Green Going Mainstream: (How) Can Niche Parties Expand Their Electorate?

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Abstract

What explains why some smaller parties remain small after gaining their first seats whilst others manage to compete with the mainstream? Whilst we understand the contextual conditions that make niche and challenger parties successful on their main dimension of competition, much less is known about how the strategic behavior of these parties on other dimensions helps them expand. We ask if Green parties can successfully appeal to a more mainstream electorate by broadening their issue appeals or if doing so leads to strong trade-offs with their core constituents. We leverage a field experiment and survey experiment in Germany around the 2021 election. In the first study, the German Greens worked with us to randomize which policy bundles they use in their Facebook campaign. We measure the effectiveness of these policy bundles on votes at the polling station level in the 2021 Bundestag election. In the second study, we measure the effectiveness of the different policy bundles for particular groups of voters in a conjoint and vignette experiment. We find that Green parties can successfully appeal to a broader electorate without antagonizing their core constituents. Our paper has important implications for the scholarship on party competition and helps us understand how new party families have managed to gain increasing support in European party systems.

Keywords— Spatial competition; Parties; Persuasion; Challengers; Experiment

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1 Introduction

The last decades in European politics have been shaped by a dramatic transformation of European party systems. This transformation has been defined by the emergence of new niche and challenger parties. Parties such as Green and radical right parties have become established actors in nearly all West European party systems. At the same time, the erstwhile dominant parties of the mainstream left and right have seen a strong electoral decline.

Political science scholarship has dedicated much attention to the factors that can explain the emergence of niche or challenger parties. Structural accounts focus on the changes in the demand side of political competition as a result of the socio-economic transformations of post-industrial societies (Kriesi et al., 2008; Kitschelt et al., 1994). More behavioralist approaches emphasize the changing nature of the political issue space and the possibility to attract voters with novel programmatic appeals (De Sio & Weber, 2014; De Vries, Hobolt, & Hobolt, 2020). In general, the political science literature has been able to identify a number of contextual conditions that can explain the emergence of new party families and how and when they manage to win their first seats in parliament. However, if we look at the transformation of party systems in Western Europe in the past 20 years, we see strong variation in new party success. In some countries, these parties remain small, yet in other places, they are serious contenders for the largest party in the country or even win the election. Radical right and Green parties have at least at some point in polls outperformed their competitors of the mainstream left and right in nearly all Western European countries. Parties like M5S or LREM have become the strongest party in national elections. What can explain the electoral expansion of new party families beyond their breakthrough phase? Why do some of these parties manage to attract a larger, more mainstream part of the electorate whilst others remain small?

In this paper, we analyze how niche parties can expand their electoral base beyond their core voters and make two contributions. First, we argue that in order to understand the variation in electoral success among niche and challenger parties, we need to take these parties seriously as strategic actors and need to look beyond their core issues—the climate for the Greens and immigration for the Radical Right. The literature on niche and challenger party success has often treated these parties as the product of changing socio-economic conditions and the behavior of other actors (De Vries et al., 2020; Meguid, 2005). We argue that variation in electoral success beyond the breakthrough of a new party will be determined by how these parties can balance the expansion to new voters by campaigning on other issues without losing substantially among their core constituents. Based on a logic of 'consideration sets' (Oscarsson & Rosema, 2019), we distinguish core constituents, likely voters and non-supporters and conceptualize how niche party strategies affect support among these groups.

Our second contribution is methodological. We argue that existing studies often fall short in causally

identifying how party strategies affect electoral fortunes as a result of the study designs. As party strategies and electoral behavior are strongly endogenous, observational studies face high obstacles for causal identification. While these studies certainly have their merits, instances with strong claims to causal identification are rare in research on party politics. We mitigate these concerns by using a variety of experimental designs.

We focus on the Green party in Germany as a typical example of a European Niche and Challenger party. In the 2021 election the German Greens saw a large expansion of their electorate, albeit falling short in outperforming the social democratic SPD. This context presents an ideal testing ground for how Green parties can expand their electorate. Using two survey experiments, we investigate which issues niche parties can emphasize to successfully broaden their appeals without alienating their core constituents. In addition, using a field experiment on Facebook, we study which means these parties may use to appeal to new voters. First, we run an online survey on a representative sample of 3500 German adults before the 2021 Bundestag election. Using a survey experiment, we measure which specific policy bundle is most effective at changing whether people would consider voting for the Greens and how competent respondents think the Greens are at solving particular policy problems. Respondents see an appeal using one of three policy bundles: one focusing only on climate (the control group), one that focuses on climate and social justice (the 'climate + left' treatment arm), or one that focuses on climate and economic growth (the 'climate + right' treatment arm). We find that both the treatments, respectively, influence voters' perceptions of the competence of the Green candidate on social justice and economic growth. However, this only translates to a higher willingness to vote Greens for the climate + left policy bundle. Furthermore, we find that a wider appeal towards either the left or right does not seem to harm the perceived competence on climate or how important the party's core constituents think the issue is to the party. That said, a party's core constituents are less likely to vote for the party if they use a climate + right message. It thus seems that appealing broadly can attract new voters and does not lead to trade-offs with a party's core constituents, but only as long as the party uses an economically left message.

Second, in the same survey, we implement a conjoint experiment where we randomize the policy positions that the Green party takes on eight different policy issues. The results indicate that there are certain policy shifts a challenger party can make that attract voters who have not voted for the party before without alienating those who did. For instance, Green voters do not feel strongly about banning domestic flights whilst voters that consider the party but did not vote for them (likely voters), and especially those that do not consider the party at all (non-supporters), feel strongly about not banning domestic flights; and as a result, non-supporters would be 5.2% more likely to vote for the party if they don't support a ban on domestic flights, whilst for Green voters, there is no statistically significant

difference between supporting banning flights and not doing so. Taken together, this shows that there are certain policy positions where the party would not lose much among their core constituents if they change their appeals, whilst they could gain substantially among other parts of the electorate.

