

Countering Illiberalism?

How Public Perceptions Shape the Effectiveness of Militant Democracy Against the German AfD

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Anna Rachel Heckhausen, Vienna, 29 May 2025

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Abstract

A century after the rise of fascism in Europe, the world is again witnessing a surge of anti-democratic movements which challenge the foundations of liberal democracy. These developments have generated renewed interest in the concept of militant democracy (MD) – intolerant measures enacted by the state against supposedly anti-democratic parties to protect democratic regimes from internal threats. However, debates around MD are dominated by the paradox of democratic self-injury where attempts to safeguard democracy may end up eroding the very principles they are meant to protect.

Considering this possibility of self-injury, this thesis examines the effectiveness of militant democracy measures, focussing on the public's perception of MD. To be effective, militant democracy needs to reduce support for an anti-democratic party while maintaining high support for the remaining political system and institutions. Targeted parties can be expected to intervene in this process by discrediting MD and its proponents as anti-democratic.

This study investigates such influences in the German context. Using a randomized survey experiment with 605 German citizens, the study tests how exposure to MD-related debates—both neutral and critical—affects attitudes toward the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and general support for liberal democracy. The results show no statistically significant effects of MD measures on support for the AfD or regime performance and institutions. However, when framed by the AfD, a potential party ban significantly decreases support for the democratic regime.

These findings suggest that supporters of MD measures must be mindful of potential backlash effects and improve communication strategies to counteract opposing frames. Ultimately, a multifaceted approach that balances measures by various actors is recommended to protect democratic values effectively.

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Introduction

A century after the rise of fascism in Europe, the world is again witnessing a surge of anti-democratic movements. Illiberal parties and leaders are gaining ground globally and challenge the foundations of liberal democracy. Increasingly, political leaders question and often quietly undermine democratic norms, eroding democracies from within. They may pass laws to restrict the press, gain control over the judiciary, or marginalise opposition voices, all while presenting themselves as the true defenders of democracy. Faced with these threats, democratic societies often appear unprepared. More than ever, they need to answer an uncomfortable question: how can democracies protect themselves from internal threats without compromising the very values they seek to defend?

Scholars have described this development as the third wave of autocratisation, with states across the globe witnessing a substantial erosion of core institutional requirements for liberal democracy (Diamond 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Lührmann et al. 2020; Wike and Fetterolf 2022).² This decline affects both liberal and democratic elements of liberal democracy which are intrinsically linked. Following a substantive notion of democracy, democracy needs not only free and fair elections but also liberal components to be meaningful (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Laruelle 2022; Lührmann et al. 2020; J.-W. Müller 2016; Treib, Schäfer, and Schlipphak 2020). These components include civil liberties enabling political actors and citizens to form pluralist perspectives on political problems, as well as checks and balances and the rule of law which prevent the abuse and overturn of democracy by those in power.

The third wave of de-democratisation differs from previous waves in the methods employed by anti-democratic actors (Bermeo 2016; Bourne and Rijpkema 2022; Diamond 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Schedler 2024; Stahl and Popp-Madsen 2022; Steinbeis 2019; Waldner and Lust 2018). Elites largely refrain from sudden moves to autocracy. In Western democracies, cases of de-democratisation via military coups or outright electoral fraud have given way to gradual democratic setbacks under a legal façade as a more common path towards autocracy. Aiming to evade the high legitimacy costs of drastic violations of liberal democratic rights, anti-democratic actors now erode democracy in a stepwise fashion. According to the so-called paradox of democratic self-destruction,

² This finding holds across different ways of measuring liberalism and democracy, weighing countries and populations, and has been documented by various organisations such as Freedom House, International IDEA and the Varieties of Democracy project.

democracy is the only regime providing its internal enemies with the means to overthrow it.³ Anti-democratic actors gain power via democratic elections and, once in power, imitate democratic institutions while incrementally eroding their functions. Maintaining a democratic façade, such democratic subversion is less likely to trigger pro-democratic mobilisation and makes it difficult for observers to pinpoint the end of democracy. While democratic subversion does not always result in democratic breakdown, it erodes the substance of liberal democracy.

Actors of democratic subversion are parties which gain power via democratic elections despite their ambiguous orientation towards democracy (Bermeo 2016; Diamond 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Schedler 2024; Waldner and Lust 2018). Such parties are usually not openly anti-democratic but rather pay lip service to democracy (Bourne and Rijpkema 2022; Low 2018; Lührmann et al. 2020; J.-W. Müller 2016; Schedler 2024). They may show commitment to institutions commonly associated with democracy such as elections and criticise democratic deficits in the existing system, presenting themselves as true defenders of democracy (Laruelle 2022; J.-W. Müller 2016). However, these parties reject and attack political rights and liberal institutions fundamental for meaningful democracy (Lührmann et al. 2020). Illiberal actors undermine liberal rights and institutions without which democracy cannot endure by proposing majoritarian, exclusionary solutions (Laruelle 2022). Observers often cannot establish with certainty that parties are anti-democratic until they reveal it in government. The more parties have wilfully destroyed democracy, the easier they are to classify but the more difficult it gets to protect liberal democracy from them (Schedler 2024).

These developments have generated renewed interest in the concept of militant democracy (MD) - intolerant⁴, apparently illiberal measures which are enacted by state actors against supposedly anti-democratic parties and designed to protect democratic regimes from internal threats (J.-W. Müller 2012, 1253). While the idea of MD was developed in the early 20th century, the recent resurgence of populism and illiberal ideologies has revived debates about the legitimacy, effectiveness, and consequences of MD measures.

Debates around MD are dominated by the paradox of democratic self-injury where attempts to safeguard democracy may end up eroding the very principles they are meant to

³ Authoritarian regimes may combat their opponents via repression and co-optation. Democracies conventionally cannot employ such strategies as this would violate democratic values of free speech, association, and political equality. Karl Popper describes this paradox as the paradox of tolerance (Downs 2012; Kaltwasser 2019; Lührmann et al. 2020; J.-W. Müller 2016; Popper 1971, 265; Rummens 2019).

⁴ The term “intolerant” is used to distinguish militant democratic tools from other (“tolerant”) strategies which aim to tackle threats by including anti-democratic actions in ordinary political interactions (Bourne 2023).

protect (Kaltwasser 2019; J.-W. Müller 2012; 2016; Pedahzur 2003). On one hand, MD may be the only way to defend democracy against domestic forces exploiting its freedoms to overthrow it. On the other hand, MD measures can themselves be regarded as undemocratic or may backfire. They may be abused by ruling actors, foster the radicalisation of the targeted party, or create a public backlash. Hence, it remains controversial whether MD tools are effective in achieving their intended outcome - limiting the destructive participation of anti-democratic parties without harming the democratic system itself. Effective MD measures need to not only restrict the functioning of anti-democratic parties as such but also get the public on board in order to avoid a backlash. The effectiveness of MD hinges on how it affects public opinion regarding the anti-democratic party and liberal democratic institutions and requires a consensus on the measures' legitimacy. As I will elaborate on in the [next chapter](#), while some empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of MD measures, only a few have systematically researched public reactions to MD and addressed its potential negative consequences.

This thesis seeks to fill this gap by investigating the research question “How do public perceptions of militant democracy influence its effectiveness in countering anti-democratic threats?” To be effective and avoid backlash, MD must not only weaken an anti-democratic party organisationally but also reduce public support for that party while maintaining high support for the political system and institutions. Targeted parties may attempt to interfere with these aims by spreading their own narratives on MD. Hence, two sub-questions guide this research. First, how does the implementation of MD influence public opinion on the targeted party and levels of political support for liberal democracy? And second, how does the targeted party's framing of MD impact public opinion on these matters? By investigating these questions, this research sheds light on the potential benefits and drawbacks of intolerant measures against anti-democratic parties. Thereby, it aims to contribute to both the academic and practical debate on how to safeguard democratic institutions against internal threats.

Germany provides a particularly relevant context for exploring backlashes against MD due to its extensive portfolio of MD tools and ongoing political controversies. The country's legal framework includes various MD instruments, such as party bans and the surveillance of political groups. These measures have been invoked to address the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a right-wing extremist party which has continuously gained support since its formation in 2013. The AfD's increasing popularity, coupled with its ambiguous relationship with democratic principles, make it a salient case to discuss the potential and risks of MD in

modern liberal democracies. The German experience serves as an example for other countries facing similar threats, making the findings of this research relevant beyond the German context.

In investigating a potential backlash against MD in Germany, the thesis employs a randomised survey experiment with a sample of 605 German citizens. Surveys are a commonly used tool to measure public opinion. Moreover, as a randomised control trial, this survey experiment allows to manipulate and trace the causal influence of MD on public opinion. This is a decisive advantage of experimental survey research compared to potential alternatives like social media analysis. This research tests four hypotheses. The first two hypotheses examine the impact of considering a ban of the AfD on respondents' attitudes towards the AfD and their regime support. The third and fourth hypotheses pertain to the impact of AfD frames of a potential party ban on public opinion. I do not find evidence that inducing considerations of a party ban is either effective in reducing support for the AfD or that it causes a backlash in terms of decreasing regime support. When framed by the AfD, however, considerations of a party ban significantly reduce support for the democratic regime – even among opponents of the AfD. Therefore, proponents of tools of military democracy need to be aware of this risk of backlash effects. Two implications follow. Supporters of militant democracy need to increase their own efforts to communicate the necessity of intolerant measures against illiberal parties to counterbalance frames by the targeted party. Moreover, they need to engage in a more multifaceted strategy spanning intolerant and tolerant measures and involving different types of actors in a concerted effort to combat illiberal parties.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive review of the literature on potential countermeasures against modern challenges to liberal democracy with a focus on militant democracy and its effects. Chapter 2 explains the research design, including details on the German case, the data sources, and the methods employed. Chapters 3 and 4 present the data and results from the hypotheses tests while Chapter 5 discusses implications of these findings. This research demonstrates that the implementation of MD as such does not alter attitudes towards the targeted party or democratic regime. However, when MD is framed by the targeted party, support for the regime – particularly trust in institutions - decreases significantly. While limitations of experimental research necessitate further research to explore the durability of effects and the influence of repeated exposure to contradictory frames, these results point towards important learnings for those aiming to defend democracy. Chapter 6 concludes that militant democratic methods such as party bans should not be regarded as standalone tools but need to be complemented by both extensive debate on the legitimacy of these tools and broader efforts by non-state actors to safeguard democracy.

1 Literature and Theory

This chapter reviews key academic perspectives on countermeasures against anti-democratic parties. It first surveys different types of countermeasures, paying particular attention to militant democracy. Secondly, the chapter discusses the effectiveness of militant democracy focussing on the role of public opinion. It closes with the hypotheses guiding this research.

1.1 Countermeasures against parties pursuing democratic subversion

Scholars agree that democratic defenders should combat anti-democratic parties as early as possible, ideally before they gain power ('Wehret den Anfängen' - 'Beware the beginnings') (Schedler 2019). This is because the constraints and opportunities anti-democratic governments face are endogenous to their achievements - ruling illiberal actors create increasingly more opportunities for themselves (Schedler 2019). Less clarity exists on how to approach democratic defence. One can broadly differentiate between the different actors involved (state, parties, civil society) and the nature of countermeasures (tolerant, intolerant) (Schäfer and Hartleb 2022).⁵

1.1.1 Actors of countermeasures

Scholars generally distinguish between **three types of actors** aiming to combat anti-democratic parties. First, the state and public authorities are "individuals or organisations empowered by (...) law (...) to act in the public interest" (Bourne 2023, 746; Lührmann et al. 2020; Schedler 2019; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023). They include judicial, legislative, and executive branches of government, the bureaucratic apparatus, and state or substate agencies but also international organisations (Bourne 2023). Second, political parties are "organisations which 'seek influence in a state', mostly by fielding candidates in elections to occupy positions in legislative and executive bodies at various territorial levels" (Bourne 2023, 747). They may respond to anti-democratic actors at a formal or policy level and in their rhetoric about or behaviour towards such actors (Heinze 2018; Lührmann et al. 2020). Third, civil society refers to "private groups or institutions organized by individuals for their own ends" (Bourne 2023, 747), including media organisations (Fallend and Heinisch 2016; Lührmann et al. 2020; Schedler 2019; Schroeder et al. 2023; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023). These three classes

⁵ Researchers use further criteria to categorise countermeasures against anti-democratic parties. Such criteria include different targets (parties as such, radical party supporters, moderate party supporters), the point in time (anti-democratic party in opposition, gaining electoral momentum, in government), and how threatening a party is (based on size, strength, radicality).

of actors may overlap, for instance, public authorities are partially formed by party members (Bourne 2023).

Table 1. Types and examples of countermeasures against anti-democratic parties.

Note: The shaded area shows examples of militant democracy – intolerant measures by the state. (Bourne 2023; Downs 2012; Heinze 2018; Lührmann et al. 2020; Schäfer and Hartleb 2022)

Actor	Tolerant measures	Intolerant measures
State	Judicial controls and ordinary law to prosecute crimes (e.g., racist speech, corruption)	Rights-restrictions (political rights: association/assembly, expression, rights to obtain access to public goods) - e.g., denial of public funding, surveillance Party ban
	Constitutional checks and balances	
	Public pedagogy/persuasion (e.g., civic education)	
Parties	Adopt (co-opt policies)	Demonise party
	Collaborate (electoral, executive, legislative, public)	Ignore party, stick to own party positions
	Indifferent/tolerant rhetoric about the party	Ostracism (electoral, governmental/cordon sanitaire, parliamentary, public)
	Forbearance (ordinary tactics of party-political opposition/competitive party strategies, e.g., parliamentary/administrative procedures to block legislation)	
Civil Society	Information/civic campaigns (non-violent acts of protest/persuasion/accommodation in the public sphere)	Antagonise, exclude (e.g., from civil society organisations)
	Include party supporters (e.g., in civil society organisations)	Coercive confrontation (collective violence, physical attacks: e.g., damage to property, diffuse threats of violence, political violence, organised armed conflict)

1.1.2 Tolerant and intolerant countermeasures

Any actor can engage in both tolerant (inclusionary, incorporating) and intolerant (exclusionary, militant) approaches, as displayed with examples in Table 1. **Tolerant** approaches subject anti-democratic parties to the same rules and practices as those applied to other parties (Bourne 2023). Such approaches have various strengths. As a normative advantage, tolerant approaches abide by democratic principles of inclusion and plurality (Bértoa and Rama 2021; Lührmann et al. 2020). Thereby, tolerant approaches may have practical advantages in mitigating polarisation and conveying a feeling of inclusion even to

radical voters, rather than fostering a perception of victimhood (Lührmann et al. 2020). Through tolerant approaches, actors may demystify anti-democratic parties by forcing them to justify their positions and create practical solutions once in government (Lührmann et al. 2020; Schäfer and Hartleb 2022). A failure to do so may disenchant party supporters and create internal ruptures in the party. However, critics lament that tolerant engagement of anti-democratic parties may normalise their positions and, thereby, increase their voter support (Lührmann et al. 2020; Schäfer and Hartleb 2022; Schroeder et al. 2023). When anti-democratic parties influence policies or even gain government access, they may realise the threat of democratic subversion (Bértoa and Rama 2021; Lührmann et al. 2020; Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023; Schäfer and Hartleb 2022). Moreover, anti-democratic parties' positions may spill over to democratic parties as they mimic their adversaries, raising mistrust in established actors' democratic commitments (Lührmann et al. 2020; Schäfer and Hartleb 2022). Empirically, anti-democratic parties included in governments have not become more moderate over time, so an inclusion strategy does not appear to be successful (Bértoa and Rama 2021; Lührmann et al. 2020).

Intolerant approaches constitute an alternative to ineffective and possibly dangerous tolerant measures against anti-democratic parties. They follow the logic that anti-democratic parties are illegitimate as they threaten liberal democratic institutions, principles, and values and, hence, cannot be tolerated in a democracy. Instead, they must be treated fundamentally differently from other parties - “parties are denied rights, privileges, and respect which political parties would usually enjoy, either by law or in practice, because of their representative function in a democratic society and/or as a governing party in the international sphere” (Bourne 2023, 747; Lührmann et al. 2020). Thereby, intolerant approaches aim to avoid risks posed by tolerant approaches. This primarily includes the threat that anti-democratic parties' accession to power may result in democratic subversion, as well as the normalisation or spill-over of policy positions (Lührmann et al. 2020).

1.1.3 Militant democracy: intolerant countermeasures by state actors

The term **militant democracy** commonly captures the logic of intolerant but legal measures implemented by state actors (shaded in Table 1)⁶. Militant democracy (MD) refers to a state-enforced system of “pre-emptive, prima facie illiberal measures to prevent those aiming at

⁶ Because of militant democracy's legal nature, illegal and extrajudicial processes like coup d'états do not classify as MD even if their proclaimed goal is to protect or (re-)establish democracy (Hudson and Towriss, n.d.)

subverting democracy with democratic means from destroying the democratic regime” (Accetti and Zuckerman 2017; Bourne 2023; Capoccia 2013; Kaltwasser 2019; J.-W. Müller 2012, 1253). Besides parties, MD’s targets can include associations or individuals.⁷

The concept of MD traces its **intellectual origins** back to the rise of international fascism in the early 20th century. It was coined by Karl Loewenstein, a Jewish lawyer who fled Germany in 1933, in two influential articles published in the *American Political Science Review* in 1937 (Loewenstein 1937a; 1937b; Kaltwasser 2019; J.-W. Müller 2012). Loewenstein identified the problem that democracies which adhere to “democratic fundamentalism,” “legalistic blindness,” and an “exaggerated formalism of the rule of law,” (Loewenstein 1937a, 424) are incapable of defending themselves against these authoritarian threats. Instead, Loewenstein argued, democracies must “fight fire with fire,” (Loewenstein 1937b, 656) advocating for legislation to restrict the democratic freedoms of anti-democratic parties to prevent their abuse.⁸ He stressed that “If democracy believes in the superiority of its absolute values over the opportunistic platitudes of fascism, it must live up to the demands of the hour, and every possible effort must be made to rescue it, even at the risk and cost of violating fundamental principles”, “[d]emocracy must become militant” (Loewenstein 1937a, 423, 432).

Throughout the last century, measures of militant democracy have **spread**. Countries differ in their portfolio of MD measures as well as in the political culture regarding their use. Nevertheless, most democracies have adopted at least some MD-like legal measures protecting certain constitutional principles from amendments or restricting civil rights for political reasons (Capoccia 2013; Kaltwasser 2019; Tyulkina 2015). For instance, bans - the most repressive measure of MD, are possible in 43 African countries (Moroff 2010) and more than 20 out of 37 European democracies examined by Bourne and Bértoa (2017) have banned a party at some

⁷ A note on terminology: The term ‘militant democracy’ usually refers to state or legal action restricting the rights of parties, organisations, or individuals. Sometimes, however, the term is used in a broader fashion to also include tolerant approaches or acts by non-state actors (Hackner 2023; Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023). Other terms that are sometimes used synonymously with MD include ‘intolerant’, ‘defensive’, ‘defending’, ‘fighting’, or ‘fitting’ democracy (Beširević 2023; Downs 2012; Schedler 2019; Stahl and Popp-Madsen 2022). The term ‘neo-militant democracy’ also refers to MD in the 21st century used against illiberal or populist parties, rather than against fascist or communist parties as in the 20th century (Skrzypek 2023). It is used in delimitation from ‘quasi-militant democracy’, referring to authoritarians’ use of coercive measures under the guise of democracy. In the German discourse, the terms ‘wehrhafte’ (defending), ‘streitbare’ (fighting), ‘militante’ (militant), or ‘abwehrbereite’ (ready to defend) ‘Demokratie’ are used (Merkel 2024; J.-W. Müller 2012; Capoccia 2013). Moreover, their legality is a central characteristic of MD measures.

⁸ Loewenstein’s ideas captured long-existing notions. Karl Popper, for instance, had argued that tolerant societies must have the right not to tolerate the intolerant. Carl Schmitt had also warned that a value-neutral interpretation of the constitution could lead to “neutrality until suicide” (Lührmann et al. 2020; J.-W. Müller 2012, 1257; Popper 1971, 265).

point since WWII. MD practices are even enshrined in international law, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, and have been upheld by the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice of the EU (Bale 2007; Bétoa and Rama 2021; Beširević 2023).

However, over time, the **targets of MD have evolved and become more controversial**. While Loewenstein developed MD as a response to fascism, he understood its principles as applicable to threats from both left and right extremism - an anti-extremist rather than negative republican understanding of MD (Loewenstein 1937a). Since the Cold War, the definition of threats to democracy and potential targets of MD has broadened, including more diffuse terms of religious fundamentalism, and, later, populism and illiberalism (Bourne and Bétoa 2017; Capoccia 2013; J.-W. Müller 2012; Skrzypek 2023; Stahl and Popp-Madsen 2022). Because of these actors' ambiguous relationship to democracy, there is a controversy around the applicability of MD (Accetti and Zuckerman 2017; Bourne and Rijpkema 2022; Bourne 2023; 2024; Kaltwasser 2019; Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023; J.-W. Müller 2016).

1.2 The effectiveness of militant democracy

At the heart of MD measures rests a **paradox** which sparks controversy around the application of MD in defending democracy against its modern challengers. The paradox of democratic self-injury speaks to the idea that a democracy may destroy itself in the process of defending itself (Kaltwasser 2019; J.-W. Müller 2012; 2016; Pedahzur 2003): “attempts to defend democracy against its internal enemies can generate irreparable damages, to the point that the regime might end up losing its democratic character” (Kaltwasser 2019, 79).

