

Legitimize or Delegitimize?
Mainstream Party Strategies towards
Challenger Parties and How Voters Respond

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PhD Dissertation

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Preface

This summary report provides a summary of the dissertation “Legitimize or Delegitimize? Mainstream Party Strategies towards Challenger Parties and How Voters Respond”. In addition to the summary report, the dissertation consists of two unpublished working papers. This summary report focusses on the overall theoretical arguments and contributions of the dissertation. Moreover, chapter 4 of this summary report constitutes an independent empirical study and is part of the dissertation as well. In the summary report, I also briefly present the research designs and main results of the two working papers. Table 1 provides an overview of all the three studies, which jointly constitute the dissertation.

Table 1: Overview of studies in the dissertation

Type of Work	Reference
Paper A	“Can Mainstream Parties Shape Citizens’ Legitimacy Evaluations of Challenger parties?” <i>Unpublished Working Paper</i>
Paper B	“How Mainstream Parties Strategically Legitimize Challenger Parties in the Eyes of Citizens – Survey Experimental Evidence from Sweden” <i>Unpublished Working Paper</i>
Book chapter/ Chapter 4 in the summary report	“Mapping Mainstream Parties’ (De-)Legitimizing Strategies towards Challenger Parties – A quantitative media content analysis in Sweden and Germany”

1 Introduction

We are currently witnessing a fundamental transformation of European politics. Whilst European party systems have been dominated by large mainstream right and left parties for the past several decades, their dominance is now increasingly threatened by the rise of populist challenger parties from the ideological fringes (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Chega in Portugal, La France Insoumise in France, Syriza in Greece, AfD in Germany, and, most recently, the Brothers of Italy are only a few examples of rising challenger parties currently disrupting their respective political systems. This rise of challenger parties is not a historically unique phenomenon, as Western European multi-party democracies have experienced similar disruptions from the rise of challenger parties before. In the past, the rise of Green parties and – even further back in time – Social Democratic parties effected lasting transformations to politics. Hence, investigating the interaction between challenger and mainstream parties is crucial to understanding political change in modern democracies.

A large political science literature has explored how the rise of challenger parties changes the content of party competition – that is, the issues over which parties compete and what positions they take on these issues (e.g., Green-Pedersen, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008; Kriesi et al., 2006; Wagner & Meyer, 2016). Challenger parties politicize issues that defy the established patterns of competition (van de Wardt, De Vries, & Hobolt, 2014). Mainstream parties, in turn, respond by integrating these issues into their own policy platforms or by downplaying their salience (e.g., Abou-Chadi, 2014; Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2009; Meguid, 2005). Extant literature has thus made considerable progress in explaining how policy-based competition between challenger and mainstream parties has transformed European politics.

With this dissertation, I offer a new and different perspective on party competition between mainstream and challenger parties, focusing on competition over *legitimacy*. Numerous studies have explored challenger parties' attacks on mainstream parties' legitimacy by means of populist, anti-establishment rhetoric (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; van Kessel, 2015; Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017). When using such rhetoric, challenger parties accuse mainstream parties of serving the interests not of 'the people', but of a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004).¹ In other words, challenger

¹ It is important to note that portraying mainstream parties as part of a corrupt elite that does not represent 'the people' is only one aspect of challenger parties' populism.

parties blame mainstream parties for neglecting their duties as political parties in a democratic polity – that is, representing and implementing the will of the people. De Vries and Hobolt (2020) argue that challenger parties’ anti-establishment rhetoric serves an important function. It undermines mainstream parties’ appeal and thus protects the policy innovation of the challenger. To put it in the words of De Vries and Hobolt (2020, p. 57), ‘[t]he antiestablishment strategy seeks to attack the value of the dominant party “brand” as a whole, rather than its specific policy offering’.

Surprisingly, existing literature tells us little about whether and how mainstream parties, in turn, attack the legitimacy of challenger parties and how citizens react to such attacks by mainstream parties.² This is the point of departure of this dissertation. I contend that challenger parties’ populism is only one side of a form of party competition that often becomes salient when challenger and mainstream parties compete with each other. This dimension centres on something perhaps more fundamental than policy: parties’ legitimacy. With this dissertation, I investigate to what extent mainstream parties engage in this competition over legitimacy, and how citizens respond to it.

I contend that a prevalent feature in mainstream parties’ response to challenger parties is that mainstream parties strategically seek to delegitimize challenger parties. Mainstream parties aim to push challenger parties out of the ‘region of acceptability’ in the minds of citizens by signalling that the challenger is incompatible with or even a threat to the democratic polity. I call this a delegitimizing strategy. As an example, in 2020, the leadership of the German CDU summarized their approach to dealing with the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) the following way (CDU, 2020):

AfD is in our view a dangerous party for our society and our country. Large parts of the party follow a racist-authoritarian idea of politics and challenge fundamental principles of our constitution. The party disdains democratic institutions and representative democracy. [...] Therefore, we view AfD as political enemy we must not collaborate with.

This statement exemplifies the core message of mainstream parties’ delegitimizing strategies: mainstream parties portray challenger parties as not deserving of participation in the democratic game of policy-based competition (‘The challenger party is threatening the democratic polity’). There are striking

Another aspect is populist challenger parties’ portrayal of themselves as the ‘true’ representatives of ‘the people’ (Mudde, 2004).

² I conceptualize challenger parties as all parties with a populist and/or ideologically radical political platform. I conceptualize mainstream parties as those that define the government alternatives – usually this is the largest center-left and center-right party (Mair, 2006)

parallels between challenger parties' populist anti-establishment rhetoric and mainstream parties' delegitimizing strategies. In just the same way, challenger parties portray mainstream parties as not deserving of participation in the democratic game of policy-based competition by means of populist anti-establishment rhetoric ('The mainstream parties are corrupt').

When mainstream parties employ delegitimizing strategies towards challenger parties, I therefore conceive of this as a competition over legitimacy between mainstream and challenger parties. Party competition over legitimacy is fundamentally different from party competition over policy. When party competition centres on policy, parties engage in a debate over who is best at delivering policy. In contrast, when party competition centres on legitimacy, parties engage in a debate over who is actually a fair player within the democratic competition over policy. In other words, mainstream parties as well as challenger parties try to define who is part of the circle of democratic parties within which one ought to engage in political arguments and compromise – independently of substantive agreement or disagreement.

However, delegitimizing strategies are only one strategic option for how mainstream parties may seek to influence citizens' legitimacy evaluations of challenger parties. Delegitimizing a challenger can be costly for mainstream parties as it, for example, entails that joint governments are not feasible. In other words, office-related goals might interfere with vote-related goals. Hence, I argue that mainstream parties often seek to legitimize controversial challenger parties to facilitate cooperation with a challenger. I call this a legitimizing strategy. Mainstream parties' aim, when pursuing a legitimizing strategy, is to pull challenger parties into the 'region of acceptability' in the minds of citizens by signalling that the challenger is no threat to the democratic polity.

One might conceive of delegitimizing as well as legitimizing strategies as mainstream parties positioning themselves on a single, continuous delegitimizing-legitimizing dimension. Importantly, mainstream parties move on this continuum. In many cases, mainstream parties seem to move from the delegitimizing end closer to the legitimizing end of this continuous dimension. In fact, mainstream parties often end up forming governments with the very same parties they had delegitimized in the past (Akkerman, De Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016; de Lange, 2012).

Sweden is a good case in point. In 2011, when the mainstream right Moderate party (M) ruled out any collaboration with its far-right challenger the Sweden Democrats (SD), the then-party leader of M said the following about SD (Dagens Nyheter, 2011):

SD is a party that has sprung from the white power milieu and has roots in racist movements. I have a recurring debate with them about the danger of having their

ideological starting point in an “us and them” thinking. This way of thinking is strongly represented by SD.

Yet, following a period of delegitimization, M has switched to a legitimizing strategy towards SD (Leander, 2022). In 2022, M signalled openness to a government passively supported by SD. The contrast between the 2011 statement displayed above and the following statement from 2022 of M partly leader Ulf Kristersson clearly illustrates this shift in strategy (SVT Nyheter, 2022):

[SD] have roots that are unpleasant, just like the Left Party. They came to terms with their history in the 1990s. There are several parties that have terrible roots [...]. I also take note of the fact that they [SD] are now coming to terms with their history.

M no longer portray SD as a threat to the democratic polity, but instead portray the party as a ‘respectable’ democratic competitor. But how prevalent are (de-)messages actually and how do voters respond to them? This dissertation provides answers to these two questions.

1.1 The research question and main argument

My main argument is that delegitimizing as well as legitimizing strategies are an important – but thus far overlooked – dimension in how mainstream parties compete with challenger parties. To support this argument, I aim to show that parties actually use these strategies and that voters respond to them. Therefore, I ask the following two research questions. First, I ask to what extent these strategies are a prevalent feature in mainstream parties’ responses to challenger parties. Second, I ask how citizens react to these strategies.

Hence, my overall research question is:

To what extent do mainstream parties employ (de-)legitimizing strategies in their responses to challenger parties and how do citizens react to these strategies?

In line with the twofold nature of my main research question, I proceed with two steps in order to establish my central argument that (de-)legitimizing strategies are an important dimension in the competition between mainstream and challenger parties. First, I aim to show that (de-)legitimizing strategies are indeed a prevalent feature in mainstream parties’ responses to challenger parties. I will theorize that citizens’ legitimacy evaluations of challenger parties have important ramifications for mainstream parties’ office- as well as vote-related goals. Hence, mainstream parties have an interest in shaping citizens’ legitimacy evaluations of challenger parties. Therefore, they employ (de-)legitimizing strategies. Second, I contend that citizens follow mainstream

parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their own evaluations of challenger parties. Mainstream parties serve as trustworthy cue-givers to many citizens when evaluating the legitimacy of a challenger party.

1.2 Empirically testing the argument

To investigate (de-)legitimizing strategies empirically, I examine mainstream right parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies vis-à-vis far-right challenger parties in two countries: Sweden and Germany. More specifically, I examine how the Swedish Moderates (*Moderaterna*, or M) and the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, or CDU) employ (de-)legitimizing strategies towards the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, or SD) and the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, or AfD).

I chose these two countries for two reasons. First, there are ongoing public debates on how to deal with these challengers from the far right in both countries. In Germany, AfD's legitimacy is regularly the subject of public debates – presumably not least due to Germany's fascist history and AfD's radicalization over time (Arzheimer, 2019; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019). In Sweden, the question of how to deal with SD is routinely discussed as well – especially since three parties of the centre (the Liberals) and the mainstream right (the Moderates and the Christian Democrats) joined a pre-electoral alliance prior to the 2022 general election (Polk, 2022). Whilst this consideration guided my initial decision to study Germany and Sweden as cases, I empirically substantiate this 'assumption' as part of this thesis.

Second, I contend that Germany and Sweden represent two prototypical cases of mainstream parties' response strategies to challenger parties at different points in time. In Germany, AfD is confronted with delegitimizing strategies by the mainstream right (CDU) and mainstream left (SPD) – just like many challenger parties in their early stages (Art, 2007). However, as elaborated above, mainstream parties often switch from an initial delegitimizing to a legitimizing strategy. Sweden represents one such case, where the mainstream left (S) maintained its initial delegitimizing strategy, but the mainstream right (M) switched to a legitimizing strategy. Again, I will empirically substantiate this 'assumption'.

I employ two different empirical approaches to demonstrate that (de-)legitimizing strategies are an important feature of mainstream party competition with challenger parties. First, I document mainstream parties' use of (de-)legitimizing messages towards SD and AfD over time using a media content analysis. For this purpose, I developed a coding scheme that allows me

to measure mainstream parties' use of delegitimizing as well as legitimizing messages in both countries.

The content analysis shows that (de-)legitimizing messages are prevalent in both countries. There are clear patterns and trends in mainstream parties' use of (de-)legitimizing messages, indicating that their use reflects an underlying strategy. In both countries, the mainstream right parties initially responded to the emergence of their new far-right challengers by strongly delegitimizing them. The German CDU/CSU kept delegitimizing AfD over the observed period of time. In fact, the extent to which CDU/CSU delegitimized AfD slightly increased over time. In contrast, the Swedish M gradually shifted away from a delegitimizing strategy, instead adopting a legitimizing strategy. The Social Democrats did not move away from their initial delegitimizing strategy regarding SD.

Second, I demonstrate that citizens follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their own evaluations of challenger parties' legitimacy. To test this, I conducted two survey experiments: the first one I implemented in Germany (Paper A) and the second one in Sweden (Paper B). In both experiments, I randomly exposed survey participants to a series of either legitimizing or delegitimizing messages about AfD and SD sponsored by CDU and M. Additionally, in the Swedish experiment, I included one condition where the survey participants were exposed simultaneously to a legitimizing message by M and a competing delegitimizing message by the Centre party (C) – a small centrist mainstream party.

The results of both experiments demonstrate that mainstream parties can powerfully shape citizens' legitimacy evaluations of challenger parties. Citizens evaluate the challenger as more legitimate when confronted with legitimizing – as opposed to delegitimizing – mainstream party messages. Furthermore, respondents followed mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their attitudes towards collaborations between mainstream and challenger parties. Additionally, in the Swedish experiment, I also find evidence that (de-)legitimizing strategies have downstream consequences for challenger party voting and likeability. Another important finding from the Swedish experiment is that those respondents who were exposed to both messages – a legitimizing one by M and a delegitimizing one by C – evaluated SD no differently than the group who read only the legitimizing message by M. This shows that M's legitimizing message is effective, even in the face of a competing delegitimizing message from another party. In conjunction, these experiments provide robust evidence that mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies shape citizens' evaluations of challenger parties.

1.3 What to learn from this dissertation? The contributions in brief

The main contribution of this dissertation is to establish that mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies are an important – yet previously neglected – dimension of party competition between mainstream and challenger parties. To do so, I first show that (de-)legitimizing strategies are a prevalent feature in mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties. Second, I show that citizens follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their own evaluations of challenger parties' legitimacy.

Put together, these findings enhance our understanding of mainstream party competition with challenger parties. Mainstream parties can successfully shape citizens' legitimacy evaluations of challengers in their preferred direction. Mainstream parties can push challenger parties out of the mainstream in the eyes of citizens by means of delegitimizing strategies – for instance, in order to electorally harm the challenger. Conversely, they can pull challenger parties into the mainstream in the eyes of citizens by means of legitimizing strategies – for instance, in order to facilitate cooperation with the challenger. I conclude that mainstream parties are powerful gatekeepers that have considerable leeway in shaping to what extent citizens deem challenger parties legitimate.

Besides this main contribution, I make two methodological contributions. For the content analysis, I developed a coding scheme that allows for empirically disentangling (de-)legitimizing strategies from mainstream parties' policy-based response strategies to challenger parties, such as accommodative strategies (Meguid, 2005). Whilst many tools to measure populism exist, this is the first attempt to measure (de-)legitimizing strategies over time, parties, and political contexts. Moreover, I designed two experiments in two different contexts, manipulating (de-)legitimizing strategies in a way that allows for robust inferences, given the significant contextual differences and the different operationalizations of my independent variable (Mutz, 2011). Experimentally examining the effects of party strategies across different contexts is a challenging endeavour and my designs might inspire future studies that aim to do so. The following list provides a concise overview of the dissertation's contributions.

