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Abstract

Three different constituencies are becoming increasingly common across Western European electorates: mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters. Despite their distinct behaviours in electoral politics, we have limited empirical knowledge about the characteristics that distinguish these three groups, given the typical underrepresentation of non-voters in surveys and the relative recency of large-scale research on populist voters. To address this gap, we analyse novel survey data from contemporary Germany that oversamples non-voters and includes a sizeable share of both populist radical left and populist radical right party supporters. Two main findings with broader implications stand out. First, populist voters resemble their mainstream counterparts in their expectations about democracy but correspond more closely to non-voters regarding (dis-) satisfaction with democracy. Second, non-voters and populist voters seem to reject mainstream democratic politics in distinct ways, throwing doubt on the (further) mobilization potential of abstainers for populist projects.

Keywords

democracy, partisanship, populism, deprivation, non-voting

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Introduction

Western European democracies have changed in complex ways in recent decades. Among the most significant long-term changes is declining turnout. Despite some differences across countries, the overall picture is similar: fewer people go to the polls now than 30 years ago (Mair, 2013). Not by chance, research has shown that non-voters and voters should be thought of as two different constituencies, each with its own sociodemographic and sociopolitical characteristics. However, in recent years, this trend has been

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accompanied by the well-documented growth of voting for populist parties, often seen as better positioned to mobilize former non-voters than their mainstream counterparts, despite mixed evidence (Immerzeel and Pickup, 2015; Leininger and Meijers, 2021). Empirical studies that compare these three constituencies are rare, not least because non-voters are usually underrepresented in surveys and support for populist parties has only begun to receive increasing academic attention in the last few years.

While their respective characteristics and roles within Western European politics received little comparative scrutiny, the decline of mainstream voters and the rise of both non-voters and populist voters certainly represent important challenges to democracy in the region. On one hand, the growth of non-voting implies that fewer citizens participate in the political system, potentially 'hollowing out' the legitimacy of representative politics (Mair, 2013). Furthermore, as less educated and socioeconomically deprived citizens tend to vote less, those who win elections end up overrepresenting the ideas and interests of the well-off (Gallego, 2010).[1] On the other hand, the expansion of populist voting involves a problematic form of political engagement, since populist forces are often at odds with *liberal* democracy, can foster a moralization of the political debate and may encourage polarization (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, 2018). Both non-voting and populist voting can thus be seen as forms of rejecting mainstream democratic politics. Hence, it is imperative to better understand what differentiates those who remain loyal to mainstream parties from both those who abstain and those who opt for populist alternatives, which often – though not always – represent a threat to liberal democracy.

To address this research gap, in this article, we offer a detailed empirical analysis of these three different groups to examine the extent to which they should be considered separate constituencies. Taking the advantage of a national representative survey recently undertaken in Germany, in which non-voters are oversampled and a sizeable share of the electorate supports both populist radical left (PRL) and populist radical right (PRR) parties (Die Linke and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), respectively), we are able to compare in detail the sociodemographic and sociopolitical characteristics of mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters.

The empirical analysis demonstrates that these are indeed three different constituencies which relate in distinct ways to representative politics. Two main findings stand out. First, we show that populist voters resemble mainstream voters in their expectations of representative democracy, but more closely match non-voters in their disenchantment with democratic practice. Second, populist voters appear mainly disappointed with a democratic and party-political system they are engaged with in principle and have unmatched expectations about. In contrast, non-voters seem both more fundamentally disconnected from and less expectant of democratic principles and representative practice. These findings have important consequences for the study of Western European democracy, because they underline that citizens may undertake two distinct forms of withdrawal from democratic politics: either disengaging from the political system or actively confronting established political parties. By demonstrating that citizens eligible to vote should be thought of as three separate groups with their own sociodemographic features and sociopolitical views, we clarify how the electorate is structured today and identify factors that influence their respective (non-)mobilization. Importantly, our findings suggest that despite their parallel emergence, structural disengagement from and indifference towards modern politics among abstaining segments of the citizenry should not be confused with the more specific subjective historical disappointment in democracy and mainstream party politics fuelling populist support. Contrary to popular belief, in a

case where both leftist and rightist populist parties are electorally represented, average non-voters appear too removed from representative democratic politics and too opposed to political parties to form an untapped reserve electorate easily available for (further) populist mobilization.

The rest of the contribution is divided into four parts. In the next section, we offer a brief discussion about the relevance of distinguishing different constituencies in Western European democracies and summarize the main empirical findings of the existing literature on non-voters, mainstream voters and populist voters. After this, we explain the research design of our article, putting special emphasis on the case selection, data, operationalization and methods. Subsequently, we present the empirical analysis and the interpretation of the statistical models that help us to clarify what sets apart non-voters, mainstream voters and populist voters in contemporary Germany. Finally, we conclude by summarizing the main findings and advancing some ideas about the future research agenda on this topic.

Three Constituencies in Western Europe: Mainstream Voters, Non-Voters and Populist Voters

In his seminal contribution *Ruling the Void*, the late Peter Mair (2013) offers a chilling assessment of the transformations that Western Europe has been experiencing in the last decades. Specifically, he identifies declining turnout as one of the major challenges that is affecting democracy in the region. In line with the cartel party theory (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2009), Mair draws attention to the fact that growing collusion and decreasing policy differences between mainstream political parties have triggered the desertion from the political arena of an important segment of the electorate. Although this is a subtle and gradual process that is more evident in some countries than in others, almost all Western European democracies are affected by citizen disengagement from conventional forms of political participation in general and from elections in particular. At the same time, Mair argues that decreasing electoral participation has facilitated the ongoing detachment of mainstream political parties from civil society, with increasing cartelization and delegation of decision-making to non-majoritarian institutions at the national and supranational levels. Seen in this light, Western European democracies are characterized by growing:

> indifference on the part of *both* the citizenry and the political class: they are withdrawing and disengaging from one another, and it is in this sense that there is an emptying of the space in which citizens and their representatives interact (Mair, 2013: 18, italics in original).

