

# Can established parties shape citizens' evaluations of challenger parties' legitimacy?

## Abstract

The current rise of challenger parties throughout Western Europe has often sparked intense public debates on whether these parties should be considered as beyond the pale of democratic politics. Against this backdrop, mainstream parties face a fundamental choice: Do they treat and portray the challenger as an undemocratic political pariah (i.e., a delegitimizing strategy) or as a 'normal', democratic party (i.e., a legitimizing strategy) despite its controversial stances? I argue that such response strategies by mainstream parties shape citizens' evaluations of challenger parties' democratic legitimacy – which I operationalize as democraticness perceptions and tolerance judgements. Using data from a population-based survey experiment in Germany, I find strong support for my argument. When the mainstream right CDU portrays its far right challenger 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) – a party generally deemed as illegitimate by most citizens and strongly delegitimized by its mainstream competitors – as a democratic actor, citizens evaluate it as more legitimate. Importantly, these effects are not restricted to supporters of the mainstream right, but influence citizens across party lines. These findings suggest that mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties has far-reaching consequences for democratic politics.

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## **Introduction**

The rise of challenger parties over the past years and decades represents a fundamental change of European politics and poses a complex challenge to mainstream parties (Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2009). In particular, populist far right parties have gained political momentum (Mudde, 2007, 2010, 2019) and increasingly challenge the dominance of mainstream parties in Western Europe (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Their entrance into parliament polarizes citizens ideologically (Bischof & Wagner, 2019) and leads to an erosion of social norms within the citizenry (Valentim, 2021). Using strong anti-establishment, populist rhetoric, they challenge established norms of democratic competition (Valentim & Widmann, 2021), and undermine mainstream parties' appeal (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

The democratic legitimacy of new challenger parties is contested amongst the public and mainstream party elites alike. As an initial response to the rise and parliamentary representation of their controversial challengers, mainstream parties often portray their new competitor as undemocratic and ostracize it (i.e., a delegitimizing strategy) (Downs, 2002; van Spanje, 2010b). Importantly, however, mainstream parties in several political systems no longer delegitimize parties that were initially treated as political pariahs – see for example the Danish People's Party or the Dutch PVV. Instead, these FRPs are treated as legitimate competitors and even have become coalition partners after some time in parliament in some instances (i.e., a legitimizing strategy) (de Lange, 2012; Heinze, 2017).

In this paper, I ask whether such mainstream party response strategies shape citizens' evaluations of FRPs' legitimacy. I conceptualize and measure legitimacy evaluations as tolerance judgements towards and democraticness perceptions of FRPs. My main argument is that when mainstream parties portray an FRP as undemocratic and ostracize it (i.e., a

delegitimizing strategy)<sup>1</sup>, citizens evaluate the targeted FRP as less legitimate than when the FRP is portrayed as democratic and not ostracized (i.e., a legitimizing strategy).

Based on a spatial conception of democratic politics, the vast majority of existing studies on mainstream parties' responses to FRPs has examined mainstream parties' ideological shifts and their electoral consequences in response to FRPs' success (e.g., Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; Chou, Dancygier, Egami, & Jamal, 2021; Hjorth & Larsen, 2020; Meguid, 2005). This study focusses on mainstream parties' non-policy based strategies. A couple of previous studies (Van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017; Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007, 2009; van Spanje & Weber, 2017) have investigated the electoral consequences of mainstream parties' political exclusion of FRPs – often referred to as ostracism in the literature (e.g., Downs, 2002; van Spanje, 2010b).

However, so far, the existing literature solely focusses on vote choice as an outcome of mainstream parties' response strategies and neglected a more fundamental asset of FRPs – i.e., their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. This is the first study to directly tap into (de-)legitimizing effects of mainstream parties' response strategies towards their far right challengers. Moreover, the literature focusses on mainstream parties' delegitimizing strategies. Yet, we do not know whether mainstream parties can also *legitimize* parties that are widely viewed as illegitimate by the public.

To test my theoretical argument that mainstream parties shape citizens' legitimacy evaluations of FRPs, I conducted a population-based survey experiment in Germany. Although the CDU – Germany's mainstream right party – generally refuses to collaborate with its far right

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<sup>1</sup> Several authors refer to mainstream parties' portrayals of FRPs as undemocratic as a strategy of 'demonization' (e.g., Heinze, 2017; van Heerden, 2014; van Heerden & van der Brug, 2017). Hence, what I call a delegitimizing strategy could be conceived of as a combination of a (strong form of) ostracism – that is, a strategy of political exclusion) which is justified by demonizing rhetoric. It also comes close to what Hjorth (2020) calls "moral distancing".

challenger<sup>2</sup> AfD, there is internal disunity with regard to how far this boycott should reach and to what extent the AfD should be seen as a democratically legitimate competitor or not (Arzheimer, 2019). This setting allowed me to credibly assign delegitimizing as well as legitimizing messages to CDU politicians in a way, which is ethical and meaningful to respondents.

The results of my survey experiment show that mainstream parties' communication strategies towards FRPs have a substantial impact on how citizens evaluate FRPs' legitimacy. The survey reveals that a large share of the population evaluates the AfD as illegitimate. However, when exposed to a legitimizing strategy, citizens perceive FRPs as more democratic and are less likely to deny them democratic privileges – such as holding demonstrations or speaking at public schools. Importantly, the effects are not restricted to citizens who support the message-sponsoring party. Yet, the views of FRP's own supporters remain unaffected by legitimizing strategies.

This study primarily contributes to two strands of literature. First, it contributes to the literature on mainstream parties' response strategies to challenger parties and their consequences. To this literature, it contributes by providing strong evidence that mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies actually shape citizens' legitimacy evaluations. Shaping legitimacy evaluations as a tool used by mainstream parties has so far been neglected by scholars of party competition and the more specific literature on responses to challenger parties. Second, it contributes to the literature on the 'normalization' or 'mainstreaming' of the far right. So far, this literature is dominated by two very different understandings of these concepts (Hjorth, Nyrup, & Larsen, 2021). Some scholars conceive of this process of mainstream parties' adoption of the far right's stances (Mudde, 2019; Wagner & Meyer, 2016). Others, however,

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<sup>2</sup> Such non-cooperation agreements are often referred to as a "cordon sanitaire" in the literature (e.g., de Jonge, 2020; Downs, 2002).

conceive of mainstreaming as ideological moderation of challenger parties (Hjorth et al., 2021; Moffitt, 2021). This paper, however, offers a different perspective, which is not focused on policy positions of the far right or mainstream parties. I contend that mainstream parties shape citizens evaluations of whether far right parties are beyond the pale in democratic politics or not.

### **FRPs' rise and mainstream parties' response strategies**

Faced with the multifaceted, complex challenge of FRPs' rise, mainstream parties have responded in a multitude of different ways (see Heinze, 2017 for an overview). It is well-documented that mainstream parties ideologically have moved to the right on cultural issues and increasingly emphasize these issues in response to FRPs' electoral successes (e.g., Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; Bale et al., 2009; Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016; van Spanje, 2010a; Wagner & Meyer, 2016). Following the terminology used in Meguid's seminal study (2005), the literature often refers to such strategies as 'accommodative strategies'.

