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The Alternative for Germany (AfD) as Populist Issue Entrepreneur: Explaining the Party and its Voters in the 2021 German Federal Election

Michael A. Hansen  and Jonathan Olsen

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the vote for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2021 German Federal Election. Using the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), we confirm some findings from previous studies, above all that attitudinal variables – including anti-immigrant ideology – are much stronger predictors of the AfD vote than socio-demographic variables. Moreover, we uncover three new findings in relation to vote choice for the AfD. First, anti-EU attitudes had a positive, statistically significant impact on AfD vote choice in 2021. Second, negative attitudes towards political elites increased the probability of voting for the AfD. Third, and perhaps most important, dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was positively related to voting for the AfD. Given these results, we argue here that the AfD has become something of a populist ‘issue entrepreneur’ which, while exploiting existing niches in the electoral marketplace (the EU and migration), is finding new issues to tap and exploit.

The 2021 Federal Election was not an especially good one for Germany’s first successful populist radical right party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD). This election saw the AfD move from being the third largest party in the Bundestag to its fifth largest party, down 2.3 per cent from 2017, consequently losing 11 seats. The AfD’s losses, moreover, occurred across Germany – in the old states and the new states, in cities as well as in rural areas. Despite this, it would be wrong to conclude that the 2021 election was a complete failure for the party. For one thing, the AfD appears to have found a durable (if shifting) segment of the population from which it can draw support. One in ten German voters in 2021 supported the party, and in Saxony the AfD has now established itself as that state’s largest party.

In this study, we explore who voted for the AfD in the 2021 election and why. In order to answer these basic questions, we utilise the 2021 post-election German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). Our article

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contributes further to a deeper understanding of the AfD and its voters. Overall, we confirm four findings from previous studies on AfD support. First, socio-demographic variables are not strong predictors of voting for the AfD. Additionally, our analysis corroborates previous scholarship indicating that far-right political ideology, anti-immigrant sentiment, and dissatisfaction with democracy are positively correlated with voting for the AfD.

More significantly, perhaps, we uncover three new findings from the 2021 data on AfD vote choice. First, contrary to some of the scholarship on the 2017 federal election (but consistent with scholarship that looked at voting for the AfD in 2013), anti-EU attitudes had a positive, statistically significant impact on AfD vote choice in 2021. Second, and underscoring the party's populist credentials, we show that negative attitudes towards political elites increased the probability of voting for the AfD in 2021. Finally, our analysis finds that dissatisfaction with the Merkel government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was positively related to voting for the AfD. Our results underscore a conclusion that the AfD, which started life largely as a Eurosceptic party and then morphed into an anti-immigrant party of the populist radical right, has become a 'challenger party' or a populist 'issue entrepreneur'. A populist issue entrepreneur such as the AfD is able to instrumentalise existing issue cleavages in the political marketplace (in Germany, this has meant the EU and refugees/immigrants in the last two elections) to maintain its competitive advantage on those issues. At the same time, the AfD-as-populist-issue-entrepreneur continues to find new issue cleavages in the electoral marketplace to exploit – in this case, the Merkel government's COVID-19 policy.

Our article is organised as follows. First, we review the literature on voting for the AfD in the 2013 and the 2017 elections. Although there is some scholarly disagreement about how important classic populist radical right issues such as anti-immigrant attitudes were to the party and its voters in 2013, the clear scholarly consensus is that by 2016 or so the AfD had evolved into its populist right-wing form. However, migration and the refugee issue declined in salience in German politics relative to the importance of the COVID-19 crisis as the 2021 election approached. Consequently, the AfD saw a dip in its polling numbers. The party found its feet again by positioning itself as the opponent of the Merkel government's handling of the virus. Although the AfD did not initially differ from Germany's other political parties in its reaction to COVID-19, it quickly shifted its position to an anti-lockdown, anti-vax (or anti-mandatory vaccination) stance. This allowed the party to find a distinct niche on this issue. Accordingly, we follow some scholars in viewing the AfD as a 'challenger party' (de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Schwarzbözl and Fatke 2016; de Vries and Hobolt 2020; Donovan 2021) or our preferred term, a populist issue entrepreneur. In the next, empirical section, we describe the dataset, measurement of the dependent variable, methodical strategy, inclusion and exclusion of independent variables, and our

hypotheses. Following descriptions of the data and methodology, we present model output for multinomial logistic regressions of vote choice, which compare voting for the AfD to voting for each of its party competitors. Finally, we provide concluding remarks on the results and our interpretation.

Vote Choice and the AfD

The dominant interpretation of the AfD in the literature has been that the AfD started as a EU-sceptical or EU-hostile party in 2012–2013. Then, over the next few years, it transformed itself into a classic populist radical right party with anti-immigrant, xenophobic themes (see Franzman 2016; Arzheimer 2015; Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri 2015; Grimm 2015; Mader and Schoen 2015; Decker 2016; Arzheimer 2017; Dilling 2018; Goerres, Spies, and Kumlin 2018; Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Hansen and Olsen 2019; Hansen and Olsen 2020). In terms of socio-demographic variables, scholars have come to various conclusions on the support base of the party. For example, some have found that voting for the AfD has been associated with being a man (Schmitt-Beck 2017; Dilling 2018; Goerres, Spies, and Kumlin 2018); middle-aged (Decker 2016; Dilling 2018; Arzheimer and Berning 2019); and more highly educated (Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri 2015; Berning 2017). Others, however, have found that, overall, socio-demographic variables are poor predictors of the AfD vote (Hansen and Olsen 2019; Wurthmann et al. 2021).

In terms of attitudinal variables, anti-immigrant themes were already present in the party (and among its voters) in 2013, but scholars have disagreed on the relative importance of Euroscepticism versus anti-immigrant attitudes in determining the vote for the party at that point in time. For example, one of the earliest pieces of scholarship on the AfD, that of Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri (2015, 173) viewed the AfD as a ‘right-wing populist movement in the making’ but one in which Euroscepticism dominated over xenophobia/anti-immigration attitudes for its voters. Grimm (2015) argued that the AfD’s relative success with voters in 2013 stemmed from an anti-EU positioning which exploited the gap between the German public’s scepticism on EU bailouts and the pro-EU consensus of Germany’s other political parties. Thus, the AfD – the ‘alternative’ to the pro-EU consensus – attracted voters primarily from this electoral niche. Arzheimer and Berning, in a study of the AfD vote over time (2019, 2) concluded that there was ‘a dramatic shift in the motives of AfD voters’ between roughly 2013 and 2016. Put more precisely, after 2013 they found that there was an evolution in the voting base of the AfD. As they write (25), ‘right-wing views and negative attitudes towards immigration, which played no or only a minor role in the early days, are now the main drivers of AfD support’. Meanwhile, Schmitt-Beck (2014) postulated that

immigration concerns were just as important to AfD voters in its early stages as the stability of the euro. A later study by the same author (Schmitt-Beck 2017) explored voters for the AfD in 2013 using data from the 2013 GLES. Here, he found that the AfD had a substantial number of voters who cast their ballots because of the euro crisis; however, these were early deciders and were a minority of the party's voters. The majority of AfD support in 2013 came from late deciders who cast their vote for the party based on xenophobic sentiments. A shift in the type of voter who would support the AfD (from purely Eurosceptic but not necessarily right-wing populist to a more typical populist radical right voter) clearly influenced the party's electoral strategies. Schwarzbözl and Fatke (2016) argued that both Euroscepticism as well as anti-immigration sentiments were more important to AfD voters than any other group of voters already in 2013. Using an original survey, Goerres, Spies, and Kumlin (2018) concluded that although anti-EU sentiments were still to be found among AfD voters in 2016, these were less significant than anti-immigrant attitudes. Finally, Hansen and Olsen (2019), using the 2017 GLES data set, found that by the time of the 2017 election Eurosceptical attitudes played no role whatsoever in AfD vote choice; instead, voter support for the AfD in 2017 was driven solely by two factors – anti-immigrant and anti-establishment attitudes.

