Asymmetric Perceptions of Campaign Tone:

How Issue Type and Party Status Shape Voter Perceptions of Campaign Messages

Martin Haselmayer[1,2], Lisa Hirsch[3], Marcelo Jenny[4]

[1]Hochschule Campus Wien, Research Center Administrative Sciences, [2]University of Vienna, Department of Government, [3] University of Vienna, Austrian Social Science Data Archive (AUSSDA), [4] University of Innsbruck, Department of Political Science

Corresponding author: Martin Haselmayer, Hochschule Campus Wien, Research Center Administrative Sciences / University of Vienna, Department of Government; martin.haselmayer@hcw.ac.at

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Abstract

This study examines how voters perceive campaign messages depending on issue type (valence vs. position), tone (positive, neutral, negative), and party status (government or opposition). While prior research shows that parties adjust campaign tone and issue focus strategically, less is known about how such choices affect voter perceptions. Using a factorial survey experiment with German respondents, we find that positive messages on valence issues are evaluated most favourably, particularly when issued by government parties. Conversely, messages from opposition parties are viewed more positively when emphasizing position issues. These asymmetries disappear for negative messages, supporting the notion of a general negativity bias, where negative tone overrides other message attributes. These findings show that voters assess campaign messages not only by their content and tone, but also by their interplay with party status. Our results add to work on campaign sentiment and political psychology, revealing asymmetries in how voters perceive political communication.

Keywords: Party communication, Issue competition, Campaign sentiment, Voter perceptions, Survey experiment, Germany

INTRODUCTION

Political parties compete not only over *which* issues to emphasize, but also *how* to communicate them. A key distinction in political communication is between valence issues, which reflect shared goals such as reducing crime or corruption, and position issues, which involve ideological disagreement, such as immigration or European integration (Stokes, 1963; 1992). Valence issues evoke competence and credibility of political actors, while position issues activate partisan identities (Clarke et al., 2009; Green & Jennings, 2012).

Campaign communication also varies in sentiment, or campaign tone. Parties may present messages in a more positive or negative way and do so with varying intensity (Haselmayer, 2019). While tone can be conveyed through both self-promotion and criticism of opponents, our focus is on the overall sentiment of messages rather than their directional target. Research shows that parties strategically vary the tone of their campaign messages (et al.,Kosmidis et al., 2019; Crabtree et al., 2020). At the same time, work on negative campaigning highlights how parties link criticism to issue attributes, for instance by targeting rivals' issue ownership (Lefevere et al., 2020; Seeberg, 2020). Yet most research treats issue content and sentiment as separate dimensions. This research note instead focuses on how voters perceive variation in message sentiment, examining how the perceived intensity of campaign tone is shaped by issue characteristics and party status in government or opposition. We know little about how issue type and tone interact, and even less about how these dynamics depend on a party's government or opposition status. Comparative research suggests that governing parties are more likely to highlight valence issues in their self-presentation, while opposition parties focus more on positional stances, particularly when criticizing opponents (Bjarnøe et al., 2023). These patterns indicate that party status not only affects communication strategies, but may also influence how such messages are received by voters.

This study examines how voters perceive the tone of campaign messages depending on issue type (valence vs. position), sentiment (positive, neutral, or negative), and party status (government vs. opposition). Specifically, we analyse how identical message characteristics are interpreted differently depending on the political context in which they are communicated, in particular the status of the sender. We focus on the perception of message sentiment as the key outcome, rather than persuasion or behavioural responses. This distinction is important because perceptions of campaign negativity have consequences that extend beyond immediate message interpretation. Research shows that political attacks contribute to affective polarization when they are perceived as negative by voters (Nai & Maier, 2023), while broader work on attack politics demonstrates that perceptions mediate the relationship between message exposure and subsequent political evaluations (Nai et al., 2025). In multiparty settings, perceptions of negative campaign messages are also shaped by partisan predispositions (Haselmayer et al., 2020). Understanding how citizens perceive campaign tone is therefore essential for explaining how campaign communication influences political attitudes and evaluations.
Building on prior work showing that valence appeals are viewed more favourably when issued by credible actors (Stokes 1992; Kosmidis et al., 2019), we argue that messages from government parties are perceived more positively when they emphasize valence issues, reflecting their association with governing capacity. In contrast, messages from opposition parties may be perceived more positively when advocating controversial (position) issues, as they are seen as less directly responsible for implementing contested policies.

We test these expectations in a factorial survey experiment conducted in Germany, randomly varying issue type, tone, and sender status. Our results reveal clear asymmetries in voter perceptions. Overall, messages on valence issues are perceived more positively than those on position issues. This difference is amplified by party status: positive messages on valence issues

from government parties, and on position issues from opposition parties are perceived most positively. These patterns, however, vanish for negative messages, suggesting that a general negativity bias (Soroka, 2014) overrides both content and sender cues.

By highlighting how voters perceive the interplay of tone, issue type, and party status, this research note extends existing work on campaign strategy and political psychology to the study of voter perceptions. It provides new empirical evidence on how these dimensions jointly shape the interpretation of campaign messages, showing that voters are sensitive not only to what is said and how, but also to who communicates it. In doing so, it offers new insight into the perceptual dynamics of electoral communication in multiparty systems.

THEORY

Most research focuses on either of the two established dimensions of election campaigns: issue type and campaign tone (Crabtree et al., 2020). Issue type captures whether parties communicate about widely shared policy goals (valence issues) or controversial positions on how to achieve those goals (position issues) (Stokes, 1963, 1992; D'Alimonte et al., 2020). Valence issues, such as reducing unemployment or corruption, typically command broad agreement, while position issues, such as immigration or European integration, involve ideological disagreement and divergent policy preferences. Beyond issue type, prior research highlights the importance of issue salience and issue ownership in shaping party communication and voter responses (e.g., Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Green-Pedersen, 2007). While these factors are not part of our experimental manipulations, we account for their potential confounding role in additional robustness analyses. Our focus is instead on how voters perceive variation in message tone, issue type, and party status. We return to the potential role of issue salience and ownership in the discussion.

