



**UNIVERSITY
OF TWENTE.**

Master Thesis

**Issue voting as the means to electoral success? An analysis of Volt's voter potential in
German and Dutch domestic politics**

by

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Abstract

The EU integration issue has only played a small role in recent domestic elections in Germany and the Netherlands but has the potential to increase its impact on future elections. This is particularly exciting for Volt as the only pan-European party at the moment. This research focuses on Volt's electoral chances in Germany and the Netherlands and analyses the issue positions of Volt voters and the political opportunity structures in the German and Dutch political systems through the lens of the issue voting theory based on Dutch and German election studies. The data analysis shows that Volt voters in both countries are significantly more in favour of further European integration than the other respondents, indicating that the voting behaviour can indeed be explained by the issue voting theory. In Germany, Volt voters also care more about climate change than the other respondents. Apart from that, Volt voters hold very centric views towards all analysed issues. In the Netherlands, the issue positions deviate from the other respondents in terms of EU unification and the protection of the freedom of speech. Based on the data, Volt's theoretical voter potential is higher in Germany when making the two deviating issue positions in both countries a condition to be considered potential Volt voters. Still, it is more likely Volt will be able to realise at least parts of its theoretical voter potential in the Netherlands than in Germany due to the more favourable political opportunity structures of the Dutch political system, even though the Dutch party system entails a higher degree of party competition than its German counterpart.

Keywords

Volt, issue voting, issue salience, issue positions, voter potential, party competition

Table of contents

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Research questions.....	4
1.2	Overview thesis	5
2	State of Literature	6
3	Theoretical framework.....	10
4	Methodology	17
4.1	Research design.....	17
4.2	Datasets.....	17
4.3	Operationalisation.....	19
5	Results and Data Analysis.....	20
5.1	Issue positions of Volt voters	20
5.2	Popularity of Volt voters' issue positions.....	26
5.3	The German and Dutch political systems.....	28
5.3.1	Party competition.....	29
5.3.2	Electoral systems	34
5.3.3	Public party funding	36
6	Discussion and Conclusion	37
6.1	Limitations	42
6.2	Further research.....	42
7	Bibliography.....	44
8	Appendix.....	50

List of Figures

Figure 1 Comparison of the attitudes towards EU integration between German Volt voters and all other respondents.....	21
Figure 2 Comparison of the attitudes towards climate change between German Volt voters and all other respondents.....	22
Figure 3 Comparison of the attitudes towards EU integration between Dutch Volt voters and all other respondents.....	24
Figure 4 Comparison of the preference for protecting freedom of speech between Dutch Volt voters and all other respondents	25
Figure 5 Comparison of the attitudes towards Volt between respondents holding the same issue positions and all respondents.....	28
Figure 6 Comparison of German parties' vote shares under the condition of voters agreeing on Volt's issue positions	29
Figure 7 Comparison of Dutch parties' vote share under the condition of voters agreeing on Volt's issue positions	31
Figure 8 Vote migration towards Volt in the 2021 Dutch federal election.....	32
Figure 9 For which parties did Volt voters vote in the previous election	33

1 Introduction

“The nature and scale of many of the challenges facing Europe, such as migration, require pan-European solutions.”

Alberto Alemanno (2018) used those words to describe the current situation in Europe and they are also he calls transnational parties the “fertilizer for a truly European polity”. But is the topic of European integration really that important in domestic politics? Almost two decades ago, Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) referred to the potential of the EU integration issue to influence European politics as a “sleeping giant”. If that giant ever were to be awakened, it would have far-reaching effects not only on European politics but also on research in the field. A shift away from nationally-focused politics to a European polity could lead to European elections leaving its second-order election behind. On the academic level, an increasing focus along the lines of the Pro-/Anti-EU cleavage could change the way parties are classified as the attitude towards EU integration would become significantly more important. For all of this to happen, voters would have to put far more emphasis on EU integration during their voting decision because parties would be forced to position themselves more distinctly on the topic of EU integration when it influences their electoral prospects.

As indicated by Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004), the EU integration issue contains a lot of untapped voter potential. To investigate the effects on all parties across the political landscape would exceed the limitations of this thesis. Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) already saw the beginning of opportunistic political actors noticing the possibility to separate themselves from their political competition based on the EU issue, but they attributed this behaviour mostly to far left or far right parties who were positioning themselves mainly as anti-EU. This thesis will instead focus on the party with the most pro-EU stance that stands to profit from the stimulation of the EU integration issue, especially among pro-integrationist voters who consider the EU issue to be particularly important. The party in question is the pan-European party Volt. Hence, the general objective of this thesis is to investigate Volt’s voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands. More precisely, this means that the main research question is “What is Volt’s voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands based on the issue voting approach?” The question already hints at the importance of the issue voting approach as it will serve as the theoretical framework for this thesis. For Volt, EU integration is the central issue. The perceived concentration of Volt on this topic is so strong that Benjamin Leruth even warns that Volt might only be seen as a “single-issue movement” (Leruth, 2021). This shows that

Volt's voter potential is heavily influenced by the EU integration issue and is thus the perfect subject for this thesis because the voter potential will be estimated based on an assessment of the issue positions of Volt voters.

But how can voter potential be defined? Scholars like Lichteblau et al. (2020) use the "propensities to vote" (PTV) to measure the actual voter potential (AVP). The PTV is based on a question in election studies that asks respondents about the likelihood of them voting for a particular party on a scale ranging from 1 to 11. In this thesis though, the term voter potential will not be used in exactly the same way because Volt is a new party and thus cannot be considered a known commodity in the political systems. This makes it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from analysing election studies in this particular way. Looking at how Volt's campaigns and general approach to attract votes, it quickly becomes clear that the party focuses strongly on issues. As a new party, party identification is not a viable option to be electorally successful anyway, but they also put comparatively little emphasis on their candidates. That is why the investigation of Volt's voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands will be connected with the issue voting theory. Another reason for this choice is that this thesis aims to go beyond the already known socio-demographic attributes of Volt voters like age and education and assess their characteristics and Volt's voter potential based on analysing attitudes towards issues.

This means that issue voting is the most suitable theoretical framework as it explains vote choices as voters choosing the party whose positions are closest to their own ones. Therefore, voter potential will be defined as the share of voters that agree with Volt on their most central issues. The concluding answer to the main research question will also consider the political opportunity structures in Germany and the Netherlands to give a thorough answer not only about the theoretically possible but also about the realistic voter potential of Volt. In the last decades, many scholars have observed the trend of increasing importance of issue voting at the expense of party voting (Nie et al., 2013). The degree to which issue voting does play a role in actual voting behaviour depends on several factors but at the EU level, a study found that the issue-voting model outperforms the competing second-order model when evaluating their ability to explain voter's behaviour in Irish referendums on EU treaties (Garry et al., 2005).

One example of the increasing importance of issues is the rising popularity of official voting advice applications (VAA) in both countries. Although the exact numbers vary slightly depending on the election and the source, it is clear that they have become increasingly influential, especially among young, politically interested, and high-educated voters (Martin &

Chase, 2017; Mendgen, 2021). As an illustration, the Dutch *Stemwijzer* for the 2021 elections has been completed more than 7.8 million times, which is more than half of all eligible voters (ProDemos, 2021). This does not only indicate the growing relevance of issue voting in general but also demonstrates the connection between issue voting and the already known characteristics of Volt voters. Like the users of VAAs, they are also young and high-educated. Thus, the issue voting theory is very applicable to further investigate Volt's electorate and future potential.

Historically, academics developed three different theoretical models trying to explain voting behaviour. The sociological model is primarily based on the work of Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) and uses socio-economic factors to explain electoral behaviour. The most important finding was that membership in social groups strongly influenced voting decisions (Arzheimer, 2007). The second one is the psychosocial model which focuses on party identification rather than sociological variables (Arzheimer, 2007). The most important publication about it is the book *The American Voter* by Campbell et al. (1960), in which the authors describe that partisanship is obtained in a process involving family values and social identification (Antunes, 2010). Finally, the theory of rational choice or the economic model¹ has been brought forward by Anthony Downs (1957) in his work *An economic theory of democracy*. It assumes that parties try to position themselves and their policies in a way to maximise their votes. On the other hand, voters are assumed to act rationally by trying to gain as much utility from their vote as possible. This means that voters as well as political parties base their decision solely on their interests (Antunes, 2010). For his analysis, Downs (1957) uses spatial representation where voters choose the party closest to their own position while parties try to put themselves in the optimal place to maximise their electoral result (Antunes, 2010). From this, the issue voting theory has been derived over time as it also uses the spatial theory but adds several aspects like the salience of different issues. A more detailed elaboration on the issue voting theory will be done in chapter 3. By using the issue voting theory as a framework, the analysis will be structured in a way that enables an assertion about not only the issue positions of Volt voters but also an estimation of the size of Volt's voter potential and the main competing parties.

The choice for Germany and the Netherlands as the countries to assess the electoral prospects for Volt is based on them being the two most important countries for Volt or as Chris Aalberts (2022a) frames it: "Volt is in fact a German-Dutch party with some loose members

¹ Nowadays, economic voting primarily refers to voting behaviour being determined by the economic situation. This differentiation had not been made back then.

elsewhere”. On one hand, this underlines the choice for Germany and the Netherlands. On the other hand, this indicates that Volt Europe as a whole also has other problems to deal with when it comes to the party’s future in all European countries. Analysing the situation in all European countries definitely seems intriguing but would also surely exceed the limits of this thesis. Thus, this thesis will solely focus on the electoral prospects of Volt on a domestic level in Germany and the Netherlands.

1.1 Research questions

As already mentioned, the main research question of this thesis is “What is Volt’s voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands based on the issue voting approach?”. To be able to give a profound answer to this question, several sub-questions need to be answered first as they deal with various aspects of Volt’s overall voter potential in both countries. The first sub-question aims to shed light on the issue positions of Volt voters. Which unique attributes differentiate them from voters of other parties? Remembering the issue voting theory, this will be done by focusing on attitudes towards issues rather than attributes like party affiliation, age, gender, or education because according to the theory, voters choose the party closest to their opinion on critical issues. In addition, there has already been extensive research on those attributes. The state of research in this particular field will be presented in chapter 2. This means that the main focus will be on issues, and it will thus be vital to investigate the issues where the issue positions of Volt voters deviate significantly from all voters as it will indicate which issues characterise Volt’s voters. Thus, the first sub-question is: “Which issue positions do Volt voters in Dutch and German national elections have?”

The answers from the first sub-question will then subsequently enable the next step in the analysis which aims to estimate the share of voters that theoretically match the profile of Volt voters based on the previously analysed characteristics and issue positions. How large is the group of voters that have the same attitudes towards Volt’s most central issues? This will give a first idea of whether there is a significantly large group of voters sharing Volt’s opinions on prominent issues in the first place that the party might be able to attract in the future. This analysis will be conducted with the help of election study data from Germany as well as the Netherlands. Thus, it will also be interesting to see whether Volt’s issues appeal more to the Dutch or the German electorate. Therefore, the second sub-question will be: “How many voters have the same issue positions as Volt voters?”

To be able to answer the main research question about Volt’s voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands, the results from the second sub-question would be too simplistic as there

are other factors that heavily influence Volt's actual voter potential. One central element of this is party competition. Depending on which and how many parties target the group of voters defined when answering the previous sub-question that share the same issue positions as Volt, the actual voter potential could actually be significantly lower than the potential based solely on the data. Thus, it is essential to analyse Volt's political opportunity structures in both countries because for Lucardie (2000), the political opportunity structures are one of the three factors that determine the electoral success of new parties. Besides party competition, this also includes institutional aspects like the electoral system and public party funding. It is utterly indispensable to also take these circumstances into account before elaborating on Volt's voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands because historically, the success of new parties is closely related to the type of electoral system they try to succeed in (Harmel & Robertson, 1985). All these several aspects that affect Volt's electoral prospects will be referred to as the political system. Hence, the third sub-question will be: "Does the German or the Dutch political system provide better opportunities for Volt?".

By analysing these research questions, this thesis aims to add to the research in the field of studying voting behaviour. The focus on Volt will investigate the pro-EU side along the EU integration dimension which has mostly been ignored by the research on the topic. Further, the examination of the issue positions of Volt voters and the calculations of the theoretical voter potential will add to the knowledge about Volt voters and the eventual answer on the realistic voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands will give more insight into the electoral prospects of Volt in the future. The comparison of Volt's situation in both countries is also relevant from a societal point of view because it adds a new element as it investigates the deviating political opportunity structures in both countries. Moreover, this thesis also aims to add to the research on the issue voting theory as its application in the actual analysis of Volt's issue positions will prove that the theory is indeed able to explain voting behaviour. This means that the findings of this thesis will improve the overall understanding of how citizens make their voting decisions.

1.2 Overview thesis

So how exactly is this thesis structured? After the general introduction and the presentation of the research questions, a brief overview of the state of the literature will be given, before the theoretical framework for this thesis will be presented. The theory of issue voting has been present in political science for almost a century and is still relevant today. It will enable using a fresh approach to the question of why and how citizens decide to cast their

vote for Volt. The subsequent methodology chapter will give more insight into how the analysis will be conducted to accurately answer the research questions. The main data sources used in this thesis will be recent Dutch and German election studies as those two countries are considered the “homeland” of Volt and the places where Volt has been most successful to date (Aalberts, 2022a).

The following analysis chapter will be divided into three main parts. After every single step, a comparison between the findings in Germany and the Netherlands will be made if deemed fruitful. First, the issue positions of Volt voters will be analysed with the help of the election study data with special emphasis on issue questions about for example climate change, pro/anti-EU positions, or positions on socio-political issues. In the second part, the findings from the first analysis will make it possible to estimate how many voters overall hold the same issue positions as Volt voters. The third and last part of the analysis will then go another step further and not only use the general election studies but also data from local elections and previous findings on vote migration. This way, three central aspects of the German and Dutch political systems will be examined: the party competition in the domestic political spaces, the electoral systems, and the state of public party funding in Germany and the Netherlands. With the help of these different approaches, it will be easier to give a profound answer to the main research question, because these circumstances play a vital role in determining Volt’s voter potential.