Third, we partner with the German Greens and run a field experiment during the 2021 election in two constituencies for the Bundestag. In these competitions, the party randomizes at the zip code level which policy bundle they use to appeal to voters on Facebook. In targeted zip codes, voters either get no ads from the Greens, see ads that combine a climate message with a left message, or ads where the climate message is combined with a right message. We use the same ads as in the first study. Whilst not significant when including controls, we find that there is a mobilization effect of about 2% when running Facebook ads versus not doing so. In addition, it seems that the climate+left message is more effective at mobilizing voters. These results thus confirm other work which states that online campaigning might be an important means for non-mainstream actors to reach out to voters (Diamond, 2010).

Our findings with regards to a niche and challenger party's reputation on their core issue are in line with existing work on the importance of a party or candidate's reputation (Green, 2007). Indeed, building on these studies, we hypothesize that once niche and challenger parties have established themselves as the 'guardians' of a certain topic through a strong brand, voters will trust them to keep that topic at heart even when the party expands its appeals by incorporating other issues in their program. Once a niche or challenger party has thus established its party brand, it can extend its appeal without damaging its standing on the core issue. In addition, our findings show that if these parties choose to expand their appeals and try to persuade new voters, then cheap, modern campaign techniques such as Facebook ads seem to be an effective means to attract new voters.

Taken together, our paper implies that there might be a path to success for niche and challenger parties beyond the break-through phase. Our findings and argument have important implications for the literature on party competition in Europe: we show that even though a party might initially have been a challenger, when it has established itself it can attract other parts of the electorate. With the right strategic choices, nice and challenger parties can thus compete as the mainstream's equals.

2 Theory

2.1 The appeals niche and challengers can use

The socio-economic structures of European societies have transformed in recent decades and have fundamentally altered the demand side of political competition. Changing employment and family structures, globalization, immigration, and other socio-structural transformations have created political demands on new issues outside the traditional conflict line around redistribution and state intervention

in the economy (Beramendi, Häusermann, Kitschelt, & Kriesi, 2015; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2008; Oesch, 2013). Highly educated socio-cultural professionals prefer progressive policies on issues such as environmental protection, gender equality or immigration. On the other hand, less-skilled workers and the petit bourgeoisie have more authoritarian/nationalist preferences. This differentiation of the issue and preference space, also called 'electoral dealignment, has provided fertile ground for new parties to attract a sizable share of the electorate.

In these changing context conditions, parties often conceptualized as 'niche' (Abou-Chadi & Orlowski, 2016; Meguid, 2008) or 'challenger' parties (De Vries et al., 2020), have been able to exploit the pluralization of demands by gaining credibility or ownership on a new issue dimension. As De Vries et al. (2020) argue, challenger parties act as issue entrepreneurs that can successfully mobilize issues that drive wedges through the electorate of the established parties of the mainstream left and right. Green parties on the environment and radical right parties on immigration can be seen as prime examples of this development.

While the literature has largely accepted a degree of electoral dealignment as a realized precondition for this development, there is an ongoing debate about the factors that determine when challenger and niche parties can successfully mobilize issues to attract a meaningful share of the electorate. The main focus of this debate lies in the behavior of mainstream parties. As Meguid (2005, 2008) has influentially argued, mainstream parties can weaken niche parties by accommodating their issue positions on immigration or the environment. Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi (2022) have, however, recently tested this idea empirically and do not find any evidence that accommodative strategies reduce radical right support. De Vries et al. (2020) argue that mainstream (or dominant) parties can prevent challenger party success by focusing competition on a competence dimension where they have an in-built advantage.

All these studies have in common that they focus on the context conditions that determine the success of niche and challenger parties. The demand-side explanations focus on electoral dealignment and ask whether the right breeding ground is available, and supply-side explanations see the behavior of other parties as core determinants of new party success. These perspectives have without a doubt significantly contributed to a better understanding of why parties such as Green and radical right parties have become established actors in many multi-party systems. Arguably, however, they tell us more about the breakthrough phase of challenger and niche parties: the period where they do or do not gain their first seats. The core question in this literature is how these parties can successfully attract a share of the electorate that strongly cares about an issue and how established parties can potentially prevent that. Niche parties use a niche in the ideological issue market to appeal to a niche of the electorate. While this niche can be quite sizable, such a perspective prevents us from taking these parties more seriously as contenders for becoming the strongest party of a block or even leading governments. Indeed, this

literature mainly considers competition between mainstream and new parties as "competition between unequals" (Meguid, 2008), which thus leaves unanswered why some of these parties seem to be contending as *equals*.

Building on work from Spoon (2011) and Meyer and Wagner (2013), we argue that to understand the large variation in the success of these parties after the breakthrough phase, it is important to focus on what niche and challenger parties can do as strategic actors. Spoon (2011) asks whether small-party agency can explain whether these parties persevere after their initial success. She argues that "small parties' survival is based on a careful balancing act in which they must determine how to maximize their vote and seat share [by becoming more moderate] without completely sacrificing their policy preferences" (2011, p. 15). For instance, do radical right parties stay extremely anti-immigration or do they take a more moderate stance to attract more voters? Spoon argues that this balancing act influences whether these parties persist in the long run: become too extreme and you only appeal to your core constituents, become too moderate and you lose your core constituents.

What Spoon (2011) doesn't consider, however, is that niche and challenger parties can also choose to compete on *other* dimensions of competition. Meyer and Wagner (2013) discuss this scenario and argue that parties strategically choose whether to focus on the same issues as other parties in a country (a mainstream profile) or if they focus on issues neglected by their rivals (a niche profile). Parties make this decision based on their electoral success: if parties lose, they will try something new and switch between a more niche or mainstream profile. We build on their argument by reversing the causal arrow and ask whether competing on more mainstream issues influences the vote share of niche and challenger parties.

The key question, in this regard, is how niche and challenger parties can become more attractive to new voters without alienating their core constituents. We use a logic of consideration sets to elaborate on this point. According to consideration set models of electoral choice, voting is a two-stage process (Oscarsson & Rosema, 2019). In the first stage, voters exclude certain options and create a set of viable options, and in the second stage, they choose from within this set. Importantly, different factors can affect the two stages. Consideration sets help us identify voters that parties might try to persuade and therefore why certain niche and challenger parties manage to grow more than others. We pose that voters who vote for a niche or challenger party during the breakthrough phase are the party's *core constituents*. A second group of voters have the party in their consideration set but have not voted for the party yet, they are *likely voters*. Finally, a third share of the electorate does not consider a party at all and are *non-supporters*. Based on the consideration set model, parties can expand their electorate in two different ways. (1) They can increase the vote share among people who have the party in the consideration set. (2) Parties can expand the share of people who have the party in the consideration set. While the first strategy should lead to an immediate increase in support for the party, the second one can be considered

a more long-term strategy. Niche and challenger parties thus face one crucial strategic question: how can they retain their core constituents whilst becoming more attractive to likely voters and potentially even try to become part of the consideration set of a larger share of the electorate?

