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Values, Taboos, and Votes: How Basic Human Values Affect Populist Electoral Support

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Abstract

How do individuals' underlying value orientations affect populist voting? Building on the congruency model in social psychology, we theorize that voters holding non-conformist values feel closest to political actors who employ a taboo-breaking populist style in the political debate. Moreover, we hypothesize that security and universalism values feed into vote choices between right-wing and left-wing parties. Leveraging structural equation modeling (SEM) and data from the 2017 *German Longitudinal Election Study* (GLES), we find that non-conformist values predict voting for the populist far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), but not for the left-wing populist The Left. Further, security and universalism values are associated with a higher probability of voting for not only populist but also mainstream parties. These findings point to the underlying role of basic human values in electoral support for populist parties and political behavior in general.

Zusammenfassung

Wie beeinflussen grundlegende individuelle Wertorientierungen das Wählen populistischer Parteien? Aufbauend auf dem sozialpsychologischen Kongruenzmodell argumentieren wir, dass sich Wähler*innen mit nonkonformistischen Wertorientierungen politischen Akteuren am nächsten fühlen, die sich durch einen tabubrechenden politischen Stil in der öffentlichen Debatte auszeichnen. Darüber hinaus nehmen

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wir an, dass die Werte Sicherheit und Universalismus in die Wahlentscheidung zwischen rechten und linken Parteien einfließen. Wir untersuchen Umfragedaten aus der *German Longitudinal Election Study 2017 (GLES)* und implementieren Strukturgleichungsmodelle. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass nonkonformistische Werte das Wählen der rechtsradikalen populistischen Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) wahrscheinlicher macht, jedoch nicht für die linke populistische Die Linke. Darüber hinaus korrelieren die Werte Sicherheit und Universalismus mit einer höheren Wahrscheinlichkeit nicht nur populistische, sondern auch moderate Parteien zu wählen. Die Befunde sprechen für die Rolle grundlegendender menschlicher Wertvorstellungen in der Wahl populistischer Parteien und allgemeinem politischem Verhalten.

Résumé

Dans quelle mesure les valeurs sous-jacentes portées par les individus influencent-elles le vote populiste? À partir du modèle de la congruence développé en psychologie sociale, nous posons que les électeurs porteurs de valeurs non-conformistes se sentent les plus proches d'acteurs politiques recourant à un style populiste et n'hésitant pas à briser des tabous. De plus, nous formulons l'hypothèse selon laquelle les valeurs de sécurité et d'universalisme conduisent à des choix électoraux concentrés entre les partis traditionnels de gauche et de droite. En nous appuyant sur la modélisation par équations structurelles (SEM) et sur les données de l'étude électorale longitudinale allemande (GLES), nous montrons que les valeurs non-conformistes prédisent le vote pour le parti de droite populiste Alternative pour l'Allemagne (AfD), mais pas pour le parti populiste de gauche Die Linke. De plus, les valeurs de sécurité et d'universalisme sont associées à une probabilité plus élevée de voter non seulement pour les partis populistes mais aussi pour les partis traditionnels. Ces résultats soulignent le rôle sous-jacent joué par les valeurs humaines fondamentales concernant le soutien électoral en faveur des partis populistes et les comportements politiques en général.

KEYWORDS

basic human values, conformity, Germany, populism, voting

INTRODUCTION

It came as a surprise to many observers when Donald Trump's approval ratings increased after delivering speeches in the 2016 US presidential primaries against political opponents, women, disabled people, Mexican immigrants, and even members of his own party (Panizza, 2017: 415). These comments, however, did not astonish students of populism who were familiar with populism's "solidarity of the dirty secret" (Reyes, 2005). People love to hear things from leaders they sympathize with but keep this to themselves to comply with social norms and political correctness.

Populists' "taboo-breaking" (Mudde, 2004: 554) style is not limited to aggressive campaign strategies. More generally, populists call into question the governing "establishment" and the norm of contributing to public discussions in a restrained and politically appropriate fashion. So far, research has analyzed populist party leaders' behavior (van der Brug & Mughan, 2007; McDonnell, 2016), party manifestos (March, 2017; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), and communication strategies (Aalberg, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In light of growing public support for populist parties in Europe and beyond, research has furthermore highlighted the role of sociodemographic factors (Oesch, 2008) as well as political and populist attitudes in populist voting (Akkerman et al., 2017; Andreadis & Stavrakakis, 2017; Loew & Faas, 2019; Rama & Santana, 2020; Rooduijn, 2018; Wuttke et al., 2020).

More recently, studies have turned to examining populist party support from a social psychology angle. Most notably, Bakker et al. (2016) found that the personality trait agreeableness is associated with a higher propensity to vote for populist parties in several European countries. Norris and Inglehart (2019) consider authoritarian and populist values a driver of citizen support for authoritarian-populist parties in a similar vein. However, this line of research has mainly overlooked the potential role of basic human values (Schwartz, 1994) in populist voting, even though values have been found to shape individuals' political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Barnea & Schwartz, 1998; Caprara & Vecchione, 2017). This article seeks to address this gap, arguing that specific value orientations draw voters to populist parties that engage in a taboo-breaking political style. Building on the personality congruence approach (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004), we hold that citizens feel closer to political actors sharing similar value orientations. Borrowing from an often overlooked scholarly perspective on populism, we suggest that populist actors reveal their value orientations by employing a distinct populist style (Moffitt, 2017; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). This style is mainly characterized by 'bad manners' and the violation of behavioral norms in the political debate.

When political actors perform a particular style in public, voters observe these behaviors and, according to the congruence hypothesis (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004), prefer actors whose style is most congruent with their value orientations. In this line of argument, voters holding non-conformist values—that is, a low appreciation of self-restraint in individuals' behavior in their everyday life—conceive populist actors' unconventional political style an overlap in desirable human behavior. This match between individuals' non-conformism and populist actors' taboo-breaking behavior, in turn, manifests in electoral support for populist parties. Moreover, previous research has shown that security and universalism values guide individuals' political ideology, such as left-wing or right-wing orientation (Caprara et al., 2017). We thus hypothesize that security values make voting for right-wing parties and universalism values left-wing voting more likely.