Campaign tone refers to the sentiment of political messages (Crabtree et al., 2020; Haselmayer, 2021), that is, whether communication is perceived as positive, neutral, or negative. Unlike concepts such as negative campaigning, tone does not necessarily imply a directional component or a specific target (e.g., Haselmayer, 2019; 2021). In line with our focus on message perception, we define tone as the perceived sentiment of a message, measured on a five-point scale capturing both its direction and strength. While our theoretical expectations primarily concern differences between positive and negative messages, this approach allows us to capture more fine-grained variation. We therefore use "tone" and "sentiment" interchangeably to refer to this evaluative dimension.

While prior research has explored these dimensions in isolation, less is known about their interaction in shaping voter perceptions. This is particularly important as recent studies highlight the electoral potential of issue-based negative campaigning (Lefevere et al., 2020; Seeberg, 2020). Such studies examine how negative messages shape voter perceptions, for instance of issue competence, but they do not directly compare how positive and negative messages are perceived across different contexts. As a result, we lack evidence on how the perception of message tone varies by issue type and party status.

To understand these dynamics, it is necessary to consider how citizens process political information. Research in political psychology shows that voters do not respond to campaign messages uniformly, but interpret them through cognitive and affective filters. In particular, work on negativity bias demonstrates that negative information tends to be more salient and more strongly processed than positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Soroka, 2014). At the same time, perceptions of negativity are not fixed but vary depending on contextual and individual-level factors, including message content (e.g., policy vs. personal attacks), tone (civil vs. uncivil negativity), and individuals' tolerance of negativity (e.g., Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Mattes &

Redlawsk, 2014; Nai & Maier, 2021). More recent work further shows that these perceptions are consequential, as perceived negativity can mediate the effects of campaign attacks on political evaluations and affective polarization (Nai & Maier, 2023; Nai et al., 2025). Building on this literature, we examine how the interaction of issue type, tone, and party status shapes the perception of campaign messages. Recent comparative research (Bjarnøe et al., 2023) further shows that parties strategically combine issue type and tone depending on their institutional role: government parties tend to emphasize valence-based appeals in self-presentation, while opposition parties rely more on position issues, particularly in attacks. Franzmann et al., (2020) similarly demonstrate that parties strategically emphasize either valence or position issues depending on their electoral yield.

Together, these findings highlight how party status shapes campaign strategies, but they leave open how such strategies are perceived by voters. Building on this work, we theorize how voters respond to variation in both issue type and sentiment, and how these responses are conditioned by a party's status in government or opposition.

At the same time, voters' perceptions of campaign messages are shaped by partisan predispositions, with individuals interpreting messages from preferred parties more positively and those from opposing parties more negatively (e.g., Druckman et al., 2013). While this represents an established mechanism, our focus is on how message characteristics and party status shape the perception of campaign tone beyond such partisan predispositions. We account for this empirically by including respondents' party preferences (PTV scores) as control variables.

PERCEPTIONS OF VALENCE AND POSITION ISSUES

Valence issues "link parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the entire electorate" (Stokes, 1963, p. 373). These issues typically involve consensus on goals like lower crime rates, less corruption, or more employment, and competition therefore centres more

strongly on perceived competence and credibility, rather than ideological disagreement (Enelow & Hinich, 1982; Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). In contrast, position issues reflect ideological cleavages, where voters and parties disagree about policy direction, such as taxation, immigration, or (more or less) European integration (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). While this distinction is widely used in literature, we acknowledge that some issues may shift categories over time. Following established work (et al.,Stokes, 1963; Franzmann et al., 2020), we adopt a predefined classification of unambiguous valence (e.g., crime, unemployment, corruption) and position issues (e.g., European integration, immigration) to ensure consistent interpretation across respondents. For the election under study, Franzmann et al.(2020) show that these valence issues reflect broadly shared goals, while the selected position issues exhibit substantial ideological dispersion.

On valence issues, we expect that positive messages, such as promises to fight corruption are perceived more favourably, as they reflect shared goals and signal policy commitment. Prior work suggests that such positivity can serve as a credibility cue, indicating that the policy is likely to be implemented (Kosmidis et al., 2019, p. 815). By contrast, for position issues, the reception of a positive message depends more on individual attitudes. A message promoting European integration may resonate with pro-EU voters but alienate Eurosceptics, leading to greater variance in perception.

While valence issues may generally be perceived more positively than position issues, research on negativity bias suggests that negative information is processed more strongly and can override baseline differences in message content. Consistent with this, prior research in psychology and political communication shows that negative messages tend to attract more attention and exert stronger effects than positive ones (e.g., Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Soroka, 2014). Voters may

discount issue content when tone is strongly negative, regardless of the issue type or party identity. Therefore, we examine perceptual differences between positive and negative messages[1]:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Respondents perceive messages on valence issues more positively than messages on position issues.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Respondents perceive negative messages on valence issues similarly to negative messages on position issues.

THE CONDITIONAL ROLE OF GOVERNMENT STATUS

However, the impact of issue type on message perception may not be uniform across parties. A key factor conditioning voter responses is a party's status, particularly whether it holds office or sits in opposition. Research suggests that competence evaluations are more important for governing parties, as voters can observe their actual performance (Green & Jennings, 2012). For valence issues, where competence is central, government messages may appear more credible and thus be perceived more positively. A government party has demonstrated governing capacity and can enact policy, making its claims more believable. Government parties may benefit from emphasizing valence issues when performance is viewed positively, but they are also more vulnerable to negative evaluations when it is contested, reflecting the logic of democratic accountability whereby governing parties are both empowered to act and held responsible for policy outcomes (e.g., Powell & Whitten, 1993). In contrast, opposition parties lack governing authority, and voters may treat their campaign promises with more scepticism, especially on valence issues which concern broad societal goals. Yet this asymmetry can work in the opposite direction on position issues, where voters' own preferences play a stronger role in shaping

[1] We test this in the Appendix (Model 1 of Table C4); see also Figure 2.

reactions (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). When government parties propose controversial measures, such as cutting welfare or restricting immigration, voters who oppose such policies may respond more negatively precisely because the government has the power to implement them. This dynamic reflects broader mechanisms of political threat perception, suggesting that actors with greater capacity to act elicit stronger emotional responses to disagreeable content (Marcus et al., 2000). By contrast, opposition parties, which are less directly responsible for policy outcomes, may appear less threatening and provoke less negative reactions to contentious policy positions, as they are not held accountable for their implementation. This logic aligns with patterns in party strategy (Bjarnøe et al., 2023) and likely reinforces asymmetric perceptions of credibility: voters may trust government parties more on shared goals, while viewing opposition parties as more authentic when advocating controversial positions.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Respondents perceive messages on valence issues from government parties more positively than messages on valence issues from opposition parties.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Respondents perceive messages on position issues from opposition parties more positively than messages on position issues from government parties.