The clear scholarly consensus today is that, regardless of which attitudinal drivers were most important in 2013, by 2016 or so the AfD had fully evolved into its populist right-wing form with populist positioning and anti-immigrant attitudes at its very core. The transition from EU-sceptical/EU-hostile party to classic populist radical right-party was complete. However, just as the euro and sovereign debt crisis starting in 2009 gradually receded in both severity and importance to voters, migration and the refugee issue – which had dominated German and European politics from 2015 to 2018 – saw a similar decline in salience as the COVID-19 crisis emerged. That migration and refugees were not of great concern to voters when Germany was locked down is, of course, not surprising. Perhaps also not completely surprising was the AfD's small (but nevertheless significant) drop in support in public opinion polls in mid-2020. Although the AfD did not initially differ from Germany's other political parties in its reaction to COVID-19, it quickly shifted its position to an anti-lockdown, anti-vax (or anti-mandatory vaccination) stance. The AfD's narrative cast the Merkel government's handling of the virus as a story of 'virus hysteria', national decline caused by an incompetent elite, and/or a pretext for an anti-democratic and unconstitutional power grab by the political establishment (see Donovan 2021; Forchtner and Özvatan 2022). This allowed the party to find a distinct niche on this issue as the public grew weary of measures meant to control the virus. In fact, a number of AfD campaign posters specifically called for the end of COVID-19 lockdowns, and the overall

theme of the campaign was ‘Deutschland. Aber normal’. (Germany. But normal.). The phrase was displayed at the bottom of all of the party’s campaign posters, regardless of the specific poster theme, pushing the narrative that Germany needs move beyond the pandemic.

We follow some scholars, therefore, in viewing the AfD as it has evolved over the last decade as the story of a ‘challenger party’ (de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Schwarzbözl and Fatke 2016; de Vries and Hobolt 2020; Donovan 2021), or as we prefer to term the party, a populist issue entrepreneur. de Vries and Hobolt (2012, 251) define challenger parties as ‘parties that have not previously held political office’. According to them, such parties are much more likely to be ‘issue entrepreneurs’, exploiting niches in the electoral marketplace by seising on issues that might enjoy a general consensus among established parties but far less consensus among the public at large. As Donovan (2021) has convincingly shown, the Merkel government’s handling of the Corona crisis offered the AfD a perfect new issue to exploit after the fading of the EU debt and refugee crises. As she writes (826): ‘Not only was it new and unknown, but it was also one of high appropriability from the perspective of a challenger party, much like the environment, the EU, and immigration had been in earlier periods’. Donovan (2021) notes that the AfD has carved out a unique appeal to voters around some defining issues (the anti-EU ‘alternative’ to the established parties; anti-immigrant sentiments), marking the party – in our view – as a populist issue entrepreneur. However, the AfD’s previous core issues have waxed and waned in importance to voters. In the 2013 federal election, Euroscepticism was either (depending upon the scholarly analysis) the dominant theme for AfD voters, competed closely with anti-immigrant attitudes in attracting the vote, or was already more a minor rather than major motivating factor. By 2017, however, anti-immigrant attitudes were clearly the appeal for AfD voters, with anti-EU attitudes playing a secondary role – or virtually no role at all. Given the ascendance of the salience of the COVID-19 issue, it might be expected that voters’ attitudes towards the government’s handling of the COVID-19 issue might now be central to explaining AfD support in 2021. This is one of the main things we set out to explore empirically.

Data

The dataset used for the empirical analysis is the first release of the 2021 Cross-Section German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) Post-Election survey (GLES 2022). The survey represents the largest collection of individual level vote choice data related to the German Federal Election currently available. The study was conducted between 27 September 2021 and 21 November 2021, and was released publicly on 21 January 2022. The survey is conducted through the use of random sampling. All empirical analyses

conducted here utilise socio-demographic and regional post-stratification survey weights.

Dependent Variable and Method

The dependent variable of interest under investigation is vote choice in the 2021 German Federal Election. In particular, the focus is on exploring predictors of voting for the Alternative for Germany (AfD). As Germany contains a multi-party electoral system, it's necessary to estimate how AfD voters compare to each and every party in the system. The statistical method implemented here is multinomial logistic regression. Since the analysis concerns individual-level vote choice, and all of the potential vote choices cannot be ordered continuously in a theoretically meaningful way, the decision to use multinomial logit is an obvious one. Multinomial logit is commonly utilised when there is a dependent variable of choice with more than two categories that cannot be substantively ordered (i.e. nominal level variable).¹ For a model with this type of nominal level dependent variable with k categories, the multinomial regression model estimates $k - 1$ logit equations. Thus, the model estimates coefficients and standard errors for each category in comparison to a chosen reference category of the dependent variable. In this study, the reference category is vote choice for the AfD. Since voting for the AfD is the empirical phenomena under investigation, we compare voting for the AfD to voting for all other parties individually by using this statistical model.

The multinomial logistic regression setup allows us to observe two distinct trends. First, it will be possible to view how voting for the AfD is statistically different than voting for each competitor political party. In particular, we will be able to estimate whether AfD voters differ from one party in one way, and another party in a different way. Second, it will be possible to observe the ways in which AfD voters are similar to voters of each of the other competitor parties in the German political system. As previous studies have shown, the AfD voter demographic profile shares similarities with voters for other parties (see for example, Hansen and Olsen 2019). Using this method, we will be able to determine whether (for example) AfD voters and voters for the FDP are statistically similar in anti-immigrant sentiment.

As is well known, the electoral system in Germany is distinctive in that voters are allowed to cast two ballots. The first vote cast is for a particular candidate in single-member districts using plurality electoral rules. The second vote is cast for a party, with the second vote filling the remaining seats through proportional representation if a party meets the 5 per cent vote share threshold. While the second vote determines the overall share of seats a party gets in the Bundestag, the first vote (supplemented by party lists) determines who will fill these seats. In some respects, the

decision-making process in the mind of the voter is different depending on the particular vote. Since the mechanisms that explain vote choice for these two votes might be different, our investigation explores both votes in isolation. Therefore, the two votes will operate as separate dependent variables in the analysis.

Independent Variables

There are a number of socio-demographic and attitudinal variables contained in the empirical analysis as independent variables and which we to test our hypotheses. First, a number of socio-demographic variables are included in order to determine whether AfD voters have a distinctive profile. These variables represent all of the basic socio-demographics commonly included in behavioural research on vote choice, including age, gender, education, and income. While some studies find clear demographic trends, other studies conclude that AfD voters are similar to voters for other parties (see discussion above in the previous section). In addition, an eastern Germany variable is included in the analyses that accounts for whether the respondent resides in an eastern state, since some recent studies show that the AfD performs much better in the new *Länder* (Hansen and Olsen [Forthcoming](#)). We follow Hansen and Olsen (2019) and Wurthmann et al. (2021) in our expectation that socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, and income) do not play a significant role in determining AfD vote choice.

*H*₁: Age, gender, education, income, and east German residence are not correlated, or are only weakly correlated, with voting for the AfD.