The answer to this question of course depends on the niche or challenger party we are looking at. In this study, we focus on Green parties. Green parties developed in the seventies and eighties as a response to increased attention among the electorate to non-economic concerns such as the environment (Inglehart, 2015). The first national Green party in Europe was founded in Britain, and the first Green party to be nationally successful was the German Green party (Richardson & Rootes, 2006). In 1995, the Finish Green party was the first Green party to be a part of the government. What unites different Green parties is, of course, the emphasis on environmental protection, often historically connected to the anti-nuclear movement, and their more recent focus on social justice and progressive values.

Once a Green party has mobilized all voters for whom the environment is the most salient issue (their core constituents), it can choose which other groups of voters to appeal to. Based on the socio-structural support groups of different mainstream parties, two strategies seem possible for Green parties to expand their electorate: emphasize an economic left-wing position or focus on economic centrism. Structural accounts of transforming party competition may help us identify those groups. The composition of the economic left has changed due to the switch toward a more service-oriented economy and because of educational expansion. The share of workers in manufacturing has declined and an educated middle class has appeared (Oesch, 2013). This new middle class as well as the remaining groups of voters working in manufacturing are the social groups that predominantly support state intervention and redistribution (Beramendi et al., 2015). Whilst traditionally the electorate of Social Democratic and Socialist parties, Green parties may try to gain ground among this part of the electorate using a more economically left-wing message. At the other pole of the economic left-right dimension, Green parties could try to compete among voters with more economically conservative positions. Traditionally the supporters of Liberal and Christian-Democratic parties, these voters are generally (small) business owners, the self-employed, and managers (Beramendi et al., 2015; Oesch, 2013). The Greens could try to appeal to these voters with a more right or centrist economic message that emphasizes economic competence.

In this article, we thus ask whether it is possible for niche and challenger parties to expand their electorate without alienating their core constituents. In particular, we explore whether it is more effective for the Greens to expand their electorate with a more left-wing or a right-wing economic appeal. When assessing whether a strategy is more effective, we distinguish between retaining core constituents, convincing likely voters, and potentially persuading non-supporters.

2.2 How to appeal to voters

Alongside the specific appeals these parties make, an important aspect of growing electorally is having the means to convince voters. Mainstream parties have an advantage in this regard because of their increased resources and the ties they have built with voters since the Second World War through organizations such as unions and employers organizations. Niche and challenger parties, on the other hand, generally have more limited funds due to their smaller size and do not have as strong ties to civil society because they are much younger. This raises the question of *how* these parties can contact new voters.

One important means of campaigning for nice and challenger parties in this regard is the use of cheap ads on social media. The expansion of social media has been linked to the rise of non-mainstream political forces more generally. Diamond (2010), for instance, argues that the internet was a 'liberating technology' in the wage of the Arab spring of 2010-2012, and Guriev, Melnikov, and Zhuravskaya (2021) link the expansion of 3G networks to satisfaction with governing parties. Hager (2019) randomizes Facebook ads in Berlin and finds that online ads positively influence vote choice.

Social media might thus be an important avenue for niche and challenger parties to connect to new voters in an affordable way that does not require the strong ties that mainstream parties can rely on. We test whether this is indeed the case.

3 Design

We test what types of appeals are more effective using a set of three pre-registered experiments, all fielded in Germany before the 2021 Bundestag election on a representative sample of 3500 adults. In all three experiments, we vary the issue bundles the Greens use to persuade voters. In the survey experiment and the field experiment, we have a 'climate only' treatment (the control arm), one that focuses on social justice (the 'climate + left' treatment arm) and one that focuses on economic competence and job creation (the 'climate + right' treatment arm). In the conjoint experiment, we vary the party's position on multiple other issues as well.

3.1 Survey experiment

Treatments: In the survey experiment, respondents see one of four ads from a candidate of the Green party. The first two ads are two different ways the party discusses climate, and the other two the climate + left and climate + right arms. The different treatments we use are:

- *Climate 1:* 'We'll take everyone with us into the climate-neutral age.'

- *Climate 2:* 'We must now set the course for climate-neutral prosperity.'

- *Climate + left:* 'We'll take everyone with us into the climate-neutral age. We support families with low and middle incomes.'
- *Climate + right:* 'We must now set the course for climate-neutral prosperity. That is how we secure employment and economic growth.'

We use two different climate messages because the party wanted to field these messages in the Facebook component of the study. In the analysis, we find no difference between the climate messages and code them together into a single control group to increase our power (as specified in the PAP).

Outcomes: As our main outcome measure, we ask how much respondents like the candidate based on an 11-step feeling thermometer. To capture which mechanisms might be at play, respondents are also asked how competent they think the party leadership would be in government on each issue (the climate, social justice, and jobs). Second, as a manipulation check, we ask how important respondents think certain issues are to the candidate. Third, respondents are asked where they position the candidate on a general left vs right scale. In order to have baseline data for the main outcome measure, we ask what the respondents think of the party at the beginning of the survey. As such, the survey experiment is a between-subject design that uses a baseline measure to increase the power of the experiment. Recent research has shown that repeated measures designs tend to yield the same results as more common designs while substantially increasing precision (Clifford, Sheagley, & Piston, 2021).

Estimands & Estimator: Our main estimand of interests, τ, is the average persuasive effects of taking a left or right position on the economic dimension of competition across the whole electorate (ATE). In addition, as we're interested in the trade-offs the party might face when trying to retain its core constituents whilst simultaneously attracting likely voters or non-supporters, we estimate heterogeneous treatment effects for the party's voter potentials. The core constituents of the party are defined as those voters who voted for the Greens in the 2017 election. Likely voters and non-supporters are defined based on the baseline thermostat for Green support. Respondents who indicate a higher than 0 score on the thermostat question are coded as likely voters (about half of the sample) and the rest are coded as non-supporters.