Because negative information is processed more strongly than positive information, negativity bias may override differences related to issue type and party status. Consistent with prior research showing that negativity can dominate other message attributes (Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Soroka, 2014), we examine this possibility using a three-way interaction model, reported in the appendix (Table C4, Figure C1). Together, these expectations suggest that voters' perceptions are not only shaped by the content and tone of political communication, but also by the institutional credibility of the sender.

DATA & METHODS

We use a crowdsourced survey experiment in Germany to study how voters perceive campaign messages[2]. Negative campaigning in Germany shares key characteristics with other Western European multi-party systems (Walter, 2014; Maier & Jansen, 2017), and trends in declining partisanship are similarly pronounced (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Dassonville et al., 2014). Therefore, we expect that similar mechanisms may operate in comparable party systems. To study whether issue focus, party status, and sentiment influence voters' perceptions of campaign communication we ran a factorial survey experiment. This allows us to experimentally vary multiple conditions simultaneously and to design statistically efficient subsamples of the complete universe of combinations given by the varied conditions.

We present respondents with realistic party statements and ask them to determine their sentiment. Each respondent had to rate ten statements including a sender and a target party from the set of all relevant German parties: Social Democrats (SPD), Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Left (Die Linke) and the Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)[3]. We experimentally manipulated and randomized the sentiment (neutral, weakly or strongly positive/negative), sender and target parties as well as the political topic for each sentence. We present sample vignettes for both position and valence issues below. Underlined parts varied in our experiment, randomized words used to avoid redundancy are in italics.

(1) The SPD completely failed *with* its restrictive immigration policy, the CDU

[2] The sample is not representative of the population. Appendix B reports the distribution of key respondent characteristics compared to the German population.

[3] These parties were either represented in the national parliament (Bundestag) or exceeded the five-percent threshold in voter intention surveys at the time (ARD-Wahlbarometer Sonntagsfrage, n=1,006, February 2017).

declared on its web site.

(2) The SPD welcomes CDU *proposals on* the reduction of corruption.

We use a random sample of 3000 combinations from all 5390 possible conditions[4], grouped into subsets of ten vignettes randomly. Each vignette was rated by ten respondents. This design avoids confusion between vignette characteristics and respondent attributes and improves internal validity (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

Figure 1 shows the experimental design and the manipulation of the treatment conditions (Appendix A provides examples). Data were collected over four weeks in February 2017 using a Qualtrics survey distributed via CrowdFlower[5], restricted to users eligible to vote in German national elections. In total, 300 respondents consented to participate in the survey, of whom 294 completed all questions, providing 2,937 judgments[6]. We first assessed political knowledge with four questions, then asked respondents how likely they would vote for each major German party on an 11-point scale. The subsequent experimental block consisted of ten vignettes, for which respondents rated the sentiment. Finally, we collected demographic information (gender, age, level of education, region of birth).

OPERATIONALIZATION

We are interested in how respondents perceive the tone of campaign messages. Accordingly, the dependent variable captures how respondents interpret the tone of a message as

[4] The total number results from 7 sender parties, 7 target parties, 5 levels of sentiment strength, 11 issue conditions (including positive and negative formulations of position issues), and 2 sentence batteries (to avoid redundancy): $7 \times 7 \times 5 \times 11 \times 2 = 5{,}390$. Appendix B reports the distribution of observations across these conditions.

[5] CrowdFlower was later acquired by Appen, a commercial crowdsourcing platform for online data collection.

[6] For three respondents only nine judgements were collected.

more negative or more positive. It is measured for each vignette using a five-point Likert scale (−2 "strongly negative", −1 "somewhat negative", 0 "neutral", 1 "somewhat positive", 2 "strongly positive"). Respondents could also choose "don't know".

Our main independent variable denotes whether a sentence addresses a positional (0) or a valence (1) issue. We follow similar studies (Franzmann et al., 2020) and predetermine a set of uncontroversial valence issues, which typically reach almost unanimous support in Western European countries: unemployment, environment, crime, corruption, and poverty. Positional issues deal with immigration, welfare state retrenchment/deficit spending, and support for European integration[7]. Respondents did not have to discount preferences, e.g. raise taxes to fight unemployment or lower economic growth to protect the environment –thus, consent is costless. The second independent variable is the predetermined sentiment strength of a vignette, measured on the same five-point scale as the dependent variable and informed by qualitative pretests with a group of political science researchers, whose assessments were used to refine the coding and wording of the vignettes (see Appendix A).

We include control variables to account for additional sources of variation in the perception of campaign messages, allowing us to isolate the effects of the experimental treatments more clearly. First, we adjust for partisan preferences based on propensity-to-vote (PTV) scores, for which respondents indicate how likely they are to vote for a given party on a scale ranging from "very unlikely" (0) to "very likely" (10). We include PTV scores of sender and target parties, as previous research shows that partisan leanings distort perceptions of campaign tone (Haselmayer et al., 2020).