We develop a vote choice model that incorporates established explanatory factors of vote choice—such as issue opinions (Campbell et al., 1960; Leimgruber, 2011) and sociodemographic variables (Oesch, 2008)—and citizens' underlying values, namely conformity, security, and universalism values (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017). We examine the 2017 German federal election to confront our theoretical argument with empirical data. The German case provides us with an opportunity to elucidate the role of values in populist voting, as it offers two parties,

one on the left (The Left) and one on the right (Alternative for Germany [AfD]), that have been deemed to make populist claims in the public debate (Rooduijn et al., 2019). At the same time, however, recent work indicates that AfD and The Left engage in a verbal and visual populist style to varying degrees. Specifically, the AfD state branch of Rhineland-Palatinate has been found to use more negative words and scandalizing phrases in electoral manifestos and press releases than The Left (Scharloth, 2017), and more generally electioneered with exceptionally provocative posters in electoral campaigns at the federal level (Doerr, 2021). Given these different levels of populist style performances, we consider the German case to be a particularly interesting study ground in which to examine the relationship between basic human values and populist vote choices.

Leveraging data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) and structural equation modeling (SEM), we investigate the association between underlying basic values, issue opinions, and sociodemographic factors and vote choice. We find that voters holding non-conformism values are more likely to vote for the populist far-right AfD but not for the populist left-wing The Left, and, more generally, that security and universalism values are substantial predictors of political attitudes and vote choice in the German electorate. Interpreting these findings in light of our theory, we hold that populists' electoral success, in part, relies on voters' sympathies with political actors' values which they reveal in their taboo-breaking populist style.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, building on Moffitt and Tormey (2014), we conceptualize populism as a political style—a perspective on populism that has received relatively little attention in empirical studies. After summarizing the main features of basic human values in social psychology, we discuss how those values may inform individuals' stances on issue opinions and voting behavior. Next, we explain our case selection, measures, methodological approach and present the results of the SEM analysis. Finally, we discuss our findings against the background of our value-based theory of populist voting and its broader implications for electoral behavior.

POPULIST VOTING IN THEORY

Populism as a political style

Previous scholarship has conceptualized populism as a “thin-centered” ideology (March, 2017; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn, 2018), strategy (Weyland, 2001), discourse (Hawkins, 2009), and political logic (Laclau, 2005). Moffitt and Tormey (2014) state that these approaches indeed refer to useful features of populism but raise concerns about the use of pre-defined categories in these constructs. Instead, the authors argue for a more inductive account of populism and put forward to understand populism as a political style, which they define as “the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014: 387). These repertoires, in turn, consist of several attributes, namely (1) appeal to ‘the People’, (2) crisis, breakdown, threat, (3) and ‘bad manners’. Even though the style approach offers a crisp conceptual framework of populism, it has mostly been neglected in empirical research (but see Bos et al., 2013; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). This article aims to study the stylistic dimension of populism, which is mainly characterized by actors' ‘bad manners’ in the political debate. Specifically, Moffitt (2017: 58) circumscribes ‘bad manners’ elsewhere as

populist leaders' apparent disregard for ‘appropriate’ ways of acting in the political realm, and the deliberate flouting of such expectations and practices [...]. [T]hese performances of ‘bad manners’ may manifest in several different ways,

including self-representation, use of slang, political incorrectness, fashion or other displays of contempt for ‘usual’ practices of ‘respectable’ politics.

This implies that political parties engaging in this distinct style aim to contrast their performances with that of moderate ‘mainstream’ parties. Populism, as a political style, does not only refer to what party leaders speak out loud but also how they behave in public. Considering populist style as a gradual concept (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2020), parties can be differentiated regarding the dominance of populist performances presented to the electorate. Simultaneously, moderate parties may (temporarily) assume a populist style while not necessarily making ideological populist claims (Bos et al., 2013: 194).

Whereas Moffitt (2017) focuses on political leaders using a populist style in the political debate, political actors, in general, may deliver populist performances. Without a doubt, leaders of populist parties attract the most public attention, where the media plays a critical role in transmitting political leaders’ messages to the public, including the style with which they are being conveyed (Bos & Brants, 2014; Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2014; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Empirical evidence from Western Europe suggests that supporters of right-wing populist parties pay more attention to leaders than other parties’ voter bases (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2014; Michel et al., 2020). Similarly, the populist style has been shown to increase individuals’ perceived legitimacy of right-wing populist party leaders in the Netherlands, yet only among lower-educated, cynical, and less politically efficacious citizens (Bos et al., 2013).

In line with this research, we suggest that citizens pay attention to political actors’ style and are more likely to support actors whose style is closest to voters’ own value orientations. As the populist style is characterized by norm-violating behavior in the public discourse, individuals perceive this particular style to reflect political actors’ values. As previous research in social psychology has shown, individuals tend to feel closest to actors who appear to have a personality similar to their own (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020; Bakker et al., 2016; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). Before we elaborate on this value-based congruence principle in more detail, we briefly explain the potential role of basic human values in electoral behavior and their relationship with political attitudes.

Basic human values and models of vote choice

The idea to incorporate values in electoral behavior models is by no means new (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017). Amongst others, the scholars of the Michigan School, examining US citizens’ voting behavior (Campbell et al., 1960: 177), have highlighted the role of values in voting behavior. The Funnel of Causality is at the core of this tradition, in which issue opinions, being informed by values, are considered to affect citizens’ vote choices directly (Dalton, 2014: 184).

Indeed, issue opinions are a relevant explanatory factor of vote choice, yet both opinions and vote choice may be shaped by underlying value structures (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). According to Rokeach (1973: 5), “[a] *value* is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (emphasis in original text). An *attitude*, in contrast, “refers to an organization of several beliefs around a specific object or situation” (Rokeach, 1973: 18) and turns into an opinion once verbally expressed (Katz, 1960: 168). Consequently, while attitudes revolve around particular subjects, such as immigration, values are more abstract and not related to specific issues. Drawing on Rokeach’s seminal work, Schwartz (1994) developed a system of basic human values, which he defines as “desirable trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity” (Schwartz, 1994: 21). These values are grounded in universal human needs, vary in importance from one individual to another, and can be identified in any society.

Schwartz's value system consists of a set of ten basic values. These values can be categorized into four groups: openness to change, self-enhancement, conservation, and self-transcendence. Research has frequently used value orientations as an independent latent variable, among others, to explain political attitudes. For instance, a study has found that higher conservation and lower self-transcendence values are associated with less immigration-friendly attitudes (Davidov & Meuleman, 2012). As such, basic values are likely to be influenced by personality traits, which are often held to be partially shaped by genetic predispositions (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017: 61–62).

Apart from influencing opinions on various policies, values may also indirectly inform vote choice. Leimgruber (2011), examining the effect of basic and political values on voting in Switzerland, has posited that values do not directly affect voting for left-wing or right-wing parties. He finds that political values moderate basic values entirely, indicating that the latter must be translated into a concrete political value system to inform vote choice. By contrast, other scholarly work suggests that basic values directly influence vote choice (Barnea & Schwartz, 1998; Caprara et al., 2006).