So far, only few studies have examined mainstream parties' non-policy based response strategies. A type of mainstream party response that comes close to the response of interest in this paper is ostracism – that is, a strategy of political isolation of FRPs (Art, 2007; van Spanje, 2010b). In many cases, this includes formal agreements not to collaborate with FRPs – often referred to as 'cordon sanitaire' in the literature (Downs, 2002). In some instances, mainstream parties' ostracism even entails a boycott of entering public discussion with FRPs' politicians by mainstream parties (Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007).<sup>3</sup> In other words, many FRPs are treated as political pariahs by their mainstream competitors (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; Minkenberg, 2013; Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007). Yet, other FRPs are actually not ostracized and in some political systems mainstream parties have even formed coalition

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: <https://afd-fraktion.nrw/2020/04/20/neutralitaetsgebot-von-schulen-und-universitaeten-bei-podiumsdiskussionen-zur-kommunalwahl-in-nrw/>

governments with them (de Lange, 2012). Put differently, they are treated as ‘normal’, politically legitimate competitors (Moffitt, 2021; van Spanje, 2010b).

A number of studies have investigated the electoral consequences of these different types of response strategies by mainstream parties. The existing evidence with regard to the effectiveness of accommodative strategies is mixed. Building on a spatial logic of electoral competition, several studies conclude that accommodative strategies are an effective means for mainstream parties to win voters back and electorally harm FRPs (Chou et al., 2021; Hjorth & Larsen, 2020; Meguid, 2005; Spoon & Klüver, 2020). The underlying rationale is that citizens vote for the party ideologically closest to them and thus an ideological repositioning affects vote choice. Yet, in contrast to what one would expect from a spatial approach, other studies find that accommodative mainstream party strategies actually do not mitigate – but might even fuel – FRP success (Abou-Chadi, Cohen, & Wagner, 2021; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Dahlström & Sundell, 2012). These authors contend that accommodative strategies legitimize FRPs and their stances and therefore, eventually, benefit the targeted FRPs electorally.<sup>4</sup>

This study, however, focusses on the consequences of mainstream parties’ non-policy based response strategies to FRPs. The evidence on this type of mainstream party responses is inconclusive. Some contend that ostracism – i.e., a strategy of political exclusion – is an effective strategy (Art, 2007, 2011). Yet, others point out that, depending on the (institutional) context, ostracism might even benefit the targeted FRP (Downs, 2002; Van Spanje & Van der Brug, 2009; van Spanje & Weber, 2017) or that it only works in combination with an accommodative strategy (Van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017). Most of these studies contend that the effect of ostracism on vote choice is mediated its effect on the expected utility of an FRP vote (Van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017; Van Spanje & Van der Brug, 2009; van Spanje & Weber,

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<sup>4</sup> However, it is important to note that none of these studies actually taps into citizens’ legitimacy evaluations.

2017). Put differently, voters are assumed to be rational actors who do not vote for FRPs when they do not derive any instrumental value from it – either in the form of policy influence or signaling protest (Van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017; van Spanje & Weber, 2017). Others, however, allude to the possibility that legitimacy evaluations of FRPs constitute a link between ostracism and vote choice. For example, Art (2007, p. 335) argues: “[...] policies of non-cooperation send signals to potential voters that the far right is politically illegitimate.”

In sum, the existing literature on mainstream parties’ responses to FRPs and their consequences for citizens primarily focuses on mainstream parties’ positional shifts in response to FRPs. Yet, mainstream parties’ response strategies differ considerably with regard to how they treat and portray FRPs. Some FRPs are treated as political pariahs, whilst others are treated as ‘normal’ democratic competitors. A couple of studies have examined the effects of mainstream parties’ ostracism on vote choice. However, so far, no study so far directly tap into citizens’ legitimacy evaluations of FRPs as a potential consequence of such strategies. Moreover, the existing literature

### **The argument: Mainstream party strategies and citizens’ legitimacy evaluations**

In this paper, I focus on two different mainstream party strategies, which I conceptualize as follows. First, a delegitimizing strategy, where the targeted FRP is portrayed as undemocratic and on these grounds ostracized. Second, a legitimizing strategy, where the targeted FRP is portrayed as democratic and on these grounds not ostracized. Debates on whether FRPs should be seen as ‘normal’, legitimate competitors or as an illegitimate – or even immoral – political pariahs are salient in most political systems whenever FRPs enter parliament amongst the general public and mainstream party elites alike (Art, 2011; Hjorth, 2020; Moffitt, 2021).

In line with most previous studies on the consequences of mainstream parties’ non-policy based reactions to FRPs (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; van Spanje, 2010b; Van Spanje & de Graaf,

2017; Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007; van Spanje & Weber, 2017), I focus on the mainstream right – that is, the CDU in the German context. For mainstream right parties, the question of whether the FRP should be treated as a political pariah is of particular strategic importance. On the one hand, treating FRPs as a political pariah and thus excluding them is an effective waste of votes in the right bloc (Bale, 2003) and they “lose” a potential coalition partner (de Lange, 2012). On the other hand, FRPs are presumably competing to some extent for similar (i.e., ideologically rightwing) voters, which might make delegitimizing an attractive strategy for mainstream right parties.

Importantly, whether mainstream parties pursue a delegitimizing or a legitimizing strategy has not only considerable normative implications, but arguably also strategic implications for mainstream parties.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, mainstream parties have an incentive that FRPs are evaluated as illegitimate by a large share of citizens as citizens’ willingness to vote for FRPs is contingent on their perceptions of FRPs’ legitimacy (Bos & van der Brug, 2010). As such, delegitimizing strategies could decrease the number of voters that FRPs can potentially appeal to. On the other hand, mainstream parties have incentives that their far right challengers are not perceived as beyond the pale. First, mainstream parties might portray FRPs as democratic to increase citizens’ acceptance of (future) coalitions or other forms of collaboration. If an FRP is perceived as beyond the pale by a majority of voters, its votes are effectively wasted for the right bloc (Bale, 2003). Second, several scholars have argued that political exclusion prevents FRPs from becoming more moderate (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; Han, 2019; Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007).

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<sup>5</sup> To be clear from the outset, I do not aim to explain whether (de-)legitimizing strategies reflect sincere concerns about democracy or strategic considerations. Rather, my point of departure is that mainstream parties do use these strategies and I test how they change voters’ evaluations of FRPs.

As FRPs have now become established, powerful actors in most European party systems it is of little surprise that mainstream parties in many countries have softened or even abandoned the ostracisms they initially employed. Former political pariahs – such as the Danish People’s Party, the Dutch PVV or the Austrian Freedom Party – became coalition partners or supported minority governments of mainstream parties. In other countries – such as Sweden – mainstream parties have begun to gradually abandon their initial ostracism.

In this paper, I ask whether citizens follow mainstream party elites in their legitimacy evaluations of FRPs.

