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Protest and the rise of left-nationalist challengers: evidence from Germany

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ABSTRACT


The cost-of-living crisis, unfolding in the shadow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, highlighted policy positions not traditionally represented in European party systems and protest politics. Our study asks why large-scale protests, widely anticipated during Germany's 'Hot Autumn' of 2022, did not materialize despite a severe cost-of-living crisis. Drawing on insights from social movement studies, we test the long-standing argument that successful mobilization depends on the presence of mobilizing agents that align programmatically with existing demand. We use an innovative multi-method design that combines individual-level survey data with protest event analysis to examine both protest potential and actual mobilization. The survey includes a conjoint experiment to identify factors influencing protest potential. Our findings show that despite strong public sympathy, the 'Hot Autumn' saw only moderate protest participation, as established trade unions and political parties from both the left and the right struggled to capitalize on the momentum. Instead, the left-nationalist Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) emerged as a new challenger, offering an economically left-wing, culturally nationalist platform that resonated with protest sympathizers. By analyzing how ideological (mis)alignment shapes protest dynamics, our study contributes to research on party-movement interactions and demonstrates how the two-dimensional structure of political conflict increasingly challenges traditional left-wing actors' ability to mobilize.

KEYWORDS

Protest; cost-of-living crisis; grievances; protest event analysis; survey experiments; Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht

Introduction

The cost-of-living crisis, worsened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has intensified economic hardship across European societies, particularly in Germany (e.g. Araki et al., 2023; Guan et al., 2023; Krickovic, 2015; Liadze et al., 2023). Despite the severity of this crisis, the protest response to rising prices remained moderate (e.g. Steinhilper et al., 2022). Established actors struggled to harness the protest potential, creating

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opportunities for new political challengers offering programmatic approaches beyond the traditional left-right spectrum, most notably the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW; Herold & Otteni, 2024; Thomeczek, 2024). The shift from traditional left-wing to new left-nationalist¹ challengers as the primary actors mobilizing in response to the cost-of-living crisis presents a significant theoretical and empirical challenge that this paper aims to address.

We specifically ask: *why did large-scale protests, widely anticipated during Germany's 'Hot Autumn' of 2022, not materialize despite a severe cost-of-living crisis?* To answer this question, we draw on a key insight from social movement studies: 'Mobilization is the process that gets a movement going and that links a certain demand for protest among the population in a country to a supply or offer in terms of protest opportunities' (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023, p. 125). Thus, our approach bridges two main perspectives: (1) grievance theories, which help us understand the scale and nature of protest demands in this crisis context (e.g. Bremer et al., 2020; Della Porta, 2015; Gurr, 1970; Klandermans et al., 2008; Snow et al., 1998) and (2) supply-side arguments on the role of the fitting ideological supply, which provide insights into the (lacking) opportunities and resources that drive mobilization (e.g. Borbáth & Hutter, 2024; Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022; Gillion, 2020; Jenkins, 1983; Kriesi et al., 1995; McAdam, 1982; McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

We make a primarily empirical contribution: We follow a comprehensive multistep research design, combining descriptive analysis of emerging protest patterns with inference on the microlevel causal mechanisms driving participation. To do so, we integrate two levels of analysis: the meso-level dynamics of protest events and individual-level attitudes/behaviors. First, we conduct a protest event analysis to study actual protest behavior, relying on an original, hand-coded dataset. The data are based on the coverage of two national newspapers, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *taz-die Tageszeitung*. Second, we investigate the social embedding of the protest, based on a representative population survey conducted in December 2022. The survey includes a conjoint experiment, in addition to standard items on ideological positions and political participation. The treatment varied the supply for protest, elements of a fictitious call for a demonstration: the claims, the populist appeal, the organizer, and the sponsoring political party. To increase the external validity of the experiment, we rely on the main claims of trade unions, major welfare organizations, and existing challenger parties as treatments. The experiment allows us to estimate the mobilization capacity of different types of programmatic supply.

Our results suggest a strong mismatch between the demands of the protests and the ideological supply of the main mobilizing agents. We empirically show that although a large part of German society was sympathetic to the protesters' demands, this did not translate into high participation levels. These sympathies were associated with a mix of economically left-wing and culturally right-wing ideological preferences. This combination was not reflected in the positions of the trade unions and political parties that attempted to mobilize in the fall of 2022. We observe a remarkable shift in the scale of mobilization with the emergence of a new political actor, the BSW. Compared to trade unions and other parties, the BSW stood out by offering a unique combination of economically left-wing *and* culturally

nationalist policies. We argue that the evolving ideological mismatch between protest demands and mobilizing actors explains changes in the scale of mobilization.

Our findings contribute to two key strands of scholarly literature. First, regarding the study of social movements and contentious politics, we empirically test the long-standing argument that successful mobilization depends on the presence of mobilizing agents that align programmatically with existing demand (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). In this context, we advance the debate through our novel, multistep research design, offering a nuanced empirical perspective on the limitations of traditional mobilizing actors, such as labor unions and existing challenger parties in providing an effective supply for the current cost-of-living crisis. However, rather than signaling a decline in programmatic mobilization, our findings highlight the limits of traditional actors' mobilization capacity, demonstrating that their inability to leverage protest potential reflects a growing misalignment between established political structures and emerging ideological demands. Instead, successful mobilization increasingly relies on cross-cutting programmatic appeals that integrate economic and cultural preferences in novel ways, rather than being driven solely by populist or anti-establishment identities.

Second, we contribute to research on party-movement interactions and the rise of movement parties (e.g. Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2024; Della Porta et al., 2017). We empirically document the emergence of BSW, a challenger party that, similarly to actors like Podemos in Spain or the Five Star Movement in Italy, capitalized on mobilization failures by traditional actors and successfully aligned with a previously unrepresented protest constituency. In line with previous research (e.g. Borbáth & Hutter, 2022), we emphasize the importance of the crisis in opening new opportunities for party entrepreneurs to rely on street mobilization and harness protest for electoral purposes. By representing the programmatic demand of the protesters, the BSW succeeded in entering the otherwise fairly institutionalized German party system, at least at the regional and European levels.