To estimate τ_x, we consider the Average Treatment Effect (ATE) effect. For the main outcomes, we use a simple differences-in-means estimator, estimated through OLS:

$$Y_i = \tau D_i + \beta_i \mathbf{X} + \epsilon_i \tag{1}$$

where Y_i is the difference for each respondent between the initial thermostat question about the party and the thermostat question about the candidate after the treatment. D_i is a factorized variable with the different treatment conditions; the basic climate arm is the baseline. To increase precision, β_i controls for a vector of control variables, $\mathbf{X}$. We control for a respondent's gender, age, and education. When

estimating the effects of our treatment on the mechanism and manipulation questions, for which we do not have baseline data, we control for the baseline thermostat question by adding it to $\boldsymbol{X}$. We do so because there are some small chance imbalances in our sample on the question. Because it is so predictive of the outcome, controlling for this variable changes some of the point estimates and increases precision. We further discuss this issue in the Appendix.

3.2 Conjoint experiment

In the second survey experiment conducted within the same survey, we use a conjoint experiment to test whether there are certain combinations of positions on different dimensions of competition where a challenger party can gain voters without losing among their core constituents.

Treatments & Outcome: In the conjoint we vary the policy positions of hypothetical Green party candidates. The candidates vary on their policy positions on eight policy issues: introduction of a wealth tax, height of social benefits, taxes on small businesses, use of progressive language in government institutions, refugees, funding for child care, banning domestic flights, and increasing the CO2 tax. The full levels for each attribute are shown in Appendix Table A1. Our main outcome is a forced-choice question that asks which candidate respondents would vote for. Respondents do six of such conjoint tasks. In addition, in the second half of the tasks respondents are also asked how competent they think each candidate is.

Estimand & Estimator: We are interested in the effect of changing a specific policy position on average support for the party and support for the party among specific sub-groups of voters (the same as in the survey experiment: core supporters, likely-voters, and non-supporters). We use the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) and the Marginal Mean (MM) as estimators to get at these effects (Hainmueller, Hopkins, & Yamamoto, 2014; Leeper, Hobolt, & Tilley, 2020). We cluster our standard errors at the respondent level. The exact estimation procedure is described in the Appendix.

3.3 RCT

In the RCT, we move beyond the message and focus on the *means*. We ask whether it's possible to mobilize voters by taking a position on a challenger party's secondary dimension of competition using Facebook ads.

Design: We work together with the German Greens in two constituencies ('Wahlkreise'). In these constituencies, the party randomizes whether specific zip codes are targeted with Facebook ads. The study is randomized at the zip code level because that is the most aggregate level at which Facebook ads can be targeted geographically. Within each zip code, the outcomes are measured at the polling station

('Wahlbezirke') level. Each zip code has on average about 11 polling stations in it.[1] A voter is assigned a polling station where they have to vote. In total the party randomizes the Facebook ads in 43 different zip codes which contain 512 polling stations. We thus use a cluster-block randomized design, with as blocks the constituency.

Treatments & Outcome: We use the same treatments as in the vignette experiment. However, in the RCT the control group receives no ads whatsoever. As outcome variables, we use the election results at the polling station level, which are made available as numbers of votes for the first and second vote, as well as the turnout. As pre-treatment variables, we use the number of eligible voters in each polling station as well as whether a given polling station is for mail-in voting.[2].

Estimand & Estimator: We have two estimands of interest in the RCT. First, the difference between treated and control districts captures whether there are overall persuasion and mobilization effects from running ads. Second, whether these effects differ depending on the type of ad. To estimate these estimands, we consider the intent-to-treat (ITT) effect estimated a difference in means estimator using OLS. We control for the block as well as for the pre-treatment covariates and cluster the standard errors at the level of randomization (the zipcodes). Table 1 shows the balance between the different treatment districts as compared to the control districts using this same model. The results indicate that any small imbalances are insignificant.

Table 1: Balance test

	Control vs rest	Climate+Left vs control	Climate+right vs control
Constituency 181	0.05	−0.04	−0.09
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Eligible voters (per 100)	−0.02	0.03	0.02
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Letter District	−0.16	0.25	0.20
	(0.13)	(0.20)	(0.17)
Constant	−8.85	7.23	17.25
	(10.29)	(14.58)	(13.06)
Adj. R^2	0.03	0.02	0.06
Num. obs.	512	338	326
RMSE	0.45	0.49	0.48
N Clusters	43	30	28

Note: Models estimated using `Estimatr`. Dependent variables: dummies for the different treatment groups versus the other treatment groups. The standard errors are clustered at the zipcode level. The model is the same model as is used for the actual analysis. $^*p<0.5$; $^{**}p<0.01$

[1]Figure A1 in the Appendix is an example of how the polling stations are distributed in a zip code.
[2]The mail votes are counted separately

4 Results

4.1 Survey experiment: is it effective to emphasize other issues?

We first present the main results for each treatment (persuading voters with a climate + left or climate + right message) as compared to the control condition (climate only). The outcome variable is a 11-step thermostat scale that asks voters how likely they are to vote for the Green candidate. Figure 1 shows the results of this analysis for the whole electorate and by subgroups based on voter potentials. The left plot indicates that there is a positive significant effect for choosing a message that emphasizes the climate and social justice, whereas there is no effect for a message that focuses on economic competence and job creation. In the right panel of the Figure, we can see that the positive effects are mainly driven by likely voters and non-supporters. It thus seems that challenger parties can attract other voters by choosing a message that resonates with them. In particular, campaigning on a left platform is both a good long and short-term strategy, as it is appealing to both non-supporters and likely voters. In addition, whilst the climate+right message is not particularly effective for likely voters or non-supporters, it does seem to negatively impact what Green voters think of the party. The party thus faces a trade-off with its core constituents if it chooses to focus on more right-wing messaging on the economy.

