

# Get a Grip on Yourself! Signaling Cohesiveness Through National Party Congresses

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## Abstract

Parties' success on Election Day and their ability to subsequently implement reforms is affected by their ability to convey a cohesive image. Consequently, managing the diverse and, at times, conflicting interests within a party is of vital importance for office-motivated parties. Due to the unprecedentedly high levels of media attention, their national congresses provide a unique opportunity to present their internal coherence and preference convergence to the broad public. Yet, do voters care at all about intra-party politics and do they update their beliefs about parties in light of their behaviors at the national congresses? In order to identify the causal effect of national party congresses on the voters' perceptions of party unity, we develop a deductive-sequential mixed methods research design in which we combine qualitative case studies with a quasi-experimental regression discontinuity design based on individual-level panel data from Germany. We find that disagreement at the congresses negatively affect the voters' perceptions about party unity. The results hold important implications for our understanding of the circumstances that allow parties to suggest and implement reforms.

**Keywords:** Party Congresses, Party Unity, Regression Discontinuity Design, Mixed Methods Approach

## 1 Introduction

Parties' electoral fate and their likelihood of subsequent government participation are affected by their ability to convey a cohesive image to the electorate. Previous research finds that internal fights and intra-party divisions harm parties electorally and decrease their chances to become part of the government which, in turn, crucially limit their ability

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to implement reforms (e.g., [Ceron, 2016](#); [Greene and Haber, 2015](#); [Vivyan and Wagner, 2012](#)). Consequently, appearing united is of vital importance for office-motivated parties.

Unlike most aspects of intra-party politics, national party congresses generate a significant amount of public attention and almost all major news outlets report on them. Therefore, they constitute a unique opportunity for the party leadership to send a strong signal of internal coherence and preference convergence to the broad public. Despite the enhanced media attention, whether or not voters actually respond to a party's behavior at its national congress remains unclear. On the one hand, [Seeberg, Slothuus and Stubager \(2017\)](#) demonstrate that voters indeed update their perceptions of the parties' policy positions in the aftermath of major policy shifts by the governing parties. On the other hand, empirical evidence also shows that voters neither adjust their perceptions of parties' policy positions, nor do they amend their partisan loyalties or their own Left-Right positions as a consequence of shifts in the parties' statements in the course of election campaigns (e.g., [Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2014](#); [Adams, 2012](#); [Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011](#)). Given the ambivalence of the findings concerning voters' perceptions of the parties' policy positions, we ask whether voters update their perceptions about parties' internal cohesiveness in response to the parties' behaviors at their national congress.

In order to empirically investigate the causal effect of the parties' behaviors at their national congresses, we apply a deductive-sequential mixed methods research design (e.g., [Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017](#); [Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007](#)) in which we combine qualitative case selection and interpretative methods with a quantitative quasi-experimental regression discontinuity (RD) design based on individual-level panel data from Germany. This research design allows us to thoroughly derive case-specific hypotheses and to address methodological difficulties arising when estimating the causal effect of national party congresses on voters' evaluations of the parties' internal cohesiveness. Our results show that, while congresses that signal internal unity do not effect voters' perceptions, appearing divided at the congress causes voters to update their beliefs about party unity. We attribute this finding to voters' expectations about party

cohesiveness. Rather than the exception, voters perceive parties as unified by default and only change this belief after observing internal fights at the national congresses.

## 2 Party Cohesiveness and National Party Congresses

Political parties are coalitions of politicians with similar preferences that collaborate because they can achieve their goals better together than alone (Aldrich, 1995). Even though co-partisans have similar preferences, these preferences usually are by no means identical. In fact, many political parties are composed of factions that are sub-coalitions of politicians with even more similar preferences (Dewan and Squintani, 2016; Ceron, 2016, 2012). Individual politicians and entire party factions trade the opportunity to always express their true preferences for the ability or the hope to one day steer the party's course themselves (Laver, 1981, 85-86). It is thus not far fetched to expect that in every party there are always party members who are dissatisfied with their party's current behavior (e.g., policy positions, personnel configurations, and so on). Nevertheless, while we observe some intra-party criticism of the current party leadership, why do we not constantly see massive contestation of the current party leadership?

The literature on intra-party politics provides two arguments to explain this fact. The first argument relates to the role the party leadership plays in fulfilling members' desires. We label this line of argument the *office argument*. The more the party leadership can control the promotion of party members within the party, the more incentives office-motivated party members have to stick to the party line. Such effects have been shown to apply in electoral systems with low personal vote characteristics (Carey and Shugart, 1995), when candidate selection is centralized (Hazan and Rahat, 2010), when the party is the major selector of government ministers (Bäck, Debus and Müller, 2016), and many more. While this argument certainly captures reality, it cannot explain why rank-and-file members who do not run for office do not raise their voices more often and more vehemently.

The second arguments states that intra-party unity is an important signal to voters

(Vivyan and Wagner, 2012; Marx and Schumacher, 2013). We, therefore, label it the *unity argument*. As Greene and Haber (2015) show, voters both rate parties as less competent and are less likely to vote for them when they perceive them as being internally divided. Hence, party members have incentives to mute conflict in order to allow the party to thrive.<sup>1</sup>

Such strategic refraining from intra-party conflict, however, would be rational only if voters in fact update their beliefs according to intra-party fighting. Yet, this is a non-trivial empirical puzzle and there is a debate about what drives voters' perceptions of party behavior. On the one hand, there is some consensus that voters observe party behavior in general and adjust their beliefs about the party accordingly (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2002; Jennings, 2009; Seeberg, Slothuus and Stubager, 2017). On the other hand, it is unclear which sources citizens use to update their beliefs about party behavior. Most prominently, Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu (2011, 2014) show that voters do not adjust their policy beliefs about political parties after they have changed their rhetoric. Instead, voters rather use some wider information environment that is focused on actions such as party leadership change (Somer-Topcu, 2017; Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2017) or coalition membership (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013). It remains unclear whether signals of intra-party cohesiveness or infighting are relevant to voters' perceptions.

National party congresses are an ideal framework to study how voters' perceptions of intra-party conflict are shaped. The media typically report intensively about party congresses because delegates make important decisions for the party's future course, e.g., elect the party leadership. Furthermore, speeches and votes at party congresses are not only given and made by party elites, but also by rank-and-file members that are more likely to express dissatisfaction because they do not respond to office considerations. This almost unique amount of media attention that rank-and-file speeches and party congress votes receive allows voters to observe deviant behavior much easier than deviant behavior

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<sup>1</sup>We acknowledge that rank-and-file members could simply leave the party when they are dissatisfied because their investments in the party are smaller (Hirschman, 1970). Yet, surveys with party members reveal that party members have in fact diverse preferences (Scarrow, 2014). We conclude that even though some members may leave, there is still ample potential for intra-party conflict.

in other contexts, say, internal party meetings.

At the same time, party congresses do not lead to the expression of dissatisfaction with the party line *per se*. That is, some party congresses exhibit more infighting than others. As a consequence, the effect of party congresses on voters' perceptions of intra-party unity is dependent on the delegates' behavior at a particular party congress. A party congress at which the party leader is not able to give her speech because she is constantly booed by party members sends a different signal to the electorate than a party congress at which members simply nod through the party leadership's motions without significant opposition. Moreover, if a party is perceived as internally fighting, the effect of a party congress on voter perceptions is different if the party presents itself united rather than internally fighting.

To sum up, we argue that party congresses are a prime opportunity to study how voters respond to intra-party conflict because there is high media attention about party congresses, and opposing views are likely to be voiced. Moreover, when the signal that a party congress sends does not match the expectation voters have about the party's unity, they adjust their beliefs about the party's unity.

### 3 Research Design and Causal Identification

To evaluate how party congresses affect citizens' perceptions of party unity, we rely on survey data from the German Internet Panel (Blom, Gathmann and Krieger, 2015). The German Internet Panel (GIP) is based on a representative sample of the German population. Every other month the same respondents are invited to participate in the survey and upon invitation, respondents have an entire month to fill the questionnaire. Many questions appear in multiple GIP waves, and among these is a set of questions about respondents' perceptions of party unity. The english translation of the question wording is:

“Members of the same party sometimes express opposing views. When you recall the last four weeks, do you perceive the following party as fragmented

or as cohesive?”

Respondents can either give a response on an eleven-point scale from “completely fragmented” to “completely cohesive”, or they can say that they do not know or refuse to answer. This question is asked for each of the parties represented in the German Bundestag. To avoid priming effects, we randomize the order in which the respondents rate the parties in terms of their unity. To our knowledge, this is the only available survey directly asking respondents to evaluate a party’s unity.

Despite the high quality data we can rely on, empirically addressing the research question poses a number of serious difficulties that we overcome by applying a deductive-sequential mixed methods research design (e.g., [Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017](#); [Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007](#)). This research design has two advantages: First, it solves a problem of *heterogeneous treatments* that arises because the effect of national party congresses on voters’ perceptions of party cohesion is contingent on delegates’ behavior. As a result, every party congress constitutes a unique treatment. This implies that researchers need to formulate case-specific hypotheses that are tailored to the specific congress under investigation. The first part of our mixed-methods design, thus, includes interpretive elements to tease out each party congress’ individual treatment. We detail below.

Second, our research design overcomes the well-known problem of *causal identification* that refers to challenges associated with estimating causal effects by using observational data. In contrast to experimental data, researchers cannot directly manipulate (and randomize) the treatment assignment which introduces concerns about reverse causation or endogeneity, self-selection bias, and the existence of uncontrolled, possibly unobservable, confounders. We overcome this problem by exploiting a quasi-experimental regression discontinuity (RD) in the second part of our research design. Its forcing or running variable is whether respondents answer the questionnaire before or after the party congress has started. We provide more details on the methodology below.

A caveat of our research design is that we can only apply it to party congresses that took place while the GIP was in field. Overall, we can, nevertheless, test our hypothesis

in its party congress specific form in four instances between 2012 and 2017.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.1 Qualitative Case Studies

The signal national party congresses send to the broad public is by no means homogeneous as it crucially depends on the delegates' behavior. If they engage in endless fights over their party's future course or the personnel composition of the party leadership in the conference spotlight, the party congress signals internal disagreement. However, if they act as a cohesive and unified collection of individuals with clearly defined policy goals, voters are more likely to perceive the party as internally united as a result of the party congress. Consequently, the theoretical expectations about the effect of national party congresses on voters' perceptions of party unity differ between congresses which necessitates the formulation of case-specific hypotheses.

In order to capture the signal sent by each national congress, we first follow an inductive approach and conduct qualitative case studies. By analyzing a small number of congresses in their broader context, we aim to infer the level of unity the party exhibited at their respective meeting. This facilitates the identification of preference heterogeneity within a party that has been proven difficult (e.g., [Ceron, 2015](#); [Greene and Haber, 2016](#)). Our analytical focus, therefore, is on the identification of signals indicating the existence or absence of intra-party disagreement. These signals can be (but are not limited to) elections to leadership offices, speeches given by delegates, motions and amendments debated on, and media interviews given by delegates or the party elites.

In our case studies, we focus on four national party congresses of three different German parties in the period from 2012 to 2017. This cross-sectional and temporal variation allows us to generalize the results both across parties and across time while holding constant the institutional context in which parties are embedded. The in-depth analysis of delegates' congress behavior primarily rests on media reports. Our rationale for using media reports is that we conceive it as highly unlikely that citizens directly pay attention to the course of the congress themselves. Rather, we expect them to learn

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<sup>2</sup>These are the Green party congresses in 2012 and 2017, the SPD party congress in 2013, and the Left party congress in 2016.

indirectly about intra-party unity and the convergence of delegates' preferences by relying on news they obtain through media consumption. Given that voters rely on media reports, our case study utilizes these reports as well in order to mimic the real-world process by which voters update their beliefs about party unity. Thereby, this empirical strategy enhances our study's internal validity.

In order to assure that our case studies are as comparable as possible, we consult the same media outlets as our primary source of information for all four congresses. More precisely, we systematically collect articles published shortly before, during, and directly after each of the four congresses from the same outlets. The outlets we consult in order to gather the information are the daily print newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), and the four online news sites *Spiegel Online* (SPON), *Zeit Online*, *Tagesspiegel*, and *Welt*. These outlets not only provide a broad overview of the media coverage of national party congresses but also exhibit some variation in their political leanings. While the FAZ and *Welt* are considered as more conservative outlets, the *Tagesspiegel* and *Zeit Online* are regarded as liberal and SPON is widely perceived as more left-leaning. Thereby, we aim to cover a broad range of media outlets with different audiences to adequately capture the signal voters receive by national party congresses.

### 3.2 Quasi-Experimental Regression Discontinuity Design

Once we have formulated a case-specific hypothesis on whether a given party congress is expected to increase or decrease perceived party unity, we turn to testing this hypothesis quantitatively. In order to estimate the causal effect of interest with observational data, we employ a quasi-experimental RD design for each of the congresses under investigation. This design is particularly suitable in this context since the binary *treatment variable* ( $t \in \{0, 1\}$ ) – the respondents' exposure to a party congress – is a deterministic function of a continuous *forcing variable* ( $x \in \mathbb{R}^1$ ) – the day of the response, i.e.,  $t = f(x)$ . At a known value of the forcing variable, i.e., the day the party congress starts,  $x_0$ , the function is discontinuous and the treatment status changes from 0 to 1. Hence, the probability that respondent  $i$  receives the treatment is solely conditional on  $x_i$ , i.e., the day she fills

the questionnaire, and given by  $Pr(t_i = 1|x_i)$ . Because of the deterministic relationship between treatment assignment and forcing variable (day of response), we employ a sharp RD design (e.g., [Imbens and Lemieux, 2008](#), 616f).<sup>3</sup> It has been shown elsewhere that this design provides valid estimates of the causal effect in observational studies under comparatively weak assumptions (e.g., [de la Cuesta and Imai, 2016](#); [Eggers et al., 2015](#); [Lee and Lemieux, 2010](#); [Imbens and Lemieux, 2008](#); [Lee, 2008](#)).

To ensure that we obtain unbiased local average treatment effects, we need to show that the forcing variable is continuous at the cutoff ([Eggers et al., 2015](#); [Lee, 2008](#)). Specifically, sorting behavior around the discontinuity point might cause imbalances in the data and can potentially – but not necessarily – violate the assumption and invalidate the estimates of the treatment effect. Whereas imbalances caused by a correlation between the outcome and the forcing variable is unproblematic, sorting that causes a discontinuous jump at the threshold violates the continuity assumption and potentially biases the estimate of the treatment effect ([de la Cuesta and Imai, 2016](#); [Lee and Lemieux, 2010](#)). This kind of sorting behavior occurs when actors have discretion over their treatment status. If this is the case, observations just below and above the threshold are no longer comparable and the RD design might not be able to identify the causal treatment effect.

At first sight, such a scenario could arise in our application since the respondents have full discretion over the timing of their survey responses. Theoretically, respondents can decide to complete the survey at any day during the month. This opens up the possibility for them to self-select into the treatment group if some of them consciously decide to complete the survey directly after a national party congress took place. Despite this possibility, we regard this scenario as highly implausible. Self-selection into treatment or control group would imply that the respondents are, first, aware of the upcoming congress and, second, know in advance that the survey will ask them to evaluate the parties with respect to their cohesiveness. Since the respondents cannot know in advance which items

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<sup>3</sup>Note that we have to assume that each respondent answering the survey items after the congress has started received the treatment. While this assumption is most likely violated, we note that our analysis is a conservative test. That is, mixing up treated and untreated respondents stacks the deck against our expectations.

are included in the survey, we regard the possibility of sorting which causes imbalances in the sample and violates the identifying continuity assumption – although theoretically possible – as highly unlikely.

We estimate the local average treatment effect (LATE) at the threshold nonparametrically so that we do not need to impose the linearity assumption which can bias the estimate of the treatment effect (Lee and Lemieux, 2010, 316). More precisely, we use local linear regression methods that avoid the boundary problem encountered in other kernel regression estimators and have superior finite sample properties (Hahn, Todd and van der Klaauw, 2001, 205f). We use a triangular kernel, which weights the observations by their distance to the discontinuity point and is optimal for estimating local linear regressions at the boundary (Fan and Gijbels, 1996), and estimate a regression over a window of width  $h$  on both sides of the cutoff. The value  $h$  is determined by the Imbens-Kalyanaraman optimal bandwidth algorithm (Imbens and Kalyanaraman, 2012).

## 4 Analysis of National Party Congresses

We test whether or not voters update their beliefs about party cohesiveness in response to the signals the party congresses sends. In a first step, we inductively analyze what signal each party congress sends and formulate hypotheses for each of the four cases under investigation. Subsequently, we estimate the LATE for each congress separately in order to evaluate the hypotheses and to estimate the causal effect of each congress.

### 4.1 Case Studies

#### 4.1.1 Case 1: Greens 2012

The first case we study is the Green’s national party congress that took place on November 16–18, 2012 in Hannover. This congress constitutes the beginning of the party’s campaign effort for the German federal election in September 2013. One week prior to the congress, the party announced the official result of their internal primary election (*Urwahl*) of the

leading candidates for the federal election.<sup>4</sup> 61.64% of the approximately 60,000 party members participated in the first primary election ever held by a German party. While the election of Jürgen Trittin (71.9%) was expected, Katrin Göring-Eckardt (47.3%) was able to prevail against both, the parliamentary party group leader Renate Künast (38.6%) and the party leader Claudia Roth (26.2%) ([Zeit Online, 2012](#)). In light of these results – particularly the surprisingly bad performance of party leader Claudia Roth – the party leadership was nervous about their delegates’ behavior at the congress. Especially the party’s left camp was concerned about the party’s future course ([Caspari, 2012](#)).

Despite this, the media widely regarded the congress as a success for the party. Although it was even unclear whether Roth would run for re-election as party leader until two days before the congress, delegates confirmed both party leaders Cem Özdemir (83.3%) and also Claudia Roth (88.5%) in office ([FAZ, 2012](#)). Furthermore, the congress was characterized by a clear demarcation between the Greens and the Christian Democrats. One year prior to the German federal election in 2013, the majority of delegates, including the leading candidates and the party leadership, coherently stated their preferences in favor of a coalition government with the SPD, and against the often-debated possibility to form a coalition with the Christian Democrats ([Beikler, 2012](#)).

Besides the general agreement concerning the preferred coalition option, the congress further showed high conformity among delegates in terms of policy preferences. In addition to rather undisputed resolutions against the purchase of armed drones for the German military and numerous resolutions on the promotion of renewable energy and the complete abandonment of coal energy until 2030, the party even exhibited high levels of cohesiveness on more controversial issues ([Spiegel Online, 2012](#)). Notably, delegates were able to agree on a course for the search for a permanent disposal site for nuclear waste. Before the congress, the party had debated whether or not the Gorleben salt dome should be excluded entirely from the search. Although the Lower Saxony party branch was in favor of excluding Gorleben, delegates were able to find a compromise and

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<sup>4</sup>According to §10 (5) of the Green’s party statutes, at least half of the leading candidates have to be female if there are multiple candidates to be elected. Party members can cast as many votes as there are positions.

decided to not exclude the Gorleben salt dome from the nationwide search (Beikler, 2012; Kamann, 2012).

Taken together, the Greens were able to convey the image of a cohesive party. Neither personnel nor policy issues caused open conflicts at the congress and most media reports highlight the party's unity. Overall, the congress was regarded as a successful start of the Green election campaign. We therefore expect the party congress to increase voters' perceptions about the Greens' party unity.

#### **4.1.2 Case 2: Social Democrats 2013**

For SPD party elites, the timing of the party congress between November 14-16, 2013 was rather problematic. After four years of participation in a CDU/CSU led Grand Coalition, the SPD had been faced with yet another devastating electoral result at the federal level only six weeks prior to the party congress. In the weeks since the election, CDU/CSU and Greens had decided to not form a government, and the SPD party leadership had engaged in coalition bargaining with CDU and CSU. Rank-and-file members raised serious concerns about whether the party should enter a Merkel government after they had suffered severe electoral losses and had supported undesired policies when they had done so previously. To face these concerns, the party leadership had delegated the final decision whether to form another Grand Coalition to its rank-and-file members. So far, this decision had been made by a party congress.

If it would not have been for German party regulations calling for leadership elections every other year, it is very questionable whether the SPD leadership had convened a party congress in the middle of coalition bargaining. Most pundits argued that a party congress after the presentation of a draft coalition agreement and prior to the rank-and-file vote would have made more sense.

Unsurprisingly, the party congress was strongly influenced by both the electoral defeat and the looming vote on the coalition agreement that was currently being negotiated. On the one hand, both the party leader, Sigmar Gabriel, and the *Kanzlerkandidat* Peer Steinbrück assumed responsibility for the bad electoral performance. Mr. Steinbrück even

retired from the party elite altogether. Their congress speeches mostly focused on what mistakes they and the party had made during the campaign, and what needed to be done to return to previous electoral strength (Monath, 2013; Gathmann and Medick, 2013). On the other hand, several party elites explained why forming a Grand Coalition was preferable to remaining in opposition or calling early elections (Gathmann and Medick, 2013; Medick, 2013).

These tensions were most visible when the party leader, his deputies, and the party's secretary general sought reelection. Traditionally, there is only one candidate for each position. Therefore, the media cover the share of affirmative votes closely and compare them to previous intra-party elections. All of the party elites performed worse than they had done so two years earlier. Some even failed to be elected in the first round of elections, and a second round had to be called to fill all positions. Eventually, all candidates were elected, yet, their loss in support was widely reported by the media (Sturm, 2013; Medick, 2013; Sattar, 2013).

Overall, the media reports indicate that the SPD party congress in November 2013 sent a signal of internal divisions to voters. We, thus, expect that it has a negative influence on voters' perceptions of SPD party unity.

#### **4.1.3 Case 3: Left 2016**

The year 2016 started rather badly for the Left party. In March, the party suffered electoral defeats in three state elections. In Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, the party missed the 5% electoral threshold again, and in the state of Saxony-Anhalt, where the party aimed at becoming the strongest party, it lost almost 7.5 percentage points compared to its prior vote share (Meisner, 2016). Moreover, the party lost a significant amount of votes to the right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) which further spurred uncertainty and internal debates about how to address the new right-wing competitor (Leubecher, 2016). Only days before the national congress on May, 28-29 in Magdeburg, the former parliamentary party group Gregor Gysi publicly complained about his party appearing powerless and questioned the current leadership's

ability to manage the party's crisis ([Meisner, 2016](#); [Zeit Online, 2016](#)).

Accordingly, the congress was accompanied by unrest and internal disagreements. As a result of the recent AfD electoral successes, this congress's overarching question was what position the Left should take on immigration and refugees. While the party leaders Bernd Riexinger and Katja Kipping as well as the parliamentary party group leader Dietmar Bartsch supported a less restrictive policy, the other parliamentary party group leader Sahra Wagenknecht and her husband, the former party leader Oskar Lafontaine, openly advocate a capacity limit on the number of refugees ([Meisner, 2016](#)). The latter stance and her public statements exposed Sarah Wagenknecht to sharp criticism within her own party. Given the extraordinary high saliency of this issue in 2016, the party aimed at dissolving this internal disagreement and to develop a strategy at their congress.

However, substantive debates about policies were sidelined almost entirely by an attack against Wagenknecht right at the beginning of the congress. During Riexinger's speech shortly after the congress started, activists entered the convention hall and threw a cake at Wagenknecht ([Hagen, 2016](#)). In a flyer distributed among delegates, the activists stated that Wagenknecht's controversial statements on refugee policy were the reason for their attack. Although the activists were members of a left organization and no party members, this extraordinary act covered any substantive debate and caused the party to rally behind Wagenknecht as a politician, yet, not her behind her policies ([Hagen, 2016](#); [Wyssuwa, 2016](#)). Despite this, pictures of the attack were omnipresent in media outlets as they depicted the party's internal disagreement. Although both Kipping (74%) and Riexinger (78.5%) got reelected as party leaders, the attack against Wagenknecht remained the overarching topic of the congress ([Spiegel Online, 2016](#)).

We therefore expect the congress to send a strong signal of disunity to the electorate. The attack showcased the lasting discord within the party on how to address the AfD's successes and how to position on the salient issue of refugee policy. Given this, we hypothesize that the congress caused voters to perceive the Left party as being less united.

#### 4.1.4 Case 4: Greens 2017

The 2017 Bundestag election resulted in a complicated government formation opportunity in which any government composition was either ruled out by one of its potential member parties, or it was lacking a parliamentary majority. Counter to traditional animosities, the Greens engaged in a preliminary coalition bargaining round with CDU, CSU, and FDP. The Greens convened a special party congress to discuss the results of this preliminary coalition bargaining round, and to decide on whether formal coalition bargaining should be started. Only a few days after delegates had been invited to the special party congress, the FDP withdrew from preliminary coalition bargaining leaving the Green special party congress without its intended purpose. Instead, party elites used the opportunity to praise the party for its sense of responsibility and its willingness to compromise for the greater good, and to have delegates re-confirm the party's commitment to the formation of a stable government.

Virtually all media outlets characterize the party congress as a form of “would have, could have” party congress. That is, they point out that the Greens would have faced significant internal fights if they had had to seriously discuss the preliminary bargaining round's results that severely diverged from Green principles. Yet, these discussions never took place ([Ehrich, 2017](#); [Zeit Online, 2018](#); [Spiegel Online, 2017](#); [Heid, 2017](#)). Instead, congress delegates acknowledged all party negotiators' speeches with applause, and accepted the central motion by the party leadership with a broad majority ([Heid, 2017](#)). While some media also noted that party leadership elections were due a couple of months later, and that different party members were expected to run for office, they do not report any public debates about the future leadership ([Reimann, 2017](#); [Lohre, 2017](#)). Instead, they specifically mention the party's unity ([Leithäsuer, 2017](#)).

Overall, the media reports indicate that the party was surprisingly coherent at a time when it was expected to be severely internally fighting. Therefore, we expect that this special party congress has a positive impact on voters' perceptions of the Greens' party unity.

## 4.2 Hypotheses Testing

Following the qualitative case studies above, our sample of national party congresses include two cases where we expect a positive (Greens 2012 and 2017) and two cases where we expect to find a negative impact on the voters' evaluations of the parties' unity (SPD 2013 and Left 2016). In this section, our analysis proceeds with the quasi-experimental RD design introduced in Section 3.2. For the sake of conciseness, we group the cases by the hypothesized direction of their effect and jointly discuss the results.

### 4.2.1 United Parties: The Greens 2012 and 2017

Turning to the first two congresses under investigation, the upper row in Table 1 displays the estimate of the LATE for the two Green congresses in 2012 and 2017, respectively. As described in Section 3.2, we estimate the LATE nonparametrically by relying on local linear regression methods with a bandwidth size determined by the Imbens-Kalyanaraman optimal bandwidth algorithm (Imbens and Kalyanaraman, 2012). In order to evaluate the robustness of our results with respect to the specific bandwidth size chosen by the researcher, we also report estimates obtained by employing half and twice of the optimal bandwidth size.

Table 1: RD Estimates: United Parties

	Greens 2012			Greens 2017		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	-0.916 (0.831)	4.467	105	0.392 (0.639)	4.728	386
<i>Half BW</i>	-2.262* (1.228)	2.233	52	0.213 (1.110)	2.364	165
<i>Double BW</i>	0.324 (0.597)	8.933	266	0.200 (0.430)	9.456	707

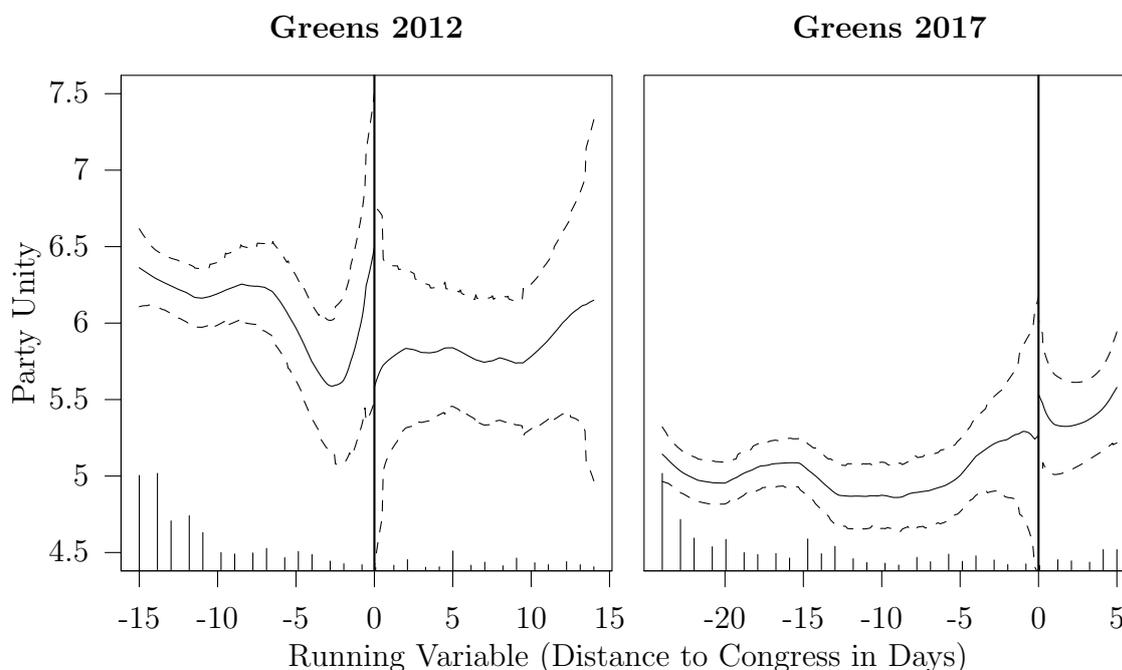
*Note:* Signif. code: \*p<0.1. Bandwidths are determined by the Imbens-Kalyanaraman optimal bandwidth algorithm (Imbens and Kalyanaraman, 2012).

In contrast to our expectation derived in Section 4.1, the LATE of the Greens' congress in 2012 is negative, except for the largest bandwidth size. However, only the estimate obtained from the specification with half of the optimal bandwidth size is statistically

significant at an  $\alpha$ -level of .1, suggesting that the congress did not have any detectable effect on the public’s perception of party unity. A similar pattern emerges when looking at the Greens’ congress in 2017. While all estimates are signed as expected, the estimates are far from reaching any conventional significance threshold.

An important strength of RD designs is the ability to present visual evidence for the existence or absence of a discontinuity in a simple graph (e.g., [Lee and Lemieux, 2010](#)). In order to investigate these patterns more closely, Figure 1 graphically illustrates the effect of the congresses on the perception about the Green party’s cohesiveness. The horizontal axis depicts the distance to the beginning of the national party congress in days which is the running or forcing variable in this analysis as it determines the treatment assignment. Party unity scores, measured on a scale from “completely fragmented” (0) to “completely cohesive” (11), are shown on the vertical axis. The vertical bars at the bottom of both graphs indicate the number of survey respondents answering the question at the respective day. Again, the left part of Figure 1 shows the results from the Greens’ congress in 2012 and the right part presents the results for their congress in 2017.

Figure 1: Local Linear Regressions: United Parties



The solid lines on both sides of the cutoff point at 0 represent the regressions’ point

estimates and the dashed lines are the associated 95% confidence intervals. Both parts of Figure 1 further confirm that the party congresses had no effect on the voters' beliefs about the Green party's unity. Although the party was able to appear united at both congresses, their delegates' behavior did not affect the public's perceptions in both instances.

In order to test the crucial continuity assumption, we further perform placebo analyses for all four cases under investigation.<sup>5</sup> By doing so, we use the first day of the respective national party congress as cutoff point and estimate the LATE of the congress on the other parties' perceived levels of unity. Given that the delegates' behavior at a congress should only affect how the public evaluates the internal cohesiveness of their party, we would expect no discontinuity in the other parties' unity scores.<sup>6</sup> Since we do not find discontinuous jumps at the cutoff for the other parties, our placebo tests confirm the plausibility of the continuity assumption.

These results casts doubts about the parties' ability to signal internal cohesiveness by their delegates' behavior at their national party congresses. Either voters perceive parties as united by default or cohesive behavior does not produce a strong signal that the public can use to update their beliefs.

#### **4.2.2 Disunited Parties: Social Democrats 2013 and the Left 2016**

Having shown that cohesive behavior at a national party congress does not affect the voters' perceptions about party unity, we analyze the remaining two congresses in order to see whether this null finding also hold for congresses characterized by internal fights. Both, the SPD congress in 2013 and the Left congress in 2016 were characterized by internal turmoil and open disagreement among the delegates. Consequently, our expectation is that the intra-party controversies produced a signal of disunity. In response to this signal, we expect that voters perceive the parties as being less united.

Table 2 presents the LATE for both congresses. Just like above, we also estimate the

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<sup>5</sup>The results of the placebo analyses can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>6</sup>We acknowledge that voters most likely evaluate a party's unity with respect to the other parties' cohesiveness. Therefore, it is possible that there are interdependencies among the parties. Consequently, we consider our placebo test as a hard test since these interdependencies would also cause discontinuities for the other parties.

Table 2: RD Estimates: Disunited Parties

	SPD 2013			Left 2016		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	-1.374** (0.654)	5.793	295	0.160 (0.711)	4.387	332
<i>Half BW</i>	-2.310* (1.276)	2.896	99	0.810 (1.176)	2.194	194
<i>Double BW</i>	-1.525*** (0.406)	11.585	664	-0.452 (0.500)	8.774	516

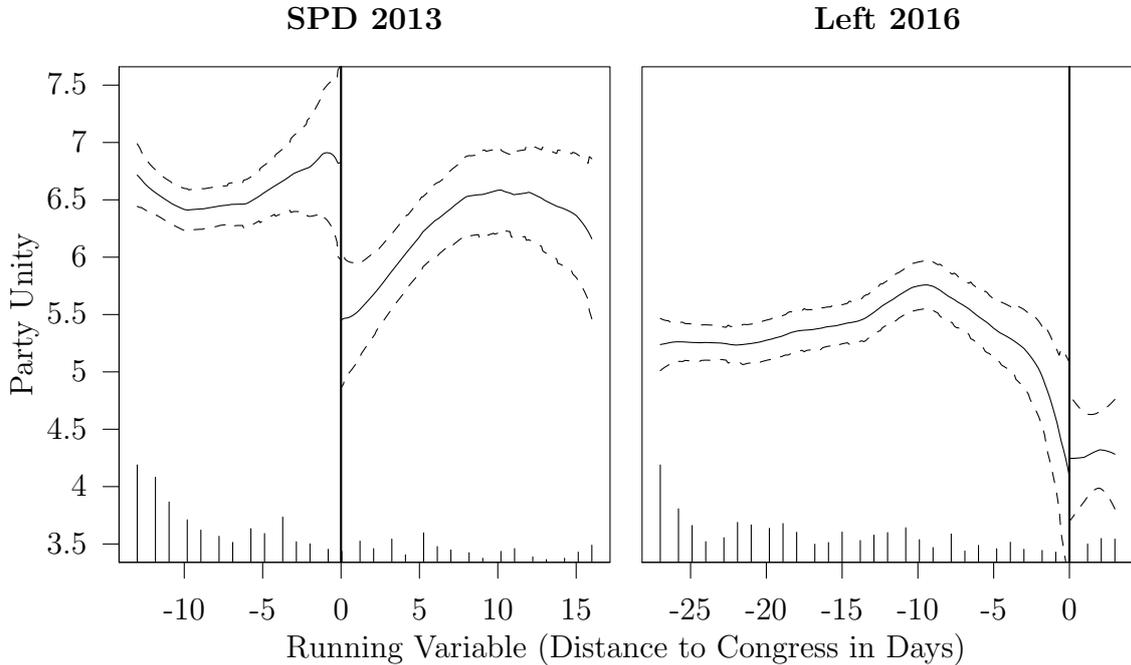
*Note:* Signif. code: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Bandwidths are determined by the Imbens-Kalyanaraman optimal bandwidth algorithm (Imbens and Kalyanaraman, 2012).

LATE when using half and twice the optimal bandwidth size in order to assess the robustness of our results. As expected, the SPD’s party congress 2013 significantly decreased voters’ perception of the party’s internal cohesiveness. Furthermore, this negative effect is robust across different bandwidth sizes and substantively meaningful, confirming our expectation derived above. Surprisingly, however, we do not find any effect for the Left party. Given that the attack against Wagenknecht was an outstanding event that was heavily covered by the media, it is remarkable that we do not find any detectable effect.

Figure 2 investigates these patterns further. Again, the figure shows the estimates from local linear regressions on both sides of the cutoff. The left panel graphically illustrates the LATE of the SPD’s congress in 2013. While the sudden drop of perceived party unity is apparent, this figure also shows that the effect does not last very long. Although the congress had a sizable impact on the public’s perception about the SPD’s internal cohesiveness, the negative shock quickly evaporates. Additionally, Figure 2 indicates a reason for the absence of a negative effect of the Left party’s congress in 2016. About five days prior to the congress, the perceived unity of the Left party starts to drop rapidly. As mentioned in Section 4.1.3, there were already plenty of internal fightings as the congress approached. Consequently, the level of party unity already was very low when the congress started. Hence, voters responding to the survey right before the congress might have been treated as well since they already received plenty signals of internal disagreement within the Left party. This, in turn, makes them more similar to

the treated voters who responded to the survey right after the congress has started.

Figure 2: Local Linear Regressions: Disunited Parties



In sum, we find empirical support for our expectation. National party congresses can in fact decrease the public’s perception of a party’s internal cohesiveness if the delegates engage in internal fights. Although the estimates for the Left party congress 2016 are insignificant, Figure 2 suggests that the approaching congress already exerts an effect before the congress started.

## 5 Conclusion

The present work investigates whether voters pay attention to intra-party processes and update their beliefs about a party’s internal cohesiveness accordingly. Previous studies find that appearing divided harms parties electorally and crucially restrict their ability to propose and implement policy reforms (e.g., [Ceron, 2016](#); [Greene and Haber, 2015](#); [Vivyan and Wagner, 2012](#)). We advance these studies by focusing on the parties’ opportunities to shape public perceptions of their internal cohesiveness. Given that unity is a decisive factor for electoral success, parties have clear incentives to communicate their

cohesiveness to the broad public in an attempt to attract votes. To empirically test our argument, we employ a deductive-sequential mixed methods research design in which we combine qualitative case studies with a quasi-experimental RD design and analyze the effect of national party congresses as the most likely cases for parties to communicate their cohesiveness.

The analyses conducted here provide mixed support for our theoretical expectations. While we do not find that voters systematically update their beliefs in response to positive signals, our evidence show that appearing disunited at the national congress decreases voters' perceptions of party unity – at least in the short-run. We conclude that voters indeed pay attention to intra-party processes and can assess the level of disagreement inherent in political parties. Concerning the null finding with respect to a positive effect, we conjecture that voters tend to perceive parties as united by default. Since the delegates gather under a single party name, voters only detect preference heterogeneity among them once they. Therefore, our findings show that parties cannot boost the publics' perceptions about their cohesiveness by appearing united at their congress. Instead, they merely can decrease the voters' perceptions about their unity by publicly displaying internal fights.

Our results point towards several promising directions for future research. First scholars will scrutinize to what extent our results carry over to other polities. Second, they will investigate why cohesive party congress performances are less effective in shaping voters' perceptions than non-cohesive performances. Finally, they will analyze how other means of party communication including staffing choice, speeches, and interviews affect citizens' ratings of party cohesiveness.

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# Appendix

## A Placebo Tests

For each of the four cases under investigation, we conduct placebo analyses in order to assess the validity of our results and the assumptions underlying the RD design. To this end, we use the first day of the respective congress as cutoff point and examine discontinuities in the perceived level of cohesiveness of the other parties. If the assumptions are valid, we expect to find no significant effect – i.e., no discontinuity – of the other parties’ levels of perceived party unity.

The tables below show the results of the placebo tests. No estimate is significant at the  $\alpha$ -level of 0.05 which indicates that the congresses did not cause discontinuities in the other parties’ perceived levels of unity.

### Green Party Congress 2012

	CDU/CSU			SPD		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	−0.535 (0.980)	4.467	114	−0.884 (0.882)	4.467	112
<i>Half BW</i>	−2.504 (1.530)	2.233	58	−1.162 (1.383)	2.233	56
<i>Double BW</i>	−0.404 (0.640)	8.933	290	−0.203 (0.546)	8.933	285
	Left			FDP		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	−1.359 (1.154)	4.467	90	−0.650 (0.886)	4.467	108
<i>Half BW</i>	−1.497 (2.037)	2.233	43	−1.039 (1.500)	2.233	53
<i>Double BW</i>	−0.730 (0.787)	8.933	219	−0.144 (0.599)	8.933	277

*Note:* Signif. code: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Cutoff is the first day of the Green congress in 2012. Bandwidths equal the size of the bandwidths in the main analysis.

## SPD Party Congress 2013

	CDU/CSU			Green		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	-0.133 (0.784)	5.793	297	0.220 (0.577)	5.793	282
<i>Half BW</i>	-1.538 (1.553)	2.896	99	-0.453 (1.052)	2.896	93
<i>Double BW</i>	-0.170 (0.463)	11.585	667	-0.524 (0.391)	11.585	643
	Left			FDP		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	-0.037 (0.781)	5.793	249	-0.636 (0.653)	5.793	255
<i>Half BW</i>	-0.136 (1.497)	2.896	86	-0.903 (1.295)	2.896	85
<i>Double BW</i>	-0.087 (0.500)	11.585	564	-0.531 (0.389)	11.585	589
	AfD					
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N			
<i>LATE</i>	-1.424 (1.089)	5.793	159			
<i>Half BW</i>	-2.060 (2.037)	2.896	55			
<i>Double BW</i>	-0.673 (0.707)	11.585	355			

*Note:* Signif. code: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Cutoff is the first day of the SPD congress in 2013. Bandwidths equal the size of the bandwidths in the main analysis.

## Left Party Congress 2016

	CDU			CSU		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	-1.006 (0.703)	4.387	378	-1.086 (0.675)	4.387	359
<i>Half BW</i>	-1.551 (1.140)	2.194	213	-0.930 (1.095)	2.194	205
<i>Double BW</i>	-0.173 (0.475)	8.774	585	-0.163 (0.489)	8.774	562
	Green			SPD		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	0.359 (0.626)	4.387	344	-0.730 (0.537)	4.387	371
<i>Half BW</i>	1.623 (1.014)	2.194	197	-0.865 (0.866)	2.194	209
<i>Double BW</i>	0.365 (0.439)	8.774	532	-0.348 (0.394)	8.774	576
	FDP			AfD		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	1.002 (0.662)	4.387	300	-0.022 (0.840)	4.387	354
<i>Half BW</i>	2.056* (1.075)	2.194	171	-1.071 (1.344)	2.194	203
<i>Double BW</i>	0.417 (0.475)	8.774	480	0.082 (0.598)	8.774	552

*Note:* Signif. code: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Cutoff is the first day of the Left congress in 2016. Bandwidths equal the size of the bandwidths in the main analysis.

## Green Party Congress 2017

	CDU			CSU		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	0.223 (0.623)	4.728	403	-0.717 (0.637)	4.728	398
<i>Half BW</i>	0.262 (1.065)	2.364	172	-0.513 (1.103)	2.364	170
<i>Double BW</i>	-0.213 (0.421)	9.456	739	-0.780* (0.428)	9.456	726
	SPD			Left		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	-0.033 (0.558)	4.728	400	0.269 (0.705)	4.728	354
<i>Half BW</i>	-0.594 (0.993)	2.364	170	-0.428 (1.213)	2.364	150
<i>Double BW</i>	-0.378 (0.400)	9.456	729	-0.081 (0.465)	9.456	652
	FDP			AfD		
	Estimate	Bandwidth	N	Estimate	Bandwidth	N
<i>LATE</i>	0.445 (0.705)	4.728	382	1.370* (0.719)	4.728	388
<i>Half BW</i>	-0.447 (1.224)	2.364	164	1.700 (1.215)	2.364	165
<i>Double BW</i>	0.220 (0.478)	9.456	688	0.600 (0.498)	9.456	716

*Note:* Signif. code: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Cutoff is the first day of the Green congress in 2017. Bandwidths equal the size of the bandwidths in the main analysis.