A second set of independent variables include attitudinal variables. A respondent's political ideology is included in the analysis in order to test whether AfD voters are further to the far right of the ideological spectrum when compared to voters for other parties. In addition, a latent measure of anti-immigrant sentiment is utilised as a predictor of vote choice since previous studies have shown that anti-immigrant sentiment is a strong predictor of support for the AfD.² Similarly, dissatisfaction with democracy is included in the model specification based on results of previous studies showing that far right voters are more likely to be dissatisfied with democracy. Since the AfD was founded as a Eurosceptic political party, a variable that measures attitudes towards the EU is included. In particular, a respondent's level of aversion to EU integration is measured. While not quite a measure of populism, we also have a measure here which investigates negative attitudes towards the German political establishment. Specifically, a variable that represents level of agreement with the belief that politicians are Germany's biggest issue is included. The expectation is that individuals that think that establishment politicians are Germany's biggest issue will

be more likely to vote for an ‘outsider’ party, such as the AfD. With regard to these attitudinal variables, the expected directions of the relationships are contained in H_2 .

H_2 : Far right ideological positioning, anti-immigrant sentiment, dissatisfaction with democracy, Euroscepticism, and negative attitudes towards German politicians are statistically related to voting for the AfD.

Finally, any study exploring recent political attitudes or behaviour must contain a variable that measures the largest current global issue – the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, a measure of the respondent’s dissatisfaction with the government’s COVID-19 response is included. Since the AfD’s election campaign highlighted the COVID-19 response as a key issue, in particular the Merkel government’s handling of the pandemic, we expect that dissatisfaction with the response is positively related to the probability of voting for the AfD.³ We formalise this relationship in H_3 .

H_3 : Dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is associated with a greater probability of voting for the AfD.

When estimating a statistical model that requires a large number of pairwise mathematical comparisons/calculations with a moderate number of observations, scholars should strive for model parsimony and limit the number of non-predictive independent variables. Thus, we estimated several models with additional socio-demographic and attitudinal independent variables that we ultimately decided to leave out of the main empirical analysis. We found that these independent variables did not have a statistically significant relationship with vote choice in the 2021 election. For example, in terms of socio-demographics, we found that unemployment and union membership had no relationship with vote choice. In regards to attitudinal predictors, we found that a respondent’s fear of globalisation, agreement that the government should do more to reduce income inequality, views on their prospective economic situation, and political interest had no impact on vote choice. These results indicate that there is no support for seeing the AfD voters as ‘losers of globalisation’ (see also Hansen and Olsen 2019). An additional independent variable withheld from the main empirical analysis was political party identification. The variable was not included in the empirical models for two reasons: (1) the variable contains a large number of categories with limited variance, which has implications for model estimation – resulting in sizable standard errors, and (2) there are independent variables that are covariates with partisan identification which are predictors of both partisanship and vote choice. That being said, model output is presented in Appendix 3 that includes party identification as an independent variable in the statistical models. Similar statistical significance trends exist in these models when compared to the main empirical analysis.

Results – Socio-Demographic Predictors

The outputs from the multinomial logit regression models are presented in Tables 1 and 2. In Table 1, model output predicting a respondent's first vote – constituency vote – is displayed, while in Table 2 model output predicting second vote – party list vote – is presented. Again, the reference category for the dependent variable is vote choice for the AfD. Therefore, all coefficients are providing a direct comparison to voting for the AfD. In terms of socio-demographics, the results in Table 1 indicate that voters for the CDU/CSU, SPD, and the *Linke* tend to be older than AfD voters. In addition, voters for all other parties are statistically more likely to attract women voters. Similarly, voters for all other parties are statistically more likely to have a university qualification. CDU/CSU voters tend to have a higher income than do AfD voters. Finally, residence in Eastern Germany does not appear to have a statistical relationship with vote choice at the individual level when controlling for other predictors.

In Table 2, a similar story appears to be borne out in regard to the impact of socio-demographics on second vote choice. CDU/CSU voters tend to be older than are AfD voters. CDU/CSU, SPD, and the Greens tend to have a

Table 1. 2021 German Federal Election first vote – multinomial logit model output.

	FDP	CDU/CSU	SPD	Green	The Left	Other
Constant	2.36** (0.30)	3.39** (0.30)	3.87** (0.29)	2.71** (0.30)	0.96** (0.35)	1.42** (0.33)
Age	-0.15 (0.17)	0.56** (0.16)	0.64** (0.16)	0.32 (0.17)	0.48* (0.21)	0.03 (0.20)
Woman	0.58** (0.14)	0.41** (0.14)	0.53** (0.13)	0.54** (0.14)	0.36* (0.17)	0.31 (0.17)
University qualification	0.53** (0.20)	0.49* (0.19)	0.55** (0.19)	0.74** (0.20)	0.80** (0.22)	0.61** (0.21)
Income	0.22 (0.15)	0.41** (0.14)	0.13 (0.14)	0.24 (0.15)	0.29 (0.18)	0.26 (0.18)
East Germany	-0.29 (0.16)	-0.09 (0.13)	-0.13 (0.13)	0.04 (0.15)	0.29 (0.18)	-0.55* (0.23)
Political ideology	-0.30 (0.17)	-0.25 (0.16)	-1.04** (0.16)	-1.18** (0.17)	-2.33** (0.21)	-0.86** (0.20)
Anti-immigrant sentiment	-0.32 (0.18)	-0.50** (0.17)	-0.76** (0.16)	-1.60** (0.18)	-1.17** (0.22)	-0.69** (0.20)
Dissatisfaction with democracy	-0.75** (0.17)	-1.06** (0.16)	-0.84** (0.15)	-0.86** (0.17)	-0.36 (0.20)	-0.36 (0.19)
Anti-EU integration	-0.40** (0.13)	-0.29* (0.12)	-0.43** (0.12)	-0.70** (0.14)	-0.28 (0.17)	-0.22 (0.15)
Politicians Germany's biggest issue	-0.26 (0.15)	-0.40** (0.14)	-0.30* (0.14)	-0.42** (0.15)	-0.26 (0.19)	-0.18 (0.18)
Dissatisfaction w/ COVID response	-0.68** (0.16)	-0.97** (0.15)	-0.81** (0.15)	-0.59** (0.16)	-0.74** (0.19)	-0.33 (0.19)
N						2,170
PRE						0.299
ePRE						0.157
Akaike Inf. Crit.						5,469.53

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses.

Table 2. 2021 German Federal Election second vote – multinomial logit model output.

