democracy.

In the rest of this article, I focus on democracy per se and liberal democracy. When referring to democracy per se, parties explicitly mention democracy, irrespective of their understanding of what democracy means and irrespective of their reason for doing so. By not predefining what parties must refer to when they allude to democracy, I explore why parties mention democracy in election campaigns, irrespective of whether they support liberal democracy. Liberal democracy refers to a political system that guarantees basic democratic rights, such as equal rights to participate in free and fair elections, free access to information, and free expression of opinion (Dahl, 1971, p. 3), as well as the protection of minority rights, the rule of law, and effective checks and balances on those in power (Coppedge et al., 2020a, p. 43).

I furthermore use the theoretical framework of valence and positional issues to theorize why parties speak about democracy per se and liberal democracy in election campaigns. From this theoretical framework, I derive visible empirical implications as to how voters should relate to democracy per se and liberal democracy and as to how German parties' references to democracy and liberal democracy should correlate with other variables if democracy and liberal democracy are indeed specific types of electoral issues. Appendix E of the Supplementary File provides additional analyses for direct and social democracy, showing that other conceptions of democracy are politicized, too, as electoral issues in postwar Germany.

3. Valence and Positional Issues

When studying the politicization of issues in elections, political scientists mostly rely on distinguishing positional and valence issues (Adams et al., 2020; De Sio & Weber, 2014; Stokes, 1963). Positional issues are studied extensively and “involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which distribution of voter preferences is defined” (Stokes, 1963, p. 373). If an issue is positional, voters disagree about the best action to take. For example, some voters might prefer more social spending, whereas others might prefer less social spending. Thus, parties present alternatives to their voters regarding the issue in question, such as more or less government spending.

Valence issues “merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate” (Stokes, 1963, p. 373). Corruption, honesty, and trustworthiness are among the most frequently analyzed valence issues (see, for example, Curini, 2017; Green, 2007). Although it is hard to believe that these issues could be positional, Stokes (1963, p. 373) explicitly states that “the question whether a given problem poses a positional- or valence-issue is a matter to be settled empirically and not on a priori logical grounds.” Issues that are positional in one context could well be valence issues in another context, namely when voters agree on the necessity of one policy issue and when parties do not present alternatives to this specific policy issue. In other words, issues are valence issues “due solely to the fact that there is overwhelming consensus as to the goal of government action” (Stokes, 1963, p. 374).

Building on the premise that issues can be positional in one context and valence issues in another, De Sio and Weber (2014, p. 872) argue that valence and position should be considered the two “ideal” endpoints of a dimension on which all policy issues can be arranged for a given polity and period. They state, furthermore, that “issues can be classified as positional or valence issues, based on the distribution of policy preferences” (De Sio & Weber, 2014, p. 872). Thus, issues can be mixed, depending on the degree to which there is general agreement in the electorate about what the government should do and on the degree to which parties provide alternative solutions. Moreover, depending on the level of agreement within the electorate,

parties have different incentives. If agreement about what the government should do is low, they can distance themselves from their competitors by taking a different position. Alternatively, if agreement among voters is high, parties can emphasize that they are more competent in this area than their competitors are (De Sio & Weber, 2014).

However, how could we assess whether parties similarly politicize democracy as other positional or valence issues? We need to investigate voters' preferences and parties' electoral alternatives to this specific policy issue. Based on the theoretical arguments described above, we can derive several empirical implications summarized in Table 1. If voters disagreed regarding the benefits of democracy or liberal democracy, parties would be highly incentivized to take different positions regarding democracy per se or liberal democracy. In this case, democracy per se and liberal democracy are clearly positional issues. Assuming that positions on democracy and liberal democracy would align at least partially with other positions, parties from different party families and ideological spectra should differ in their emphasis on democracy per se or liberal democracy more specifically. Ideology more generally becomes an important covariate for parties' positions towards democracy per se and liberal democracy, whereas other factors such as parties' challenger status play no role in itself. Parties should be able to politicize democracy per se or liberal democracy irrespective of whether they benefit from being outsiders to the political system.

In contrast, if voters would universally agree on the benefits of democracy or liberal democracy, parties would have little incentive to set themselves apart from their opponents by proposing alternative positions towards democracy per se or liberal democracy since there would be little support for such positions in the electorate. However, they would have strong incentives to emphasize their personal strength in increasing the quality of democracy, in defending democratic institutions against attacks, or in highlighting other parties' weaknesses regarding their commitment to democracy per se or liberal democracy, especially when the quality of a country's democratic institutions deteriorates. This should be particularly "easy" for challenger parties who have never participated in government and who have, therefore, never had the chance to implement reforms that they are calling for—thus gaining extra credibility vis-à-vis mainstream or government parties. Indeed, previous studies have shown that challenger parties use anti-establishment rhetoric more often in their campaigns since their attacks on the political establishment are more credible than criticism from established parties (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020, pp. 141–177). Similarly, Gessler (2019) and Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2019) have shown that smaller parties and parties with less access to political

Table 1. Empirical implications for different variables if democracy or liberal democracy were valence, positional, or mixed issues.