Interestingly, Mair's argument does not stop here. By taking a long-term perspective, he maintains that one of the corollaries of the hollowing out of democracy is the opening of the electoral opportunity structure for the rise of a new type of political phenomenon in Western Europe: populism. In effect, populist forces do not come out of the blue. Their electoral emergence is directly related to the citizen's perception that mainstream political parties are out of touch and work as responsible agents of international markets and supranational institutions, rather than as responsive agents of the national population (Mair, 2009, 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, 2018). In other words, populist forces thrive when 'voters may come to see established parties as protectors of an elite political caste that serves its own narrow self-interests rather than looking out for – or "representing" – the broader interests of society' (Roberts, 2017: 292). Western European populism can be seen, then, as an unexpected consequence of the growing cartelization of

mainstream political parties, which by detaching themselves from their social bases and removing (international) policy decisions from electoral accountability have growing difficulties holding on to their old voters and attracting new ones.

This portrayal of Western European democracy thus leads to the increasingly common identification of three different constituencies across the region: mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters. From a democratic point of view, these three groups relate distinctly to the political system. Mainstream voters are certainly the most loyal adherents to the liberal democratic regime, since they not only participate in elections but also opt for political parties that support the post-war consensus on what representative democracy means and how it should work in Western Europe. Quite different is the relationship that non-voters and populist voters maintain with the political system. While the former are disengaged from the political debate and do not participate in elections, the latter remain engaged in politics but back political parties that often advance agendas undermining liberal democratic institutions and norms.

In studying this phenomenon, the existing literature has identified characteristic features rendering citizens more likely to support mainstream parties, abstain from voting or support populist alternatives. We briefly summarize the main findings of this work in the following, before turning to our comparative focus.

Mainstream Voters

Major established political parties that used to dominate the electoral arena in post-war European politics have lost electoral support in the last decades. There are certainly different interpretations of this phenomenon, but the most common one is based on a structural approach according to which the classic cleavages that have organized the political system in Western Europe have 'defrosted' (Kriesi, 1998; Kriesi et al., 2006). The expansion of education, mass migration, growing ethnic diversity and the ageing of society drove new political battles to the fore. These sociodemographic changes brought saliency to a new line of conflict around post-materialism, globalization and European integration, which established political parties have growing difficulties handling due to internal divisions among their activists and electorates (Ford and Jennings, 2020). In fact, both social democratic parties and Christian democratic parties have increasing problems remaining as electorally competitive as they were in 1970s and 1980s, so they increasingly need to build new types of government coalitions to win office.

The fragmentation of the electoral landscape into different political parties has led scholars to refine the categories for differentiating between them. Although the most common way of doing this consists in distinguishing parties' policy positions by using different types of empirical material (e.g. party manifestos or expert surveys), a growing number of scholars make also the distinction between mainstream parties and extremist parties of different kinds. The latter are characterized by maintaining either a difficult relationship with the liberal democratic system (e.g. PRR and PRL parties) or by openly rejecting the democratic system (e.g. far-right and far-left parties). Therefore, it is possible to argue that the difference between mainstream and extremist parties lies in their attitude towards the democratic system (Akkerman et al., 2016; Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021; Mudde, 2007, 2013). While the former support existing norms and values as well as refrain from calling for an overthrow of the democratic system, the latter take radical positions and adopt either an ambivalent relationship towards liberal democracy (in the case of populist forces) or are openly undemocratic (in the case of extremist parties).

Despite important ideological differences between supporters of different mainstream parties, the voters who remain attached to such parties tend to be united by maintaining linkages with traditional intermediate organizations (e.g. the working class with labour unions, religious citizens with clerical organizations; Best, 2011). As regards new linkages, professionals appear to be attracted to left-wing mainstream parties if the latter combine investment-oriented economic stances with culturally liberal positions (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2019). Right-wing mainstream parties, on the contrary, tend to adopt more restrictive positions on immigration in order to stay competitive vis-à-vis the PRR without necessarily embracing conservative positions on moral issues (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2021; Han, 2014). Overall, thus, mainstream voters seem to belong to the citizenry that has kept traditional social connections active, remaining engaged in conventional forms of political participation and committed to the liberal democratic system.

Non-Voters

Not all citizens participate in elections. Indeed, in the classical literature of electoral behaviour, non-voters constitute a specific sociological group characterized by their tendency to participate only minimally in organized activities, to be less exposed to politics in the mass media, to be closer to non-political leaders and to be more socially isolated (Hastings, 1956). Literatures on non-voting in the United States and Western Europe have established similar determinants associated with abstention, such as a low position on the social stratification scale, low political efficacy and lack of interest in politics (Laponce, 1967). A recent meta-analysis of individual-level turnout research concluded that abstention is consistently related to sociodemographics like age and education, alongside participatory factors like mobilization, party identification, political interest and political knowledge (Smets and van Ham, 2013). Non-voters thus constitute a specific political profile with significant differences from their participatory counterpart (voters).

In the more recent context of increasing political disengagement, a limited set of research in Western Europe has tried to disentangle the political profile of non-voters, with mixed evidence. On one hand, research in the United States and Europe long held that there are few differences in social origin and opinions between voters and non-voters (Schäfer, 2013; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). On the other hand, more recent cross-national analyses have found significant differences beyond participatory attitudes between those who participate in and those who abstain from elections. For example, in the European context, dissatisfaction with politicians and the political system are similarly associated with non-voting (Hadjar and Beck, 2010). However, studies have also demonstrated that while both non-voters and populist voters express political dissatisfaction, they differ in their views of political agency (Kemmers, 2017) and other relevant issues such as political trust and political information (Van Kessel et al., 2021). For instance, far-right voters rank higher in measures of social integration (union membership, self-reported social activity and interpersonal trust) than non-voters (Allen, 2017). Overall, however, despite their often growing share of the electorate, non-voters remain a noteworthy lacuna in the understanding of political behaviour in Western Europe.

Populist Voters

At least since the 1990s, an increasing number of scholars have devoted attention to the rise of populist forces in Western Europe. Most analyses are focused on the PRR, a party

family that now is part and parcel of Western European democracy and which is characterized by the articulation of three sets of ideas: authoritarianism, nativism and populism (Mudde, 2007, 2013). When it comes to analysing those who support the PRR, there is wide agreement that they tend to be male with low levels of education and conservative positions on both moral issues and immigration (Betz, 1994; Bornschier, 2010; Rydgren, 2013). Scholars have also shown that the typical PRR voter is not a 'modernization loser' in an objective sense, that is, people who are unemployed and/or living in poverty, but rather in a subjective sense, that is, individuals who feel left behind because of ongoing cultural and economic transformation that negatively affect their social status (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Rooduijn and Burgoon, 2018). A perception of social deprivation, as contrasted in particular with a subjective assessment of the past, has been shown to be associated with support for the PRR (Gest et al., 2018).