On practical grounds, scholars also debate the **effectiveness of MD tools**. MD is successful when it limits an anti-democratic “party’s ability to participate in the democratic system [in a destructive manner] without seriously challenging the functioning of that system” (Hackner 2023, 14). Here, influence on both the anti-democratic party as well as on the public is of key relevance.

As the first element of success, a **party’s destructive participation** can be limited by weakening it organisationally and electorally. MD tools can impose practical hurdles on target parties’ functioning as party members may face prosecution, unemployment, or restricted political careers (Bleich 2011; Bourne and Bétoa 2018; Gärditz 2017; Meyer-Resende 2019; Tilly 2005). In consequence, parties may struggle internally or even disintegrate (Bleich 2011; Minkenberg 2006). Hence, through intolerant measures, actors aim to curb targets’ ability to

mobilise and reduce the spread of anti-democratic ideas (Minkenberg 2017). Additionally, by implementing MD against an anti-democratic party, intolerant measures aim to address the public as such and curtail public support for that party (Husbands 2002; Lührmann et al. 2020). Eventually, MD tools may reduce anti-democratic parties' organisational capacities, electoral support, and number of recruits (Bleich 2011; Gärditz 2017; Minkenberg 2006; Van Spanje and Van der Brug 2009).

As the second element of success, to **avoid damaging the democratic system**, practitioners must ensure that MD tools are not misapplied or abused and that public support for liberal democracy is maintained (Wegscheider and Stark 2020; Zmerli 2014). The use of MD measures may set precedents that anti-democratic forces, once in power, can exploit to eliminate political opponents (Accetti and Zuckerman 2017; Skrzypek 2023; Taggart and Kaltwasser 2016). Democratic actors may also misuse MD tools for party-political purposes (Accetti and Zuckerman 2017; Lührmann et al. 2020; Moroff and Basedau 2010; J.-W. Müller 2012). When employing MD tools, democratic actors risk replacing political with legal solutions to political problems. As political actors employ legal measures like party bans to combat anti-democratic challengers, they may fail to engage politically with the underlying reasons for public discontent (Gärditz 2017; Hailbronner 2024; Lübke-Wolff 2023; Lührmann et al. 2020; Manow and Wald 2024; Möllers 2024). This not only erodes constructive political debate but also strengthens anti-democratic parties' claim that other parties are unresponsive. MD proceedings often involve independent state institutions and risk politicising these, whether in reality or only in critics' perception (Kaltwasser 2019). This provides anti-democratic actors with ammunition to attack liberal democratic institutions like constitutional courts and may reduce public support for these institutions and liberal democracy generally. To effectively implement MD tools, democratic actors must counteract such developments.

Existing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of MD is mixed but rather negative (Bourne and Bértoa 2018). Bale (2007; 2014), Bleich (2011), Capoccia (2001), and Hackner (2023) have analysed democratic defence measures in Belgium, The Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Spain, Turkey, and the United States. They argue that intolerant tools have been more effective than tolerant ones in containing anti-democratic parties, can be successful in combination with tolerant methods and, at least, do not cause a backlash. In contrast, Downs (2012), Fallend and Heinisch (2016), Lührmann (2020), and Van Spanje and Van der Brug (2009) find that intolerant measures do not contain illiberal parties. For example, proceedings in Israel have demonstrated the legal difficulties of implementing MD measures, as well as the dangers of radicalisation or the formation of new groups after a party ban (Hackner 2023).

Bértoa and Rama (2021), Minkenberg (2006), and Moroff and Basedau (2010) also identify negative effects of party bans in Africa, Germany, and Turkey, including the abuse of MD tools, the declining legitimacy of established politicians, and an eroding political culture.

This debate raises the **puzzle of how effective intolerant measures can be in safeguarding liberal democracy against anti-democratic parties considering their inherent contradictions and dangers**. Most articles on MD focus on normative debates regarding MD's legitimacy or provide descriptive accounts of the variation in MD tools available across countries. Only a few studies including those mentioned above empirically investigate the effectiveness of MD. While various articles on MD mention unintended negative side effects, even fewer systematically study them. This is particularly true for backlashes caused by critical public opinion on MD (de Leeuw and Bourne 2020; Van Spanje and Van der Brug 2009) or anti-democratic parties' discursive reaction to MD tools (Brandmann 2022; Minkenberg 2006). As one of the few, De Leeuw and Bourne (2020) examine levels of public support for party bans across Europe using an item from the European Social Survey (ESS) fielded from 2002 to 2010. They find that support for party bans is generally high and partially correlated with individual orientations towards the democratic establishment. However, as the authors acknowledge, the little variation in responses may likely result from the extreme and abstract phrasing of the ESS item. Moreover, the item measures theoretical support for party bans, rather than considering their implementation in a specific case or the potential consequences of their implementation. Additionally, as data only runs until 2010, it does not capture potential changes in public opinion induced by the rising strength of illiberal and populist anti-democratic parties, as well as increasing societal polarisation. Thus, Bourne and de Leeuw's research does not sufficiently illuminate the effectiveness of MD considering its impact on public opinion. Moreover, much literature assumes radical parties to be passive recipients of MD measures while, actually, they may actively respond to being challenged and sway public opinion in their favour (Brandmann 2022). Considering this gap, this work examines the **research question “How do public perceptions of militant democracy influence its effectiveness in countering anti-democratic threats?”** Two questions structure the investigation of this research question.

- (1) How does the implementation of MD influence public opinion on the targeted party and levels of political support for liberal democracy?
- (2) How does the targeted party's framing of MD impact public opinion on these matters?

1.3 Public opinion and militant democracy

This section discusses the role of public opinion in the effectiveness of MD before turning to how it might be influenced by the implementation and framing of MD.

1.3.1 Public opinion and the effectiveness of MD

Scholars stress that legal proceedings are not sufficient for effective MD. Instead, they need to be complemented by a public debate around MD tools (Kaltwasser 2019; Möllers 2024). This is because the effectiveness of MD hinges on how it affects public opinion regarding the anti-democratic party and political support for liberal democracy.

1.3.1.1 *Public opinion regarding the anti-democratic party*

Public opinion regarding the anti-democratic party can be understood in terms of **individuals' party attachment**. Party attachment consists of two dimensions, individuals' partisan identity and their partisan attitude (Rosema and Mayer 2020). Partisan identities indicate whether an individual identifies with a certain party and is often only conceptualised in a positive direction, as positive partisanship. In contrast, **partisan attitudes** are an individual's set of attitudes towards each party in a system which are to a certain degree positive *or* negative (Rosema and Mayer 2020). Especially in multi-party parliamentary systems, the concept of partisan attitudes can be more relevant than party identities (Paparo, De Sio, and Brady 2020; Rosema and Mayer 2020). Even if few citizens identify with a political party, they may still form some psychological attachment with parties captured by partisan attitudes. Moreover, the notion of partisan attitudes allows citizens to have positive attitudes towards multiple parties, as well as not only positive but also negative partisan attachments (Rosema and Mayer 2020).


1.3.1.2 *Political support for the regime*

Political support is the attitude by which a person orients themselves positively or negatively to a political object and has significant political implications (Easton 1975, 436). Public support for democracy not only makes democratisation more likely but is also crucial to the survival of democratic regimes (Claassen 2020; Dalton 2004; Klingemann 1999; Listhaug and Wiberg 1998; Wegscheider and Stark 2020). Moreover, political support is a key component of well-functioning democracies: it influences whether citizens abide by laws even if they disagree with them, are interested and involved in political affairs, and whether political actors can

decide and act without much restraint (Fuchs et al. 1998; Wegscheider and Stark 2020; Zmerli 2014).

Citizens may show different levels of support towards different **political objects**, as displayed in Table 2. Easton originally proposed three different objects, the political community to which people belong, their regime – the basic framework for governing the nation-state, and political authorities - the incumbents and key decision makers (Easton 1965, Part Three). One can further divide the regime into three sub-categories, namely regime principles, regime performance, and regime institutions (Norris 1999; 2011). Regime principles refer to the fundamental normative values on which a regime is based, and their support reflects beliefs about the legitimacy of the constitutional arrangements. Support for regime performance indicates citizens’ satisfaction with the decision-making processes in their country and the overall democratic performance of their government. Support for regime institutions displays trust and confidence in core institutions of the state, such as governments, parliaments, and the legal system. While lines between these objects are often ignored or blurred in debates over public support for democracy, most researchers agree on the theoretical significance of distinguishing between them (Dalton 2004; 1999; Fuchs et al. 1998; Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1998; Klingemann 1999; Listhaug and Wiberg 1998).

Table 2. Types and objects of political support (Norris 2011).

Type of support	Object of support
 Diffuse support	Political community
	Political regime
	Regime principles
	Regime performance
	Regime institutions
Specific support	Political authorities

Support for these different objects differs in its level of abstraction (left column in Table 2). Accordingly, Easton famously distinguished between two types of support, **diffuse and specific support** (Easton 1975). Specific support increases when citizens are satisfied with the performances of political authorities and feel like policy outputs meet their needs. Hence, specific support is shaped by citizens’ direct experiences with incumbents and is relatively volatile. Diffuse support, in turn, is a more stable underlying attitude based on citizens’

appraisal of the normative value of their system, regardless of its outputs. It demonstrates citizens' trust in and the perceived legitimacy of their political community and regime. While diffuse support roots in citizens' socialisation, it can also be influenced by experiences and spillovers from shifts in specific support. Thus, the two types of support and different objects are separate but interdependent (Fuchs et al. 1998; Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1998; Listhaug and Wiberg 1998).

The separation of different types and objects of support is relevant as they may have **different political implications**. If a citizen voices discontent with a specific policy implemented by incumbents, this may be an expression of healthy democratic contention. However, when that citizen loses trust in parliament and courts and begins to question the legitimacy of democratic structures in general, democratic survival is at stake. Thus, a decline in diffuse support for the political community or regime is of main interest to scholars concerned about democratic stability.

Militant democracy may challenge political support at various levels. Citizens may show declining approval of the incumbents implementing MD, they may feel like democracy is not a system in which they can truly express their opinion, or they may feel alienated from their political community. Diffuse support has stronger implications for democratic stability than declining specific support for political authorities. At the same time, scholars suggest that parties targeted by MD verbally attack the regime more so than the political community, and the more diffuse the type of support, the less likely MD is to have a sustainable impact on it. Thus, this research examines the effects of MD at a mid-range level, focussing on the two more specific facets of support for the political regime - regime performance and regime institutions (shaded in Table 2).

1.3.2 The influence of militant democracy on public opinion

If it is to be effective, MD needs to influence public opinion in the two domains in particular ways. On one hand, it needs to **curtail public support for the anti-democratic party** targeted by MD measures to limit its ability to participate in the democratic system. To this end, MD measures have a communicative, educational function for the public. They signal that a party is regarded as illegitimate and dangerous (Koopmans 2005; Lührmann et al. 2020; Minkenberg 2006). Such stigmatisation may help to deter voters from supporting a certain party, change their attitudes, and reduce right-wing mobilisation (Husbands 2002; Lührmann et al. 2020). On the other hand, actors of MD need to ensure that MD does **not undermine support for the**

democratic regime which is essential for the survival of democratic political systems (Claassen 2020; Dalton 2004; Klingemann 1999; Listhaug and Wiberg 1998; Wegscheider and Stark 2020). Implementing actors need to avoid conveying an impression of abuse of MD for political purposes or unfair treatment of the targeted party. This requires a public debate on the implementation of MD tools and a wide consensus on their legitimacy (Kaltwasser 2019; Möllers 2024).

It follows that, if MD is effective, the following hypotheses should hold.

Hypothesis 1.a Exposure to information that a party is a target of militant democratic tools reduces individuals' attachment to that party.

Hypothesis 2.a Exposure to information that a party is a target of militant democratic tools does not decrease individuals' regime support.

However, corresponding to these two domains, public opinion may backlash against MD tools. First, **constant or increasing partisan attachment** to the targeted party may threaten MD's success. The implementation of MD may evoke positive attachments to the party in multiple ways. MD measures may provoke resistance amongst voters, mobilise them, and increase electoral support for anti-democratic parties (Bértoa and Rama 2021; de Leeuw and Bourne 2020; Downs 2012; Fallend and Heinisch 2016; Hackner 2023; Lührmann et al. 2020; Manow and Wald 2024; Merkel 2024; Minkenberg 2017; 2006; Möllers 2024; Van Spanje and Van der Brug 2009). Previously moderate party supporters may radicalise and move to the extremes (de Leeuw and Bourne 2020; Lührmann et al. 2020). Support for the prosecuted party may also rise based on solidarity and a growing sense of collective identity (Minkenberg 2006; 2017). Research suggests that the attitudes of party supporters may not moderate even after their party has been excluded or banned. As MD treats the causes rather than symptoms of extremism, it may not constitute a sustainable solution for civic re-education (Husbands 2002; Merkel 2024; Pedahzur 2003).

Second, MD may be counterproductive when it **erodes support in liberal democratic institutions, other parties or politicians, and liberal democracy** as such. MD may strengthen already existing public mistrust in established parties and the existing democratic system (Downs 2012; Lübke-Wolff 2023). Citizens may perceive unelected liberal democratic institutions as delegitimised and equipped with arbitrary power (Kaltwasser 2019; Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023; Minkenberg 2006). Moreover, they may gain the impression that parties and politicians in government undermine democratic principles and restrict citizens' democratic choices (Hackner 2023; Kaltwasser 2019; Lührmann et al. 2020;

Minkenberg 2017). This is especially the case if citizens perceive the implementation of MD as a slippery slope towards ever-further restricted political freedoms rather than an exceptional measure. Because of this, supporters of parties targeted by MD may gain the impression that democracy is pointless and question the legitimacy of the liberal democratic model as such (Brandmann 2022; Manow and Wald 2024; Kaltwasser 2019). Consequently, MD may erode regime support and challenge the functioning of the democratic system, thereby undermining the effectiveness of MD.

Hence, if MD is not effective but rather causes a backlash, the following hypotheses should hold.

Hypothesis 1.b Exposure to information that a party is a target of militant democratic tools increases individuals' attachment to that party.

Hypothesis 2.b Exposure to information that a party is a target of militant democratic tools decreases individuals' regime support.

1.3.3 The influence of militant democracy framing on public opinion

Parties targeted by MD may induce or strengthen such a **backlash in public opinion**. They may instrumentalise debates on the implementation of MD in their discourse to radicalise voters and mobilise support (Bale 2007; Bétoa and Rama 2021; O'Donohue and Tecimer 2024; Fallend and Heinisch 2016; Gärditz 2017; Hailbronner 2024; Lührmann et al. 2020; Minkenberg 2006; 2017; Pedahzur 2003). Parties can use MD debates to increase the visibility of their narratives and to underline the validity of their positions, further polarising between supposedly 'evil' elites and 'ordinary' people (Bleich 2011; Kaltwasser 2019; Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023; Stahl and Popp-Madsen 2022; Van Spanje and Van der Brug 2009).

To do so, parties may employ **framing**. Framing theory rests on the premise that political issues have implications for multiple value-based considerations. Issues are complex so a single message cannot convey all their facets (Chong and Druckman 2007; Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019). As politicians usually not only intend to inform audiences but also to convince them of their preferred interpretations of events, they strategically employ frames in communication (Chong and Druckman 2007; Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019). A communicative frame is the "meaning embedded into a message by a political actor to encourage the listener to interpret an event or situation from a non-neutral perspective" (Cassell 2021, 583) and "has implications for citizen understanding, evaluation, and judgement" (Carnahan, Hao, and Yan

2019, 3; Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2001). As citizens tend to have rather unstable opinions, their opinions can change in exposure to framing (Chong and Druckman 2007; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; Zaller 1992). Scholars have demonstrated the influence of communicative frames on citizens' thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviour such as voting decisions with experiments, surveys, and case studies across a range of issues (Chong and Druckman 2007; Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019; Druckman 2001). When framing effects occur, they tend to be persistent (Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019). While politicians' framing often influences citizens via mass media, there can also be direct links between political communicators and audiences, especially in an era of online news and social media (Carnahan, Hao, and Yan 2019; Chong and Druckman 2007; Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019). Various factors moderate the intensity of framing effects on audiences. Amongst them are individual predispositions like prior attitudes and values, knowledge of contradictory evidence, issue saliency, and source credibility (Chong and Druckman 2007; Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019).

Frames differ in their **nature and characteristics**. Emphasis frames, for instance, present an issue in a way which draws attention to the broader themes and considerations based on which the issue should be understood (Carnahan, Hao, and Yan 2019; Druckman 2001). Communicators' frame expertise increases the chances that their frames successfully influence public opinion. Frames tend to be more successful when they appeal to emotions, contain a dramatic, unambiguous, and conflict-laden storyline, simplify complex matters, and are rooted in ideas or values prevalent in the underlying culture (Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019; Kangas, Niemelä, and Varjonen 2014). Each frame consists of several frame elements, disaggregated components of discursive frames (Cassell 2021; Iyengar and Adam 1993; Matthes and Kohring 2008; Treib, Schäfer, and Schlipphak 2020).

When anti-democratic parties are threatened or targeted by MD, they are likely to frame MD unfavourably, aiming to undermine the different pillars required for its success. MD frames by targeted parties likely consist of **frame elements** addressing evaluations of both (1) the anti-democratic party itself, and (2) liberal democratic institutions.⁹

⁹ To arrive at the list of frame elements presented here, I have collected, synthesised, and categorised prior literature's suggestions on potential party narratives on MD.

1. Positive evaluations of the targeted party

One potential group of frame elements consists of positive evaluations of the targeted party. These elements affirm the integrity of the targeted party, highlight its outsider status, and present it as the true defender of democracy.

- 1.1. (Frontstage) moderation: The party is moderate. If at all, radical elements within the party are negligible or limited to a few individuals or groups against which the party is already active (Brandmann 2022; Downs 2012; Hackner 2023; Lührmann et al. 2020). Note: With such a frame element, anti-democratic parties attempt to adjust to the ‘democratic Zeitgeist’ marked by widespread social norms of racial equality and support for democratic institutions. Voters commonly do not want to openly support parties which are openly racist or extremist (Brandmann 2022). Propagating more moderate self-presentations, anti-democratic parties may appeal to electorates in the centre. Moreover, they make it harder to apply MD measures and protect themselves from potential reputational damage done by MD (Brandmann 2022; Lührmann et al. 2020). Such moderation towards the outside may occur detached from any internal moderation (Brandmann 2022).
- 1.2. Because the party is moderate, any attack is unjustified: the party is a victim persecuted and unjustly demonised by the political establishment. As it is a martyr, solidarity with the party is called for (Bértoa and Rama 2021; Bleich 2011; Downs 2012; Fallend and Heinisch 2016; Gärditz 2017; Hackner 2023; Koß 2024; Lührmann et al. 2020; Merkel 2024; Minkenberg 2006; 2017).
- 1.3. The application of MD tools confirms the party’s integrity, like a badge of honour (Brandmann 2022; Manow and Wald 2024). That other parties and liberal democratic institutions attempt to apply MD tools against the party demonstrates that the party is truly fighting for citizens’ interests and against evil elites. - Note: This frame element may be particularly resonant with citizens generally mistrusting state institutions (Bértoa and Rama 2021).

2. Negative evaluations of liberal democratic institutions, other parties, and MD tools

The second group of MD frame elements presents negative evaluations of liberal democratic institutions, other parties, and MD tools to undermine trust in these objects. The following frame elements may serve this purpose.

- 2.1. The use of MD tools against the party, liberal democratic institutions, and other parties are undemocratic and, thereby, destroy democracy.
 - 2.1.1. MD tools employed against the party are undemocratic, anti-pluralist, and exclusive. All members of the public should have the right to form parties to achieve their political goals. MD takes away citizens' free electoral choice (Bértoa and Rama 2021; Hackner 2023; Lührmann et al. 2020).
 - 2.1.2. By implementing MD tools, liberal democratic institutions and other parties are hypocritical and apply double standards: while claiming to be democratic, they undermine democracy and liberal freedoms such as the freedom of speech and press (Hackner 2023; Kaltwasser 2019; Lührmann et al. 2020; Minkenberg 2017).
- 2.2. MD tools and liberal democratic institutions are politicised by other parties. The targeted party is prosecuted for political reasons because other parties are intimidated by its electoral strength and policy proposals. Other parties use MD tools to get rid of a political rival (O'Donohue and Tecimer 2024; Hackner 2023; Low 2018; Minkenberg 2006).
- 2.3. Other parties and the government are politically unresponsive, and elites are out of touch with people's reality and needs. They use MD tools instead of dealing with problems and providing practical solutions (Kaltwasser 2019; Lührmann et al. 2020).
- 2.4. Non-majoritarian liberal democratic institutions have too much power. These institutions are unelected and corrupted and, thus, should not have the authority to impose MD measures on a party supported by (parts of) the population. Hence, the validity of the liberal democratic model as such is questionable (O'Donohue and Tecimer 2024; Kaltwasser 2019).

If targeted parties succeed in influencing public opinion with their framing of MD and, thereby, undermining the effectiveness of MD, the following hypotheses should hold.

Hypothesis 3 Individuals exposed to negative militant democracy frames have a higher attachment to the targeted party than individuals not exposed to such frames.

Hypothesis 4 Individuals exposed to negative militant democracy frames have lower regime support than individuals not exposed to such frames.

2 Research Design

For this thesis, I conduct a survey experiment in Germany to investigate public opinion on Militant Democracy. This section presents the selected case and methodological approach.

