Diverse Discontents? Analyzing Support for the Alternative for Germany in the 2017 and 2021 German Federal Elections

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Abstract

Laclau (2005) argued that structural forces shaped individual discontent. If these discontents were left unaddressed by the regime, they would become a wellspring of anti-establishment energy that populist candidates could tap into. I engage with this argument by analyzing patterns of support for right wing populism in Germany. I argue that Laclau's focus on individual demands as the "minimal unit of analysis" lends a spatial element to his argument, as the impact of structural change varies geographically. Using a hierarchical model, I aim to show that economic concerns did drive support for the AfD, but only in places where structural forces are generating systemic economic distress and only amongst those who feel that Germany democracy is failing them. My effect of interest is a three-way interaction between democratic dissatisfaction (which allows me to isolate the behavior of the disaffected), concern over immigration, and concern over the economy. I allow the entire interaction to vary based on a rural/urban and east/west distinction. I find that in 2017 support for the AfD was strongly predicted by economic concern in rural spaces, despite the economy not being a major focus for the party. At the same time, concern over the economy does not predict support for the AfD in urban spaces. These regionally varying effects are consistent with Laclau's argument that populist forces tap into structurally generated discontent.

Introduction

As a recent reflection on the literature pointed out (Bernhard & ONeill 2022), much of the discussion of populism in the empirical comparative literature has avoided the arguments put forward by Ernesto Laclau (2005). Laclau's contention that voters read their own problems into the anti-establishment rhetoric of populist candidates, turning the politicians into empty signifiers of sorts, is difficult to verify. However, his argument is laid out within a conceptual framework that emphasizes the importance of representative failure (often as a product of structural change) as the origin of the discontents that populists tap in to. Indeed, for Laclau, populism is a demand side phenomenon that is predicated upon 'social demands', which emerge as local conditions change in ways that governments cannot (or will not) address. Individuals who carry these unmet needs may become disaffected and are liable to read their own problems into the anti-establishment appeals made by populist candidates. Thus, the connection between these individuals and populist candidates has more to do with their specific unmet demands than the generalized anti-establishment sentiments espoused by populists. While we may not be able to observe the process whereby specific problems are transformed into generalized discontent, we can assume that the unmet demands will vary based on local social and economic conditions, which will in turn shape the discontents that populists tap in to. Thus, we would expect to find the nature of support for the same populist candidate varying with changing structural conditions.

In this chapter I aim to test this argument by analyzing support for the Alternative for Germany (AfD, Alternative Fuer Deutschland) through the theoretical framework that Laclau lays out. I draw on existing literature to identify the refugee crisis and growing regional economic disparities between the center and periphery as two potential structural sources of discontent (Rodriguez-Pose 2018, Iammarino et al 2019). The refugee crisis affected the whole of Germany (though especially urban centers(Katz & Noring

2016)), while regional disparities have primarily harmed rural spaces. If Laclau's argument holds, we should expect the refugee crisis to be a salient predictor of support for the AfD everywhere, but economic discontent to only be a salient determinant of support in rural spaces, where economic interests have been systematically neglected by contemporary development policies. In addition to spatial variation, I argue that we must also account for variation in effects at different levels of democratic dissatisfaction, as Laclau argued that individuals must be conscious of the government's failure to address their problems before they are susceptible to populist appeals.

To do this, I develop two Bayesian hierarchical models, using the 2017 and 2021 editions of the GLES rolling cross-section data set. My outcome variable is intention to cast a 2nd vote for the AfD. The model incorporates a three-way interaction between democratic dissatisfaction, concern over the economy, and concern over immigration. The interaction is necessary because I wish to identify the effect of my determinants of interest at high levels of democratic dissatisfaction and because I wish to assess whether either determinant is effective in the absence of the other. I allow the effect of the three-way interaction to vary across four theoretical regions of interest: urban West Germany, urban East Germany, rural West Germany, and rural East Germany. To interpret the results, I produce a series of two-way interactions using predictions based on samples from the posterior, in which concern over the economy and immigration are allowed to vary while democratic dissatisfaction remains fixed. I find, as my reading of Laclau predicts, that high concern over the economy is only a major driver of support for the AfD amongst the democratically dissatisfied in rural Germany (both east and west), high concern over immigration, however, is a driver of support for the AfD in all contexts.

Unmet Demands

Before moving further, it is worth briefly reiterating some of the foundational elements of Laclau's argument. The structural bent of the conceptual framework surrounding Laclau's populism is manifest in his description of the typical populist scenario:

"Think of a large mass of agrarian migrants who settle in shanty towns on the outskirts of a developing industrial city. Problems of housing arise, and the group of people affected by them request some kind of solution from local authorities. Here we have a *demand* which initially is perhaps only a *request.* If the demand is satisfied, that is the end of the matter; but if it is not, people can start to perceive that their neighbors have other, equally unsatisfied demands – problems with water, health, schooling, and so on. If the situation remains unchanged for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands… and an equivalential relation is established between them. The result could easily be… a widening chasm separating the institutional system from the people." (Laclau 2005, 73-74)

In this example the structural process of industrialization is at the root of populist discontent. The equivalential relation between the people living on the outskirts is one in which they are bound together as individuals whose varied demands are ignored by the city.[1] Those inside the city will still have demands, but they live more comfortably knowing that they will be addressed by those in power. The populist arrives and serves as a conduit for the collectively experienced discontent that the inhabitants of the outskirts share. The populist comes to symbolize a host of demands far too varied to be

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[1] The city/outskirt dichotomy is also a metaphor for the agonistic frontier at the heart of politics, which delimits the demands that government chooses to address in a particularized fashion from the remainder which it chooses to ignore (and which it renders equivalent through this decision).

effectively represented in a policy platform and in this context ambiguity becomes the populist's friend. It is better to vaguely rail against the establishment than to address specific demands and in so doing exclude some portion of those who metaphorically live on society's outskirts. Most of Laclau's work is dedicated to understanding how the populist manages this feat, unmet demands are a given. However, equally important is this initial description of how the wellspring of unaddressed demands is formed.