	FDP	CDU/CSU	SPD	Green	The Left	Other
Constant	2.61** (0.29)	2.98** (0.28)	3.70** (0.28)	2.66** (0.29)	0.78* (0.34)	1.40** (0.32)
Age	0.002 (0.16)	0.64** (0.16)	0.72** (0.16)	0.32 (0.17)	0.31 (0.20)	-0.10 (0.19)
Woman	0.25 (0.13)	0.31* (0.13)	0.35** (0.13)	0.46** (0.14)	0.16 (0.16)	0.22 (0.16)
University qualification	0.55** (0.19)	0.39* (0.19)	0.44* (0.19)	0.71** (0.19)	0.51* (0.22)	0.39 (0.21)
Income	0.32* (0.14)	0.44** (0.14)	0.12 (0.14)	0.33* (0.15)	0.13 (0.17)	0.32 (0.17)
East Germany	-0.13 (0.14)	-0.07 (0.13)	-0.17 (0.13)	-0.05 (0.15)	0.33 (0.17)	-0.32 (0.19)
Political ideology	-0.36* (0.16)	-0.08 (0.16)	-1.02** (0.15)	-1.20** (0.17)	-2.36** (0.21)	-0.85** (0.19)
Anti-immigrant sentiment	-0.54** (0.17)	-0.79** (0.17)	-0.93** (0.17)	-1.80** (0.19)	-1.55** (0.22)	-1.02** (0.20)
Dissatisfaction with democracy	-0.80** (0.16)	-0.98** (0.15)	-0.78** (0.15)	-0.84** (0.16)	-0.40* (0.19)	-0.42* (0.18)
Anti-EU integration	-0.35** (0.12)	-0.37** (0.12)	-0.51** (0.12)	-0.79** (0.14)	-0.56** (0.17)	-0.16 (0.15)
Politicians Germany's biggest issue	-0.19 (0.15)	-0.19 (0.14)	-0.25 (0.14)	-0.16 (0.15)	-0.14 (0.18)	0.06 (0.17)
Dissatisfaction w/ COVID response	-0.54** (0.15)	-0.99** (0.15)	-0.73** (0.14)	-0.67** (0.15)	-0.56** (0.19)	-0.25 (0.18)
N						2,176
PRE						0.235
ePRE						0.168
Akaike Inf. Crit.						5,531.50

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses.

higher share of women voters supporting them. Voters for all other parties are more likely to have a university qualification. The voters for the FDP, CDU/CSU, and Greens have a statistically higher income when compared to AfD voters. Finally, eastern Germany residence does not appear to be a predictor of second vote choice.

The results in Tables 1 and 2 would seem to suggest that in the 2021 election AfD voters had a distinctive socio-demographic profile. However, there is reason to be extremely cautious with these claims. In Appendix 4, the average marginal effects are presented for the gender and university qualification variables.⁴ We focus on these variables because there are clear theoretical arguments in the literature for the impact of both of these variables on AfD vote choice (see discussion in preceding section). The results in Appendix 4 indicate that the average marginal effects of both of these variables are substantively very small. Men are less than a percentage point more likely to vote for the AfD. Similarly, the lack of a university qualification is associated with less than a percentage point increase in the likelihood to vote for the AfD. Similarly, in Appendix 4 we also provide the average marginal effects for age on vote choice. The probability of voting for the AfD is statistically

the same at every level of age. However, the variable does have an effect on the two main catch-all parties. Older respondents are statistically more like than are younger people to vote for the CDU/CSU and SPD. Older respondents are less likely to vote for the FDP. These results demonstrate that socio-demographic predictors do a relatively poor job of distinguishing AfD voters from voters for other parties. In other words, the key to understanding who votes for the AfD and why is not to be found here. Thus, the results provide support for H_1 .

Results – Attitudinal Predictors

The results displayed in Tables 1 and 2 confirm a number of previous findings on AfD vote choice and political attitudes. With the exception of the CDU/CSU, and FDP for the first vote, AfD voters are statistically further to the right on the political ideological spectrum when compared to voters for the SPD, Greens, and the Left Party parties. In Figure 1, the average marginal effects are displayed for the effect of political ideology on first and second vote. Figure 1 demonstrates that a respondent identifying on the far left of the ideological spectrum has a probability of zero for voting for the AfD. Comparing a far left voter to a far right voter, there is an increase of around 10 per cent in the probability of voting for the AfD. Indeed, as a respondent moves to the right of the ideological spectrum there is an increase in the probability of voting for the CDU/CSU and FDP, and a decrease in the probability of voting for SPD, Greens, and the Left party. The results indicate that AfD voters tend to be on the far right of the ideological spectrum. However, the results also show that respondents on the far right cast votes for all three of the right-wing parties.

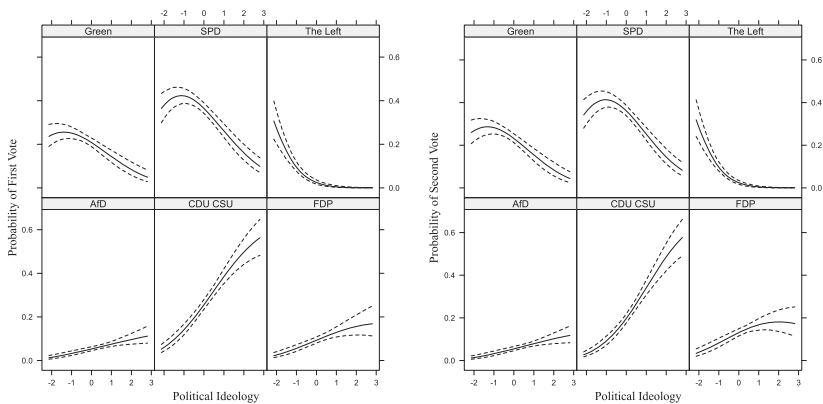


Figure 1. Average marginal effect of political ideology on vote choice.

A similar story is told when exploring the effect of anti-immigrant sentiment. In [Tables 1 and 2](#), model outputs demonstrate that voters for all other parties are statistically less likely to hold strong anti-immigrant sentiment when compared to AfD voters. The sole exception is when comparing AfD voters to FDP voters in the first vote, which shows that the two groups have a statistically similar level of anti-immigrant sentiment. The result confirms previous studies, which argue that the AfD gains much of its support by exploiting immigration as a campaign issue. In [Figure 2](#), the average marginal effects of the anti-immigrant sentiment variable on vote choice is displayed. The figure shows an increase in the probability to vote for the AfD of around 8 per cent when moving from extremely positive attitudes towards immigrants to extremely negative attitudes. [Figure 2](#) also indicates that there is an increase in the probability to vote for the CDU/CSU and the FDP. However, the predicted probability of voting for the CDU/CSU and FDP for a respondent that holds extremely negative attitudes towards immigrants is unclear due to the large confidence bounds. The large confidence bounds exist because there are relatively small percentage of CDU/CSU and FDP voters that holds such strong anti-immigrant sentiment. Another aspect of the figure to point out is that there is a dramatic drop of over 40 per cent in the probability of voting for the Greens when moving from positive attitudes towards immigrants to negative attitudes. Anti-immigrant sentiment has a minor role in the probability of voting for the SPD or *Linke*.

A third finding of previous studies confirmed here is the large impact that dissatisfaction with democracy has on AfD vote choice. With the exception of the Left party first vote, voters for all other parties have a statistically significant lower level of dissatisfaction with democracy when compared to AfD voters. The substantive impact of this variable on voting for the AfD is sizable. [Figure 3](#) displays the average marginal effects of dissatisfaction

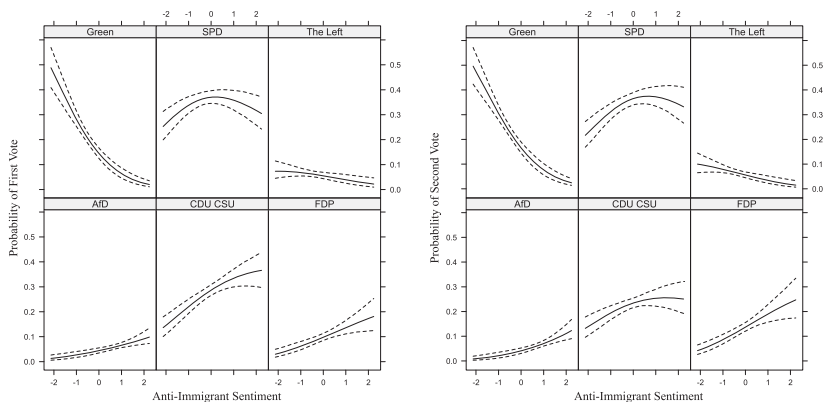


Figure 2. Average marginal effect of anti-immigrant sentiment on vote choice.

