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Avoiding vote loss by changing policy positions:

The Fukushima disaster, party responses, and the German electorate

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Abstract

This paper addresses the electoral consequences of the German government's anti-nuclear power policy shift after the Fukushima accident. Building on a cost-benefit framework and insights from political psychology, the theoretical analysis anticipates that the policy shift could not earn governing parties additional votes but avoid vote loss. Utilizing data from multiple surveys and employing simulation techniques, the evidence demonstrates that voters, in particular incumbents' supporters, became more skeptical of nuclear power after the Fukushima disaster. At the same time, governing parties' supporters were particularly eager to perceive a credible change in the government's nuclear power stance. As a consequence, governing parties did not garner additional votes but inhibited their supporters from voting for other parties and thus avoided vote loss. Generally speaking, the novel approach proposed in this paper is suitable to shed light on electoral effects of parties' policy shifts that have thus far gone unnoticed.

Introduction¹

Party competition takes place in dynamic environments. Vote-seeking parties (e.g. Strøm and Müller, 1999) thus have incentives to adapt to changes in their environment, e.g., gradual changes in public opinion (Ezrow, 2005; Page and Shapiro, 1983; Stimson et al., 1995). The success of gradual adaption to changes in public opinion appears to depend upon policy domain, however. Notwithstanding the multitude of policy and non-policy factors affecting electoral behavior (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960), policy change in the economic domain appears to be accompanied by electoral gain (MacKuen et al., 1992). In contrast, voters appear to punish parties, particularly niche parties (Adams et al., 2006), for policy shifts on value-based or ideological issues (Tavits, 2007). Parties will thus change positions in the economic domain, but may be reluctant to do so in the ideological domain.

This conclusion may give rise to an overly static portrayal of party competition in the value-based domain. Public opinion might change quickly even on ideological or directional issues as a response to external events (e.g. Birkland, 2006; Bishop, 2014; Boin et al., 2008; Kingdon, 2011). For example, terror attacks make voters more inclined to support measures that aim at curbing civil liberties (e.g. Davis and Silver, 2004; Hetherington and Suhay, 2011). In this case, the shift in public opinion provides vote-seeking parties with incentives to adopt more conservative policy stances in this domain. In particular, if supporters of liberal parties adopt more conservative policy positions, these parties will have an incentive to shift their policy stance to avoid vote loss. As loss aversion is a strong motive of human beings (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Levy, 1997; Sabatier, 1988), it does not come as a surprise that scholars addressed loss avoidance strategies of parties and candidates to which voters respond in elections (see on U.S. midterm elections, e.g., Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Cohen et al. 1991; Jacobson 2004). Yet, some research on electoral effects of loss avoidance strategies suffers from methodological problems. By focusing on concomitant changes in

party positions and electoral support from one election to the next (e.g. Adams et al., 2004; Adams et al., 2009; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Tavits, 2007), it is not well-suited to measure electoral effects of policy shifts in their entirety. For example, if a policy shift helps a party to recover from a decline in popular support between two elections but that shift does not help to increase electoral support as compared to the previous election, this positive effect will go unnoticed. Thus, if a party responds to anticipated vote loss by revising its policies this move will appear ineffective unless it manages to increase electoral support in comparison to the preceding election. Tackling electoral effects of these defensive, loss-averse policy moves requires different research designs that permit to explore the temporal order of policy moves and shifts in public opinion in a more fine-grained fashion.

Against this backdrop, we address party and public responses in Germany to the Fukushima disaster in March 2011. This case is well-suited to explore the electoral effects of loss-averse policy shifts because the nuclear disaster led to an anti-nuclear power shift in public opinion thereby threatening the pro-nuclear incumbent parties, i.e., Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Free Democrats (FDP), with vote loss. The governing parties quickly shut down 7 of Germany's 17 nuclear power plants and announced an ultimate nuclear phase-out by 2022, thereby reversing their October 2010 decision to abandon the phase-out policy originally enacted in 2001. Looked at from a cost-benefit perspective, the electoral effect of the policy shift depends on the evolution of public opinion and the perception of the policy shift. Using survey data, we show that in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster, the anti-nuclear power shift in public opinion was pronounced among supporters of government parties, which in turn ran the risk of losing votes. By giving up their long-held pro-nuclear power stance, these parties did not manage to attract additional votes but avoided a considerable vote loss. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework on which our analysis draws. After the description of the data, we explore voters' responses to the disaster and the electoral effects of

the policy shift. In conclusion, we sum up key findings and discuss implications.

Theoretical Framework

Political parties hold stable positions on many issues, particularly on issues that are of key importance for their supporters and the party's identity (e.g. Goren, 2005; Tavits, 2007). Yet, there is also change in parties' policy positions. Although factors like leader personalities and intra-party processes play a considerable role (e.g. Meyer, 2013: 169ff), changes in a party's environment are a major incentive for policy changes. In particular, profound changes in public opinion on relevant dimensions give parties incentives to adapt policy positions (e.g. Adams, 2012; Stimson, 1999). Whereas such changes, generally speaking, take a considerable time (Page and Shapiro, 1992), single events can play a crucial role in these processes. In particular, so-called focusing events, i.e., typically natural or man-made disasters (Birkland, 1997) have the potential to affect public opinion on policies.

Focusing events, e.g., nuclear disasters (e.g. Eiser et al., 1990; Lenz, 2012), get massive media coverage and evoke emotional responses in the electorate. The latter include anger and anxiety that motivate people to alter attitudes and question long-standing attachments (Marcus et al., 2000; Rucht, 2008). In political debates, these events serve as examples to demonstrate that a certain policy is no longer viable. Citizens who have opposed this policy may thus feel confirmed. Some of its supporters, however, may reconsider or even change their policy attitudes leading to a considerable shift in public opinion against this policy. Provided attitudes toward this policy play a role in voting behavior, this shift in public opinion poses an electoral threat to parties pleading for this policy.