- *Theoretical contribution:* Proposing competition over legitimacy as a dimension of competition between challenger and mainstream parties; conceptualizing and theorizing mainstream parties' engagement in this competition over legitimacy by means of (de-)legitimizing strategies

- *Methodological contribution #1*: Operationalizing (de-)legitimizing strategies by designing a coding scheme that allows for disentangling these strategies from policy-based strategies and to measure them over countries, parties, and time
- *Methodological contribution #2*: Developing treatments with real parties to examine citizens' reactions to these strategies in different contexts, which might serve as a blueprint for investigating citizens' reactions to (de-)legitimizing strategies
- *Empirical contribution #1*: Showing that (de-)legitimizing strategies are a prevalent feature in mainstream parties' response to challenger parties
- *Empirical contribution #2*: Showing that citizens follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their own assessments of challenger parties' legitimacy

1.4 The plan of the dissertation

This dissertation proceeds as follows. In the next chapter, I expound the most important theories of party competition and describe the state of the literature on mainstream party competition with challenger parties. I provide a conceptualization of (de-)legitimizing strategies. Moreover, I explain in detail how these strategies differ from policy-based strategies and how my conceptualization relates to similar phenomena previously studied. I discuss when and why mainstream parties may seek to legitimize or delegitimize and which goals these strategies may ultimately serve. In the last section of the theory chapter, I hypothesize, based on extant literature, that citizens follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their own evaluations of challenger parties' legitimacy. In the third chapter of this dissertation, I discuss the considerations that guided my choice to study Sweden and Germany as cases and how the findings from these cases might generalize. Subsequently, in the fourth chapter, I present the media content analysis. In this chapter, I first provide a detailed description of the methodology and then present the findings, answering the first part of my research question. In the fifth chapter of this dissertation summary report, I briefly expound the design of my survey experiments and present the main findings, answering the second part of my research question. Finally, I conclude in the sixth chapter, by summing up the core arguments of this thesis and discuss potential avenues for further research.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

In this chapter of the dissertation, I will first review the literature on party competition, with a particular focus on competition between mainstream and challenger parties. Subsequently, I will propose a new perspective on competition between challenger parties and mainstream parties – competition over legitimacy. I will argue that mainstream parties engage in this competition over legitimacy by means of (de-)legitimizing strategies. Finally, I hypothesize that citizens react to these strategies by adjusting their evaluations of the targeted challenger parties.

2.1 Competition over policy between mainstream and challenger parties

Extant scholarship has primarily focused on three dimensions structuring competition between parties – position, competence, and salience. I call competition structured by these three dimensions policy-based competition, because all three dimensions centre on parties' ability to deliver good political outcomes – that is, policy.

Parties aim to win votes by taking *positions* on issues and persuading voters of their positions – a theory also known as the 'spatial theory' of politics (A. Downs, 1957). The underlying rationale is that citizens vote for the party with the position closest to their own position. Indeed, some studies suggest that voters respond to positional shifts of parties and adjust their vote choice accordingly (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Clagow, 2006; Seeberg, Slothuus, & Stubager, 2017). Other studies, however, suggest that parties' positional shifts are not followed by a shift in voters' perceptions of party positions (see for an overview of the literature Adams, 2012; Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-Topcu, 2011).

Independent of their positions on political issues, parties also differ with respect to how competent they are perceived to be by voters (Petrocik, 1996). First, parties differ with regard to the extent to which voters perceive them as competent in solving problems related to specific issues (Stubager & Slothuus, 2012). Second, parties differ with respect to more general valence traits not tied to specific political issues, but to the capacity to deliver good outcomes more generally – that is, traits such as honesty or integrity (Bjarnøe, Adams, & Boydston, 2022; Johns & Kölln, 2019). Consequently, parties aim to convince voters of their own *competence* and attack the competence of their competitors (Jung & Tavits, 2021). The underlying rationale is that citizens vote for the party that appears most competent to them (van der Brug, 2004).

Whilst parties can effectively enhance voters' perceptions of their own competence (Stubager & Seeberg, 2016), rival parties can also decrease voters' competence evaluations of their competitors (Lefevere, Seeberg, & Walgrave, 2020; Seeberg, 2019; Seeberg & Nai, 2021).

Finally, parties differ in the extent to which they emphasize specific issues. Parties aim to increase the *saliency* of those issues that are beneficial to them – in terms of competence or positions – and decrease the saliency of those issues that are beneficial to their competitors (Green-Pedersen, 2019; Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008). The underlying rationale is that not all issues are equally important to voters. Thus, voters support the most proximate (position) and competent party on the issue of most concern to them. Existing evidence suggests that parties have considerable agency in determining the relative saliency of issues over which parties compete (Dolezal, Ennsner-Jedennastik, Müller, & Winkler, 2013; Spoon, Hobolt, & de Vries, 2014; Wagner & Meyer, 2014).

The rise of challenger parties changes the content of party competition and has ramifications for how challenger as well as mainstream parties compete on all three dimensions – positions, competence, and saliency. Challenger parties politicize new issues – that is, issues that were previously not on the agenda or issues on which mainstream parties hold positions that do not diverge significantly from each other (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997; Kriesi et al., 2008; Kriesi et al., 2006). Moreover, challenger parties aim to break the dominance of mainstream parties by using a strategy of *issue entrepreneurship* (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; van de Wardt et al., 2014). When pursuing such a strategy, challenger parties politicize wedge issues; that is, issues that defy the established patterns of political competition, such as European integration or immigration. Hence, these are difficult for mainstream parties to integrate into their policy platforms, and therefore these issues put a wedge within mainstream parties' constituencies. In other words, challenger parties increase the saliency of issues that received little attention before and take positions not occupied by mainstream parties on those issues.³

Accordingly, when mainstream parties respond to the rise of challenger parties, they adjust their policy platforms on all three dimensions: position, competence, and saliency. I call these strategies policy-based response strategies. Focusing on how mainstream parties seek to influence the dimensions of position and saliency, Bonnie Meguid argues in her seminal study (2005) that

³ To my knowledge, there is no study specifically examining how challenger parties attack the competence of mainstream parties.

mainstream parties can pursue three different policy-based strategies in response to challenger parties.⁴ First, they can pursue an accommodative strategy – that is, mainstream parties move their position closer to the challenger parties’ position. Second, they can pursue an adversarial strategy – that is, mainstream parties move their position even further away from the challenger parties. However, both of these strategies entail a positional shift on the challenger’s core issue. Thus, these strategies might increase the salience of the issue ‘owned’ by the challenger, which might eventually benefit the challenger. Hence, mainstream parties might pursue a third strategy instead: a dismissive strategy – that is, mainstream parties seek to downplay the salience of the challenger parties’ issue on the political agenda. Existing evidence documents that mainstream parties have often chosen accommodative strategies, especially with regard to far-right challenger parties (Abou-Chadi, 2014; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; Wagner & Meyer, 2016).

In their comprehensive theory of competition between mainstream parties, De Vries and Hobolt (2020) synthesize all three dimensions of policy-based party competition. First, focusing on position, mainstream parties take positions and focus on issues that are widely popular, whilst making sure to remain unique in their policy offer and thus avoid overlap with other parties. De Vries and Hobolt (2020) call this strategy *distinctive convergence*. Second, focusing on competence, De Vries and Hobolt (2020, pp. 88-89) point out that ‘mainstream parties benefit from the “incumbency advantage” of having government experience and the brand value attached to that’. Mainstream parties can leverage this by using a strategy of *competence mobilization*. When pursuing this strategy, mainstream parties emphasize their experience in government. Third, focusing on salience, mainstream parties pursue a strategy of *issue avoidance*. Mainstream parties try to keep issues that benefit challenger parties off the agenda.

The vast majority of studies on citizens’ responses to mainstream parties’ policy-based strategies towards challenger parties has investigated the electoral consequences of accommodative strategies – that is, positional shifts towards the challenger’s positions. The evidence is mixed. Some scholars have argued that it electorally hurts the challenger even though there might not be a net benefit for the mainstream party pursuing the accommodative strategy (Chou, Dancygier, Egami, & Jamal, 2021; Hjorth & Larsen, 2020; Spoon & Klüver, 2020). Others have argued that an accommodative strategy actually

⁴ Meguid (2005) hypothesizes that mainstream parties’ responses to challengers also have ramifications for voters’ perceptions of issue ownership and thus perhaps also competence perceptions. Yet this is theorized as a byproduct of the positional changes when pursuing an accommodative or an adversarial strategy.

backfires electorally as it, for instance, legitimizes the challenger parties' positions and increases the saliency of their core issues (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Krause, Cohen, & Abou-Chadi, 2019).⁵ As the preceding discussion showed, political science scholars have made considerable progress in explaining how the interaction between challenger parties' entrepreneurial strategies and mainstream parties' policy-based response strategies change the content of party competition.

2.2 A novel perspective: How mainstream parties engage in a competition over legitimacy with challenger parties

With this dissertation, I offer a new and different perspective on competition between challenger and mainstream parties, centring on competition over legitimacy. When parties compete over policy, they engage in a debate over who is best at delivering policy outcomes. In contrast, when parties compete over legitimacy, parties engage in a debate over who is actually a legitimate actor within the democratic competition over policy. Whilst challenger parties engage in this competition by means of populist anti-establishment rhetoric (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020),⁶ I argue that mainstream parties employ delegitimizing strategies towards challenger parties.

With my argument, I aim to build on and extend important existing scholarship on the non-policy elements in mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties (e.g., de Lange, 2012; W. N. Downs, 2002; van Spanje, 2010b; van Spanje & van Der Brug, 2007). Of particular importance for this dissertation, Joost van Spanje and colleagues have pioneered in investigating how mainstream parties' ostracism of challenger parties influences the electoral fortunes of the targeted challenger parties (van Spanje, 2017; van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017; van Spanje & van der Brug, 2009; van Spanje & Weber, 2017).

⁵ It is important to note that whilst the outcome – legitimizing the challenger – might be the same, my theoretical argument is very different. Legitimization according to these studies is a result of positional shifts. Legitimization according to my theory is a result of strategically portraying a challenger as democratic.

⁶ An almost countless number of theories of populism exist in the literature (see Kriesi, 2018 for an overview). I follow the theory of De Vries and Hobolt (2020) insofar as they conceive of challenger parties' anti-establishment rhetoric as having an important *function* for challenger parties when they compete with mainstream parties. It attacks the 'brand' of the party as a whole and not only the specific policy offer. Hence, anti-establishment rhetoric protects the policy offer from 'plagiarism' by mainstream parties. Building on this idea, I contend that delegitimizing strategies have an important – and very similar – function. They attack the challenger as a whole and help mainstream parties to protect their 'brand'.

When mainstream parties ostracize challenger parties, they systematically rule out collaboration with the challenger party (van Spanje, 2010b) – a phenomenon which is also known as ‘cordon sanitaire’ (W. N. Downs, 2002). The electoral consequences of ostracism or a cordon sanitaire are, according to these studies, highly conditional on the specific context (de Jonge, 2020; Pauwels, 2011; van Spanje, 2017; van Spanje & van der Brug, 2009; van Spanje & Weber, 2017).

Extending this literature, I conceive of ostracism and a cordon sanitaire as part of a broader mainstream party strategy that seeks to signal to voters that a challenger party is incompatible with or even a threat to the democratic polity – that is, a delegitimizing strategy. Importantly, extant literature has almost exclusively focused on how mainstream parties try to keep challenger parties out of the mainstream. In this dissertation, I also theorize and test how mainstream parties facilitate challenger parties’ way into the mainstream in the minds of citizens by means of legitimizing strategies.

With my perspective, I theorize how (de-)legitimizing strategies influence citizens’ evaluations and perceptions of the challenger itself.⁷ A few scholars have indeed alluded to the possibility that mainstream parties’ portrayals of challenger parties influence citizens’ legitimacy evaluations (Art, 2007; Ivarsflaten, 2006; van Heerden & van der Brug, 2017). With this dissertation, I provide a theoretical framework and a rigorous empirical test of how mainstream parties’ portrayals of challenger parties influence citizens’ evaluations and perceptions of these challenger parties.

2.3 Conceptualizing delegitimizing and legitimizing strategies

The central concepts in this dissertation are mainstream parties’ delegitimizing and legitimizing strategies towards challenger parties. In order to theorize and empirically investigate these strategies, a necessary first step is to provide a precise conceptualization, which I will provide in the following.

⁷ My theory differs in important ways from previous studies. For instance, previous studies on ostracism hypothesize that citizens’ vote choices are driven by expected utility in terms of getting their preferred policy implemented (van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017; van Spanje & Weber, 2017). Accordingly, it is argued that voters infer information about the effectiveness of voting for a challenger from mainstream parties’ ostracism. Thus, ostracism could influence vote choice without changing the evaluations of the targeted challenger itself. Conversely, ostracism could influence citizens’ perceptions and evaluations of a challenger without having an immediate effect on vote choice. For instance, it may affect voters who do not consider the challenger to be competent or disagree on policy. In these cases, a delegitimizing strategy could still limit the potential number of voters a challenger party could mobilize.

I conceptualize a delegitimizing strategy as mainstream parties' portrayal of a challenger party as incompatible with or even a threat to the democratic polity. When pursuing a delegitimizing strategy, mainstream parties attack the challenger party and its legitimacy as a whole, rather than its specific policy offer.⁸ The goal is to push or keep challenger parties out of the mainstream in the minds of citizens. I conceive of this delegitimizing strategy as a communication strategy. The aim of this strategy is to signal to citizens that a challenger party is incompatible with or a threat to the democratic polity. These signals might take various forms. For example, mainstream parties might choose to demonize challenger parties rhetorically (Schwörer & Fernández-García, 2020; van Heerden & van der Brug, 2017) or ostracize the challenger and put a cordon sanitaire around it (W. N. Downs, 2002; van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017; van Spanje & Weber, 2017).

However, a delegitimizing strategy is only one strategic option mainstream parties can pursue in response to challenger parties. In contrast to a delegitimizing strategy, mainstream parties might also choose to legitimize challenger parties. I conceptualize a legitimizing strategy as mainstream parties' portrayal of a challenger party as being compatible with the democratic polity. In other words, mainstream parties portray a challenger party as a 'normal' democratic competitor. The goal is to pave the challenger party's way – or even pull it – into the mainstream in the minds of citizens.

A legitimizing strategy might be explicit when mainstream parties, for example, emphasize that a challenger party has been elected into parliament or that it represents the views of citizens. More typically, however, I expect that a legitimizing strategy manifests itself implicitly when mainstream parties, for example, advocate for more cooperation with a challenger party. I expect this since emphasizing that a party is democratic might actually raise doubts about the challenger party's legitimacy. Parties that acknowledge each other as legitimate do not explicitly emphasize this; rather, it is implicit when they simply compete over policy.

There is an important sequence in the use of delegitimizing and legitimizing strategies: the latter typically follows the former. A legitimizing strategy only makes sense when a challenger party is not perceived as legitimate in the minds of citizens. This can, but does not necessarily need to, be the result of a delegitimizing strategy in the past. A reputation as illegitimate might also stem from delegitimizing strategies by competing parties, the media, or previous conduct on the part of challenger parties themselves (de Jonge, 2020;

⁸ This description of the 'function' of a delegitimizing strategy mirrors De Vries and Hobolt's (2020, p. 57) description of the function of challenger parties' populist anti-establishment rhetoric.

Ivarsflaten, 2006; van Spanje & Azrout, 2021). When the legitimacy of a new challenger party is never contested, mainstream parties might simply treat it like any other party as soon as it enters the political scene and thereby implicitly legitimize it.

Delegitimizing and legitimizing strategies are conceptually as well as empirically fundamentally different from policy-based strategies. Conceptually, they are different as delegitimizing strategies neither aim to convince voters that the mainstream party's own policy offer is superior to the challenger party's policy offer – with respect to positions or competence – nor is the aim to influence the perceived saliency of an issue. For that reason, a delegitimizing strategy is different from negative campaigning (Lau & Rovner, 2009), although the aim of both negative campaigning and delegitimizing strategies is to lower voters' evaluations of the targeted challenger party. Extant studies on negative campaigning have investigated voters' responses to parties' attacks on their competitors' valence traits (Jung & Tavits, 2021) or its issue competence (Lefevre et al., 2020; Seeberg, 2019; Seeberg & Nai, 2021; Somer-Topcu & Weitzel, 2022). Delegitimizing strategies instead aim to lower voters' evaluations of a challenger party via attacking the challenger's legitimacy. Just like challenger parties' 'antiestablishment strategy seeks to attack the value of the dominant party "brand" as a whole, rather than its specific policy offering' (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020, p. 57), I argue that mainstream parties attack challenger parties as a whole, rather than their specific policy offering, by means of delegitimizing strategies.

Empirically, policy-based and (de-)legitimizing strategies can be combined in various ways. According to van Spanje and de Graaf (2017), combining ostracism – which implies a delegitimizing strategy according to my theoretical framework – with an accommodative strategy is the sweet spot for mainstream parties to effectively ward off electoral competition from challenger parties. In Chapter 4, I will contrast mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies with their policy-based strategies to demonstrate that they are empirically distinct.