Figure 1: Main results
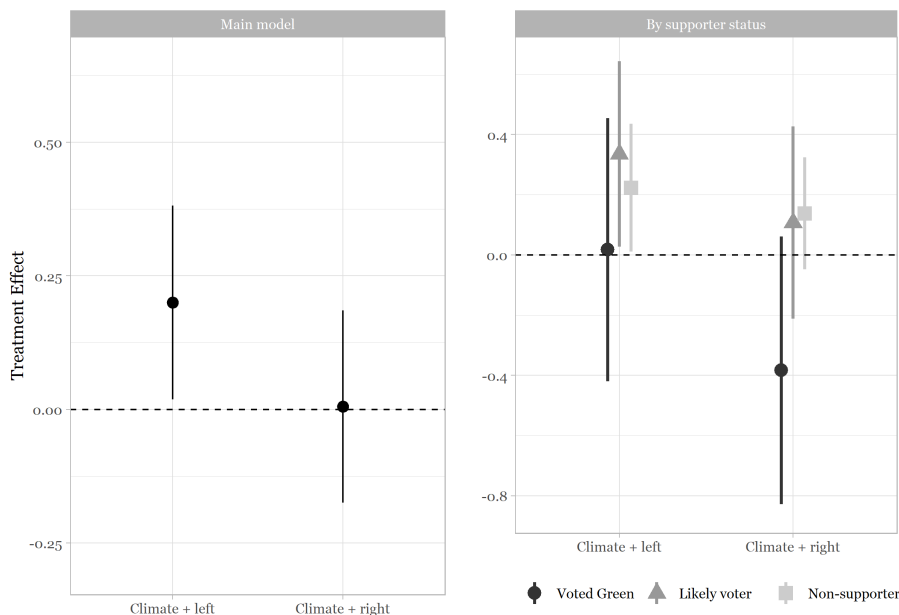
We then turn to the question of the perceived competence of the candidate on the different issues. These results are shown in Figure 2. The left panel of the figure shows that campaigning on other issues does not seem to harm the perceived competence of the party on climate. Campaigning on social justice (the left issue), by contrast, increases how competent respondents think the party is on this issue. The same holds for combining a climate appeal with a more right-wing appeal, albeit to a lesser extent, as

the right panel shows. This means that campaigning on other issues influences how competent voters think a party is on these issues, but doing so only translates to votes when it is a left issue. This means that whilst combining a climate appeal with a right-wing economic position might not create votes in the short-term, in the long run, it can potentially pay off if more voters place the party in their consideration set because they deem it more competent. The interaction effect with voter potentials supports this conclusion because the results are strongest for non-supporters who are likely most surprised by seeing the Green party campaign using an economic right-wing appeal. Whilst there are thus no immediate effects, a climate+right appeal might work in the longer term by turning non-supporters into likely voters as they start deeming the party more competent at dealing with the economy.

Figure 2: Results for the perceived competence of the candidate
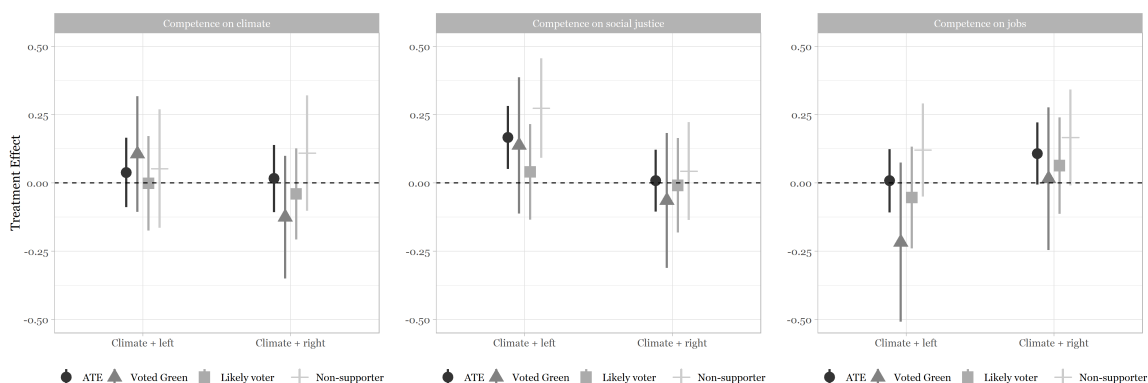
To confirm that the climate+right message is indeed understood by voters but then not acted upon, we look at the effect of our messages on how important respondents think the topic of the message is to the candidate. The results of this test are reported in Figure 3. The results indicate that choosing another position does not influence how important people think climate change is to the candidate. For the left and right messages, by contrast, respondents seem to identify that the candidate tries to signal that she finds these issues important. This thus confirms that respondents understand the message, yet this only translates into a higher likelihood to vote for the candidate when using the climate+left message. In addition, the null result for the importance of climate implies that voters know that the Green party cares about the environment and that campaigning on other issues does not change this reputation.

In sum, in the survey experiment, we find that broadening your appeals attracts new voters. It only does so, however, when using a climate + left message. In addition, we find some support that broadening your appeals with a climate + right message seems to alienate the party's core constituents. It thus seems that the strategic choice niche and challenger parties make—such as which issue positions to take and which issues to emphasize—influence what voters think of them.

Figure 3: Results for the perceived importance of different issues for the candidate
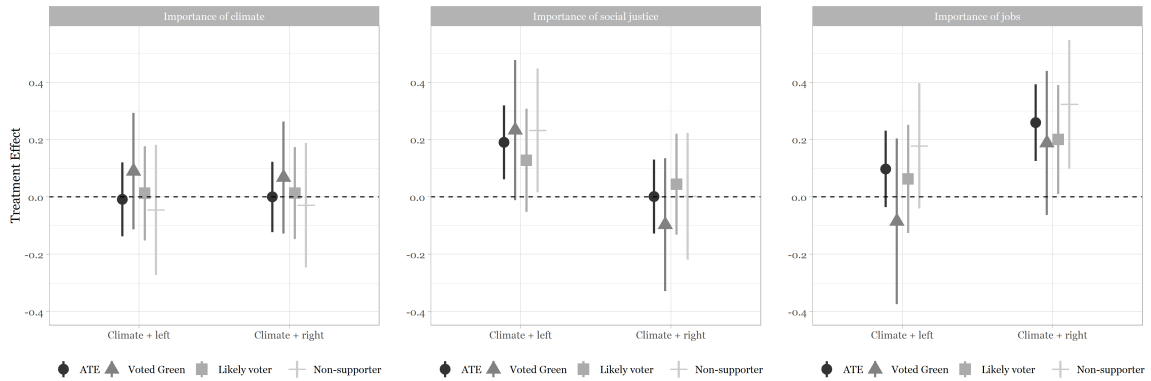
4.2 Conjoint experiment: which positions lead to the fewest trade-offs?