Finally, the concluding chapter will then answer the main research question with the help of the findings from the analysis of the three sub-questions. This means an elaboration on Volt’s actual prospects in German and Dutch domestic elections considering all circumstances, including recent political events in both countries. In addition, it will also be discussed how likely it is that Volt can indeed elevate its status from a new party to an established one. Other important aspects in the closing chapter include an assessment of the various ramifications of the findings of this thesis on theoretical and political considerations. Moreover, the limitations of the thesis and especially of the empirical method will be discussed before an outlook on further research in the field will be given.

2 State of Literature

Volt is widely regarded as the first pan-European party. But what is already known about Volt from an academic point of view? As a new and upcoming party, Volt unsurprisingly garnered a lot of interest among researchers and scholars of various kinds. As Volt definitely falls under the category of a new party, it is necessary to elaborate on the characteristics of new

parties in general first. According to Krouwel and Lucardie (2008), there are four distinct types of new parties, with Volt falling under the category of “Birth” because it is neither a transformation nor a merger or split of an established party but rather a completely new founded one. Regarding the factors influencing the success of new parties, several variables have been identified. Lago and Martinez (2011) point out that unfulfilled political needs are advantageous for the formation of new parties when electoral systems are rather lenient. In addition, a large enough group of elastic voters that are open to changing their party preference is also beneficial for the electoral prospects of new parties (Lago & Martinez, 2011). Tavits (2008) adds more variables that encourage the emergence of new parties like low cost of entry and high rewards for getting into office. Further, discontent with existing parties also enhances the emergence of new parties (Tavits, 2008). On the other hand, single-issue parties also face multiple problems when trying to establish themselves. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) for example, managed to attract a group of voters that was very Eurosceptic and opposed to immigration. While the party’s leadership wanted to add more issues, that created risks for internal tensions about what issues UKIP should focus on and also the potential loss of their original supporters if the party would move away from their initial trademark issue (Lynch et al., 2012).

Another aspect that is crucial for a new party like Volt is the behaviour of the mainstream parties. Meguid (2005) does not use the term new party but focuses on niche parties instead, but Volt also fulfils the criteria of a niche party: focus on policies that are not part of the classic party competition, bring up issues that do not fit the predominant political division, strong reliance on a single policy position. Thus, literature on niche parties can also be used in the case of Volt, which also means that Meguid’s findings are relevant for Volt because they demonstrate that the response of the mainstream parties has a big influence on Volt’s electoral prospects. The most interesting conclusion drawn is that the behaviour of mainstream parties does not only include the changing of issue positions but also the alteration of salience as well as the ownership of issues (Meguid, 2005). In the specific case of new parties in the Netherlands, Krouwel and Lucardie (2008) conclude that the historical success of new parties in the open Dutch political system was not actually as overwhelming as one might initially expect as half of all new parties that were able to get into parliament did not manage to stay there for longer than consecutive elections. They argue that the probability of success depends on several factors like the political opportunity structure, issue ownership and positioning, and the allure of the party leadership. If new parties successfully managed to win a place in the political landscape, they do stand a good chance to have an impact on other parties, but for

actual influence on policies, they need to become part of the government (Krouwel & Lucardie, 2008).

Transitioning from external factors to Volt and its program, the party argues that many current challenges can only be tackled on a supranational level because national parties would reach their limits when being confronted with complex problems like climate change (Volt, 2022). This way, Volt is vying to shock European politics, but it is not easy to place the party on the political spectrum as it combines liberal, green, and socialist views. Volt considers itself neither left nor right but policy-based. Volt's MEP Damian Boeselager summarises that "Volt stands for fixing the EU, an innovation-friendly & sustainable economy & a more just society." Asked whether Volt could be viewed as (green) social liberals, he argues that such a classification would still mean different things between Bulgaria and Portugal and that the focus should not be on labelling things but on finding policy proposals (Boeselager, 2022). Still, the fact that he is part of the parliamentary group of the Greens on the European level gives a clear first indication of where Volt is located in the political spectrum. In the Netherlands, Simon Otjes places Volt near D66 programmatically because they are both "progressive on moral and cultural matters, pro-European and centrist on the economy" (Otjes, 2021a). The only discrepancy is their attitude towards nuclear energy. Aalberts (2022b) refers to Volt's policies as being remarkably similar to the demands of Groen Links in the Netherlands. In general, he characterises Volt's issues positions with the terms progressive, sustainable, social, liberal, and international (Aalberts, 2022c).

Another important academical aspect is the profile of Volt voters. The two things that clearly stand out are that Volt has been very electorally successful among young and highly educated voters (NOS, 2021). During the last Dutch federal election in 2021, more than 40% of Volt voters were between 18 and 34 years old, the second-highest share of young voters among all relevant parties. Even more distinct was Volt's position at the top when it came to the voters' level of education, as more than 70% of Volt voters were categorised as highly educated (NOS, 2021). These Dutch findings can partly also be backed up by German data. In the last local elections in Cologne, for example, Volt ranked third among all parties when only considering 16-24-year-olds with a vote share of 11% (Deutschland Wählt, 2020).

Interestingly, exit polls from those last federal Dutch elections showed that Volt managed to attract voters from diverse backgrounds as only 18% of them did not vote in the previous election in 2017 (Leruth, 2021). Regarding the location of Volt's success, it has become clear that big student cities are very favourable. In North Rhine-Westphalia for

example, Volt has been by far the most successful in cities like Bonn, Cologne, Aachen, and Münster. The same trend can be observed in the Netherlands. One aspect that does not seem to be too important in the context of analysing the characteristics of Volt voters is the aspect of gender. Using the data from the last Dutch federal elections again, Volt ranks in the middle when it comes to the men-women ratio among their voters. Hence, it looks like this attribute is neglectable in the general discussion about the characteristics of Volt voters (NOS, 2021). According to Thomas Zittel, Volt's voter profile resembles the one of the Pirate Party when they were the upcoming political movement in Germany. Hence, it seems like Volt is not the first new party that tries to become relevant by attracting young, high-educated voters first (dpa, 2021).

Regarding the prospects of Volt, Leruth (2021) refers to other transnational or pan-European parties that tried to become a political force across Europe. All of them were not able to make a lasting impression, with honourable mentions going to the Pirate parties who were able to attract over 40 seats in the Czech Republic, Iceland, and Luxembourg. But Leruth argues that the characteristic that separates Volt from those other unsuccessful pan-European parties is that Volt seems to be able to take advantage of the increasing salience of the European integration issue in national elections. Especially the most recent Dutch election has displayed a shift from the usual left-right dimension towards a cosmopolitan/nationalist one, as evidenced by the election results (Leruth, 2021). Otjes (2021b) draws the same conclusion as he argues that although the EU integration topic might not have been very present in the public debate leading up to the election, the polarisation along the lines of the EU integration dimension is very much apparent. This aspect is one of the main reasons why issue voting will be so crucial in this thesis. Further, this also shows why EU integration will always be the central issue analysed. On one hand, it is the trademark issue of Volt, and on the other hand, there are several indications that it might have the potential to become more salient in the future.

But even though those developments are definitely advantageous for Volt, Leruth also warns that the party still faces major obstacles on its way to becoming an important player in European politics. Internal conflicts and more difficult electoral systems could be problematic on Volt's way to developing into a regular force in multiple European countries. The strong focus on the European integration issue might also complicate Volt's ability to attract a bigger group of voters. Thus, the national groups will have to be innovative in finding other topics in order to attract voters (Leruth, 2021). This thesis aims to shed more light on which other issues Volt could try to occupy to increase its voter potential. Campaign strategist Felix Rotterberg

suggests that Volt should focus on occupying the climate change issue as they could “double their seats if they manage to go even stronger on the climate” (Erdbrink, 2021).

3 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of this thesis will be presented, and the choice for it will be reasoned. Further, an elaboration on the most relevant types that scholars developed over time is also indispensable. As already alluded to in the introduction, issue voting has been chosen as the theory to analyse the research question. But why were other theories explaining vote behaviour dismissed? The sociological model developed by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) argues that being part of social groups has a strong influence on voting behaviour. In this context, the phrase group could mean for example an ethnic group or a social group. The psychosocial model has a slightly similar approach but focuses considerably more on party identification. As this affiliation to a specific party is also explained as being heavily influenced by family values and social context, both theories are not suited for an analysis of Volt’s electorate and the party’s voter potential because as a new party, the aforementioned explanations are no viable options for Volt to attract votes. Supporting this reasoning is the overall trend that sees the importance of party membership and social-structural voting (class voting as well as religiously based voting) declining (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Thus, Volt tries to achieve electoral success by appealing to voters who compare their own attitudes and preferences with the proposals made by parties and then choose the party that fits their own interests best. This focus on issues can also be observed in Volt’s campaigning. While politics has become increasingly personalised in recent decades (McAllister, 2007), Volt puts comparably little emphasis on its leading candidates but aims to shift the attention towards issues in the majority of the party’s communication. That is why the issue voting theory is the only reasonable choice in this case because Volt is neither able to rely on party identification nor a charismatic leading candidate to attract votes.

For a long time, different versions of the so-called “traditional spatial theory” were dominant in the field of issue voting and their overall influence is indisputable. As a complete overview of the history and development of the issue voting theory in the last, almost one hundred years would greatly exceed the limitations of this thesis, this chapter about issue voting as the theoretical framework for the analysis of Volt’s voter characteristics will condense the most important historical developments and aggregate the most relevant aspects for this thesis. The starting point for the issue voting theory was the basic spatial model which is also called the “proximity” model because it assumes that in a hypothetical space, points exist that reflect

the attitudes of voters as well as the positions of candidates. The model then argues that voters always choose the candidates whose “point” is closest to their own one (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). Historically, academics on the topic of issue voting were always under the impression that the “good” citizens would predominantly use issue voting, or as Carmines and Stimson (1980) frame it: “The common-indeed, universal-view has been that voting choices based on policy concerns are superior to decisions based on party loyalty or candidate image. Only the former represent clearly sophisticated behaviour.”

This is another indication that issue voting suits an analysis of Volt voters very well because the findings of other scholars on Volt’s electorate showed that Volt voters are comparatively well-educated, which makes them the perfect fit for a voting theory that addresses voters with that particular characteristic. But as Carmines and Stimson (1980) clearly show, the type of issue plays an essential role. In their terms, “hard-issue” voting is what is relevant when analysing the decision-making process of voters, as it assumes that in this case, the voting decision stands at the end of a long, sophisticated thought process that considered the voter’s policy preferences as well as matching policy positions offered by political parties (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). The presence of “hard-issue” voting naturally means that there is also “easy-issue” voting. According to Carmines and Stimson (1980), the distinction between both types is not only that “easy issues” are in fact “easier” but incorporate attributes like differing decision-making processes. Their differentiation added a completely new element though. Before, the spatial model linked sophisticated rationality to issue voting without any restrictions. The work of Carmines and Stimson (1980) thus added a new layer of “easy-issue” voting which is used most frequently by lesser-educated voters (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). Although the basic spatial model has faced severe criticism (for example by Stokes, 1963) over time, all current improved ones can be traced back to this basic idea.

One essential step in the improvement process of the original proximity model of issue voting came in 1989 when Rabinowitz and Macdonald introduced their “directional theory of issue voting”. The crucial difference between their new directional theory and the old spatial model is the added aspect of whether the voter and the candidate lie on the same side of a neutral point. Hence, it is not only about absolute proximity anymore but also about voters and candidates being on the same side, e.g., in the left-right dimension. In addition, Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) also include the aspect of “intensity”. In the directional theory model, this is conceptualised as how far away from the neutral point the preferences of voters and candidates are located. Thus, the directional theory proves that voters tend to have a rather dispersed

preference when it comes to certain aspects and objectives of policy-making. The empirical evidence displayed by Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) clearly showed that their model works significantly better in explaining the vote choices made by citizens compared to the basic proximity one.

More precisely, comparisons between the two models demonstrated not only the general superiority of the directional model but its validity for all kinds of different settings like parties, candidates, and even miscellaneous countries. Further, this is also valid across all different sophistication groups. Hence, Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1995) conclude: “We found that at all levels of sophistication, voters appear to follow the directional model. These results hold in both the United States with its weak two-party system and in Norway with its highly disciplined multiparty. The consistency of the findings suggests they are likely to generalize, at least to other long-standing democracies.”

What is particularly interesting about their findings for this thesis is that more sophisticated voters tend to be more aware of issues in the first place, but then also more capable to take them into account when making their voting decision. Remembering that Volt already has relatively highly-educated voters, it seems reasonable to assume that the theory of issue voting fits them especially well. On the other hand, Singh (2010) showed that the ability of voters to deploy issue voting is closely tied to the political context as the complexity of an election affects the difficulty to identify the correct party. For example, a higher number of parties makes it more challenging to accurately choose the closest party. Moreover, multiple electoral dimensions complicate proximity voting regardless of the voter’s personal level of sophistication. Thus, the electoral environment has a major influence on the ability of voters to actually find the most proximate party (Singh, 2010).

One essential aspect that has been absent in this overview of issue voting theory until this point is the salience of issues. According to Bélanger and Meduid (2008), the comprehension of issue ownership voting has first been brought up by Budge and Farlie in 1983, but they further improved the understanding of the topic in their work *Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice* from 2008. The focus of Bélanger and Meduid on issue salience changed the comprehension of issue ownership in a way that issue ownership itself is not sufficient anymore if the issue's salience is infinitesimal at best. This means that issue ownership for a party only has positive effects on the voting behaviour of citizens who consider that specific issue salient. Bélanger and Meguid (2008) argue that this way of modelling issue voting is more exhaustive when it comes to displaying the real vote choice of

citizens. Their main finding is that the salience of an issue is vital for the degree of influence of issue ownership on vote behaviour. In turn, this leads to parties having to think differently about the phenomenon called issue voting as previous research might have indicated that party reputation, as well as party positions, are already sufficient to attract voters. Since that does not seem to work anymore according to recent findings, parties are forced to underline the importance and salience of “their” issue to voters to be electorally successful (Bélanger and Meguid, 2008).