However, Western Europe has seen the emergence not only of PRR parties but also of PRL parties. The latter have received much less academic attention, in part because they are less common and less electorally successful across the region. Yet, PRL parties such as Die Linke in Germany, La France Insoumise in France, Podemos in Spain, SYRIZA in Greece and the Socialist Party in the Netherlands have made important electoral inroads in the last years and contest mainstream parties from different ideological angles (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; Koch, 2020). Existing research on this topic shows that those who support the PRL tend to be younger citizens supportive of democracy and with higher levels of education and liberal positions on both moral issues and immigration (Ramiro, 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2019).

Extant research on Western Europe thus reveals that it is possible to identify populist voters who opt either for radical left or for radical right parties. Given that these two party families have very different ideological profiles, it is worth asking about the potential commonalities of their electorates (Rooduijn, 2018). Although research about this is scarce, some studies have shown that citizens who are in favour of populist parties are interested in politics and should not be confused with apathetic protest voters (Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018; Van Kessel et al., 2021). Furthermore, those who hold populist attitudes tend to be in favour of democracy but dissatisfied with its actual functioning and supportive of direct democratic mechanisms (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert, 2020; Zaslove et al., 2021). In turn, Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2019) reveal that those who vote for populist parties are inclined to have strong Eurosceptic positions and are dissatisfied with democracy, while Pirro and Portos (2021) demonstrate that populist party voters tend to engage more in forms of non-electoral participation than non-populist party voters.

In summary, a growing but largely separate set of academic literatures has identified sociodemographic and sociopolitical characteristics of mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters across Western Europe. However, a striking gap remains in that very few studies have empirically analysed them in comparative perspective.[2] As a result, the literature provides only limited expectations about *how* these three constituencies engage with and dissociate from democratic politics. We can identify three complementary theoretical lenses which emerge from this discussion and guide the empirical analyses that follow: first, electoral participation appears to relate to a set of sociopolitical and attitudinal baseline factors. We would thus expect those citizens without (perceived) capacities or interest in the political process to be less likely to vote in the first place. Second, attitudes towards the democratic and representative political system should systematically differentiate the three groups. Here, we expect that more favourable attitudes towards the

existing system of democratic representation and its perceived practice should systematically favour voting for mainstream parties over populist parties. Yet, it remains unclear to what extent expectations and evaluations of democratic practice may differ between non-voters and populist voters. Third, ideological and party-political identification appears to systematically set these three groups apart. We expect strong ideological contrasts and partisan identities between populist voters and mainstream voters, but it remains unclear how non-voters may relate to both established and populist parties and their respective platforms.

Research Design

Case Selection: Why Contemporary Germany?

To empirically compare the three constituencies and show what sets them apart, we focus on the case of contemporary Germany. Taking advantage of a representative survey undertaken in the context of the 2017 general election, which oversamples non-voters and includes a sizeable share of respondents that declare to support populist forces, we can provide a detailed comparative empirical analysis of the three constituencies. But why does contemporary Germany represent a good case study to undertake this type of empirical analysis? Two main reasons justify this case selection.

First, there is little doubt that the structural changes affecting Western European democracy discussed above are present in contemporary Germany. In fact, one could see this case study as an ideal place to test the general argument about the subtle and gradual formation of three different constituencies, which should have their own sociodemographic and sociopolitical characteristics. As can be seen in the following figure, when looking at those citizens who are eligible to vote (rather than only those who voted), Germany has witnessed important transformations since 1990. On one hand, there is a long-term tendency towards declining mainstream party voting in the country, decreasing from around 70% of eligible voters to around 55% in 2017. On the other hand, populist parties have gradually become stronger, peaking with the support of over 15% of eligible voters. Finally, while non-voters show no clear long-term trend, their share of the electorate grew from a historical high point of 20% in 1990 to around 30% in 2013 (Schäfer, 2013: 40), and only declined significantly again in the 2017 election (Figure 1).

These trends illustrate the puzzling relationship between the three constituencies we discussed above: as indicated by the vertical lines in the figure, we can identify distinct periods in which the relative size of the groups moves together in different ways. Until 2002, mainstream voting remained roughly stable, while non-voting decreased and increased to the apparent benefit, or expense, of populist parties. A similar dynamic is apparent from 2009 onwards: despite some losses for mainstream parties, populist gains occurred alongside significant decreases in the share of non-voters. In contrast, from 2002 to 2009, mainstream voting saw a dramatic decline, while both populist voting and non-voting increased. Given the apparent absence of a consistent relationship between these three groups' eligible vote shares, it thus remains crucial to better understand the distinct profiles of mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters within the German electorate.

Second, the German case study is particularly interesting because nowadays two populist forces are represented in the Bundestag. On the left, the PRL party Die Linke obtained 9.2% in the 2017 general election and has been able to establish itself at the national level from its East German origins.[3] On the right, the PRR party Alternative für Deutschland

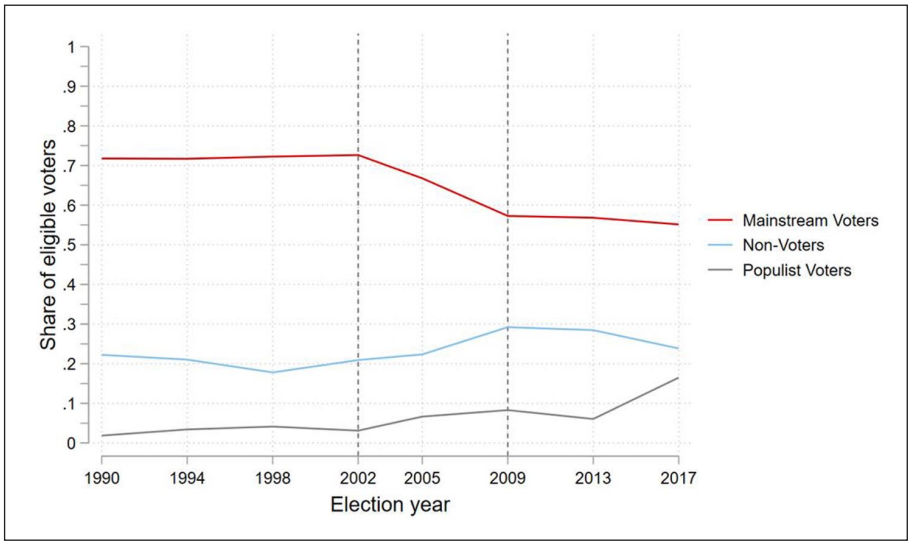

Figure 1. Evolution of Three Constituencies in German Federal Elections.
Source: Bundeswahlleiter.
Non-voters, populist party voters and mainstream party voters as shares of the eligible electorate in Germany, 1990–2017. (Proportional) second vote used for vote shares. Parties without parliamentary representation (including AfD in 2013) excluded from groups.