2.1 Case: Germany

This research uses the Federal Republic of Germany as a case study to investigate the research questions. Germany is a typical case of a militant democracy confronting anti-democratic threats in two key respects. First, Germany's experience with the rise and increasing popularity of an extremist party mirrors the emergence of similar illiberal movements across liberal democracies. Second, Germany is typical for other countries that allow for MD tools like party bans as these tools are also provided for in the German constitution. At the same time, because Germany is generally relatively open to MD from a legal and historical perspective, it serves as a hard test case for examining potential backlash against militant democracy.

2.1.1 Militant democracy in Germany

The German legal system covers a wide range of intolerant countermeasures against anti-democratic parties, particularly state-led tools, making it a **paradigmatic case of MD** (Bourne 2023; Capoccia 2013; de Leeuw and Bourne 2020; Glathe and Varga 2023; Hackner 2023; Laumond 2023; J.-W. Müller 2012; 2016). The German Federal Constitutional Court officially adopted a substantive understanding of democracy as a set of values to be defended against its declared enemies - the liberal-democratic constitutional order ("freiheitlich demokratische Grundordnung") as specified in the constitution (Capoccia 2013; J.-W. Müller 2012). The German constitution contains various articles to guarantee the protection of this order, including the possibility to temporarily limit individuals' active civil rights (Art. 18) or the possibility to ban parties deemed unconstitutional (Art. 21(2)) (Backes 2006; Capoccia 2013; *Grundgesetz Für Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany]*, n.d.; Low 2018; Lübke-Wolff 2023; Minkenberg 2006; Möllers 2024; J.-W. Müller 2012). Germany has also established institutions like the *Verfassungsschutz* (Office for the Protection of the Constitution) to monitor political parties and other groups which may constitute a threat to Germany's constitutional order (Hackner 2023; Gärditz 2017; Minkenberg 2006; J.-W. Müller 2012). The *Verfassungsschutz* collects and analyses information and publicly reports on it to enable timely political and legal responses to threats to the liberal-

democratic order. For a complete list of German militant democracy tools, please refer to [Appendix A](#).

Various of these tools have been **invoked in Germany** since World War II. Out of six attempted party bans, two have been successful (1952 banning of the quasi-Nazi Socialist Reich Party, 1956 banning of the German Communist Party) (Backes 2006; Bértoa and Rama 2021; Capoccia 2013; Hackner 2023; Low 2018; Kaltwasser 2019; Minkenberg 2006; J.-W. Müller 2012). While many associations have been banned, there have only been four applications for the forfeiture of individual rights, none of which has been successful (Capoccia 2013; Merkel 2024; J.-W. Müller 2012). Party bans and the surveillance of political groups possible in Germany represent some of the most controversial intolerant tools, offering rich material for examining the potential side-effects of legally restricting supposedly anti-democratic parties.

2.1.2 Militant democracy against the **Alternative für Deutschland**

Germany is a particularly interesting case study as, currently, debates on MD are highly salient in the context of measures taken against the **Alternative für Deutschland** (AfD) (Ertelt 2024; Gärditz 2017; Low 2018; Lübke-Wolff 2023; Merkel 2024; Meyer-Resende 2019; Treib, Schäfer, and Schlipphak 2020; Tworek 2021; Valentino 2018). The AfD has become the largest right-extremist party in Germany since its founding in 2013 and has gained 20.8% of votes in the 2025 federal elections (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2025; Hackner 2023; Laumond 2023). Scholars regard it as an illiberal, anti-pluralist, populist party which embraces right-extremist and anti-constitutional attitudes (Brandmann 2022; Hackner 2023; Low 2018; Lührmann et al. 2020; Treib, Schäfer, and Schlipphak 2020). Thus, the AfD poses a significant challenge to the liberal democratic order. However, like other modern challengers of liberal democracy, it shows an ambiguous relationship to democracy. While leading AfD party members regularly make statements violating constitutional principles, the party's programme as such is not anti-constitutional (Meyer-Resende 2019; Möllers 2024). Unlike most former targets of MD, the AfD claims to accept the rules of liberal democracy and does not officially propose the abolition of parliamentary democracy (Laumond 2023; Low 2018). These ambiguities render MD against the German AfD an ideal subject for studying the potential pitfalls of MD.

Various MD tools are relevant in the context of the AfD. Monitoring and classification by the Verfassungsschutz have already affected the AfD for years. After having regarded the federal AfD as a suspected case of right-wing extremism (rechtsextremistischer

Verdachtsfall) since March 2021, the Verfassungsschutz classified the party as secured right-extremist in May 2025. At the state level, Verfassungsschutz offices have classified four AfD sections as secured right-wing extremist (gesichert rechtsextremistisch), five sections as suspected cases, and only seven cases are not classified. The party's sub-section Der Flügel and the party youth Junge Alternative have also been labelled as secured right-wing extremist (Gärditz 2017; Treib, Schäfer, and Schlipphak 2020). Furthermore, massive public protests against right-wing extremism at the beginning of 2024 have incited discussions on a potential party ban (of the party as a whole or some state sections), restrictions of state financing for the AfD, or rights restrictions of individual AfD politicians (Lübbe-Wolff 2023; Merkel 2024; Möllers 2024). Based on an open letter from 600 lawyers and an expert opinion from 17 experts in constitutional law, 113 members of the German Bundestag introduced a motion to initiate ban proceedings, while 43 members proposed to evaluate the prospects of success of such proceedings (Deutscher Bundestag 2025). These motions were discussed by the Bundestag on January 30, 2025, and subsequently forwarded to the Bundestag's Committee on Internal Affairs and Community (Deutscher Bundestag 2025). In a representative poll from May 2025, 48% of German respondents indicated that they support banning the AfD while 37% of respondents are opposed to such a ban (Hölzl, Reuters, and Zeit Online 2025).

2.1.3 The effectiveness of militant democracy against the AfD

Very few studies discuss the effectiveness of MD tools against the AfD or potential backlashes. Meyer-Resende (2019) suggests that the classification and surveillance of the AfD by the federal Verfassungsschutz in 2019 have unsettled party members. Party members working for state institutions may fear losing their jobs if AfD classifications proceed further, thus rendering AfD membership a professional liability. Moreover, the Verfassungsschutz decision focused public attention on ways in which the AfD oversteps constitutional boundaries.

Brandmann (2022), however, finds that the AfD has **recognised these threats early on** and taken strategic actions to mitigate dangers posed to it by MD measures. According to her, while the Verfassungsschutz issued its initial statements against the AfD only in early 2019, AfD officials expected the Verfassungsschutz to take measures already back in 2017. Anticipating MD measures, the AfD established a **working group** (Arbeitsgruppe Verfassungsschutz) to prepare the AfD to deal with the Verfassungsschutz (Brandmann 2022; Laumond 2023). This group issued reports on the legal requirements for the implementation of MD measures. Based on these, it advised caution and provided party members and officials

with clear instructions regarding words or activities to avoid a Verfassungsschutz classification. The AfD even informed the public about this working group, signalling its willingness to fight any MD measures taken (Brandmann 2022).

Demonstrating this willingness in practice, the AfD has taken **legal action** against MD measures (Brandmann 2022; Hackner 2023; Laumond 2023). When the Verfassungsschutz presented the AfD as a case of assessment for undermining the free democratic basic order in January 2019, the AfD launched a successful emergency appeal against the publication of this label (VG Köln 2019). The Administrative Court in Cologne decided that the Verfassungsschutz did not have a legal basis for publicly describing the AfD as a case of assessment and that this action had been disproportionate. Some later appeals against Verfassungsschutz statements were equally successful. However, in spring 2022, courts dismissed an AfD appeal challenging its designation as a case of suspicion as the Verfassungsschutz had been able to provide sufficient evidence to support and publicise its classification of the AfD (VG Köln 2022; OVG Nordrhein-Westfalen 2024). By suing state intelligence services, the AfD ties up significant state resources, leveraging its extensive financial assets to fund its legal contestation of MD measures (Laumond 2023).

In addition to legal challenges, the AfD has taken **organisational steps** to circumvent MD measures or minimise their impact (Brandmann 2022). In March 2020, after the Verfassungsschutz had declared the party's extreme-right sub-section Der Flügel as a case of observation, the federal AfD board ordered the section to dissolve itself. While the section issued statements that it would discontinue all activities, AfD members report that it has not changed its actions in any way, and its members – most prominently Björn Höcke - are still active in the party (Brandmann 2022). Besides officially dissolving the Flügel, the AfD has also launched numerous exclusionary proceedings against party members. However, according to Brandmann (2022), most of these proceedings have not led to actual exclusions and only impose sanctions on individuals in rare, extreme cases to publicly draw a line.

In its **public communication**, the AfD intends to cover up racism and portray itself as socially acceptable (Brandmann 2022). In response to Verfassungsschutz statements, the AfD has repeatedly launched press conferences in which it describes such classifications as misplaced and instrumentalised for personal political goals. Supporting these claims, the AfD leverages the fact that its ambiguous relationship to democracy makes it more difficult to clearly label it as an anti-democratic actor (Valentino 2018). Thereby, the AfD delegitimises MD measures taken, aims to curb the reputation of the Verfassungsschutz, and tries to mitigate the negative consequences of potential MD measures. Hackner (2023) observes that the AfD

has publicly moderated its language after Verfassungsschutz classifications became public to declare itself as a party fully committed to democracy and representing all German citizens. Concerned about the impact of MD measures on its electoral support, the AfD even commissioned a survey to assess the impacts of Verfassungsschutz statements on the electorate (Brandmann 2022). Tailoring its messages to different audiences and media, the AfD differentiates in its MD strategy between the East and West of Germany (Brandmann 2022). While party officials in West Germany are seriously concerned about Verfassungsschutz classifications, such classifications may not pose much of an electoral disadvantage in the East where, according to the AfD, scepticism of state institutions is more widespread because of experiences with the German Democratic Republic's Ministry for State Security. Here, the AfD discredits the Verfassungsschutz as a 'Stasi 2.0' and proudly claims Verfassungsschutz classifications as a badge of honour.

In its public communication, the AfD walks a **fine line between extremism and moderation**. Well-informed about the ways in which the Verfassungsschutz assesses parties as potential targets of MD, AfD officials carefully tailor their speech to fit within legal boundaries (Brandmann 2022). They are called upon to carefully reflect on their use of words and to deliberately avoid certain terms associated with the nazi regime (e.g., 'Umvolkung'). Instead, AfD officials use signals and coded phrases which do not name their explicit thoughts but send messages to radical voters. When confronted, party officials can then deny any malicious intentions. The AfD also employs a strategy of calculated provocations which can later be presented as a misunderstanding (Brandmann 2022). Doing so, the AfD is aware that official party documents are more relevant for the Verfassungsschutz than statements by individual party members. Thus, it employs significantly more cautious language in these documents. Brandmann (2022) describes that, while the AfD's strategy papers call for moderation, AfD officials explain that this is only a precaution against Verfassungsschutz monitoring, and AfD members who act contrary to this strategy do not need to fear any internal repercussions. Such official moderation sends signals to the Verfassungsschutz and voters in general, rather than communicating the party's actual positions to party members and supporters. With methods like these, the AfD intends to cover up racism and portray itself as socially acceptable.

Going forward, many scholars are **sceptical about the effectiveness** of using MD tools against the AfD (Gärditz 2017; Low 2018; Manow and Wald 2024; Merkel 2024; Möllers 2024). They fear that an attempt to ban the party may fail, inadvertently lending more credibility to the AfD and that the AfD may exploit MD to strengthen its victim narratives. In

response, voters may radicalise, and public opinion may sway further in the AfD's favour. Such concerns cast doubt on the expectation that militant democracy can effectively protect democracy from threats posed by the AfD.

2.2 Methods

To analyse how the implementation of MD tools and AfD framing of such tools impact public opinion, I conducted a **survey experiment**. This experiment was designed as a randomised control trial. Randomisation allows to systematically manipulate an independent variable, (i.e., reflection about the use of MD tools, respectively AfD narratives) and isolates its effects on dependent variables (public opinion on the AfD and regime support) from potential confounders. This provides strong grounds for drawing causal inferences regarding the relationship between (the framing of) MD and relevant public attitudes. Likewise, in framing research, experiments are a popular tool to investigate the impact of frames on public opinion (Carnahan, Hao, and Yan 2019; Chong and Druckman 2010; Kangas, Niemelä, and Varjonen 2014; Nelson, Wittmer, and Carnahan 2015). To examine the effects of frame-setting, researchers often compare treatment groups exposed to certain frames to a control group that only receives basic descriptive information about the issue to be framed ((Bullock and Vedlitz 2017; Chong and Druckman 2007; Kangas, Niemelä, and Varjonen 2014) Bullock and Vedlitz 2017; Chong and Druckman 2007; Kangas, Niemelä, and Varjonen 2014). As a drawback, experimental settings have limited external validity. They fail to accurately represent how citizens engage with political news on militant democracy in the real world, whether framed by the targeted party or not. This is especially relevant in modern times, where online news consumption dominates, users can flexibly pick the texts they consume, and readers commonly focus on headlines and short texts rather than comprehensive articles. To tackle this limitation, I conducted my experiment via an online questionnaire which can better simulate online news consumption than a physical survey. Moreover, I presented the experimental conditions as short texts to plausibly imitate real-world content.

The **population** for my survey is individuals who are eligible to vote in German national elections – German nationals aged eighteen or older, who have a residence in Germany.¹⁰ I created the survey with the online survey tool Qualtrics and fielded it in early

¹⁰ Additionally, I require respondents to be fluent in German to avoid problems with their comprehension of survey questions.

February 2025¹¹ via the online opt-in survey provider Prolific.¹² **Respondents** were selected from a pool of volunteers registered with Prolific who complete surveys in exchange for small financial rewards.¹³ While opt-in survey providers do not employ random selection to provide representative samples, research has found that their samples are roughly representative of national populations along key dimensions such as age, income, gender, and education in the middle-income range of a population (Stantcheva 2023). Moreover, experimental average treatment effects are very similar between representative and non-representative samples (Coppock, Leeper, and Mullinix 2018). This research was approved by the ad-hoc Ethical Research Committee of the Department of Political Science at Central European University. The participants provided informed consent and were granted anonymity. All procedures were conducted following the guidelines and regulations set by the review board.

The survey is structured as a **post-only design** – the dependent variables are measured only once for each respondent, after exposure to the stimulus. Alternative pre-post designs measure dependent variables twice for each respondent – both before and after exposure to the stimulus. Such designs achieve higher precision than post-only experiments while finding similar treatment effects (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021). However, this research does not employ a pre-post design due to the limited survey length. In a pre-post design with such a short length, respondents would be required to answer the same or very similar items within short timespans, possibly leading to consistency pressures and respondent frustration. This intuition was confirmed by a pilot implementation of the survey. Already in the post-only design, respondents recognised similarities among repeated measures targeting the same construct (e.g., three items on partisan attitudes), indicating that another repetition of these measures before exposure to the stimulus would harm the survey flow.

Based on these decisions, the survey is **structured** as follows. After giving informed consent, respondents provide information on covariates and socio-demographic questions. Next, they are randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. Respondents in the first condition are directed straight to the next section. In the other two conditions, respondents read a short text, answer a question related to the text to increase their engagement, and

¹¹ The survey was fielded between 07.02 and 10.02.25, two weeks before the early elections for the German Bundestag (23.02.25).

¹² Prolific ensures a high data quality by taking steps against participants registering multiple times, e.g., by requiring unique phone numbers and restricting the number of potential sign-ups with the same IP address and machine. Additionally, Douglas, Ewell and Brauer (2023) demonstrate that respondents on Prolific provide high quality data, compared to respondents from MTurk, Qualtrics, or an undergraduate student sample.

¹³ Respondents were screened based on their membership in the population (German nationals, residing in Germany, 18+). Additionally, I required respondents to be fluent in German in order to avoid comprehension problems.

complete a manipulation check. Subsequently, respondents in all three groups are asked the same questions on their support for the AfD and the regime to assess how their exposure to different experimental conditions influences the dependent variables.

Completion of the survey takes around 5 minutes. The survey was designed in English and translated into German by a native speaker. Before fielding, the survey was pre-tested with a convenience sample of 23 German citizens. The following section describes the survey items in detail. For the complete survey in English and German, please refer to [Appendix B](#).

2.2.1 Dependent variables

As dependent variables, I measure the two dimensions of public opinion relevant to the success of MD, attitudes towards the targeted party, and support for the political regime.

2.2.1.1 Partisan attitudes

As one dependent variable, I measure partisan attitudes towards the AfD. Using partisan attitude measures, this survey experiment can show whether respondents feel particularly positive or negative towards the AfD after exposure to an experimental condition, regardless of whether respondents identify with the AfD and whether respondents have more significant attitudes towards other parties. In contrast, for instance, measures of party identification or voting intentions usually only obtain responses towards a single party to which a respondent feels most favourably (Lutz and Lauener 2020; Rosema and Mayer 2020). This research uses three different items to capture partisan attitudes as a way to reduce measurement error (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder, JR 2008; Stantcheva 2023). The items are then combined into a single index of AfD partisan attitudes. Each item asks about attitudes towards each party in the German Bundestag (SPD, CDU/CSU, Bündnis 90/die Grünen, FDP, AfD, Die Linke, BSW) to prevent respondents from focussing on the AfD and to limit pressures of social desirability.

First, studies such as the American National Election Studies, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, the British Election Studies, or the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) measure partisan attitudes using a feeling thermometer with varying numbers of scale-points (GLES 2023; Rosema and Mayer 2020). Adjusted from these surveys, this survey experiment asks: How much do you support or oppose each of the following parties? – Strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, neutral, somewhat support, strongly support, I don't know.”

A second measure of partisan attitudes focuses on representation and asks “To which extent do you feel that each of the following parties represents the interests of people like you? – Not at all, To a small extent, To some extent, To a large extent, Completely, I don't know” (Lutz and Lauener 2020; Pew Research Center 2023). The phrasing ‘represents the interests’ and ‘people like you’ render this item a more indirect measure of party support and direct respondents’ focus away from themselves to reduce social desirability bias.

Last, a common approach to measuring party preferences in multi-party systems is to use propensity-to-vote (PTV) scales (Paparo, De Sio, and Brady 2020). Such scales have been applied to many multi-party systems, including Germany. They ask separately for different parties in a party system “How likely is it that you will *ever* vote for each of the following parties? – Extremely unlikely, Unlikely, Neither likely nor unlikely, Likely, Extremely likely, I don't know.” While the wording of this item is connected to voting behaviour, it rather measures a party-oriented attitude because of its emphasis on the term ‘ever’, the undefined time or election, and the possibility of reporting favourable or unfavourable attitudes towards multiple parties (Paparo, De Sio, and Brady 2020).

2.2.1.2 *Regime support*

The survey includes items to measure the two more specific dimensions of regime support - evaluations of the regime’s democratic performance and support for regime institutions. First, as a measure of support for the regime’s **democratic performance**, I employ a common survey item asking “On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy is working in Germany? – Extremely dissatisfied, Very dissatisfied, Somewhat dissatisfied, Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Somewhat satisfied, Very satisfied, Extremely satisfied, I don't know” (Klingemann 1999; Norris 2011; 1999; Wegscheider and Stark 2020). This item has been criticised for its ambiguity, with scholars questioning whether it reflects attitudes towards the democratic processes in practice (as intended here), towards democracy in general (more abstract) or policy outputs (more specific) (Norris 2011; 1999; Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1998; Klingemann 1999). However, various researchers suggest that the wording ‘how democracy is working’ encourages respondents to report their evaluations of democratic performance and that it is a suitable indicator (Norris 2011; 1999; Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1998; Wegscheider and Stark 2020). Moreover, the item’s widespread use in survey projects like the Eurobarometer or the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems makes it an attractive candidate for comparative purposes.

Second, to measure support for **institutions**, I adopt a common political trust item from the ESS and GLES (European Social Survey 2018; GLES 2023). The item asks “How much do you personally trust or distrust each of the following institutions or organisations? - The Government, The Parliament, The Office for the Protection of the Constitution, The Constitutional Court, Public-service media. – Completely distrust, Distrust, Neither trust nor distrust, Trust, Completely trust, I don’t know.” As for partisan attitudes, these five items are combined into a single index of support for regime institutions.

2.2.2 Independent variables: experimental conditions

Respondents are randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. These conditions present a stimulus to respondents before they are inquired about their attitudes towards the AfD and political support for the regime. The first condition serves as a **baseline condition** which does not mention MD, neither descriptively nor framed. Respondents in this condition move directly from the covariate section to the dependent variable section. Thus, attention depletion might be slightly lower in this group than in the other two conditions. However, considering the simplicity of the treatment in the other two conditions and the generally short survey length, differences in attention can be assumed to be minimal and not influence survey responses.

The second and third conditions refer to the **implementation of an MD measure** – a potential AfD-ban. This survey uses party bans as an MD measure because they are commonly regarded as the most extreme type of MD. Moreover, the effects of party bans have tangible practical implications which can be easily comprehended and assessed by respondents.

The **second condition represents the implementation of a party ban** generally. It contains descriptive information on the potential banning of the AfD without providing strong additional evaluative frames.¹⁴ The stimulus is phrased as follows:

Some voices in Germany are currently calling for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to be banned as a party.

Such a ban is possible if a party poses a threat to the free democratic basic order. A motion for a party ban can be submitted by the federal government, the Bundestag or

¹⁴ I chose not to phrase the treatment as a hypothetical scenario (e.g., ‘Imagine that the German government decided to ban the AfD...’), as previous studies have found that such approaches can introduce hypothetical bias and increase respondents’ cognitive burden, thereby undermining the validity of results (Kaderabek and Sinibaldi 2022; Loomis 2011; McDonald 2020).

the Bundesrat, for example, based on reports from the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The final decision is made by the Federal Constitutional Court.