These findings match the conclusions drawn by Green-Pedersen (2007) about issue competition becoming increasingly influential in Western European party competition, while party affiliation and social-structural voting are dwindling. On the other hand, electoral volatility has increased, meaning voters are more willing to change their votes. This means that party competition nowadays not only consists of positional competition but also entails competition on which issues are important, which is commonly referred to as issue competition. From a party’s perspective, issue competition means having your preferred issue play the largest possible role on the political agenda. It is essential to point out that although issue competition has risen, positional competition still plays a decisive role as well, and that both do not prohibit each other (Green-Pedersen, 2007). This has been demonstrated by William Riker in 1996 when he defined two different principles of issue competition: the dominance and the dispersion principle. The dominance principle shows that political parties benefit from putting issues on the political agenda where they have the support of the electorate and there is also significant disagreement with other parties (Green-Pedersen 2007). Looking at the situation of issue competition in the Netherlands and Germany specifically, van der Brug (2003) showed that left-right positions did not change in both countries even when different issues shaped the political agenda. This means that positional competition and issue competition do not necessarily directly influence each other.

But to what extent do these theoretical considerations apply to Volt? As it is obvious that European integration is the central issue of Volt and thus also for this thesis, it seems fruitful to go into more detail about the specific circumstances of the European integration topic and EU issue voting. Regarding the degree of politicisation of the EU, especially mainstream ruling parties try to shift the debate away from discussing the preferable degree of EU integration to different issues concerning the EU that are more undisputed (Guinaudeau & Persico, 2014).

According to De Vries (2010), the influence of issue voting does not affect all parties to the same degree in the case of EU issue voting as the influence differs considerably between

political parties. This can be explained by two different components: the general attitude of political parties towards the EU issue and the strategies of said parties. Especially the first aspect is essential for Volt, the party which can reasonably be considered the most European party in any European country regardless of the situation in domestic party competition. Keeping in mind one of De Vries' (2010) conclusions which reads "parties that care about European integration and those that take an outspoken and unified stance on the issue are much more susceptible to EU issue voting", it is unquestionable that Volt is very much affected by EU issue voting even though the party is much less visible in terms of the left-right spectrum, another facet that influences the degree to which parties might be able to benefit from EU issue voting (De Vries, 2007). Still, this very much justifies the choice of the (EU) issue voting theory as a theoretical framework for this thesis.

So, Volt does very much check the box to have European integration as its central issue. But going back to Bélanger and Meduid (2008), issue salience is also of utmost importance. Considering the overall power of the issue, Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) already argued that the pro/anti-EU orientation is a "sleeping giant" that possesses the potential to heavily shape the future of European party competition many years ago. Back then, they saw that parties did not really differ in their views on European integration. Thus, they concluded that therefore voters' different attitudes towards the topic did not have any impact on election results and policy-making. The reasoning for this is that voters could not combine their preference for EU positions with their preference for the left-right dimension. Hence, voters largely ignored EU-related positions and focused on other issues instead. One interesting underlying element to this is that Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) also found that attitudes toward EU integration are independent of the basic left-right dimension. It will be interesting to see whether this is true for the datasets analysed in this thesis, especially as it seems like Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) and De Vries (2007) have dissenting opinions on whether the left-right dimension does matter or not. But Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) also predicted that at some point, politicians would arise who would aim to take advantage of this untapped potential. In addition, they also elaborated on the necessary circumstances under which that might happen. They produced four different possibilities: new actions by the elites, the reaction to external events, or the result of chance or changing voter behaviour. Considering the current situation, particularly the second option has become a real possibility given the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

As the data used in this thesis will be extracted from Dutch and German election studies, it is logical to focus more on these two countries. Around the last turn of the millennium, EU

issue voting was not able to explain voting behaviour in the neighbouring countries (De Vries, 2007). As mentioned before, the impact of EU issue voting is dependent on two factors: the salience of the issue and the degree of conflict between domestic political parties (De Vries, 2007). The need for both elements to be present was observable in the case of the 2002 Dutch election when Dutch voters still did not care enough about the EU issue to make it relevant, even though the latter aspect of sufficient conflict between domestic political parties was present in the case of the 2002 Dutch election. In Germany, neither were voters interested in the topic nor did parties fight about it back then. But those findings are almost exactly 20 years old, and as De Vries (2007) concluded in the end: “But this situation is not cast in stone”.

Fortunately, as already touched on in the introductory part of this thesis, the salience of the EU integration in domestic elections has increased in recent years. To reiterate, Leruth (2021) argued that during the last Dutch elections, Volt was able to take advantage of the increased importance of the European integration issue. Needless to say, Leruth is by far not the only academic who observed this trend. In Germany though, there has been less evidence of an increase in the salience of the EU integration issue. Braun (2021) concludes that in all member states, European issues were more important in the 2019 European Parliament elections than in the previous EP elections - except for Germany. Interestingly, overall interest in EU politics did animate citizens to vote in all countries, even in Germany where almost no evidence for controversy over the issue was to be found (Braun, 2021). Braun (2021), calls this phenomenon “Europeanness”, meaning that European issues were able to mobilise voters by being put on the agenda of the political space. Likewise, De Sio et al. (2019) point to the 2019 EP elections as a decisive point as the surge in voter turnout could be seen as the result of actual politicisation. Although the extent to which various aspects influence party competition in EP elections is very hard to grasp, especially as the elements constantly change, the two central dimensions are still the economic and the cultural ones (Schäfer et al., 2021). Transitioning back from EP to national elections, these aforementioned findings are relevant for this thesis because De Vries and Hobolt (2016) provided evidence of similar degrees of EU issue voting in both types of elections, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands. They did not only show that vote choice is influenced by EU issue voting in general but also did so for the two countries in question here, making it unequivocally clear that EU issue voting has been present in EP and national elections in the Netherlands and Germany. Interestingly, EU issue voting was even more influential in national elections than in European ones in the case of Germany (De Vries and Hobolt, 2016).

After elaborating on all these different facets of the issue voting theory, it is vital to link them with this particular thesis and the research questions shaping the analysis. To reiterate, the main research question of this work is “What is Volt’s voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands based on the issue voting approach?”. To be able to answer this question in the end it is essential to define the term voter potential in the context of this thesis. As already mentioned in the introduction, the term voter potential is not used in exactly the same way as for example in the work of Lichteblau et al. (2020). Although their approach of utilising the “propensities to vote” (PTV) based on data from election studies about the likelihood of respondents voting for a particular party does make a lot of sense, this is not completely viable for this thesis as such extensive data is not available on Volt because it is not only a new party but also has not been very successful to date. Hence, the term “voter potential” will rather be loosely defined as the share of voters that agree with Volt on their most central issues because according to the issue voting theory, which is how voters make their voting decision. If voters were to decide based on party affiliation or social circumstances, Volt would not stand a chance to attract voters anyway. Therefore, the term voter potential has to be heavily linked to the issue voting theory because it is the only realistic way for Volt to be electorally successful.

Although there has been a constant rise in issue voting in recent decades, that obviously does not mean other voting behaviour explanations have become completely irrelevant. Still, the subsequent analysis will assume that all voters cast their votes based on the issue voting approach. Hence, the first and second sub-question deal with analysing the issue positions of Volt voters and the whole electorate. By using the proximity model, it will be possible to answer the first sub-question by calculating the issue positions of Volt voters because according to the theory, voters chose the party that is closest to their own opinion. Thus, it is necessary to evaluate where Volt voters are located before assessing how many voters hold the same views overall. This calculation will be done when answering the second sub-question because according to the theory, all voters whose issue positions are very proximal to Volt’s issue positions could potentially become Volt voters if they were to cast their vote based on the issue voting theory. Other crucial points of the theory, for example, issue salience, issue competition, and how much all of these might affect a new Pan-European party like Volt will enable an exhaustive estimation of Volt’s voter potential based on the issue voting approach in the end.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design

So, what does the theoretical framework exactly mean for this thesis? First of all, issue voting is important for Volt, because as a new party, Volt cannot rely on attributes like party identification to attract voters. In addition, it should help Volt that its current voters are over proportionally highly educated because that is the group of sophisticated people who are more receptive to issue voting than the average voter. The use of the issue voting theory will first make it possible to assess the issue positions of Volt voters. This gives insight into the minds of voters because it reveals partly with which issues they associate Volt, but more importantly, it helps to determine which issues are relevant factors for their voting decision based on the proximity of the voter's own and Volt's issue positions. To be able to do this kind of analysis, it has to be assumed that the analysed issues are salient because otherwise, it would be impossible to make any kind of statement about the issue positions and their influence. It should be noted that the salience of issues is also a constantly changing process so it would be difficult to make any universal statements anyway because the salience of issues is so volatile. That is also one of the reasons why the estimation of Volt's theoretical and realistic voter potential can only be done under different conditions. The theoretical voter potential will be assessed by calculating the share of all respondents who agree with Volt's characteristic issue positions. Finally, the political systems and the opportunity structures for Volt in Germany and the Netherlands will be analysed by zooming in on attributes like party competition, electoral systems, and public party funding. The findings from analysing those circumstances are vital in order to be able to answer the main research question about Volt's voter potential in both countries in the end.

4.2 Datasets

To conduct the empirical analysis necessary to be able to answer the research questions, appropriate datasets have been selected that have the ability to display voter characteristics from the Netherlands and Germany. In the Dutch case, wave fourteen of the LISS panel has been chosen as the dataset. The LISS panel is a representative sample of Dutch individuals who participate in monthly Internet surveys. The panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet connection. A longitudinal survey is fielded in the panel every year, covering a large variety of domains including health, work, education, income, housing, time use, political views, values, and personality. The questionnaire used here

is views on politics and values, with the questionnaire being administered in three parts. The overall date of data collection was from December 2021 until March 2022. All three parts were presented to a little more than 6,000 panel members with around 86% participating in the end. This means that the overall number of respondents was between 5,240 and 5,316 in every part. Essential for this thesis, the number of Volt voters was 125, making the dataset a reliable source of information to receive insight into the characteristics and issue positions of Volt voters.

To be able to analyse the voter characteristics of German Volt voters, it is vital to use an appropriate dataset in this case as well. Here, the choice has been made to use data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). As the GLES contains a wide range of studies, two specific datasets published in 2022 have been selected: Wave 18 and 19 from the GLES Panel 2021. Both studies include a large number of units (13,963 in Wave 18 and 13,568 in Wave 19) as well as a large number of variables (285 in Wave 18 and 304 in Wave 19). Hence, both samples also contain a solid number of Volt voters, 31 and 45, respectively. Regarding the number of Volt voters available in both studies, some further clarification is necessary. Participants who indicated they voted for Volt with either their first or second vote have all been included in the general population of Volt voters to increase that number.

Another important aspect that needs to be reflected upon is the timeframe of both studies. The dates of data collection of both surveys do not differ too much, as Wave 18 was conducted between August 11, 2021, and August 24, 2021, while Wave 19 was conducted between September 15, 2021, and September 25, 2021. This leads to the reasonable conclusion to rule out any time effects as it seems highly unlikely that the basic attitudes of Volt voters changed significantly over such a brief period of time.

In chapter 5, vote migration data will be used as well. Unfortunately, not many informative datasets about vote migration involving Volt are available regarding German elections because the party usually falls under the category “others.” Thus, the only applicable data is limited to cities where the party has been more successful than nationwide. In the Netherlands though, Volt’s success in the last federal election has made the party become more prominent in vote migration research. The data used in the chapter is based on online research conducted by Ipsos, commissioned by the NOS, among a representative sample of 6,420 Dutch voters (Harteveld & van Heck, 2021). Another source for data on the last federal elections in the Netherlands is Peil.nl, a cooperation between Maurice de Hond and No Ties BV (de Hond, 2021).

4.3 Operationalisation

Because the datasets contain a large amount of information, selecting the questions most essential to identify the most characteristic issue positions of Volt voters compared with all other survey participants is necessary. Therefore, the focus is primarily on their general attitude towards basic political questions and which issues Volt voters consider most relevant. This is especially important in light of the theoretical framework used in this thesis. To analyse the datasets empirically, the software program SPSS has been used and all calculations are rounded to one digit after the decimal point. In short, first, the characteristics of Volt voters will be examined, and then it will be estimated how many potential voters of this type there are in total. Then the main competitors and the political opportunity structures in both countries will be analysed to assess which political system is more favourable for a small new party like Volt.

To answer the first sub-question, it is of vital importance to scan both datasets for issue-related questions as only those are useful for this analysis considering the theoretical framework. The most important question is without a doubt the one asking whether European unification should be pushed forward, or whether European unification has already gone far too far because it concerns Volt's trademark issue. Unfortunately, the questions asked in the German and Dutch datasets are not completely identical. This will have to be considered when comparing the results from both countries not only when answering this particular research question but all the time. On the other hand, the questions do not differ too much either. Importantly, the question of whether European unification should go further or has already gone too far is almost exactly the same in both datasets. After the selection of the questions, the answers of Volt voters and all other respondents will be compared to identify the issues where Volt voters deviate the most from the overall population. This will mostly be done by a comparison of the mean answer but also includes an analysis of the distributions of all answers given. This way, it will be possible to recognise the specific issue positions that characterise Volt voters.

This is essential because, in the next step, the second sub-question will be answered by using those previously identified issues to assess the share of overall respondents holding the same issue positions when it comes to Volt's central topics. The process to estimate how many respondents have the same issue positions as Volt voters will be the following: With the findings from the first part of the empirical research, the most relevant issues that characterise Volt voters will be selected. Then, the range of answers where the vast majority of Volt voters are located in the cases of critical issues will be used to calculate the share of all respondents that fulfil the criteria of Volt voters. This will then give an extremely basic first idea of how

many respondents could theoretically vote for Volt if all of them were to use the proximity model while also basing their vote decision solely on the issue voting approach.

