

# Priming Potential Populists: Results from a Survey Experiment in the 2017 German Election

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## Abstract

Mainstream politicians' electoral success increasingly depends on their ability to win votes from at least some of the voters who are susceptible to populist appeals. To what extent can this particular group of citizens be primed with mainstream political messages? This article presents a theoretical framework that outlines the conditions under which mainstream primes may overcome these citizens' feeling of resentment toward the established elite and shift their vote intentions. I consider hypotheses about how the priming of performance, policies, strategic considerations, and uncertainty may affect these people's vote intentions. I test these hypotheses through survey experimentation on a targeted sample of 1,800 citizens with a high propensity for populism during the 2017 German election and find support for several of the hypotheses. The results shed

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light on the scope of priming effects, the political behavior of potential populist voters and the political prospects to reduce the appeal of populism.

Keywords: Priming, Survey Experiment, Populism, Political Knowledge

# Introduction

Can voters who are inclined to vote for populist parties be primed with mainstream political messages? A large literature in political science has found evidence for the ability of the media, parties and politicians to prime citizens, that is, to influence their political choices by talking about and thus, raising the salience of some topics while ignoring others (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Johnston et al. 1992; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Lenz 2012). It is not clear, however, to what extent previous insights into priming of average voters apply to the group of voters that is least likely to be swayed by mainstream arguments: potential voters for populist parties in an election campaign in which populist arguments are highly salient. Given these citizens' resentment toward the current political elite (Cramer 2016), any blunt attempt to prime them with non-populist messages is likely not to work or might even backfire by making them not less, but even more supportive of populist candidates (cf. Chong and Druckman 2007, 2010). Yet it is this group of voters that mainstream politicians increasingly need to target in order to win elections in many established democracies today.

In this article, I explore to which extent non-populist political messages are able to shift the vote intention of voters who are susceptible to right-wing populist appeals. I propose a theoretical framework that builds on existing theories of voting behavior that conceive voters as performance-oriented (Duch and Stevenson 2008), strategic (Downs 1957) and self-interested actors (Meltzer and Richard 1981), but that puts the *psychology* of potential populist voters centre-stage. I theorize that by taking these voters' concerns - such as their resentment toward established political elites, their feeling of increasing uncertainty and of not getting their fair share of the economic pie (Cramer 2016; Mudde 2007) - seriously, existing theories of voting behavior can help us design mainstream political messages that appeal to this group of voters.

I test these expectations through survey experimentation during a real-world election campaign in which populist messages were highly salient on a large pool of roughly 1,800 voting-age German citizens who were specifically selected for this study due to their high propensity to vote for a right-wing populist party. The findings of this study have broad implications for our understanding of populist voters, priming, and election campaigns. First, my study bridges

the two literatures on political behavior and right-wing populism to further our understanding on the group of voters who lean toward populist parties and politicians. Even under particularly unfavorable conditions for mainstream primes, I find that some of them, especially those focusing on economic performance and political uncertainty, are effective with this group of voters and can sway their vote intentions. Second, and in line with previous research, my findings underline the crucial role of a populist voter’s level of political knowledge in moderating their resistance to mainstream primes. It is particularly those potential populist voters with less political knowledge whose support for populism decreases the most as a result of exposure to mainstream arguments. Finally, the article provides insights into the relative argumentative strength of different sorts of primes that challenges the dominant view in the literature, suggesting that under certain conditions and with certain audiences policy primes might be as effective as performance primes.

## Priming Potential Populist Voters

There is considerable evidence for *priming* of citizen political evaluations. By talking about certain issues and ignoring others, the media, parties and politicians can influence the issues to which citizens pay attention when making political choices (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Johnston et al. 1992). As a result, and in contrast to persuasion, which seeks to change citizens’ opinions, priming makes some considerations more accessible to citizens than others and doing so, changes the “standards that people use to make political evaluations” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 63). Priming has been found to be particularly powerful with “valence” judgements that focus citizen attention on the performance of the economy or on candidates’ personal characteristics (Lenz 2012; Vavreck 2009). Furthermore, the closely related literature on framing has shown that not only the amount of exposure to political messages, but also their argumentative strength and the timing of when people receive them matter: When citizens are exposed to competing frames under lab conditions outside of real-world election contexts, stronger frames and frames received later in time often trump weaker frames or the ones individuals were exposed to earlier (Chong and Druckman 2007, 2010).

However, previous studies on priming and framing effects have largely been restricted to either the average voter or to college students.<sup>1</sup> Yet the effectiveness of priming strategies, especially when combined with *mainstream* political messages, may be more limited with the group of voters *least susceptible* to these sorts of political appeals: the increasingly large number of citizens in established democracies who tend to distrust and feel abandoned by current political elites. These citizens frequently share a feeling of resentment towards mainstream politicians and perceive them as either unable or unwilling to solve the most urgent problems that they themselves and other people like them face today (Cramer 2016; Mudde 2007). As a consequence, they are likely to be more susceptible to the anti-establishment rhetoric and appeals of (often right-wing) populist parties and politicians and rather sceptical toward mainstream messages, especially if the latter too blatantly praise current elites and their policies. Thus, mainstream parties' ability to use standard non-populist primes to sway the vote of at least some of these citizens, while normatively desirable and increasingly important to win elections, seems limited.

Furthermore, the timing and especially whether competing populist frames are salient or not are likely to matter, too. All else equal, we expect that priming these potential populist voters with mainstream messages during and especially toward the end of a *real-world election campaign* will prove particularly difficult. Over the course of an election campaign these voters will have been exposed to many frames and counterframes - including both mainstream and populist ones - and party cues leaving little room for any new mainstream message to alter their vote choice late in the campaign (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2004; Kalla and Broockman 2018). This is particularly likely to be true for many established democracies these days where major events, such as the economic repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis and, above all, the influx of Syrian and other refugees since 2015, have helped raise the salience of issues that benefit especially right-wing populists and their anti-immigrant policy agendas.

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<sup>1</sup>This is true both for studies that analyze the effectiveness of mainstream political appeals (Chong and Druckman 2007, 2010; Lenz 2012) and those that rather focus on non-mainstream (e.g. racial) ones (Huber and Lapinski 2006; Mendelberg 1997).

## Performance, Policies, and Uncertainty

Despite these limitations to the ability to prime voters susceptible to populist appeals with mainstream messages, I argue that carefully crafted non-populist primes may shift these people's vote away from populists and toward mainstream parties. Grounded in existing theories of voting behavior, I present a theory of priming that specifically focuses on this group of voters and that outlines the conditions under which we would expect these citizens to be swayed by non-populist messages. Based on this theory, even voters sceptical toward current political elites may be primed through a variety of mainstream political messages, including both performance and policy primes as well as primes that appeal to strategic electoral considerations and those that address political uncertainty.