2.4 How mainstream parties use (de-)legitimizing strategies to achieve their vote- and office-related goals

But when and why exactly would mainstream parties seek to delegitimize or legitimize challenger parties in the eyes of citizens? Based on the existing literature, I theoretically postulate that mainstream parties may, depending on the specific circumstances, have good reasons to pursue either one of these strategies. My theoretical framework builds on the premise that parties' choice of (de-)legitimizing strategies is guided by vote, office, and policy motives

(Strøm, 1990) – the former two motives being the most important ones. More precisely, I will argue that the choice of whether to delegitimize or legitimize a challenger has important ramifications for mainstream parties' vote- and office-related goals and thus I expect them to use these strategies strategically.

Perhaps the most important underlying motivation of a delegitimizing strategy might be to electorally harm the challenger. In fact, citizens do not consider parties they perceive as illegitimate to be viable options at the voting booth even when they agree with their policies (Bos & van der Brug, 2010; Hartevelde & Ivarsflaten, 2016; Ivarsflaten, 2006). This might be due to a sincere preference for a democratic polity (Bos & van der Brug, 2010) or due to social norms and stigmatization associated with voting for challenger parties that are perceived as radical or extreme by the public (Blinder, Ford, & Ivarsflaten, 2013; Hartevelde, Dahlberg, Kokkonen, & Brug, 2019; Mendes & Dennison, 2020; Valentim, 2021).

Yet the detrimental consequences of being widely perceived as illegitimate within the citizenry presumably go far beyond challenger parties' inability to mobilize the full potential of voters. For such parties it is more difficult to win support for their policy proposals (Blinder et al., 2013; Bolin, Dahlberg, & Blombäck, 2022; Ivarsflaten, Blinder, & Bjånesøy, 2019) and to recruit competent personnel given the stigmatization associated with them (Art, 2011). The latter obviously indirectly harms the challenger electorally as well. Hence, when a challenger party is perceived as illegitimate by the citizenry, this entails that mainstream parties have a considerable advantage when competing with this challenger over votes. Mainstream parties might seek to gain or leverage such a competitive advantage by pursuing a delegitimizing strategy towards challenger parties.

However, when perceived as unjustified, insincere, and unfair by voters, a delegitimizing strategy might backfire electorally for mainstream parties (Moffitt, 2021). Delegitimizing strategies may have the unintended consequence of increasing the populist appeal of the targeted challenger parties and play into an effective narrative of being a 'victim of the corrupt and evil establishment' (Fallend & Heinisch, 2015). Moreover, scholars have argued that ostracism electorally benefits the challenger when voters perceive as the challenger more effective in opposition than in government to achieve their policy preferences (van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017; van Spanje & van der Brug, 2009; van Spanje & Weber, 2017). In addition to that, excluding challenger parties from government decreases satisfaction with democracy for certain segments of the citizenry and thus may move these citizens even further out of reach for mainstream parties (Hartevelde, Kokkonen, Linde, & Dahlberg, 2021). The vote-related benefits of a delegitimizing strategy are therefore uncertain and

context-dependent. Moreover, they might vanish over time (van Heerden & van der Brug, 2017).

In addition, a delegitimizing strategy may come with considerable costs for mainstream parties. In the most extreme cases, such a strategy entails a boycott of even entering public discussion with challenger parties (van Spanje & van Der Brug, 2007). In any case, a delegitimizing strategy entails that challenger parties cannot be coalition partners of mainstream parties. This, according to my theoretical framework, is the major cost of pursuing a delegitimizing strategy. Put in more abstract terms, a delegitimizing strategy may interfere with mainstream parties' office-related goals. In line with this rationale, existing evidence shows that mainstream parties only rule out coalitions with challenger parties when they do not need the challenger for a government majority (Backlund, 2022; de Lange, 2012; van Spanje, 2010b).

As party systems fragment and challenger parties become increasingly electorally successful, mainstream parties' options to form coalitions without them diminish (Bale, 2003). In other words, the relative costs of a delegitimizing strategy increase. Challengers that are widely perceived as illegitimate turn into a problem for mainstream parties. In such scenarios, mainstream parties might seek to legitimize challengers in the eyes of voters to facilitate cooperation and to ultimately increase the likelihood of gaining office (McDonnell, Werner, & Karlsson, 2021).

In sum, I have argued that a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of citizens is the Achilles heel of many challenger parties and therefore can be a blessing to mainstream parties. Mainstream parties might seek to leverage this by means of a delegitimizing strategy. Yet the electoral benefits of such a strategy are uncertain and often entail considerable costs, most of which are office-related. In such cases, this blessing can turn into a curse. To facilitate cooperation, mainstream parties might then seek to legitimize the challenger. Against this backdrop, I expect that mainstream parties variously seek to influence citizens' legitimacy evaluations of challenger parties by means of delegitimizing as well as legitimizing strategies.

H1: Delegitimizing as well as legitimizing strategies are a prevalent feature of mainstream parties' response to challenger parties.

2.5 Citizens' reactions to mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies

So far, I have elaborated why I expect mainstream parties to employ delegitimizing as well as legitimizing strategies. However, in order to establish that (de-)legitimizing strategies are an important yet previously neglected feature of mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties, this is only the first

step. The second necessary step is to show that citizens actually respond to these strategies. Do (de-)legitimizing strategies influence voters' perceptions and evaluations of challenger parties? Put differently, do (de-)legitimizing strategies 'work'? Importantly, the purpose of the following theoretical discussion is to briefly expound what we know from existing scholarship about the influence of political parties on public opinion, whilst I do not aim to disentangle any of the discussed mechanisms below.

A large literature has demonstrated that parties can influence citizens' opinions on a wide range of subjects (Bullock, 2019). Parties can influence citizens' opinions on political issues via framing these issues – that is, selectively emphasizing certain relevant considerations or aspects (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Rather than changing the weight of certain existing considerations, parties' messages may also influence citizens by providing new information on a given issue (Leeper & Slothuus, 2019; Lenz, 2009). Arguably, the issue of how to deal with a controversial challenger leaves room for framing and learning effects. Evaluating the legitimacy of a challenger party is presumably a challenging task for most citizens. Many competing considerations are potentially relevant for citizens' evaluations of challenger parties. For instance, on the one hand, challenger parties might have been democratically elected into parliament. On the other hand, due to their populist and radical ideological profiles, citizens might perceive that these parties are nevertheless at odds with the democratic polity (Valentim, 2021).

In addition to the content of a message and of great importance for my theoretical framework, information on the sponsor of a certain message (i.e. a source cue) strongly influences how persuasive a message is (Druckman, 2001, 2022; Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013). According to partisan motivated reasoning theory, party-sponsored messages activate partisan identities (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). To protect their partisan identities, partisans are motivated to reach conclusions in line with these identities when confronted with a message sponsored by a party. Therefore, citizens follow a message when sponsored by their 'own' party (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010), but move their opinions and attitudes away from messages sponsored by other parties (Nicholson, 2012; Aaroe, 2011). Partisan motivated reasoning thus leads to the expectation that only in-partisans willingly follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies. In contrast, out-partisans update their evaluations of the targeted challenger in the opposing direction. Hence, partisanship might condition citizens' reactions to (de-)legitimizing strategies.

However, it is important to note that when mainstream parties employ (de-)legitimizing strategies, it is not only partisanship as an identity that might

be activated. For example, an identity as ‘democrats’ that might be superordinate to a partisan identity and thus offset the usual partisan animosities might be activated as well. Moreover, (de-)legitimizing strategies might also induce motivations to affirm moral values and therefore make these messages appealing to a broader set of citizens than just in-partisans (Bayes, Druckman, Goods, & Molden, 2020).

Furthermore, we know that the persuasiveness of messages is strongly conditioned by citizens’ trust towards the sponsor of a message (Druckman, 2001). Many citizens might be unsatisfied with the performance of mainstream parties and have limited trust in them (Mair, 2013; Whiteley, 2014). Yet I expect that many citizens still view mainstream parties as central actors that represent, aim to sustain, and seek to safeguard the democratic polity – at least in democratic polities with a history of stable and strong mainstream parties (Brader, Tucker, & Duell, 2012). Hence, I argue that the majority of citizens still rely on mainstream parties as trustworthy cue-givers when it comes to the question of challenger party legitimacy.

To test the predictions derived from my theory as precisely as possible, I focus on legitimacy evaluations as the main dependent variable. I conceptualize citizens’ legitimacy evaluations as a) democraticness perceptions (Bos & van der Brug, 2010) and b) tolerance judgments (Berntzen, Bjånesøy, & Ivarsflaten, 2017; Petersen, Slothuus, Stubager, & Togeby, 2010). The first variable taps into perceptions of challenger parties’ democraticness – measured as perceptions of challenger parties as being undemocratic and a threat to democracy.

This operationalization of my dependent variable closely matches my conceptualization of a delegitimizing strategy as a portrayal of challenger parties as incompatible with and threatening to the democratic polity as well as my conceptualization of a legitimizing strategy – a portrayal of challenger parties as compatible with the democratic polity. In addition to democraticness perceptions, tolerance judgements are also part of what I call legitimacy evaluations – that is, citizens’ willingness to grant the challenger democratic privileges, such as expressing themselves in public debate and holding demonstrations (Petersen et al., 2010). This is arguable an even harder test of my theoretical expectations as this variable is arguably subordinate to ‘mere’ perceptions in the minds of citizens. Both variables together I call legitimacy evaluations.

H2: When mainstream parties pursue a legitimizing strategy – as compared to a delegitimizing strategy – citizens evaluate the targeted challenger as more legitimate.

I do not postulate hypotheses on the moderating impact of partisanship. Whilst partisan motivated reasoning theory would predict a moderating impact of partisanship, these studies mostly focussed on how citizens form opinions on specific policies (Druckman et al., 2013; Nicholson, 2012; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Delegitimizing messages and opinion formation on challenger parties might be different, however – not least because they might activate other identities. Therefore, I do not theorize the moderating impact of partisanship, but analyse it exploratorily in the papers which are part of this dissertation.

Furthermore, I do not postulate hypotheses on other important consequences, such as attitudes towards mainstream party collaborations with the challenger, voting for the targeted challenger, and likeability of the challenger. I will, however, investigate such potential downstream consequences of mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in Paper B.

2.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have first reviewed the literature on party competition. I have explained that the existing literature on how mainstream parties compete with challenger parties has primarily focused on mainstream parties' policy-based strategies in response to challenger parties. Building on existing studies of mainstream parties' ostracism and demonization, I proposed a new dimension in the competition between mainstream parties and challenger parties: competition over legitimacy. I argued that mainstream parties engage in this competition over legitimacy by means of delegitimizing and legitimizing strategies. I conceptualized a delegitimizing strategy as mainstream parties' portrayal of challenger parties as incompatible with or threatening to the democratic polity. I conceptualized a legitimizing strategy as mainstream parties' portrayal of challenger parties as compatible with to the democratic polity. Subsequently, I theorized that mainstream parties primarily pursue these strategies to achieve their vote- and office-related goals. Moreover, I argued that we should expect citizens to follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their evaluations of challenger parties. In the remainder of this summary report, I will describe my empirical approach to testing my hypotheses, present the results, and discuss them in light of the hypotheses.

3 Reflections on case selection

Before I could empirically investigate my hypotheses, I needed to choose which countries, mainstream parties, and challenger parties to examine. In the following, I describe the considerations which guided these choices.

In line with previous studies (Moffitt, 2021; van Spanje, 2010a), I argue that any challenger party can in principle be subject to mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies. This implies that there is no reason to exclude any democratic political system *per se* from the universe of potential cases. However, it seems plausible to assume that the extent to which delegitimizing and legitimizing strategies are used varies across countries, but also considerably over time within a given country. Whenever challenger parties are rising, these strategies are particularly likely to be employed by mainstream parties. Then, mainstream parties have to find a strategy to deal with this new challenger. In contemporary politics, it is in many cases far-right parties challenging the dominance of mainstream parties. Hence, these parties are presumably often the targets of mainstream parties' delegitimizing as well as legitimizing strategies, whilst, for example, a few decades ago Green parties might have been the most frequent targets of such strategies.

Against this backdrop, I chose to study mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies towards far-right parties in Sweden and Germany. In both countries, I suspected that there were salient ongoing public debates about how to deal with challengers from the far right. In Sweden, the question of how to deal with SD is saliently discussed – especially since three parties of the centre (the Liberals) and the mainstream right (the Moderates and the Christian Democrats) joined a pre-electoral alliance prior to the 2022 general election. In Germany, coalitions with AfD are off the table, yet AfD's legitimacy is routinely discussed – presumably not least due to AfD's radicalization over time (Arzheimer, 2019; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019).

Moreover, I aimed to find cases which allow for generalizations over a wide range of different countries (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). In that regard, I contend that Germany and Sweden represent two prototypical cases of mainstream parties' response strategies to challenger parties at different points in time. The German AfD was founded in 2013 and entered the national parliament for the first time in 2017. Like many other challenger parties in their early years of existence, the party is delegitimized by all mainstream parties. SD, meanwhile, entered the Swedish national parliament for the first time in 2010. Whilst the party was initially also delegitimized by all mainstream parties, just like in Germany, three parties of the centre right have recently

opened up for collaboration with SD (Bolin et al., 2022). In other words, these parties switched from a delegitimizing to a legitimizing strategy.

By means of the media content analysis presented in the next chapter, I will empirically substantiate both of these assumptions – a) that the legitimacy of SD and AfD is routinely discussed by mainstream parties in Sweden and Germany and b) that German mainstream parties in unison delegitimize AfD, whilst M has switched from its initial delegitimizing strategy to a legitimizing strategy.

A shift of mainstream right parties' strategies from delegitimizing to legitimizing far-right challenger parties, however, could be witnessed in many European countries with multi-party systems, such as Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, or Austria (Akkerman et al., 2016). Germany thus represents a case of strong delegitimization, which is typically found in the early stages of challenger party presence. Sweden represents a case where (some) mainstream parties are currently switching from a delegitimizing to a legitimizing strategy towards the far-right SD. Importantly, similar patterns have happened on the left side of the political spectrum as well. Whilst coalitions with Green parties were initially systematically ruled out by the mainstream left, such coalitions are nowadays widely prevalent throughout Western Europe (Bale, 2003; Mair, 2001; Röth & Schwander, 2021).

Another important question is to what extent Sweden and Germany represent most-likely or least-likely cases for verifying my argument. Germany's right-wing fascist historical legacy as well as AfD's radicalization over the past few years (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019) arguably make Germany a most-likely case for mainstream parties' use of delegitimizing strategies. For the same reasons, it can also be expected that delegitimizing strategies resonate particularly well with citizens in Germany. With the same rationale, it seems plausible to expect that Germany is not only a least-likely case for mainstream parties' use of legitimizing strategies, but also for effects of legitimizing strategies on citizens' evaluations of AfD. It should also be noted here that, although AfD has become more radical in recent years, it was initially founded as an anti-EU party (Arzheimer, 2019) and thus has a 'reputational shield' to ward off accusations of racism and extremism (Ivarsflaten, 2006).

Whilst Sweden does not have a historical legacy of fascism, SD have their roots in outright racist, right-wing extremist movements (Widfeldt, 2008). In the words of Ivarsflaten (2006), SD lack a 'reputational shield'. Yet the party has made considerable effort to appear more moderate in recent years (Bolin et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, compared to Germany, it seems somewhat less likely that mainstream parties employ delegitimizing strategies and that these strategies resonate with citizens. Conversely, it seems more likely to find legitimizing strategies in Sweden. Sweden has a tradition of 'bloc politics'

(Aylott & Bolin, 2015). However, ever since SD entered parliament, no bloc has been able to reach an absolute majority (Backlund, 2022). As the Centre party (C) left the centre-right bloc and joined the centre-left bloc, forming a government without SD has become almost impossible for the centre-right bloc. Therefore, M has a strong incentive to legitimize according to the theory outlined earlier in this dissertation.

3.1 Chapter summary

To summarize, in this chapter I have explained that the potential universe of cases includes, in principle, any democratic polity. Yet competition over legitimacy is arguably in most political contexts only a temporarily salient dimension of party competition. I expect this dimension to be most salient whenever challenger parties are on the rise. Therefore, I chose to test my hypotheses in Sweden and Germany, where the far-right SD and the far-right AfD are currently disrupting their respective party systems. Furthermore, I have argued that these two countries represent prototypical cases in terms of mainstream parties' response strategies to challenger parties at different points in time. Finally, I have discussed to what extent these countries represent most- or least-likely cases for verifying my argument. I concluded that Germany is a most-likely case with regard to delegitimizing strategies, but a least-likely case with regard to legitimizing strategies. Whilst the Swedish M have an incentive to legitimize, I contend that Sweden is neither a most-likely nor a least-likely case for the verification of my argument.