The role of basic human values in populist voting

How, then, may basic human values inform voting for populist parties? As the political style literature suggests, populist parties intend to break taboos in the political sphere by employing a non-conformist taboo-breaking political style in public (Moffitt, 2017; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Drawing on the voter-politician congruence principle developed in social psychology (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020; Bakker et al., 2016; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004), we reason that citizens feel closest to political actors whose performed style is in accord with their basic values.

So far, the congruency model has mainly been applied to personality traits and voting behavior. Indeed, Bakker et al. (2016) have found that voters' low agreeableness makes voting for populist parties more likely. In contrast to personality traits, basic human values, despite similarly forming individuals' personalities, have been devoted less attention in the study of populist voting behavior. This is somewhat surprising, as previous research suggests that basic values yield more explanatory power for political behavior than personality traits (Barnea & Schwartz, 1998; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). Furthermore, in contrast to traits, values refer to what individuals consider desirable without necessarily behaving accordingly. In the context of populist voting, supporters of such parties may not always behave as populist actors do; it is also possible that they do not break norms in public themselves but endorse such behavior when shown by political actors. Our argument and empirical analysis thus focus on the less explored domain of basic values and populist voting.

We hypothesize that citizens are drawn to political parties whose actors' political style aligns with their own value orientation. Against the background of populist voting, individuals who approve of taboo-breaking and non-conformist behaviors are likely to feel closest to political actors who show similar behavior in the political realm. We argue that Schwartz's theory of basic human values offers value domains that help specify individuals' value orientations and their role in political behavior. In his value theory, Schwartz (1994) proposes conformity as a value referring to individuals' "restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms" (Schwartz, 1992: 9), which points to the extent to which individuals consider complying with norms desirable. If individuals, however, score low in conformity, they tend to neglect the importance of following social norms in everyday life. Apart from the Schwartz value theory, research into authoritarianism has similarly drawn on conformity values. While conformity is undoubtedly an essential component of authoritarian values, the latter refers more generally to the "tension between the values of

autonomy and social conformity” (Feldman, 2003: 47). To study the specific role of different value domains as operationalized in the Schwartz value theory, we focus on the decomposed value of conformity.

According to the congruency model in social psychology (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004), voters holding non-conformist values should feel emotional proximity to actors performing a populist style that is characterized by not complying with established norms in the political debate. Furthermore, as individual identity research has shown, perceived value congruence with others might not only create an emotional feeling of proximity; values might also help individuals “recognize political similarities and differences with other citizens” (Nelson & Garst, 2005: 491). In this line of argument, voters holding non-conformity values are drawn to actors performing a populist style because they feel emotional closeness to such actors *and* believe that when a political actor behaves in line with their value orientations, she likely holds similar political views.

An additional factor feeding into the congruency between voters’ and populist actors’ values is their skepticism towards perceived “mainstream” opinions and politicians (Rooduijn, 2014). Similar to populist actors, voters of populist parties may consider their political orientation as fundamentally different from mainstream society’s public opinion. Voters who feel like outsiders in their social and political environment may sympathize with political actors who identify themselves as outsiders. We reason that the perceived “outsiderdom” of populist actors manifests in their populist style, characterized by showing discontent of mainstream rules in the political debate.

In sum, drawing on the rich literature in social psychology, we expect that voters holding low conformity values feel closer to political parties whose actors perform a populist style that disregards the rules of ‘respectable politics’. This value-based voter-party congruence manifests in votes on polling day, where voters holding non-conformist values should be more likely to cast a vote for a populist party. Hence, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1 *Voters holding weak conformity values are more likely to vote for populist parties.*

The voter-party congruence, however, may also build on different value domains other than conformity. Voters may endorse populist and mainstream parties because they perceive proximity between their own values and the party’s ideology. Again, Schwartz’s value theory provides us with different basic values that might similarly feed into value-based voter-party congruence. In a study comparing the influence of basic human values on ideological placement, Caprara et al. (2017: 388) found that “welfare of all people” (universalism) on the one hand, and “preserving the social order and status quo” (security) on the other, constitute the trade-off between ideological placements across 16 societies. Building on this empirical evidence, we argue that security and universalism values may similarly function as anchors by which citizens feel closer to political parties whose actors make statements in public that are in line with voters’ value orientation.

Concerning security, this value refers to the desire to live in “safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self. It derives from basic individual and group requirements” (Schwartz, 1992: 9). Voters oriented toward stability in an individual’s social environment and society should be more likely to subscribe to right-wing parties’ political agenda, which usually stresses law-and-order policies. Moreover, security values have been found to nurture skeptical attitudes toward immigration (Davidov & Meuleman, 2012). In light of the salient debate over immigration in Europe in recent years, we expect citizens with strong security values to be more likely to vote for right-wing parties that promote anti-immigrant agendas. While we theorize that non-conformism feeds into the value-based congruence between voters and populist parties, security values may draw voters to right-wing parties in general, both mainstream and populist. By contrast, individuals holding weak security values should

be more inclined to vote for left-wing parties, as progressively oriented parties usually champion societal change rather than social stability, which would hinder the implementation of progressive policies. Hence, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2a *Voters holding strong security values are more likely to vote for right-wing parties.*

Hypothesis 2b *Voters holding weak security values are more likely to vote for left-wing populist parties.*

Besides conformity and security values, universalism represents another value domain based on which voters may feel more appealed by parties sharing their value orientation. Universalism, defined as “understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature” (Schwartz, 1992: 12), relates to the lens through which individuals perceive their fellow human beings irrespective of their background. Put differently, individuals holding strong universalism values have a more inclusive view, while individuals opposed to that value domain tend to think in exclusionary terms about out-group people. In this sense, anti-universalism values are likely related yet not identical to more racist attitudes and behavior (Moskowitz & Stroh, 1994). In Schwartz’s value system, universalism is opposed to security, implying that individuals holding strong universalism values should exhibit weak security values.