The **third condition represents the framing of MD by the targeted party**. It contains the stimulus from the second condition and adds negative AfD frames of a potential party ban. The stimulus used in this condition is based on the theoretical expectations for MD frame elements presented in the literature review, as well as corresponding messages which the AfD has spread via social media and in the parliamentary debate on a potential AfD-ban on January 30, 2025 (DIP Dokuments- und Informationssystem für Parlamentsmaterialien 2025). To validate whether the AfD uses the frame elements proposed by theory, I examined Facebook posts from the official account of the federal AfD and the accounts of the two party heads, Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla. By searching for MD-related keywords including ‘Verfassungsschutz’ (Office for the Protection of the Constitution), ‘Verfassungsgericht’ (Constitutional Court), ‘Prüffall’ (case for inspection), and Parteienverbot’ (party ban), I extracted 77 posts related to militant democracy targeted at the AfD published until September 2024. In these posts, I could identify instances of all frame elements presented in the literature review. Particularly dominant were discreditations of MD measures as undemocratic, politicised and implemented by overly powerful unelected institutions, as well as descriptions of the AfD as a moderate, truly democratic victim. Beyond the frame elements identified in the literature, the AfD frequently invoked references to conspiracies and presented MD measures as illegal. For instance, one post by Alice Weidel (2021) reads as follows (translated by the author).¹⁵

+++ Office for the Protection of the Constitution disregards democracy and the Constitution! +++

Ten days before the state elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, it is being leaked to the media that the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has categorised the AfD as a ‘suspected case’. This is a transparent election campaign manoeuvre without any factual basis.

The domestic intelligence service is allowing itself to be politically abused to defame the largest opposition party in the national parliament, which is also represented in all state parliaments, and to put it at a disadvantage in political competition. This is an unprecedented scandal in Western democracies.

The Office for the Protection of the Constitution loses all legitimacy when it one-sidedly intervenes in the political debate as a tool of the established parties. It damages democracy and disregards the constitution, which, according to a judgement by the Federal Constitutional Court, imposes particular restraint on state agencies, especially in election years.

¹⁵ Upon request, the full table of the analysed posts can be shared by the author.

The Alternative für Deutschland will not be intimidated by this easily understood manoeuvre. It will use all legal and political means at its disposal to defend itself against this encroachment on its rights and this impairment of its electoral chances.

Having corroborated the AfD's use of frame elements presented in theory, I created the stimulus for the third treatment group based on a synthesis of these elements:

Some voices in Germany are currently calling for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to be banned as a party.

Such a ban is possible if a party poses a threat to the free democratic basic order. A motion for a party ban can be submitted by the federal government, the Bundestag or the Bundesrat, for example, based on reports from the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The final decision is made by the Federal Constitutional Court.

The AfD criticises such considerations:

- This discussion is a politically motivated attack on a democratically elected opposition party. A ban would be an abuse of power - the government is trying to suppress dissenting opinions.
- The AfD is not extremist, but a legitimate voice of opposition in favour of free debate. A ban would deprive AfD voters of their political voice.
- Moreover, unelected institutions such as courts or the Office for the Protection of the Constitution have too much power. It is undemocratic for such institutions to decide on the legitimacy of political parties.

This condition does not only present frames but also specifies the AfD as the source of criticism. With such a design, it will not be possible to differentiate between the effects of the source (AfD) and the effects of the frames (criticism) on public opinion. However, this design is used since theoretical expectations relate to the *framing* of militant democracy *by the targeted party*. Future research may examine the effects of different frames and sources separately.

Following the text, conditions two and three include a **question related to the text** aiming to increase respondents' engagement. The question is adjusted from ARD-DeutschlandTREND implemented by Infratest Dimap (Infratest Dimap 2024) and asks "In your view, would it be appropriate or inappropriate to initiate proceedings to ban the AfD? –

Completely inappropriate, very inappropriate, somewhat inappropriate, neither appropriate nor inappropriate, somewhat appropriate, very appropriate, completely appropriate, I don't know.”

As visualised in Figure 1, I hypothesise that, if MD is successful, respondents presented with information about a potential AfD-ban without critical framing should have lower party attachments to the AfD (H1.a) and no lower regime support (H2.a) than respondents not exposed to such a stimulus. However, if MD backlashes, respondents presented with information about a potential AfD-ban without critical framing may have higher party attachments to the AfD (H1.b) and lower regime support (H2.b) than respondents not exposed to such a stimulus. Similarly, if party frames are effective in creating a backlash, respondents exposed to AfD frames of a potential party ban should have higher party attachments to the AfD (H3) and lower regime support (H4) than respondents not exposed to such a stimulus.

H1.a Respondents exposed to information about a potential AfD ban have a lower attachment to the AfD than respondents in the control group.

H1.b Respondents exposed to information about a potential AfD ban have a higher attachment to the AfD than respondents in the control group.

H2.a Respondents exposed to information about a potential AfD ban show no lower regime support than respondents in the control group.

H2.b Respondents exposed to information about a potential AfD ban show lower regime support than respondents in the control group.

H3 Respondents exposed to AfD frames of a potential AfD ban have a higher attachment to the AfD than respondents merely exposed to information about a potential AfD ban.

H4 Respondents exposed to AfD frames of a potential AfD ban show lower regime support than respondents merely exposed to information about a potential AfD ban.

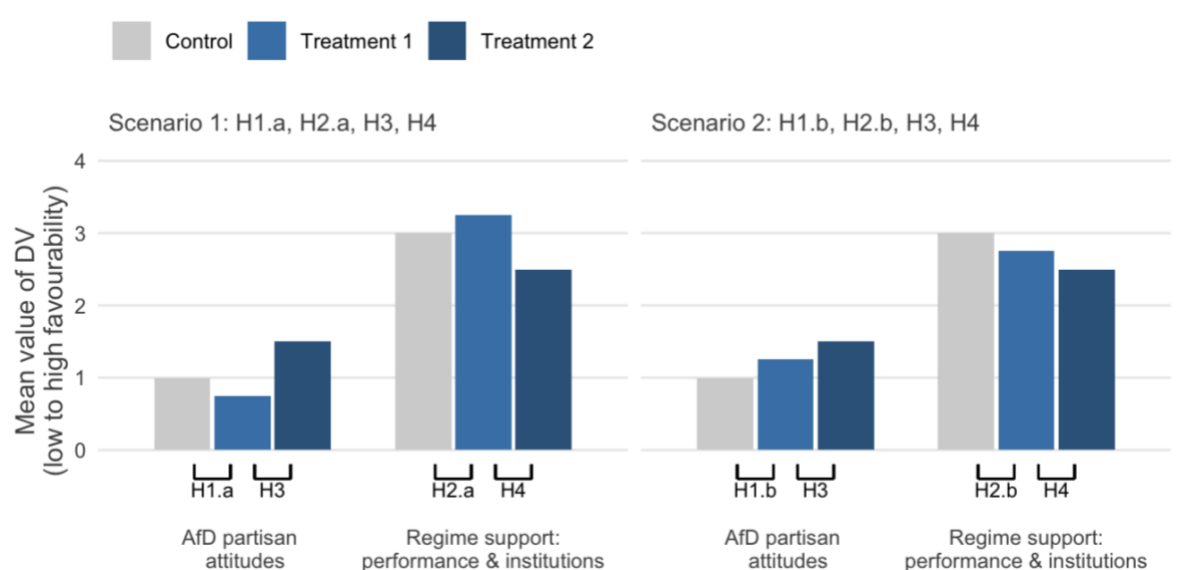


Figure 1. Stylised hypothetical effects by scenario.

2.2.3 Manipulation check

The survey includes a factual manipulation check to measure respondents' attention to the experimental stimuli. The advantage of such a factual manipulation check is that it measures attention to the experimental stimuli rather than to the survey in general (different to instructional manipulation checks) and allows to identify *individual respondents* who were inattentive, rather than merely allowing for the comparison of groups (different from subjective manipulation checks) (Kane and Barabas 2019). For the two treatment groups, this survey's manipulation check is placed between the stimulus and the dependent variables. Kane and Barabas (2019) find no evidence that placing the manipulation check before the dependent variable influences experimental outcomes. The manipulation check is phrased as follows: "For this survey, it is very important that the text you just read was understandable for you. We would therefore like to ask you to answer the following question about the text. If you don't know the answer, that is no problem - in this case, please simply state 'I don't know'. Which of the following statements applies best to the text you just read? - The text describes the possibility of banning the AfD. [correct answer for treatment 1] *or* The text describes criticism of a potential AfD ban. [correct answer for treatment 2] - The text describes the electoral system in Germany. - The text describes the powers of the German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. - The text describes the existing parliamentary committees. - I don't know." As suggested by Stancheva, face-saving language may be a means to reduce socially desirable answers (Stancheva 2023). Hence, to minimise random guessing by respondents, the item clearly states that it is acceptable for respondents to select 'I don't know' in case they do not know the answer.

2.2.4 Covariates

Apart from its experimental conditions and dependent variables, the survey measures respondents' **baseline support for the AfD** which may moderate the treatment effects. Individual predispositions such as frame-opposing prior attitudes may render individuals resistant to disconfirming information, and vice versa (Chong and Druckman 2007; Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019; Zaller 1992). Hence, AfD opponents may clearly reject AfD frames of militant democracy. In turn, AfD supporters may react particularly negatively to the discussion of a party ban and show a stronger framing effect than AfD opponents – MD may be effective for some parts of the population but not for others. Baseline AfD support is measured through an item adjusted from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES 2023). It asks, “In general, what do you think of the political parties in the German Bundestag?” Like the partisan attitude items, the question includes each of the parties in the German Bundestag. Answers are collected on a 7-point scale of “Extremely against, Strongly against, Against, Neither in favour nor against, In favour, Strongly in favour, Extremely in favour”. This scale uses a different number of scale points and different response labels than the scales used for partisan attitude items in the dependent variable section to avoid consistency pressures in respondents' answers.

The survey also includes **standard socio-demographic and control variables**, namely age, gender, level of education, primary state of residence, and political interest. The survey provider offers further socio-demographic data, including sex. I control for these variables as they may be associated with prior political views and thus, affect the dependent variables.

Message- and source-related characteristics such as issue saliency, emotional appeal, and source credibility may also impact the strength of framing effects. However, for the sake of parsimony, this study only varies the content of frame elements between the treatment conditions but keeps other message characteristics such as issue and source constant.

2.2.5 Further considerations

Various survey design considerations aim to improve data quality. The survey predominantly uses 5- and 7-point Likert scales. Such scales were found to be more reliable than scales with fewer options but less attention-depleting than scales with more answer options (McKelvie 1978; Stantcheva 2023). Every response option receives a label to provide guidance for respondents and increase reliability (Krosnick 1999; Stantcheva 2023). The scale includes a middle option as is standard in political science survey research. Although respondents might be attracted to middle options, such options improve answers' reliability and validity because

respondents are not forced to pick a side when they have a true middle attitude (Bishop 1987; Xu and Leung 2018). Most survey item also includes an ‘I don’t know option’ (Stantcheva 2023). This option bears the risk of encouraging satisficing, and some researchers argue that it does not improve data quality. However, others claim that respondents see meaningful differences between middle options and ‘I don’t know’ options and find a decreasing answer quality in surveys without such an option. To avoid systematic question order effects, I randomise the question order within both the dependent variable section and the covariate section (Stantcheva 2023). To reduce item non-response, the survey forces responses. Acknowledging that this may frustrate respondents, the survey allows respondents who cannot or do not want to answer to select the ‘I don’t know’ option (Stantcheva 2023).

2.2.6 Data analysis

After fielding, the data was analysed with R (R Core Team 2023) and R-Studio (Posit team 2024) using the packages *car* (Fox and Weisberg 2019), *dplyr* (Wickham et al. 2023), *effectsize* (Ben-Shachar, Lüdtke, and Makowski 2020), *ggplot2* (Wickham 2016), *knitr* (Xie 2023; 2015; 2014), *MASS* (Venables and Ripley 2002), *modelsummary* (Arel-Bundock 2022), *performance* (Lüdtke et al. 2021), *purrr* (Wickham and Henry 2023), *stargazer* (Hlavac 2022), *survey* (Lumley 2004; 2010; 2024), *tibble* (K. Müller and Wickham 2023), and *tidyr* (Wickham, Vaughan, and Girlich 2024). The choice of statistical tests is contingent on the data characteristics discussed in the [next section](#). Thus, further details on the statistical methods used are presented in the [analysis & results section](#).

3 Data

This study is based on survey responses from 605 German nationals aged 18 and older.¹⁶ For a list of relevant variables from the survey data after pre-processing, please refer to [Appendix C](#). Table 3 provides an overview of the numeric variables from the survey data.

Likert-scale variables cover the full range of possible values, and missing data is minimal. The next sections discuss sociodemographic and dependent variables in more detail.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics - numeric variables.

Note: Dependent variables are highlighted.

	Scale	Min	Max	Mean	Median	SD	NAs
Age		18	72	31.86	29	10.48	0
Political interest	0-4	0	4	2.46	2.0	0.93	0
Support for the AfD	0-6	0	6	0.66	0.0	1.47	1
AfD partisan attitudes (post-treatment) ¹⁷	0-6	0	6	0.79	0.0	1.57	0
Regime performance	0-6	0	6	3.05	4.0	1.47	1
Regime institutions ¹⁸	0-6	0	6	3.24	3.3	1.21	0
Adequacy of party ban	0-6	0	6	3.67	4.0	2.12	2

3.1 Sociodemographic composition of the sample

Figure 2 compares the sample and population by age, sex, and region. Population data is taken from the German Federal Statistical Office (DESTATIS Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). Respondents' **age** ranges from 18 to 72. Compared to the population, the sample overrepresents younger age groups (ages 18 to 44) and underrepresents older age groups (ages 45 to 60+). A chi-square test of goodness of fit, however, does not find a significant difference between these age groups in the sample and the population (p-value ≈ 0.67). In terms of **sex**, with 50.25% males and 48.76% females, the sample slightly overrepresents males, but this difference is insignificant as supported by a chi-square test of goodness of fit (p-value ≈ 0.64). All German **states** are represented by the sample, with 83.14% of respondents having their main residence in Western states, 10.41% in Eastern states, and 6.45% in Berlin. Here, however, the sample differs from the population with statistical significance (p-value of a chi-square test of goodness

¹⁶ Upon request, the survey data and code used for analysis can be shared by the author.

¹⁷ Index formation: Before forming indices for AfD partisan attitudes and support for regime institutions, I examined the inter-item correlations of the respective items. Inter-item correlation values above 2 are considered good for index-formation (Piedmont 2014). The partisan attitude items had an inter-item correlation (Spearman) of ≈ 0.79 , support for regime institutions items of ≈ 0.551 . As all items were measured on the same 0-6 scale, for index formation, I used simple averaging.

¹⁸ Ibid.

of fit < 0.001 for both residence and region). The sample overrepresents Western states and underrepresents Eastern states compared to the population.¹⁹

In terms of **education**, respondents constitute a diverse sample. While few respondents have either not had any schooling at all or not obtained a high-school degree ($n = 3$) or obtained a PhD ($n = 16$), other educational levels are represented relatively evenly. 159 respondents have completed high school, 108 respondents have completed vocational training, 177 respondents obtained a bachelor's, and 140 respondents completed their master's studies.

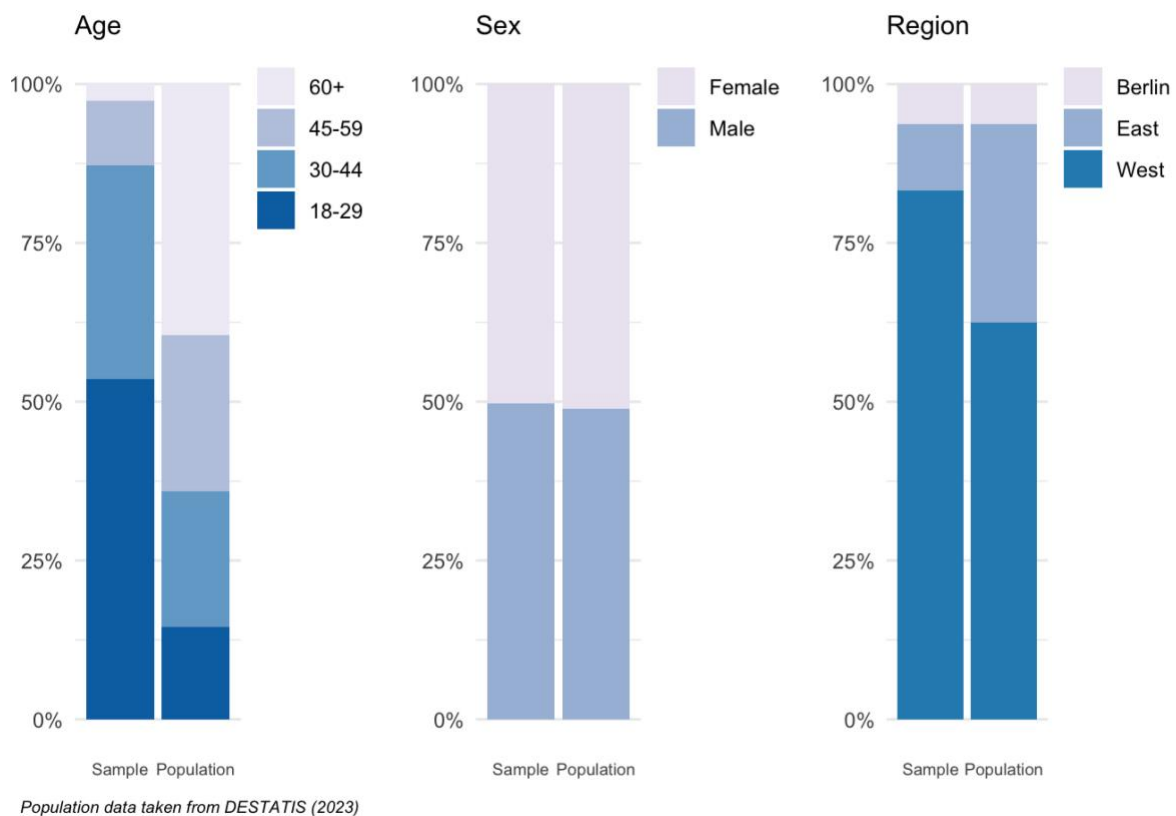


Figure 2. Comparing sample and population characteristics.

3.2 Dependent variables

Figure 3 plots the distributions of the dependent variables by treatment group. The partisan attitudes index is right-skewed, with most respondents strongly opposing the AfD (median = 0). The two regime support items show a slight left skew as respondents generally report

¹⁹ Overrepresented states are Bavaria, Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, and the Saarland. Underrepresented states are Baden-Wuerttemberg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holsten, and Thuringia.

medium to high support for the regime while a few respondents are strongly opposed. Across all groups, support for regime institutions slightly exceeds support for regime performance.

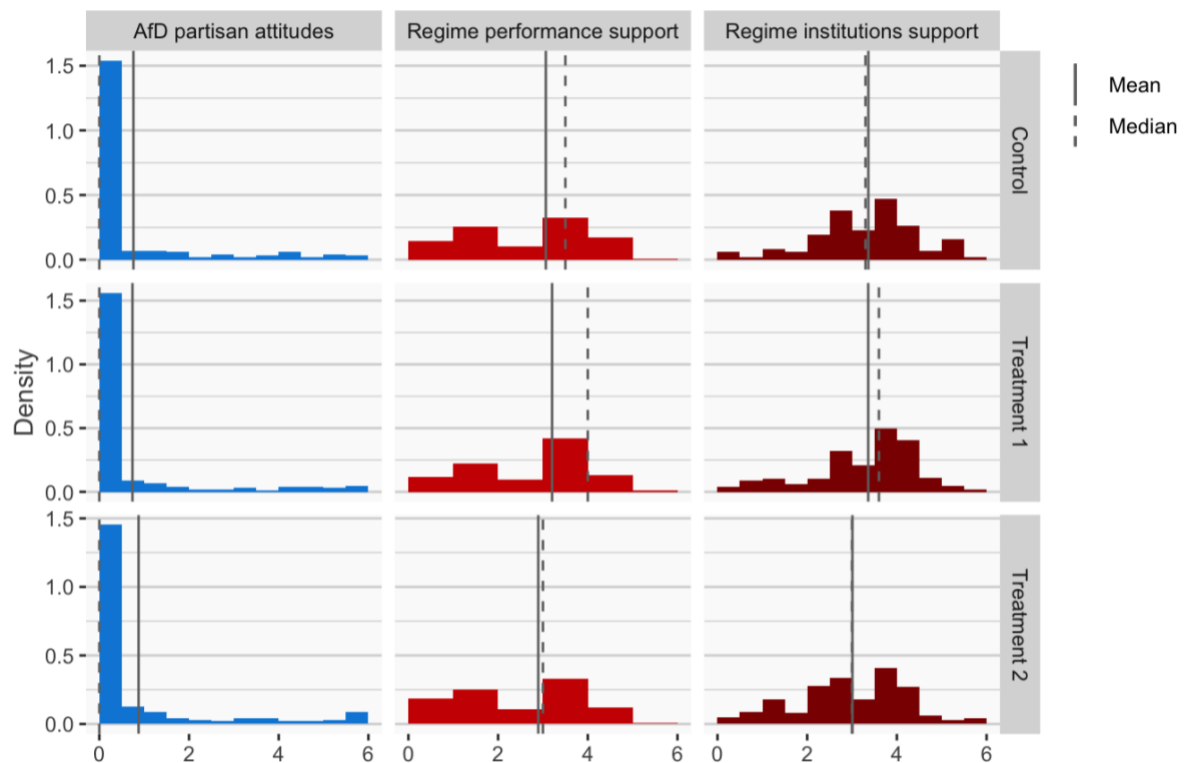


Figure 3. Distribution of dependent variables across treatment groups.