To answer the third research question about the Dutch and German political systems, more empirical sources will be used than only the two aforementioned datasets. For example, data on vote migration will add more perspective on party competition in both party systems, while an analysis of the overall features of the political systems like the electoral thresholds and the public party funding will reveal more about the political opportunity structures for a new party like Volt in Germany and the Netherlands. Party competition is important because to be electorally successful, Volt needs to find a place in the political space where it can attract a substantial number of voters. This depends on the positioning of other parties on the issues Volt emphasises. Analysing for example which other parties current Volt voters voted for in previous elections enables not only the identification of Volt's main competitors but also gives more perspective on how many voters are actually located in the proximity of Volt's issue positions. This marks a crucial step from the basic and theory-driven first two sub-questions to a more realistic assessment of the actual situation in Dutch and German domestic politics. The same can be said for aspects like the electoral threshold as it has a profound impact on the probability of new parties having a chance of becoming relevant. A comparison of those circumstances allows for a profound comparison of the political opportunity structures for Volt in Germany and the Netherlands.

5 Results and Data Analysis

5.1 Issue positions of Volt voters

Germany

Reiterating the first sub-question "Which issue positions do Volt voters in Dutch and German national elections have?", this chapter aims to shed light on the nature of Volt voters. After extracting the answers from Volt voters, it is a central part of this analysis to examine what attitudes separate them from the other respondents who participated in the election studies. This way, it will be possible to identify the most unique issue positions of Volt voters. In general, based on the available data, as many different issues as possible will be evaluated to detect all positive outliers. In the case of Volt, it seems quite obvious to start with the EU integration issue as it is Volt's central issue. If Volt voters are not significantly more in favour of further EU integration than the other respondents, Volt's whole strategy would have to be seriously questioned.

The question about European integration in the German datasets is whether “European unification should be pushed forward so that there is soon a common European government or European unification has already gone far too far.” The answers are coded from 1 to 7, with one standing for advancing European unification and seven signifying that European unification already goes far too far. To analyse the results, the mean value will be the focal point without ignoring possibly interesting findings among the distribution of respondents among all answer options. So, were German Volt voters more in favour of European integration than the other respondents?

As the question is exactly the same in both German datasets, merging the data makes sense in this case. After excluding all outliers, the mean value of the 75 Volt voters is 2.87. The distribution also shows that 64% of all Volt voters are in favour of further EU integration (answers 1-3). Among the 26,934 other respondents, the attitude towards EU integration is significantly more negative as the mean value is 4.23 and only 34% of the respondents view further EU integration as favourable. This strong deviation of Volt voters from all other respondents in the two German datasets also becomes visible when the results are displayed in the form of a chart. Figure 1 shows the comparison of attitudes towards European integration between German Volt voters and all other respondents:

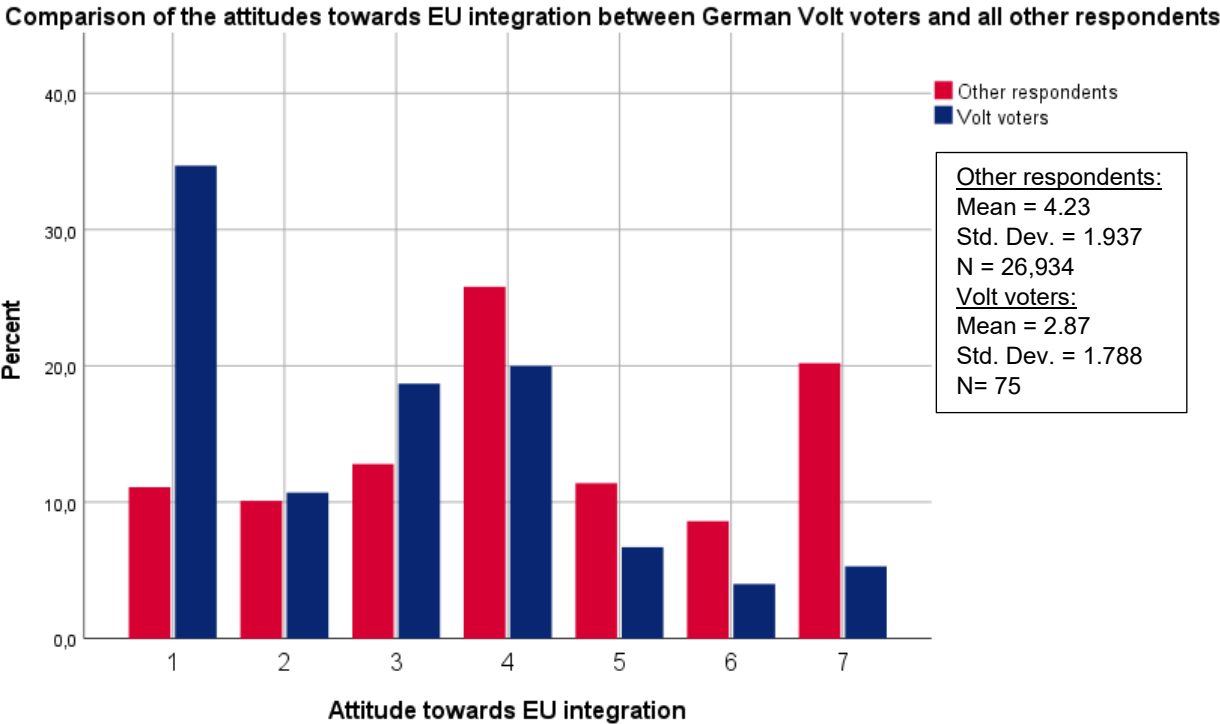


Figure 1 Comparison of the attitudes towards EU integration between German Volt voters and all other respondents

The scan of all other issue positions reveals that the climate change issue is the only other issue where Volt voters have significantly different opinions from all other respondents. In the datasets, the topic is introduced with the following statement: “Some think that tackling climate change should be a priority, even if it hurts economic growth. Others think that economic growth should be a priority, even if it makes it more difficult to combat climate change.” Then, the respondents are asked to give their own opinion: “And what is your personal opinion on the topic of "economic growth and combating climate change?" Like in the other question about EU integration, answers are coded from 1 (Prioritise tackling climate change, even if it hurts economic growth) to 7 (Prioritise economic growth, even if it makes combating climate change more difficult). To improve the readability of the text, this issue will solely be referred to as “climate change” even though that is not exactly how it is framed in the question. The answers among German Volt voters clearly lean towards prioritising tackling climate with a mean value of 2.63, and the distribution also shows that 73.3% of them chose either answering options 1,2, or 3. Figure 2 again demonstrates the deviation between German Volt voters and all other respondents:

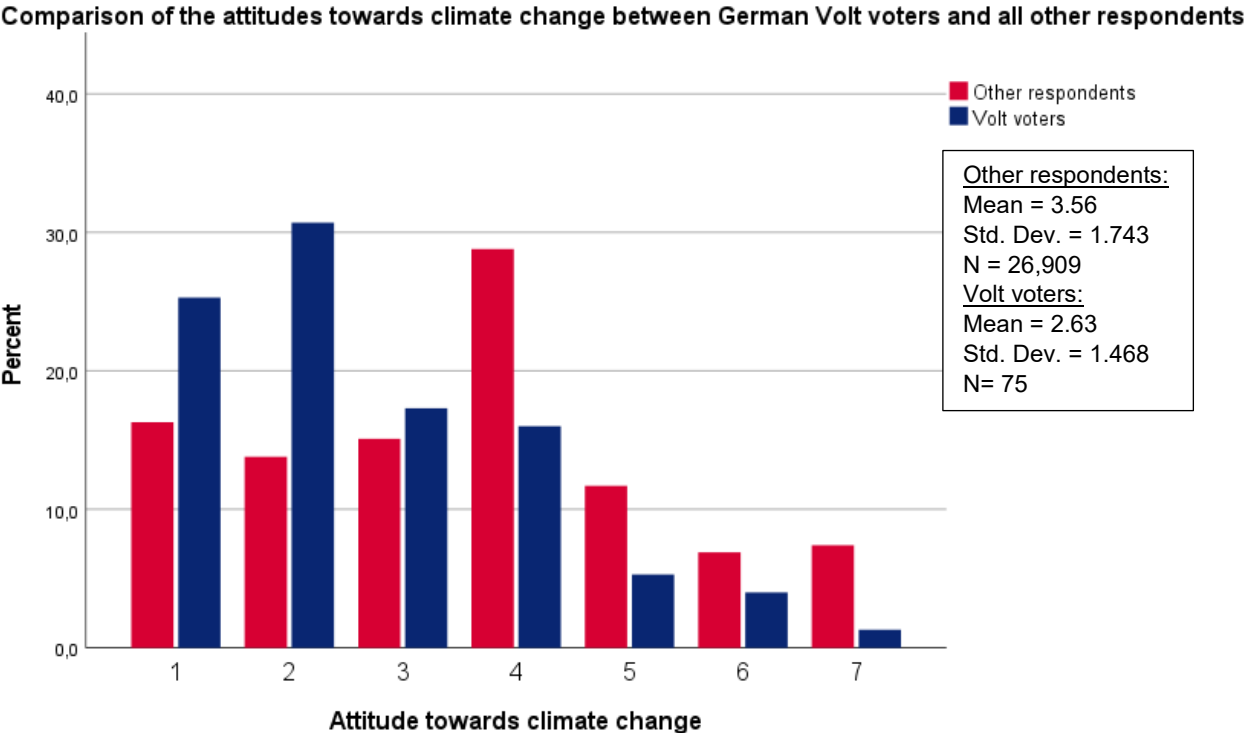


Figure 2 Comparison of the attitudes towards climate change between German Volt voters and all other respondents

Overall, Volt voters differ strongly from the general population in both cases observed. They are considerably more in favour of European integration as shown by the mean values of 2.87 and 4.23. The difference in issue positions is slightly smaller in the case of the climate

change topic but still significant as Volt voter's mean value is 2.63 while the mean value of all other respondents is 3.56.

The analysis of the few other issues that are part of both German datasets does not show any other major deviations. The only one where at least some difference can be observed concerns the question of whether fossil fuels should be taxed more, but as expected after the findings from the climate change issue, Volt voters (mean value of 3.11) are a bit more in favour of higher taxes on fossil fuels than all other respondents (mean value of 2.60). When it comes to other issues, Volt voters matched the issue positions of all other respondents very closely. This includes the questions that were part of both datasets and all other questions concerning issues from one of the two datasets. A summary of all those issues and the mean values can be found in appendix 1. One question that does not directly concern issues but is still interesting in the context of this thesis is a question about the German voting advice application "Wahl-O-Mat". Respondents were asked whether they did use the application and as expected the share of users was significantly higher among Volt voters (64,4%) than among all other respondents (42%). This can be regarded as another indication that Volt voters use issue voting more frequently than all other respondents.

The Netherlands

After the findings from Germany, it seems reasonable to start the analysis of the Dutch dataset with the same central question of whether Volt voters in the Netherlands are also more in favour of European integration than the other Dutch respondents. In the Dutch dataset, the coding for the question is 1= European unification should go further and 5= European unification has already gone too far. As expected, Dutch Volt voters are, like their German counterparts, also considerably more in favour of European integration than the other respondents. The mean value of Volt voters is 2.18, significantly less than the mean value of 3.29 in the case of all other respondents. The significant deviation becomes even clearer when shown in the form of the distribution of the attitudes on EU integration in one figure, as can be seen in the following figure 3:

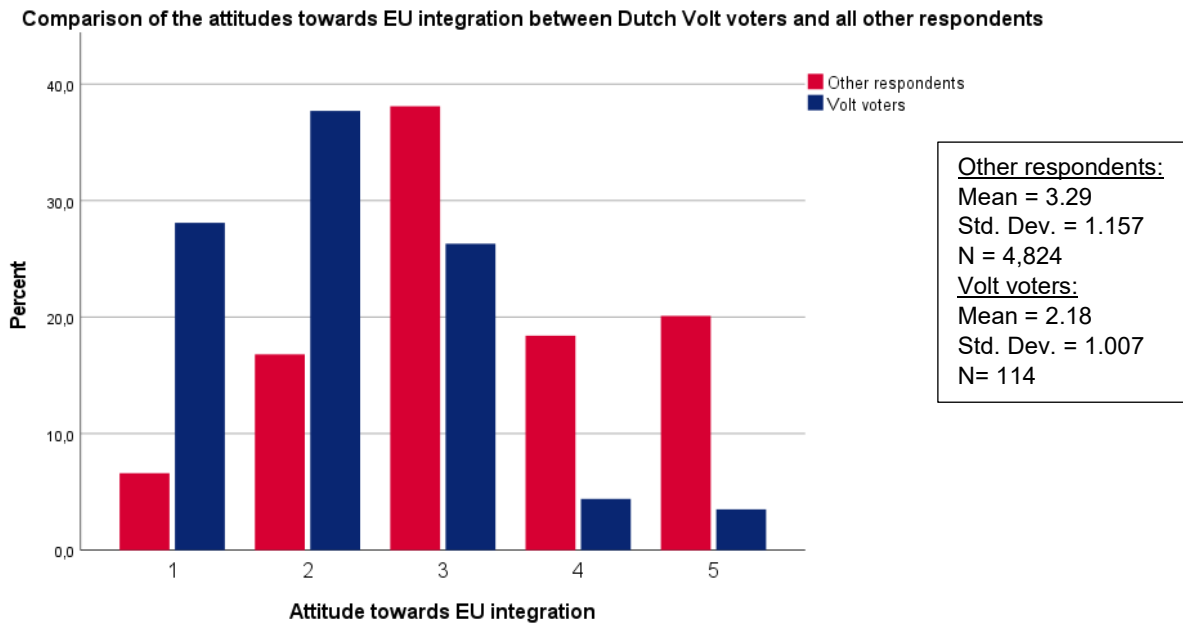


Figure 3 Comparison of the attitudes towards EU integration between Dutch Volt voters and all other respondents

Thus, the issue of European integration is the most impactful issue when it comes to characterising the issue positions of Volt voters in the Netherlands. Therefore, in the next chapter, this issue will also be the central condition when analysing how many voters have the same issue positions overall in the Netherlands.