Space plays a critical role in Laclau's example. Structural forces generate negative conditions in the city's outskirts, which in turn generate discontent. Those who live away from the city altogether are not directly affected by these conditions. Thus, to build on Laclau's example, if we imagine a state with multiple cities scattered across a broad landscape, we would expect the populist's appeal to resonate in some spaces more than others. Perhaps, however, there is more than one structural force at work, creating different discontents in different parts of the state. If this were true, we might see more generalized success for the populist candidate, however we would also expect the determinants of populist support to be different based on the challenges faced locally. Thus, if we are to take Laclau's argument seriously we must read the importance of geography out of Laclau's example and entertain the possibility that support for populism may be driven by different forces in different spaces.

There are two salient factors that spring from this short consideration: first, supporters of populism will typically live in places that are experiencing the negative consequences of structural change, which government cannot or will not address; second, they must personally experience those negative consequences in a way that leaves them cognizant of the representative failures of those who govern them. Those who are conscious of representative failure are more likely to be motivated by it.

Empirically, this suggests that to observe the dynamics of populist support as Laclau describes it we should account for both location and individual levels of democratic satisfaction. As the absence of either condition would be disruptive to his explanation.

Secondarily, Laclau's broader argument is focused on the idea that populists are able to draw support from diverse sources by becoming a locus of anti-establishment sentiment. Laclau's discussion of 'equivalential chains' takes this to the extreme, such that the populist candidate becomes an empty signifier into which individuals can read their own particular problems. Such an argument is impossible to verify with the data I use, but I hope to test an alternative, which I believe follows logically. While every person's problems are different, those living in the same spaces are all affected by the same structural forces and presumably their discontents are channeled into popular discourses, such that what starts as an impossibly diverse set of issues can be reduced to a smaller set of topics. If Laclau's argument is correct, we would expect that support for populists amongst the democratically dissatisfied would be tied to the impact of the structural forces at play locally.

This leads to two general hypotheses about support for populism:

1. The dynamics of support for populism will vary across space, as the impact of structural developments varies geographically. The salience of determinants in different spaces should align with our understanding of structural change.
2. The dynamics of support for populism will vary based on individual levels of democratic dissatisfaction, as individuals must believe they are experiencing representative failure.

To test these general hypotheses here, they must be translated to the specifics of the German case, which is the focus of the next section.

The German Case

In Germany, the right-side of the political spectrum has been a political no man's land (Decker 2008, Art 2011). Parties that have sought to establish themselves in this space have consistently failed. The Third Reich still casts a long shadow over the more extreme conservative elements of German politics and the moderate CDU/CSU is a dominant force in German politics, leaving little space for ideologically similar competitors (Arzheimer & Berning 2019). More generally, German civil society and media also contribute to efforts to censure and suppress far right groups in the state (Art 2018). Similarly, Germany has been a leader in the construction of an 'ever closer union' at the European level, which has left little space for Euroscepticism within the German party system. Thus, those voters who identify with the political space to the right of the CDU/CSU or oppose the European project are left without representation. At least initially, it was the latter of these two representative lacunae that the AfD sought to fill.

Sometimes referred to as the 'Professor's Party', in its early days the AfD was a party of Euroscepticism and moderate conservatism. Disgruntled elites from both the CDU/CSU and the FDP joined the party (Jaeger 2019). However, the emergence of a party to the right of the center (even if only on the issue of Europe) became a magnet for actors even further to the right (Art 2011). Part of the AfD's original platform was concern over the democratic deficit created by the EU. This informed its internal structure, which leverages direct democratic principles and (at least initially) allowed for a tripartite leadership structure (Jaeger 2019, Hoehne 2021). Indeed, the AfD has been identified by scholars as the most democratic of the German parties in terms of its internal structure (Hoehne 2021). This has also allowed for significant variation within the AfD at the local level, where direct elections amongst local members determine local leadership. Under these conditions, anti-EU neo-liberals, national conservatives, and anti-democratic far-right actors were all able to establish themselves within the party and within the leadership. The ideological diversity of the party has made it difficult to govern and has led to several changes in leadership.

Even in its earliest days, however, under the moderate, economically Eurosceptic Bernd Lucke, the party's slogan was "mut zur Wahrheit" or "dare to tell the truth", a classically populist expression, which implies that others are lying. AfD officials refer to the other parties in the German system as cartel or system parties, further highlighting their desire to position themselves as outsiders fighting against a 'secretive elite', which they mention in their manifesto (Hoehne 2021). In this sense the AfD has many of the hallmarks of a populist party as it is conceived of in the contemporary, comparative literature (Mudde 2004). As Laclau argued (2005), and as other scholars studying the AfD have pointed out (Havertz 2020), being the party of ambiguous discontent offers the advantage that anyone who is unhappy with the existing regime can project their own beliefs and preferences onto your call for change. Thus, from the start the party has been well positioned to draw support from multiple sources.

Empirically, however, there is little evidence to suggest that the AfD's appeal is multifaceted. Within the existing literature, anti-immigrant and anti-democratic attitudes predominate in explanations of the AfD's success. Scholars analyzing the topic have found that the AfD drew xenophobic and anti-

democratic voters from its earliest days, even before these positions had become integral messaging elements for the party (Berbuir et al 2014, Schmitt-Beck 2014, Wagner et al 2015, Arzheimer 2015, Grimm 2015). In relation to the 2017 election, scholars have found that democratic dissatisfaction and high levels of concern over immigration were key determinants of support (Hansen & Olsen 2019, Dilling 2018, Lees 2018). It is important to note, however, that these explanations do not accommodate the possibility of different explanations in different contexts, nor do they entertain the possibility that effects may vary in relation to the degree of democratic dissatisfaction. Thus, this work offers new insight into the origins of support for the AfD in this respect.