Vote-seeking parties may respond to this threat by considering a revision of their policy stance. To analyze these considerations, we focus on a scenario in which an event led to a shift in public opinion against a policy supported by governing parties and opposed by

opposition parties. Assuming governing parties are vote-seeking, they have an incentive to carefully consider likely electoral costs and benefits of changing their policy stance in line with the shift in public opinion. To examine costs and benefits, we assume that attitudes toward policy issues are short-term factors potentially making voters inclined to deviate from partisan attachments (Campbell et al., 1960; Downs, 1957; Rabinowitz and McDonald, 1989). An issue will affect vote choice if it arouses voters' interest and if voters have preferences over policy options and perceive partisan differences on the issue. In addition, partisan differences on an issue are conducive to issue voting because parties are likely to campaign on controversial issues, thereby increasing their saliency (e.g. Damore, 2005; Krosnick, 1988).

Starting with benefits, by shifting their policy position governing parties might garner votes from adherents of opposition parties and unaffiliated voters. This expectation, however, rests on the assumption that all voters quickly perceive incumbent parties to have credibly changed their policy position. Building on some kind of Bayesian updating (Gerber and Green, 1998, 1999), this assumption is at odds with the notion of motivated reasoning (e.g. Kunda, 1990; Lodge and Taber, 2013). Partisan motivated reasoning implies that adherents of governing parties are likely to perceive a credible policy shift of incumbent parties. By contrast, identifiers of opposition parties might counter-argue and interpret the policy shift as tactical maneuver rather than as a credible shift. Provided issue-voting, they will thus not consider voting for governing parties, despite their policy shift. A similar reasoning applies to partisan independents although counter-arguing processes might be weaker as no 'hostile' party attachment serves as a predisposition (e.g. Visser, 1994). Taken together, governing parties are thus unlikely to garner additional votes by shifting their policy position.

An incumbent policy change in accordance with a public opinion shift, however, might prove beneficial for governing parties in avoiding vote loss. In response to external shocks, supporters of governing parties may subscribe to policy positions held by opposition,

rather than governing, parties. Provided issue voting, they might vote against their long-term partisan affiliations. Issue voting would be likely if incumbent parties stick to their position, thereby providing voters a policy choice and opposition parties an opportunity and incentive to campaign on this polarized issue. Sticking to their policy position thus may cost governing parties votes. If they change their policy position in accordance with the shift in public opinion, however, their supporters, due to motivated reasoning, are likely to perceive the incumbents' policy shift as credible and real. Moreover, the issue is likely to become a non-issue. Accordingly, by giving up their policy position, governing parties might prevent their supporters, who now prefer opposition policies, from abstention or switching to opposition parties. Put differently, a policy shift may avoid vote loss.

A policy shift may come at some electoral cost for governing parties, however. Some of their supporters may still subscribe to the governing parties' long-held position. By giving up their position, incumbent parties might run the risk of losing the votes of these supporters. Provided parties with a congenial policy stance, these voters switch to them or, in absence of this kind of parties, they might abstain. Yet, by shifting their policy position, incumbents make this policy a non-issue, i.e. a question on which relevant parties hold similar positions and thus have no possibility to campaign on. Accordingly, the electoral salience of this policy is low and so is the probability of vote loss due to the incumbents' policy shift.

Putting the likely responses of three relevant subsections of the electorate together, the cost-benefit perspective suggests that by giving up a now unpopular policy stance governing parties may, on balance, avoid vote loss. We expect that this hypothesis also applies to German governing parties' policy shift on nuclear power in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. This event is likely to have made German voters more skeptical of nuclear power, especially those adherents of governing parties supporting nuclear power. As attitudes toward nuclear power affect vote choice in Germany (Küchler, 1990; Thurner, 2010; Thurner et al., 2011), this anti-nuclear power shift in public opinion posed an electoral threat to governing

parties. By adopting an anti-nuclear power stance, they could prevent these voters from switching to a different party or abstaining. At the same time, they were unlikely to garner additional votes from other voters or to lose votes of steadfast supporters of nuclear power. Thus, German governing parties might have avoided vote loss.

Data and Methodology

We test our expectations using data from online and CATI surveys. The series of cross-sectional online surveys were conducted in the run-up to and after the federal election 2009 as part of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES, see Rattinger et al., 2011). Each survey comprises roughly 1,000 respondents drawn from a nonprobability online panel. Six of these surveys include questions on nuclear power and cover a time period that ranges from two years before the Fukushima accident to about half a year after it. The survey conducted in March 2011 deserves special attention because it was fielded when the Fukushima disaster took place. In response to the events in Japan (beginning on March 11), new items were added to the questionnaire (see Figure 1). In effect, 300 respondents completed the survey on 14 March or later and were asked questions concerning nuclear power. Additionally, we rely on CATI data from the Politbarometer series (see Jung et al., 2013). Each survey includes a random sample of about 1.200 respondents from the German population eligible to vote.²

--- Figure 1 about here ---

Concerning the setting, it is warranted to provide some key dates concerning political events and communication in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. As Figure 2 suggests, the incumbent parties quite timely responded to a skeptical opinion climate (see e.g. Spiegel, 2011). As questions about nuclear power attitudes in Tracking 13 were included from 14

March on, respondents in this survey were already subject to news about the accident and the immediate reactions of the government for three days. Then, the May/June 2011 survey took place between the announcement of and the decision on an ultimate phase-out, whereas the last survey was conducted two months afterwards.

--- Figure 2 about here ---

The main purpose of this analysis is to gauge electoral effects of the incumbent parties' policy shift. As discussed above, the shift might have avoided potential vote loss. Following this line of reasoning, gauging this effect requires comparing the actual evolution of public opinion to a contra-factual scenario in which incumbent parties stuck to their original position on nuclear power. To perform this comparison, we will clearly spell out underlying assumptions.

