

# When Words Divide: MPs as Polarisation Entrepreneurs on the Digital Civic Platform *abgeordnetenwatch.de* \*

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Emotional language in elite communication plays a central role in shaping affective polarization. We argue that actors at the ideological fringes function as polarization entrepreneurs, employing more negative emotional tone to widen affective distance, whereas centrist MPs, constrained by coalition bargaining and median-voter incentives, tend to respond with more positive emotional tone. We test these claims in a setting where citizens, not elites, set the agenda: more than 250,000 publicly archived, moderated question-answer exchanges on the German platform *Abgeordnetenwatch.de* (2005-2024). The platform's citizen-initiated, content-moderated design allows us to observe elite responsiveness without algorithmic amplification or uncontrolled incivility. We measure eight discrete emotions using a transformer-based classifier and analyse dyadic emotional reciprocity between questions and replies, before turning to a difference-in-differences design that exploits the COVID-19 onset as a polarising shock. We demonstrate that fringe parties disproportionately mirror or amplify negative affect, whereas centrist parties systematically adopt more positive tones. Substantively, our findings link micro-level choices in elite replies to macro-level patterns of democratic cohesion, contributing to research on elite communication, emotional politics, and digital constituency service.

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# 1. Throwing the First Stone: Emotional Entrepreneurship and the Politics of Division

In contemporary democracies, Members of Parliament (MPs) are not just legislators but emotional entrepreneurs who help define the moral boundaries of public life. Their words can ignite resentment or inspire restraint, transforming legitimate debate into emotional conflict—or defusing hostility before it spreads. Every exchange with citizens, whether online or in person, becomes a test of how representatives use their communicative power: to divide or to connect. As affective polarisation deepens across democracies, understanding when and why MPs employ a range of emotions is central to explaining how democratic communication fractures or holds together.

This paper examines how MPs’ emotional language either fosters or prevents affective polarisation in direct interactions with citizens. We develop a theory that explains how politicians strategically deploy the full repertoire of emotions to shape the emotional climate of democratic communication. Our theoretical framework connects spatial models of party competition with recent advances in measuring discrete emotions (Widmann and Wich, 2023). We argue that MPs at the ideological fringes have an incentive to act as polarisation entrepreneurs. They use emotional negativity to draw moral boundaries and mobilise loyal supporters, whereas centrist MPs have an incentive to rely on positive emotions to mitigate conflict and preserve cooperation. To test these propositions, we leverage a unique dataset of over 250,000 citizen–MP interactions from the German platform *Abgeordnetenwatch*, which records public question-and-answer exchanges between voters and their representatives. The platform’s design makes it an exceptional site for studying how representatives respond when citizens, rather than journalists or party elites, set the agenda.

We make three contributions to the study of affective polarisation and democratic representation. First, we advance the literature on elite communication and polarisation (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012; S. B. Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley, 2021; Renström, Bäck, and Carroll, 2023) by theorising not only what elites say, but how they respond when citizens challenge them. Whereas most research analyses self-initiated elite communication—parliamentary speeches, social media posts, or campaign rhetoric (Evkoski et al., 2025; Nai and Maier, 2024), our analysis captures the emotional dynamics of responsiveness: how MPs react to citizen emotions in a public and regulated setting. Second, we contribute to the political psychology of emotion by extending work that emphasises individual feelings such as anger or fear (Renström, Bäck, and Carroll, 2023) to a multidimensional account of emotional repertoires. By differentiating between eight discrete emotions, we move beyond sentiment polarity and identify how emotional valence functions as a strategic tool of division or cohesion. Third, we contribute to the literature on representation and constituency service (Sanches et al., 2024) by situating affective polarisation within the everyday communicative routines of representative democracy. *Abgeordnetenwatch* exemplifies a digital form of constituency service: MPs respond directly to citizen concerns, and their tone is publicly visible. Analysing this arena allows us to observe affective strategies where accountability and visibility intersect.

The paper proceeds in five steps. We begin by situating MPs within the broader framework of

democratic communication, highlighting their dual role as policymakers and meaning-makers. For our theory, we outline the strategic incentives that lead fringe and centrist actors to seek or resist affective polarisation and explain how these incentives are realised through emotional expression.<sup>1</sup> We next introduce the *Abgeordnetenwatch* dataset, arguing that its citizen-initiated structure provides an ideal testing ground for our theoretical expectations. The empirical analysis commences with a description of the emotional profiles of parties across the eight discrete emotions. We then examine the reciprocity of emotional tone between citizen questions and MP replies. Finally, we implement a difference-in-differences design to assess how polarising shocks, such as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, alter emotional strategies across the ideological spectrum. The conclusion reflects on the implications of our findings for the responsibility of political elites in maintaining the emotional fabric of democratic life.

## 2. Political Elites as Polarization Entrepreneurs

Members of Parliament (MPs) occupy a pivotal position within democratic systems. As elected representatives, they are both participants in policy-making and public communicators tasked with justification, clarification, and responsiveness. Their outward communications—whether in parliament, in the media, or on digital platforms—form a central link between citizens and the state. MPs are not merely conveyors of information. They are meaning-makers who interpret and moderate social conflict, articulate moral boundaries, and serve as role models for what is considered to be an “appropriate” disagreement. This communicative power renders them key stakeholders in shaping how citizens perceive politics, public debate, and the legitimacy of democratic struggle.

The quality of democratic discourse thus depends heavily on how MPs exercise this communicative authority. When representatives engage respectfully with their opponents and constituents, they can strengthen trust and foster a more inclusive and pluralistic debate. However, when they use rhetoric that moralises political difference, stokes anger, or delegitimises adversaries, they risk transforming ideological disagreement into affective polarisation. Here disagreement over policy positions is replaced by conflict over values, where opposing camps are seen as violating core principles rather than simply holding alternative preferences (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012; Renström, Bäck, and Carroll, 2023). In turn, such elite polarisation is known to translate into the wider polarisation of society, such that citizens begin to evaluate political actors and policies not only by ideological distance but by affective distance too (Banda and Cluverius, 2018; Bäck et al., 2023). MPs, as the visible anchors of party positions, thus have a pivotal role in translating ideological space into affective divisions. Because of this, elites are perfectly positioned to become polarisation entrepreneurs (Vries and S. Hobolt, 2020): actors who recognise and exploit emotional divisions for political gain.

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<sup>1</sup>Fringe and centrist labels are used in favour of “extreme” and “mainstream” due to the subjective nature of what constitutes mainstream, as well as the recent politicisation of the term (Crulli and Albertazzi, 2025).

## 2.1. The role of Emotion in Polarising Elite Communication

The key rhetorical device at their disposal of polarisation entrepreneurs is their emotional expression. Political emotions such as anger, fear, and hope are not simply reflections of underlying attitudes but rhetorical resources that shape perception and motivate behaviour. Experimental and survey research show that negative emotions, and specifically anger, are particularly potent in fueling affective polarisation as it is closely tied to moral evaluation and the attribution of blame (Bakker and Lelkes, 2024; Renström, Bäck, and Carroll, 2023). When citizens perceive that their values have been violated, anger transforms political opponents into moral transgressors rather than legitimate adversaries. Thus, “anger causes people to both lean heavily on their prior dispositions and respond in a hostile manner toward people and ideas that undermine them” (Erisen, 2020, p.11).

Empirical evidence from parliamentary debates confirms that emotional negativity is pervasive among political elites. Using automated sentiment analysis of speeches across six European parliaments, Evkoski et al. (2025) demonstrate that opposition MPs consistently employ more negative sentiment than government MPs, producing affective divides within the institutional core of democracy itself. These findings align with earlier research on U.S. and European contexts, suggesting that elite anger elicits greater public engagement and partisan sorting (Webster, Connors, and Sinclair, 2022). Hence, the emotional tone of MPs’ communication is not merely a stylistic matter. It is constitutive of how partisans perceive and relate to one another.

Some media contexts explicitly reward MPs for emotional intensity. Social media, for example, prioritises engagement, and emotional content—especially anger and moral outrage—drives attention. Nai and Maier (2024) demonstrate that populist politicians’ dark or emotionally charged campaign messages receive disproportionate visibility, incentivising even moderate actors to adopt affective styles. Moreover, Brady et al. (2017) find that political ideas are much more effectively diffused online amongst an in-group audience when emotionally charged, making emotions an excellent vehicle for political messaging. These mechanisms illustrate how individual-level communication strategies interact with technological affordances: emotional amplification is both a cause and a consequence of elite competition. As emotional extremity becomes a form of political capital, affective polarisation becomes self-reinforcing.

Taken together, these mechanisms demonstrate that MPs, as central actors in democratic communication, play a decisive role in structuring the emotional climate of politics. Their unique institutional authority gives them both the capacity and the responsibility to shape whether political conflict remains a legitimate contest of ideas or devolves into affective division. Understanding these mechanisms provides the theoretical foundation for analysing how elite communication fosters or mitigates affective polarisation in democratic societies.

## 2.2. Stoking or Containing the Fire: Emotional Strategies of MPs in Citizen Communication

In the classical spatial model of electoral competition, parties seek to maximise support by positioning themselves close to the median voter. When citizens’ preferences are normally distributed along a single ideological dimension, this “fight over the centre” encourages moderation

and policy convergence. However, when public attitudes become concentrated at the ideological fringes, the strategic landscape shifts. In such contexts, polarisation can become electorally advantageous: parties may gain support not by appealing to the centre but by mobilising emotions that intensify attachment to the fringes of the political spectrum. Actors located at the ideological margins have the strongest incentive to exploit these dynamics. For them, a polarised electorate enlarges their potential constituency and legitimises more radical positions. These polarisation entrepreneurs benefit when the political space itself becomes divided into mutually antagonistic camps. Their strategic goal is not merely to persuade but to *pull* citizens outward, reinforcing the salience of moral and emotional boundaries between “us” and “them.” Affective polarisation thus serves both an electoral and an ideological function: it consolidates a loyal, emotionally charged base while undermining the legitimacy of compromise.