Although there is no evidence for it in the survey-based literature, there are strong theoretical reasons to expect that systemic inequality between regions would drive support for an anti-system party like the AfD. Observational studies have offered convincing evidence of an association between localized economic suffering and aggregate level support for populist candidates in Germany and throughout almost the entirety of the West (Colantone & Stanig 2018, Becker 2017). These differences are thought to be driven by a number of factors but especially automation and liberalization, which have significantly reduced the competitive advantages of the periphery's cheap land and labor (Iammarino et al 2019). These effects are compounded by agglomeration, a development approach which has emphasized the consolidation of capital in mega urban centers in order to take advantage of economies of scale (Rodriguez-Pose 2019). The result is an economic system which leaves little hope of advancement for rural communities. Indeed, these dynamics explain the net population outflows that many rural communities in both western and eastern Germany have experienced in the last ten years. Unfortunately, it is often the most talented who are able to leave, placing those left behind in an even worse position (Carr & Kefalas 2009, Cramer 2016). Combining this information with Laclau's explanation of how structural change drives support for populism, there is a clear theoretical justification for expecting the importance of the economy to differ across space. In rural regions there is almost certainly a wellspring of unmet demands related to the economy. In urban spaces there are still demands connected to the economy, but the present trajectory of development leaves them more likely to be addressed.

Another important development, which no analysis of the 2017 federal election in Germany would be complete without accounting for is the European refugee crisis. The refugee crisis, which beset all of Europe, but which was exacerbated in Germany by Angela Merkel's decision to accept a massive influx of refugees, was a boon for the nascent xenophobic wing of the AfD. In 2015, the party's stint as an anti-EU, moderate, conservative entity ended, when Bernd Lucke, arguably the key figure in the party's founding, resigned to be replaced by Frauke Petry, a fellow cofounder. Hoping to capitalize on the refugee crisis, Petry embraced a national-conservative identity politics that was far more socially oriented than Lucke's.[2] Over the next two years, under Petry's leadership the party was driven further to the right.

This transition was also boosted by the proliferation of 'The Wing', which is the fascist, extreme right branch of the party headed by Bjoern Hoecke, who leads the party in Thuringia and who contributed to the ousting of Bernd Lucke in 2015 through the publication of the Erfurt Resolution. The Erfurt Resolution, which called for an even more conservative AfD and the preservation of its existing internal

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[2] Some argue that Petry is in fact a member of the extreme right herself, though her rhetoric falls far short of others in the party.

democratic structure, reflected the strong ties between Hoecke and the leaders of PEGIDA, an Islamophobic reactionary movement that formed in Dresden in response to the refugee crisis (Althoff 2018). Hoecke's views are overtly racist and antisemitic and "The Wing" was forced to formally dissolve by party leadership in 2020 after the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution identified it as "extreme". However, evidence indicates that it continues to operate.

The refugee crisis helped to push the AfD to the right. It is also important to note, however, that the crisis itself did not impact all places equally. The German government allocated refugees to municipalities using a formula based on existing population density and tax revenues (Katz and Noring 2016). This means that cities bore an outsized share of the burden and refugees were allocated to states without consideration for the proportion of foreign residents prior to the start of the crisis. Figure below highlights the relative impact of the refugee crisis on foreign resident populations. The largest shocks were felt in East Germany. Thus, there is also strong reason to suspect that the impact of the refugee crisis will have a spatial element as well, with cities feeling the shock most profoundly, especially in East Germany.

Figure: Asylum Seekers as a Proportion of Foreign Population
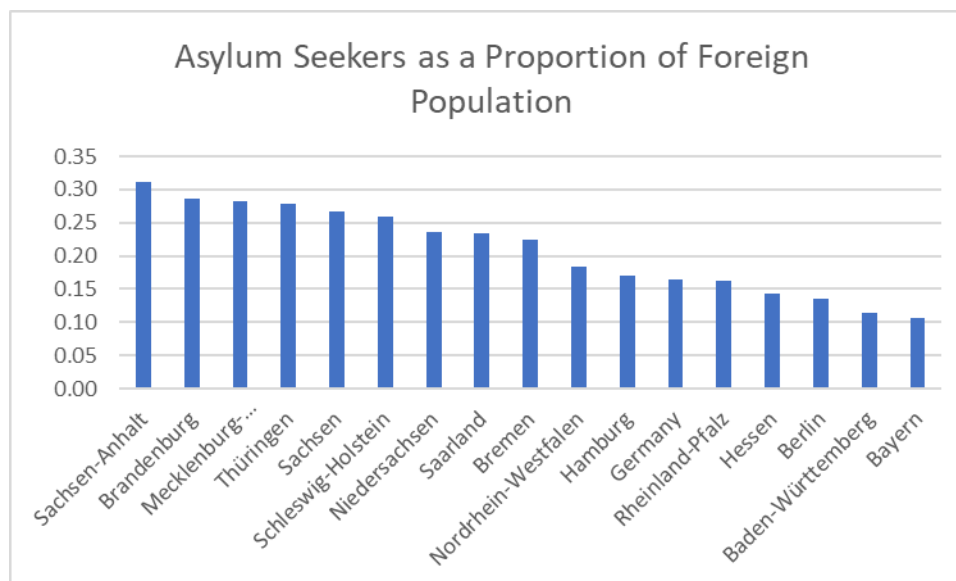
In addition to the economic challenges that are typical of advanced economies, Germany also struggles with the lingering economic disparities that stem from reunification. The former states of the GDR have struggled to compete with their Western counterparts and have failed to catch up in developmental terms.

Thus, there are two major theoretical distinctions to be drawn between districts in Germany: rural and urban, and Eastern and Western. We have strong theoretical reasons to expect behavior to vary between rural and urban districts as economic and social changes have proceeded differently in these spaces. The East/West divide in Germany is also an important point of consideration, as the eastern states have struggled to keep up economically. Ultimately, I would expect this to potentially exaggerate the tensions between rural and urban spaces in this region, but to not otherwise impact the dynamics.

The trends that I have outlined here also serve as the impetus for my selection of 'unmet needs' that the AfD is aiming to address. Keeping things relatively simple, I choose to specifically assess how individuals' attitudes towards immigration (measured by policy preference) and individuals' concern over the economy (measured by a sociotropic evaluation of general economic conditions) determine support for the AfD. Xenophobic sentiments have been given minimal space in Germany's political system and in this sense the AfD is filling a significant representative lacuna for voters seeking policies and rhetoric to the right of the CDU/CSU. It is a political perspective that gained particular traction in the context of the refugee crisis. Secondarily, Laclau's arguments suggest that a populist party should be able to draw in individuals experiencing generalized economic discontent in those spaces that are systemically under served. Thus, I expect negative economic evaluations to serve as a predictor of support for the AfD amongst the democratically dissatisfied in rural regions. These arguments are grounded in the existing literature, which I seek to build on here.