Independent variables	Valence issue	Positional issue	Mixed issue
Agreement among voters	Universal	Low	High but not universal
Parties' ideology	Does not explain the variance in the dependent variable	Explains variance in the dependent variable substantially	Explains variance in the dependent variable partially
Challenger status of parties	Explains variance in the dependent variable substantially	Does not explain the variance in the dependent variable	Explains variance in the dependent variable partially

Note: The dependent variable refers either to the salience of democracy or to an emphasis on liberal democracy.

power are more likely to politicize and criticize the political system of their countries. Consequently, if democracy per se or liberal democracy are valence issues, challenger parties—irrespective of their ideological profile—should be more likely to refer to democracy and liberal democracy than established parties are.

Finally, if democracy per se or liberal democracy are mixed issues, there might be high but not universal agreement among voters regarding the benefits of democracy and liberal democracy, and both parties' ideology and their challenger status might explain the variance in parties' references to democracy and liberal democracy in election campaigns. Following De Sio and Weber (2014, p. 872), democracy per se and liberal democracy would be issues located between the ideal types of positional and valence issues. For contemporary democracies, this might be the most realistic scenario. However, this remains an educated guess because, at least to my knowledge, this is the first study to conceptualize and analyze democracy as an electoral issue.

In the following sections, I first introduce the case of postwar Germany. I then describe the data and methods used to analyze the quality of the two democracy issues in German regional and national election campaigns. I subsequently analyze German voters' attitudes towards democracy per se and parties' references to it in election campaigns. Finally, I study the quality of the liberal democracy issue for German voters and parties. Appendix E of the Supplementary File shows further analyses of direct and social democracy.

4. The Case of Germany

In the early postwar period, the stability of German democracy was much debated. On May 23, 1949, the German Basic Law came into effect, highly influenced by the Allies, who supervised its creation and could have vetoed its implementation. Although it enshrined basic liberal democratic rights as unalienable, it was highly questionable whether the West German political elite and German citizens would support newly created institutions (Wolfrum, 2006). Reunification and the collapse of the Soviet republic were other shocks to the German political system. However, it remained unclear whether East Germans would support liberal democracy in the long run (Gabriel, 2007; Pickel, 2016). Thus, the case of German national and regional elections provides interesting and important variation in the experience and degree of establishment of liberal democratic attitudes for the study of democracy issues in election campaigns.

The German case provides additional variation in other influential variables, namely, the government status of parties, the parliamentary strength of parties and the effective number of parties. In the period between 1945 and the end of the 1950s, the CDU/CSU, FDP, and SPD established their dominant positions, whereas many smaller parties with questionable relationships with newly created democratic institutions, such as the Deutsche Partei (German Party) and the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany), lost political relevance or were prohibited. The dominant position of the CDU/CSU, FDP, and SPD was only undermined by the rise of the Greens in the 1980s, the rise of Die Linke in the 1990s, and, finally, the rise of the AfD in the late 2010s. At the regional level, party competition was slightly more fragmented. For example, the radical right party NPD has been represented in various regional parliaments since the 1960s and has lost relevance only with the creation of the AfD. Considering German national and regional elections, we can compare the same party at similar points in time, once in opposition and once in government. In addition, regional election results for the same party often differ greatly, leaving the same party with few seats in one state parliament and many seats in another at similar points in time.

For these reasons, studying German national and regional elections allows us to control for many factors that might influence the likelihood that German parties made democracy an issue of their electoral campaigns. It also allows the study of different points in time when democracy issues might be more or less relevant to citizens, such as elections shortly after regime changes or elections with new parties that strongly criticize political institutions in place. This is a unique competitive advantage over a study taking a cross-country perspective on contemporary democracies because, in this within-country study, the variance in influential factors discussed above (e.g., government status and strength of challenger parties) is large. In contrast, the variance in many contextual factors (e.g., understanding of democracy and experience with democracy) is comparably small across the units of analysis or can be controlled for.

5. Data and Method

This study builds on data that (a) describe voters' attitudes towards democracy, (b) is produced by parties to promote their electoral pledges, i.e., election manifestos, and (c) contain important control variables that might influence parties' emphasis on democracy per se or liberal democracy.

Data describing voters' attitudes towards democracy: In the analysis, I first briefly review survey data collected and in parts already analyzed by others (Baker et al., 1981; European Social Survey, 2012; European Values Study, 2015; Haerpfer et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2014a, 2014b; Weil, 1987). This review sheds light on the evolution of German voters' support for democracy per se and liberal democracy. Since the available data are not comparable, are only available for short periods, or are no longer accessible in their raw format, this part of the analysis is performed descriptively, source by source.