Another control is political *knowledge* - an additive index of the number of correct answers

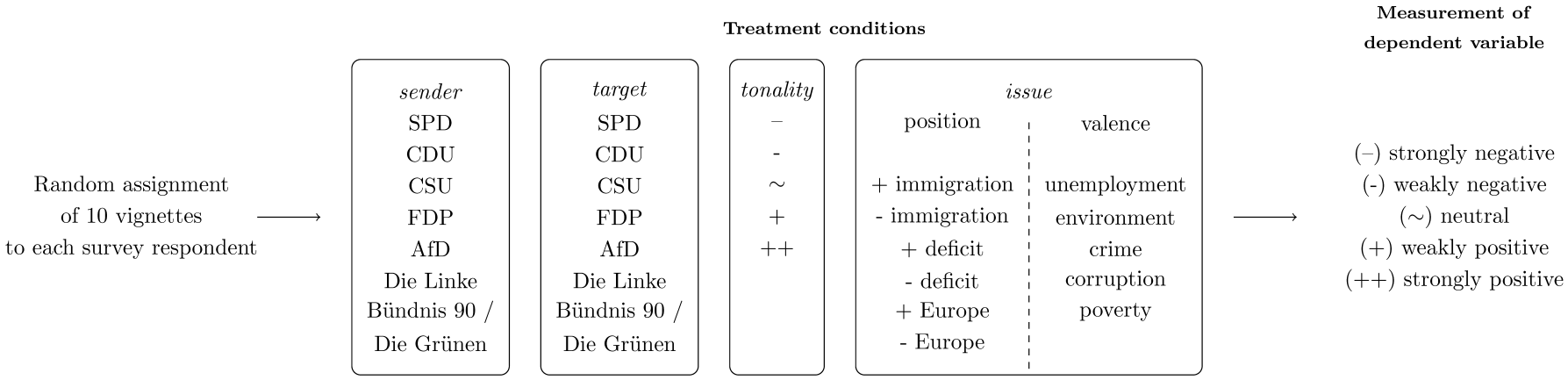
[7] For the election under study, Franzmann et al. (2020) show that these valence issues reflect broadly shared goals, while the selected position issues exhibit substantial ideological dispersion.

to four multiple-choice questions (year of next election, parties in government, current cabinet members, CETA contract partners). Demographic controls include *gender* (male/female)*, age* (continuous)*, region (*Eastern/Western Germany*), urbanity* (urban/rural based on the population of a respondent's residence) and *education (*measured on a 6-point scale from 1 (no formal graduation) to 6 (completed tertiary education).

To check for ordering effects and grammatical variations in our vignettes, we also use fixed effects for vignette order (0-10) and grammatical variation (1/2). We also include a dummy to adjust for self-referential messages with identical subjects and objects. Descriptive information on all variables is available in Appendix B.

Because issue salience and party-specific issue competence may constitute contextual differences across the selected issues, we additionally assess these factors using data from the GLES 2017 Campaign Panel (Roßteutscher et al., 2019), fielded contemporaneously with our experiment. We measure issue salience as the share of respondents naming an issue as their first or second most important political problem and party-specific issue competence as the share identifying a given party as best able to solve that problem. These measures are used in additional robustness analyses reported in Appendix C (Tables C5–C6).

Figure 1: Experimental design



RESULTS

From the full sample of 2937 completed vignettes, we exclude cases with 'don't know' answers ($n = 64$) and those with a missing a PTV score for a party ($n = 201$). The remaining data consists of 2672 vignette ratings from 284 respondents. The mean sentiment of their ratings is 0.12 (Sd 1.32), which reflects the distribution in the randomized vignettes (36% negative, 21 % neutral, 43% positive). To test our expectations, we run two OLS multiple regression models. As observations are not independent of each other, we cluster standard errors at the level of respondents. Robustness checks in Appendix C present results from models using respondent-fixed-effects, jackknife standard errors (to account for the effect of different issues) and excluding respondents whose response patterns diverged from the overall distribution. We additionally assess whether the findings are robust to variation in issue salience and party-specific issue competence at the time of the experiment, using external measures from the GLES 2017 Campaign Panel (Roßteutscher et al., 2019). These analyses confirm the results presented below. The first model tests a direct effect of issue type on perceptions of message sentiment. The second model interacts issue type and the government status of the emitter party to examine whether perceptions of campaign tone vary between government and opposition parties. Both models include the control variables introduced above.

Table 1 presents the regression coefficients, Figure 2 plots the predicted values for the interaction of issue type and tone, Figure 3 for issue type and government status. Model 1 confirms our first hypothesis (H1a): respondents perceive messages on valence issues on average 0.20 units more positively than a message on a position issue.

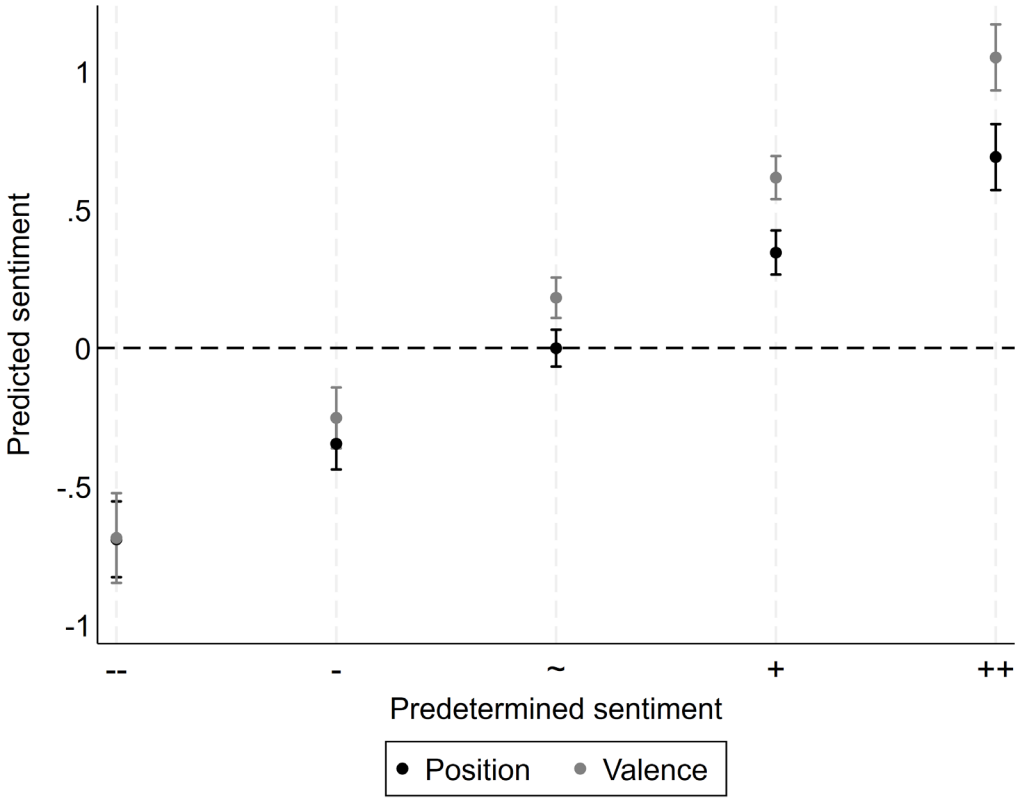
Table 1: Explaining perceptions of campaign sentiment