I am interested in how concern over the economy and immigration effect support for the AfD separately, so I interact the two terms to allow me to estimate the impact of each when the other is absent. Ultimately, however, I am interested in how these factors interact when democratic dissatisfaction is high, so I add a variable accounting for this as a third term to the interaction. Three-way interaction terms are notoriously difficult to interpret. To address this, I rely on the generative character of my models to simulate multiple two-way marginal effect plots between immigration and the economy at different levels of democratic dissatisfaction.

Table one, below, summarizes this discussion. I identify the most salient dimensions of Laclau's explanation of the structural origins of populism, as I have interpreted it.

Table 1: Operationalizing Laclau's Conception of Populism

Salient Dimensions	General Reasoning	German Context
Unmet Needs	Systemic developments generate needs in the populace that the existing government fails to address.	I focus on concern over immigration (because of the refugee crisis) and concern over the economy (because of the center-periphery dilemma in advanced economies).
Democratic Dissatisfaction	Voters must recognize the regime's failure to address their needs, otherwise it will not influence their behavior.	The GLES data that I use provides a question on satisfaction with German democracy, which I assume is a (rough) proxy of perceived efficacy of representation.
Space	Systemic developments do not affect all places equally, producing variation in the salience of different needs across space.	From an economic perspective, rural communities, especially in Eastern Germany have been underserved, while cities have prospered. At the same time, cities bore much of the burden of the refugee crisis.

The discussion of the German case so far, summarized in Table 1, leads me to a second set of more specific hypotheses. If we accept Laclau's argument around the structural origin of support for populism, then the character of support will have more to do with local conditions than the appeals made by the populists themselves. Thus:

1. I expect concern over the economy to have no association with support for the AfD amongst the democratically dissatisfied in urban regions, which have benefited from structural changes in the Germany economy.
2. I expect concern over immigration to have a positive association with support for the AfD amongst the democratically dissatisfied in urban spaces, due to the impact of the refugee crisis.
3. I expect concerns over the economy and immigration to be equivalently strong predictors of support for the AfD amongst the democratically dissatisfied in rural regions, which experienced (a less severe version of) the refugee crisis and have also been chronically underserved by development policy.

These hypotheses require me to isolate the dynamics of support for the AfD amongst the democratically dissatisfied in different regions. This requires a rather complex model structure, which I explain in detail in the next section.

Methods

To test these hypotheses, I rely on multi-level models that I generate in STAN, which is a Bayesian statistical programming language (accessed through R). Stan offers great flexibility in model construction as well as the ability to simulate results through the sampling of the posterior, this second point is particularly important for the presentation of my results. My data primarily comes from the 2017 and 2021 edition of the German Longitudinal Election Survey's rolling cross section, and I specifically use the data that was collected before the election. I also include district level demographic and economic controls that were made available by the German government.

My key dependent variable is intended second vote in the 2017 election. I have chosen the second vote because the first vote is tied to a specific candidate and the AfD is an ideologically diverse party (Hoehne 2021), in which a given candidate may not represent the facet of the AfD that appeals to particular voters.

To isolate the dynamics of (reported) support for the AfD amongst democratically dissatisfied respondents in the 2017 GLES data set, I implement a three-way interaction between democratic dissatisfaction, preference for stricter (or looser) immigration policies, and a sociotropic evaluation of the current Germany economy. The three-way interaction between these three variables is important for two reasons. First, to determine whether economic concern serves as a separate driver of support for the AfD it is necessary to control for the level of concern over immigration. If concern for the economy only mattered when respondents were also concerned about immigration, it would not really constitute a separate source of support for the AfD. Second, because Laclau believed that disaffection with the system was an integral element of support for populism, being able to analyze the interaction between immigration attitudes and concern over the economy at high levels of democratic dissatisfaction is essential.

Three-way interactions are notoriously difficult to interpret. To address this, I develop custom marginal effect plots using posterior predictions generated from my models. This allows me to examine the relationship between immigration attitudes and evaluations of the economy as predictors of support for the AfD at fixed levels of democratic dissatisfaction. In the results section I offer a more detailed explanation of how to interpret these charts.

Because I am interested in how these mechanics vary across space, I allow the three-way interaction (and its component terms) to vary across my theoretical regions of interest: rural Eastern Germany, urban Eastern Germany, rural Western Germany, and urban Western Germany. Urban spaces are identified based on their logged population density. Though my primary concern is with the divide between urban and rural Germany, there is a broad emphasis in the literature on the differences between the states of former Eastern and Western Germany. So, I incorporate the distinction into my framework, though I expect the dynamics will remain largely the same. These random effects are implemented without partial pooling, all four groups are large (the smallest has more than 300 respondents) and there is negligible risk of exaggerating differences due to small sample size.

With this model I hope to assess the dimensionally complex relationship that Laclau proposed, in which support for populism varies based on different types of discontent across both location and levels of disaffection.

For space purposes, I exclude the full specification of the model, but I include it in Appendix A for those that are interested. In addition to the regionally delineated random effects, I also include district specific random intercepts, to capture variance that may be driven by local candidates, party structure, and other general differences that I have not accounted for. I do employ partial pooling in this case. Table 2, below, lists out the controls that are included in the model. In the next section I present my results.

**Table 2: District and Individual Level Controls**

Level	Control List
Individual	Age; Gender; Education; Left-Right Score (Self Placement);
District	GDP; Change in GDP; % of Pop. Foreign Born; % of Pop. Over 65; % of Pop Employed in Mining; % of employed in Manufacturing; % unemployed; Change in % Unemployed;

Results

In this section I examine a series of marginal effect plots which capture the relationships between my parameters of interest, under the conditions of interest. To reiterate, I am interested in how concern over immigration and concern over the economy interact as predictors of support for the AfD at high levels of democratic dissatisfaction and how this relationship changes in different structural contexts.

If Laclau's argument holds, we should expect that (a) democratic dissatisfaction is a prerequisite to strong support for the AfD and (b) the effect of determinants of support for the AfD identified by the literature will vary substantially across different structural contexts.