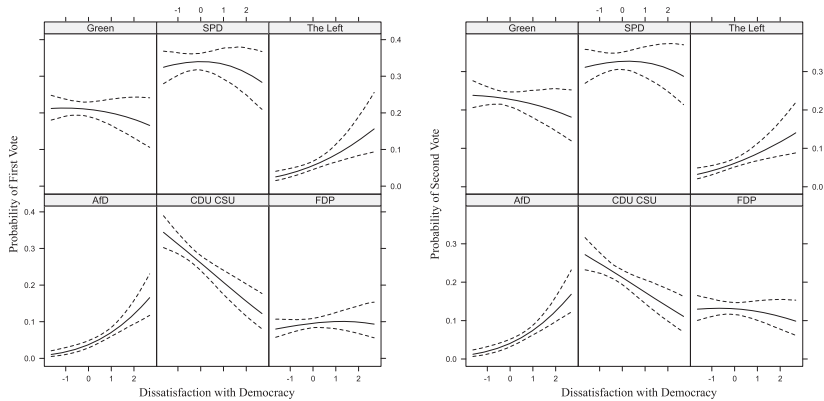


Figure 3. Average marginal effect of dissatisfaction with democracy on vote choice.

with democracy on vote choice. The results indicate someone that is completely dissatisfied with democracy is 10 per cent more likely to vote for the AfD when compared to someone completely satisfied with democracy. In comparison, dissatisfaction with democracy has a negative relationship with voting for the CDU/CSU, which is logical since the CDU/CSU was the governing party at the time of the election. Dissatisfaction with democracy also slightly increases the probability of voting for the Left party. The variable has no effect on the probability of voting for the other parties.

Beyond these results found in previous studies, outputs in [Tables 1 and 2](#) points to three new findings on attitudinal predictors of voting for the AfD. First, contrary to findings on the 2017 Federal Election (Hansen and Olsen 2019), there is evidence that negative attitudes towards the EU is related to voting for the AfD. Voters for the FDP, CDU/CSU, SPD, Greens, and the Left Party (with the exception of the first vote), have statistically higher levels of positive attitudes towards EU integration. Of course, it should be noted that the substantive impact on attitudes towards EU integration on vote choice is small (average marginal effect plot displayed in [Appendix 4](#)). On average, a respondent completely opposed to EU integration is only 3 per cent more likely to vote for the AfD over someone that is completely supportive. In contrast, opposition to EU integration decreases the probability of voting for the Greens by around 10 per cent.

A second new finding is that attitudes towards the political elite have a small but significant impact on voting for a particular candidate. In [Table 1](#), the results indicates that individuals that believe that politicians are Germany's biggest issue are less likely to vote for the CDU/CSU, SPD, and Green party candidate in the first vote. The substantive average marginal impact of this variable is also quite small at around only a few percentage points (see, average marginal effects in [Appendix 4](#)). However, the results do indicate

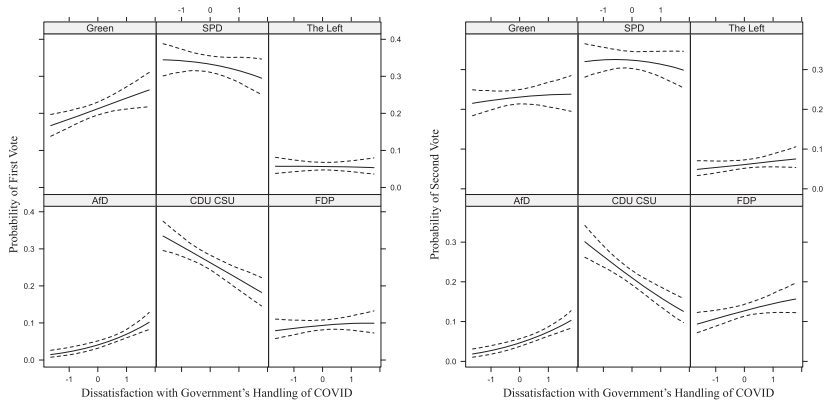


Figure 4. Average marginal effect of dissatisfaction with COVID handling on vote choice.

that candidates for mainstream parties vote share could be harmed by overall views of whether politicians in the political establishment are seen as corrupt or a problem. There is no effect of the variable on the second (party list) vote. Taken together, our analysis of these five attitudinal variables provides convincing evidence for H_2 .

Finally, one of our chief questions – the impact the Merkel’s government’s handling of the COVID-19 – demonstrates some quite substantive effects (Figure 4). Voters for all other political parties had a statistically significant lower level of dissatisfaction with the government’s COVID-19 response. In fact, when comparing an individual that is completely satisfied with the handling of the pandemic to someone that is completely dissatisfied, the dissatisfied individual is 10 per cent more likely to vote for the AfD. There is a decline of around 9 per cent in the probability of voting for the CDU/CSU. The probability of voting for the FDP, Green, SPD, and the Left Party is stable across all levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the issue of COVID-19 did not play a role in determining vote choice for any of the other competitor parties. The results provide evidence that the AfD was able to utilise the Merkel government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as an election issue in order to take away votes from the CDU/CSU. In other words, our findings here provide additional evidence for an understanding of the AfD as a populist issue entrepreneur, which confirms H_3 .

Conclusion

This article examined the voters for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2021 German Federal Election. Using the 2021 post-election German

Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), we confirmed four findings from previous studies. Our results once again demonstrate that socio-demographic variables are weak predictors of voting for the AfD: the party's voters have a similar socio-demographic profile when compared to its political party competitors. Additionally, the results here corroborate previous findings that far right political ideology, anti-immigrant sentiment, and dissatisfaction with democracy are positively correlated with voting for the AfD.

More significantly, we uncovered three new findings in relation to vote choice for the AfD. First, contrary to findings on the 2017 federal election, anti-EU attitudes had a positive, statistically significant impact on AfD vote choice in 2021. The result indicates that the party was once again able to exploit anti-EU sentiment, just as it had done in 2013. Second, negative attitudes towards political elites increased the probability of voting for the AfD candidate at the expense of the CDU/CSU, SPD, and Greens: mainstream party candidates, in short, suffer when voters believe that politicians are a problem for the country. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we found that dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was positively related to voting for the AfD. Similar to the refugee crisis in the 2017 election, the AfD was able to make the government's handling of a crisis a priority campaign issue. This finding underscores our conceptualisation, drawing on the work of previous scholars, of the AfD as a populist issue entrepreneur, able to find new issues to exploit in the political marketplace as a vote-winning strategy.

Having shown this, can the AfD be understood as a 'successful' issue entrepreneur? We would suggest that the answer here is somewhat ambiguous. According to a recent article by Lehmann and Zehnter (2022), the AfD lost votes in 2021 because its response to COVID was not able to draw upon a successful combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism which some scholars (such as Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) have theorised can account for the electoral success of populist radical right parties. In particular, Lehmann and Zehnter (2022) argue that the anti-authoritarian (or more correctly, libertarian) stance of the AfD towards COVID-19 measures and its harsh criticisms of the Merkel government's actions stood in tension with the party's otherwise authoritarian policy positions, leaving it only the populist/anti-elitist card to play. The tension within this position led to electoral decline for the AfD in 2021.