	Model 1	Model 2
Valence	0.20***	0.06
	(0.05)	(0.07)
Valence # Sender: Gov		0.34**
		(0.11)
Vignette sentiment	0.38***	0.39***
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Sender: Gov	0.01	-0.15*
	(0.05)	(0.06)
Sender PTV	0.02***	0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Target PTV	0.02***	0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Self-reference	0.02	0.03
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Vignette order	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Political knowledge	-0.08***	-0.08***
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Constant	0.17	0.24#
	(0.12)	(0.12)
Socio-demographic controls	*Yes*	*Yes*
Battery fixed effects	*Yes*	*Yes*
BIC	8543.13	8537.43
N	2672	2672

Standard errors clustered at respondents in parentheses, # $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In line with Hypothesis 1b, Figure 2 (based on Table C4 in the Appendix) shows that this difference holds only for positive messages, suggesting a general negativity bias in evaluations of party messages.

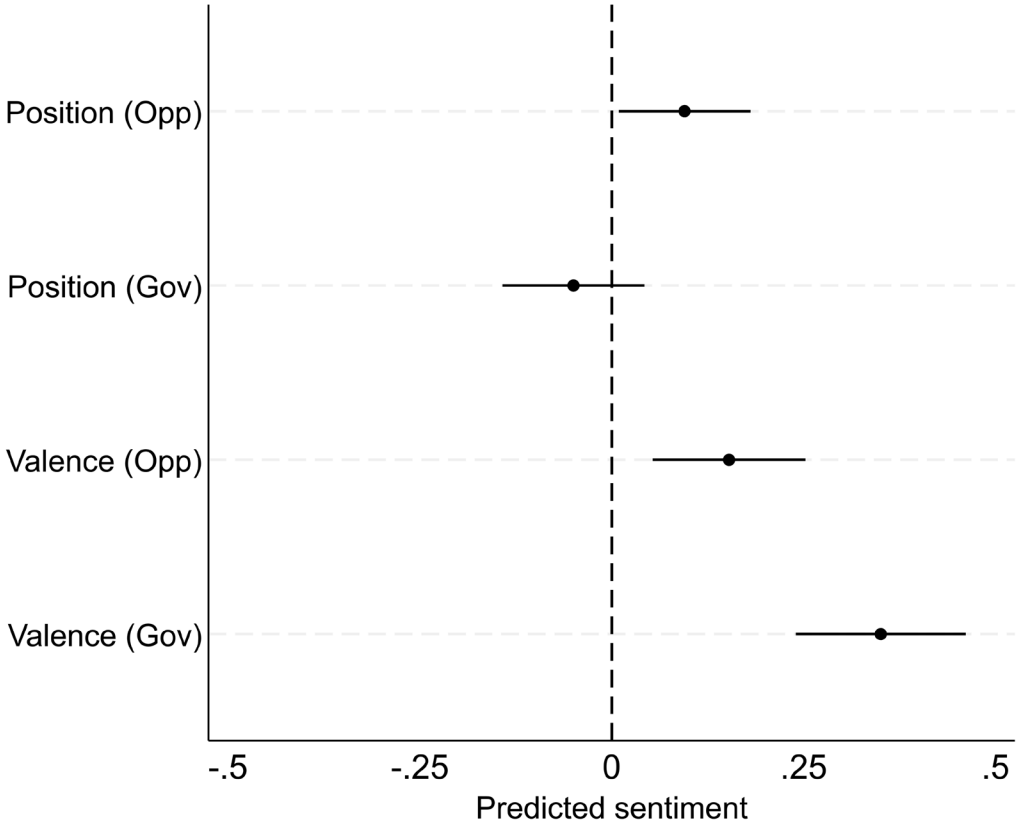
Figure 2: Predicted perceived sentiment of party messages by issue type and sentiment



Note: The y-axis shows predicted perceived sentiment by issue type and predetermined sentiment, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on Model 1 in Table C4. All other variables are held at their observed values.

Turning to our second hypothesis on the conditional effect of government status on the perception of issue-based party messages, Model 2 and Figure 3 show that government parties are perceived more positively on valence issues than opposition parties (+0.34). Figure 3 reveals that this effect is composed of two contrary patterns: respondents perceive government parties more positively on valence issues (+0.20) and opposition parties more positively on position issues (+0.15).

Figure 3: Predicted perceived sentiment of party messages by issue type and party status



Note: The x-axis shows predicted perceived sentiment by issue type and party status, with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on Model 2 in Table 1. All other variables are held at their observed values.

Additional analyses (Appendix Table C4 and Figure C1) show that asymmetries by issue type and party status are limited to positive messages. Negative tone overrides these effects, reinforcing a general negativity bias and suggesting that tone can outweigh other message attributes.

Turning to the control variables, the coefficient for the pre-assigned vignette sentiment indicates that respondents' evaluations broadly align with the intended manipulation, although the correlation is moderate ($r \approx 0.4$), suggesting that perceptions are also shaped by individual predispositions and contextual interpretation. PTV scores of sender and target parties are positively associated with perceived sentiment, indicating that respondents evaluate messages involving

preferred parties more positively. Individual-level characteristics, such as political knowledge and place of residence, are also associated with variation in perceived sentiment, while vignette order and self-references show no systematic effects.