Figures 1a and 1b: Support for the AfD Amongst the Democratically Dissatisfied In East Germany

East Germany, Urban (Democratic Dissatisfaction = 2 σ)

East Germany, Rural (Democratic Dissatisfaction = 2 σ)

Concern Over Immigration
-2 σ
2 σ
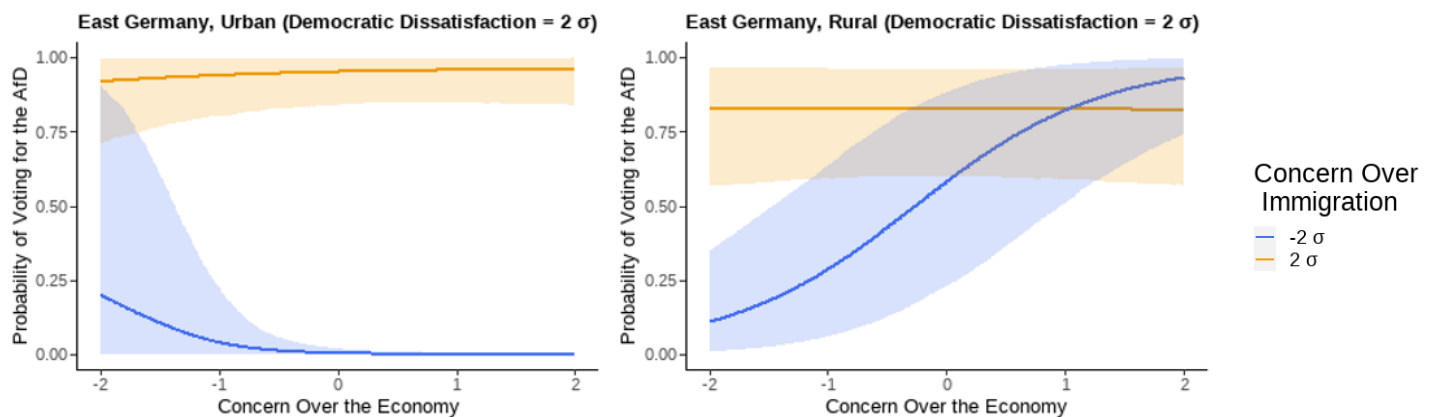
The marginal effect plots presented in figure one present the likelihood of voting for the AfD at different levels of concern over immigration and different levels of concern over the economy. Change in concern over immigration is presented through the orange and blue lines, blue represents the likelihood of voting for the AfD when a respondent is two standard deviations below the average level of concern over immigration (they would prefer looser immigration policies) and orange represents the likelihood of supporting the AfD when a respondent is two standard deviations above the mean (they would prefer tighter immigration policies). White space between the two lines indicates a significant difference in voting behavior based on immigration attitudes. Large margins (the shaded space around the lines) indicate that the model can offer little insight based on the proposed combination of respondent traits. Thus, we can see that in urban spaces in East Germany, amongst those who are democratically dissatisfied, immigration attitudes are a tremendously strong indicator of support for the AfD. There is a massive difference between the orange and blue lines. Flat lines indicate that concern over the economy, which changes along the x-axis is having virtually no effect on the likelihood of voting for the AfD. Conversely, an upward slope indicates that concern over the economy is increasing the likelihood of voting for the party. The democratically dissatisfied in Urban Eastern Germany who want stricter immigration have a very high likelihood of voting for the AfD, while those who want looser immigration policies almost certainly will not. In rural East Germany, however, the story is different. The orange line indicates that those who are concerned with immigration will vote for the AfD regardless of how they feel about the economy, just like in urban East Germany. However, the blue line, which represents those who are not concerned with immigration, shows a strong positive effect of concern over the economy. The strong divergence in the relationship between immigration and the economy amongst the democratically dissatisfied in urban and rural regions would seem to support the emphasis that Laclau placed on the salience of structural contexts in determining the shape of populist support. In rural East Germany, where structural economic strains exist, economic concern is a driver of support for the AfD that operates independently of concern over immigration.

Figure 1 offers evidence in support of all three of my hypotheses tied to the German case. Amongst the democratically dissatisfied, immigration matters in urban spaces and the economy doesn't. In rural spaces both factors drive support for the AfD. Figure 2 presents the same relationships but in Western Germany and the results are largely the same. The primary difference is tied to the confidence of estimations in urban West Germany, which is significantly lower (as evidenced by the wide margins).

Figures 2a and 2b: Support for the AfD Amongst the Democratically Dissatisfied In West Germany
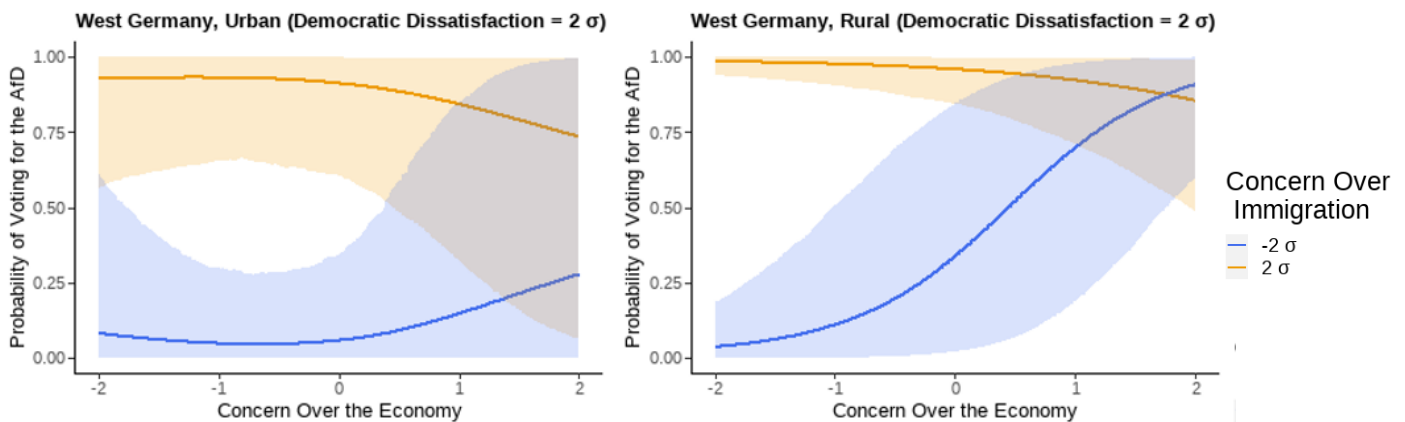
The convergence of the orange and blue lines in figures 1b and 2b indicates that at high levels of economic concern there is no meaningful difference in the likelihood of voting for the AfD based on immigration attitudes. The flat orange line in these charts also indicates that individuals who strongly prefer stricter immigration policies are likely to vote for the AfD no matter how they feel about the economy. This particular dynamic is indicative of a two-way interaction in which both terms are positive but the interaction term itself is negative. This relationship suggests that there are separate subpopulations that both vote for the AfD but for different reasons, which is also in keeping with the simplified version of Laclau's empty signifier argument that I proposed.