(AfD) is a recent newcomer in the German party system (Arzheimer, 2015), entering the national parliament for the first time in 2017 with 12.6% of the vote after only narrowly failing to clear the 5% threshold in 2013 with 4.7%. The existence of both a PRL party and a PRR party in the current national parliament permits examining if those who support populist forces – independent of their leftist or rightist profile – do have different characteristics to non-voters and mainstream voters. Furthermore, if (most) non-voters who might be attracted to populist parties can be considered likely to have been mobilized by either of these parties, this renders non-voters more representative than in cases where only one type of populist party is electorally present (such as Germany before 2017), thus sharpening the comparison we aim for.

Data and Operationalization

To comparatively profile the three constituencies in contemporary Germany, we rely on a survey of 2783 citizens which was conducted online in two panel waves in 2017 and 2018 (see Vehrkamp and Merkel, 2018). Ideally suited for our purposes, it separately sampled non-voters (n = 883) from a pool identified as abstaining in post-election surveys and oversampled voters for small parties, including the two populist forces that are represented in the national parliament, the PRL Die Linke and the PRR AfD (n > 290 for each).[4] After applying sampling weights and a design weight in all analyses, the sample is representative for citizens eligible to vote during the 2017 federal election for both western and eastern Germany.

We use these data to contrast non-voting, populist voting and mainstream voting by German citizens, relying on the vote choice of respondents at the 2017 election as the

dependent variable and modelling the likelihood of voting for one of the mainstream parties (Christian democratic/social union (CDU/CSU), Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens, free democratic party (FDP)), for a populist party (AfD, Die Linke) and for abstention.[5] Specifically, we draw on the literature discussed above to study the association of individual (non-)vote choice with three clusters of factors: (1) 'baseline' attitudes and sociodemographic features influencing political participation, (2) expectations and evaluations of democracy and (nostalgic) deprivation shaping disaffection with democratic politics, as well as (3) (non-)ideological views and (negative) partisanship influencing the relationship to (mainstream) party politics.

As 'baseline' factors shaping the propensity for electoral participation, we include relevant attitudes in the form of respondents' reported political interest and their perceived internal efficacy (measured as information on and understanding of political issues as well as trust to engage in political discussions). Furthermore, we record sociodemographic information on education levels and household income that condition voting. We also include standard controls in the form of gender, age and (former East or West German) regional residence, which should relate to the type of electoral participation: while being male and older are generally associated with populist voting, the latter is crucial in the German case because there remains, even 30 years after reunification, a strong divide between the eastern and western parts of the country. Despite some long-run gains in socioeconomic conditions, parts of the population of eastern Germany feel left behind as citizens, given the harsh structural transformations of the 1990s and the remaining gap in living standards, infrastructure and perceived social influence. In other words, eastern Germany is a territory that is both socioeconomically less disposed towards electoral participation (Schäfer et al., 2016) *and* strongly marked by the politics of subjective status loss that should fuel the rejection of mainstream political parties and the disposition to vote for populist forces of different kind, rather than abstain from voting altogether (Bornschier, 2010; Gidron and Hall, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Rydgren, 2013).

Seeking to clarify different citizens' relation to democratic politics, we consider in a second cluster of factors to what extent (dis-)satisfaction with democracy may condition whether citizens abstain, vote for populists or vote for mainstream parties. To compare attitudes towards democracy, we include respondents' support for democracy as a political system, measured by (dis-)agreement with the statement that 'all in all, democracy is the best political system'. We also consider whether citizens desire greater direct democracy by measuring whether they would prefer greater use of referenda 'for important political questions'. To capture evaluations of democratic practice, we employ citizens' reported satisfaction with democracy as well as perceived democratic input responsiveness (measured as external political efficacy). We further probe the grounds of citizens' (dis-)satisfaction by studying whether (non-)vote choices are shaped by citizens' perceived (nostalgic) deprivation, that is, a perceived absence 'of being valued members of society' (Gidron and Hall, 2020: 1028). To capture sentiments of deprivation, we calculate the average self-placement of respondents between central (1) up to marginal (4) relative positioning of 'people like them' in society, according to economic, political and societal forms of marginalization (see Gest et al., 2018). To measure nostalgic deprivation, these questions are repeated with respondents indicating their perceived position '30 years ago'. Again, we average the responses across the three forms of social integration (see online appendix for details).

Finally, to clarify the three constituencies' relation to representative (party-)political practice, we consider the role of ideology and (negative) partisanship for engaging with

or detaching from mainstream democratic politics. Regarding ideology, we include respondents' left–right self-placement, as well as their specific views on economic issues (pro-/anti-state intervention), cultural issues (pro-/anti-progressive values), immigration (pro-/anti-multiculturalism) and the European Union (EU; pro-/anti-integration) (see online appendix for details). To capture the additional role of political identities (see Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019, 2021; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2019), we employ a set of questions asking respondents to rate 'whether they would vote for' the respective party in the next election at the subnational (Landtag), national (Bundestag) and European (EU parliament) level on a 4-point scale ranging from 'No, definitely not' to 'Yes, definitely'. We categorize as positive partisans only those reporting they would 'definitely' vote for the party in question at each of the three electoral levels and categorize as negative partisans only those respondents who indicate they would 'definitely not' vote for the respective party at any of the three electoral levels.