Citizens can be efficiently drawn toward the fringes of the political spectrum when their understanding of social problems and their solutions becomes emotionally saturated. In this sense, emotional engagement makes political preferences “sticky” by transforming them into affective identifications rather than rational evaluations. Building on this logic, we expect that MPs located at the ideological fringes will use emotional negativity strategically to reinforce moral boundaries and mobilise affective distance. These actors serve as entrepreneurs of division, deliberately deploying the full repertoire of negative emotions—anger, fear, disgust, and sadness—to differentiate in-group virtue from out-group vice. Through this process, negative affect becomes a communicative weapon: it legitimises confrontation, moralises disagreement, and deepens partisan attachments.

In contrast, centrist parties generally seek to maintain a unified political spectrum. Their strategic interest lies in preserving moderation, both because centrism maximises proximity to the median voter and because it facilitates coalition formation in multiparty systems. Considering government coalitions depend on cooperation across ideological divides, sustaining a depolarised public sphere becomes a precondition for governance itself. Centrist actors are therefore likely to adopt rhetorical strategies that mitigate conflict and emphasise shared identity or pragmatic problem-solving. These parties thus face strong incentives to use positive emotions as instruments of cohesion. Positive affective cues—pride, empathy, enthusiasm, and hope—reduce conflict and promote a shared sense of representation, thereby performing an integrative function, signalling respect and stability, and counteracting the divisive tendencies of political competition.

**Hypotheses.** From this theoretical framework, we derive two observable implications:

**H1:** Political actors at the fringes of the ideological spectrum will emphasise negative emotions in their communication to drive citizens’ political opinions further apart.

**H2:** Political actors at the centre of the ideological spectrum will emphasise positive emotions in their communication to foster unity and keep citizens’ opinions together.

In sum, the strategic competition over affective polarisation mirrors the broader contestation over the structure of the party system. Polarisation entrepreneurs attempt to divide the political space, expanding the emotional distance between camps, whereas centrist actors strive

to keep the spectrum cohesive. This strategic tension constitutes provides the political foundation for understanding how MPs use emotional expression to either ignite or contain affective polarisation. Our theory advances research on elite communication by integrating emotional valence into the analysis of citizen-directed interaction. By theorising how MPs’ emotional choices either ignite or contain affective polarisation in their exchanges with citizens, we link the micro-dynamics of emotional rhetoric to the macro-dynamics of democratic division. Moreover, our account is explicitly designed for the pluralistic party systems characteristic of most European democracies. Whereas many existing studies of affective polarisation focus on two-party contexts (Banda and Cluverius, 2018, e.g.), we theorise rhetorical strategies suited to environments with multiple, overlapping cleavages. In such systems, MPs may not only attack ideological opponents but also seek to position themselves as responsible mediators.

### 3. Studying Affective Polarisation Based on Citizen-MP Interaction on Abgeordnetenwatch

*Abgeordnetenwatch*<sup>2</sup> is a non-profit digital platform founded in Germany in 2004 to enhance transparency and accountability in representative democracy. It enables citizens to pose public questions to elected representatives at the local, state, federal, and European levels, and to view their responses online. Each entry includes the full text of a citizen’s question, the MP’s reply, and metadata identifying the representative, legislature, and topic of the question. Over time, the platform has evolved into a quasi-institutionalised channel of citizen–representative communication: parties and individual MPs recognise it as part of the democratic infrastructure, and answers are often treated as official statements (Korthagen and Dorst, 2020; Edwards, Kool, and Ooijen, 2015). For researchers, this archive provides a systematic record of dyadic, text-based communication between citizens and MPs, combining deliberative interaction with a traceable digital footprint.

A key feature of *Abgeordnetenwatch* is its moderation policy, which ensures deliberative civility without constraining political diversity.<sup>3</sup> All submissions are reviewed prior to publication. Messages containing insults, defamatory language, or irrelevant content are rejected. Importantly, moderation is content-neutral: it filters for form rather than viewpoint. This guarantees both procedural fairness and comparability across interactions, conditions that are rarely met in less regulated digital environments. The resulting dataset thus preserves the authenticity of political discourse while minimising distortions caused by incivility or algorithmic amplification.

The exchanges between citizens and MPs on *Abgeordnetenwatch* exemplify a digital form of constituency service. In traditional settings, constituency service refers to the range of activities through which MPs serve, represent, and allocate benefits to citizens across multiple arenas—the district, the parliament, and the public sphere (Sanchez et al., 2024). Digital platforms such as *Abgeordnetenwatch* extend this representative function into the online domain, allowing MPs to respond to citizens’ inquiries directly, publicly, and asynchronously. These interactions combine accessibility and transparency with accountability, transforming the private logic of con-

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<sup>2</sup>Literally “MP Watch”.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/ueber-uns/mehr/moderations-codex>

stituency casework into a publicly observable form of representative communication (Korthagen and Dorst, 2020; Schürmann and Stier, 2023). The platform therefore constitutes a new arena for democratic responsiveness—one that enables systematic analysis of how MPs manage their representative roles and communicative tone in response to citizens’ concerns.

The structure of *Abgeordnetenwatch* makes it uniquely suited to test our theory of how MPs use emotional expression to create or prevent affective polarisation. Most empirical studies of elite communication focus on self-initiated output such as parliamentary speeches, press releases, or social media posts (Evkoski et al., 2025; Nai and Maier, 2024). These sources capture what politicians choose to say, but not how they respond to citizens’ provocations, emotions, or concerns. By contrast, *Abgeordnetenwatch* reverses the communicative direction: citizens initiate contact, and MPs must decide how to respond within a constrained, public setting. This quasi-experimental structure allows us to observe how elites communicate when prompted by the electorate, rather than when performing for party audiences or algorithmic visibility.

Furthermore, the platform’s moderation system removes two major confounding factors in studies of online polarisation: unregulated toxicity and algorithmic amplification. Because all submissions are screened for civility, and because content visibility is chronological rather than algorithmic, the emotional tone of MPs’ responses reflects strategic choice rather than opportunistic adaptation to platform incentives (Garzón-Velandia, Barreto-Galeano, and Sabucedo-Cameselle, 2024). This clarity of context allows us to isolate elite-driven mechanisms of affective communication.

Each question–answer pair forms a dyadic exchange that can be systematically coded for emotional valence and rhetorical framing. This structure enables direct testing of our hypotheses about emotional strategy across the ideological spectrum.. Similar to Evkoski et al. (2025), we can model emotional reciprocity—whether negative questions trigger negative responses—and investigate how ideological extremity conditions these dynamics. Finally, *Abgeordnetenwatch* bridges the gap between studies of elite discourse and citizen affect. Unlike parliamentary or media corpora that capture one-sided elite messaging, this dataset records both sides of the communicative exchange. It thus offers a unique opportunity to examine how emotional rhetoric operates in representative interaction, linking the micro-dynamics of affective language to the macro-dynamics of democratic polarisation.

## 4. Data

The data used this paper are all questions from citizens and their corresponding answers from political representatives submitted to Abgeordnetenwatch from its inception in 2005 until 2024. This constitutes 113,266 questions and 90,515 answers. Descriptives of these corpora are displayed in Table 1. The questions submitted over the approximately 20 years this platform has been available, are largely directed at SPD and CDU, yet all parties are represented in the data. In terms of thematic breadth, the dataset categorizes interactions across a wide range of policy areas. Specifically, the questioner can select the policy area most relevant to their inquiry from a total of 54 options. The top five most popular themes are displayed in Table 1.

Variable	N Questions	% Questions	N Answers	% Answers
<b>Total</b>	113266	100.0%	90515	100.0%
<b>Year</b>				
2005-2009	1.800	1.6%	1.526	1.7%
2010-2014	38.438	33.9%	30.896	34.1%
2015-2019	25.907	22.9%	21.835	24.1%
2020-2024	47.121	41.6%	36.258	40.1%
<b>Top Policy Areas</b>				
Außenpolitik	8.366	7.4%	6.434	7.1%
Finanzen	7.904	7.0%	6.253	6.9%
Gesellschaftspolitik	17.756	15.7%	14.276	15.8%
Gesundheit	13.143	11.6%	10.558	11.7%
Soziale Sicherung	6.420	5.7%	5.299	5.9%
<b>Parties</b>				
AfD	3.554	3.1%	2.667	2.9%
Die Grünen	17.664	15.6%	13.877	15.3%
CDU	28.349	25.0%	21.704	24.0%
CSU	8.694	7.7%	6.448	7.1%
Die Linke	7.434	6.6%	6.870	7.6%
FDP	14.669	13.0%	11.525	12.7%
SPD	30.748	27.1%	25.884	28.6%

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of questions to and answers from Bundestag representatives on Abgeordnetenwatch.de

#### 4.1. Abgeordnetenwatch Demographics - Citizens

According to the most recent data published by Abgeordnetenwatch, the website had 2.6 million visitors annually, as of 2022. There is very limited information, however, on who these visitors are. Albrecht and Trénel (2010) report findings from a survey conducted by Abgeordnetenwatch itself between May 30 and June 12, 2007, with 1,037 user participants. The results are compared to the ARD/ZDF telephone survey from 2007, which involved 1,822 respondents aged 14 and older. Their study concludes that Abgeordnetenwatch users are predominantly male, slightly younger, and more educated than the general population Albrecht and Trénel, 2010. Krlev (2018) analyzes data from a January 2016 survey of 745 citizens who used the Abgeordnetenwatch platform. By comparing the findings to the European Social Survey (ESS) data from 2014, Krlev similarly identifies a disproportionately male and more highly educated user base relative to the general population. Yet, this comparison finds that Abgeordnetenwatch usership is disproportionately older than the general population. Furthermore, while political supporters from across the spectrum engage with the platform, there is a notable overrepresentation of Green (Die Grünen) and Liberal Party (FDP) voters (Krlev, 2018).