Figures 3a and 3b: Support for the AfD Amongst the Democratically Satisfied In East Germany
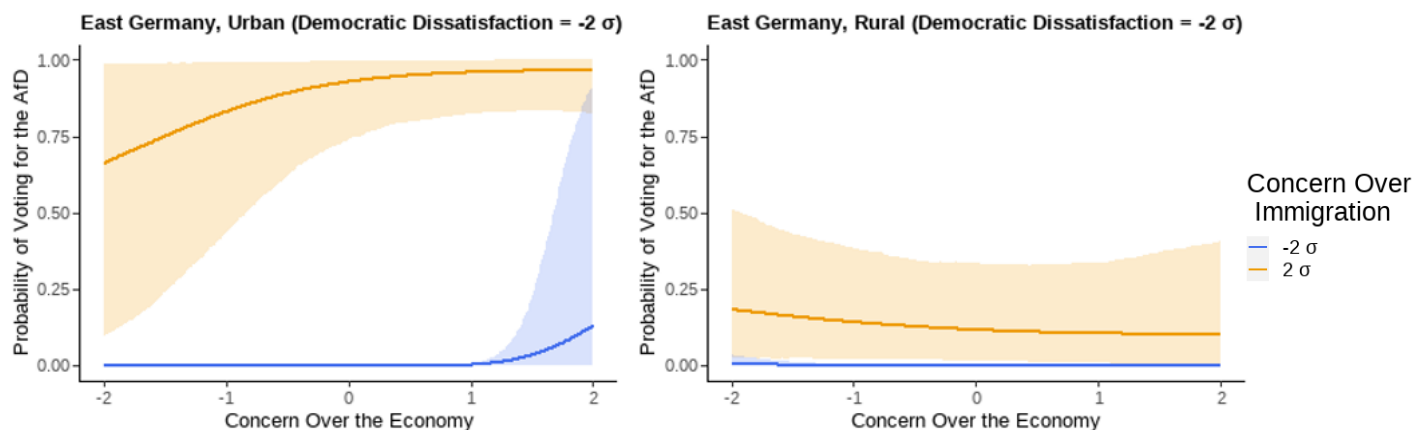
As a point of reference, figures 3 and 4 present the results in these same regions amongst those individuals who identify as satisfied with Germany's democracy. Generally speaking, amongst the democratically satisfied the likelihood of voting for the AfD is far lower. In rural spaces, neither concern over immigration nor concern over the economy significantly bolsters the likelihood of voting for the AfD. In urban spaces, on the other hand, concern over immigration remains a strong predictor of support for the AfD, though in West Germany it must be combined with concerns over the economy to make support for the AfD more likely. The persistent salience of immigration attitudes as a predictor of

support for the AfD in urban spaces, regardless of level of democratic dissatisfaction points to the impact of the refugee crisis in cities, which has been highlighted by the literature. It also suggests that in addition to appealing to the disaffected, the AfD is capturing a group of voters that are content with Germany democracy but are looking for more restrictive immigration policies.

Figure 4: Support for the AfD Amongst the Democratically Satisfied In West Germany
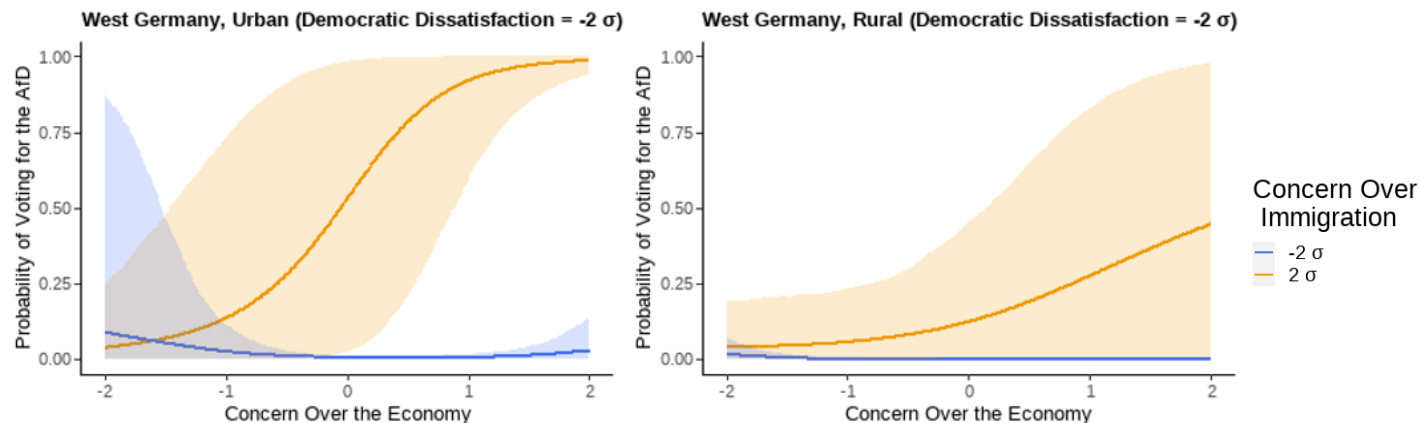
The variance in the effect of economic evaluations and immigration policy preferences across regions and degrees of disaffection suggests that the appeal of the AfD is indeed tied to both the structural context of the respondent and to their belief that the current regime is unable to meet their needs. In the long term, it would be useful to