Whether FRPs should be evaluated as legitimate actors or not is arguably a salient and complex issue for many citizens. On the one hand, these parties have been democratically elected into parliament. On the other hand, these parties are often associated with extreme ideologies and undemocratic behavior. As such, I expect that citizens do not have crystallized opinions on how to evaluate these parties’ democratic legitimacy, but are prone to influence from mainstream party communication. Indeed, plenty of evidence shows that party elites’ communications has considerable influence on voters’ policy opinions (e.g., Broockman & Butler, 2017; Bullock, 2011; Lenz, 2009; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Zaller, 1992) and even perceptions of political reality (Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018).

### **Research design: A survey experimental approach**

A key challenge in studying causal effects of political elites’ messages on public opinion is that these messages are not independent of public opinion. Mainstream parties’ responses to FRPs *as well as* citizens’ evaluations of FRPs are presumably to some extent a consequence of FRPs’ actual conduct and other confounding variables. Put differently, selection bias poses a severe challenge to the identification of causal effects using observational data. Would citizens’ evaluations of an FRP actually be different if mainstream parties adopted another

communication strategy? Moreover, how mainstream parties treat the new far right challenger might be a consequence of voters' evaluations of the far right challenger (instead of the reverse relationship that I hypothesized). Arriving at robust causal conclusions on how mainstream party communication shapes citizens' evaluations of FRPs is further complicated by the fact that mainstream parties do almost never suddenly shift their communication strategies (which would allow for strong quasi-experimental tests), but change them rather slow and gradually. Furthermore, for a quasi-experimental design the researcher would have to foresee changes in party strategies. Hence, I choose a survey experimental approach – in contrast to almost all previous studies on how mainstream parties' responses to FRPs' influence citizens (see Hjorth & Larsen, 2020; van Spanje & Weber, 2017 for two notable exceptions).

### **The context of the experiment: German mainstream parties' responses to the AfD**

For the most part, the AfD is treated like a typical pariah party by its mainstream competitors (Arzheimer, 2019). They ostracize the party and portray it as undemocratic (Arzheimer, 2019). Put differently, German mainstream parties employ a *delegitimizing strategy* towards the AfD. Nevertheless, Germany provides a fruitful setting for my survey experiment. Whilst German mainstream parties – including the CDU – generally delegitimize the AfD, there is considerable internal disagreement with regard to the extent to which the AfD should be treated as a political pariah. Whilst the official party line is a strict cordon sanitaire,<sup>6</sup> several high-ranking politicians of the CDU – especially in the Eastern German *Länder* – publicly advocate that their party should be open towards forming coalitions with AfD (Arzheimer, 2019).<sup>7</sup> Due to this internal disunity within the CDU and because German mainstream party elites were actually intensely debating FRPs' legitimacy at the time when the data was collected (January 2021), the German

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<sup>6</sup>[https://archiv.cdu.de/system/tdf/media/dokumente/cdu\\_deutschlands\\_unsere\\_haltung\\_zu\\_linkspartei\\_und\\_afd\\_1.pdf?file=1](https://archiv.cdu.de/system/tdf/media/dokumente/cdu_deutschlands_unsere_haltung_zu_linkspartei_und_afd_1.pdf?file=1)

<sup>7</sup> See for example: <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/sachsen-anhalt/landtagswahl/offener-brief-cdu-basis-afd-zusammenarbeit-100.html>

context allows me to manipulate (de-)legitimizing strategies in way that is not only credible and meaningful to respondents, but also ethical.

### **The experimental procedure**

The survey experiment (N=2,079) was conducted in collaboration with YouGov in January 2021. The sample is representative of the German adult population in terms of gender, age, region, and voting behavior in the national election 2017. At the very beginning of the survey, respondents were told that the survey aims to investigate what citizens think about current political issues and politics more generally to hide the actual experiment. Then, respondents answered a number of questions tapping into, for example, external political efficacy, trust in several political institutions, party identification, and attitudes towards immigration.

The stimulus material of this study is tied to a discussion about AfD's participation in panel debate at public schools. This case was chosen for three reasons. First, I suppose that voters' opinions on this issue are not crystallized, but somewhat conflicted due to the existence of many competing considerations on the issue leaving room for influences (see Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Nicholson, 2012 for similar rationales justifying the choice of issues/cases in political communication experiments). Second, I suppose respondents find this issue relevant and thus engaging (ensuring high experimental realism). Third, it allows for a credible manipulation of (de-)legitimizing strategies. At the time the data was collected, invitations of AfD representatives to events taking place at public schools regularly sparked intense discussions. There are not only instances where participation of AfD politicians at school events elicited intense protest from civil society actors,<sup>8</sup> but (local) mainstream party representatives also boycotted such events in which AfD participated and justified this boycott on the grounds of AfD's alleged undemocratic nature and its detrimental consequences for

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mopo.de/hamburg/protest-an-der-max-brauer-schule--schueler-vergraulen-afd-politiker---polizei-rueckt-an-33753180>

democracy.<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup> In other instances, mainstream party politicians have argued that the AfD's "right" to participate in school panel discussions should not be denied.<sup>11</sup>

Before respondents were exposed to the treatment, they read the following text:

*"The participation of the AfD at panel discussions is a frequently discussed topic. Other parties also regularly express themselves in this discussion. Currently, there is for example a discussion on the planned participation of an AfD representative at a panel discussion at the Goethe-Gymnasium [English: high school] in Holsterhausen<sup>12</sup>. The panel discussion is supposed to take place prior to a local election. Some voices expressed themselves critically towards AfD's participation, whereas others are supportive of the participation. We would like to ask you a couple of questions on the topic."*

Next, the sample was randomly split into three groups. One third of the respondents was assigned to a delegitimizing mainstream party strategy (delegitimizing condition), one third was assigned to legitimizing mainstream party strategy (legitimizing condition), and one third did not read anything further, but directly answered the outcome measure questions (the benchmark condition).

In both treatment conditions, respondents were told that they will read a couple of "typical" newspaper articles readers "might encounter" in daily newspapers on the debate in Holsterhausen before answering the questions.<sup>13</sup> Using this language ensures that deception is

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<sup>9</sup> <https://afd-fraktion.nrw/2020/04/20/neutralitaetsgebot-von-schulen-und-universitaeten-bei-podiumsdiskussionen-zur-kommunalwahl-in-nrw/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/rheinland/keine-wahlveranstaltung-mit-der-afd-100.html>  
<https://afd-fraktion.nrw/2020/04/20/neutralitaetsgebot-von-schulen-und-universitaeten-bei-podiumsdiskussionen-zur-kommunalwahl-in-nrw/>  
<https://www.24vest.de/oer-erkenschwick/oer-erkenschwick-podiumsdebatten-sind-diskussion-13571104.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hamburg.de/bsb/pressemitteilungen/12412952/2019-04-03-bsb-politische-diskussionen/>

<sup>12</sup> Holsterhausen is fictitious city, which I came up with to avoid any potentially confounding associations of participations with regard to the place (some regional branches of AfD are more extreme than others).