The inclusion of negative partisanship as an explanatory variable is for two reasons. First, theoretically, negative party identification can have different consequences for how individuals structure political environment and position themselves towards democracy. For example, negative identifiers towards the PRR show stronger democratic credentials in comparison to positive identifiers towards the PRR (Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). Second, empirically, negative partisanships' sizes vary considerably within the German electorate. According to our measurement, populist parties tend to be much more rejected than mainstream parties (see Table 1 in the online appendix). The operationalization of positive and negative partisanships thus emphasizes a more active form of partisan identification, which goes beyond electoral support.

At the same time, we categorize as 'apartisans' those citizens who report either no negative or no positive partisanship for any party and expect these to engage least in electoral politics (Dalton, 2012). Furthermore, citizens who indicate negative partisanships with respect to all mainstream parties simultaneously are classified as 'anti-establishment' partisans, and those reporting negative partisanship to all populist parties simultaneously are classified as 'anti-populist' partisans. We expect these identities to relate to electoral vote choices in favour of populist or mainstream parties.

Method

Since the three dependent variables (non-voting, mainstream voting and populist voting) are dichotomous, we rely on logistic regression models.[6] To facilitate interpretation, all results are shown as average marginal effects of one-unit increases on the predicted probability of falling into either of our three categories. To render these effects more substantively meaningful, all ordinal independent variables were mean-centred, such that coefficients represent marginal increases by one categorical unit from the sample average (these variables are labelled as 'ctd.' in the output figures). All continuous variables were standardized, such that marginal effects represent one-standard-deviation increases from the sample mean (these are labelled as 'std.').

Analysis

To compare the three constituencies, Figure 2 first presents our baseline model of electoral participation. As expected, sociodemographic and attitudinal factors indeed reveal stark differences in the political profiles of non-voters, populist voters and mainstream voters.

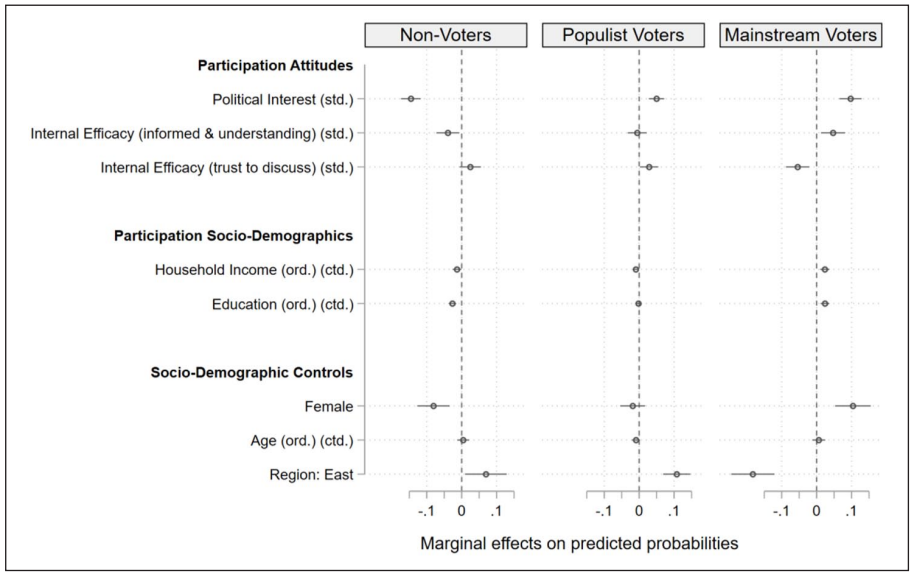

Figure 2. Baseline Model for Non-Voters, Populist Voters and Mainstream Voters.
Baseline model: Marginal effects on predicted probabilities of belonging to one of three groups in the 2017 German electorate. Separate logistic models for each group. See online appendix for full model output and alternative multinomial specification.

Beginning with the characteristics of non-voters, political interest stands out as the sharpest dividing line between these and both types of voter groups: one standard deviation higher than average political interest renders a typical German citizen around 15% less likely to abstain from casting a ballot, while both voter groups are associated with above-average interest in politics. Strikingly, non-voters are least likely to report being highly informed about and understanding politics but simultaneously are significantly more likely to trust themselves to engage in political discussions. In terms of sociodemographics, non-voters are the least likely to report household income or education levels above average as well as the most likely to be male.

Mainstream voters, in turn, are unique in that they tend to more cautiously assess their ability to engage in political debates while claiming to understand and be informed about politics, in contrast to the other two groups. Sociodemographically, this constituency stands out as being much more likely western German residents and tends to consist of higher earning, more educated female citizens. Finally, populist voters appear to combine features of both other groups: they share with non-voters a self-perceived ability to engage in political debates, while sharing with mainstream voters a high interest in politics. Sociodemographically, populist voters are even more likely to be eastern German residents than non-voters and slightly less likely to report above-average incomes, but otherwise lack significant similarities.

Thus, while the three types of electorates are distinct in terms of participatory attitudes and sociodemographics, the baseline model appears insufficient to account for the specific features separating populist voters from the two other groups. Accordingly, Figure 3 presents results from a set of models which additionally includes either democratic (dis-) satisfaction, (nostalgic) deprivation, ideological views or (negative) partisanship.[7]

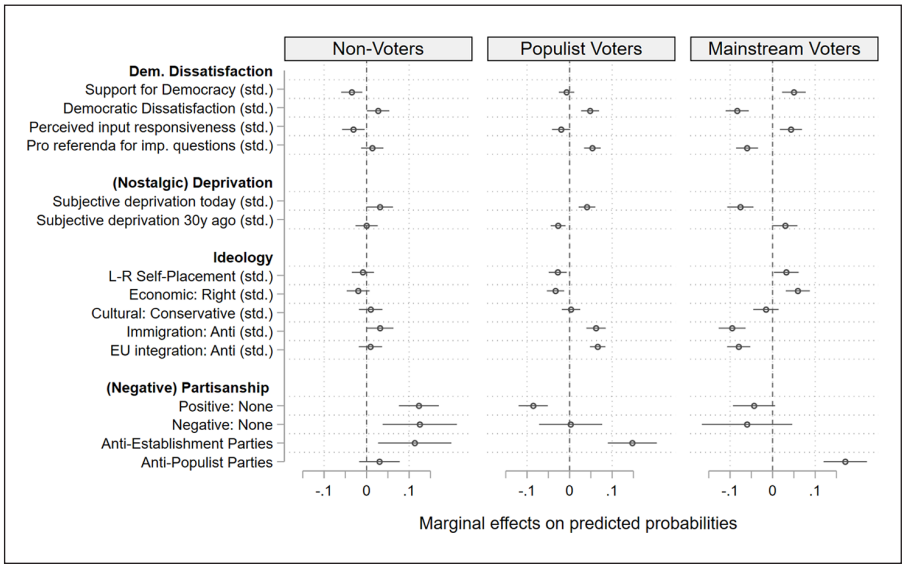

Figure 3. Extended Models for Non-Voters, Populist Voters and Mainstream Voters.
Extended models: Marginal effects on predicted probabilities of belonging to one of three groups in the 2017 German electorate. Four separate models for each group, as indicated by bold headings. Baseline factors omitted from figure but remain included in all models. See online appendix for full model output and specification with all theoretical factors included simultaneously.