I am unable to extend this exact analysis to the 2021 election for a few reasons: the GLES rolling cross section has changed its question set and no longer asks the same ten-point question about immigration preferences, it has instead been replaced by a five-point question about fear of refugees. The survey has also removed the question on occupation, which was an important control for assessing economic evaluations. Additionally, the questions on the economy and democracy are now only asked in the follow-up interview, so that some 2,000 cases (a third of the sample) are dropped. There is an obvious non-randomness to the missingness as individuals have opted out of the second set of questions. Similarly, up to date structural information for the German districts is not yet available. With all of that said, I make a best attempt at replicating the analysis using the 2021 data set. I find that much of the variation in behavior that was evident across regions in 2017 is not present in 2021. It is possible that this is because of the changes in the questions used, or the absence of the occupation control. However, the results suggest that my three key independent variables are much weaker predictors of support for the AfD in 2021 than they were in 2017, particularly in West Germany. This may reflect the increased salience of Covid-19, but the survey does not include a question on the topic. Recent work suggests that the party moved quickly to center their messaging around the government's response to the virus (Lehmann & Zehnter 2022). The dramatic shift in the effects across the regions of interest between 2017 and 2021 is an interesting finding, assuming it is not the byproduct of one of the problems mentioned above. It suggests that democratic dissatisfaction is no longer the strong determinant that it once was for the party, which may point to its populist character fading. From a Laclauian perspective populism is not an inherent trait carried by an actor but a role that actor takes on within a system, one which can be lost if the actor somehow loses their status as a symbol of discontent.

Figure 5: Support for the AfD Amongst the Democratically Dissatisfied in 2021
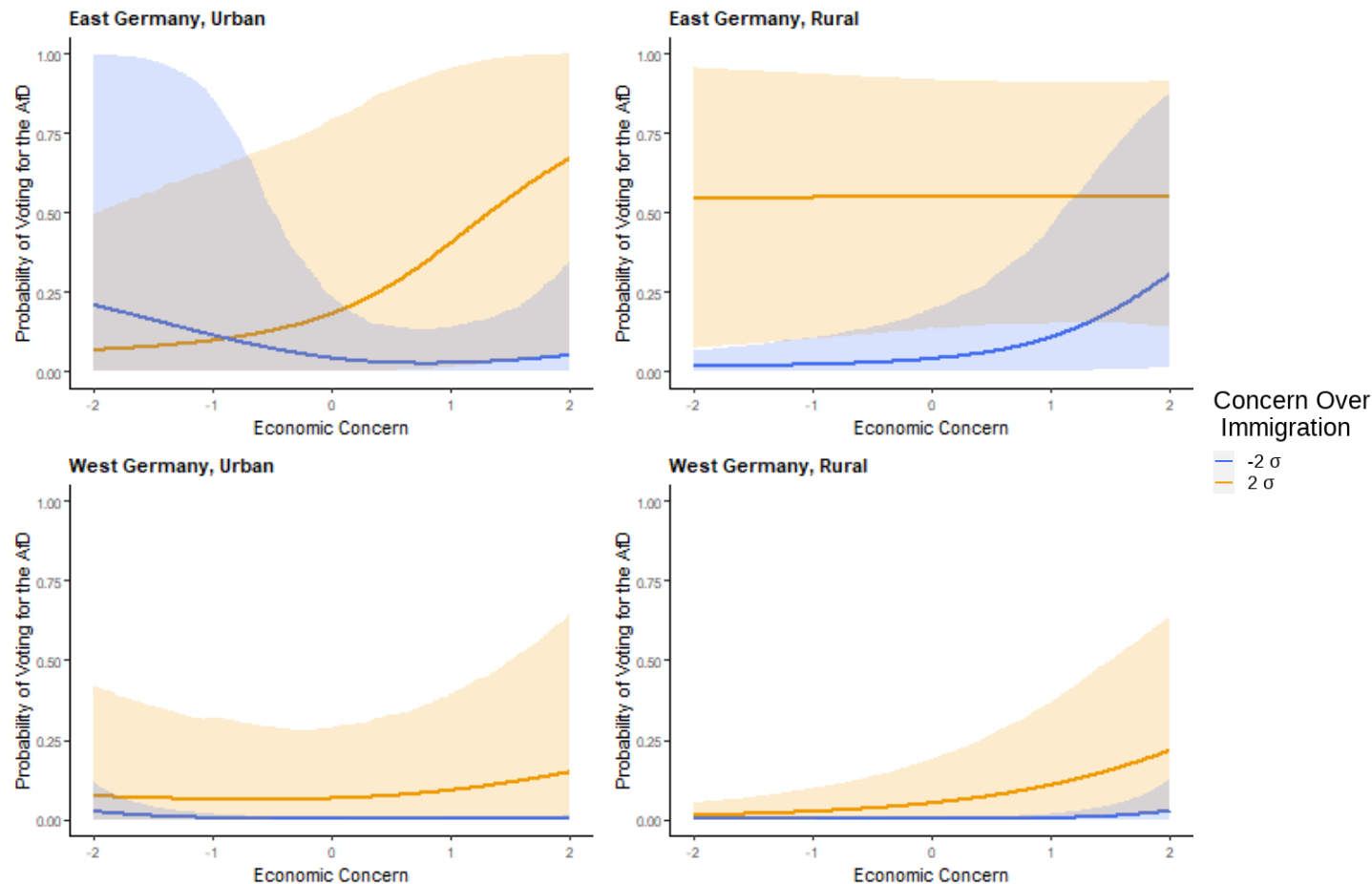
Ultimately, the findings from 2021 point to the need for further investigation, as the impact of Covid 19 and the changes to the survey make it difficult to interpret the differences in the results. It is possible, however, that as the AfD has continued to push further to the right it has solidified (and particularized) its image and lost its ability to serve as a Laclauian populist symbol. Scholars have noted this dynamic as the typical story arc of far-right parties in Germany (Art 2011, 2018). It is important to remember, however, that the AfD's vote share between the 2017 and 2021 elections changed by just two percentage points, so while their supporters are no longer clearly identified by concern over immigration or the economy they have maintained their appeal in some other way.