Theoretical approach

Like other forms of political participation, protest succeeds when demand meets the right supply (e.g. Borbáth, 2024; Kriesi et al., 1995; Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2014; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). In the context of demonstrations, demand refers to the pool of participants, while supply refers to the mobilizing organizations. The latter might include trade unions, political parties, new social movements, or even individual activists. From a demand-side perspective, Klandermans and Oegema (1987) distinguish four steps for people to participate in protest: (1) becoming part of the protest potential, (2) becoming a target of mobilization attempts, (3) becoming motivated to participate, and (4) overcoming barriers to participation. Protest potential thus refers to the reservoir of individuals who can be mobilized by protest entrepreneurs (also see: Hunger et al., 2023). Only a fraction of those sympathizing with the demands of protesters is likely to pass all hurdles and participate in a protest event. In what follows we rely on the demand and supply-side distinction to examine the protest potential and the protest mobilization taking place in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

The protest demand in a two-dimensional political space

Demand-side accounts of participation center on the role of grievances. However, scholars disagree on how important grievances are in driving protest mobilization. Some argue that grievances caused by the perception of a negative change in the status quo motivate protest (Gurr, 1970; Klandermans et al., 2008; Snow et al., 1998). According to this strand of literature, grievances are associated with increased protest mobilization not only at the individual level, but also at the macro level (e.g. Bremer et al., 2020; Della Porta, 2015). Another group of authors argues that grievances play little or no role in explaining the ebb and flow of protest (e.g. Grasso & Giugni, 2016; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). As Jenkins (1983, p. 530) notes, grievances are constantly present in society and provide a stable potential for the emergence of protest. Recent studies (e.g. Portos, 2021; Zárate-Tenorio, 2021), draw a more nuanced picture, showing that grievances are necessary, but not sufficient to explain protest behavior.

In the context of the cost-of-living crisis, grievances are often featured in the public discourse, media accounts, and politicians' speeches. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was a clear, well-identified negative shift in European economic dynamics (Liadze et al., 2023). In response to the conflict, many European countries have chosen to cut their economic ties with Russia and invest in efforts to diversify their energy supply away from fossil-based Russian sources. However, in a context where reliance on cheap Russian energy has long been a feature of the energy landscape in Europe (e.g. Krickovic, 2015), countries have been faced with the challenge of sourcing energy through more expensive channels. As energy prices rose across the board, households and businesses were feeling the pinch (Guan et al., 2023). Real wages fell while the cost of living continued to rise (Araki et al., 2023). This combination of price increases and real-wage decreases has resulted in what can only be described as a cost-of-living crisis characterized by widespread economic hardship.

History provides numerous examples of how economic grievances combined with political grievances drove protest, most recently in the aftermath of the Great Recession in Southern Europe (Bremer et al., 2020; Della Porta, 2015; Della Porta et al., 2017; Kurer et al., 2019; Portos, 2021). During the summer of 2022, a few months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as prices, particularly for energy, began to rise substantially in Germany, many political observers predicted a 'Heißer Herbst' (Hot Autumn) marked by numerous protest events and a significant number of participants (Steinhilper et al., 2022).² The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) established that behavioral change is a complex process, influenced by multiple factors beyond individual perceptions (such as grievances). Building on this framework, we first focus on the attitudinal dimension – sympathy – as a possible precursor to action. Connecting this strand of literature with recent studies on protest participation (e.g. Portos, 2021; Zárate-Tenorio, 2021), we would expect that the experience of economic grievances by large parts (i.e. a clear majority) of the population leads to an attitudinal response (in our case sympathy) towards the protesters, but not necessarily to more action (in our case protest behavior). This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: *Large parts of the population sympathize with the cost-of-living protesters.*

Grievances are intertwined with preferences over specific issues that develop in reaction to the events of the crisis and the policy-decisions of the government. Crises tend to tap into multidimensional issue preferences, including economic and so-called non-economic or ‘cultural’ views. In the case of previous crises, issue-based grievances related to economic and political grievances fueled protest against austerity during the Great Recession (Altıparmak & Lorenzini, 2018; Bremer et al., 2020) or against the lockdown restrictions designed to limit the risk of the COVID-19 pandemic (Borbáth, 2024; Hunger et al., 2023). In the case of the cost-of-living crisis, the strong and widely felt economic impact (e.g. Kögl, 2022; Vates, 2022) likely resulted in prioritizing such multi-dimensional preferences over economic issues. The vulnerability caused by the crisis feeds into demands for governmental intervention to limit the effects of the economic fallout. Low income groups are hardest hit (Guan et al., 2023), and redistributive measures could alleviate their economic burden. Therefore, the issue preferences associated with crisis-induced grievances likely strengthen left-wing views on addressing economic inequality, providing social welfare measures, and implementing measures to mitigate the direct effects of the crisis. Relevant policy proposals included subsidies to low-income individuals, the introduction of gas price caps, or limits on rent increases.

At the same time, programmatic beliefs are multi-dimensional and especially in the context of the grievances triggered by the cost-of-living crisis, likely also include preferences over noneconomic issues (Masch et al., 2023). More than one million Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Germany within a short period of time, putting additional pressure on the tight housing and labor markets, as well as on already understaffed schools. These problems may be short lived with sufficient integration efforts, but integration usually takes time. Those who experience immediate (perceived or real) grievances are likely to seek quick redress, for instance, by endorsing measures like restricting additional refugee admissions. We suggest that similar grievances feed a more general nationalist sentiment that also includes challenging the material and discursive support provided to Ukraine. This includes supporting calls for immediate peace and limiting the military and financial aid provided to Ukraine. Based on these two-dimensional programmatic preferences, we formulate our second hypothesis:

H2: *Those who sympathize with the cost-of-living protests likely hold more left-wing preferences on economic and more nationalist preferences on non-economic issues than those who don’t sympathize with the cost-of-living protests.*

When demand meets (no) supply

Until now, we focused on the role of grievances and issue preferences. However, a demand-side model that does not take into account the external political context or the internal, agency focused dynamic of protest mobilization can only provide a partial account. The emergence of protest is explained by resources and opportunities, supply-side factors that go beyond grievances or issue preferences. The role of opportunities is the focus of the political process approach (Kriesi et al., 1995; McAdam, 1982), while agency is often studied through the lens of resource mobilization (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Although they are analytically distinguished, authors tend to

agree that the joint presence of grievances, political opportunities, and resources triggers and helps sustain protest mobilization (Borbáth & Hutter, 2024; Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022).

Supply-side accounts of resources and opportunities emphasize the role of organizations in sustaining protest. Depending on the context, these might include trade unions (e.g. Jansson & Uba, 2023), non-governmental organizations (e.g. Borbáth & Hutter, 2024), political parties (e.g. Kriesi et al., 1995), or even the church or education institutions (e.g. McAdam, 1982). The dynamics of supply perspective emphasizes the role of ideological alignment with protest demands (e.g. Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2014; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). For instance, parties that advocate policy positions that resonate with protesters' demands are likely to be more successful in mobilizing citizens. Complementing this view, the resource-based perspective emphasizes the role of organizational assets. These include access to their material as well as immaterial endowments, like organizational know-how, media coverage, support from key affiliates, access to a wider pool of activists/sympathizers, etc.

In the case of the cost-of-living crisis, trade unions and opposition parties are typically expected to mobilize protesters' economic preferences. However, the protesters' issue preferences did not fully align with the positions represented by these organizations due to the multidimensional conflict structure involved. In Western Europe, and specifically in Germany, trade unions have been hesitant to combine economically left and culturally nationalist positions (e.g. Hillen & Steiner, 2020). In the case of trade unions, involvement in protest mobilization is further hindered by a social-democratic government (e.g. Bailey, 2017). Similarly, left-nationalist positions were not represented by either the mainstream political party, the Christian Democrats, or the challenger parties in opposition. The latter include the culturally progressive Left Party (Die Linke), as well as the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which started out as economically right-wing and, over time, became invested in de-emphasizing its position on the economic dimension (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019). Therefore, we expect a certain mismatch between demand and supply, leading to lower levels of actual protest mobilization as expected when looking only at the dynamics of the demand side. More specifically, we hypothesize:

H3: *Existing actors had limited success in mobilizing protests during the cost-of-living crisis due to a mismatch between their programmatic offerings and the public's demands.*

Case & methods

Germany after the Russian invasion of Ukraine

To test our hypotheses, we study Germany after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This invasion, which began in February 2022, sent shockwaves across Europe. Germany found itself particularly vulnerable due to its heavy reliance on cheap Russian energy imports, especially gas (Oltermann, 2022). The construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline aimed to further increase this dependence, with gas being touted as a 'bridge technology' towards a fossil-free energy mix. In response to the invasion, Germany severed its economic ties with Russia, leading to dramatic increases in energy prices and triggering

a widespread cost-of-living crisis affecting both industry and households (Oltermann, 2022).

Additionally, Germany experienced a significant influx of Ukrainian and Russian refugees seeking shelter from the war (Romashchenko, 2023). This population surge exacerbated the existing housing shortage in Germany, with over one million refugees, intensifying competition in an already tight housing market. At the same time, the Russian invasion of Ukraine drove up construction costs for new housing, as many materials were imported from Russia and Ukraine. This caused a substantial rise in construction expenses, leading to the suspension of numerous project (Jackson et al., 2024). As a result, lower-income groups faced increasingly unaffordable housing prices.

In summary, the Russian invasion of Ukraine amplified the cost-of-living crisis, making Germany a critical case to study. The intersection of economic, energy, and international issues provides the context for examining the political ramifications of the cost-of-living crisis.

Protest event analysis

To contextualize our individual-level analysis, we examine protest behavior in Germany during the cost-of-living crisis. To do so, we conducted an original protest event analysis using articles from two German quality newspapers: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *taz-die tageszeitung* published between 2019 and 2023. We follow the data collection strategy established by the PRODAT project (Rucht & Ohlemacher, 1994), and focus on demonstrative protests (e.g. demonstrations or rallies), and appellative protests, which directly target policymakers to influence political decisions (e.g. petitions). The coding process consisted of two steps. Initially, we apply a machine-learning classifier to identify articles referencing protests. Subsequently, research assistants meticulously coded these articles, extracting information on protest forms, actors involved, claims, and the number of participants.

The protest events in the empirical analysis include those with claims related to 'Work/Labour,' 'Welfare and social issues,' and 'Economy' for economic protests, and 'Peace/war,' 'Human rights international,' and 'Migration and integration' for international war-related protests. During this period, large protest events regarding the massacres in Iran took place, which fall under the second category. We excluded these events, as they are not related to the war in Ukraine. Similarly, we excluded the Labour Day protests, as these have a more celebratory character in Germany.

Survey analyses

Besides the manifest protest activities, we study the mobilization potential, meaning the people who would potentially participate in the protest. Therefore, we fielded an online survey in December 2022, when the effects of the cost-of-living crisis were expected to hit hardest. The representative survey has been fielded by the survey company *Bilendi & Respondi* with 2,826 respondents in December 2022. To ensure high-quality answers, we excluded the 5% fastest respondents (*Speedrunners*) and those respondents that showed no variance in our important item batteries (*Straightliners*), leaving us with 2552 responses.

Table 1. Attributes in conjoint vignette design.

| Attributes | Level | Formulation |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Treatment 1: Claims | 0: No further claim | No additional text |
| | 1: Economy Left | The rich and crisis profiteers must be obligated to show solidarity and finally be taxed appropriately |
| | 2: Economy Right | To prioritize our country and the economic needs of our citizens |
| | 3: Climate Left | The consistent expansion of renewable energies |
| | 4: Climate Right | The consistent use of coal to generate electricity |
| | 5: International Left | Solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees |
| Treatment 2: Populism | 6: International Right | Peace negotiations with Russia and the withdrawal of sanctions |
| | 0: No populism | No additional text |
| Treatment 3: Organizers | 1: Populism | and loudly reminded that the views of ordinary people take precedence over the views of the political elite. |
| | 0: Broad=neutral | a broad alliance of different organizations and initiatives. |
| | 1: Left interpretation | a broad alliance of social associations and left- progressive initiatives |
| | 2: Right interpretation | a broad alliance of liberal organizations and right-wing conservative initiatives |
| Treatment 4: Party | 0: None | No party. |
| | 1: the Left | Representatives of the Left party are announced as speakers. |
| | 2: AfD | Representatives of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party are announced as speakers |
| | 3: AfD and the LEFT | Representatives of the parties Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Left have been announced as speakers. |

We asked questions about whether citizens are sympathetic to the cost-of-living protesters, whether they would consider participating, and their socio-economic characteristics. Respondents were also presented with a series of different policy proposals, where they could express their position on a scale from ‘Completely disagree with the claim’ (1) to ‘Completely agree’ (7). We present the results for 10 different policies, grouped into two categories. The first category comprises economic claims, including the ‘Introduction of a Gas Price Cap,’ ‘Subsidies for Low-Income Individuals,’ ‘Limitation of Rent Increases,’ ‘Extension of Nuclear Energy,’ and ‘Coal-fired Power Plants.’ The second group consists of more cultural claims, such as ‘End of Corona Lockdowns,’ ‘Reduction of Asylum-Seeker Benefits,’ ‘Withdrawal of Sanctions against Russia,’ ‘Delivery of Heavy Weapons to Ukraine,’ and ‘Unlimited Admission of Ukrainian Refugees’.

The survey also includes a conjoint experiment that presented respondents with two different calls for a protest asking them to choose which one they would attend. To enhance the statistical power of our analysis, we ask respondents to conduct the paired comparison of the calls for protest three times. Table 1 presents the different levels for the four attributes we vary in our experimental setting. To enhance the external validity of the experiment, we used the main claims formulated by labor unions, welfare organizations, and the two challenger parties. We collected these calls by reviewing the daily coverage of events during the so-called ‘Hot Autumn’ of 2022. This design allows us to assess the mobilizing potential of economic grievances, populist wording, movements, and parties. Table A.1 in Appendix A presents an example of the experimental setting in which the respondents are presented with two randomized calls for participation in a demonstration relating to the cost-of-living crisis. The survey experiment was preregistered and received ethics approval by the WZB Ethics Board.³ Together with the aggregated protest

event data, the survey provides us with fine-grained individual-level data to better understand the mechanism of protest mobilization in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

Empirical findings

Economic and peace-related protest events in Germany after the Russian invasion

Before focusing on the individual-level analysis, we provide some contextual information on the German protest landscape in the period of the cost-of-living crisis using protest

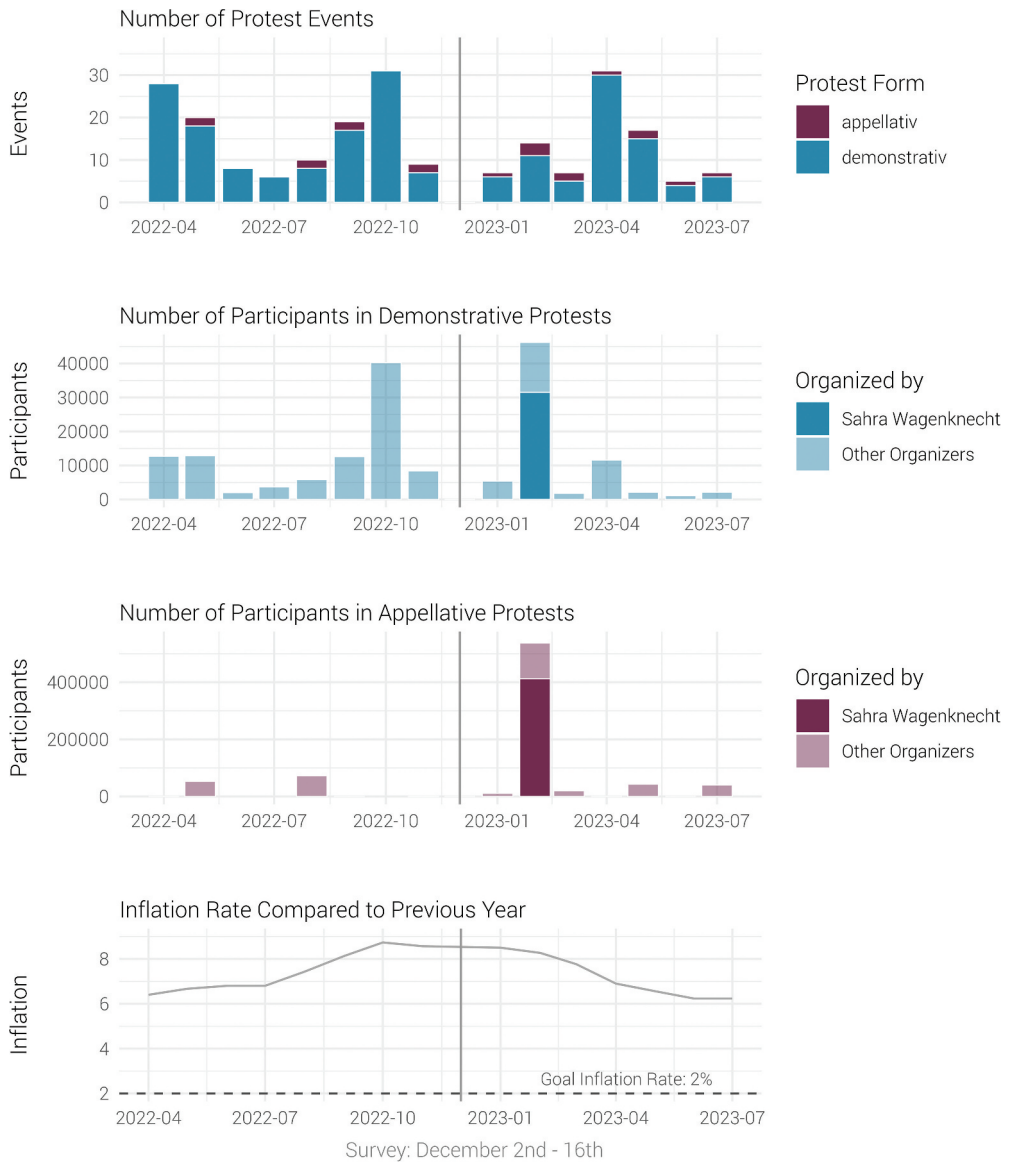


Figure 1. Economic and peace-related protest events and participants in Germany from April 2022 until July 2023; Labor Day protests are excluded; vertical line marks the survey period, inflation measured as three months average.

event analysis. [Figure 1](#) presents the number of protest events (upper panel), the number of protest participants in demonstrative protests (upper-middle panel), the number of participants in appellative protests (lower-middle panel), and the monthly inflation rate as a grievance measure (lower panel). We begin in April 2022, excluding February and March due to the exceptionally large number of people who protested immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Looking at the number of protest events focusing on economic or war-related issues, we see an increase during the autumn of 2022. October has a high number of protest events. However, this number is not remarkably higher than in previous months. For instance, April 2022 saw similarly high numbers of events. Judging solely from the number of protest events, we cannot see that a 'Hot Autumn' materialized in 2022 in response to the cost-of-living crisis. Arguably more important than the number of events is the number of participants, as depicted in the middle and lower panel of [Figure 1](#). In October approximately 40,000 people participated in events concerning economic or war-related issues during October 2022, which is more than in previous months. Nevertheless, when comparing the number of protest events and participants during the so-called 'Hot Autumn' to previous years, it is evident that protest activity in autumn 2022 was not substantially higher. Appendix E presents the event and participant numbers of all protest events covered in the dataset from 2019 until 2023 and discusses the long-term perspective more thoroughly. Overall, from a long-term perspective, the aggregate data does not support the characterization of autumn 2022 as a 'Hot Autumn'.

Yet, what happened after the so-called 'Hot Autumn'? Next, we broaden our temporal scope by focusing on the time and political developments after autumn 2022. A notable trend in the cost-of-living protests post-December 2022 is the prominence of events organized by Sahra Wagenknecht. Wagenknecht, a former member of the party *DIE LINKE* (the Left), is one of Germany's most well-known politicians. Due to ongoing conflicts, she left her former party *DIE LINKE* and founded her own party, *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit* (Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht – Reason and Justice) in January 2024 (Mudde, 2024). Her newly established party received 6.2% of the votes in the European Elections in Germany in June 2024, securing six seats in the European Parliament.

Wagenknecht has a notable history with protests and social movements. In 2018, she founded the movement *Aufstehen* (Rise Up) aimed at mobilizing for left-wing majorities. However, this initiative did not achieve the desired cooperation among left-wing parties and movements (Weisskircher, 2018). In February 2023, leveraging her experience and public profile, Wagenknecht organized a major protest action regarding the Russian-Ukraine war. Collaborating with the prominent German journalist and feminist Alice Schwarzer, she orchestrated a petition and a rally at the Brandenburger Gate, close to the German parliament and government seat. The rally, titled *Aufstand für Frieden* (Uprising for Peace), reportedly attracted over 50,000 participants according to the organizers, though police estimates placed attendance at around 13,000 (Vorreier, 2023). Given the common tendency of organizers to overestimate and police to underestimate crowd sizes, a mean of these numbers was used to approximate actual attendance, a standard method in protest event analysis. The accompanying petition, *Manifest für Frieden* (Manifesto for Peace), initially gathered over 400,000 signatures when it launched in February 2023, and by June 2024, it had amassed more than 900,000 signatories (Schwarzer & Wagenknecht,

2023). Figure 1 highlights the number of participants in both the rally and the petition as reported in February 2023. The size of these events is remarkable, raising the question of why they achieved such prominence compared to other cost-of-living protests during that period.

In summary, we did not observe a substantial increase in protest activity in autumn 2022. Change in the number of protest events is not particularly noteworthy, while the number of participants is mainly higher than usual due to the events linked to Wagenknecht. During autumn, labor unions and political parties such as the far-right AfD and the Left attempted to mobilize people. However, the most significant event that brought many people to the streets and garnered a large number of petition signatures occurred later, when Wagenknecht entered the protest scene. This raises the question: why were traditional mobilizing actors unable to mobilize large segments of the population, despite expectations of mass mobilization? And, relatedly, how can we explain the remarkable success of the protests organized by Sahra Wagenknecht?

Citizen’s sympathy for the protests and their willingness to participate

In the next step, we examine the perception of the general population regarding these cost-of-living protests. We are particularly interested in whether people sympathize with the protests and whether they would be willing to participate in them.⁴ Figure 2 presents the results. First, we look at the number of people who have sympathy for the protesters. More than 35% of respondents expressed ‘Very much’ sympathy, while an additional 30% responded with ‘Much’. In total, approximately two-thirds of respondents answered positively, whereas only a third had just ‘Some’ or ‘Not at all’ sympathy for the cost-of-living protesters.

We take these figures as confirming our expectation that large parts of the population sympathized with the cost-of-living protesters (H1). This interpretation is supported by comparisons to previous protest waves. For example, Hunger et al. (2023) found that

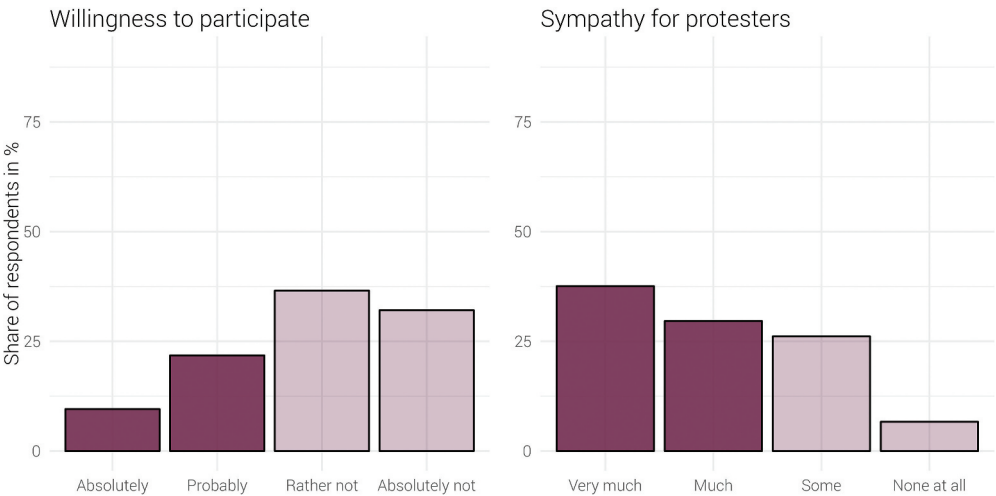


Figure 2. Willingness to participate in cost-of-living protests and understanding for protesters.

during the anti-containment protests in Germany – a relatively unpopular movement – only around 20% of respondents expressed sympathy. By contrast, Rüdig and Karyotis (2014) report that at the height of the anti-austerity movement in Greece in 2010, about 65% of the general population endorsed the idea that people should protest against austerity measures. Relatedly, Mercea et al. (2024) asked about actual ('have done') and potential ('would consider in the future') protest participation across six European countries over the past three years. For Germany, they report that around 31% of respondents can be classified as potential protest participants and 23% as actual participants on any kind of issue.

However, this sympathy did not translate into protest participation, as shown in the protest event data and the survey. When asked about their willingness to participate, nearly 40% of respondents replied with 'Rather not', while over 35% answered they would 'Absolutely not' participate. Only 5% said they would 'Absolutely' participate, and approximately 20% responded they might 'Probably' participate. Taken together, one-quarter of the German population considers participating in the cost-of-living protests, while two-thirds are sympathetic to the protesters.

A certain discrepancy between sympathy and participation is expected (e.g. Ajzen, 1991), but here, we observe a particularly sharp contrast between sympathy and willingness to participate. For a comparison to the COVID-19 protest, where sympathy and willingness to participate are more congruent, see Appendix C and Hunger et al. (2023). We have also examined whether differences in the willingness to participate and sympathy for the protests can be attributed to individual resources (economic, time, and educational). However, our analysis, presented in Appendix D, shows that these factors do not explain the discrepancy we document. What then explains this rather pronounced mismatch between sympathy and willingness to participate?

Political claims: economically left-wing and culturally nationalist?

To answer this questions, we focus on the policy preferences of those who are sympathetic to the cost-of-living protests. Figure 3 visualizes the results comparing those who belong to the protest potential (*Much* or *Very much* sympathy for the cost-of-living protesters) with those who do not (*Some* or *None at all* sympathy for cost-of-living protesters).⁵

Looking at the economic claims, we find that most people agree with policies aimed at mitigating the economic effects of the cost-of-living crisis. This is particularly true for the 'Introduction of a Gas Price Cap,' 'Subsidies for Low-Income Individuals,' and 'Limitation of Rent Increases.' Additionally, the 'Extension of Nuclear Energy' and 'Coal-fired Power Plants' are also viewed positively, as both measures reduce energy costs. However, people who are sympathetic to the cost-of-living protesters agree significantly more strongly with these economic claims than those who are not sympathetic.

Regarding the cultural claims, we also observe pronounced differences between protest sympathizers and non-sympathizers. Compared to non-sympathizers, sympathizers of the cost-of-living protests are more in favor of 'Ending Corona lockdowns', 'Reducing asylum-seeker benefits', and 'Withdrawing sanctions against Russia'. Conversely, they are less in favor of 'Delivering heavy weapons to Ukraine' and the 'Unlimited admission of Ukrainian refugees'. Generally, it seems that people who are part of the cost-of-living

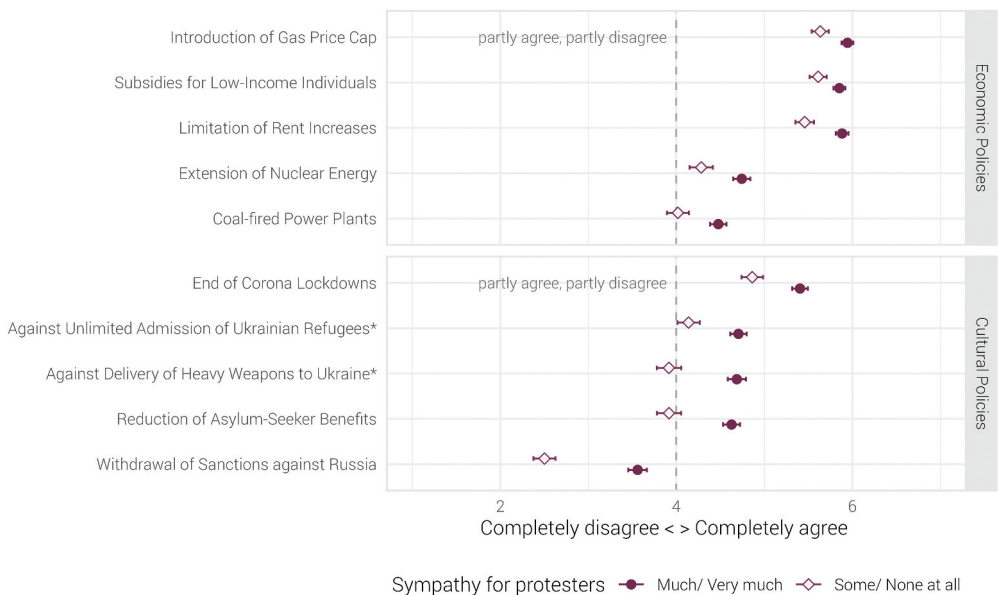


Figure 3. Policy preferences of cost-of-living protest potential. * indicates that direction of item was reversed.

protest potential are more likely to support Russia-friendly policies. This finding supports our hypothesis *H2: Those who sympathize with the cost-of-living protests likely hold more left-wing preferences on economic and more nationalist preferences on non-economic issues than those who don't sympathize with the cost-of-living protests.*⁶

In summary, we find that on the economic left-right dimension, respondents who belong to the mobilization potential of the cost-of-living protests support more left-wing economic policies that aim to mitigate the negative economic effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Simultaneously, they are comparatively more supportive of policies that would be grouped on the Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist side of the cultural GAL-TAN scale.

Which protests mobilized? Survey experimental evidence

To disentangle the effect of various types of protest supply on the willingness to participate, Figure 4 presents the results of the conjoint experiment. Our findings indicate that the economic claims did indeed mobilize participants. The left-wing economic claim, 'The rich and crisis profiteers must be obligated to show solidarity and finally be taxed appropriately,' and the right-wing economic claim, 'To prioritize our country and the economic needs of our citizens,' both had statistically significant positive and substantial effects on protest participation. This underscores the importance of economic issues during the cost-of-living crisis. Conversely, international and war-related claims had a demobilizing effect. The left-wing claim 'Solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees' and the right-wing claim 'Peace negotiations with Russia and the withdrawal of sanctions' both led to

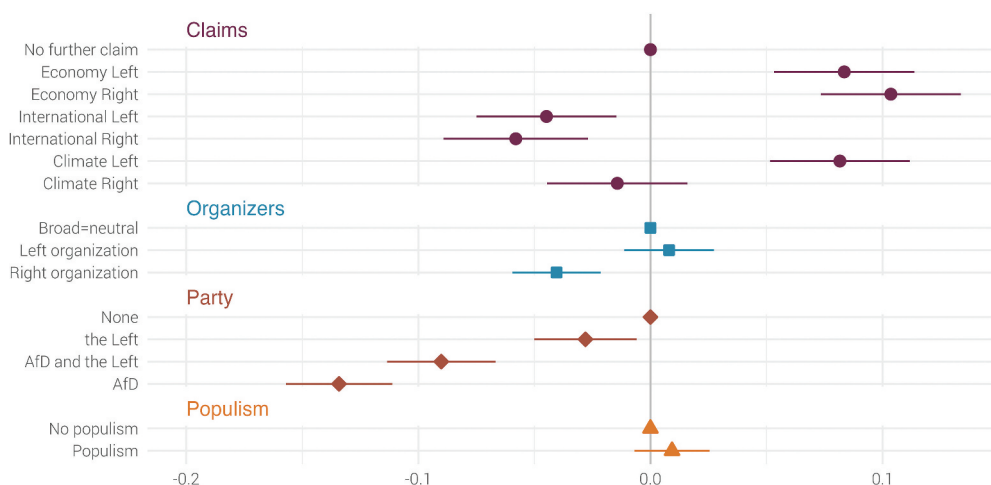


Figure 4. Conjoint experiment with forced choice: drivers of protest participation.

decreased protest participation, albeit not consistently. The heterogeneous effect analysis in Appendix H shows that sympathizers of the cost-of-living protests are only demobilized by the left-wing claim to support Ukraine, while the non-sympathizers are only demobilized by the right-wing claim for peace negotiations and a withdrawal of sanctions.

The presence of ‘a broad alliance of social associations and left-progressive initiatives’ (left organization) had no significant effect on people’s likelihood to participate, whereas ‘a broad alliance of liberal organizations and right-wing conservative initiatives’ even resulted in negative effects. Populist appeals, such as ‘and loudly reminded that the views of ordinary people take precedence over the views of the political elite,’ also showed no effect on participation.

The most important results for our paper relate to the influence of political parties as mobilizing actors. As introduced before, our treatments included ‘Representatives of the Left party are announced as speakers’ (the Left), ‘Representatives of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party are announced as speakers’ (AfD), and ‘Representatives of the parties Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Left have been announced as speakers’ (AfD and the Left). Compared to the reference category ‘no references to parties,’ the presence of party speakers had a demobilizing effect. This effect was relatively small but significant for speakers of the Left party, stronger for speakers of both the Left and the AfD, and strongest for speakers of the AfD alone. In sum, the presence of these two challenger parties had a demobilizing effect, suggesting that neither the AfD nor the Left party represented a policy package fully aligning with the mobilization potential of the cost-of-living protests.

This finding confirms our expectation (H4) that established trade unions and political parties could not effectively mobilize during the cost-of-living crisis. These actors did not represent a policy package congruent with the preferences of those with mobilization potential. Combined with our evidence from the protest event analysis (again, see Figure 1), the experimental evidence suggests that only an actor credibly combining economically left-wing with culturally nationalist policies was able to tap into the

substantial demand for protest among the German population. While our results are suggestive since our experimental evidence comes from the height of the supposed ‘Hot Autumn’ of 2022, Sahra Wagenknecht and her new party represent such an actor who combined both elements of the policy package. Accordingly, we argue it was not enough for established actors to offer only one part of the economical left-wing and culturally nationalist policy package, both parts were needed to effectively mobilize a broad base of supporters.

Discussion and conclusion

We began with the question of why large-scale protests, widely anticipated during Germany’s ‘Hot Autumn’ of 2022, did not materialize despite a severe cost-of-living crisis. By examining protest dynamics between the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the summer of 2023, we highlight the explanatory role of the mismatch between the demand for protest and the ideological supply of the main mobilizing agents. Our comprehensive multistep research design combines a protest event analysis of two German newspapers, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *taz-die tageszeitung*, with an original survey that includes a survey experiment fielded in December 2022. Our study yields at least three empirical key takeaways.

First, we demonstrate that a large portion of the German population was sympathetic to the cost-of-living protests, with approximately two-thirds expressing much or very much sympathy for the protests. However, this high level of sympathy did not translate into a high willingness to participate. In fact, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they would ‘rather not’ or ‘absolutely not’ participate in the protests. Consequently, the highly anticipated ‘Hot Autumn’ of 2022 did not fully materialize. Although there were more protest events and participants in October 2022 than usual, the numbers fell short of expectations, given the severe impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

Second, we explain this limited mobilization by highlighting an ideological mismatch between demand and supply. Those most likely to participate in cost-of-living protests favored economically left-wing policies but also held culturally nationalist preferences and stronger populist attitudes. This cross-cutting combination of policy positions was not represented by the existing trade unions or parties in the German political system at the time. As a result, no major political actor fully aligned with these preferences, limiting the mobilization capacity of traditional actors. Our survey experiment confirms this misalignment, showing that left-wing trade unions had no effect on mobilization, while the presence of the challenger parties AfD or DIE LINKE even demobilized potential participants.

Third, we trace the emergence of the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) to its ability to seize the momentum of protest mobilization during the crisis. Combining economically left-wing and culturally nationalist policies, Sahra Wagenknecht led the largest cost-of-living crisis protest. She is well-known for her criticism of economic inequality and support for large-scale redistributive measures. Combined with a culturally nationalist stance on migration and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, her policy package was highly attractive to a significant portion of the German population. Our survey evidence suggests that this policy package was crucial to the success of her mobilization efforts. The rally *Aufstand für Frieden* (Uprising for Peace) and the accompanying petition

Manifest für Frieden (Manifesto for Peace) tested the political viability of a new party with a distinct policy package based on left-wing economic and nationalist cultural policies. The success indicated that a new challenger party with such a policy orientation would have a strong chance of success in the German political landscape.

Since many European countries have faced similar crises to the one we describe, we expect our findings, particularly demand-side patterns related to the potential to protest, to have broader applicability. Similarly, we expect that the scenario of new party emergence we document in the German case may travel more broadly. By using protests as a test balloon for founding a new party, Wagenknecht followed the playbook of other movement parties in Europe, such as the left parties Podemos and SYRIZA (Della Porta et al., 2017), or the right parties Chega and Vox (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2024). At the same time, similarly to the Five Star Movement, the BSW challenges the traditional left-right classification and the dimensional structure of the existing party system.

Our study has some limitations. Most notably, we lack longitudinal survey data to track developments over time. Additionally, our experimental design did not include BSW as a treatment, as the party had not yet been founded at the time of our data collection. Furthermore, we cannot fully rule out the endogeneity problem, that is, whether the supply of a left-nationalist platform created corresponding demand. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to examine how parties' ability to mobilize street protests evolves over time.

The normative implications of our findings are worrisome for the ability of progressive actors to make use of opportunities, such as the one provided by the cost-of-living-crisis. In the medium and long term, the crisis led to the emergence of a new left-nationalist challenger party, the *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht*, instead of the reinvigorating the historically central organizations of the labor movement. The rise of this party challenges the labor movement to take a position in a multidimensional programmatic space. In its founding year of 2024, the BSW achieved notable success in the *European Election* and state-level elections in *Brandenburg*, *Saxony*, and *Thuringia*. This initial success suggests that this new left-nationalist challenger party is likely to have lasting effects on the German party system and the role of labor unions in political mobilization. Whether progressive actors can adapt to this ideological restructuring and reclaim mobilization capacity remains an open question for future research.

Notes

1. With the term nationalist, we refer to the cultural dimension within the two-dimensional policy space. We chose the term nationalist as it best characterizes BSW's stance on cultural issues. Other scholars have used terms such as traditional or authoritarian, which are equally appropriate and describe the same position on the GAL-TAN (Green/Alternative/Liberal – Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist) spectrum.
2. The term 'Hot Autumn' is not new to the German protest landscape. It was originally used in 1983 to describe large-scale protests against the NATO Double-Track Decision. 'Hot Autumn' was officially selected as the word of the year 1983 by the Association for the German Language (see also Hutter et al., 2022).
3. The preregistration is available on this link: <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/RJY53>

4. As our survey has already been adjusted according to gender, education, and other demographic factors in the data collection process, we do not use additional weights in the main analysis. Additional weighted results are presented in the Appendix B, and the results remain consistent.
5. For a similar analysis by willingness to participate, see Appendix I. The results are similar.
6. We also find that individuals belonging to the protest potential exhibit strong populist attitudes, i.e. Peoplecentrism and Anti-Elitism. A detailed analysis and discussion can be found in Appendix J.

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Ethics statement

The survey experiment received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center (WZB Research Ethics Review No. 2022/10/177) in October 2022. It was also pre-registered on OSF and can be accessed through this link: <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/RJY53>

Data availability statement

To access replication files for this article, please visit: https://osf.io/zf5ca/?view_only=5a4440d9844944d0816ef3d0d5a5b398

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