4 The content analysis

The aim of the following chapter is to empirically investigate the first sub-question of my dissertation: to what extent are (de-)legitimizing strategies a prevalent feature in mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties? For that purpose, I conducted a quantitative media content analysis mapping mainstream parties' use of the strategies in Sweden and Germany. To identify (de-)legitimizing strategies, I had to develop coding scheme that allowed me to a) disentangle (de-)legitimizing from policy-based strategies and b) map these strategies over contexts, parties, and time. Besides answering the first sub-question of my dissertation, the content analysis contextualizes and motivates the treatments used in the survey experiments. In addition, I empirically substantiate the considerations guiding my choice to study Sweden and Germany as described in the previous chapter of this dissertation.

4.1 Methodology

To investigate to what extent (de-)legitimizing strategies are a prevalent feature in mainstream parties' response to challenger parties, I needed a data source that a) captures a communication channel through which parties routinely communicate with citizens, b) captures the different manifestations of (de-)legitimizing statements as conceptualized in the theory chapter of this dissertation, and c) allows for comparisons over countries, parties, and time.

Daily newspapers fulfil all three requirements. Mainstream parties' messages to citizens from a wide range of different primary sources – such as press conferences, interviews, press releases, and broadcasted debates – are all transmitted through this medium. Moreover, in contrast to other data sources, such as Twitter, newspapers allow for reliably investigating *trends* in party communication over time and countries. This approach is also in line with a similar study by van Heerden and van der Brug (2017).

The population of the German part of this media content analysis are all statements by representatives of CDU/CSU and SPD about AfD published in the print version of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2020. This maximizes the number of statements and therefore produces a sufficient number of observations to analyse within-party trends. I retrieved these newspaper articles through the database Factiva. The population of the Swedish part of this media content analysis are all statements by representatives of M and S about AfD published in the print version of *Dagens Ny-*

heter between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2021. I retrieved these newspaper articles through the database Retriever.⁹ To capture as many statements as possible, I include all sections except for the ‘Letters to the Editor’ sections.

The years when SD and AfD entered parliament for the first time mark the beginning of the observation period in each country. This choice is in line with my theoretical framework. Whilst mainstream parties might employ delegitimizing strategies before a challenger has entered parliament, legitimizing strategies become primarily important after a challenger has entered parliament. Only when challenger parties are represented in parliament are they relevant for mainstream parties’ office-related goals. In addition, entrance into parliament also might signal to mainstream parties that their vote-related goals are threatened by the challenger. Therefore, entrance into parliament is a key moment where mainstream parties, at a minimum, have to choose whether and to what extent to (de-)legitimize. The end of the observation periods in both countries is shortly before my experiments were fielded. The German experiment was fielded in early January 2021 and the Swedish experiment was fielded in early March 2022.

4.1.1 Sampling the articles

To preselect potentially relevant articles, I used the search string ‘AfD and (CDU or CSU or FDP or SPD or Grüne or Linke)’ in Germany.¹⁰ This string resulted in 6,090 articles in the period from 1 January 2017 until 31 December 2020. As indicated by this search string, I coded statements for all German parties – not only CDU/CSU and SPD. Yet, for the purpose of this dissertation, I will only focus on statements by CDU/CSU¹¹ and SPD as only these parties fall into my conceptualization of mainstream parties. The results for the remaining parties are shown in the Appendix A1. I used the search string ‘(SD

⁹ Two different databases had to be used. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was not available on Retriever, and *Dagens Nyheter* was not available on Factiva.

¹⁰ In the German search string, unlike in the Swedish search string, I only included the party name abbreviations. There are two reasons for this. First, in German newspapers, it is simply most common to use the abbreviations as opposed to the full party names. Second, only using the abbreviations resulted in a sufficient number of articles in Germany, but not in Sweden. Moreover, I could not think of any potential reason why this difference in the search string could induce any biases in the estimate of interest – the relative proportion of delegitimizing and legitimizing statements.

¹¹ CSU operates only in Bavaria, whilst CDU only operates outside of Bavaria. Since the two parties form a common faction in the national parliament, I merged both parties.

or Sverigedemokraterna) and (S or Socialdemokraterna M or Moderaterna C or Centerpartiet) in Sweden. This search string resulted in 8,071 articles in the period from 1 January 2010 until 31 December 2021. Again, I only focus on the mainstream left S and mainstream right M. I show the results for C in the Appendix A1. I read – or at least skimmed through – all of these articles.

Using a search string with party names to preselect articles entailed a great deal of work, as I had to read many more articles than those that actually contained statements by mainstream party representatives about AfD/SD. However, this preselection procedure presumably minimizes biases. To be sure, there are certainly articles which are part of the population that were not captured by the search string. For example, there might be articles where the full party names instead of abbreviations were used. Yet it seems unlikely that this entails party-specific biases or – more importantly – time- and party-specific biases. In comparison to a dictionary-based approach – that is, a search string that includes terms regarding the content of the statements, which in my case would be terms indicating (de-)legitimizing statements, such as ‘extremist’ – no articles are excluded, because of *a priori* determined terms.

4.1.2 The unit of analysis: Mainstream party representatives’ statements

The unit of analysis are mainstream party representatives’ statements about SD/AfD. To define a statement, I follow (De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021, p. 904): ‘A statement is a quote or paraphrase in the news that can be connected to a specific actor.’ Hence, any statement by mainstream party representatives that directly refers to or conveys a clear message about AfD/SD is included in the dataset. When the same statement was quoted or paraphrased in more than one newspaper article, I coded this as only one observation in the dataset. Importantly, whilst this definition of statements does not restrict the relevant statements to direct quotes about AfD/SD by mainstream party representatives, a newspaper article that merely describes or interprets some kind of behaviour or action by mainstream parties is not included. Statements that were made more than a month before they were referenced in the newspaper article are also not included in the dataset.

One newspaper article results in more than one observation in the dataset when it contains statements about AfD by representatives of different mainstream parties. However, in no case is more than one statement per mainstream party per article coded. When several representatives of the same party

made statements in one article, I coded the statement made by the politician with the more important function in the party.¹²

As I conceptualize parties as unitary actors, I cover a wide range of different actors within parties. My data covers not only mainstream party statements made by professional politicians, but also by local politicians, retired politicians, and rank-and-file party members. However, only party members' statements are included in the data. This thus excludes for example think tanks – assuming that there is no information in the article that the person making the statement is a party member.

Within the 8,071 Swedish articles produced by the search string, I identified 496 statements about SD by M and S. Within the 6,090 German articles produced by the search string, I identified 611 statements about AfD by CDU/CSU and SPD.

4.1.3 The coding

The main purpose of this coding scheme is to empirically disentangle delegitimizing as well as legitimizing strategies from policy-based strategies. Hence, I developed a coding scheme to code the content of each of the statements I identified accordingly. Each statement was assigned a single code capturing the type of message it conveyed about SD/AfD. The coding scheme is described in Table 2. A more detailed version of the coding scheme can be found in the Appendix A2.

¹² In practice this means that when local politicians, rank-and-file members, or MPs made a statement that was also made by a representative who holds an official function in the party, the statement made by the latter was coded.

Table 2: Brief description of coding scheme with examples

Code	Statement type	Operationalization	Example
1	Delegitimizing (explicit)	Statements that convey the message that SD/AfD is threatening the democratic polity	<i>The Sweden Democrats are a neo-fascist one-issue party that respects neither people's differences nor Sweden's democratic institutions</i> (Dagens Nyheter, 2014)
2	Delegitimizing (implicit)	Statements that convey the message that SD/AfD is incompatible with the democratic polity	<i>Speaking to journalists later, Laschet says Rivlin had inquired with concern about AfD. He assured him: "We never want to come to government functions with AfD votes.</i> (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2020)
3	Legitimizing	Statements that convey the message that SD/AfD is compatible with/not threatening the democratic polity	<i>Martina Mossberg, opposition councillor in Haninge, sees SD as "a party like any other" and is therefore open to their support.</i> (Dagens Nyheter, 2017a)
4	Both/unclear	Statements that contain legitimizing <u>and</u> delegitimizing elements; statements that clearly touch upon the legitimacy of SD/AfD, yet it is unclear whether they legitimize or delegitimize	<i>"The M policy of not talking to SD on political issues has been abolished. But organised cooperation will not be initiated with either the Sweden Democrats or the Left Party, whose values we do not share," says Andreas Hamrin, press secretary of the Moderates.</i> (Dagens Nyheter, 2017b)
5	Negative campaigning	Any statement that conveys a message about the challenger that is not delegitimizing, but negative in its valence towards the challenger	<i>So far, both the Sweden Democrats and the bourgeois parties have been very interested in standing up for the right of venture capitalists to make big money from schools. That's the dividing line in Swedish politics," says Magdalena Andersson.</i> (Dagens Nyheter, 2017c)
6	Residual category	No delegitimizing; no legitimizing; no (negative) valence	<i>"CSU leader Markus Söder has called on CDU/CSU to not only deal with AfD. "You can lose elections in the east, but you have to win them above all in the west," he told Welt am Sonntag.</i> (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2019)

Note: In the initial version of the coding scheme, I had also included a code for mainstream party statements with a positive valence ('positive campaigning') towards SD/AfD but which were not legitimizing. Since I did not identify a single such statement, I dropped this code.

All statements that convey the message that SD/AfD is a threat to the democratic polity were coded as a 1. This includes, inter alia, statements in which AfD/SD is labelled racist, fascist, or extremist. Moreover, statements in which mainstream party representatives accuse AfD/SD of not respecting democratic institutions are coded as a 1.

In addition to such explicitly delegitimizing statements, I also coded a more implicit form of delegitimizing statements (see code 2 in Table 2). Whilst not all of these statements portray AfD/SD as an outright threat to the democratic polity, they still suggest that it is incompatible with it. This includes, inter alia, statements in which collaborations with AfD/SD are systematically ruled out (van Spanje, 2017) – that is, the provided reason is not disagreement over policy or a lack of experience/competence. Furthermore, statements that portray AfD/SD as qualitatively different from the other parties are part of this category as well. Moreover, statements that suggest that the very existence of AfD/SD is a problem and that the party needs to be kept away from political influence are in this category.

The third category includes all statements that legitimize AfD/SD (see Code 3 in Table 2). This includes, inter alia, statements in which AfD/SD are portrayed as democratic – for instance, by highlighting their representative function or by emphasizing that they are constitutional – as well as statements that portray the challenger explicitly as not qualitatively different from other parties.

However, sometimes mainstream party representatives advocated in favour of increased cooperation without explicitly portraying SD as a ‘normal’ democratic party. Such statements are also included in this category. In contrast to the delegitimizing category, I decided not to differentiate between explicit and implicit legitimizing. In line with my theory, explicitly legitimizing statements are very rare, since emphasizing that a party is democratic might actually raise doubts about the challenger party’s legitimacy. Parties that acknowledge each other as legitimate do not explicitly emphasize this, but rather state it implicitly by simply competing over policy and collaborating with one another. Some of the statements contained legitimizing as well as delegitimizing elements. These statements were coded as 4.

Any statement that conveys a message about the challenger that is not delegitimizing but is negative in its valence towards the challenger is coded as 5. This category includes statements criticizing SD’s or AfD’s positions and/or targeting the party’s valence traits, yet which do not suggest that the party threatens or is incompatible with the democratic polity. In other words, with these statements, mainstream parties compete in a policy-based competition with the challenger. In contrast, Categories 1, 2, and 3 reflect mainstream parties’ engagement in competition over legitimacy. One might also conceive of

Category 5 as a very implicit form of legitimizing. While these statements seek to lower citizens' evaluations of challenger parties, the means they use – that is, negative campaigning – is no different from the means that mainstream parties use when they criticize other 'normal' democratic parties. Finally, all remaining statements that fit none of the five categories described above were assigned a 6.

When several representatives of the same party made statements in one article and all of them had an equally important position in the party or their positions were unclear, I coded only the statement that was delegitimizing or legitimizing. When one statement was delegitimizing, but another one legitimizing in these articles, I coded this as one observation/statement and assigned a 3.

4.1.4 Reflections on validity and reliability

To check for the reliability of the coding, a second coder coded a random subsample of 100 articles for each country. Before coding these 200 articles, the second coder received instructions, familiarized himself with the codebook, and coded 50 articles per country as a training round. I compared my coding with that of the second coder after the training round and we discussed those statements we coded differently. Subsequently, I adjusted the codebook and gave further instructions to the second coder before he coded the 200 articles eventually used for the reliability check. For Sweden, Krippendorff's Alpha is .667 (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). For Germany, Krippendorff's Alpha is .752. This difference in intercoder reliability between Sweden and Germany might be due to the fact that both coders are from Germany and often had to use DeepL – a web-based neural machine translation tool – to translate the Swedish articles. Whilst the intercoder reliability is certainly not perfect, it still shows that my conceptualization and coding scheme allow for a more or less reliable (de-)legitimizing strategies and for separating these strategies from policy-based strategies.

To meaningfully map communication within parties over time, a large number of statements is needed. Although I chose my search string to preselect the articles in a way that maximized the number of identified statements, the number of statements per party (see Table 3) was still not very high in some years. A small number of statements threatens the reliability of my estimates, and this should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

Table 3: Number of statements per mainstream party and year in Sweden and Germany

Country	Germany						Sweden						
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2020	Total	2010/ 2011	2012/ 2013	2014/ 2015	2016/ 2017	2018/ 2019	2020/ 2021	Total
Year													
Number articles produced by search string (total)	1,468	1,882	1,346	1,394	1,394	6,090	900	637	1,619	1,429	2,111	1,395	8091
Number of articles coded (total)	139	216	152	197	197	704	74	35	95	122	139	74	439
Statements coded (total)	166	265	194	270	270	895	90	35	108	137	153	83	606
Statements from CDU/CSU (Germany) and M (Sweden) (used in Figures 1-4)	59	121	92	99	99	371	43	12	46	58	25	38	255
Statements from SPD (Germany) and S (Sweden) (used in Figures 1-4)	55	69	49	67	67	240	40	16	46	52	62	25	241

Against this backdrop, I report the results for party-year dyads in Germany, but party-2-year dyads in Sweden. The reason for this is the considerably lower number of statements for each year in Sweden as compared to Germany. My estimate of interest in the analysis is the share of (de-)legitimizing statements per one year in Germany and per two years in Sweden.

4.2 Findings

The main goal of this content analysis is to provide an answer to my first research question: *To what extent are (de-)legitimizing strategies a prevalent feature in mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties?* In addition, another aim is to provide insights into the pretreatment environment of my two survey experiments. These two aims will guide the presentation of the findings. Moreover, I will juxtapose my results on German and Swedish mainstream parties' use of (de-)legitimizing strategies with these parties' policy-based strategies towards AfD and SD.