We expect voters with strong universalist values to be drawn to parties and political actors who cater to these values when conveying messages to the public. Simultaneously, citizens’ strong (weak) universalism values will inform their stances on issue opinions. For instance, while a positive opinion on immigration will be derived from relatively strong universalist value orientations, individuals refusing universalism values are more likely to oppose immigration-friendly policies. Conversely, voting for left-wing populist parties is likely to be guided by strong universalism values. Striving for equality among citizens regardless of their background has been a typical claim of left-leaning parties and should speak to voters strongly oriented toward universalism values. Therefore, we derive the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a *Voters holding weak universalism values are more likely to vote for right-wing parties.*

Hypothesis 3b *Voters holding strong universalism values are more likely to vote for left-wing parties.*

Apart from their direct effect on voting behavior, conformity, security, and universalism values are likely to inform voters’ stances on issue opinions. While previous research has provided inconclusive evidence for whether values exert direct influence on voting or only through issue opinion (Leimgruber, 2011), we seek to test these two possible scenarios in our empirical analysis. As mentioned before, individuals’ security and universalism may affect their stances on immigration and other issues like environmental or economic policies. The same could apply to conformity values; non-conformist voters may prefer radical or non-mainstream issue opinions on, for instance, immigration or European integration. Indeed, as previous research has shown, issue opinions on various policy areas remain an essential explanatory factor of populist voting (Rama & Santana, 2020; Rooduijn, 2018). Therefore, we incorporate issue opinions both as a determinant of populist vote choice into our model but additionally assume that underlying values may inform individuals’ issue opinions in the first place.

Besides values and issue opinions, it is critical to consider citizens’ sociodemographic characteristics as additional determinants of populist voting. For instance, Oesch (2008) has found that in various societies, the working class has become gradually disaffected with how democracy works, resulting in fertile ground for populists who cater to individuals’ skepticism toward moderate parties that are held to be responsible for the status quo. In the following, we

develop a research design to study the relationship between values, issue opinions, sociodemographic characteristics, and populist voting.

RESEARCH DESIGN: A STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL OF VOTE CHOICE

Germany offers an opportunity to study the influence of values on populist vote choice as populist parties on the right and the left have gained strength in recent years. The radical-right Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*) and the far-left The Left (*Die Linke*) have both been classified to make populist claims in the political debate (Rooduijn et al., 2019) and are represented in the *Bundestag* (Federal Parliament). Since both parties have not yet been part of the federal government, their governmental status can be neglected as another potential mediating variable in the context of this study.

At the same time, however, studies suggest different degrees to which the two parties engage in a populist political style. With respect to AfD, Berbuir et al. (2015: 173) point to distinct “patterns of populist communication” that distinguish the party from others. Although we still lack comprehensive studies analyzing how German political parties deliver taboo-breaking and provocative performances, recent work has begun to study the stylistic elements of AfD’s and The Left’s behavior in parliament and electoral campaigns. Investigating German party branches’ manifestos and press releases in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate through a linguistic lens, Scharloth (2017) finds that AfD uses considerably more negative words and scandalizing phrases than the other parties. By contrast, The Left engages in such language significantly less than AfD but still more than the other parties. In a similar vein, Doerr (2021) examines AfD’s campaign posters and finds that the party “used provocative images of gender and sexual freedom together with anti-Islam rhetoric to promote the party’s election campaign at the national and state levels” (12). Taken together, these studies indicate that AfD engages in more provocative language and campaign strategies than The Left. Nonetheless, data and studies on the extent to which political actors engage in a populist style are scarce and deserve more attention in future research.

Research into the explanatory factors of AfD’s electoral success has found that sociodemographic characteristics and self-perceptions thereof predict radical right-wing populist voting in Germany (Bergmann et al., 2018). Other scholars have advanced that economically privileged citizens are more likely to vote for AfD (Lengfeld, 2017). Further, AfD’s agenda has been found to generate electoral support (Schmitt-Beck, 2017), mainly through immigration policies, an issue that became increasingly salient in the public debate since the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015. However, since AfD has gained votes from former voters of all principal parties except the Greens (Dilling, 2018: 94), it can be assumed that “AfD’s rise cannot be sufficiently explained by the defection of discontented Christian Democrats” (Dilling, 2018: 94).

To bring together values, issue opinions, and vote choice, we draw on the Funnel of Causality (Dalton, 2014), modeling values to impact issue opinions that, in turn, affect vote choice. We maintain this chain, yet with an additional path: As we hypothesize a direct link from values to vote choice additionally to the indirect path through issue opinions, we also test the direct effects of conformity, security, and universalism values on voting. In line with previous research on the relationship between values, attitudes, and vote choice (Leimgruber, 2011), we employ structural equation models (SEM) that enable us to assess the direct and indirect effects of values on vote choice.¹

¹We implemented the SEM models with the R package ‘lavaan’ (Rosseel, 2012).

Our SEM model consists of the following hierarchy of one measurement model and two regression models:

1. Basic Values: Schwartz's Portrait Values Questionnaire (confirmatory factor analysis)
2. Issue Opinions = Basic Values + Socio-Demographics (ordered probit regression)
3. Vote Choice = Basic Values + Issue Opinions + Socio-Demographics (binary probit regression)

In the measurement model (1), we build latent variables for the three values using confirmatory factor analysis. Furthermore, we employ ordered probit regression of values on issue opinions while controlling for socio-demographics (2) and run a binary probit regression of values, issue opinions, and socio-demographics on vote choice (3) (i.e., whether the respondent intends to vote for party *x* at the next election [1] or not [0]).² We only consider respondents who indicated a party preference in the analysis. We use the maximum likelihood estimator for the measurement model and the diagonally weighted least squares estimator for the opinion and vote choice models. In addition to the direct effects, we define indirect effects of values through issue opinions. We run the model for each principal German party to assess how the values-opinion-choice relationship works empirically across parties. The structure of our SEM model is displayed in [Figure 1](#).

We extract the data for our analysis from the first wave of the 2017 federal election short-term panel by the German Longitudinal Election Study ($N = 18,079$) (Roßteutscher et al., 2018).³ Schwartz values are gauged by responses to the established Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ), in which individuals with different value orientations are described. The respondent is asked to assess how similar or dissimilar the described person is to herself. [Table 1](#) displays the portraits used to construct the latent value scores for conformity, security, and universalism. The two questions for the conformity value capture the extent to which citizens value (or disregard) conformist behavior in public. This value corresponds to the distinct populist political style, marked by contempt of respectable mainstream behavior in the political debate.

As shown in [Table 2](#), we select six issue opinions that cover various policy areas, namely socio-economy, immigration, integration, EU integration, climate protection, and privacy. By choosing these issues, we take into account voters' opinions on a whole range of policy areas as explanatory variables of vote choice. While we consider various issue opinions to reflect the multidimensional nature of political ideology (Laméris et al., 2018), we run additional regression models controlling for individuals' self-placement of a left-right scale as a robustness test. Unfortunately, the panel wave used for this analysis did not contain any items measuring populist attitudes, not allowing us to incorporate this domain in our study. In addition to issue opinions, we control for the following sociodemographic variables: age, income, education, gender, and religiosity.⁴

RESULTS

The confirmatory factor analysis (measurement model) yields robust results with all loadings being over 0.5 in identical directions, suggesting that the latent value variables

²More specifically, the question asks about the party vote (instead of the candidate vote), which is the most critical vote in Germany's mixed-member proportional (MMP) representation electoral system.