Discussion

Within broader discussions of populism, these results have interesting implications. There are those who conceive of populism as a primarily cultural reaction to increasing diversity and changing cultural values and there are also scholars (particularly outside of political science) who emphasize the importance of structural trends in the economy as a driving force behind support for populists. The results presented here suggest that both explanations may be valid, though in different contexts. My analysis offered little evidence for the economy as a predictor of AfD support in urban spaces, which have been the primary beneficiaries of structural change in advances economies in the last forty years. Nor is there any

evidence that the economy drove support for the AfD amongst those content with the regime in rural spaces. Amongst the dissatisfied in rural spaces, however, concern over the economy is a strong predictor of support and one that drove support for the party even amongst those who are not concerned about immigration. This fits with Laclau's explanation of how structural economic change would impact support for populism, primarily motivating individuals who are disaffected and living in spaces that are experiencing the negative consequences of structural change first-hand to vote for populist candidates. This support, Laclau argued, would come regardless of whether the populist candidate has a clear plan to address the economic issues, which the AfD certainly does not (Havertz 2020). It may be the case that Ostiguy's conceptualization of populism as a performance of 'low' culture is a critical facet of explaining the translation of generalized discontent in rural spaces that are suffering economically into support for a populist party like the AfD (Ostiguy 2009).

Thus far I have emphasized that structural economic stresses in rural districts lead individuals who are dissatisfied with democracy and concerned about the economy to vote for the AfD. A finer point of Laclau's argument, however, is that these concerns must be translated via cultural cues into a generalized discontent that the person with the unmet demand can buy into. The AfD's xenophobic rhetoric is repellent to many in urban spaces who are increasingly sensitized to discriminatory language and attitudes, but it might still be tolerable in rural spaces that are changing less quickly. Indeed, a willingness to say things that are deemed inappropriate in "cosmopolitan" (De Vries 2017) society might be a culturally symbolic way of signaling belonging in "parochial" spaces (something that Laclau was adamant populists would need to do). This might explain how those who are unconcerned with immigration align with the AfD in rural spaces, despite their lack of emphasis on the economy. Addressing this possibility is beyond the scope of this project, but it is certainly something that should be considered when reflecting on the results. Addressing the importance of these cultural cues would require a more finely tuned question set than my data provides.

Whatever the explanation, the divergent effects that I have identified warrant further investigation and paint a complex picture of support for the AfD, which is evidently driven by different factors in different contexts in a manner consistent with our understanding of structural economic change, as Laclau argued it would be.

Looking forward an important next step will be the recreation of this analysis in other contexts, with other candidates. Germany presented a particularly poignant case because of the recent arrival of the AfD and the heightened salience of immigration in the 2017 election. In places where populist movements have emerged out of establishment parties which already carry strong associations, like in the United States, we may not see the sort of extreme variance in support that I observed in rural spaces in this paper.

Conclusion

This analysis has focused on isolating the context under which Laclau argued that the dynamics of populism would operate. I have drawn out the spatial element that was implicit in his emphasis on structural change as a driver of unaddressed demands and isolated the effects of interest at high levels of democratic dissatisfaction. If Laclau's theory holds, we would expect concern over the economy to only be a salient predictor of support for the AfD amongst the democratically dissatisfied in spaces facing the negative consequences of structural change. My analysis offers evidence supporting this argument in 2017, though I did not find an equivalent effect in 2021.

Additionally, outside of its connection to Laclau's argument, the analysis also demonstrated the importance of the economy as a separate predictor of support for the AfD in rural Germany. Prior to this the literature suggested that the economy had not played a significant role in shaping voting behavior in the 2017 the election.

Beyond the study of populism, this analysis also points to the importance of sensitizing analysis to intersectionality. I showed that before answering the question of whether concern over the economy influenced a voter's decision to support the AfD in 2017 we must first ask where the voter lives and how disaffected they feel. This is a rather specific sort of intersectionality that pertains to a Laclauian notion of populism. However, the concept is easily extended to other contexts. For example, in the United States, we might ask how likely someone is to support Donald Trump in 2024. Factors such as education and income will doubtless matter, but their effects may be substantially different depending on a person's race, gender, or religiosity in a way that calls for the kinds of interactions that I employed here. Combining the interaction terms with hierarchical model structures, as I did here, further bolsters the value of the approach by allowing the entire interaction to vary in respect to some other dimension. In my case that dimension was spatial but there is no reason that it could not be social. This entire analysis could be redone allowing my terms of interest to vary based on gender or class structure instead of region. Ultimately, this approach may prove very useful for critical scholars who seek to understand the particular, political experiences that exist at the intersection of identities. Exploring this highly dimensional space makes the task of explaining voting behavior more complicated and creates more work, but it also arguably allows us to engage more directly with the complexity that is postulated by theorists like Laclau.

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Appendix A

Model Specification

All non-binary variables are scaled, to ease interpretation and estimation. I adopt a non-centered reparameterization for the random intercept in the actual STAN model. In the posterior predictions, reference categories for the binary variables are male and employment in a blue-collar job. All other controls are held at their average value.

$$logit(p_i) = \alpha_{[district]}$$

$$+\beta_1 * DemocraticSatisfaction * EconomicConcern * ImmigrationConcern_{[region]}$$

$$+\beta_2 * DemocraticSatisfaction * EconomicConcern_{[region]}$$

$$+\beta_3 * DemocraticSatisfactoin * ImmigrationConcern_{[region]}$$

$$+\beta_4 * EconomicConcern * ImmigrationConcern_{[region]}$$

$$+\beta_{5:9} * IndividualControls + \beta_{6:14} * District\ Controls$$

$$\alpha_{[district]} \sim N(\mu, \sigma)$$

$$\mu \sim N(0, 2.5)$$

$$\sigma \sim Exp(1)$$

$$\beta_{1:4[region]} \sim N(0, 2.5)$$

$$\beta_{5:9} \sim N(0, 2.5)$$

$$\beta_{6:14} \sim N(0, 2.5)$$