Our data has limited metadata on the individuals posing questions to corroborate these findings. With only a questioner’s first name and the first letter of their last name, few inferences can be made. To analyze gender distribution, we used a basic name classification tool (Arcos

and Perez, 2016) to identify whether names are male, female, or non-binary.<sup>4</sup> Plotting the absolute counts of questions posed by men and women over time in Figure 1, shows patterns consistent with prior research: Abgeordnetenwatch users are predominantly male. Despite the platform’s growing popularity, the gender disparity among questioners remains present over time.

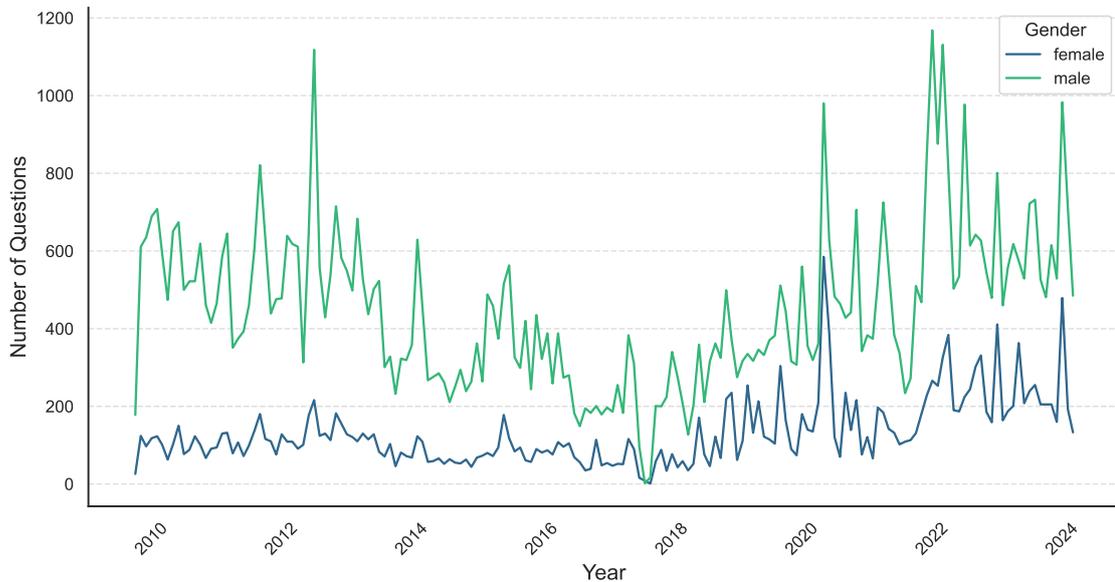


Figure 1: Monthly number of questions per questioner’s estimated gender.

## 4.2. Abgeordnetenwatch Demographics - Representatives

In contrast, much more metadata is available for the representatives receiving and answering the questions. Figure 2 displays the the share of answered questions per MP, grouped by Bundestag party. Although the range of response rates varies somewhat within all parties, the vast majority of questions on this platform are answered. The figure does show that the lowest share of response on average, comes from AfD representatives.

By cross-referencing the representatives’ names with the *Comparative Legislators Database* (Göbel and Munzert, 2022), one can also obtain the age and gender for members of the Bundestag. The first population plot in Figure 3 indicates that female MPs across all age groups receive fewer questions than their male counterparts. Additionally, middle-aged MPs tend to receive the most questions. Both of which likely reflects the demographic composition of parliaments, where younger and female MPs are underrepresented. However, when analyzing the response rates in the second plot, a more uniform pattern emerges. On average, approximately 75% of questions receive a response, regardless of the age or gender of the MP. There is a slight increase in response rates for MPs aged 30-39, but the difference is marginal, refuting the notion that younger MPs are disproportionately active on digital platforms like Abgeordneten-

<sup>4</sup>Notably, names classified as "NaN" (i.e., unrecognized by the classifier) are often from non-Germanic cultural or linguistic backgrounds and are therefore excluded from the gender-based analysis.

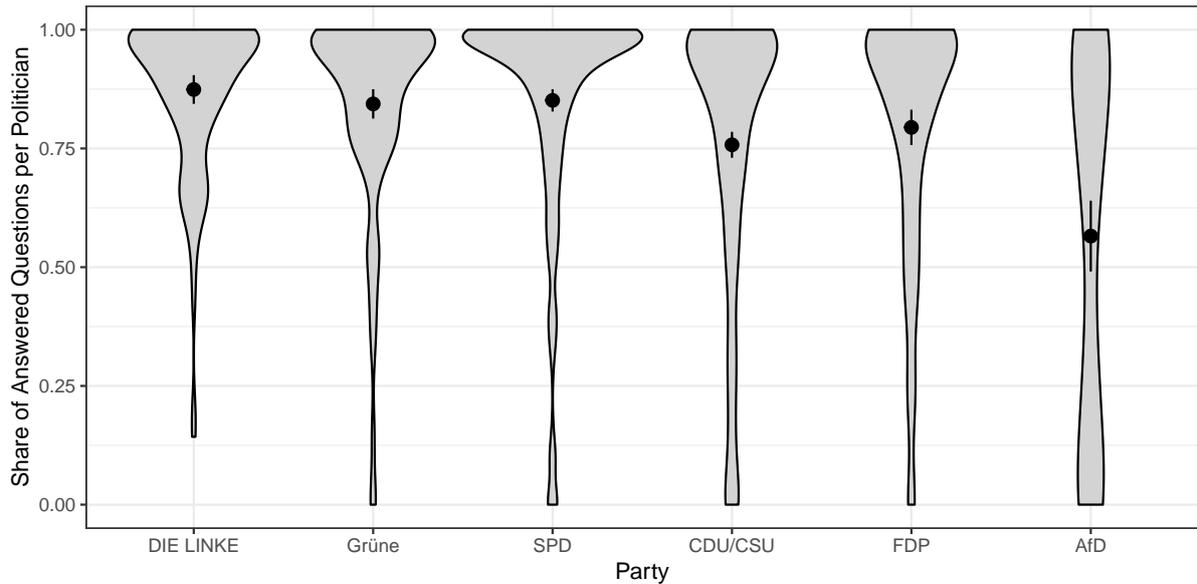


Figure 2: Share of answered questions per MP, grouped by party. Points show 95% confidence intervals.

watch. Finally, plot 3 of Figure 3 displays the speed of responses in days. Interestingly this plot shows that response speed is significantly longer for younger, female MPs, compared to the other demographics. Together, this suggests that, while question volume and speed reflects demographic imbalances in the Bundestag, responsiveness remains relatively consistent across age and gender groups.

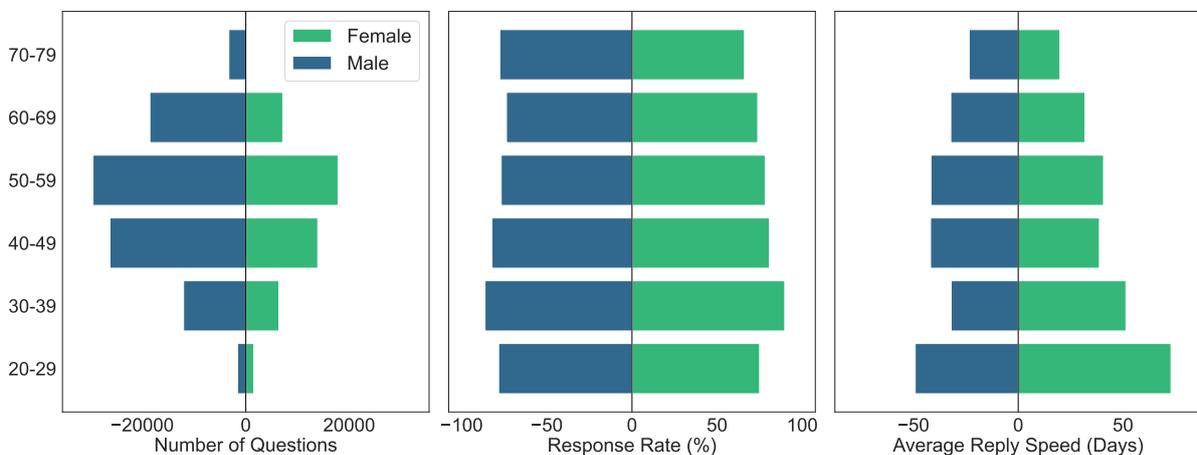


Figure 3: Three demographic plots showing the number of questions, response rate, and response speed of representatives disaggregated by age and gender.