³Note that the GLES panel study is not representative of the German electorate.

⁴The wording for the sociodemographic variables and the descriptive statistics for all variables can be found in the Online Appendix [A](#) and [B](#), respectively.

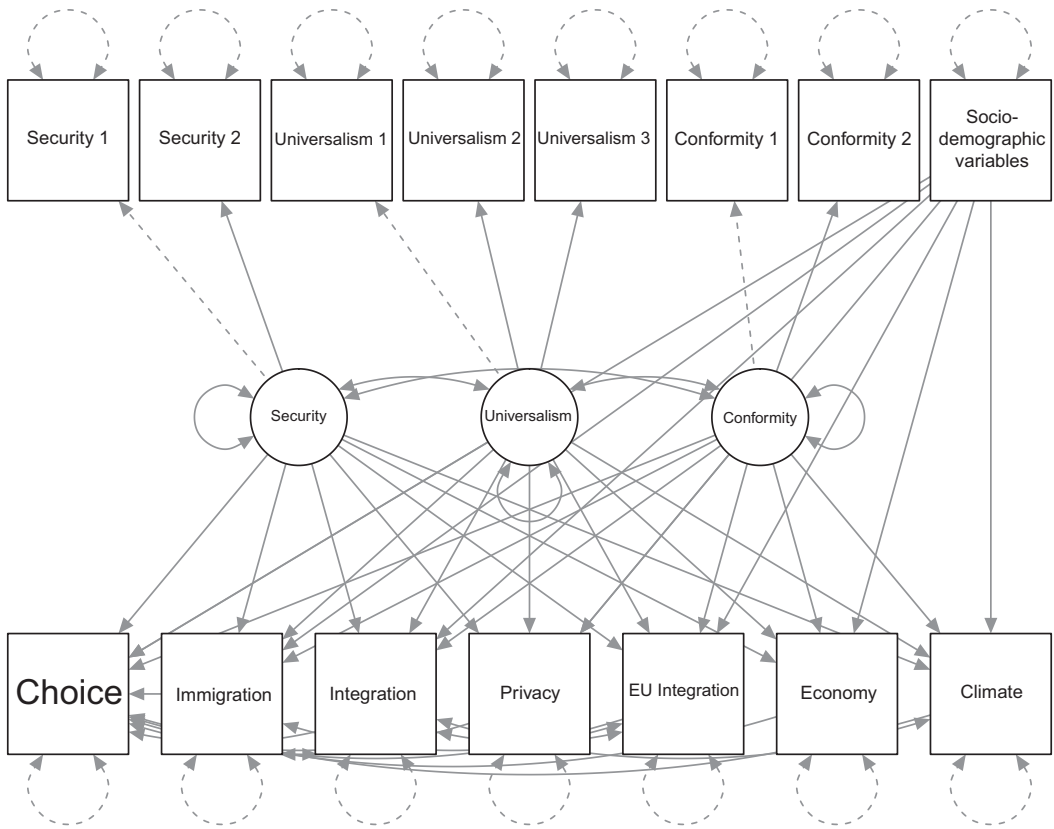


FIGURE 1 Set-up of the structural equation model

TABLE 1 Value variables. Response set for all variables on a scale from 1–6: “not like me at all” - “very much like me”

Variable	Item wording
Security 1	It is important to him/her to live in secure surroundings. He/she avoids anything that might endanger his/her safety.
Security 2	It is important to him/her that the government ensures his/her safety against all threats. He/she wants the state to be strong so that it can defend its citizens.
Universalism 1	He/she thinks it is important that every person in the world should be treated equally. He/she believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life.
Universalism 2	It is important to him/her to listen to people who are different from him/her. Even when he/she disagrees with them, he/she still wants to understand them.
Universalism 3	He/she strongly believes that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to him/her.
Conformity 1	It is important to him/her always to behave properly. He/she wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong.
Conformity 2	He/she thinks people should follow the rules at all times. He/she believes that people should do what they're told.

TABLE 2 Issue opinion variables

Variable	Response set
Socio-economy	Lower taxes, although this results in less social services (1) – More social services, although this results in raising taxes (7)
Immigration	Immigration for foreigners should be easier (1) – Immigration for foreigners should be more difficult (7)
Integration	Foreigners should completely assimilate to the German culture (1) – Foreigners should be able to live according to their own culture (7)
EU Integration	European unification should be pushed further (1) – European unification has already gone too far (7)
Climate	Fight against climate change should take precedence, even if it impairs economic growth (1) – Economic growth should take precedence, even if it impairs the fight against climate change (7)
Privacy	In favor of strong state interference (1) – Against strong state interference (7)

constructed in the measurement model fit the data adequately. The overall model fit (for the AfD-Model, $\chi^2 = 4359.78$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07) succeeds the cut-off proposed in the SEM literature (Hooper et al., 2008).⁵ As for the covariance between the three latent variables, conformity and security values are moderately associated with each other ($r = 0.48$), followed by security and universalism ($r = 0.22$), and universalism and conformity ($r = 0.12$).⁶

The effects of the three values, controlling for sociodemographic variables, on issue opinions are shown in Table 3. The results indicate that all values are statistically significant for all of the issue opinions. The directions of the effects are in line with our theoretical expectations. For instance, a person with higher security, lower universalism, and lower conformity scores is much more likely to hold a critical view of European integration.⁷ Moreover, the explanatory power of issue opinion is more reliable than sociodemographic variables, bolstering the relevance of values in forming issue opinions. Regarding issue opinions on immigration, we find that pro-security values make anti-immigrant opinions more probable, while stronger universalist and conformity values predict immigration-friendly attitudes. As such, the finding confirms the results of previous studies (Leimgruber, 2011), and our evidence indicates that values substantially affect individuals' stances on specific policy issues.

Table 4 reports the SEM model results for vote choices for AfD, The Left, and the other principal German parties. The table displays the direct effects of values, issue opinions, and socio-demographics on vote choice (direct effects), the indirect effect of values on the sum of issue opinions (indirect effects), and the multiplied direct and indirect effects of values (total effects). The results show that the three values exhibit significant and robust effects on AfD-voting, where security has the greatest direct impact ($\beta = 0.642$), meaning that voters with stronger security values are more likely to vote for rightist parties. In contrast, we observe reverse effects for universalism and conformity: anti-universalist values ($\beta = -0.470$) and non-conformist values ($\beta = -0.403$) make AfD-voting more likely. Figure 2 illustrates the direct and indirect effects of the three values, selecting immigration as an illustrating moderating issue opinion. As the coefficients suggest, conformity, universalism, and security values affect right-wing populist behavior in the context of the 2017 federal

⁵The factor loadings for all models can be found in Online Appendix C. The factor loadings and goodness of fit statistics deviate marginally between the party models shown in Table 4.