4.2.1 Germany

Figure 1: % delegitimizing statements over time and mainstream parties (Germany)

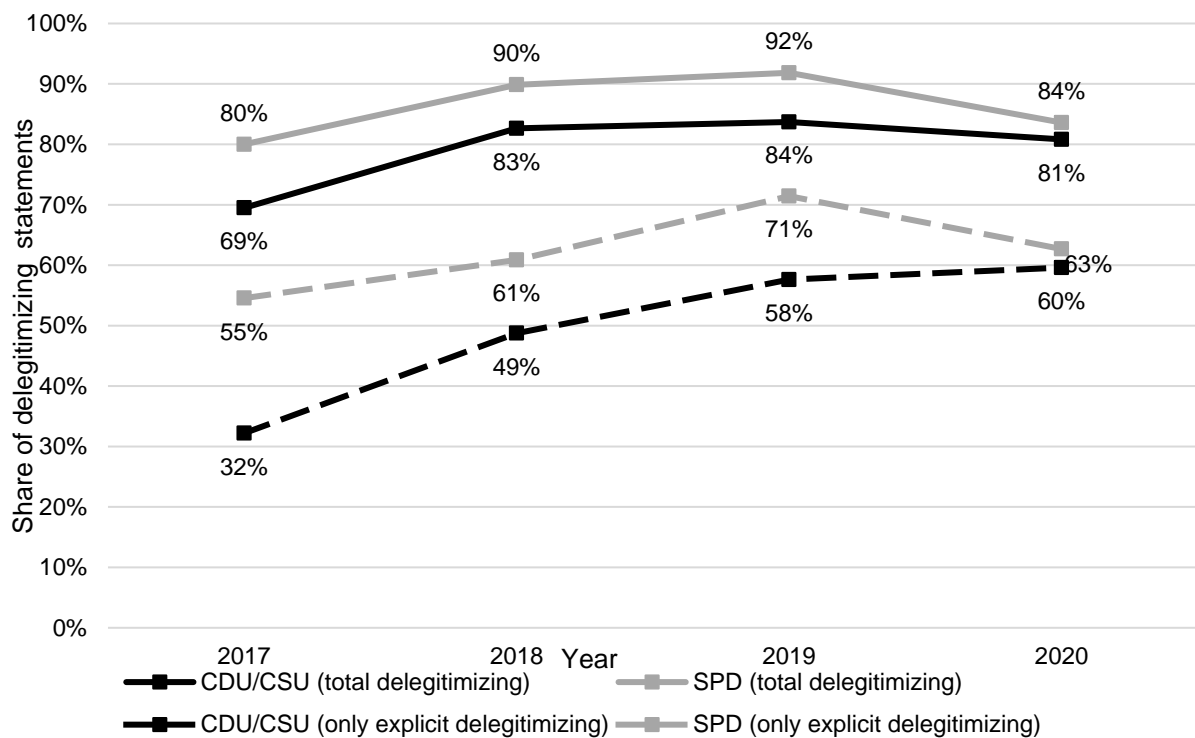


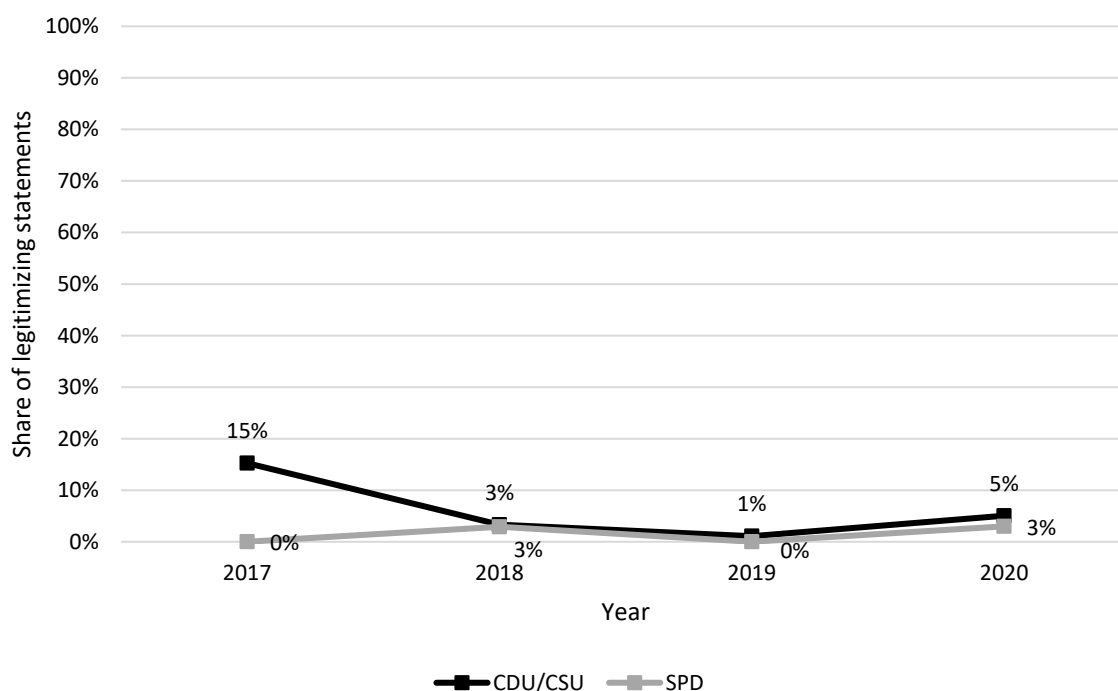
Figure 1 provides clear evidence that delegitimizing strategies are indeed a prevalent feature in German mainstream parties' response to AfD. In 2017,

the year AfD entered parliament for the first time, 69% of all statements from CDU/CSU representatives about AfD were delegitimizing – as indicated by the solid black line, which represents the share of *explicitly as well as implicitly* delegitimizing statements. SPD used delegitimizing statements even more extensively. 80% of SPD representatives' statements were delegitimizing. After 2017, both mainstream parties' communication regarding AfD became even more delegitimizing. It culminated in 2019, when 92% of the statements about AfD sponsored by SPD representatives and 84% of the statements sponsored by CDU representatives were delegitimizing. This trend towards more delegitimization of both parties – perhaps in response to AfD's radicalization (Arzheimer, 2019; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019) – is striking. First, it indicates that my coding scheme creates a meaningful, valid measure of delegitimizing messages. Second, and more importantly, it suggests that mainstream parties' use of delegitimizing messages is systematic and thus reflects an underlying strategy.

A large proportion of these delegitimizing statements were *explicitly* delegitimizing – which is indicated by the dashed line in Figure 1. That is, they portrayed AfD as a threat to the democratic polity. Consistently, more than half SPD-sponsored statements were explicitly delegitimizing. CDU/CSU did not employ explicitly delegitimizing statements to the extent SPD did in the beginning of the observed period. Yet the share of explicitly delegitimizing statements by CDU/CSU representatives gradually increased over time. In 2020, the last observed year, CDU delegitimized AfD almost to the same extent as SPD. Hence, the frequency as well as the intensity of both German mainstream parties' delegitimizing messages increased over the observed time period.

But did German mainstream parties also employ legitimizing statements – that is, messages portraying AfD as a democratic party? Figure 2 shows that SPD representatives, over the entire observed time period, almost never made legitimizing statements. There were a few legitimizing statements by CDU/CSU representatives in 2017, but in the subsequent years the share of legitimizing is negligibly small. Overall, I conclude that legitimizing statements about AfD by mainstream party representatives were barely existent in Germany.

Figure 2: % legitimizing statements over time and mainstream parties (Germany)



In sum, the findings of this content analysis show that all German mainstream parties pursued a strongly delegitimizing strategy. They also confirm the considerations that guided my case selection. Whilst the level or intensity of German mainstream parties' delegitimization of AfD might be particularly high due to Germany's Nazi history, this response arguably nevertheless represents a typical initial mainstream party response to challenger parties. Many far-right parties have been confronted with ostracism, a *cordon sanitaire*, and similar measures in the early stages of their representation in parliament (Art, 2007; Hjorth, 2020). Beyond far-right parties, far-left as well as Green parties were presumably also subject to delegitimizing strategies of (the then-) mainstream parties before they were ultimately legitimized.

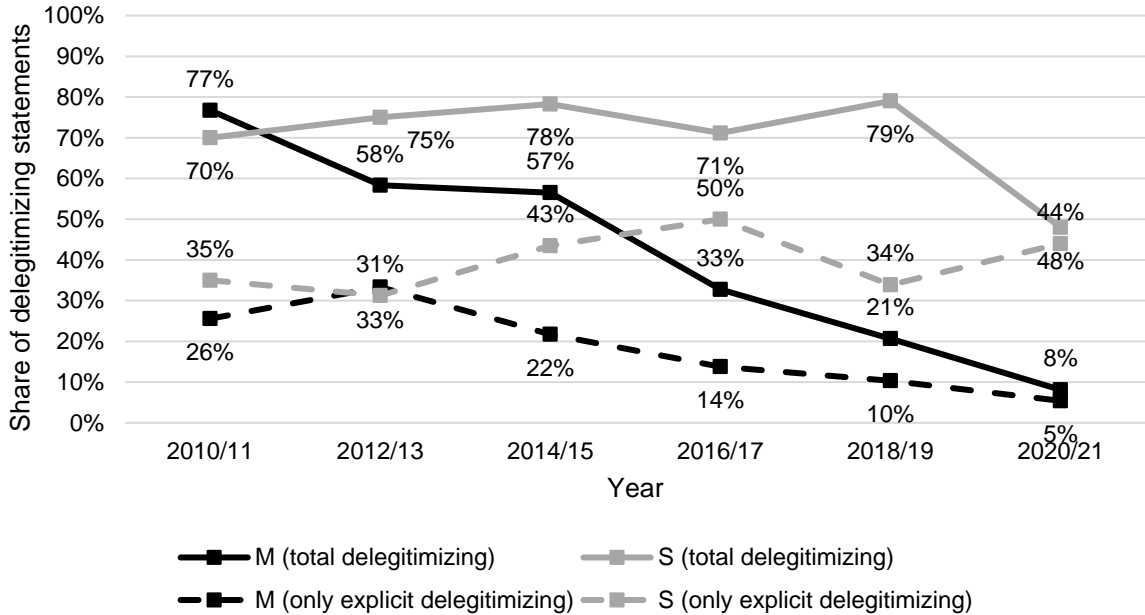
4.2.2 Sweden

Now, I will turn the results of the Swedish branch of the median content analysis. To what extent and how do Swedish mainstream parties' use (de-)legitimizing messages? An important contextual difference in Sweden compared to Germany is that, due to Sweden's tradition of 'bloc politics', the entrance into parliament of SD made it impossible for mainstream parties to lead governments with absolute majorities (Aylott & Bolin, 2015). Therefore, ever since SD entered government, Sweden has been governed by minority governments.

Leading a majority government without SD has become particularly and increasingly difficult for M following SD’s entrance into parliament. This might incentivize M to legitimize, according to my theoretical framework.

However, the mainstream left S as well as the mainstream right M employed delegitimizing in 2010 and in 2011, as can be seen in Figure 3. More than two-thirds of the statements from both mainstream parties about SD were delegitimizing in those years. The Swedish part of the content analysis thus confirms that German parties are no outlier with respect to the use of delegitimizing strategies towards far-right parties that have newly entered parliament. Yet, in contrast to Germany, the relative frequency of delegitimizing statements in mainstream parties’ statements about SD did not increase over time. Instead, M gradually delegitimized less over time. In particular, after 2014, M gradually dropped the delegitimizing strategy it had initially pursued.

Figure 3: % delegitimizing statements over time and mainstream parties (Sweden)



In that regard, it is important to note that following the 2014 election, Swedish mainstream parties formed an agreement – known as the ‘December Agreement’ (Swedish: ‘Decemberöverenskommelsen’) – that the smaller of the two blocs would always allow the larger one to govern. This agreement effectively ruled out the possibility of SD having any influence (Aylott & Bolin, 2015) and therefore marks the peak of Swedish mainstream parties’ ostracism. Yet, shortly after, the Christian Democratic (*Kristdemokraterna*, or KD) party and M left the agreement (Aylott & Bolin, 2019). Following the 2018 election, the M’s prospects of gaining office dropped considerably as the Centre Party (C)

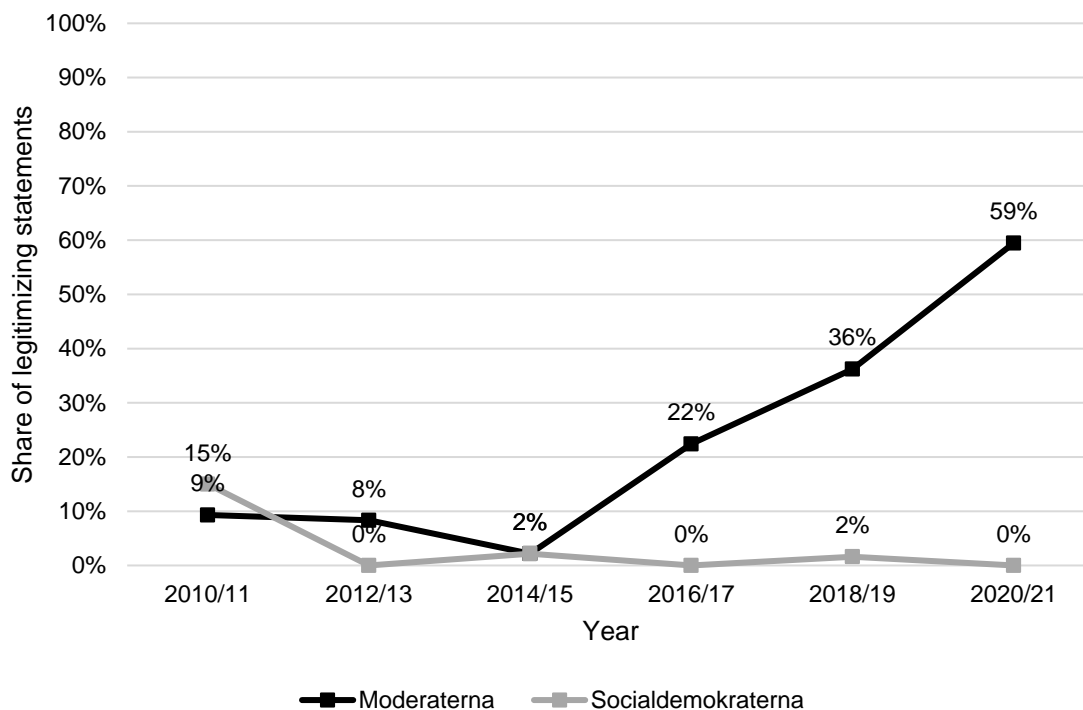
left the centre-right bloc and passively supported the centre-left bloc instead (Leander, 2022).

In line with my theoretical framework, this development was accompanied by a substantial decrease in delegitimizing statements by M. At the end of the observed period, the share of delegitimizing statements in M's statements about SD was only 8%. Representing only 5% of all identified statements, explicit delegitimizing has become very rare.

In contrast to the M, S's level of delegitimizing was relatively stable over time. This is also in line with my theoretical considerations, as for S there are fewer costs involved in delegitimizing SD, since they do not need the support of SD to lead governments. Only at the very end of the observed period, in 2020/2021, does S delegitimize significantly less often, with only 48% delegitimizing statements. When looking at explicit delegitimizing only, however, there is no such drop.

But did the M then adopt a legitimizing strategy as it (almost) stopped delegitimizing SD? Figure 4 below shows the percentage of legitimizing statements made by M. The trend this figure displays mirrors the trend in Figure 3: as M's delegitimizing statements decreased, the number of legitimizing statements rose steadily and sharply. Until 2014/2015, both S and M only rarely legitimized. However, the two parties then diverged. Whilst S almost never made legitimizing statements, the M clearly reversed its strategy and started to legitimize. This switch in strategy by M – as measured by the frequency of (de-)legitimizing statements in *Dagens Nyheter* – is also in line with a recent analysis of parliamentary speeches by Leander (2022), further increasing the validity of my measure.

Figure 4: % legitimizing statements over time and parties (Sweden)



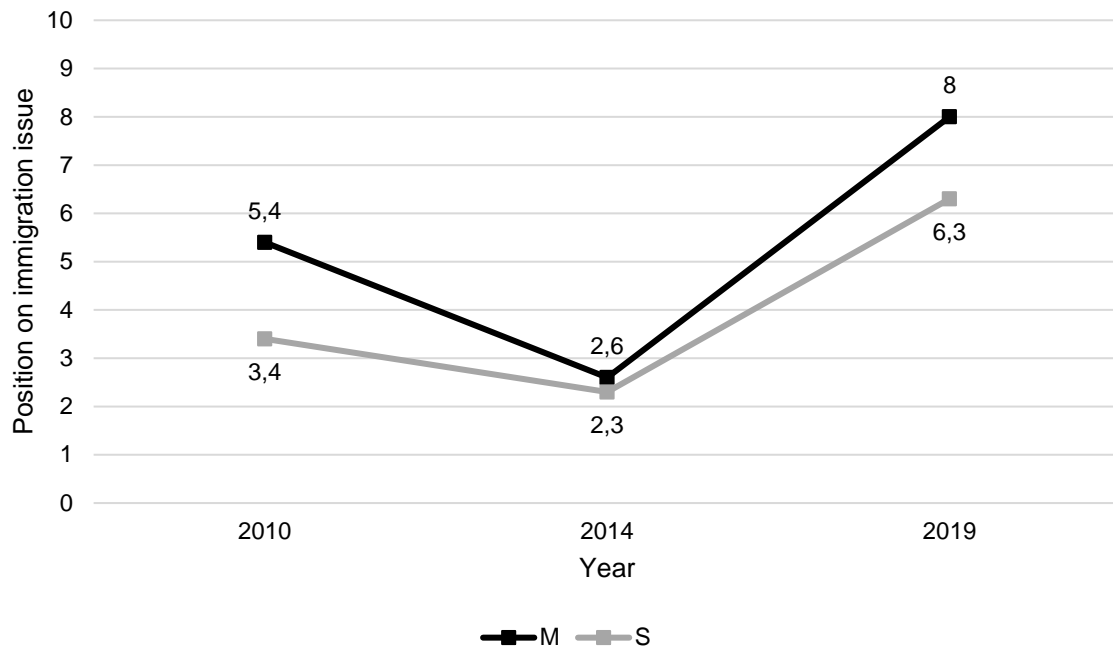
4.3 Mainstream parties' policy-based responses to AfD and SD

In the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly discuss the policy-based response strategies of CDU/CSU and M to AfD and SD, respectively. In the theoretical chapter of this dissertation summary report, I have argued that (de-)legitimizing strategies are not only conceptually different from mainstream parties' policy-based response strategies to challenger parties, but also that these strategies can be combined in various ways. In other words, they are also empirically distinct.

