Research Article

Assessing the Impact of Party Identification in Transnational Election Campaigns: Evidence from the 2019 European Parliament Election

Thomas Waldvogel, Uwe Wagschal, Thomas Metz, Bernd Becker, Linus Feiten and Samuel Weishaupt

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Abstract

Since the introduction of "Spitzenkandidaten" for the presidency of the European Commission, elections to the European Parliament have been characterised by the dynamic between an increasingly transnational election campaign and a national electoral process. However, the implementation of a European election campaign focusing on transnational top candidates remains controversial because it is still unclear to what extent nationally formed political predispositions such as party identification can serve as heuristics for assessing a transnational election campaign. Though TV duels as miniature campaigns directly open up this antagonism, research at the European level remains limited. Drawing on data from a field study consisting of virtualised real-time-response measurement and survey data of 157 participants, we show that expressive party identification as a heuristic is considerably constrained in transnational debates' reception, while being complemented by instrumental aspects such as candidate orientations and ideological attitudes.

Keywords

Thomas Waldvogel, Uwe Wagschal, Thomas Metz, Bernd Becker, Linus Feiten and Samuel Weishaupt

As a climax of political communication, televised debates provide voters with the opportunity to directly compare persons, parties and programmes in a one-evening-event. While TV debates are largely established in national election campaigns in many European countries, this format of political communication was unprecedented at the European level until the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections (Maier, Rittberger and Faas 2016). In the run-up to the 2019 elections of the EP, five televised debates took place between Manfred Weber (EPP) and Frans Timmermans (S&D), the transnational 'Spitzenkandidaten' of the two party families who were considered to be most likely to appoint the next President of the European Commission.

While election campaigns for the EP gain an increasingly transnational character, the electoral process remains national. Though TV duels as miniature campaigns (Maier and Faas 2011) open up this antagonism directly, research at the European level remains limited. This seems counterintuitive since televised debates on the European level between the transnational top candidates of the two party families who are supposed to be most likely to appoint the future Commission President are controversially discussed in political science (for example Schmitt, Hobolt and Popa 2015; Hobolt 2014; Gattermann 2015; Christiansen 2016). Comprehensive research on TV debates at the national level has shown that party identification (PID) is a predominant predictor when assessing perception processes and effects of debate reception. Though the level of party identification has declined in a number of developed democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002), studies show that partisanship remains a powerful predictor of political behavior such as vote choice, voter turnout, and electoral campaign activity (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015), stressing its heuristic function for the perception and evaluation of the political world (Brader and Tucker 2012). Whether this heuristic function also remains valid in a transnational context such as EP elections is so far still unclear in political science research. Consequently, we know little about the extent to which nationally formed political predispositions like party identification can serve as a heuristic for assessing a transnational election campaign with pan-European lead candidates. This article aims to contribute to the research filling this gap.

PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND (EUROPEAN) DEBATE RECEPTION: STATE OF RESEARCH

There is a vast body of literature on the perception and effects of televised debates on the national level (see McKinney and Carlin 2004; Maier, Faas and Maier 2014; Benoit, Hansen and Verser 2003) as well as on methodological issues when implementing real time response measurement (RTR) in the applied research design (Waldvogel 2020; Waldvogel and Metz 2020; Reinemann, Maier, Faas and Maurer 2005; Papastefanou, 2013; Maier, Hampe and Jahn 2016a; Maier, Maurer, Reinemann and Faas 2007). This research on TV debates at the national level has shown that party identification is a predominant predictor when assessing perception processes and effects of debate reception as well as the quality of RTR-data.

In political science research, party identification originally was conceived as an individual's stable affective tie to a political party (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960). According to the concept of Campbell and colleagues, it emerges through political socialisation, for example by parents, friends or membership in political groups, and substantially shapes the perception and evaluation of the political world. Long-term party identification is supplemented by two short-term influencing factors: the evaluation of candidates and current political issues. The perception of these two variables is largely determined by party identification through the "funnel of causality".

Since the introduction of the concept there remains a lively debate on its nature and origins. In this discussion, two competing views of partisanship complement (Huddy and

Bankert 2017). From an instrumental point of view, which is rooted in the rational choice paradigm and stresses utility maximisation as the driving force behind political decision making and involvement (Fiorina 1981; Downs 1957), party identification is the accumulation of evaluations on party performances, ideological beliefs, one's own issue-related proximity to a party, as well as the evaluation of candidates. If these evaluations turn out to be negative, partisans may abandon their party preferences if the party no longer complies with these instrumental considerations. In a complementing expressive approach, which is grounded in social identity theory (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015; Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002) party identification is an enduring identity strengthened by social affiliations. This social identity with a party and its associated groups promote an emotional attachment to the party, generate stability over time in party identification and diminish the political influence of short-term effects on party loyalties. These two complementing perspectives also have a direct impact on information processing and the perception of election campaigns such as televised debates. While an expressive model of partisanship provides a motive for biased reasoning which may result in a selective processing of information, an instrumental model contrasts, in which partisans are thought to impartially consider political information (Bankert, Huddy and Rosema 2017).

Thus, PID is of particular interest for the analysis of perceptual processes, effects and methodological issues regarding research on televised debates. As such, it has been demonstrated that political pre-dispositions, for example the strength of party identification moderates to what extent debate reception affects candidate images (for example Maurer and Reinemann 2007, 2003; Maier and Faas 2003), voting intentions (McKinney and Warner 2013; Maier 2007c; Maier, Faas and Maier 2013; Klein and Rosar 2007; Klein and Pötschke 2005; Faas and Maier 2004; Benoit and Hansen 2004), interest in the election campaign and willingness to participate (Range 2017; McKinney, Rill and Gully 2011; Maier, Faas and Maier 2013; Klein 2005; Faas and Maier 2004), political knowledge and efficacy (Range 2017; McKinney and Warner 2013; McKinney, Rill and Gully 2011; Maurer and Reinemann 2006; Maier 2007a; Maier, Faas and Maier 2013; Gottfried, Hardy, Winneg and Jamieson 2014; Faas and Maier 2011; Benoit and Hansen 2004; Benoit Hansen and Verser 2003) as well as candidate preferences (Maier 2007b; Bachl 2013). Hence, research has shown that the impact of party identification on subsequent variables of debate perception and information processing is far reaching.