We would suggest another interpretation of the AfD's electoral results. On the one hand, the AfD lost votes in the 2021 election, declining 2.3 per cent (and consequently losing 11 seats) from its 2017 result. On the other hand, the AfD gained votes at the expense of the Union, and became the largest party in several eastern German states. Given that the migration and refugee issues had clearly declined in salience in the period preceding the election as COVID crowded out all other issues, it was perhaps inevitable

that the AfD would struggle to maintain or increase its share of the vote. An ‘authoritarian’ response to COVID – one that would align itself with the Merkel government – would have clearly not benefitted the AfD electorally (something which opinion polls demonstrated in the early months of the virus when the AfD more clearly backed the incumbent government’s response). Consequently, the party changed tactics and prioritised a populist/anti-elitist frame in deciding how to engage with its political competitors. The party’s narrative – one of ‘virus hysteria’, national decline caused by an incompetent and out-of-touch elite, and/or a pretext for an anti-democratic and unconstitutional power grab by the political establishment – fit its populist core perfectly. Although this is impossible to say with any certainty, it is very likely that had the AfD not changed tactics and challenged the Merkel government its electoral support would have declined much further. As it was, the AfD was able to hold on to a significant core of voters and make deep inroads into former Union voters in the 2021 election. Moreover, it is important to note that the three issues the AfD has been able to exploit as an issue entrepreneur – the EU, migration/refugees, and COVID – appear to be linked more by a common populist/anti-elitist stance than by nativism and authoritarianism. The party’s ability to be an issue entrepreneur, in other words, is deeply embedded in its anti-elite/populist frame.

In conclusion, we should also note what our investigation did not show. Robustness checks and model specification comparisons revealed, for example, no evidence for the AfD voters as a ‘loser of globalisation’ or individuals in economic distress. Indeed, employment status, household income, fears of globalisation, and an individual’s prospective economic situation had zero impact on voting for the party. AfD voters are not simply individuals facing economic hardship or the threat of globalisation. Instead, the AfD’s voters are enticed by the party’s anti-establishment politics, demonisation of migrants and minorities, EU-hostile rhetoric, and instrumentalisation of public exhaustion with the fight against COVID-19. Of course, as with all survey research, it is important to recognise that this is only one survey. In order to confirm the relationships found here, future research should conduct similar analyses as comparable data is released.

Notes

1. This analysis tests how AfD voters differ from voters for each and every party. This study does not make the methodological assumption that voting for all other parties is the same by using a binary vote choice measure. If we were to code AfD vote as a 1 and votes for all other parties a 0, there would be a methodological assumption that CDU/CSU voters are statistically different from AfD voters in the exact same way as FDP, SPD, Green, and Left party voters are different from AfD voters. The results indicate that this assumption is incorrect.

2. The latent measure was created using factor analysis on five survey questions asking about the respondents view of immigrants in the country. Survey question wording and coding, as well as Cronbach's Alpha scores and factor loadings, are presented in Appendix 1 and 2.
3. The coding scheme for all variables is presented in Appendix 1 and descriptive statistics are presented in Appendix 2. All independent variables were scaled to have a mean of 1 and a standard deviation of 0 so that coefficients would be comparable in the model output.
4. The average marginal effects plots were created using the DAMisc R package (Armstrong 2020).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Variable Coding

Socio-demographics:

Age – respondent age at the time of the election survey.

Gender – 0 = male respondent, 1 = female respondent.

University Degree – 0 = no degree, 1 = university degree.

Income – basic income categories 1 = under 500 euro, 2 = 500 to under 750 euros, 3 = 750 to under 1000 euros, 4 = 1000 to less than 1250 Euro, 5 = 1250 to less than 1500 Euro, 6 = 1500 to less than 2000 Euro, 7 = 2000 to less than 2500 Euro, 8 = 2500 to less than 3000 Euro, 9 = 3000 to less than 4000 Euro, 10 = 4000 to less than 5000 Euro, 11 = 5000 to less than 7500 Euro, 12 = 7500 to less than 10000 Euro, 13 = 10000 Euro and more.

East Germany – 1 = residing in Eastern Germany; 0 = residing in Western Germany.

Political Attitudes:

Political Ideology – The respondent is asked to self-place their ideology on a 1 (left) to 11 (right) scale.

Anti-Immigrant Sentiment – estimating factors analysis based on three statements created the anti-immigrant sentiment variable. The Cronbach's Alpha score for the three variables was 0.836. The proportion of the variance explained with one factor loading was 0.473. The statements indicate that immigrants make the economy, culture, and crime worse, as well as whether immigrants should adapt to German culture and adopt German practices –2 = strongly disagree, –1 = tend to disagree, 0 = neutral, 1 = rather agree, 2 = fully agree.

Dissatisfaction w/ Democracy – Respondent is asked 'how satisfied or dissatisfied are you – all in all – with democracy as it exists in Germany?' 2 = very dissatisfied, 1 = dissatisfied, 0 = partly satisfied, –1 = satisfied, –2 = very satisfied.

Anti-European Integration – The respondent is provided the statement that European integration should go further and asked their level of agreement. –2 = strongly agree, –1 = agree, 0 = neutral, 1 = disagree, 2 = strongly disagree.

Dissatisfaction w/ Government's COVID Response – The respondent is asked their level of satisfaction with the government's COVID response on an 11 point scale. –5 = completely satisfied to 5 = completely dissatisfied.

Politicians Germany's Biggest Issue – The respondent is provided the statement that politicians are Germany's biggest problem and asked their level of agreement. 2 = strongly agree, 1 = agree, 0 = neutral, –1 = disagree, –2 = strongly disagree.

Additional Variables that Utilised in Models as a Robustness Check:

Unemployed – 0 = not unemployed, 1 = currently unemployed at time of survey.

Union Member – 0 = not a member of a union, 1 = currently a union member.

Fear of globalisation – Respondent is asked how scared they are of globalisation, and the scale is 0 = not scared at all to 7 = very scared.

Gov. Reduce Income Inequality – Respondent is asked their level of agreement with the statement ‘the government should take measures to reduce income differentials’. –2 = strongly disagree, –1 = tend to disagree, 0 = neutral, 1 = rather agree, 2 = fully agree.

Economic Prospective – Respondent is asked ‘what will be your own economic situation this year?’ –2 = much worse, –1 = a little worse, 0 = stay the same, 1 = a little better, 2 = much better.

Party ID is coded as the party the respondent identifies with.

8Political Interest – attention to politics 0 = hardly; 1 = only now and then, 2 = some of the time, 3 = most of the time.

Appendix 2: Descriptive Statistics

Table A1. Descriptive statistics – socio-demographics.

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	16	55	53.28	90	18.17
Income	1	9	8.31	13	2.45
	0	1			
Gender	51.86%	48.14%			
University degree	64.16%	35.84%			
Unemployed	98.85%	1.15%			
Union member	84.55%	15.45%			
East Germany	75%	25%			

Table A2. Descriptive statistics – political attitudes.

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Political ideology	1	6	5.32	11	2.02
Anti-immigrant sentiment	–2.13	–0.09	0	2.23	1
Fear of globalisation	1	4	3.61	7	1.65
Political interest	0	2	2.38	4	0.93
Dissatisfaction w/ democracy	–2	–1	–0.49	2	0.92
Economic prospective	–2	0	–0.06	2	0.77
Anti-European integration	–2	–1	–0.80	2	1.05
Dissatisfaction w/ COVID response	–5	–1	–0.21	5	2.91
Politicians Germany’s biggest issue	–2	–1	–0.50	2	1.07

Table A3. Descriptive statistics – anti-immigrant sentiment.