In line with a long literature on economic voting (e.g. Duch and Stevenson 2008; Powell and Whitten 1993), I assume that voters inclined to vote for populist parties care about the performance of the economy. Just like any other voter, they want their country's economy to do well and evaluate incumbent politicians accordingly. As a consequence and despite their fundamental dissatisfaction with some of the government's policies (e.g. on immigration), they will be responsive to primes that highlight the current state of the national economy (cf. Alt, Lassen and Marshall 2016; Lenz 2012; Vavreck 2009). They are expected to reward the incumbent party or, in the case of coalition governments, the party of the incumbent prime minister if the economy is doing well and to punish them if this is not the case. Thus, priming good economic performance is likely to increase their support for the incumbent whereas highlighting economic difficulties will decrease it. Applying this to a national context where the economy is doing well, this leads us to:

***Hypothesis 1 (Economic Voting):*** Priming of the good economic situation in a country makes voters who are susceptible to populist appeals

- a) less likely to vote for the right-wing populist party and
- b) more likely to vote for the party of the incumbent prime minister or chancellor.

However, voters who turn to populist parties do not only care about valence issues like economic performance, but they are also strategic and pursue specific goals with their vote (Downs 1957; Cox 1997). Given their general level of dissatisfaction with the established

elite, they may use their vote either to try to replace the incumbent parties or politicians by some “outsider” or, if this is not possible, cast a protest vote in order to send a signal to incumbents (Mudde 2007, 226-229). Yet in some situations, these two strategies may be in conflict with each other. For example, many of these voters share a feeling that the current political elite builds a sort of cartel in which politicians are primarily interested in clinging to political power and no longer offer true policy alternatives (cf. Katz and Mair 1995). This feeling tends to be particularly prevalent in the context of a grand coalition government where we lack a strong opposition in parliament and thus, any plausible challenger to the incumbent government. In such a situation, many of these voters may be inclined to cast a protest vote and support a populist party (Kriesi 1999, 419-420). However, to the extent that such a protest vote makes a grand coalition the only viable governing coalition among mainstream parties, it often entails the continuation of the very grand coalition that these voters despise. In this context, priming these voters about their option to cast their vote strategically not for their preferred (i.e. populist) party, but against the continuation of the grand coalition might sway some of these voters. Based on these assumptions, we formulate the following:

***Hypothesis 2 (Strategic Voting):*** Priming the strategic aspect of their vote and informing them about how to use it to reduce the electoral chances of a future grand coalition will make voters who are susceptible to populist appeals

- a) less likely to vote for the right-wing populist party and
- b) more likely to vote for the mainstream opposition parties who are potential future coalition partners outside of a grand coalition.

Voters may support politicians or political parties not so much for their past economic performance in office or because they are attracted by their policy promises (Lenz 2012), but also because they expect from them a reduction in political and economic uncertainty (cf. Jacobs and Matthews 2017). This might be particularly true for voters who lean toward (right-wing) populist parties. These people often share the feeling that due to macro-level developments such as globalization, the recent surge in mass immigration or economic and political crises, things are getting worse for them (Cramer 2016; Mudde 2007). This might make them feel insecure and vulnerable, and reduce their opposition to mainstream politicians

who promise to credibly reduce uncertainty from international economic and political risks (cf. Jacobs and Matthews 2017). Thus, priming uncertainty and emphasizing the importance of leadership characteristics might make them more likely to vote for the incumbent and her party, especially if the incumbent is generally perceived to be a capable leader with strong leadership skills. So we can state:

***Hypothesis 3 (Uncertainty):*** Priming of political uncertainty and importance of leadership characteristics makes voters who are susceptible to populist appeals

- a) less likely to vote for the right-wing populist party and
- b) more likely to vote for the party of incumbent prime minister or chancellor.

Finally, voters dissatisfied with mainstream politicians are likely to care not only about performance, but also about policies. In many cases it is these citizens' very disagreement with how politicians have handled certain issues - from immigration to Eurozone financial bailouts - that has pushed them to consider voting for populist alternatives in the first place. A long line of research in political science going back to (Meltzer and Richard 1981)'s seminal article starts from the assumption that citizens' self-interest shapes their attitudes toward economic redistribution and their vote choice. Voters leaning toward populist parties are likely to be no different in this respect. What is more, many of them have the feeling of not getting the share of the economic pie that they deserve and that their personal financial concerns are often ignored by mainstream politicians (Cramer 2016). Therefore, I expect that explicitly addressing the issue of social inequality and supporting policies that aim at effectively reducing the gap between rich and poor will allow mainstream left-wing parties to win back some of these alienated voters (cf. Matthews 2017). This leads to:

***Hypothesis 4 (Social Inequality):*** Priming of social inequality combined with information about the main left-wing party's policy positions and their main competitors' positions on this issue make voters who are susceptible to populist appeals

- a) less likely to vote for the right-wing populist party and
- b) more likely to vote for the main left-wing party strongly supporting redistributive policies.

Table 1 applies the four treatments to the German context and summarizes the expected effects from each of them on the electoral support for different German political parties: the

Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU) of incumbent chancellor Angela Merkel, the main left-wing Social Democratic Party (SPD), the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and the two mainstream opposition parties, the Liberals (FDP) and the Greens.

Table 1: Expected Effect on Electoral Support

	(1) AfD Populist	(2) CDU/CSU Incumbent	(3) SPD Left-Wing	(4) FDP/Greens Opposition
Economic Performance	–	+		
Strategic Voting	–			+
Uncertainty	–	+		
Social Inequality	–		+	

– : decreased support; + : increased support; AfD: far-right populist party; CDU/CSU: centre-right Christian Democrats/Christian Social Union (party of incumbent chancellor); SPD: centre-left Social Democrats (coalition partner in grand coalition); FDP: Liberals; empty cells: no predictions from theoretical model.

## The Role of Political Knowledge

The effects of the previously discussed treatments are expected to be moderated by a voter’s level of political knowledge.<sup>2</sup> In order for a new message to shift a person’s vote intention, it both needs to be received and accepted by this person. In other words, new information needs both to be available and accessible to the voter in order for it to shift her opinions (Zaller 1992). While *availability* of new information is less of a concern in the context of a survey experimental intervention where both less and more knowledgeable respondents receive the same pieces of information, there will be differences between these two groups with respect to the *accessibility* of this information, that is, with how they process this information (see also Chong and Druckman 2007, 2010). Following Zaller (1992), I expect that more knowledgeable voters with an inclination toward right-wing populism will be more likely to resist mainstream primes that try to shift their vote away from these parties and toward non-populist parties. Due to their higher level of political attentiveness, these voters will already be aware of

<sup>2</sup>The discussion of the moderating effect of political knowledge is not part of the registered pre-analysis plan.

arguments both in favor and against different political parties and thus, their vote intention is less likely to be moved by a single prime in a survey. Less knowledgeable voters, on the other hand, will lack the contextual knowledge necessary to evaluate and resist the information conveyed in the treatment messages and as a result, be more likely to change their vote. I thus propose the following:

***Hypothesis 5 (Political Knowledge):*** Any treatment effect from Hypotheses 1 to 4 is expected to be larger in absolute size for less knowledgeable than for more knowledgeable voters.