⁶See Online Appendix C.

⁷Except for the climate issue opinion, for which universalism and conformity have converse effects. However, the effect size for universalism values is much stronger than for conformity and security values.

TABLE 3 Ordered probit regression of values and sociodemographic variables on issue opinions (socio-economic variables not shown in the table) in the SEM model of predicting AfD vote choice. The coefficients only marginally differ from the other SEM models predicting vote choices for other German parties (see [Online Appendix](#)). *B* = unstandardized coefficient, β = standardized coefficient

Dependent variable	Value	<i>B</i>	Std. error	<i>p</i> -value	β
Immigration	Security	1.275	0.048	0.000	0.842
	Universalism	-0.646	0.018	0.000	-0.585
	Conformity	-0.369	0.027	0.000	-0.360
Integration	Security	-1.138	0.046	0.000	-0.767
	Universalism	0.566	0.018	0.000	0.523
	Conformity	0.339	0.027	0.000	0.338
Privacy	Security	-0.771	0.030	0.000	-0.516
	Universalism	0.227	0.013	0.000	0.208
	Conformity	0.120	0.018	0.000	0.118
EU Integration	Security	0.581	0.035	0.000	0.391
	Universalism	-0.370	0.014	0.000	-0.341
	Conformity	-0.239	0.021	0.000	-0.238
Socio-economy	Security	-0.539	0.028	0.000	-0.361
	Universalism	0.405	0.013	0.000	0.372
	Conformity	0.182	0.018	0.000	0.181
Climate	Security	0.076	0.025	0.003	0.051
	Universalism	-0.478	0.013	0.000	-0.445
	Conformity	0.118	0.017	0.000	0.119
<i>N</i>	12,003				

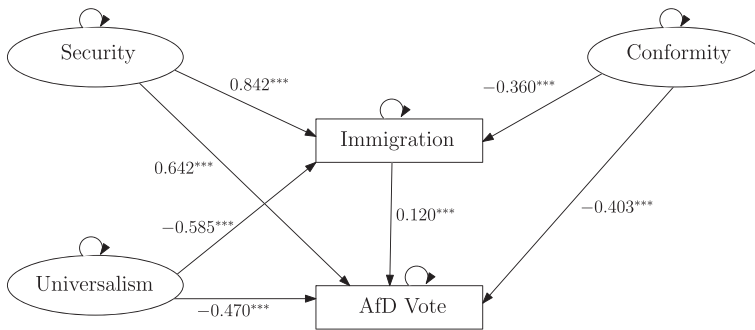


FIGURE 2 Path diagram. AfD vote with standardized probit coefficients (* * * = $p \leq .001$). Further issue opinions and socio-demographic variables are not shown in the diagram

election. Importantly, in contrast to security and universalism values, the mediation of conformity by issue opinions only marginally adds to its direct effect, suggesting that conformity mainly directly feeds into voting for AfD. Concerning the indirect effects, weaker conformity values are associated with anti-immigration and anti-EU attitudes, which in turn make voting for AfD more likely.

The results reveal direct reverse effects for voting for the left-wing populist The Left, yet also for the Green Party. Embracing universalism and refusing security values makes voting for

TABLE 4 Binary probit regression of vote choices for German parties. β = standardized coefficient. Sig. = significance level (+ = $p \leq .1$; * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; *** = $p \leq .001$)

	AfD		The Left		CDU		SPD		Greens		FDP	
	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.
Direct effects												
Security	0.642	***	-0.307	***	0.150	+	-0.037		-0.502	***	-0.027	
Universalism	-0.470	***	0.319	***	-0.152	**	0.015		0.402	***	0.046	
Conformity	-0.403	***	0.069	***	0.080		0.093	+	0.199	***	-0.003	
Immigration	0.120	***	0.009	***	-0.092	*	-0.036		0.023		0.002	
Integration	-0.050	*	-0.026	*	0.076	**	0.060	*	-0.045	*	-0.002	
Privacy	0.086	***	0.061	***	-0.091	***	-0.038	*	-0.029	*	0.007	
EU Integration	0.197	***	0.097	***	-0.140	***	-0.118	***	-0.078	***	-0.034	
Socio-economy	0.016	***	0.087	***	-0.015	***	0.049	**	-0.024	**	-0.143	***
Climate	-0.022	*	-0.041	*	0.093	***	0.033	+	-0.087	***	0.080	***
Age	-0.001	***	0.004	***	0.002	*	0.003	**	-0.004	***	0.005	***
Income	0.006	***	-0.060	***	0.049	***	0.013	*	-0.001	*	0.018	**
Gender	-0.203	***	-0.141	***	0.043	+	0.075	**	0.217	***	-0.005	
Education	-0.118	***	0.079	***	-0.014	***	-0.070	***	0.137	***	0.036	+
Religion	-0.069	***	-0.142	***	0.153	***	0.028	*	-0.016	*	0.047	**
Security \rightarrow Sum Issue Opinions	0.165	***	0.001	***	-0.134	**	-0.120	*	0.044	*	0.042	
Indirect effects												
Universalism \rightarrow Sum Issue Opinions	-0.130	***	0.012	***	0.075	*	0.088	*	0.013	*	-0.079	
Conformity \rightarrow Sum Issue Opinions	-0.096	***	-0.017	***	0.090	***	0.070	***	-0.024	***	-0.008	
Total effects												
Security	0.807	***	-0.306	***	0.016	***	-0.157	***	-0.458	***	0.014	
Universalism	-0.600	***	0.331	***	-0.076	***	0.103	***	0.416	***	-0.032	
Conformity	-0.499	***	0.052	***	0.170	***	0.163	***	0.175	***	-0.012	
χ^2	4359.777		4275.416		4286.623		4300.397		4296.209		4262.447	

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	AfD		The Left		CDU		SPD		Greens		FDP	
	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.
CFI	0.928		0.928		0.908		0.908		0.911		0.908	
TLI	0.923		0.923		0.902		0.901		0.904		0.901	
RMSEA	0.065		0.065		0.064		0.064		0.064		0.064	
N	12,003		12,003		12,003		12,003		12,003		12,003	