<sup>13</sup> The stimulus material was developed and adjusted based on the results of a first pretest and tested in a second pretest. The two pretests did not only serve the purpose to validate that the vignettes are actually

reduced to a minimum. The participants in each treatment condition were then exposed to a series of four different mock<sup>14</sup> newspaper articles. The articles resemble each other across conditions to the largest extent possible.

All articles have a similar structure (see Table 1 for an example from each condition). In each article, a CDU politician is cited who a) advocates for/against a boycott of the panel discussion and b) justifies his/her position by portraying the AfD as (un-)democratic. The portrayal contains the mere labelling of the AfD as a “(un-)democratic” as well as an argument for *why* the AfD should be considered as (un-)democratic and on these grounds boycotted. Although the newspaper articles are fictitious, they mimic real newspaper articles to the largest extent possible. Furthermore, the arguments used mostly imitate real statements of CDU politicians. The politician cited in the newspaper articles varies between each of the four articles. Two of them are local-level politicians, one is on the Länder-level, and one is a national-level politician. Assigning the messages to politicians on the Länder- and national level reduces the likelihood that the strategy is perceived as “only” tied to a local case with limited relevance for national politics.

I used four articles in order to increase respondents’ involvement with the stimulus material. Moreover, four different articles facilitated the use of (four) different arguments for/against a boycott in each of the two experimental conditions. Respondents were instructed after each article to think again about the CDU politician’s statement they just read and were asked to rate the comprehensibility of the statement. This further enhances respondents’ involvement with the stimulus material.

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perceived as (de-)legitimizing by respondents, but also that they do not differ substantially with respect to credibility.

<sup>14</sup> At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed. That is, they were told that the debate on the panel discussion in Holsterhausen as well as the newspaper articles were fictitious.

To increase experimental and mundane realism, the newspaper articles included a picture displaying AfD's logo or a panel discussion. The articles were presented in the form of newspaper articles published on the webpage of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* – one of Germany's most popular newspapers.

Table 1: Two examples of mock newspaper articles; one per experimental condition

Legitimizing condition	Delegitimizing condition
<p><b>CDU district chairwoman: AfD represents <u>legitimate positions of voters</u></b></p> <p>In the debate on the panel discussion at the Goethe-Gymnasium in Holsterhausen, the district chairwoman of the CDU, Susanne Herzog, pleads that her party should participate in the panel discussion <u>despite</u> the participation of the AfD. “As the AfD represents <u>legitimate views and voices of citizens within the range of democratic opinions – even if we do not always like them, we have to confront them in public discourse. That is how it is in a democracy</u>”, says Susanne Herzog.</p>	<p><b>CDU district chairwoman: AfD represents <u>rightwing extremist, undemocratic positions</u></b></p> <p>In the debate on the panel discussion at the Goethe-Gymnasium in Holsterhausen, the district chairwoman of the CDU, Susanne Herzog, pleads that her party should <u>not</u> participate in the panel discussion <u>because</u> of the participation of the AfD. “As the AfD represents <u>right-wing extremist views and voices of citizens outside the range of democratic opinions the party has lost its right to speak at schools. We should not provide a platform to this party by appearing together with the AfD at schools</u>”, says Susanne Herzog.</p>

### Outcome measures & partisanship

Following others, I operationalize legitimacy evaluations as a) perceptions of AfD's democraticness (Bos & van der Brug, 2010; Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2012; Jacobs & van Spanje, 2019; van Spanje & Azrout, 2019, 2021) and b) citizens' willingness to grant the AfD democratic privileges (Berntzen, Bjånesøy, & Ivarsflaten, 2017) – that is, tolerance judgements. Respondents' perceptions of AfD's democraticness were measured using two items. Respondents reported to which extent they agree with the following two statements on a 5-point-Likert-scale: 'The AfD is a democratic party' and 'The AfD poses a threat to democracy'. Based on these two items I created an index ( $\alpha = .81$ ; labelled “Democraticness” in the figures below). I measure respondents' tolerance in two different ways. First, respondents reported on a 5-point-Likert-scale whether they support a boycott of the panel discussion in

Holsterhausen by CDU or not (“Boycott” in the figures below). Second, I measured respondents’ tolerance judgements using various items. Respondents were asked whether the AfD should have the right to speak at public schools, express themselves in public debate, hold public demonstrations, and whether the police should have better opportunities to tap the telephones of representatives of the AfD. These items were taken from Petersen, Slothuus, Stubager, and Togeby (2010). In addition to the four items, I added an item tapping into support for a party ban – a peculiar feature of the German context. Again, I formed an index based on the five items ( $\alpha = .89$ ; “Tolerance”).<sup>15</sup>

All outcome variables were rescaled (0-1) and the scales of three variables were reversed, so that negative values indicate that the AfD is evaluated as less legitimate and positive values indicate that the AfD is evaluated as more legitimate.

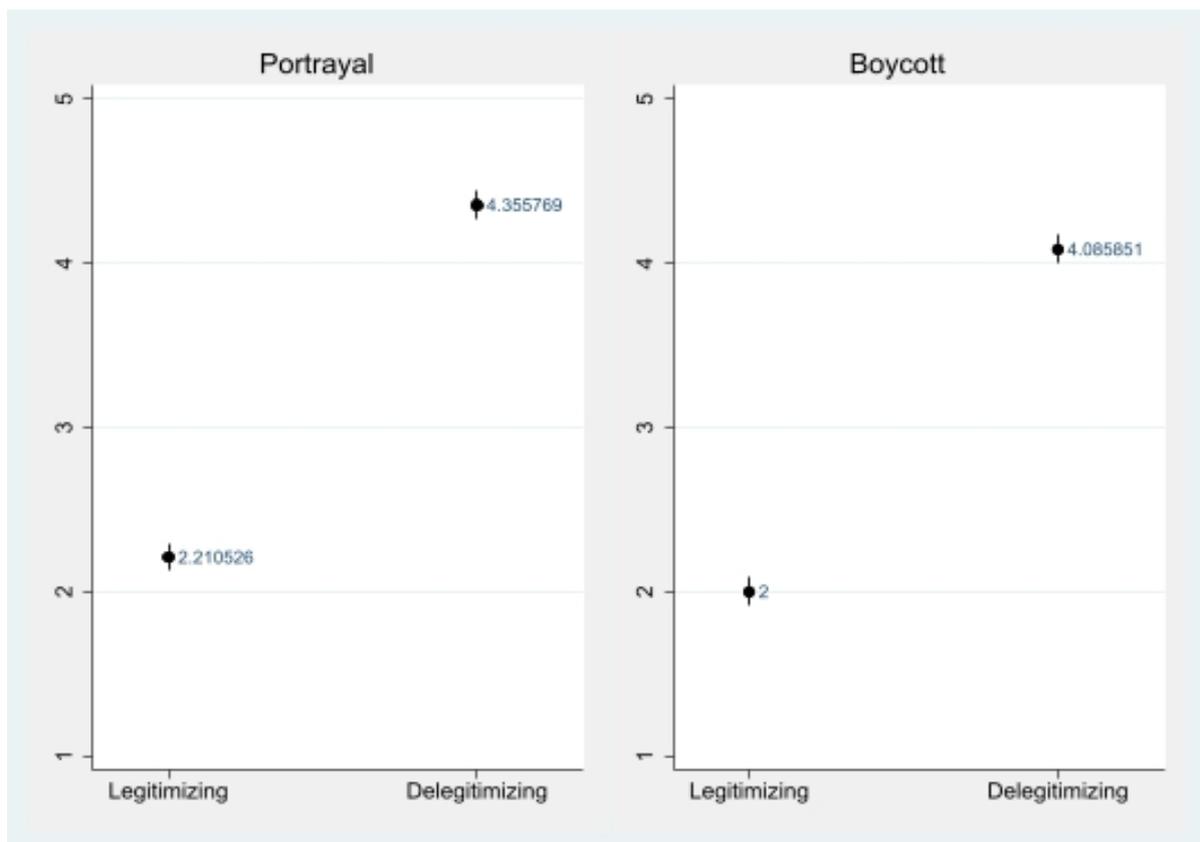
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<sup>15</sup> The formation of these indexes was guided by a factor analysis.