In the conjoint experiment, we further investigate the effects of strategically changing a position on what different groups of voters think of the party. As explained in the design section, the conjoint varies the issue positions of the party on a wider range of issues than in the survey experiment. Figure 4 presents the results for the different voter potentials (Green voters/core constituents, likely voters, and non-supporters). The results indicate that, as expected, Green voters are most similar to the party's likely voters, with as the largest difference that the party's core constituents are more aggressive in fighting climate change. Non-supporters, by contrast, have preferences that diverge further from those of Green voters.

These results mean that whether voters place the party in their consideration set is partly a function of policy proximity and which issues voters care about. As a consequence, the Green party has the strategic opportunity to become more appealing to these different shares of the electorate by changing their positions. In fact, we can use the marginal means presented in Figure 4 to precisely estimate how much the party would win among likely voters and non-supporters if they change specific policy appeals, whilst simultaneously calculating how much they would lose among Green voters if they do so. The results for this analysis are shown in Table 2.

The table illustrates the trade-offs the Greens might face if they change their policy positions from their own ideal positions to those of other groups of voters. For instance, whilst there are very few differences between Green voters and the party's likely voters, the Greens could become more attractive by choosing their likely voters' preferred position on CO2 taxes. Doing so would increase their vote by 1.4% among this group, yet decrease it by 3.2% among Green voters. Of course, there are fewer Green voters than other voters in the electorate, and if the party takes this into consideration then there are no substantial net gains or losses among the electorate at a net gain of 0.02%. Larger gains are to be made when changing their positions toward non-supporters. Changing their position on CO2 taxes to the ideal
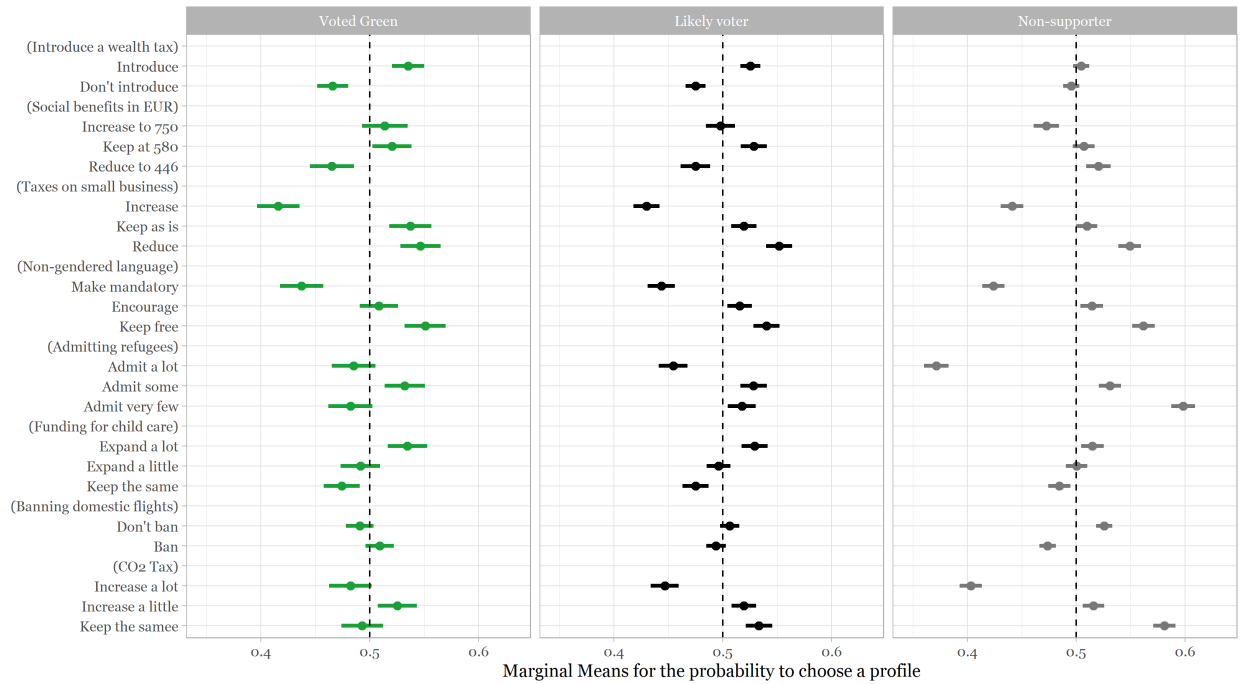
Figure 4: Main results from the conjoint analysis

Table 2: Wins and losses when adopting certain policy positions

|	Ideal likely voter policies			Ideal non-supporter policies		
Policies	↑ Likely vot	↓ Greens	Net gain	↑ Non-sup	↓ Greens	Net gain
CO2 Tax	1.4%	-3.2%	0.02%	6.5%	-3.2%	2.7%
Banning domestic flights	1.2%	-1.8%	0.16%	5.2%	-1.8%	2.2%
Non-gendered language						
Admitting refugees				6.7%	-5%	2.5%
Funding for child care						
Taxes on small business						
Introduce a wealth tax						
Social benefits in EUR				1.4%	-5.5%	-0.2%

Note: Empty cells indicate that Green voters and the other group have the same ideal policy preferences. The positive (negative) percentages indicate an increase (decrease) in the vote percentage for the party for a given subgroup of the electorate were they to change their policy position. The net gains and losses are calculated using the share of a particular group in the electorate. Green voters are 15.3% of the electorate, likely voters 36.3% and non-supporters 48%. For instance, a 10% increase among non-supporters results in a 4.8% increase in the electorate.

position of non-supporters, for instance, would result in a 6.5% increase among non-supporters and a 3.2% decrease among Green voters. Corrected for the size of both groups in the electorate, this would result in a 2.7% net gain. Taken together, this shows that there are certain issues where it is worth moving away from the ideal position of their core constituents because doing so could attract more voters without losing substantially among their own core constituents or in absolute numbers. Niche and challenger parties thus have the strategic freedom to broaden their issue appeals, potentially without trade-offs, by changing their positions on other issues. How costly this process is, however, depends on the trade-offs that they face with the specific group of voters they intend to target.