In terms of attitudes towards democratic politics, the extended models suggest that non-voters stand out from the rest of the electorate by being significantly less likely to consider democracy as the best political system. Furthermore, they share with populist voters a dissatisfaction with democracy in practice and a perception that elected leaders are not responsive to people like them but do not tend to demand greater use of referenda. While non-voters report feeling somewhat deprived today, there is no significant pattern in terms of their self-assessed deprivation 30 years ago, in contrast to both other groups.[8]

Considering ideological and partisan leanings further crystallizes the specific characteristics of non-voters in Germany in relation to representative political practice. In contrast to both other groups, non-voters lack a clear ideological profile in any dimension of political conflict aside from immigration: non-voters tend towards rejecting immigration on average, but not as consistently as populist voters.[9] They are also most likely to be apartisan in the sense of not reporting positive or negative partisanship for any political party. But abstainers do not appear equally disposed towards all parties: non-voters are more likely to report anti-establishment than anti-populist partisan identities. However, this pattern flips when we control simultaneously for respondents' ideological views, as non-voting is then significantly associated with anti-populist partisanship in addition to apartisanship (see online appendix). Together with the fact that anti-immigration views also lose significance in these models, this suggests that abstainers' average expressed rejection of mainstream parties may stem from their anti-immigration preferences. However, it also suggests that typical non-voters in Germany who do not hold strong anti-immigration views are more likely to exhibit negative partisanship towards populist rather than mainstream parties.

These extended models also more clearly single out populist voters as a distinctive constituency. In terms of democratic attitudes, these voters retain greater belief in democracy as a political system than non-voters, but they report the greatest dissatisfaction with democratic practice and are unique in demanding greater use of direct democratic tools to supplement representative politics. Their subjective assessment of social integration also distinguishes populist voters: only this group is significantly less likely to perceive greater deprivation 30 years ago, but simultaneously feels more deprived today.[10]

In distinction to non-voters, populist voters are significantly more likely to share a clear ideological profile despite loyalties to two parties that diverge on the economy, immigration and EU integration. Even further, these voters' preferences stand in direct opposition to typical mainstream voters' views. Political identities additionally differentiate populists: in contrast to abstainers, these voters are much less likely to report no positive partisanship and do not consistently lack a negative partisan identity. Indeed, populist voting significantly relates to strong anti-establishment partisanship, an association which seems to rest largely on their ideological disagreements (see online appendix).

Finally, these extended models also reveal further distinctive characteristics of mainstream voters. Not only are they significantly more likely to support democracy in principle compared to non-voters, but only these voters report high satisfaction with democratic practice and consider politics as responsive to people like them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, seeking greater use of referenda is negatively associated with mainstream voting.

In terms of subjective deprivation, mainstream voters almost exactly mirror their populist counterparts. They uniquely report significantly lower social marginalization today and tend to perceive themselves as more deprived 30 years ago.[11] Ideological and partisan profiles further identify mainstream voters as the flipside of populist voters: despite their internal party-political competition, voters of mainstream parties exhibit shared ideological preferences in opposition to populist voters' views and report strong anti-populist partisanship which even eclipses populist voters' rejection of mainstream parties.

To provide a more fine-grained picture of the German electorate and especially its populist constituency, we zoom in on how left-wing and right-wing populist voters differ in their relationship to democratic and mainstream party politics in our sample. To that end, we run the same baseline and extended models described above but this time separating the group of populist voters into supporters of the AfD and Die Linke.

In a first step, our baseline factors reveal similar political interest, internal efficacy and regional residence in voters of both parties, supporting our classification (see online appendix). However, we also confirm key contrasts in income, education and gender which are in line with the literature on right-wing or left-wing populism (Rooduijn et al., 2017).[12]

Our extended models reveal further similarities between both groups which support our categorization alongside crucial differences which set apart right-wing from left-wing populism (see Figure 4): while both voter groups differ drastically from the much more democratically satisfied mainstream voters, Die Linke voters are much *less* democratically dissatisfied than AfD voters. The former are not significantly more likely to report high democratic dissatisfaction and only slightly more likely to perceive lower input responsiveness to 'people like them' and demand greater use of referenda. This contrasts with AfD voters, who express much more radical attitudes towards the democratic and representative system. A similar picture of degrees of dissatisfaction emerges with regard to (nostalgic) deprivation. Both voter groups differ drastically from mainstream party voters and lean towards perceiving a relative social marginalization over the last 30 years, but AfD voters more strongly express such perceptions.

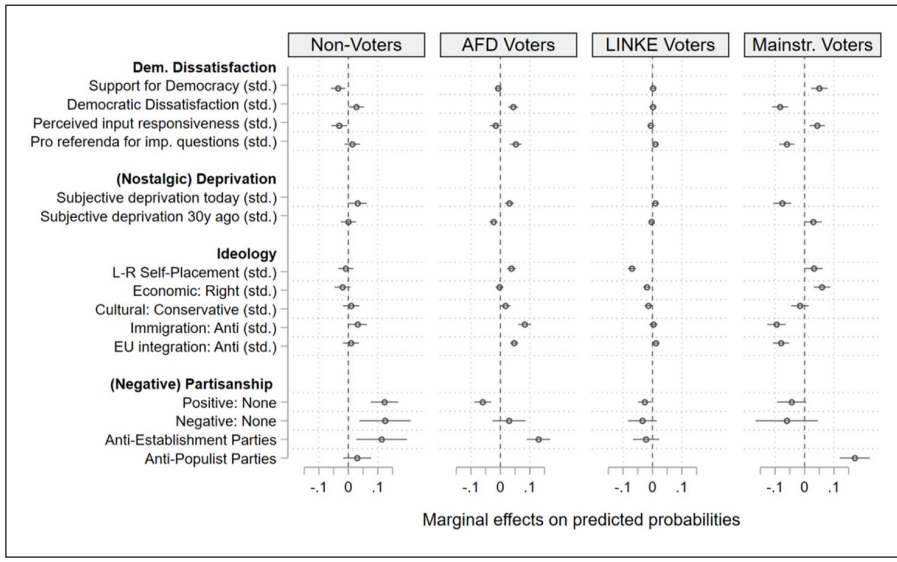

Figure 4. Extended Models for Non-Voters, AfD Voters, Die Linke Voters and Mainstream Voters.