CONCLUSIONS

Using a factorial survey experiment with German respondents, this study shows that voters perceive campaign messages differently depending on issue type, message sentiment, and a party's institutional status. In line with our expectations, valence issues are perceived more positively than position issues. Moreover, these effects are shaped by party status: messages from government parties are perceived more favourably on valence issues, while those from opposition parties are perceived more positively on position issues.

These findings underscore the role of perceptual asymmetries in campaign communication. Beyond showing that parties adapt strategies by tone (Crabtree et al.,, 2020), issue type (Franzmann et al.,, 2020) or by government status (Bjarnøe et al.,, 2023), this study adds a voter perspective on the interaction of issue type, tone, and party status in campaign messages. It shows that voter perceptions are not only shaped by message content or tone alone, but by how both intersect with party status.

These results have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they advance our understanding of issue competition and campaign sentiment by showing that institutional credibility may condition voter evaluations. Practically, they suggest that messages from government parties are perceived more positively when emphasizing valence issues, while those from opposition parties are viewed more positively when emphasizing position issues. However, these perceptual asymmetries are confined to positive messages. For negative messages, these patterns largely disappear, indicating that tone can override content and party cues when sentiment

is negative. Our results also confirm a general negativity bias in voter evaluations of party messaging.

Naturally, this study has limitations. Our design relies on a non-representative online sample from Germany, which constrains generalizability. In addition, the experimental setting presents respondents with isolated vignettes, which does not fully capture the broader informational and contextual environment in which campaign messages are typically encountered. While similar mechanisms may operate in comparable multiparty contexts, their magnitude may depend on contextual factors such as economic conditions or salient political issues, which shape how voters evaluate government and opposition parties.

Moreover, our analysis focuses on how voters perceive the tone of campaign messages and does not capture the downstream effects of these perceptions on attitudes or behaviour. Future research could examine whether these perceptual patterns translate into differences in political evaluations or electoral outcomes, and whether they replicate across institutional settings.

It would also be valuable to experimentally examine how issue ownership and issue salience interact with tone and party status in shaping the perception of campaign messages. In addition, future work could explore how individual-level factors such as age, political knowledge, or affective polarization moderate how voters interpret campaign tone, and how tone shapes the perceived credibility of government versus opposition messages across issue types.

Overall, our findings show that voters are not just passive recipients of campaign messages. Their perceptions depend not only on what is said, but also on who says it, how it is said, and what type of issue is being addressed. Understanding these perceptual filters is essential for advancing the study of electoral behaviour and party competition in contemporary democracies.

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Supplementary information

Appendix A: Examples of vignettes with varying sentiment and issue focus

Vignettes of varying sentiment for a fixed positional issue (predetermined score in parentheses):

The SPD *condemns* CDU proposals for a (*restrictive / permissive*) immigration policy. **(--)**

The SPD *criticizes* CDU proposals for a (*restrictive / permissive*) immigration policy. **(-)**

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for a (*restrictive / permissive*) immigration policy. **(~)**

The SPD *welcomes* CDU proposals for a (*restrictive / permissive*) immigration policy. **(+)**

The SPD *lauds* CDU proposals for a (*restrictive / permissive*) immigration policy. **(++)**

Vignettes of varying sentiment for a fixed valence issue (predetermined score in parentheses):

The SPD *condemns* CDU proposals for reducing corruption. (--)

The SPD *criticizes* CDU proposals for reducing corruption. (-)

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for reducing corruption. (~)

The SPD *welcomes* CDU proposals for reducing corruption. (+)

The SPD *lauds* CDU proposals for reducing corruption. (++)

Vignettes of position issues for a fixed sentiment level (predetermined score in parentheses):

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for a *restrictive* immigration policy. **(~)**

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for a *permissive* immigration policy. **(~)**

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for welfare state retrenchment. (~)

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for deficit spending. (~)

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for more European integration. (~)

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for less European integration. (~)

Vignettes of valence issues for a fixed sentiment level (predetermined score in parentheses):

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for *fighting unemployment*. **(~)**

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for *protecting the environment*. **(~)**

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for *fighting crime*. **(~)**

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for *fighting poverty.* **(~)**

The SPD *discusses* CDU proposals for *reducing corruption.* **(~)**

Appendix B: Descriptive information

Table B1: Descriptive characteristics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	N
Perceived vignette sentiment	0.12	1.32	-2	2	2,672
Valence issue	0.45	0.50	0	1	2,672
Sender: government party	0.41	0.49	0	1	2,672
Predetermined sentiment	0.11	1.41	-2	2	2,672
Sender PTV score	3.71	3.34	0	10	2,672
Target PTV score	3.83	3.36	0	10	2,672
% Female	0.27	0.44	0	1	2,672
Age	37.70	13.28	18	81	2,672
Education (0-6)	3.37	1.53	1	6	2,672
Knowledge (0-4)	1.54	1.09	0	4	2,672
% Eastern German	0.19	0.39	0	1	2,672
% Urban	0.73	0.44	0	1	2,672
Self-reference	0.15	0.36	0	1	2,672
Grammatical battery dummy	1.51	0.50	1	2	2,672
Vignette order	5.50	2.87	1	10	2,672

Table B2: Sample characteristics (comparison to population)

Variable	Sample	Population
% Male	73.4	49.3
% Eastern German	19.2	19.6
Mean Age (Std. Dev)	37.5 (13.2)	44.2
Mean Education (0–6) (Std. Dev.)	3.4 (1.5)	2.0

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses. Source: German Federal Statistical Office (Statistisches Bundesamt)

Table B3: Distribution of experimental conditions

Factor	Condition	N	%
Issue	Immigration (+)	263	9.0
	Immigration (-)	264	9.0
	Deficit (+)	193	6.6
	Deficit (-)	227	7.7
	Europe (+)	286	9.7
	Europe (-)	399	13.6
	Unemployment	236	8.0
	Environment	260	8.9
	Crime	331	11.3
	Corruption	243	8.3
	Poverty	235	8.0
Tone	--	560	19.1
	-	468	15.9
	~	599	20.4
	+	688	23.4
	++	622	21.2
Sender	SPD	365	12.4
	CDU	393	13.4
	CSU	448	15.3
	Grüne	444	15.1
	AfD	419	14.3
	FDP	445	15.2
	Linke	423	14.4
Target	SPD	466	15.9
	CDU	471	16.0
	CSU	391	13.3
	Grüne	387	13.2
	AfD	379	12.9
	FDP	395	13.4
	Linke	448	15.3
Battery	Battery 1	1,447	49.3
	Battery 2	1,490	50.7

Note: Treatment assignment was randomized.