## Manipulation checks

To assess whether respondents actually perceived the stimulus material as intended, they were asked two questions at the very end of the survey. First, the respondents were asked ‘To what extent do you think the AfD was portrayed as democratic or undemocratic by the CDU in the articles?’ on a scale from 1 ‘Democratic’ to 5 ‘Undemocratic’. Second, they were asked whether CDU advocated to participate in the panel discussion in Holsterhausen or not in the articles (scale from 1 ‘Should definitely participate’ to 5 ‘Should definitely not participate’). These two questions reflect that the treatment consists of two elements – ostracism versus no ostracism and portrayal as democratic versus undemocratic.

Figure 1: Manipulation checks

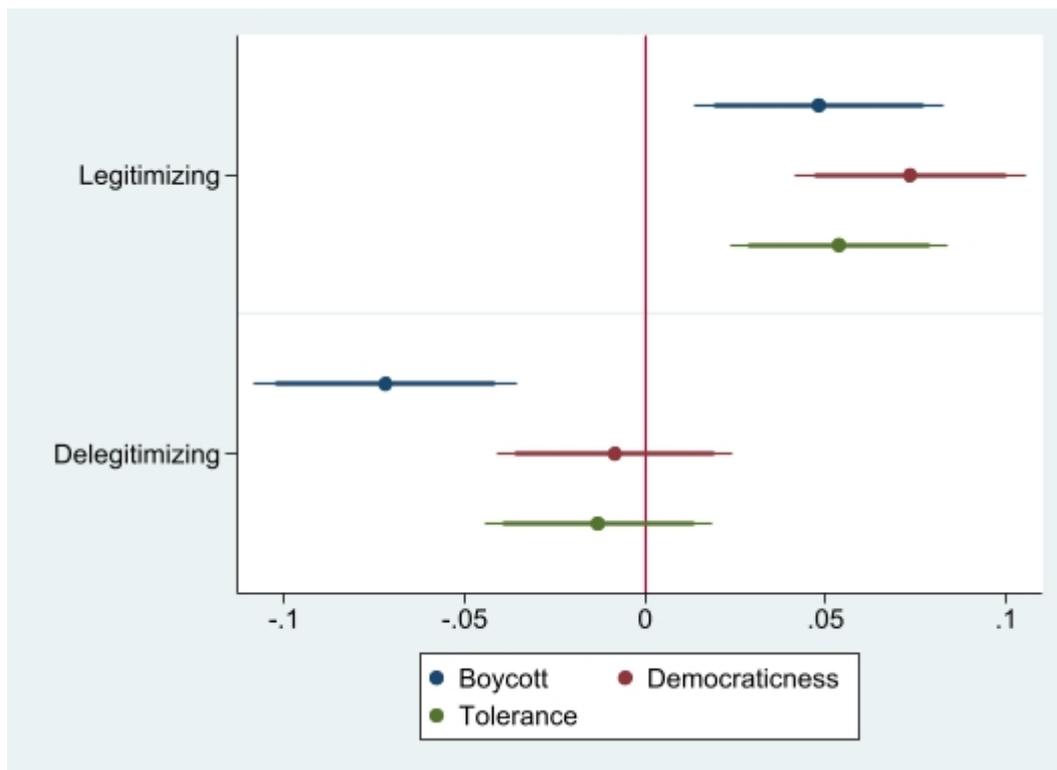


*Note:* Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence interval. Respondents who answered “Don’t know” were excluded from the analysis. The full regression output of the OLS models can be found in the Appendix (Table B1).

The averages displayed in Figure 1 clearly show that both manipulations were successful. Respondents rated CDU's portrayal of AfD as substantially more democratic than in the delegitimizing condition (left panel in Figure 1). This difference is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Respondents also correctly identified CDU's stance with regard to the panel discussion in Holsterhausen in both treatment conditions (right panel in Figure 2).

## Results

The results presented in Figure 2 clearly support the argument I put forward in this paper. Citizens follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their evaluations of FRPs' legitimacy.



Respondents in the delegitimizing condition are on average considerably more supportive of CDU's boycott of the panel discussion in Holsterhausen than the respondents in the legitimizing condition. There is a difference of .12 scale points between the legitimizing condition and the delegitimizing condition. This difference is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). However, the effects are not restricted to the specific case on the panel discussion in

Holsterhausen – to which the newspaper articles in the two treatment conditions were tied to – , but also affect respondents’ perceptions of AfD’s democraticness (Model 2). Respondents in the delegitimizing condition perceive AfD as less democratic than those in the legitimizing condition ( $b = -.082$ ;  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that citizens’ democraticness perceptions of AfD can be shaped by mainstream parties’ delegitimizing strategies. Furthermore, mainstream party-sponsored (de-)legitimizing messages also affect citizen’s tolerance towards AfD (Model 3). Respondents in the delegitimizing condition are significantly less tolerant towards AfD as compared to those in the legitimizing condition ( $b = -.067$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

In Figure 2, I present the effects of treatment by party affiliation.<sup>1617</sup> The results show that CDU supporters’ evaluations of AfD’s legitimacy are more strongly shaped by treatment than the legitimacy evaluations of all other respondents. Whilst the difference between the legitimizing condition and the delegitimizing condition for the full sample is .12 scale points, it is .21 scale points for CDU supporters only. The interaction (CDU supporters versus all others) is statistically significant ( $p = .004$ ). The effects of treatment on democraticness perceptions of and tolerance towards AfD are also stronger for CDU supporters than for all others. However, the interaction terms are not significant. Importantly, the effects are by no means restricted to CDU supporters. Outpartisans (the bottom-left panel) are also affected by treatment, but to a lesser extent than CDU supporters. Notably, independents seem to be less prone to influences of CDU’s (de-)legitimizing communications on their legitimacy evaluations of the AfD. For independents, the effect of treatment on democraticness perceptions even barely fails to hit the threshold of statistical significance (90 per cent). The