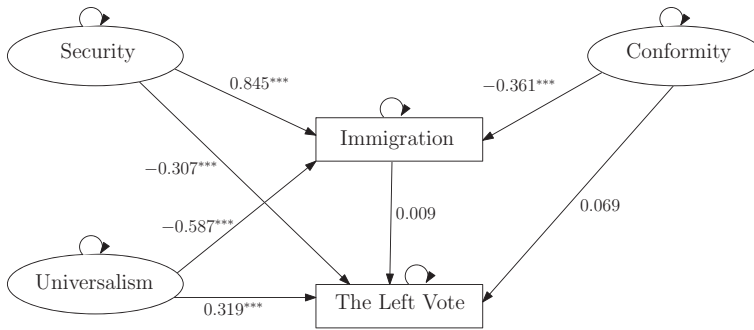


FIGURE 3 Path diagram. The Left vote with standardized probit coefficients (* = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; *** = $p \leq .001$). Further issue opinions and socio-demographic variables are not shown in the diagram

these parties more likely. Conformity does not yield a significant coefficient on voting for The Left (see Figure 3). However, prioritizing conformity values increases the propensity to vote for the Greens, which also holds for the center CDU and SPD. Overall, the results suggest that AfD-voting, unlike the other party preferences, becomes more likely the less citizens are oriented toward conformity values. By contrast, security and universalism affect voting AfD and CDU in similar ways. Holding pro-universalism and anti-security values appears to positively influence voting for Greens, The Left, and SPD. While conformity is strongly associated with voting for CDU, SPD, and the Greens, only issue opinions and socio-demographics, unlike value orientations, predict voting for the liberal FDP.

As Figure 4 illustrates, the results support our expectations concerning the impact of values on voting for AfD as a right-wing populist party: controlling for issue opinions and various sociodemographic variables, anti-conformist, pro-security, and anti-universalism value systems make AfD-voting more likely. The effects of the latent value variables support the relevance of citizens' value systems in voting for the right-wing populist party. In line with our expectations derived from the literature on German populist parties (Doerr, 2021; Scharloth, 2017), we find a more substantial anti-conformism effect for the right-wing AfD than, as Figure 5 shows, for the left-wing populist The Left. More precisely, in contrast to all other parties except the FDP, neither conformism nor non-conformism values predict voting for The Left. At the same time, pro-universalism and anti-security values make voting for The Left more likely, indicating congruence between the party's leftist orientation and its voters' security and universalism values.

Nonetheless, juxtaposing AfD voters to the other parties' electorates based on value orientations would be inaccurate, as voters of both AfD and, to a lesser extent, CDU tend to hold anti-universalist values. However, taking all variables together, pro-conformity prevails over anti-universalist values among CDU voters. The parties further on the left (SPD, Greens, The Left) exhibit the opposite value system than AfD, indicating a value-based cleavage between left-wing and radical right voter bases.

To test the robustness of our results, we carried out analyses with different model specifications and sample subgroups. First, scrutinizing whether the SEM analysis results hold in alternative regression frameworks, we ran probit regression models without mediation and furthermore controlled for individuals' left-right placement. These models confirm the association between conformity and voting for the various parties identified in the SEM models (see Online Appendix D).⁸ Second, the voting behavior of The Left's supporters may deviate

⁸However, when controlling for left-right self-placement, some coefficients for security and/or universalism values become statistically insignificant. This is most likely due to the strong relationship between security and universalism values and political ideology (e.g., Leimgruber, 2011). Moreover, in the probit models, universalism values are positively associated with the likelihood to vote for FDP.

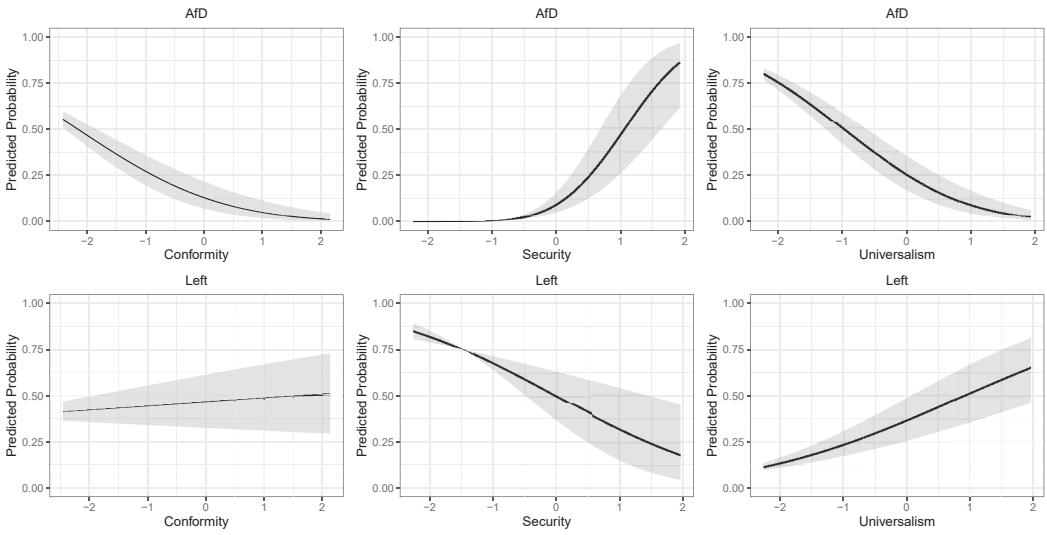


FIGURE 4 Predicted probabilities for voting AfD and The Left conditional on value orientations, holding all other variables constant at their mean

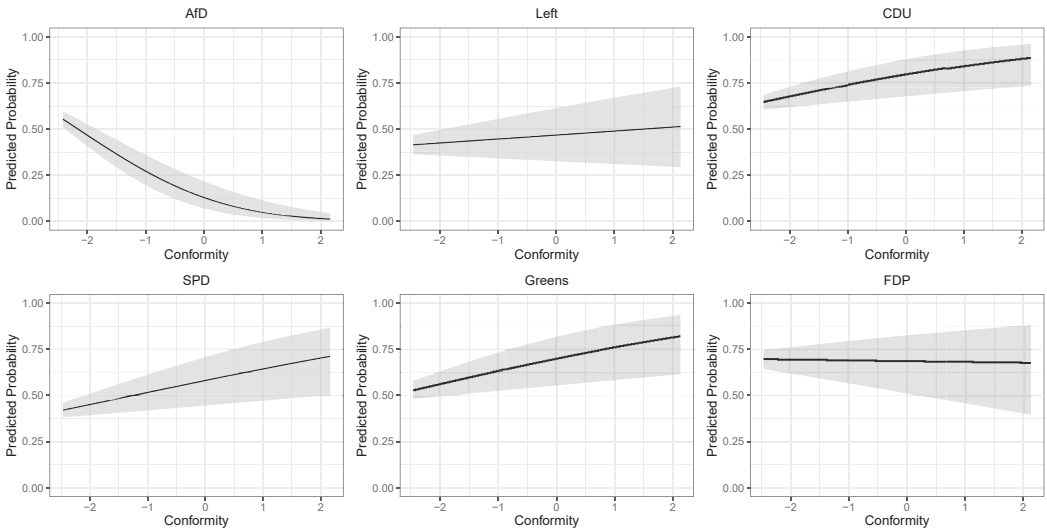


FIGURE 5 Predicted probabilities for voting German principal parties conditional on conformity values, holding all other variables constant at their mean