One other significant deviation of Volt voters from all other respondents can be found when analysing a different type of question. Here, the previously used approach of comparing mean values cannot be applied because the question is structured differently. Respondents were given four different goals they might consider desirable in politics. Those four options were: maintaining law and order in the country, increasing citizens' political say, preventing price increases, and protecting the freedom of speech. Then, the respondents were asked to choose which of these goals would be their first, second, and third choice. Across the board, Volt voters preferred the goal of “protecting the freedom of speech” more than all other voters. To make the deviation more obvious, figure 4 shows not only whether respondents chose the goal of protecting the freedom of speech with their first, second or third choice, but also the value 4 which stands for the share of respondents that did not choose it with any of the three choices. In contrast to the previous findings, it is not appropriate to compare the means of Volt voters and all other respondents because, as indicated, the type of question is different, and the data is only ordinally scaled. Still, the distribution displayed in the following figure 4 clearly shows the difference between Volt voters and all other respondents:

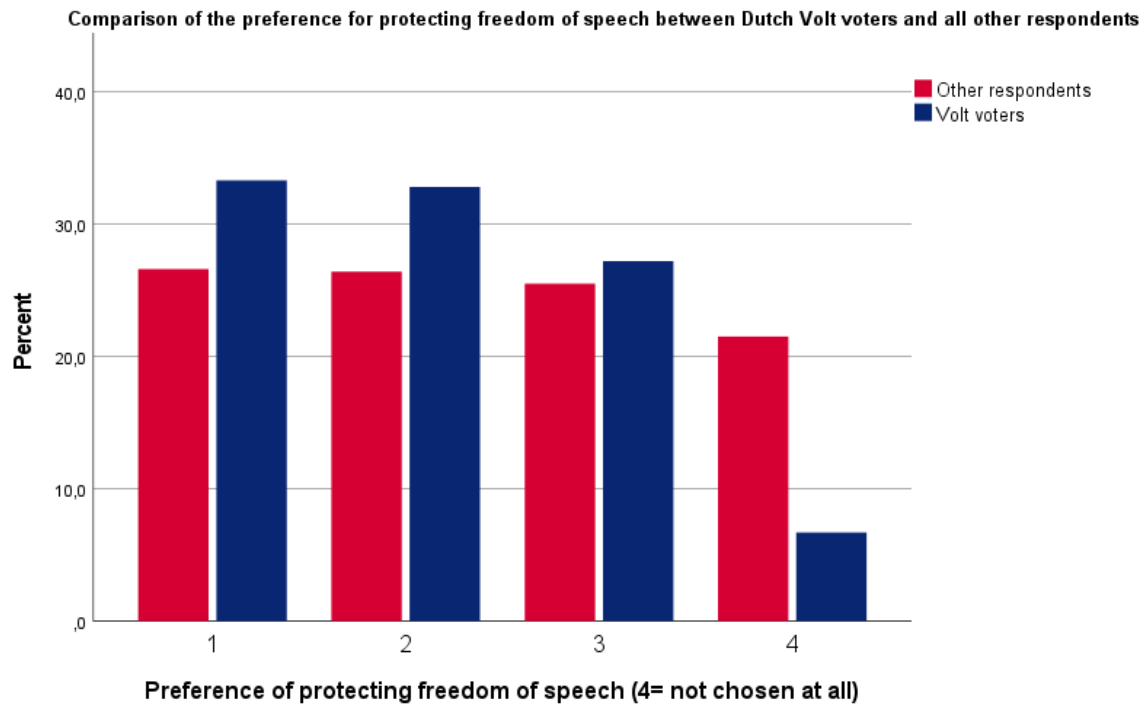


Figure 4 Comparison of the preference for protecting freedom of speech between Dutch Volt voters and all other respondents

The difference might not seem too big when analysing the share of answers for choices 1, 2, or 3 but the inclusion of the value 4 demonstrates the share of respondents that did not choose the protection of the freedom of speech with any choice clearly shows the deviation. Answers to this kind of question tend to be relatively close due to the nature of how the answers are given because an option chosen as a first choice is not available anymore as a second choice. Thus, it would be expected that after having a higher share of first choices for protecting the freedom of speech, Volt voters would more likely have a lower share for second choices or at least third choices. As this still is not the case, it can definitely be stated that Volt voters value the protection of the freedom of speech more highly than all other respondents. As this issue does not seem to be one of Volt’s main focal points, it might offer an opportunity for Volt to put more emphasis on this particular issue.

Regarding other attitudinal variables in the Dutch dataset, none show any significant discrepancy between Volt voters and the other respondents, for example when it comes to issues like differences in income, euthanasia, or immigrants and asylum. Some deviate a little bit while other issue positions of Volt voters almost exactly match the issue positions of all other Dutch respondents. The exact mean values of the calculations concerning all topics mentioned can be found in the appendix 2.

5.2 Popularity of Volt voters' issue positions

As already indicated in the methodology chapter, this chapter aims to answer the second research question “How many voters have the same issue positions as Volt voters?”. This will be done by calculating how many voters of the datasets share the characteristic issue positions that have been extracted from the data in the previous chapter. The idea of analysing the datasets this way is made under the assumption that Volt could theoretically attract all the votes in question. For example, if 25% of all voters would hold the issue position of being extremely in favour of more EU integration and they would all base their voting decision only on this particular issue, Volt would theoretically be able to attract a vote share of 25%. This does not necessarily mean Volt will also fulfil this potential, it is only a statement about how many voters Volt might theoretically be able to attract if the issue voting theory would be fully applicable. An assessment of how likely that is considering the various other aspects that influence Volt's actual voter potential will be part of the concluding chapter.

Germany

The previous chapter revealed two issue positions that characterise Volt voters: being in favour of further EU integration and prioritising tackling climate change over economic growth. Thus, those two issue positions will be used to answer the second sub-question. It should be noted that for both issues, all voters will be considered possible Volt voters who are on the same side of the neutral point. This means respondents have to be in favour of further EU integration and prioritise tackling climate change over economic growth. Intuitively, one might question whether respondents who are only slightly in favour of further EU integration (answer 3 on a scale from 1 – 7), should indeed be considered as having the same issue position as Volt voters. The argument for still including them is predominantly based on the directional theory which argues that voters might choose the party with the most extreme position when they think this will lead to the desired policy outcome of only a little movement in the preferred direction in the end. In the case of Volt, this means that voters who only want a little more EU integration might vote for the party to spark any policy change in the desired direction in the first place as they are aware Volt is highly unlikely to become powerful enough to implement all of their (extreme) demands regarding EU integration.

Considering Volt's strong focus on the EU integration issue, the first step will be the calculation of how many respondents are generally in favour of further EU integration (answers 1, 2, or 3). Among all 27,009 respondents who answered the question, 34.1% chose one of the three options indicating they are in favour of further EU integration. Obviously, the numbers

resemble the distribution shown in figure 2 very closely as the analysis is almost identical. This time, though, the analysis will go one step further by assessing how many respondents agree with Volt voters on the EU integration issue and also on the climate change topic. Using the same criteria (answer 1, 2, or 3), 23.2% of the respondents are agreeing with both characteristic issue positions of Volt voters. Interestingly, combining both issue positions shows that there is a strong correlation between the two issue positions. Among all respondents, only 45.2% are in favour of tackling climate change (answers 1, 2, or 3), but with the prerequisite of also having to be in favour of further EU integration, that number rises to 68.1%. Hence, respondents who are in favour of further EU integration also tend to be more in favour of prioritising tackling climate change over economic growth. For Volt, this is definitely advantageous as it means they could target this specific group by emphasising the climate change issue next to the EU integration one without having to sacrifice a large share of respondents who only agree with them on the EU integration position.

The Netherlands

As the climate change issue, unfortunately, was not part of the Dutch dataset, the two characteristic issue positions in the Dutch case are the EU integration and the protection of free speech. As the scale in the Dutch dataset only includes option 1 (European unification should go further) to 5 (European unification has already gone too far), only answers 1 and 2 will be considered as agreements with Volt's issue positions as only they can reasonably be viewed as being in favour of further European unification. Of the 4,938 respondents who answered the question, 1,203 (24.4%) chose either option 1 or 2. This number is significantly lower than the one in Germany, but the different scale makes it difficult to draw any definite conclusions from this. For the freedom of speech issue, all respondents who chose the goal with either their first or their second choice will be considered as having the same issue position as Volt voters. Of the 1,203 respondents who were in favour of further EU unification, 752 also view the protection of the freedom of speech as an important political goal. The addition of this second condition reduces the share of respondents agreeing with Volt voters' issue positions to 15.2%. As in the German calculations, there is some correlation between both issue positions to be seen, albeit not as strong. Without including the condition of being a proponent of further EU unification, 54.9% of all respondents chose freedom of speech as a goal as one of their first two choices. Among respondents who are also in favour of further EU unification, 62.6% are also of the same opinion regarding the importance of protecting free speech. Thus, there is also some

indication of a coherent group of respondents that Volt could be able to target not only with the EU integration topic but also by underlining the significance of the freedom of speech.

Interestingly, the LISS Dataset also includes more data on respondents' attitudes towards Volt. This makes it possible to check whether respondents holding the same issue positions as Volt also have a higher opinion of the party. The following figure 5 compares the attitudes towards Volt (0= very unsympathetic, 10= very sympathetic) between all respondents (without condition) and the respondents holding the previously mentioned issue positions of being in favour of further EU unification and regarding the protection of the freedom of speech as an important political goal (with condition). As expected, the figure demonstrates that respondents who have similar issue positions as Volt also think higher of the party.

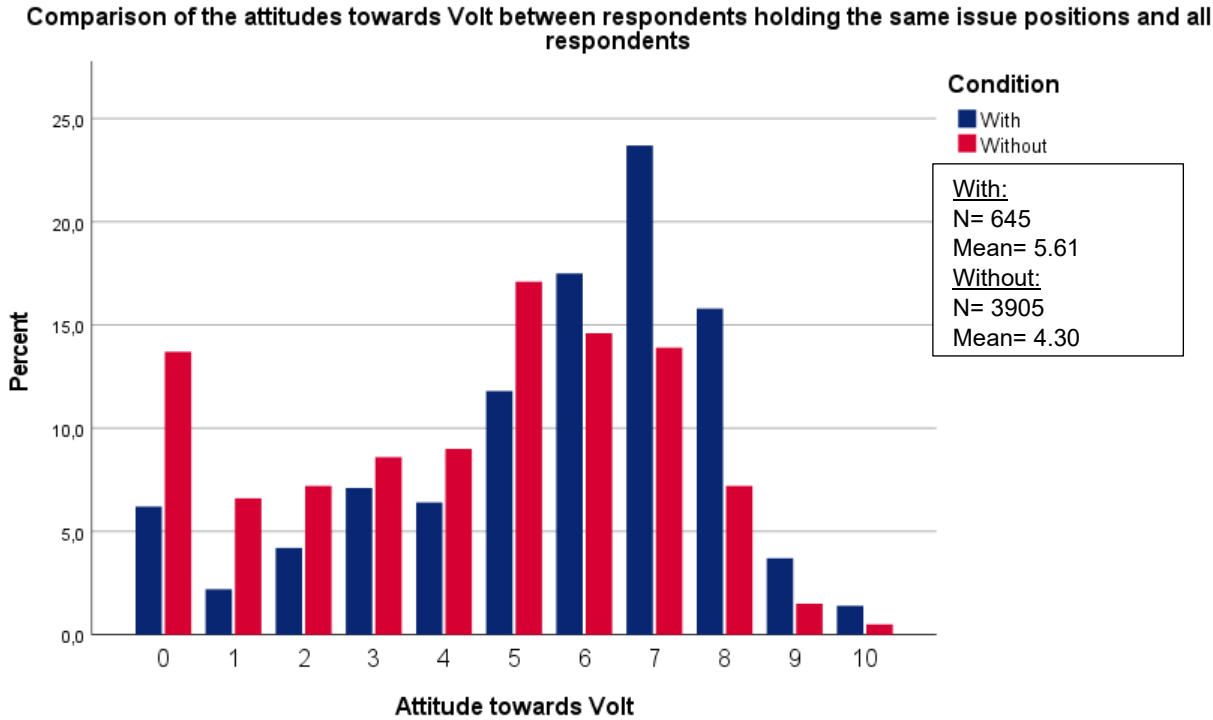


Figure 5 Comparison of the attitudes towards Volt between respondents holding the same issue positions and all respondents

5.3 The German and Dutch political systems

This chapter aims to answer the third sub-question “Does the German or the Dutch political system provide better opportunities for Volt?”. As the political systems contain several distinct aspects that all influence the opportunity structures for a new party like Volt, this chapter will be divided into multiple subsections. Each of those subsections deals with one important condition of the German and Dutch political systems.

5.3.1 Party competition

First, the situation regarding party competition for Volt in both domestic political spaces will be analysed as it is of significant importance for the assessment of whether the German or the Dutch political system provides better opportunities for Volt.