Findings

The theoretical analysis suggests that the Fukushima disaster made the German electorate more skeptical of nuclear power, with attachments to pro-nuclear power parties being incapable of reducing these effects. To examine this proposition, we utilize data from the online surveys in which attitudes toward nuclear power were measured using an 11-point scale running from -5 ('immediate shutdown of all nuclear power plants') to +5 ('further construction of nuclear power plants'). Table 1 reports the mean evaluations as well as standard deviations in the whole samples and in partisan subgroups. The evidence indicates that the public was somewhat indifferent about the further use of nuclear power at the outset of the period under study. It then became gradually more skeptical until mid-2010 (-1.02). After the Fukushima disaster, support for nuclear power deteriorated as is indicated by the

drop of the mean evaluation below -2.

Although they differ in methodology, CATI data virtually tell the same story (see Figure 3). In 2009 and 2010, respondents were asked whether they preferred sticking to the phase-out plan or continuing using nuclear power. After the Fukushima disaster, from March 2011 onward, respondents were additionally provided with the option to favor a fastest possible shutdown of nuclear power plants. As the evidence shows, in 2009 and 2010 a majority of the respondents pleaded for pursuing the phase-out agenda. Still, a sizable minority, comprising up to 40 percent of the electorate, favored further using nuclear power. As with the online data, after the Fukushima disaster public opinion looks different. The proportion of steadfast supporters of nuclear power decreased to roughly ten percent, whereas some 35 percent preferred the phase-out plan. Majorities, however, pleaded for shutting down nuclear power plants as fast as possible.³

--- Table 1 and Figure 3 about here ---

Turning to the role of party attachments in affecting evaluations of nuclear power (Table 1), CDU/CSU and FDP identifiers exhibited positive attitudes toward nuclear energy before March 2011, whereas identifiers of opposition parties held an anti-nuclear stance.⁴ Turning to responses to the nuclear disaster, the evidence is clearly at odds with the hypothesis that governmental identifiers somehow resisted its impact. Rather, especially CDU/CSU supporters changed their position from a positive to a negative view of nuclear energy, whereas FDP identifiers were at least indifferent.⁵ Moreover, compared to all other subgroups, CDU/CSU identifiers made the largest shift, thereby decreasing the gap between them and oppositional supporters. Supporters of the Greens and the Left exhibit smaller variation across all surveys included. Especially for Green adherents, this might be interpreted as some kind of ceiling effect, as these voters already opposed nuclear energy unambiguously.

In sum, the electorate became more skeptical of nuclear power, while partisan attachments became less effective, albeit not ineffective, in shaping attitudes toward nuclear power.⁶

Building on the notion of motivated reasoning, we anticipated that adherents of governing parties were more likely than other citizens, particularly more than supporters of opposition parties, to consider the governing parties' policy shift as credible. Relying on data from CATI surveys, respondents were quite skeptical, as 72 and 66 percent perceived the policy shift as not credible in May and June, respectively. To examine the role of party attachments in shaping these perceptions, we ran logistic regressions with party attachments as focal predictor variables (see Table A1). The evidence suggests that CDU/CSU adherents were disproportionately likely to deem the policy shift credible whereas FDP supporters did not differ from, rather skeptical, partisan independents. Adherents of SPD and the Greens, however, questioned the credibility of the government's policy shift. Accordingly, in May 2011 roughly twelve percent of opposition adherents believed in the government's credibility but 60 percent of the CDU/CSU supporters.

Given these differences in perceived credibility, it is straightforward to expect that the gap between government and opposition supporters in the perceived position of governing parties on nuclear power widened, rather than diminished, after the Fukushima disaster. Utilizing data on perceived partisan positions toward the use of nuclear power measured on the above-mentioned eleven-point scale (Table 2), the evidence suggests that before the Fukushima disaster, opposition parties were considered as rejecting nuclear power, with the Greens being the most pronounced opponents of this energy source. After that event, respondents perceived the Greens as somewhat more skeptical and the SPD as considerably more critical. However, perceptions of incumbent parties'⁷ stances on nuclear power underwent the most profound change. Before the Fukushima disaster, they were deemed staunch supporters of nuclear power. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the public considered them as slightly supportive of this energy. And the pro-nuclear image of the

incumbent parties did not recover in the remainder of 2011. Moreover, the increase in standard deviations of perceived policy positions of incumbent parties suggests that citizens – as expected – differed considerably in their willingness to perceive the proclaimed policy shift as real.⁸

--- Table 2 about here ---

Thus far, the evidence suggests that the German electorate became considerably more skeptical of nuclear power after the Fukushima disaster. Incumbent parties responded to this change that was particularly pronounced among CDU/CSU supporters⁹ by shifting their policy stance. This shift was primarily perceived by their supporters while partisan independents and adherents of opposition parties questioned its credibility. These findings suggest that by shifting their policy position incumbent parties could hardly gain votes from adherents of other parties, but may have inhibited CDU/CSU and FDP supporters from abstaining or switching to different parties.

Exploring the electoral consequences of the changes in public opinion and party positions, we compare citizens' actual responses to their hypothetical responses if the governing parties had not given up their pro-nuclear power position. Relying on a distance model of vote choice, we calculated the mean distance between voters' positions and perceived CDU/CSU position in partisan subgroups in the various online surveys (upper section of Table 3). In addition, relying on a contra-factual scenario, we imputed the CDU/CSU position on nuclear power as perceived by the various partisan subgroups in the 2010 survey (Table A2). Utilizing this information, we once again calculated in partisan subgroups mean distances between voter positions' and CDU/CSU positions as perceived by the respective subgroups (lower section of Table 3).