I turn next to a survey experiment conducted during the 2017 German federal election to test these hypotheses.

## Data and Methods

### Data

The survey experiment was specifically designed to sample a large group of voters who are susceptible to populist appeals in the context of a real-world election campaign where populist primes were prevalent. It is on this group of voters that is least likely to be swayed by non-populist messages that I will test the above hypotheses.

**Campaign Context.** I conducted the survey experiment shortly before the 2017 German federal election. This was the first federal election after Germany had seen a large influx of mostly Syrian refugees in 2015 and 2016, with a peak of 890,000 asylum seekers registering with German authorities in 2015 alone.<sup>3</sup> This influx of refugees in combination with reports in German media about crimes committed by groups of young men from mostly North African countries in several German cities led to a sharp increase in support for the anti-immigrant populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in opinion polls and state elections across Germany in 2016 and 2017. In this context I fielded the survey between September 7 and September 15, 2017, that is, shortly before the German federal election held on September

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<sup>3</sup>Numbers are from the Office of Migrants and Refugees (BAMF), Germany.

24, 2017 and thus, in the peak of the election campaign.<sup>4</sup> The large majority of respondents (77%) was surveyed after September 11, 2017, i.e. less than two weeks before election day. As a result, most respondents in the survey will have been extensively exposed to real-world campaign messages of the 2017 German federal election by the time they take the survey. Most importantly, the AfD party heavily criticized the incumbent government and German chancellor Angela Merkel for their immigration policies during the campaign, thus priming the issue of immigration in this election.

**Sampling procedure.** Participants were recruited by the survey firm YouGov. In order to select a pool of people with a high propensity to vote for the AfD party, we used a pre-screening question that asked respondents about their immigration attitudes and retained only those respondents from the YouGov online panel with the most extreme anti-immigration attitudes for the survey experimentation. The pre-screening question is a slightly adapted standard item from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) tapping respondents' position on the libertarian-authoritarian value dimension. It reads as follows (English translation): "Do you think that laws on immigration should be more liberal or more restrictive?"<sup>5</sup> Respondents indicate their support or opposition to this statement on an 11-point scale where higher values correspond to a more anti-immigration attitude. Almost all of the respondents in the sample (1,664 out of 1,786) fall into the highest (i.e. most anti-immigration) category on this variable.

Using respondents' anti-immigration attitudes as a proxy for their susceptibility to vote for populist parties has several advantages over alternative approaches. Especially in the German context where the recent surge in support for the populist AfD is directly linked to the salience of the immigration issue, focusing on immigration attitudes is probably the best way to tap respondents' *potential* to vote for populist parties. Consistent with this assumption, data from the GLES show that in the fall of 2017 anti-immigration attitudes among German voters

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<sup>4</sup>YouGov Deutschland administered the survey and I did not have access to any of the survey data before its official pre-registration on EGAP.

<sup>5</sup>"Sind Sie der Meinung, die Zuzugsmoeglichkeiten fuer Auslaender sollten eher erleichtert oder eher eingeschraenkt werden?" To the extent that the pre-screening question primes the issue of immigration in respondents' minds, the results in this study will represent a rather conservative estimate of the effect of non-populist messages on these voters.

are highly predictive of AfD vote in that election.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, asking respondents in the pre-screening question directly about their attitude toward the AfD would likely have restricted the pool to the narrow group of hard-core AfD partisans. Furthermore, asking respondents about their partisanship shortly before the measurement of the outcome variable, i.e. vote intention, might have suppressed any treatment effects from non-populist priming messages.

**Sample characteristics.** The final sample consists of 1,786 German voting-age citizens who are strongly opposed to further immigration to Germany. These respondents represent a random draw from the most anti-immigrant third (37 percent) of respondents within the YouGov panel for Germany. This sample is largely representative to the overall German population with respect to gender, age and education.<sup>7</sup> However, as intended by our pre-screening, the sample is *not* representative with respect to respondents' partisan affiliations. There is a clear over-representation of partisans for the right-wing populist AfD party, with most respondents (21%) in our sample identifying with this party.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, AfD vote intention among people in our sample is at 27%<sup>9</sup> and thus, substantially higher than the average support for this party in the German population, which was at around 10% at the time of the survey.

The survey itself is administered online. In contrast to other surveys like the GLES which are conducted by phone or personal interview, administering the survey online has the advantage that results are less affected by social desirability bias. I expect respondents to more truthfully answer the pre-screening question about their anti-immigration attitudes and express their vote intention for the right-wing populist AfD party when they fill in the survey at their own computer at home than if they were asked these questions in a direct conversation with an interviewer.

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<sup>6</sup>For example, AfD vote intention in the GLES pre-election survey is only 2.59 percent for those who score 8 and below on the 1 to 11 anti-immigration scale in the GLES while it is much higher, at 20.16 percent, for those who score 11 on this scale.

<sup>7</sup>There is a small under-representation of less educated people and, quite surprisingly, of very young people in the sample. The share of people aged 18-29 in our sample is 9% whereas their share is 14% in the overall population. Data on the German population are from the website of the German statistical office.

<sup>8</sup>Support for the two major mainstream parties, the CDU/CSU and the SPD, follows at 18% and 14% respectively. See summary statistics in Appendix for details.

<sup>9</sup>This number is calculated based solely on people in the control group.

## Dependent Variables

Four dichotomous variables measure respondents' vote intention for each of the following four parties or combinations of parties: the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, the center-right Christian Democratic Party (CDU/CSU), the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), and for the two mainstream opposition parties, the Liberals and the Greens (FDP/Greens), combined. For each of these variables, respondents are coded as 1 if they picked the respective party as their answer to the survey question "Which party would you vote for if there was a federal election this Sunday?"<sup>10</sup> and as 0 otherwise.