Party identification is said to substantially influence candidate evaluations and expectations on candidates' appearances before debate reception as well as it moderates the actual assessment of one candidate's performance in the debate and candidate preferences in retrospect. Furthermore, PID significantly shapes real-time reactions of recipients to the debate as it is conceived in the concept of construct validity and defined as 'pronounced associations between the measured RTR scores and party identification' (Maier, Maurer, Reinemann and Faas 2007: 66), which is a major approach to evaluate the validity of real-time-response measurement. Consequently, recipients seem to watch political debates through a coloured lens (Maier 2007b: 108). These findings on the predominant role of party identification in debate reception are in line with the results of 'classical' research on campaigning and party identification: mechanisms of selective exposure and selective information processing usually prevent individuals from receiving information contradicting their views (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1955). On the other hand, TV debates are considered more deliberative, since competing candidates are able to present their (contradicting) views and arguments to the audience. Consequently, debate research has demonstrated that candidate orientation and perceived debate performances are substantially shaped by RTR-evaluations meaning that PID preforms political attitudes, candidate preferences and their perception but is neither able to entirely block effects nor to determine perception processes all alone.

The emergence of TV debates at the European level is closely related to the introduction of transnational Spitzenkandidaten of the European party families in 2014. While there is

extensive research on televised debates at the national level, studies on transnational TV discussions regarding the election to the EP are scarce.

Dinter and Weissenbach (2015) deal with the democratic-theoretical effects of the 2014 'Eurovision Debate' and investigate the medium-term impact of debate reception on attitudes and emotions towards the European Union (EU). To this end, they combine quantitative questionnaires in a pre-post design with qualitative data from group discussions for 50 study participants. The authors show that the reception of the Eurovision Debate could positively influence the candidate images as well as the emotions and images of the participants about the EU. Unfortunately, the study does not implement real-time measurement to assess viewers' reactions to the debate second-by-second nor does it provide any information on the role of party identification for the effects observed and the perception of the debate.

Maier, Rittberger and Faas (2016) investigate the effects of the 2014 Eurovision Debate on EU-related attitudes of 110 young German voters and they assess the moderating role of political involvement in their laboratory study. Drawing on real-time response data and a content analysis of the debate, the authors find respondents' reactions to the candidates' statements being positive on average. Additionally, for some respondents and a sub-set of their EU-related attitudes, debate reception caused attitudinal changes resulting in more favorable views towards the EU albeit the direct association of real-time responses to candidates' messages and post-debate attitudes was not as substantial as expected. Furthermore, the authors' regression models do not indicate strong evidence for a moderating effect of political involvement regarding information processing, direct debate effects and the association between RTR and EU-related attitudes.

Expanding the aforementioned experiment to 24 countries, Maier, Faas, Rittberger, Fortin-Rittberger et al. (2018) inquire whether the Eurovision Debate met the expectation to increase political competition in order to improve the electoral connection between citizens and EU legislators and thus the quality of democracy in the EU. Surveying 828 young but eligible voters with their quasi-experimental pre-posttest study design, the authors show that debate reception had a recognisable impact on the participants, indicating strong evidence of higher cognitive and political involvement just as considerably changing EU-related attitudes. Unfortunately, the study could not afford to implement RTR in all countries and no results were reported.

The few present studies provide initial insights into debate reception at the European level. However, they do not analyse party identification as a main factor in debate reception nor implement real-time-response measurement systematically in their studies to track participants' perceptions and evaluations second-by-second. In addition, due to their quasi-experimental study design in laboratory settings, the studies' data also might lack external validity (Maier, Faas, Rittberger, Fortin-Rittberger et al. 2018: 615). To reduce restrictions on the external validity of the measurement, virtualised implementations of RTR have recently been developed. With this novel approach, RTR is implemented as software and study participants use their own mobile input devices as hardware to provide feedback in natural reception situations – for example from home – about their current impression of a TV discussion. This facilitates to abandon physical input devices and conduct field studies outside the laboratory. Methodological research has shown that virtualised RTR provides both valid and reliable data and thus corresponds to established standards of data quality (Waldvogel 2020; Waldvogel and Metz 2020; Maier, Hampe and Jahn 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES

This article addresses the guiding research question whether the heuristic function of party identification for the perception and evaluation of televised debates remains valid in a

transnational context such as EP elections. Since we know little about the impact of party identification in transnational contexts we opt for an explorative approach in which we try to inductively derive assumptions from the existing literature relating to our object of research and interest. Considering the two complementary approaches of an instrumental and expressive model of party identification, we conceive three scenarios about the impact of PID in transnational debate reception using the 2019 EP election as an example.

First, characterising an expressive approach, Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) interpret party identification as a social identity. Addressing the question on how people define themselves in relation to political groups, they present their concept which focuses 'on identification with social groups. Social identification involves comparing a judgement about oneself with one's perception of a social group'. As people reflect on their political affiliations, 'they call to mind some mental image, or stereotype, of what these sorts of people are like and square these images with their own self-conceptions' (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002: 8). Assuming that this mechanism of 'in-group identification' is also valid in transnational contexts, party identification may exert an impact by recognising common identities of social groups and the translation of existent political leanings across national borders (Finifter and Finifter 1989). By displaying the friend-foe logic of social identity which is at the centre of an expressive partisanship, we can derive our first hypotheses that we should find pronounced differences in average net evaluations of participants by national party identification (H1) while all partisan groups should significantly be distinguishable by their RTR-evaluations (H2).

Second, by referring to an instrumental perspective, party identification could exert such an impact in a transnational context that shared evaluations of the candidates and their performances may lead to an affective attachment to a European party family, emphasising utility maximisation as the driving force behind political behavior (Downs 1957). Therefore, we hypothesise that party identification significantly shapes real-time-responses of the participants (H3) while RTR-evaluations substantially affect candidates' debate performances and preferences in turn even when controlling for other variables of debate reception (H4).