Data produced by parties to promote their electoral pledges: Data on German parties' election campaigns have been collected by the Manifesto Project (Lewandowski et al., 2018; Volkens et al., 2019) and the Political Documents Archive (Benoit et al., 2009). To investigate whether democracy per se and liberal democracy are issues of German party competition, I split parties' national and regional election manifestos into sentences (for a table of parties by party family, see Appendix B of the Supplementary File). I then count all sentences that contain the term “*demokrat*,” excluding all instances in which it is part of a party name. For example, a sentence containing “undemokratisch” (undemocratic) is counted as a democracy sentence, but a sentence containing only the party name “Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands” (German Social Democratic Party) is not. I measure the salience of democracy in election manifestos as the percentage of sentences per manifesto that mention the term “*demokrat*.” In a few instances, quasi-sentences provided by the Manifesto Project lack punctuation at the end of sentences. I use quasi-sentences in these instances.

To assess how often parties speak about liberal democracy when they speak about democracy, I use a dictionary. The dictionary is based on the definition provided in the theory section and encompasses references to the German Basic Law, equal opportunities for different social groups, human rights, minorities, pluralism, public control, and the separation of power (see Appendix C of the Supplementary File for the dictionaries). The emphasis on liberal democracy measures the percentage of democracy sentences that refer to liberal democracy. Sentences that do not contain the term “*demokrat*” are not considered for this measurement (see for a similar procedure, Alekseev, 2024). By restricting the analysis to sentences that link the term democracy with liberal institutions, I study whether parties take an active stance towards liberal democracy. If sentences include any of the dictionary terms, irrespective of whether they contain the

term “*demokrat*,” the measurement would also include instances in which parties claim to support the rights of specific minority groups (e.g., Russia Germans, “Russlanddeutsche”) or speak about specific violations of human rights (e.g., by the US). However, parties can make these statements irrespective of their support for liberal democracy (e.g., the AfD); hence, a measurement focusing on democracy sentences has higher internal validity and is less biased.

Data that contains important control variables: Finally, I use a variety of sources to operationalize the independent and control variables. For the independent variables, I categorize parties as challenger parties if they have not previously participated in government at the national or state level. Once they have participated in any government at any level, they are categorized as established parties for all levels of government. The data on government participation and the percentage of votes gained in elections are taken from the ParlGov dataset (Döring & Manow, 2019) and the RD|SED dataset (Röth et al., in press). The data for party families are from the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2019). For parties with missing information, I completed the data myself.

I also add a sequence of control variables. To control for the strength of challenger parties in each election, I aggregate the percentage of votes gained by all challenger parties. The Politbarometer series provides information on the level of satisfaction with how democracy works among the electorate (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2020). For most years since 1990, the sample has been split between East and West Germans. I, therefore, use the overall percentage of respondents from East and West Germany who state that they are at least somewhat dissatisfied with how democracy works for each party for national elections in the respective year. For state elections in East Germany, I base the percentages only on data for East Germany and likewise use only West German data for parties competing in West German elections. Between 1996 and 1998, the Politbarometer samples were not split between East Germans and West Germans. I split the sample according to the states where the interviews were conducted. Since the data do not allow us to reliably measure the percentage of dissatisfied respondents by party in each state, this is a proxy for parties’ supporters in East and West German regional elections.

I control for the quality of democracy each year via V-Dem’s electoral democracy index (Coppedge et al., 2020b; Pemstein et al., 2020). Owing to a lack of alternatives, I also use these data for regional elections. I measure democratic experience in years since 1949 for all national and West German elections and in years since 1990 for all East German elections. Finally, I include data on the change in GDP for each state and nationally to account for changes and differences in economic circumstances across territories and time. These data are taken from the statistical offices of Germany and the German states (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2006, 2019). I do not control for time or period because democratic experience measured in years since the first democratic elections after 1945 already captures changes in each dependent variable due to changes in time.

Owing to a lack of data for other periods, I restrict my analyses to parties’ election manifestos published between 1977 and 2017 and link the data described above to them. I include clustered standard errors for parties in territories over time. Although parties share similar values and party platforms across German states and at the national level, there are still significant differences between party branches from different territories, which leads to within-group serial correlation. I, therefore, account for heteroscedasticity across these groups. Unfortunately, the use of a panel regression model is not possible because the dataset is strongly unbalanced.

Appendix F of the Supplementary File shows the robustness checks. Furthermore, I assume that parties that place more emphasis on liberal democracy also favour liberal democracy more strongly than other parties do.

6. Democracy Per Se as an Electoral Issue

German citizens' support for democracy has been the focus of several studies. Weil (1987) has shown that, by the 1960s, few West Germans supported a new Nazi regime, and nearly two-thirds believed that the postwar democratic system was better than any other regime since the pre-1914 Wilhelmine era (Baker et al., 1981, p. 92). In the early 1990s and the early 2000s, 88 percent and 93 percent of German respondents, respectively, either agreed or strongly agreed that "democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government" (European Values Study, 2015, waves 2 and 4). German citizens' support for democracy has remained high in recent years. In 2020, only 8–10 percent of German citizens agreed that "it would be better if Germany would not be a democracy" (Kaftan, 2024). Moreover, differences in support for democracy per se between East and West German citizens seem to have vanished (Pickel & Pickel, 2023). Overall, German citizens have shown increasing levels of support for democracy, with a high level of agreement at least since the early 1990s (see Table 1).