## Independent Variables

**Treatments.** The survey experiment has four treatments and all 1,786 participants were randomly assigned to either the control or one of the four treatment groups. The treatments correspond to hypotheses 1 to 4 that I specified in the theory section. In each case, a treatment consists of roughly two sentences that directly precede the question that taps a respondent's vote intention in the upcoming election and are displayed on the same screen as the vote intention question. The four treatments read as follows (English translation):<sup>11</sup>

***Economic performance:*** "The German economy is doing very well, with unemployment at a historic low. The upcoming election will shape Germany's economic prospects for the next years."

***Strategic voting:*** "The CDU/CSU is very likely to win the federal election and form the new government. Whoever wants political change has only one option: to make the FDP or the Greens as strong as possible in order to avoid another four years of a Grand Coalition."

***Uncertainty:*** "These are uncertain times and the world order is unstable. In times like these many think it is important for Germany to have an experienced leader."

***Social inequality:*** "In the upcoming election the SPD wants to make Germany fairer, provide more support to people who are struggling, and have the rich pay more in taxes. The

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<sup>10</sup>This question was asked in German and represents the standard survey item tapping respondents' vote intention that is used in election surveys in Germany. For the original German translation, see the Appendix.

<sup>11</sup>The German text of the treatments can be found in the Appendix.

CDU/CSU and the FDP oppose those changes. Thus, the outcome of the election is likely to have a direct impact on the extent of social inequality in Germany.”

Based on assignment status, I create four dichotomous variables, indicating whether a respondent received either of the four treatments.<sup>12</sup>

**Political Knowledge.** The survey includes five questions that tap different aspects of respondents’ political knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Two of the questions are about procedural aspects of the German electoral system: One of them is about the precise election threshold of valid votes that parties need to win in order to be allocated any seats in the national legislature (answer: 5 percent); the other asks respondents which of the two votes each voter has in the election is more important for the allocation of seats in parliament (answer: the second vote). The other three questions gauge the extent to which respondents are informed about the election campaign itself by asking them to name the party each of the lead candidates from three smaller parties (CSU, FDP, Greens) belongs to.<sup>14</sup> Based on the additive index of political knowledge from these questions ranging from 0 to 5 ( $\alpha = .72$ ), I created a knowledge dummy where respondents below the mean are coded as less politically knowledgeable and those above it as more politically knowledgeable.

**Control Variables.** The analysis includes a series of standard control variables that have been shown to influence citizens’ voting behavior. The most important control variable is *party identification*. To avoid any priming of partisanship and thus, confounding of our treatment effects, this item was not included in the survey. Instead, I used information that YouGov had previously collected about each respondent. A person’s party identification is part of the information that YouGov routinely collects from its panel members and which is automatically updated every 12 months. Using this information, I create six indicators for AfD, CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP/Greens, mainstream parties’ (i.e. CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, the Left) combined partisanship, or for those with no partisanship at all.

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<sup>12</sup>Two of my treatments, the strategic voting and the social inequality primes, do not only prime respondents, but they also contain informational components about the different political parties in the election.

<sup>13</sup>The section on political knowledge is not part of the pre-analysis plan.

<sup>14</sup>While the knowledge questions were asked after randomization, these questions are about factual knowledge. As a result, the knowledge variable is likely to be “a measure of pre-randomization conditions, and treatment assignment had no effect on measurement error” (Lin, Green and Coppock 2016, 16).

As socio-demographic control variables, I include indicators for gender, different age groups, region (East versus West Germany), levels of education (bottom tier, medium tier, top tier), income groups (including a dummy for respondents with missing income values), trade union membership, and most important topic (immigration, terrorism, crime). Finally, a dichotomous variable indicates if a respondent does not fall into the most extreme (i.e. restrictive) category of the pre-screening question about immigration attitudes, which is the case for 122 of our 1,786 respondents. With the exception of union membership and income, all control variables were measured before respondents were exposed to a treatment. In the case of union membership and income, I assume that responses to these factual questions are unaffected by the treatments. Following common practice in the literature, I treat missing values for trade union membership, party identification and most important topic as absence of these things and code them as 0.

## Methods

To test my hypotheses, I estimate the following OLS model<sup>15</sup>

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T1_i + \beta_2 T2_i + \beta_3 T3_i + \beta_4 T4_i + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where  $Y_i$  is a respondent's vote intention toward one of the parties (1) AfD, (2) CDU/CSU, (3) SPD or (4) FDP/Greens,<sup>16</sup>  $T1_i$  to  $T4_i$  are indicators for the four campaign message treatments of economic performance, strategic voting, uncertainty and social inequality primes respectively,  $X_i$  is a vector of covariates and  $i$  indexes individual respondents. I use one-tailed significance tests if I specified them in the pre-analysis plan (see Table 1 above). In all other

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<sup>15</sup>Unless explicitly stated otherwise, the analysis follows the study design that I pre-registered on EGAP, with two additions. First, in the pre-analysis plan I specified models that included a dummy variable to identify the 122 respondents that are less anti-immigrant than the rest of the sample. Based on my initial analyses, I found that these 122 citizens react differently to the four treatments than the other 1,664 respondents and therefore, added interaction terms between this dummy and the treatment variables. Second, the pre-analysis plan only explicitly breaks down the party identification variable for the model on AfD vote intention, but failed to do so for the models for the other political parties. I estimate models of the vote intention for the other parties analogously by: (1) including a party identification dummy for the party whose vote share a given model analyzes, (2) an AfD partisanship dummy and (3) a dummy for no partisan affiliation (reference category: partisanship for all other mainstream parties).

<sup>16</sup>FDP and Greens are treated here as a single party so as to capture support for mainstream opposition parties more generally.

cases, I adopt two-tailed significance tests. Based on the hypotheses, we would expect negative coefficients on all four treatments with AfD vote intention and positive coefficients on  $T1_i$  and  $T3_i$  with CDU/CSU vote intention,  $T4_i$  with the SPD and  $T2_i$  for the FDP and Greens. For the analysis on how political knowledge conditions the effect of the four treatments, I run new regressions where I add a political knowledge dummy and its interaction with each of the four treatments to the model.<sup>17</sup>

All models control for a respondent's answer to the pre-screening question about their immigration attitudes by including an indicator for those less opposed to immigration and interactions between this indicator and the four treatments.<sup>18</sup> This serves to avoid any confounding of our estimates by the 122 respondents who are less hostile to immigration and thus, are likely to respond differently to the treatments.

## Results

Table 2 presents the results of the survey experiment. It shows the effect of each of the four mainstream primes on the vote intention in the 2017 German federal election for people who are very strongly opposed to any further immigration to Germany and thus, susceptible to appeals from the anti-immigrant populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. The coefficients that are displayed in bold directly test the hypotheses that I specified above. Column 1 shows the effect of our four treatments on support for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. Based on these results, we can see that, contrary to my expectations, none of the four messages leads to a reduction in overall support for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party among this group of voters. All four coefficients are substantively small and indistinguishable from 0.