Third, we may further elaborate this notion and take up the critique by Abramowitz and Saunders (2006) that Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) neglect the role of ideology in the formation of party identification while claiming that consistency of ideology and party identification has important consequences for political behaviour. As such, it has been shown that political ideology is an important factor when adapting party identification to new political environments (Finifter and Finifter 1989). We can therefore assume that, if PID is characterised by ideology (Fiorina 1981), it should be feasible to translate the nationally formed party identification into a European party environment. Pre-requisites being met for this adaptation process at the micro-sociological level, however, are that at the macro-sociological level the underlying axes represent comparable cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) and span an equivalent coordinate system of political parties within the EU (Reiljan, Kutiyski and Krouwel 2019; McElroy and Benoit 2007; Gabel and Hix 2002). If we further relate this empirical expectation to consistency-theoretical approaches (for example Heider 1958; Festinger 1962), we can assume that in a TV debate those contents are perceived by the recipients that correspond to existing ideological attitudes in order to avoid cognitive dissonances. Consequently, from this perspective of political communication research, the expectation is that partisans and their political allies 'cheer their hero and boo the villain' (Sears and Chaffee 1979: 227) meaning that adherents of a particular party should adopt distinct positions in a common perceptual space of debate perception (H5) while positioning alongside established dimensions of political competition when evaluating candidates of a transnational TV debate (H6).

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DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Stimulus: The final televised debate in the run-up to the 2019 EP election between the top candidates of the two party families who were most likely to appoint the future Commission President took place on the evening of 16 May 2019 in Germany. Ten days before election day, Frans Timmermans (S&D) and Manfred Weber (EPP) discussed the most important issues in a debate that lasted 90 minutes. Around 1.68 million viewers watched the debate which was broadcasted live in Germany (ZDF) and Austria (ORF).[1]

Device and data: In order to measure perception processes and effects of debate reception in real time, we have developed the so-called 'Debat-O-Meter', an application for mobile devices with which users can feedback their impressions about a debate second by second in natural reception situations. The Debat-O-Meter is conceived as a 'virtual laboratory' that extends beyond the functional scope of a physical RTR input device. It is characterised by a modular structure, as it is known from 'traditional' RTR laboratory studies, in order to ensure the standardisation of the survey process and thus the internal validity of the measurement procedure. After a tutorial, users are directed to a pre-survey in which they are asked about their political attitudes, sociodemographic variables and their expectations towards the debate. The study participants then proceed to the core function, the RTR module, with which they transmit their spontaneous impressions. The real-time reactions are gathered by the Debat-O-Meter and stored together with a time stamp and the user pseudonym in a database on a server. The Debat-O-Meter is implemented as a push-button system in reset mode, implying that a key must be actively pressed for a value to be sent. Users have the possibility to rate the discussants once every second with double plus (for a very good impression) to double minus (for a very bad impression). For statistical and graphical analysis these inputs are converted to +2 to -2. If no key is pressed, this is considered a neutral impression and corresponds to the value 0. After the debate, the study participants are forwarded to a post survey. At the end, the users receive an overview of their own evaluation behavior for each candidate over the entire debate and for the different topics as well. In addition, the Debat-O-Meter provides a complex security architecture and user monitoring to detect scripts and fend off DDoS attacks.

Sample: During the debate 672 people logged into the Debat-O-Meter. 412 subjects entered the RTR-module by passing the tutorial, completing the pre-survey and gave at least one real-time evaluation whereas about 268 users ran through the entire process, completing the post survey and getting individual results in the VAA-module at the end of the debate. Since our recruitment strategy was based on 'open access' by media cooperation with the aim to engage as many participants as possible, the data selection was confined afterwards to gain an appropriate sample for analysis. Hence, we are focusing on participants who completed the pre-survey at the beginning of the debate, rated the candidates via RTR and filled out the post-survey in a reasonable time span.[2] Additionally, we eliminated cases whose rating behaviour refuted sincere, human participation and who resided outside of Germany.[3] Therefore, we are confident to attain data which structure and quality come close to that of a regular lab setting. After applying our data quality criteria, we remain with 157 cases.

Looking at the demographics, we see a sample characterised by males (65.8 per cent) and older people (62.6 per cent being 40 year or older) with a high degree of formal education (77.4 per cent graduating college or university) and a substantial interest in politics (89.7 per cent). The spatial representation differs considerably and ranges from about 32 per cent in Baden-Württemberg to 1 per cent in Hamburg, although we have reached participants in all federal states. As such, our sample is neither representative for Germany nor for distinct groups of voters. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that the relative small and self-selecting group of respondents is a limited basis for making very strong, broad conclusions. Nevertheless, our design is appropriate to assess whether national formed party identification can serve as a predictor of information processing and effects of a transnational televised debate.

RESULTS

Distinguishing Partisan Groups by RTR Evaluations

A first approach to examine the extent to which nationally formed party identification can serve as a heuristic to assess a transnational election campaign is to analyse the average net evaluations of participants by partisan attachment (H1). To this end, we calculated the net number of votes cast for each politician for all participants excluding those who had skipped the question on partisanship or who had mentioned 'other' parties which leaves us with 144 cases. If the underlying friend-foe logic of social identity which is at the centre of an expressive partisanship (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002) is also valid in the context of transnational debate's reception, we can derive the following assumptions about the relationship between RTR-score and PID. Adherents of the SPD and CDU/CSU should clearly evaluate the representative of their own party family positively while the opposing candidate is strongly rejected. A similar logic should apply to the two traditional allies of the two parties. Green adherents favour Timmermans over Weber while this relation should be reversed for FDP adherents. At the same time, support or rejection should be less pronounced than among the candidates' own supporters. Adherents of Die LINKE should also rate Timmermans better than Weber but less clearly than the Greens because a protest attitude rivalry to the Social Democrats is part of the party's DNA. Weber's rejection on the other hand should be more pronounced than among the Greens' adherents since they are ideologically farther away but at the same time should not exceed the negativity of the SPD adherents for whom the friend-foe logic should be more pronounced. Adherents of the AfD should strongly reject both candidates since an anti-EU and anti-establishment attitude is part of the populist nature and founding myth. The rejection of the S&D candidate should be even stronger than for Weber due to the ideological distance of both parties though it should not exceed the opposition between the adherents of the two candidates represented in the TV duel.