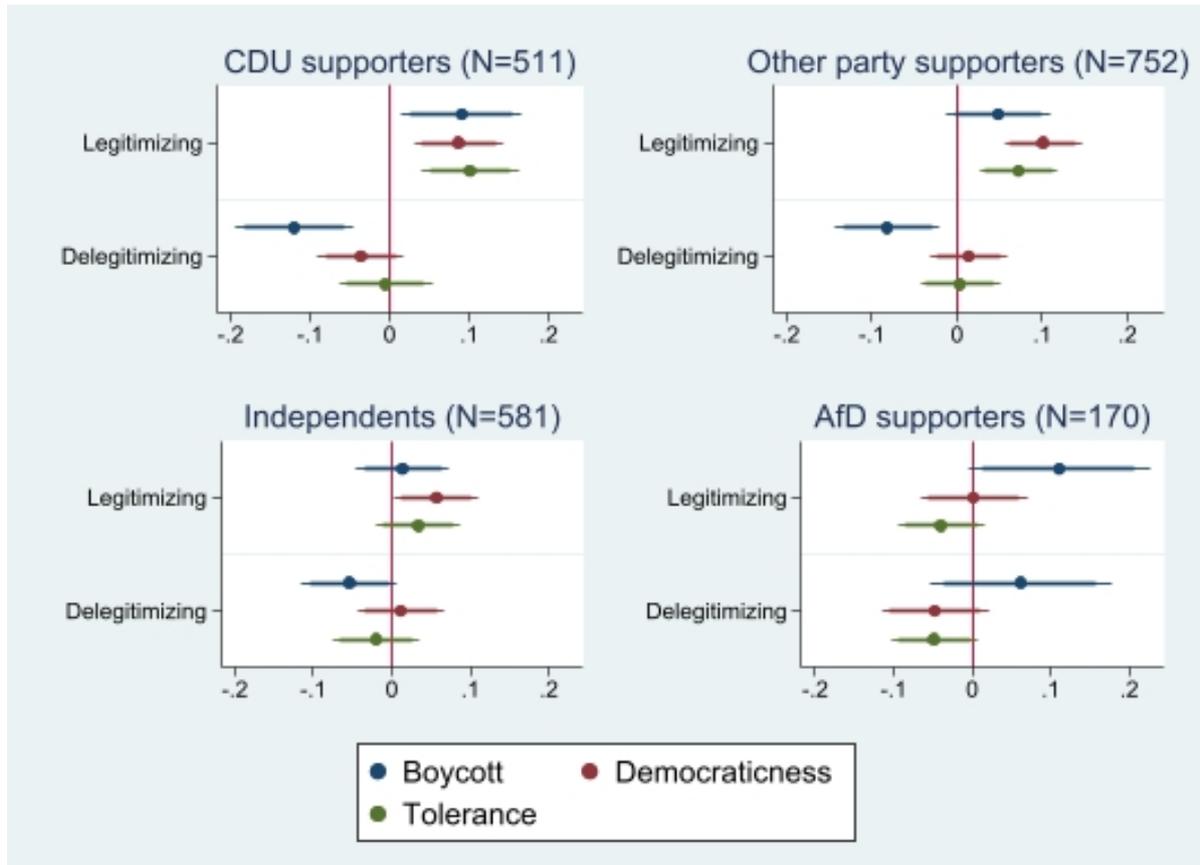
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<sup>16</sup> I did not split up the group of supporters of other parties further as the number of observations were too low. Yet, I analyzed them separately. Supporters of the Greens are somewhat stronger affected by treatment. Other than that, this analysis does not yield any interesting findings.

<sup>17</sup> To measure party affiliation, respondents were asked whether there is a party they are more leaning towards to than any other party. 28.85 per cent in the sample reported that they are not leaning towards any party. The findings also replicate when self-reported vote choice is used instead to measure party affiliation.

upper right panel shows that AfD supporters' legitimacy evaluation of their own party is not influenced by treatment status.

Figure 2: Effects of treatment (versus control group) on legitimacy evaluations by party affiliation



Note: OLS regression estimates are shown. Error bars represent 90 per cent and 95 per cent confidence intervals, respectively.