The comparison of actual and hypothetical policy distances suggests that the

governing parties' policy shift made a considerable difference in voters' perceptions. As the results from the simulation indicate, the absolute distance between CDU/CSU and its supporters would have amounted to roughly 3.9 after the Fukushima accident. Turning to actual policy distances, the CDU/CSU's distance to its supporters increased considerably in March 2011 (2.46) suggesting that voters had responded to the disaster but did not yet perceive 'their' party to have shifted its position sufficiently. In the two successive surveys, this distance, however, decreased again. By comparing the two actual and hypothetical policy distances, it thus turns out that the governing parties' policy shift was useful in limiting their policy distance to their supporters.¹⁰

--- Table 3 about here ---

Finally, we examined the electoral impact of the incumbents' shift on nuclear power by gauging the effect of attitudes toward nuclear power on intended vote choice using alternative-specific multinomial probit models, thereby considering variable distances between voters and parties on the nuclear power issue (see Alvarez/Nagler 1998).¹¹ In order to avoid exaggerating the impact of attitudes toward nuclear power, we controlled for party identification and ideological self-placement. The results of multinomial probit models (Table A3) suggest that voter-party distances on the nuclear power issue affected vote choice at the individual level before as well as after the Fukushima incident. Yet, the effects are not overwhelmingly sizable. To make the results of those models more accessible, we estimated choice probabilities (Long and Freese, 2006: 330-332) that can be interpreted as vote shares for the four parties contributed by CDU/CSU identifiers (upper section of Table 4). To capture the impact of the incumbent policy shift, we calculated choice probabilities while imputing the different parties' policy positions as perceived by CDU/CSU identifiers in 2010 (lower section of Table 4). By comparing probabilities across specifications, we aim at

gauging the electoral consequences of the incumbents' policy shift.

The results reported in the upper and lower rows in Table 4 suggest that the governing parties' policy shift made a difference in voting intentions. According to the findings on CDU/CSU identifiers, some nine to 14 percent of the CDU/CSU's core supporters would no longer have voted for it if governing parties had not given up their pro-nuclear power stance.¹² As CDU/CSU supporters accounted for some 80 percent of the CDU/CSU vote intentions in the period under study, the CDU/CSU would have lost some one to two percent of the total vote intentions. The main beneficiary would have been the Greens garnering some additional four percent of CDU/CSU supporters.

--- Table 4 about here ---

The evidence thus suggests that by changing its position toward nuclear power the main governing party CDU/CSU avoided some vote loss. Yet, we have to keep in mind that the above strategy is likely to yield a conservative estimate of the quantity of interest. Using this simulation technique, it is impossible to estimate how parties would have campaigned and how salient the nuclear power issue would have been if incumbent parties had not shifted their policy position. Provided the 2010 positions on nuclear power, policy distances would have been larger and anti-nuclear power parties would have had an incentive to campaign on this issue. If anything, attitudes toward nuclear power would have become more powerful in shaping individual vote choice resulting in a larger impact on aggregate-level election results in the 2013 German federal election.¹³ Put differently, if incumbents had not downplayed the nuclear power issue by giving up their pro-nuclear power stance, they would have lost even more electoral support.

Conclusion

This paper examined the electoral effects of the incumbent policy shift in Germany after the Fukushima disaster. Building on the notion of differential voting functions, we anticipated that by giving up their pro-nuclear power stance incumbents may have avoided vote loss. The evidence suggests that the Fukushima disaster rendered German voters, particularly the supporters of pro-nuclear power incumbent parties, more skeptical of nuclear power. Moreover, government supporters were quick to perceive the incumbents' policy shift as real whereas adherents of opposition had serious doubts. By adopting an anti-nuclear power stance, incumbent parties thus could not gather additional votes from partisan independents or opposition supporters but avoided vote loss among their supporters. As the analysis could not quantify the impact of downplaying the nuclear power issue and ultimately transforming it into a non-issue, the estimate of the avoided vote loss is likely to be conservative.¹⁴ We thus conclude that the policy shift of the Merkel government on the nuclear power issue in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster served as a means to avoid likely vote loss.

In analyzing electoral effects of policy shifts that are driven by loss aversion, we proposed a research design that permits to study public opinion in a more fine-grained way than the widely used comparison of election results. Employing this methodology in other cases may show that loss-averse policy shifts are more effective than previous research suggested. By capitalizing on rather fine-grained overtime variation in survey responses, the research design is well-suited to capture the temporal sequence of policy shifts and potential effects. At the same time, it implies that we utilize voting intentions as indicators of actual votes. Assuming that voting intentions are more volatile than voting behavior, it may be objected that this strategy exaggerates the electoral impact of policy shifts. To alleviate this problem, one might suggest employing the simulation technique to data on vote choice gathered in the next election. Leaving aside problems arising from longer intervals, election studies are unlikely to include survey items tapping attitudes toward policies that parties have

made non-issues by shifting policy positions. Taken together, there is no simple solution to the analysis of electoral effects of policy shifts and we thus suggest clearly spelling out underlying assumptions.

The electoral outcome of this kind of policy moves depends on the responses of various subsections of the electorate. At the voter level, we identified motivated reasoning as a key obstacle to strategies aiming at attracting additional votes by giving up long-held positions on salient policy issues. To be sure, leaders might change policy positions of their supporters as the latter are eager to perceive the leaders' shift as credible and to follow it (e.g. Lenz, 2012). Non-supporters, however, will question the credibility of this policy shift and will hardly vote for a party because of its recently adopted policy position. Yet, we cannot take it for granted that this pattern applies to all shifts in public opinion (i.e., triggered by external shocks or secular changes), contexts, policies, and parties alike. Rather, we suggest carefully exploring popular responses to partisan policy shifts in various contexts to better understand the, potentially, conditional nature of voter responses to partisan policy shifts. These findings, in turn, may fuel research on elite strategies.

At the elite level, this analysis builds on several motivational and cognitive assumptions whose appropriateness we cannot take for granted. In particular, by exploring the impact of the governing parties' policy shift from a cost-benefit perspective the analysis suggests that the policy shift resulted from strategic behavior. Lacking appropriate information, we cannot determine whether party leaders acted strategically or were driven by other motivations including policy concerns. Future research on elite decision-making may provide valuable insights on this issue. Even if it turned out that elites did not respond to strategic incentives, this would not invalidate the conclusion that their policy shift served as means to avoid vote loss. Irrespective of this specific question, as leaders differ in risk aversion as well as in motives, time frame, and perceptions of voter responses, future research may explore the interplay of elite responses, events, and public opinion from this angle.