As can be seen from Table 1, the expected pattern is generally apparent. A highly opposing evaluation behaviour among adherents of the SPD and CDU/CSU is evident. The contrast is more pronounced for the former while the latter do not clearly reject the opponent. A similar pattern is apparent for the respective traditional allies. For the Greens this pattern is more valid than for FDP supporters. In addition, the assumptions about the association to the adherents of the candidates are mainly met. Interestingly, FDP adherents reject Timmermans more strongly than CDU/CSU supporters albeit this might be explained by a larger ideological distance. Expectations are also largely satisfied with regard to Die LINKE. They rate Timmermans better than Weber although this is less pronounced than among the Greens. In contrast to our expectations however, Weber is less strongly rejected and thus does not exceed the level of rejection by SPD supporters. If we now turn to the adherents of the AfD, we find a negativity towards Timmermans that surpasses all previous evaluations and thus also transcend the rivalry among SPD and CDU/CSU whereas Weber is not clearly rejected by AfD-adherents. While the strong negativity might stem from the large ideological distance between the parties, Timmerman's polarising appearance in the debate and his long biography as an EU politician, Weber's minor dislike could be explained by the fact that it was mainly his party, the CSU, that repeatedly showed interest in the concerns of right-wing populist parties. Although the expected pattern is in principle evident individual assumptions are partially less pronounced than anticipated. In this respect, we cannot completely confirm hypothesis 1. Whether this is an indication that the effect of nationally formed PID fades out when it comes to the reception of a televised debate in a transnational campaign will be examined next.

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Table 1: Average net evaluations (SD) for participants by partisan attachment.

	Mean	SPD	Greens	CDU	FDP	AfD	Linke	No PID
Timmermans	38,0	83,7 (69,9)	71,2 (58,4)	16,3 (54,7)	4,2 (38,3)	-138,8 (175,7)	53,8 (65,9)	68,3 (112,5)
Weber	29,1	-5.6 (32,7)	8,9 (51,9)	67,4 (80,1)	57,8 (118,3)	36,4 (84,3)	10,7 (32,2)	74,2 (111,3)

In order to verify whether all groups can in fact be distinguished from each other (H2), we perform Kruskal-Wallis rank sum tests with post-hoc multiple comparisons. Our results show that the distinct partisan groups are only partially distinguishable in the post hoc comparisons at a significance level of 0.05. Regarding the RTR ratings for Timmermans, only eight out of 21 pairwise group differences are significant. While the evaluation behavior of AfD adherents is largely distinct and the distinguishability only to CDU/CSU and FDP adherents fades out (but may be explained by the proximity in the same political camp), the picture for the other parties is more ambiguous. While Greens can additionally be distinguished from FDP and CDU/CSU adherents, this also applies to both partisan groups compared to SPD supporters whereas adherents of Die LINKE do not show any further distinguishability. Looking at the real-time ratings for Weber, a low level of distinctiveness remains and is even more apparent. Only four out of 21 pairwise group differences are significant. Thus, Greens can be distinguished from CDU/CSU adherents while the latter have a distinct evaluation behavior towards Die LINKE and SPD supporters with social democrats, in turn, clearly differing from individuals without a partisanship. It is evident that party identification is not a good predictor to distinguish partisan groups consistently. Regarding Weber's evaluations, only the CDU/CSU-adherents can be clearly distinguished from the center-left camp whereas in most other cases relations not only within but also between the political camps are blurred. A similar pattern applies when we look at the ratings for Timmermans. Within the center-right spectrum only the AfD is consistently distinguishable from all groups of the center-left. Conversely, this also applies to supporters of the SPD and, remarkably, to the Greens when we consider the distinctiveness to adherents of the center-right parties. In all other cases, the differences within and between the political camps fade out. Consequently, we only find weak evidence for hypothesis 2.

Connecting Party Identification to Immediate Attitudes of Debate Reception

As a further approach to assess the role of PID in debate perception, we implement structural equation modeling (SEM). Using this method, we verify whether pronounced associations between PID and the measured RTR scores are present for our data (H3) while suggesting that RTR-evaluations substantially affect candidates' debate performances and preferences in turn even when controlling for further variables of debate reception (H4).

To this end, we follow a model that is established in empirical debate research (Maier 2007b) and has been expanded in recent years (for example Bachl 2013). We have reproduced this model with our data for both candidates in Figures 1 and 2 (for a detailed operationalisation and how the single paths are derived see Bachl 2013). Thereby, candidate evaluation is captured as an overall assessment of the candidate ranging from -2 ('very low') to +2 ('very high'). Accordingly, live debate performance is measured as the mean evaluation during the debate (ranging from -2 for 'very bad' to +2 for 'very good'). The same applies to the expected/perceived debate performance. Party identification was operationalised as a metric variable ranging from -3 to +3, reproducing the political left-right-spectrum in Germany. One may argue that this is inappropriate regarding the categorical nature of PID. Thus, we additionally computed our models with a dummy-variable considering this categorical assumption. We estimated all models with

robust standard errors for each candidate separately. In Figures 1 and 2, we merged the results for the respective candidates. We have to note that neither of the four models passes the likelihood-ratio-test. However, as the test has been shown to regularly reject models with a larger number of cases this seems to be of lesser relevance (see Weiber and Mühlhaus 2014: 204). To take the model structure into account, we rely on 'root mean-square error of approximation' (RMSEA), 'standardized root mean square residual' (SRMR) and 'Comparative Fit Index' (CFI) statistics instead. While the first indicator questions an adequate model fit SRMR and CFI show strong values that meet the common cutoff criteria. The four models presented display both standardised coefficients (arrows) and the associated R^2 values (boxes; bold) whereby dummy-specifications are in italics.

Turning to the associations between the measured RTR scores and party identification they turn out to be significant (Path A_3) even after controlling for candidate preferences and expectations on candidates' performances prior to the debate. Coefficients differ only slightly between the models while the beta-score of Timmermans with the metric PID-specification shows a substantial correlation. Remarkably, the coefficients all remain below the level known from studies on TV duels in national elections (Maier 2007b; Maier, Faas and Maier 2014; Maier Hampe and Jahn 2016). This might be a further indication that the nationally formed party identification loses its impact on the reception of TV debates in transnational election campaigns. As such, PID weakens its function to provide viewers with adequate heuristics for spontaneous evaluation of the discussion. Considering this restraint, we find evidence supporting hypothesis 3 that party identification significantly shapes real-time-responses of the participants without being a substantial factor.