The Swedish case clearly confirms that both strategies are empirically distinct from each other. More precisely, it shows that an accommodative strategy can, but does not need to, be accompanied by a legitimizing strategy. Figure 5 displays M's as well as S's positions on immigration policy according to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022). I chose to examine mainstream parties' focus on immigration, as this constitutes *the* core issue of SD. This data suggests that both mainstream parties responded in 2014 with an adversarial strategy (Bolin, Lidén, & Nyhlén, 2014), but then switched to an accommodative strategy in response to SD (Backlund, 2022; Meguid, 2005). Importantly, however, *both parties moved in parallel with regard to their policy-based strategies*. Yet, as I have shown before, they diverge with regard

to (de-)legitimizing strategies. Only M has adopted a legitimizing strategy recently. S has continued to delegitimize, despite having pursued an accommodative strategy after 2014 (van Spanje & de Graaf, 2017).

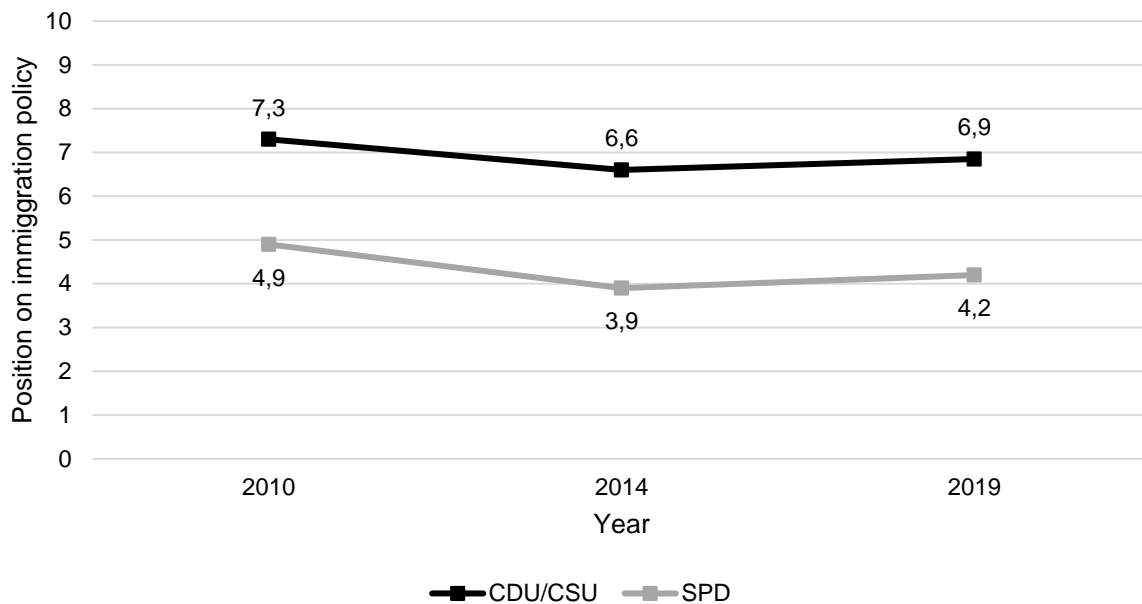
Figure 5: Immigration policy positions of Swedish mainstream parties over time



Note: Data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022). Scale from 0 to 10. Higher values indicate a more restrictive position on immigration policy.

In Germany, mainstream parties did not change their positions on immigration in response to AfD. The trend is remarkably stable. German mainstream parties moved in neither a more restrictive direction – that is, an accommodative strategy – nor a more liberal direction – that is, an adversarial strategy (Meguid, 2005). In other words, in Germany, neither mainstream party adjusted its policy positions in response to AfD, and instead more or less stayed where they were before. At the same time, they both adopted strongly delegitimizing strategies, which actually slightly intensified over time.

Figure 6: Policy positions on immigration of German mainstream parties over time



4.4 How the content analysis informs the survey experiments

An important aim of this content analysis is to contextualize the two survey experiments which I conducted to examine citizens' reactions to (de-)legitimizing strategies – my second research question. First, the results of the content confirm that mainstream parties are relevant actors in ongoing debates on how to deal with the challengers from the far right in both countries. This is important insofar as I can connect my treatments to real, salient debates and can credibly manipulate the messages of real mainstream parties. In more technical terms, my treatments interact and resonate with citizens' experiences and perceptions of mainstream party strategies in the real world.

Second, the results show that the extent to which mainstream parties employ (de-)legitimizing strategies varies across and within parties over time. As I have argued before, Germany thus represents a typical case of mainstream parties' initial response – strong delegitimization – whilst Sweden represents a typical case of mainstream parties' switching from a delegitimizing to a legitimizing strategy. The content analysis therefore empirically substantiates the considerations that guided my case selection. Hence, in Sweden, I can experimentally induce variation in how respondents perceive M's position close to the legitimizing end of the delegitimizing-legitimizing continuum. Conversely, in Germany, I can experimentally induce variation in how respondents perceive CDU's position close to the delegitimizing end of the delegitimizing-legitimizing continuum.

Third, and related to the preceding two points, the results of the content analysis illuminate the pretreatment environment of the survey experiments (Druckman & Leeper, 2012; Gaines, Kuklinski, & Quirk, 2007; Slothuus, 2016): to what extent were the respondents exposed to delegitimizing and legitimizing strategies by the different mainstream parties before they entered the experimental setting? In other words, to what extent were they treated prior to participating in my survey experiments? As my experiments aim to manipulate the (de-)legitimizing strategies of real parties on salient issues, the answer to this question has important ramifications for the meaningful interpretation of my experimental results.

Before entering the experimental setting in January 2021, most survey participants in Germany were presumably exposed to strong delegitimization by all parties. If my theory is correct, the delegitimizing stimulus material survey participants in my experiment are exposed to is only one treatment on top of many previous “treatments” that have already made their mark on citizens’ opinions (Slothuus, 2016). In brief, I expect strong pretreatment for the delegitimizing condition, which reduces the likelihood of finding (large) effects. In contrast, the legitimizing condition should be barely pretreated. In other words, it seems likely that in this condition the respondents were exposed to new information, in contrast to the respondents in the delegitimizing condition.

In Sweden, the pretreatment environment presumably looks very different, given the results of my content analysis. As M switched strategies from a delegitimizing to a legitimizing strategy, the survey participants were more often exposed to legitimizing than to delegitimizing messages by M. Meanwhile, S was still pursuing a delegitimizing strategy when my experiment was fielded. Hence, respondents were exposed to delegitimizing frames from other parties that strongly conflicted with M’s adoption of a legitimizing strategy. This is an important contextual difference between Germany and Sweden. Both conditions presumably contain little information or frames which are new to the respondents. In other words, pretreatment for both conditions is strong. Any effect is thus presumably a very conservative estimate. This difference in context also entails that voters for parties other than M probably know that their own party disagrees with M’s legitimizing message and delegitimizes instead. Hence, it could be expected that M’s messages resonate less with out-partisans as compared to CDU’s messages.

4.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that mainstream parties use (de-)legitimizing messages in Germany as well as in Sweden. Yet the extent to which

they use each of these messages varies. In Germany, both mainstream parties delegitimized AfD over the entire observation period from 2017 until 2020. In Sweden, M gradually switched from delegitimizing SD to legitimizing it, whilst S maintained its initial delegitimizing strategy. As part of this content analysis, I have developed a coding scheme that allowed me to a) disentangle (de-)legitimizing strategies from mainstream parties' policy-based response strategies to challenger parties and b) measure these strategies over countries, parties, and time. Moreover, I have discussed mainstream parties' policy-based response strategies related to their use of (de-)legitimizing strategies in both countries. This evidence suggested that (de-)legitimizing strategies are not only conceptually but also empirically distinct from each other. Finally, I have discussed how the findings of the content analysis substantiate the design as well as the interpretation of the findings from the survey experiments included in this dissertation.

5 The survey experiments

Mapping mainstream parties' use of (de-)legitimizing strategies constituted only the first step of my dissertation. The second step is to examine how citizens react to these strategies. For that purpose, I conducted two survey experiments – one in Germany and one in Sweden. In this chapter of the summary report, I will first explain why I chose survey experiments as a method to study citizens' reactions to (de-)legitimizing strategies. Then, I will briefly elaborate on the experimental procedures and present the main findings. I provide a much more detailed discussion of the designs, the contexts, and the results of the experiments in the papers which constitute the dissertation in conjunction with this summary report.

5.1 Why survey experiments?

A key challenge in studying the causal effects of political elites' messages – and strategies more generally – on public opinion is that these messages are not independent of public opinion. Mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties as well as citizens' evaluations of these parties are presumably to some extent a consequence of challenger parties' actual conduct and other confounding variables. Put differently, selection bias poses a severe challenge to the identification of causal effects using observational data. Moreover, how mainstream parties portray challenger parties might be a consequence of voters' evaluations of the far-right challenger, rather than the reverse relationship which I hypothesize. Isolating the distinct effect of mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies is thus a challenging endeavour.

Arriving at robust causal conclusions on how mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies shape citizens' evaluations of challenger parties is further complicated by the fact that mainstream parties do not suddenly shift these strategies (which would allow for strong quasi-experimental designs), but change them rather slowly and gradually. Furthermore, a quasi-experimental design would require the researcher to foresee changes in party strategies. Hence, I chose a survey experimental approach – in contrast to the vast majority of previous studies on how mainstream parties' response strategies to challenger parties influence citizens (see Hjorth & Larsen, 2020; van Spanje & Weber, 2017 for two notable exceptions).

However, designing experiments to study citizens' reactions to (de-)legitimizing strategies comes with its own challenges. In particular, credibly manipulating the messages of real parties on salient political issues is a challenge. As the media content analysis has shown, parties in the real world regularly

employ (de-)legitimizing messages. This entails not only presumably strong pretreatment effects (Gaines et al., 2007), but also that issues or cases where both messages – legitimizing and delegitimizing – can be credibly assigned to the same party are hard to find.

Meaningfully manipulating the same party strategy *across different political contexts* poses another challenge. Using the same treatment in both countries would have been convenient, but would not have allowed for a meaningful interpretation of the experimental results. Not only would it raise issues of ecological validity, but differences in effects would also be confounded by differences in the effectiveness and how citizens make sense of the manipulation across the different contexts.

To address these challenges, I came up with two different ways of operationalizing (de-)legitimizing strategies in my treatments. In Germany, I connected CDU's (de-)legitimizing messages to a discussion on whether CDU should boycott a panel discussion in a public school due to the participation of AfD. In Sweden, I connected M's (de-)legitimizing messages to a discussion on whether M should be open to giving SD ministerial posts in a potential government after the 2022 election. Both cases entail that survey participants could connect the treatment to actual party behaviour and messages they were exposed to in the real world. These messages were embedded in a series of four mock newspaper articles in each experimental condition. After reading these articles, respondents had to answer a wide range of different outcome measures tapping into their perceptions and evaluations of AfD/SD.

Using the stimulus material in both countries would be neither ecologically valid nor credible and thus would probably not effectively manipulate respondents' perceptions of mainstream parties' portrayals of SD and AfD. In Germany, it is presumably widely known that CDU/CSU rules out forming coalitions with AfD (Arzheimer, 2019). Using the Swedish treatment in Germany would thus be perceived as highly unrealistic and therefore yield either no or not very meaningful treatment effects. Conversely, using the German treatment in Sweden would also presumably not yield any effect, as the days of M boycotting SD are long gone (Leander, 2022).

5.2 Germany

In the following, I will briefly summarize the design and the most important findings of the German experiment (Paper A). How do mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies operate in a context where the challenger is widely perceived as illegitimate and mainstream parties unanimously strongly delegitimize? The German experiment provides an answer to that question.

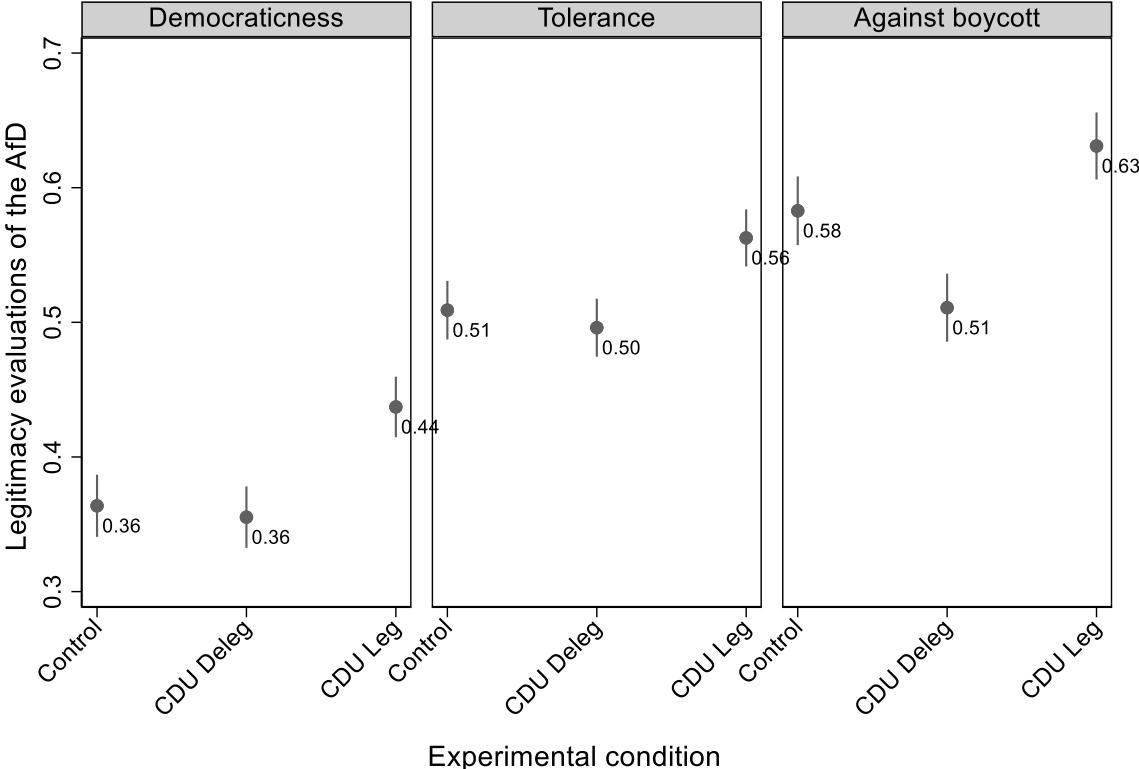
The experiment was embedded in a survey administered to a nationally representative sample (gender, age, region, education, and vote choice in 2017) and fielded in January 2021. During the survey, participants were introduced to a hypothetical case of a panel debate which was supposed to take place prior to a local election at a high school (German: *gymnasium*). I told the respondents that there was a discussion regarding this event since a representative of AfD was invited to participate.