But under what conditions do parties speak about democracy in their election campaigns? Table 2 shows the results of the regression analyses that seek to explain the variation in the salience of democracy in German parties' national and regional election manifestos between 1977 and 2017. In line with democracy per se being a mixed issue (see Table 1), both the challenger status of parties and their party family are important for explaining the variation in the salience of democracy in parties' election manifestos. Challenger parties are more likely than established parties to mention democracy in their election manifestos. The coefficient becomes even more precise and larger once controlling for party families, indicating this is not driven by a correlation between party families and the challenger status of parties. Moreover, since established parties do not become more likely to mention democracy as challenger parties strengthen, this is most likely not an effect of periods with many or strong challenger parties. There are also some significant differences in the salience of democracy in election manifestos from different party families. Ecological, socialist, and social democratic parties are more likely to mention democracy than liberal parties, while the salience of democracy in manifestos of Christian democratic, conservative, nationalist, and special issue parties does not differ from the salience of democracy in election manifestos of liberal parties.

In conclusion, the distribution of the data described above suggests that democracy per se is a mixed issue. German citizens have steadily supported democracy since the 1960s, but substantial agreement might have been reached only in the 1990s. Regardless of their ideological positions, challenger parties are more likely to speak about democracy, suggesting that references to democracy per se can be used as a valence issue by parties who are not (yet) mainstream parties with government experience. However, some variation in the salience of democracy in election manifestos is related to parties' families. Compared with liberal parties, ecological, socialist, and social democratic parties are more likely to speak about democracy in their election manifestos.

Table 2. Linear regression results for the salience of democracy per se in German election manifestos.

	All parties	All parties	Established parties	Established parties
Challenger	0.66* (0.26)	1.68** (0.50)		
Challenger strength			0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)
Ecological (vs. liberals)		0.99*** (0.20)		1.20*** (0.12)
Socialists (vs. liberals)		3.96*** (0.39)		3.50*** (0.27)
Social democrats (vs. liberals)		0.72*** (0.13)		0.70*** (0.13)
Christian democrats (vs. liberals)		-0.20 (0.10)		-0.19 (0.10)
Conservatives (vs. liberals)		0.24 (0.80)		N.A.
Nationalists (vs. liberals)		0.11 (0.52)		N.A.
Special issue (vs. liberals)		0.21 (0.53)		N.A.
Dissatisfied voters	0.04*** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Previous GDP change	0.09 (0.05)	0.08 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)
Democratic experience	-0.02*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02*** (0.00)
National (vs. East)	1.72*** (0.36)	1.38*** (0.30)	1.07** (0.34)	1.32*** (0.26)
West (vs. East)	0.73** (0.27)	0.39 (0.26)	0.31 (0.25)	0.49* (0.21)
Democratic quality	-6.88* (3.43)	0.65 (3.55)	-14.20*** (3.02)	-1.54 (2.65)
Intercept	6.24* (3.04)	1.10 (3.02)	12.75*** (2.67)	3.08 (2.30)
N	677	677	566	566
R ²	0.28	0.51	0.23	0.52
Adj. R ²	0.27	0.50	0.22	0.51

Notes: Linear regression results with clustered standard errors for parties in territories over time that are additionally corrected for heteroscedasticity across territorial party branches; standard errors are shown in parentheses; significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.; a list of parties included by party families is shown in Appendix B of the Supplementary File.

7. Liberal Democracy as an Electoral Issue

The European Social Survey, wave 6 (European Social Survey, 2012), and waves 5, 6, and 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS; Haerpfer et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2014a, 2014b) contain survey items that are closely linked to the definition of liberal democracy presented above as a democratic system that protects

the rights of minorities, upholds the rule of law, and contains effective checks and balances for governments. The European Social Survey (ESS) conceptualizes citizens' support for liberal democracy along three survey items: the courts treat everyone the same, the courts can stop the government from acting beyond its authority, and the rights of minority groups are protected. Similarly, the WVS survey asks respondents whether women have the same rights as men and whether civil rights protect people's liberty from state oppression are essential characteristics of democracy.

Figure 1 shows the mean importance that German citizens attribute to liberal democracy in each survey, including 95 percent confidence intervals. The mean values are first calculated for each respondent across the survey items and then for each group of party supporters. The category "All" includes respondents who indicated no or any party preference. German citizens have, on average, attributed high importance to liberal democracy since 2006, but there are small differences among supporters of different parties that are most likely not the result of sampling errors. Since both surveys ask respondents to indicate the level of importance they attribute to liberal democracy rather than asking them whether they support liberal democracy, it remains unclear whether this indicates little or substantial disagreement among the German citizenry concerning the attractiveness of liberal democracy (see Table 1).