This finding can be seen even more clearly in Figure 4 which displays mean values of the three dependent variables by group. The figure also already indicates differences in partisan attitudes and regime support between groups. While values are very similar for the control and Treatment 1 group, respondents in Treatment 2 report higher mean support for the AfD and lower mean support for regime performance and institutions.

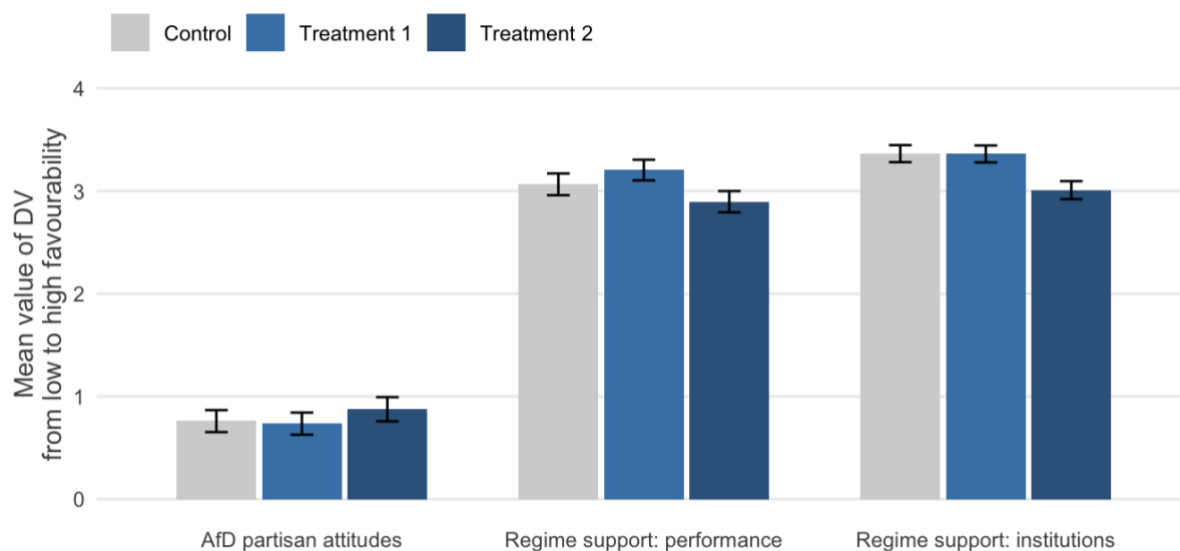


Figure 4. Comparison of DVs across treatment groups, with standard errors.

3.3 Attention

Respondents spent on average 4 minutes on the survey (median: 3.3 minutes; interquartile range from 2.5 to 4.2 minutes), slightly less time than expected. This may result from the sampling via an online provider, as volunteers listed on Prolific are likely highly experienced survey respondents. Respondents in Treatment 2 spent more time on the treatment (78 seconds) than those in Treatment 1 (56 seconds), likely due to the slightly longer text they had to read.

There was no **attrition** – all respondents completed the survey to 100%. Similarly, item non-responses are generally very low. Most survey items have NA rates below 2% - most actually have 0% nonresponses. The only exceptions are items asking about attitudes towards the Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht (BSW) with nonresponse rates of up to 6% of responses. This is unsurprising since the BSW is a rather new party and irrelevant to this project as items on parties other than the AfD are not needed for further analysis.

Overall, 95% of respondents in the treatment groups have passed the **factual manipulation check** (FMC) and there are only minor differences between the two treatment groups (94% in Treatment 1, 95.5% in Treatment 2). Mann-Whitney U tests for age, interest, and AfD support and chi-square tests of independence for gender, residence, and education do not find significant associations between passing the FMC and any of these variables.

Moreover, responses to the question of how **adequate** the initiation of procedures to ban the AfD are further suggest that the treatment was effective. As displayed in Figure 5, respondents in Treatment 2 rate the initiation of banning procedures as less adequate (mean \approx 3.54) than respondents in Treatment 1 (mean = 3.81). Although there is no statistically

significant difference in medians (p-value of a Mann-Whitney U test ≈ 0.15), the observed difference in means is in line with theoretical expectations that Treatment 2 renders respondents more critical of an AfD party ban than Treatment 1.

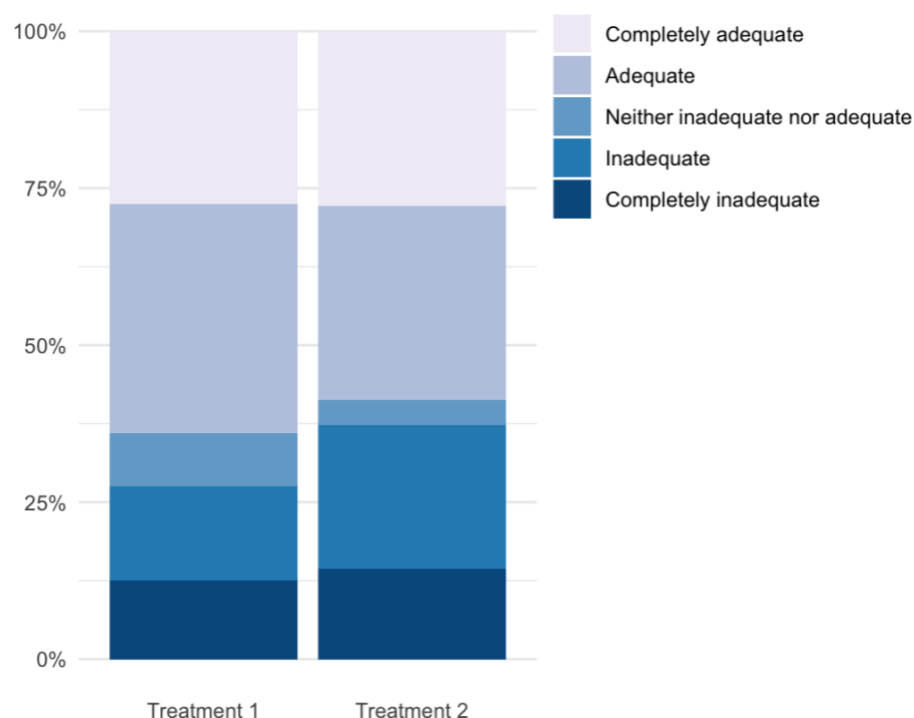


Figure 5. Ratings of the adequacy of an AfD ban across treatment groups.

3.4 Group balance

The number of respondents in each group is roughly equal (control group: $n = 200$, Treatment 1: $n = 202$, Treatment 2: $n = 201$). The groups are balanced by age, interest, gender, education, residence, and pre-treatment AfD support. This is confirmed by Kruskal-Wallis tests (for numeric variables) and Chi-square tests of independence (for categorical variables), as these tests do not find any significant differences between the three groups in terms of these variables.

4 Analysis and Results

To test my hypotheses, I employ Mann-Whitney U tests and corroborate my findings with multiple linear regression models. Robustness tests substantiate my results.

4.1 Tests: Mann-Whitney U tests and multiple linear regression

Mann-Whitney U tests are used because of the non-normal distributions of the dependent variables across the treatment groups.²⁰ This non-parametric test analyses whether the distributions differ between two groups (not just the means). The assumptions for Mann-Whitney U tests are met: the three treatment groups are independent, and Levene's test confirms homogeneity of variance (p-value ≈ 0.63 for partisan attitudes, ≈ 0.96 for regime performance, ≈ 0.28 for regime institutions).

To test the robustness of findings from the Mann-Whitney U tests, I estimate three **regression models** for each dependent variable. Each model progressively incorporates additional covariates and interaction terms to assess potential moderating effects. Model 1 examines the relationship between the treatment group and the dependent variables without any additional covariates. This baseline model is specified as:

$$\text{Model 1: } Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Group}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where Y_i represents one of the three dependent variables, partisan attitudes, support for regime performance, or support for regime institutions. Group_i indicates whether the respondent was assigned to the control group, Treatment 1, or Treatment 2. Tests for Hypotheses 1 and 2 require a comparison between the control group and Treatment 1, while tests for Hypotheses 3 and 4 require a comparison between Treatment 1 and Treatment 2. This design ensures that the treatment groups being compared differ in only one aspect. Since all hypothesis tests involve Treatment 1, it is used as the reference category. β_1 captures the effect of the treatment on the outcome variable. The error term ε_i accounts for unexplained variance.

To control for potential confounding variables, Model 2 introduces a set of individual-level covariates, including age, education, political interest, region, and pre-treatment support for the AfD. The equation for this model is:

²⁰ The non-normality of the distributions of the dependent variables is visible in Figure 3 and confirmed by Shapiro-Wilk Tests (p-value < 0.001 for all dependent variables across all three groups).

$$\text{Model 2: } Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Group}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Age}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \text{Education}_i + \beta_4 \cdot \text{Interest}_i + \beta_5 \cdot \text{Region}_i + \beta_6 \cdot \text{Party Support for AfD}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Model 3 investigates whether the effect of treatment varies depending on respondents' support for the AfD. To do so, I introduce an interaction term between the group and AfD support:

$$\text{Model 3: } Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Group}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \text{Age}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \text{Education}_i + \beta_4 \cdot \text{Interest}_i + \beta_5 \cdot \text{Region}_i + \beta_6 \cdot \text{Party Support for AfD}_i + \beta_7 \cdot (\text{Group}_i \cdot \text{Party Support for AfD}_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

β_7 captures the extent to which the treatment effect is moderated by pre-treatment AfD support.

Figure 6 illustrates the coefficients of Model 2 for all three dependent variables while

Table 4 presents the regression results. Coefficients for education are omitted for the sake of brevity – all education-related coefficients are small and non-significant. The complete regression table and regression results from models 1 and 2 can be found in [Appendix D](#).

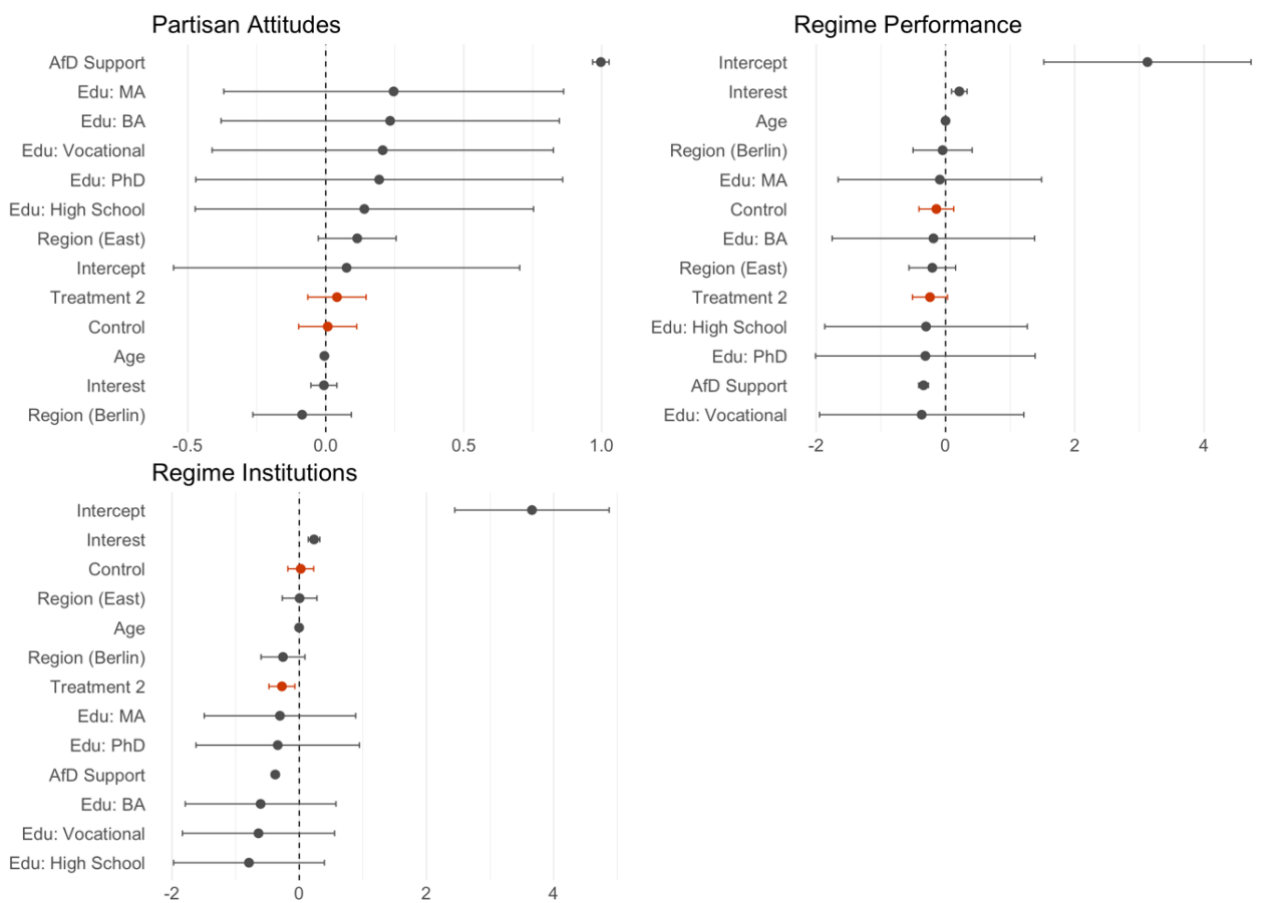


Figure 6. Estimated regression coefficients (Model 2) with 95% confidence intervals for the three dependent variables.

Table 4. Regression Model 2 - baseline with covariates.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	0.01 (0.05)	-0.14 (0.14)	0.02 (0.10)
Treatment 2	0.04 (0.05)	-0.24* (0.14)	-0.27*** (0.10)
Age	-0.01** (0.002)	0.0004 (0.01)	-0.002 (0.005)
Interest	-0.01 (0.02)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.23*** (0.05)
Region (East)	0.11 (0.07)	-0.20 (0.18)	0.01 (0.14)
Region (Berlin)	-0.09 (0.09)	-0.05 (0.23)	-0.26 (0.18)
AfD Party Support	1.00*** (0.02)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.03)
Constant	0.08 (0.32)	3.13*** (0.82)	3.66*** (0.62)
Observations	602	601	602
R ²	0.88	0.15	0.28
Adjusted R ²	0.88	0.13	0.27

Note: Coefficients for education are omitted for brevity; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Model fit differs strongly between the three models and across the three dependent variables. Model 1 generally has a very low fit with an adjusted R² of 0.02 and lower. Models 2 and 3 are similar in their fit for each dependent variable. Fit is highest for partisan attitudes with an adjusted R² of 0.88. This high fit is largely driven by the inclusion of pre-treatment AfD support as a covariate. The models have a much lower fit for the two regime support variables. Adjusted R² is at 0.13 for performance support and around 0.27 for institution support. Hence, not much of the variance in the regime support variables is explained by models. For the purposes of this x-oriented research, this is acceptable since the aim is to examine the effects of an independent variable (the treatment), rather than to fully explain all variation in the dependent variables.

4.2 Hypothesis tests

4.2.1 Hypothesis 1

To test Hypothesis 1, I compare partisan attitudes towards the AfD between the control group and Treatment 1. Both groups' medians are at 0, while the mean AfD attitudes of the control group are around 0.025 scale points higher than the mean AfD attitudes of Treatment 1. This difference in means points in the direction of H1.a - Respondents exposed to information about a potential AfD-ban have a lower attachment to the AfD than respondents in the control group. However, the difference in partisan attitudes is not statistically significant in either the Mann-Whitney U test comparing the distributions (two-sided p-value ≈ 0.95) or the linear regressions (p-value in Model 2 ≈ 0.9 ; similar in the other models). There is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis for either H1.a or H1.b.

4.2.2 Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis pertains to differences in support for both regime performance and regime institutions. Examining support for regime performance, differences in medians, means, and regression results provide support for H2.a – Respondents exposed to information about a potential AfD-ban do not show lower (but rather more) regime support than respondents in the control group. Median support for regime performance is 1 point higher in Treatment 1 than in the control group, mean support is 0.14 points higher. The picture is more ambiguous looking at support for regime institutions. Median support for institutions is higher in Treatment 1 than in the control group by 0.3 scale points, but effects disappear and even reverse slightly in terms of means and regression coefficients – rather pointing towards support for H2.b – Respondents exposed to information about a potential AfD-ban show lower regime support than respondents in the control group.

However, this effect is not statistically significant. Mann-Whitney U tests for differences in the distributions between the control group and Treatment 1 produce a two-sided p-value of approximately 0.4 for support for regime performance and 0.55 for support for regime institutions. The regression models do not show a significant effect of the control group on regime support variables either (Model 2: p-value ≈ 0.3 for support for partisan attitudes, ≈ 0.8 for support for regime institutions). Hence, we cannot reject the null hypothesis H2.a that Respondents exposed to information about a potential AfD-ban show no lower regime support than respondents in the control group. There does not seem to be a backlash effect of militant democracy in terms of regime support.

4.2.3 Hypothesis 3

Now I turn towards comparing the two treatment groups. Median AfD partisan attitudes are the same in Treatment 1 and Treatment 2 (values of 0). However, mean AfD support is 0.093 scale points higher in Treatment 2 than in Treatment 1 and the regression coefficient also indicates more favourable attitudes towards the AfD in Group 2, suggesting support for H3 - Respondents exposed to AfD frames of a potential AfD-ban have a higher attachment to the AfD than respondents merely exposed to information about a potential AfD-ban.

Nonetheless, this effect is not statistically significant (p-value of Mann-Whitney U test ≈ 0.2 , p-value of regression Model 2 ≈ 0.5 , similar across regression models). I cannot reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference in AfD partisan attitudes between respondents exposed to AfD frames of a potential AfD ban and those merely exposed to information on such a ban.

4.2.4 Hypothesis 4

Last, I examine differences in regime support between Treatment 1 and Treatment 2. For both regime performance and regime institutions, a comparison of medians and means suggests that respondents in Treatment 2 are less supportive of the regime than respondents in Treatment 1. This supports H4 that respondents exposed to AfD frames of a potential AfD-ban show lower regime support than respondents merely exposed to information about a potential AfD-ban.

Median **support for regime performance** is statistically significantly higher in Treatment 1 than in Treatment 2 at the 0.05 significance level (Mann-Whitney U p-value ≈ 0.014). The size of this effect, however, is small with a rank-biserial coefficient of 0.12. Regression model 2 provides a p-value of ≈ 0.08 , significant at the 0.1 but not at the 0.05 alpha level. This effect holds and has an even higher significance in Model 1 (p-value ≈ 0.035) and Model 3 (p-value ≈ 0.06). On average, support for regime performance is 0.24 scale points lower in Treatment 2 than in Treatment 1.

Support for H4 is even stronger when focussing on **support for regime institutions**. Both the Mann-Whitney U comparison of medians and the linear regression Model 2 show that respondents in Treatment 2 are significantly less supportive of regime institutions than respondents in Treatment 1 at a significance level of alpha = 0.01 (Mann-Whitney U p-value: 0.0005; regression Model 2: p-value ≈ 0.009). This effect holds across the different regression models, albeit with slightly varying levels of significance (Model 1: p-value ≈ 0.003 , Model 3:

p-value ≈ 0.01). For support for regime institutions, the effect size of the difference in medians is small to medium with a rank-biserial coefficient of 0.19. According to linear regression Model 2, respondents in Treatment 2 show, on average, 0.27 scale points less support for regime institutions than respondents in Treatment 1.

Overall, we can reject the null hypothesis as these results show significant support for H4. Respondents exposed to AfD frames of a potential AfD-ban show lower regime support than respondents merely exposed to information about a potential AfD-ban – particularly in terms of support for regime institutions.

4.3 Predictions

Figure 7 presents predicted values of the dependent variables by treatment group (based on regression Model 2). Coherent with the discussed regression results, the three treatment groups have similar predicted partisan attitudes towards the AfD but there are strong differences in the predicted support for regime performance and regime institutions between treatment groups 1 and 2.