between West and East Germany. Splitting the sample into two regional sub-samples supports the null-effect of conformity values on The Left in the West yet reveals a slightly positive effect in the East. This finding is in line with the observation that the Eastern part of The Left and its partisans tend to be more moderate than in the West (Hough & Koß, 2009). At the same time, all value effects for voting for AfD hold for both German regions (see Online Appendix E). Lastly, we test whether there are common patterns among AfD and The Left voters by running a model on voting for either of the two parties (see Online Appendix C.3).

Compared with the separate models for AfD and The Left, all coefficients are close to zero, illustrating the necessity to differentiate between left-wing and right-wing populist parties in empirical analyses.

CONCLUSION

How do individuals' underlying value orientations matter for populist voting? Building on the congruency model in social psychology (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004), we argue that voters feel closest to political actors they conceive of sharing their personal values. In turn, voters holding weak conformity values believe that a political actor who engages in a populist style (Bos et al., 2013; Moffitt, 2017; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) represents her personal values. In this line of argument, political actors' populist style serves as an anchor based on which voters "infer politicians' motives and values" (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004: 591). We theorize that voters who score low in conformity values feel emotional proximity to political actors performing a populist style, which disregards behavioral norms in the public debate. Furthermore, building on previous research into the influence of values on individuals' political opinion (Caprara et al., 2017), we hypothesize that more vital security values make voting for right-wing parties and stronger universalism values voting for left-wing parties more likely.

In line with our expectations, our analysis of voting behavior in the context of the German 2017 federal election reveals that individuals holding non-conformist values are considerably more likely to vote for the far-right populist AfD. While our analysis does not establish a direct, causal link between AfD politicians' non-conformist behavior and voters' non-conformism values, the results suggest that, controlling for issue opinions and sociodemographic variables, AfD's electoral base is considerably less favorable of following behavioral norms in public. Interpreting these results in light of our theory, we propose that the association between non-conformism values and voting for AfD can be explained by the distinct populist style performed by the far-right populist party's actors in the political debate.

By contrast, non-conformist value orientations do not increase individuals' probability to vote for the left-wing populist The Left. While we solely analyze the drivers of populist voters in the context of Germany, our results point to differences between the determinants of right-wing and left-wing populist voting (see also Andreadis & Stavrakakis, 2017; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017), namely a congruency between voters' and populists' non-conformist behavior only for the far-right AfD but not for the left-wing The Left. This pattern may stand out for two reasons. First, it has been noted that The Left is a pragmatic rather than a fully-fledged populist party (Hough & Keith, 2019) and that its manifestos and press releases make less use of scandalizing and negative language than AfD's (Scharloth, 2017), which is why this party may be less appealing to non-conformist citizens. Second, it may be that non-conformist voters are only drawn to right-wing populist parties, while left-wing populist parties do not appeal to this particular group of voters holding such values. While it remains to be scrutinized whether non-conformist citizens generally turn to right-wing populist parties in other contexts, our study implies that AfD and The Left voters do not have value orientations in common.

That said, in line with the conflicting relationship between universalism and security values in the Schwartz theory of basic human values, pro-universalism and anti-security values are positively associated with voting for German left-wing parties (SPD, Greens, and The Left). By contrast, the reverse value orientations predict voting for the center-right CDU and far-right populist AfD. Therefore, besides the role of basic values in populist voting, our empirical study points to the relevance of values in electoral behavior more generally (Barnea & Schwartz, 1998; Caprara et al., 2006; Leimgruber, 2011). Basic human values do not only account for voting for populist parties but also for the majority of other non-populist parties. First, voters holding stronger conformity values tend to vote for mainstream parties, except

the liberal FDP. Second, security and universalism values matter for voting for CDU, SPD, and the Greens, suggesting that personal values play a significant role in citizens' vote choices and deserve more attention in political behavior research.

While our study has provided empirical evidence for the relationship between basic values and populist voting as well as electoral behavior more generally, it is not free from caveats. First, while various comparative expert surveys provide information on the extent to which party manifestos are characterized by populist claims in Germany and beyond, there is a dearth of data and studies that empirically examine whether and to which degree political parties and their representatives show non-conformist behavior in public. Our assessment that politicians of AfD engage more seriously in a populist style than those of The Left builds on a few but not yet solidified empirical analyses on the stylistic dimension of politicians' behavior. Future studies leveraging both visual and quantitative text analysis tools may address the current shortage of data of this kind, advancing our empirical knowledge about how political actors perform a populist style.

Second, since our empirical analysis rests on observational data and is correlative in nature, we cannot precisely determine to what extent voters pay attention to political actors' style performances. In a similar vein, in this study, we examined vote choices for populist *parties* but not individual politicians. While qualitative evidence suggests that AfD politicians heavily engage with a populist style in the political debate (Scharloth, 2017), experimental research could shed more light on the causal effect of politicians' political style on citizens' vote choices for political parties.⁹

Third, we lack studies examining the relationship between basic values and populist attitudes, which have been found to be a fertile approach to tap into populist orientations in citizens and their role in political behavior. Future studies might investigate whether basic values are related to populist attitudes and how these two concepts help explain and predict populist voting.

Lastly, it remains to be examined whether the relationship between non-conformist values and populist voting travels to other societies. While our study suggests that non-conformism only feeds into voting for right-wing populist parties in the case of Germany, one also might expect voters of other political parties to hold non-conformism values in different societal contexts. For instance, supporters of progressive parties could violate social norms as a means to champion a more inclusive political order. Future research may thus investigate whether non-conformism exclusively accounts for right-wing populist parties in other European societies or also drives voting for non-populist parties in contexts other than Germany.

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OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned Open Data and Open Materials badges for making publicly available the digitally-shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results. The data is available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/38PV7N>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in "gesis" at <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.4232/1.13150>.

⁹See Neuner and Wratil (2020) for a conjoint study of populist voting behavior, yet without political style as a profile attribute.

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