To complete the picture, we can assess the associations of party identification to further variables of debate reception. Thus, party identification largely determines candidate evaluations before the debate while the latter seems to define the expectations of the discussants' performances and absorbs the influence of PID. We must be aware that perception processes in our model are conceived in two ways. The RTR captures the spontaneous impressions of the debate while the question about debate performance in the post-survey is a reflective variation on a similar issue. Both concepts should therefore be empirically correlated. This correlation has been repeatedly proven in research on televised debates at the national level (Reinemann, Maier, Faas and Maurer 2005). If we study our models, we see that 'debate performance (RTR)' and 'perceived debate performance' after the debate are significantly and substantially correlated, even if we control for further variables of debate reception. As such, the reflected perception of the debate after reception is primarily a function of the spontaneous impressions during the debate (RTR) whereby these are preformed by candidate evaluations and expectations before the debate rather than by an expressive party identification. Furthermore, party identification is not able to affect candidate evaluation after the debate. Instead, candidate preference in retrospect is significantly influenced by spontaneous debate reactions (RTR), by candidate evaluation before the debate and the perception of debate performance after the discussion. This might speak for an instrumental approach of partisanship overall. In a way, our results contrast to findings from other studies on televised debates at the national level where expressive party identification indeed influences candidate preferences after the debate (Waldvogel 2020). This may therefore be interpreted as a further indication for present constraints of expressive PID in transnational debates' reception and for an instrumental approach. The findings outlined differ slightly between our models for both candidates whereby the role of expressive party identification on debate perception seems less clear for Weber. Taken together, our findings suggest hypothesis 4 to be valid: RTR-evaluations might substantially affect candidates' debate performances and preferences. However, we require further investigation on the role of expressive and instrumental party identification in debate perception.
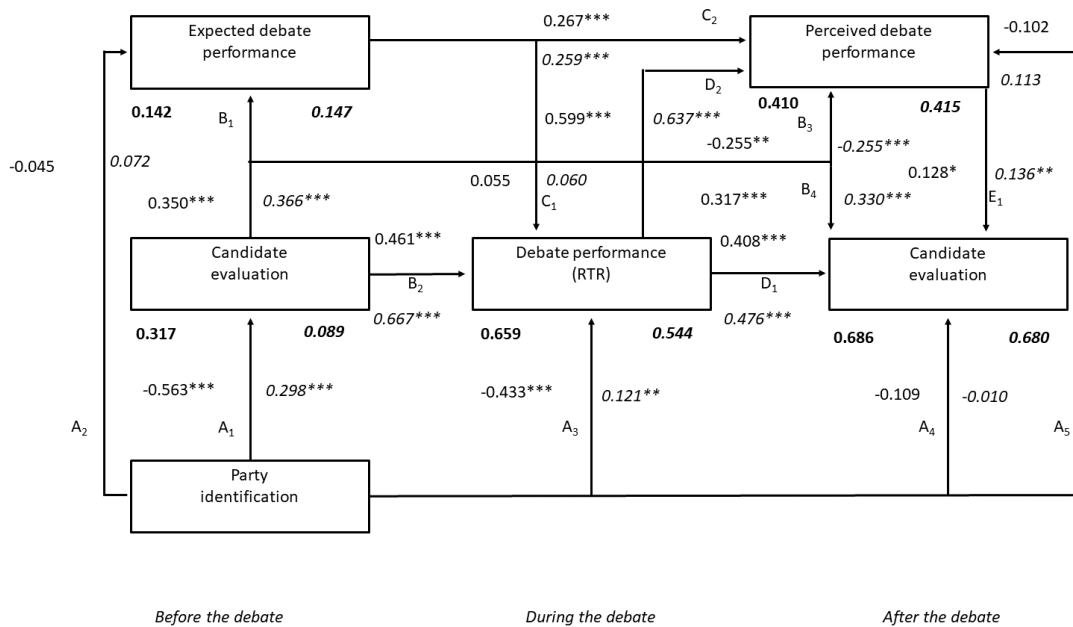
Figure 1: Structural equation model - Manfred Weber.
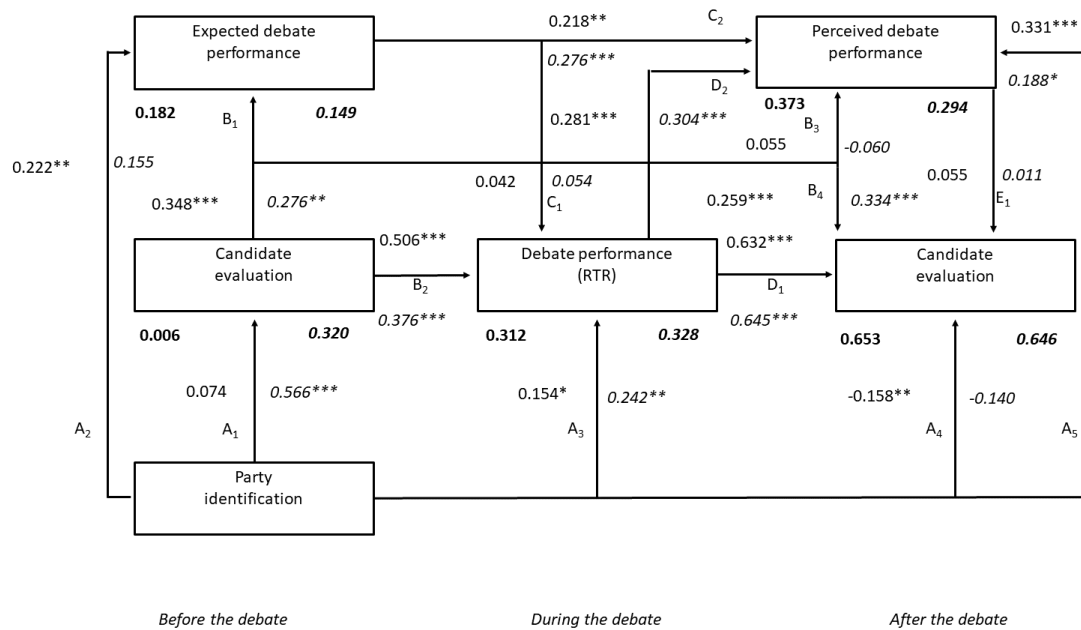
PID metric: N=104; χ²=3.602; p=0.058; RMSEA=0.158; SRMR=0.018; CFI=0.986

PID-Dummy: N=104; χ²=2.634; p=0.105; RMSEA=0.125; SRMR=0.017; CFI=0.992

Figure 2: Structural equation model - Frans Timmermans.