After this introduction, the participants were randomly assigned to three conditions. In the first condition, the benchmark control condition, participants answered the questions tapping their legitimacy evaluations of AfD immediately after this introduction. In the other two conditions, the participants then read four mock newspaper articles, each containing a statement about AfD from a CDU representative. In the delegitimizing condition, all four CDU representatives advocated boycotting the event and justified this by accusing AfD of threatening the democratic polity. In the legitimizing condition, all four CDU representatives advocated participating in the event and justified this position by arguing that AfD is a democratic party.¹³ In line with my conceptualization of (de-)legitimization, the portrayal of AfD in terms of its compatibility with the democratic polity expresses itself in the form of boycotting/ collaborating as well as a mere rhetorical description serving as justification of this position in my treatments.

After reading these four articles, participants answered outcome measures tapping legitimacy evaluations of AfD. First, they were asked two items tapping democraticness perceptions of AfD ('Democraticness') on a 5-point Likert scale. Second, they were asked four items tapping tolerance judgements towards AfD ('Tolerance') on a 5-point Likert scale. Third, they were asked to what extent they support a boycott by CDU representative ('Boycott') of the panel debate on a 5-point Likert scale. Put together, these questions and items allows for a nuanced measured of my dependent variable – legitimacy evaluations of AfD. The goal of this experiment is to test my expectation that citizens perceive the challenger – that is, AfD – as more legitimate when exposed to a legitimizing – as compared to a delegitimizing strategy (H2 in this summary report).

¹³ The specific argument was different in each mock newspaper article in the legitimizing as well as in the delegitimizing condition.

Figure 7: Effects of CDU’s (de)-legitimizing messages on legitimacy evaluations of AfD



Note: Point estimates show predicted mean for each experimental condition. Error bars represent 95 % confidence intervals.

Figure 7 provides strong support for my hypothesis with regard to all three different measures of legitimacy evaluations. Survey participants in the legitimizing condition (“CDU Leg”) perceived AfD on average as more democratic ($p < .001$), were more tolerant towards it ($p < .001$), and more against a boycott of the event by CDU representative ($p < .001$) than participants in the delegitimizing condition (“CDU Deleg”). The difference between these two conditions is largest (.12) on the last outcome (“Against boycott”) measure. However, the effects on the other two outcome measures seem substantial in size as well – although it should be noted that I obviously lack a good benchmark for putting these effect sizes into perspective. Participants in the legitimizing condition rated AfD 8 percentage points more democratic on my index scale and were 6 percentage point more tolerance towards it on the respective index scale as compared to participants in the delegitimizing condition.

Whilst the legitimizing condition also significantly differed from the control group with respect to all three outcomes ($3 \times p < .001$), the delegitimizing condition only significantly differed with respect to the specific question of CDU’s boycott of the panel debate ($p < .001$). For this outcome measure, the

effect of CDU's delegitimizing messages is in fact larger than the effect of CDU's legitimizing messages as compared to the control group. However, the delegitimizing condition did not differ significantly from the control in their democraticness perceptions of ($p = .614$) and tolerance judgements toward ($p = .405$) AfD.

The lack of effects of delegitimizing CDU messages on these two outcomes can presumably be explained by pretreatment effects (Druckman & Leeper, 2012). As shown in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, all German mainstream parties – including CDU – actually strongly delegitimize AfD in the real world, but rarely employ legitimizing messages. Hence, only the information contained in the legitimizing condition was new to many participants, whilst many participants were exposed to delegitimizing messages before. Hence, delegitimizing messages may have already unfolded their influence on participants' opinions before they participated my experiment leading to ceiling effects (Slothuus, 2016). The question on CDU's boycott of the panel debate is more specific and might therefore be less prone to pretreatment effects.

Overall, I conclude that the findings from the German experiment provide strong evidence for my first hypothesis that citizens follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their legitimacy evaluations of challenger parties.

5.3 Sweden

As documented by the content analysis, Swedish mainstream parties delegitimized SD in its early stages almost to the same extent as German mainstream parties delegitimize AfD today. Yet M has sharply switched towards a legitimizing strategy and now aims to form a coalition government support by SD, whilst the parties on the left of the political spectrum still delegitimize SD. How do (de-)legitimizing strategies operate in such a context? The Swedish study (Paper B) provides an answer to that question.

The experiment was embedded in a survey administered to a nationally representative sample (gender, age, region, education) fielded in March 2022. The experimental procedure largely resembles the procedure of the German experiment, but deviates in a few important respects. In the Swedish experiment, participants were randomly assigned to four conditions. In the first condition, the benchmark control condition, participants answered the questions tapping their legitimacy evaluations of SD immediately after an introductory text. In the remaining three conditions, the participants then read four mock newspaper articles, each containing a statement about SD from a representative of M.

In the Swedish experiment, unlike in the German experiment, the treatment was directly tied to a routinely discussed political issue: the participation of SD in a government led by M after the September 2022 election. More specifically, I varied whether M were willing to give SD ministerial posts in such a government. The official party line was not to give SD ministerial posts at the time the experiment was fielded. In the delegitimizing condition, all four M representatives advocated against giving SD ministerial posts and called into question SD's legitimacy. In the legitimizing condition, all four M representatives advocated in favour of giving SD ministerial posts and portrayed SD as a fully legitimate, 'normal' democratic party.¹⁴ Again, this operationalization contains both a position on collaborating with SD and a rhetorical depiction of SD which serves as justification. This is in line with my conceptualization of (de-)legitimizing strategies.

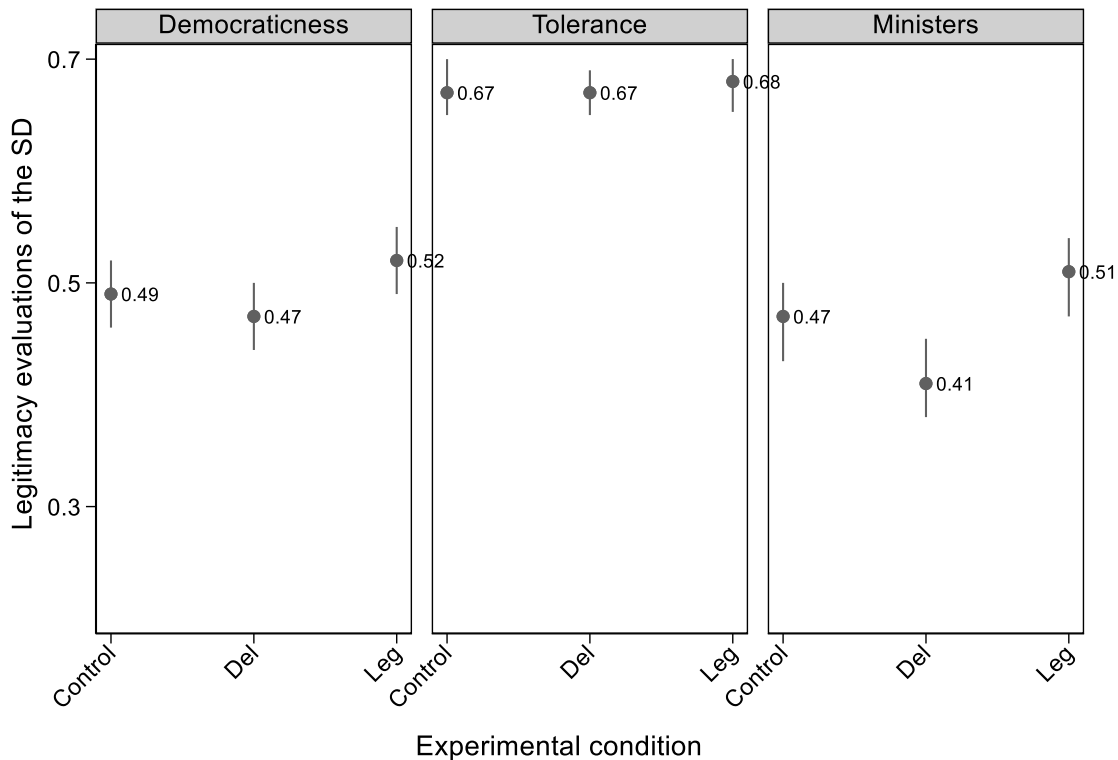
Unlike in the German experiment, I added one condition in which the survey participants were simultaneously exposed to a legitimizing message by M and a competing, delegitimizing message by the Centre party (C) – a small, centrist party. The purpose of this condition is to investigate whether M's legitimizing message is effective even in the face of such a competing delegitimizing message from another party. However, for the sake of simplicity and comparability with the German results, I do not report the results for this condition here.

I employed the same main outcome measures as in the German experiment – that is, an index for democraticness perceptions of SD as well as an index for tolerance judgements. In addition, I asked respondents to what extent they agree with the statement “M should be willing to give SD ministerial posts in a joint government”.

Again, my expectation is that the survey participants to evaluate SD as more legitimate when exposed to legitimizing as compared to delegitimizing messages sponsored by M (H2 in this summary).

¹⁴ Again, the specific argument used was different in each mock newspaper article in the legitimizing as well as in the delegitimizing condition.

Figure 8: Effects of M's (de-)legitimizing messages on evaluations of SD



Note: Error bars represent 95 % confidence intervals.

In line with my expectations, participants in the rated SD as 5 percentage points more legitimate than those who read delegitimizing messages sponsored by M ($p = .021$). Both treatments could sway participants' perceptions of SD's democraticness. Yet, compared to the German experiment, the effect size is smaller. As discussed before, this might be due to the fact that both conditions in the Swedish experiment are pretreated – to most participants there is arguably only little new information contained in the vignettes.

In contrast the German experiment, the effect of treatment on tolerance judgement was negligibly small and insignificant ($p = .734$). Again, this might be again due to contextual differences between Sweden and Germany in the real world. Perhaps those citizens who can be persuade to be more tolerant towards SD have already been influenced by M's actual legitimizing messages prior to their participation in my experiments.

Finally, I turn to the outcome measure tapping survey participants' opinions on whether M should be willing to give SD ministerial posts in a joint government. Both conditions differ significantly from the control condition in the expected direction ($p < .001$ for both comparisons). Taking into considerations that the question of whether and how M should form a government with SD was a routinely discussed political issue in the real world at the time when

the data was collected, the observed difference of 10 percentage points between the delegitimizing and the legitimizing condition seems substantial in size.

Overall, the findings from the Swedish experiment replicate the findings from the German experiment to a large extent. This corroborates that (de-)legitimizing strategies can successfully sway public opinion in different contexts and hence their effects presumably generalize widely.

5.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have elaborated in detail the reasons why I chose survey experiments as a method to investigate citizens' reactions to mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies. I have argued that survey experiments are a suitable method to get at the causal effects of mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies on public opinion. Moreover, I have discussed the challenges of credibly and meaningfully manipulating (de-)legitimizing strategies with real parties and political issues despite the contextual differences between the cases. Next, I turned to results of the experiments. In conjunction, the two experiments provided clear and robust evidence that citizens follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their own evaluations of challenger parties' legitimacy. In other words, mainstream parties can effectively shape how citizens view challenger parties by means of (de-)legitimizing strategies.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Summing up

With this dissertation, I aimed to introduce a new perspective on how mainstream parties compete with challenger parties. I put forward that an important yet previously neglected dimension of this competition is that mainstream parties engage with challenger parties in a contest over legitimacy. My main argument is that mainstream parties strategically seek to legitimize or delegitimize challenger parties and that voters follow such strategies in their evaluations of the targeted challenger parties. I tested this argument in two steps in Sweden as well as Germany.

First, by means of a quantitative media content analysis, I showed that mainstream parties actually pursue (de-)legitimizing strategies, but the extent to which mainstream parties legitimize or delegitimize varies. Second, by means of two survey experiments, I showed that citizens follow mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing strategies in their evaluations of challenger parties.

These findings have important consequences for our understanding of mainstream party competition with challenger parties. Mainstream parties can effectively steer citizens' legitimacy evaluations of challengers in their preferred direction. In other words, mainstream parties can push challenger parties out of the mainstream in the eyes of citizens by means of delegitimizing strategies – for instance, to electorally harm the challenger. Conversely, they can also pull challenger parties into the mainstream in the eyes of citizens by means of legitimizing strategies – for instance, to facilitate cooperation with the challenger in order to gain office. Mainstream parties are thus powerful gatekeepers who have considerable leeway in shaping to what extent citizens deem challenger parties legitimate.

6.2 The open questions

The answer to one research question often raises a multitude of new research questions. This dissertation is no exception. In the following, I will discuss some of the most important questions raised by my findings.

A first open question is whether and to what extent (de-)legitimizing strategies influence the public in terms of outcomes other than evaluations of the targeted challenger parties. Perhaps the use of these strategies has repercussions for mainstream parties in terms of citizens' evaluations of the mainstream party pursuing these strategies. Mainstream parties might be re-

warded or punished by different groups of voters for the use of (de-)legitimizing strategies. Beyond the evaluations of specific parties, these strategies might influence citizens' evaluations of the political system as a whole and satisfaction with democracy (Harteveld et al., 2021). Whilst I included some questions pertaining to the evaluations of M and the political system in the Swedish experiment, I decided not to include those results in this dissertation for the sake of coherence and due to time constraints.

In addition, future research might dig more deeply into the mechanisms driving the effects of (de-)legitimizing strategies on citizens. In my treatments, I aimed to operationalize a party strategy. Accordingly, the mainstream party statements used as treatment involved a variety of different elements that could drive the observed effects. The message in each condition included several different arguments and frames, a position taken by a mainstream party, appeals to identities, etc. It is beyond the scope of this project to disentangle whether the effects I found are due to framing, learning, motivated reasoning, or other mechanisms.

Moreover, extending the empirical scope by studying other countries and parties would allow for scrutinizing the robustness and generalizability of my findings. I investigated (de-)legitimizing strategies in two different contexts – Sweden and Germany. These two contexts differ in important respects. First, the two countries have different historical legacies – Germany has a right-wing fascist history, whilst Sweden does not have such a history. Second, SD has roots in outright fascist movements, but has adopted more moderate rhetoric and policies over time. In contrast, AfD was founded as an anti-EU party, but became more radical and populist over time. Third, the M is dependent on the support of SD to gain office. In contrast, CDU can currently gain office without AfD and the radical left Die Linke – with whom they also systematically rule out forming coalitions. However, if the German party system further fragments and AfD keeps growing, CDU might soon find itself in a similar situation to that of the Swedish M – especially in the eastern states, where Die Linke as well as AfD are particularly strong. However, Sweden and Germany share multiple similarities. In both countries, mainstream parties are comparatively strong and the multi-party systems are highly institutionalized. This raises the question of how transferable my findings are to countries with very different political systems.

An obviously interesting setting to examine (de-)legitimizing strategies is the United States. It is well-established that the presidency of Donald Trump was accompanied by a surge in the use of fierce populist, anti-establishment, and norm-breaching rhetoric (Boucher & Thies, 2019; Stuckey, 2021). However, Trump's opponents, allegedly representing the establishment, presumably also employed delegitimizing strategies towards him. The delegitimizing

strategies of representatives of the ‘establishment’ have received much less scholarly attention. As a nominee for the Democratic party, Hillary Clinton said about Trump’s supporters: ‘*You could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. [...] The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, islamophobic – you name it.*’ This statement clearly falls into my conceptualization of a delegitimizing strategy. Yet a delegitimizing strategy might play out very differently when pursued against an opponent from the competing party in a two-party system than when pursued by a mainstream party towards a challenger party in a multi-party system.

Perhaps more important than scrutinizing the robustness and generalizability of my findings, extending the empirical scope and exploring different settings would also allow for gaining more theoretical insights into *when* mainstream parties employ (de-)legitimizing strategies and *when* citizens react to them. For this, more theory as well as empirical research in different settings is necessary. In a rather exploratory fashion, I explored party sympathy as an individual-level moderator of citizens’ reactions to mainstream parties’ (de-)legitimizing strategies. As a next step, future research could investigate other individual-level moderators, such as anti-establishment attitudes (Uscinski et al., 2021) or certain psychological traits, impacting how well (de-)legitimizing messages resonate with an individual (Bakker, Schumacher, & Rooduijn, 2021; Blinder et al., 2013; Ekholm, Bäck, & Renström, 2022).