However, the situation looks different for the treatment effects that I anticipated to be positive, which are displayed in columns 2 to 4. Focusing exclusively on the four coefficients in bold which test my hypotheses, we can see that two of the four coefficients of primary interest are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  and in the expected direction: The coefficients

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<sup>17</sup>The model with the knowledge dummy and its interactions was not specified in the pre-analysis plan.

<sup>18</sup>These interactions are not included in the pre-analysis plan.

of 0.059 and 0.038 in column 2 suggest that priming respondents about the good performance of the German economy or appealing to their desire for less uncertainty both benefit chancellor Angela Merkel and her incumbent CDU/CSU and increase support for this party among anti-immigrant citizens by 5.9 and 3.8 percentage points respectively. On the other hand, there is no evidence that either the strategic voting or the social inequality prime work on these voters, with both coefficients being close to 0 and not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Based on these regression estimates, Figure 1 illustrates the effects of the treatments on mainstream parties graphically. For each of the three mainstream parties, it plots the predicted vote intention for the control group and to the left of it, the predicted vote share after exposure to one of the primes. We can see that the CDU/CSU vote share, which is relatively low in this sample with only about 14%, climbs to roughly 20% and 18% after exposure to economic performance and the uncertainty primes. The two treatments for the FDP/Greens and the SPD leave the overall vote intention for either party more or less unaffected at around 11% and 17% respectively.

All in all, the evidence supports the assumption that even citizens susceptible to AfD appeals are responsive to at least some non-populist campaign messages. However, exposure to these messages does not lead to an overall reduction in electoral support for the German right-wing populist party. Results in Table 2 do not provide support for any of the (a) variants of the four hypotheses that predict a decrease in the vote share for populist parties (H1a, H2a, H3a, H4a). Instead, what we see is a shift in vote intentions between mainstream parties: Increased popularity of the incumbent CDU/CSU primarily comes at the expense of small mainstream opposition parties like the liberal FDP and the Greens (see column 4 in Table 2). Evidence from Table 2 and Figure 1 clearly support our (b) variants of the economic voting and the uncertainty hypotheses (H1b, H3b) whereas there is little support for the strategic voting and the inequality hypotheses (H2b, H4b).<sup>19</sup> This may indicate that rather than reaching those hard-core populist voters who have already turned to the populist

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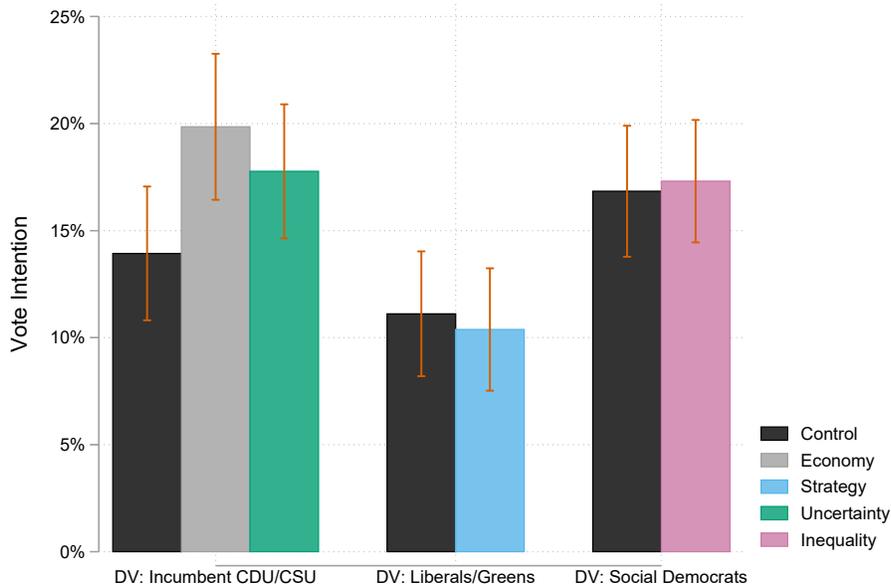
<sup>19</sup>However, there is some evidence in Table 2 that the strategic voting prime shifted votes from the SPD to the CDU/CSU. While I did not hypothesize such a shift above, it is consistent with the overall goal of this prime, which is to increase the vote share for a governing coalition among mainstream parties which does not include the SPD. However, coefficients are just above the conventional threshold of  $p=0.05$ .

Table 2: Vote Intention in 2017 German Federal Election

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	AfD	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP/Greens
Economic Voting	<b>-0.0085</b> (0.027)	<b>0.059</b> <sup>+++</sup> (0.024)	-0.015 (0.022)	-0.046 <sup>**</sup> (0.019)
Strategic Voting	<b>0.0014</b> (0.027)	0.044* (0.023)	-0.043* (0.022)	<b>-0.0073</b> (0.021)
Uncertainty	<b>0.0038</b> (0.027)	<b>0.038</b> <sup>++</sup> (0.023)	-0.014 (0.022)	-0.037* (0.019)
Social Inequality	<b>-0.000087</b> (0.027)	0.0052 (0.021)	<b>0.0047</b> (0.022)	-0.010 (0.020)
Constant	0.17 <sup>***</sup> (0.044)	0.018 (0.037)	0.066* (0.039)	0.090 <sup>***</sup> (0.034)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1786	1786	1786	1786
$R^2$	0.45	0.41	0.42	0.27

*Note:* Dependent variable is vote intention in 2017 German federal election for the party indicated at the top of each column. OLS regression with control variables: indicators for region (East vs. West), age group, gender, income group, education level, party identification, and most important topic (immigration, crime, terrorism). Models control for 122 respondents who are less anti-immigrant (indicator and interaction with treatments). Robust standard errors in parentheses. One-tailed significance tests are reported for directional hypotheses that were specified in preanalysis plan. Coefficients of primary interest for hypothesis tests are in bold. For one-tailed tests: +  $p < 0.1$ , ++  $p < 0.05$ , +++  $p < 0.01$ . For two-tailed tests: \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Figure 1: Share of Respondents Intending to Vote for Mainstream Parties, by Treatment Condition



Note: DV = dependent variable.

AfD party, the economic voting and the uncertainty primes primarily manage to win back dissatisfied voters who have defected to other mainstream parties.

A second observation from the results in Table 2 is that they seem to align well with Lenz (2012)’s previous findings about the superiority of performance primes over policy primes: Even with strongly anti-immigrant citizens, priming the economy - a valence issue - proves an effective means to win votes by the incumbent party whereas priming redistributive policy - a position issue - does apparently not manage to shift votes. However, as the next section shows, we will have to qualify this conclusion once we split the group of strongly anti-immigrant voters into different levels of political knowledge and analyze people with low and high political knowledge separately.