4.3   RCT: is it possible to mobilize new voters in the field?

We now turn to our analysis of using Facebook ads to appeal to new groups of voters. In Figure 5, we show the results for running any ads versus no ads with and without controls. Whilst not significant when including controls - which is likely due to small imbalances - there seems to be a small mobilization effect of about 2% (there are about 2500 voters per polling station). Furthermore, there seems to be a persuasion effect that is largest for the SPD—the main left-wing party—as well as for the CDU and the Greens. This confirms that it is possible for challenger parties to mobilize and persuade voters through unconventional campaign tools such as Facebook ads.
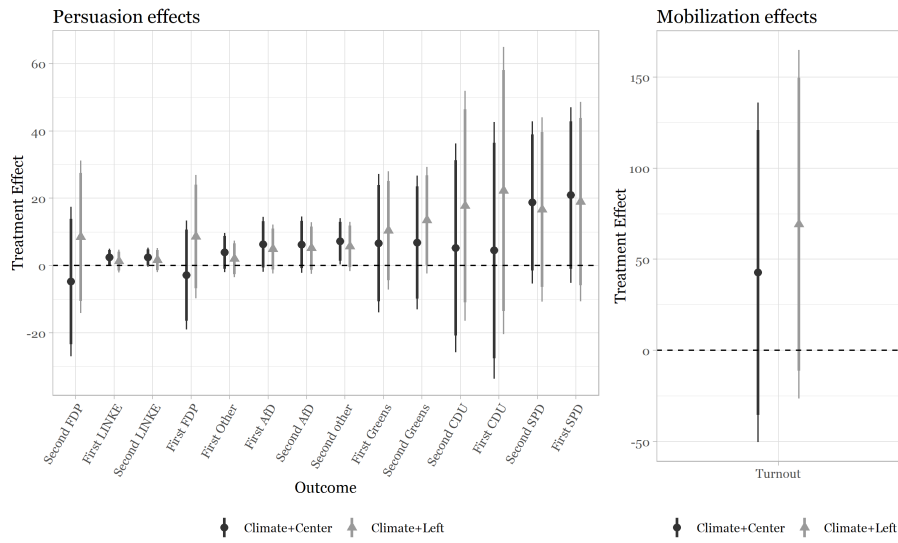
Figure 5: Results for any ads vs no ads
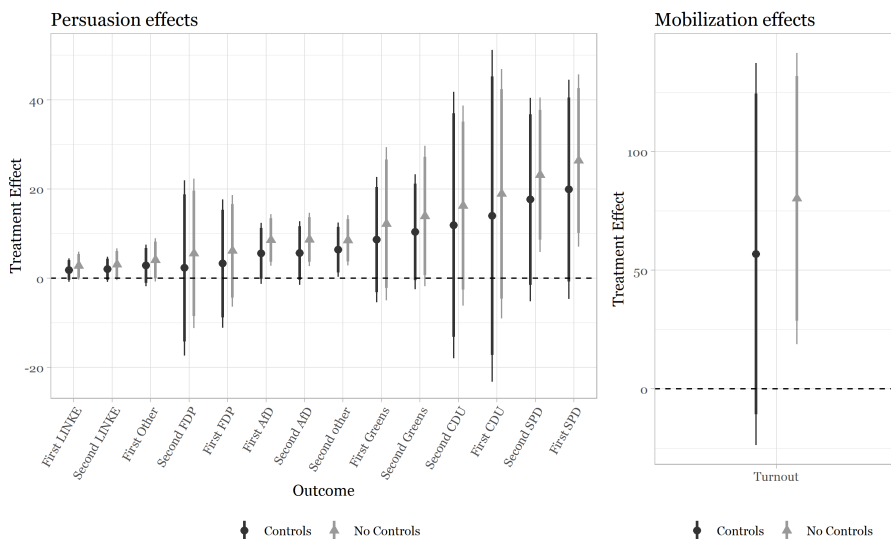
Note: The thin line indicates the 95% confidence interval and the thick line the 10% confidence interval. Models are estimated using `Estimatr` with SEs clustered at the level of randomization. In the model with controls we control for if a district was a mailing district as well as for the number of eligible voters. The outcome is the number of votes at the polling station level.

In Figure 6 we look at the effects of the individual treatment arms versus the control group. Whilst the differences are small and insignificant, it seems like the treatment message that combines a climate message with a left message is the most effective.

Figure 6: Results for the left or right message versus no ads

Note: The thin line indicates the 95% confidence interval and the thick line the 90% confidence interval. Models are estimated using `Estimatr` with SEs clustered at the level of randomization. The outcome is the number of votes at the polling station level.

Our results build on existing work that has highlighted that online tools are an important means for smaller parties to reach out to voters (Diamond, 2010). In line with this literature, we indeed find that it is possible to attract voters using relatively cheap Facebook ads.

5   Discussion and conclusion

We find that Niche and Challenger parties can attract new voters by broadening their issue appeals. When these parties try to persuade voters by taking a position on other issues, voters are not only more likely to vote for them, but they also see the party as more competent on the other issue. Simultaneously, there are particular positions with few trade-offs for the party on the party's main dimension of competition: if Green parties take an economic left-wing position, their core constituents remain equally likely to vote for them. However, the party's core constituents do seem to dislike a more right-wing position on economic issues.

In addition, we find that appealing on other issue dimensions does *not* change the perceived competence of the party on its main issue dimension nor how important voters think this issue dimension is to the party. This result holds for both the party's core constituents as well as for other voters. A green party can thus compete on other issues without jeopardizing its perceived competence on the Green issue or even how important voters think the environment is to them.