## 5. Partisan Emotional Profiles on Abgeordnetenwatch

Systematically capturing emotions as negative or positive valence in political communication is a well-studied topic (e.g., Crabtree et al., 2020; Marcus, 2003). Yet an increasing number of studies argues that discrete, individual, emotions are a more precise measurement approach

(e.g., Ridout and Searles, 2011; Widmann, 2021). Nowadays, the most common psychological definition of discrete emotions contains five basic emotions (anger, fear, disgust, sadness, and joy) (Ekman, 1999). Three additional emotions (enthusiasm, pride, and hope) are particularly relevant to political discourse (Brader and Marcus, 2013). Taken together, these emotions can be grouped into positive (joy, enthusiasm, pride, and hope) and negative (anger, fear, disgust, and sadness) emotions. We annotate every sentence, from all questions and answers in our dataset with these eight discrete emotions using the fine-tuned transformer model from Widmann and Wich (2023). This results in eight binary variables indicating whether a sentence belongs to each of these emotions.<sup>5</sup> An example of a question and answer pair, and their emotional labels, is an interaction between a citizen and Beatrix von Storch (AfD). On December 24, 2017, this citizen wrote:<sup>6</sup>

*Dear Ms. von Storch, what is your attitude towards right-wing extremism and National Socialism? Why are you defaming the alliance "Aufstehen gegen Rassismus"? Is it not important to you to show civil courage against racism? How do you campaign against racism and xenophobia? Do you not see Germany's historical responsibility? I have been working with young refugees from all over the world for four years. They are lovely young people who are willing to learn, who are currently taking a lot, but also want to give a lot back. They are an enrichment for our country!*

The sentences in this question are classified as emotionally positive (joy and pride). The sentences in the answer by MP Storch from July 24, 2018, in contrast, are classified as emotionally negative (anger and sadness):

*Dear Mr. N., National Socialism was the darkest chapter in our history. Our historical responsibility obliges us to defend civil freedom, democracy and the liberal constitutional state against all forms of extremism. The alliance "Aufstehen gegen Rassismus" is an intolerant and anti-democratic project. The alliance wants to prevent and disrupt freely and democratically elected parties from exercising their democratic rights and even duties, for example when holding party conferences or information stands. This has nothing to do with civil courage, but shows a deeply anti-democratic attitude. Yours sincerely, Beatrix von Storch*

To give an overview of the different emotional profiles of different parties on abgeordnetenwatch.de, we first replicate parts of Valentim and Widmann (2023) based on all 113,266 answers by Bundestag Representatives. Figure 4 depicts the normalized number of emotions per sentence and party. Our predictions come close to findings by Valentim and Widmann (2023), who model emotions found in parliamentary speeches in German state parliaments: On average, the AfD uses significantly more negative emotions compared to centrist parties. In turn, Figure 5 depicts the use of emotions in questions, directed at each of the Bundestag parties. In contrast to answers, we do not find the patterns described in questions<sup>7</sup>. This indicates a much more even

<sup>5</sup>It should be noted that one sentence can be classified as multiple emotions.

<sup>6</sup>The original German text can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>7</sup>The one exception to this is disgust, yet as seen by the scale of the sub-figure of this emotion, it is a relatively rare emotion to be expressed in Abgeordnetenwatch questions.

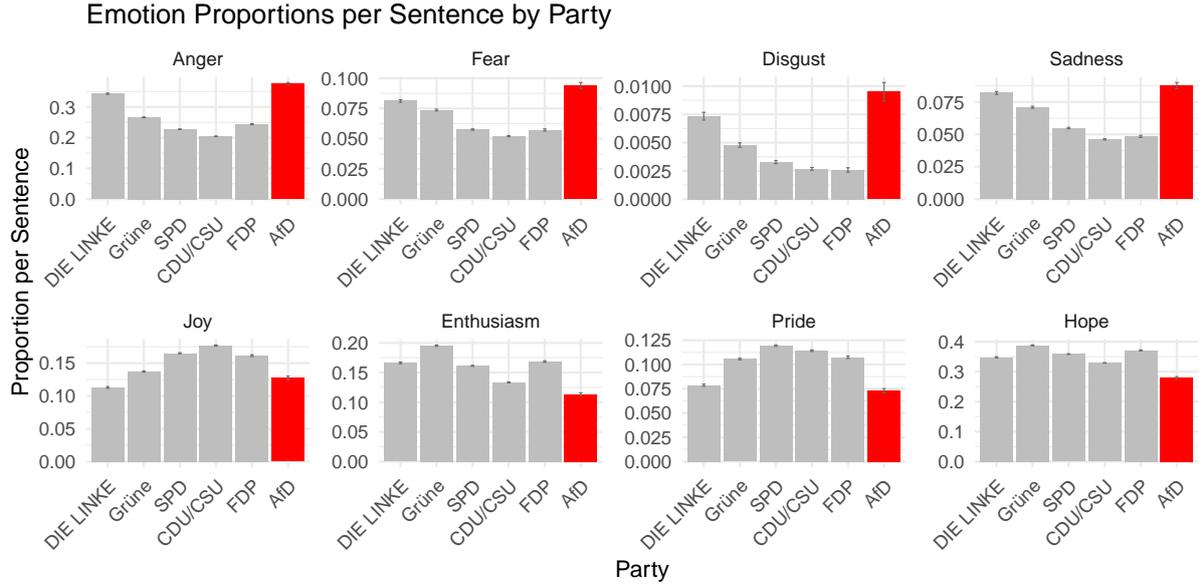


Figure 4: Normalized average share per sentence of different discrete emotions in answers on Abgeordnetenwatch, grouped by party. Including 95% confidence intervals.

distribution of emotions in citizens’ questions, irrespective of the party to which the question is addressed. This even distribution sets an essential baseline for this study: whilst questions addressed to different Bundestag parties do not display markedly different emotional profiles, the answers from representatives do. The radical right party AfD replies more often than other parties with negative emotions while, on average, integrating fewer positive emotions. We also see that the far left party, Die Linke, leverages more negative and fewer positive emotions than the remaining parties. This aligns with what research knows about populist rhetoric (Crabtree et al., 2020).

## 6. Emotional Reciprocity Between Questions and Answers

The structure of the Abgeordnetenwatch platform provides a key analytical advantage: questions are directly linked to the specific answers given by Members of Parliament. This allows us not only to examine the emotional profiles of questions and responses separately, but to model the extent to which the emotional tone of a question predicts the emotional tone of the corresponding reply. In doing so, we observe how MPs navigate emotional cues in citizen communication. As discussed in the literature review above, emotional expression is central to processes of political polarisation. MPs therefore face a strategic choice when responding to emotionally charged queries: to mirror and potentially intensify the emotional tone of the constituent, or to moderate it by adopting a different affective stance. The central question becomes: *How do politicians respond when confronted with positively or negatively valenced citizen messages?*

To address this, we classify both questions and replies as positive or negative when more than 50% of their emotional content is associated with either positive or negative emotions.<sup>8</sup> Based

<sup>8</sup>In later iterations of this study, this analysis will be replicated using the continuous emotional valence measure

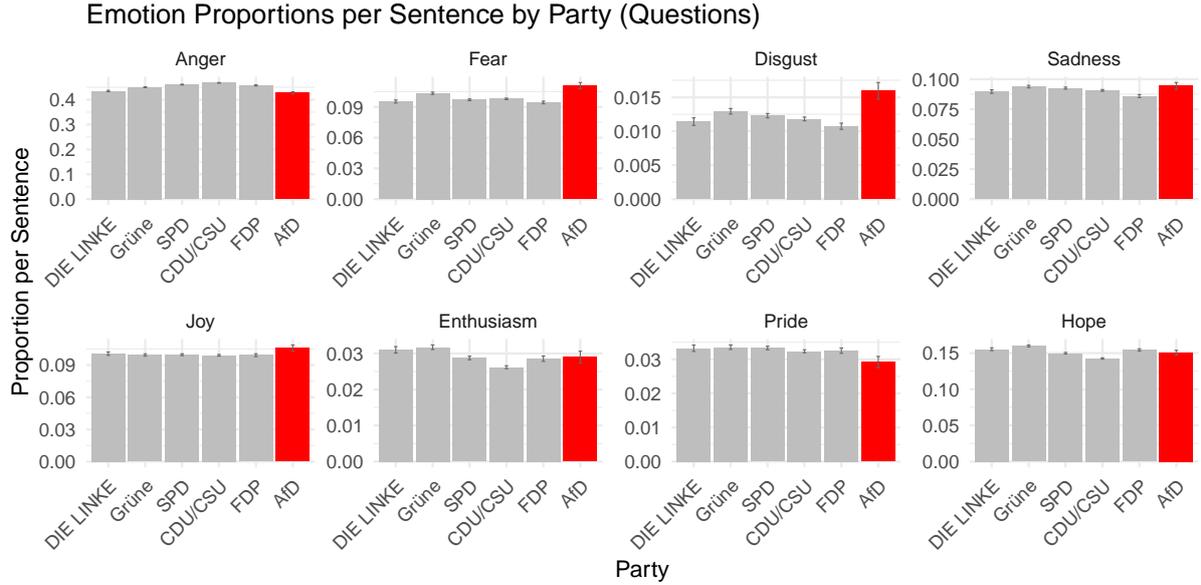


Figure 5: Normalized share of different emotions in answers on Abgeordnetenwatch, grouped by party. Including 95% confidence intervals.

on this classification, we construct two analytic samples: one consisting of positively valenced questions ( $N = 36,646$ ) and one of negatively valenced questions ( $N = 105,509$ ). Unanswered questions are excluded from both datasets. We then estimate two logistic regression models in which the dependent variable is the probability that an MP responds with the *same* emotional valence as the constituent. The key independent variable is party affiliation, allowing us to assess systematic partisan differences in emotional mirroring. Both models include two-way fixed effects for legislative term and policy issue to account for temporal and topical heterogeneity.

Figure 6 presents the predicted probabilities for each party across the two models.<sup>9</sup> When responding to positively valenced questions, most parties, including *Die Linke*, respond positively in approximately 75% of cases. In contrast, the AfD responds positively only slightly more than half of the time. The pattern reverses for negatively valenced questions: the AfD responds negatively in around 50% of cases, followed by *Die Linke* at roughly 40%. This tendency to replicate negative emotional tone is considerably weaker among centrist parties, who are markedly less likely to adopt negative language even when confronted with negatively emotional queries.