## Respondents’ Level of Political Knowledge

To examine the moderating effect of political knowledge, Table 3 shows results from models that interact each of the treatment variables with a political knowledge indicator.<sup>20</sup> Overall,

<sup>20</sup>The analysis on the moderating effect of political knowledge was not included in our pre-analysis plan.

there is some evidence for moderation by political knowledge. The evidence for moderation (Hypothesis 5) is strongest for the economic voting and the uncertainty primes in column 1. Each of these two treatments strongly reduces support for the right-wing populist AfD party among less knowledgeable respondents, by 8.9 and 9.9 percentage points respectively ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, consistent with my theoretical expectation about the greater resistance to primes by more knowledgeable voters, these two treatments are not effective at all in reducing AfD support among more knowledgeable voters. At 4.1 ( $= 13.0 - 8.9$ ) and 6.1 ( $= 16.0 - 9.9$ ) percentage points respectively, the effects are not only much smaller and no longer statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ ,<sup>21</sup> but they have also changed in direction, suggesting that these two treatments would make more knowledgeable voters rather more - and not less - likely to vote for the populist AfD party in an election. As the interaction terms for these two treatments show, this difference in treatment effects between respondents with low and high political knowledge is statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .<sup>22</sup> Figure 2 plots the predicted vote intention for the populist AfD party for these two treatments for both knowledge groups. We can see that AfD support drops from 29% to roughly 20% and 19% after exposure to the economy and inequality primes among the less knowledgeable while support among the more knowledgeable stays the same or possibly even slightly increases.<sup>23</sup>

As for the other treatments, evidence for moderation by political knowledge is less clear. A cursory look at the coefficients in Table 3 seems to suggest that treatment effects for low knowledge respondents in my sample tend to be larger in absolute terms, but these differences fail to be statistically significant at conventional levels.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the results from Table 3 should lead us to reconsider hypotheses H1a, H2a, H3a and H4a. At least for the less knowledgeable voters in my sample, there is compelling evidence that both priming economic performance (H1a) and social inequality (H4a) strongly reduce

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<sup>21</sup>The effect of the inequality prime has a  $p = 0.071$ .

<sup>22</sup>While substantively similar to the findings presented here, the effects for the economic voting prime are no longer statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  once we replace the knowledge dummy with a continuous knowledge variables. For results with this alternative knowledge measure, see the Appendix.

<sup>23</sup>While not statistically significant, the small *increase* in support for the AfD is consistent with Chong and Druckman (2007) and Chong and Druckman (2010)'s finding that priming motivated respondents frequently backfires and may lead to an effect that is the opposite of what was intended with the initial prime.

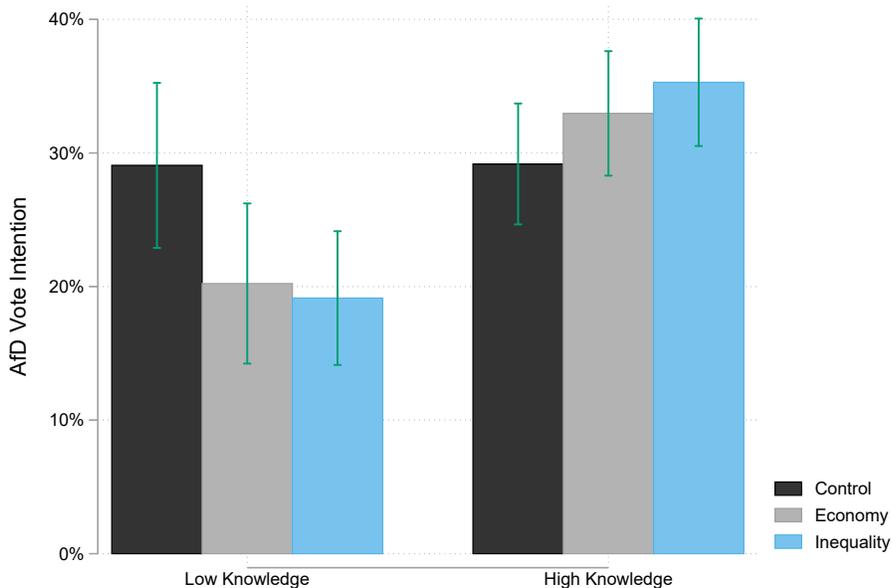
<sup>24</sup>The one notable exception is the economic voting prime and CDU/CSU vote intention in column 2.

Table 3: 2017 Vote Intention by Level of Political Knowledge

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	AfD	CDU	SPD	FDP/Greens
Economic Voting	<b>-0.089**</b> (0.044)	<b>0.023</b> (0.035)	0.023 (0.038)	-0.059** (0.028)
Strategic Voting	<b>-0.042</b> (0.041)	0.067** (0.034)	-0.037 (0.036)	<b>-0.013</b> (0.032)
Uncertainty	<b>-0.032</b> (0.045)	<b>0.056</b> (0.037)	-0.0019 (0.038)	-0.033 (0.029)
Social Inequality	<b>-0.099**</b> (0.040)	0.0093 (0.032)	<b>0.050</b> (0.039)	0.0082 (0.033)
Knowledge	0.0010 (0.039)	-0.0024 (0.034)	0.033 (0.032)	0.0056 (0.030)
Economy*Knowledge	<b>0.13**</b> (0.054)	<b>0.057</b> (0.047)	-0.061 (0.045)	0.021 (0.038)
Strategy*Knowledge	<b>0.075</b> (0.053)	-0.041 (0.045)	-0.0068 (0.044)	<b>0.0100</b> (0.041)
Uncertainty*Knowledge	<b>0.057</b> (0.053)	<b>-0.027</b> (0.045)	-0.019 (0.045)	-0.0057 (0.038)
Inequality*Knowledge	<b>0.16***</b> (0.050)	-0.0065 (0.041)	<b>-0.072</b> (0.045)	-0.029 (0.041)
Constant	0.20*** (0.048)	0.016 (0.039)	0.048 (0.045)	0.087** (0.037)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1786	1786	1786	1786
$R^2$	0.46	0.41	0.42	0.27

*Note:* Dependent variable is vote intention in 2017 German federal election for the party indicated at the top of each column. OLS regression with control variables: indicators for region (East vs. West), age group, gender, income group, education level, party identification, and most important topic (immigration, crime, terrorism). Models control for 122 of the 1,786 respondents who are less anti-immigrant (indicator and interaction with treatments). Robust standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients of primary interest for hypothesis tests are in bold. \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Figure 2: Share of Respondents Intending to Vote for the AfD, by Political Knowledge and Treatment Condition



support for the populist AfD party by 8.9 and 9.9 percentage points each, practically cutting support for this party by a third among those most likely to vote for this party.