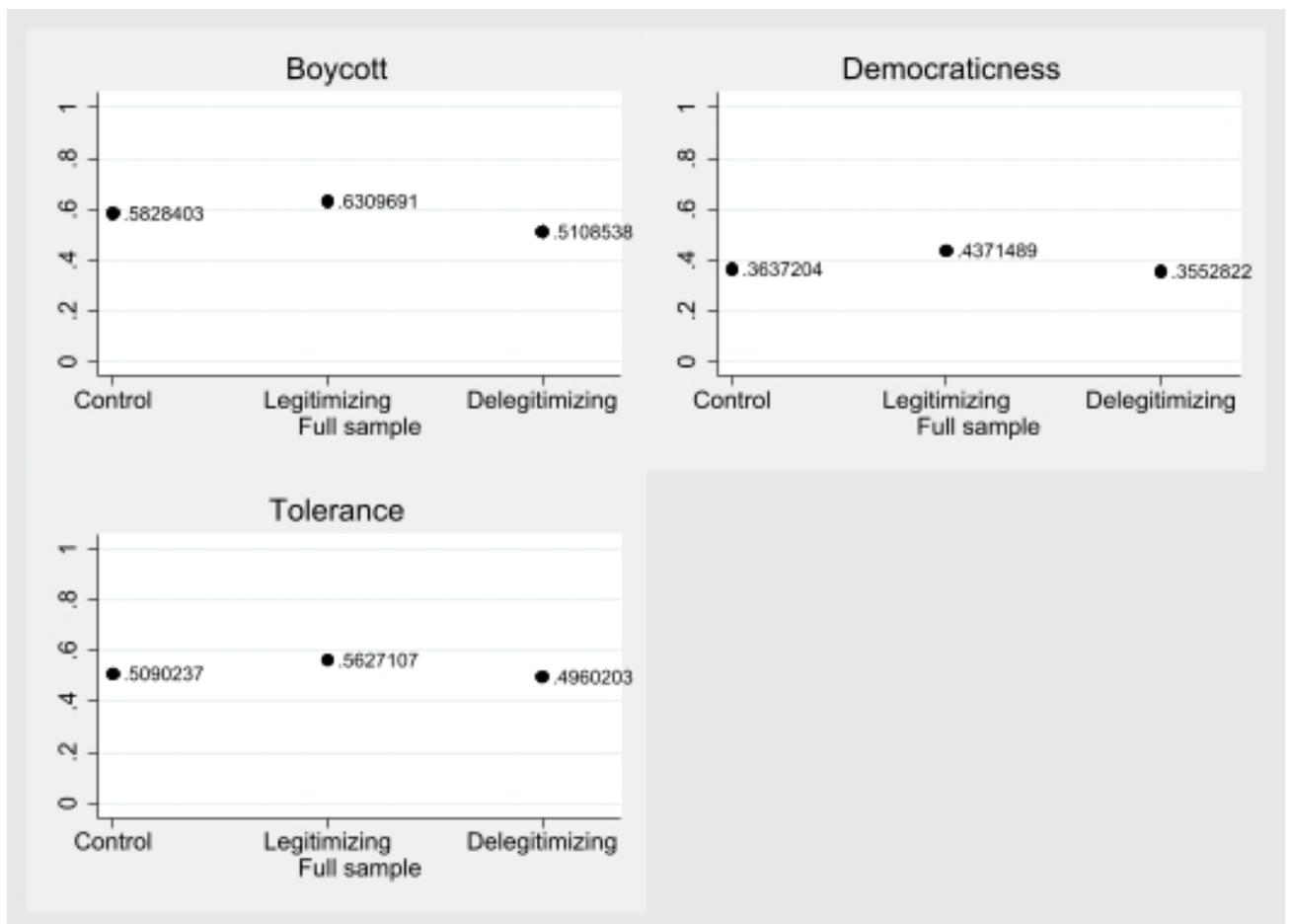
### Comparison with benchmark condition

The comparison with the benchmark condition yields two interesting results. First, it reveals that German citizens – without the interference of the treatment used in this study – to a large part evaluate the AfD as illegitimate. Only 44% of the respondents in the benchmark group rather or strongly oppose a boycott of the panel discussion in Holsterhausen and only 19% fully

or rather agree with the statement that the AfD is a democratic party, whilst 54 % rather or fully agree that the party poses a threat to democracy.

Second, the comparison with the benchmark condition reveals that the legitimizing – and not the delegitimizing condition – is mostly driving the results. The legitimizing ( $b = .048$ ;  $p = .008$ ) and the delegitimizing condition ( $b = -.072$ ;  $p < .001$ ) both differ significantly from the benchmark condition with regard to the first dependent variable tapping into legitimacy evaluations – that is, support for CDU’s boycott in Holsterhausen. Yet, only the legitimizing, but not the delegitimizing condition, differs significantly with regard to democraticness perceptions as well as tolerance judgements.

Figure 3: Comparisons with benchmark condition



*Note:* Averages are shown. Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals. No covariates are included. 1 represents pro-AfD views (no support for boycott in Holsterhausen; AfD is a

democratic party/no threat to democracy; completely tolerant towards AfD) and 0 anti-AfD views (full support for boycott in Holsterhausen; AfD is an undemocratic party/threat to democracy; completely intolerant towards AfD).

The most plausible explanation for this are pretreatment effects. As described before, in the German context, respondents were strongly exposed to delegitimizing communication before. Hence, the control group is far from neutral and the stimulus material was just one additional message on top of the many delegitimizing messages respondents were exposed to before entering the experimental setting (Druckman & Leeper, 2012; Slothuus, 2016). German mainstream parties *do* delegitimize and as such the delegitimizing vignettes resemble the real world more than the legitimizing ones. The fact that respondents in the pretest rated the delegitimizing as considerably more credible than the legitimizing one pretest lends support to this proposition, which I, unfortunately, cannot ultimately prove. That the legitimizing and the delegitimizing condition both differ significantly from the benchmark condition with regard to the boycott in Holsterhausen can arguably also be interpreted as a finding that points to existence of pretreatment effects. Whilst citizens were exposed to many messages portraying the AfD as generally undemocratic and threatening the political system, they did not receive any messages on this specific case before the experiment. Hence, there was room for influence of the treatment.

However, the goal of this experiment was after all to create variation in the independent variable – that is, (de-)legitimizing mainstream party strategies. This was successfully achieved by the treatment material. Therefore, the fact that the results are mainly driven by the legitimizing condition does not change the substantial conclusion drawn from this analysis. Whether mainstream parties' portray FRPs as 'normal', democratic competitors or whether they portray them as undemocratic political pariahs has substantial consequences for how citizens evaluate FRPs' legitimacy.

## **Concluding remarks**

The results of this experiment showed strong support for my argument that mainstream parties can shape citizens' evaluations of FRPs' legitimacy via portraying them as (un-)democratic actors. Citizens – across party lines – perceive FRPs as more democratic and are less likely to deny FRPs democratic privileges when mainstream parties pursue a legitimizing strategy. These findings suggest that mainstream parties (de-)legitimizing strategies towards FRPs have far reaching consequences for FRPs and Western democracies more generally.

Mainstream parties' strategies towards their challengers and their consequences

Moreover, this paper contributes to the literature on the mainstreaming of far right parties. Most existing literature conceptualizes mainstreaming as a process of mainstream parties' adoption of FRPs' ideas, issues, rhetoric and policies or moderation of the far right itself (e.g., Mudde, 2019; Wagner & Meyer, 2016) or whether (formerly) far right actors moderate their positions (Hjorth et al., 2021). I, however, contend that mainstream parties can influence whether citizens evaluate FRPs *as actors* as beyond the pale or not by portraying them as (un-)democratic actors. This perspective differs from previous conceptions of mainstreaming in important ways. Legitimacy evaluations might not only be influenced by (perceived) ideological extremity of or the means used by an actor, but also the conception of democracy applied when evaluating an actor. My experiment provides strong evidence that even in the German context – where far right parties are particularly strong stigmatized due to its peculiar history – mainstream parties can legitimize these parties in the eyes of citizens.

The findings of this study also point to important avenues for future research. First, it remains unclear *why* mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies influence citizens' evaluations of FRPs. These strategies might change citizens' evaluations of FRPs' legitimacy via persuasive arguments (Lenz, 2009). My research design does not allow for conclusions on which arguments or frames exactly resonate with citizens. Citizens might follow party cues rather

blindly (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). However, it is important to note that this experiment shows that it is *not* only in-partisans who follow the messages of their party. Another possibility is that mainstream parties inform citizens about social norms – that is, the mainstream party cues function as informational shortcuts shaping beliefs about what others do and what others think ought to be done. Second, further empirical studies are needed to corroborate the robustness and generalizability – for example, across different political contexts – of my results. Third, I focused on mainstream parties’ portrayals of FRPs with regard to its compatibility with democracy, but it remains unclear whether positional shifts of mainstream parties in response to FRPs also influence citizens’ legitimacy evaluations. Even though several scholars alluded to this possibility (e.g., Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Dahlström & Sundell, 2012), this has not been tested yet.