Germany

A first insight into the party competition in Germany will be gained by analysing the party preferences of the group of voters having the same issue positions as Volt voters as defined in the previous chapter. This way, it will be possible to analyse which other parties are currently able to attract the votes of that particular group of voters. In Germany, only the second vote will be considered as it is the relevant one, especially for a small new party like Volt. Looking at Volt first, their vote share doubles but on a small level from 0.2% to 0.4%. This shows the tiny relevance of Volt in current German domestic politics, but the change also demonstrates that not only the absolute numbers are relevant to assess which other parties currently attract the voters with Volt’s issue position but also the change between the initial vote share when considering all respondents and the vote share of only the respondents who have Volt’s issue positions. The difference will indicate which parties are located close to Volt’s issue positions. Hence, the share from both situations, with and without the condition of being in favour of EU integration and tackling climate change, will be displayed in figure 6 to show Volt’s main competitors in German politics:

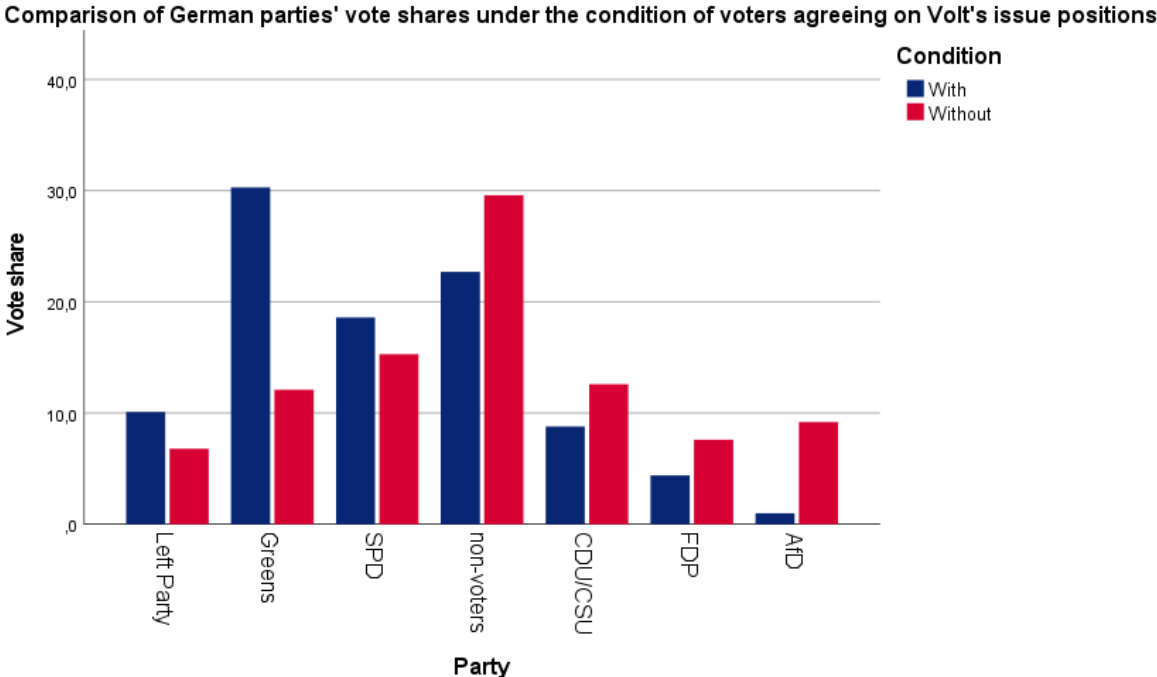


Figure 6 Comparison of German parties' vote shares under the condition of voters agreeing on Volt's issue positions

The comparison clearly shows that the vote share of the Greens increases by far the most if the condition of respondents having to hold the same issue positions as Volt voters is applied. Among all respondents, their vote share is only slightly above 10% but that number rises to 30% among respondents who have the Volt issue positions. The data thus indicates that the Greens are located closely to Volt's issue positions and should therefore be considered Volt's main competitor. Regarding the other parties, the SPD should also be considered a competitor while non-voters also play a significant role, especially when examining absolute numbers. Whether those respondents can be convinced to vote at all and specifically for Volt is difficult to assess but at least based on the raw numbers, there might be a group of potential new Volt voters.

Fortunately, more useful data in the form of vote migration data is available enabling a broader analysis of German party competition. Therefore, it will be analysed whether the findings based on the election datasets match the conclusions to be drawn from the vote migration data. The municipal election 2020 in Cologne has arguably been the biggest success of Volt in German politics to date. Due to this success, the party also features prominently in the dataset about voter migration between the Cologne council elections in 2014 and 2020. Although this dataset is only limited to the local elections in Cologne, it still is interesting to analyse from which other parties Volt managed to gain votes, especially as this allows for a different approach to the question about Volt's party competition. In Cologne, Volt predominantly attracted voters from the Greens. This is even more impressive considering the Greens themselves won the election by becoming not only the strongest party but also gaining 9% at the same time. In relative numbers, almost 15% of Green voters in 2014 voted for Volt in 2020. That is by far the highest percentage. Among the other relevant parties, that number ranges constantly between 1.5% and 2.0% (see appendix 3). This clearly shows the outstanding position of the Greens. The absolute numbers also underline this as Volt got more votes from former Green voters than from all other parties combined. Moreover, the absolute balance of migrated votes from the Greens to Volt is the fourth-highest among all vote migrations. In addition, Volt was able to win over not only voters who previously voted for the Greens but also a comparatively substantial number of former non-voters (3,400 votes). To illustrate this number, this is double the amount of votes Volt managed to win from the CDU (1,700 votes). So, the conclusion from the dataset on vote migration in Cologne local elections is clear. Volt managed to gain votes mainly from the Greens and to a lesser extent from non-voters. Of the other parties, none separated themselves distinctively from the others (Kölner Statistische Nachrichten, 2020).

The vote migration data from the European Election 2019 in Munich (Statistisches Amt München, 2019) is even more explicit: More than half of all Volt voters (54.0%) voted for the Greens in the 2014 European election. That is by far the highest share, with non-voters (15.7%) coming in at a distant second, followed by several other parties (see appendix 4). Like in Cologne this is not an effect of voters being dissatisfied with the Greens as they gained almost 10% in the European elections in Munich as well, but rather indicates an overall shift of voting attitude towards the two parties. Very tentatively, this could also be interpreted as issues occupied by the parties' gaining votes, probably primarily climate change, having become more salient and thus helping the Greens increase their vote share.

The Netherlands

In the Dutch dataset, non-voters are not clearly indicated so they will not be included in the figure. What can be said is that the share of respondents who did not answer the question for which party they voted in parliamentary elections for whatever reason decreased from 25.1% without the condition to 12.1% when including the condition. As the Dutch party system is significantly more fragmented than the German one, only parties who reach a vote share of at least 3% will be displayed in figure 7 which demonstrates the party competition in the Netherlands and the influence of the condition. Here, the condition is defined as elaborated on in the previous chapter: being in favour of further EU unification and regarding the protection of the freedom of speech as an important goal.

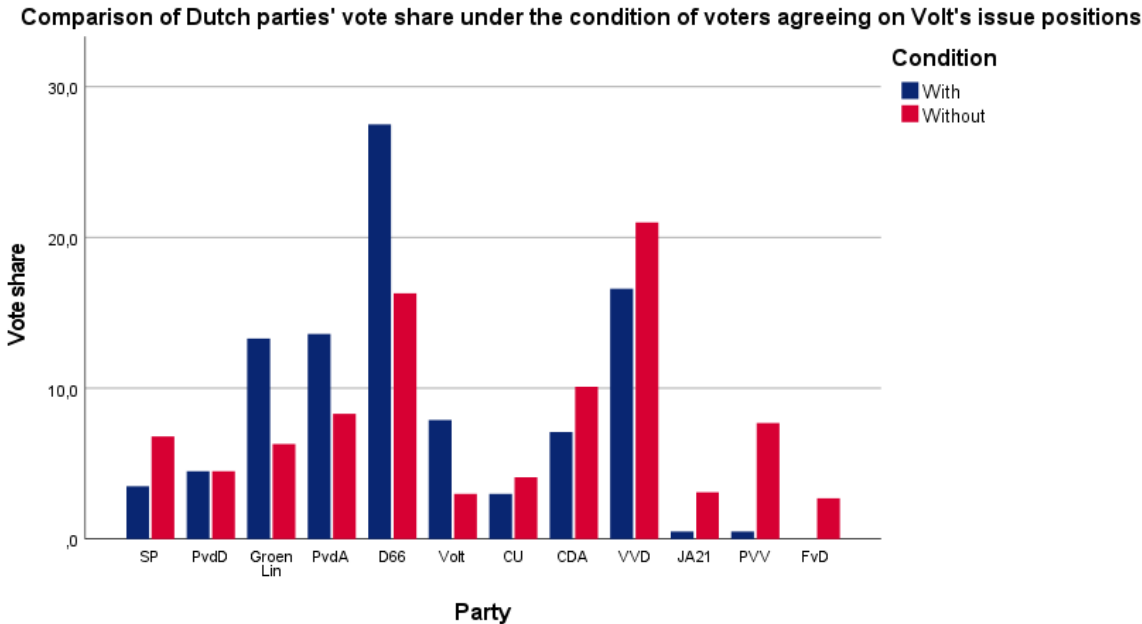


Figure 7 Comparison of Dutch parties' vote share under the condition of voters agreeing on Volt's issue positions

Unsurprisingly, Volt's vote share increases the most when considering relative terms as its vote share almost triples from 3.0% to 7.9%. This indicates that the condition indeed comes close to the actual location of Volt voters. Regarding the main competitors, D66 stands out both in absolute and relative numbers, but also GroenLinks and PvdA are relevant rivals in the fight for voters in the analysed issue position area. Like in Germany, all competitors can be categorised as centre-left parties. The fact that Volt can be included in figure 7 already signals that in the Netherlands, there is more data available on Volt in general because of the party's success.

Looking at data on vote migration from Ipsos (Harteveld & van Heck, 2021) displayed in figure 8 below on where the Volt voters in 2021 were coming from, it is no surprise to see that the biggest share of Volt voters in 2021 previously cast their vote for D66. What is interesting is that after D66, it is a group of other parties with about the same share. From the analysis in previous chapters, Groen Links should have separated themselves more in terms of voters switching to Volt. Instead, former VVD, CDA, Groen Links and non-voters are all a significant part of the composition of the Volt electorate. The data even allows an analysis of vote migration based on distinctive characteristics like education, gender, age, urbanity, the timing of vote decision, political interest, and trust in politics. Although it is great to have such a diverse dataset, the aforementioned characteristics are not the main focus of this thesis, and it also seems like the number of participants is too small in some samples to draw any meaningful conclusions.

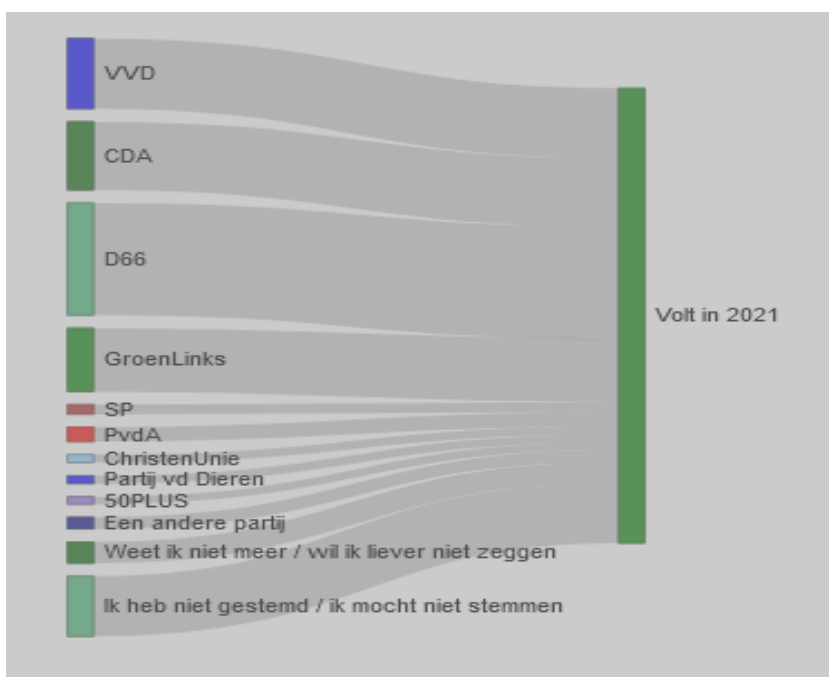


Figure 8 Vote migration towards Volt in the 2021 Dutch federal election

Interestingly, the data from Peil.nl (de Hond, 2021) illustrated in figure 9 does not exactly match the data from the election research conducted by Ipsos. Although both sources claim to work with representative samples, de Hond uses his own method that aims to ensure that the participants' previous voting behaviour reflects that of the last elections because he argues that it is necessary to correct for the known representativeness characteristics (de Hond, 2022a). The different results have to stem from the different research methods as the studies were published four and seven days after the federal election at the end of March 2021.

According to Peil.nl, 37% of Volt voters voted for D66 in the 2017 federal election. This is very much in line with all previous findings and further amplifies D66's status as Volt's main competitor. The second-highest share according to this data is coming from non-voters (18%), closely followed by GroenLinks (17%). This is a significant difference in comparison with the Ipsos study as GroenLinks did not separate itself so much from the other parties. Only a small percentage of Volt voters in 2021 voted for VVD (9%), CDA (7%) and PvdA (5%) in the previous election. All other parties can be neglected. Overall, this means that the data about vote migration during the federal elections are not identical. On the other hand, it also confirms several findings like the leading position of D66 as Volt's main competitor and possible source of new voters. Whether GroenLinks is actually close to D66 or just part of a group of several other parties together with VVD, CDA and PvdA depends a bit on the dataset and the method but combining all findings it seems like they are somewhere in between.

Wat stemden de kiezers bij TK2017?

Peil.nl	Gestemd TK2021													
	VVD	D66	PVV	CDA	SP	PvdA	Gr.Links	FVD	PvdD	Chr.U	JA21	VOLT	SGP	Andere
verticaal geperceenteerd naar Gestemd TK2017:														
VVD	57%	15%	7%	12%	1%	2%	1%	9%	8%	6%	26%	9%	1%	8%
D66	7%	46%	1%	4%	1%	11%	11%	0%	7%	4%	4%	37%	0%	4%
PVV	7%	3%	60%	5%	6%	2%	1%	36%	6%	4%	14%	0%	1%	4%
CDA	8%	5%	6%	54%	5%	3%	0%	1%	4%	9%	10%	7%	9%	21%
SP	3%	4%	5%	4%	53%	7%	9%	9%	12%	2%	2%	3%	0%	9%
PvdA	2%	6%	0%	3%	5%	54%	0%	0%	3%	2%	1%	5%	0%	1%
GroenLinks	3%	9%	1%	4%	8%	11%	65%	0%	12%	4%	1%	17%	0%	8%
FvD	2%	1%	6%	2%	1%	0%	0%	20%	2%	1%	20%	0%	1%	5%
PvdD	1%	1%	2%	1%	4%	1%	4%	6%	33%	1%	0%	1%	0%	7%
CU	1%	1%	1%	3%	0%	1%	0%	0%	3%	54%	1%	1%	10%	3%
SGP	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	2%	1%	4%	0%	1%	65%	1%
50Plus	2%	1%	2%	4%	6%	2%	0%	0%	2%	1%	6%	1%	0%	9%
Niet gestemd	7%	8%	9%	4%	9%	5%	8%	16%	8%	7%	15%	18%	13%	19%
Totaal	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Figure 9 For which parties did Volt voters vote in the previous election

Finally, the EenVandaag Opinion Panel and Ipsos also provide an overview of the current situation by the means of a poll showing vote migration from the last election in 2021 till nowadays (EenVandaag, 2022a). The data referred to here as “now” is from June 28, 2022. There, the four seats of Volt come from former Volt voters (2.5), D66 (1), and PvdA (0.5). Again, this is very much in line with all previous findings. In addition, as all preceding data is based on vote migration up until the federal election in 2021, this more recent data shows that the situation does not seem to have changed significantly.

5.3.2 Electoral systems

Electoral systems have a significant effect on political opportunity structures as they heavily influence how “open” a party system in a particular country is. That is why it is crucial to analyse the electoral systems in Germany and the Netherlands before answering the third sub-question of whether the German or the Dutch political system provides better opportunities for Volt. The comparison between the German and Dutch electoral systems is interesting as they are hugely different, especially when it comes to the electoral threshold. In Germany, a political party has to receive either at least 5% of the party list votes to get into parliament or win at least three mandates in the constituencies. This relatively high electoral threshold can partly be explained by the bad experiences during the time of the Weimar Republic when a too fragmented parliament facilitated the rise of the NSDAP. In contrast, the electoral threshold in the Netherlands is the lowest of all countries in the world because there is only a “natural” threshold preventing parties from entering parliament. This means that when a party receives enough votes needed for one seat in the parliament, they will in fact get that seat. As the Dutch parliament has 150 seats, it means that about 0.667% of votes are sufficient to get into parliament in the Netherlands. Unsurprisingly, this leads to a very high number of parties in the Dutch second chamber and subsequently to a very fragmented parliament.

Germany

Comparing the political opportunity structures in Germany and the Netherlands for a small new party like Volt, it becomes clear that it is easier to become relevant and visible in the Dutch system, especially due to the low electoral threshold. To analyse the impact of the electoral threshold on Volt’s electoral chances in Germany, it seems fruitful to compare the election results of elections with and without a threshold. The most fitting example for this is a comparison between the “Kommunalwahl” (without an electoral threshold) and the “Landtagswahl” in North Rhine-Westphalia as it is arguable the best of all 16 German states to analyse. This argumentation is based not only on the sheer size of the state but also on the recent

success of Volt there. The choice for the Landtags- instead of Bundestagswahl is based on the fact that voters tend to experiment more in “lesser” important elections. Hence the comparison between local and state is more reasonable than comparing local with federal elections. Still, several aspects need to be kept in mind. First, due to Volt being such a new party, only a comparison between the most recent elections in 2020 (local level) and 2022 (state level) is possible. Further, Volt has become part of the local government in some cities where they had the most success (e.g., Cologne and Münster). So, when it comes to local politics, the perception of Volt’s work there definitely could have influenced its success in the most recent elections on the state level. On the other hand, though, several cities can be compared not only ones with Volt being involved in governing but also ones where they are part of the opposition. When analysing the results, these circumstances should also be considered.

As an exhaustive analysis of all electoral constituencies would exceed the limits of this thesis, the focus will solely lie on the constituencies where Volt managed to gain a substantial number of votes. Looking at the local elections in 2020, it becomes clear that Volt was not able to participate in all constituencies as they participated in only seven of them. In five constituencies, Volt was able to gain multiple seats in the local councils. Interestingly, those five places were all relatively big cities with a great share of students: Bonn (5.1%), Cologne (5.0%), Aachen (3.7%), Münster (2.6%), and Düsseldorf (1.8%). This means it is only viable to compare the results from these constituencies with the results from the 2022 state election. If the electoral threshold indeed hurt the election outcome of Volt, they should have received fewer votes in all constituencies mentioned before.

So how did Volt fare in the NRW state elections held on May 15, 2022? While it can surely be seen as a positive sign that Volt managed to field more candidates in many constituencies, the election results clearly worsened in all compared constituencies. Although the classification of constituencies is different between the two elections, the results are still unambiguous as Volt’s vote share decreased everywhere (see appendix 5 for an overview of the exact numbers). In summary, the evidence clearly shows the impact of the electoral threshold on the vote share gained by Volt. Losses in some cities could be explained by local policy decisions or unpopular work in local councils. But the (not very surprising) result that Volt lost votes in every single constituency makes it essentially impossible to argue that the electoral threshold does not have any effect.

Another outcome of the closed German party system is the relatively small number of competitive parties. As there are currently only six different parties that can realistically surpass

the 5% electoral threshold, there are not many parties Volt is competing with. The analysis of the party competition has displayed that Volt's main competitor is the Greens. This finding is not only based on the analysis of the issue positions but is also backed up by the data on vote migration.

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the election system is significantly more favourable to small parties like Volt. Historically, there has been a lot more change in terms of the importance of particular parties and the variance of vote shares in the Dutch political system. In the most recent election in March 2021, a remarkable number of 37 parties participated, with a new record of 17 entering parliament in the end (Palese, 2021). Hence, it does not come as a surprise that Volt has already achieved a lot more in the Netherlands than in Germany until now because getting into parliament is so much easier in the Netherlands. The high degree of fragmentation in the Dutch party system also means that there are multiple competitors for Volt. The different analyses of issue positions and party competition have shown that D66 is currently the biggest competitor, but GroenLinks and to a lesser extent the PvdA also compete with Volt for votes.

5.3.3 Public party funding

Another essential component of the political opportunity structure of a particular country is how the financing of parties is organised. After the most recent state elections in North Rhine-Westphalia, held on May 15, 2022, the Co-President of Volt Europa, Reinier van Lanschot evaluated the results in a thread on his Twitter account (van Lanschot, 2022). Interestingly one of his highlighted items was to congratulate the Greens on the election result. He elaborates on Volt's result only afterwards. While he did not really rate the number of votes, the most striking thing was that he pointed out that Volt missed the 1% federal financial threshold. Further, van Lanschot also reiterated the fact that the 5% threshold makes it hard for new parties to become part of parliaments in Germany. But his reference to the federal financial threshold can be seen as an indication of what Volt's first objective in Germany is. Hence, it is necessary to thoroughly analyse the requirements for public financial funding for parties in Germany as well as in the Netherlands to be able to compare the political opportunity structures for Volt in both countries.

So, one of the main differences between the systems in Germany and the Netherlands is whereas in the Netherlands state funding is based purely on the number of party members, in Germany it is not about the quantity but the (financial) contribution they make to the party organisation. The amount of state funding in both countries is relatively low in comparison to

other European countries though. For example, between 2014 and 2016 the amount of money used for public party funding per voter was only 1,0€ in the Netherlands and 2,3€ in Germany, while it was 2,5€ in Sweden, 3,5€ in Denmark, 4,6€ in Austria, and 7,8€ in Belgium. This finding is also substantiated by estimates of how many political parties are dependent on public funding. In this regard, Germany and the Netherlands are at the bottom (between 30% and 50%) when comparing numerous European countries, with the dependency on public funding ranging between 60% and 80% in most countries (van Biezen, 2017).

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The overall aim of this thesis was to get a better understanding of the issue positions of Volt voters and to investigate Volt's voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands through the lens of the issue voting theory. This was possible by analysing data from election studies in both countries that gave insight into the attitudes of respondents on several kinds of issues. As expected, the analysis has shown that the EU integration issue is indeed the most defining issue position of Volt voters in Germany and the Netherlands. This can generally be seen as an indication that the issue voting theory plausibly explains the voting behaviour of Volt voters because it confirms the suspicion that voters choose Volt because of their issue position on EU integration. The data clearly backs this up as not only do Volt voters' issue positions deviate significantly from all other respondents, but respondents who are in favour of further EU integration are also substantially more likely to vote for Volt. This underlines the immense importance of this particular issue for Volt's electoral prospects in general. Apart from the EU integration issue position, the data from Germany has revealed that the climate change issue is the only topic where the issue positions of Volt voters deviate significantly from all other respondents. So, if Volt would decide to emphasise another issue much stronger, the climate change issue would be the most logical choice in Germany. Other issues where German Volt voters deviated from the other respondents were either marginal or completely non-existent. Unfortunately, the climate change issue was not part of the Dutch dataset, so no statement can be made whether the same is valid for the Netherlands. According to the findings of this thesis, the protection of the freedom of speech is the second issue next to the EU unification one that Volt should focus on to attract more voters in the Netherlands because it is clearly the issue where Dutch Volt voters' issue positions deviated most strongly from all other respondents.

The analysis of the main competitors in both domestic party systems has confirmed the expectations and findings of other scholars. In Germany, the election data, as well as the vote migration data, show that the Greens are by far Volt's main competitor. In the much more

fragmented Dutch party system, Volt not only has to deal with D66 but also with GroenLinks and to a lesser extent with several other parties. The answer to the main research question about Volt's voter potential in Germany and the Netherlands has to be split into two parts. The first one will deal with the theoretical voter potential based on the answers to the first two sub-questions. In Germany, 23.2% of the respondents agree with Volt's issue position on both issues evaluated. This means that if Volt would be able to fully occupy both issues and those voters would all make their voting decision based on their issue position on one or both of the issues, Volt could theoretically gain as much as almost a quarter of all votes. It is advantageous for Volt that combining both issues would not alienate a large group of potential Volt voters as both issue positions are shared by the majority of them.

In the Netherlands, the theoretical voter potential based on the positions on the EU unification and the protection of freedom of speech issues came out at 15.2%. The lower share compared to Germany does not come as a surprise considering that the share of respondents in favour of further EU integration was already significantly lower in the Netherlands than in Germany, although it has to be noted that the range of response options was not exactly the same, so the comparison has to be taken with a grain of salt.

As already touched on, those numbers should only be considered the results of extremely simplistic and basic theoretical calculations. To estimate the actual realistic voter potential of Volt in Germany and the Netherlands, several other factors come into play. First, it has to be emphasised again that all of the considerations have been made under the assumption that the issue voting approach is dominant. Although there have been signs of increasing issue voting, which is definitely a beneficial development for Volt's electoral prospects, other ways of determining voting behaviour like party affiliation, social-economic characteristics, or economic voting are unlikely to completely vanish. Still, most of those ways to attract voters are no viable option for a new party like Volt anyway, and the findings of other academics on the attributes of Volt voters considering age and education suggest that Volt voters indeed chose Volt mostly because of their issue positions. Thus, the probability of Volt realising a significant share of its voter potential is heavily tied to the advancement of issue voting. The other crucial variable in determining Volt's actual electoral prospects is the salience of "their" issues. Realistically, the salience of the EU integration issue and possibly other issues they decide to emphasise will be the main factor in determining Volt's chances on the European and domestic levels as it is essential for Volt that citizens heavily consider the EU integration issue when

making their voting decision because otherwise, the party will find it difficult to differentiate itself from all other parties.

Looking closer at the actual party competition in both countries, it bodes well for the electoral prospects of Volt in Germany that the party did not profit from migrating voters at the expense of the Greens' overall success. The fact that the Greens were quite successful themselves in recent elections in Germany also could be a sign of pro-European and climate change alert voters becoming larger in number and more votes for the Greens might indicate a larger number of voters who could potentially vote for Volt at a later point in time. At the moment though, it is difficult to imagine how Volt could realistically reach enough votes in federal elections to surpass the 5% electoral threshold. Only a couple of different scenarios come to mind that might have a strong positive effect on Volt's electoral prospects in Germany. The first one is a strong increase in the salience of central Volt issues. As the climate change topic is occupied by the Greens the only option here is the EU integration issue. If this "sleeping giant" were to be awakened in the German political space, Volt as the most pro-European party would certainly be able to profit. The second scenario would be voters of the Greens massively migrating to Volt. Even though the Greens are part of the current German government and thus might have to make some concessions, especially regarding climate change policies which not all of their voters might be fond of, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine enough voters drawing the consequence to vote for Volt instead of the Greens so that Volt will get into parliament. The risk of "wasting" their vote because the chosen party might not make it into parliament is a common consideration for German voters that makes life increasingly difficult for new parties.

Another scenario would be Volt gaining trust with their work on a local level, which they would then be able to convert into votes in federal elections. In general, though, the comparably young electorate should definitely be helpful in the future, while a lot will also depend on whether Volt will be able to expand its presence from cities to more rural areas. Otherwise, it will be impossible to reach 5% in a German federal election. If the recently proposed new EU election law would be implemented, it would seem like a more realistic target to surpass the 3,5% threshold in EP elections, especially considering Volt should always perform better in EP than federal elections based on the higher salience of the EU integration issue in EP elections. In addition, the EU election reform has the potential to influence Volt's electoral prospects in another way as well as in contrast to other parties, Volt would not have to make any compromises because the party uses the same party manifesto all over Europe.

As all the scenarios have to be considered highly unlikely, it has to be concluded that the different opportunity structures make it much easier to envision Volt as an important political actor in the Netherlands than in Germany. This does not change considering the findings from the analysis part of this thesis which indicate that the theoretical voter potential is higher in Germany because it just seems significantly more likely that Volt can realise a solid amount of its potential in the Netherlands than even a small share of its potential in Germany. The aforementioned fast-moving Dutch political space can currently be observed in the example of the farmers' protests against the government's plan to curb nitrogen emissions. A party called Farmer-Citizen Movement (Dutch: BoerBurgerBeweging, BBB) was founded in 2019 as a result of the first farmers' protests. In 2021, the party managed to win only one seat in the second chamber but as the current protests dominate the media and the topic of the government's plans to scale down the agricultural sector (Sterling, 2022) to adhere to European laws, the party has skyrocketed in recent polls. At the end of June 2022, polls show BBB between twelve (EenVandaag, 2022b) and eighteen (De Telegraaf, 2022) seats. The latter would mean that the party is the second-largest party. Whether the farmers' protests are the cause or just the occasion (de Hond, 2022b) is debatable, but it is clear that the heavily increased salience of the issue aided BBB a lot. This example demonstrates how quickly a completely new party which occupies only one particular issue might become a big player in Dutch politics. Of course, it has to be seen whether BBB can convert these favourable polls into actual seats, in the end, but such a fast meteoric rise of a small niche party is almost unimaginable in the German political system.

In the case of party competition, it could be advantageous for Volt that their main competitor D66 is currently part of the government as recent polls show that D66 struggles to keep their vote share due to increasing criticism, for example in the current heated debate about the situation of Dutch farmers. On the other hand, the high degree of competition among the numerous political parties in the Netherlands has also led to new parties disappearing again quickly after they first appeared on the political stage. Still, the electoral prospects for a small new party like Volt are higher in the Netherlands due to the political opportunity structures and in particular the lower electoral threshold. History has shown that there is much more change in the Dutch party system in comparison with the very stable German one. Hence, it is much easier for Volt to increase its vote share in the Netherlands.

For Volt, it means that the party should do everything in its power to increase the salience of the EU integration issue, but the empirical analysis has also shown that there are other issues Volt could specifically target to attract voters who are not only focused on the EU

issue. In a broader sense, the comparison of the German and Dutch political systems has demonstrated that the Dutch one is significantly more favourable for new parties. The main reason for this is the higher electoral threshold in Germany which has proven to be an almost insurmountable hurdle for small parties. From a theoretical perspective, the comparison of Volt's vote share in elections with and without an electoral threshold has shown that voters are inclined to experiment more in lower-level elections in Germany where the stakes are not as high as in federal elections. To be able to convince voters in elections with a significant threshold in place, an extremely high salience of the issue focused on by the party is necessary. This could also be beneficial if Volt would try to attract non-voters because as analysed in the empirical chapter, there is also a relevant group of citizens who decided against voting at all. A high salience along the lines of the pro-/anti-EU dimension might convince at least some of them to return to the voting ballots.

Regarding the theoretical implications, the general increase in issue voting can be seen as a result of voters basing their voting decision less and less on aspects like historic party affiliation, religion, or class. This means that the issue voting theory should become even more relevant as a concept to explain voting behaviour. The results from the empirical analysis have proven that the issue voting theory is indeed able to explain the voting behaviour of Volt voters by focusing on issue positions. The analysis of the attitudes on the EU integration has demonstrated that not only are Volt voters significantly more in favour of further EU integration than all other respondents but also that respondents who are in favour of further EU integration are substantially more likely to vote for Volt. For election research, this means that less emphasis should be put on characteristics like gender, age, religion, or partisanship. Instead, the focus should be more on aspects of issue voting theory like under which conditions the proximity or the directional model works better and the various implications of issue salience and issue ownership.

Although it is difficult to say whether the proximity model or the directional model works better in the particular case of this analysis, it can be concluded that it would be more advantageous for the electoral prospects of Volt if the explanation of the directional model would hold true. The reason for this is that Volt's position on the EU integration issue has to be considered extreme and according to the directional model, this would not only not prevent them from attracting citizens who are only slightly in favour of further EU integration but might even make them more attractive because voters might choose the party with the most extreme issue position if they think they can achieve the desired policy outcome this way. In the case of Volt, this means that voters who only want a little more EU integration could still choose Volt

even if their actual issue position is not the most proximate one because a strong election result for Volt might move the actual policy outcome or the positions of more important parties slightly in the desired direction. In such a manner, the voters would have a higher probability of the favoured effect than if they would choose a party that is only a little in favour of further EU integration, even though that party would be closest to them in proximity terms.

6.1 Limitations

Of course, this thesis also has limitations. First, this thesis relies heavily on the election datasets from Germany and the Netherlands. It is essential for the finding of this thesis the datasets actually provide useful information about the preferences and issue position of German and Dutch citizens. In addition, the empirical analysis of how many voters have the same issue position as Volt voters is very basic and simplistic. To some degree, this is because especially in German election studies, Volt's role is infinitesimally small. But even if this would be different, the analysis still has to assume two main conditions which are not realistic in actual politics. First, the assumption that the issues in question are completely salient is not very reasonable but necessary to be able to estimate any numbers based on the election studies. Second, it had to be assumed that all voters would base their voting decision on the issue voting theory. Obviously, this is not very realistic either, especially as it is difficult to assess the exact influence of the electoral threshold in Germany. Hence, the analysis has only revealed the size of the groups who hold the analysed issue positions, but that does not mean that all of those respondents will actually base their vote choice on those positions.

Furthermore, important aspects of issue competition, issue ownership, and issue salience had to be neglected to make it possible to conduct the empirical analysis in the first place. If the EU integration would indeed become significantly more salient, it is highly likely that other parties would turn their attention to the issue as well. Those developments would thus also have to be accounted for when making any statements about Volt's realistic voter potential which seems difficult.

6.2 Further research

Finally, this thesis has displayed that there are still lots of aspects that need to be analysed further before a complete understanding of the topic is possible. One thing that would definitely be helpful is more extensive data. To be more precise, the data in Germany leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to Volt but also smaller parties in general as the overwhelming focus is on the parties that are already part of the parliament. In the Netherlands, it would be valuable if the election study data would include a critical issue like climate change. This would

enable a more complete assessment of the situation concerning issue positions as it is arguable a very central one in the current political space.

Moreover, it would be fruitful to further investigate various aspects of issue salience. How salient are the analysed issues for all respondents and in particular for (potential) Volt voters? This aspect has been mostly neglected due to the limits of this thesis but also because of the lack of data. In theory, the “propensities to vote” (PTV) data is very promising to assess a party’s voter potential but at least for Volt, the data is lacking as well. In Germany, Volt is considered too irrelevant to be included in questions about how likely it is that respondents might cast their vote for them. In the Netherlands, Volt is included in the PTV questions but of all 5,626 respondents, only 814 answered the question. This makes the results rather useless but if more extensive data would be available, this would enable a completely new dimension as it would be possible to verify whether respondents holding the same issue positions as Volt are also significantly more likely to actually vote for Volt.

Other potential future avenues of research deal to a greater extent with Volt voters. Surveys that ask them specifically about why they voted for Volt and which issues they associate with the party would be very fruitful to get a better understanding of their motivations to cast their vote for Volt. Finally, Volt itself could be researched in greater detail. Why do they decide to focus on issues and how do they select the topics (not) to put emphasis on?

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8 Appendix

Appendix 1: Attitudes towards other issues in Germany

Issue	Mean value Volt voters	Mean value other respondents
Welfare and taxes	4.40	4.02
Facilitate immigration	4.20	4.84
Foreigners should adapt to German culture	3.64	3.14
State may restrict civil liberties in emergency situations	3.57	3.51
The state should take on more debt	2.67	2.65
The debt brake should be relaxed	3.07	2.79
Compulsory vaccination should be introduced	3.13	3.17
The state should stay out of the economy	2.73	2.75
The minimum wage should be raised significantly	3.89	3.93
Rich citizens should pay more taxes	4.02	3.95
The state should take measures to reduce income inequality	3.82	3.86
A speed limit of 130km/h should apply on all motorways	3.36	3.17
The state should regulate rents more	3.60	3.71

Appendix 2: Attitudes towards other issues in the Netherlands

Issue	Mean value Volt voters	Mean value other respondents
Euthanasia	4.68	4.43
Differences in income	4.07	3.91
Immigrants should adapt to the Dutch culture	3.03	3.43
Obtaining asylum should be easier	2.75	2.33

Appendix 3: Vote migration in the Cologne local elections (Kölner Statistische Nachrichten, 2020).

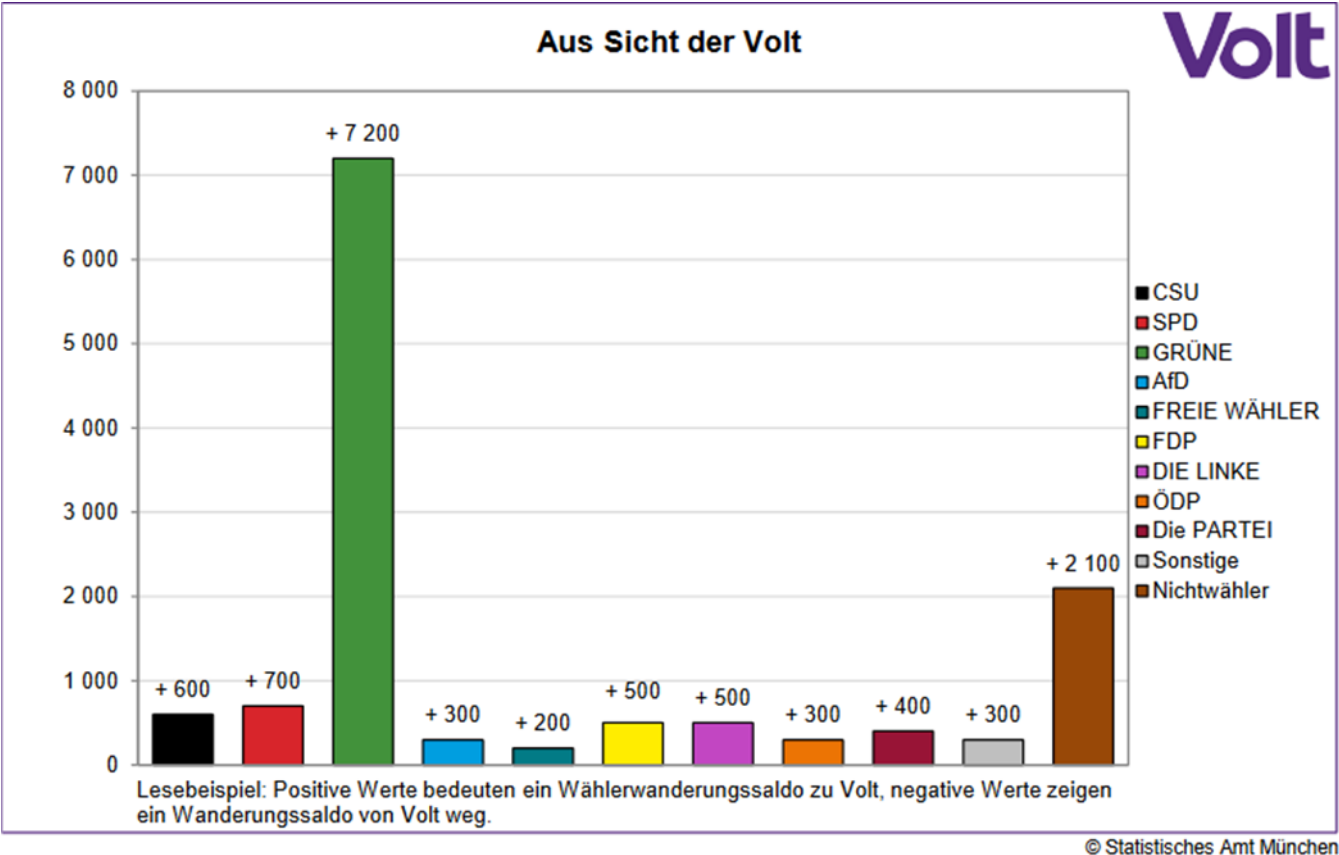
Tabelle 1 Wählerwanderung bei den Kommunalwahlen 2014 und 2020 in Köln (Wahl des Rates)

Von den Wählerinnen und Wählern, die 2014 Partei ... wählten,	... haben 2020 ... % Partei ... gewählt								
	SPD	CDU	GRÜNE	DIE LINKE	FDP	AfD	Volt	Sonstige	Nicht- wählende
	in Zeilenprozent								
SPD	63,2	2,6	20,1	1,6	1,6	1,9	1,9	1,8	5,4
CDU	3,1	72,7	12,2	1,3	1,9	1,6	1,5	1,5	4,2
GRÜNE	0,7	0,6	71,4	1,0	0,7	0,5	14,7	9,8	0,6
DIE LINKE	3,9	1,5	5,9	63,7	1,9	1,9	2,0	15,3	3,8
FDP	2,3	2,9	26,1	1,4	58,4	1,5	1,9	3,3	2,2
AfD	9,9	5,8	2,5	1,7	11,9	58,7	1,6	2,3	5,6
Sonstige	12,6	2,3	5,1	6,2	2,5	5,4	2,2	33,5	30,2
Nichtwählende	1,0	0,9	3,9	0,6	0,6	0,7	0,8	0,6	91,0
	in absoluten Stimmen								
SPD	74 700	3 000	23 800	1 900	1 900	2 300	2 200	2 100	6 400
CDU	3 400	79 900	13 400	1 400	2 100	1 700	1 700	1 700	4 600
GRÜNE	600	500	56 300	800	600	400	11 600	7 800	500
DIE LINKE	1 100	400	1 700	17 900	500	500	600	4 300	1 100
FDP	500	600	5 400	300	12 100	300	400	700	400
AfD	1 400	800	400	300	1 700	8 500	200	300	800
Sonstige	4 100	800	1 700	2 000	800	1 800	700	11 100	10 000
Nichtwählende	4 200	3 600	16 300	2 500	2 300	2 700	3 400	2 600	379 500

Berechnungsmethode:

Multinomial-Dirichlet Modell, vgl. Rosen, Jiang, King & Tanner, 2001. Siehe zur Methode ausführlich den Schluss dieses Papiers.

Appendix 4: Voter migration in the 2019 European elections in Munich from the point of view of the parties (Statistisches Amt München, 2019):



Appendix 5: Volt's vote shares in recent elections in North Rhine-Westphalia

Constituency	Kommunalwahl 2020 (local election)	Landtagswahl 2022 (state election)
Bonn	5.1%	1.9%
Cologne	5.0%	1.3% - 3.1%
Aachen	3.7%	0.3% - 2.4%
Münster	2.6%	1.5% - 1.7%
Düsseldorf	1.8%	1.0% - 1.5%