## 7. Polarising Shocks and the Escalation of Emotional Response

The descriptive results reported above indicate that the emotional valence of responses differ between fringe and centrist parties. To investigate this behaviour within a causal framework, we employ a difference-in-differences (DiD) design. If MPs representing parties at the fringes of the political spectrum are more likely to amplify or reinforce negative emotions, while members of centrist parties seek to reassure, we would expect these strategies to be particularly pronounced following polarising events. Accordingly, we model the emotional valence of Abgeordnetenwatch

introduced below.

<sup>9</sup>The full regression tables can be found in Appendix B.

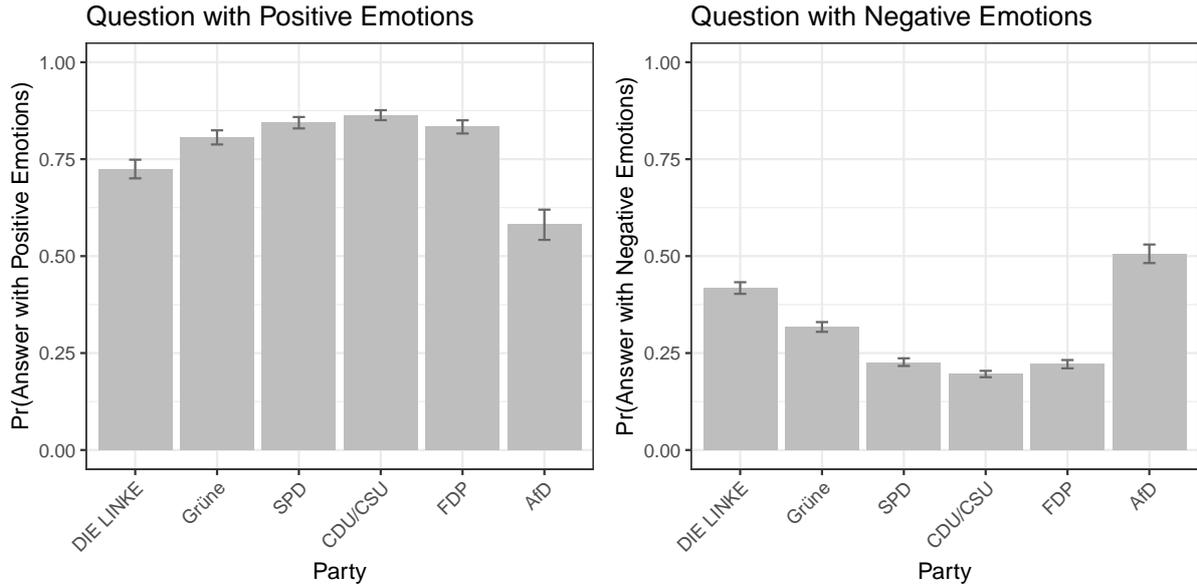


Figure 6: Expected values from logit models (Imai, King, and Lau, 2008) comparing the reply behaviour of parties to questions containing a majority of positive (left figure) and negative (right figure) emotions. The binary dependent variable indicates whether an answer holds a majority share of positive (left figure) and negative (right figure) emotions. Two-way fixed effects on legislature and issue. (N=36,646 positive emotions questions; N=105,509 negative emotions questions)

responses before and after the announcement of the first national Covid stay-at-home orders in Germany.

### 7.1. National COVID-19 Containment in Germany

We define the 8th of March 2020 as the discontinuity in our difference-in-differences design. This date marks the point at which the German federal government first signaled that COVID-19 required serious nationwide behavioural change. Since authority over public health responses in Germany is largely held at the state level, the timing and implementation of containment measures varied sub-nationally, making a single uniform policy date difficult to identify. The 8th of March nonetheless represents the first clear moment at which the crisis was framed as national in scope. On this date, Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn publicly urged all citizens to stay at home whenever possible.<sup>10</sup> This constitutes the first federal communication advocating population-wide restrictions (Hale et al., 2021).<sup>11</sup> In the twelve days that followed, every German state introduced bans on public gatherings and social events. A coordinated national shutdown was effectively in place by 20 March 2020 (Hale et al., 2021). We therefore interpret 8 March as the moment when the pandemic became salient as a national crisis for

<sup>10</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20200723101526/https://www.nst.com.my/world/world/2020/03/572961/germans-told-stay-home-covid-19-cases-pass-900>

<sup>11</sup>Prior to this date, there were two instances of lock-down or restriction measures. First, on 26 February, the district of Heinsberg implemented a local lockdown, having emerged as an early epicentre of infection (Hale et al., 2021). Second, on 29 February, the federal coronavirus response committee recommended cancelling large public events, but only when they posed an “increased risk of transmission” (Hale et al., 2021). Neither of these constituted a national framing of the crisis or mandated population-wide behavioural change, and both received more limited public and political attention than the 8 March announcement.

the majority of the public. It signalled that the outbreak would have substantial implications for social life, mobility, and the national economy, and that citizens’ personal freedoms would be constrained. As such, this moment provides a theoretically meaningful and behaviourally relevant discontinuity for studying changes in political communication between citizens and elected representatives.

Finally, we consider this discontinuity to be substantively meaningful for examining emotional responses because it represents a highly polarising moment. Over the course of the pandemic reactions to lockdown measures in Germany were structured along ideological lines (Schieferdecker, 2021). For instance, a Deutsche Bank report on mass protests in August 2020 finds that participation was disproportionately concentrated among supporters of both the far left and far right (Boettcher and Schneider, 2020). These patterns underscore that the pandemic response was inherently a politically contentious event. The 8th of March discontinuity therefore provides analytic leverage for identifying partisan differences in emotional expression.

## 7.2. Emotional Valence

The dependent variable in our difference-in-differences model is the emotional valence of responses on Abgeordnetenwatch. Building on the eight discrete emotion categories described above, we construct a single measure of emotional valence for each answer. The measure captures the balance between positive and negative emotional content across sentences. For each sentence  $i$ , we first compute the total number of negative emotions  $N_i$  and positive emotions  $P_i$  present. We then sum over the relevant categories:

$$N_i = \sum_{e \in \text{Neg}} E_{i,e}, \quad P_i = \sum_{e \in \text{Pos}} E_{i,e}.$$

Next, for each response  $t$  containing  $n_t$  sentences, we calculate the average negative and positive emotion scores across all sentences:

$$N_t = \frac{1}{n_t} \sum_{i \in t} N_i, \quad P_t = \frac{1}{n_t} \sum_{i \in t} P_i.$$

Finally, the emotional valence  $EV_t$  for each response is computed as the relative difference between positive and negative scores:

$$EV_t = \frac{P_t - N_t}{P_t + N_t}.$$

This measure ranges from  $-1$  (entirely negative) to  $+1$  (entirely positive), with values near zero indicating a balance of positive and negative emotions, or an inherently neutral response.

## 7.3. Difference-in-Differences Design

To examine the causal effect of the COVID-19 lockdown announcement on the emotional valence of Abgeordnetenwatch responses, we implement a difference-in-differences (DiD) design. Parties at the political fringes, specifically the AfD and Die Linke, constitute the treatment

group, while all remaining parties form the control group<sup>12</sup>. The discontinuity is defined based on the date the questions were submitted, rather than the answers received. Unanswered questions are excluded from the analysis<sup>13</sup>. We estimate the model across three temporal windows surrounding the discontinuity: three months, two months, and one month before and after the lockdown announcement. The regression model is specified as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Post}_t + \beta_2 \text{Treatment}_i + \beta_3 (\text{Post}_t \times \text{Treatment}_i) + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_p + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where  $Y_{it}$  is the emotional valence of the response by MPs  $i$  at time  $t$ ,  $\text{Post}_t$  indicates the post-lockdown period, capturing the main treatment effect across all parties,  $\text{Treatment}_i$  identifies the treatment group. The interaction term  $\text{Post}_t \times \text{Treatment}_i$  captures the additional effect of the lockdown announcement specifically for fringe parties. Finally,  $X_{it}$  represents the only included covariate: the emotional valence of questions. Party fixed effects  $\mu_p$  are included, and standard errors are clustered at the MP level to account for within-MP correlation over time.

#### 7.4. Difference-in-Differences Results

Table 2 presents the DiD estimates across three temporal windows surrounding the lockdown announcement: six months (three months before and after), four months, and two months. The main effect of the lockdown announcement is positive and statistically significant in all windows, indicating that, on average, MPs' responses became more positive following the announcement, potentially reflecting attempts to reassure constituents. In contrast, the interaction between the post period and the fringe party treatment group is negative and statistically significant across all windows. This demonstrates that responses from fringe parties became markedly more negative relative to centrist parties, with the largest effect corresponding to a decrease of 0.232 in emotional valence.

Figure 7 illustrates the treatment effect for the two-month window. In the month prior to the lockdown announcement, centrist parties had an average emotional valence of 0.38, which increased to 0.50 in the month post-lockdown. By contrast, fringe parties had a pre-lockdown average of 0.22, which declined to an average of 0.11 post-lockdown. These descriptive patterns align with the diverging strategies of the two groups hypothesised in this paper: centrist parties tended to reassure constituents, whereas fringe parties' responses became more negative following the announcement.

Figure 8 presents the pre- and post-treatment trends in weekly averages of emotional valence. The fringe parties exhibit more week-to-week variability, including a notable outlier during the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve 2019 with a weekly average 0.608 based on only three observations. A formal regression test of the difference in pre-treatment slopes shows that the trends are not significantly different between both groups for the 60 and 120 day windows. The 180 window is significantly different, yet due to these few uncharacteristically optimistic responses. The results of these tests are reported in Appendix C, and indicate that the identification assumptions are most plausibly satisfied when relying on the narrower temporal

<sup>12</sup>These are referred to as the control group for convenience; we do not expect these parties to be unaffected by the treatment, but rather that any effect may occur in the opposite direction from the treatment group.

<sup>13</sup>Unanswered questions constitute approximately 12% of the total.

Table 2: DiD Estimates of Answer Emotional Valence Around first COVID-19 Measures in Germany

	<i>Dependent variable: Answer Emotional Valence</i>		
	180 Days	120 Days	60 Days
Intercept	0.127 (0.087)	0.156* (0.094)	0.149 (0.113)
Fringe Party x Post	-0.118** (0.054)	-0.130** (0.057)	-0.232*** (0.090)
Post-Lockdown	0.085*** (0.022)	0.070** (0.032)	0.135*** (0.042)
Question Emotional Valence	0.091*** (0.014)	0.096*** (0.018)	0.087*** (0.032)
Observations	4266	2417	871
$R^2$	0.116	0.095	0.085
Adjusted $R^2$	0.114	0.092	0.076

*Note:*

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

windows.

In the post treatment trends, following the lockdown announcement, a clear divergence emerges between the two groups. Emotional valence in replies from fringe parties declines sharply in the weeks after 8 March. This growing disparity persists until mid-April, with the first easing of lockdown measures in Germany (Hale et al., 2021).

## 7.5. Robustness: Emotional Reciprocity

A potential concern is that the observed divergence in MP responses may simply reflect a change in the emotional tone of the questions they received. If constituents became more anxious or frustrated after the announcement of the first COVID-19 measures, MPs might merely be mirroring this shift rather than actively adopting an emotional strategy. To assess this possibility, we re-estimate the difference-in-differences models using the emotional valence of the questions as the dependent variable.

Table 3 reports the results across the same temporal windows. For the 120- and 60-day windows, the post-lockdown coefficient is negative and statistically significant (-0.134 and -0.113, respectively), indicating that questions became more negative following the lockdown announcement. This likely reflects constituents expressing heightened concern or uncertainty in response to rapidly evolving public health restrictions. At the same time, the interaction term between the post period and the fringe-party indicator is statistically significant only in the 120-day window, and is not consistently signed across specifications. To contextualise these estimates, Figure 9 plots the group means for the 120-day model. Among centrist parties, emotional valence decreases from  $-0.298$  pre-lockdown to  $-0.433$  post-lockdown. By contrast, questions directed at fringe-party MPs show a slight increase in emotional valence, rising from  $-0.327$  to  $-0.293$  across the same period. Thus, the shift toward more negative constituent messaging appears concentrated among centrist MPs' correspondence, rather than among those

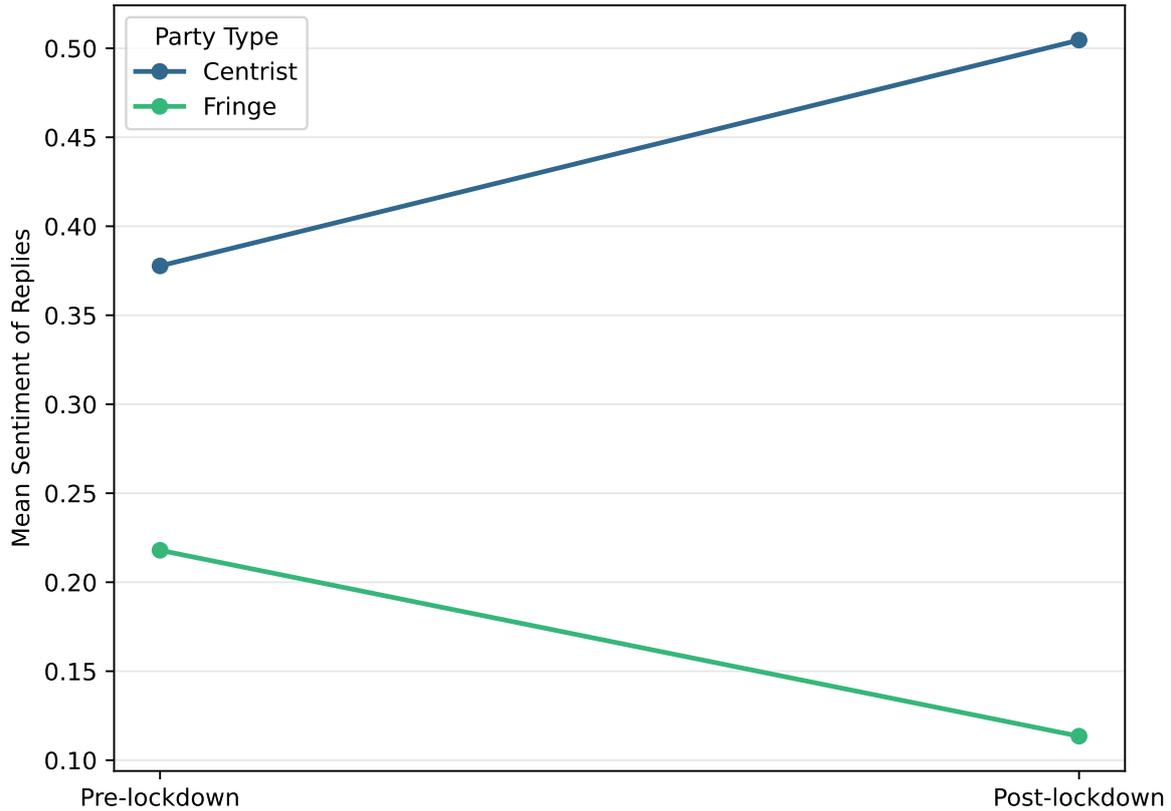


Figure 7: Treatment Effect of first COVID-19 Measures Announcement on Emotional Valence of Abgeordnetenwatch Answers on a two month window

associated with fringe parties.

Moreover, Figure 10 displays the pre- and post trends. The two groups exhibit near-parallel trajectories both before and after to the discontinuity. Taken together, these findings suggest that the main DiD results are not driven by reciprocal emotional mirroring. Although constituent communications do become more negative following the lockdown announcement, this shift does not occur to the same extent in questions directed at fringe MPs. The divergence in MP response behaviour therefore reflects a strategic partisan difference rather than a simple emotional reaction to constituent tone.

### 7.6. Robustness: Arbitrary Cut-offs

Next, we examine whether the estimated effects are sensitive to the specific timing of the intervention. If the effects documented above simply reflect longer-term temporal dynamics or unrelated shocks, then we would expect to observe similar patterns at arbitrary cut-off points. We therefore re-estimate the model using cut-off dates exactly one year before and one year after the first lockdown announcement. These dates were chosen because they fall well outside the initial COVID-19 shock period while remaining within the same legislative term, meaning that the same MPs answer citizen inquiries on abgeordnetenwatch. If the emotional shift observed in the main analysis were spurious or cyclical, similar treatment effects should appear around these placebo thresholds.

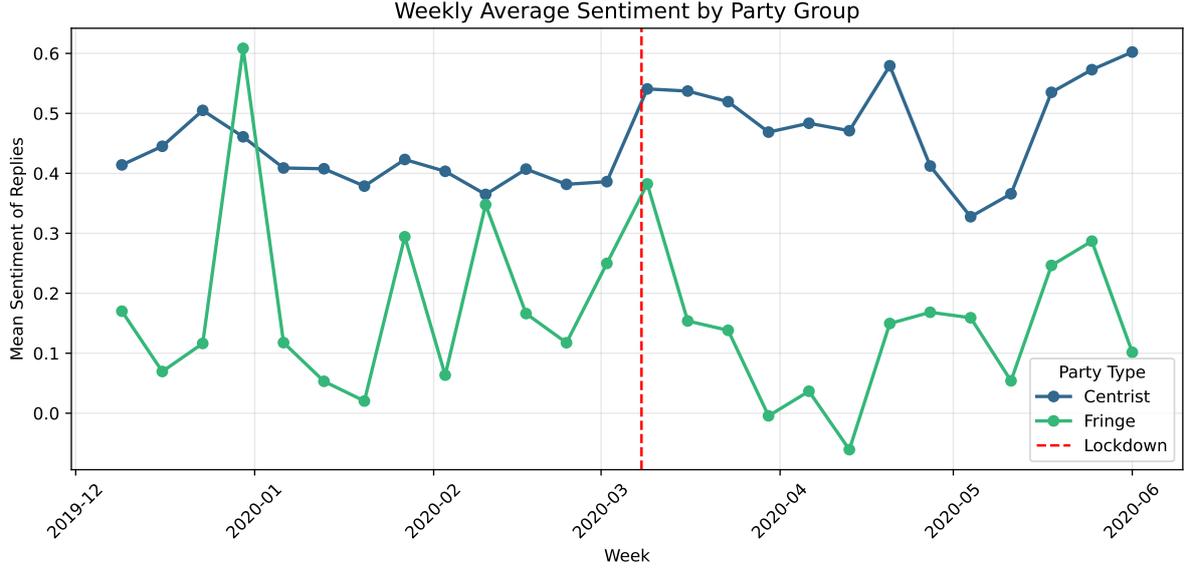


Figure 8: Trends in Average Weekly Emotionality of Answers between Centrist and Fringe Parties.

Table 3: DiD Estimates of Question Emotional Valence Around COVID Lockdown

<i>Dependent variable: Question Emotional Valence</i>			
	180 Days	120 Days	60 Days
Intercept	-0.472*** (0.041)	-0.428*** (0.040)	-0.407*** (0.059)
Fringe Party x Post	-0.047 (0.051)	0.160** (0.064)	0.154 (0.098)
Post-Lockdown	0.035* (0.019)	-0.134*** (0.019)	-0.113*** (0.032)
Observations	4879	2756	1005
$R^2$	0.010	0.021	0.019
Adjusted $R^2$	0.009	0.018	0.011

Note:

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

The results of these arbitrary cut-off models are reported in Table 4, with model 1 capturing the results surrounding 08-03-2019, and model 2 capturing the difference in emotional valence of responses before and after 08-03-2021. Both models are estimated using the same model specification as the main model and within a symmetric 120-day window around the relevant cut-off date. Across both placebo cut-off estimations, the interaction term remains small and statistically indistinguishable from zero, indicating that the divergence in emotional tone between fringe and centrist parties does not necessarily emerge at arbitrary points in time. This supports the interpretation that the shift documented in the main model is indeed associated with the timing of the lockdown announcement rather than long-term trends or unrelated shocks.

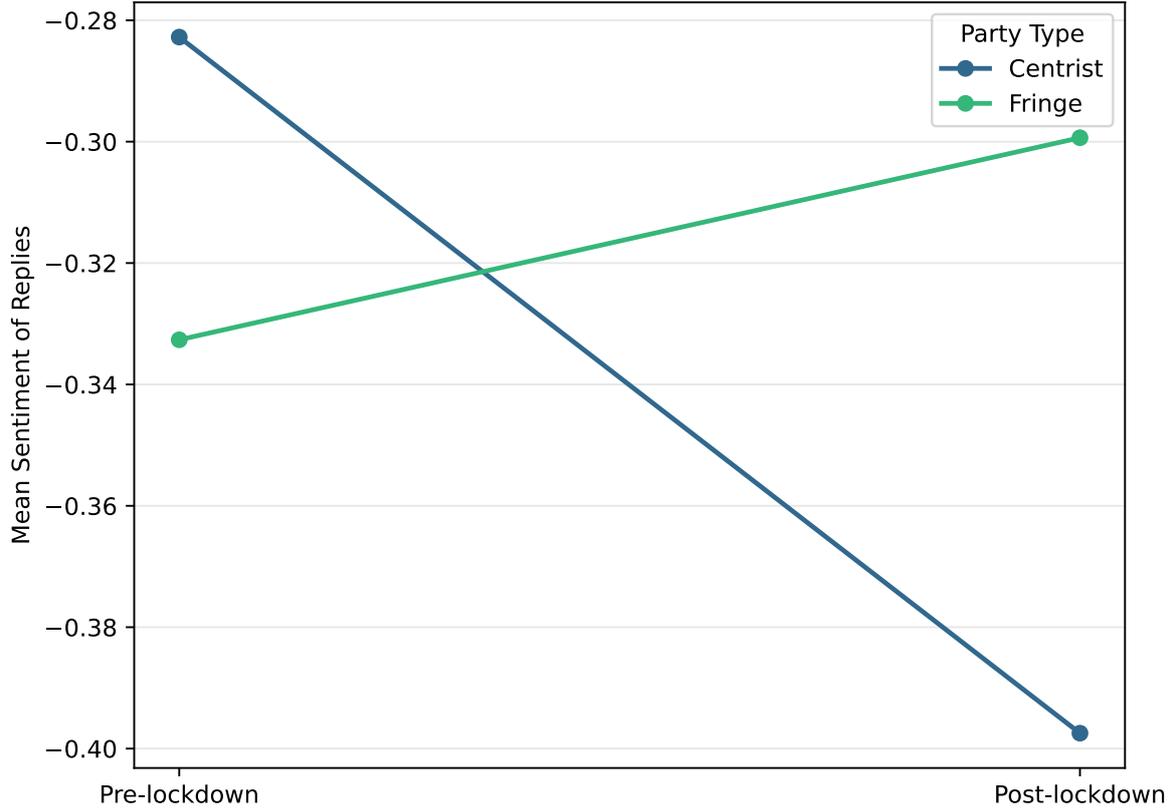


Figure 9: Treatment Effect of first COVID-19 Measures Announcement on Emotional Valence of Abgeordnetenwatch Questions on a four month window

Table 4: Robustness Test DiD Estimates of Answer Emotional Valence

	<i>Dependent variable: Answer Emotional Valence</i>		
	120 Days	120 Days	120 Days
Intercept	0.257*** (0.050)	0.269*** (0.061)	0.368*** (0.041)
Fringe Party x Post	0.005 (0.069)	-0.098 (0.068)	-0.096* (0.053)
Post-Lockdown	0.031 (0.028)	0.017 (0.027)	0.096** (0.040)
Question Emotional Valence	0.044** (0.021)	0.101*** (0.019)	0.094*** (0.017)
Observations	1770	2442	2129
$R^2$	0.086	0.085	0.066
Adjusted $R^2$	0.081	0.082	0.063

Note:

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

### 7.7. Robustness: Government-Opposition Dynamics

Finally, we consider whether the observed divergence between fringe and centrist parties could instead be explained by government–opposition dynamics. One potential alternative explana-

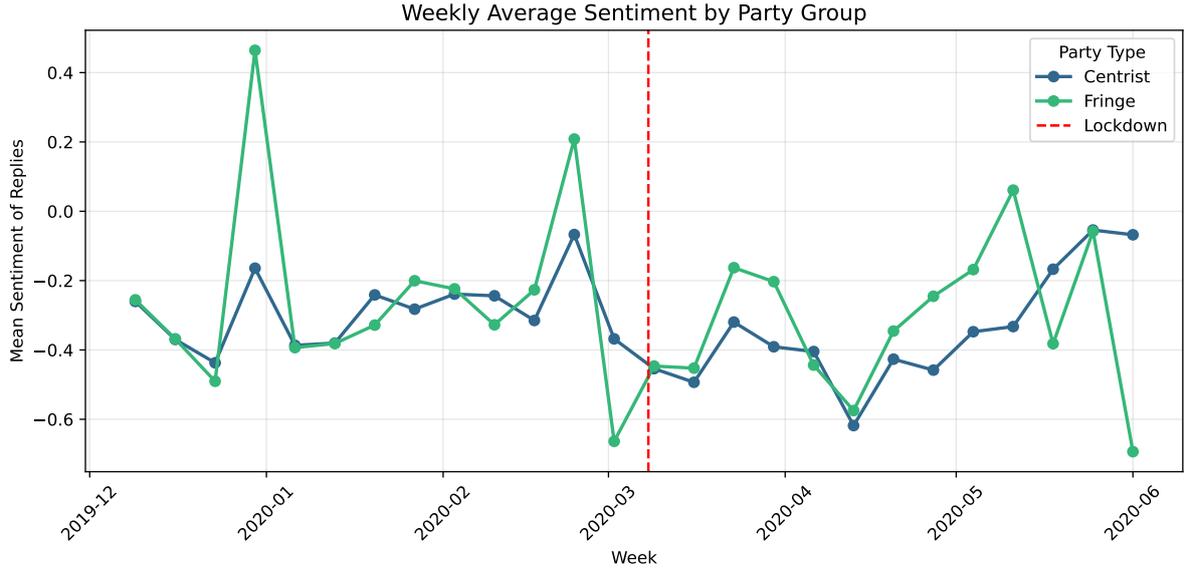


Figure 10: Trends in Average Weekly Emotionality of Abgeordnetenwatch Questions between Centrist and Fringe Parties.

tion for the observed partisan divergence could namely be that it may simply reflect government–opposition dynamics rather than ideological positioning at the political fringes (Evkoski et al., 2025). Government parties, as the actors responsible for designing and defending policy responses to the pandemic, may be more likely to adopt a reassuring and positive communicative tone. By contrast, opposition parties have stronger incentives to criticise government decisions. If the emotional shifts identified in the main analysis were primarily driven by this institutional divide, then we would expect all opposition parties—regardless of ideological orientation—to become more negative in their replies following the lockdown announcement, and government parties to become more positive. To test this, we re-estimate the model designating the two centrist opposition parties (FDP and The Greens) as the treatment group and the coalition parties in office (CDU, CSU, SPD) as the control group.

At a window of 120 days the government–opposition specification reported in model 3 of Table 4 yields a modest negative interaction effect, which is statistically significant at the 10% level ( $p = 0.076$ ). However, when the estimation window is narrowed to 30 days on either side of the intervention, this interaction term becomes fully insignificant (Coefficient of  $-0.0417$ ,  $p$ -value of  $0.534$ ). Taken together, this suggests that while government–opposition dynamics may contribute marginally to emotional tone, they do not account for the substantial divergence between fringe and centrist parties observed in the main analysis.

## 8. Discussion

This paper examines how the emotional expression by elected representatives in public communication with citizens contribute to the dynamics of affective polarisation. We argued that the incentives to either promote or contain polarisation vary systematically across the ideological spectrum. MPs at the political fringes benefit from a polarised environment that enlarges

their potential support base and legitimises a more conflictual political culture. By contrast, representatives from centrist parties rely on broad, coalition-compatible support and enjoy a strong incentive to maintain a unified political landscape. These incentives manifest in different emotional strategies: fringe MPs are more likely to deploy negative emotions which accentuate moral boundaries and distance, whereas centrists are more likely to use positive emotions that minimise conflict and emphasise a shared political community.

Our analysis of more than 250,000 citizen–MP exchanges on *Abgeordnetenwatch* supports these expectations. Emotional divergence does not stem from citizens, whose questions display similar emotional profiles across parties, but from MPs’ responses. Representatives from the AfD, and to a lesser extent *Die Linke*, consistently express more negative and less positive emotion, while centrist parties adopt comparatively more positive tones. Examining emotional reciprocity further shows that most parties respond positively when addressed with positive affect. The AfD, however, does so only slightly more than half of the time and is distinctly more likely to mirror or intensify negative affect when confronted with negatively valenced questions. Among centrist parties, this tendency to replicate negativity is notably weaker, indicating a greater reluctance to engage in affective escalation. A difference-in-differences design which exploits the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as a polarising shock, confirms these dynamics causally. Following the lockdown announcement, MPs overall became more positive in their replies, consistent with efforts to maintain reassurance and stability during a crisis. Yet fringe parties moved in the opposite direction: their responses became significantly more negative relative to centrist parties across all temporal windows. These findings align with our theoretical expectation that ideological outsiders have stronger strategic incentives to intensify affective distance, particularly during moments of heightened uncertainty.

Taken together, the results indicate that affective polarisation is not solely a mass-level phenomenon that emerges from citizen attitudes. It is actively shaped and maintained through elite communication strategies of polarisation entrepreneurs in everyday constituent interaction. MPs are not simply recipients of public affect; they are agents who amplify, diffuse, or redirect emotional tone. Emotional expression is therefore not merely expressive but strategic: a tool for either deepening divides or reinforcing common ground.

These findings contribute to ongoing debates about the sources of democratic division. They show that routine dyadic political communication can cumulatively shape the emotional climate of political discourse. In doing so, the study highlights the importance of integrating analysis of emotional rhetoric into theories of representation, party competition, and public responsiveness. Future research might examine whether these emotional strategies diffuse across communication channels, vary by policy domain, or change in response to electoral cycles.

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# Polarization in Bi-Directional Political Communication: Analysing the Language of Abgeordnetenwatch Questions and Answers

## Appendix

### A. Example Question (German)

Question on December 24, 2017, to Beatrix von Storch (AfD; MP of the Bundestag):

*Sehr geehrte Frau von Storch, welche Einstellung haben Sie zum Rechtsextremismus und zum Nationalsozialismus? Warum diffamieren Sie das Bündnis "Aufstehen gegen Rassismus"? Ist es Ihnen nicht wichtig, Zivilcourage gegen Rassismus zu zeigen? Wie engagieren Sie sich gegen Rassismus und Fremdenfeindlichkeit? Sehen Sie nicht die historische Verantwortung Deutschlands? Ich arbeite seit 4 Jahren mit geflüchteten Jugendlichen aus allen Gegenden der Erde. Es sind liebenswerte, lernwillige junge Menschen, die zur Zeit viel nehmen, aber auch viel zurückgeben wollen. Sie sind eine Bereicherung für unser Land!*

Answer on July 24, 2018:

*Sehr geehrter Herr N., der Nationalsozialismus war das dunkelste Kapitel unserer Geschichte. Unsere historische Verantwortung verpflichtet uns dazu, die bürgerliche Freiheit, die Demokratie und den liberalen Rechtsstaat gegen jede Form von Extremismus zu verteidigen. Das Bündnis „Aufstehen gegen Rassismus“ ist ein intolerantes und antidemokratisches Projekt. Das Bündnis will frei und demokratisch gewählte Parteien an der Ausübung ihrer demokratischen Rechte und sogar Pflichten, beispielsweise bei der Durchführung von Parteitag oder Informationsständen, hindern und stören. Das hat mit Zivilcourage nichts zu tun, sondern zeigt eine zutiefst antidemokratische Gesinnung. Mit freundlichen Grüßen Beatrix von Storch*

## B. Emotional Reciprocity Regression Table Study

	Question x Answer: Positive Emotions	Question x Answer: Negative Emotions
(Intercept)	0.87*** (0.25)	-1.33*** (0.16)
Party: AfD	-0.64*** (0.08)	0.35*** (0.05)
Party: CDU/CSU	0.88*** (0.05)	-1.08*** (0.03)
Party: FDP	0.65*** (0.06)	-0.93*** (0.03)
Party: Grüne	0.46*** (0.05)	-0.44*** (0.03)
Party: SPD	0.72*** (0.05)	-0.90*** (0.03)
AIC	33155.76	102290.70
BIC	34729.93	104070.07
Log Likelihood	-16392.88	-50959.35
Deviance	32785.76	101918.70
Num. obs.	36646	105509

Fixed effects on legislature and topic.

Table 5: Logit Models to test the relationship of positive (negative) emotions in questions with positive (negative) emotions in answers.

## C. Pre-treatment Trend Regressions

To assess whether the parallel trends assumption required for the difference-in-differences (DiD) design is satisfied, we examine pre-treatment trends in emotional valence between fringe and centrist MPs prior to the introduction of the first COVID-19 containment measures in Germany. For this purpose, we estimate the following model separately within symmetric time windows of 90, 60, and 30 days before the lockdown:

$$a\_EV_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 days_t + \beta_2 Fringe_i + \beta_3(days_t \times Fringe_i) + \beta_4 q\_EV_t + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (2)$$

where  $a\_EV_{it}$  denotes the emotional valence of MP  $i$ 's responses on day  $t$ . The variable  $days_t$  is a linear time index that increases by one for each day before the lockdown date and thus captures general temporal patterns in emotional language. The dummy variable  $Fringe_i$  equals one for MPs belonging to the AfD or Die Linke and zero for all other parties. The interaction term  $days_t \times Fringe_i$  measures whether the pre-lockdown trajectory of emotional valence differs systematically between Fringe and Centrist MPs. Finally,  $q\_EV_t$  controls for the emotional valence of the parliamentary question to which the MP is responding. Standard errors are clustered at the MP level to account for within-speaker correlation.

The coefficient on  $days_t$  captures the time trend in emotional tone among Centrist MPs prior to the lockdown. This coefficient is small and statistically insignificant across all window lengths, suggesting that their emotional tone remained relatively stable over time before the intervention. The coefficient on  $Fringe_i$  indicates whether Fringe MPs differ in their baseline level of emotional expression compared to Centrist MPs. This coefficient is negative and statistically significant in the 90-day and 60-day windows, showing that Fringe MPs already expressed a substantially more negative emotional tone than Centrist MPs prior to the lockdown. Since the DiD design requires parallel pre-treatment trends rather than equality in outcome levels, this difference in baseline tone does not violate the identification assumptions.

The key coefficient for evaluating the parallel trends assumption is the interaction term  $days_t \times Fringe_i$ . This coefficient tests whether Fringe and Centrist MPs exhibited different trajectories in emotional tone prior to the lockdown. This interaction coefficient is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero in the 60-day and 30-day windows, indicating no detectable difference in pre-treatment trends between the two groups. Yet, in contrast, in the 90-day window, the estimated coefficient is positive and statistically significant, indicating diverging pre-treatment trends and therefore a violation of the parallel trends assumption within this broader estimation window. This violation is most likely driven by two outlier observations in the week between Christmas and New Years Eve 2019, where AfD responses were coded as uncharacteristically positive. For reference, this concerns the following response by Detlev Spangenberg with an emotional valence of 0.714:

Sehr geehrter Herr M.,

selbstverständlich haben Sie recht, wenn Sie diese Kritik ansprechen. Die Entfernungspauschale ist eine notwendige steuerliche Entlastung, um die Tätigkeit aus finanzieller Sicht erst zu ermöglichen, um die Belastungen die durch einen langen Arbeitsweges entstehen, zu senken. Aber auch aus volkswirtschaftlicher Sicht ist dieses Instrument

von großer Bedeutung, führt es doch auch dazu, daß trotz eines langen Arbeitsweges eine Tätigkeitsaufgenommen wird, sich lohnen kann und somit ein steuerpflichtiges Beschäftigungsverhältnis zustande kommt. Politiker, die dies bestreiten, oder sogar die Abschaffung der Pendlerpauschale fordern demonstrieren damit ihre wirtschaftliche Inkompetenz. Die AfD wird sich immer für die Beibehaltung bzw. Erhöhung dieser steuerlichen Entlastung einsetzen.

Mit freundlichem Gruß D. Spangenberg MdB

And the response by Stephan Brandner with an emotional valence of 0.999998:

Sehr geehrter Herr S.,

vielen Dank für Ihre Frage. Neben einem Neujahrsempfang plane ich auch eine Reihe anderer Veranstaltungen. Datum, Veranstaltungsort und Thema gebe ich stets auf den sozialen Netzwerken sowie in Pressemitteilungen zur Kenntnis. Ich bin sicher, dass es eine Gelegenheit für ein Treffen in naher Zukunft geben wird.

Beste Grüße

Stephan Brandner

Taken together, these results suggest that the parallel trends assumption is satisfied when restricting the analysis to the 60-day and 30-day windows around the intervention, but without accounting for these outliers, not when using the larger 90-day window. The difference-in-differences estimates can therefore be interpreted with greater causal validity when employing the narrower temporal windows.

Table 6: Pre-Trend Test: Emotional Valence Before First COVID-19 Measures in Germany

	<i>Dependent variable: Answer Emotional Valence</i>		
	90 Days (1)	60 Days (2)	30 Days (3)
days	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.004)
C(group)[T.Fringe]	-0.379*** (0.074)	-0.321*** (0.080)	-0.127 (0.115)
days:C(group)[T.Fringe]	0.003** (0.002)	0.004 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.011)
Question Emotional Valence	0.083*** (0.022)	0.081*** (0.027)	0.011 (0.045)
Observations	1442	1042	322
$R^2$	0.040	0.036	0.016
Adjusted $R^2$	0.037	0.032	0.004

Note:

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