PID metric: N=104; χ²=3.720; p=0.054; RMSEA=0.162; SRMR=0.017; CFI=0.991

PID-Dummy: N=104; χ²=3.478; p=0.062; RMSEA=0.154; SRMR=0.018; CFI=0.992

Mapping Partisan Groups in a Common Perceptual Space of Debate Reception

To this end, we abandon analysing the aggregated average scores of the real-time responses throughout the debate – as we have done so far – and proceed with a more in depth perspective by examining the reactions to each of the candidates' statements. For this purpose, we implement multidimensional scaling (MDS).[4] To do this we make use of the fact that the RTR data does not only provide information about the relation between participants and candidates. Rather, the data contains information on how (dis-)similar the study participants are to one another in terms of whether they agree in their evaluations to the candidates' statements. With this information, the data can be used to extract and visualise the overall pattern of these (dis-)similarities in evaluation behaviour among the participants. This provides the opportunity to draw a common perceptual space of debate reception of the participants.

Figure 3: MDS with bootstrapping by partisan groups.
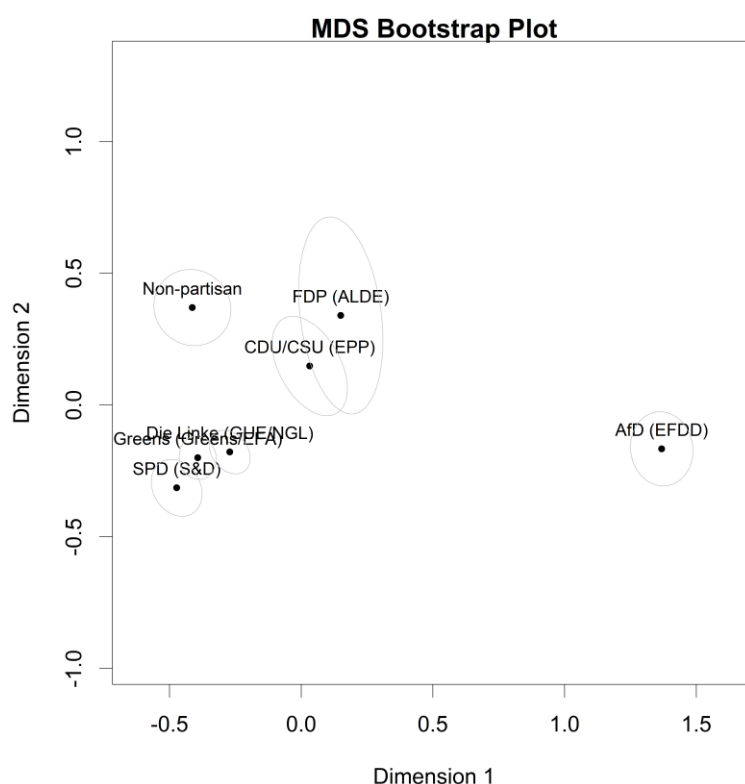
Since the representation of all 157 participants prevents a straightforward interpretation and clutters the plot, we have condensed the RTR-data. For each item we have calculated the average rating of a particular group, split by party identification. These form the basis for the positions in the MDS shown in Figure 3. In order to investigate the distinguishability of these positions, we apply a bootstrapping algorithm to the scaling results which makes it possible to obtain confidence intervals for the positions of the single partisan groups (Jacoby and Armstrong 2014).

By implementing MDS on RTR-data we hypothesise that the overall pattern displayed in the MDS-configuration is mainly structured by party identification. We therefore expect the individual partisan groups to be positioned in distinct segments of the MDS-map, reflecting known patterns of the German party system. The generated structure of the common perceptual space seems valid overall (Figure 3). We see a leftist camp formed by supporters of the SPD, Die LINKE and the Greens. These adherents seem to have perceived the debate in a similar way. As a second group, CDU/CSU and FDP supporters are assorted together. Those who have no party identification come close to the two aforementioned

groups with a somewhat greater proximity to the conservative camp. Adherents of the AfD, on the other hand, are located far apart from all others, reflecting their overall opposition towards the 'established' parties. Assuming that the nationally formed PID can be considered a heuristic for the perception of transnational debates, the individual partisan groups should take distinct positions in the perceptual space. To assess whether this is the case we can refer to the bootstrapping results. If party identification as a filter leads to distinct perceptions, this should also be reflected in clearly distinguishable positions in the MDS; in short, the ellipsoids should not have any intersections. As we see from Figure 3, the MDS configuration clearly separates the political camps. However, we can also observe from the ellipsoids that there are significant overlaps within the political camps. Supporters of the SPD and Die LINKE cannot be clearly distinguished whereas the latter form an intersection with the Greens. The overlap of the ellipsoids is even stronger in the conservative camp where adherents of the CDU/CSU and FDP show very similar perceptions. If we further relate to the 95 per cent confidence intervals (ellipsoids) for the positions of the partisan groups based on the bootstrapping procedure, it can also be stated that people without party identification and AfD-adherents take unique positions in the perceptual space but also oppose each other clearly, since they show the largest distance apart. Against this background, we might have evidence that expressive PID can serve as an adequate heuristic to define perceptions between the political camps but that its effect within these groups clearly loses its impact. Consequently, our findings show no evidence supporting hypothesis 5 as adherents of distinct partisan groups do not adopt distinct positions in the common perceptual space of debate perception (H5).