Our findings are in line with both electoral realignment and issue voting accounts of electoral change. There are certain groups of voters where the Greens have an advantage, and campaigning on issues these voters care about attracts them to the party. At the same time, and in line with issue voting accounts,

17

the party can in the more long-term appeal to new voters by changing its issue positions. In addition, our findings with regards to the party's reputation on its core issue are in line with the literature on party brands (Butler & Powell, 2014; Green, 2007). Once a nice and challenger party is known as competent on a certain issue, then it can campaign on other issues without losing its image. If a party is thus young and does not have a strong brand yet, then it needs to consistently mention and campaign on a single issue to be seen as competent. Once it has established itself, like the German Greens, then its reputation will ensure that it is seen as competent on that issue even if they discuss other concerns in their campaign.

Taken together, the findings of this study imply that niche and challenger parties are strategic actors as much as mainstream parties: the campaign choices they make influence their election results. A large part of the variation in success of these parties thus stems from these strategic choices and not from the contextual conditions they operate in. As such, our results have important implications for the study of Niche and Challenger parties: if these parties exist for long enough and they make the right strategic choices, it will be hard to distinguish them from their mainstream competitors, casting into doubt whether they should be studied as a separate group of parties to begin with. With the right strategic choices, these parties can compete as equals.

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A Online Appendix

A.1 Deviations from pre-analysis plan

A.1.1 Survey experiment

We deviate from the pre-analysis plan with the exact heterogeneous treatment effects we estimate. In the pre-analysis plan we proposed to estimate heterogeneous treatment effects specifically for each subgroup of voters as determined by their previous vote share. In the paper, most of the heterogeneous treatment analyses were done using the general left-right scale. We made this decision to keep the presentation concise and to have enough respondents in each category. Nonetheless, we present the results here with the heterogeneous treatment effects as specified in the PAP:

...

In addition, in the PAP we specified that we would code core-constituents of each party and the Greens using the 17 vote but also the 21 vote and the thermostat questions. We did not do this in the end because the approach we used now—only 17 vote share—is more in line with the theoretical argument we hope to make about attracting voters who voted for other parties in other elections. Nonetheless, our main results for Green voters only with the same specification as in the PAP are presented here:

...

A.1.2 Conjoint experiment

Similar to survey experiment, results presented here exactly according to the PAP.

A.1.3 Field experiment

The main difference between the PAP and the results presented here is that we were not able to collect baseline data for each polling station. This is a result of the fact that there were many more mail-in polling stations as compared to 2017. Do note, however, that the main estimator we pre-registred was a difference-in-means estimator which is what we used.

A.2 Example of the randomization in the RCT

Figure A1 shows how the different polling stations (the white dots) are spread out in a small city (which has one zipcode).

A.3 On IRB review

Our study did not receive IRB approval because of procedural reasons. We confirmed the opportunity to conduct this study with the Green party only three weeks before the election in September, so our

Figure A1: Example of polling stations within a zipcode

time-line was extremely tight. Because the European University Institute's (EUI) IRB board does not convene for four months over the summer, it was not possible to get IRB approval for our study within the limited time we had. We nonetheless submitted a complete IRB application after the election yet before we had access to any of the data. This application was rejected on procedural grounds because the EUI's IRB board does not review studies that have been conducted already—even if the researchers have not received the data yet. Whilst unfortunate and unavoidable, we want to note that many institutes do not require IRB approval for studies such as these. The survey experiment and conjoint experiment are very simple, standard experimental studies that use standardized questions that have been approved in other IRB applications. In fact, in most places studies such as these are exempt from IRB approval to begin with, particularly in Europe. The same holds true for the Facebook study because we solely served on an advisory role to the party: the party implemented the randomization, the treatments, and designed the intervention. We helped them solely by randomizing a list of zipcodes. In addition, the data that we use to assess the success of the interventions is all open source (as these are simply election results). Because we thus do not treat human subjects ourselves nor collect data from them, the Facebook study would under standard procedures also be exempt from IRB approval. Finally, because we prepared for this study to be reviewed by an ethics committee, all of the research was conducted in line with the ethical standards contained in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

A.4 Imbalances in the survey experiment

Due to come chance randomizations, there were some small imbalances in the survey experiment on the baseline measure for Green support. Because this measure is so predictive of the outcome, we control

for it in our main analyses (as specified in the PAP). Here we present several balance tests and discuss this issue further. ...

A.5 Further design considerations

A.5.1 Sampling

For the survey experiment and the conjoint experiment—which were part of the same online survey—we use a population representative sample from Bilendi, a German survey firm. The sample is representative on the following respondent characteristics: gender, age, and education. We run the survey with 3200 respondents. The survey was in the field for two weeks starting in the first week of September 2021. We fielded the survey in this period because being too close to the election means that voters will have already decided which party they will vote for, whereas if the survey is too far away from the election, politics is not in the minds of voters and the political context might be different than in the field experiment.

If we compare the sample to the European Social Survey, as shown in Figure **??**, we can see that the sample is balanced.

A.5.2 Level and attributes in the conjoint

The full levels and attributes are shown in Table A1.

Table A1: Levels and attributes

Attributes	Possible levels
CO2 taxes	Increase a lot; increase a little; leave the same
Banning domestic flights	Yes; No
Expanding child care	Strongly; A little; leave the same
Expanding Hartz IV	Strongly; A little; leave the same
Taxing on small companies	Expand; Leave the same; decrease
Introduce a wealth tax	Yes; No
Admit refugees	Many; Some; Barely any
Make gendering mandatory	Make mandatory; Encourage; Leave free

A.5.3 Estimation in the conjoint

The AMCE is obtained by regressing the dependent variable on dummy variables for all levels of each attribute, except for one level which is the baseline for each attribute. Each respondent (indexed by $i \in (1,...,N)$) is presented with K rating tasks ($k \in (1,...,6)$, P different policies ($p \in (1,...,8)$), and in each one of her tasks the respondent chooses the most preferred of J alternatives ($j \in (1,2)$). I estimate the AMCE using using a simple linear regression of the form:

$$CandidateChoice_{ijpk} = \alpha + \beta_1[policy1_{ijpk}] + ... + \beta_x[policyp_{ijpk}] + +\epsilon_{ijpk} \qquad (2)$$

where $CandidateChoice_{ijpk}$ is coded as 1 if a candidate is selected. To test for heterogenous treament effects of core constituents from the Greens and other parties, we will interact with the same variables as in experiment I.