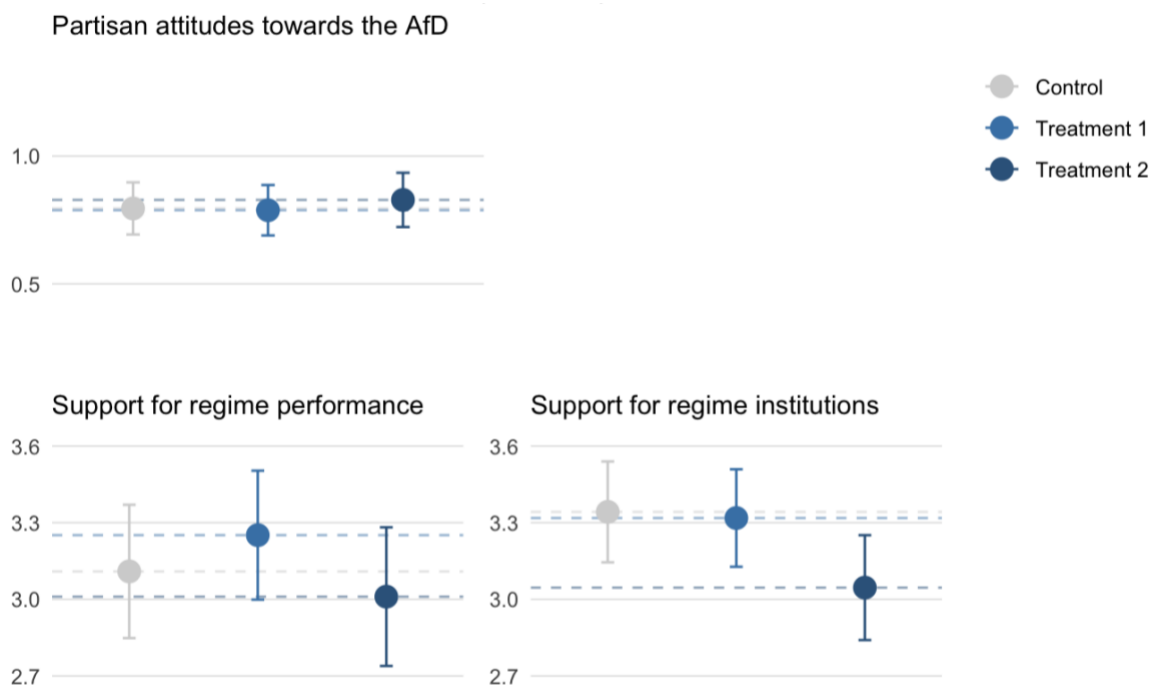


Figure 7. Predicted values for the dependent variables by treatment group with 95% confidence intervals (Model 2).

4.4 Covariates and robustness

Amongst the covariates, education and region do not have a significant effect on any of the dependent variables. Age has a statistically significant effect on partisan attitudes (p-value ≈ 0.03) with older respondents being, on average, less favourable towards the AfD than younger respondents. Similarly – and unsurprisingly, respondents who report strong support for the AfD pre-treatment also display more favourable AfD partisan attitudes after the treatment (p-value < 0.001). Political interest does not significantly relate to partisan attitudes, but it has a significant positive association with support for regime performance and institutions (p-values < 0.001). On average, as political interest rises, predicted support for the regime rises.

4.4.1 Heterogenous treatment effects for different levels of AfD support

I also test for a potential heterogeneous treatment effect across different levels of AfD support by including **interactions** between the treatment group and pre-treatment AfD support in Model 3. This regression model does not show any significant interaction effects of group and AfD support. Model 3 confirms all findings from Model 2 discussed above.

Moreover, I replicate my analysis with a subset of respondents which reported **low pre-treatment AfD-support** (values ‘extremely against’, ‘strongly against’, or ‘against’), as shown in [Appendix D](#). This constitutes a hard test for the backlash effects I found in my prior analyses. Supporters of the AfD can be expected to react more negatively to MD than opponents of the AfD, so if opponents show a similar negative reaction, this corroborates my findings. Indeed, Mann-Whitney-U tests and regression analyses with a subset of AfD-opposing respondents yield similar results as tests on the entire sample. The differences in support for regime performance and institutions between Treatment 1 and Treatment 2 remain significant and even increase in magnitude. Moreover, interacting the treatment with pre-treatment AfD support shows that, amongst respondents with relatively higher AfD support (those who are only ‘against’ rather than ‘extremely against’ the AfD), negatively framed MD (Treatment 2) additionally leads to significantly increasing support for the AfD.

4.4.2 Huber regressions

The multiple linear regression analysis satisfies **key assumptions**, including the independence of observations and the absence of multicollinearity. While the linearity assumption is only partially met, the sample size ($N = 605$) provides some robustness against minor deviations. However, the normality of residuals is not fully achieved, and heteroscedasticity is evident in

models predicting regime performance and institutions. These violations may affect the accuracy of standard errors and, consequently, the reliability of p-values and confidence intervals. Despite these limitations, linear regression is maintained for interpretability and comparability, with results interpreted cautiously considering these assumption violations.

To address concerns related to the **non-normality of residuals and heteroscedasticity**, particularly in the models predicting regime performance and institutional quality, I conduct a **Huber regression** as a robustness check (Huber 1964). This method reduces the influence of outliers and downweights observations with large residuals, offering more reliable coefficient estimates under assumption violations. The results are largely consistent with those of the OLS models, suggesting that the core findings are robust to deviations from classical linear regression assumptions. [Appendix D](#) shows the results of the robust regression models.

4.4.3 Weighting

Another concern is the **lack of representativeness** of the sample, particularly in terms of age and region - the sample underrepresents both older respondents and those from East Germany. Addressing this, I applied post-stratification cell-weighting. This method allows to adjust for the under- and over-representation of certain groups by assigning weights to each observation based on key characteristics, such as age and region (Stantcheva 2023). Given the limited availability of sample data for respondents aged 60+ in Berlin, I collapsed the region categories Berlin and West. This decision was guided by regression results, which indicated that Berlin residents were more similar to West German residents in terms of the dependent variables than to East Germans. With the resulting data, I conducted new Mann-Whitney U and regression analyses, adjusting for the weights. [Appendix D](#) shows the weighted regression results.

For the **Mann-Whitney U test** comparing the control and treatment 1 groups, there was no significant difference in the dependent variables – supporting results from the original analysis. Comparing treatment 1 and treatment 2, there was no significant difference in terms of support for regime performance, but the weighted data revealed a persistent, albeit weaker difference in terms of support for regime institutions (p-value = 0.064).

Regression results²¹ broadly align with the original results while showing minor deviations. Coefficients in the analysis of **partisan attitudes** do not exhibit any major shifts. While the coefficients for group 0 (control group), group 2 (treatment 2), and respondents in East Germany change from positive to negative, these changes are very small, and coefficients

²¹ Here, I focus on weighted versions of Model 2. The appendix includes regression tables for all three models.

are close to zero in both the weighted and unweighted analyses. Similarly, for **regime performance**, the directions of the coefficients remain largely consistent between the weighted and unweighted models. The signs of the coefficients for the control group and Eastern residency change direction in the weighted analysis, but again both values are close to zero. Notably, the significant difference between treatment group 1 and treatment group 2 in terms of support for regime performance is lost in the weighted analysis. Examining **support for regime institutions**, coefficients for the impact of the treatment group on support stay similar in the weighted analysis. Moreover, with weighted data, respondents in the control group are significantly more supportive of institutions than respondents in treatment 1. This suggests a potential backlash of militant democracy in terms of regime support even without AfD framing.

Overall, the **application of weights only has minor effects** on the general direction and magnitude of the coefficients in the regression models. However, the statistical significance of some results was reduced. Notably, the difference between treatment groups 1 and 2 in terms of support for regime performance, which had been significant in the unweighted analysis, became non-significant when weighted. This aligns with the interpretation that treatment 2 has a more substantial negative impact on support for regime institutions than on support for regime performance. These insights are valuable but should be interpreted with caution. Due to the small number of respondents in certain categories, particularly those of older age groups in Eastern Germany, there is a risk that a few respondents disproportionately influence the weighted results.

5 Discussion

This study finds no evidence that considering a party ban significantly alters attitudes towards the AfD or regime support. However, when the AfD frames MD negatively, trust in the democratic regime declines. These findings contribute to ongoing debates on the effectiveness and unintended consequences of militant democracy, highlighting the importance of political communication and a multifaceted approach to effectively combat illiberal parties.

5.1 Experimental results and their implications

The experiment **could not demonstrate that the implementation of militant democracy (MD) has a direct effect on public opinion**. There is no evidence that MD decreases partisan attachment to the AfD and fulfils an educational function by signalling the illegitimacy of the party. While previous research presented in the literature review has suggested that MD might deter voters or reduce mobilization, the results here do not support this assumption (Koopmans 2005; Lührmann et al. 2020; Minkenberg 2006). Although there were some indications that the effect might tend in this direction - respondents exposed to MD demonstrated slightly lower mean support for the AfD and slightly higher mean support for democratic performance, these effects were not statistically significant. Likewise, there is no indication that MD provokes a backlash by increasing partisan support for the AfD or undermining support for regime institutions. The study finds no evidence that MD fosters resistance, mobilization, or radicalization among voters, nor that it generates solidarity with the targeted party. Similarly, there is no sign that MD as such increases mistrust in the established political system or leads to perceptions of its abuse for political purposes.

However, in political reality, radical measures such as party bans rarely occur in isolation. As discussed in the literature, they are accompanied by extensive public discourse and political framing (Chong and Druckman 2007; Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019). I analysed this aspect in the second treatment condition, which tested the **impact of AfD framing of MD measures**. While this framing did not increase partisan attachment to the AfD, it significantly reduced trust in democratic institutions. The **absence of an effect on partisan attitudes** might be explained by methodological factors. Strong prior attitudes and high salience of the issue make it difficult to shift individuals' opinions on the AfD. As Chong and Druckman (2007) discuss, when an opinion is strongly entrenched, such as negative perceptions of the AfD, it is less susceptible to manipulation. This finding suggests that militant democracy measures may have a harder time influencing attitudes toward the targeted party if the public already feels

strongly about that party, than influencing regime support. From a policy perspective, this implies that proponents of militant democracy need to be less concerned about a backlash manifesting in terms of increasing support for targeted parties than about the potential erosion of trust in the democratic regime. Moreover, if MD cannot rely on an educational function to shift public opinion, its effectiveness in containing anti-democratic parties hinges solely on its ability to disrupt their organizational structures.

While there was no significant change in partisan attitudes towards the AfD, respondents exposed to AfD frames exhibited significantly **lower support for the regime**. Specifically, on average, those in Treatment 2 reported 0.24 scale points lower support for regime performance and 0.27 scale points lower support for regime institutions on 7-point scales compared to respondents in treatment 1. These findings align with studies that highlight the potential backfire effects of MD. Scholars have warned that MD can reinforce existing mistrust in the political system, with citizens perceiving institutions as delegitimized or wielding arbitrary power (Downs 2012; Kaltwasser 2019; Lübke-Wolff 2023; Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023; Minkenberg 2006). Such perceptions can lead to disillusionment with the democratic model itself (Brandmann 2022; Manow and Wald 2024; Kaltwasser 2019). Anti-democratic parties strategically exploit MD measures to radicalize voters, increase their visibility, and polarize the electorate (Bale 2007; Bértó and Rama 2021; Fallend and Heinisch 2016; Gärditz 2017; Lührmann et al. 2020; Minkenberg 2006; 2017; Pedahzur 2003) – a strategy this research demonstrated to be effective.

AfD frames **influenced support of regime performance and institutions to different degrees**. Effects on support for institutions were more significant and substantively larger than effects on support for regime performance. These dynamics align with theories on political support, which predict that attitudes towards regime institutions are more specific – and, hence, more malleable, than more diffuse support for regime performance (Easton 1975). Yet, in this study, regime support declined across both types of regime support, indicating that political framing has the potential to undermine even the more stable aspects of democratic legitimacy. This has serious implications for democratic stability, as a decline in regime support poses a greater threat to the functioning of democratic processes than, for instance, dissatisfaction with individual political actors.

5.2 The nature of AfD frames

The effectiveness of the AfD's framing strategies aligns with **theoretical expectations regarding successful political communication**. Effective frames appeal to emotions, present clear and dramatic narratives, simplify complex matters, and resonate with values prevalent in the underlying culture (Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019; Kangas, Niemelä, and Varjonen 2014). The AfD's framing of MD meets those criteria by painting a simplified picture of an 'evil' political establishment and institutions attacking the AfD. These narratives raise sentiments of injustice, fear, and outrage and tap into existing mistrust of state institutions.

Such narratives are **not unique to debates on militant democracy**. Rather, the AfD uses discussions on MD as opportunities to reinforce its broader anti-establishment discourse, regardless of whether MD measures are implemented (Bleich 2011; Kaltwasser 2019; Malkopoulou and Moffitt 2023; Stahl and Popp-Madsen 2022; Van Spanje and Van der Brug 2009). Even in the absence of militant democracy, similar frames would likely be employed in different contexts to delegitimize democratic institutions and portray the party as a persecuted outsider – all with the aim of radicalising voters and mobilising support (Bale 2007; Bértoa and Rama 2021; Fallend and Heinisch 2016; Gärditz 2017; Lührmann et al. 2020; Minkenberg 2006; 2017; Pedahzur 2003). This insight qualifies concerns about a potential backlash when considering the implementation of MD. Negatively framed MD contributes to declining regime support which may seem like a reason to avoid its use. However, if the AfD is likely to employ similar anti-regime narratives regardless of whether MD is implemented, then the argument against MD based on aims to prevent backlash loses some of its weight. To assess to which extent militant democracy as an object of targeted parties' framing contributes to declining democratic support, future research may experimentally compare the impact of negative framing of MD compared to similar negative frames of other objects.

5.3 Effect sizes and framing in action

The effect sizes observed in this study were relatively small. A single instance of framing may not overwrite pre-held conceptions to a large extent. However, effect sizes may be amplified in real-world settings where political discourse is characterized by **repeated exposure** (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). Continuous exposure to AfD portrayals of militant democracy as undemocratic and illegitimate may have a more significant and substantive impact on regime support than a single exposure as part of an experiment. At the same time, in practice, public opinion is not only shaped by a single narrative. Instead, **multiple, competing narratives**,

including those promoted by political actors advocating for MD measures impact public attitudes. A systematic analysis of the discourse used by both opponents and supporters of militant democracy may help to better understand these patterns. If proponents of a party ban actively communicate the rationale behind such measures, emphasize the value of democratic institutions, and encourage open debate, they may counterbalance the negative framing of MD by targeted parties. While pro-MD framing may increase the effectiveness of a party ban per se, such conflicting narratives may also have harmful implications. Given the controversial and high-stakes nature of party bans, intense debates on militant democracy risk further polarizing public opinion.

To maximize the effectiveness of MD while avoiding backlash effects, strong efforts must be made to **foster broad public consensus** on the necessity and legitimacy of such measures. According to Möllers (2024), such a public debate around MD is crucial for its success. For instance, proponents might want to clarify that MD is a last resort after all other avenues have been exhausted (Möllers 2024). More broadly, democracies must engage in discussions about the paradox of MD, namely the tensions between restrictions of freedoms of democratic participation and safeguarding democracy from illiberal threats. Via such dialogues, a wide societal consensus on the meaning of democracy and the definition of enemies of democracy needs to be established for MD to work (Kaltwasser 2019).

5.4 How findings travel to other conditions, contexts, and cases

While this study examined the reaction of German citizens to party bans, its findings may apply to other strategies against illiberal parties and travel beyond German borders.

Germany's experience with MD has significant potential for **generalization** to other contexts. The rise of illiberal and populist parties is not unique to Germany but rather observed **across many European countries and beyond**. Whether positioned at the right or left end of the political spectrum, such illiberal parties pose a danger to democracy by threatening to erode it from within. While Germany has a particularly strong tradition of militant democracy and a well-established set of tools, other nations grappling with similar threats also have state-led intolerant measures available. This makes it possible to extrapolate findings from the German case to other situations where states or other political actors are considering or implementing intolerant measures against illiberal parties. Still, researchers should consider differences that may arise based on variations in democratic consolidation or experiences with militant democracy. For example, in countries where MD is less established, backlash effects on regime

support may be even greater. Moreover, these findings primarily apply to stable liberal democracies, as MD measures function differently in electoral democracies and autocracies where they are used primarily to suppress legitimate opposition.

Such differences also relate to the **temporal scope** of this research. In post-authoritarian states in which certain parties show a clear autocratic legacy like in Germany after WWII, banning extremist parties may restore rather than undermine faith in democracy. My findings primarily apply to the post-2000 era in which gradual subversion from within has become a common cause of democratic decline, and it has become increasingly difficult to define which parties pose a true threat to democracy.

Last, while this study focuses on militant democracy (state-led intolerant measures), similar dynamics may apply to **intolerant measures implemented by other actors**, such as political ostracism or civil society-led exclusion campaigns. While subtle implications of different types of intolerance may vary, general learnings should hold across tools (Bale 2014; Minkenberg 2006). Targeted parties may employ comparable framing strategies regardless of whether they are excluded by the state, other parties, or civil society actors – leading to similar effects on public opinion.

5.5 Limitations and avenues for further research

This study has certain limitations. Regarding **internal validity**, the observed effects of negative framing of MD may result from the framing itself, the respondents' reaction to the AfD as the source, or a combination of both. In this study, I cited the AfD as the source of criticism to strengthen external validity. However, future research could employ multiple treatment conditions to compare the effects when the AfD is identified as the source of frames versus when it is not.

The **external validity** of survey experiments is limited by nature. Controlled experimental settings cannot fully replicate real-world patterns of media consumption in which individuals **selectively engage with political messages**, reinforcing pre-existing attitudes (Barabas and Jerit 2010). This study has aimed to mirror contemporary news consumption as closely as possible by implementing the survey online. Still, it required respondents to engage with texts on a potential party ban and AfD frames who might otherwise not encounter such information, be that because of their political orientation, news consumption habits, or lacking political interest in general.

Gaines, Kuklinski and Quirk (2007) further criticise that one-shot cross-section experiments on framing do not allow to draw conclusions on the **duration of effects**, or the effects of **repeated exposure** to a stimulus. Effects of framing – such as decreased support for regime institutions demonstrated in this study, are only relevant in Political Science if they last more than a few seconds or minutes. This study cannot show whether effects are transitory or longer lasting, or how repeated exposure to AfD frames or even competing frames of MD might impact citizens' attitudes. Future research may attempt to address this issue by analysing the effects of repeated exposure to frames of MD in longitudinal studies, and by supplementing experimental survey research with other methods such as systematic content analyses of different parties' framing of MD and public reactions to those frames. While this study focuses exclusively on the AfD's negative frames of MD, further research may also examine the (positive) framing strategies of other political parties and explore differences in public opinion when exposed to the frames of the AfD as opposed to other parties.

Another limitation of experimental framing research is the danger of contamination by some respondents' **prior exposure to the treatment in real-world political discourse** (Barabas and Jerit 2010). While randomisation assures that such exposure is evenly distributed across treatment groups, the likelihood of encountering different treatments outside the experiment may vary. This discrepancy can lead either to an inflation or a deflation of treatment effects (Barabas and Jerit 2010). Given the extensive public debate on a potential AfD ban in the year preceding this study, it is plausible that a large share of respondents has been exposed to discussions on an AfD ban and AfD framing before the experiment. For instance, an AfD ban was publicly discussed in the context of anti-AfD protests at the beginning of 2024, at the time of the AfD's election victories in the European Parliament and three German states in the summer and fall of 2024, and when the Bundestag discussed an AfD ban only a week before this survey was fielded. This high saliency of the issue outside the experiment may have reduced the difference-making potential of the treatments, leading to an underestimation of their actual effects. Therefore, rather than undermining the findings, the prominence of public debate suggests that my results are a conservative estimate. If anything, the treatment effects observed in this study may be weaker than those that would emerge if discussions on an AfD ban had not been as prominent. A potential pre-treatment of respondents may have additional beneficial effects. Citizens exposed to debates on militant democracy prior to the survey are likely more familiar with the concept, which may enhance their understanding of the treatment. Moreover, prior exposure makes the treatment appear more realistic, thereby enhancing the external validity of findings.

Experimental studies also need to cope with the possibility of **Hawthorne, social desirability, and demand effects**. Survey participants may respond differently when they feel observed, under social pressure, or understand what a study is about. However, recent evidence shows that demand effects are less relevant than commonly assumed – respondents seem to be relatively indifferent to researchers’ expectations (Mummolo and Peterson 2019). Moreover, this study tried to alleviate these issues by explicitly assuring anonymity to respondents. Generally, respondents in online surveys are less likely to adjust their responses in reaction to social expectations or researcher demands as they feel more anonymous and detached from the researcher than respondents who encounter researchers face-to-face (Stantcheva 2023). Additionally, I intentionally asked about respondents’ attitudes towards all parties in the German parliament to avoid directing their attention towards the AfD, aiming to reduce social desirability and demand effects.

The sample’s **limited representativeness** also raises questions about generalizability. While the sample was largely representative in terms of gender, it underrepresented certain demographics, such as residents of Eastern Germany, where the AfD is particularly strong. This may have influenced the magnitude of the framing effects observed. A more proportional representation of respondents from Eastern states may on one hand have led to a smaller framing effect if their prior attitudes were already more favourable towards the AfD and more critical of the regime, leaving less room for change (Bértoa and Rama 2021; Brandmann 2022). On the other hand, including more respondents from Eastern states may also have increased the treatment effects if there had been more individuals amongst those respondents who regard the AfD as a credible source, amplifying framing effects (Chong and Druckman 2007; Dan, Ihlen, and Raknes 2019). Besides the observed characteristics, as this project did not employ random selection, the sample may differ from the population in further unobserved characteristics. Thus, generalisation to the general German public should be treated with caution. Future studies should employ representative sampling to assess the robustness of my findings. Such research employing representative samples would also be beneficial in providing additional insights into potential **heterogenous treatment effects** which can only be analysed to a limited extent with non-representative studies. Expanding the scope of research further, scholars may conduct **cross-national comparisons** to assess the effectiveness of MD in different political contexts with varying political and legal cultures. Doing so, it may be insightful to assess how the impact of MD on public opinion changes in connection with a different size and radicalness of the targeted party, the system’s degree of polarisation, and the institutional context.