Extended models: Marginal effects on predicted probabilities of belonging to one of four groups in the 2017 German electorate. Four separate models for each group, as indicated by bold headings. Baseline factors omitted from figure but remain included in all models. See online appendix for baseline factor marginal effects and full model output.

Most clearly, voters of both parties differ crucially in their ideological preferences and in their attitudes towards mainstream parties. As Figure 4 indicates, Die Linke voters are on opposite sides with AfD voters in general left–right placement and on cultural issues. In line with the key issues of PRL and PRR parties (March, 2017; Rama and Santana, 2019), Die Linke voters share a significant left-wing economic stance but no clear preference on immigration, whereas the reverse is true of AfD voters. Only on EU integration do both voter groups share sceptical positions, but again in a less drastic form in the case of Die Linke. This resonates with the notion of soft versus hard Euroscepticism, whereby PRL parties oppose EU integration practice as a 'neoliberal' project, while PRR parties oppose EU integration in principle on nationalist grounds (Beaudonnet and Gomez, 2017), including in Germany (Ketelhut et al., 2016).

These different preferences also mirror different types of (negative) partisanship among AfD and Die Linke supporters: AfD voters oppose mainstream voters on all ideological dimensions and report very high negative partisanship towards all established parties. This is not the case for voters of Die Linke, who tend to agree with mainstream voters in Germany on cultural issues and do not report a significant antipathy towards all established parties. As we show in the online appendix, Die Linke voters instead systematically dislike parties that are further on the right, including both the market-liberal FDP and especially the AfD. Overall, these results corroborate the view that populist voters differ systematically from mainstream supporters and non-voters, but they also underline that the PRR in Germany presents a much more drastic opposition to the existing democratic and party system than its less populist counterpart on the radical left.

Conclusion

Western European democracy has experienced structural transformations in the last decades and finds itself in the eyes of many observers in a highly uncertain period. Part of the challenge lies in the fact that more and more countries are facing the formation of three different constituencies – mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters – that each relates differently to the political order. Even though this diagnosis is widely shared among practitioners and scholars alike, there is little empirical research about what sets apart these three constituencies. This lacuna can be explained, to a great extent, by the lack of survey data on non-voters as well as the fact that populist voting is a relatively recent phenomenon in Western Europe that has been receiving increasing attention only in recent years.

With the aim of starting to fill this research gap, in this article we analysed survey data from contemporary Germany that oversamples non-voters and includes an important number of voters for both the PRL and the PRR, providing an ideal test case to contrast citizens who do not vote with those mobilized by populist parties and those remaining loyal to mainstream parties. Our findings show that the three groups differ substantially in their relation to democratic politics. Specifically, political interest, belief in democracy as well as ideological and partisan preferences most clearly single out who tends to participate electorally in the first place. In turn, western German residence, perceptions of historically improving social integration as well as satisfaction with democratic practice and responsiveness most strongly differentiate between those who vote for established parties or rather for populist alternatives. In contrast to mainstream voters, who remain supportive of and satisfied with democracy in both principle and practice and actively reject populist alternatives which challenge it, populist voters are marked by disappointment with and ideological opposition to a democratic and party-political system they are engaged with in principle and have unmet expectations of . Populist and mainstream voters in Germany represent clearly opposed camps on all ideological dimensions except for cultural liberalism, and these frontlines are reflected in starkly polarized patterns of negative partisanship from both sides. However, in the German case, left populist opposition takes a markedly less extreme form and is more specifically directed towards right-wing ideologies and parties. In contrast, non-voters seem both more fundamentally disconnected from and less expectant of democratic principles and party politics. Yet, while non-voters in Germany seem to reject mainstream parties they ideologically disagree with on immigration, those abstainers who do not hold strong anti-immigrant views tend to feel more repelled by populist alternatives than by mainstream parties. This throws doubt on the (further) mobilization potential of such citizens for populist challengers. Overall, while mainstream voters in Germany select political parties that support the liberal democratic regime, non-voters are disengaged from the party-political sphere and democracy as a whole. In turn, populist voters remain expectant of democracy as a system and engage with the electoral arena but opt for political parties that oppose the post-war consensus on what democracy means and how it should work in practice, especially in the case of the PRR.

These results have important consequences for the study of Western European democracy, because they throw the spotlight on two alternative interpretations of the electorate. On one hand, these findings suggest that citizens may undertake two distinct forms of withdrawal from democratic politics: either disengaging from the political system and rejecting all political offers (non-voters) or actively confronting mainstream political parties and supporting new political forces that challenge the democratic system from within

(populist voters). By demonstrating that citizens eligible to vote should be thought of as three separate groups with their own sociodemographic features and sociopolitical views, we thus contribute to clarifying how the electorate is structured today and identify factors that influence their respective (non-)mobilization. Importantly, our findings suggest that, despite their parallel emergence, structural disengagement from and indifference towards modern politics among abstaining segments of the citizenry should not be confused with the more specific subjective historical disappointment in democracy and mainstream party politics fuelling populist support. On the other hand, our results may also suggest that populist voters present a (temporary) midpoint between mainstream and non-voting. The former develop positive and negative partisanships, and are engaged and satisfied with democratic political practice, whereas non-voters lack positive and negative partisanships, have fully disengaged and lost all expectation of the democratic system. Seen this way, a lot may depend on how these citizens assess the medium-term 'success' of their populist challenge to the mainstream: if attitudes towards democratic politics and ideological representation improve as populists establish themselves in the party system, they may again resemble the mainstream electorate more closely. In contrast, if they remain frustrated from established political institutions, populist voters may eventually fully dissociate from the democratic system, further 'hollowing out' democracy. Given the tense relationship of populist parties with liberal democracy, balancing reconciliation of their voters with democratic politics while maintaining support for underlying principles guarding inclusive participation may thus present a major challenge facing Western European democracies.