Although this research is plagued with methodological problems (Richards, 1996), it is likely to yield crucial insights into processes of opinion formation in democratic politics.

In this analysis, we capitalized on rather fine-grained overtime variation in public opinion data to explore voter responses to a focusing event and partisan policy shifts. This strategy enabled us to glean new insights into the dynamics of issue attitudes, partisan perceptions, and voting behavior. Yet, the data are far from perfect. The rather long inter-survey intervals as well as the cross-sectional nature of the surveys inhibit more detailed analyses of the individual-level dynamics of voters' responses to parties' policy shifts. To overcome these limitations, data from fine-grained panel surveys are useful. Still, we are quite confident that these more refined analyses would not alter the conclusion that the German governing parties managed to avoid some vote loss by giving up their pro-nuclear power stance in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Attitudes toward nuclear power in the German electorate and partisan subgroups, 2009-2011 (means)

	Apr/May 2009	Dec 2009	June/July 2010	March 2011	Difference (pre/post Fukushima)	May/June 2011	Aug/Sept 2011
Total	0.02 (3.33) 954	-0.46 (3.32) 1005	-1.02 (3.25) 1011	-2.24 (2.88) 465	-1.22***	-2.26 (2.83) 1062	-2.08 (2.85) 1090
CDU/CSU PID	1.72 (2.89) 203	0.79 (3.09) 238	1.46 (2.88) 166	-1.34 (2.65) 92	-2.80***	-1.03 (3.06) 206	-1.03 (3.06) 215
FDP PID	1.14 (3.08) 69	0.39 (3.46) 72	1.10 (2.67) 47	-0.07 (3.21) 14	-1.17	-0.90 (2.95) 37	-0.69 (2.93) 39
SPD PID	-0.58 (3.29) 237	-1.57 (2.94) 221	-1.95 (2.88) 269	-3.06 (2.52) 112	-1.11***	-2.76 (2.42) 242	-2.71 (2.54) 273
Greens PID	-3.39 (1.69) 83	-3.11 (2.11) 55	-3.10 (2.30) 113	-3.88 (1.72) 43	-0.78*	-3.63 (1.77) 166	-3.52 (1.86) 150
The Left PID	0.03 (3.17) 63	-0.70 (3.33) 124	-1.72 (3.26) 113	-1.75 (3.39) 35	-0.03	-2.26 (3.15) 111	-2.56 (2.62) 89
Non-identifiers	-0.13 (3.23) 273	-0.37 (3.26) 244	-0.62 (3.06) 253	-2.16 (2.89) 145	-1.54***	-2.34 (2.73) 263	-1.57 (3.00) 287

Notes: Cell entries are mean values, standard deviations, and numbers of observations. Differences tested using t-tests for independent samples; Significance levels: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. Scale from -5 (immediate shutdown of all nuclear power plants) to +5 (further construction of nuclear power plants).

Table 2. Citizens' perceptions of party positions on nuclear power, 2009-2011 (means)

	Apr/May 2009	Dec 2009	June/July 2010	March 2011	Difference (pre/post Fukushima)	May/June 2011	Aug/Sept 2011
Perceived CDU position	2.17 (2.52) 385	1.71 (2.73) 897	2.61 (2.40) 837	0.86 (3.11) 390	-1.75***	0.35 (2.83) 893	-0.13 (3.02) 892
Perceived FDP position	1.49 (2.70) 353	1.44 (2.74) 862	2.22 (2.66) 799	0.66 (3.11) 364	-1.56***	0.74 (2.94) 844	0.51 (3.13) 840
Perceived SPD position	-0.88 (2.37) 380	-0.98 (2.62) 878	-1.28 (2.40) 828	-2.25 (2.65) 382	-0.97***	-1.54 (2.54) 864	-1.93 (2.47) 874
Perceived Greens position	-3.88 (2.25) 401	-3.11 (3.00) 907	-3.75 (2.28) 869	-3.88 (2.22) 391	-0.13	-3.82 (2.26) 921	-4.07 (2.12) 956
Perceived The Left position	-1.14 (3.07) 277	-2.00 (2.95) 813	-2.25 (2.59) 754	-2.63 (2.77) 341	-0.38	-2.26 (2.71) 797	-2.38 (2.80) 796

Notes: Cell entries are mean values, standard deviations, and numbers of observations. Differences tested using t-tests for independent samples; Significance levels: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. Scale from -5 (immediate shutdown of all nuclear power plants) to +5 (further construction of nuclear power plants).

Table 3. Absolute distances between voter positions and the perceived CDU position in partisan subgroups, 2009-2011 (means)

	Apr/May 2009	Dec 2009	June/July 2010	March 2011	May/June 2011	Aug/Sept 2011
CDU/CSU PID	1.33	1.83	1.74	2.46	2.10	2.21
FDP PID	2.31	1.94	2.40	2.77	2.54	2.56
SPD PID	4.35	4.54	5.53	4.83	4.37	3.90
Greens PID	6.71	6.42	6.56	5.32	4.54	4.96
The Left PID	3.28	4.37	5.57	4.81	4.52	4.37
Non-identifiers	3.98	2.60	3.66	3.91	3.35	3.14
Simulation (assuming CDU/CSU perception of June/July 2010)						
CDU/CSU PID				3.86	3.94	3.95
FDP PID				3.28	3.46	3.13
SPD PID				6.04	5.63	5.66
Greens PID				7.24	7.00	6.91
The Left PID				5.18	5.43	5.57
Non-identifiers				4.67	4.72	4.19

Note: Cell entries are mean differences between voter positions and voter perceptions of party positions.