Table 3 shifts the focus back to the party competition, showing regression results for the emphasis on liberal democracy for all parties and established parties. In line with the empirical implications of issues being positional, only the party family correlates significantly with the parties' emphasis on liberal democracy. Ecological, socialist, social democratic, conservative, nationalist, and special issue parties emphasize liberal democracy less than liberal parties do when discussing democracy. When the outlier is excluded, the

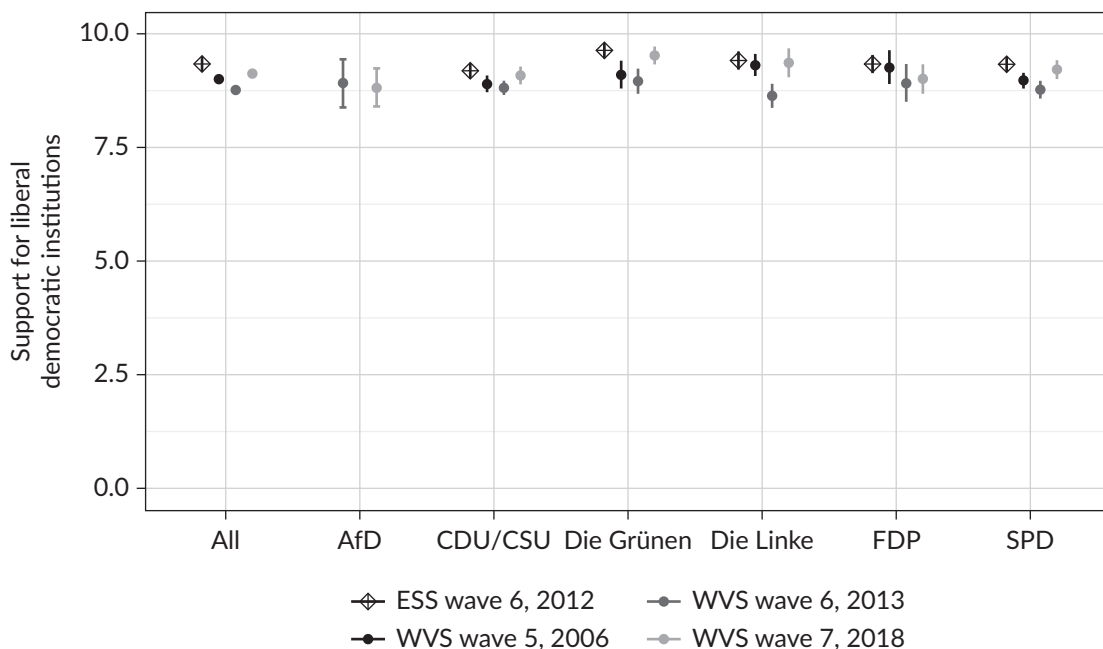


Figure 1. Importance of liberal democracy among German party supporters. Notes: This figure is based on data from the ESS wave 6 (European Social Survey, 2012) and WVS waves 5, 6, and 7 (Haerpfer et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2014a, 2014b); party support is conceptualized as the party respondents voted for in the last general election (ESS) or an upcoming election (WVS; second ballot in both cases); for more information, see Appendix A of the Supplementary File.

Table 3. Linear regression results for German parties' emphasis on liberal democracy in election campaigns.

	All parties	All parties	Established parties	Established parties
Dissatisfied voters	-0.23*** (0.06)	-0.16 (0.09)	-0.29*** (0.07)	-0.11 (0.11)
Challenger	-4.25* (2.02)	0.73 (3.27)		
Challenger strength			-0.22 (0.14)	-0.20 (0.14)
Ecological (vs. liberals)		-19.38*** (2.80)		-17.42*** (2.77)
Socialist (vs. liberals)		-16.12*** (4.10)		-19.14*** (4.21)
Social democrats (vs. liberals)		-18.62*** (2.70)		-18.75*** (2.71)
Christian democrats (vs. liberals)		-5.06 (3.42)		-4.91 (3.44)
Conservatives (vs. liberals)		-27.33*** (6.05)		N.A.
Nationalists (vs. liberals)		-11.81* (5.68)		N.A.
Special issue (vs. liberals)		-17.01** (6.09)		N.A.
Previous GDP change	0.38 (0.34)	0.29 (0.32)	0.04 (0.37)	-0.11 (0.35)
Democratic experience	-0.05 (0.08)	0.01 (0.09)	-0.13 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.09)
National (vs. East)	3.44 (4.09)	1.65 (4.39)	6.38 (5.07)	3.93 (4.97)
West (vs. East)	-2.94 (3.27)	-4.02 (3.82)	0.18 (4.18)	-1.48 (4.26)
Democratic quality	-32.79 (54.29)	-37.54 (54.81)	-5.32 (60.89)	-50.67 (63.03)
Intercept	63.30 (45.57)	74.26 (48.09)	61.67 (53.57)	102.57 (54.41)
N	653	653	544	544
R ²	0.06	0.18	0.05	0.16
Adj. R ²	0.05	0.16	0.04	0.15