Appendix C: Robustness tests

Table C1: Explaining message sentiment using respondent-fixed effects

	Model 1a (CL)	Model 1 (Resp. FE.)	Model 1 (CL)	Model 2 (Resp. FE.)
Valence	0.20***	0.16***	0.06	-0.01
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Valence # Sender: Gov	-	-	0.34**	0.43***
			(0.11)	(0.10)
Vignette sentiment	0.38***	0.41***	0.39***	0.41***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Sender: Gov	0.01	0.03	-0.15*	-0.17*
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Sender PTV	0.02***	0.01	0.02***	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Target PTV	0.02*	0.02*	0.02*	0.02*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Self-reference	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.05
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Vignette order	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	0.17	-0.29	0.24#	-0.19
	(0.12)	(0.37)	(0.12)	(0.37)
Individual-level controls	*Yes*	*No*	*Yes*	*No*
Battery fixed effects	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
BIC	8543.13	10345.79	8537.43	10331.95
N	2672	2672	2672	2672

Standard errors in parentheses; # $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table C2: Explaining message sentiment using jackknife estimation based on eleven replications excluding one issue at times (JN)

	Model 1 (CL)	Model 1 (JN)	Model 2 (CL)	Model 2 (JN)
Valence	0.20***	0.20**	0.06	0.06
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Valence # Sender: Gov	-	-	0.34**	0.34#
			(0.11)	(0.17)
Vignette sentiment	0.38***	0.38***	0.39***	0.39***
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Sender: Gov	0.01	0.01	-0.15*	-0.15
	(0.05)	(0.10)	(0.06)	(0.13)
Sender PTV	0.02***	0.02*	0.02***	0.02*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Target PTV	0.02*	0.01#	0.02*	0.02#
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Self-reference	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Vignette order	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	0.17	0.17	0.24#	0.24
	(0.12)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.16)
Individual-level controls	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
Battery fixed effects	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
BIC	8543.13	8503.67	8537.43	8490.09
N	2672	2672	2672	2672

Standard errors in parentheses; # $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Excluding potential cheaters

We examine coder performance and flag respondents showing a lack of variation in their response patterns as well as too much variation to identify and eliminate spammers or cheaters (e.g. Berinsky et al 2012). We use the following indicators: standard deviation of judgments per respondent, the skewness of the distribution of judgements per respondent and the number of given judgements falling into the same category. Thereby, we identify 41 individuals whose response patterns could indicate potential cheating or spamming. Table C3 compares results for this restricted sample with analyses of the full sample of vignettes.

Table C3: Explaining message sentiment excluding potential spammers/cheaters (PC)

	Model 1 (CL)	Model 1 (PC)	Model 1 (CL)	Model 2 (PC)
Valence	0.20***	0.20***	0.06	0.04
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Valence # Sender: Gov	-	-	0.34**	0.39***
			(0.11)	(0.11)
Vignette sentiment	0.38***	0.40***	0.39***	0.41***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Sender: Gov	0.01	0.02	-0.15*	-0.15*
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Sender PTV	0.02***	0.02**	0.02***	0.02**
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Target PTV	0.02*	0.01#	0.02*	0.01#
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Self-reference	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.02
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Vignette order	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	0.17	0.17	0.24#	0.25#
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.13)
Individual-level controls	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
Battery fixed effects	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
BIC	8543.13	7675.88	8537.43	7668.90
N	2672	2370	2672	2370

Notes: Standard errors clustered at respondents in parentheses $^{\#}p < 0.1$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$

Reference:

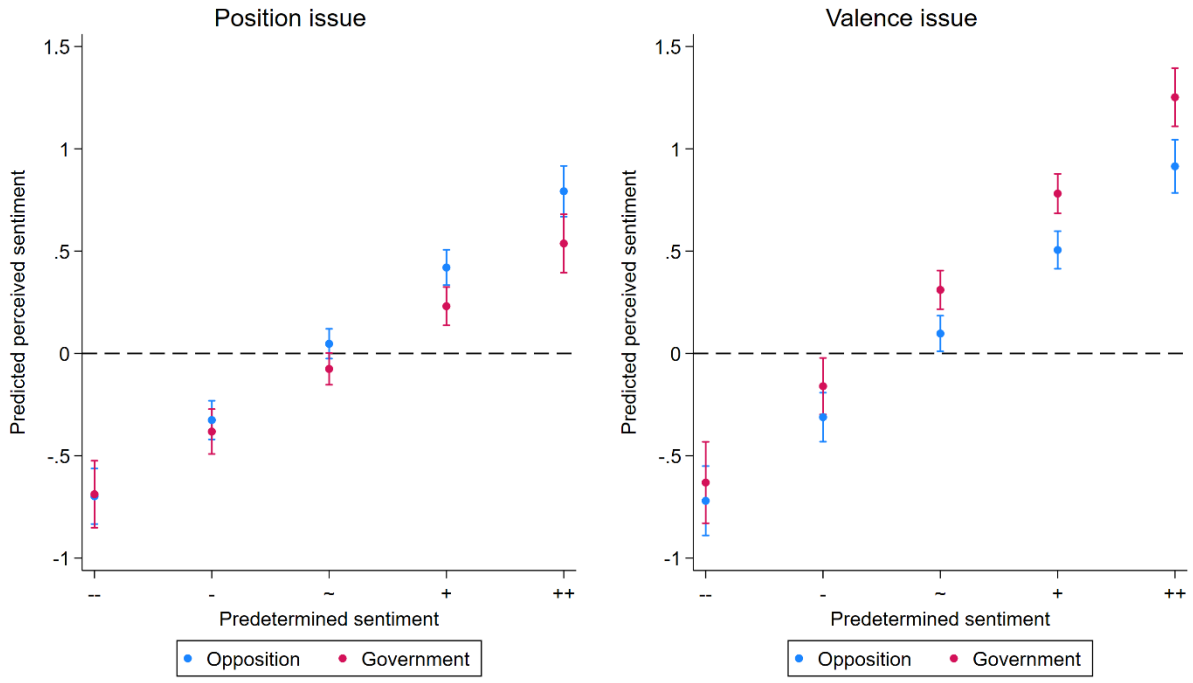
Berinsky, A., Huber, G., & Lenz, G. (2012). Evaluating Online Labor Markets for Experimental Research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. *Political Analysis, 20*(3), 351-368. doi:10.1093/pan/mpr057