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Require immigrants to adapt to German culture	–2	0	0.23	2	1.13
Minorities should adapt to German practice	–2	1	0.66	2	0.96
Immigrants bad for German economy	–2	0	–0.47	2	0.87
Immigrants bad for German culture	–2	–1	–0.45	2	1.24
Immigrants lead to more crime	–2	0	–0.03	2	1.19

Table A4. Descriptive statistics – party ID.

Variable	AfD	FDP	CDU/CSU	SPD	Greens	The Left	Other
Party ID	4.15%	6.22%	24.91%	19.42%	14.72%	5.55%	25.03%

Appendix 3: Vote Choice Models (w/ Partisan Identification as Independent Variable).

Table A5. 2021 German Federal Election first vote – multinomial logit model output.

	FDP	CDU/ CSU	SPD	Green	The Left	Other
Constant	-1.28 (0.77)	-0.54 (0.73)	0.41 (0.56)	-4.37 (5.73)	-4.43 (4.73)	-0.72 (0.63)
Age	-0.23 (0.22)	0.33 (0.22)	0.20 (0.21)	-0.004 (0.22)	0.29 (0.26)	-0.14 (0.24)
Woman	0.82** (0.18)	0.60** (0.18)	0.70** (0.17)	0.56** (0.18)	0.50* (0.21)	0.41* (0.19)
University qualification	0.48* (0.23)	0.54* (0.23)	0.55* (0.23)	0.59* (0.23)	0.56* (0.26)	0.55* (0.24)
Income	0.01 (0.19)	0.25 (0.18)	0.08 (0.18)	0.13 (0.19)	0.33 (0.22)	0.17 (0.20)
East Germany	0.06 (0.20)	0.28 (0.19)	0.28 (0.18)	0.44* (0.20)	0.70** (0.22)	-0.26 (0.25)
Party ID – FPD	6.28** (0.96)	5.30** (0.96)	2.94** (0.89)	6.61 (5.78)	5.09 (4.93)	2.26* (0.98)
Party ID – CDU/CSU	4.49** (0.81)	5.75** (0.76)	2.95** (0.63)	6.86 (5.74)	4.21 (4.82)	2.76** (0.68)
Party ID – SPD	4.51** (1.14)	4.17** (1.11)	6.52** (0.97)	8.74 (5.79)	7.03 (4.81)	3.64** (1.04)
Party ID – Green	7.82 (7.00)	7.22 (7.00)	8.22 (6.98)	13.42 (9.01)	10.32 (8.42)	6.80 (6.99)
Party ID – the Left	0.99 (1.36)	0.11 (1.48)	1.94* (0.89)	5.80 (5.77)	6.22 (4.77)	0.76 (0.99)
Party ID – other	2.84** (0.75)	2.61** (0.73)	2.50** (0.54)	6.30 (5.73)	5.49 (4.73)	2.05** (0.57)
Political ideology	-0.47* (0.22)	-0.63** (0.21)	-0.76** (0.21)	-0.80** (0.22)	-1.85** (0.28)	-0.81** (0.24)
Anti-immigrant sentiment	-0.32 (0.23)	-0.55* (0.22)	-0.70** (0.21)	-1.40** (0.23)	-0.94** (0.26)	-0.62** (0.23)
Dissatisfaction w/ democracy	-0.40* (0.19)	-0.65** (0.18)	-0.53** (0.18)	-0.57** (0.19)	-0.21 (0.23)	-0.12 (0.20)
Anti-EU Integration	-0.09 (0.17)	0.02 (0.16)	-0.04 (0.16)	-0.28 (0.18)	0.06 (0.21)	0.07 (0.17)
Politicians Germany's biggest issue	-0.38 (0.20)	-0.43* (0.19)	-0.39* (0.19)	-0.54** (0.20)	-0.46* (0.23)	-0.34 (0.21)
Dissatisfaction w/ COVID response	-0.58** (0.19)	-0.75** (0.18)	-0.65** (0.18)	-0.39* (0.20)	-0.67** (0.23)	-0.18 (0.21)
N						2,164
PRE						0.522
ePRE						0.390
Akaike Inf. Crit.						4,130.2

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses.

Table A6. 2021 German Federal Election second vote – multinomial logit model output.

	FDP	CDU/ CSU	SPD	Green	The Left	Other
Constant	-2.45* (1.23)	-1.18 (0.84)	0.57 (0.52)	-4.53 (7.17)	-4.93 (5.43)	-0.97 (0.63)
Age	-0.04 (0.21)	0.41 (0.21)	0.35 (0.21)	0.05 (0.22)	0.10 (0.25)	-0.21 (0.23)

(Continued)

Table A6. Continued.

	FDP	CDU/ CSU	SPD	Green	The Left	Other
Woman	0.39* (0.17)	0.49** (0.17)	0.45** (0.16)	0.42* (0.17)	0.20 (0.20)	0.26 (0.18)
University qualification	0.49* (0.22)	0.43 (0.23)	0.42 (0.22)	0.57* (0.23)	0.15 (0.26)	0.31 (0.24)
Income	0.16 (0.18)	0.33 (0.18)	0.10 (0.17)	0.28 (0.18)	0.13 (0.22)	0.27 (0.20)
East Germany	0.22 (0.19)	0.29 (0.19)	0.13 (0.18)	0.25 (0.20)	0.70** (0.22)	-0.08 (0.22)
Party ID – FPD	6.71** (1.27)	3.40** (0.97)	1.64* (0.72)	5.80 (7.19)	3.42 (5.80)	0.58 (1.06)
Party ID – CDU/CSU	5.62** (1.24)	5.79** (0.85)	2.29** (0.56)	6.80 (7.18)	4.09 (5.50)	2.79** (0.66)
Party ID – SPD	4.32** (1.38)	3.01** (1.05)	5.32** (0.70)	7.83 (7.19)	6.32 (5.47)	2.63** (0.87)
Party ID – Green	9.87 (11.02)	7.90 (10.99)	8.63 (10.96)	14.50 (13.09)	12.09 (12.22)	8.09 (10.97)
Party ID – the Left	2.02 (1.63)	-0.30 (1.93)	0.87 (0.86)	5.33 (7.21)	6.51 (5.46)	1.05 (0.96)
Party ID – other	4.80** (1.22)	3.08** (0.85)	2.60** (0.51)	6.84 (7.17)	5.80 (5.44)	2.73** (0.58)
Political ideology	-0.52* (0.21)	-0.36 (0.21)	-0.72** (0.20)	-0.84** (0.22)	-1.73** (0.27)	-0.72** (0.23)
Anti-immigrant sentiment	-0.42 (0.22)	-0.85** (0.22)	-0.80** (0.21)	-1.56** (0.23)	-1.34** (0.27)	-0.92** (0.23)
Dissatisfaction w/ democracy	-0.46* (0.19)	-0.53** (0.19)	-0.48** (0.17)	-0.57** (0.19)	-0.27 (0.23)	-0.19 (0.20)
Anti-EU integration	-0.10 (0.16)	-0.13 (0.16)	-0.21 (0.15)	-0.46** (0.17)	-0.34 (0.21)	0.06 (0.17)
Politicians Germany's biggest issue	-0.28 (0.19)	-0.09 (0.19)	-0.36* (0.18)	-0.23 (0.19)	-0.34 (0.23)	-0.07 (0.20)
Dissatisfaction w/ COVID Response	-0.46* (0.18)	-0.80** (0.18)	-0.59** (0.17)	-0.51** (0.18)	-0.44* (0.22)	-0.11 (0.20)
N						2,170
PRE						0.548
ePRE						0.426
Akaike Inf. Crit.						3,991.6

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses.