Table 4. Predicted choice probabilities for CDU/CSU identifiers with actual and simulated party positions

	Dec 2009	June/July 2010	March 2011	May/June 2011	Aug/Sept 2011
CDU/CSU vote share	90.6 %	85.1 %	92.9 %	84.7 %	87.3 %
SPD vote share	3.8 %	10.0 %	1.7 %	7.3 %	5.3 %
Greens vote share	2.4 %	2.5 %	3.1 %	7.4 %	2.9 %
The Left vote share	3.1 %	2.4 %	2.3 %	0.6 %	4.9 %
Simulation results (perceived party positions in June/July 2010)					
CDU/CSU vote share			82.1 %	75.3 %	73.4 %
SPD vote share			3.8 %	10.5 %	9.7 %
Greens vote share			7.2 %	12.0 %	7.5 %
The Left vote share			7.0 %	2.2 %	9.8 %

Notes: Group-specific mean distances for nuclear power issue and ideological self-placement imputed.

Figure 1. Data points surrounding the Fukushima accident

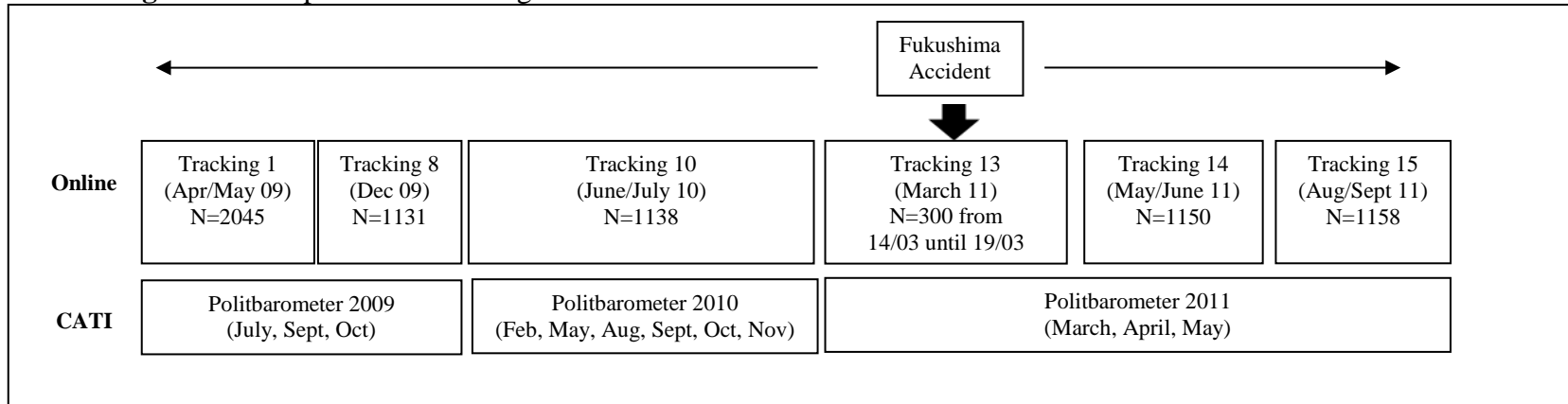
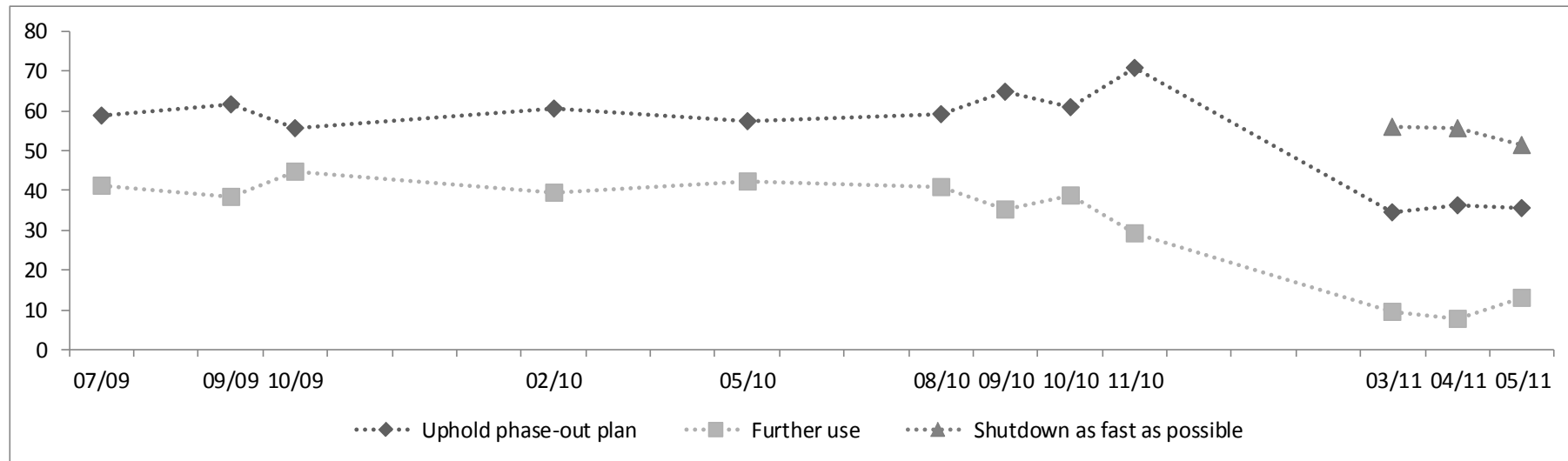


Figure 2. Political events in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster

- 14 March 2011: Announcement of a three-month moratorium for reconsideration of nuclear power
- 15 March 2011: Temporally shut-down of the seven oldest power plants
- 15 April 2011: Announcement of Chancellor Merkel to prepare phase-out bills
- 30 June 2011: Parliamentary decision on permanent shutdown of seven oldest power plants and complete phase-out by 2022

Figure 3. Evaluations of nuclear power, 2009-2011 (CATI surveys)



Notes: Although there is no information on several intervening months, we connected the results for the sake of visualization. Differences in question wording between the years are documented in the appendix.