Table C4: Explaining message sentiment: Conditional effects of sentiment strength and issue focus (Model 1) and of sentiment, sender government status and issue focus (Model 2)

	Model 1	Model 2
Valence	0.19***	0.05
	(0.05)	(0.07)
Valence # Vignette sentiment	0.08*	0.04
	(0.04)	(0.05)
Sender: Gov # Vignette sentiment	-	-0.07
		(0.05)
Sender: Gov # Valence	-	0.34**
		(0.11)
Sender: Gov # Valence # Vignette sentiment	-	0.13#
		(0.07)
Vignette sentiment	0.35***	0.37***
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Sender: Gov	0.01	-0.14*
	(0.05)	(0.06)
Sender PTV	0.02***	0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Target PTV	0.02*	0.02*
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Self-reference	0.03	0.05
	(0.06)	(0.07)
Vignette order	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	0.17	0.24#
	(0.12)	(0.12)
Controls	*Yes*	*Yes*
Battery fixed effects	*Yes*	*Yes*
BIC	8544.52	8550.13
N	2672	2672

Notes: Standard errors clustered at respondents in parentheses # $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure C1: Predicted perceived sentiment of party messages, conditional on issue type, predetermined sentiment, and party status.



Notes: The Y-axis shows the perceived sentiment of a party message by issue type and assigned tone, with 90% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on Model 2 in Table C4. All other variables are held at their observed values.

Because issue salience and party-specific issue competence may shape how campaign messages are perceived independently of our experimental manipulations, we assess whether the main results remain robust when accounting for these contextual differences. To do so, we draw on Wave 2 of the GLES 2017 Campaign Panel (Roßteutscher et al. 2019). Table C.5 reports the issue-level salience and party competence measures used in these analyses. Table C.6 presents regression models that additionally adjust for issue salience as well as the issue competence of the sender and target parties. The substantive findings remain unchanged after including these controls.

Table C.5: Issue salience and party issue competence

Issue	**Salience**	**N (Competence)**	**Party competence**					
			CDU/ CSU	SPD	FDP	Greens	Linke	AfD
Immigration	67.2	9,127	25.8	16.9	1.5	2.2	3.8	16.9
Deficit	12.0	1,616	16.2	28.2	3.7	2.1	11.1	5.6
EU	5.8	757	39.1	25.0	1.2	2.6	2.1	5.0
Unemployment	4.9	685	19.2	22.8	2.6	2.5	7.1	4.6
Environment	2.8	402	10.2	4.8	0.8	51.8	4.3	0.0
Crime	3.3	463	27.6	9.8	1.8	0.5	2.9	20.4
Corruption	0.3	47	1.9	1.7	4.9	6.4	26.7	10.4
Poverty	12.4	1,608	11.1	26.3	1.7	2.3	16.8	6.9

Note: Data are based on GLES 2017 Campaign Panel, Wave 2. Weighted percentages. Salience is the percentage of respondents naming the issue as their first or second most important political problem. Party competence is the percentage assigning the respective party as best able to solve the issue. N (Competence) reports the unweighted number of valid competence responses. The experimental deficit issue combines positive and negative framings of the same underlying fiscal/welfare dimension; the GLES measure therefore pools the corresponding social-spending/welfare and deficit/public-finance categories. As the GLES competence item does not provide consistently separate estimates for CDU and CSU, their competence scores are combined and reported as CDU/CSU.

Reference:
Roßteutscher, S., Schmitt-Beck, R., Schoen, H., Weßels, B., Wolf, C., Gärtner, L., Preißinger, M., Kratz, A., & Wuttke, A. (2019). *Wahlkampf-Panel (GLES 2017).* GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln, ZA6804, Version 7.0.0. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13323

Table C6: Explaining message sentiment adjusting for issue salience and party issue competence

	Model 1	Model 2
Valence	0.17**	0.04
	(0.06)	(0.08)
Valence # Sender: Gov		0.36**
		(0.12)
Predetermined vignette	0.39***	0.39***
sentiment	(0.02)	(0.02)
Sender: Gov	0.07	-0.16#
	(0.07)	(0.09)
Sender PTV	0.02***	0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Target PTV	0.02*	0.02*
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Issue salience	-0.10	-0.10
	(0.11)	(0.11)
Sender issue competence	-0.38	0.03
	(0.26)	(0.28)
Target issue competence	0.39*	0.43*
	(0.18)	(0.18)
Self-reference	0.02	0.03
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Vignette order	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Political knowledge	-0.08***	-0.08***
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age	-0.00#	-0.00*
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Female	-0.02	-0.02
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Eastern Germany	-0.08	-0.09
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Education	0.00	0.00
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Urban	-0.22***	-0.22***
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Constant	0.17	0.21
	(0.12)	(0.13)
Battery fixed effects	*Yes*	*Yes*
BIC	8558.83	8554.73
N	2672.00	2672.00

Notes: Standard errors clustered at respondents in parentheses # $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$