Appendix 4: Average Marginal Effects for Independent Variables from Tables 1 and 2.

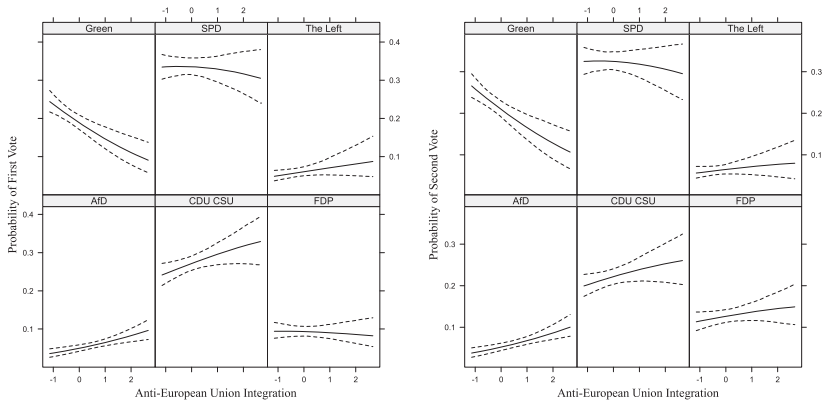


Figure A1. Average marginal effect of anti-European Union integration on vote choice.

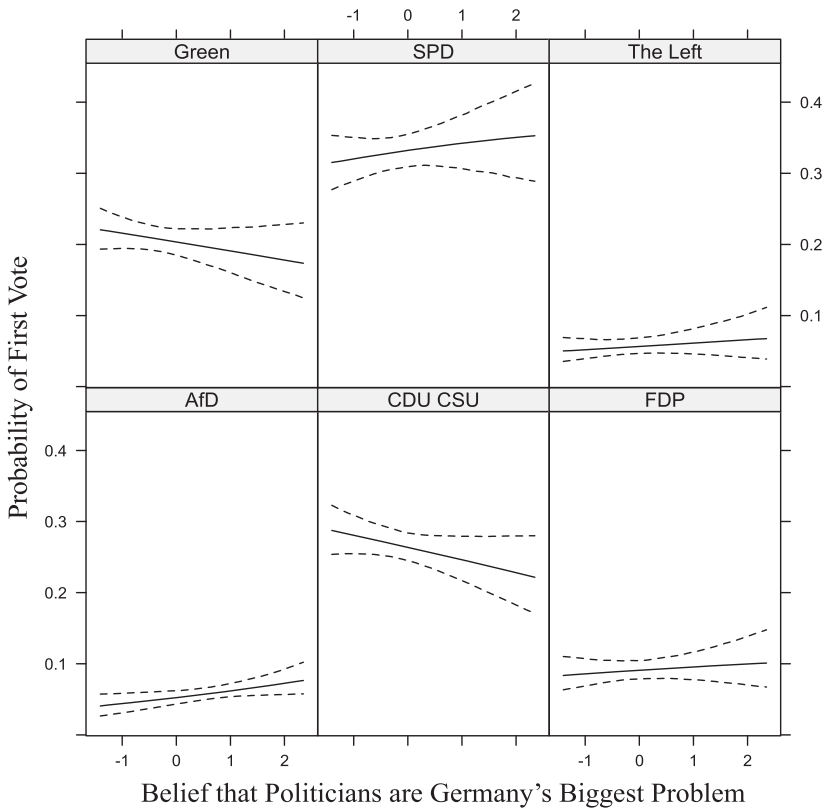


Figure A2. Average marginal effect of attitudes towards politicians on first vote choice.

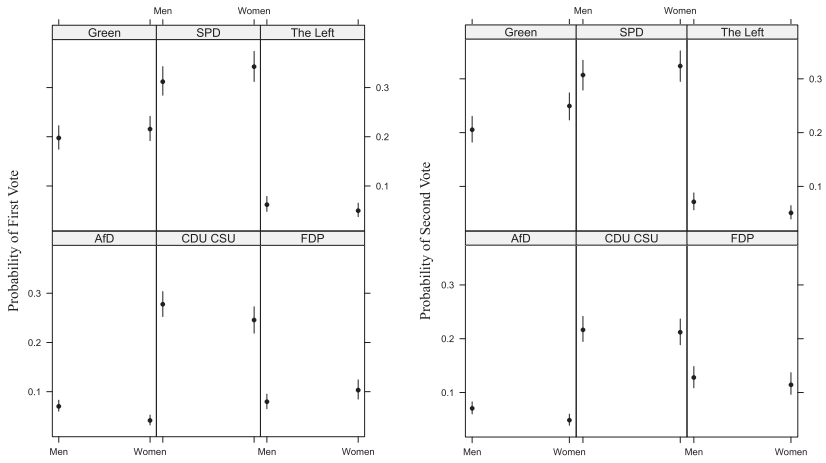


Figure A3. Average marginal effect of gender on vote choice.

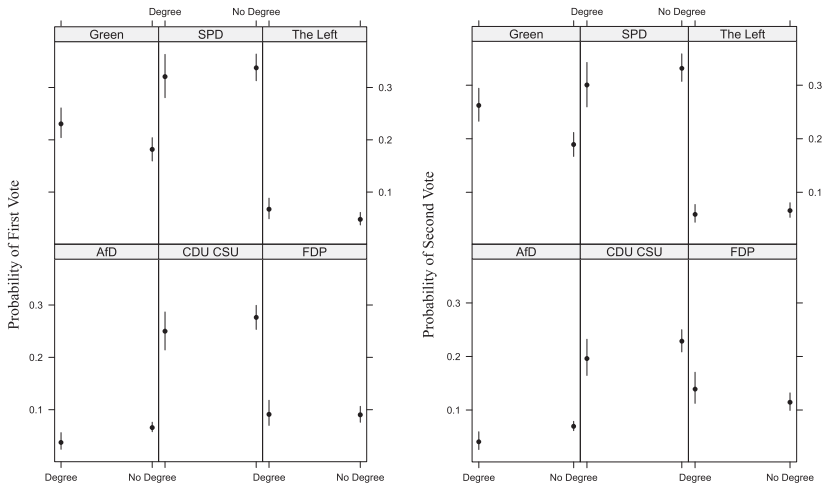


Figure A4. Average marginal effect of university qualification on vote choice.

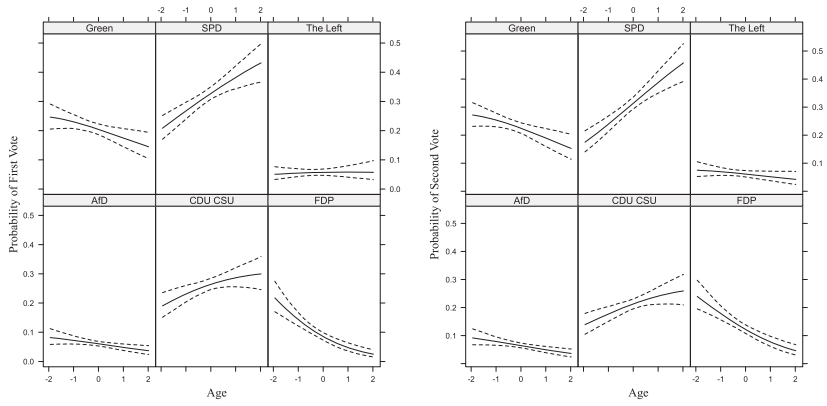


Figure A5. Average marginal effect of age on vote choice.