Because of very limited existing research with a comparative focus on mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters in Western Europe, this article makes an important contribution to a research topic that deserves much more attention. We can suggest at least three areas that are particularly important to address going forward. First, the empirical analysis undertaken here considers only one measure in time. Therefore, future research could try to work with panel data to examine citizens that from one election to another change between mainstream voting, non-voting and populist voting patterns. Particularly interesting would be to examine the extent to which the votes for PRR and PRL parties come from previous non-voters and previous mainstream party supporters. According to the empirical findings of this article, one could expect that once a PRR/PRL has been able to establish itself in the electoral arena – as in the case of Germany in 2017 discussed in this contribution – it should have very limited capacity to attract further non-voters. The reverse trajectory would be similarly interesting: under which conditions do (former) populist voters turn to abstaining from voting (again) or instead choose to (again) support mainstream parties? Our findings suggest that focusing on the drivers of greater satisfaction with democratic practice and reduced antipathy towards established parties might be promising to explore in this regard.

Second, however interesting the case, this work has focused only on one country, and in consequence, it is important to undertake comparative analyses to see whether the characteristics that we identify for mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters in Germany are similar across Western Europe. In our opinion, the existence of both PRR and PRL parties, as well as the growing fragmentation of the electoral space into different political forces, makes the German case study not only particularly interesting but also representative of political trends one can observe in many Western European countries. Nevertheless, future studies can try to test the generalizability of the empirical findings presented in this contribution. Particularly interesting in this regard could be

the comparison with other cases who contain specific territories within the country that – similar to Eastern Germany in our case study – are strongly marked by the politics of subjective status loss that should fuel the rejection of mainstream political parties and the disposition to vote for populist forces of different kind, rather than abstaining from voting altogether (Bornschier, 2010; Gidron and Hall, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Rydgren, 2013).

Third, given that the evidence we present here demonstrates that mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters maintain a distinctive relationship with the democratic regime, practical policy responses such as mandatory voting should perhaps be more carefully weighted in regard to potential consequences for the democratic regime (e.g. Malkopoulu, 2020). Comparing our findings with cases with mandatory voting like Belgium would appear promising for studying what happens when people are forced to vote even when they do not appear to have strong liberal democratic credentials.

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Supplementary Information

Additional Supplementary Information may be found with the online version of this article.

Context

Table 1: Different types of partisanship for the 2017 election in Germany.
Table 2: Question wording for populist attitude items contained in our index and correspondence to Akkerman et al. scale.
Figure 1: Marginal effects from separate logistic models with alternative aggregation methods of populist attitudes items.
Figure 2: Diagram presented to respondents to measure self-placement of social status.

Notes

1. For the case of Germany, the case study we empirically analyse in this article, see the work of Elsässer et al. (2017), who show the highly unequal responsiveness of the Bundestag.
2. As far as we know, there are two exceptions. First, Allen (2017) provides a cross-national empirical analysis of these three constituencies for Western Europe, but his study focuses on far-right parties rather than on populist parties of different ideological colours. Second, comparing nine European democracies, Van Kessel et al. (2021) show that mainstream voters, non-voters and populist voters differ in terms of their levels of political information and misinformation. However, neither of these contributions systematically contrasts forms of democratic and representative (dis-)content among these groups or relies on a survey sample that overrepresents non-voters as we do in this article.
3. Die Linke is the successor of the (mainly East German) Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the legal successor of the German Democratic Republic's ruling Socialist Unity Party. In 2005, the PDS entered into an alliance, and 2 years later merged, with the Labor and Social Justice Party led by prominent (West German) former members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).
4. Comparative party scholars tend to agree that the AfD and Die Linke can be considered populist radical right (PRR) and populist radical left (PRL) parties, respectively (Lewandowsky et al., 2016; Loew and Faas, 2019; March, 2011; Rooduijn et al., 2019). Of course, as we corroborate in our analysis later, this does not mean that populist ideas matter equally strongly for both parties (Lührmann et al., 2020; Meijers and Zaslove, 2021) or that those who support these parties have identical ideological preferences and sociodemographic characteristics.
5. We explore the robustness of this categorization in the online appendix by providing alternative models which disaggregate the two populist party voters as well as the established and niche mainstream parties and which test the association of an index of populist attitudes with each (sub-)group. Results support our threefold distinction, as these groups strongly contrast with each other, while differing only in degrees between niche and established mainstream party voters as well as between PRL and PRR party supporters.
6. As a robustness check, we provide alternative multinomial models with a threefold dependent variable in the online appendix.
7. The online appendix presents further results from models including all theorized factors simultaneously to assess the relationship between the factor clusters and the robustness of associations.
8. As presented in the online appendix, subjective deprivation today is no longer significantly associated with non-voting in models which simultaneously control for democratic attitudes. This suggests that low support for democracy and lack of perceived input responsiveness may explain why non-voters report a feeling of social marginalization.

9. However, non-voters in fact express similarly distributed ideological preferences on all dimensions as the voting population (see online appendix). Hence, a lack of reported preferences on political issues does not seem to explain why these citizens do not vote.
10. The association of populist voting with current deprivation perceptions narrowly fails to clear traditional levels of significance when also controlling for democratic attitudes (see online appendix), suggesting that these attitudes are informed by such assessments.
11. Again, these associations do not reach significance thresholds in models including (related) democratic attitudes (see online appendix).
12. We also scrutinized the classification of both parties as populist by running our baseline participation models together with an index of populist attitudes (see online appendix). Results show not only that both parties' electorates are much more populist than mainstream party voters but also that our index of populist attitudes significantly predicts voting only for the AfD. This is in line with research showing that left populists are significantly more populist than mainstream parties, but tend to be *less* populist than their counterparts on the radical right, including in Germany (Hough and Keith, 2019; Lewandowsky et al., 2016; Loew and Faas, 2019; Meijers and Zaslove, 2021).

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