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## Appendix: Vignettes

Delegitimizing condition	Legitimizing condition
 <p>CDU-Kreisvorsitzende bezieht Stellung</p> <p><b>CDU-Kreisvorsitzende: AfD vertritt rechtsextreme, undemokratische Positionen</b></p> <p>In der Debatte um die Podiumsdiskussion am Goethe-Gymnasium in Holsterhausen plädiert die Kreisvorsitzende der CDU, Susanne Herzog, dafür, dass ihre Partei aufgrund der AfD-Beteiligung nicht an der Podiumsdiskussion teilnimmt. „Da die AfD rechtsextreme Ansichten und Positionen außerhalb des demokratischen Meinungsspektrums vertritt, hat sie ihr Recht verwirkt, an Schulen aufzutreten. Wir sollten dieser undemokratischen Partei keine Bühne bieten, indem wir gemeinsam mit ihr auftreten“, so Herzog.</p>	 <p>CDU-Kreisvorsitzende bezieht Stellung</p> <p><b>CDU-Kreisvorsitzende: AfD vertritt legitime Ansichten von Wählern</b></p> <p>In der Debatte um die Podiumsdiskussion am Goethe-Gymnasium in Holsterhausen plädiert die Kreisvorsitzende der CDU, Susanne Herzog, dafür, dass ihre Partei trotz AfD-Beteiligung an der Podiumsdiskussion teilnimmt. „Da die AfD eine demokratische Partei ist, die legitime Ansichten und Stimmen von Bürgern und Bürgerinnen innerhalb des demokratischen Meinungsspektrums vertritt – auch wenn diese uns nicht immer gefallen –, hat sie auch das Recht an Schulen aufzutreten. Wir sollten uns der Partei im Diskurs stellen. So ist das eben in einer Demokratie“, so Herzog.</p>
<p><b><u>CDU district chairwoman: AfD represents rightwing extremist, undemocratic positions</u></b></p> <p>In the debate on the panel discussion at the Goethe-Gymnasium in Holsterhausen, the district chairwoman of the CDU, Susanne Herzog, <u>pleads that her party should not participate in the panel discussion because of the participation of the AfD. “As the AfD represents right-wing extremist views and voices of citizens outside the range of democratic opinions the party has lost its right to speak at schools. We should not provide a platform to this party by appearing together with the AfD at schools”, says Susanne Herzog.</u></p>	<p><b><u>CDU district chairwoman: AfD represents legitimate positions of voters</u></b></p> <p>In the debate on the panel discussion at the Goethe-Gymnasium in Holsterhausen, the district chairwoman of the CDU, Susanne Herzog, <u>pleads that her party should participate in the panel discussion despite the participation of the AfD. “As the AfD represents legitimate views and voices of citizens within the range of democratic opinions – even if we do not always like them –, we have to confront them in public discourse. That is how it is in a democracy”, says Susanne Herzog.</u></p>
 <p>CDU-Fraktionsvorsitzender meldet sich zu Wort</p> <p><b>Stefan Schmid (CDU): AfD verachtet regelmäßig demokratische Institutionen</b></p> <p>In der Diskussion um die Teilnahme der CDU an Podiumsdiskussionen an Schulen mit AfD-Beteiligung meldet sich nun auch Stefan Schmid, Vorsitzender der CDU-Stadtratsfraktion in Holsterhausen, zu Wort. Da die AfD regelmäßig demokratische Institutionen verachte, könne man als Demokrat die Partei nicht „wie eine demokratische Partei behandeln“. Demzufolge plädiert er dafür, „keinen Vertreter unserer Partei zu dieser Veranstaltung zu schicken, wenn ein Vertreter der undemokratischen AfD vor Ort ist“.</p>	 <p>CDU-Fraktionsvorsitzender meldet sich zu Wort</p> <p><b>Stefan Schmid (CDU): AfD ist demokratisch gewählt worden und darf nicht diskriminiert werden</b></p> <p>In der Diskussion um die Teilnahme der CDU an Podiumsdiskussionen an Schulen mit AfD-Beteiligung meldet sich nun auch Stefan Schmid, Vorsitzender der CDU-Stadtratsfraktion in Holsterhausen, zu Wort. Da die AfD durch die Wahl in den Bundestag von der Wählerschaft legitimiert und somit demokratisch sei, könne man als Demokrat die Partei nicht „diskriminieren und anders als alle anderen demokratischen Parteien behandeln“. Demzufolge plädiert er dafür, „einen Vertreter unserer Partei zu dieser Veranstaltung zu schicken, auch wenn ein Vertreter der AfD vor Ort sein wird“.</p>

**Stefan Schmid (CDU): AfD regularly disdains democratic institutions**

In the debate on the participation of the CDU at panel discussions at schools with AfD representatives, the chairman of the CDU faction in the city council, Stefan Schmid, is now expressing his view. Since the AfD “regularly disrespects democratic institutions”, as a democrat one cannot “treat the party like a democratic party”. Therefore, he pleads for “not sending a representative of our party to this event if a representative of the AfD will be present”.

**Stefan Schmid (CDU): AfD has been elected democratically and must not be discriminated against**

In the debate on the participation of the CDU at panel discussions at schools with AfD representatives, the chairman of the CDU faction in the city council, Stefan Schmid, is now expressing his view. Since the AfD “is legitimized through its election into parliament by the electorate and is therefore democratic”, as a democrat one must not “discriminate against the party and treat them differently than all other democratic parties”. Therefore, he pleads for “sending a representative of our party to this event, even if a representative of the AfD will be present”.



Debatte über Podiumsdiskussion in Holsterhausen

**CDU-Landesinnenminister: AfD schafft Nährboden für Gewalt**

Auch auf Landesebene haben sich wichtige Stimmen innerhalb der CDU geäußert, die fordern, dass Vertreter ihrer Partei nicht mit der AfD bei Podiumsdiskussionen diskutieren sollen. So sagte Landesinnenminister König (CDU): „Die AfD ist eine undemokratische Partei, die einen Nährboden für Gewalt schafft. Daher sind wir gut beraten, alles zu tun, um zu verhindern, dass die undemokratische AfD ihren Hass verbreiten kann. Das gilt in Holsterhausen genauso wie überall sonst“. Alles andere sei „unvereinbar mit unserer freiheitlich-demokratischen Grundordnung“.



Debatte über Podiumsdiskussion in Holsterhausen

**CDU-Landesinnenminister: AfD ist eine verfassungskonforme, demokratische Partei**

Auch auf Landesebene haben sich wichtige Stimmen innerhalb der CDU geäußert, die fordern, dass Vertreter ihrer Partei nicht vor Podiumsdiskussionen mit der AfD zurückschrecken sollten. So sagte Landesinnenminister König (CDU): „Die AfD ist eine verfassungskonforme und damit demokratische Partei. Daher sind wir gut beraten, der AfD auch ihren Platz, der ihr als demokratische Partei zusteht, auch zuzugestehen. Das gilt in Holsterhausen genauso wie überall sonst“. Alles andere sei „unvereinbar mit unserer freiheitlich-demokratischen Grundordnung“.

**CDU-state interior minister: AfD creates a fertile breeding ground for violence**

Also on the Länder-level important voices have expressed themselves, who demand that representatives of their party should refrain from discussing with the AfD at panel discussions. Landesinnenminister König (CDU) said: “The AfD is an undemocratic party that creates a fertile breeding ground for violence. Therefore, we should do everything to prevent the AfD from disseminating its hate. This applies to Holsterhausen as it does elsewhere.” Anything else is “incompatible with our constitutional order”.

**CDU-state interior minister: AfD is a constitutional, democratic party**

Also on the Länder-level important voices have expressed themselves, who demand that representatives of their party should not back off from debates with the AfD. Landesinnenminister König (CDU) said: “The AfD is a constitutional and thus democratic party. Therefore, we should grant the party its democratic rights. This applies to Holsterhausen as it does elsewhere.” Anything else is “incompatible with our constitutional order”.