Appendix

Question wording (Online data)

Party positions on nuclear power

‘And what positions do the political parties hold on nuclear power? Should more nuclear power stations be built or do they prefer an immediate shutdown of all nuclear power plants? In your view, again using a scale from 1 to 11, what is the position of the political parties on this issue?’: Coded from -5 ‘immediate shutdown’ to +5 ‘further construction’.

Individual attitude toward nuclear power

‘And what is your view on nuclear energy: How would you describe your own views on this issue?’: Coded from -5 ‘immediate shutdown’ to +5 ‘further construction’.

Party identification

‘And now let's go back to the political parties again briefly. Many people in Germany are inclined to support a particular political party for a longer period of time even if they occasionally vote for another party. What about you? In general terms, are you inclined to support a particular political party? And if so, which one?’: Dummy Coding of ‘CDU/CSU’, ‘FDP’, ‘SPD’, ‘Greens’, ‘The Left’.

Vote intention

‘You have two votes in the federal election. The first vote is for a candidate from your constituency and the second is for a party. Please tell me how you would vote, if national elections would be held on next Sunday’: Coded 1 ‘CDU/CSU’, 2 ‘FDP’, 3 ‘SPD’, 4 ‘Greens’, 5 ‘The Left’.

Left-Right

‘In politics people often talk of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Using a scale from 1 to 11 where 1 means ‘left’ and 11 means ‘right’, where would you place yourself?’: Coded from 1 ‘left’ to 11 ‘right’.

Question wording (Politbarometer data)

Attitude toward nuclear power (2009, 2010)

According to a political decision, all German nuclear power plants shall be shut down until 2021. But there is also the claim for a further use of nuclear power plants. What is your preference?: ‘in favor of upholding the phase-out plan until 2021’, ‘in favor of a further use of nuclear power plants’.

Attitude toward nuclear power (2011)

‘In the end of 2010, the government decided to extend the lifespan of nuclear power plants until 2035, although it was originally designated until 2021. What is your preference?: ‘in favor of extension until 2035’, ‘in favor of upholding the phase-out plan until 2021’, ‘in favor of shutting down nuclear plants as fast as possible’.

**Table A1. Predictors of government credibility
(Logistic Regression)**

	Credibility (1=policy shift credible; 0=policy shift not credible)	
	May 2011	June 2011
PID (probability for 'policy shift credible', Model from May)		
CDU/CSU PID (61 %)	1.37*** (0.20)	1.06*** (0.19)
FDP PID (31 %)	0.12 (0.47)	0.26 (0.53)
SPD PID (15 %)	-0.77** (0.26)	-0.62** (0.23)
Greens PID (10 %)	-1.28** (0.39)	-0.62 (0.33)
The Left PID (12 %)	-1.07* (0.45)	0.14 (0.40)
Ref.: Non-Identifiers (28 %)		
Political Interest low	-0.04 (0.26)	0.13 (0.26)
Political Interest high	0.03 (0.19)	-0.21 (0.17)
Education low	-0.18 (0.21)	-0.02 (0.19)
Education high	-0.25 (0.20)	-0.21 (0.17)
Age	0.04 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)
male	-0.10 (0.17)	-0.10 (0.16)
Constant	-1.25*** (0.34)	-0.57* (0.29)
N	1518	1580
Pseudo R ²	0.12	0.08

Notes: Cell entries are logit coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Table A2. Perceived CDU position in partisan subgroups, 2009-2011 (means)

	Apr/May 2009	Dec 2009	June/July 2010	March 2011	Difference (pre/post Fukushima)	May/June 2011	Aug/Sept 2011
CDU/CSU PID	1.84 (2.49) 106	1.51 (2.61) 220	2.27 (2.25) 144	0.18 (2.64) 87	-2.09***	-0.46 (2.55) 187	-0.96 (2.56) 196
FDP PID	1.85 (2.75) 29	1.23 (2.81) 71	1.78 (2.11) 38	0.87 (1.71) 12	-0.91	-0.45 (2.21) 31	-0.47 (2.32) 33
SPD PID	2.36 (2.09) 106	2.04 (2.68) 200	2.79 (2.41) 245	1.12 (3.33) 104	-1.67***	0.80 (2.83) 209	0.17 (2.99) 235
Greens PID	3.20 (1.76) 36	2.94 (1.87) 49	3.36 (1.80) 102	1.37 (3.05) 37	-1.99**	0.73 (2.32) 157	0.92 (3.10) 134
The Left PID	2.94 (2.40) 24	2.47 (2.53) 117	2.88 (2.49) 103	1.88 (3.46) 32	-1.00	0.75 (3.31) 101	-0.31 (3.53) 78
Non-identifiers	1.67 (3.13) 78	0.93 (2.87) 200	2.12 (2.63) 164	0.84 (3.07) 105	-1.28**	0.26 (3.08) 182	-0.24 (3.10) 184

Notes: Cell entries are mean values, standard deviations, and numbers of observations. Differences tested using t-tests for independent samples; Significance levels: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. Scale from -5 (immediate shutdown of all nuclear power plants) to +5 (further construction of nuclear power plants).

Table A3. Predicting vote intention 2009-2011 (alternative-specific multinomial probit models, four alternatives)

	Dec 2009	June/July 2010	March 2011	May/June 2011	Aug/Sept 2011
Difference to Parties on nuclear power issue (abs)	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.10** (0.03)	-0.23*** (0.07)	-0.16*** (0.05)	-0.13*** (0.03)
Party Identification	1.62*** (0.23)	2.41*** (0.34)	2.41*** (0.51)	2.66*** (0.42)	1.39*** (0.24)
Left-Right-Placement (Ego-Party-Differential)	-0.24*** (0.05)	-0.21*** (0.04)	-0.23*** (0.06)	-0.21*** (0.06)	-0.25*** (0.04)
CDU ASC	-0.43* (0.19)	-1.14*** (0.26)	-1.03* (0.42)	-0.55 (0.34)	-0.67*** (0.19)
SPD ASC	-0.71** (0.23)	-0.80*** (0.22)	-0.99* (0.43)	-0.18 (0.32)	-0.27 (0.16)
Greens ASC	-0.78* (0.37)	-0.74** (0.27)	-0.50 (0.39)	0.36 (0.30)	-0.03 (0.16)
N	443	506	213	503	526
Alternatives	1772	2,024	852	2012	2104
Log simulated-pseudolikelihood	-318.62	-352.67	-146.81	-315.78	-334.77

Notes: Cell entries are logit coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses; Significance levels: *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$. ASC: Alternative-specific constant; Reference alternative: The Left party.