Characteristics of mainstream parties might also influence how citizens react to (de-)legitimizing strategies. M and CDU are both relatively large mainstream parties in established democracies with highly institutionalized party systems. When smaller, less institutionalized mainstream parties pursue such strategies, they might be less effective (Brader et al., 2012). Future studies could also investigate the *interaction between policy-based and (de-)legitimizing mainstream party strategies*. I have argued and provided some empirical evidence that these two kinds of strategies can be combined in various ways. Previous research suggests that how mainstream parties make use of these two kinds of strategies is indeed empirically intertwined (Backlund, 2020). Future research could look into how different combinations of these strategies influence citizens. For example, a delegitimizing strategy might be less persuasive when combined with an accommodative strategy, as the latter might mitigate the credibility and principledness of the former (Christensen & Fernandez-Vazquez, 2022).

Finally, another important avenue for future research would be to examine how these strategies operate in interaction with challenger parties’ policy-based and populist strategies and attributes of the targeted challengers more generally. To get at the distinct causal effect of (de-)legitimizing strategies, the

attributes of challenger parties were ‘fixed’ in my experiments, yet future research on this could give us a more nuanced and comprehensive picture. Do citizens only follow mainstream parties’ delegitimizing strategies when challenger parties are perceived as populist and radical in the first place? Conversely, do citizens only follow legitimizing strategies when challenger parties are perceived as somewhat moderate? Does it matter whether the challenger has a left or right ideology? Does the electoral strength of the targeted challenger parties matter for the effectiveness of (de-)legitimizing strategies?

The answers to these questions are of high normative relevance. What are the limits of (de-)legitimizing strategies’ impact on citizens’ legitimacy evaluations of challenger parties? It would be a worrisome finding for democracy if mainstream parties could act as a ‘cartel’ blocking the entrance of ‘objectively’ democratic parties into political systems. Finding the reverse, that mainstream parties can legitimize challenger parties that are clearly threatening to the democratic polity, would be worrisome as well.

Simply put, my argument and findings can be seen from two different perspectives. Seen from one perspective, they suggest that delegitimizing strategies constitute an important, informative cue for citizens on whether challenger parties threaten the democratic polity. Moreover, legitimizing strategies might inform citizens that a challenger party has moderated and thus has become a legitimate actor in the democratic competition over delivering good policy. Seen from another perspective, mainstream parties restrict democratic competition in an undemocratic manner and can legitimize parties that pose a threat to the democratic polity.

However, the question of whether mainstream parties are rather assisting citizens in safeguarding democracy by keeping the ‘rascals’ out or ‘undemocratically’ ward off competition from challenger parties is not merely subjective. Neither is the question of whether mainstream parties are useful sources of information to citizens on whether a challenger party is no longer a threat or whether they trivialize the actual danger of some challenger parties. The empirical questions of *when* mainstream parties employ (de-)legitimizing strategies and *when* citizens react to them are essential to assessing (de-)legitimizing strategies normatively. To answer these highly relevant questions, more research on (de-)legitimizing strategies is needed.

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Appendices

A1: Mapping the use of (de-)legitimizing strategies for other parties than the mainstream right and the mainstream left

Table A1: Use of (de-)legitimizing messages by the Center party

	2010/11	2012/13	2014/15	2016/17	2018/19	2020/21
Number of coded statements	7	7	16	27	33	21
% delegitimizing statements (explicit and implicit)	71 %	71 %	50 %	81 %	82 %	67 %
% delegitimizing statements (only explicit)	29 %	57 %	25 %	11 %	24 %	29 %
% legitimizing statements	14 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %

Table A2: Use of (de-)legitimizing messages by the Greens (Die Grünen), the Liberals (FDP), and the radical left (Die Linke)

		2017	2018	2019	2020
Die Grünen	Number of coded statements	22	43	26	40
	% Delegitimizing statements (explicit and implicit)	77 %	91 %	85 %	92 %
	% Delegitimizing statements (only explicit)	55 %	70 %	69 %	72 %
	% Legitimizing statements	5 %	0 %	0 %	3 %
FDP	Number of coded statements	12	43	26	40
	% Delegitimizing statements (explicit and implicit)	67 %	72 %	94 %	75 %
	% Delegitimizing statements (only explicit)	50 %	44 %	75 %	55 %
	% Legitimizing statements	8 %	11 %	0 %	5 %
Die Linke	Number of coded statements	18	14	11	24
	% Delegitimizing statements (explicit and implicit)	72 %	79 %	100 %	76 %
	% Delegitimizing statements (only explicit)	33 %	50 %	63 %	72 %
	% Legitimizing statements	6 %	7 %	0 %	4 %

A2: Codebook for the media content analysis (long version)

Code 1: Delegitimizing (explicit): Any message that explicitly suggests incompatibility with or even an outright threat to the democratic polity

Which statements to include?

- Labelling challenger as racist, fascist, extreme, völkisch etc.
- Accusing challenger of not respecting democratic institutions
- Accusing challenger of lying systematically, propaganda, etc.
- Portraying challenger as dangerous or detrimental (to society) -> they are demagogues, they are creating an atmosphere of hate, etc.
- Portraying challengers are un-Swedish/un-German
- Associating challenger with undemocratic states or leaders or the Nazi past or clearly extremist actors

Code 2: Delegitimizing (implicit): Any message that suggests that the challenger is not a party like the “other”, “normal” parties, but none of the elements mentioned above are present

- Ruling out collaborations as a matter of principle/fundamental differences
- Drawing a clear line between the challenger and all other parties, suggesting that there is a qualitative difference between the challenger and all other parties
 - Example: „Det vore nytt för riksdagen, det har hittills aldrig hänt att riksdagen skulle ändra på inkomstbeslutet, och det vore inte ansvarsfullt av Socialdemokraterna att därmed bryta mot den ordning och praxis som de själva varit så stolta över i snart 20 år. Det vore anmärkningsvärt att göra det med Sverigedemokraterna, säger Anna Kinberg Batra (M), gruppledare i riksdagen.”
 - Rehlinger ihrerseits vermag gelöster zu agieren als Maas seinerzeit. „Ich habe mit Ausnahme der AfD zu allen politischen Akteuren im Saarland ein entspanntes Verhältnis“, sagt sie.
 - Keine bürgerliche Partei, but reactionary
 - When policy disagreement is reason for exclusion, then no
 - Pathologisieren von AfD/SD support: diffuse anxiety leading people to vote for this party
- Suggesting that the party as a whole in its very existence is a problem that needs to be “fixed”; for example indicated by the use of verbs such as “bekämpfen”, “wir müssen Antworten finden”
 - „Dann aber kam ein Schock nach dem anderen: Trump in Amerika, der Austritt Großbritanniens aus der Europäischen Union und zuletzt das Erstarken der AfD. Wer sich darüber aufregte, musste sich jetzt den Satz anhören: „Und was tust du dagegen?“ Es war ein „Tritt in den

Arsch, um sich zu engagieren“, wie es Peter Gack ausdrückt, der Mann mit den Tesa-Streifen an den Händen.“

- Discussing strategies against AfD: überflüssig machen, bekämpfen, warnen
- Criticizing other established parties for Nähe zu AfD or parroting them
- Highlighting no dependence of SD or being happy about no political influence
- Avoid having anything in common with party

Code 3: Legitimizing: Any statement that conveys the message that a challenger party is compatible with the democratic polity

- Portrayals as democratic: Highlighting the representative function of these parties, highlighting that they are constitutional
- Portraying the challenger explicitly as not qualitatively different from other parties
 - ”Martina Mossberg, oppositionsråd i Haninge, ser SD som "ett parti som alla andra" och är då öppen för stöd därifrån.”
- Advocating for or justifying increased cooperation as compared to (previous) status quo
 - ”Det kan handla om en osäkerhet. Då är det väl viktigt att vi är tydliga med att vi inte vill regera med Sverigedemokraterna. Men vi har ett politiskt landskap att hantera nu där även Sverigedemokraterna sitter i Sveriges riksdag, säger Moderaternas partisekreterare Tomas Tobé.”
- Highlighting (legitimate) grievances that led to AfD support or emphasizing that they need to be taken serious (only if party is not also delegitimized; otherwise these statements are coded 3)
- When legitimizing (e.g., increased cooperation) is criticized by mainstream competitors or journalist and then the accused politician distracts from the topic, I code this as legitimizing

Code 4: Both/unclear: Messages that contain legitimizing as well as delegitimizing elements

- When a legitimizing action is advocated (inclusion or cooperation), but still the challenger is described as illegitimate according to 1 or 2
- When some elements of the party are portrayed as democratic, but others are portrayed as undemocratic
 - Example: ”En lite nervös frågeställare undrar hur partiledningen ser på Sverigedemokraterna. - Om Sveriges riksdag har åtta partier, låtsas inte då att det bara är sju partier, säger Ulf Kristersson och drar ner applåder och enstaka bravo-rop. - Men SD har fel, fortsätter han. Jag

delar inte deras grundläggande värderingar och jag tänker inte samarbeta eller samtala med dem, säger Kristersson och får nya applåder.”

- When the topic of challenger party legitimacy is touched upon, but statement is neither legitimizing nor delegitimizing

5: Negative campaigning: Any message about the challenger that is not delegitimizing, but negative in its valence towards the challenger

- Can target issue positions, valence traits (honesty, integrity), etc.
- When valence traits are attacked, I code this as 6 when it suggests that this threatens society/the “system”; for example accusing competitors as lying is 5, accusing them of manipulation and propaganda is 1
- When ruling out collaboration on the grounds of policy difference

6: Messages about the challenger with no valence or where valence is unclear

English summary

The dominance of mainstream parties throughout Europe is increasingly under threat due to the rise of challenger parties. A large literature has explored how mainstream parties have responded to the rise of challenger parties by adjusting their own policy platforms. I offer a new perspective on how mainstream parties compete with challenger parties. I argue that mainstream parties either seek to delegitimize or to legitimize challenger parties, and that voters react to these strategies. When pursuing a delegitimizing strategy, mainstream parties portray challenger parties as incompatible with and threatening to the democratic polity. When pursuing a legitimizing strategy, mainstream parties portray challenger parties as compatible with the democratic polity.

To establish that (de-)legitimizing strategies are an important dimension of mainstream party competition with challenger parties, I ask two questions. First, I ask to what extent (de-)legitimizing strategies are a prevalent feature in mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties. Second, I ask how citizens react to these strategies.

To answer the first research question, I conducted a quantitative media content analysis in Germany and Sweden to map mainstream parties' (de-)legitimizing messages over time. I developed a coding scheme that allows for disentangling (de-)legitimizing strategies from policy-based strategies and to measure these strategies over time, countries, and parties. The results suggest that there are clear patterns and trends in how mainstream parties employ (de-)legitimizing messages, indicating that they reflect underlying strategies. In Germany, both mainstream parties – the mainstream right CDU/CSU and the mainstream left SPD – have consistently delegitimized AfD ever since it entered parliament. In contrast, in Sweden, the mainstream right Moderate Party (M) gradually switched from a delegitimizing to a legitimizing strategy after SD's entry into parliament, whilst the mainstream left Social Democratic Party (S) maintained its initial delegitimizing strategy.

To answer the second question, focusing on citizens' reactions to (de-)legitimizing strategies, I implemented two survey experiments in Sweden in Germany. I randomly exposed the participants to delegitimizing as well as legitimizing messages sponsored by the M. To do so, I developed treatments which connected my manipulation to salient political debates that participants are exposed to in the real world. Respondents adjusted their evaluations of AfD and SD accordingly. They perceived SD as well as AfD as more democratic when confronted with legitimizing as compared to delegitimizing messages.

Furthermore, in Germany, legitimizing messages by CDU/CSU positively influenced tolerance judgements towards AfD. In Sweden, M's legitimizing messages enhanced sympathy with and vote intentions for SD. Moreover, in the Swedish experiment, I could show that M's legitimizing message is no less effective in the face of a competing, delegitimizing message sponsored by the small but pivotal centrist Centre Party.

In sum, my findings suggest that (de-)legitimizing strategies are an important and prevalent feature in mainstream parties' responses to challenger parties. This has important consequences for our understanding of party competition between mainstream and challenger parties. Mainstream parties can steer citizens' legitimacy evaluations in the direction that serves their interests best. Hence, I suggest that mainstream parties are powerful gatekeepers in party systems that have considerable leeway in shaping to what extent citizens deem challenger parties legitimate.

Dansk resumé

De etablerede partiers dominans i hele Europa er i stigende grad truet af udfordrerpartiernes fremmarch. Der findes en omfattende litteratur, som har undersøgt, hvordan de etablerede partier reagerer på fremkomsten af udfordrerpartier ved at tilpasse deres egne politiske platforme. Jeg tilbyder et nyt perspektiv på, hvordan mainstream-partier konkurrerer med udfordrerpartier. Jeg argumenterer for, at mainstream-partierne enten forsøger at delegitimere eller legitimere udfordrerpartierne, og at vælgerne reagerer på disse strategier. Når de etablerede partier forfølger en delegitimeringsstrategi, fremstiller de udfordrerpartier som uforenelige med og truende for det demokratiske samfund. Når de etablerede partier forfølger en delegitimerende strategi, fremstiller de etablerede partier udfordrerpartier som forenelige med det demokratiske samfund.

For at fastslå, at (de-)legitimeringsstrategier er en vigtig dimension af mainstreampartiernes konkurrence med udfordrerpartier, stiller jeg følgende spørgsmål: I hvilket omfang er (de-)legitimeringsstrategier et fremherskende træk i mainstreampartiernes reaktion på udfordrerpartier, og hvordan reagerer borgerne på disse strategier.

For at besvare det første spørgsmål gennemførte jeg en kvantitativ medieindholdsanalyse i Tyskland og Sverige for at kortlægge mainstreampartiernes (de-)legitimerende budskaber over tid. Jeg udviklede et kodningsskema, der gør det muligt at adskille (de-)legitimeringsstrategier fra politikbaserede strategier og at måle disse strategier over tid, lande og partier. Resultaterne tyder på, at der er klare mønstre og tendenser i den måde, hvorpå mainstream-partierne anvender (de-)legitimerende budskaber, hvilket indikerer, at de afspejler underliggende strategier. I Tyskland har begge mainstream-partier – det højreorienterede CDU/CSU og det venstreorienterede SPD – konsekvent delegitimeret AfD, lige siden det kom ind i parlamentet. I Sverige derimod skiftede det almindelige højreorienterede Moderaterne (M) gradvist fra en delegitimerende til en legitimerende strategi efter SD's indtræden i parlamentet, mens det almindelige venstreorienterede Socialdemokratiske Parti (S) fastholdt sin oprindelige delegitimerende strategi.

For at besvare det andet spørgsmål om borgernes reaktioner på (de-)legitimerende strategier gennemførte jeg to survey-eksperimenter i Sverige i Tyskland. Jeg udsatte tilfældigt deltagerne for delegitimerende såvel som legitimerende budskaber sponsoreret af M. For at gøre dette udviklede jeg behandlinger, som forbandt min manipulation med fremtrædende politiske debatter, som deltagerne udsattes for i den virkelige verden. Respondenterne

justerede deres vurderinger af AfD og SD i overensstemmelse hermed. De opfattede SD såvel som AfD som mere demokratiske, når de blev konfronteret med legitimerende budskaber sammenlignet med delegitimerende budskaber. I Tyskland havde legitimerende budskaber fra CDU/CSU desuden en positiv indflydelse på tolerancevurderingerne over for AfD. I Sverige øgede M's (de-)legitimerende budskaber desuden sympatien med og stemmeintentionerne for SD. Desuden kunne jeg i det svenske eksperiment vise, at M's legitimerende budskab ikke er mindre effektivt over for et konkurrerende, delegitimerende budskab sponsoreret af det lille, men centrale midterparti Centerpartiet.

Alt i alt tyder mine resultater på, at (de-)legitimeringsstrategier er et vigtigt og udbredt træk i de etablerede partiers reaktion på udfordrerpartier. Dette har vigtige konsekvenser for vores forståelse af partikonkurrencen mellem hovedpartier og udfordrerpartier. Mainstream-partier kan styre borgernes legitimitetsvurderinger i den retning, der tjener deres interesser bedst. Jeg hævder derfor, at mainstream-partier er magtfulde gatekeepers i partisystemer, som har et betydeligt spillerum til at forme, i hvilket omfang borgerne anser udfordrende partier for at være legitime.