## Conclusion

This article examines the power of priming effects in a context where we would expect them the least: among voters who are susceptible to populist appeals in a context where they are likely to have previously been heavily primed by real-world populist messages. The evidence from my survey experiment suggests that even this group of voters is responsive to some of the primes that I tested. As predicted by my theoretical framework, being able to shift these voters' attention to performance-related issues - in particular, the economy and leadership skills of the incumbent prime minister or chancellor - clearly benefits the incumbent party and may help them win elections (Hypotheses H1b and H3b). However, contrary to my expectations, this increased support for the incumbent does not come at the expense of the right-wing populist challenger, but instead seems to shift votes away from minor mainstream opposition parties toward the party of the incumbent head of government. Thus, while I

clearly find evidence of priming effects among potential populist voters, their overall support for right-wing populist parties is unaffected by my primes (Hypotheses H1a, H2a, H3a, H4a).

I find that part of the reason for these null-findings is the moderating effect of political knowledge.<sup>25</sup> While both priming valence and position issues strongly reduces support for a populist party among the less politically knowledgeable - as expected by Hypotheses H1a, H4a -, it has no effect - or possibly even backfires - for more knowledgeable voters.

In uncovering these effects, the study extends our understanding of the scope of priming effects to a group of voters that has hitherto received rather scant attention: voters leaning toward (right-wing) populist parties. Even in an extremely unfavorable context where these citizens are exposed to competing populist frames, it is possible to sway their vote with mainstream messages. However, there is not one single strategy that works with all potential populist voters. For mainstream parties, this means that they have to decide what strategy they want to pursue in an election and then, chose the appropriate priming strategy accordingly. While my results suggest that priming performance and performance-related traits of the incumbent are successful electoral strategies, politicians trying to target specific groups of voters (e.g. potential populist voters with little political knowledge) might be better off priming citizens' policy considerations. Thus, the choice of the ideal priming strategy for potential populist voters depends both on the specific goals of politicians and on the target audience of their primes. Preliminary evidence suggests that strategies that are not chosen wisely might not only be ineffective, but potentially even backfire and harm a party's electoral success.

However, many questions remain for future research to consider. First, how do the findings from this study from a multi-party context travel to countries with just two major parties? Given that a significant shift in votes happened among mainstream parties, it is not clear to what extent priming economic performance and uncertainty are equally powerful strategies in a two-party context. Second, future research could build on the insights from this study to more systematically test the respective strengths and weaknesses of performance versus policy primes with potential populist voters and how each is moderated by respondents' level

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<sup>25</sup>This aspect of my theoretical framework is not part of the registered pre-analysis plan.

of political knowledge. This research, for example, could include a more systematic analysis of the conditions under which primes may backfire with some of these voters.

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# Appendix

## Question Wording of Treatments (English Translation)

A. [Control:] Which party would you vote for if there was a federal election this Sunday?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, other party, dont know/no answer (DK/NA)

B. [Treatment 1 (economic voting):] The German economy is doing very well, with unemployment at a historic low. The upcoming election will shape Germanys economic prospects for the next years. Which party would you vote for if there was a federal election this Sunday?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, other party, DK/NA

C. [Treatment 2 (strategic voting):] The CDU/CSU is very likely to win the federal election and form the new government. Whoever wants political change has only one option: to make the FDP or the Greens as strong as possible in order to avoid another four years of a Grand Coalition. Which party would you vote for if there was a federal election this Sunday?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, other party, DK/NA

D. [Treatment 3 (uncertainty/leadership characteristics):] These are uncertain times and the world order is unstable. In times like these many think it is important for Germany to have an experienced leader. Which party would you vote for if there was a federal election this Sunday?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, other party, DK/NA

E. [Treatment 4 (social inequality):] In the upcoming election the SPD wants to make Germany fairer, provide more support to people who are struggling, and have the rich pay more in taxes. The CDU/CSU and the FDP oppose those changes. Thus, the outcome of the election is likely to have a direct impact on the extent of social inequality in Germany. Which party would you vote for if there was a federal election this Sunday?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, other party, DK/NA

## Question Wording of Treatments in Survey (German Original)

A. [Control:] Welche Partei wuerden Sie waehlen, wenn am kommenden Sonntag Bundestagswahl waere?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, Sonstige, weiss nicht/keine Angabe

B. [Treatment 1 (economic voting):] Der deutschen Wirtschaft geht es momentan sehr gut und die Arbeitslosigkeit ist auf einem historischen Tiefstand. Der Ausgang der Bundestagswahl wird Deutschlands wirtschaftliche Zukunft fuer die naechsten Jahre entscheidend mitpraegen. Welche Partei wuerden Sie waehlen, wenn am kommenden Sonntag Bundestagswahl waere?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, Sonstige, weiss nicht/keine Angabe

C. [Treatment 2 (strategic voting):] Die CDU/CSU wird sehr wahrscheinlich als staerkste Partei aus der Bundestagswahl hervorgehen und die neue Regierung bilden. Wer einen politischen Wechsel moechte, hat im Prinzip nur eine Option: die FDP bzw. die Gruenen so stark wie moeglich zu machen, um weitere vier Jahre einer Groen Koalition zu verhindern. Welche Partei wuerden Sie waehlen, wenn am kommenden Sonntag Bundestagswahl waere?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, Sonstige, weiss nicht/keine Angabe

D. [Treatment 3 (uncertainty/leadership characteristics):] Wir leben in unsicheren Zeiten und die Weltordnung ist instabil. In Zeiten wie diesen ist vielen wichtig, dass Deutschland von einer Person mit weltpolitischer Erfahrung regiert wird. Welche Partei wuerden Sie waehlen, wenn am kommenden Sonntag Bundestagswahl waere?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, Sonstige, weiss nicht/keine Angabe

E. [Treatment 4 (social inequality):] Die SPD verspricht, Deutschland gerechter zu machen, Beduerftige staerker zu unterstuetzen und die Reichen staerker zur Kasse zu bitten. Die CDU/CSU und die FDP lehnen diese Aenderungen ab. Der Ausgang der Bundestagswahl wird also direkten Einfluss auf das Ausmass sozialer Ungleichheit in Deutschland haben. Welche Partei wuerden Sie waehlen, wenn am kommenden Sonntag Bundestagswahl waere?