As the first survey in April/May 2009 used several questionnaire splits, only a subset of respondents was asked for party perceptions. As a result, the sample is too small for reliable estimations.

¹ We are grateful to the reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

² Leaving aside mode effects, relying on data from nonprobability online samples raises issues of whether results apply to the general public. Online respondents were quota sampled (gender, age, education) on the basis of the distributions in the target and the online population. Moreover, we applied post-stratification weights according to the national census (analyses of non-weighted data support the substantive conclusions presented in this paper). These techniques notwithstanding, our analysis builds on the assumption that the nonprobability sampling is not correlated with the substantive findings concerning the dynamics of citizens' policy evaluations and perceptions as well as voting intentions before and after the Fukushima disaster. In order to check the validity of this assumption and bolster our conclusions, we additionally relied on data from CATI surveys in as many instances as possible. Online and CATI samples do not differ in terms of education and political interest. However, in the online samples, supporters of the SPD and the Green party are somewhat overrepresented. As we perform group-wise analyses, these differences are unlikely to bias the results.

³ To be sure, the differences between pre- and post-Fukushima results might be inflated by the change of response options after the disaster because some respondents might have chosen a fastest possible shutdown before that event. However, the decline in the proportion of steadfast supporters of nuclear power is unlikely to be a methodological artifact.

⁴ We assume that party attachments as measured by the standard indicator were not affected by the Fukushima disaster and parties' responses.

⁵ Given the low numbers of FDP identifiers, the respective findings suffer from a considerable lack of precision.

⁶ Results from CATI data confirm this interpretation in terms of partisan subgroups. Before the nuclear disaster, adherents of governing parties favored further using nuclear power whereas supporters of opposition parties preferred upholding the phase-out agenda. After the Fukushima accident, pluralities in all partisan subgroups pleaded for a phase-out or a fastest possible shutdown.

⁷ Party positions of CDU and CSU were measured separately, but are strongly correlated ($r > 0.9$) suggesting that respondents did not distinguish between them. For the sake of comparability to other party perceptions, we utilized the CDU position, rather than a combination of CDU and CSU positions.

⁸ Taking a closer look at the CDU/CSU's perceived policy positions by partisan affiliation suggests that the increase in heterogeneity stems from two sources hinting at motivated reasoning. To begin, the increase in standard deviations in the perceived position of the CDU/CSU (Table A2) suggests that supporters of the

Greens, the SPD, and the Left became less homogeneous in their perception of the CDU/CSU's policy stance. In addition, the perceptual differences between CDU/CSU adherents and supporters of opposition parties increased, rather than decreased. Prior to the Fukushima disaster, its supporters perceived CDU/CSU as a pro-nuclear power party as did SPD and Green supporters somewhat more strongly. After the Fukushima disaster CDU/CSU supporters were quick to perceive the CDU/CSU as neutral, or even holding a mildly negative stance. In contrast, supporters of opposition parties did not change their perceptions swiftly. As a result, the perceptual difference between CDU/CSU and SPD supporters increased from roughly .5 to more than 1. For Green supporters, the evidence yields a similar, although less consistent pattern. Finally, before the Fukushima disaster, partisan independents perceived the CDU/CSU as somewhat less pro-nuclear power than CDU/CSU supporters but from March 2011 onward they perceived it as considerably less anti-nuclear power than CDU/CSU supporters did.

⁹ One may object that CDU/CSU supporters' shift in policy preferences is not a genuine shift but reflects elite cueing or projection effects (see e.g. Visser, 1994). Lacking panel data, we are not able to completely rule out the latter possibility. Still, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster in March 2011, CDU/CSU identifiers were quite skeptical of nuclear power (-1.34; Table 2) while they perceived 'their' party as neutral (0.18; Table A2). Accordingly, the shift in attitudes is considerably larger than the shift in perceived party positions ($p < 0.001$). Despite the limitations of the data, we thus conclude that at least a considerable portion of the overall shift of CDU/CSU supporters in attitudes toward nuclear power does not reflect elite cueing.

¹⁰ In addition, we examined the proportions of voters closest to specific parties on the nuclear power issue, rather than mean distances, in the various surveys (see table B1 on the authors' web pages). The results suggest that some 20 percent of CDU/CSU supporters would have been no longer closest to the CDU/CSU on the nuclear power issue if incumbent parties had not changed their position in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. The results concerning FDP supporters are in line with our conclusions but, due to the low number of observations, require careful interpretation.

¹¹ Because public support for the FDP diminished in 2011, the numbers of FDP adherents and voters are too small to permit statistical analysis. We thus did not include FDP vote intention as an alternative in the model.

¹² Additional analyses suggest that by shifting their policy position, the CDU/CSU could not attract votes from other partisan subgroups. Nor would a non-move have cost it a considerable number of votes (see table B3 on the authors' web pages).

¹³ Likewise, by focusing on party choice and excluding non-voting the analysis is likely to give a conservative

estimate of the electoral impact of policy attitudes.

¹⁴ In the 2013 federal election campaign, nuclear power was not an issue anymore (Krewel, 2014: 39-43). In accordance with this finding, additional analyses of vote choice in the 2013 federal election showed that attitudes toward the role of nuclear power in energy supply did not make a difference in vote choice anymore (see Table B2 and Figure B1 on the authors' web pages).