5.6 Policy implications for counterstrategies against illiberal parties

My findings underline the limitations of MD in the modern era, where the definition of anti-democratic parties has become ever more fluid and controversial. Illiberal actors strategically present themselves as democratic, making MD less effective and riskier. These findings suggest that party bans should not be employed in isolation but as part of a broader strategy to counteract illiberal parties.

Regarding **militant democratic tools**, as discussed above, communication is key. Moreover, before banning an entire party, the state should consider less severe measures, such as banning only the most extreme sections of a party. While this approach carries its own risks, it may reduce the likelihood of legal failure and the resulting communication disaster. Restricting party funding may be another option, as it presents fewer legitimacy concerns and is less likely to provoke a backlash. Merkel (2024) suggests that limiting state financing for actors who undermine democracy could be a less intrusive yet effective strategy.

Beyond legal measures that infringe on the rights of illiberal actors, efforts should also focus on **strengthening democratic institutions**. Legal and institutional reforms may help safeguard democratic structures from illiberal encroachments. For instance, the German Bundestag decided in December 2024 to protect the Constitutional Court by enshrining the judicial term lengths in the constitution and designating alternative processes to elect new members in case the ordinary procedures are obstructed by a blocking minority.

At the same time, **democratic parties** must provide political solutions to citizens' grievances, addressing concerns like economic insecurity, migration, and social issues. A constructive, issue-based political debate can help distinguish democratic from anti-democratic competitors in the political arena.

Civil society also plays a crucial role in democratic self-defence. Grassroots initiatives, social engagement, and public awareness campaigns can counteract the narratives of illiberal actors (Lübbe-Wolff 2023; Minkenberg 2017). These initiatives can facilitate dialogue between citizens on threats to democracy, foster engagement against right-wing radicalism, and develop avenues towards protecting democracy - something Wolfgang Merkel (2024) refers to as 'ziviler Verfassungsschutz' (civil protection of the constitution, p. 7). Moreover, active associations can create a sense of community at the local level, which may help alleviate grievances that drive citizens toward supporting illiberal parties. According to Gertrude Lübbe-Wolff (2023), "even the best constitutional defence system is of no use in the long run without a majority of citizens who oppose anti-democratic efforts with sufficient institutional

understanding. [translated by the author]” (p. 9). Strengthening civil society’s capacity to defend democracy may be as important as legal measures in ensuring long-term democratic resilience.

Ultimately, the findings highlight the limitations of militant democracy in the modern era. Traditional MD was designed to counter overtly anti-democratic actors, whereas contemporary illiberal parties strategically position themselves within democratic frameworks. This complicates the application of MD and increases the risk of unintended consequences such as declining support for the democratic regime. A multifaceted approach combining legal, communicative, and civic strategies may be necessary to effectively counteract illiberal threats while safeguarding democratic legitimacy.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how public perceptions of militant democracy influence its effectiveness in countering anti-democratic threats. Specifically, it investigated whether MD affects support for anti-democratic parties and the democratic regime. Considering the crucial role of communication in real-world politics, this research further investigated how the way targeted parties frame MD affects public perceptions. Since debates about militant democracy as a tool to counteract illiberal threats to democracies in the 21st century have recently gained prominence, understanding its potential consequences is crucial.

The findings indicate that merely considering a party ban does not significantly affect partisan attachment to the AfD, nor does it impact regime support. However, when the AfD frames MD negatively, trust in democratic institutions and support for regime performance decline. This suggests that while MD does not necessarily provoke a backlash in the form of increased support for the targeted party, it may contribute to broader political alienation with the democratic system when framed by political actors.

These results contribute to theoretical discussions on MD by demonstrating that its effectiveness depends not only on institutional consequences for the party, but also on shifts in public perception. From a policy perspective, my findings underscore the need for careful communication strategies when implementing MD. Policymakers must proactively justify intolerant measures and seek broad public support for their implementation to counterbalance frames by targeted parties. Moreover, MD alone appears insufficient in combating illiberal threats – it must be embedded in a broader strategy that includes various actors and measures like institutional reform, political responses to citizens' concerns, and civic engagement.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The experimental setting cannot fully replicate real-world media consumption characterised by selective engagement with information, imitate repeated exposure to frames, or measure long-term framing effects. Future research should explore these dynamics through longitudinal studies and evaluate the robustness of findings across countries with different institutional and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the study highlights the inherent paradox of militant democracy. While designed to defend democracy, the application of militant democracy unavoidably runs counter to democratic values. As democracies seek to defend themselves against internal threats, they must strike a balance between self-defence and openness. The challenge remains - democracies need to safeguard their foundations without compromising the very principles they stand for. Militant democracy may be but one component of this endeavour.

Appendix A: Tools of Militant Democracy in Germany

The German constitution contains various articles to guarantee the protection of its liberal-democratic constitutional order (“freiheitlich demokratische Grundordnung”) (Backes 2006; Capoccia 2013; *Grundgesetz Für Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany]*, n.d.; Low 2018; Lübbe-Wolff 2023; Minkenberg 2006; Möllers 2024; J.-W. Müller 2012).

- Article 79 (3) - ‘eternity clause’: This clause holds that certain fundamental aspects of the constitution, article 1 (human dignity and human rights) and Article 20 (the nature of the German state as a democratic, federal, and social state based on the rule of law), cannot be amended. This is intended to prevent a legal revolution.
- Article 21 (2): This clause allows for the banning of parties deemed unconstitutional. Only political organs (parliament, upper house, executive) can bring applications for party bans. Only the Federal Constitutional Court can decide on a party ban. Since recently, parties can also be excluded from state funding if they are deemed unconstitutional but not significant enough to pose an actual threat.
- Article 9 (2): Interior ministries can dissolve associations considered unconstitutional.
- Article 18: Individuals’ active civil rights can be temporarily limited.
- Article 20 (4): Citizens have the right to resist attempts by everyone including public authorities to abolish the constitutional order.

Besides these provisions, Germany has established institutions like the *Verfassungsschutz* (Office for the Protection of the Constitution) to monitor political parties and other groups which may constitute a threat to Germany’s constitutional order (Hackner 2023; Gärditz 2017; Minkenberg 2006; J.-W. Müller 2012). It collects and analyses information and publicly reports on it to enable timely political and legal responses to threats to the liberal-democratic order. Additionally, state officials have duties of loyalty towards the German state - individuals associated with radical organisations cannot hold certain state positions (Capoccia 2013; Lübbe-Wolff 2023; J.-W. Müller 2012).

Appendix B: Survey

Survey in English

Landing page

Welcome to our survey!

You are invited to participate in a study as part of our social science research. We look forward to your feedback, as you are a valuable contributor to the success of our project.

Procedure: If you decide to participate, you will complete a questionnaire that will take approximately 5 minutes. You can complete the survey on any device with an internet connection.

Compensation: You will receive the compensation as previously agreed with your survey provider.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: The researchers will not receive any personal information about you, and your responses will remain completely anonymous. They will be stored and aggregated with the data from other participants. Under no circumstances will your data be evaluated individually. Your responses will be used exclusively for academic research purposes.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from participation at any time. However, your consent to process the responses already stored cannot be revoked.

Contact Information: Do you have questions, suggestions, or comments related to the survey? You can reach us at teilnehmerinfo@ceu.edu.

[consent] If you are ready to participate in this project, please click "Agree" to begin the survey.

- Agree
- Disagree

Covariates & Socio-demographic questions

To start with, we would like to ask you some general questions about yourself.

- **gender:** Please indicate your gender.
 - Answer options: Male; Female; Diverse; Prefer not to say
- **age:** Please insert the year in which you were born
 - Answer options: drop down with numbers between 1900 and 2009
- **education:** What is the highest general education qualification you have obtained?
 - Answer options: School diploma (e.g., Hauptschule, Realschule, Abitur); Vocational qualification after school (e.g., apprenticeship, master craftsman); Bachelor's degree; Master's degree or Master's equivalent; State examination; Doctorate or higher; Finished school without obtaining a diploma; Never attended school; I am still a student and have not yet graduated
- **residence:** In which state do you live (main residence)? [drop down]
 - Answer options: Baden-Wuerttemberg; Bavaria; Berlin; Brandenburg; Bremen; Hamburg; Hesse; Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania; Lower Saxony; North Rhine-Westphalia; Rhineland-Palatinate; Saarland; Saxony; Saxony-Anhalt; Schleswig-Holstein; Thuringia
- **interest:** Generally speaking: How strongly interested are you in politics?
 - Answer scale: Very strongly; Strongly; Moderately; Less strongly; Not at all [randomly reverse choices]
- **party_support:** In general, what do you think of the political parties in the German Bundestag? [matrix]
 - Parties: SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; BSW
 - Answer scale: Extremely against, Strongly against, Against, Neither in favour nor against, In favour, Strongly in favour, Extremely in favour, I don't know.

Experimental Stimulus

Group 1: Baseline Condition

[Directly move to dependent variable section]

Group 2: Treatment 1 (neutral description of potential party ban of AfD)

Please **carefully** read the following text. This is very important for this survey – take the time you need.

Some voices in Germany are currently calling for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to be banned as a party.

Such a ban is possible if a party poses a threat to the free democratic basic order. A motion for a party ban can be submitted by the federal government, the Bundestag or the Bundesrat, for example, based on reports from the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The final decision is made by the Federal Constitutional Court.

- **adequacy_afd:** In your view, would it be appropriate or inappropriate to initiate proceedings to ban the AfD?
 - Answer scale: Completely inappropriate, Very inappropriate, Somewhat inappropriate, Neither appropriate nor inappropriate, Somewhat appropriate, Very appropriate, Completely appropriate, I don't know. [randomly reverse choices]

Group 3: Treatment 2: (description of potential party ban, framed with AfD-narratives)

Please **carefully** read the following text. This is very important for this survey – take the time you need.

Some voices in Germany are currently calling for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to be banned as a party.

Such a ban is possible if a party poses a threat to the free democratic basic order. A motion for a party ban can be submitted by the federal government, the Bundestag or the Bundesrat, for example, based on reports from the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The final decision is made by the Federal Constitutional Court.

The AfD criticises such considerations:

- This discussion is a politically motivated attack on a democratically elected opposition party. A ban would be an abuse of power - the government is trying to suppress dissenting opinions.
- The AfD is not extremist, but a legitimate voice of opposition in favour of free debate. A ban would deprive AfD voters of their political voice.
- Moreover, unelected institutions such as courts or the Office for the Protection of the Constitution have too much power. It is undemocratic for such institutions to decide on the legitimacy of political parties.

-
- **adequacy_afd:** After reading this text, in your view, would it be appropriate or inappropriate to initiate proceedings to ban the AfD?
 - Completely inappropriate, Very inappropriate, Somewhat inappropriate, Neither appropriate nor inappropriate, Somewhat appropriate, Very appropriate, Completely appropriate, I don't know.
 - [randomly reverse choices]

Manipulation Check

Group 1 (control)

[Directly move to dependent variable section]

Group 2 (treatment 1):

- **manipulation_treatment1:** [only shown to treatment group 1]
 - For this survey, it is very important that the text you just read was understandable for you. We would therefore like to ask you to answer the following question about the text. If you don't know the answer, that is no problem - in this case, please simply state 'I don't know'.
 - Which of the following statements applies best to the text you just read?
 - The text describes the possibility of banning the AfD. [correct answer]
 - The text describes the electoral system in Germany.
 - The text describes the powers of the German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.
 - The text describes the existing parliamentary committees.
 - [randomise order of response options]

Group 3 (treatment 2):

- **manipulation_treatment2:**
 - For this survey, it is very important that the text you just read was understandable for you. We would therefore like to ask you to answer the following question about the text. If you don't know the answer, that is no problem - in this case, please simply state 'I don't know'.
 - Which of the following statements applies best to the text you just read?
 - The text describes criticism of a potential AfD ban. [correct answer]
 - The text describes the electoral system in Germany.
 - The text describes the powers of the German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.
 - The text describes the existing parliamentary committees.
 - [randomise order of response options]

Dependent variables

Now we would like to find out more about your views on politics.

[randomise order of these two sections (all DV1s, all DV2s)]

DV 1: Partisan attitudes

- **partisan_attitudes_1** [matrix]
 - How much do you support or oppose each of the following parties?
 - Parties: SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; BSW
 - Answer scale: Strongly oppose, Somewhat oppose, Neutral, Somewhat support, Strongly support, I don't know.
- **partisan_attitudes_2** [matrix]

- To which extent do you feel that each of the following parties represents the interests of people like you?
- Parties: SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; BSW
- Answer scale: Not at all, To a small extent, To some extent, To a large extent, Completely, I don't know.
- **partisan_attitudes_3** [matrix]
 - How likely is it that you will ever vote for each of the following parties?
 - Parties: SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; BSW
 - Answer scale: Extremely unlikely, Somewhat unlikely, Neither likely nor unlikely, Somewhat likely, Extremely likely, I don't know.

DV 2: Regime support

DV2.2: Support for democratic performance

- **support_performance:** On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy is working in Germany?
 - Answer scale: Extremely dissatisfied, Very dissatisfied, Somewhat dissatisfied, Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Somewhat satisfied, Very satisfied, Extremely satisfied, I don't know. [randomly reverse choices]

DV2.3: Support for democratic institutions

- How much do you personally trust or distrust each of the following institutions or organisations? [randomise order of these five items]
 - **support_institutions_1** The Government,
 - **support_institutions_2** The Parliament,
 - **support_institutions_3** The Office for the Protection of the Constitution,
 - **support_institutions_4** The Constitutional Court,
 - **support_institutions_5** Public-service media.
 - [randomly reverse order of institutions]
- Answer scale: Completely distrust, Distrust, Neither trust nor distrust, Trust, Completely trust, I don't know. [randomly reverse choices]

Closing page

Thank you for completing the Survey!

In case you have any comments or suggestions for the survey, please share them with us here: teilnehmerinfo@ceu.edu.

Please click the button to be redirected to Prolific and to submit your responses.

Survey in German

Prolific survey description

Title: Ihre Meinung zählt: Eine wissenschaftliche Umfrage

Study description:

Vielen Dank für Ihr Interesse an dieser Studie!

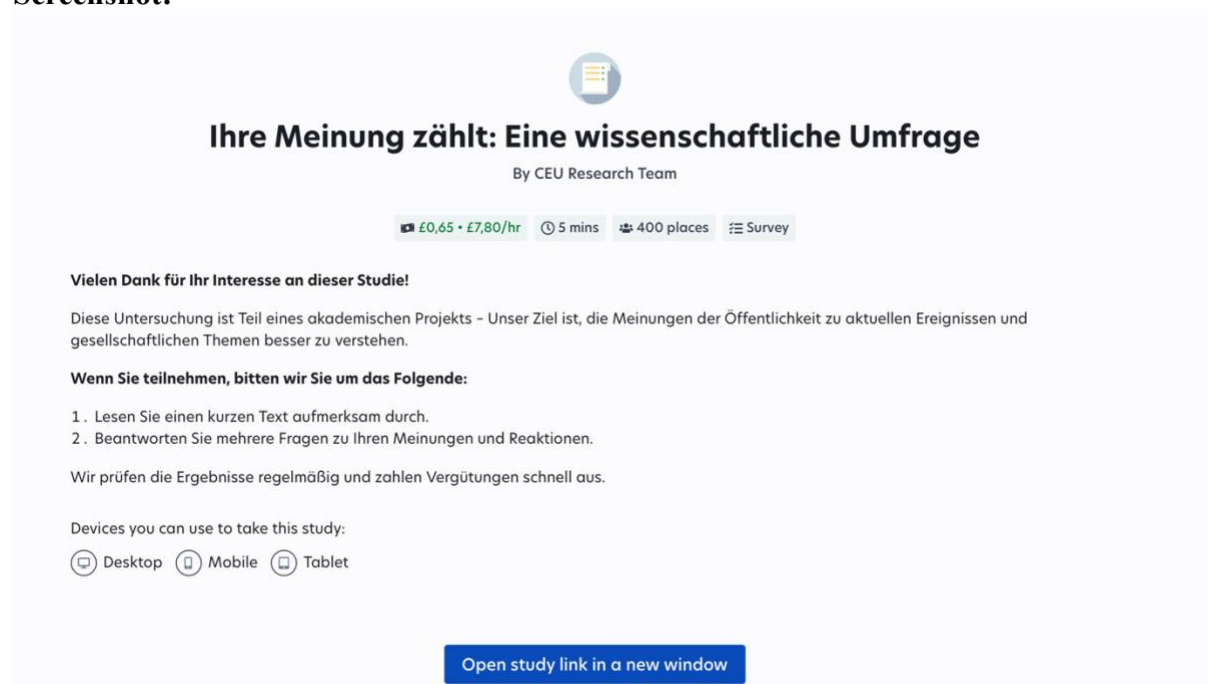
Diese Untersuchung ist Teil eines akademischen Projekts – Unser Ziel ist, die Meinungen der Öffentlichkeit zu aktuellen Ereignissen und gesellschaftlichen Themen besser zu verstehen.

Wenn Sie teilnehmen, bitten wir Sie um das Folgende:

1. Lesen Sie einen kurzen Text aufmerksam durch.
2. Beantworten Sie mehrere Fragen zu Ihren Meinungen und Reaktionen.

Wir prüfen die Ergebnisse regelmäßig und zahlen Vergütungen schnell aus.

Screenshot:



Landing page

Willkommen zu unserer Umfrage!

Sie werden gebeten, an einer Studie im Rahmen unserer sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung teilzunehmen.

Wir freuen uns auf Ihre Rückmeldung. Sie ist ein wertvoller Beitrag zum Gelingen unseres Projekts.

Ablauf: Wenn Sie sich entscheiden, teilzunehmen, füllen Sie einen Fragebogen aus, der in etwa 5 Minuten dauert. Sie können die Umfrage an jedem beliebigen Gerät mit Internetverbindung ausfüllen.

Vergütung: Sie bekommen die Vergütung, wie zuvor mit Ihrem Umfragedienstleister vereinbart.

Anonymität und Vertraulichkeit: Die Forschenden erhalten keine persönlichen Informationen über Sie und Antworten bleiben vollkommen anonym. Sie werden gespeichert und mit den anderen Daten anderer Teilnehmender zusammengefasst. Unter keinen Umständen werden Ihre Daten individuell ausgewertet. Ihre Antworten werden ausschließlich für akademische Forschungszwecke verwendet.

Freiwillige Teilnahme und Rücktritt: Die Teilnahme an dieser Studie ist freiwillig. Sie können die Teilnahme jederzeit abbrechen. Ihr Einverständnis zur Verarbeitung der bereits gespeicherten Antworten können Sie jedoch nicht widerrufen.

Kontaktinformationen: Haben Sie Fragen, Wünsche oder Hinweise im Zusammenhang mit der Umfrage? Sie erreichen uns unter teilnehmerinfo@ceu.edu.

[**consent**] Wenn Sie bereit sind, an diesem Projekt teilzunehmen, klicken Sie bitte auf „Zustimmen“ und starten Sie die Umfrage.

- Zustimmung
- Nicht zustimmen

Covariates & Socio-demographic questions

Zu Beginn möchten wir Ihnen einige allgemeine Fragen zu Ihrer Person stellen.

- **gender:** Bitte geben Sie Ihr Geschlecht an.
 - Answer options: Männlich; Weiblich; Divers; Möchte ich nicht angeben
- **age:** Bitte geben Sie das Jahr an, in dem Sie geboren wurden.
 - [drop down with numbers between 1900 and 2009]
- **education:** Welchen höchsten allgemeinen Bildungsabschluss haben Sie erworben?
 - Answer options: Schulabschluss (z. B. Hauptschule, Realschule, Abitur); Beruflicher Abschluss nach der Schule (z. B. Ausbildung, Meisterbrief); Bachelor-Abschluss; Master-Abschluss; Staatsexamen; Promotion oder höher; Schule abgeschlossen ohne Abschluss; Nie eine Schule besucht; Ich bin noch Schüler:in und habe keinen Abschluss
- **residence:** In welchem Bundesland wohnen Sie (Hauptwohnsitz)? [drop down]
 - Answer options: Baden-Württemberg; Bayern; Berlin; Brandenburg; Bremen; Hamburg; Hessen; Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; Niedersachsen; Nordrhein-Westfalen; Rheinland-Pfalz; Saarland; Sachsen; Sachsen-Anhalt; Schleswig-Holstein; Thüringen
- **interest:** Einmal ganz allgemein gesprochen: Wie stark interessieren Sie sich für Politik?
 - Answer scale: Sehr stark; Stark; Mittelmäßig; Weniger stark; Überhaupt nicht [randomly reverse choices]
- **party_support:** Was halten Sie generell von den Parteien im Deutschen Bundestag? Von der Partei halte ich...
 - Parties: SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; BSW
 - Answer scale: Extrem wenig, Sehr wenig, Wenig, Weder wenig noch viel, Viel, Sehr viel, Extrem viel, Ich weiß es nicht.

Experimental Stimulus

Group 1: Baseline Condition

[Directly move to dependent variable section]

Group 2: Treatment 1 (neutral description of potential party ban of AfD)

Bitte lesen Sie den folgenden Text **aufmerksam** durch. Dies ist sehr wichtig für diese Umfrage - nehmen Sie sich dazu die Zeit, die Sie benötigen.

Aktuell fordern einige Stimmen in Deutschland, die Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) als Partei zu verbieten.

Solch ein Verbot ist möglich, wenn eine Partei die freiheitlich-demokratische Grundordnung gefährdet. Einen Antrag für ein Parteiverbot können die Bundesregierung, der Bundestag, oder der Bundesrat stellen, zum Beispiel auf Basis von Berichten des Verfassungsschutzes. Die endgültige Entscheidung trifft das Bundesverfassungsgericht.