CDU/CSU, SPD, Gruene, FDP, Die Linke, AfD, Sonstige, weiss nicht/keine Angabe

## Summary Statistics

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	Obs	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
female	1786	0.52	0.50	0	1
East	1786	0.24	0.42	0	1
educRS	1786	0.46	0.50	0	1
educGY	1786	0.33	0.47	0	1
income1500_2499	1786	0.25	0.44	0	1
income2500_3999	1786	0.23	0.42	0	1
income4000pl	1786	0.10	0.30	0	1
incomemiss	1786	0.16	0.37	0	1
unionmbr	1786	0.12	0.32	0	1
age18_29	1786	0.09	0.29	0	1
age30_44	1786	0.22	0.41	0	1
age45_59	1786	0.39	0.49	0	1
age60pl	1786	0.30	0.46	0	1
mit_imm	1786	0.57	0.49	0	1
mit_terr	1786	0.13	0.33	0	1
mit_crime	1786	0.05	0.22	0	1
pid_afd	1786	0.21	0.41	0	1
pid_cdu	1786	0.18	0.38	0	1
pid_spd	1786	0.14	0.35	0	1
pid_fdpgr	1786	0.07	0.25	0	1
pid_no	1786	0.30	0.46	0	1

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## Results with Continuous Political Knowledge Variable

Figure 3: Effect of Economic Voting Treatment on AfD Support

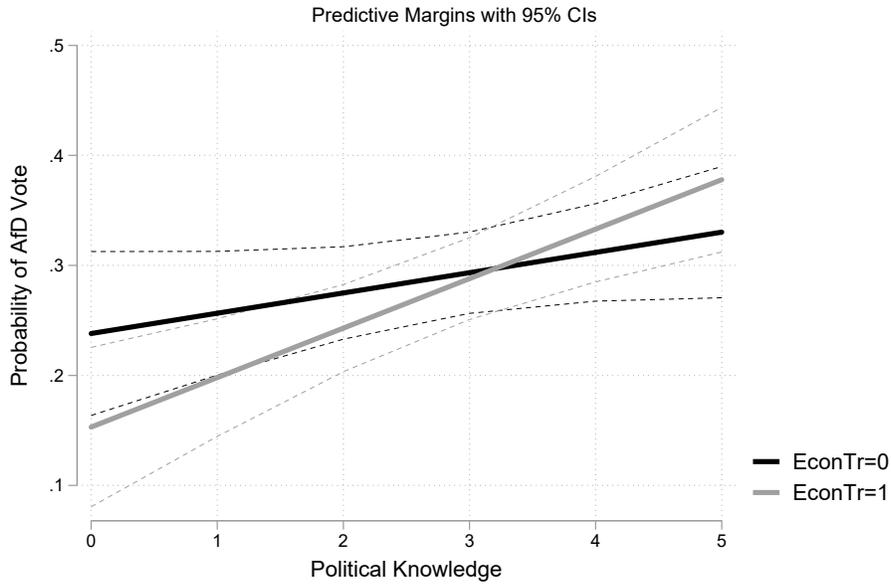


Figure 4: Effect of Social Inequality Treatment on AfD Support

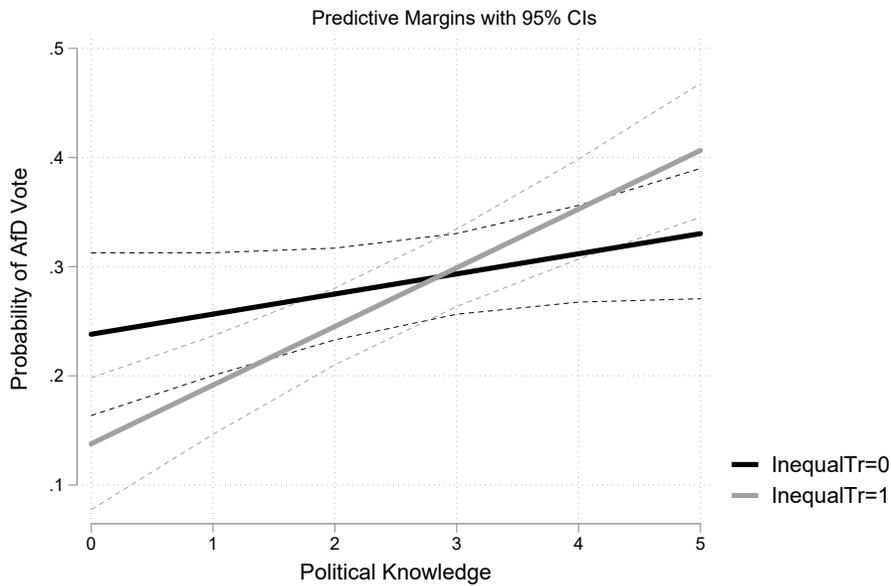


Table 4: Models for 2017 Vote Intention with **Continuous** Political Knowledge Variable

	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	AfD	CDU	SPD	FDP/Greens
Economic Voting	<b>-0.085</b> <b>(0.052)</b>	<b>0.0025</b> <b>(0.039)</b>	0.046 (0.044)	-0.044 (0.028)
Strategic Voting	<b>-0.033</b> <b>(0.050)</b>	0.084** (0.040)	-0.042 (0.044)	<b>-0.019</b> <b>(0.037)</b>
Uncertainty	<b>-0.040</b> <b>(0.054)</b>	<b>0.067</b> <b>(0.041)</b>	0.017 (0.044)	-0.047 (0.029)
Social Inequality	<b>-0.10**</b> <b>(0.047)</b>	-0.0044 (0.037)	<b>0.061</b> <b>(0.043)</b>	-0.0037 (0.036)
KnowledgeContinuous	0.018 (0.011)	-0.0021 (0.008)	0.011 (0.008)	0.0046 (0.007)
EconTr*KnowContinuous	0.027* (0.016)	0.020 (0.012)	-0.021* (0.012)	-0.00053 (0.009)
StratTr*KnowContinuous	0.013 (0.016)	-0.015 (0.012)	0.00030 (0.013)	0.0043 (0.012)
UncertTr*KnowContinuous	0.014 (0.015)	-0.0095 (0.011)	-0.011 (0.012)	0.0034 (0.009)
SocInTr*KnowContinuous	0.035** (0.015)	0.0033 (0.011)	-0.019* (0.012)	-0.0022 (0.011)
Constant	0.16*** (0.051)	0.020 (0.041)	0.037 (0.047)	0.081** (0.038)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1786	1786	1786	1786
$R^2$	0.47	0.41	0.42	0.27

*Note:* Dependent variable is vote intention in 2017 German federal election for the party indicated at the top of each column. OLS regression with control variables: indicators for region (East vs. West), age group, gender, income group, education level, party identification, and most important topic (immigration, crime, terrorism). Models control for 122 of the 1,786 respondents who are less anti-immigrant (indicator and interaction with treatments). Robust standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients of primary interest for hypothesis tests are in bold. \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .