**Parties’ views of the voters and campaign strategy: Comparing German, Austrian, and Italian parties with respect to rationality and emotion**

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**Abstract**

Liberal democracies have faced increasing polarization in recent years. This trend not only comprises an ideological distancing between parties and their adherents but chiefly also an affective alienation between the different camps. In journalistic commentary as well as academic analysis, populist parties are seen as the main drivers of the emotionalization of political discourse. However, we lack a clear understanding of why the new challengers opt more for emotional than rational appeals. While one might presume that emotional appeals are simply more effective in mobilizing supporters and persuading broader swaths of the electorate, such an explanation is at best impartial: Why do established mainstream parties, particularly given their superior resources, not appeal more to emotions if such a strategy is so effective? The present paper traces the development of diverging campaign strategies in recent election campaigns in Germany (2017), Austria (2017) and Italy (2018). Analyzing in-depth, semi-structured interviews with party bureaucrats, advertisers, consultants, and politicians, I seek to interpretively reconstruct the perceptions that these “campaigners” have of the electorate, the voters of their party, and the implicit and explicit “theories” of voting behavior they entertain. I believe these to be worthy of study because they underlie the campaigns that eventually emerged. With the continued reconfiguration of socio-structural alignments, directly accessing the perceptions of the involved actors becomes increasingly central to understanding party competition.