Notes: Linear regression results with clustered standard errors for parties in territories over time that are additionally corrected for heteroskedasticity across territorial party branches. Standard errors are shown in parentheses; significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; a list of parties included by party families is shown in Appendix B of the Supplementary File.

differences between conservative and nationalist parties, on the one hand, and liberal parties, on the other hand, are not significantly different from zero. While challengers, parties do not emphasize liberal democracy more than established parties do, and established parties do not react to changes in the strength of challenger parties by adapting their emphasis on liberal democracy. Thus, the regression provides no evidence that parties consider liberal democracy to be a valence issue.

In conclusion, how parties emphasize liberal democracy in election campaigns indicates that liberal democracy is a positional rather than a valence or mixed issue. While data on German citizens' position towards liberal democracy are scarce, available sources measuring the importance Germans attribute to liberal democracy suggest some small but meaningful differences between supporters of different parties. I find no evidence that liberal democracy is politicized by parties with challenger status more than by parties that have already governed at least once or that liberal democracy is a valence issue in the elections under study.

8. Discussion

The results presented in this study are robust in several ways. First and foremost, the results are not biased due to negative references to democracy. The share of negative references to democracy in all manifestos is considerably low, with only 0.06 percent of all democracy sentences using negative references to democracy (see Appendix C.4 in the Supplementary File for the measurement). Neither do parties speak negatively about democracy, nor do parties use negations of the term democracy such as “undemocratic.” Second, all the results remain stable for including territory fixed effects and clustered standard errors for parties over time and for excluding the artificial outlier Die Linke in Saxony-Anhalt in 1994 (see Tables 6 to 11 and Appendix F in the Supplementary File). Third, analyses in Appendix E (in the Supplementary File) show that parties also put forward social and direct democracy as positional issues in election campaigns. In contrast to liberal and direct democracy, social democracy is not put forward by liberals but by left-wing parties. Fourth, the results for the emphasis on liberal democracy are stable when the analysis is extended to sentences that do not contain the term “*demokrat*” (see Table 12 in Appendix F of the Supplementary File).

However, data on German citizens' attitudes towards democracy in general and liberal democracy specifically are far too scarce to make general arguments for larger time frames. Owing to the scarcity of data on German citizens, it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate possible changes in the quality of democracy issues over time. Potentially, parties change their positions due to factors other than those included in the regression analyses, and investigating trends would be of interest in itself. In addition, comparative studies could use more advanced techniques of computational text analysis, combined with hand coding, to develop comparative measures of party positions regarding different conceptions of democracy, making a better distinction between framing and position-taking.

9. Conclusion

Given the proposition that “the question whether a given problem poses a positional—or valence-issue is a matter to be settled empirically” (Stokes, 1963, p. 373), this article does not argue that democracy per se is a mixed issue in all polities or that conceptions of democracy are always positional issues. However, democracy per se and conceptions of democracy can be issues of different types in democratic multiparty competition, even in countries such as Germany and even during periods without actual attempts at democratic backsliding, such as between 1977 and 2017. While democracy per se, irrespective of its connotation, is often put forward by left-wing parties and challenger parties, all else being equal, liberal democracy is clearly an issue put forward by liberal parties more often than by any other party family. In combination with the data on citizens' attitudes towards democracy per se and liberal democracy, this suggests that democracy per se has been a mixed issue and that liberal democracy has been a positional issue in Germany during the period under study.

Establishing whether democracy per se and different conceptions of democracy are issues of party competition and, if so, what types of issues they are, will help us address many important questions concerning democratic stability. Just as we use theories surrounding party competition to study the potential effects of a change in government on social policies, we should increasingly use theories of party competition to study how democratic institutions themselves become politicized in democratic elections and what consequences this has for the stability of liberal democracies worldwide. Since the way parties speak about democracy in election campaigns is likely to affect citizens (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002), it helps us understand how much parties and election campaigns, such as those put forward by Donald Trump's Republicans and Victor Orbán's Fidesz, contribute to destabilizing liberal democracies.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the support of André Kaiser, Sven-Oliver Proksch, and Nils-Christian Bormann, as well as the constructive feedback from several anonymous reviewers. This manuscript has been presented in different versions on several occasions, where I received helpful feedback from Martin Elff, Zac Greene, the participants of the research seminar at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics, University of Cologne, and the participants of the Comparative Politics & Political Economy Research Workshop, University of Konstanz. Thank you.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The replication material is available upon request from the author or at: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/dzni2riesyhg4h3ro817c/replication-material_party-competition-over-democracy.zip?rlkey=xbv1mkdhtqdfwaj3jb4bq7jkr&e=1&dl=0