In hypothesis 6 we derived the assumption that partisan groups should be positioned alongside established dimensions of political competition when evaluating candidates of a transnational TV debate. We suggested that for the adaptation process of PID to transnational contexts at the micro-sociological level the pre-requisite has to be met that at the macro-sociological level the underlying axes represent established cleavages of political competition. But how can the dimensions that compose our common perceptual space be interpreted? It is important to note that the dimensions generated are solely products of the statistical method and are extracted in a manner that captures the maximum variation of the data on the interrelations between the single partisan groups. However, they have no inherent meaning. Rather, the meaning has to be reasonable on the basis of the group coordinates on these dimensions. In order to perform this task, one can take advantage of the fact that the raw data contain not only information about the (dis-)similarities between the partisan groups but also information about their positions on the individual candidate statements (items). By regressing the extracted dimensions (with the coordinates as values for the cases) to individual policy items, it is possible to understand how these items are linked to the extracted dimensions (Borg and Groenen 2005). The use of standardised coefficients from these regressions provides for the projection of vectors into the generated perceptual space. These vectors differ in their angle to the axes, depending on their relation to them.

Including all 104 items in the graph would lead to cluttered plots. We have thus chosen two approaches to map the items in a way that allow for an interpretation of the dimensionalities (König and Waldvogel 2018). First, the items with the highest explanatory power (explained variance) for each topic were projected into the configuration (Figure 4A). Second, we project those vectors that represent the topic-specific average vector over all items for each topic, for example taking the average vector from all items of climate policy (Figure 4B).

If we look at Figures 4A and 4B we first notice that the lower right quadrant of the common perception space in which the AfD adherents are located remains totally deserted. This may reflect the issue-related opposition of this group to all others. If we take a closer look at the single items in Figure 4A, we see on the side of the leftist camp topics of civil rights (copyright protection on the internet, violations of rule of law) and welfare state (EU

unemployment reinsurance). These stand in contrast to the demand for stricter control of the EU's external border, a topic that also affects AfD adherents. On the other hand, statements about the expansion of an EU army and the rejection of a coalition in the EP that would bring the opposing candidate into the office of EU-Commission President point in the direction of the conservative camp. Oscillating between left-wing and conservative camps are claims on Iran policy, calling for Israel's interests to be taken into account, statements which take a positive view of the nuclear phase-out and which point to the risks of a Brexit while rejecting a 'Dexit' for Germany. These statements can thus be regarded as fairly uncontroversial between the established political camps and for those without party identification but are in strong opposition to the concerns of AfD adherents. Turning to the topic-specific average vectors displayed in Figure 4B, we can verify the oscillating character of most issues between the established political camps that point in the direction of people without a party affiliation. As such, the perceptual space seems to be less confined by the controversy over single issues and statements between these two established camps but rather defined in a general opposition to AfD-adherents. Summarising our observations from both figures, it seems that it is less issue-related positions that define the dimensionality of the perceptual space but rather ideological stances on pro- versus anti-EU which leads to a complex structure of left and conservative camps, participants without PID and the more distant AfD adherents. We can relate this finding with our prior observations on a decline of the impact of party identification in transnational debates' reception. Neither in Figures 4A or 4B are we able to identify traditional cleavages spanning the political space as we would expect them from a sociological perspective (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The micro-sociological finding on party identification in the previous subsections thus finds its analogy in the macro-sociological consideration of the political perceptual space. Thus, our findings do not indicate support for hypothesis 6 as partisan groups do not position alongside established dimensions of political competition when evaluating candidates of a transnational TV debate.

Figure 4A (left): Perceptual space of debate reception. (A) Selected items as property vectors.
Figure 4B (right): Perceptual space of debate reception. (B) Topic-specific property vectors.
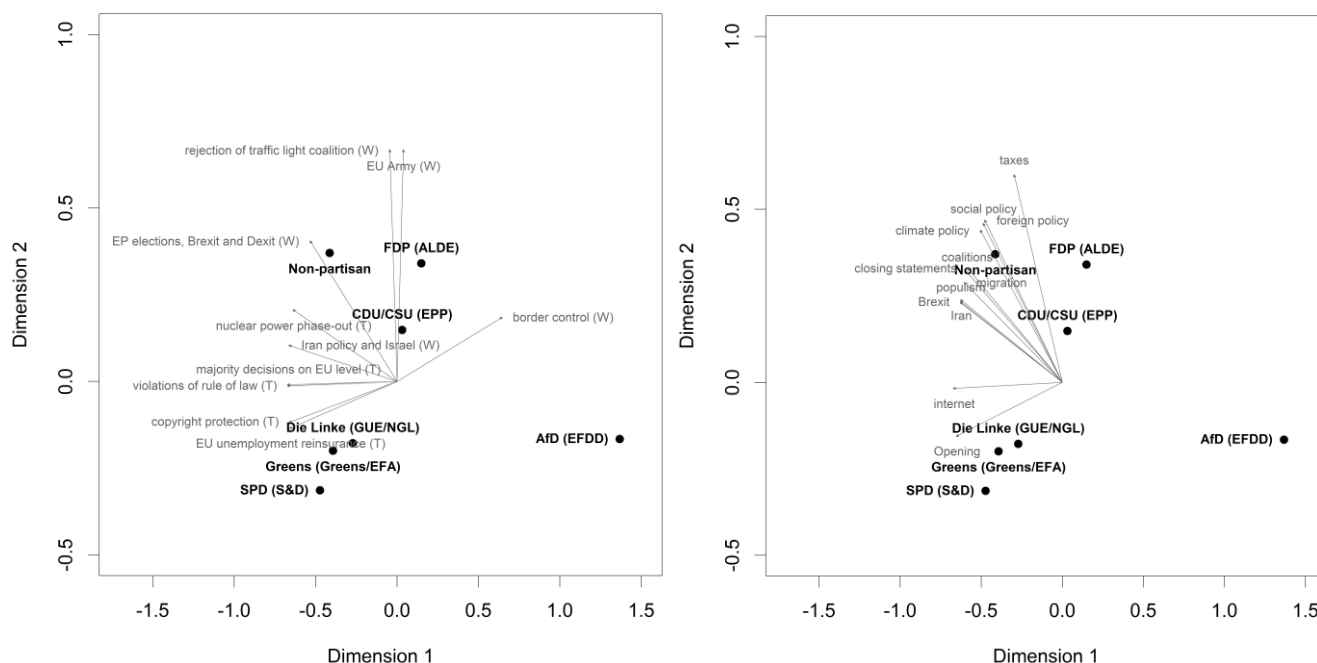
CONCLUSION

As miniature campaigns, TV duels on the EU level reveal the antagonism of an increasingly transnational election campaign and a national election process. Being climaxes of political communication, televised debates allow a detailed investigation of perception processes and effects on their recipients. Thus, using the TV duel between Frans Timmermans (S&D) and Manfred Weber (EPP) as an example we have examined whether nationally formed party identification can serve as a heuristic for the perception and effect of duel reception in transnational contexts.