- **adequacy_afd:** Wäre aus Ihrer Sicht die Einleitung eines Verbotsverfahrens gegen die AfD angemessen oder nicht angemessen?
 - Völlig unangemessen, Sehr unangemessen, Eher unangemessen, Weder angemessen noch unangemessen, Eher angemessen, Sehr angemessen, Völlig angemessen, Ich weiß nicht.
 - [randomly reverse choices]

Group 3: Treatment 2: (description of potential party ban, framed with AfD-narratives)

Bitte lesen Sie den folgenden Text **aufmerksam** durch. Dies ist sehr wichtig für diese Umfrage - nehmen Sie sich dazu die Zeit, die Sie benötigen.

Aktuell fordern einige Stimmen in Deutschland, die Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) als Partei zu verbieten.

Solch ein Verbot ist möglich, wenn eine Partei die freiheitlich-demokratische Grundordnung gefährdet. Einen Antrag für ein Parteiverbot können die Bundesregierung, der Bundestag, oder der Bundesrat stellen, zum Beispiel auf Basis von Berichten des Verfassungsschutzes. Die endgültige Entscheidung trifft das Bundesverfassungsgericht.

Die AfD kritisiert solche Überlegungen:

- Diese Diskussion ist ein politisch motivierter Angriff auf eine demokratisch gewählte Oppositionspartei. Ein Verbot wäre ein Machtmissbrauch - die Regierung versucht, abweichende Meinungen zu unterdrücken.
 - Die AfD ist nicht extremistisch, sondern eine legitime Stimme der Opposition, die für freie Debatten eintritt. Ein Verbot würde AfD-Wähler ihrer politischen Stimme berauben.
 - Außerdem haben nicht gewählte Institutionen wie Gerichte oder der Verfassungsschutz zu viel Macht. Es ist undemokratisch, dass solche Institutionen über die Legitimität politischer Parteien entscheiden.
-

- **adequacy_afd:** Nachdem Sie diesen Text gelesen haben, wäre aus Ihrer Sicht die Einleitung eines Verbotsverfahrens gegen die AfD angemessen oder nicht angemessen?
 - Völlig unangemessen, Sehr unangemessen, Eher unangemessen, Weder angemessen noch unangemessen, Eher angemessen, Sehr angemessen, Völlig angemessen, Ich weiß nicht.
 - [randomly reverse choices]

Manipulation check

Group 1 (control)

[Directly move to dependent variable section]

Group 2 (treatment 1)

- manipulation_treatment1:

- Für diese Umfrage ist es sehr wichtig, dass der Text, den Sie gerade gelesen haben, für Sie verständlich war. Wir möchten Sie daher bitten, die folgende Frage zum Text zu beantworten. Wenn Sie die Antwort nicht wissen, ist das kein Problem - in diesem Fall geben Sie bitte einfach „Ich weiß es nicht“ an.
- Welche der folgenden Aussagen beschreibt den Text, den Sie gerade gelesen haben, am besten?
 - Der Text beschreibt die Möglichkeit, die AfD zu verbieten. [correct response]
 - Der Text beschreibt das Wahlsystem in Deutschland.
 - Der Text beschreibt die Befugnisse des deutschen Bundespräsidenten, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.
 - Der Text beschreibt die bestehenden parlamentarischen Ausschüsse.
 - Ich weiß nicht.
- [randomise order of response options]

Group 3 (treatment 2)

- manipulation_treatment2:

- Für diese Umfrage ist es sehr wichtig, dass der Text, den Sie gerade gelesen haben, für Sie verständlich war. Wir möchten Sie daher bitten, die folgende Frage zum Text zu beantworten. Wenn Sie die Antwort nicht wissen, ist das kein Problem - in diesem Fall geben Sie bitte einfach „Ich weiß es nicht“ an.
- Welche der folgenden Aussagen beschreibt den Text, den Sie gerade gelesen haben, am besten?
 - Der Text beschreibt die Kritik an einem möglichen AfD-Verbot. [correct response]
 - Der Text beschreibt das Wahlsystem in Deutschland.
 - Der Text beschreibt die Befugnisse des deutschen Bundespräsidenten, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.
 - Der Text beschreibt die bestehenden parlamentarischen Ausschüsse.
 - Ich weiß nicht.
- [randomise order of response options]

Dependent variables

Jetzt würden wir gerne mehr über Ihre Ansichten zur Politik in Deutschland erfahren.

[randomise order of these two sections (all DV1, all DV2s)]

DV 1: Partisan attitudes

- partisan_attitudes_1 [matrix]

- Was halten Sie so ganz allgemein von den einzelnen politischen Parteien?
- Parties: SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; BSW

- Answer scale: Lehne stark ab, Lehne eher ab, Neutral, Unterstütze eher, Unterstütze stark, Ich weiß es nicht.
- **partisan_attitudes_2** [matrix]
 - Inwieweit haben Sie das Gefühl, dass die folgenden Parteien die Interessen von Menschen wie Ihnen vertreten?
 - Parties: SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; BSW
 - Answer scale: Gar nicht, In geringem Maße, In gewissem Maße, In großem Maße, Vollständig, Och weiß es nicht
- **partisan_attitudes_3** [matrix]
 - Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie die folgenden Parteien jemals wählen werden?
 - Parties: SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; BSW
 - Answer scale: Extrem unwahrscheinlich, Eher unwahrscheinlich, Weder unwahrscheinlich noch wahrscheinlich, Eher wahrscheinlich, Extrem wahrscheinlich, Ich weiß es nicht.

DV 2: Regime support

DV2.2: Support for democratic performance

- **support_performance:**
 - Wie zufrieden oder unzufrieden sind Sie insgesamt damit, wie die Demokratie in Deutschland funktioniert?
 - Extrem unzufrieden, Sehr unzufrieden, Eher unzufrieden, Weder zufrieden noch unzufrieden, Eher zufrieden, Sehr zufrieden, Extrem zufrieden, Ich weiß es nicht. [randomly reverse choices]

DV2.3: Support for democratic institutions

- Inwieweit vertrauen oder misstrauen Sie persönlich den folgenden Institutionen oder Organisationen? [randomise order of these five items]
 - **support_institutions_1** Die Regierung,
 - **support_institutions_2** Das Parlament,
 - **support_institutions_3** Der Bundesverfassungsschutz,
 - **support_institutions_4** Das Bundesverfassungsgericht,
 - **support_institutions_5** Öffentlich-rechtliche Medien.
 - [randomly reverse order of institutions]
- Überhaupt kein Vertrauen, Wenig Vertrauen, Teilweise Vertrauen, Viel Vertrauen, Vollkommenes Vertrauen, Ich weiß es nicht. [randomly reverse choices]

Closing page

Vielen Dank für Ihre Teilnahme an dieser Studie.

Falls Sie noch Anmerkungen oder Vorschläge zu der Umfrage haben, können Sie uns diese gerne unter teilnehmerinfo@ceu.edu mitteilen.

Bitte klicken Sie auf den Knopf um zurück zu Proflic zu gelangen und Ihre Antworten einzureichen.

Appendix C: Variables in the Survey Dataset for this Project (Selection)

Variable	Description
group	Respondent's experimental group: 0 = Control, 1 = Treatment 1, 2 = Treatment 2
partisan_attitudes	DV: Index of post-treatment partisan attitudes towards the AfD from 0 (no support) to 6 (full support)
support_performance	DV: Level of post-treatment support for regime performance from 0 (dissatisfaction) to 6 (satisfaction)
support_institutions	DV: Index of post-treatment support for regime institutions from 0 (no support) to 6 (full support)
FMC	Factual manipulation check: 0 = fail, 1 = pass
adequacy	Support for a ban of the AfD from 0 (not adequate) to 6 (fully adequate) [only available for treatment 1 and treatment 2]
age	Age in years [approximation based on respondents' year of birth]
gender	Gender: male, female, diverse
sex	Sex: female, male
education	Highest level of education obtained by the respondent: no_degree, high_school, vocational, bachelor's, master's
residence	German state of residence
region	Region of state of residence based on pre-1990 borders: East, West, Berlin
interest	Political interest from 0 (low) to 4 (high)
party_support_AfD	Baseline (pre-treatment) support for the AfD from 0 (low) to 6 (high)
AfD_supporter	Recoding of party_support_AfD into three categories, low (0-2), medium (3), high (4-6)

Appendix D: Regression Results

Linear regression results

Model 1: Baseline

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	AfD Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	0.02 (0.16)	−0.14 (0.15)	0.003 (0.12)
Treatment 2	0.14 (0.16)	−0.31** (0.15)	−0.35*** (0.12)
Constant	0.74*** (0.11)	3.20*** (0.10)	3.36*** (0.08)
Observations	603	602	603
R ²	0.002	0.01	0.02
Adjusted R ²	−0.002	0.004	0.02
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Model 2: Baseline with covariates

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	0.01 (0.05)	−0.14 (0.14)	0.02 (0.10)
Treatment 2	0.04 (0.05)	−0.24* (0.14)	−0.27*** (0.10)
Age	−0.01** (0.002)	0.0004 (0.01)	−0.002 (0.005)
Education: High School	0.14 (0.31)	−0.30 (0.80)	−0.79 (0.60)
Education: Vocational	0.21 (0.32)	−0.37 (0.81)	−0.64 (0.61)
Education: BA	0.23 (0.31)	−0.19 (0.80)	−0.61 (0.60)
Education: MA	0.25 (0.31)	−0.09 (0.80)	−0.30 (0.61)
Education: PhD	0.19 (0.34)	−0.31 (0.87)	−0.34 (0.66)
Interest	−0.01 (0.02)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.23*** (0.05)
Region (East)	0.11 (0.07)	−0.20 (0.18)	0.01 (0.14)
Region (Berlin)	−0.09 (0.09)	−0.05 (0.23)	−0.26 (0.18)
AfD Party Support	1.00*** (0.02)	−0.34*** (0.04)	−0.38*** (0.03)
Constant	0.08 (0.32)	3.13*** (0.82)	3.66*** (0.62)
Observations	602	601	602
R ²	0.88	0.15	0.28
Adjusted R ²	0.88	0.13	0.27

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Model 3: Interaction with AfD support

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	−0.003 (0.06)	−0.20 (0.15)	0.005 (0.11)
Treatment 2	0.06 (0.06)	−0.29* (0.15)	−0.29** (0.11)
Age	−0.01** (0.002)	0.0002 (0.01)	−0.002 (0.005)
Education: High School	0.15 (0.31)	−0.30 (0.80)	−0.79 (0.61)
Education: Vocational	0.22 (0.32)	−0.35 (0.81)	−0.64 (0.61)
Education: BA	0.25 (0.31)	−0.18 (0.80)	−0.61 (0.61)
Education: MA	0.26 (0.31)	−0.09 (0.80)	−0.30 (0.61)
Education: PhD	0.20 (0.34)	−0.30 (0.87)	−0.34 (0.66)
Interest	−0.01 (0.02)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.23*** (0.05)
Region (East)	0.12 (0.07)	−0.21 (0.18)	0.005 (0.14)
Region (Berlin)	−0.09 (0.09)	−0.04 (0.23)	−0.25 (0.18)
AfD Party Support	1.01*** (0.03)	−0.40*** (0.07)	−0.40*** (0.05)
Control * AfD Party Support	0.01 (0.04)	0.09 (0.10)	0.03 (0.07)
Treatment 2 * AfD Party Support	−0.03 (0.04)	0.07 (0.09)	0.03 (0.07)
Constant	0.06 (0.32)	3.17*** (0.82)	3.68*** (0.62)
Observations	602	601	602
R ²	0.88	0.15	0.28
Adjusted R ²	0.88	0.13	0.26

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Robust regression results

Model 1 – Robust linear model: Baseline

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	AfD Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Intercept	0.200 (0.028)	3.283 (0.105)	3.473 (0.082)
Control	0.002 (0.040)	−0.147 (0.149)	−0.059 (0.116)
Treatment 2	0.035 (0.040)	−0.338 (0.149)	−0.408 (0.115)
Observations	603	602	603
RMSE	1.67	1.46	1.20

Model 2 – Robust linear model: Baseline with covariates

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Intercept	0.000 (0.000)	3.103 (0.830)	3.656 (0.598)
Control	0.000 (0.000)	−0.163 (0.139)	−0.020 (0.100)
Treatment 2	0.000 (0.000)	−0.245 (0.140)	−0.339 (0.101)
Age	0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.006)	0.001 (0.004)
Education: High School	0.000 (0.000)	−0.243 (0.811)	−0.701 (0.584)
Education: Vocational	0.000 (0.000)	−0.307 (0.818)	−0.590 (0.589)
Education: BA	0.000 (0.000)	−0.105 (0.811)	−0.585 (0.584)
Education: MA	0.000 (0.000)	−0.018 (0.815)	−0.272 (0.587)
Education: PhD	0.000 (0.000)	−0.174 (0.879)	−0.413 (0.634)
Interest	0.000 (0.000)	0.216 (0.062)	0.209 (0.045)
Region (East)	0.000 (0.000)	−0.162 (0.187)	0.037 (0.135)
Region (Berlin)	0.000 (0.000)	−0.031 (0.236)	−0.250 (0.170)
AfD Party Support	1.000 (0.000)	−0.367 (0.039)	−0.391 (0.028)
Observations	602	601	602
RMSE	0.55	1.35	1.03

Model 3 – Robust linear model: Interaction with AfD support

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Intercept	0.000 (0.000)	3.137 (0.834)	3.666 (0.597)
Control	0.000 (0.000)	−0.205 (0.153)	−0.059 (0.109)
Treatment 2	0.000 (0.000)	−0.285 (0.153)	−0.351 (0.110)
Age	0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.006)	0.001 (0.004)
Education: High School	0.000 (0.000)	−0.250 (0.814)	−0.689 (0.583)
Education: Vocational	0.000 (0.000)	−0.301 (0.821)	−0.572 (0.588)
Education: BA	0.000 (0.000)	−0.101 (0.814)	−0.568 (0.582)
Education: MA	0.000 (0.000)	−0.023 (0.818)	−0.261 (0.585)
Education: PhD	0.000 (0.000)	−0.178 (0.883)	−0.399 (0.631)
Interest	0.000 (0.000)	0.214 (0.063)	0.206 (0.045)
Region (East)	0.000 (0.000)	−0.165 (0.188)	0.038 (0.134)
Region (Berlin)	0.000 (0.000)	−0.030 (0.237)	−0.250 (0.170)
AfD Party Support	1.000 (0.000)	−0.410 (0.069)	−0.415 (0.049)
Control * AfD Party Support	0.000 (0.000)	0.071 (0.099)	0.060 (0.071)
Treatment 2 * AfD Party Support	0.000 (0.000)	0.063 (0.093)	0.019 (0.067)
Observations	602	601	602
RMSE	0.55	1.35	1.03

Weighted regression results

Model 1 – Weighted: Baseline

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	−0.07 (0.13)	0.08 (0.14)	0.29** (0.12)
Treatment 2	0.001 (0.14)	−0.26* (0.15)	−0.32*** (0.12)
Constant	0.72*** (0.09)	3.19*** (0.09)	3.30*** (0.08)
Observations	603	602	603
R ²	0.001	0.01	0.04
Adjusted R ²	−0.003	0.01	0.03

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Model 2 – Weighted: Baseline with covariates

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	−0.04 (0.05)	0.05 (0.13)	0.21** (0.11)
Treatment 2	−0.02 (0.05)	−0.20 (0.14)	−0.30*** (0.11)
Age	−0.01*** (0.001)	0.01*** (0.004)	0.01* (0.003)
Education: High School	0.11 (0.44)	−0.33 (1.31)	−1.09 (1.03)
Education: Vocational	0.29 (0.44)	−0.68 (1.31)	−0.95 (1.03)
Education: BA	0.17 (0.44)	−0.23 (1.30)	−0.80 (1.03)
Education: MA	0.21 (0.44)	−0.48 (1.30)	−1.01 (1.03)
Education: PhD	0.52 (0.45)	−0.56 (1.33)	−0.85 (1.05)
Interest	−0.02 (0.02)	0.16** (0.07)	0.20*** (0.05)
Region (East)	−0.11** (0.05)	0.07 (0.16)	0.12 (0.12)
AfD Party Support	0.97*** (0.01)	−0.40*** (0.04)	−0.43*** (0.03)
Constant	0.42 (0.44)	2.94** (1.31)	3.77*** (1.04)
Observations	602	601	602
R ²	0.90	0.17	0.28
Adjusted R ²	0.90	0.16	0.26

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Model 3 – Weighted: Interaction with AfD support

	<i>Dependent variable</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	−0.14*** (0.05)	−0.01 (0.15)	0.21* (0.12)
Treatment 2	−0.06 (0.05)	−0.28* (0.16)	−0.34*** (0.13)
Age	−0.01*** (0.001)	0.01*** (0.004)	0.01* (0.003)
Education: High School	0.12 (0.43)	−0.35 (1.31)	−1.10 (1.04)
Education: Vocational	0.33 (0.43)	−0.67 (1.31)	−0.96 (1.04)
Education: BA	0.19 (0.43)	−0.24 (1.31)	−0.82 (1.04)
Education: MA	0.21 (0.43)	−0.51 (1.30)	−1.03 (1.03)
Education: PhD	0.53 (0.44)	−0.59 (1.33)	−0.87 (1.05)
Interest	−0.03 (0.02)	0.15** (0.07)	0.20*** (0.05)
Region (East)	−0.10* (0.05)	0.08 (0.16)	0.12 (0.12)
AfD Party Support	0.92*** (0.02)	−0.46*** (0.06)	−0.44*** (0.05)
Control * AfD Party Support	0.13*** (0.03)	0.09 (0.10)	0.004 (0.08)
Treatment 2 * AfD Party Support	0.06* (0.03)	0.12 (0.10)	0.05 (0.08)
Constant	0.45 (0.44)	2.99** (1.31)	3.79*** (1.04)
Observations	602	601	602
R ²	0.90	0.17	0.28
Adjusted R ²	0.90	0.16	0.26

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Regression results for a subset of respondents with low AfD-support

Model 1 – Subset: Baseline

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	AfD Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	0.04 (0.07)	−0.17 (0.15)	−0.03 (0.12)
Treatment 2	0.09 (0.07)	−0.33** (0.15)	−0.36*** (0.12)
Constant	0.24*** (0.05)	3.39*** (0.10)	3.55*** (0.08)
Observations	532	531	532
R ²	0.004	0.01	0.02
Adjusted R ²	−0.0001	0.01	0.02
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Model 2 – Subset: Baseline with covariates

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	−0.01 (0.04)	−0.15 (0.15)	0.02 (0.11)
Treatment 2	0.06 (0.05)	−0.28* (0.15)	−0.29*** (0.11)
Age	−0.01** (0.002)	0.001 (0.01)	−0.003 (0.005)
Education: High School	0.20 (0.25)	−0.29 (0.80)	−0.80 (0.61)
Education: Vocational	0.23 (0.25)	−0.45 (0.81)	−0.74 (0.62)
Education: BA	0.22 (0.25)	−0.18 (0.80)	−0.62 (0.61)
Education: MA	0.25 (0.25)	−0.09 (0.80)	−0.30 (0.61)
Education: PhD	0.21 (0.27)	−0.32 (0.87)	−0.38 (0.66)
Interest	−0.01 (0.02)	0.20*** (0.07)	0.23*** (0.05)
Region (East)	0.14** (0.06)	−0.22 (0.20)	−0.08 (0.15)
Region (Berlin)	−0.07 (0.07)	−0.05 (0.23)	−0.26 (0.18)
AfD Party Support	0.96*** (0.04)	−0.36*** (0.12)	−0.46*** (0.09)
Constant	0.06 (0.25)	3.17*** (0.82)	3.68*** (0.63)
Observations	532	531	532
R ²	0.56	0.06	0.14
Adjusted R ²	0.55	0.04	0.12

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Model 3 – Subset: Interaction with AfD support

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Partisan Attitudes	Regime Performance	Regime Institutions
Control	−0.01 (0.05)	−0.27* (0.15)	0.01 (0.12)
Treatment 2	0.01 (0.05)	−0.28* (0.15)	−0.26** (0.12)
Age	−0.01*** (0.002)	0.001 (0.01)	−0.0001 (0.005)
Education: High School	0.19 (0.24)	−0.25 (0.80)	−0.78 (0.61)
Education: Vocational	0.23 (0.25)	−0.39 (0.81)	−0.73 (0.62)
Education: BA	0.20 (0.24)	−0.15 (0.80)	−0.60 (0.61)
Education: MA	0.24 (0.24)	−0.06 (0.80)	−0.29 (0.61)
Education: PhD	0.21 (0.26)	−0.31 (0.86)	−0.38 (0.66)
Interest	−0.02 (0.02)	0.22*** (0.07)	0.23*** (0.05)
Region (East)	0.14** (0.06)	−0.22 (0.20)	−0.08 (0.15)
Region (Berlin)	−0.06 (0.07)	−0.05 (0.23)	−0.27 (0.18)
AfD Party Support	0.85*** (0.07)	−0.63*** (0.24)	−0.41** (0.19)
Control * AfD Party Support	0.03 (0.10)	0.69** (0.31)	0.07 (0.24)
Treatment 2 * AfD Party Support	0.29*** (0.10)	0.03 (0.32)	−0.22 (0.24)
Constant	0.11 (0.25)	3.14*** (0.82)	3.64*** (0.63)
Observations	532	531	532
R ²	0.57	0.07	0.15
Adjusted R ²	0.56	0.05	0.12

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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