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

References

- Adams, J., Merrill, S., & Zur, R. (2020). The spatial-voting model. In L. Curini & R. Franzese (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of research methods in political science and international relations* (pp. 205–223). Sage Publications.
- Alekseev, A. (2024). The (changing) concept of democracy in (transforming) European populist radical right discourses: The case of Polish Law and Justice. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2360635>
- Allen, N., & Mirwaldt, K. (2010). Democracy-speak: Party manifestos and democratic values in Britain, France and Germany. *West European Politics*, 33(4), 870–893. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402381003794662>
- Baker, K. L., Dalton, R. J., & Hildebrandt, K. (1981). *Germany transformed: Political culture and the new politics*. Harvard University Press.
- Benoit, K., Bräuninger, T., & Debus, M. (2009). Challenges for estimating policy preferences: Announcing an open access archive of political documents. *German Politics*, 18(3), 441–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644000903055856>
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>

- Blick, A., & Salter, B. (2021). Divided culture and constitutional tensions: Brexit and the collision of direct and representative democracy. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 74(3), 617–638. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsz049>
- Bobba, G., & McDonnell, D. (2016). Different types of right-wing populist discourse in government and opposition: The case of Italy. *South European Society and Politics*, 21(3), 281–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2016.1211239>
- Bowler, S., Denmark, D., Donovan, T., & McDonnell, D. (2017). Right-wing populist party supporters: Dissatisfied but not direct democrats. *European Journal of Political Research*, 56(1), 70–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12166>
- Carey, J., Clayton, K., Helmke, G., Nyhan, B., Sanders, M., & Stokes, S. (2022). Who will defend democracy? Evaluating tradeoffs in candidate support among partisan donors and voters. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 32(1), 230–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2020.1790577>
- Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C., Lindberg, S., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Bernhard, M., Fish, M., Glynn, A., Hicken, A., Luhrmann, A., Marquardt, K., McMann, K., Paxton, P., Pemstein, D., Seim, B., Sigman, R., Skaaning, S., Staton, J., . . . Ziblatt, D. (2020a). *V-Dem Codebook v10*. V-Dem Project.
- Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C., Lindberg, S., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Bernhard, M., Fish, M., Glynn, A., Hicken, A., Luhrmann, A., Marquardt, K., McMann, K., Paxton, P., Pemstein, D., Seim, B., Sigman, R., Skaaning, S., Staton, J., . . . Ziblatt, D. (2020b). *V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v10* [Data set]. V-Dem Project. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20>
- Curini, L. (2017). *Political corruption and valence issues. Corruption, ideology, and populism. The rise of valence political campaigning*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale University Press.
- De Sio, L., & Weber, T. (2014). Issue yield: A model of party strategy in multidimensional space. *American Political Science Review*, 108(4), 870–885. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000379>
- De Vries, C. E., & Hobolt, S. B. (2020). *Political entrepreneurs*. Princeton University Press.
- Döring, H., & Manow, P. (2019). *Parliaments and governments database (parlgov): Information on parties, elections and cabinets in modern democracies: Development version* [Data set]. ParlGov Project.
- Drinóczi, T., & Bień-Kacała, A. (2019). Illiberal constitutionalism: The case of Hungary and Poland. *German Law Journal*, 20(8), 1140–1166. <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.83>
- Engler, S., Gessler, T., Abou-Chadi, T., & Leemann, L. (2023). Democracy challenged: How parties politicize different democratic principles. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30(10), 1961–1983. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2099956>
- European Social Survey. (2012). *European social survey round 6 data (2012). data file edition 2.4* [Data set]. <https://ess.sikt.no/en/datafile/450fa78e-68ab-493f-b169-dbc7ab8ffec2/80?tab=0>
- European Values Study. (2015). *European values study longitudinal data file 1981–2008 (evs 1981–2008)* [Data set]. <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13486>
- Farrell, D., & Schmitt-Beck, R. (2002). *Do political campaigns matter? Campaign effects in elections and referendums*. Routledge.
- Forschungsgruppe Wahlen. (2020). *Politbarometer 1977–2018 (Partielle Kumulation)* [Data set]. GESIS, Köln. ZA2391 Datenfile Version 15.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14206>
- Gabriel, O. W. (2007). Bürger und Demokratie im vereinigten Deutschland. *Politische Vierteljahreszeitschrift*, 48(3), 540–552. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-007-0090-x>
- Gessler, T. (2019). *Political conflict on immigration and democracy in Europe* [Unpublished PhD dissertation]. European University Institute.
- Gidengil, E., Stolle, D., & Bergeron-Boutin, O. (2022). The partisan nature of support for democratic backsliding:

- A comparative perspective. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(4), 901–929. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12502>
- Graham, M. H., & Svobik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 392–409. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>
- Green, J. (2007). When voters and parties agree: Valence issues and party competition. *Political Studies*, 55(3), 629–655. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00671.x>
- Grzebalska, W., & Pető, A. (2018). The gendered modus operandi of the illiberal transformation in Hungary and Poland. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68, 164–172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.12.001>
- Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., Lagos, M., Norris, P., Ponarin, E., & Puranen, B. (2022). *World values survey: Round seven—Country-pooled datafile version 6.0*. JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat.
- Inglehart, R., Haerpfer, C., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., Lagos, M., Norris, P., Ponarin, E., Puranen, B. (2014a). *World values survey: Round five—Country-pooled datafile version*. JD Systems Institute. <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV5.jsp>
- Inglehart, R., Haerpfer, C., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., Lagos, M., Norris, P., Ponarin, E., Puranen, B. (2014b). *World values survey: Round six—Country-pooled datafile version*. JD Systems Institute. <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>
- Kaftan, L. (2024). Lip service to liberal democracy in Western Europe? *European Political Science Review*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773924000079>
- Kornai, J. (2015). Hungary's U-turn: Retreating from democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(3), 34–48. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0046>
- Kwiatkowska, A., Muliavka, V., & Plisiecki, H. (2022). Hollowed or redefined? Changing visions of democracy in the political discourse of Law and Justice. *Democratization*, 30(3), 458–478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2152439>
- Lewandowski, J., Merz, N., Regel, S., Lehmann, P., & Muscat, P. (2018). *ManifestoR*. Manifesto Project. <https://rdr.io/cran/manifestoR>
- Pemstein, D., Marquardt, K. L., Tzelgov, E., Wang, Y. T., Medzihorsky, J., Krusell, J., Miri, F., & von Römer, J. (2020). *The V-Dem measurement model: Latent variable analysis for cross-national and cross-temporal expert-coded data* (Working No. 21). University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute.
- Pickel, S. (2016). Konzepte und verständnisse von demokratie in ost-und westeuropa. In S. Schubert & A. Weiß (Eds.), *„Demokratie“ jenseits des Westens* (pp. 318–342). Routledge.
- Pickel, S., & Pickel, G. (2023). The wall in the mind—Revisited stable differences in the political cultures of Western and Eastern Germany. *German Politics*, 32(1), 20–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2022.2072488>
- Rohrschneider, R., & Whitefield, S. (2019). Critical parties: How parties evaluate the performance of democracies. *British Journal of Political Science*, 49(1), 355–379. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000545>
- Röth, L., Saldivia Gonzatti, D., Kaftan, L., & Kaiser, A. (2024). Studying multi-level systems with cross-level data. *British Journal of Political Science*.
- Sadurski, W. (2018). *How democracy dies (in Poland): A case study of anti-constitutional populist backsliding* (Research paper No. 18/01). Sydney Law School. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3103491>
- Sadurski, W. (2019). Polish constitutional tribunal under PiS: From an activist court, to a paralysed tribunal, to a governmental enabler. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 11(1), 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-018-0078-1>

- Scarrow, S. E. (1997). Party competition and institutional change. *Party Politics*, 3(4), 451–472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068897003004001>
- Scarrow, S. E. (1999). Parties and the expansion of direct democracy: Who benefits? *Party Politics*, 5(3), 341–362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068899005003005>
- Simonovits, G., McCoy, J., & Littvay, L. (2022). Democratic hypocrisy and out-group threat: Explaining citizen support for democratic erosion. *The Journal of Politics*, 84(3), 1806–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1086/719009>
- Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder. (2006). Bruttoinlandsprodukt—preisbereinigt, verkettet—1970 bis 1991 (Wirtschaftswachstum). <https://www.statistik-bw.de>
- Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder. (2019). *Bruttoinlandsprodukt—presbereinigt, verkettet—1991 bis 2018 (Wirtschaftswachstum) (wz 2008)*. <https://www.statistik-bw.de>
- Stokes, D. E. (1963). Spatial models of party competition. *The American Political Science Review*, 57(2), 368–377. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952828>
- Volkens, A., Krause, W., Lehmann, P., Matthieß, T., Merz, N., Regel, S., & Weßels, B. (2019). *Manifesto project dataset* [Data set]. Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung.
- Weil, F. D. (1987). Cohorts, regimes, and the legitimation of democracy: West Germany Since 1945. *American Sociological Review*, 52(3), 308–324. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095352>
- Wolfrum, E. (2006). *Die geglückte Demokratie. Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschlands von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. Klett-Cotta.

About the Author



Lea Kaftan is a postdoctoral researcher at GESIS—Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences in Cologne, Germany. Her research speaks about electoral politics, public opinion, and historical data, with a focus on democratic attitudes, party positions, and voter perceptions of parties. Methodologically, she is interested in survey experiments and recent advances in quantitative text analysis. She received her PhD from the University of Cologne in 2022 and has previously worked at Witten/Herdecke University.