Drawing on data from a field study consisting of virtualised real-time-response measurement and survey data of 157 participants we first showed average net evaluations of our participants being systematically shaped by partisan attachment although the assumed patterns about the group relations were less clear than expected. Moreover, we showed party identification to have a fairly consistent effect for the discrimination of the political camps while failing to reveal group differences within the political camps. In a further step, we verified associations between party identification and the measured RTR scores to be present and significant even after controlling for other variables of debate reception. Noticeably, all calculated coefficients remained below the level known from studies on TV duels in national elections which we took as a further indication that the nationally formed party identification loses its heuristic impact for the reception of TV debates in transnational election campaigns. Assessing the impact of party identification on subsequent variables of debate reception we found a consistent pattern which partly confirms the structures of debate perception known from studies on national TV debates with several restrictions on the PID's role in the reception process. As such, party affiliation was neither able to affect candidate evaluation after the debate nor did it predict the individuals' verdicts over the debate's winner after reception which might be interpreted as a further indication to the constraints of party identification in transnational debates' reception. These constraints were also visible in the common perceptual space of debate reception from our participants. As such, party identification failed to discriminate the single parties within the political camps, affirming our aforementioned findings. When interpreting the dimensionalities of our configuration we found the perceptual space to be confined by ideological preferences rather than by issue-related evaluations driven by party identification.

However, our results are confined by a number of limitations. Regarding the use of virtualised forms of RTR measurement there are initial indications that the real-time data collected in field studies are of comparable quality to laboratory studies in terms of reliability and internal validity (for example Maier Hampe and Jahn 2016), while simultaneously improving external validity. Yet virtualisation poses new challenges. While the development of a security architecture to ward off scripts and DDoS attacks is a general IT problem for which various solutions already exist and are also applied in the Debat-O-Meter, the withdrawal from the laboratory also results in specific challenges for real-time-response measurement. For example, we can no longer trace which signal viewers are using to follow the debate. Due to different signal transmission frequencies inter-individual delays can occur (so-called 'playout delays'), which make it difficult to connect media stimulus and real-time response as well as to synchronise the individual RTR data series with each other. However, there are already concepts available based on watermarking, fingerprinting, user feedback and statistical methods such as expectation maximisation that have not yet been systematically tested with regard to real-time response measurements. In addition to these technical constraints, there are also methodological restrictions resulting from our chosen study design. First, the relatively small sample and size of the respective subgroups makes it difficult to generalise our findings beyond the concrete context of the study and to draw broad conclusions. Second, due to the lack of a follow-up survey, we cannot make any statements about the persistence of the effects and perception processes found which are known to be affected

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by media and interpersonal follow-up communication (Scheufele, Schünemann and Brosius 2005; Reinemann and Wilke 2007; Maier 2007d; Maier and Faas 2003; Fridkin, Kenney, Gershon and Woodall 2008).

At the end of our analysis, the question needs to be answered to what extent the nationally formed party identification can serve as heuristic for transnational duels' reception (Brader and Tucker 2012). Our study shows that the antagonism between a national electoral process and a transnational election campaign has a considerable impact on party identification as a predictor of perceptual processes and effects in debate reception. If we refer to the approaches of instrumental and expressive party identification, we find that the affective attachment to a party in a transnational context suffers limitations in its heuristic function. It merely permits a consistent discrimination between the political camps but fails to uncover difference within these camps. In the transnational context however, this indifference seems to be compensated by instrumental perspectives such as ideological attitudes and candidate orientation. This is a strong argument for hosting TV debates in transnational contexts like elections to the EP, even when the concept of Spitzenkandidaten is contested. In this respect, we reject an opposing view of the instrumental and expressive approaches and advocate a complementary interpretation. We therefore agree that 'partisanship likely is a mix of both instrumental and expressive factors, and the conditions under which one or the other model holds sway is worth future research investigation' (Huddy and Bankert 2017). Additionally, ideological preferences must be considered (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006) when assessing the impact of party identification in transnational election campaigns.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Thomas Waldvogel, University of Freiburg, Department of Political Science, Werthmannstraße 12, 79098 Freiburg, Germany [thomas.waldvogel@politik.uni-freiburg.de].

Uwe Wagschal, University of Freiburg, Department of Political Science, Werthmannstraße 12, 79098 Freiburg, Germany [uwe.wagschal@politik.uni-freiburg.de].

Thomas Metz, University of Freiburg, Department of Political Science, Werthmannstraße 12, 79098 Freiburg, Germany [Thomas.metz@uni-freiburg.de].

Bernd Becker, University of Freiburg, Department of Computer Science, Georges Köhler Allee, Gebäude 51, 79110 Freiburg, Germany [becker@informatik.uni-freiburg.de].

Linus Feiten, University of Freiburg, Department of Computer Science, Georges Köhler Allee, Gebäude 51, 79110 Freiburg, Germany [feiten@informatik.uni-freiburg.de].

Samuel Weishaupt, University of Freiburg, Department of Computer Science, Georges Köhler Allee, Gebäude 51, 79110 Freiburg, Germany [weishaus@informatik.uni-freiburg.de].

ENDNOTES

[1]http://www.quotenmeter.de/n/109543/erschreckend-geringes-interesse-an-tv-sendungen-zur-europawahl.

[2]The maximum was set to 23:59.

[3]A multilevel security architecture is embedded within the Debat-O-Meter to ward off manipulation. Without risking compromising the system we can give away the detail that it uses not only measures such as Captchas to distinguish human users from automated scripts but also monitors user behaviour in real time to spot suspicious incidents.

[4]As this is, to our knowledge, the first time that MDS is applied for the analysis of RTR and is not yet an established approach in debate research, we provide a brief description of the basic principles of the method and our implementation in the online appendix 1.[i]

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